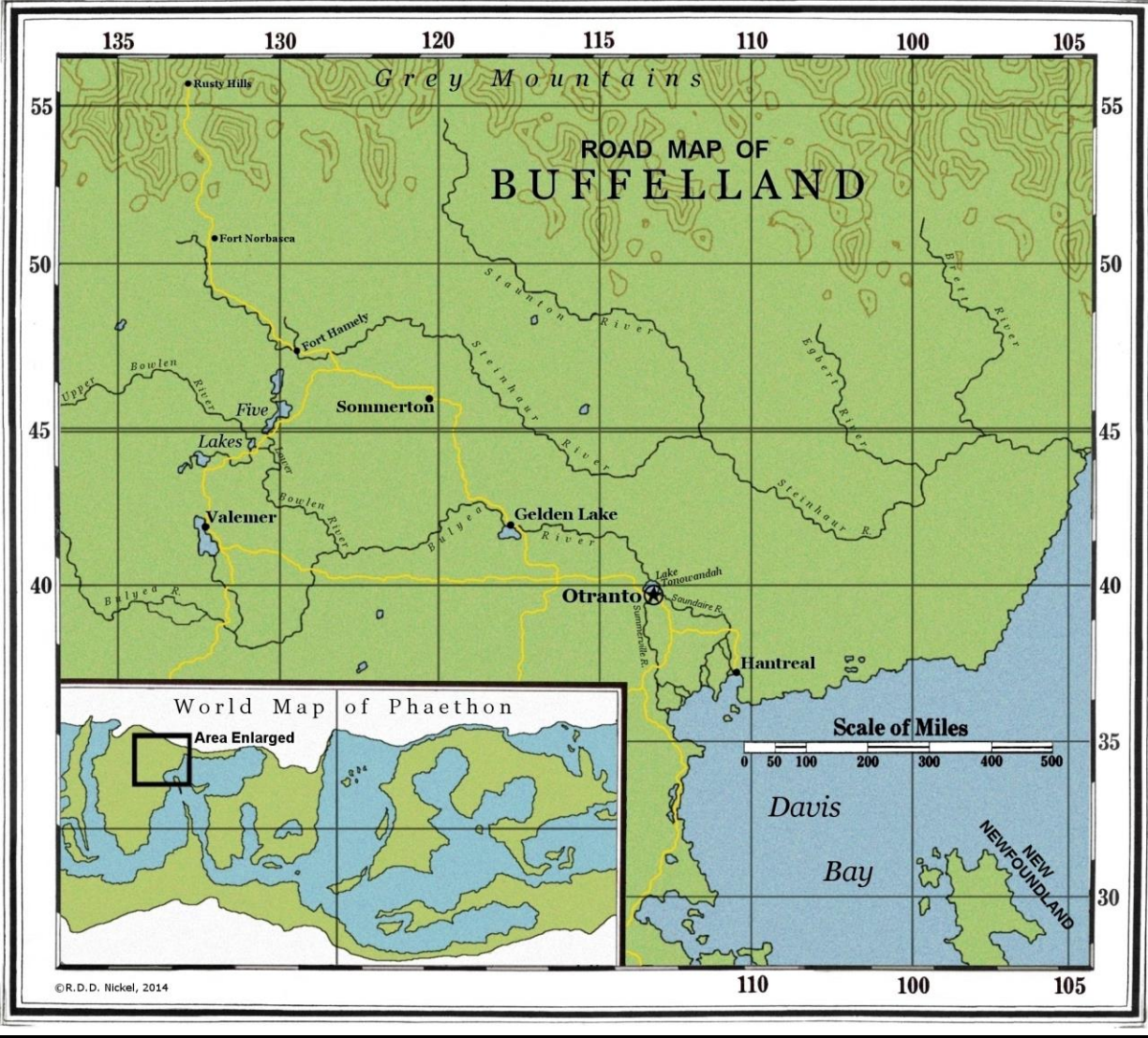


The Space-Truckin' Adventures
of
JAMES STARKEY

by R.D.D. NICKEL

EPISODE 2:
The Crew Assembles



In the previous episode: James Starkey and his best friend Tyler Keefer had totaled James's foster father's '68 Cobrasnake and James needed to get a job to pay back the 50,000 bucks he owed for the classic car. Despite being intrigued by Tyler's idea of signing up with Astrocor to get jobs in Space, James eventually was convinced by his girlfriend Susan to get a job at the coal mines in the nearby town of Rusty Hills.

Meanwhile, the haggard, old space-trucker, Captain Jack Fisher, had signed a lucrative charter with Astrocor and leased a nice, sizeable rocket-trailer to make his shipments with, but his plans were hampered when an explosion at the shipyard shuts off access to his rocket-trailer pending investigation.

When we last saw our friends, Captain Jack was departing Space Station Phoebus 1, en route to Phaethon, aboard his hardy, little shuttle-craft, the Wayward Son; while James, Tyler, Susan, and their classmates were celebrating their high school graduation in the green, spruce forests outside their hometown of Fort Hamely.

Our story, however, begins four thousand miles to the south, in the vibrant city of Batonville, Wessippissi....

In the bayous of Wessippissi, in the large port town of Batonville, there lived a man, all alone, in a grimy, one bedroom apartment. His name was Jackson Hudson, but everyone just called him "Hudson".

He woke up that morning to the sound of rain pattering on his bedroom window. Another wet, overcast day. He pulled himself out of bed and groggily walked over to his bathroom and looked at his face in the mirror, at his thinning hairline and the white whiskers that stood out so glaringly on his black skin. When did he get so old and tired? It seemed like not so long ago when he was on top of the world. But things change. It wasn't his choice. It's just the way it is. He washed his face and went to the kitchen to pour himself a bowl of cereal.

He pulled up a newspaper to read over breakfast while outside the kitchen window the streets were coming to life with the hustle and bustle of the morning rush hour. As he sat reading his paper, he was about to put the spoon in his mouth but paused and put it back in the bowl when his eyes happened upon an ad in the classifieds that caught his attention. He pulled the paper up close to his face. His eyes weren't as good as they used to be.

“SHUTTLE PILOT WANTED

If you're yearning for adventures in Space but don't want to deal with the stuck-up, tight-ass bureaucracy of the big megacorps, than you might just be the man I need. I got a one-ship space-trucking outfit flying out of Otranto at the end of Weighmonth and need a pilot something fierce.

Contact Cpn. Jack Fisher at 26-69-2214-59.

Must be certified to fly a Peregrine Model 2 or an aerospace-craft with suitably similar flight controls.”

Hudson set the paper down and tapped his fingers on the white, enamel table-top. He was considering calling the number. This despite the fact that he was not a professional pilot but a career musician. As a young man, he had acquired fame and fortune playing in a soul band, scoring several number one hits and becoming a household name across much of Phaethon. But those days were over. His old band was now split up and he had long ago squandered his wealth on booze, drugs, and women. And even though he was still fairly well known, these days he barely scraped by playing odd gigs here and there. In fact, he was set to fly out later that very day for a gig in Otranto, Buffelland. He signed a contract to play a series of shows in one of the city's hottest clubs. It was going to be his most lucrative gig in years, but he worked at that club before and despised the manager, a conniving, backstabbing old prick named Gino Hornsby.

He got up from the table and walked over to the window. He looked out across the busy street and over the row of buildings on the other side to the sea-port that lay beyond. He watched as the boats came in and out of the harbour and up and down the river. He was tired of the life that he was living. The bright lights, the booze, the drugs, and the night life no longer appealed to him the way they did when he was younger. Lately it seemed as though he was just drifting along. Doing what he was doing only because it was the only life he had ever known. He walked back over to the table and looked at the ad again. Back in his heyday he had actually gotten his pilot's license. Not for any particular reason, just one of the many decadent expenses he indulged in back when he was made of money. Not only that, but he even once owned a MacInnis DC-15, which had a control system very similar to the one in the ad. He read the first sentence again. “...flying out of Otranto at the end of Weighmonth.”

“Now, what were the odds of that?” thought Hudson, “This old man being in the same city at the same time as me.” If he didn't know any better he would almost think it was fate, but he brushed that thought aside. Nevertheless, the prospect continued to stand out in his mind. He walked back over to the window

and focused his gaze on a white sail-boat as it slowly floated down the river. He watched as the little craft turned around a bend and disappeared out of sight. For a long minute, he stood staring at the spot where it disappeared until, finally, he made up his mind. He stepped over to his telephone, picked it up, and dialed the number.

Meanwhile, in a small town four thousand miles to the north, another man was beginning a busy day of his own.

~

James Starkey woke up with a hammer pounding in his brain, sprawled across his girlfriend, Susan's, bed. Last night was their graduation night and the two of them (along with most of their classmates) had celebrated a little too hard. Jim rolled over and slung his arm around Suzie and rested his chin on her shoulder. She stirred and gently put her hand on his. Jim snuggled in closer and put his hand on her hip. Suzie pushed it away.

"Not now." she said.

"Mmmm." groaned Jim, "Oh, come on."

But just then, they were disturbed by the sound of something rapping against the window - *Rap!... Rap! Rap!*

"What is it?" asked Suzie.

"I don't know." Jim muttered. "Probably just a bird."

"Well, can you go check?"

Jim just grumbled. He didn't move or open his eyes.

"Please," said Susan, throwing his arm off her and turning over to face him.

"Fine." he said. He threw the blanket off him and swung his leg over the side of the bed. He remained in that position until another rap on the window encouraged him to get up. He stumbled over to the window, opened it up and - *Whack!* Something struck him on the forehead. He rubbed his head and looked down to see his best friend, Tyler Keefer, standing below with a handful of pebbles.

"Shit, sorry. Didn't see you there." he said.

"Jesus, Ty." said Jim, "What the hell are you doin' here at this hour of the morning?"

