

The Elevator Repairman

I could see the Christmas Tree lights screaming at me from the dispatch panel as I closed off the lock seals to my deep-space vessel, The Acheron. I had just returned from repairing E-R Bridge 17-7, one of the earlier spacetime portals and one ready for retirement. This maintenance operation had been a bit hairy, as I had to take the sled directly into the throat of the bridge with two of my mobile systems, Gertrude and Grace, to perform the final testing sequences. We couldn't get the force walls completely aligned to specs, but my girls got them stabilized within limits. It should last a few more years, especially since this bridge was rarely used anymore. But I would have to report in no uncertain terms that increased monitoring would be required, and the Director would have to budget for decommissioning and replacement of this dinosaur.

I had just secured the sled and was anchoring Gertrude and Grace back into their nests when my headset chirped. They wanted me to immediately respond, but nothing was so important that it couldn't wait a few minutes. It seemed like every call of late had to be answered right away. Let 'em wait; my systems were more important for now. I slid along in zero gravity touching the front bolts to ensure they were fitted and secured into place. Satisfied with that, I performed one last unnecessary ritual. "You girls all snug?" I asked.

"Yes, Joe", two soft voices responded together. "Good Night."

“Good night, girls.” I keyed the interior hatch and pushed my way to the opposite side of the space. I waited while the hatch slid aside and then entered the vestibule. I could immediately feel the artificial gravity take hold and within a minute, I was able to slough off my foul weather gear. I checked the fittings, as was my habit, and carefully hung it away. By now the dispatch board was madly flashing.

I sat in front of the panel and noticed with pleasure that it was a voice message. I keyed the mike. “OK, Nina, I’m here now. What’s up?”

“Joe, we’ve been trying to reach you for the past two hours. They’re throwing a fit over here. We’ve got a Priority Alpha repair ticket for you.”

“Oh, everything’s Priority Alpha with you guys. I had to go outside with my mobile systems to make this repair. I’m sending an addendum along with the tech specs on this one. This bridge is going to need some major upgrading if it’s going to stay around much longer.”

“Never mind that now. How soon can you get over to 37-15?”

Dispatch should have already known the answer to that. But I opened the navigation screen and touched in the coordinates. “That’s three jumps away. I can probably get there in about forty-eight hours. But that’s Johnson’s territory.”

“The Director wants you on this one. It’s coded Cosmic/Atomal.”

That made me sit up. Cosmic/Atomal meant some kind of emergency. “Johnson can get there quicker. Why me?”

“Because you’re the Elevator Repairman. Now get going. Call me when you exit the last jump.”

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I contacted my dispatcher immediately after transiting my third bridge. “I’m four hours out, Nina. Now what’s the big rush?”

“I can’t say. The Director wants to talk to you personally.”

“Huh?” I was a bit taken back. Neal Jensen, the Director of Transport, was one of the most powerful men in the universe. I had seen pictures of him and heard his speeches, but had never met the man or even spoken with him. “Why all the attention?”

“Can’t say. But he’ll be here within the hour. I’m to keep you on line until he gets here, so I guess we can gossip some until then.”

I leaned back to get comfortable; my back had been bothering me of late. I realized with a smile how much I looked forward to talking with my dispatcher. “You know, Nina, I still can’t get over instantaneous voice communications across the universe. When I started my tour, scientists were still saying that kind of thing was impossible.”

“Well, you know Joe, what someone once said about advanced technology.”

“Yeah,” I mused. “It truly is magic. But the idea of pairing a white hole with black hole bridges to bounce information back and forth in time has been around for a while. It just took some engineering catch-up to make it practical.”

“Well, it’s still magic to me. I’m waiting until they perfect visuals. Then I can see what you look like.”

That caused me a spike of anxiety. “I guess I’ll have to start dressing for our weekly chats.”

There was an embarrassing silence as neither of us could think of anything to say. She finally broke the knot. “So, Joe, why do they call you the Elevator Repairman? What is an elevator anyway?”

“An elevator was an ancient mechanical device on Earth that moved people from one level to another: similar to what an E-R bridge does. In trade school, someone started calling me that and it just stuck I guess.”

“How long have you been on this tour? I’ve been here for three years and I know you were here before that.”

