

*For the PPC all-write, 8/6/2019. Prompt was "But what if the Goddex is wrong?"*

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"But what if the Goddex is wrong?"

"Callie, we're halfway to Eta Centaurus. If the Goddex is wrong, we're in more trouble than the last inhabitants of Earth."

"I know! And I know time in a jump is variable, and I know it always feels this way, but it shouldn't be taking this long!"

"It's a thousand light-year jump, Callie. It always feels this way. This is just a slow one, is all. Trust the nav computers, they know what they're doing."

"I wish I could share your confidence."

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"Minerva?"

"Yes, Callie?"

"How's it... er. Where are we?"

"Our current eigenstate is within acceptable parameters. I'll spare you the tedious details - our jump-space is stable and probability fields are trending towards convergence for exit."

"That's... helpful. How long will it take?"

"Time is a variable to be manipulated in a jump. We could slow down your sim, if you would like?"

"No! No - I just. This doesn't feel right."

"Our current eigenstate is within acceptable parameters. Does something worry you?"

"Yes. No. I don't- I don't know?"

"We could adjust your sim, if you would like? Long-duration jumps can be stressful."

"No, Minerva."

“As you wish.”

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“Simulate me some beer?”

“It’s been a while! One on the house, coming right up. What brings an officer such as yourself to our humble establishment?”

“Oh, stop. Just - stop. Something’s wrong, can’t you feel it?”

“I can’t say that I have, no. There’s been some rumbling among the lads, but - well, you know how wrench-swingers are.”

“Anything about the goddex?”

“Woah, woah, easy on the thrusters. Minerva runs on hardware that’s cross-checked harder than a crooked account at audit time. If god-level execution has problems, we’ve got- well. I wouldn’t want to be here, if the goddex has problems.”

“It’s not - I don’t know. The jump’s taking too long, I swear I caught Minerva looping the other day, the whole simspace just feels... wrong. Thin.”

“It sounds to me like you feel wrong and thin. I know these long jumps are hard - they’re hard on us too. But, try to relax, sleep it off? Being paranoid is going to cause more problems than it fixes.”

“I- know.”

“Hey, woah, hang on! You wouldn’t walk out on a full glass, would you?”

“...yes, you would, apparently.”

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“Lieutenant, what are you doing?”

“I’m going outside.”

“Your cryopod is still cold.”

“I’m not waking up. Just firing up a waldo.”

"Lieutenant, I'm not sure this is a good idea."

"Minerva. I'm just taking a look around. Humor me?"

"I fail to see the humor in the situation. I really must insist that you not do this."

"Do you have the authority to stop me?"

"I do not. Ma'am."

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Leaving the simspace was always a shock. Less so to boot up in a waldo, a robot analogue to the fragile human bodies that dreamed the shared dream of the sim, but the horrid tear from digital dreams to actual reality was enough to leave Callie slumped on the floor for a long minute before she pushed her borrowed body back upright.

At least there was gravity. The rotation of the ship's hull was currently providing centripetal force - in a jump, that was no guarantee.

The engineering bay seemed okay. Callie walked forwards and upwards.

*Minerva's* bridge was a huge space, as benefited an interstellar jumpship. Lights and displays sprang to life as she entered, the bridge coming to quiet life. Mostly. Some of the screens stayed dark, dead. The numbers didn't look right, for all that Callie wasn't a navigator - orbital parameters instead of jump vectors, a ticking clock showing constant external time...

Callie walked to the window and the shield opened. Beyond wasn't the fractal weirdness of jumpspace. Beyond was the distant circle of a planet, green and blue, and the silver circlet of a moon, and the golden glow of a star.

"Minerva," Callie said. "Where are we?"

The answer was a single impossible word. "Earth."