Ty said, "It's nine-thirty, Jim."

"Oh, god." Jim moaned, "Is it that late already? That bus of mine leaves in half an hour."

"Yeah, I know what time it's leaving. Just get your shit together and let's go."

"Yeah, alright." said Jim, "I'll be down in a minute."

He closed the window and turned around to put on his jeans and slip on his shirt. Suzie stirred and looked at him.

“Are you leaving already?” she asked.

“Yeah, afraid so.” said Jim, “Guess I’m running late.”

“When will you be back?”

“Should be back on the fifteenth.”

“Oh, I wish you didn’t have to go so soon.”

“Yeah, well...” said Jim, “It was either this or go up to Space with Ty - and you wouldn’t *let* me do that.”

Susan frowned.

“You know I couldn’t stand it if you were gone for months at a time.”

“Yeah, I know.” said Jim, “That’s why I’m doin’ this for you.” He bent over and gave her a kiss. “I love you.” he said, “And I’ll be back in two weeks.”

“Are you gonna call me?”

“Every night.” said Jim. He blew her a kiss and slipped out the door. He ran down the stairs, out the front door, and hopped into Ty’s truck. Ty was leaving that day, too. But while Jim was going north to the coal mines of Rusty Hills, Ty was going south-east to the city of Otranto to attend a recruiting campaign being held by Astrocor, the preeminent spacing company in the system.

As they turned the corner onto the main drag, Ty said, “Do you remember getting into a fight last night?”

“Shit, vaguely.” said Jim, “What the hell was that all about?”

“I dunno. I think I said something about your girlfriend.”

Jim laughed, “Yeah, that’ll do it. What did ya even say anyways? I think we were goin’ at it for real.”

“Shit. I don’t even know. I think I was just upset you aren’t comin’ with me to Otranto.”

“Well, whaddaya do.” said Jim, “You know I’d *like* to be goin’ up there with ya.”

“Yeah, well,” said Ty, “you gotta keep your old lady happy, I guess.” He tapped the steering wheel and breathed a heavy sigh. “Tell ya what. Whaddaya say I let you borrow my truck when I’m gone?”

Jim looked at his friend.

“You sure, man?”

Ty scratched his head.

“Well, I’m not gonna need it when I’m up in Space. And I’d rather you have it than leave it sitting in some seedy parking lot for the next few months.”

Jim nodded.

“Well, shit, man. This is real great of you.” he said, “And don’t worry. I promise I won’t get a scratch on ‘er.”

Ty laughed, “Yeah, this comin’ from the guy who flipped his foster dad’s ‘68 Cobrasnake.”

“Oh, take off!” said Jim, punching Ty in the arm. They had a good laugh as they pulled into the bus station parking lot.

Jim looked up at the big sign that read, “*Deerhound Bus Depot*”.

“Well, I guess this it.” he said.

“Yeah, ‘spose so.” said Ty.

They got out of the truck. Ty grabbed his suitcase from the box and met James by the driver-side door.

“Well, I’m guessin’ you’ll wanna hit the road.” he said, “What’s it, a ten hour drive to Rusty Hills?”

“Yeah, something like that.” said Jim. He looked down at his watch. “Well, enjoy yourself in Space.” he added.

“Enjoy yourself in the shit hole.”

James frowned, but Ty just slapped him on the shoulder.

“Seriously,” he said, “When we meet up again, we’ll raise the roof.”

“As always.” said James, “Until next time, pal.”

He shook his friend’s hand and then hopped in the truck. Ty called back to him as he was pulling out of the parking lot.

“If ya get one dent on my truck, Jim - I’ll kill ya!”

Jim just smiled and honked the horn. He pulled out onto the main drag and drove away.

~

Two weeks later, Jim found himself plodding ankle deep through sticky, black mud under a grey, overcast sky. He laid down what felt like his nine millionth piece of cribbing onto the box that he was constructing. His arms were burning, his feet were sore, and he cursed those grey, muddy blocks of wood. He paused to catch his breath, and before turning around to fetch another piece, checked his watch.

“Three o’clock already.” he muttered to himself, “Hell with this. I’m goin’ for lunch.”

It was the last day of his first fourteen day stint at the muddy, open pit mine. For the past two weeks he had been slogging it out almost non-stop for twelve hours a day. Today, he had been going hard with no break since he started in the morning and by now he was flat-out beat. He left the box he was working on unfinished and walked up the hill, over to his lunch trailer. His lunch was cut short, however, when half-way through his sandwich, his boss, a middle-aged man with a wide chin and a flat top haircut named Bruce Crawford, burst through the door.

“What the hell are you doin’, boy?” he screamed.

“Havin’ lunch.” said Jim.

“I thought I told you I need that cribbing built *pronto* so we can take that boom off the shovel!”

“Yeah, I know, Bruce.” said Jim, his sandwich still in his hand, “But it’s past three already. I’m the only guy out there and I’ve been workin’ since six-thirty this morning. Jesus, I need to get somethin’ to eat.”

“Something to eat? Something to *eat!*?” said Bruce. “The mechanics are sittin’ around doin’ nothing and you’re in here having *something to eat!* Give me that!” He snatched the sandwich out of Jim’s hand and threw it in the garbage.

“What the hell?!” yelled Jim.

Bruce pointed at him with an evil stare.

“Don’t you give me no lip, boy. You can have something to eat when the job’s done. Right now, you’re on my watch. Hear? Now you get your ass off that chair AND GET BACK TO WORK!”

He pointed at the door.

Jim sighed and grudgingly got up. He put his gloves and hardhat on, and walked back out to the mud hole. By the time six o’clock finally arrive and the whistle blew, he was positively famished. He threw his shovel in the tool shed, hung his gear back in his locker, and thanked the Lord it was finally his days off. He left the change room and tried to sneak past Bruce’s office, but the ornery old man called him in anyways.

“I suppose you got a week off, now.” he said.

“Yeah, that’s right.” said Jim.

“Well, you better adjust your attitude before you get back.”

Jim just nodded tiredly and walked out. He punched his time card on the way out the gate and drove directly to the pub for something to eat.

After having a bite, he hopped in the little, red pick-up and pulled out of Rusty Hills, that little pit-stop of a mining town, to begin his ten hour drive back home. All through the night, he drove south. Out of the mountains and down the long Steinhauer River valley back to his home town.

By the time he pulled into Fort Hamely, the Yellow Sun* was rising in the east and Jim was on his ninth cup of coffee. He pulled up to his house just before 7:00 a.m. and, despite all the coffee he drank, was ready to expire. However, no sooner had he walked through the door than he found that Ted, his foster father, was waiting for him, sitting at the kitchen table with a newspaper and a cup of coffee of his own, clean shaven as usual with his short, dark hair neatly parted.

“Good morning, James.” he said, “I see you pulled an all-nighter.”

“Hello, Ted.” replied James, tiredly. He tried to walk past and get to his

* The Primary and, by far, the brighter of Phaethon’s two suns.

room but Ted continued.

“You got my money, James?”

James rolled his eyes and sighed. He turned around to face his foster father and put his arms up in exasperation.

“I only just finished my first set, Ted. How the hell could I have your money yet?”

“I know you don’t have the whole fifty thousand, James.” said Ted, dryly, “I was thinking you could pay me back in installments.”

“How ‘bout I give you the money when I have the fuckin’ money.” said James.

“How about I don’t trust you with a savings account.” snapped Ted, “How about that? Now, did you get your first paycheck yet?”

Jim nodded.

“Let’s see it.”

Jim pulled his pay stub from his wallet and slapped it on the table. Ted looked at it and raised his eyebrows.

“Hmm,” he said, “That’s a pretty hefty sum. I wish I could’ve made that kind of money when I was your age.”

“Just what do you want?” said James.

“How about nine hundred bucks?” said Ted, “That’s five hundred for my payment, and another four hundred for rent. And that should leave you with enough for gas and whatever else you need.”

“*RENT!*?” yelled James, “I have to make payments *and* pay rent?!”

Ted looked at him without blinking.

“Yes, rent.” he said, “You’re a grown man, now, James. If you want to stay sleeping under my roof, you have to pay rent.”

James breathed in angrily.

“Fine.” he said, “Nine hundred bucks for payment *and* rent. Is that what you want?”

“Yes, that’s exactly what I *just* said.”

“Fine, I’ll get you your damn money. But right now I’m going to sleep. Okay?”

“Okay. Good.” said Ted, “And I expect that money by tomorrow.”

He took a sip of coffee and resumed reading his paper as Jim stormed off to his room.

That evening, Jim woke up to an empty house. He showered, got dressed, and picked up the phone to give Suzie a call. But her dad answered and said that she was busy. He hung up the phone. This was the fifth day in row she hadn’t answered. He tapped his fingers on the table and figured what he would do that

evening. Tyler and his buddy Tod went down to Otranto to get jobs with Astrocor and most of his other friends were either out of town or working.

"Hell with it." he thought, *"I'll just head down to the pub and see who's there."*

When he pulled up to the bar, he found his friends, Renny, Beaver, and Alex, drinking and smoking on the patio, with the sounds of laughter, conversation, and loud rock music issuing from the bar's open doors. When they spotted Jim walking up the steps, the trio looked at him and grew silent. Renny turned around and muffled a snigger. Jim looked at him and furrowed his eyebrows.

"Eh, uh - what's goin' on, guys?" he said as he walked up to join them."

"Uh, not too much, Jimbo." said Alex, awkwardly. "Just hangin' out, havin' a few drinks, you know."

"How's it up in Rusty Hills?" said Beaver.

"Rusty Hills? Oh, fuck." said Jim, leaning against the rail. He pulled out a cigarette and lit it up. "Worst two weeks of my life. Ty was right. That place *is* a shit hole."

"That bad, eh?" said Beaver.

