

The Space Truckin' Adventures
of
JAMES STARKEY

by
R.D.D. NICKEL

EPISODE 1:
Big Debts and High Stakes

A large, round space station slowly rotated five hundred miles above the planet Phaethon. Far away, a small, winged shuttle-craft slowly approached it from high orbit. Inside the shuttle-craft, manning the controls, sat an old, grizzled looking man with a shaggy, white beard and a wool trimmed denim vest. As he piloted the vessel he stared intently at his destination, the space station bracketed by two of the planets three moons with the light of the system's two suns glistening off the windows and solar panels. With his left hand grasping the control, he punched some digits into the console monitor with his right and lifted the microphone to his mouth.

"Space Station *Helias 1* - Come in Space Station *Helias 1*. This is Captain Jack Fisher aboard Shuttle-craft *Wayward Son*, requesting permission to dock - do you read me?" He waited a few seconds, holding the mic a few inches from his face before impatiently trying again.

"Shuttle-craft *Wayward Son* to Space Station *Helias 1* - am I clear to dock?" Again, he waited a minute, tapping the mic on the control board. He was about to try for a third time when a woman's voice came through, crackling from the microphone speaker.

"Space Station *Helias 1* to Shuttle-craft *Wayward Son*. All docks are currently occupied. Please sync orbit and hold your position until further notice."

The grizzled, old man looked at the console monitor to check the Phaethon date: *Monday, 10 Maymonth, 1985 P.R.*

"Oh, for chrissakes, it's Monday. This is going to take forever" he grumbled. He tossed the mic, tapped the retro rockets, flipped the switch to *auto*, leaned back, and pulled a flask from his denim vest.

By the time Flight Control came back through the com, the old man was fast asleep in his chair. They had to try calling him three times before the fourth call woke him up.

"*Helias 1* Flight Control to Shuttle-craft *Wayward Son* - do you read?"

The old man yawned and fumbled with the mic. Its curly cord had gotten tangled in the co-pilot controls when he tossed it across the cockpit. The flight control lady continued trying to hail him as he untangled it.

"What!?" he yelled into the mic when he finally got it to his face.

"Shuttle-craft *Wayward Son*, you are clear to dock at Bay Three. Please follow proper docking procedure and enjoy your stay on *Helias 1*."

"Yeah, yeah," the old man replied tiredly, "Shuttle-craft *Wayward Son* preparing to dock." He fired his thrusters and resumed his approach.

Meanwhile, five hundred miles below, on the surface of Phaethon in a country in the northern hemisphere known as Buffelland, an entirely different adventure was unfolding.

~

James Starkey switched it into low gear as he skidded his foster father's vintage sports car around another corner. He and his good buddy, Tyler Keefer, were going for a joyride through the dusty back roads in the forests outside their home town of Fort Hamely. Behind them, with sirens blazing, followed a police cruiser in hot pursuit.

"Hot damn, Jim," yelled Tyler in the passenger seat, "Looks like sheriff's gaining on us."

"Don't you worry there, Ty," replied Jim, "I'm gonna lose 'em on this side road. Watch this." He pulled the E-brake and turned a hard left, the spinning tires shooting gravel into the trees behind them as he cut down a side road that branched off from the one they were on. The sheriff, however, was one step ahead and cut the same corner right after them.

"Ah shit, Jim" yelled Ty, "We can't shake him. This copper's good."

"I'll shake him," said Jim, all calm and cool. They turned a corner and up ahead was a bridge crossing a small creek.

"Hold on," said Jim, "We're comin' up on McDouglas Bridge."

Ty looked at it and immediately noticed that something was wrong.

"Oh shit! The bridge is out!" he yelled.

Coolly, without taking his foot off the accelerator, Jim evaluated the situation. Sure enough, both the on- and off-ramps were still intact but the length of the bridge in-between was completely washed away - most likely in last spring's flood. Jim downshifted and put the accelerator to the floor.

"What the hell are you doing!" yelled Ty, "What are you crazy!?"

Jim grinned and clenched the steering wheel.

"Here goes nothin'" he said right before they hit the on-ramp, and braced himself as the car took air.

It all seemed to go by in slow motion; dirt and dust trailing behind the spinning tires as the orange sports car sailed across the creek bed and slowly spun sideways to the left. The boys inside were screaming, "Holy Shit!" as the car touched down sideways on the other side and proceeded into a barrel-roll, tumbling four or five times before coming to a halt on its roof some ways down the trail.

The sheriff, still hot on their trail in his cruiser, came upon the broken bridge and had just enough time to pull his E-brake and skid sideways to a halt just inches away from the on-ramp. He jumped out of his cruiser and ran up the ramp to see what happened to the boys. Right at this time, Jim and Ty were just crawling out of the wrecked, upside-down sports car. Jim stood up.

"Ah shit," he said, kicking the side of the car, "Ted is really gonna hand me my ass this time. You Ok, man?" he added, looking at Ty.

“Yeah... I think so,” said Ty, stretching his back. He chuckled, “Heh, heh. All in one piece - oh shit! Callahan!” he shouted when he spotting the sheriff standing on the on-ramp on the other side of the creek.

“You boys alright?” called the sheriff. Jim turned to Ty without answering the man.

“We should book it, man. Let’s make a run for it.”

Callahan must have overheard him because he yelled, “No point in running, son. I can see your face from here, James Starkey.” Jim stopped in his tracks but Ty made to make a run for it.

Callahan yelled out, “I see you, too, Tyler Keefer. You wouldn’t want me to tell your old man you tried to run, now would you, son?” Tyler grimaced. “Now, ya’ll come on back here. Le’me give you all a ride home. We’re ten miles outta town after all.”

“Ah shoot,” said Jim, kicking some stones. He looked at Ty and shrugged. They both climbed down the creek bed and made their way to the police cruiser.

~

Meanwhile, up on *Helias 1*, Captain Jack Fisher was sitting outside the office of a certain John Sterric.

“Mr. Sterric will be able to see you now, Mr. Fisher.” chirped the secretary.

“Captain Fisher.” grumbled the old man under his breath as he got up and stepped inside the office. John Sterric was a senior executive with Astrocor™, one of the primary spacing companies in the Alpha Centauri System. As such, his office was among the most luxurious on the station. The walls were done up with the most expensive wood panel; mahogany trimmed with brass. His desk was made from the finest Masanboan redwood with what looked like a polished granite surface inlaid in the middle of the desktop. The office was located at the very edge of the cylindrical space station and boasted a large bay window, adorned with expensive potted plants on either side, and presenting a breathtaking view of the planet below.

John Sterric himself was sitting behind his desk with his back to the door when Jack walked in the room, gazing at the mountains, rivers and oceans of Phaethon as they slowly drifted past the window.

“Daencin Piscer.” he sneered without turning around, “I heard you flew a hundred trillion kilometers to come crawling back to me.”

