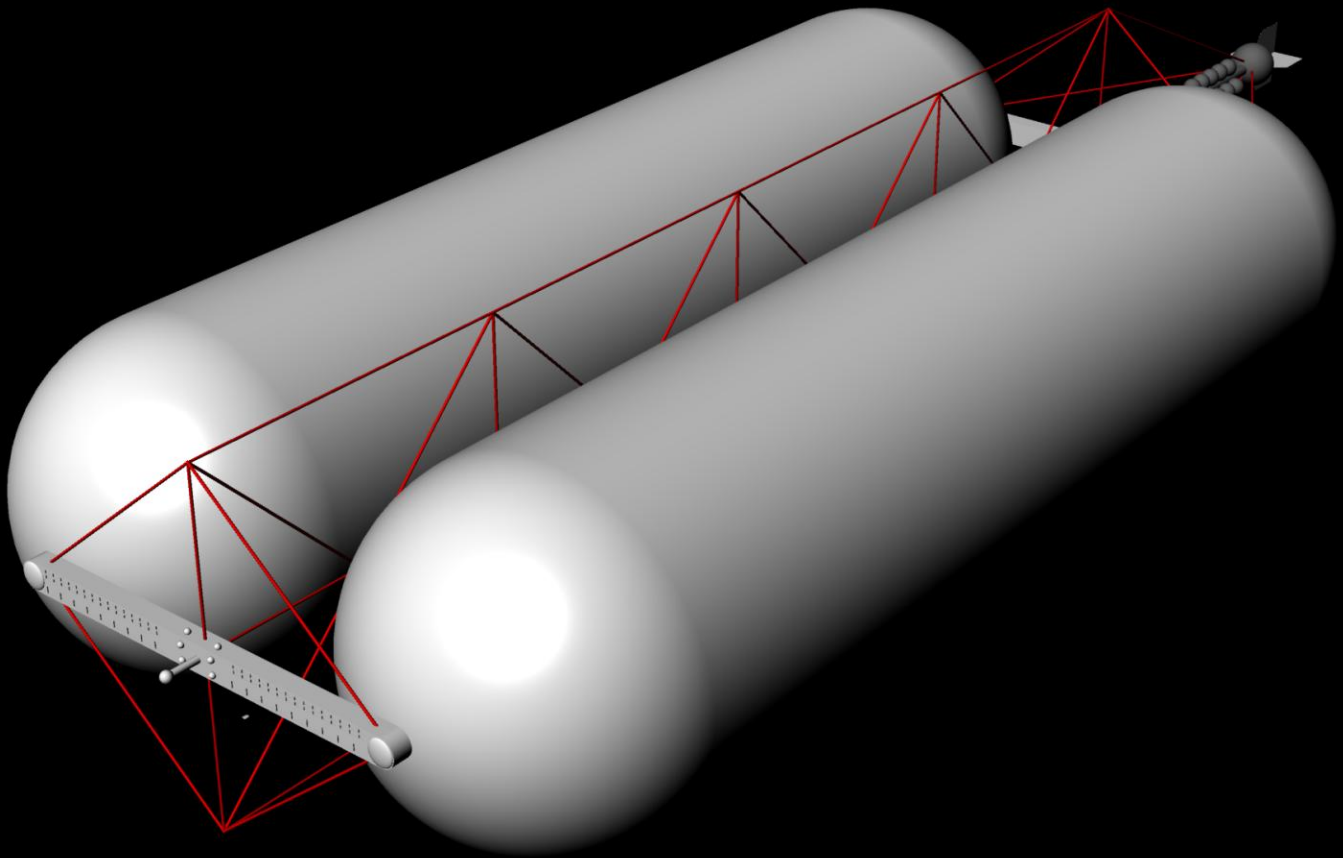


Mass Disappearance



By Scott Lowther

Copyright © 2014 Scott Lowther
scottlowther@ix.netcom.com 1st release, April 2014

MASS DISAPPEARANCE

by

SCOTT LOWTHER

Want to piss me off? Violate the laws of physics right in front of me. Don't ask me why, that sort of thing just rubs me the wrong way.

So, like most other freighters, most of our trips were dull as dirt. Ferrying frozen colonists or other passengers and their doodads from civilized systems to civilized systems, stuff like that. Even so, on occasion some wacky crap happened. There's some weird stuff out there, trust me, and some of it ain't near to being explained. Some of it probably never will be explained, and is probably best avoided. Like the time we went to Gunston Station. Yeah, *that* Gunston Station, in the Gunston System. Yes, I know, nobody goes there anymore. Yes, I know the whole system is quarantined. But once upon a time it was a hundred thousand people in an O'Neill set up shop in a quiet backwater system, busily mining tritium by the gigaton out of a friendly little gas giant with an unlikely abundance of the stuff. We were the last commercial transport to go there before the whole place went to hell. Well, I think. Let me explain.

We came out of hyperspace on the tenth day out of our home base on Atlantis. A little off the mark: one hundred twenty AUs from the primary. We'd planned on ten AUs. Sure, you expect to be a little off... how accurate can you possibly be when aiming at a target dozens of lightyears away while flying blind in your own little pocket universe? But being off that far was, at least for us, unprecedented. George, the ships aivatar, was particularly annoyed; he wouldn't even talk to us, just grumbled and tried to blame human error. That's just the kind of guy he was. A bit of a dick. He got better after he took a shotgun blast to the central processor, though. Different story.

Normal procedure would've been to contact Gunston Station by hyperwave and update the flight plan then do a quick hyperjump the rest of the way, but George was too upset... he just recalculated and jumped right in. We popped in a hundred thousand clicks from the Station, which was in the L5 point with the primary and the gas giant. Couldn't see the gas giant real well from that distance, but the star was nice and bright. Too far to make out the Station as anything other than a speck in the distance. The sublight engines drove us the rest of the way in.

From there we should've been able to easily contact the station over regular radio. Hell, we should have been able to hear all kinds of radio and hyperwave chatter... from the Station, from the facilities orbiting the gas giant, from the prospectors among the asteroids and comets, from the ships going every which way. But all we got was static.

The station was clearly there... we could see it through the telescope, bounce radar off it, pick it up on infra red. The neutron and gamma detectors picked up the faint traces of a large, functional fusion reactor. So, it was there, they just weren't talking to us. All of our scopes were focussed on the station, at first to see that it was intact, then to look for damage or other ships... of which we saw none.

It was a standard O'Neill: two hemisphere-capped cylinders, gleaming metal hulls five kilometers in diameter and twenty kilometers long, side-by-side and linked with big crossbars at the fore and aft hubs. Big fusion reactor sticking out the tail end of it, big zero-g docking area on the front-end crossbar. There should have been a swarm of ships around it... transports to and from the gas giant and the asteroids, transports from out of system, maintenance bots, the works. Not a one. The outer surface of the cylinders were nearly mirror smooth; that kept us from noticing right off that the cylinders weren't turning. George of course noticed it first.

A colony station like this is a hell of a thing to see up close. Just gigantic, you know? But to see the thing sitting there dead as a mackerel, with no lights on and the cylinders stopped... that was just disturbing. I've seen my share of Marie Celestes over the years, and there's always just something terribly wrong about them. But a Marie that big? Ugh.

Best as we could see on radar and visual, it was perfectly intact. The cylinders are of course dotted with hatches for escape ships; none of them seem to have been opened since they were installed. No responses to hails.

All five of us were on the flight deck, trying to figure out what to do... me in the pilots seat, Captain Sarah in the co-pilots seat, our Thessi fix-it critter Loff standing, George surrounding us all and our one passenger, Mr. Cranston, just standing there all jittery. The ships cat was... who knows. For once, she wasn't prancing along the instrument panel.