"Yeah," said Jim, taking a haul on his cigarette. "Oh, well. It wasn't my first choice, but if it makes Suzie happy, whatever."

At this, the three hooligans reacted. Beaver coughed, Alex spit out his drink, and Renny made a stupid face as though he was trying hard not to laugh.

"Whoa." said Jim, holding up his hand, "Why you guys acting like that? What's going on?"

"Uh... nothing." said Alex, "Don't worry about it."

"Nothing, eh?" said Jim, "Than why are you acting so weird? How 'bout you two?" he said, pointing at Renny and Beaver, "What's goin' on?"

They both shook their heads, not saying anything.

"Oh, so that's how it is." said Jim, "Well, I tell you what. I'm gonna go grab a beer and when I come back you guys better start talkin'." He turned around to walk in the bar but he heard Renny mumble under his breath.

"I wouldn't go in there if I were you."

Jim spun around.

"What's that?" he said.

"Nothin' " said Beaver, "I was just gonna say, you know, let *me* go grab you a beer, buddy. Stick around and relax."

He stepped over and patted Jim on the back and started to walk towards the bar door, but Jim grabbed him by the shirt and shoved him against the post.

"That's not what you said." he shouted in Renny's face, "You guys been actin' weird since I got here. You tell me what's goin' on right now!"

Renny, clearly in shock at having been lunged at, muttered, “Uh, uh, it’s just that - well - you see, uh...”

But before he could finish what he was trying to say, Beaver blurted out, “Suzie’s in the bar makin’ out with some guy!”

Jim looked at him. His mouth hung open and his eyes grew wide.

“*SHIIIIIT!*” he yelled, “You’ve gotta be kiddin’ me!” He threw Renny aside, “Who is it!? Who the *HELL* is it? I don’t care. I’ll find out for myself.” He turned around and stormed into the bar and punched the wall as he marched through the door. “I’ll kill the sonofabitch!” he shouted.

Renny shook himself off and gave Beaver a push.

“Leave it to you.” he said.

Jim marched through the crowded bar, fists clenched, shoving his way through and looking left and right for the perpetrators. On the far side of the bar, he found them. Sitting on the padded seats against the wall, heavily engaged in a make-out session: Susan and a young man Jim knew all too well. Tall, gangly, ginger, and wearing so much jewelry and gold chains that he looked like an asshole. It was Lenny Birdstein, the obnoxious tool who, a month earlier in this very bar, was bragging to Jim about the million dollars he made on his mission to Earth. Jim wasted no time. He grabbed the guy by the collar and yanked him away from Suzie who shrieked as Jim pummeled him in the face.

“You gangly, redheaded creep!” he shouted. He grabbed hold of Lenny’s shoulders and was about to throw him to ground with every intention of pounding his face into the floorboards when Suzie jumped over and shoved herself between the two men.

“Jim, stop it!” she screamed. Jim pushed her away.

“What the fuck is goin’ on?” he yelled, “I’ve been gone two weeks and this is what I come back to!?”

“No, no, Jim, it’s not what it looks like.”

“Oh no, huh?” said Jim, “I’ll tell you what it looks like. I got that shitty job up in that bloody shit hole ‘cause you couldn’t stand the thought of me being away for months at a time. But it turns out you couldn’t even wait two weeks. *That’s* what it looks like! And what the hell?” he added, looking at Lenny who was straightening his white t-shirt, “You couldn’t find a better guy than this piece of shit?”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa, Jimmy boy,” said Lenny, raising his arms, “I thought we were friends. No need to let something like this get between us. Hey, remember that money you asked me for?” he pulled out his checkbook, “What’s a few grand between old family friends?”

Jim was too incensed to even consider the offer.

“Do I want your fuckin’ money.” he sneered, “I’ll fuckin’ kill you is what

I'll do!"

He lunged at Lenny, about to go at him for a second time, ignoring Suzie who was shouting, "Jim, don't!", when Renny, Alex, and Beaver came from behind and grabbed him by the shoulder.

"Hold on there, Jim. Settled down." said Alex, but Jim wouldn't listen. In the end, it took the three of them to physically restrain him long enough until he relaxed a little, breathing heavily with his fists still clenched.

Alex said, "Now, why don't you come with us and let us buy you a beer?"

"Oh, fuck off." said Jim. He brushed them aside and walked over to the bar by himself.

"Eh, Bill!" he called to the bartender, "I'll have a shot of Jack Walker and a bottle for the road."

Old Bill, a friend of Jim's parents when they were still alive, tried to ask what was going on but Jim was having none of it. He took his shot and left the bar with his bottle of whiskey.

He spent the rest of the night at the docks on the east end of town, sitting on the cement ledge and staring out at the Mudwater River, the light of Aegiale* reflecting off its waters. When he was finished, he tossed the empty bottle into the river and stumbled home.

The next day, he woke up late. He went to the bank to pull out the money that he owed Ted and spent the rest of his days off moping around the house and drinking in the evenings by himself. On Sunday, he got in his truck and drove back up to Rusty Hills.

His first day back on the job was another round back to the shit show. Once again, he was the only labourer on the crew and Bruce had him hauling cable all morning to run alongside a gravel road they were building out to the east end of the mine. And when the hoist cylinder broke on the gravel truck, he had Jim climb up into the box and unload all the gravel by hand.

"Now, Jim," he said, "you get your ass up there and throw all that gravel out the back, ya hear? We need this road done by the end of shift."

"Yeah, yeah." said Jim, and he went back to the toolshed to grab a shovel and brought it back to the truck.

Still flustered by the events of the past week, he angrily scooped shovelful after shovelful of gravel over the side. He was nearly half-way done when he heard his boss yelling at him from below.

"James. James. JAMES!!"

James looked up over the side of the box at Bruce who was standing on the ground below.

* One of Phaethon's three moons.

“James, you get down here right now!” said Bruce.

James sighed and lept over the side of the box, his shovel still in hand.

“What is it?” he said.

“James, what the hell are you doin’?”

“I’m doing what you told me to do.”

“I *told* you to throw that gravel over *there!*” The old man pointed towards the back of the truck.

James shrugged, “I thought the skidsteer could push it over there.”

“Oh, so that’s what you *think* is it?”

“Yeah,” said Jim, getting angry, “That’s what I think.”

Bruce flared his nostrils.

“You don’t think.” he said, “YOU DO WHAT I TELL YOU!”

Jim was about to shout back at the man but then thought better of it. Instead, he threw his shovel on the ground, turned around, and walked away without saying a word.

“WHAT THE HELL DO YOU THINK YOU’RE DOING?!?” Bruce shouted after him.

“I quit.” said Jim.

“Well, fine!” yelled Bruce, “You goin’ home than? You little shit. Well, you better not think about crawlin’ back. I’ll be damned if you ever get a job at this place again!”

“That’s fine.” said Jim.

He walked back to the trailer, grabbed his things, and walked off site, punching out for the last time. He hopped into his truck and was driving out of Rusty Hills before the hour was out.

Out of the mountains and down through the rolling foothills, the highway winded past one gorgeous vista to the next. The Yellow Sun shining in a bright, clear sky on the grey asphalt of the road and the dark, green spruce trees of the northern forests. He flicked on the radio. “Cruising to the Dream” by Tom Eddy was playing. He smiled and turned it up. With one arm out the window, he tapped the side of the truck to the easy, feel-good beat and smiled as the wind blew through his scruffy, blond hair.

By the time evening was setting in, he was out of the foothills and driving through the flat, boreal forests of northern Buffeland. He had a bite to eat at a roadside stop in a little town called Fort Norbasca. As he ate, he casually looked out the window at the tall towers of some industrial plant, poking above the trees on the other side of the road.

Half an hour later, he found himself driving down into the long, wide valley of the Steinhauer River which lazily meandered through the forest below him while the Yellow Sun sank low over the western hills, turning the sky a rich, dark

blue and reflecting brilliant shades of orange and pink off the bottoms of low hanging clouds. As he made his way down the hill he spotted, off to his right, the bright, orange glow of a distant fire on a large sandbar on the side of the river. Feeling adventurous, he decided he might take a look. So, when he came across a pair of dirt tire tracks veering into the forest on the right side of the highway, he stopped and turned down them.

The little trail wound its way a short distance through the bush before it came out into the open onto the wide sandbar he saw from the road. A huge bonfire burned brightly in the middle of the sandbar, around which a half a dozen people or so were scattered about talking and laughing, while a few tents and canoes could be seen in the background.

Jim pulled his truck up to the fire and hopped out. One of the people, a red-headed man with a bushy beard waved his hand and spoke up.

“Hey, partner! What brings you here this evening?”

“Ah, not much.” said Jim, “Just passin’ through, ya know? Saw your fire from the hill and thought I’d check it out.”

“Right, man.” said the bearded guy, “Well, by all means, you’re welcome to join the party. You want a beer, partner?”

“Yeah, I’d love to!” said James.

“Name’s Eric.” said the bearded guy as he handed Jim a can, “And these here are Doug, Joan, Kelley, Clive, and Stetson.” He waved his arm around at the other people, all of whom were young adults, with the exception of Clive whose hair and neatly trimmed beard were silvery grey. “And that young lady over there is Yana.” Eric pointed over at the tents at a beautiful, young woman with long, straight, blonde hair who was rummaging through her bag. She looked up from what she was doing and waved at Jim. Jim gave her a grin and waved back. He was about to say something to her but was interrupted by Clive.

“So, what’s your name, young man?”

“What?” said Jim, “Oh yeah. It’s James Starkey”

He pulled the tab off his beer can and threw it on the ground. Clive watched this and winced his eyes. But he turned back to Jim with a pleasant face.

“Nice to meet you, Jim.” he said, “So where are ya comin’ from on this fine evening?”

“Rusty Hills.” said Jim.

“Oh, very nice.” said Clive, “So, do you work up there?”

