

In Harmony's Way

Observatory 4401

Raymond Frost stared at the deep recesses of the Great Galaxy through the eyes of an observation probe launched hundreds of cycles ago. Changes in orientation and lens aperture took two starsets to complete. Patience was a must. Even with quantum communication capabilities, it took a painstaking amount of time to get the images right. At each aperture setting observations were recorded prior to making more adjustments and performing the same task again. Constant yaw and tilt drifts hampered Raymond's work. Evidence of alternative habitable planets remained scarce.

The latest three dimensional images came in. Ray batted away his brown hair from his kind eyes and flicked through the images on a holographic table. He paused when the Great Nebulae took his breath. As a graduate astrophysics student, Ray viewed the nebula's images as eye candy. The other holograms seemed bland in comparison.

Ray returned to the observation console, entered his key, and was about to change the probe orientation when the 3D image turned to static. Many training cycles had not prepared the graduate student for this. Rocking backwards into his chair, Ray's jaw dropped as his eyes whitened with fright.

"What the . . . Dr. Brown, can I borrow you for a minute?"

Harry Brown, Ray's emeritus professor, stopped working on his nano board. He removed the magnifying glass framework from his forehead, rose out of his chair, and approached his young graduate student. For his age, Brown was in good shape. He suffered from a touch of arthritis that he treated from time to time, but with extension therapy, it was difficult to guess his exact age. Brown comforted the young scientist by putting his hand on Ray's shoulder. Ray represented the son that he never had, always eager to hear his opinions.

"What's the problem, Raymond?"

"Probe BA101 went out. Can you fix it?"

Brown pulled up a chair, sat beside Ray, inserted his key into the maintenance console unit, and started typing away.

After gaining entry, Dr. Brown stopped and swiveled to address his graduate student. "You'll have to wait a few starsets before I figure out what went wrong. Why don't you start writing your thesis? Besides, a young man shouldn't spend so much time in here."

Brown sighed. "This observatory can be a stimulating place, but with time it chills the heart." He knew this all too well. His wife of fifty cycles died two cycles ago, and he felt himself letting go without her intervention. His gray facial hair had swallowed his countenance.

Even though it took many cycles to get what he wanted, the observation building contained the best holographic and computer equipment. Brown insisted upon equipment quality

over cost: a cylindrical, saucer shaped building made from ceramic reinforced nano-materials that housed top notch remotes for 3D imaging and computational calculations. The temperature was chilled to maintain sensitive electronic devices. Oil and burnt metal smells emanated through the observatory due to Dr. Brown's side projects.

"Thanks for the advice. Please let me know when it's fixed." Raymond smiled at the professor and grabbed his coat off the back of his chair.

"Of course, but it will be at least two starsets until the system checks are complete. I don't want you to become a hermit like me . . . go out and have some fun."

Ray nodded. "I'll try. See you in two starsets."

Grabbing his extensive observation notebooks from the table and removing his observation probe key, Ray departed.

#

Pub Night

Ray entered Hops Bar with his two pals, Sam and Alex. Already well lubricated, they entered Hops seeking female companionship. His friends had cajoled Ray into going out with them.

Elizabeth Allan knew that she may be targeted by this threesome. Her long, dark hair, youthful glow of twenty cycles, and beautiful face attracted men left and right, but her need for intelligent conversations turned just as many potential suitors away.

"*What's Ray doing here?*" Elizabeth thought to herself. Liz folded her arms as if a cool breeze cooled her body. Despite sitting next to Ray and paying attention to every word he uttered during an entire English semester, Raymond Frost remained distant, cold, isolated. Even a stupid man, which Raymond was not, would get the hint that she was once infatuated with him. At this point she had lost interest. Liz not only wanted a smart man, she wanted a man that would woo her with his confidence.

Hops was her last refuge from her radio audience. Usually she came with her girlfriends, but tonight Liz wanted to drown her sorrows after a tough day on her daily radio show. Few members of her audience responded to her hypothetical, political queries, and those that did had little knowledge on the subject, just regurgitating the same tired crap they heard elsewhere. Liz wanted to be a public spokesperson ever since she was a little girl. On days like this she wondered what had attracted her to broadcasting. All the added humanity classes, although useful for rounding out her knowledge base, didn't help her achieve her goal of becoming a radio personality. Even her graduate communication curriculum didn't prepare her for what she learned on the air. Some days she played the humor card; other days she chose a serious tone when bad news came in—if only she could freely cover breaking news or come up with a way to solidify her position as a talk show host. She was abysmally frustrated from today's events, and the potential of interacting with Ray would top off her day.

The old bar looked like a tavern from over several thousand cycles ago. Most people preferred the clear ceramic decor. Not Elizabeth, she preferred hanging glasses, a wooden bar, and an ice lane that kept beer at the appropriate temperature. On most evenings spilt beer and smoke stench filled the bar with a musky aroma.

Alex approached Elizabeth even though she turned her head away the instant she spotted him coming.

“What’s up beautiful? Can I buy you a drink?” He smiled and looked into her uninviting eyes. She held back even the faintest glimmer of a smile.