“Fourteen years now.” I could imagine her shaking her head. Fourteen years in deep space repairing E-R bridges. It was important work and paid well, but few could suffer the monastic lifestyle. In the early years, I made it a point to take frequent vacations back to Earth and other way stations. But as I got older, I found my assignments more remote, and it just became too much trouble to get to any inhabited locations. I was also in high demand, as it seemed that there were few bridge repairmen left that had any experience with the older Kerr bridges. These ancient byproducts of black holes had always been a problem to keep from closing and had been largely replaced by the newer Tipler cylinders. In fact, my last contact with humans had been riding along with some neutron cowboys as they herded a group of neutron stars for synthesis. Those guys had been fun to be around, but that was years ago. This last tour had kept me out for so long, I had begun to doubt if I could handle any real human contact any more. My world now consisted of the confines of The Acheron, my gawky systems, and temperamental bridges.

“Fourteen years in deep space,” she repeated. “I’ve seen your schedule. You’ve got enough credits to buy yourself a governorship, Joe. Why don’t you retire and rule your own planet?”

I smiled. “And what...”

But she cut me off. “Oops, his excellency is here. Time to brace up.” The line went dead.

A few minutes later a deep, officious voice came on. “Mister Smith, how are you this fine evening?”

Evening? When was the last time I saw an evening? “Fine, sir. I...”

“Please report directly to me as soon as you reach 37-15. Just contact dispatch and they’ll reach me. Please go to an encrypted Cosmic/Atomal code for all future communications. We’re feeding you the preliminaries on this bridge, so you can start to troubleshoot. I have an important appointment, but contact me when you arrive and have the bridge stable.” He clicked off before I could acknowledge.

There was a long pause and then Nina came back on. Her voice was subdued. “Good luck, Joe.”

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E-R 37-15 was one of the earliest bridges built and had many of the force features that had long been abandoned as too dangerous. But it had performed well over the years, although there was little traffic in that sector. A quick check of the trip schedule confirmed that there had been no transits for over two years. Why would the Director be so interested in this bridge? I shoved the thought aside and scrolled through the tech specs and remote sensor readings. There was a discernable flip in one of the walls, but I

would have to go out to check the force transmitters and gravity detectors to see how serious the problem was. I began to prepare the sled to go outside, when I remembered my instructions to report in.

I keyed the remote. “Nina, I’m at the mouth of the bridge. There’s a flip on one of the walls, but I can’t tell how serious it is until I go outside. I’ll be out for about two hours and will call in later.”

“The Director is at a meeting, but asked me to find out how long you’ll be.”

“Geez, Nina, I can’t tell at this point. It looks like a routine repair, but I’ll know more after I run the on-site diagnostics.”

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It didn’t take me long to suit up in my foul weather gear, a thin-skinned space suit used for short trips into space or partial vacuum environments, and keyed the latches to my sled. The open-space vehicle slid down its track and clacked into launch position. I keyed for my diagnostic mobile system, Gertrude, and instructed her to attach to the outside of the sled. The bulky metallic cylinder had no form of a human, but was a comforting sight as she hovered in the now weightless space and drifted over to my side. I checked her connections and asked for a self-diagnostic run.

“All systems green,” she smoothly replied.

“Let’s go, then,” I said.

The exterior hatch slowly slid back revealing the black depths of space. I rechecked my harness and keyed the positioning jets. The sled slowly inched forward and then was adrift. I touched the throttle to my left, and The Acheron slowly fell behind. I turned back to face my panel and brought up the navigation screen. I turned

down the range to the kilometer scale and brought up the locations of the ring transmitters. These old style Kerr bridges had negative energy spheres seeded throughout their interior force walls to keep their throats open. Without these supports, a Kerr bridge would immediately collapse into a singularity point and you'd be left with an unstable black hole. The location and force of each sphere had to be precise and each bridge was surrounded by a series of transmitters and detectors of gravitational waves that served to both monitor and adjust the location and force of the spheres.

The transmitters also served the important secondary function of acting as navigation buoys for transiting deep-space ships. Kerr bridges were a manipulation of black holes. These managed collapsing stars actually formed a ring, not a singularity point as was once thought, that allowed travel between far distant points of our universe, or even between time eras and an infinite series of parallel universes. In fact, it was the recent uses of bridges to bounce information back and forth in time that allowed instantaneous communication across the universe. But Kerr bridges were inherently dangerous. A ship could transit safely if it approached from the top or bottom of the ring on a well-defined trajectory. If the ship approached the side of the Ring of Death, it was instantly crushed. Each ship had a special code in its navigation computers specific to its form and mass that interacted with the transmitters to guide it safely through the bridge.