“Ah shit. No.” said Jim, “I *was* workin’ up there, but I just quit this afternoon. Got sick of that place real quick.”

“Oh, I see.” said Clive.

“But whatever.” said Jim, “How ‘bout you guys? What do you all do?”

Clive gestured around the fire at his friends.

“We all work together at Carbocor.” he said.

“Carbocor? Is that that plant I saw up by Fort Norbasca?”

“That’s right.”

“What do ya do there?”

Stetson, the tall, scruffy guy with the flannel shirt, piped in.

“Pretty much the opposite of what you do at Rusty Hills.” he said “We help the planet. We don’t destroy it.”

“Don’t mind Stetson.” said Eric from across the fire, “He can be a little blunt. We convert carbon dioxide in the atmosphere back into carbon and oxygen.”

“Well, where’s the money in that?” said Jim.

Eric laughed.

“There isn’t any.” he said, “It’s a government operation.”

“That’s right.” said Stetson, “We’re trying to stop what happened on Earth from happening here.” He chugged down what was left of his beer and threw the bottle in the fire. “And it’d be a hell of a lot easier if it wasn’t for people like you burning all that coal and shit.”

“Pretty sure I told you I quit.” said Jim. He took a sip of his beer and glared at the tall guy.

He was about to say something else to the guy, something a little more terse, but at that moment Yana came back from the tents and took her place by the fire. She looked at James and smiled.

“Hey, how ya doin’?” she said, “My name’s Yana.”

“Yeah, Eric told me your name.” he said. He walked over and shook her hand, “I’m James Starkey. But everyone just calls me ‘Jim’ ”.

“Well, it’s lovely to meet you, Jim.”

She had just the slightest Neerlandian accent which sounded like pearls washing over the beach.

“Yana here is general manager of the whole operation.” said Clive.

Jim looked at her and grinned.

“Is that so?” he said, “So, you’re everyone’s boss.”

Yana laughed.

“It’s just a job.” she said, “And besides, I’m not anyone’s boss out here.”

“Well, even so.” said James, “I know *I* wouldn’t wanna get on your bad side.”

Yana laughed again.

Later in the evening, after the rest of the gang had gone to their tents, James found himself lying with Yana on a sandy slope near the water’s edge, far away

from the tents and the fire which had by now died down to embers. By this time, the Yellow Sun had long dipped below the horizon and the Orange Sun* was now high in the sky, lighting the valley in a dim, twilight glow. Beside him, Yana was lighting up a joint. And as she was taking her first puff, a bright star appeared out of the East and slowly made its way across the sky.

“Oh, wow.” said James, “Is that a satellite?”

Yana took another haul on her joint and slowly blew out the smoke into the wind.

“No. Probably a space station.” she said, “It’s pretty bright.” She passed the joint to Jim and continued, “I bet you it’s that new station that Astrocor put up.”

James took a puff off the joint. He furled his eyebrows and stared at the cherry.

“I betcha that’s where Tyler is right now.” he said.

“Who’s that?” said Yana. She took the joint from Jim’s fingers and brought it to her own lips.

“A friend of mine.” said James, “He went to down to Otranto to sign up with Astrocor at their big job fair. I wanted to go, too, but my girlfriend...” he cleared his throat, “... my *ex*-girlfriend, I should say, convinced me to get that shit job up in Rusty Hills instead.” He took the joint back from Yana and took another toke. This time it made him start coughing. “Oh well...” he said, between coughs, “I guess... I guess missed the boat on that one.” He handed Yana back the joint.

She tried to take another toke, but by now, the roach was so small that it just crumbled in her fingers. She wiped her fingers off in the sand and rolled onto her side to look at Jim.

“You can still go.” she said, smiling.

“Oh, yeah?” said James. “How’s that?”

“Don’t you know, silly? Whenever one of those big companies have one of their job fairs, all of the contractors swoop in to pick up the stragglers. I bet you any money if you go to Otranto that you’ll be able to get a job with one of them.”

“Huh.” said James, “I never thought about that.”

“Well, now you have something to think about.” said Yana, “Of course, at the same time,” she added, playing with her hair, “I could get you a real good job at Carbocor.”

James rolled over and looked at her.

“You’d do that for me?” he said.

“Yeah, why not? I like you.”

James grinned.

“Yeah, I like you, too.”

She gave him a mischievous smile and leaned over and kissed him.

* The smaller and dimmer of Phaethon’s two suns.

The next morning James woke up on the sand alone, the Orange Sun had set and the Yellow Sun was already high in the sky. He got up to see the canoers on the other side of the sandbar. The fire was out and the tents were gone, and they were busy packing their canoes, which sat ready on the shore of the river. Wincing in the glare of the morning sun, he walked over to them. Yana, who was walking to her canoe with her bag in her arms, looked over at him.

“Oh, look who’s up and at ‘er.” she said.

James smiled and walked up to her.

“Leaving so soon?” he said.

“Afraid so. We got a long ways to go before nightfall and we slept in as it is.” She rolled her eyes and grinned.

James laughed.

“I had a good time with you.” he said.

“Yeah, me too.” said Yana, “I’d love to see you again. Are you going to take me up on my offer?”

James just stood there and didn’t say anything.

“It’s okay.” she said, “You don’t have to decide right now. You just do whatever you feel is best.”

“Alright.” said James.

She smiled and turned back to walk to her canoe. She tied her bag up and pushed out to join her friends who were already in the water. She paddled a ways out and turned back and waved at James.

“See ya, Jim.” she said, “Whatever you choose to do, I wish you the best of luck!”

James smiled and waved back.

“You, too.” he said, “Happy waters!”

She smiled and paddled away.

James stayed and watched until they paddled around the bend and then he turned back towards his truck, which was still parked by the remains of the fire. He looked down at his feet and kicked a small rock.

“Happy waters” he said, “Stupid.”

A few minutes later he was parked at the edge of the highway at the entrance of the trail he came in on. He sat and stared at the grey asphalt and wondered if he should go right: down south to Fort Hamely and on to Otranto; or whether he should go left: back up north to Fort Norbasca. He looked up over the trees. One of the moons was still out, hanging low in the blue, morning sky. He imagined himself in spaceship, flying past the moons and far from the world into the great, wide open of Space.

He put his truck into gear and turned right.

A few hours later, when he reached Fort Hamely, he didn't even stop. He drove right through the town and across the old, red bridge that crossed the Mudwater River. He gave a mocking salute as he drove by the town limits sign, and drove up and out of the valley. And, although he didn't know it at the time, he left his old life behind him forever.

By noon the next day, he was driving through the open farmland of central Buffeland. Past grain silos, train stations, yellow fields of rapeseed, and brown fields of wheat. With the window open and the sun shining in a clear, blue sky, he cruised with the radio blasting and his arm out the window. He was just coming up to the small town of Gelden Lake when the old rock song "Suzie Q" started playing on the radio.

*"Suzi Q! Why can't you be true?
Oh, Suzie Q! Why can't you be true?"*

Jim cursed and smacked the consol. He knocked the dial when he did so and the radio went to static.

"Oh, for christ sakes!" he said. He started fumbling with the dial, trying to find something to listen to that didn't remind him of his cheating ex-girlfriend. Finally, he settled on the country station. "Country Highways" by John Aspen was playing. He lifted his head back towards the road and - *Holy shit!* - He was on the shoulder and was barreling straight towards a hitchhiker. He swerved left to avoid the man and narrowly missed a semi-truck in the opposite lane who sounded his horn in protest. He slammed on his brakes and stopped on the side of the road to catch his breath. Meanwhile, the hitchhiker came running up to the truck and stopped at the open, passenger-side window.

"Holy willikers!" he said, "Are you alright?!"

"Am *I* alright?" said Jim, "How 'bout you? Jesus, I almost smoked ya!"

He looked at the guy. He was a young man, not much older than himself, with a rather bookish looking outfit, what with his short, neatly cut dark hair, thick-rimmed glasses, and white, button-up shirt. He gave Jim a little shrug.

"What the hell were you even doin' on the side of the road like that?" said Jim.

"Tryin' to hitch a ride." said the man.

Jim nodded. He reached over and opened the passenger door.

"Hop in." he said, "It's the least I can do for you."

"Oh, geez. Thanks, sir." said the man. He hopped up onto the seat and buckled his seatbelt.

James put the truck in gear and started off again.

“So, where ya goin’?” he said.

“Otranto.”

James grimaced, and his passenger noticed.

“Uh,” he said, “If you’re going only part way, I’d be completely happy with that.”

James rubbed his eyes. He wasn’t expecting any passengers on his trip, and it was still over 300 miles to Otranto. But after nearly killing the guy, he didn’t feel like he had a choice.

“No,” he said, “No, I’m goin’ to Otranto, too. I can take you all the way.”

The man’s face brightened up.

“Well, this is real swell of you, sir. I really appreciate this.”

“Yeah, like I said. It’s really no sweat.” said James. “And the name’s James Starkey, by the way.”

“Oh, right.” said the man, “My name is Harold Zalinsky.” He reached his hand over the seat, “It’s a pleasure to meet you, sir.”

James laughed, “No, not ‘sir’. You can just call me ‘Jim’. It’s good to meet you too, Harold.” He reached over and shook the man’s hand and turned his head back towards the road.

After that, there was a few minutes of awkward silence. Both of them sat and stared at the highway with the soft melody of John Aspen playing on the radio.

Finally, James tried to make conversation.

“So, you been following the ice bashen playoffs?” he said.

“Uh, I don’t know. I’ve seen a little of it, I guess.”

“Yeah,” said Jim, “I think the Steele Blades have a chance at the cup this year. Whaddaya figure? You think they’ll win against Hantreal next Tuesday?”

“Oh, I couldn’t say.” said Harold, “Honestly, I’m not really into sports.”

James looked bewildered.

