

# **Permaneo Humanus**

- The last human -

**Part I : The involuntary survivor**

**By Daniel Ygrelius**

## Prologue:

The man stood perfectly still in front of the bathroom mirror, staring at himself. His gaze was rigid, cold... Defeated. He felt his stomach twist inside with nervousness and a nasty taste plagued the inside of his mouth.

"Ugh! Acid reflux again." he thought with a slight grunt.

The man in front of the mirror was Douglas Young and with deep breaths he stood gathering strength for a journey he did not want to undertake. He was a white and a rather pale man in his thirties with brown hair. He was of medium height and had a body that was a little more on the skinny side. He was wearing black trousers that were of the sturdy type and on the upper part of his body he wore a thin, grey jacket with pockets on the sides and arms. He stood there in front of the bathroom mirror, scrutinising his unshaven face.

"Damn it! I don't want to be away from my family for eight months. I really don't, but what can I do? The mortgage on the house has to be paid before the end of the year." he continued in his thoughts.

He studied his hands with critical eyes and clenched them tightly, all while a growing rage smouldered inside of him.

After a moment of self-reflection, he stared at the ceiling, dazzling himself with the bright light for a short while.

"Please! Let this assignment pass quickly and painlessly, otherwise I don't know what I'm going to do."

Putting an end to his mental musings, Douglas stretched himself up and splashed some much-needed cold water over his face. The water felt fresh against his skin and did its part to cheer him up.

A short sigh later, he filled his lungs with the lemon-fresh bathroom atmosphere, grabbed his suitcase and walked out from there with determined steps.

Douglas had only made it a few steps outside the door when he was greeted by a flurry of human activity. He was at the New Horizon spaceport and people from hundreds of nationalities were rushing through the dense crowd with too much luggage in their hands.

A monotonous buzz of different languages joined in with its loud cacophony and Douglas sighed and got ready to move. With his eyebrows shaped in a determined manner, he took a deep breath and entered the moving mass of bodies.

His mission now was to get to his family on the other side of the huge space port and as he pushed deeper into the crowd he was reminded of his situation again.

"Fuck! I should have read the contract more carefully." he hissed, clenching his teeth so hard that it exposed his jaw muscles.

"It clearly stated that the job as a class A2 astrophysicist was mine if I signed a paper that I was willing to take on related tasks where the salary was almost too good to be true, and with the ongoing loan and all, of course I signed without thinking." His eyes lit up with an angry fire.

"Little did I know that it would result in me having to work at the Demanthos station as a miner for eight months. Fucking son of a..."

Before he could finish the sentence, he bit his lower lip and felt his nostrils flare up

with impotent anger.

After producing another sigh of the more troublesome variety, he stopped abruptly and closed his eyes, trying to bring order to his chaotic emotional life.

Five heartbeats later, the situation was back under control and when he opened his eyes again, he realised that his entire family was standing right in front of him.

"There you are!" his wife Catherine said in a silky smooth voice, smiling at him. She stood there straight and proud in a summer dress, looking so beautiful as her hair fell down her shoulders like a golden waterfall. Catherine's bright blue eyes were framed by a face where words like angelic beauty were barely enough to describe her appearance and Douglas shivered every time he saw her. A few freckles here and there helped create a kind of playfulness in her radiance and he was so happy that she had chosen to share her life with him.

"We've been looking everywhere for you." she said, pretending to look troubled. "It's almost as if you don't want to leave."

"Hrm... Aren't we funny?" Douglas snorted dryly as he wrapped her in his arms.

"Come now, my love." Catherine said after a while. "We must hurry now so you don't miss your flight."

With a tired grunt, he nodded his agreement to her and with the suitcase in a firm grip, they hurried off towards one of the check-in stations further away.

Quick steps followed and after struggling through the living thicket of arms and legs, they eventually reached their final destination.

Armed with a scowl, Douglas handed his documents to the check-in staff and after handing over his luggage for scanning and registration, he took a deep breath and turned around.

Catherine and his parents, Sonya and William, were all smiling at him and they did their best to make the upcoming farewell as undramatic as possible.

Their dog, Otis, was also present and looked happy but whether it was the sight of his beloved master or the thought of a juicy bone was impossible to know.

Without hesitation, he pulled Catherine to him again and gave her a long, passionate kiss goodbye while drinking in her presence with his eyes closed.

"Oh, Catherine... Can you manage without me for eight months?"

"Hehe, you little rascal there." she purred and playfully poked his lower lip with her index finger. "Of course I will."

She laughed wonderfully again and said:

"While you are gone, I can finally start decorating the house according to our plans and make sure everything is ready when you come home."

"And don't you worry." she said suddenly, raising her index finger warningly at him.

"After I've helped your parents out in the plane-countries, they will stay with us and help out, and in the unlikely event that we're attacked by bandits or something like that, we'll always have Otis here to protect us."

When Otis heard his name mentioned, he immediately stood up and barked ecstatically while wagging his tail wildly.

"Oh, Otis. I will miss you most of all." He sighed and bent down to ruffle the golden brown fur.

Otis was quick to bark his approval of the treatment and for a brief moment it was just the two of them, dog and master, and everything was perfect.

Douglas hugged his furry friend one last time and, bolstered by Otis' loving but naive outlook on life, he stood up and got ready to leave.

With a smile on his lips that looked far too contrived for the moment, he nodded at them and was about to head for the departure gate when a nasty feeling in his stomach stopped his feet from moving forward.

Suddenly it felt like he would never see his family again and the farewell that was taking place right now would be the very last time he would see them in his life.

Douglas went cold inside and as his face reflected this, Catherine rushed up to him and wrapped her arms around his neck.

"My love! Is everything ok?" she asked with her warm smile intact.

"I just got the feeling that I will never see either of you again."

"Oh, Douglas, my darling husband. You worry too much. Of course we will see each other again soon." she purred with her bubbly personality and continued:

"If I know you well, you'll call me on the holotec unit as soon as you arrive and then we can talk to each other in private.... Right, hmm?"

"Hrmf! Catherine. Only you can read my mind." he replied slyly and took a deep breath of her fragrant hair.

Catherine's eyes sparkled like two diamonds in a sea of blue and unable to resist her beauty, the two met in a final kiss before parting ways.

"Important information for all travellers going to Demanthos station on flight TB-303." a formal female voice suddenly said in the speaker systems around them. "Time of departure, 15 minutes. I repeat... Departure in 15 minutes. All travellers must proceed immediately to check-in station 113-C for processing."

"Right! That's it, I guess." Douglas sighed wearily and smiled his crooked smile again.

"Take care now and I'll call you as soon as I get up there, and by the way, don't forget to get a new dog insurance for Otis. The old one has just expired."

Before he walked the last bit towards the departure gate, he looked up and took one last look at his family. They were all there with waving hands and smiling at him in a way that melted away the icy feeling of goodbye inside his body.

Douglas waved back at them and was about to turn around when William, a well-dressed and sturdy man in his seventies, suddenly rushed forward and hugged his son.

"Good luck now, my son. Eight months goes by faster than you think, so don't worry about it now. Everything will be just fine."

His words were truly warming and the sight of Williams weathered face with a thick, silver-grey moustache enhancing his smile made Douglas' throat feel extra thick and miserable.

"Hmm... I hope so." Douglas sighed wryly and shook his head slightly.

"But working in a dusty mine during that time. It will definitely test my limits. Believe me."

"My beloved son. Don't weigh yourself down with negative thoughts now. Think positive ones instead. Then everything will feel a little easier, you'll see." his

mother interjected, who was now standing next to William, showing with a slight shake of the head that she was the one who knew him best.

Sonya Young was an older woman in her prime, and curls of silver nurtured a face where wisdom had found a home. Her favourite light pink dress, which she had chosen to wear for the occasion, shimmered beautifully in the light around them. She was slightly round at the hips but her whole person radiated a love that was both absolute and true. She had always loved her son more than anything and Douglas knew that in her bosom there was a security and warmth that never wavered.

"Hehe! You're right, Mom. As usual, you're right." he laughed with a rueful expression on his face.

They embraced each other in a healing way and Douglas pressed his face against her chest.

"Come now! Off you go now so you don't miss your flight." she continued, waving her hand at him.

Douglas responded with a stern nod and made his way to the departure gate with quick steps.

Seven minutes later he was sitting in his seat inside the huge Black Viper freighter, looking out the circular window on his left.