We'd come a long way, after all, and wouldn't get full payment until we delivered our cargo at the destination. Cranston had family on the station, so he was bound and determined to get on board. Sarah and Loff and I all had an unpleasant feeling about the situation... but heck, along with the money and the wasted time if we split,

we were all curious. George of course just sorta sniffed at us. It was clear he felt that this must all be some humans fault.

This just wasn't what we'd planned.

About two weeks earlier, this fare came in looking to go on to Gunston Station. One in-the-flesh passenger, four in cryosleep and a few hundred downloaded into a storage matrix, all staff from some R&D firm on Mars. Their papers and their story checked out and their cash was good; a nice, bland milk run of a trip. We'd used the spaceports hyperwave comm system to reach out to Gunston and file the plan. We heard 'em clear as day... everything out Gunston way was fine and dandy, no problems to report, come right on in we'll leave the light on for you thank you good day. So... off we went. Ten days we spent in hyperspace, cut off from the universe and entirely uneventful. Our in-the-flesh passenger - Mr. Cranston - pretty much kept to himself, stayed in his cabin except to go to the cargo bay a few times a day and check on his charges. Squirrely little fella, a bit excitable. Had a sister on the station he was going to see; real proud of her, meet him in the dining area and he wouldn't stop yapping about how she was a physicist or some such, head of the project at Gunston that the passengers were heading out to work on. And then, just as we should be getting ready for some simple docking and payment collection, all our plans went kerblooey on account of nobody being home.

With nobody minding the store there was nobody to operate the docking bays, so George sent out a bot. It accessed the manual door controls next to one small docking bay, found that the power was still on, got the doors open. A whiff of atmosphere puffed out when the doors opened. That's odd, you know... should have been zero pressure in the docking bay, or full atmospheric. Slight pressure meant that a slow leak had built up within the bay, coming from the rest of the station. Station maintenance was off their game. Well, the bay was unoccupied, so we just slid on in, the landing gear clamped to the floor grating. George had the bot shut the door, pressurize the bay and turn on the gravity field. A bunch of junk rained down when the gravity came on in the bay... surprised the bejesus out of us. There was all kinds of stuff that had been left floating around. A shoe - a kids shoe - landed on the canopy right in front of me and just sat there.

So there we sat. Cranston was all for dashing out of the ship; Loff was lost in thought. To my shock, Cap'n Sarah finally decided that we should go exploring. No answers seemed to be coming our way, so if we wanted 'em, we'd have to go get 'em.

In retrospect, we should've simply had George send out a bunch of bots. Heh... at the time we probably thought of that, but we wanted to go see for ourselves what was going on. So we suited up. Loff didn't... his people aren't nearly as naturally curious as ours, he was just as happy to stay behind and mind the store. Sarah and Cranston donned the standard ships environment suits. I put on one of those too, but with some tactical armor and a whole lot of guns. There's no dangerous situation that can be made safer by walking into it ignorant *and* unarmed. I would've packed a few tactical nukes as well, but Sarah had never allowed me to bring any of mine on board. Damn.

So the three of us set out from the ships airlock, accompanied by three bots guided by George. We weren't *completely* stupid, though we were pretty close. While he was guiding the bots, George was also trying to crack into the stations computer through open terminals. As we got to the personnel doors, he finally had some success. "I've accessed basic systems," he said. "But there's no sign of the station AI. And all records seem to have been wiped."

"That's weird," Sarah said as we gathered around the sealed door.

"That's nothing," George said. "The station chronometer is also offline and wiped." They left the power on but shut down the station rotation and the clocks?

Beyond the docking bay door was the standard maze of corridors, offices, storage rooms, embarkation lobbies, workshops, transport system and whatnot that you find near any docking bay. The transport line with a cargo sled was just a short stumble away – the gravity plating was a bit wobbly. Apart from the wonky gravity, clocks and computers, all systems seemed to be working properly. There were no signs of panic, or struggle, or a rush on evacuation ships. Certainly no signs of disaster; everything was intact, except for occasional bits of random consumer goods. That weirded me out, I can assure you. Same with Sarah. And I'm pretty sure same with Cranston, though he never said a peep. All I got from him was a look of relief when he saw a sign that pointed out we were heading to Cylinder B. I guessed that's the one that his family lived in.

The cargo sled took a corner and headed towards the cylinder hub, through the massive magnetic bearings. As you go through, the gravity from the deck plating cuts off and you are left in pretty much freefall. The sled wouldn't cross from the fixed crossbar to what should have been the rotating hub-tunnel, so we pushed off and floated onward. The tunnel was well lit: the far end of it, maybe a hundred meters off, was bright as daylight. We drifted off towards the light.

At the end of the hundred meters worth of tunnel, you've passed through the magnetic bearings and are in a hemispherical endcap. There's another terminal there, where you're supposed to be able to hop a shuttle that can

take you all along the core spine that runs the length of the habitat. There's also a bunch of windows, a big annular low-gravity viewing area where you can look out over pretty much the whole inner surface of the habitat. Remember, you're like two and a half kilometers up from the floor, so it's a hell of a view. All the main internal lighting in this type of O'Neill is on the core spine, shining straight down from above. Usually the habs in each pair are different, with one industry and housing, the other more like farms and forests and nature and stuff, but even so there are some pretty common features such as the quartets of radial support struts connecting the spine to the hull every so many kilometers. All the ones I've seen are pretty impressive sights... big cylindrical fields of green or urban areas, rivers, roads, aircraft flying around, people basejumping from the core to land under chutes or fanpacks. But this one... damn.

The cylinder we entered must've originally been given over mostly to farming or forests, but something had gone wrong. The lights were still on but the gravity off, and the pressure vessel was still sealed. So it remained a viable place for plant life to survive. And boy did it... the whole cylinder was covered in green fluff. But the fluff, which was trees and weeds and whatnot, was no longer held down by artificial gravity. Trees grew hundreds of meters high. Balls of weeds dozens of meters in diameter floated free, or tethered by long vines. Ivy, or something, seemed to cover all the core spine supporting struts. Vines snaked upwards, reaching towards the lights on the core spine; some grew kilometers long, reaching from the walls to pretty near the core. We couldn't see that any had grown all the way to the core, but it looked like a few had tried; there were clouds of smoke some ways down the core where weeds had gotten too close to the lights and caught fire.

In every O'Neill this size I've ever seen, the far end, twenty or more kilometers away, is a bit hazy. But this one... you couldn't see a third of the way down the length of it. With no gravity all the water in the lakes and streams and sewers and such was free to float around, and I guess it mostly evaporated into one vast uniform cloud. Plus there were darker clouds here and there... smoke, some of them, maybe, but also probably vast blots of pollen. I could feel my allergies acting up even though my suit was sealed up tight. Bleah.

It was a mess. Of course, there was only one question: how the hell had the plants grown this much in only a week and a half? Well, there was more than one question... another was "is there really enough organic matter on board to feed this much plant growth?" And of course the ever-popular "*now* what do we do?"

We must've floated there for a quarter hour, just looking at the jungle around us. Sarah and I, we had nowhere to go... we sure didn't have need to go gardening. But Cranston started to panic. Kept going on about his sister and her kids, down there in the weeds somewhere. But nobody answered any communications. George even rang every phone number he could find in the stunted computer records. Nothing. Cranston was able to call up the map of the place on his faceplate; his sister's apartment complex was down there in the weeds, not far from the base of the endcap. Just two and a half kilometers down, two and a half kilometers forward.

