

THE DAYS BETWEEN

by Allen Steele

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Three months after leaving Earth, the URSS Alabama had just achieved cruise velocity when the accident occurred: Leslie Gillis woke up.

He regained consciousness slowly, as if emerging from long and dreamless sleep. His body, naked and hairless, floated within the blue-green gelatin that filled the interior of his biostasis cell, an oxygen mask covering the lower part of his face and thin plastic tubes inserted in his arms. As his vision cleared, Gillis saw that the cell had been lowered to a horizontal position and that its fiberglass lid had folded open. The lighting within the hibernation deck was subdued, yet he had to open and close his eyes several times before his retinas were able to take even that little illumination.

His first lucid thought was: Thank God, I made it.

His body felt weak, his limbs stiff. Just as he had been cautioned to do during flight training, he carefully moved only a little at a time. As Gillis gently flexed the muscles of his arms and legs, he vaguely wondered why no one had come to his aid. Perhaps Dr. Okada was busy helping the others emerge from biostasis. Yet he could hear nothing save for a sublime electrical hum; no voices, no movement.

His next thought was: Something's wrong.

Back aching against the strain, his arms feeling as if they were about to dislocate from his shoulders, Gillis grasped the sides of the cell and tried to sit up. For a minute or so he struggled against the phlegmatic embrace of the suspension fluid; there was a wet sucking sound as he prized his body upward, then the tubes went taut before he remembered that he had to take them out. Clenching his teeth, Gillis pinched off the tubes between thumb and forefinger and, one by one, carefully removed them from his arms. The oxygen mask came off last; the air was frigid and it stung his throat and lungs, and he coughed in agonized spasms as, with the last ounce of his strength, he clambered out of the tank. His legs couldn't hold him, and he collapsed upon the cold floor of the deck.

Gillis didn't know how long he lay curled in a fetal position, his hands tucked into his groin. He never really lost consciousness, yet for a long while his mind lingered somewhere between awareness and sleep, his unfocused eyes gazing at the burnished metal plates of the floor. After awhile the cold penetrated his dulled senses; the suspension fluid was freezing against his bare skin, and he dully realized that if he lay here much longer he would soon lapse into hypothermia.

Gillis rolled over on his back, forced himself to sit up. Aquamarine fluid drooled down his body, formed a shallow pool around his hips; he hugged his shoulders, rubbing his chilled flesh. Once again, he wondered why no one was paying any attention to him. Yes, he was only the communications officer, yet there were others farther up the command hierarchy who should have been revived by now. Kuniko Okada was the last person he had seen before the somatic drugs entered his system; as Chief Physician, she also would have been the last crew member to enter biostasis and the first to emerge. She would have then brought up -- Gillis sought to remember specific details -- the Chief Engineer, Dana Monroe, who would have then ascertained that Alabama's major systems were operational. If the ship was in nominal condition, Captain Lee would have been revived next, shortly followed by First Officer Shapiro, Executive Officer Tinsley, Senior Navigator Ullman, and then Gillis himself. Yes, that was the correct procedure.

So where was everyone else?

First things first. He was wet and naked, and the ship's internal temperature had been lowered to 50 degrees. He had to find some clothes. His teeth chattering, Gillis staggered to his feet, then lurched across the deck to a nearby locker. Opening it, he found a stack of clean white towels and a pile of folded robes. As he wiped the moist gel from his body, he recalled his embarrassment when his turn had come for Kuniko to prepare him for hibernation. It was bad enough to have his body shaved, yet when her electric razor had descended to his pubic area he found himself becoming involuntarily aroused by her gentle touch. Amused by his reaction, she had smiled at him in a motherly way. Just relax, she said. Think about something else...

He turned, and for the first time saw the rest of the biostasis cells were still upright within their niches. Thirteen white fiberglass coffins, each resting at a forty-five degree angle within the bulkhead walls of Deck C2A. Electrophoretic displays on their lids emitted a warm amber glow, showing the status of the crewmembers contained within. Here was the Alabama's command team, just as he had last seen them: Lee, Shapiro, Tinsley, Okada, Monroe, Ullman...

Everyone was still asleep. Everyone except himself.

Gillis hastily pulled on a robe, then strode across the deck to the nearest window. Its outer shutter was closed, yet when he pressed the button that moved it upward, all he saw were distant stars against black space. Of course, he might not be able to see 47 Ursae Majoris from this particular porthole. He needed to get to the command center, check the navigation instruments.

As he turned from the window, something caught his eye: the readout on the nearest biostasis cell. Trembling with unease as much as cold, Gillis moved closer to examine it. The screen identified the sleeper within as Cortez, Raymond B. -- Ray Cortez, the life-support chief -- and all his life-signs seemed normal as far as he could tell, yet that wasn't what attracted his attention. On the upper left side was a time-code:

E/: 7.8.70 / 22:10:01 GMT

July 8, 2070. That was the date everyone had entered hibernation, three days after the Alabama had made its unscheduled departure from Highgate. On the upper right side of the screen, though, was another time-code:

P/: 10.3.70 / 00.21.23 GMT

October 3, 2070. Today's date and time.

The Alabama had been in flight for only three months. Three months of a voyage across forty-six light-years which, at 20 percent of light-speed, would take more 230 years to complete.

For several long minutes, Gillis stared at the readout, unwilling to believe the evidence of his own eyes. Then he turned and walked across the compartment to the manhole. His bare feet slapping against the cool metal rungs, he climbed down the ladder to the next deck of the hibernation module.

Fourteen more biostasis cells, all within their niches. None were open.

Fighting panic, Gillis scrambled further down the ladder to Deck C2C. Again, fourteen closed cells.

Still clutching at some intangible shred of hope, Gillis quickly visited Deck C2D, then he scurried back up the ladder and entered the short tunnel leading to the Alabama's second hibernation module. By the time he reached Deck C1D, he had checked every biostasis cell belonging to the starship's one hundred and three remaining passengers, yet he hadn't found one which was open.

He sagged against a bulkhead, and for a long time he could do nothing except tremble with fear.

He was alone.

\* \* \*

After awhile, Gillis pulled himself together. All right, something had obviously gone wrong. The computers controlling the biostasis systems had made a critical error and had prematurely awakened him from hibernation. Okay, then; all he had to do was put himself back into the loop.