The megacity, named New Horizon, was indeed gigantic, presenting a seemingly endless landscape of kilometer-high buildings outside. With a population of 750 million people, activity in the city was colossal, with thousands of hovercrafts travelling in the air everywhere.

It was virtually impossible to take it all in and the sight was more like the movements inside an artificial wasp's nest of metal and glass.

Suddenly the freighter's engines started up and after a slow start the hundred meter long metal colossus lifted up into the air and headed for the stars above.

Douglas kept his gaze out the window as he watched the enormous megacity that was also his home quickly become smaller and smaller until the grey-white domain of the clouds took over the view outside.

With a slight sigh, he leaned his head back against the chair and tried to relax as the nasty feeling he had felt before suddenly returned again.

"I can't believe it but it still feels like I never gonna see any of this again." he whispered anxiously to himself but quickly remembered what his mother had said to him half an hour before.

"Damn it, Douglas. Pull yourself together and listen to what mom said before and think positively." he hissed with an irritated tongue and gritted his teeth in an angry grimace.

"It's probably just the anxiety I feel about having to do this fucking job." he told himself and immediately shook all dark thoughts from his mind.

Ten minutes later, the massive cargo ship was in interstellar space just above the Earth's exosphere and was now heading towards the asteroid Demanthos Y-0212.

The journey itself would take a couple of hours, so to pass the time in the best possible way, Douglas took the opportunity to get some much-needed sleep. He fixed himself in the most comfortable position in the chair and then let the darkness of unconsciousness take him.

Demanthos, as the colony was called, was a collaborative project between the leading nations of Earth. It was the first step towards a decolonization of the hopelessly overpopulated Earth, which at the beginning of the 27th century numbered a staggering 25 billion people.

The colonization of the planet Mars was too far away so the plan to build the Demanthos space station was the only realistic proposition at the moment. Unsurprisingly, the project was met with growing scepticism among Earth's population and as time went on, the debate over its construction became more and more heated.

Earth's resources were severely limited at that time and using a large part of those very resources to build a colony far out in space was not welcomed by the population. Endless debates ensued and it wasn't long before the majority felt that the money should be spent on something more important and concrete rather than on lofty, vague projects that wouldn't be of any use anyway.

Things looked bleak for a long time until an asteroid, without warning, hit the center of the Pacific Ocean, causing enormous damage to the environment.

Humanity was severely shocked by the event and the aftermath of the impact killed over 350 000 people around the neighbouring coasts on both sides of the ocean. Suddenly, the critical majority saw the consequences of just such an event in a new light and realised how doomed they would all be if a much larger celestial body were to strike our planet.

With immediate effect, people demanded action from the Earth's leaders and a major investigation was launched shortly thereafter. The process was very complicated, but after years of protracted negotiations, a resolution was reached that was called project Star hope.

Everyone thought it was the much-criticised Demanthos project that had taken place a few years earlier, but that was not the case here. Instead, it turned out that the new project would focus on the creation of a giant anti-matter cannon that would lie in orbit around Earth. It would then watch over the planet and protect humanity from any future asteroid threats.

It was a costly and time-consuming project but finally, thirty years later, it was completed in a locked orbit around Earth and ready for use.

Named Icarus from the Greek tragedy, the station finally gave humanity a chance to protect itself from the countless boulders traveling out there in the dark bosom of space.

However, it soon became clear that the Icarus station required a lot of material to operate properly, so to avoid the extreme shipping costs from Earth, the construction of the previously criticised space station, Demanthos, was finally started.

Up there, people of all nationalities would learn to live in space and extract valuable mineral deposits from nearby asteroids while helping to keep the Icarus station running smoothly.

The new colony was placed on the giant asteroid Demanthos Y-0212 which, in turn, was located at a stable point in space, a so-called LaGrange point, 670 000 kilometres from Earth.

The celestial body had an impressive diameter of 26.3 kilometres and, thanks to its rapid rotation around its own axis and the use of modern technology, it provided a gravity that simulated Earth's own to the colony.

Twenty years later, a small community of 16 700 individuals had formed and most residents now called Demanthos Station their home.

## Chapter 1

---

150 million kilometres from Earth, or an astronomical unit as it is also known in the scientific community, lies the Sun. This medium-sized star is the source of all life on Earth, and since the creation of the solar system it has radiated a constant stream of energy across our home planet.

After the long journey from the sun's surface, a stream of light particles reached a face in deep sleep. The face was breathing calmly and a subtle smile could be seen on the lips.

The strip of light grew stronger and stronger and slowly travelled across the sleeping face until it reached the right eyelid. Shortly thereafter, the modest smile disappeared from the lips and the eyelids immediately began to show their displeasure at the ongoing disturbance.

Suddenly they opened with a jerk and after a few blinks, two red-rimmed eyes stared around dizzily in an unfocused manner.

Douglas Young had just woken up.

Following the mechanical ritual that an awakening usually resulted in, he produced a loud yawn and smacked his mouth while rubbing the worst of the gravel from his eyes.

A new day had just begun on the space station and inside he felt a disgusting weight pressing down on his chest.

With a deep sigh, he got up and sat wearily on the bed for a long time, staring expressionlessly at the computer screen in front of him.

The light from it reflected clearly on his face, revealing a ravaged look that had seen better days.

Douglas always woke up to Earth news and this was the only way, apart from the much-needed Holotec calls with his family, to keep abreast of the outside world.

He had been serving on the asteroid for over six months now and his time in this hellish workplace was finally coming to an end. His employment on board had been a slow and painful affair, and with each passing day the struggle against the clock had become more and more palpable to him.

Five minutes later, he was still sitting on his bed, lost in deep thought, when a red light suddenly started flashing nearby.

"Aargh! Not now." he thought with a sigh and tried to ignore the light as best he could.

It wasn't possible, of course, and after dreaming away for a brief moment, he stared at the blood-red light again, like a protagonist who had just located his mortal enemy.

The flashing energy had only one message to convey and by now Douglas Young knew it very well.

It was time to report for duty.

Unable to procrastinate any longer, he wearily struggled out of bed, brushed his teeth, put on his worn work clothes and reluctantly began the long walk to his workstation. The way there was constructed like a complicated labyrinth and he had to go through several long corridors, junctions and other passages before finally reaching his destination.

Once there, he fished his identity card out of his pocket and pushed it towards a door panel that sat next to a heavy metal door. The entrance opened quickly and revealed a wide and damp lattice staircase on the other side that looked clearly worn after years of use.

With a scowl on his face, he walked up the twenty-four steps and then continued on into a narrow corridor that led to his workplace.

Douglas' actual job as a miner had not suited him at all, so after a couple of hectic weeks at the beginning of his stay, he managed to switch over to a more suitable job. It wasn't as physically demanding as working in the mines, but it was still awful. His duties, which were characterised by a murderous boredom, involved cleaning the air ducts around the colony and checking that the atmosphere processors were working properly.

On this particular day, everything felt a little extra heavy for some reason and he quickly tried to think of something uplifting to avoid falling into another depression. However, the mental gymnastics failed to fully restore his mood and with a resigned sigh, he finally shrugged his shoulders and got to work.

Two hours of pointless metal scrubbing later, he was suddenly interrupted by a man's voice deep in one of the air ducts.

"Eyyyyy! What's up?" the unknown man shouted ecstatically.

Immediately Douglas jumped and stared at the source of the sound, rolling his eyes tiredly as he realised who the owner of the voice was.

"Argh! You scared the hell out of me, Matt. Don't you have anything better to do?"

"Erm... Sorry about that." he complained sullenly, holding his hands up in the air to prove his innocence.

"I was just trying to lighten the mood here. Hell, everyone seems to be really pissed off today."

"I'm sorry, Matt, I didn't mean to snap at you like that." Douglas replied with a tired smile.

"It's just that I've been feeling strange all damn morning and I have no idea why."

"Mmm... I know the feeling." Matt said with a surprisingly deep insight in his voice and put his hand on Douglas shoulder.

"Speaking of something else. Will you be joining me in sector six for lunch later today?"

"Absolutely! Meet me at the bottom of the well-worn stairs at noon." Douglas replied, instantly feeling a little better about himself.



Matt nodded his approval over their lunch plan and after they had parted ways, Douglas returned to his monotonous work again.