The core shuttle system, looking like any subway that's ever been built, still seemed functional. Cranston was insistent that we take it to the support strut closest to his sister's apartment; he went kinda bugnuts when Sarah and I hung back. Sarah was disturbed by the place and didn't want to go down into that mess. I agreed... I didn't want her to get into some unnecessary danger. Of course, I didn't want to get *me* into any unnecessary danger either, but I think I sound more heroic if I say that my main motivation was to keep her from harm. And let's face it, we weren't explorers. We weren't Space Marines, cops or rescue personnel. Basically, I was just a truck driver.

But ah, hell, it was his sister. Could you really say "no" to a guy in that much distress over his lost sister and her kids? Well... I could, and was about to. But he was smart enough to appeal to Sarah, not to me. She was always more sympathetic than me. Better person, I guess. He talked her into it, and thus I had no choice but to go along. So we and the three bots hopped on the shuttle. The bots managed to get the shuttle working; it drove us the three kilometers or so to the first station, which was a ring around the core connected to the four spokes that radiated out to the hull. An elevator was waiting at the spoke Cranston wanted to ride down. He launched at it, the rest of us just followed.

Let me tell you, elevators in a zero gravity facility need to be designed right. This one wasn't... no handholds, no seats, no straps. Made for a rather undignified ride.

Weird as everything had been, all the mechanisms had worked more or less fine. So it was actually a bit of a relief when the elevator stopped early, a hundred or so meters up... something finally not working entirely right. Of course, this resulted in everyone slamming into the floor and bouncing when we came to a stop. Warning lights blinked and alarms beeped; the panel said that the elevator shaft was blocked below this point. We never did find out what it was blocked with, but Sarah guessed that it might've been weeds that had invaded the shaft and had filled it with crap thirty stories high. In any event, that was as far down as it was going to go. The bots pried the door open to find a blank wall. Then they popped open the emergency hatch up above; George let us know that there was a door

only a few meters up. So we floated up though into the elevator shaft. With no sense of up or down, I had this moment of panic when I was sure that I was staring down into a poorly lit bottomless pit.

The bots pried the shaft doors open. We found that it opened up onto a balcony that wrapped all the way around the spoke. Apparently in better days this was an open air cafe; the tables and chairs had long since all floated away, but the signs remained, along with a small kitchen, some bathrooms and an emergency closet. Fortunately there were hand holds... railings on the wall and the edge and ivy that had spiraled around the spoke and covered everything. We held onto the railings and ivy to keep from floating away.

Again, everything looked perfectly intact, if rather mossy and weed-covered. The emergency closet intrigued me, so I had George use the bots to pry it open. Bandages, meds and other first aid supplies came spilling out, floated off into the great green beyond.

Latched into the emergency closet were what I was hoping to find: fanpacks. These were rescue models, designed to be put on in a hurry and jet you off into the sky in a moments notice to get to the spine or go up the outside of the spokes, or even just get from one side of the hull to the other faster than the elevators could do it. If we were to go down, this would let us get down there, and back up, in short order. The closet held five of the packs; one each to the three humans, one to one of the bots. The other two bots linked together and shared the fifth.

Cranston could see where his sister's apartment building must be, roof just under the canopy of green a few hundred meters to one side. I had George take over flight control of the fanpacks... he was a pain in the ass, but I'd rather have him piloting than have people flying incompetently all over everywhere.

So down we flew, in formation like so many ducks. The point should have probably been taken by one of the bots, seeing as how they're expendable, or by me, seeing as how I was wearing armor, but George put Cranston at the point. Cranston was first to reach the foliage, feet-first while decelerating. George flew him down to where he could get a hand hold on the broad leaves, then folded the fans over his back, then did the same for the rest of us. So there we stood, sorta, our feet in the weeds, the rest of us in the sky. The bots set to work; they turned into a flurry of activity and mowed a path down into the tangles of vines and stems below us. They didn't have to go very far. The greenery was little more than a shell; more than a few meters in, the leaves were gone, as were most of the stems... and most of the light. With the lights on our suits, we could see a good distance; the stems formed a vertical forest, kinda like stands of bamboo, but with several meters between each stem. The plants were all slowly growing towards the core spine lights, I guess, and didn't waste much effort or material growing down here in the dark.

The shell of greenery was about a dozen meters above the roof of the apartment building. We crawled our way towards it, found that it was covered with a tracery of mostly dead vines. Like any apartment rooftop, it had a door leading into the building; of course, it was locked. The bots saw to that. As soon as the door opened, Cranston leaped through and shot down the stairwell, demonstrating better zero-g agility than I would've credited him with. The lights in the hallways were still on.

His sister's apartment was three floors down from the roof, so it didn't take him long to reach it. When we got there, he had already opened the door... he either had a key, or it recognized him. Don't know. Anyway, we followed him in. I hadn't known what to expect. I would've guessed that it'd either be empty, or a scene of horror... dead bodies, blood splashed around, something like that. But it was just an apartment like any other, furnished like you might expect, except that the furnishings were all floating in mid air. Cranston was dashing from room to room, basically swimming through the cloud of stuff that filled each room... books, clothes, childrens toys, bedding, chairs, pictures that once hung on the wall. It was all there... but it all looked terrible. Everything paper or fabric was moldy, blackened by mildew and decay. The kitchen and bathroom showed evidence that the water had come out and floated around, splashing everything. The walls, floor and ceiling were stained by substances mundane but disgusting. Were it not for the unreal sight of everything simply floating around, it would have looked squalid, like some 19th century tenement out of Dickens. The decay seemed the product of years, not the few days that had passed since we had communicated with this place. Apart from us bumping around, it was silent.

The items floating around seemed like they had, in better days, been fine products – a lot of it hand made. The squalor was clearly the result of whatever had happened to the station, not some economic distress or other calamity prior to everything going to hell. There was no sign of packing, nor sign of disaster... nor sign of the people themselves. They simply weren't there. Cranston... well, he went frantic, then went mad. He screamed. He threw things. He wailed, yelled things that didn't make much sense. And he bounced off the walls. Sarah floated up beside me, put her hand on my shoulder and nodded towards the door. She looked sad. I couldn't blame her. We were in the presence of some great tragedy, and we couldn't even begin to explain what had happened. She and I left the apartment, leaving Cranston to rave at his loss and confusion.

The bots were in the hallway, forcing all the doors open. From what we could see, the same story played out over and over... apartments full of floating stuff covered in filth and rot, slowly bouncing off walls that had once been brightly colored, now indescribable tones of gray and brown and black. It didn't help that the lights were

failing, and the surviving lights were themselves smeared with a thin coat of the muck of mold and dust and dirt that seemed to coat everything. A few apartments showed signs of fire, but in rooms full of floating water, fires hadn't stood much chance of taking hold. Sarah wandered in to one apartment; I floated through the door on the opposite side of the hallway. In the dimly lit main room there was only a limited cloud of stuff; the previous inhabitant apparently wasn't much of one for knickknacks. Plus all the interior doors were closed, locking away whatever cloud of flotsam those rooms held. But the main room did hold one item that caught my attention...a grand piano. In its day it must have been a marvelous piece of work... all wood and ivory and steel, not plastic and glass. It might've even come from pre-Evacuation Earth, from the looks of the ornamentation. But the general decay had done the wood no favors.