“It’s Jack.” said Jack, “And I’m an independent contractor now, so get over yourself, John.”

Mr. Sterric spun his chair around to face his old acquaintance. His suit consisted of a grey and silvery collarless shirt with a metallic slash draped

diagonally across his chest. The standard fashion in this era among officers of the Terran Autocracy.

“It’s *leirn* to you, *Daencin*.” he said, “I know you like to dress like one of these *Phaethian* bumpkins, but don’t forget, we’re both Terrans in this room.”

Jack laughed, “*leirn Sterric*,” he said as he sat down and helped himself to one of the complimentary cigars, “You know, it’s funny. Somebody told me on the way in here that the locals like to call you *Iron Sterric*.” He lit the cigar, crossed his leg, leaned back, and blew a long stream of smoke. John looked at the cigar and crinkled his mouth in disgust.

“God, I hate those things,” he said.

“Then why do you have them?” said Jack, smoking away.

“Because the bumpkins love ‘em. They think it’s rude if you don’t offer them. My god, you’d think the officials, at least, would be more civilised.” He looked Jack up and down. Jack grinned and took another puff.

He said, “If you hate this place so much, why did you agree to come back here?”

“Because that’s what was asked of me. You see, *Daencin*, I do what the Autocracy requires of me. Something, I’m sure, you’ll never understand.”

“I understand perfectly well. I just prefer to live my own life. But hey, that’s what’s great about this place; people can live the way they want here.”

“Well, you enjoy it while it lasts. It’s only a matter of time before we take over.” John spun his chair around to, once again, gaze out the window. A majestic mountain range was drifting by and the light of the system’s two suns, now sinking over the horizon, reflected off the rivers, which, up here in orbit, gave them the appearance of luminescent trees.

“And none too soon, either, if you ask me.” he said, “She’s too beautiful to be ruled by these barbarians.”

Jack set his cigar down in the ashtray and flicked away the ashes.

“Let’s get down to brass tacks.” he said.

~

Back on *Phaethon*, Jim Starkey was sitting at the bar at a local pub nursing a pint of cold beer and silently brooding. He finished the last gulp and angrily slammed the mug on the bar. His bartender, a middle-aged man with a thick, salt-and-peppered mustache named Bill, stepped up while washing a mug and said, “Why so glum, chum?”

“Can I get another beer?” said Jim, ignoring the question. Bill finished washing the mug and filled it up with a pint. He made a move to hand it to Jim but held it back when Jim reached for it.

“What’s the matter, Jimmy-boy?” he said.

“Ah shit, Bill,” said Jim, “I don’t wanna talk about it.”

“C’mon, Jim, I knew you since you were this big.” said Bill, gesturing the size of a baby with his hands, “It wouldn’t have anything to do with a ‘68 Cobrasnake, now would it?”

Jim gave Bill an irritated look.

“It’s Ted.” he said, “Bastard’s suing me for fifty thousand bucks. That’s more than the damn car was worth. Can I have my beer now?”

Bill slid him the pint. He said, “That’s no way to talk about your father, Jim.”

“Ted’s not my father.” said Jim.

“He’s the closest thing you got.”

“Yeah, for whatever the hell that’s worth. Anyways, I’m nine* years old now, I can get along just fine without his bastard ass.”

“Right,” said Bill, “Now that he doesn’t have a car for you and your pals to go joyriding in.”

Jim slammed his pint down so hard he spilled some beer on the bar.

“But Jesus, man! Fifty thousand bucks!” he said, “Where the hell am I supposed to find that kind of money. What a fucking jerk.”

Bill looked at him, shaking his head. He said, “You know, son, if I owned a classic car like that, I’d probably sue you too if you wrecked it.”

Jim looked at him contemptuously. He said, “Whatever, Bill, just keep ‘em comin’”

Bill shook his head and returned to his tasks. “Suit yourself,” he mumbled as he turned away. Jim stayed and continued drinking, and as he was lighting up a cigarette a hand slapped him on the shoulder from behind.

“Havin’ some rough times there, buddy?” yelled the assailant in his ear.

Jim spun around to face the guy, “What the hell?” he snapped. The guy, who looked not much older than him, was a tall, lanky ginger with big ears and big front teeth, and was wearing way more jewelry than any man should ever get away with.

“So you’re name’s Jim, eh?” he said, ignoring Jim’s snap. “Jim Starkey?”

“Yeah, what’s it to you?” said Jim.

“Your parents were George and Jennifer Starkey?”

“Yeah, they were.” said Jim, “Who the hell are you?”

“Holy shit! It is you!” said the lanky guy, all excited, “Little Jimmy! Shit, have you ever grown.”

Jim repeated his previous question, more tersely this time.

“Who the *hell* are you?”

* About 18 in earth years

The lanky guy extended his hand for a handshake.

"I'm Lenny Birdstein," he said, "I flew on the same interplanetary freighter as your parents."

Jim ignored Lenny's outstretched hand who awkwardly put it back in his pocket.

"Well," he said, "either you got the wrong guy or you're full of shit. My parents died in a drunk re-entry crash when I was two. What, were you flying on a freighter when you were a kid?" He turned around to get back to his beer but Lenny sat down on the stool next to him. He pulled out a picture from his wallet.

"Check this shit out." he said.

Jim gave the photo a passing glance and then doubled back to take a closer look. The picture, it turned out, was of Lenny, looking no younger than he did now, with none other than Jim's mother... as a teenager. It looked like a graduation photo; his mother was wearing a light green dress and Lenny was wearing a baby-blue suit and was holding Jim's mother in a way that Jim found more than a little inappropriate.

"What the hell?" he said, "That's my mother!"

"Heh heh, yeah," said Lenny, "She was a real hottie." Jim shot him an angry glance. Lenny added, "I bet you're wondering why I haven't aged a day."

"I'm wondering why you have a picture of my mom in your wallet." said Jim. He paused and added, "But, uh, that's kinda weird, too."

Lenny gave a little chuckle.

He continued, "Well, I'll tell you, Jim. I just came back from a mission to Earth. Was on one o' them big, corporate starships. Eight standard years there, eight back. But it only felt like a couple weeks to me 'cause they freeze you in cryostasis for most of the journey."

Jim's interest was piqued and he turned his stool to face Lenny.

"Yeah, I've heard about that. What was it like?"

Lenny grinned and inched his stool a little closer.

He said, "Man, it's like, you just go to sleep here in the Alpha Centauri System and wake up at Earth eight years later - but not a day older. Work a couple weeks there, unloading and shit, and then you go back to sleep another eight years to go home. And it's like you only been gone two weeks, but really you been gone sixteen years"

Jim raised his eyebrows, Lenny grinned.

"That's right," he said, "I'm older than Bill. You see those guys over there?" He pointed at a table full of middle-aged men. "Those guys are my high school buddies. But I forgot to tell you the best part. You know how much they paid me for the job?"