It really was a brainless occupation he had taken on, he reflected sourly to himself. Down with the hand scraper in the foul-smelling dishwashing solution, then scrub and wipe the sides of the air ducts with strenuous arm movements. After this, put the scraper back into the tub and repeat the same pattern over and over... And over again. He couldn't believe how legendarily boring his job was, but the equivalent would probably be working on the assembly line in the aerospace industry or at one of Shell's interstellar refuelling stations.

Douglas immediately shuddered at the new thought and continued to count down the minutes to zero as the lunch break would temporarily save him from the ongoing punishment that was his job. Here, deep in the damp ventilation shaft, the clock was his only friend and even it had turned its back on him now.

"Argh! Three fucking hours until lunch. How am I going to survive this?" he hissed mentally, showing a grimace of crushed determination.

He knew very well that there was no point in complaining. The job wouldn't go any faster, so with a sour grunt he clenched his jaw and got to work.

Slowly but surely the scrubbing progressed and when ten minutes remained before the wonderful lunch break came into effect, he stopped working and slipped away to a closed-off part of the air tunnel.

Once there, he sat down at the edge of a circular window opening and stared out at the stars outside. The view on the other side was truly heartbreakingly beautiful and an infinity of stars, all hidden in timeless mystery, revealed their splendour to him. With a facial expression that only a child in a toy shop could produce, he let his eyes wander while drinking in the scene of the cosmic spectacle outside.

In the midst of all this, he saw his home, planet Earth, among the countless constellations of stars and the sight looked more like a priceless jewel of green, blue and white living out its existence in a sea of blackness.

Far down there, underneath the clouds, was Douglas's home, and if that wasn't enough to calm the black feelings inside, he knew that his wonderful family was there, faithfully awaiting his return. Oh, how he longed for home.

"Ah, life up here sucks." he whispered tiredly between breaths, releasing his tense shoulders with a sigh.

"But soon the mortgage on the house will be paid off and everything will be back to normal again."

The reminder of his bright future put Douglas in a slightly better mood, but it only lasted for a few seconds before a strong sense of doom suddenly came over him.

As if out of nowhere, the same horrible premonition he had experienced at the spaceport six months earlier returned and immediately he went cold inside.

What was this strange feeling he felt and why was he experiencing it now?

These questions demanded an answer, but as much as Douglas wanted to, he couldn't answer any of them. All he knew was that he had to return home to his family as soon as possible.

"Fuck it! I need to talk to Matt now at lunch and see if he can do anything. I need to get the hell out of here."

Armed with his new plan, Douglas was about to get up and head for the exit when he noticed a sparkling light in the blackness of space outside that was clearly different from the other stars.

"Hmm... What a strange light." he thought, and immediately focussed on the new phenomenon.

"You don't see a sight like that every day. Maybe today is my lucky day." he continued with a cautious optimism in his voice and headed for the exit.

Shortly thereafter, he descended the worn metal staircase and made his way to the corridor outside where he was immediately met with a total hysteria.

Hundreds of colonists were rushing everywhere to get their lunch on time and in Douglas eyes it looked more like one long and drawn-out Christmas rush of chaotic proportions.

"Damn it! I hope Matt won't be late now. I really need to talk to him." he thought hopefully and bit his lower lip.

Unable to do anything but wait, he stood patiently at the entrance to his workplace, looking for his friend in the moving mass of bodies.

A five-minute delay quickly increased to ten and still no sign of Matt. It wasn't long before a sense of unease manifested itself inside of him and if that wasn't enough, his stomach started to rumble in protest.

"Hrm, god damn it." he thought irritably and continued the thought after scanning the crowd one last time.

"I'd better call him on the holo-unit in case something has happened."

He lifted his left arm and frantically fingered a bracelet-like device with a small computer screen in its center.

Seven signals later, the digital silence was broken and he finally made contact.

"Damn it, Matt. Where are you?" Douglas complained impatiently.

"Oh, shit! I'm sorry man. I got stuck with a job a little longer than expected but I'm on my way to you now. Be there in five minutes."

"Ok! But hurry up, I'm starving."

Five minutes later, Matt finally showed up and once again apologised for his late arrival.

"Yes, yes! Can we talk about that later. Come on... The lunch break isn't that long." Douglas hissed, breaking his stationary demeanour with a jerk.

As they hurried through the ongoing hysteria, Douglas took the opportunity to ask what had happened and it was as he had suspected. Problems with broken area sensors again.

Matt Carlsen, his friend's full name, was a light-skinned man in his thirties. He was tall and thin and had blonde hair that was always a bit on the messy side. He had an athletic body but was rather lazy and did not like to exercise. His clothes, that showed clear signs of wear and tear, consisted of an orange work suit made of a very durable material that would withstand the harsh working climate up there. The suit had several spacious pockets on the chest, arms and legs and was comfortable and practical to wear even if it didn't look like it. It was soggy and dirty from oils and other liquids and was in dire need of washing.

Matt's job up there consisted of checking and repairing broken sensors around the station. It was a dirty and low-paying job with few benefits, but at the same time it was an accessible job that most people could get without requiring any special qualifications of any kind.

However, Matt's choice of work was somewhat controversial as his father, Fred Carlsen, the head of space traffic up there, could easily have given him a better job with much higher pay and status.

In Matt's case, he felt that the level of responsibility for working with the extra-terrestrial flight service was far too high for him, so he chose a career that better suited his personality.

"Fuck! I hate my job!" Douglas complained between the quick steps. "It's as brainless as working at Shell Interfuel or McDonald's."

"Hey, stop complaining." Matt said. "My job isn't exactly better. I always have the misfortune of being summoned to 'The Dope Spot', you know the new nightclub that always insists on playing music way too loud. Anyway, the heavy bass from the club's sound equipment means that the area sensors nearby are always out of phase. Hrm... It's so god damn typical."

He stopped abruptly for a moment of internal reflection and then said:

"But it's a much better job than having to rub shoulders with the fancy suits upstairs in the office where Dad works."

"Hmm... That's true." Douglas replied, suddenly looking at his friend with a sly smile on his face.

"So to summarise what you just said, our jobs suck hard and we should quit immediately and become full-time pimps instead... You know the whores need to be checked, hehe."

Matt laughed heartily at the comment and it was very clear that the two men shared a very special sense of humour between them, to say the least.

A few minutes later they reached the lunch sector and with a sinking feeling inside, the duo saw the result of their late arrival.

There were no tables available as far as the eye could see and wherever they looked they were met with the sight of standing queues at least ten meters long.

Just as they were getting used to the idea of a cancelled lunch, Douglas saw a nearby couple get up to leave. Without hesitation, he pointed at them, but before Matt could react to his wild gestures, Douglas was already halfway to the vacant table.

He arrived just in time and after the two of them had crash-landed on the chairs there, they both breathed a sigh of relief.

"Phew! That was close." Matt gasped breathlessly and immediately began to study the various lunch menus in front of him.

The two men typed their choices into the virtual computer unit in the center of the table and after enjoying their dishes in peace, Douglas leaned back in his chair, feeling full but not quite so satisfied.

"How was your neo-vegan lasagne?" Douglas asked after a while.

"Eh, it was ok. How was your veggie burger?" Matt countered.

"Bah! What do you think?" he complained. "It tasted like synthetic crap but unfortunately there's nothing else edible here. Why would the Central Earth Health Council ban all use of meat?" he whispered bitterly to himself.

They sat there for a long time talking to each other and after Douglas had recovered from the disgusting nature of the veggie burger, he cleared his throat and said:

"Right! I know I'm late but do you think there's any chance of me getting on the freighter going back to Earth on the next shipment?"

"What!?! Are you thinking of going home?" Matt gasped, visibly surprised.

"But you have at least one month left on your contract!"

"I know, but I will go nuts if I don't get out of here soon. You see... I've been plagued by a strange feeling inside ever since I left Earth six months ago and it's that I'll never see my family or my homeplanet again... And yes, Matt, I know how crazy that sounds."

"Hehe, you got that right." Matt laughed and continued:

"But are you sure you haven't just suffered from the classic space sickness that so many people suffer from here? I mean, being stuck on a cramped and inhospitable mining colony for an extended period of time can't be good for any of us up here."

"I-I don't know... I don't think so." Douglas replied uncertainly and continued after a moment of internal reflection.

"The only thing that is clear is that the feeling of separation I experienced when I left my family in New Horizons spaceport six months ago was so strong that I almost broke down inside."