“I’m waiting for someone. I’m sorry.” Liz glanced away.

“Your loss.” Alex grinned and moved on to more worthy candidates.

While Sam approached women on the other side of the bar, Ray hovered around his drink. He took a long swig and then noticed Liz on the opposite side of the rounded bar. After staring at Liz for a few moments, he turned his face away, radiating discomfort. It was as if he was trapped inside an invisible jar that protected him from the rest of the world.

Elizabeth looked away and shook her head. *He doesn’t even have enough confidence to say hello*, she thought.

Sam and Alex managed to find two interested girls and returned with them to Ray’s side. They chided Ray for being such a wimp. Sam spoke his mind, “C’mon Ray, it isn’t that tough. Make a move on someone.”

Ray shook his head. “I’m terrible at this. What if she says no?” Ray looked at the ground and gulped. His friends had put him into this sticky situation. He didn’t want to face another woman with her “too good for you” attitude. His shabby clothes and terminal shyness deterred him.

“A better question is: what if she says yes?” Alex and Sam pushed Ray off his bar stool toward several women shattering his invisible protective jar. “Get to it.”

Ray’s beer almost spilled as his feet met the floor. He took his mug along with him as a measure of liquid courage. A gaggle of women giggled as Ray neared. Ray looked over several of them before taking a long gulp of beer. He didn’t dare. They came in assassin squads and would shoot him down just to get a good laugh out of it. He finally focused his attention on Liz. At least he knew her from the past. *Maybe it wouldn’t be so bad*, he thought.

Fidgeting and avoiding eye contact, he timidly asked, “Liz, I don’t know how to say this, but would you mind joining us? The guys put me up to this.” Ray looked back at his pals who shot him two thumbs up. Ray nervously smiled in response.

“You really know how to charm the ladies don’t you?” Liz sighed. He didn’t have any confidence at all, not even the nerve to say it was his idea. *This was the perfect ending to a miserable day*, she thought.

Raymond swallowed hard. “What do I need to say to tempt you into joining us?” Elizabeth’s spring flower perfume intoxicated Raymond’s nose. Her jeans and shirt combination fit snugly around her athletic frame.

“Why don’t you start by telling me how you feel, or maybe a compliment?” Liz shook her head up and down as a slight smile crossed her face. She thought, *At least he was honest. Maybe I’ve misjudged him. If he manages to string together the right words, I might accept his invitation.* She waited for his response.

Ray looked like a deer caught in headlights. He froze in fright as his knees buckled and his body leaned forward spilling beer all over Liz’s shirt. She shrieked and grabbed a handful of bar napkins and began tapping her beer soaked shirt. Without thinking, Ray attempted to help by grabbing a few napkins and absorbing the spill from Liz’s outfit. When he tapped too close to her breasts, she slapped him, hard.

“Okay, be that way. I wanted you to be different.” With hurt, wounded eyes, Ray put his hands into his pockets, looked to the ground, and trounced out of Hops. His buddies and their respective dates laughed at his rapid retreat.

Liz shook her head and ordered another growler. If she could put up with all the wolves surrounding her, she could deal with a beer perfumed shirt.

#

Hitting the Books

Ray combed through his previous results and carefully constructed his thesis. Over a period of fourteen starsets the interior stars within the Great Nebula didn’t move as he originally predicted. He probably discovered another black hole. Evidence of a life supporting, alien planet seemed fleeting at best. Star wobbles and light deviation levels were nearly undetectable. They would fail statistical validation. Even so, he located a possible water world in the far reaches of the Great Nebula. It was Ray’s dream to discover an alien planet that existed within the appropriate distance from its star for liquid water to exist.

He returned to the observatory and sought out Dr. Brown. Brown played with a few images of the remote observatory camera. The images appeared to be from a much greater distance than Ray expected.

“I’ve made good progress on my thesis.”

“Good. I’m glad you’re making progress on something.” Brown snickered. “Your interpersonal skills with the opposite sex could use improving.” Brown twisted a computer video showing Ray’s rejection that was posted on the internet. Normally, he wouldn’t pry into a graduate student’s personal life, but Brown wanted Ray to succeed in all aspects of life. “There are Gray downloads to improve. . .”

“Please don’t. . .” Ray shook his head and sighed. “What’s the status on my observation probe?”

Brown shook his head. “Something’s happened. Take a look at this.” Brown inserted a key into the maintenance console and brought up the readings. An unusually high gamma radiation level occurred just before the observation probe went out. No additional downloads would ever occur. A tear came out of Ray’s left eye as his grin faded into a frown. He trembled because he thought he would have to start all over again with another remote probe. Plopping into a nearby chair, he composed himself for a moment.

“So, what happens now?”

Dr. Brown sighed. “Try not to worry, Raymond. There will always be obstacles in your way in life.” Brown paused. “Use the three-dimensional star images that you’ve gathered and change the scope of your thesis to analyze star clusters.”

Ray wiped the tears from his eyes. He would be unable to prove that other inhabitable worlds existed any time soon.