"I don't know." said Jim, "But I bet you're about to tell me."

Lenny leaned forward and said it quietly, like it was a secret.

“A *million bucks*,” he said. And he lifted his hands up, displaying the gold rings on his fingers. “You see these rings?” He lifted up his golden necklaces. “You see these chains? I got a brand new ‘85 Corsair Cruella parked outside. I got a nine hundred thousand square foot house up in Vista Creek. I heard you got some money problems, Jim. You wanna make some dough? Go to Otranto. Apply to one of the spacing companies there. Sign up for an interstellar trade mission. You can go to Earth, Epaphus, Deianara... *wherever*. Just get yourself on one of ‘em interstellar freighters. You’ll make a shit-load. And trust me - it’s easy.”

Jim took a sip of his beer and said, “So I can get paid a million bucks for - what is essentially to me - two weeks of work?”

“Yeah, dude,” said Lenny, “It’s the cat’s pajamas.”

Jim glanced over at the table of Lenny’s, now, middle-aged high school buddies.

“But when I get back,” he said, “All my friends will be old men.”

Lenny threw his hands up, “Who cares, Jim? Think about it - a *million bucks*! You can make new friends. And besides, I’m still hanging out with these old farts.”

Jim shook his head.

“I don’t know,” he said, “I like my friends the way they are now. And what’s more, I got a good girl on the go. I wouldn’t leave her behind, not even for a million bucks. But, hey, you were friends with my dad, weren’t you?” he added, grinning, “I’m sure with your million bucks you could spare fifty grand to help out your buddy’s little boy.”

Lenny got up and slapped him on the shoulder.

“You wish, pal. I got too many bling and bitches to spend my money on. But you just think about what I said. A million bucks - it could be yours.”

He walked back to his table and high-fived with his middle-aged buddies before sitting back down with them, laughing. Jim turned back to the bar and stirred his cigarette around as he snuffed it out in the ashtray.

“A *million bucks*...” he thought.

~

High above Phaethon, *Helias 1* was passing behind the night side of the planet. Down below, the lights of the cities and towns shone like a million amber stars complimenting the actual stars that surrounded the black disc of the planet. Inside the station was a rather classy bar on the first level called the Starlite Room whose own dimly lit, blue and amber lights were perfectly chosen to match the celestial vista displayed outside its wall sized panel windows. At a table right

beside one of these massive windows sat Jack Fisher drinking a short glass of brandy. He was waiting for a business contact of his, listening to the smooth jazz band on stage. He didn't have to wait very long though, as he was still on his first drink when the man in question spotted him and walked up to the table.

"Jacky! My boy! You haven't aged a day!" bellowed the rotund man as he walked up to the table, "How you been, you old fart?"

Jack stood up to shake his friend's hand but the man went in for a hug.

"How you doin', Bob," Jack said to his old friend as he pushed him away, "I see *you* haven't aged a day, either."

"Bah ha ha ha!" Bob roared in laughter as he took a seat, "It's the anti-aging cream. Hah ha! It works wonders on the skin!"

Jack laughed as he sat back down at the table. The last time he had seen his friend, Bob Fagle, it was thirty standard years ago when they both worked together at Astrocor. Back then, Bob was a young man in fairly decent shape with a full head of hair; now, he was fat, bald, and thirty years older. Jack himself had spent the majority of the past thirty years in cryostasis and looked practically the same.

Bob continued, "So what brings you here, Jacky boy? I heard you been plying around the universe the last few decades."

"Oh, you know, Bob," said Jack, "I'm space trucker at heart. Once you get it in ya, you can't stop."

He pulled a pack of cigars out of his denim vest and tapped it on the table before pulling one out and lighting it with one of the bar's complimentary matches.

"But how about you, old friend." he continued, "How's your life been? What'd be in Phaethon reckoning? Fifteen? Sixteen years since I saw you last?"

"Yeah, about that." Bob paused the conversation to whistle at a passing waitress. "Hey, sugar. How 'bout a drink over here? Tall margarita with a double shot of tequila."

The waitress sighed and nodded, and walked on.

"You know, Jack," Bob continued, "I'm never gonna get used to that. People going off to the stars... sleeping in cryostasis... coming back, years or decades later, and looking no older then when they left."

"Well, believe me." said Jack, "It's even stranger from the other perspective."

"Hmph. Yeah, I guess it would be."

"But, seriously, Bob. How you been hangin'? It's been sixteen years for chrissakes."

Bob chuckled, "Oh, not much to say about me. Been married a few times, had a few kids I rarely see. You know, the usual sad story. Hah ha! But the business is doing good, Jack. I can say that much about myself."

"That's good, Bob." said Jack, puffing on his smoke, "Tell me about that."

“Well,” said Bob, “Lemme bum a smoke and I’ll tell you all about it.”

Jack gave his friend one of his cigars and courteously lit it a match for him. Bob took a drag and continued.

“So, I quit Astrocor not long after you flew off in that starship and started my own company; freighting parts for all the major players in the system: Astrocor, GPOS... even Omnistar from time to time... Ha! We used to fly all around this system. Pyroeis, Phainon, Caliban, Sycorax - everywhere! Those were the good ol’ days, Jack. It truly was the wild frontier back then! Ha ha! Back when this system was first startin’ out!”

He paused and took another drag of his cigar.

“Well, that was sixteen years and four marriages ago. These days I pretty much stay close to home. Try to make it planetside to see the grandkids as often as I can, you know. But the company’s doing fairly well. I have a shipyard on Aegle these days - ‘Fagle’s on Aegle’ we call it. Heh heh. We supply rockets and spacecraft components to whoever needs ‘em, contractors and the big companies alike. In fact, we’ve really seen a hike the last few years. Astrocor’s been buying out all the other parts suppliers and since they bought out GPOS last fall, we’ve been the only company that supplies old GPOS components. Heh heh, but I’m guessing that has something to do with why you called me?”

Jack smiled and took a drink.

“Maybe I just wanted to see my old friend. What’s wrong with that? But if you want to talk business, I’m all ears.”

Bob chuckled, “Heh heh, that’s what I thought. But we got plenty of time to talk business, Jacky. First let’s hear about you. You been out among the stars the last two decades - you gotta have some stories to tell.”

Jack smiled tentatively and took a long drag from his cigar.

“Not much to say about me.” he said.

Bob laughed.

“Go on.” he said, “You’ve been out among the stars for sixteen years! I’ll be damned if you got nothing to tell.”

“Alright.” Jack conceded, “I got a story to tell.” he took a long sip of from his cup of brandy and continued, “Where to start? Right. Well, right after I left Astrocor, like you said, I bought a brand new Terran-built starship. An Icaria Mark 10.”