He recovered somewhat with a shaky breath and continued after repressing the difficult memory as best he could.

"So please check if I can get on the next freighter, Matt. I feel like this is something I just have to do. I don't give a shit about this job anymore! Whatever happens happens... And besides, I'm fucking sick of seeing an eternal night outside my window all the time and always smelling the artificial lemon scent in my room."

"Hehe, don't worry, Douglas. I'll check it out immediately after our lunch break." he said, trying to reassure him with a confident smile.

When he saw that it had no further effect, he shook his head and said:

"Don't worry so much, Douglas. It will surely work out, you'll see. I'll just tell Dad to add an extra seat for you." Matt explained and suddenly looked at his friend with a sad look in his eyes.

"But it's going to be really empty here without you, you know."

"Yeah, but don't worry about it, Matt. As soon as you come down to Earth again, it's an order that you come and visit us for a while. My dad has helped rebuild a lot of the new house now and as you already know, you're always welcome."

"Hmm... That sounds like a very good idea, Douglas. I've always liked that house and after seeing you struggle so much to get rid of the mortgage and everything, I'm definitely curious to see what it looks like now."

After taking the last bite of a bread-like appetiser, Matt took his portable computer reader out of his pocket and started typing a few commands on it.

"Hrm... That looks good." he said, staring at the illuminated screen and nodding to himself in satisfaction.

"My tour of duty ends a couple of weeks before Christmas so it shouldn't be a problem for me to come out and visit you guys for a while once I'm back home."

"Promise me." Douglas demanded with a serious look.

"Catherine would be delighted if you could come."

Matt gave his word of honor that they would pursue their future Christmas plans together and after the lunch break ended, they both shook hands and parted ways to return to their respective slave jobs at the station.

The remaining hours in the tunnels went much faster now that Douglas had a chance to get back home, and when the workday finally ended he stopped by one of the large shopping centers nearby to buy supplies and check out the latest holo-games.

Playing video games was a good, if not a necessary, way to cope with the murderous boredom on the station and it also helped to overcome the acute sense of homesickness that so many suffered from up there.

After buying a liter of synthetic milk, four egg spheres and a week's supply of small, square meal cubes that tasted like Styrofoam, he went into a nearby gaming store and browsed the assortment there.

His search quickly bore fruit and, nestled among the new releases of the latest X-Infinity console, his eyes were drawn to the game 'Disco Pimp Simulator 2.0 - Extreme Bitch A\$\$ Edition'.

In that game, you took on the role of a pimp in 1970s Harlem, and beatings of prostitutes, bloody violence, foul language plus other types of adult activities were promised on the game case in very colourful words.

With lustful eyes, Douglas shivered with delight as he thought of the possibilities offered by the game and after carefully reading the text on the back, he put it back on the shelf.

The search continued, and after a while he found another game that also looked very promising. 'Total sea life destroyer - Gotta kill 'em all!' as the game was called, was a humoristic game that basically consisted of eradicating all sea life, especially the sneaky whales and dolphins, before they spread across the planet's oceans and destroyed everything.

"Mmm... Games that involve eradicating things can never be boring." he smiled with a devilish glint in his eyes and put it back in its place.

With a wonderful feeling in his body, he walked out of the shop and was about to head home when he decided to take a quick peek into the special antiques shop next door.

Once inside, he was struck by a thick atmosphere of dust, various perfumes and the wonderful smell of newly opened plastic toys that immediately played on his nostalgic feelings.

The aisles inside the shop were narrow and difficult to navigate, and everywhere he looked there were large piles of various antiques and other amazing items just waiting to find new owners.

Douglas carefully made his way down one of the narrow corridors, always looking around to make sure he didn't knock anything over.

After a few steps, he suddenly saw something interesting and stopped in front of a thick pile of old comic books that immediately caught his attention.

With careful hands, he picked up one of the comic books and took a closer look at it.

"Aah... The Incredible Hulk. I remember those comics from when I was a kid. Wow! I remember reading them every day when I came home from school. Mmm... Sometimes you were very lucky that your dad worked as an antiquarian specialising in the 20th century."

Flipping through the dusty pile of comic books, he discovered several other well-known comics such as X-men, Spider-Man and Donald Duck that his father used to bring home for him to read.

With a big and almost childish smile on his face, he put them back in their place and continued his exploration inside the antiques shop.

Ten steps later, he found himself in the middle of the shop, about to look at an impressive sword replica belonging to the fairytale character of Conan the Barbarian, when a nasal voice suddenly broke the silence.

"Ehss... Finden sie etwas spetziellt, hmm?" said the person in a chaotic mixture of both English and German.

Douglas immediately jumped with a jolt but relaxed when he realised who had asked the question.

"Hehe, nothing yet, Fritz but I'm looking." he replied, struggling not to laugh at the shopkeepers peculiar but delightful accent.

While getting to know the German-born Fritz Kellner, who like Douglas father also was an antiquarian, Douglas had realised that his language was really just a hopeless mixture of English, German and something else that he still couldn't put his finger on. Whatever the underlying cause, it was clearly amusing to Douglas' ears and a real treat to experience every time he spoke to him.

"Ach so, ach so... If there's anything you want to wunchen, just frage mich, ok. Ich bin super knowledgeable about most things in mein shop."

A toothy smile immediately appeared on Douglas' face and he nodded happily at Fritz, who by now had also become his friend.

"Don't worry, my friend. If I find anything here, I'll let you know."

With that said, he continued further into the antiques shop, looking around with his eyes set on bargain mode.

Small, thin clouds of dust swirled in the air from his presence and when he reached the back of the shop, he spotted something he hadn't seen in over twenty years.

"No, you're kidding me ... Star Wars figures!" he gasped to himself, hardly believing his own eyes.

In front of him, in a large bowl, were about twenty plastic figures and these toys had been one of the few things Douglas had worshipped as a child.

With greedy hands he picked up one of them and slowly brought it to his nose and inhaled.

"Ah! I'll never forget that plastic smell." he purred with a loving tone in his voice and lost himself in memories of the past.

He saw himself playing in his room as a little boy, out in the plane-countries where he grew up, and everything was colourful and wonderful at a time when every day was like a little adventure in itself.

"Mmm... It really was a wonderful time." he sighed deeply and looked wistfully at the figure in his hand.

"Hehe, Admiral Ackbar. I actually didn't have that." he continued, studying the other plastic figures in the bowl.

"A Jawa, two Stormtroopers, and a Power Droid. I had all of those."

Douglas continued to dig through the plastic figures until he found one that made his heart beat a little faster.

"A-anakin Skywalker! I.. had... that... one too." he said mechanically, his voice sounding surprisingly melancholy.

"Ahhs! Der Krieg der sterne, zehr gut, Douglas. Just arrived from a collector in England. Very valuable, hmm... Are you interested in buying some?" Fritz asked, suddenly standing behind his back.

"Aargh! Shit, you scared me, Fritz. Don't sneak up on me like that, please."

"Ah, entschuldigung my friend but I couldn't resist seeing you mit meinen action figuren, jah."

After catching his breath for a moment, Douglas bravely stretched and said:

"Well, yes. I'm definitely interested in buying some, but it will have to be at the end of the month. I'm a little short on credits right now."

"Ah, sehr gut, sehr gut! It's good to know. Hehe." he laughed and stumbled back to the counter again.

With a slight shake of the head at Fritz's manner, Douglas put the figure back in the bowl and was on his way out of the shop when he suddenly noticed a meter-high shelf of antique Blu-ray films tucked away among a collection of rolled-up carpets. Among them he saw films such as Star Wars Parts V and VI, Aliens, Commando, Blade Runner, Starship Troopers, First Blood and both Tron films.

With nostalgia in his eyes, he smiled his widest schoolboy smile yet and said to himself:

"Ah, what wonderful films. It's certainly not easy to find old Blu-ray films these days. Hmm... They must have come from some old museum somewhere." he thought with fascination and immediately decided on one thing.

"When I get back to Earth, I'll definitely make sure to load up all the classics on my portable crystal memory and watch them all. It's been far too long since I last saw them."

Douglas said goodbye and waved to Fritz who immediately produced his special German-English laugh and welcomed him back again.

Once outside, he took a deep breath of the artificial air and then continued home with a yawn.

After walking through long and impersonal corridors that looked worn out, he arrived at one of the suggestive adult quarters of the colony. The area was bathed in the light of large neon signs, all trying to drown each other out in the ongoing battle for new customers.