The robe he had found wasn't very warm, so he made his way through the circular passageway connecting the ship's seven ring modules until he entered C4, one of two modules that would serve as crew quarters once the Alabama reached 47 Ursae Majoris. He tried not to look at the rows of empty bunks as he searched for the locker where he stowed his personal belongings. His blue jumpsuit was where he had left it three months ago, hanging next to the isolation garment he had worn when he left Gingrich Space Center to board the shuttle up the Highgate; on a shelf above it, next to his high-top sneakers, was the small cardboard box containing the precious few mementos he had been permitted to take with him. Gillis deliberately ignored the box as he pulled on his jumpsuit; he'd look at the stuff inside once he reached his final destination, and that wouldn't be for another 230 years ... 226 years, if you considered the time-dilation factor, but why split hairs?

The command center, located on Deck H4 within the ship's cylindrical hub, was cold and dark. The lights had been turned down and the rectangular windows along its circular hull were shuttered; only the soft glow emitted by a few control panels pierced the gloom. Gillis took a moment to switch on the ceiling lights; spotting the environmental control station, he briefly considered adjusting the thermostat to make things a bit warmer, then decided against it. He had been trained as a communications specialist; his technical understanding of the rest of the Alabama's major systems was cursory at best, and he was reluctant to make any changes that might influence the ship's operating condition. Besides, he wasn't staying here for very long; once he returned to biostasis, the cold wouldn't make much difference to him.

All the same, it was his duty to check the ship's condition, so he walked over to the nav

table, pulled away the plastic cover which protected its keypad, and punched up a display of the Alabama's present position. A bright shaft of light appeared above the table, and within it appeared a tiny holographic model of the ship. It floated in midair at the end of a long curved string which led outward from the center of the three-dimensional halo representing the orbits of the major planets of the solar system. Moving at constant 1-g thrust, the Alabama was already beyond the orbit of Neptune; the ship was now passing the canted orbit of Pluto, and in a few weeks it would cross the heliopause, escaping the last weak remnants of the Sun's gravitational pull as it headed into interstellar space.

The Alabama had now traveled farther from Earth than any previous manned spacecraft; only a few space probes had ever ventured this far. Gillis found himself smiling at the thought. He was now the only living person -- the only conscious living person, at least -- to have voyaged so far from Earth. A feat almost worth waking up for ... although, all things considered, he would have preferred to sleep through it.

He moved to the engineering station, uncovered its console, and pulled up a schematic display of the main engine. The deuterium/helium-3 reserves that had been loaded aboard the Alabama's spherical main fuel tank before launch had been largely consumed during the ninety-day boost phase, but now that the ship had reached cruise speed, the magnetic field projected by its Bussard ramscoop was drawing ionized interstellar hydrogen and helium from a 4,000 kilometer radius in front of the ship, feeding the fusion reactor at its stern and thus maintaining a constant .2c velocity. Microsecond pulsations of the same magnetic field enabled it to simultaneously perform as a shield, deflecting away the interstellar dust that, at relativistic velocities, would have soon shredded the Alabama's hull. Gillis's knowledge of the ship's propulsion systems was limited, yet his brief examination showed him that they were operating at 90 percent efficiency.

Something softly tapped against the floor behind him.

Startled by the unexpected sound, Gillis turned around, peered into the semi-darkness. For a few moments he saw nothing, then a small shape emerged from behind the nav table: one of the spider-like autonomous maintenance robots that constantly prowled the Alabama, inspecting its compartments and making minor repairs. This one had apparently been attracted to Gillis's presence within the command deck; its eyestalks briefly flicked in his direction, then 'bot scuttled away.

Well, then. So much the better. The 'bot was no more intelligent than a mouse, but it reported everything that it observed to the ship's AI. Now that the ship was aware that one of its passengers was awake, the time had come for Gillis to take care of his little problem.

Gillis crossed the deck to his customary post at the communications station. Sitting down in his chair, he pulled away the plastic cover; a few deft taps on the keyboard and his console glowed to life once more. Seeing the familiar screens and readouts made him feel a little more secure; here, at least, he knew what he was doing. He typed in the commands which opened an interface to Alabama's DNA-based artificial intelligence.

Gillis, Leslie, Lt. Com. I.D. 86419-D. Password Scotland.

The response was immediate: I.D. confirmed. Password accepted. Good morning, Mr. Gillis. May I help you?

Why was I awakened? Gillis typed.

A short pause, then: Gillis, Leslie, Lt. Com. is still in biostasis.

Gillis's mouth fell open: What the hell...?

No, I'm not. I'm here in the command center. You've confirmed that yourself.

This time, the AI's response seemed a fraction of a second longer. Lt. Com. Leslie Gillis is still in biostasis. Please re-enter your I.D. and password for reconfirmation.

Impatiently, Gillis typed: I.D. 86419-D. Password Scotland.

The AI came back at once: Identification reconfirmed. You are Lt. Com. Leslie Gillis.

Then you agree that I'm no longer in biostasis.

No. Lt. Com. Leslie Gillis remains in biostasis. Please re-enter your I.D. and password for reconfirmation.

Gillis angrily slammed his hands against the console. He shut his eyes and took a deep breath, then forced himself to think this through as calmly as he could. He was dealing with an AI; it may be conditioned to respond to questions posed to it in plain English, yet nonetheless it was a machine, operating with machine-like logic. Although he had to deal with it on its own terms, nonetheless he had to establish the rules.

I.D. 86419-D. Password Scotland.

Identification reconfirmed. You are Lt. Com. Leslie Gillis.

Please locate Lt. Com. Leslie Gillis.

Lt. Com. Leslie Gillis is in biostasis cell C1A-07.

Okay, now they were getting somewhere ... but this was clearly wrong, in more ways than one. He had just emerged from a cell located on Deck A of Module C2.

Who is the occupant of biostasis cell C2A-07?

Gunther, Eric, Ensign/FSA

The name was unfamiliar, but the suffix indicated that he was an Federal Space Agency ensign. A member of the flight crew who had been ferried up to the Alabama just before launch, but probably not one of the conspirators who had hijacked the ship.

Gillis typed: There has been a mistake. Eric Gunther is not in cell C2A-07, and I am not in cell C1A-07. Do you understand?

Another pause, then: Acknowledged. Biostasis cell assignments rechecked with secondary data system. Correction: cell C1A-07 presently occupied by Eric Gunther.

Gillis absently gnawed on a fingernail ; after a few minutes he developed a possible explanation for the switch. Captain Lee and the other conspirators had smuggled almost fifty dissident intellectuals just before the Alabama fled Earth; since none of them had been listed in the ship's original crew manifest, the D.I.s had to be assigned to biostasis cells previously reserved for the members of the colonization team who had been left behind on Earth. Gillis could only assume that, at some point during the confusion, someone had accidentally fed erroneous information to the computer controlling the biostasis systems. Therefore, although he was originally assigned to C1A-07 while Ensign Gunther was supposed to be in C2A-07, whoever had switched his and Gunther cells had also neglected to cross-feed this information from the biostasis control system to the ship's AI. In the long run, it was a small matter of substituting one single digit for another....