Bob piped in, “Mark 10, eh? I knew you bought a starship, but Jesus - an Icaria *Mark 10*?” he whistled, “Mile and half long; pion-drive antimatter engines; can reach up to eighty percent the speed of light. Them Terrans sure know how to build a starship. How much did that cost you? Must be a pretty penny.”

“Eight million.” said Jack.

Bob gave an incredulous grin.

“Yeah, that’s about right. Where’d you get that kind of money?” he said, “You never made that much working at Astrocor, I can tell you that much.”

He took a sip of his margarita.

Jack replied, “I *never* made that kind of money. I leased those rockets off the Autocracy.”

“The *Terran* Autocracy!?” cried Bob, spitting out his drink, “But they’re on Earth. How’d you make a deal with *them*?”

Jack looked at his friend.

“John Sterric.” he said.

“You mean *Iron* Sterric?”

“Hsyeah,” said Jack, “I don’t know if you knew this, but he’s actually a Terran official.”

“Yeah, yeah,” said Bob, settling back in his chair, “I heard the rumours. So it’s true than. I s’pose they sent him here to look after their stake in the company.”

“Yeah, something like that.” said Jack.

“I heard he’s back now.”

“He is.” said Jack, taking a drag from his cigar, “I was just dealing with him not too long ago, actually. But, I’ll tell you more about that later.

“As I was saying, he was able to act on behalf of the Autocracy to lease me the rockets... on the condition that I complete a mission to the Epsilon Eridani System to trade contraband with the E.R.E.”

“The E.R.E.?” said Bob, “You mean the Epistemic Republic of Epaphus?”

“Yeah, that’s right.” said Jack, “They’ve been on bad terms with Earth for years and refuse to deal with ‘em. That’s why the Terrans have been working through intermediaries like myself to get any trading done. Anyways, I took it as an opportunity to get myself back to travelling the universe. One dangerous mission to Epaphus and I’d own myself an interstellar vessel again.”

“Right,” said Bob, flicking his ashes into the ashtray, “But I’m guessin’ you’re about to tell me it didn’t all work out as planned.”

“You can say that again.” said Jack.

“So, what happened?”

“Well,” said Jack, “let me tell ya.”

He leaned back in his chair, crossed his leg, and threw his arm around the shoulder. He took another puff from his cigar and continued.

“I was on my final approach to Epaphus - just on the outskirts of the system. I had just been unthawed from cryostasis and was enjoying my first cup of coffee when the alarms just started *blaring*. An unknown ship was approaching my trajectory off my starboard side. At first, I thought they might be government space rangers, but when I tried to hail them - no response. They just kept comin’ until they were right on top of me. They latched onto my airlock and boarded my ship.

There wasn't much I could do."

"So, who were they?" asked Bob.

"Pirates." said Jack.

"Holy shit. You're kidding."

"Fraid not. They've pretty much overrun the system, now. It's become more than the Republic can handle. The pirates that boarded me, I guess they were part of one of the largest criminal syndicates in the system. Run by some giant crime lord named Doctor Damn.

"Anyways, they took my ship and I was forced into a holding cell on *their* boat. I don't know how many weeks I was in there but if I ever have to survive on recycled protein paste again, I think I'd rather starve. Eventually, they threw me in a small shuttle and took me down to some small, jungle compound on Epaphus and locked me in a dingy, little hut. I was there for five local days - by the way, an Epaphus day is about eight standard days long so that's like five or six *weeks* here. Anyhow, when they finally figured out they weren't gonna get no ransom money for me I thought they were going to kill me. Luckily, though, I made friends with one of the guards and he spoke up for me. So instead of shooting me, they blindfolded me, threw me in the back of a truck, and dumped me smack dab in the middle of the jungle with nothing but the clothes on my back, a canteen of water, and a small knife. I was in that jungle for *three* Epaphian days before I made it to civilisation."

"My god." said Bob, leaning forward, "So you survived for - what would that be? three or four weeks - alone in the jungle?"

"Yeah," said Jack.

"Holy shit. I knew you were a tough old fart, but that's just incredible. How the hell did you do it?"

Jack sighed.

"I know how to catch a fish, Bob. And, believe it or not, I've been in hairier messes than that. I've been flying around this universe for longer than you can imagine."

He took a sip of brandy and had another drag off his cigar, then continued with his story.

"I hiked through the bush until I came to a river, then I fashioned a raft out of vines and driftwood. I carved a spear and caught some fish, but mostly I survived off fruits and nuts and shit. I drifted down that river for, like I said, three local days, until I finally came across a small village. They were kind enough to take me in and feed me and let me have some of their home-made wine. And I tell you, Bob, after the past few weeks I been through, that was the best goddamn wine I ever had, and we partied for *hours*. And the women..."

Jack took a long puff on his cigar, smiled, and shook his head.

“Anyways,” he continued, “one of the villagers was driving down to Benyca - the nearest major city - to sell some beans or something and was happy to give me a ride.”

Bob slapped the table and laughed.

“Ha hah! You old dog, you.” he said, “No matter what bullshit you go through, you always come out on top!”

“Well, not exactly, Bob.” said Jack, “I still don’t have my ship, remember.”

“Oh, right.” said Bob, “So, whatever happened to that? And how did you make it back here?”

“Ah, shit.” said Jack. He took a sip and looked out the window at the inky black disc of the planet, a sliver of silvery light now appearing on its Eastern horizon. “That’s another story entirely. But long story short, I had to make one hell of a bargain to get back here.

“I contacted the authorities in Benyca and reported what happened. They had me do a little covert work for them and I helped them locate the hidden base I was at - I heard they blew it to kingdom come. In exchange, I was given passage on one of their Omnistar freighters back to Alpha Centauri. I arrived at *Larson Station* a couple weeks ago and had enough money left in my Phaethon account to buy the hunk of junk I’m flying now. I flew that over to this station and here I am.” He took a long gulp of brandy.

Bob had, by now, long finished his first drink and the waitress came by with his second.

“Thanks, toots.” he said with a wink, and turned back to Jack.

“Jesus,” he said, “That’s one hell of a story. But you haven’t told me yet what happened to your starship?”

Jack snorted, “My Icaria?” he said, “Shit. They told me it was a lost cause trying to track that thing down. Like I said, they have no control over their own system anymore. So, I’m back here empty handed, and now I owe the Terran Autocracy eight million fat ones. Actually,” he add, taking a sip of brandy and pointing his finger, “I was *supposed* to fly to Earth after my Epaphus mission, but seeing as I lost the ship they gave me, I decided to come back here instead. The one thing I wasn’t counting on was that Sterric would be back here as well.”

Bob laughed. “And now you’re up shit creek!” he said, “I’m surprised he didn’t try to deport you back to Earth.”

“I know,” said Jack, “I was lucky that way, I guess. No, I’m off the hook for the time being, but I’m gonna have to pay ‘em back within the next five standard years or else they *will* deport me. They’ll take me back to Earth and I’ll probably be sentenced to indentured servitude for god knows how long.”