“Really? Like you don’t even got a favorite team or nothin’?”

“I dunno. The Sommerton Miners, maybe? That’s who my dad always cheered for.”

“The Miners!?” said Jim, “You kiddin’ me? They haven’t even made the half-seasons since ‘72!”

“Well, geez, I don’t know.” said Harold, “Like I said, I’m not really into sports.”

“Alright. Fair enough.” said Jim, “In that case, what *are* you into?”

Harold scratched his head.

“I don’t know. A whole bunch of stuff, I guess. Science, history, politics...”

James nodded his head.

“Right on.” he said, “So, what are ya goin’ to Otranto for?”

“Well, I was hoping to get a job in Space.”

Jim spun his head and looked at him.

“No way!” he said, “You kiddin’ me?”

“No, not at all.” said Harold. He adjusted his glasses. “I just finished my Bachelor of Science. I was hoping to be a science officer on a starship.”

“On a *starship*!” said James.

“Well, yeah.” said Harold, “I know I probably won’t land a job on a *starship* right away. But with my degree, I can get a job as a science officer on practically any space-going vessel. In fact, it’s a legal requirement for every crew to have one.”

James looked back at the road and tapped his fingers on the steering wheel to the tune of the radio.

“Well, fancy that.” he said, “That’s why *I’m* going to Otranto, too.”

“To be a science officer on a starship?”

James laughed.

“No, not a science officer. I don’t have a fancy degree like you. I just finished High School. But I *do* want to go to Space.”

Harold looked ahead and squinted.

“Well, I suppose they’ll need deck hands, too...” he muttered under his breath.

James heard it, but he just laughed.

“Listen.” he said, “Whaddaya say me and you join forces?”

“What do you mean?” said Harold.

“I mean, I’ll be the wheels and you can help us get a job with that fancy degree of yours.”

Harold squinted.

“Like, you mean you’ll drive me around the city.”

“Yeah,” said Jim, “But you gotta put in a good word for me if somebody takes an interest in you.”

Harold sighed and adjusted his glasses.

“Yeah.” he said, “Yeah, I guess that shouldn’t be a problem.”

“Than it’s a deal.” said James. And he hit the accelerator and turned up the radio.

When evening came, they found themselves driving along the coastal highway down the western shores of Lake Tonowandah. Across the calm waters of the lake, silhouetted against the setting sun, was the skyline of downtown Otranto, painted black against a brilliant, orange sky and mirrored in the calm waters of the lake.

Jim had never been to Otranto before and couldn’t believe just how huge it was. From the time they passed the city limits sign (a small monument, really, in

and of itself) until the time they crossed the Summerville River into the downtown core, nearly fifty minutes had passed. By now, evening had all but set in and the lights began to turn in on in all of the buildings and skyscrapers which seemed to spread as far as the eye could see.

Growing up, Jim had made plenty of visits into Sommerton, which was a rather big city itself with a handful of twenty or thirty story buildings in its city center, but he had never seen anything like this. Here there were more massive skyscrapers than he could count. Some of them fifty or even *sixty* stories tall. And towering above even these was the monumental B.L.T. Tower, the tallest building on Phaethon. Its massive spherical top resting on a tall, grey pillar and by a long spire which pointed towards the heaven. A brilliant beacon shone at the tip of the spire which alternated between playful hues of red, yellow, green, and blue.

They passed through downtown towards the east side of the city and found a cheap motel close to the Saundaire River, right across a small channel from the Percival MacDougall Dominion Spaceport. The motel wasn't anything to brag on, but its location was handy and there was a decent looking patio bar nearby. Harold went to bed early, but Jim walked over to the bar to have a few drinks and relax on the patio after the long day's drive. It was a clear, breezy evening, and as Jim sipped at his rum and cola, he looked up at the dark, blue sky and watched the lights of the airplanes and spacecraft as they buzzed across the sky. He watched one craft in particular as it fired its thrusters and launched up and out of the atmosphere and imagined himself on it, leaving the world behind and entering a realm he had only ever seen in the movies. After a couple more drinks, he paid his tab and went back to the motel to retire for the night.

The next morning, the boys got up bright and early and went to a roadside truck stop for breakfast. They bought a newspaper from a kiosk by the door and found a nice table to sit at by the window. Jim unfolded the paper on the table and nonchalantly flipped through the pages. He paused a few pages in and was perusing an article about the upcoming global elections. Harold, noticing this, piped in.

“So, who are you planning on voting for?”

“Shit, I dunno.” said Jim. “Probably Bromley, I guess.”

Harold looked shocked.

“Blair Bromley? You're voting Alliance?”

“Yeah. What's the matter with that? Who are you voting?”

Harold adjusted his glasses.

“Well, I haven't had a chance to look over all his policies yet. But I'm kind of leaning towards Ian Douchard.”

“Douchard?! Are you fucking kiddin' me?” said James, “If it wasn't for his

father nationalizing the megacorps, we'd be workin' for Astrocor already!"

At that moment, the waitress came by to take their orders. Jim asked for a coffee and bacon and eggs, Harold decided on pancakes.

"Anyways." said James, after she left, "Who cares about all this. I thought we were looking for jobs. Let's see what we got."

He flipped over to classifieds section and spotted an ad that caught his interest right away.

"SPACE JOB

Lookin for a couple helpers to help out on me space tug. Well be cleaning up debris from low orbit and haulin scrap between the moons and phayathon.

If yer intrested call 26-02-9620-15. Ask fer Cap'n Jeff."

"Whaddaya think about that?" he said to Harold.

Harold shrugged.

"Works for me."

"Alright." said Jim. He circled the ad and took the paper over to the payphone. The man who called himself "Cap'n Jeff" answered.

"I'll be at Derrickson Scrapyard all day." he said, "If ya's wanna interview, why doncha bring yer buddy wicha and come on over."

Jim agreed, and after breakfast, Harold and him got in the truck and left.

The scrapyard, as it turned out, was across the Saundaire River on the very outskirts of the city and it took them over an hour to get there. They found Cap'n Jeff waist-deep in the open panel of a green, derelict looking space shuttle, tinkering away in the bowels of the engine. It took the boys a moment or two of yelling to get his attention, but when they did, the man, making a series of groans, contorted his body out of the hole. He was old and looked worse for wear. He was shirtless, partially toothless, and had a somewhat thin, gangly looking body with a half a dozen or so old fashioned sailor's tattoos scattered across his arms and torso. He arched his back, making another loud, painful sounding groan and, with twitching movements, reached into his back pocket for a pack of cigarettes. Every move he made was jerky and awkward. Even the simple act of pulling a lighter from his back pocket looked painful and difficult. But he managed to get it out and light his smoke with it and began talking to the boys.

"Oh, dis ol' space tug, she don't look like much." he said, when James asked him about the derelict shuttle, "But once I get 'er fixed up, she'll be the fastest ship in the universe."

"And that's the ship you mentioned in your ad." said Jim.

"Oh, yes." he said, patting the rusty, green hull, "I've had this ol' girl since

1976.”

“I see...” said Jim. But the man went on to ramble for another half hour or so, a little bit about the job but mostly about various fights and run-ins with the law that he had supposedly gotten into, and about how he was sure that the government sabotaged his ship on purpose. But, between the lines, Jim and Harold gathered the gist of what their jobs would be like if they accepted the man’s offer. It seemed his idea was for them to work as labourers in the scrapyard until he had gotten his ship up and running - whenever that would be. Jim and Harold did their best to politely decline and turned around to make their way to the gate.

“Well, if ya changes yer minds,” called Jeff after them, “Don’chu be ‘fraid to come on back here.”

The rest of the day, they had no more luck. They called a half a dozen more numbers and drove from one side of the city to next, visiting the offices of various spacing contractors and such. But as the day came to a close, they went back to the motel with no offers. Everyone they talked to said the same things: the positions were already filled, they were looking for higher credentials, or they simply weren’t hiring. Jim didn’t even bother going to the bar that night, he just went to bed feeling let down.

The day after that, they got up bright and early once again, but as morning turned into evening, it turned out to be the same as the day before. And so it went on, one day after the next, until two weeks went by and the only offer they had gotten was from Cap’n Jeff.

“I don’t know about this.” said Jim one evening after eating dinner at their roadside truck stop, “I was told there was gonna be tons of people looking for guys like us.”

“I dunno.” said Harold, spinning the salt shaker on the table, “Maybe we should call Cap’n Jeff.”

“And work in some shitty scrapyard? I thought we were trying to get jobs in Space.”

“Well, you got a better idea? It’s the only offer we got so far!”

Jim took a drag on his cigarette and looked out the window at the Yellow Sun setting over the buildings.

“I’m gonna have to go home, tomorrow.” he said.

“What? Why?” said Harold, “I thought we had a deal. I thought you wanted to go to Space.”

“I know.” said Jim, “But before I came down here, I was offered a good job back home. Plus, I’m gonna have to leave while I still got money for gas.”

“Well, why don’t you call Cap’n Jeff, than?” said Harold, “I know it’s crappy work, but it can you afloat until something better comes along.”

Jim looked down at the cherry of his cigarette.

“Ah, shit. I don’t know. Maybe.” He shook his head. “No. I can’t be dickin’ around forever. I got a huge debt to pay off and this job’s a sure thing.”

Harold sighed and looked down.

“That’s a shame.” he said.

“Yeah, well, whaddaya do?” said Jim. He crushed his cigarette and looked out the window again. The sun had now set completely leaving nothing but a thin sliver of light reflecting off the crest of a billowing bank of clouds on the horizon. He turned back towards Harold.

“Tell ya what.” he said, “Before I leave tomorrow, why don’t we go downtown and tie one off?”

Harold scratched his head.

“I don’t know.” he said, “I’m not really much of the partying type.”

“Oh, come on.” said Jim, “Might be the last time I’ll see ya. And besides, it’s on me.”