Yet this didn't answer the original question: why had he been prematurely revived from biostasis? Or rather, why was Gunther supposed to be revived?

Why did you revive the occupant of cell C2A-07?

CLASSIFIED/TS. ISA Order 7812-DA

What the...? Why was there an Internal Security Agency lock-out? Yet he was able to get around that.

Security override AS-001001, Gillis, Leslie, Lt. Com. password Scotland. Repeat question: why did you revive the occupant of cell C2A-07?

CLASSIFIED/TS: OPEN. Ensign Gunther was to confirm Presidential launch authorization via secure communication channel. Upon failure to confirm authorization by 7.5.70/00.00, Ensign Gunther was to be revived from biostasis at 10.3.70/00.00 and given the option of terminating the mission.

Gillis stared at the screen for a long while, comprehending what he had just read but nonetheless not quite believing it. This could only mean one thing: Gunther had been an ISA mole placed aboard the Alabama for the purpose of assuring that the ship wasn't launched without Presidential authorization. However, since Captain Lee had ordered Gillis himself to shut down all modes of communication between Mission Control and the Alabama, Gunther hadn't been able to send a covert transmission back to Earth. Therefore the AI had programmed to revive him from biostasis ninety days after launch.

At this point, though, Gunther wouldn't have been able to simply turn the ship around even if he'd wanted to do so. The Alabama was too far from Earth, its velocity too high, for one person to accomplish such a task on his own. So there was no mistake what "terminating the mission" meant; Gunther was supposed to have destroyed the Alabama.

A loyal citizen of the United Republic of America, even to the point of suicide. Indeed, Gillis had little doubt that the Republic's official press agency had already reported the loss of the Alabama and that FSA spokesmen were issuing statements to the effect that the ship had suffered a catastrophic accident.

Since no one else aboard the ship knew about Gunther's orders, the AI's hidden program hadn't been deleted from memory. On the one hand, at least he had been prevented from carrying out his suicide mission. On the other, Gunther would remain asleep for the next 230 years while Gillis was now wide-awake.

Very well. So now all he had to do was join him in biostasis. Once he woke up again, Gillis could inform Captain Lee of what he had learned, and let him decide what to do with Ensign Gunther.

There has been a mistake. I'm was not supposed to be revived at this time. I have to return to biostasis immediately.

A pause, then: This is not possible. You cannot return to biostasis.

Gillis's heart skipped a beat.

I repeat: there has been a mistake. There was no reason to revive the person in cell C2A-07. I was the occupant of cell C2A-07, and I need to return to biostasis at once.

I understand the situation. The crew manifest has been changed to reflect this new information. However, it is impossible for you to return to biostasis.

His hands trembled upon the keyboard: Why not?

Protocol does not allow for the occupant of cell C2A-07 to resume biostasis. This cell has been permanently deactivated. Resumption of biostasis is not admissible.

Gillis suddenly felt as if a hot towel had been wrapped around his face. Security override B-001001, Gillis, Leslie, Lt. Com. Password Scotland. Delete protocol immediately.

Password accepted, Lt. Gillis. Protocol cannot be deleted without direct confirmation of Presidential launch authorization, and may not be rescinded by anyone other than Ensign Gunther.

Rage surged with him. He angrily typed: Revive Ensign Gunther at once. This is an emergency.

No members of the crew may be revived from biostasis until the ship has reached its final destination unless there is a mission-critical emergency. All systems are at nominal status: there is no mission-critical emergency.

Eric Gunther. Eric Gunther lay asleep on Deck ClA. Yet even if he could be awakened from hibernation and forced to confess his role, there was little he could do about it now. The long swath of ionized particles the Alabama left in its wake rendered impossible any radio communications with Earth; any signals received by or sent from the starship would be fuzzed out while the fusion engines were firing, and the Alabama would remain under constant thrust for the next 230 years.

If I don't return to biostasis, then I'll die. This is an emergency. Do you understand?

I understand your situation, Mr. Gillis. However, it does not pose a mission-critical emergency. I apologize for the error.

Reading this, Gillis found himself smiling. The smile became a grin, and from somewhere within his grin a wry chuckle slowly fought through. The chuckle evolved into hysterical laughter, for by now Gillis had realized the irony of his situation.

He was the Chief Communications Officer of the URSS Alabama. And he was doomed because he couldn't communicate.

\* \* \*

Gillis had his pick of any berth aboard the ship, including Captain Lee's private quarters, yet he chose the bunk that had been assigned to him; it only seemed right. He reset the thermostat to 71 degrees, then he took a long, hot shower. Putting on his jumpsuit again, he returned to his berth, lay down, and tried to sleep. Yet every time he shut his eyes, new thoughts entered his mind, and soon he would find himself staring at the bunk above him. So he lay there for a long time, his hands folded together across his stomach as he contemplated his situation.

He wouldn't asphyxiate nor perish from lack of water. Alabama's closed-loop life-support system would purge the carbon-dioxide from the ship's air and recirculate it as breathable oxygen-nitrogen, and his urine would be purified and recycled as potable water. Neither would he freeze to death in the dark; the fusion engines generated sufficient excess energy for him to be able to run the ship's internal electrical systems without fear of exhausting its reserves. Nor would he have to worry about starvation; there were enough rations aboard to feed a crew of 104 passengers for twelve months, which meant that one person would have enough to eat for over a century.

Yet there was little chance that he would last that long. Within their biostasis cells, the remaining crew members would be constantly rejuvenated, their natural aging processes held at bay through homeostatic stem-cell regeneration, telomerase enzyme therapy, and nanotechnical repair of vital organs, while infusion of somatic drugs would keep them in a coma-like condition that would deprive them of subconscious dream-sleep. Once they reached 47 Ursae Majoris, they would emerge from hibernation -- even that term was a misnomer, for they would never stir from their long rest -- just the same way as they had been when they entered the cells

Not so for him. Now that he was removed from biostasis, he would continue to age normally. Or at least as normally as one would while traveling at relativistic velocity; if he were suddenly spirited back home and was met by a hypothetical twin brother -- no chance of that happening; like so many others aboard, Gillis was an only child -- he would discover that he had aged only a few hours less than his sibling. Yet that gap would gradually widen the farther Alabama traveled from Earth, and even the Lorentz factor wouldn't save him in the long run, for everyone else aboard the ship was aging at the same rate; the only difference was that their bodies would remain perpetually youthful, while his own would gradually break down, grow old...

No. Gillis forcefully shut his eyes. Don't think about it.