Bob grinned and took a drag from his cigar.

“And that’s why you called me, isn’t it? What can I do you for, Jack?”

“Bob, I need some rockets I can hook onto my *Wayward Son*. I just signed a charter with Astrocor and I mean to run my own freighting outfit. With the right ship and a good crew, I figure I can pay back Sterric well before my five years are up. No problem.”

Bob smiled. “I might have something.” he said, “What is it you’re flyin’ exactly?”

“GPOS Peregrine, Model 2.” said Jack. “A detachable shuttle-craft. She’s good for flying around the planet and its moons on her own, but I’ll need some rockets to attach to ‘er if I’m gonna go interplanetary.”

Bob rubbed his chin and took a sip from his margarita.

“An old Peregrine, eh? Hmm, this might be tough. They stopped making Model 2’s in the sixties.” He turned his head and thought for a second, “It can be hard to find rockets for those, but if I remember correctly, we *just* purchased a pair of GPOS Griffin Mark 1’s. They’ll hitch on to an old Peregrine. Almost thirty goddamn years old, but they’ll do the job for you, I think. And they got enough cargo space in ‘em for whatever you’ll need, I’m sure.”

“Good,” said Jack, “That sounds like exactly what I need.”

“You’ll just have to give me a day or two to get back to you, so I can find out for sure.” said Bob.

“Of course,” said Jack. He pulled out a pen from his denim vest and tore off a piece from his cigar pack and wrote a phone number on it. “This is the number of my hotel room. I’ll be staying on the station for the next little while, so you’ll have plenty of time to get back to me.”

Bob took the number and put it in his pocket.

“Alright,” he said, “A handshake and a toast, shall we?”

Jack shook his outstretched hand and then Bob slapped his hand on the table.

“Ha ha! Now, enough with the business.” he said, “Let’s celebrate like it’s the old times!”

He raised his glass and clinked it against Jack’s and they finished what was left of their drinks in one gulp.

~

The next week at school, Jim was nursing a mild hangover while his history teacher, Mr. Hemstock, a bespectacled, overweight man with a long bushy beard, was droning on at the peripheral of his attention.

“...and as we come to the close of your twelfth semester, most of you will be preparing to graduate. But before you can do that, my students, you will first need to pass your final exams. This year we covered the entirety of Phaethian history and today we will recap.

“We learned about Frank Hurley and his crew of a hundred and forty four, who came to Phaethon from Earth aboard Mankind’s first interstellar vessel, the *Helios*. And how, nearly two thousand years ago, he became the first man to set foot on our planet. We learned about how the Apocalypse destroyed the Old Civilisation on Earth and how our ancestors descended into barbarism without contact with their homeworld. We learned about how a New Civilisation was built on Earth and how the starship *Cygnus* brought the first Earth men to our planet in over five Phaethian centuries. And how, on the plains of Togarmi, they were greeted by nomads on horseback. We learned about the rise and fall of the Toliman Empire and how...”

Thunk! Whatever attention Jim was paying was broken by an eraser thrown at the back of his head.

“Psst! Jim,” whispered Tyler Keefer from behind him. Jim turned around, rubbing his head.

“Shit, Ty, what the hell do you want?” he said.

“Yo, Jim, I have an idea for you to pay back Ted.” said Ty.

“It better be good, that actually fuckin’ hurt. What is it?”

Ty leaned in closer.

“I can get us jobs in space.” he said.

“Ah, hell no.” said Jim, “I don’t wanna leave home for years and years and come back when everybody’s old and shit. And besides,” he added, “my uncle said he can get me a job working in the coal mines up in Rusty Hills.”

“What?” said Ty incredulously, “You don’t wanna work in those muddy shit holes. *Look!* We can get jobs in space, man! We can be goddamn astronauts! And besides,” he added, “you’re only gone for ‘years and years’ if you go to another solar system - you know, *interstellar travel*. I’m talkin’ about jobs right here, in *this* system. You won’t be gone for more than a few months at a time - at most.”

Jim reluctantly nodded, “Go on.” he said. Ty pulled out a newspaper clipping from his pocket and handed it to Jim.

“Here, check this shit out.” he said, pointing at an ad on the clipping.

“Astrocor is holding a big job fair on the First of Weighmonth in Otranto and they’re takin’ up new recruits to that new space station they put up. I guess they’re planning a massive expansion in the system and - well - they need hands”

“Hey,” said Jim, “that’s the Monday after grad.”

“Yeah, man. I was thinking we can drive down there in my dad’s old pick-up.”

“Your old man’s still letting you borrow that thing after what happened?” asked James.

Ty put his hands up in defense.

He said, “Hey man, *you* were the one who stole Ted’s car. I was just along

for the ride.”

“Oh take off!” said Jim, throwing the eraser back at Ty’s face, “You practically told me to!”

Mr. Hemstock, quick on the draw as usual, piped in, “Mr. Starkey. Mr. Keefer! Do either of you, perhaps, have something to add to this discussion.”

Jim turned back around to face his teacher.

“No, sir. We were just discussing our - uh - *career options*.”

Mr. Hemstock shook his head, bent his rod, and adjusted his glasses. He said, “That’s a very important thing to discuss, James. But there are better times to do so than in my history class.

“Tyler! Quick!” he suddenly snapped, pointing his rod at Tyler, “Which Tungarian dictator nearly conquered the whole planet in the Second Globe War.”

“Grünzwath. Jesus, I’m not retarded.” said Tyler irreverently.

Mr. Hemstock turned back to Jim.

“You see, Jim,” he said. “Your friend can pay attention. Why can’t you?”

He shook his head, sighed, and continued with his lesson.

“Anyways, class - where were we? Oh yes - We learned about the Third Globe War, in which many of your grandfathers fought. And about how a global, parliamentary government would be set up to govern the entire planet. Which, of course, brings us to our present political situation...”

Their teacher safely lost in his lecture, Jim turned back around to resume his conversation with Ty.

“Well, shit.” he said, scratching his chin, “I’ll have to run this by Suzie.”

“Well you just talk to your old lady, Jim. But make sure you get back to me before grad. You *are* going to the party, right?”

“Of course.” said Jim. “I’ll let you know.”

“Alright.” said Ty, and they shook hands.

~

Sometime later, up on *Helias 1*, Jack Fisher was at the Starlite Room drinking brandy at the bar. For the past two weeks, he spent most of his time at the bar, having nothing much else to do, being more or less stuck on the station while waiting for the call from Bob Fagle. Better here than in the hotel room watching TV, he figured. And as he sat there sipping on his drink, he couldn’t help but notice a woman smiling at him from across the bar. She wasn’t an attractive woman, and she certainly wasn’t young, but at Jack’s age he really didn’t care. He took another drink and got up to walk around the bar to where she was sitting.

“What’s a beautiful woman like you doing in a dump like this?” he said.