The atmosphere was hazy and challenging and amidst the flashing orgy of lights, busty women danced in glass tubes hanging down from the ceiling.

Here, all tastes were catered for and everything from striptease to sex with beautiful, triple-breasted beauties was promised while a rhythmic rumble of muffled bass lines spread its sound waves across the area.

He nodded amiably at the women's inviting movements and then continued on his way home.

A few blocks later, he finally stood in front of his door and, driven by a long-established routine, he placed his palm on a blank computer screen next to the entrance and pressed it against the glass.

Immediately afterwards, the door opened in front of him and with a yawn he stepped into his home and placed the grocery bags on the sink.

Finally at home in the cramped apartment, he threw his work clothes on a chair and stumbled over to the unmade bed where he fell onto it with a thud.

He was immensely tired and just wanted to rest his eyes for a few minutes before stepping into the bathroom for a quick but much-needed shower. His body did not share this plan and after a few deep breaths the darkness of unconsciousness found him.

Several hours later he woke up again and, after yawning his way back to reality, decided to call his family.

Douglas sat up in bed and was about to activate the Holotec device when he suddenly stopped, his hand hanging in the air above the activation button.

"Hmm... This time I'm not going to call them in advance and tell them my plans. Oh no! I'll just come home without any warning and surprise them all. Ah, it will be perfect." he realised with an excited tingle in his stomach.

Douglas felt that his new plan, which, with Matt and his father's help, would get him out of this place and home to his beloved family, would be a breath of fresh air in his otherwise dull life.

## Chapter 2

---

After an uneventful evening, the highlight of which was two boiled egg spheres, a glass of synthetic milk and a plate of the Styrofoam-flavoured squares, he crawled back into bed and dreamed of the future.

This Christmas was going to be a perfect celebration for his whole family and with the mortgage out of the way, they were finally free of the financial shackles that had weighed them down for so long.

The next morning Douglas woke up to a distant murmur that sounded dreamy and distant in his mind. Slightly sleep-deprived, he turned his eyes to the sound further away and realised that it was only the hologram screen that had brought him to life.

"Hrm... Another long day of meaningless work ahead of me. I really hope that Matt got me the ticket out of here." he thought, running a hand over his face in a futile attempt to escape the grim reality that was still his everyday life.

It didn't work, of course, so with a grunt he got up and freshened up, got dressed and then reluctantly left his apartment for work.

Once there, he surveyed the scene with a furrowed brow and shook his head slightly.



"Yes, yes... Don't just stand there looking so sour, Douglas. It doesn't make the job any faster." he sighed to himself.

With a snort at his unwanted but true realisation, he set about his monotonous work, cleaning the air tunnel in front of him and some fifty atmosphere processors that had definitely seen better days. The latter were located at the bottom of small, round cavities in the walls and were much harder to clean than the air tunnels themselves. Driven by a rare form of stubbornness, he didn't let this weigh him down and after five sweaty hours, only one atmosphere processor remained to be cleaned.

"Phew! At last. Just one more to go and I'll be ready for lunch." he gasped, wiping the sweat off his forehead.

He inserted the rag into the dark cavity and started the monotonous scrubbing when he suddenly felt something land on his hand.

"Huh? What the...? AAAARGH! A HAIRY SPIDER!" he screamed in panic and backed away from the wall as fast as he could without looking back.

At the same moment he hit his heels of the scrubbing bucket behind him and fell helplessly to the floor with a loud crash.

Head and floor met in a brutal embrace, and with immediate effect he felt a stabbing pain burning in the back of his head.

Dazed and annoyed at his recklessness, he was about to stand up and regain some of his lost dignity when he instead noticed the spider crawling around on his chest.

Eyes wide with terror, he screamed again and stood up as if a million volts had suddenly shot through his body.

Seconds later a new struggle began and, no longer interested in regaining his dignity, he stamped his feet frantically and whipped his clothing as if the garments had suddenly become his worst enemy.

The whole thing must have looked very comical, and after his earlier shock had subsided, he cast a critical eye over his person, searching for the hairy arachnid that was nowhere to be seen.

It was gone.

"Phew! Holy shit. That was scary." he gasped and shivered inwardly.

A few shaky minutes later he finished his shift and to unwind after the spider attack he slipped away to his secret hideout, as he had done the day before, to collect his thoughts.

The sight of his home planet outside did its part to calm him down, but when his eyes landed on the strange light source he had discovered the day before, he noticed how it had changed drastically.

The light was no longer a sparkling point but had by now transformed into a large, glowing sphere that seemed to grow stronger with each passing second.

With two eyebrows reflecting his puzzled state, he was trying to figure out what he was looking at when the holo-disk suddenly interrupted his thoughts.

"Heey! Matt here. How's the scrubbing going, haha?"

"Hrm... Trying to be funny, are we." he hissed and grunted lightly at his friend.

"You know it." Matt replied sarcastically and continued in the same breath:

"How about lunch soon? Same time and place as yesterday?"

"Absolutely! It's a date."

Just as Douglas had finished the sentence, the most critical question of the day bubbled up in his mind and with an impatient air, he couldn't wait for them to meet before getting the answer.

"Right. By the way... Have you talked to Fred about the trip?" Douglas asked when the communication between them was suddenly cut off for no reason.

"God damn it!" he hissed, shaking his left arm irritably a couple of times in the air.

No matter how hard he tried, he got no response from the device. The holo-unit was completely dead.

"Hrmf! These holo-drives are completely useless. Cheap, fucking rubbish." he hissed and began to move towards the exit with an angry look on his face.

Five minutes later, after being forced to join the nervous lunchtime hysteria again, he arrived at the square and saw that Matt was already there.

"Hmm... You're on time. Not bad." Douglas said sarcastically.

"Yes, yes, whatever. Let's hurry up and eat before the break is over." Matt complained impatiently, leading them through a sea of people.

They hurried to the same restaurant as the day before and found an empty table which they immediately claimed.

The duo had just sat down when Matt noticed that his friend looked very upset and decided to investigate further.

"Hey? Is everything ok with you? It looks like you just saw a ghost."

"Hehe! Oh, that." Douglas laughed, looking a little embarrassed.

"It's nothing special. I just got a nasty spider on me when I was cleaning one of the atmosphere processors earlier."

"Haha, yes, it's the same old Douglas I hear." he laughed heartily and shook his head.

"I've never met anyone who is as scared of spiders as you are."

Douglas didn't respond to the comment but instead produced a grunt that in Matt's world read:

"This isn't funny at all and even if you think it is, I'm really scared of spiders. Ok!?"

Matt abandoned the topic before the mood between them soured and after the lunch break was over, they got up and headed for sector six where their paths would diverge.

Once there, Douglas stopped and stared at Matt with a searching look in his eyes.

"What happened earlier, anyway? All of a sudden my holo-unit died for no reason whatsoever."

"Hmm... I have no idea, Douglas, but it sure sounds strange to me. These models are known for their stability and should be able to withstand sudden disturbances without any problems."

"Hrm... That's so typical. Then it must be a new budget variant that the company has sent to us to replace the old T33s. That wouldn't surprise me at all. Just send all the shit to the Demanthos station. Cheap bastards." Douglas muttered to himself and rolled his eyes before asking the critical question that had been so abruptly interrupted earlier.

"Well? Have you spoken to Fred about you know what?" he asked curiously and immediately followed up with:

"Please, Matt. Let it be good news."

Matt stared at him for a long time without giving an answer, but when he saw how Douglas was dying of impatience, he felt it was time to say something.

"I'm sorry, Douglas, but I wasn't able to..." he began disappointedly, deliberately withholding the rest of his answer to let his friend suffer a little longer.

"...Keep you on this second-hand station any longer. Hehe! It's okay, Douglas, your place on the freighter is fixed." he continued, waving his hands in the air to assure Douglas that he could relax.

As he realised the meaning of what Matt had just said, his tense shoulders dropped and he exhaled, visibly relieved at the news.

"You... You bastard! You'll always do that shit." he complained, giving Matt an icy stare that quickly thawed from the friendship the two shared.

"My nerves can't handle that kind of shit."

Realising that he did indeed have a ticket away from there, Douglas asked when the actual journey to earth would take place.

"The freighter will be here later tonight but it doesn't leave for Earth until tomorrow night so you have plenty of time to pack your things."