Harold shrugged.

“Alright.” he said.

After paying their tab, the boys hopped in the truck and made their way downtown. They drove around for a bit, admiring the neon lights and bustle of Otranto’s Main Boulevard before stopping at what looked like a happening place on whose glittering marquee read the words, “*The Tiger’s Den*”.

“How ‘bout this place?” said Jim.

“Fine by me.” said Harold.

Jim parked the truck outside the bar and they got out and stepped inside.

The place was clearly a very nice club, but despite it being Saturday night it was nearly empty. Atmospheric, dim lights shone above the round tables and red, velvet seats scattered about the bar floor, while the few occupied tables were lit by their own candles. On the walls hung black and white photos of various celebrities. The waitresses, all beautiful young women in classy, red dresses, attended to the handful of patrons, while a short, stocky bartender quietly wiped down the dark, hardwood bar counter. On a little stage upfront, a band played a slow, bluesy tune.

Jim and Harold took a seat near the back and ordered their drinks from the waitress, a chatty, young woman who Jim happily flirted with. While waiting for their drinks, Jim watched the band onstage. The lead singer, a younger looking man with a driving cap and a thin moustache, played his guitar effortlessly while soulfully singing his song. But Jim’s eyes were drawn towards the bass player, a tall, heavy set, middle aged black man who looked suspiciously familiar. About the time their drinks arrived, the band finished their song. At this point, the bass player stepped up to the front and started playing a funky riff, much bouncier than the last song, with a soulful rhythm. He put his mouth to the microphone and began

singing with a deep, rich baritone voice.

*“Beautiful and vicious,
My bab’s got it all!
Workin’ for my baby,
Gonna give that girl a call!”*

Immediately, Jim recognized the song. He took a closer look at the bass player and his eyes widened - he *knew* he recognized the man! He grabbed Harold by the shoulder and pointed at him.

“Holy shit! Do you know who that is?” he said, almost shouting.

“No, I can’t say I do.” said Harold, “Should I?”

Jim looked at his friend.

“Dude! That’s Jackson Hudson!”

“Jackson who?”

Jim spread his arms out in disbelief.

“Are you kiddin’ me? Jackson ‘the Howlin’ ’ Hudson!” He gestured at the man again, “The best soul singer of all time. One of *the* best musicians of the 1970s! We’re in the presence of a legend, Harold!”

At Jim’s insistence, they stayed at the small club and watched the band play right until closing time. After they played their last song, the band left the stage and the lights came on in the bar. Jim paid the tab and the two of them stumbled outside where it was now raining on the neon lit streets of downtown. Jim stepped up to his truck, fumbling with his keys and Harold, seeing this, piped up.

“You’re not planning on driving are you?”

“Yeah, why not?” said Jim.

“Because you’re loaded, Jim. You can’t drive right now.”

“Oh, take off.” said Jim, “I’m fine. ‘Sides, we need to get back to the motel.”

“Why don’t we just find a place nearby?”

“In downtown Otranto? You kiddin’ me? There’s no place ‘round here we can afford.”

“Than why don’t you give the keys to me.” said Harold, “I can get us home. Don’t you worry.” He reached for the keys in Jim’s hand but Jim pushed him away.

“Fuck off, you turd. You’re loaded, too.”

Harold stumbled backwards, and after regaining his footing, put his fists up in the air and shook them in a clumsy looking boxing pose. Jim just laughed at him and put the keys back in his pocket.

“Alright, you win.” he said, “We’ll find a place downtown.”

He gestured down the street and the two of them started walking down the

wet sidewalk in the rain. Just then, from a nearby alley, they heard the sound of a door slamming followed by an angry, shouting voice.

“You’re a loser, Hudson! Your career is over. Ya hear me? We didn’t even make enough dough tonight to cover expenses!”

“Oh, *fuck you* and your expenses.” came another voice, deeper and louder than the last one.

“Oh, fuck *me*?! Fuck you! I’m tearing up the contract, Hudson. You used to be somebody, but now you’re just a washed up loser.”

“Tear up the damn contract.” shouted Hudson, “Fine by me! I never liked working with you anyways, you crusty, old goat. I’ll see your ass in hell!”

“Good riddance.” yelled the manager, and they heard the door slam shut.

Jim and Harold turned to peek around the corner and saw none other than Jackson Hudson himself, the man who played so amazingly on stage, now walking alone through the litter strewn alley with his head down in the rain. He wore a wide-brimmed hat, an old, beige trench coat, and carried a battered, old guitar case under his arm. When he walked out onto the sidewalk, past the two boys, Jim spoke up.

“To hell with that guy.” he said, “You were fuckin’ awesome tonight.”

“And *who* the hell are you?” snapped Hudson.

Jim put his hands up.

“Nobody. Just a longtime fan.”

“And I ‘spose you want my autograph or some shit.”

“No, man. I wouldn’t bother you with something like that, right now. I just wanted to say we enjoyed the show. That’s all.”

Hudson sighed.

“Alright. Thanks.” he said. He turned around to walk away but then stopped, sighed again, and turned back around. “Jesus. What the hell you guys doin’ out in the rain like this, anyways?”

Jim shrugged.

“We were just gonna find a place to stay. You wouldn’t know any cheap hotels around here?”

“Yeah, there’s a Vacation Inn not far from here. Left down Sixteenth Avenue, right next to The Greasy Spoon Café.” he paused, “Say, you boys ain’t hungry are ya?”

Jim and Harold looked at each other and shrugged.

The Greasy Spoon Café turned out to be a typical inner city diner. Nothing more than a metal trailer occupying an otherwise empty lot between two tall buildings (one of which being the Vacation Inn). Inside there wasn’t much space, just a long counter with a row of stools and a handful of four-seater tables along

the other side by the window. The three of them chose one of the tables and sat down, Jim and Harold on one side and Hudson on the other. Meanwhile the rain, pattering against the window, obscured the shapes of the street lights outside. Soon, the waitress appeared to take their orders. Jim and Hudson asked for coffee, but Harold just wanted water. Hudson pulled out a cigarette and lit it up with a match. Jim pulled out a cigarette of his own. He fumbled in his pocket for his lighter but Hudson reached over and with his still lit match. Jim lit his cigarette with it and took a drag.

“Thanks.” he said.

Hudson relaxed and rested his arm along the top of the seat.

“So, what brings you two to the big city?”

James shrugged.

“Lookin’ for work.” he said.

“And how’s that goin’ for ya?”

James flicked his ashes.

“Not that great. We’ve been down here two weeks and got nothin’ so far.”

“Hmph.” muttered Hudson. He took a drag off his cigarette and looked out the window.

“Hey, I hope you don’t mind me sayin’,” said Jim, “But I’ve been a huge fan of yours since I was a kid. My foster mom used to listen to your records all the time.”

Hudson turned his gaze back from the window.

“Your foster mom?”

“Well... yeah.” said Jim, “My parents died in a drunk spaceship accident when I was two. I was raised in a small foster home.”

Hudson looked at him and silently nodded, his cigarette hanging at the side of his mouth.

“Me too.” he said.

After that followed a short, awkward silence before Harold piped up.

“Uh, I’m sorry about what happened to you tonight. You know, getting fired and all.”

Jim reached over and shoved him.

“Yeah. That’s really gonna lighten up the conversation.”

Hudson just waved them off.

“Ah, hell no.” he said, “I was gonna walk out on that contract anyhow. I got another job lined up. And ‘sides, I never *did* like that crusty, old prick.”

“So, you got another gig somewhere?” said James.

“Nah,” said Hudson, “somethin’ different. Got me a job piloting a space freighter.”

Jim and Harold’s eyes widened when they heard this and they leaned over

the table to listen further.

“No kiddin’!” said James, “How’d you manage that?”

“Some old man named Jack Fisher put an ad out in the Otranto Gazette. I answered it.”

“Well, hot damn!” said James, “Me and Harold have been lookin’ for a space job for the past two weeks. You don’t think this Fisher guy is lookin’ for anyone else, do ya?”

“Now, you wait right here, buster.” said Hudson, “I was just tellin’ ya what *I’m* doin’. I wasn’t inviting you to join me. ‘Sides, what makes ya think this guy’ll wanna hire a couple pimply faced boys like you?”

Jim was taken aback. He pointed over at Harold.

“Well, for one thing, Harold here’s a science officer.”

“A *science* officer?!” said Hudson.

Harold adjusted his glasses.

“Um, well, that’s the position I was looking for. You see, I have my Bachelor of Science in Astrophysics and majors in...”

Hudson harrumphed, cutting him off.

“So, you got some B.S. degree. And how ‘bout you, blondy? You got any fancy credentials?”

Jim shook his head.

“No, I just graduated High School.”

“Right. You got nothin’. Just a couple kids straight outta school. Both greener than a frog’s ass.”

James slammed his cup down on the table and pointed at the man.

“And what about you?” he said, “How many bass solos did you have to play to qualify *you* to fly a spaceship?!”

“Now, you wait right here...” said Hudson.

“No!” said James, “We’ve been drivin’ up and down these streets for the past two weeks lookin’ for a job like this. And here you are, leaving your music career behind you to pilot a space freighter. Why’d the hell you do that? It’s not for the money I bet you. I’ve wanted to go to space since I was a kid. Come on, man. Just give us a chance.”

Hudson looked at him silently for a second. He took a drag off his cigarette and quietly looked down as he crushed it out in the ashtray. Finally, he looked back up at Jim.

“You got wheels?” he said.

“Yeah.” said Jim, “My truck’s parked outside the Tiger’s Den.”

“Alright than,” said Hudson, “Let’s say tomorrow morning you give me a ride to the spaceport and I’ll let you meet the old man.”

Jim grinned.

“That’s great!” he said.

Hudson pointed at him.

“I can’t promise he’ll take you on, though. That’s up to him.”