The woman answered him, speaking in a thick Togarmian accent.

“I am doing probably exactly what you are doing. Dreenking my troubles away.”

“Well, honey,” said Jack, “I see you’re almost empty. Whatta you say I buy you a drink.”

The woman looked at her drink, which was, indeed, almost empty and shrugged.

“What are you drinking?” said Jack pulling out his wallet.

The woman replied simply, “Wodka. Straight, no ice.”

Jack smiled.

“You’re my kind of woman.” he said.

He snapped his fingers at the bartender.

“One vodka,” he said, “No ice.” He sat down and faced the Togarmian woman. “So, what’s your name, sugar?”

“My name ees Anastasiya Burkov.” she said, “But you can call me Nastya.”

“Nastya.” said Jack, “That’s a very pretty name. For a very pretty woman. My name is Fisher. Captain Jack Fisher.”

He extended his hand for a shake. Nastya hesitated for a moment then shook his hand and said, “So you are captain. Like everyone else on dees station.”

Jack shrugged.

“It’s a job.” he said, “What is it you do for a living?”

“I am chief engineer on de reactors on dees station.”

“Ah,” said Jack, “Let me see. What is it you’re running? One point twenty-one gigawatt Tokamak nuclear fusion reactor. Am I right? That’s an old style, but reliable.”

Nastya looked impressed and turned in her chair to face Jack directly and smiled.

“Dees ees correct. You know your equipment.”

Jack made a sly grin and faced away while taking another sip on his drink.

“Well, I’ve been around for a while. I’ve learned a thing or two.”

Nastya smile and looked away. After a short silence, Jack spoke up.

“Well,” he said, “Whattaya think about splittin’ this place?”

“I sought you would never ask.” said Nastya, “Your place or mine?”

“Well, I got drinks in my hotel room on the fourth level. How does that work for ya?”

“Dees ees fine.” said Nastya.

“Alright,” said Jack. And without taking his eyes off Nastya, he slipped a twenty on the bar.

“Keep the change.” he said, and the two of them left the nightclub.

When they arrived at the hotel room, no sooner had Jack shut the door then the room’s private telephone rang.

“Help yourself to a drink.” he said to Nastya, “The bar is over there. I have to take this.”

And he picked up the receiver to answer the call. “Hello?... Oh, Hey Bob! What’s the good news?... Oh yeah?... Ok, go on... No way... uh huh... Alright... No, I don’t think so... Yeah, I’ll give you a call in a week or two and let you know where I’m at... Alright... Thanks Bob... Bye.”

He hung up the phone.

“SON OF A BITCH!!” he shouted.

“Vat ees eet?” asked Nastya, walking over with the drinks. Jack sighed, rubbing the bridge of his nose.

“It’s nothing.” he said softly, “There was an explosion in the ship yards on Aegle. The rockets I chartered were damaged in the blast. I guess some damn greenhorn tried to open the outer hatch of an airlock without closing the inner hatch first. The entire hangar depressurised in a matter of seconds. Blew the place sky high.”

“Oh my god.” said Nastya with her hand over mouth, “Ees everson alright?”

“No.” said Jack, clutching his drink, “The greenhorn and two other yard workers were killed instantly and two others are reported missing. Probably buried in the rubble.”

“Dees ees awful.” said Nastya.

“I know,” said Jack, “And with the investigation and everything, they say they won’t even be able to *look* at my rockets for at least a month!”

He sighed and shook his head. Nastya meekly smiled. Jack turned on some soft music. Then he took the drink out of Nastya’s hand and set it gently down on the table and put his arms around her waist.

“But we don’t need to worry about this.” he said, “How ‘bout we just enjoy ourselves tonight?”

~

Meanwhile, down in Fort Hamely, it was graduation night. Ceremonies were held that afternoon but the evening was reserved for celebration. It was a warm, cloudless evening, the primary sun low on the horizon shining brilliant shades of orange across the valley as Jim and his girlfriend, Susan Quigley, held each other close on the swinging chair of Susan’s front porch, having recently come back from the ceremonies and changed into less formal clothes. Ahead of them, down the valley, they could see the three crescents of Phaethon’s moons, hovering just above the tree tops of the distant hills.

“You’re not really going up there, are you, Jim?” asked Susan, staring at the moons.

“I’m thinking about it, Suzie,” admitted Jim, “But don’t worry,” he said

kissing her ear, "I'll only be gone a couple months at a time."

"Oh, but that's *so* long," complained Suzie.

"It's not so long as all that," said Jim, "And 'sides, Ty says I'll be able to pay off Ted after only a couple of tours. Maybe only one."

"It's still a long time," said Suzie, "And what about all the dangers? There's meteors, and pirates, and radiation... and just look at what happened to your parents."

Jim frowned. He didn't want to think about his parents' death.

"That was just a freak accident." he said sternly.

Suzie turned to look him in the face.

"Just promise me you won't go." she said.

"C'mon, Sue. Don't make me do that."

"Please, just don't go. You can get that job in Rusty Hills. It'll take you longer to make the money, but we can see each other more often." she smiled and kissed him on the lips.

Just then - *AHWOOOOGA!* - their conversation was interrupted by Tyler Keefer's bullhorn as he slid around the corner of the street in his red, single cab pick-up truck and pulled up, right onto Suzie's front lawn. Their friends from class, Stevie and Jessica, were sitting in the cab while Renny, Beaver, and Alex were hanging out in the box.

"Whadda we got here? A couple o' lovebirds about to make out!" shouted Renny from the back, grinning with his buck teeth. He laughed and hi-fived with his buddies.

"Hop in the back," said Ty, snapping and pointing at the box of the truck with his thumb. "We're going to the smoke show!"

The 'smoke show', of course, was Fort Hamely's annual "Smoke In The Valley" event. Everywhere across town, kids piled into cars, vans, and pick-up trucks and gathered together in selected spots across town to participate in the event. You see, in towns and cities across Phaethon, it was an annual tradition for high school graduates to gather in their vehicles in strategic upwind locations and spin their tires in unison in an attempt to blanket their towns in smoke. Parents, teachers, and other adults not only tolerated the event but actually supported it as they did the exact same thing when they were young. In bigger cities, this was often a large organised event, complete with parades, fireworks, pyrotechnics, and smoke machines to augment the effect, but in Fort Hamely it was just kids in their cars and trucks doing burnouts.

For their location, Jim and Ty chose an old cement dock on the east side of town, overlooking the Mudwater River. Elsewhere, cars and trucks were stationed in parking lots, driveways, empty streets, and old storage yards, waiting for this year's class president to set off the fireworks to signal the smoke-out to begin.