When technology advanced to the point where engineers figured out a way to synthesize neutron stars, artificially constructed Tipler Cylinders provided a much safer means for bridge transport. But there were still some of these old Kerr bridges around and they were maintenance hogs. I located the nearest detector and adjusted my approach.

Within a few minutes, I could make out the pulsating blue light of one of the detectors and just off to its right was the blinking red of a transmitter. I throttled down and drifted to within a kilometer of the detector and then went into reverse to slow my approach. I stopped to within twenty meters and then disconnected Gertrude. The metal cylinder swung around to the side of the sled and snaked out a thin, fibrous mesh net, which would capture all gravity readings off the detector. I touched my pad and the spider image of the net enlarged on my screen.

I could see that it was nearly deployed. “Whenever you’re ready, Gertrude.”

“Readings coming in now,” she responded as my screen lit up with jagged vectors.

I stopped and stared at my display for a moment in confusion, my mind refusing to believe what I saw. “Gertrude, please recalibrate the net.”

My display went dead for an instant and then flared back to life. “Calibration complete,” Gertrude echoed.

The jagged lines were still there. I manipulated the scales on my receiver and then asked Gertrude for her interpretation. “The wall-line of spheres has been compromised. There are several out of place and the transmitters are stopped-out trying to move them. The detectors are recording gravity waves far outside safety ranges.”

“Run a diagnostic on the transmitters. Let’s see if they’re causing this glitch.” I fully expected this to be the problem, as it often was with these bridges, and I resigned myself to a lengthy repair job out on the sled. Still, even with the negative energy spheres out of kilter, I shouldn’t be seeing these wild gravity wave readings. I toyed with the idea of going back to The Acheron and running over to the other side of the ring for

more readings for I was not getting complete information loadings on some of the transmitters, but that would take time. I keyed another frequency. “Grace, break out some repair packs and bring them out to me.”

I received an acknowledgement and within minutes could see a large, mechanical spider detach itself from The Acheron. Grace, my repair mobile system, flexed her arms as she approached our position. I still didn’t have enough information to determine the proper fix, but I wanted her standing by. I set my comms on roam so all my systems could hear me. I detached myself from the sled and tested my jets. “Grace, follow me out to the nearest transmitter.”

The pulsing blue light got intense as we approached. I flipped down my visor and gripped the edge of the platform. I anchored myself to one of the protruding rings and found the main panel. Grace had already attached herself to the repair portal and was awaiting instructions. “Grace, I’m going to slave the other transmitters to this one. If the readings get into the red, detach them and we’ll go from there.”

I keyed in a combination and the main panel slid away. I set up the instructions and entered the action command. Immediately there was a loud wailing in my headset and I could see the settings disengage and go back to their previous settings. “What was that all about, Grace?”

“Your slaving command was overridden due to incomplete information being received from the other transmitters. This is an automatic response to prevent a breakdown of the sphere line.”

Incomplete information? The transmitters were highly directional and had a feedback function to ensure that the spheres were receiving proper instructions and

commands. The only way information could be lost was if some of it was radiating out into space. “Are all the transmitters pointed correctly?”

There was a pause and I knew Gertrude was running a check. She was back on the line a second later. “All transmitters are properly aligned.”

This was impossible. “Run the check again, please.”

Another second later. “Second check confirms that all transmitters are properly aligned and sending. Also, two more transmitters have gone to the stops and the others are increasing their output. The level of missing information is increasing.”

I had set my own display over to her diagnostic and could see that she was right. How do you lose information? Never, in my whole career, had I ever seen anything like this. Something was amiss, but I couldn’t find out here. I had to return to The Acheron, get above the throat of the bridge, and take a direct reading on the walls.

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I was in position and touched the autopilot pad to begin our top-down descent to the throat of E-R Bridge 37-15. Two more transmitters had gone off line, which put about half of the active ones at the stops. Whatever the problem was, it was getting worse at a progressive rate. The autopilot chirped its acknowledgment and I watched the bug on my display follow the lined circular path that would lead me into the bridge. The Acheron is a specialty repair ship that was designed to have gravity engines far more powerful than its mass would require under normal conditions. It was built for unusual circumstances such as the one I now faced. In order to get proper diagnostic readings, I had to partially descend into the throat of the bridge and hover while Gertrude performed her work. Normally, once a ship is established on the path into the bridge throat, it was

drawn down at an increasing rate until it entered and made passage to the other side, much like gravity drawing water down a drain. According to design tests, The Acheron should be able to hover as close as 0.3 to the event horizon, but I programmed the autopilot to stop at 0.5; that should be close enough for what I had to do.