Jim nodded understandingly.

“Yeah, of course.” He turned to Harold and shouted, “Right on! Looks like we got ourselves a job, buddy!” And he gave his friend a high-five.

Hudson looked on from across the table with his arms crossed.

“Yeah, we’ll see about that.” he said.

~

Meanwhile, on the other side of the city, in a hardy, orange shuttle-craft parked in dry-dock at the spaceport, an old man with a scraggy, white beard was lying fast asleep on a small couch in the ship’s common area. In his dreams, he was a boy again back on Earth. He was fishing with his father on an ordinary, ocean-going boat, a mile or two off the coast of the large, rocky island that, many ages ago, he once called home. He watched as his father strung line onto the reel of a long fishing rod, talking to him about fishing and his love for the sea. He turned his gaze away towards the coast and saw thousands of gulls as they circled and perched along the sides of the tall, rocky cliffs and rolling, green hills of the shore. He listened to the sounds of the squawks and the noise of the crashing waves. And just as he saw a killer whale lift his majestic head out of the water and shoot a huge geyser from his spout, another sound joined the fray. The out-of-place sound of a telephone ringing. The whale finished his discharge and came crashing back down into the surf with a mighty splash. Excited, he turned around to tell his father, but when he did, saw that his father, who a moment ago was holding a fishing rod, was now holding a black telephone receiver which was ringing louder than ever. With a grave expression on his face, his father handed him the receiver and said, “Phone’s for you, me son.”

And then he woke up.

The telephone, it turned out, was actually ringing, blaring shrilly in his ears from across the room. He looked at the time on the wall - *3:45 am*.

“For the love of god.” he muttered, “Who the hell is calling at this hour.”

He lifted himself off the couch and stood up. As he went to walk over to the phone, he hit his shin on the coffee table.

“Goddammit! Mother of hell!!” he shouted, kicking his bruised leg. Cursing under his breath, he stumbled over to the phone and picked up the receiver.

“What the hell do you want?!” he yelled.

“Hello, Daencin.” calmly answered the all too familiar voice on the other end, “I didn’t disturb you, did I?”

“John Sterric.” growled the old man, “My name is Jack. And hell yes, you disturbed me. Do you have any idea what time it is down here?”

“I’m afraid I don’t, Daencin.” said Sterric, still calling Jack by his Terran name, “We operate on Standard Time on the station. You know that.”

“Just what is it you want?” said Jack. He seated himself on a nearby chair and rubbed his shin.

“Daencin, I’m calling to ask you when you’ll be ready to start flying shipments. It’s been over a month since you’ve signed the charter and quite frankly, we’re getting impatient.”

Jack stood up and pointed his finger.

“I already told you, John. My rocket-trailer was damaged in the explosion on Aegle. I can’t do shit till it gets repaired.”

“I’m well aware of the incident at the shipyard.” said Sterric, “But I have to ask. Do you even have a crew put together yet?”

Jack grit his teeth.

“I’m workin’ on that.”

“I bet you are.” said Sterric, his voice dripping with dry sarcasm, “I got to tell you - *Jack!* This doesn’t look good.”

“Well, so what?” said Jack, “You know I don’t give a shit what it looks like.”

“You’ve always been an impertinent bastard.” said Sterric, “But regardless of what it *looks* like, I need you flying. We’ve got a shipment that needs to get to the planet Phainon by ‘6576. That’s just a few weeks from now, Daencin. We’ve got no other crews available and we *need* to get this shipment moved. If you’re not ready by then you can consider your charter null and void. And you know what *that* means.”

“Hsyeah.” said Jack. “You fly my ass back to Earth.”

“That’s right.” said Sterric, “And after what you pulled, I wouldn’t be surprised if you wind up toiling in the sulphur mines of Io for the rest of your miserable life. So, if I were you, I’d do whatever I can to see this mission through. Do you hear me?”

“Don’t worry, John.” said Jack, “I’ll have a crew together by then. And I’ll *push* that shipment to Phainon myself if I have to. But...” he added, “not because you told me to. But because I’m a space trucker. It’s what I do. So, good bye, John. I’ll see your ass later.”

He hung up the phone and went back to the couch to resume his sleep.

When morning came around, he was awoken once again to the telephone ringing.

“Jesus Christ! What now?” he said, but he looked at the clock and saw that it

was already 8:30 a.m. Once again, he got up to answer the phone, being careful this time not to hit his shin on the coffee table.

“Hello,” he spoke tiredly into the receiver.

“Good morning, sir!” chirped a friendly sounding woman on the other end, “Am I speaking to Captain Jack Fisher?”

“Yeah, that’s me.” said Jack.

“Hi, Captain Fisher. This is dry dock security. I have three gentlemen here to see you. One of them says he’s arranged to meet with you this morning. A Jackson Hudson, I believe.”

“Jackson Hudson!?” said Jack. He just now remembered agreeing to meet the man today, but didn’t recall him saying anything about bringing other people along. “And who are the other two?” But before the woman could get back to him, he shook his head. “You know what, never mind. Just let ‘em in.”

He didn’t feel like arguing that morning. Not over the phone at any rate. If he needed to tell someone to “fuck off”, he could tell them in person. He put on a pair of jeans that were lying on the floor and went over to the galley to brew a pot of coffee from the automatic dispenser. When it was finished, he poured a cup - black of course - and walked over to the other side of the ship and took the cargo elevator down to the airlock. Out the hatch and down the airstairs, he stretched in the morning sun letting its light glisten off the curly, white hairs of his bare chest. He took a seat at a little patio he set up for himself under the curved wing of his shuttle-craft. There he sat and enjoyed his coffee and watched as the light of the rising sun shone down rows of other ships of all shapes and sizes that lined the gangway corridor. And as he was taking another sip, he saw, in its glaze, the silhouettes of three figures walking down the gangway towards him. When they were close enough, he shielded his eyes from the sun to get a better look. The one figure was a large, middle-aged black man whom he pretty sure was Jackson Hudson, the other two he didn’t know: a short, nerdy-looking, dark-haired white boy, and a handsome, smug-looking blond one, neither of whom could have been much older than adolescents. When the trio arrived at his ship, the large, black man stepped towards the table.

“You Captain Jack?” he said.

“That I am.” said Jack.

The large man looked up and down, surveying the well-worn, orange hull of Jack’s shuttle-craft, with its thirty foot wings that extended straight out from the top of the craft before curving down towards the ground and the lusty pin-up girl painted under the cockpit. Under this, was written the ship’s name in blue, cursive letters: “*The Wayward Son*”.

“Nice ship.” he said.

“Thanks.” said Jack, dryly, “I’m guessin’ you’re Hudson.”

Hudson nodded.

“You’re guessin’ right.” he said.

He extended his hand.

Jack stood up, his coffee still in one hand, and accepted the man’s shake with the other.

“So, you’re looking for a job as a pilot, eh?”

“That’s right.” said Hudson.

“On the phone you told me you can fly a MacInnis DC-15. Is that right?”

“That’s right.” said Hudson, “I was certified on it.”

“*Was*’?” said Jack, “When’s the last time you flew.”

Hudson grimaced.

“Not for seven or eight years.” he said, “Time’s been tough.”

“That’s quite some time.” said Jack, “And how about these two. You didn’t say you’d be bringing company.”

“Oh, these two kids? Just a couple young bucks who dream ‘bout goin’ to Space. I told ‘em I’d let ‘em meet you. I hope ya don’t mind.”

Jack took a sip of coffee.

“No, that’s okay.” He walked up to Harold, looking the young man up and down, “And what’s your name?” he asked him.

“Uh, it’s Harold.” said Harold.

“Is that right?” said Jack, “And do you have a last name, Harold. Or is it just ‘Harold’?”

“Oh, yeah. Right.” said Harold, “Uhm, it’s Zalinsky. Harold Zalinsky. And it’s very nice to meet you, sir.”

He extended his hand for a shake, but Jack ignored it.

“And what do you have under your belt, boy?”

Harold looked down at his belt. He pulled it out from his waist and looked down into his black dress pants.

Jack put his hands up.

“Credentials, kid! Credentials!” he said, “Tickets. Degrees. What do you got? What position you lookin’ for?”

“Oh,” said Harold, laughing meekly, “Right. Uh, yeah. I was kinda hoping to be a science officer - it you’re looking for one, that is. I just received my Bachelor’s in Astrophysics. I also minored in Rocket Telemetry and Astrodynamics and have taken courses in...”

“That’s enough.” said Jack. He smiled and took a long sip of coffee and walked over to Jim.

“How ‘bout you, blondy?” he said, “You got anything under your belt?”

James grabbed his belt with both hands, lifted it up, and smiled.

“Just a high school diploma and a drive to succeed.”

Jack stifled a chuckle.

“Right. And have you ever been to Space?”

“Nope. ‘Fraid not.” said James, “I haven’t even been on an airplane.”

Jack put his head down. He closed his eyes and rubbed his brow.

“What’s your name, son?” he said.

“James Starkey.” said James, “But all my friends call me ‘Jim’.”

“So, Jim.” said Jack, “You got no experience. Nothin’ under your belt. What makes you think I’d wanna hire you?”

“Because I wanted to go to Space all my life, sir. My parents worked on a space freighter. They had the right stuff. I think I have it, too.”

“I’m sure you do.” said Jack. He stepped back and started pacing again. “So, what do we got here? A rusty pilot who hasn’t flown in a decade, a barely experienced university graduate, and a scruffy haired kid who hasn’t been so much as a mile off the ground...” He paused and took a big, long sip of coffee and then leaned back and took a deep, long breath of morning air. Finally, he said, “Tell ya what. You’re all hired.”

James grinned.

“Well, that’s great!” he said, “When do we start.”

“Right away.”

James, Harold, and Hudson all looked at each other.