The piano floated about a meter above the floor, in what looked like the position it had originally been in. It seemed to have simply... risen. Something about it fascinated me... just the wrongness of the situation, I think. I can't play a tune to save my life, but floating in front of it I poked a few of the keys. The piano actually worked; I think it was out of tune. But the sound echoed off the moldy walls in a way I just didn't like. I felt like the sound was attracting the attention of things that were best left undisturbed. I pushed off from the piano, sending it slowly drifting backwards. I bumped into Sarah; she had come in and was floating behind me. She looked... I dunno. "Concerned," I guess.

"I want to get out of here," she said. I nodded glumly. "Want to show you something first, though." She led me out of that apartment and into the one across the hall. Here, there was not nearly as much stuff floating, even though it had clearly been a standard family apartment based on the larger furniture which remained. But the windows were fully open, with no screens; the smaller floating items had apparently drifted out into the murk beyond. A few vines had penetrated the window and had tried exploring the apartment before they dried up and died. Sarah pointed out the window.

Two of the bots had exited the building and were outside exploring at ground level, each with many bright lamps lighting up the night. As I watched, the lamps started breaking away from the bots, floating under their own power to separate locations to spread the light around and get a wider field of view. Outside this side of the apartment was an open area, a road intersection and a wide square. Beyond that was what must once have been a park. But no more... we could see that the trees, grass, weeds had all run riot. The trees grew up to the canopy; the weeds, probably mostly dead, seemed to fill the spaces between the tree trunks. It was a vast mass of plant matter.

Fortunately, we couldn't smell a thing, what with the suits; be damned if I was going to crack the thing open to take a sniff. Sarah, I think, knew what I was thinking... always wondered a bit about her in that regard. Anyway, she asked George what the air was like down there. Oxygen was up around thirty-five percent but pressure wasn't up appreciably. A lot of oxygen had been added to the air, and a lot of nitrogen taken out. Carbon dioxide was nil, and it stank of rotting vegetation. Pollen was through the roof; humidity was near eighty percent. Organic compounds from simple to really complex filled the air down there. And it was silent: there were bugs in the canopy, but not much of anything down below. And with no rotation, the natural cycles that kept air circulating in the habitat had ceased. No wind, not even a breeze, above the canopy... and absolutely nothing moving down below. Even dust in the air had ground to a halt.

Even so, Sarah and I felt sure that something was out there. Just that feeling, you know? Like you're being watched. But the bots had spread themselves all over hell and gone out there, said there was nothing. Still, I found that I had my pistol in my hand. I never remembered actually pulling it out of the holster, but there it was. So I put it back. I told George to keep an eye on the park. For once, he didn't give a rude answer, he just did it. You could tell that George was busy concentrating when he was businesslike. Being a dick takes effort, I guess.

Sarah suddenly noticed that the silence was really silent. As in, no Cranston yelling and screaming. I figured he'd finally settled down; Sarah and I left the apartment to go find him. Imagine how thrilled we were to find his suit – with him not in it – floating like a splayed jellyfish in the hallway. “Shit,” I said. I'm eloquent like that. Without his suit, we couldn't track him unless we saw him.

Sarah asked George if he knew where Cranston was. He said no... then a few seconds later said yes. Sent images to our faceplates taken from one of the bot-cams floating outside showing Cranston launching himself out of one of the ground-level main doors, heading towards the park. He had gone beyond raving; he was flat-out nuts. He'd torn most of his clothes off; the look on his face bore little relationship to what you'd expect from a sane human. He flew at a pretty good clip across the road, across the square, and smack into one of the trees. Didn't even faze him... he just crawled around it and shot into the woods. Sarah and I flew back to the open window; by then he was gone from sight. The separated bot-lamps and bot-cams flew of their own accord into the woods, chasing him. A few sharp and moving shadows were cast as the lights passed into the woods, then it was all black.

One of the bot-lamps, with a bot-cam in tow, almost caught up with Cranston. He was incredibly fast in among the trees and weeds; the bots could barely keep up. He was just a light shape in the dark. You'd get a glimpse

of him, then he was gone again. This went on for a minute and a half or so... then... hmm. How to say it. Well, things got worse.

The leading bot-cam and bot-lamp caught up with him, the lamp first. He'd stopped dead in his tracks, as it were. He was floating vertically between a pair of trees, a bunch of crap – twigs and old dead leaves and dirt and rocks and such – floating around him. The bot-lamp was maybe two meters off to the side of him, the camera maybe seven or eight meters behind, moving in. I think he was looking up at something, though it was hard to tell from behind. He was still yammering, crazy stuff. Only thing he said that didn't sound like gibberish was "I told them," whatever that meant.

Couldn't see what he was looking at; the lamp was shining at him from the side. But... the darkness in front of him... it fell on him. Best way I can describe it. *The darkness fell on him.* Took out the lamp, too. Later when we could play the video back in slow motion, the darkness was like a wall of translucent black goo; the lamp lit a bit of it just as it fell on the guy. There was an audible "splat." I don't know whether it was the darkness that went splat, or Cranston... in either case, Cranston never made another sound.

After the lamp got taken out the bot-cam switched to infra-red. All it could see was a vague *something* ahead of it. And when it flew closer, there was a blur of motion and it was gone too. According to George, it was destroyed, or at least turned off or its transmissions completely blocked. The following bots-cams and bot-lamps slowed, but continued forwards... and they too started getting taken out when they approached where Cranston had been. Then the bots stopped... and they continued to get eliminated, in a pattern moving towards *us*. Oh shit, you'd think I would've said. But no, it was actually Sarah. What I said was that we gotta go.

"What about Cranston? Should we look for him?" Sarah was, as I'd said, the humanitarian.

"Fuck *that* noise. The man's dead." As I'd said, I'm not so much the humanitarian. Right then I really wanted that tactical nuke that Sarah would never let me bring. I was thinking that those woods would look *spectacular* repainted in "combustion orange;" based on the rapidly decreasing supply of bot-cams, whatever it was out there in the woods was getting closer.

"George," I said, "Get us the hell out of here." The fanpacks flipped open and roared to life, full power; even with an incredibly efficient AI controlling them, Sarah and I used hands and feet to bounce off walls and pull ourselves along handrails to get up the stairwell. I was sure I could hear something very big making "squish" noises near the bottom of the building. There were no more surviving bits of the bots outside the building.

We flew out the rooftop door towards the tunnel in the foliage, but the tunnel had already started to close back up. The plants were greedy for every little bit of real estate. Without the bots to serve as weed whackers, it was up to me... more specifically, it was up to my omnigun. Sarah had thought me odd for buying that admittedly ridiculous-looking weapon, but I didn't hear her complain when I used it to lob a grenade into the foliage. It blew a fair – but incomplete - hole in the canopy; a flip of a switch brought the flame thrower online, and a quick blast set the whole canopy aflame. The high oxygen content turned the fire into a massive conflagration over our heads; but in our suits, which would allow us to walk around on Mercury at noon, who cared? The fanpacks blasted us through the thinnest, weakest part of the burning canopy. And we were out, back in the sky. George hovered us for a second, to make sure that we were intact and nothing was on fire, then he started us upwards again. I couldn't wait to rattle around in the elevator again.