I was only a few minutes into the descent when I noticed the engines powering up in reverse. This was happening too soon, and I felt a stab of panic. My instincts screamed at me to disengage the autopilot and get out of there, but I hunched forward and concentrated on the display, my hand over the pad. The engines had spooled up to forty-five percent and we were only at the 0.8 mark. The gravity draw was far stronger than the detectors had indicated, but I hadn't had a reading since I approached the throat and I knew the situation was deteriorating.

I disengaged the autopilot and grasped the throttle. "Gertrude, we're going to stop at 0.7. Do your readings from there."

I fought to keep The Acheron on the line and goosed the throttle to slow our descent. I was on track, but any mistakes now would send me hurling into the Ring of Death. As the counter crept up to 0.7, I increased the throttle and we finally came to a hover. "Gertrude, start your readings and hurry." I didn't have to say that, but I needed to talk. Sweat began to dribble into my eyes and I furiously blinked it away; I couldn't afford to take my hands off the pad.

From the corner of my eye I could see a series of scrolling messages beside raw data spikes. I wasn't sure what it meant, but I had to keep my attention on flying the ship. I glanced at the throttle indicators: sixty percent just to keep a hover and I was continually advancing it to keep station. "Come on, Gertrude. We gotta go."

“Data complete,” she replied.

I instantly keyed the throttle up to seventy percent and focused on the bug. We began to slowly move away from the point and I sighed in relief. But then the bug wobbled and slowed. I looked in horror as The Acheron again came to a hover and slowly began to be pulled back into the throat. I moved the engines up to eighty percent and the movement reversed, but not fast enough. In panic I put the throttle up to one hundred percent. The bug wobbled again and then finally began to back out of the throat. I held my breath as we went through the 0.8 mark and then backed the throttle down again as the effects of gravity began to lessen as we went out beyond the 0.9 mark.

I stayed glued to the display and didn't slow until we were passed the orbit of the transmitters and detectors. Finally I brought the ship to a stop and sat staring at the static display, breathing heavy, willing my heart rate to slow down. I freed one of my hands to wipe the sweat out of my stinging eyes. I keyed up the data display and started to ask Gertrude for a summary, but stopped and stared at what lay before me.

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I still hadn't stopped shaking by the time I reached the dispatch panel. I paused trying to calm down, and finally placed the call. “Nina, we have a serious wall breach. It was an artificial break and could only have been caused by a vessel in transit. I'm forwarding an alert. I think we've got an alien race using our bridges.”

“Stand by.” Her voice was neutral and unemotional: not what I would have expected at my revelation.

Then the voice of the Director came on. “Mister Smith, how long before you can get that bridge repaired and back in operation?”

I sat in stunned shock for a moment. Maybe he hadn't understood what I said. I tried to remain calm, knowing whom I was speaking to. "Sir, there is more. We are getting a significant information loss going through the throat and disappearing in the wall breach. We know that there are an infinite number of microscopic wormhole bridges that connect to parallel universes. We think this is a natural means of balancing out our static universe. I think the tear in the wall has ruptured one of these micro-bridges and we're losing information and mass. If this continues, we could destroy our whole universe, maybe many parallel ones as well. This bridge has had it. It will probably implode on its own, but we should shut down the negative energy spheres while we still can to make sure. I also strongly urge you to alert our military forces to the possible presence of an alien race in our thread. I was almost overtaken by the breach and just barely got out with my skin. I must leave this sector. If I stick around much longer, I may get sucked into the spacetime collapse."

"Mister Smith, please listen carefully. There is no alien race. There is another ship on the other side of that bridge and if the bridge collapses, they will never get back. They will be lost forever. They weren't on your schedule, because the vessel is carrying a group of very important men and women. Now, I've been in discussions with TechOps and they tell me there is a way for you to put an artificial bridge to the force walls."

I shook my head in frustration. Those theoretical desk-bound jerks in TechOps were going to get me killed. "Sir, that would require me to hover inside the throat of the bridge. That operation has never been performed successfully. I don't believe such a procedure is possible."