"Gaah! That's perfect!" Douglas exclaimed euphorically. "Shit, Matt! You know you're the man in my life."

Matt smiled broadly at the compliment, and after Douglas had rewarded him with a warm hug, they parted ways to return to their respective duties.

The rest of the day passed like a breeze. No matter how monotonous and awful the work was, he no longer cared about the imminent threat of new spider attacks. He had finally got his ticket out of there and no matter what happened, he took it all in stride. Even his boss, Matthew Anderson, took the news of his sudden departure well. He was also very helpful in providing Douglas with the necessary documents as he resigned with immediate effect.

The day's tumultuous activities had sucked the wind out of him so, with tired eyes, he yawned all the way home to bed and went to sleep earlier than usual.

His otherwise cramped and uncomfortable bed felt unusually comfortable this evening and with a groan he buried himself in the duvet and closed his eyes.

"Mmm... I'm finally getting out of here tomorrow. Oh... Catherine, my love! Soon I'll be in your arms again." he whispered quietly to himself and fell asleep shortly afterwards.

Suddenly, Douglas was awakened by the silent alarm on the station and a bright red light flashed in his face. Clearly dazed and wondering what had happened, he rose unsteadily from his bed and looked out the window.

What met his sleepy eyes out there was something he could not have imagined in his worst nightmares and the sight took his breath away.

One of the Black Viper freighters, which would take him back to Earth later that day, had just docked and to his horror he now saw it being heavily bombarded by a swarm of asteroids.

"W-what the hell! What's going on?" he whimpered anxiously and swallowed nervously.

Two seconds later, the craft was pulverised in front of his eyes, followed by a violent explosion that quickly spread everywhere.

Unable to say or do anything, he just stood there with his mouth open as the blast waves tore through the station.

He tried to rid himself of the vision and tell himself that everything was just a bad dream, but it was to no use. The ominous spectacle outside had already done enough damage.

With tearful eyes, he looked out again and noticed a hundred new boulders coming in, but they no longer threatened the area where the freighter had been. Oh, no!

Apparently they were going to hit... The Demanthos Station instead.

When he realised what was happening, he felt cold inside and felt life crystallising in a very nasty way. Feverish thoughts of all kinds bombarded his newly awakened brain and he suddenly felt very nauseous.

"O-oh.... N-no!" he stammered, trying to swallow with a throat that was far too dry at the moment.

"I-I have to warn someone. Must w-warn... Oh, no! Matt!" he gasped in horror, suddenly realising how precious time had become.

Driven by a growing panic that was quickly boiling over, he threw on his work clothes and ran out into the corridor outside.

His feet, his arms, his whole body... Everything felt horrible and unreal now and like a naive child he still hoped that all this was just his imagination and nothing else.

Douglas stormed down the corridor and as he did so, the shaking under his feet became more and more powerful.

"FUCK! This is really happening." he thought breathlessly and said to himself in the same breath:

"I really hope the shields hold!"

By now, several of the other colonists on the station had also realised that something was not right and were running around everywhere like scared chickens.

As a result, traffic quickly became chaotic and Douglas had to be very careful not to collide with anyone there.

As he ran, jumped and dodged panicked people of all kinds, he tried to get hold of Matt via the holo-disc but all it did was to reproduce a broken howl.

"Fucking hell!" he swore with an angry tongue and ripped it off with a jerk. The brief moment he studied the holo-disk proved to be enough because suddenly, out of nowhere, a terrified colonist ran out right in front of him.

With a sinking feeling inside, he realised that the collision was inevitable and the resulting impact knocked them both to the ground with a violent force.

Caught up in the mechanical effects of the crash, Douglas rolled over several times and felt searing abrasions quickly flare up all over his body.

"Aargh! Damn it!" he shouted in stress, doing everything he could to get back on his feet.

Under normal circumstances he would have checked on the other person and made sure everything was okay, but these were no longer normal circumstances.... Far from it.

With Matt's and his own well-being in focus, he forced himself to his feet again and continued his desperate escape while small drops of sweat ran down his forehead. The steps followed each other at an increasingly frantic pace and Douglas could really feel the adrenaline pumping through his veins now.

Distant explosions and screams reached his ears and after a few quick breaths the shaking had become so strong that it was difficult to stay upright in there.

Suddenly he heard the internal speaker system crackle and a formal female voice immediately began to give a very fateful damage report.

"Sectors one, two, four, six and seven shut down. Shield level now down to 65 per cent capacity." she explained in an emotionless manner.

"Oh, no! Sector four is where Matt lives." he thought, feeling more and more hopeless with each passing second.

Driven by his newfound sense of self-preservation, he continued onward and eventually came to a plaza area with a few shops and a small entertainment center. With manic eye movements, he searched for any kind of communication tools that could help him reach Matt or someone at the Icarus station to warn them of what had just happened.

At first he found nothing, but after stubbornly continuing his search, he noticed a couple of computer terminals inside one of the shops.

"A powered-up terminal! Just what I need." he thought excitedly and immediately started looking for a way to get into the building.

As a first attempt, he pulled the door handle at the main entrance, but as he had already suspected, the door was locked.

"God damn it!" he hissed through clenched teeth, looking through the thick glass window next door that mockingly displayed his unattainable prize.

With a large dose of self-discipline, Douglas took a deep breath, closed his eyes and concentrated hard to come up with a solution to the new problem. Something had to be done and quickly.

Suddenly one of the shops behind him exploded and sharp metal debris spread chaotically across the small square.

With a shrill scream, he threw himself to the ground with his hands over his head and waited until the worst was over before looking up again.

When he did, he noticed that there was fire everywhere and thick black smoke was billowing out of several of the buildings in an infernal way.

"Fucking hell! The whole damn Demanthos station is going down in flames." After assuring himself that no acute danger threatened him at the moment, he got up and hurried to the big window again.

Somehow, miraculously, the shop in front of him had escaped the effects of the explosions and, with a grim expression, Douglas realised what had to be done.

He had to break the glass somehow. The only question was how?

Armed with two open eyes, he searched for a tool of any kind and in the wake of the previous explosion, it wasn't long before his search bore fruit.

In a pile of rubble further away he saw a long metal pipe sticking straight up and without hesitation he ran to it and tried to tear it off.

He shouldn't have done that and, lost in his eagerness, he wrapped his hands around the metal which was still scalding hot from the previous explosion.

Sensing an incredible pain in his hands, Douglas let go of the pipe with a roar and swore to himself.

"Aargh! Get a fucking grip Douglas!" he shouted at himself.

At the same moment he ripped off his shirt and wrapped it around the pipe. Seconds were very precious now.

When he was finished, he squeezed the fabric hard and heard it sizzle under his fingers.

He yanked the instrument free and like a brave warrior he stood there with his new tool in his hands, feeling ready for the challenge.

However, a couple of distant explosions shattered his newfound confidence and with a jolt he turned and ran back to the terminal building again.

It was very urgent now.

Once there, he used the momentum of his leap and swung the pipe at the window with all his might.

Unable to resist the incoming force, the glass immediately shattered, causing a storm of shards that spread everywhere.

Dozens of shards cut small gashes on his body, but still reeling from the adrenaline rush, he threw the iron pipe away and made his way into the shop.

He crash-landed in front of one of the terminals and tried to control his breathing as best he could.

New explosions rocked the square outside but Douglas just gritted his teeth and did everything he could to stay focused on the computer screen in front of him.

He typed a number combination on the keyboard and tried to log in but all he got was an angry red text denying him entry.

"Hrmf! The meteorite storm must have knocked out the computer system somehow." he thought, baring his teeth at the machine.

Stubborn as he was, Douglas did not give up so easily and tried one more time. He quickly entered another numerical code, hoping the terminal would let him in this time, but instead it displayed the same angry message as before.

Closing his eyes, he blew hot air through his nose and rammed his fists down on the keyboard.

"DAMN IT! NOT NOW!" he shouted while the saliva was flowing everywhere.

As he sat there listening to the distant screams and explosions that spread its macabre symphony through the station, the speaker system suddenly crackled to life again.

"Sectors one, two, four, five, six and seven shut down. Shields now down to 30 per cent capacity."

To his horror, Douglas realised that the only sector still intact was the one he was in, so without wasting any more time he abandoned the terminal and ran out of there.

Suddenly the female computer voice produced a new status report and this time the information was far more sinister than it had been before.