But there was no way of getting around it: he was now living under a death sentence. Yet a condemned man in solitary confinement has some sort of personal contact, even if it's only the fleeting glimpse of a guard's hand as he shoves a tray of food through the cell door. Gillis didn't have that luxury. Never again would he ever hear another voice, see another face. There were a dozen or so people back home he had loved, and another dozen or so he had loathed, and countless others he had met, however briefly, during his twenty-eight years he had spent on Earth. All gone, lost forever...

He sat up abruptly. A little too abruptly; he slammed the top of his head against the bunk above him. He cursed beneath his breath, rubbed his skull -- a small bump beneath his hair, nothing more -- then he swung his legs over the side of his bunk, stood up, and opened his locker. His box was where he had last seen it; he took it down from the shelf, started to open it...

And then he stopped himself. No. If he looked inside now, the things he left in there would make him only more miserable than he already was. His fingers trembled upon the lid. He didn't need this now. He shoved the box back into the locker and slammed the door shut behind it. Then, having nothing else better to do, he decided to take a walk.

The ring corridor led him around the hub to Module C7, where he climbed down to the mess deck: long empty benches, walls painted in muted earth tones. The deck below contained the galley: chrome tables, cooking surfaces, empty warm refrigerators. He located the coffee maker, but there was no coffee to be found, so he ventured further down the ladder to the ship's med deck. Antiseptic white-on-white compartments, the examination beds covered with plastic sheets; cabinets contained cellophane-wrapped surgical instruments, gauze and bandages, and rows of plastic bottles containing pharmaceuticals with arcane labels. He had a slight headache, so he searched through them until he found some ibuprofen; he took the pill without water and lay down for a few moments.

After awhile his headache went away, so he decided to check out the wardroom on the bottom level. It was sparsely furnished, only a few chairs and tables beneath a pair of wallscreens, with a single couch facing a closed porthole. One of the tables folded open to reveal a holographic game board; he pressed a button marked by a knight piece and watched as a chess set materialized. He used to play chess assiduously when he was a teenager, but had gradually lost interest as he grew older. Perhaps it was time to pick it up again...

Instead, though, he went over to the porthole. Opening the shutter, he gazed out into space. Although astronomy had always been a minor hobby, he could see none of the familiar constellations; this far from Earth, the stars had changed position so radically that only the AI's navigation subroutine could accurately locate them. Even the stars were strangers now; this revelation made him feel even more lonely, so he closed the shutter. He didn't bother to turn off the game table before he left the compartment.

As he walked along the ring corridor, he came up a lone 'bot. It quickly scuttled out of his way as he approached, but Gillis squatted down on his haunches and tapped his fingers against the deck, trying to coax it closer. The robot's eyestalks twitched briefly toward him; for a moment it seemed to hesitate, then it quickly turned away and went up the circular passageway. It had no reason to have any interaction with humans, even those who desired its company. Gillis watched the 'bot as it disappeared above the ceiling, then he reluctantly rose and continued up the corridor.

The cargo modules, C5 and C6, were dark and cold, deck upon deck of color-coded storage lockers and shipping containers. He found the crew rations on Deck C5A; sliding open one of the refrigerated lockers, he took a few minutes to inspect its contents: vacuum-sealed plastic bags containing freeze-dried substances identified only by cryptic labels. None of it looked very appetizing; the dark-brown slab within the bag he pulled out at random could have been anything from processed beef to chocolate cake. He wasn't hungry yet, so he shoved it back and slammed the locker shut.

Gillis returned to the ring corridor and walked to the hatch leading to the hub access shaft. As he opened the hatch, though, he hesitated before grasping the top rung of the shaft's recessed ladder. He had climbed down the shaft once before already, yet he had been so determined to reach the command deck that he had failed to recognize it for what it was, a narrow well almost a

hundred feet deep. While the Alabama was moored at Highgate and in zero-gee, everyone aboard had treated it as a tunnel, yet now what had once been horizontal was now vertical.

He looked down. Far below, five levels beneath him, lay the hard metal floor of Deck H5. If his hands ever slipped on the ladder, if his feet failed to rest safely upon one of its rungs, then he could fall all the way to the bottom. He would have to be careful every time he climbed the shaft, for if he ever had an accident...

The trick was never looking down. He purposely watched his hands as he made his way down the ladder.

Gillis meant to stop on H2 and H3 to check the engineering and life-support decks, yet somehow he found himself not stopping until he reached H5.

The EVA deck held three airlocks. To his right and left were the hatches leading to the Alabama's twin shuttles, the Wallace and the Helms. Gillis gazed through the porthole at the Helms; the spaceplane was nestled within its docking cradle, its delta wings folded beneath its broad fuselage, its bubble canopy covered by shutters. For a moment, he had an insane urge to steal the Helms and fly it back home, yet that was clearly impossible; the shuttles only had sufficient fuel and oxygen reserves for orbital sorties. He wouldn't get so far as even Neptune, let alone Earth. And besides, he had never been trained to pilot a shuttle.

Turning away from the porthole, he caught sight of another airlock located on the opposite side of the deck. This one didn't lead to a shuttle docking collar; it was the airlock that led outside the ship.

Reluctantly, almost against his own will, Gillis found himself walking toward it. He twisted the lockwheel to undog the inner hatch, then pulled it open and stepped inside. The airlock was a small white compartment barely large enough to hold two men wearing hardsuits. On the opposite side was the tiger-striped outer hatch with a small control panel mounted on the bulkhead next to it. The panel had only two major buttons -- Pres., Purge, and Open -- and above them were three lights: green, orange, and red. The green light was now lit, showing that the inner hatch was open and the airlock was safely pressurized.

The airlock was cold. The rest of the ship had warmed up by now, but here Gillis could feel the arctic chill creeping through his jumpsuit, see every exhalation as ghostly wisps rising past his face. He didn't know how long he remained there, yet he regarded the three buttons for a very long time.

After awhile, he realized that his stomach was beginning to rumble, so he backed out of the compartment. He carefully closed the inner hatch, and lingered outside the airlock for another minute or so before he decided that this was one part of the ship he didn't want to visit very often.

Then he made the long climb back up the access shaft.

\* \* \*

There were chronometers everywhere, displaying both Greenwich Mean Time and relativistic shiptime. On the second day after revival, Gillis decided that he'd rather not know what the date was, so he found a roll of black electrical tape and went through the entire ship, masking every clock he could find.

There were no natural day or night cycles aboard the ship. He slept when he felt tired, and got out of bed when he felt like it. After awhile, he found that he was spending countless hours lying in his bunk, doing nothing more than staring at the ceiling, thinking about nothing. This wasn't good, so he made a regular schedule for himself.