There was a long silence before the Director came back, a harder edge to his tone. “Your ship is specially designed to perform such operations as are your repair systems. Now, I can’t force you to perform any maneuver that you think is too dangerous as per the TechOp convention, but I will tell you this: there are over six hundred people on the other side of that bridge and there is no other way for them to get back. They will be stranded one hundred million light years from Earth or any other civilizations and will perish if you don’t help them. Those are men, women and children: real people with families. You are their only hope; only you can save them. I’ve been told that they call you the Elevator Repairman, which is supposed to mean that you are the best at this kind of work. Is that true?”

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I mentally rehearsed my game plan as I slowly crawled up to the top-down descent point. I would enter the spiral trajectory at minimum station keeping speed and go into freefall once I was established on the approach. I would use my docking jets to keep on the approach, using my gravity engines only if I started drifting too far off the path. I would begin aggressively throttling back when I passed the 0.1 mark. According to Gertrude’s calculations that should put me in a hover within reach of the force wall.

Suddenly my panel registered movement as The Acheron began her descent well above the drop point. I should have expected this since the gravity detectors had shown considerable deterioration in the core. I punched off the autopilot and gripped the handles. I would have to fly her down myself, using the computer-aided path on my display as a guide. I wasn’t even sure that would be accurate, since most of the transmitters were stopped out trying to adjust the negative energy spheres. I stared at the

enhanced image of the safe zone: the portion of the throat held open by the spheres. It was jagged and wobbling; I would have to mildly deviate as I descended or risk being crushed.

The Acheron continued to accelerate faster than was safe and I engaged my gravity engines. I allowed the descent to continue and gradually got into a rhythm with my throttles. I nervously glanced at the position readouts and saw that I had passed the 0.5 mark. I was still accelerating, so I swung up my engines to begin braking. As I passed the 0.3 mark, I could see that I was on track to place The Acheron on dead center. Not bad flying, I congratulated myself.

“System failure,” Gertrude intoned. “Radiator system, port side. I recommend gravity engines be brought down until repairs can be completed.”

“Not now,” I screamed. “Cross-connect.”

“Cross-connect complete. Gravity engines limited to fifty percent rated capacity.”

I wildly checked my panel. We were doing fifty percent now and were just crossing the 0.1 mark. We had slowed but not enough to maintain hover in the center of the throat. “All docking jets, direct aft, full power.”

I could see the jets flare on my monitor for just a few seconds and then die down as they ran out of fuel. I glanced again at the display and saw that I had further slowed and was coming up to the center of the throat. But I was still going too fast. I gulped hard and moved the throttle up to fifty-five percent. Visual alarms began to go off on the panel and I prayed that the engines would just hold on for another minute. The extra power did the trick; The Acheron gradually came to rest within the center of the throat. I quickly brought the engines down to ten percent and set the autopilot to maintain station.

I sat back to review my situation. I had succeeded in getting inside the E-R Bridge, but I had no idea how I was going to get back out. The failure of my port radiator system came at the most inopportune time. The vacuum of space is the perfect insulator and ships generate a lot of heat. Radiator systems are a critical means of dissipating that heat such that the crew and some sensitive equipment don't fry. My starboard radiators cross-connected could maintain my ship, but I was limited to fifty percent power on my gravity engines. That wasn't enough to exit the bridge. My other problem was that I didn't have much time to effect repairs. The gravity readings indicated that the throat was closing as more transmitters went to the stops.

I brought up the location of the negative energy spheres on my display and overlaid them with their constant state location and settings. The damage seemed to be located in one section of the wall, more evidence that this was caused by another vessel's carelessness: a carelessness that could have destroyed them. "Gertrude, how long to repair the radiator systems?"

"Grace can perform the work in approximately ninety minutes."

I needed Grace outside to reposition and reset the negative energy spheres. But I needed that radiator system to run my engines. "Grace, start on the radiator systems. Gertrude, you're coming outside with me."

It took twenty minutes to prepare the sled and load the placement data. The sled has a small gravity engine, similar to its mother ship, which is connected to probes that can direct gravity waves in specific directions. This was how I planned to reposition the negative energy spheres. Once that was accomplished, the transmitters outside the ring should come down from their stops and reset the negative energy levels to maintain the

walls, at least for a while. I had Gertrude rigged with similar probes that would draw off my sled. We would have to work in tandem and it would have to be quick; The Acheron's engines were already up to twenty percent power maintaining station. The bridge was heading for collapse.