"Warning! Nuclear reactor damaged! I repeat, nuclear reactor damaged! Critical mass will be reached in 10 minutes and 30 seconds. All crew are requested to proceed immediately to the lifeboats."

"Oh, no!" Douglas gasped, feeling his life rapidly taking a turn for the worse.

"The lifeboats! Oh my God! I really must get hold of Matt now before it's too late."

With manic fuel in his legs, Douglas ran into one of the hallways leading out of there and after running down a long corridor, he reached the square where his friend Fritz had his shop.

A huge fire had just broken out inside the shop and, concerned for his friend's well-being, he immediately ran to the entrance and looked in through the window.

The burning chaos quickly spread everywhere and Douglas was about to go inside and look for the man when a flaming shape suddenly came rushing towards him.

"Huh? What the..." Douglas managed to say as the front door suddenly exploded, releasing a scalding hot chaos that shook his entire world.

Unable to do anything, he was knocked to the ground with a brutal thud and felt his entire field of vision flash while a terrible scream assaulted his ears.

A squirming and unidentifiable form completely covered in fire lay above him, clawing the air with desperate movements. With his lungs burning from the extreme heat, Douglas did everything he could to get free before he himself burned to death. Only after a few seconds did he realise that the burning form was in fact Fritz himself and when this knowledge reached him, his eyes grew wide with an acute realisation. Without hesitation he threw Fritz aside and rolled him over several times to extinguish the deadly flames that were consuming his body.

Moaning and hissing, Douglas was well on his way to success, but to free his friend completely from the aggressive fire, he had to use himself as a tool. There was no other choice.

Armed with a brave expression, he went to work and felt the burning heat on his bare upper body.

Douglas could not be held back now and after a few frantic seconds the last of the flames were finally extinguished.

Extremely breathless and with several burns added to the growing list of injuries, Douglas got up on his knees and looked down at his friend.

Fritz's body was badly charred in several places and with a cold sense of doom inside, Douglas realised that his rescue efforts had been in vain.

The older man's mouth was trembling uncontrollably and the pain he was suffering must have been indescribable.

"Fritz!" he gasped, gently squeezing the shopkeeper's hand. "C-can you hear me? It's me, Douglas."

The hand was all sticky and hot, and although his movements were delicate, much of the charred skin came away from his grip.

This caused a new wave of pain in Fritz, who bared his teeth and cried at the same time.

"Shh! Shh! Don't try to speak, Fritz. I'm here with you now." he purred thoughtfully, trying desperately to come up with a solution to the hopeless situation they both found themselves in.

"Well, what would he do now?" he thought stressfully, biting his lower lip. He couldn't exactly stay there while the whole station was going up in flames, but at the same time he couldn't just leave Fritz there, burnt and alone.

With a hopeless face he looked down at the charred wreckage of his friend when Fritz suddenly broke the silence.

"M-mein f-freund. Y-you must save yourself. D-do you h-hear... Me."

"But..." Douglas began to protest when Fritz interrupted him.

"S-save yourself while you still have a chance."

His voice was bubbly and strained, and no matter how much Douglas tried to deny it, he knew that Fritz was right.

"But I can't just leave you here." he wailed awkwardly as small tears made their way down his cheeks.

"Don't worry about me. I'll be fine."

Douglas opened his mouth to protest again but the old man just shook his head and smiled at him.

"Go on... G-go now." he whispered and with those words Fritz shook a couple of times and died right in front of his eyes.

"FRITZ! NO!" he screamed, shaking his bloody hand, but it was no use.

Fritz was dead and all that remained now was to fulfil his last wish and get out of there before it was really too late.

With a shaky sigh, he stood up and tried to make sense of the ongoing chaos.

He was still struggling to take in everything that had happened this morning, but after several new explosions rumbled out their dark promises to him, the self-preservation instinct woke up again with full force.

With tearful eyes, he took in Fritz's dead body one last time before turning around and continuing his desperate escape to safety.

Everything felt awful and absent in his world now, and after failing to save his friend, Douglas had a rude awakening to how incredibly fragile life really was.

However, there was no time to contemplate this now, so with a scowl on his face he challenged the remaining time at the station and went in search of his friend Matt.

The steps clattered on, but barely fifty steps later he reached a sea of fleeing colonists blocking his way.

Taking a deep breath, he wiped the sweat from his brow and tried to calm down, but it was to no use.

He and everyone else there knew how much time was left before disaster struck and their reactions were clear. It was every man, woman and child for themselves now.

"God damn it! If I go into that crowd over there, there's a chance I won't get out again." he thought hopelessly.

Suddenly he noticed a hidden side passage ten meters ahead that no one was using and immediately a new plan took shape in his mind.



"Hmm... That side passage over there has a special shortcut that leads to the other side of the sector. If I could just get there somehow, I could still get to Matt before it's too late."

Seconds later, his mind was made up and armed with a brave face, he made his way into the crowd.

Sharp elbows were interspersed with swearing and threats of all kinds, but Douglas fought on and eventually reached his goal.

Finally freed from the moving prison of bodies, he adjusted the modest clothing he was wearing and then hurried down the side aisle.

A myriad of intersections and long corridors followed, and after running up a steep staircase he saw the opening to the other half of the sector beyond.

"Phew! It's about time." he gasped and had just finished the sentence when about twenty people came running towards him from a hidden side corridor.

"Oh, no! Not here too." he complained, doing his best to get through the panicked crowd as quickly as possible.

The process was painful and awkward, but after struggling through a new thicket of arms and legs, which immediately gave him new bruises, he managed to get past the panic-stricken horde of people.

Standing in the centre of the intersection bare-chested, sweaty and breathless, Douglas relaxed for a moment and caught his breath. He shouldn't have done that. Suddenly, out of nowhere, he was surprised by a new colonist running towards him with a furious pace in every step.

By pure reflex, he looked up and turned his attention to the colonist, but it was already too late. The collision between them was already a fact.

For the third time he was brutally knocked to the ground and felt the world quickly fall into a temporary darkness that drowned all his senses.

He lay on all fours and moaned incoherently before reality, with its long-awaited sharpness, re-entered into his world again.

Extremely disorientated, he got up as best he could and shook his head lazily.

He was plagued by a terrible headache and felt sick and nauseous at the same time. How much longer would all this chaos last, he thought ruefully, and was about to continue the search for his friend when he suddenly saw Matt Carlsen lying in front of him.

"Matt!" he gasped mechanically and wiped his mouth.

"I've been looking everywhere for you!"

With a look of desperation in his eyes, Douglas took a deep breath and cleared his throat before finding his voice again.

"S-station... Ahem! The station is lost and the only chance we have now is the lifeboats."

"Fuck that!" shouted Matt, tears in his voice, and Douglas immediately realised that something serious had happened.

"W-what is it?" he asked anxiously.

"M-my dad... I have to find my dad." he said standing up. "I've been trying to reach him through the holo device, but no matter how many times I try, I can't connect to the network here."

The sudden comment made Douglas' heart sink even further because with the ongoing chaos in full effect, he knew there was no time for any rescue operations now.

With a pale face, he opened his mouth to explain the impossibility of Matt's request when a catastrophic chain reaction of explosions suddenly spread through the station. They both felt the ground rumble furiously beneath their feet and as more and more collapsed around them, Matt finally realised the gravity of their situation.

With a bitter face he realised that there was no time to save his father, if he was still alive that is, and if they hurried now they might get out of there alive.

"Fuck! You're right, Douglas. We have to get out of here now." he cried, resting his hands on his knees to keep from fainting with grief.

Douglas stood there, more than ready to escape again, when a problematic thought suddenly stopped him.

"B-but how?" he stammered anxiously, displaying a pitiful expression to his friend.

"Most of the lifeboats are in the damaged sectors?"

"Not all of them." Matt said and continued before Douglas could say anything.

"When I was out on one of my work details a couple of weeks ago, I saw a lifeboat over by the engineering hub in this sector waiting to be repaired. It has been out of service for a long time due to a faulty cooling system and in our current situation it is probably the only chance we have."

With their new and only plan ready, the duo began their desperate escape, running through narrow, claustrophobic corridors as the asteroids outside continued their violent bombardment of the Demanthos Station.

Their chances of survival decreased drastically with each passing second, and on several occasions they ran into falling debris that blocked their escape route.