When Jim, Ty, Suzie, and the gang pulled up to the dock, they joined a number of other kids in their vehicles, parked and waiting to go. There was Rory Gushue in his old, beat up '81 Farde Wildhorse, the Janson brothers in their '78 Eco-Wagon van, Blake Finnigan was there with his girlfriend Sam and his '71 Chrystal Star Racer, even Tod Kavinsky in his brand new, souped up Feluchi 328. Ty pulled his truck up next to Tod's hot sports car and the gang jumped out and started handing out beers from the blue cooler they had in the box. Loud music was playing from the Janson's van - "Smoke in the Valley" by hard rock band, Navy Green. Perfectly chosen, of course, to match the event.

*"Smoooooke in the vaaalley!
The town is gettin' high-eee!"*

Tod Kavinsky was leaning, one leg up, against his 328, and looking cool as always with his black sunglasses, red and white letterman jacket, and an unlit match between his teeth. He nodded at Jim.

"Heard what happened to your Cobrasnake." he said as Jim was pulling the tab off his beer can, "That sucks."

"Yeah, no shit." said Jim, "Would've been nice to be blowing smoke with it tonight. Now, I owe my damn foster father fifty thousand bucks. I could've bought my own Cobrasnake with that kinda money."

Tod casually walked over to the edge of the dock and flicked his match into the river.

"Yeah," he said, "but that's the way she goes. You just gotta work with watcha got. Me? I'm going to Otranto this week. Going to that job fair Astrocor is holding. Get a job with them, man, and you'll be able to pay back your foster dad *and* buy your own car before Yuletide."

Jim slowly took a sip of his beer.

"Yeah, I was seriously thinking about that." he said, "But Suzie doesn't want me to go. Says I'll be gone too long." He looked over his shoulder at Suzie who was busy chatting it up with Sam.

"Well, you gotta keep your girl happy, too." said Tod, "You just do whatever it is you gotta do."

He slapped Jim on the shoulder before walking over to join the Janson brothers who were shotgunning beers and slamming the cans on the cement.

By now, the primary sun had already set and the sky had dimmed to a dark, twilight blue. Jim had already walked back to join Suzie when, over the roofs of nearby buildings, they could see a small rocket rising from the center of town and exploding in a dazzling display of glittering gold. The kids on the dock cheered, joining the roar of hooting and hollering that could be heard from all across town. The drivers scrambled to their vehicles to stamp on their brakes and push their accelerators until their rear tires started to spin in place. Billows of smoke poured

out the tires until the entire dock was covered in smoke, while vehicles stationed in other parts of town did the same. People hanging out on the hilltops were treated to the spectacular sights and sounds of hundreds of tires squealing in unison while dozens of plumes of smoke grew and slowly spread into each other until the entire lower townsite was engulfed in a giant cloud of tire smoke, like a greasy, low hanging fog. Later on, Jim and his friends were treated to some excellent photographs of the spectacle, but for now they were surrounded by nothing but a haze of grey.

After a short while, the drivers, one by one, ceased spinning their tires and exited their cars and trucks to crack some beers and join their friends to celebrate in the haze. Rory Gushue lit up a joint and Blake Finnigan popped a bottle of champagne, showering everyone within a few feet of him in delicious suds.

Everybody was laughing and cheering when Jake Loggins, a classmate of theirs, swung by in his own pick-up truck with a load of kids in *his* box.

“Party at the ruins!” he yelled as the kids in the box screamed and whistled. And as he squealed off in yet another cloud of tire smoke, Ty smacked the hood of his truck three times loudly.

“You heard him, boys and girls!” he screamed, “Get in the truck, we’re goin’ to the ruins!”

“Woo! Party time!” yelled Renny, as he, Alex, and Beaver jumped into box. Jim helped Suzie into the cab and climbed in after her and then they were off. Meanwhile, everyone else on the dock hopped into their own vehicles and soon they had a caravan of cars, trucks and vans cruising across the Steinhauer River and down the old dirt road to the ruins. Not far, in fact, from where Jim and Ty crashed Ted’s car a couple of weeks earlier. The ruins, it was said, were those of an ancient Toliman courthouse, over a thousand Phaethian years old. Of course, none of this mattered to the kids. Today they were just a bunch of marble and cement ruins covered in graffiti and an awesome place to party.

By the time midnight came around, the party was well underway. Jim was in the middle of a beer chugging contest with the Janson brothers when Ty approached him, drink in hand.

“Hey, Jim,” he said, “you thought about what we talked about, yet?”

Jim finished chugging his beer and wiped his mouth off with his sleeve.

“Right now, Ty?” he said.

Ty replied, “Leaving tomorrow, Jim. Now’s a better time than never. I mean, before you go and pass out.”

“Ah, shit.” said Jim, cracking another beer and putting an arm around his friend. “You know, I think I’m just gonna stick around. Get that job up in Rusty Hills, ya know.”

“Oh, come on, Jim!” said Ty, pushing his friend off him, “You’re my best friend. Remember when you said we’d stick together no matter what? This could be the opportunity of a lifetime, man.”

“Yeah, Ty, well... you know...” replied Jim, and he paused to take a chug of beer and continued, “We were kids when I said that. You’re my best friend, Ty, but I got a girlfriend now. And she doesn’t want me to go, Ok?”

“Man!” said Ty, gesturing so wildly that he spilled half his drink, “You are *so* whipped. You wanted to go to space ever since I knew you. Why don’t you just grow some balls?”

“You know, what? Fuck you, Keefer!” yelled Jim and he threw his beer can at Tyler who back handed it out of the air. He snorted and dived at Jim, fists out. They scuffled for a couple minutes, yelling profanities at each other, before, who else, but Tod Kavinsky showed up and pushed them apart.

“What’s going on here, guys?” he said, loud and sternly.

“Nothin’,” said Jim. And he brushed himself off and walked away. Ty patted Tod on the shoulder and walked away himself.

Later in the night, Jim found himself lying with Suzie on a blanket on the wide marble steps of the ancient courthouse overlooking the valleys of the Mudwater and Steinhauer Rivers and the lights of Fort Hamely below, nestled comfortably on the little piece of land where the two rivers joined. By now, Phaethon’s second sun, much smaller and dimmer than its main sun, had risen in the East, flooding the land in a dim, orange, twilight glow.

“So, have you made up your mind?” asked Suzie, “Are you going up there?”

“No,” said Jim.

“Oh, thank God.” said Suzie, squeezing Jim tighter.

“Nah,” said Jim, “I’m gonna take that job up in Rusty Hills. But I’m still gonna have to leave tomorrow. It starts on Monday.”

“Oh,” complained Suzie, “I don’t want you to leave me so soon.”

“I know,” said Jim, “But this way I’ll be back in only two weeks. I’m doin’ this for you, ya know.”

Suzie smiled, looking him in the eyes.

“I know.” she said. And Jim rolled over and kissed her.

~

Jack woke up in his hotel room next to the woman he had met the night before. The Togarmian woman who called herself Nastya Burkov. Trying not to wake her, he quietly slipped out of bed and began putting on his pants. Nastya woke up, however, and rolled over to look at him.