We fell away from The Acheron and drifted slowly towards the swirling blackness that defined the energy walls. I had no sense of distance, so I stayed glued to my instruments. I had no idea what range I needed to be at to get at the spheres, so I pointed my probes at the nearest one and sent out a constant signal. I slowly moved forward, fighting the shifting gravity forces that were moving my sled wildly about. Finally a blip on my screen told me I had a lock on the nearest sphere. I sent the information to Gertrude and sent her off in that direction. She was a diagnostic system, but I had her under command for repair work, which meant I had to partially direct her activities. That would slow things down, but I had no choice. Grace was busy and unavailable.

We got three of the spheres repositioned and warily approached the final two. They were either side of the wild, concentrated gravity fluctuation in the wall. Suddenly Gertrude began to drift and wobble. I tried verbally hailing her and got only partial transmissions back. I was losing information to that ruptured wormhole ahead of me. I put the keying data on constant stream for the sphere Gertrude was approaching and hoped for the best. I would have to take care of the last one myself.

I delicately approached and got a lock on the sphere. I couldn't get it moved, so I came in nearer. Slowly the sphere began to drift over to position and I could feel my sled settle down as the gravity forces lessened. I kept a wary eye on the ruptured wormhole

and was relieved to see that it, too, was closing down. I risked coming in a little closer to finish the job. Now I just had to concentrate on getting this last sphere positioned. I presumed that Gertrude was almost finished with the other one, since the wall forces were almost back into normal ranges, at least according to my display.

Suddenly my display started to move. It took me a shocked moment to realize what was happening. I was being drawn in closer to the force walls, specifically to the ruptured wormhole. I throttled up my sled, which slowed me down, but did not stop the movement. In panic now, I throttled up all the way and glanced outside. I couldn't see anything so I turned my attention back to my displays. The relative motion images wavered and I silently urged my sled to start moving away. But slowly the wobbling stopped and I continued to approach the wall, picking up speed.

I sucked in my breath. I had gotten too complacent, everything was going too well, I had come in too close and the gravity forces from the wormhole were drawing me in. I tried to think of what else I could do, but no options presented themselves. In desperation, I shifted my probes off the sphere and trained them on Gertrude, simultaneously hailing a mayday on the comm frequency. I don't know how much got through to her, or even what she could do, but the bulky system turned and began coming in my direction. I had no instructions for her; I could only watch.

As Gertrude approached, I saw her arms angle out in various directions towards the force walls. As she got nearer, her probes curved more towards the wormhole rupture. I checked my display and, sure enough, my approach was slowing. She was disrupting the gravitational forces pulling me in; she was giving me a chance. I double clicked my throttle to push the engines beyond their design limits and was rewarded by

seeing my sled break loose of its hold and begin retreating away from the wall: towards The Acheron. I focused on the panel displays so I wouldn't overshoot my mother ship and only had time to glance outside to see Gertrude disappear in the direction of the ruptured wormhole. I had to smile; I wondered what the beings in whatever universe she was heading to would think of this awkward piece of machinery.

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I sat at my dispatch panel shaking. I had just finished a wild ride out the other side of the bridge and needed to compose myself before I reported back, even if they were anxious for an update. I thought of breaking out my last bottle of Scotch, but thought better of it. Alcohol had almost done me in several years ago. Drinking and loneliness don't mix well. I took a few deep breaths and keyed in the hailing code.

"Joe, you're still there. Give me good news." It was Director Jensen's voice, hopeful.

"Yes, sir. I've repaired the sidewalls with the bridge, but I had to realign the entry point. I'm afraid I lost my diagnostic mobile system in the process, so there is no more I can do with this bridge for the time being. But it should hold long enough for a couple more passages. I will have to transmit new codes to the ship coming through."

"Joe." The Director's voice had turned earnest, fearful. "You are to install those codes yourself, personally. That is an order. Do you understand? You are to board The Siren and install and test the codes yourself. Do not let ship's personnel do it."

"Sir, the Captain of that ship has complete responsibility and authority over its operations. If he wants to have his own crew install the codes, I can't interfere."

“That is an order,” he exploded. “I’ve just signed the license making you a qualified pilot. Pilots have the authority to assume command from the Captain on entry and exits from dockage. A recent interpretation of TechOps procedures, which I am writing now, allows the definition of dockage to include E-R bridge transit. Now, the Captain can make the transit, but you must personally install that code. Do you understand?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Report to me when the codes have been installed and tested.”