Suddenly the fanpacks roared to full emergency thrust, launching us up like cannonshots. I couldn't help but look down. The canopy was blazing over a diameter of fifty, sixty meters, that weird, pulsing sort of fire you get in zero-g... and was bulging upwards. Something underneath it was big and trying to push upwards; George had seen this and accelerated us at full power to get away from it. The whole flaming bit of the canopy was pushed upwards. I don't know what it was, but I do know I emptied the omnigun into it... grenades, slugs, needles, everything that gun packed except for flame, which was out of range already. That just seemed to piss off whatever was down there. I swear, this ain't no bullshit, a whip or a vine or something shot out at me. I was more than a hundred meters up, and I saw the whip shoot along past me, over my head, missed my by three, four meters. Waved around overhead, making George back off on the upward flight. Black, kinda slick, wet looking thing. Thick as my arm. All the omnigun had left was a quick shot of flame, which didn't seem to do squat to the thing. I dropped it, unslung the shotgun and started pumping tungsten buckshot into it, blew wet squishy chunks off it. It seemed to notice that, pulled back a bit, enough so that I got past it. The whip missed and fell back down into the flames. Whatever was down there seemed to sorta settle back down; the flaming canopy collapsed, leaving a dark hole. You could see the apartment building; the roof had caved in.

I looked up; we had shot right past the balcony with the cafe, and were heading directly towards the observation deck at the endcap-end of the spine. Sarah was far ahead of me. Simple physics, she had less mass, thus accelerated faster. But a minute or two later I caught up with her as we approached the observation deck. George

had her hovering at idle power in front of the windows. Windows there were... but no door. George had taken us somewhere with no damned door!

“Gun,” was all he said. *Ah*. A few blasts from the shotgun put an adequate hole in the window. Once again, the fanpacks ran to full power, yanking us down the tunnel, around corners, down hallways and at last to the cargo bay. As we flew over the threshold the gravity plating grabbed hold, but the fanpacks kept us aloft and moving at a faster pace than I could’ve run. And so we flew right into the *George*. As soon as the outer door closed, Sarah yelled “Get us out of here!” The airlock hosed us down with who knows what noxious chemicals, then set us on fire; George was clearly taking no chances that a biological nasty might’ve come on board with us. Then we were hosed down with good old fashioned clean water, and the suits fell off us. The inner door opened and we ran to the flight deck.

Loff was in the co-pilots seat, looking worried as only a Thessi can. “I want to go home,” says he.

“You and me both, brother,” I says. George had us already in motion. We’d detached from the floor, landing gear retracted, turned to exit the docking bay door. The *closed* door.

I gestured angrily at the door, looked up at the ceiling of the flight deck. “George,” I said, “open the goddamn door and get us gone from this dump.”

“The door mechanism is not meant to open with the bay fully pressurized. I can have a bot out to close off and depressurize the bay momentarily.”

“Like hell,” I said. “Remember the window? Gun.” Sarah, seated in the captains chair between and behind the two pilots seats, just nodded.

The *George*, you’ll recall, was a cargo ship, not a warship. We didn’t have missile racks and big-ass laser batteries. But you gotta be nuts to go out into the dark in a ship that cannot drive off the occasional dumbass who thinks it’d be an entertaining jape to try to take your ship from you. So we had anti-armor machine guns mounted in retractable turrets, top and bottom, fore and aft. Pretty much an off the shelf system. Illegal on a few worlds; but those worlds sucked, and we didn’t go there. The machine guns did a fair job of turning the door into a ragged mesh; the engines on full thrust, along with the pressure of the remaining air in the bay, were more than enough to punch us through. Sounded horrible, though... scraped up the whole ship. At the time, I couldn’t have cared less.

“Stand us off ten kilometers,” Sarah said. And so we drifted out to ten kilometers, turned the ship to look at the station. It looked just as it had on the way in, if you didn’t notice the screwed up docking bay. At least nothing reached out to grab us.

We looked at the station for maybe twenty seconds. “Can anything think of one reason why we should stay here a minute longer?” Cap’n Sarah asked. Nobody said a word. “Then let’s *goooooooooooo*.”

“No can do,” George replied. “Hyperdrive is not functional.”

“What? Why?” I’m pretty sure that was all three of us.

“Outer surface hyperdrive circuitry was damaged when we shoved our way through the door. Had we waited a few moments for a bot to properly operate the docking bay pressure cycle, *like I recommended*, we would now be on our way back to Atlantis.” Sumbitch sounded smug as all get-out. All I could do was sigh.

Sarah also sighed. “Send bots out to fix the circuitry.”

“Already done.”

“Time to finish?”

“No more than a half hour.”

“Fine.” Another sigh. We were all silent for a bit. While this was by no means good news, it wasn’t terrible news. And it seemed unlikely that anything would come out of the station to get us. We had escaped whatever it was that had trashed the station, with only the loss of a fare... and a passenger. All we had to do was wait a bit, and we could go home. It seems odd to me now, but at the time I never even thought about the salvage value of the station. But then, how do you claim a derelict *city*?

After a few silent minutes, Sarah asked, “What else in this system was populated?”

George explained, in reasonable terms but a condescending tone, that several thousand people worked at the tritium mining facilities around the gas giant named Jenkins. There was a Mars-mass planet (Landis) only a million kilometers from the primary; an Earth-mass planet (Yenne) about 7 million kilometers out. Both were tidally locked, hot as hell and loaded with enough heavy metals to be worth automated mining facilities that sometimes had visits. There were a number of asteroids and comets that had small farmsteads on them, but nothing major. Attempts at contact via radio and hyperwave continued to be unsuccessful.

“What’s closest?” Sarah asked. Landis was closest at the moment. “Put it on screen. Let’s see what’s there. Maybe someone can tell us what’s going on.”

The one really good telescope the *George* had emerged from its bay in the nose of the ship and turned towards Landis. The image appeared on the main display... an empty patch of sky, slightly lit up by the proximity of the star. “Landis is not in the position charts say it should be in,” George said, sounding annoyed. I just knew that he was blaming humans for incorrect data entry. Sarah asked him to please look for Landis, wherever it was. After panning the scope over a wide swath of sky, he found the only thing in Landis’ orbit. But instead of a super-hot metal-rich world a bit smaller than Mars, all that appeared was a dust cloud. “Where’s Landis?” Loff asked. I thought it was a fair question.

The image slewed back and forth, scanning the vicinity. Nothing appeared apart from the dust cloud. Data on the screen gave approximate dimensions of the cloud: a prolate spheroid about fifty thousand kilometers thick by eighty thousand kilometers long. Mass readings indicated that it was only a few percent the mass of Landis. George was silent. “OK, show me Yenne,” Sarah said. The telescope repositioned for a few minutes; clearly Yenne was also out of place. At last, though, George found it. This time, there was a planet dead-center on the screen. For a split second I was relieved. But relief didn’t last, replaced with... I don’t even know.

I’ve seen a lot of weird things in my travels. But Yenne pretty much took the cake. It was a blackened cinder, as expected, but it was criss-crossed with a glowing lacework of cracks, I guess oozing magma along their lengths. And something was, well, *squatting* next to the planet. A whitish, lumpy oblong body, maybe a fifth the size of the planet, hovered over the dead world. From the body, what I can only describe as tentacles or legs, ten thousand or so kilometers long, a dozen or so of ‘em. A number of them had been stuck end-on into the planet. While we watched, the tips of two legs struck the world on opposite sides simultaneously. The legs we later estimated at one hundred eighty kilometers in diameter. They seemed to pierce the world to a depth of several hundred kilometers. This seemed to happen in slow motion, but it was an event taking place over planetary distances.

The legs seemed to pulse, slowly. It looked like a spider worrying over a trapped fly. A few minutes later, an incandescent spray erupted from the tips of two fatter, shorter legs that pointed off into space.

“What the fuck am I looking at?” I thought that was a fair question. Nobody answered.