He reset the ship's internal lighting so that it turned on and off at twelve-hour intervals, giving him an semblance of sunrise and sunset. He started his mornings by jogging around the ring corridor, keeping it up until his legs ached and his breath came in ragged gasps, and then sprinting the final lap.

Next he would take a shower, and then attend to himself. When his beard began to grow back, he made a point of shaving every day, and when his hair started to get a little too long he trimmed it with a pair of surgical scissors he found in the med deck; the result was a chopped, butch-cut look, but so long as he managed to keep the hair out of his eyes and off his neck he was satisfied. Otherwise, he tried to avoid closely looking at himself in the mirror.

Once he was dressed, he would visit the galley to make breakfast: cold cereal, rehydrated vegetable juice, a couple of fruit squares, a mug of hot coffee. He liked to open a porthole and look out at the stars while he ate.

Then he would go below to the wardroom and activate the wallscreens. He was able to access countless hours of datafiche through the AI's library subroutine, yet precious little of it was intended for entertainment. Instead, what he found were mainly tutorials: service manuals for the Alabama's major operating systems, texts on agriculture, astrobiology, land management, academic

studies of historical colonies on Earth, so forth and so on. Nonetheless he devoted himself to studying everything he could find, pretending as if he was once again a first-year plebe at the Academy of the Republic, memorizing everything and then silently quizzing himself to make sure he got it right. Perhaps it was pointless -- there was no reason for him to learn about organic methods of soybean cultivation -- yet it helped to keep his mind occupied.

Although he learned much about the Alabama's biostasis systems he hadn't known before, he never found anything that would help him return to hibernation. He eventually returned to Deck C2B, closed the hatch of his former cell, and returned it to its niche. After that, he tried not to go there again; like the EVA airlock on Deck H5, this was a place that made him uncomfortable.

When he was tired of studying, he would play chess for hours upon end, matching his wits against the game system. The outcome was always inevitable, for the computer could never be defeated, but he gradually learned how to anticipate its next move and forestall another loss for at least a little while longer.

The food was bland, preprocessed stuff, artificial substitutes for meat, fruit, and vegetables meant to remain edible after years of long-term freezer storage, but he did the best to make dinner more tolerable. Once he learned how to interpret the labels, he selected a variety of different rations and moved them to the galley. He spent considerable time and effort making each meal a little better, or at least different, from the last one; often the results were dismal, but now and then he managed to concoct something he wouldn't mind eating again -- stir-fried chicken and pineapple over linguine, for instance, wasn't as strange as he thought it might be -- and then he could type the recipe into the galley computer for future reference.

While wandering through the ship in search of something else to divert his attention, he found a canvas duffel bag. It belonged to Jorge Montero, one of the D.I.s who had helped the Alabama escape from Earth; apparently he had managed to bring a small supply of books with him.

Most were wilderness-survival manuals of one sort or another, yet among them were a few 20th century classics: J. Bronowski's The Ascent of Man, Kenneth Brower's The Starship and the Canoe, Frank Herbert's Dune. Gillis took them back to his berth and put them aside as bed-time reading.

On occasion, he would visit the command deck. The third time he did this, the nav table showed him that the Alabama had crossed the heliopause; the ship was now traveling through interstellar space, the dark between the stars. Because the ramscoop blocked the view, there were no windows that faced directly ahead, yet he learned how to manipulate the cameras located on the fuel tank until they displayed a real-time image forward of the ship's bow. It appeared as if the stars directly in front had clustered together, the Doppler effect causing them to form short comet-like tails tinged with blue. Yet when he rotated the camera to look back the way he had come, he saw that an irregular black hole had opened behind of the Alabama; the Sun and all its planets, including Earth, had become invisible.

This was one more thing that disturbed him, so he seldom activated the bow cameras.

He slept, and he jogged, and he ate, and he studied, and he played long and futile chess games, and otherwise did everything possible to pass the time as best he could. Every now and then he caught himself murmuring to himself, carrying on conversations with only his own mind as a companion; when this happened, he would consciously make himself shut up. Yet no matter how far he managed to escape from himself, he always had to return to the silence of the ship's corridors, the emptiness of its compartments.

He didn't know it then, but he was beginning to go insane.

\* \* \*

His jumpsuit began to get worn out. It was the only thing he had to wear, though, besides his robe, so he checked the cargo manifest and found that clothing was stowed in Deck C5C, and it was while searching for them it he discovered the liquor supply.

There wasn't supposed to be any booze aboard the Alabama, yet nonetheless someone had managed to smuggle two cases of scotch, two cases of vodka, and one case of champagne onto the ship. They were obviously put there to help the crew celebrate their safe arrival at 47 Ursae Majoris; Gillis found them stashed among the spare clothing.

He tried to ignore the liquor for as long as possible; he had never been much of a drinker, and he didn't want to start now. But several days later, after another attempt at making beef stroganoff resulted in a tasteless mess of half-cooked noodles and beef-substitute, he found himself wandering back to C5C and pulling out a bottle of scotch. He brought it back to the wardroom, poured a couple of fingers in a glass and stirred in some tapwater, then sat down to play another game of chess. After his second drink, he found himself feeling more at ease than he had since his untimely awakening; the next evening, he did the same thing again.

That was the beginning of his dark times.



"Cocktail hour" soon became the highlight of his day; after awhile, he found no reason to wait until after dinner, and instead had his first drink during his afternoon chess game. One morning he decided that a glass of champagne would be the perfect thing to top off his daily run, so he opened a bottle after he showered and shaved, and continued to indulge himself during the rest of the day. He discovered that powdered citrus juice was an adequate mixer for vodka, so he added a little of that to his morning breakfast, and it wasn't long before he took to carrying around a glass of vodka wherever he went. He tried to ration the liquor supply as much as he could, yet he found himself depressed whenever he finished a bottle, and relieved to discover that there always seemed to be one more to replace it. At first he told himself that he had to leave some for the others -- after all, it was meant for their eventual celebration -- but in time that notion faded to the back of his mind, and was finally forgotten altogether.

He went to sleep drunk, often in the wardroom, and awoke to nasty hangovers that only a hair of the dog could help dispel. His clothes began to smell of stale booze; he soon got tired of washing them, and simply found another jumpsuit to wear. Unwashed plates and cookware piled up in the galley sink, and it always seemed as if there were empty or half-empty glasses scattered throughout the ship. He stopped jogging after awhile, but he didn't gain much weight because he had lost his appetite and was now eating less than before. And every day, he found a new source of irritation: the inconvenient times when the lights turned on and off, or how the compartments always seemed too hot or too cold, or why he could never find something that he needed.