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The Siren loomed before me on the screen as I made my approach to her cargo hatches. She was a Gypsy class cruise liner, the latest in technology and luxury. I had never seen a ship so beautiful: long graceful lines, rows of glittering viewing ports for the passengers, and large massive bulbous pods for the gravity engines. She had slowed to station-keeping speed and I manipulated the throttles of my docking jets to come up alongside and match her speed. It had been a long time since I had to perform this maneuver and I wobbled back and forth a bit before I settled in.

I reported on station to the Officer of the Deck and got a terse acknowledgement. Within a few minutes, I could see a speck detach from the massive hull and begin a swinging arc in my direction. As it neared, I could make out the form of the Captain’s Gig: a small eight-person craft used to shuttle personnel between ships or even planet-side. Two Bos’n Mates in crisp, white uniforms got me situated in my seat and we began the short trip back. These men wore no expressions and concentrated on their piloting tasks, ignoring my attempts at conversation.

Once aboard, I was conducted along a series of gray, utilitarian passageways that I took to be maintenance tunnels. I recognized the small boxes along the bulkheads as a miniaturized version of testing nodes. I started to ask about them out of professional curiosity, but stopped when I saw my escort's stone visage.

We finally arrived on the bridge, a huge space with a panoramic view of the ship's foc'scle and the empty space beyond. The bulkheads were crowded with consoles and touch pads and several white-shirt officers were roaming the front, monitoring the data systems. A large, raised throne that I took as the Captain's chair broke the front. But there was a young man sitting in it. "That junior officer is in trouble if the Captain shows up," I laughed, gesturing to the presumptuous sitter.

One of the Bos'ns rolled his eyes. "That is the Captain."

Now the young man turned in my direction and I could see the epaulets of a Merchant Marine Captain on his shoulders. I gaped at him, speechless. He couldn't have been more than twenty-five years old. And the Merchant Marine promoted officers even slower than the military. How could someone so young get command of a deep space ship – and a new Gypsy-class passenger liner at that?

The Captain looked me up and down, and suddenly I became acutely aware of my surroundings and how I must appear to these people. I had been operating alone in space for fourteen years and personal appearance had never been an issue. I self-consciously felt the stubble on my face and tried to smooth over one of many tears in my jumpsuit. He frowned at me and gestured for one of his deck officers to approach me. "I thank you for delivering the codes, but Ensign Jones will take care of installing them." He turned

back to the small display, dismissing me. The kid officer stepped forward and glared at me.

I cleared my throat. I had anticipated this. “I’m sorry, sir. But I’ve received specific orders from the Director to perform the installation and testing.”

The Captain spun around in his chair, fury written over his face. “I’m the Captain of this ship and I won’t allow any bum that comes along to touch my systems. Give the codes to Ensign Jones.”

My earlier embarrassment gave way to anger. “I am a licensed dockage and harbor pilot and TechOps procedures gives pilots command authority over bridge transit.”

Ensign Jones smirked and turned to the Captain. “No, sir. It does not.”

The Captain narrowed his eyes and started to speak, but I just smiled and shook my head. “Do you two want to bet your ass on that?”

* * *

“Done.” I stepped away from the panel and turned to the others huddled about. They backed up a pace, bored expressions written over their faces. “You’re all set for normal transit.”

The boy-Captain scowled, “We could have loaded those codes.”

“Yes, sir.” A thought struck me. “Say, I’ve never seen the new generation gravity engines. Mind if I’m allowed some professional courtesy and get a tour of your engineering spaces?”

The stares I got back could have frozen hydrogen. The ensign stepped forward. “I’m sorry, but Captain Jensen has to attend to an important matter and our engineering gang is very busy. Perhaps another time.”

“Jensen,” I said. “Are you any relation to...?”

“He’s my uncle.” The boy-Captain nodded to an ensign, who motioned to my Bos’n Mate escorts. They stepped up and directed me to follow them. I started to speak, but the officer entourage was already moving away from me.

As I was led down the dull gray passageways, my mind wandered over the past several years. I realized that I was tired; that I had been going from one repair job to another for fourteen years without a break. I now wondered if I was even capable anymore of relaxing; my life so intertwined with bridge maintenance work that I was unable to do anything else. And I realized that I was turning into a hermit. I longed for interaction with other humans; just to talk with them, even just see them as a silent witness.