As we watched the whatever-it-was squatting on Yenne, George started putting basic planetary data on the screen. As we watched, the diameter of the planet began to shrink, very slowly. The cracks grew in number, but not in brightness. In fact, they began to dim. The thing was actually sucking the planet dry from the inside, like a giant mosquito. It was spraying the interior of the planet out into space, making a cloud of debris. George finally had something to say... the mass of the planet was decreasing. "I can see that," I said. "It's being shot into space." But that wasn't it. Incredibly powerful gravity waves were being emitted from the *thing* next to the planet; and the total mass of the system - planet, *thing* and cloud - was decreasing. The spray of stuff was only a small fraction of what was being sucked out of the world.

"Where's the mass going?" Sarah asked. I thought it was a fair question.

George gave the AI equivalent of a shrug: silence. Mass was simply disappearing... it wasn't moving elsewhere, it wasn't going into hyperspace, it wasn't – entirely – being converted into gravitational energy or any other form of energy we could pick up. It simply was being made to no longer exist. This is of course impossible.

Also impossible: a mechanical structure that big, able to withstand the stresses it was clearly under. We've built things bigger than worlds... O'Neills a thousand kilometers in diameter, fifteen thousand kilometers long. But those are just big eggshells, using the strongest materials known, stressed in tension, pushing the limits of safety margins. All they do is sit there and rotate. But the *thing* over Yenne... I couldn't begin to comprehend the engineering that would let such a mechanism actually work. A structure thousands of kilometers tall and wide that can actually stand on a sizable terrestrial world, never mind move? George confirmed that the material strength that a mechanism that size would need would be many orders of magnitude beyond what was thought possible. It would need to have a tensile strength that approached the nuclear binding strength... and yet it would have to be really light. George was puzzling over the mass detectors, and as far as he could tell, apart from the growing cloud of debris, the combined mass of the planet and the *thing* was centered directly on the center of the planet. That meant that the *thing*, big as a moon, could not have massed much more than a big mountain. It had to have the density of thin gas.

The sun was mostly behind it, a bit to the side, but the whole thing was lit, glowing. It appeared to be translucent, like frosted glass. It was white, but not so much the white of fine china, more like the white of maggots or some decaying dead thing. We could make out, just barely, the shadows of internal structures: they gave the impression not so much of machines but of organs.

It was all very wrong.

“I want to go,” Loff said. If you’ve ever seen a Thessi panic, you might mistake it for being extremely cool and collected. He was a statue. A fuzzy four-armed statue.

“Attention,” George said. The telescopic view slewed; for a second or two, just streaks of stars blowing past. Then it settled on a big white disk... Jenkins. White stripes, storms, the standard complement of rings that I’ve come to expect from small gas giants. Then I realized... those weren’t rings. Jenkins didn’t have rings. What it had was a series of tentacles that wrapped around the planet and plunged into the atmosphere, who knows how deep. The gas giant had its own *thing*, latched on like a tick. But this one was bigger. The same size relative to Jenkins as the one at Yenne was to its world. As impossible as the *thing* at Yenne was, this one was many times more impossible.

“How long till we can leave?” Sarah asked, kinda quiet-like. George told her more than twenty minutes. She muttered something unladylike, I forget what, but I remember that I agreed with the sentiment.

“Why didn’t you spot these when we first arrived in-system?” I asked George. He pointed out that he’s only got the one good telescope, and that it had been pointed at Gunston Station. Smaller optics had located Jenkins, but didn’t give a clear enough view to spot the *thing*.

Then it got worse. While we watched the *thing* at Jenkins, the tentacles (there were no obvious joints, just a long flexible curve, so I figured they looked more like tentacles than spiderlegs) sort of shuddered, then began to pull out. Streamers and blobs of cloud the size of continents were pulled out with them, along with white-hot glowing gas from deeper down. I’ve seen people get shanked with knives and swords, and some blades when you yank them out innards come out with them. Jenkins looked like that.

The body the tentacles were attached to was on the far side of the world; it came rising over the pole. Again it looked like slow motion, but the speed involved must have been incredible to clear the diameter of a gas giant in only a few dozen seconds. Anyway, the *thing* sat there floating in space above the pole of the planet, shaking its tentacles like a dog shaking off wet fur, and apparently impervious to the planets gravity. It looked like... I dunno, a cross between a squid and a spider, maybe? We were frozen. I’d like to say we were frozen in wonder or amazement or some such bullshit, but it was fear, flat-out. Things that violate the laws of physics, eat planets and make mass disappear? You’d have to be crazy *not* to be afraid. But then it got worse than fear. I’ve never felt anything like it, before or since, but this overwhelming feeling came over me. All four of us, George included: “*It’s looking at us.*” We all just knew. It was not a good feeling. We did not want that *thing* looking at us, knowing we were there.

Beyond the fact that it looked like a demonic tarantula and it ate whole worlds, we – all of us, including George – could sense malevolence from the *thing*. The three of us organics all got faintly nauseous, a bit of a headache, and deep sense of cold, though the temperature never varied. I heard the cat, somewhere else on the ship, screaming. Then the *thing* started to move. It flexed its tentacles like an octopus might; spread them out wide and radially, then quickly brought them together behind its body. Remember, the tentacles were long enough to hug a gas giant with a death grip, and it was able to whip them together in just a few seconds. When it did that, we could see the shadow of the *thing* pass over the face of Jenkins. It was coming directly at us.

The telescope quickly slewed again, back to Yenne. The *thing* at that world had already abandoned its world and was well on its way straight towards us. George could detect no emissions from either *thing* indicating a conventional propulsion system. The gravity detectors no longer picked up gravity waves from them, so they weren't using some sort of inertialess gravity drive. They were just... swimming. And accelerating at an incredible rate. "Sure, swimming through the vacuum of space," I said. "Why the hell not. Of course they would, wouldn't they..." Strangely, I broke free of the grip of those *things* before even George did. I grabbed the controls and put us ass-end towards the closer of the two, the one from Yenne, and poured the coals into the sublight drive. Didn't care where we were going, just away from *them*. This seemed to snap everyone else out of it. Loff chucked into a barf bag.

"Please tell me we can go to hyperdrive," Sarah said. It was not phrased like a request, but an order.

"Negative," George replied. "There's a new issue. Look at the stars."

So, we looked. Looking through the canopy, they looked fine to me; said so. Then he put a telescopic view of the stars ahead on screen. They weren't steady. They seemed to jump back and forth a little bit, some more than others. The brighter ones seemed to jump furthest. There was no pattern in the direction, just random. "The stars are not fixed. I cannot get a navigational lock."

"What the hell is this bullshit?" I asked. Stars aren't supposed to jump back and forth. That's just rude.

George said that he was uncertain as to the cause, but that it appeared to be happening everywhere he looked. He speculated that we were seeing the stars as they would be seen from that position in space, but at two different points in history, separated by many years. As to why that might be, he had no idea. This would, of course, have been a fascinating phenomenon at any other time, but at that moment we really had other concerns on our minds.

“Another issue has arisen,” George announced. I was getting mighty sick of that. He reversed the view on the screen, looking back towards the *thing* chasing us from Yenne. It was visibly closer, but it was also not alone. A cloud of tiny particles was accompanying it. The view zoomed in... the particles were tiny replicas of the *things*. The bodies measured out to about ten meters long, with tentacles several hundred meters long. They, too, were apparently swimming towards us, the tentacles blurred. They were making better time, and were rapidly overtaking us.

“How long till they catch us?” Sarah asked. The answer: about twelve minutes.

“How long until the hyperdrive is functional?” The answer: eleven minutes and change. Of course, with the stars flickering between time zones, getting the hyperdrive to function would be questionable at best.