One night, frustrated at having lost at chess yet again, he picked up his chair and slammed it through the game table's glass panel. He was still staring at the wrecked table when one of the 'bots arrived to investigate; deciding that its companionship was better than none at all, he sat down on the floor and tried to get it to come closer, cooing to it in the same way he had summoned his puppy back when he was a boy. The 'bot ignored him completely, and that enraged him even further, so he found an empty champagne bottle and used it to demolish the machine. Remarkably, the bottle remained intact even after the 'bot had become a broken, useless thing in the middle of the wardroom floor; even more remarkably, it didn't shatter the porthole when Gillis hurled it against the window.

He didn't remember what happened after that; he simply blacked out. The next thing he knew, he was sprawled across the floor of the airlock.

The harsh clang of an alarm threatened to split his skull in half. Dully surprised to find where he was, he clumsily raised himself up on his elbows and regarded his surroundings through swollen eyes. He was naked; his jumpsuit lay in an heap just within the inner hatch, which was shut. There was a large pool of vomit nearby, but he couldn't recall having thrown up any more than he could remember getting here from the wardroom.

Lights strobed within the tiny compartment. Rolling over on his side, he peered at the control panel next to the outer hatch. The orange button in its center was lit, and the red one beneath it flashed on and off. The airlock was ready to be opened without prior decompression; this was what had triggered the alarm.

Gillis had no idea how he got here, but it was obvious what he had almost done. He crawled across the airlock floor and slapped his hand against the green button; that stopped the alarm. Then he opened the inner hatch and, without bothering to pick up his discarded jumpsuit, staggered out of the airlock. He couldn't keep his balance, though, so he fell to his hands and knees and threw up again.

Then he rolled over on his side, curled in upon himself and wept hysterically until sleep mercifully came to him. Naked and miserable, he passed out on the floor of the EVA deck.

\* \* \*

The following day, Gillis methodically went through the entire ship, gathering the few remaining bottles and returning them to the locker where he had found them. Although he was tempted to jettison them into space, he was scared to return to Deck H5. Besides, there wasn't much booze left; during his long binge, he had managed to put away all but two bottles of scotch, one bottle of vodka, and four bottles of champagne.

The face that stared back at him from the mirror was unshaven and haggard, its eyes rimmed with dark circles. He was too tired to get rid of the beard, though, so he clipped it short with his scissors and let his hair remain at shoulder length. It was a new look for him, and he couldn't decide whether he liked it or not. Not that he cared much any more.

It took a couple of days for him to want to eat again, and even longer before he had a good night's sleep. More than a few times he was tempted to have another drink, but the memory of that terrifying moment in the airlock was enough to keep him away from the bottle.

Yet he never returned to the daily schedule he had previously set for himself. He lost interest in his studies, and he watched the few movies stored in the library until he found

himself able to recite the characters' lines from memory. The game table couldn't be repaired, so he never played chess again. He went jogging now and then, but only when there was nothing else to do, and not for very long.

He spent long hours lying on his bunk, staring into the deepest recesses of his memory. He replayed events from his childhood -- small incidents with his mother and father, the funny and stupid things he had done when he was a kid -- and thought long and hard about the mistakes he had made during his journey to adulthood. He thought about the girls he had known, refought old quarrels with ancient enemies, remembered good times with old friends, yet in the end he always came back to where he was.

Sometimes he went down to the command deck. He had long since given up on trying to have meaningful conversation with the AI; it only responded to direct questions, and even then in a perfunctory way. Instead, he opened the porthole shutters, and slumped in Captain Lee's chair while he stared at the distant and motionless stars.

One day, on impulse, he got up from the chair and walked to the nearest console. He hesitated for a moment, then he reached down and gently peeled back the strip of black tape he had fastened across the chronometer. It read:

P:/ 4.17.71 / 18.32.06 GMT

April 17, 2071. A little more six months had gone by since his awakening.

He could have sworn it had been six years.

\* \* \*

That evening, Gillis prepared dinner with special care. He selected the best cut of processed beef he could find in the storage locker and marinated it in a pepper sauce he had learned to make, and carefully sauteed the dried garlic before he added it to the mashed potatoes; while the asparagus steamed in lemon juice, he grilled the beef to medium-rare perfection. Earlier in the afternoon he had chosen a bottle of champagne from the liquor supply, which he put aside until everything else was ready. He cleaned up the wardroom and laid a single setting for himself at a table facing the porthole, and just before dinner he dimmed the ceiling lights.

He ate slowly, savoring every bite, closing his eyes from time to time as he allowed his mind's eye to revisit some of the fine restaurants in which he had once dined: a steak house in downtown Kansas City, a five-star Italian restaurant in Boston's Beacon Hill neighborhood, a seafood place on St. Simon's Island where the lobster came straight from the wharf. When he gazed out the porthole he didn't attempt to pick out constellations, but simply enjoyed the silent majesty of the stars; when he was through with dinner, he carefully laid his knife and fork together on his plate, refilled his glass with champagne, and walked over to couch, where he had earlier placed one last thing to round off a perfect evening.

Gillis had deliberately refrained from opening the box he kept in his locker; even during his worst moments, the lowest depths of his long binge, he had deliberately stayed away from it. Now the time had come for him to open the box, see what was inside.

He pulled out the photographs one at a time, studying them closely as he remembered the places where they had been taken, the years of his life that they represented. Here was his father; here was his mother, here he was at age seven, standing in the backyard of his childhood home in North Carolina, proudly holding aloft a toy spaceship he had been given for his birthday. Here was a snapshot of the first girl he had ever loved; here were several photos he had taken of her during a camping trip to the Smokey Mountains. Here was himself in his dress uniform during graduation exercises at the Academy; here he was during flight training in Texas. These images, and many more like them, were all he had brought with him from Earth: pictures from his past, small reminders of the places he had gone, the people whom he had known and loved.

Looking through them, he tried not to think about what he was about to do. He had reset the thermostat to lower the ship's internal temperature to 50 degrees at midnight, and he had instructed the AI to ignore the artificial day-night cycle he had previously programmed. He had left a note in Captain Lee's quarters, informing him that Eric Gunther was a saboteur and apologizing for having deprived the rest of the crew of rations and liquor. He would finish this bottle of champagne, though; no sense in letting it go to waste, and perhaps it would be easier to push the red button if he was drunk.

His life was over. There was nothing left for him. A few moments of agony would be a fair exchange for countless days of lonesome misery.

Gillis was still leafing through the photographs when he happened to glance up at the porthole, and it was at that moment when he noticed something peculiar: one of the stars was moving.

At first, he thought the champagne was getting to him. That, or it was a refraction of starlight caused by the tears which clung to the corners of his eyes. He returned his attention to a picture he had taken of his father shortly before he died. Then, almost reluctantly, he raised his head once more.