“Unless you guys have any objections.” said the captain.

James shrugged.

“That works for me.”

“Uh, yeah. Me, too.” said Harold.

Hudson crossed his arms and nodded.

“Anytime you’re ready.” he said.

“Good.” said Jack, “There’s a slot open in an hour. I hope you got your shit together, ‘cause we’re goin’ to Space.”

An hour turned out to be just enough time to get everything in order, and before long, the three men were back at the ship with their bags slung over their shoulders. Jack was standing outside waiting for them. The patio set was gone and the old captain was now fully dressed wearing a plaid shirt and a wool trimmed denim vest.

“Looks like we’re all set to go.” he said, “Hudson! You’re the pilot, now. You wanna take us off?”

“It’s been a while.” said Hudson, “But I’ll give ‘er a shot.”

“Don’t worry.” said Jack, “It’s just like riding a bike.”

He gestured towards the hatch and the four of them filed up the airstairs.

The airlock was just big enough for the four men to stand comfortably side

by side. Once James stepped inside, Jack closed the hatch behind him and spun the latch to lock it. Overhead, a bell rang and a green light came on. Jack stepped over to a ladder on the side wall and pulled a lever that opened another hatch above the ladder. James was the first to climb up the ladder. Once atop, he stepped into the cramped quarters of the upper deck and looked around at what seemed to be a small kitchen and living area.

The captain yelled from the down the ladder, “What the hell ya doin’ kid? Grab the bags!”

James laughed, “Oh, right.”

“Welcome aboard the *Wayward Son*, boys.” said the captain, once they were all aboard, “Make yourselves comfortable ‘cause this’ll be your home for the next few weeks. You can strap your bags down in that luggage compartment and the cockpit’s over there.”

James, Harold, and Hudson strapped their bags into an overhead compartment and followed the old man into man into the little, four-seater cockpit. But before James stepped inside the old man put his hand on his shoulder.

“So, you’ve *never* been to Space, huh, kid?” he said.

James shook his head.

“Tell ya what.” said Jack, “Why don’t ya sit up front there with Hudson.”

James looked at the man.

“Ya sure?” he said, “Ain’t that your seat?”

The old man made a patronizing grin.

“They’re *all* my seats.” He slapped Jim on the back and sat down in the rear next to Harold. James took his seat next to Hudson and strapped himself in.

“Alright, Hudson.” said Jack, “Call us in.”

Hudson turned around and looked at the old man.

“Ya know, it’s really been awhile.” he said, “Ya sure you don’t wanna be up here with me?”

Jack waved his hand.

“You’ll be fine.” he said.

“Alright.” said Hudson. He picked up the mic from center console, put it to his mouth and keyed it in. “Hello, flight control.”

He waited a moment but there was no response. He looked back at Jack.

“Try again.” said the captain.

Hudson spoke into the mic again, this time louder.

“Hello. Flight control.”

They waited again, but there was still no response. He tried again, this time almost yelling.

“Flight control! Goddammit. Do you read me!?”

They waited for a second and finally a voice crackled over the mic.

“Uh, yeah. We read you... Uh, exactly what flight control are you trying reach?”

Hudson unkeyed the mic.

“How many damn flight controls are there?” he said to Jack.

“Percy Mac.” said the captain.

“I’m callin’ Flight Control for Percy Mac!” said Hudson into the mic.

“Uh, yeah.” crackled the man on other end, “This is Percival MacDougall Flight Control. How may I assist you?”

“I’m tryin’ to get a ship off the ground.” said Hudson. “Do you have a runway open?”

“Uh, yeah. What is your call sign and destination, sir?”

Hudson looked back at Jack.

“So, where we goin’?”

“Space Station *Phoebus 1*.” said the old man.

Hudson put the mic back to his mouth.

“This the shuttle-craft *Wayward Son* and we’re flyin’ to *Phoebus 1*.”

“Uh, yeah. Thank you, sir.” crackled the man on the other end, “Ah, just give me a minute.”

Hudson put the mic down. A couple minutes later, the man on the other end came through once more.

“Uh, yeah, shuttle-craft *Wayward Son*?”

Hudson put the mic to his lips.

“Go ahead.”

“Uh, yeah. We, have a slot open on Runway Nine. Feel free to taxi over there. The next launch window to *Phoebus 1* is in sixteen minutes.”

“Thanks.” said Hudson, tersely. He hung the mic up back on the console and put the taxi motors into gear.

A few minutes later they were on the tarmac staring down the long avenue of Runway Nine. Hudson twiddled his fingers above the control wheel and James noticed a bead of sweat rolling down the side of his face. When the time came, a voice crackled over the mic. The same man as before.

“Shuttle-craft *Wayward Son*. Your launch window is open and you are clear for take-off.”

“Ten-four.” Hudson answered.

He cracked his knuckles, stretched his arms, and then flicked the switch to fire up the ramjets. The ship shook as the engines came to life.

“Hold on to your butts.” he said.

He pushed the throttle ahead and the ship lurched and began to cruise down

the runway. Under his seat, James could feel the vibration of the wheels passing over the tarmac. Outside the window, he could see the lines on the runway zoom by as the ship went faster and faster. Finally, the ground fell out from underneath them and they soared into the air.

“Grade A take-off.” said Jack, “Now let’s get us up to sixty thousand feet.”

“You got ‘er.” said Hudson.

Underneath them, Jim could see the spaceport get smaller and smaller and, before long, they were flying high above the countryside with the city far behind them. Far below, scattered about like little anthills, he could see the towns and villages of Buffelland’s maritime country. And then, glimmering with the reflection of the morning sun, the ocean came into view on the horizon.

“Oh my god.” he said, “This is the greatest thing I’ve ever seen!”

Behind him, Jack chuckled.

He said, “You ain’t seen nothin’ yet, kid.”

They kept on flying until the land passed away and there was nothing but ocean and clouds for as far as the eye could see. Meanwhile the needle on the low-altitude altimeter kept climbing, higher and higher until it passed the notch that said “60”.

“Sixty thousand.” said Hudson.

“Very good.” said Jack. “Now, you remember the procedure for orbital insertion?”

“Just like riding a bike.” said Hudson.

“Alright.” said Jack, smiling, “Let’s do it.”

Hudson checked his instruments, making sure his bearings were right and everything was in order. Once he was satisfied he cracked his knuckles again.

He said, “Alright, guys. Switching ramjets to LO2.”

He balled his fist onto a large, grey lever and - *CATCHUNK!* - pulled it down. For a brief second the engines grew silent, and the ship felt like it fell in mid-air, like it was dropped from a crane. Jim felt his stomach rise up into his throat. But then, with a rushing roar louder than before, the engines came back to life. Jim was pushed back into his seat. Behind him, he could hear Harold groaning, “Oh, god.” But the engines kept pushing harder and harder. And before long, he was pinned down so hard that his cheeks were pulled back and he could hardly move his arms. He looked over at Hudson. The husky man’s face was contorted in concentration, his hands gripping the controls so tightly that the veins popped out of his skin. Outside the window, the clouds whizzed by at an astonishing rate. Faster and faster they flew, until the clouds were gone altogether as their ship flew high above them. Meanwhile, the sky grew darker and darker and, one by one, the stars began to come out. And like a fast encroaching dusk, the sky went from dark blue to black, and the stars appeared in all their glory. But still

the engines fired on. The needle on the low-altitude altimeter spun around and around, the ship now flying much too fast to register in feet, while the needle on the high-altitude one, which measured in miles, steadily climbed.

When it reached 500, Hudson released the throttle and shut off the engines and, just like that, it was done. In one instant, the crushing force of acceleration gave way to the weightlessness of Space. James felt himself float in his seat, held in only by his straps, while his arms, when relaxed, drifted upwards without any effort. Hudson threw a punch into the air.

“Yeah, baby! That’s how you do it!”

“Not a bad job.” said Jack, from behind them, while Harold threw up into a barf bag.

Outside the window, the evanescent, blue disk of the planet sat serenely under the inky blackness, smattered with stars. For a moment, all four of them stared out the window, collectively transfixed by the wondrous vista outside.

“Never gets old, does it?” said Jack.

Hudson shook his head.

“Not one damn bit.”

“Why don’t you spin us around? Get us a better view.”

Hudson tilted the controls and the ship turned on its side until it was upside-down to the planet and the great, blue disk filled almost the entire view out the window.

“Oh, wow” said Harold, as a mountainous peninsula drifted by overhead, “That must be Rodinia.” He adjusted his glasses. “It is. You can see the Port of Enduria down there.”

Jim stared at the vista with his mouth agape. There above his head was entire mountain range, probably hundreds of miles long, lying under a smattering of puffy, white clouds, and surrounded by a sapphire ocean, as bright and blue as a summer sky. He unlatched his belt and let himself float above the chair. He drifted towards the window pane and rested his hands on the glass.

“You were right, Jack.” he said, “*This* is the greatest thing I’ve ever seen.”

“What I tell ya, boy.” said Jack, “Nothin’ beats it. And, oh yeah, it’s ‘Captain Jack’ to you.” He made a villainous grin and looked over at Harold and then at Hudson who were both still strapped into their seats. He tapped Hudson on the shoulder and quietly said, “Hey, do you mind flicking that switch right there?”

Hudson pointed at a little, green switch on the console labeled ‘graviductors’.

“This one?”

Jack nodded and winked.

Hudson gave Jack a sly grin and flicked the switch. Immediately, the three men who were still strapped in sunk into their seats as the ship’s artificial gravity

was turned on, and Jim, who was floating belly-up, fell right onto his ass on the floor beside his chair.

“Ah, fuck!” he yelled. And the other three all laughed.

“Welcome to Space.” said Jack.

To be continued...

**“The Space Truckin’ Adventures of James Starkey
Episode 2: The Crew Assembles”**

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Written by R.D.D. Nickel.

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