We sat there like idiots for several minutes, watching those horrible *things* creeping up on us. The sublight drive was at max thrust, accelerating us outwards at a bit over ten gees... pretty good for a little freighter, but it seemed creakingly slow under the circumstances. Several minutes later the big *thing* from Yenne approached Gunston Station. It zoomed up to the station, then spread out its tentacles, and seemed to slam to a halt right behind the station. Of course, it was on the scale of a moon; the station was just a speck. The tentacles were nine or ten times bigger in diameter than the station was long; one reached out to the station and, I swear, sucked it right up like a vacuum cleaner hose sucking up a speck of dirt. Don't ask me how you suck up a space colony in the vacuum of space, it just did it. Then it started swimming towards us again. The pause to eat the station didn't really buy us any time since the smaller ones were bearing down on us.

I knew the *George* well enough to tell by vibration that George had just added a few percent more power to the sublight drive, jacking the reactors up past the redline to do so. The gravity plating was really complaining by this point; it had a hard time compensating for the heavy orthogonal acceleration. We could feel a sort of shear running through us... if you've never felt that, it's hard to explain. The conflict between the acceleration trying to pull us aft at over ten gees and the artificial gravity system trying to stabilize us at one gee pulling down produced within the air itself a deep drumming sound, about two beats a second. Goddamn drums. Drums out of nowhere, coming from everywhere. Drums you could feel in your lungs.

Bleah. Believe you me... bleah.

Several minutes later George announced that the external hyperdrive circuitry would be sufficiently repaired to allow for a jump to hyperspace within two minutes... but that the leaders of the smaller *things* were faster

than expected and would get to us within seconds of when the hyperdrive would be ready. Additionally, with the stars doing their little time-travel dance, accurate targeting would be impossible. “Look,” I said to him, “I don’t give a rats ass where we go, just go. Pick a direction and go that way at top speed for a few minutes, see where that gets us. With luck they won’t be able to follow us, and we’ll get beyond whatever’s going on here, and can re-target the nav system.” Nobody had any better ideas.

As the seconds counted down, the closest of the *things* could be seen on the monitors looking... well, agitated. Excited, like they were living things ready to kill prey, and overjoyed at the prospect. Not having any reason not to, I unlocked the rear defense guns and opened fire. I knew it was probably pointless, but damned if I wasn’t going to take some shots at them. They were approaching at millions of kilometers per hour and the slugs from the guns wouldn’t get to them until they were right on top of us, but the slugs would hit at incredible velocity. As I fired, the things rushed out of the dark and were on top of us... just BAM! And there one was, then another, and another, big as life and twice as ugly, just sitting motionless fifty meters astern. Unconcerned with the sublight engines pouring relativistic exhaust into it, nor apparently all that bothered by four twenty-millimeter autocannon firing at a combined 5,000 rounds a minute, right into the heart of the thing. After moving so fast, it now moved real slow and deliberate-like, a few tentacles coming towards the ship. The screens suddenly flashed, then went dark... we were in hyperspace! And I’ll be damned if one of them didn’t actually reach into hyperspace. One of those tentacles somehow reached in and tried to grab the ship, but it just sorta flickered out. I’ve never heard of anything doing anything remotely like that... each hyperspace bubble is supposed to be its own pocket universe, unassailable from outside. Well, I guess *those* rules don’t apply to them *things*, either.

The hyperdrive was not fully repaired, just repaired enough to come on and run for a few minutes. It suddenly shut down, dumping us back into normal space. We’d traveled nine or ten light minutes, distance enough to give us some breathing room in case the things decided to continue the chase. George dutifully scanned for them, and since we’d outraced the light, found where they were nine or ten minutes earlier. We wouldn’t know for more than nine minutes if the things would decide to continue the chase. Repairs resumed on the hyperdrive. A look at the stars, sadly, showed the same jittery effect.

The minutes ticked by. George wanted to take as long as possible to get the circuitry patched up; several hours at least would be needed for a full repair. Sarah was willing to give him ten minutes.... time to see what those horrors deeper in-system would do. So, we watched and waited. The main telescope was good enough to make out

the *George*, ten minutes earlier, as a tiny speck boosting straight towards our current position. We could see the closest of the *things* as also tiny specks, bearing down at an astonishing clip. Just as one about reached the *George* it slammed to a halt relative to that earlier us, and our ship gave a quick flash and was gone. But the horrors didn't stop... they kept swimming along their original path, following our trail in hyperspace. But fortunately, they didn't seem to be accelerating... they could swim fast, but apparently had a top speed. Sure. Why not.

"Another concern has arisen," George suddenly said. "Oh what now," Sarah replied, and Loff simply buried his face in his four hands. The view turned to the sun itself. A red dwarf, cooler and dimmer than most stars we like to live around, it was still too bright to look at. The screen stopped the brightness down a few notches so we could see it. It looked normal enough for a red dwarf... splotchy. Lots of sunspots, prominences, even surface storms... but it had something else. The surface was writhing, like a wet blanket over a pile of snakes. As one of the "snakes" moved under the surface, the surface would darken just above it. Cooler, I guess. So I guess there was another one of those *things*, bigger even than the one eating the gas giant, living inside the star. I don't know if it was eating the star or not. Maybe it was using it as a nest. Maybe it was mating with it. How the hell would I know?

A few minutes later, as we watched the smaller *things* continue to track us down, Sarah had had enough and ordered another, longer jump. This took us about a light hour out. When we stopped to get our bearings, George announced that the stars were now fixed; they were no longer dancing. We looked back in-system... and found that everything was where it was supposed to be. The sun didn't seem to be a mass of snakes; Landis was happily orbiting. Gunston Station could be seen as a bright speck. Chatter, both radio and hyperwave, could be heard. Everything seemed normal. There was no question of us trying to head back in. We were done with that system. George finished repairs there in deep space, and we went home.

By the time we got back to Atlantis, we had been reported as overdue by Gunston Station. We'd been gone twenty-one days... time to get there and get back, with a day spent dealing with weirdassery. Space traffic control was quite surprised to see us; communications with Gunston via hyperwave were perfectly normal. And that was the problem. How do you explain that an entire solar system has been eaten by giant space monsters when the people who live there are telling you in real time that everything was hunky-dory? Well, you start by not explaining a damn thing. Instead, you start by finding the nearest military vessel and demanding a meeting with the captain, which we did. Captain Holverson of the cruiser *Terax Gehrut* took some convincing just to see us, since we refused to explain

why. But with the announcement that a passenger had been left for dead, he had no choice but to take a police interest. And once we were able to see him, and George was able to interface with the military ships aivatar, we simply started showing shipboard, bot and suit records. The arrival, the silence from the station, boarding, the conditions we found there, the dark squishy *something* in the jungle, and, of course, the *things* that were busily eating the worlds. After all that the captain and the command staff were dubious, to say the least. But where mere mortals might be out to try to pull a prank or some sort of scam, the *Terax* AI believed George entirely, and informed the captain that our story was on the level. We were asked for an explanation of what we had experienced, but we had none, apart from some guesswork. The interrogators were not happy with that, but they just grumbled and accepted it. At least for the first few hours. Suddenly, the tone changed. They became quite interested in Mr. Cranston, his sister and the project she was working on. Interesting that it took that long... I've always guessed that that's how long it took for someone higher up the military food chain to come back with more specific orders.