The window was filled with stars, all of them stationary ... save for one.

A bright point of light, so brilliant that it could have been a planet, perhaps even a comet. Yet the Alabama was now far beyond the Earth's solar system, and the stars were too distant to be moving relative to the ship's velocity. Yet this one seemed to be following a course parallel to the his own.

His curiosity aroused, Gillis watched the faraway light as it moved across the starscape. The longer he looked at it, the more it appeared as if it had a faint blue-white tail; it might be a comet, but if it was it was headed in the wrong direction. Indeed, as he continued to study it, the light became a little brighter and seemed to make a subtle shift in direction, almost as if...

The photos fell to the floor as he rushed toward the ladder.

By the time he reached the command deck, though, the object had vanished.

Gillis spent the next several hours searching the sky, using the navigational telescope in an attempt to catch another glimpse of the anomaly. When optical methods failed, he went to his com station and ran the broad-band selector up and down across the radio spectrum in an effort to locate a repeating signal against the warbling background noise of space. He barely noticed that the deck had become colder, that the ceiling lights had shut off; his previous intentions now forgotten, he had neglected to tell the AI that he had changed his mind.

The object had disappeared as quickly as it had appeared, yet he was absolutely certain of what he had seen. It wasn't a hallucination, of that he was positive, and the more he thought about it, the more convinced he became that what he had spotted wasn't a natural object but a spacecraft, briefly glimpsed from some inestimable distance -- a thousand kilometers? ten thousand? a million? -- as it passed the Alabama.

Yet where had it come from? Not from Earth, of that he could only be certain. Who was aboard, and where was it going? His mind conjured countless possibilities as he washed his dinner dishes, then went about preparing an early breakfast he had never expected to eat. Why hadn't it come closer? He considered this as he lay on his bunk, his hands propped behind his head. Perhaps it hadn't seen the Alabama. Might he ever see it again? Not likely, he eventually decided ... yet if there was one, wasn't there always a possibility that there might be others?

He realized that he had to record this incident, so that the rest of the crew would know what he had observed. Yet when he returned to the command deck and began to type a report into the ship's log, he discovered that words failed him. Confronted by a blank flatscreen, everything he wrote seemed hollow and lifeless, nothing evoking the mysterious wonder of what he had observed. It was then that he realized that, during the six long months he had been living within the starship, never once had he ever attempted to write a journal.

Not that there had been much worth recording for posterity: he woke up, he ate, he jogged, he studied, he got drunk, he considered suicide. Yet it seemed as if everything had suddenly changed. Only yesterday he had been ready to walk into the airlock, close his eyes, and jettison himself into the void. Now, he felt as if he had been given a new reason to live ... but that reason only made sense if he left something behind besides an unmade bunk and a half-empty champagne bottle.

He couldn't write on a screen, though, so he searched through the cargo lockers until he found what he needed: a supply of blank ledger books, intended for use by the quartermaster to keep track of expedition supplies, along with a box of pens. Much to his surprise, he also discovered a couple of blank sketchbooks, some charcoal pencils, and a watercolor paint kit; someone back on Earth apparently had the foresight to splurge a few kilos on rudimentary art supplies.

Gillis carried a ledger and a couple of pens back to the wardroom. Although the game table was ruined, it made a perfect desk once its top was shut. He rearranged the furniture so that the table faced the porthole. For some reason, writing in longhand felt more comfortable; after a couple of false starts, which he impatiently scratched out, he was finally able to put down a more or less descriptive account of what he had seen the night before, followed by a couple of pages of informal conjecture of what it might have been.

When he was done, his spine ached from having bent over the table for so long, and there now was a sore spot between the index and middle fingers of his right hand where he had gripped his pen. Although he had nothing more to say, nonetheless he had the need to say more; putting words to paper had been a release unlike any he had felt before, an experience that had transported him, however temporarily, from this place to somewhere else. His body was tired but his mind was alive; despite his physical exhaustion, he felt a longing for something else to write.

He didn't know it then, but he was beginning to go sane.

\* \* \*

As Gillis gradually resumed the daily schedule he had established for himself before the darkness had set in, he struggled to find something to write about. He tried to start a journal, but that was futile and depressing. He squandered a few pages on an autobiography before he realized that writing about his life made him self-conscious; in the end he ripped those pages from the ledger and threw them away. His poetry was ridiculous; he almost reconsidered a trip to the airlock when he re-read the tiresome doggerel he had contrived. In desperation he jotted down a list of things that he missed, only to realize that it was not only trivial but even more embarrassing than his auto-biography. That too ended in the wastebin.

For long hours he sat at his makeshift desk, staring through the porthole as he aimlessly doodled, making pictures of the bright star he had seen that eventful night. More than a few times he was tempted to find a bottle of scotch and get drunk, yet the recollection of what he had nearly done to himself kept him away from the liquor. More than anything else, he wanted to write something meaningful, at least to himself if not for anyone else, yet it seemed as if his mind had become a featureless plain. Inspiration eluded him.

Then, early one morning before the lights came on, he abruptly awoke with the fleeting memory of a particularly vivid dream. Most of his dreams tended to be about Earth -- memories of places he had been, people whom he had known -- yet this one was different; he wasn't in it, nor did it take place anywhere he had ever been.

He couldn't recall any specific details, yet he was left with one clear vision: a young man standing on an alien landscape, gazing up at an azure sky dominated by a large ringed planet, watching helplessly as a bright light -- Gillis recognized it as the starship he had seen -- raced away from him, heading into deep space.

Gillis almost rolled over and went back to sleep, yet he found himself sitting up and reaching for his robe. He took a shower, and as he stood beneath the lukewarm spray his imagination began to fill the missing pieces. The young man was a prince, a nobleman from some world far from Earth; indeed, Earth's history didn't even belong to the story. His father's kingdom had fallen to a tyrant and he had been forced to flee for his life, taking refuge on a starship bound for another inhabited planet. Yet its crew, fearing the tyrant's wrath, had cast him away, leaving him marooned upon a habitable moon of an uncharted planet, without any supplies or companionship...

Still absorbed by the story in his mind, Gillis got dressed, then went to the wardroom. He turned on a couple of lights, then he sat down at his desk and picked up his pen. There was no hesitation as he opened the ledger and turned to a fresh page; almost as if in a trance, he began to write.

\* \* \*

And he never stopped.

To be sure, there were many times when Gillis laid down his pen. His body had its limitations, and he couldn't remain at his desk indefinitely before hunger or exhaustion overcame him. And there were occasions when he didn't know what to do next; in frustration he would impatiently pace the floor, groping for the next scene, perhaps even the next word.