“Going so soon?” she said.

“Hsyeh,” said Jack in a hoarse whisper, “I’m going down to the planet for the next little while. No need for me to stay in this rusty barrel any longer. He put his shirt on and buttoned it up as Nastya, herself, got out of bed and put her clothes on.

“I had very good time with you, last night.” she said.

“Yeah,” said Jack, tying up his boots, “It wasn’t bad. Maybe next time I’m on the station, I’ll give you a call.”

“I would like that very much. Here,” said Nastya, as she took the complimentary notepad and pen from the room’s reading desk and jotted down a number, “Dees is my virk number. If you come to de station again, you can call me here.”

Jack took the slip of paper and looked at it.

“Yeah,” he said, half-nodding “Yeah. I might just do that.” He folded the paper up and slipped it in his breast pocket before picking up his suitcase and walking out the door. He turned around, just before he left, and winked.

He walked down the hall and took the elevator up to the spinning, cylindrical station’s central axis. From there, he walked down the long, busy axis corridor; past the habitat section where he came from, past the reactor section where Nastya worked, through station customs, and into the hangar bay.

The hangar bay was a frenzy of activity, with people and machines moving this way and that across the metal floor, loading and unloading cargo from the various spacecraft parked in the hangars that lined the two side walls of the long bay. Jack made his way through the hubbub of activity to Bay Three where his own ship was parked. Up the airstairs and into the cabin. He threw his suitcase on the head table before making his way to the front of the craft and, finally, sitting down in the cockpit of his trusty *Wayward Son*. He flicked the start-up switch and watched as all the lights and viewscreens came to life. He gently wiped the dust off one of the indicators and smiled.

After stretching and settling into his chair, he punched some digits into the computer monitor and took the cockpit mic to his mouth.

“*Helias 1* Flight Control. This is Captain Jack Fisher aboard shuttle-craft *Wayward Son*. Do you read?” He tapped the mic and waited a few seconds before impatiently trying again.

“*Helias 1*. This is shuttle-craft *Wayward Son*. Do. you. read?”

He checked Phaethian date on his monitor: *Sunday, 30 Maymonth, 1985 P.R.* “It’s bloody Sunday. What the hell’s taking them so long?” he grumbled.

He was just about to try calling them again when a woman’s voice came crackling through the mic.

“Shuttle-craft *Wayward Son*. This is *Helias 1* Flight Control. We read you

loud and clear.”

Jack spoke into his mic, “*Helias 1*, this is the *Wayward Son*, parked in Hangar Bay Three. Requesting permission to disembark.”

“*Helias 1* Flight Control to shuttle-craft *Wayward Son*. All lanes are currently clear and you are clear to disembark. Ready to initiate disembarking sequence at your signal.”

“Go.” said Jack. He tossed the mic aside and flicked some switches to retract the airstairs and close the hatch.

“Initiating disembarking sequence, now.” said the woman’s voice from the co-pilot’s chair where Jack had thrown the mic.

Alarm’s started ringing and red strobe lights flashed from the hangar ceiling. An automated voice came over the hangar bay loudspeakers.

“*Closing doors on Bay Three. Closing doors on Bay Three. All personnel stay clear.*”

This phrase repeating as Jack heard the mechanical grinding and loud clank as the large inner bay doors closed behind him. He flicked another switch to ignite the thrusters. Next, the roaring sound of rushing air as the airlocked hangar was depressurised to vacuum, and then... silence outside the cockpit. And just as Jack was getting used to the eerie silence of the vacuum there came the unnerving sensation of falling as the hangar’s graviductors were shut off and Jack and his ship went instantly from experiencing one g-force to zero. Jack, firmly strapped to his seat, nevertheless felt the strangely relaxing feeling of being relieved of all the weight of his body as the mic slowly lifted up from the co-pilot seat and floated serenely through the cabin on its curly cord. Finally, the outer doors opened, revealing behind them the majestic array of stars against the inky blackness of space.

Jack grabbed the mic from where it floated and pushed the button.

“Captain Fisher to *Helias 1*, I am disembarking from Hangar Three.”

“Copy that, Captain Fisher. Have a safe journey, and we hope you enjoyed your stay.”

Jack pushed the mic aside and gently tapped his thrusters. The mic, floating above the co-pilot chair, was pushed into the back of the seat as the ship slowly exited the hangar into the emptiness of space. Before long, he had drifted a ways away from the station. Above him, he could see the vast, blue and green orb of Phaethon. When an indicator on his panel told him he was more than two hundred meters away from the station he flicked the graviductors on and turned the gravity dial until the mic fell back onto co-pilot seat and he sank comfortably into his own. About twenty minutes later, he had drifted far enough away from the station to swing his ship around and burn his thrusters to enter an orbit that passed over Buffelland and the city of Otranto.

Once again, he punched some numbers into his console and lifted the mic to his mouth.

“Come in West Paulatia Aerospace Control,” he said into the mic, “This is Captain Jack Fisher aboard shuttle-craft *Wayward Son*. Do you read?”

Jack was about to start tapping his mic impatiently when a man’s voice came through it, bright and friendly.

“Read you loud and clear, Jack, and I can see you on our scanners. What can I do for you today?”

Jack grinned and put the mic to his mouth.

“Hey, how ya doin’? I’m looking to land my craft somewhere in the vicinity of Otranto. Can you do that for me?”

“Not a problem, Jack. Just let me take a look here, and I’ll get right back at you.”

He put Jack on hold, but after a minute came right back on.

“Yup,” he said, “there’s a runway open for you at Percival MacDougal Dominion Spaceport. That’s just outside the city on the south-east end. Does that work for you?”

“I’ve been to Percy Mac before.” said Jack, “That works just fine. What’s the weather like down there?”

“Let me see,” said the friendly man, “Bright blue skies, not a cloud to be seen. Should I let them know you’re coming?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Perfect. I will give them a holler and let them know you’re on your way. Feel free to touch down on your next pass.”

“Excellent,” said Jack, “Well, you have a good day.”

“You too, Jack. And enjoy your time on Phaethon.”

Jack placed the mic back on its stand. He lit a cigar and leaned back. He relaxed and watched the planet with all its incredible surface features as they slowly passed above him. When his ship came around for its next pass, he rolled the ship so that it was right-side up to the planet and, when his computer gave the signal, punched the retro rockets to begin his descent. And as the roar of the atmosphere began rumbling outside the hull and red and orange streaks of superheated air appeared outside the windows as his craft streamed down through the atmosphere, Jack smiled. He was going home.

TO BE CONTINUED...

“The Space Truckin’ Adventures of James Starkey
Episode 1: Big Debts and High Stakes”

©Ryley D. D. Nickel, 2015

Written by R.D.D. Nickel.
First published on the website “rddnickel.com” in November 2015.
All rights reserved.