And then I walked through a hatch and I was assaulted by light, bright and colorful. The bulkheads were draped in color and there were pictures and beautiful artwork spaced evenly about. The lights were coming from ornate wall sconces that shimmered with varying color. The floor below me shined with a red faux-wood burnish. I was in a wide, lit passageway and the dull humming of ships machinery had given way to laughter and chattering people. And then I saw them coming at me, formed in a group. They were men and women, all dressed in formal gowns and jackets. The men were healthy and tan, laughing and gesturing with assurance. The women were beautiful with perfectly coifed hair, shining dresses and glittering jewels. Everyone carried themselves

with the assurance of people who knew they were important. I stood transfixed by the scene as they glided past me, seeming not to notice. And I didn't want to go so soon. I wanted them to stop, to talk to me. I wanted contact with people.

I stepped forward to approach the flank of the group and raised my hand to draw their attention. I tried to think of something to say, a greeting that would cause them to pause and speak to me.

But as I opened my mouth, an arm firm upon my shoulder stopped me. I turned to see the two Bos'n Mates flanking me, stern looks on their faces. I turned back to the group and saw that some of the men and women now noticed me and were staring at me with looks of disgust and curiosity. But they continued gliding along.

The Bos'n Mate to my right noticed their looks and said, "Sorry folks. This is just a repairman who mistakenly wandered in here. Please continue on to the banquet. The Captain will greet you in the main ballroom."

My escorts firmly turned me toward the hatch, but I saw that the entourage had moved on and had lost any notice of me. I could hear their laughter fade as I was led back into the dull gray passageways.

* * *

"The Director wants to talk to you," Nina said. "Wait one..."

I hunched over my dispatch console and took in the familiar sights of The Acheron. The clanking of the environmental systems produced a strange comfort in me, but I couldn't force my thoughts away from the gaggle of people on the Siren. I wished now I could have just had one sentence from them directed to me.

My train of thought was interrupted by the jovial voice of the Director of Transport. “I understand that Siren has completed a successful transit and is now on her way back Earthside.”

“Yes, sir. But the tidal bridge to E-R 37-15 will only hold for a month, in my opinion, before a team will have to survey the walls and determine whether a structure tender can...”

“Yes, yes,” he interrupted. “We’ll take care of that. I just wanted to thank you again for going in and maintaining the force walls. That was a brave act and I’m sure all aboard Siren are grateful. I know that I won’t forget your sacrifice.”

“Well, thank you sir, I...”

“I have to rush to a Council meeting. Once again, good work. You’re a valuable asset to the Bureau.”

There was a long silence. I finally keyed the pad. “You still there, Nina?”

“Yeah, the Director is gone. I’ve got another repair assignment for you. But Joe, take my advice. Refuse the job and go take a long vacation. Or retire even. Go become the Lord of a planet.”

“But you heard the Director,” I said in mock seriousness. “Everyone at Bureau loves me.”

“The power shakers on Siren don’t have a clue what almost happened to them and they don’t care as long as they get back in time for their next social engagement. And the Director forgot about you the minute he walked out the hatch. You heard him; you’re just an asset. They’ll work you until you burn out or die trying to fix one of those dangerously unstable bridges, and then they won’t remember anything about you.”

I shook my head, smiling. “Yep, I guess some things never change. But you’ll remember who I am. Won’t you, Nina?”

There was another long pause, and I imagined I could hear her sighing across the universe. “Yes, Joe. I’ll remember you.”

“Then that’s something.”

“Give it up, Joe Smith. You’ve done far more than your share. You don’t owe a thing to those heartless bastards.”

I let her words roll around in my head for a long count. I knew she was right, had always known it. “You’re right, Nina. But this is what I do.

“I’m The Elevator Repairman.”

.....

Joe Smith is an actual person and a good friend of mine and this story is, in a way, a tribute to him. But there are a lot of Joe Smiths out there, although not enough. These are the men and women who, throughout their lives, perform and behave as true professionals. You will find them as doctors, soldiers, plumbers, car mechanics, full-time parents, truck drivers, ditch diggers and even elevator repairmen. They master their craft and every day perform their job to the best of their abilities. But they don’t do this for money, recognition, power, or any of the other egocentric trappings of lesser men. They do it because it’s a part of who they are. They are humble individuals who wouldn’t think of engaging in self-promotion. They are honest, honorable, and caring of other people. They perform their jobs regardless of how difficult, senseless, tedious, thankless, or dangerous the tasks. They are always respectful and never complain when something

is unfair. You rarely read or hear about them and they are often taken advantage of by the powerful, the vain, the self-centered, and the lazy.

I'm no Joe Smith, but I'm lucky to know a few. This story is my homage to them all.