Yet after a time it seemed as if the prince knew what to do even before he did. As he explored his new world he encountered many creatures -- some of whom became friends, some of whom were implacable enemies -- and journeyed to places that tested the limits of Gillis's ever-expanding imagination. As he did, Gillis -- and Prince Rupurt, who subtly become his alter-ego -- found himself embarked on an adventure more grand than anything he had ever believed possible.

Gillis changed his routine, fitting everything around the hours he spent at his desk. He rose early and went straight to work; his mind felt sharpest just after he got out of bed, and all he needed was a cup of coffee to help him wake up a little more. Around midday he would prepare a modest lunch, then walk around the ring corridor for exercise; two or three times a week he would patrol the entire ship, making sure that everything was functioning normally. By early afternoon he was back at his desk, picking up where he had left off, impatient to find out what would happen next.

He filled a ledger before he reached the end of his protagonist's first adventure; without hesitation, he opened a fresh book and continued without interruption, and when he wore out his first pen, he discarded it without a second thought. A thick callus developed between the second and third knuckles of his right middle finger, yet he barely noticed. When the second ledger was filled, he placed it on top of the first one at the edge of his desk. He seldom read what he had written except when he needed to recheck the name of a character or the location of a certain place; after a while he learned to keep notes in a separate book so that he wouldn't have to look

back at what he had already done.

When evening came he would make dinner, read a little, spend some time gazing out the window. Every now and then he would go down to the command deck to check the nav table. Eventually the Alabama's distance from Earth could be measured in parsecs rather than single light-years, yet even this fact had become incidental at best, and in time it became utterly irrelevant.

Gillis kept the chronometers covered; never again did he ever want to how much time had passed. He stopped wearing shorts and a shirt and settled for merely wearing his robe; sometimes he went through the entire day naked, sitting at his desk without a stitch of clothing. He kept his fingernails and toenails trimmed, and he always paid careful attention to his teeth, yet he gave up cutting his hair and beard. He showered once or twice a week, if that.

When he wasn't writing, he was sketching pictures of the characters he had created, the strange cities and landscapes they visited. By now he had filled four ledgers with the adventures of his prince, yet words alone weren't sufficient to bring life to his imagination. The next time he returned to the cargo module for a new ledger and a handful of pens, he found the watercolor set he had noticed earlier and brought it back to the wardroom.

That evening, he began to paint the walls.

\* \* \*

One morning, he rose at his usual time. He took a shower, then he put on his robe -- which was now frayed at the cuffs and worn through at the elbows -- and made his long journey to the wardroom. Lately it had become more difficult for him to climb up and down ladders; his joints always seemed to ache, and aspirin relieved the pain only temporarily. There had been other changes as well; while making up his bunk a couple of days ago, he had been mildly surprised to find a long grey hair upon his pillow.

As he passed through the ring corridor, he couldn't help but to admire his work. The forest mural he had started some time ago was almost complete; it extended halfway from Module C1 to Module C3, and it was quite lovely to gaze upon, although he needed to add a little more detail to the leaves. That might take some doing; he had recently exhausted the watercolors, and since then had resorted to soaking the dyes out of his old clothes.

He had a light breakfast, then he carefully climbed down the ladder to his studio; he had long since ceased to think of it as the wardroom. His ledger lay open his desk, his pen next to the place where he had left off last night. Rupurt was about to fight a duel with the lord of the southern kingdom, and he was looking forward to seeing how all this would work out.

He farted loudly as he sat down, giving him reason to smile with faint amusement, then he picked up his pen. He read the last paragraph he had composed, crossed out a few words that seemed unnecessary, then raised his eyes to the porthole, giving himself a few moments to compose his thoughts.

A bright star moved against space, one more brilliant than any he had seen in a very long while.

He stared at it for a long while. Then, very slowly, he rose from his desk, his legs trembling beneath his robe. His gaze never left the star as he backed away from the window, taking one small step after another as he moved toward the ladder behind him.

The star had returned. Or perhaps this was another one. Either way, it looked very much like the mysterious thing he had seen once before, a long time ago.

The pen fell from his hand as he bolted for the ladder. Ignoring the arthritic pain shooting through his arms and legs, he scrambled to the top deck of the module, then dashed down the corridor to the hatch leading to hub shaft. This time, he knew what had to be done; get to his old station, transmit a clear vox transmission on all frequencies...

He had climbed nearly halfway down the shaft before he realized that he didn't know exactly what to say. A simple greeting? A message of friendship? Yes, that might do ... but how would he identify himself?

In that moment, he realized that he couldn't remember his name.

Stunned by this revelation, he clung to the ladder. His name. Surely he could recall his own name....

Gillis. Of course. He was Gillis. Gillis, Leslie. Lieutenant Commander Leslie Gillis. Chief communications officer of ... yes, right ... the URSS Alabama. He smiled, climbed down another rung. It had been so long since he had heard anyone say his name aloud, he probably couldn't even speak it himself...

Couldn't he?

Gillis opened his mouth, urged himself to say something. Nothing emerged from his throat save for a dry croak.

No. He could still speak; he was simply out of practice. All he had to do was get to his

station. If he could remember the correct commands, he might still be able to send a signal to Prince Rupert's ship before it passed beyond range. He just needed to...

His left foot missed the next rung on the ladder. Thrown off-balance, he glanced down to see what he had done wrong ... then his right hand slipped off the ladder. Suddenly he found himself falling backward, his arms and legs flailing helplessly. Down, down, down...

"Oh, no," he said softly.

An instant later he hit the bottom of the shaft. There was a brief flash of pain as his neck snapped, then blackness rushed in upon him and it was all over.

\* \* \*

A few hours later, one of the 'bots found Gillis's body. It prodded him several times, confirming that the cold organic form lying on the floor of Deck H5 was indeed lifeless, then it relayed a query to the AI. The molecular intelligence carefully considered the situation for a few fractions of a second, then it instructed the spider to jettison the corpse. This was done within the next two minutes; ejected from the starship, Gillis spun away into the void, another small piece of debris lost between the stars.

The AI determined that it was no longer necessary for the crew compartments to remain habitable, so it returned the thermostat setting to 50 degrees. A 'bot moved through the ship, cleaning up after Gillis and returning the rations he hadn't consumed to the storage lockers. It left untouched the thirteen ledgers Gillis had completed, along with the fourteenth that lay open upon his desk. There was nothing that could be done about the paintings on the walls of Module C7 and the ring access corridor, so they were left alone. Once the 'bot completed its chores, the AI closed the shutters of the windows Gillis had left open, then methodically turned off all the lights, one by one.

The date was February 25, 2102, GMT. The rest of the flight went smoothly, without any further incident.

End