Without really having any choice, the two men steeled themselves and continued their maze-like escape when the computer voice gave them a new and rather gloomy prognosis. The shields, it turned out, were now only at 15 per cent capacity.

After a frantic sprint that burned their legs, they stopped for a brief moment and went over their plan one more time.

"S-so far..." Matt gasped, struggling to get the words out in his breathless state.

"So far all roads have been impassable and now there's only one road left to take. It's through the service tunnels at the other end of the sector here, and since you work there every day, you know them better than I do."

"Yes, I do." Douglas said and was about to continue forward again when a sinister thought suddenly cast its shadow over his confidence.

"I just hope they're still there when we get there." he thought, nervously biting his lower lip.

As the worry continued to claw its way deeper into his emotional life, Douglas realised that they didn't have time to be careful now. It was now or never.

Shortly thereafter, they came crashing into one of the larger squares on the colony.

Burnt bodies were everywhere and as the duo hurried past an exposed living room among the ruins, they saw a family of five lying crushed under a large and heavy iron

beam. Blood mixed with torn body parts adorned the floor and walls and the smell of burnt flesh hung heavy over the area.

With a sudden swallow, Douglas let out an agonising sound and felt his vision go black.

Matt, in turn, was quick to catch on and grabbed his arm before the darkness could take him.

"Hold on, Douglas. It's not long now." he consoled as best he could.

Douglas nodded awkwardly at his words and after stumbling through the burning nightmare, the floor began to shake more and more under their feet again.

It was really urgent now.

His heart, not slow to show its displeasure at the situation, was beating rapidly and anxiously inside his body. What if their time was up?

Surrounded by dark thoughts, Douglas was about to give up and just let the flames take him when he suddenly saw the long-awaited entrance to the tunnel system ahead.

"T-there it is!" he gasped with a relieved sigh.

The corridor they were in was dark and inhospitable and the only source of light was several rows of red warning lights flashing rhythmically from inside the service tunnel.

Without hesitation, they ran to the opening and crawled inside, and once inside its metallic interior, they made their way on all fours as fast as they could while desperate cries of death and explosions did everything it could to undermine their morale.

Breathless moans were heard from both of them and after crawling for a few minutes, they turned right at an illuminated panel that regulated the air pressure inside.

The manic flight continued at the same pace as before and after long minutes in the oily tunnels they finally reached the critical exit.

Driven by the ever-present urge to survive at all costs, they made their way out of the tunnel and stood up, their watchful eyes scanning their surroundings.

The area they were in was still intact. It was a large square with the roof almost a hundred meters above them with several access bridges connecting the different districts. They looked ahead and thirty meters away they saw the closed door that led to their final destination.

"The tech-hub! It's over there!" Matt gasped and immediately rushed over there with Douglas close behind him.

Once there, he entered his access code with nervous fingers and to their great relief it still worked without any problems.

With a mechanical sigh, the door was pushed aside and they were just about to enter the opening when the ongoing disaster caught up with them.

High above them there was a spectacular and unprecedented explosion and down from the ruined roof a huge boulder emerged, destroying everything in its path.

A huge void was torn open in the asteroid's wake and in an instant everything inside was transformed into the worst possible scenario they could imagine.

The black emptiness outside, now discernible to the naked eye, was famished and anything unanchored around them was sucked out with an unprecedented hunger.

From the violent difference in pressure that occurred, Douglas felt his internal organs coming up through his throat. His vision went black again and with his last strength he threw himself forward and grabbed the edge of the door.

In the midst of all this chaos, he looked back and saw Matt struggling a few meters away.

He was clinging on to a flimsy railing at the side of the entrance and, with horror in his eyes, Douglas saw how it was succumbing fast to the insatiable hunger of space outside.

The metal fasteners in the floor were being ripped out one by one and finally there was only one single bolt left that kept the railing anchored to the station.

Matt, fighting for his life in the increasingly hopeless situation, looked up and met Douglas' gaze with tears in his eyes.

This caused a war of emotions inside Douglas because he knew there was nothing he could do at the moment. Absolutely nothing at all.

The seconds bled away and stubborn as he was, Douglas ignored his own instinct to survive and reached out his left hand towards him.

He extended it as much as he could and Matt immediately responded with the same manoeuvre.

The distance between them decreased drastically and maybe there was still a chance for him to save his best friend after all.

Fate, it would turn out, had a completely different opinion on this matter and when only a few centimeters remained between them, the last metal fastener suddenly came loose.

With a bottomless horror in his eyes, Douglas watched as his friend lost the battle with the maelstrom above and was torn away from him with a violent force.

He heard a deep, desperate scream from Matt that was abruptly silenced as the void outside took him.

"MATT! NOOOOOO!" Douglas screamed with tears in his eyes, but as much as he wanted to, he knew it was over for his friend.

For a moment everything seemed unreal and he didn't know if he wanted to live anymore. He considered letting go and joining his friend but something made him hold on to the edge of the door.

He was living dangerously in this state until a flashing light of some sort drew his attention.

With a nonchalant air, he looked up and saw that the internal pressure alarm inside the technology hub had just been triggered.

Douglas' eyes immediately grew wide because this meant only one thing. The power door to his only salvation was closing and if he wasn't quick now it would be over for him.

With a scream he brought his left hand back to the edge of the door and began his desperate attempt to save his own skin before it was too late.

He pushed himself to the limit, but the force of the emptiness of space above him was killing his muscles. Centimeter by centimeter he moved forward but it was not enough.

He struggled on, but at this rate the power door would be closed long before he was safely on the other side.

Fear and grief ravaged his mind and was doing everything it could to extinguish the fire of self-preservation raging inside him. Tears streamed down Douglas' cheeks and he felt his grip on the edge of the door become increasingly slippery.

Everything was chaos now and Douglas was about to give up when the image of his beloved wife suddenly played in his mind. He saw himself hugging her over at the check-in desk at the spaceport six months ago and the thought of never seeing her again became too much for him.

"NOOOO! I REFUSE TO GIVE UP NOW!" he screamed, straining to the point of almost fainting.

It was all or nothing at this point because he couldn't die now. He had his wife, his family and his dog Otis to return to.

Meanwhile, the door continued its closing procedure and Douglas struggled with all his might to get in on time.

What felt like a liquid fire tore through his muscles and after a manic frustration he had managed to get halfway in.

Almost powerless, he stared at the constantly shrinking gap and realised that there was only two meters to go before the door was completely closed.

A new kind of panic quickly gripped him because if he didn't get in soon, it didn't matter what he did. In such a scenario, the door would cut him in half and then everything would be in vain.

His heart was pounding like never before and with the raging vacuum all around him, he ordered his muscles to obey him one last time.

Frustrated, Douglas struggled against the invisible hands that wanted him to join the blackness outside. He kept getting further in, but the metallic jaws approaching from both sides had gotten a taste for blood now.

"Just a little bit more!" he told himself to the point of exhaustion and clenched his teeth.

He dragged himself in with desperate movements and not long afterwards only his feet and calves were still sticking out.

The door, in turn, had not lost hope of receiving a corporeal trophy from its new victim, but just as it was about to close, Douglas made a last-ditch effort and managed to pull himself into the technology hub at the very last second.

With the atmosphere restored to normal, he fell to the floor with a thud, breathing heavily.

He had made it. He could hardly believe it but he had managed to free himself from the maelstrom on the other side of the door and made it to safety.

This safety, however, was highly questionable at the moment because the spacestation was actually going under all around him.

Thousands of stars were dancing around inside his brain and his lungs were burning with every breath. He was exhausted and just wanted to sleep for an eternity, but deep down he knew that was an impossible thought.

Suddenly Douglas realised that he was extremely cold and shivering, he dragged himself to his feet. The vacuum of space outside had lowered the temperature

considerably inside the station and with his arms around him he studied his new surroundings with a glassy stare.

He was standing in a small corridor that led to the technology hub, but before he hurried forward his eyes caught something interesting.

Hanging on the wall to his right was a grey service shirt that looked worn and without hesitation he grabbed the garment and pulled it over himself.

Slightly warmer, he took a deep breath and with his body full of adrenaline again, he continued the desperate flight to safety.

## **Congratulations, dear reader!**

You have successfully reached the end of the preview of the first two, exciting chapters of my first book.

I sincerely hope that you had a great time reading the story as I had writing it, but most of all I hope that you want to read more and follow Douglas Youngs fantastic journey.

With warm regards

/The writer