A day later, a military scout vessel left for Gunston. Scouts are of course far faster, and inside of six days it was back. I saw it leave, and I saw it come back, and I saw it fairly scream into the fleet yard orbiting Atlantis. There followed a level of activity and, I think, panic that I wasn't to see out of the military again until The War. Whatever the scout ship saw, it must've been along the lines of what we saw. But with the weird time effects, who knows if they saw something earlier or later. I was a civilian, and had no access, no clearance; I never heard anything about Gunston Station that the rest of the public didn't hear. Like everyone else, I know that hyperwave communications with the entire system was blocked, the spacelanes blockaded, the system quarantined, just a few days later. I've never heard of anyone from Gunston Station coming back to the rest of civilization.

You'd think that the military would have warned them via hyperwave to get outta Dodge. And maybe they did... the place looked like the people had simply up and split. Fast, but without panic. But where – or when – did they go? Why did the stations rotation stop? What was the big thing in the jungle? I sometimes wonder if some of the anomalies, like the stopped rotation, were because that's just what we found: the military would have sent the Station all the records we had, and so as they evacuated they would have made sure that everything was as we saw it. Predestination, of a kind.

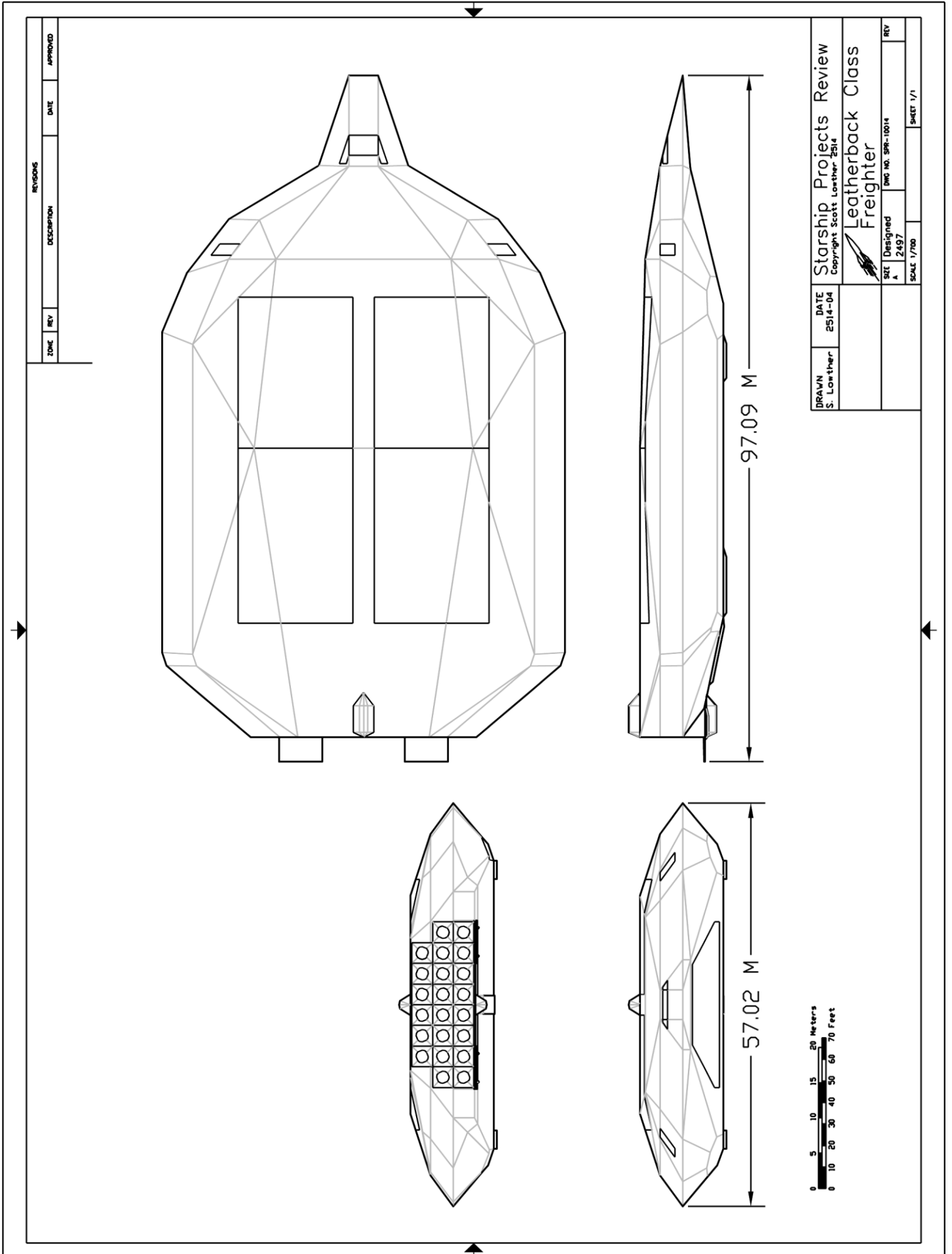
When The War started some years later, I half expected to see more of the *things*. The Enemy was certainly powerful; in the very early days, we didn't know just how powerful they were. I thought they might've been behind the *things*. But no. Even The Enemy was nowhere near that powerful. During the war the quarantine of course

collapsed, as we didn't have enough ships to spare, but I've heard rumors that there were at least a few missions that tricked Enemy forces into the Gunston system. Messages or ships were sent out with misleading information indicating that we had a major base of operations there. It's my understanding that none of The Enemy ships that went in came back out. These were just rumors, of course. In war, the facts get muddled. So who knows. And of course, there are rumors that similar areas popped up elsewhere during the war. Rumor has it that the home star systems of The Enemy encountered some disaster similar to what happened at Gunston; at the very least, they certainly have their own quarantines. And it wasn't the Segregators or the Olympians or some military black op or some corporate advertising stunt.

After we were debriefed and the scout ship came back confirming our story, we were, shall we say, induced to stay silent on what we'd experienced and seen. Our cargo and passengers meant for Gunston Station were hustled off the ship and the rest of the transport fee was paid to us, with a surprisingly lavish "shut the hell up" bonus. Since then, nobody has ever come back to me to tell me if anything new has been learned. I have found out things from back channels, from informants and even spies... the system itself is still off-limits, and a source of unease for the better-informed military leaders and analysts. The few scouts and probes that have managed to get in and get back with information have provided lots of information about the nature of time, I gather; some of the theoretical physicists apparently think that perhaps practical time travel might actually be possible based on the scraps of data they've gleaned. I think I could use a time machine. I'd like to see Sarah again.

I'm keeping my ear to the ground about those *things*. They had to come from somewhere. And when they're done in the Gunston system, then what? Can we fight them? The Enemy apparently couldn't. The gun camera footage from when I was shooting at the ones chasing us showed that most of the slugs went through them like they weren't there... not like shooting through paper or mist, but like shooting through a hologram. Absolutely no effect whatsoever. But a few slugs, just a few, seemed to bother them. I've wondered over the years if maybe these *things* were only partially in our universe, or something. All the mass they consumed and made disappear had to go *somewhere*. Sometimes they were more in than out, and at those times they could be hurt. It's pretty thin, I admit.

I can't verify any of this without showing the data we recorded, and that would break all kinds of laws and get me into a world of trouble. So you'll just have to take my word for it... or not. Maybe I'm lying. Maybe I'm crazy. Who can say? If you really want to know, you know where to go. And if you do go... well, best of luck. I won't be going with you.



REVISIONS		
ZONE	REV	DESCRIPTION

DATE	APPROVED

DRAWN S. Lowther	DATE 2514-04	Starship Projects Review Copyright Scott Lowther 2514	
		Leatherback Class Freighter	
		SHEET A	DESIGNED 2497
		SCALE 1/700	DWG NO. SPR-10014
			REV
			SHEET 1/1