#

Brain Storm

Tossing from side to side, Ray slept in fits. He dreamt that gamma radiation would destroy his world as his solar system swung into Sector G. Waking in a puddle of sweat, he pushed the damp covers aside and sat on the edge of his bed. He shuddered and shook for a few minutes to absorb these thoughts. Was he only worried about his thesis, or was there more to it? Unable to sleep, he grabbed his robe and strolled across campus to the observatory.

Along the way he bumped into Elizabeth. She was returning to her apartment from a late night at Hops. After a long day of studying for her Communication Master’s degree, she often went to Hops to vent off her frustrations.

Ray asked her, “What are *you* doing here?” He managed to squeak out this question before his interminable shyness kicked in.

“Going home. I don’t have time for you tonight.” Liz brushed the hair out of her eyes. Her head swirled, and her mouth felt dry from consuming too much alcohol.

Ray buried his hands into his trouser pockets. It seemed to offer him some level of solace. His tongue became tied in an ascot knot.

Frustrated with the long silence, Liz’s partial smile retracted. “Whatever.” Elizabeth shot him an angry glance and brushed past him, another wasted conversation with a juvenile man.

Ray shrugged and marched forward to the Observatory, entered his identification codes, and used his key along with a special security code to gain access to all probes. Ray was not supposed to know that code, but he had accidentally learned it from looking over his mentor’s

shoulder. Without seeking permission, he used every probe and worked out the coordinates for the neighboring probes to verify what happened. Two neighboring probe observatories were already unresponsive. Deep into the night he discovered a hidden trend that confirmed his worst fears.

#

Ramifications

The following morning, Ray was directed to Dr. Brown's office from campus security. Dr. Brown's sparse office conformed to modern décor with clear ceramic furniture. A top notch light circuitry computer sat on the left side of his desk. Brown sat behind his desk and lifted his eyes to see his graduate student. Ray stood before him.

"You didn't have permission to access other probes. What were you thinking?" Dr. Brown folded his fingers on his desk as he focused his stern eyes on Ray.

"I had a vision. I tracked my probe's movements and use the other probes to triangulate where a gamma radiation band existed. I then realized that our planet will pass through that gamma radiation blast in less than a dozen cycles. Don't you think we should know what we're up against?"

Harry Brown sighed. "Close the door and sit down."

Raymond did as he was instructed.

"Next time confide in me. You've made our funders nervous with your rash behavior." Brown looked down. "You know that our work is monitored. You need to reset the probes back to their proper viewing coordinates."

Ray was undisturbed. "With respect sir, I can't do that without seeing the outcome. When my images develop, I'll provide the coordinates."

Brown stood up from behind his desk. "I could put you on academic probation for this. Repositioning probes without seeking permission from other researchers could ruin their work. Did that thought ever cross your mind? Why are you putting me in a difficult position of either protecting you or throwing you to the wolves?" Brown's face flushed red. As much as he cared for Raymond, Brown would not sacrifice his career for him. His job was the only reason that he got up in the morning.

"If I'm right, you'll thank me." Ray felt vindicated by his actions.

Brown shook his head and returned to his seat. His gesture had little influence on the young graduate student. "No, Ray, this is more complicated than you think. Your drive needs adjustment. It's for your own good." Professor Brown pushed a gray button on his control panel to control Raymond's thoughts. "Now you'll be more responsive."

Ray answered, “Yes sir.” He was immune to the change, but was wise enough to respect authority when the adjustment button was pushed. A lifetime of human interactions made Ray keenly aware of his unique ability. Unlike the rest of society, Raymond’s evolved brain resisted his Gray Splinter which was surgically implanted in his head. Based on their unique DNA, everyone received their Gray Splinter at the age of five with some individuals received firmer control than others. There was only one exception: world government leaders were granted a temporary reprieve when their devices were switched off during their office tenure.

Gray Technology averted wars. Considering the technological advancements of the third millennium, a single madman could destroy the entire planet. The only way to curb humanity’s desires and emotions was through Gray Technology, a formal name given to mind control neuroscience. Gray implants known as Gray Splinters steered disturbed individuals away from violent acts. In exchange for emotional control, Gray Splinters also enabled rapid information downloads. It was a heavenly existence, or so they thought.

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Outcome

Three dimensional images came in at a rampant rate. It was worse than Ray feared. Whatever the source of the deadly gamma radiation, it knocked out every probe entering Sector G. Even worse, the duration of the gamma ray burst exceeded all theoretical thresholds. It was difficult to fathom what would create such an immense level of radiation for such an extended time—maybe it was a time distortion or merging of parallel universes.

Raymond’s probe analysis was solid proof of impending doom. He had to share the news no matter what the outcome, and he knew who could spread the news the best: Elizabeth Allen.

Ray waited for her shift to end at the communication station’s exit. He caught up with her when she emerged from the station.

With the knowledge that their world would come to a sudden end, Ray’s confidence increased. He was finally able to approach Liz. “Liz, I need your help.”

“I have nothing to say to you.” Liz trotted to avoid the boy-man.

Ray passed her and stood in her path. He grabbed her arms, and while facing her, he said, “This isn’t personal. Within seven cycles, we’re all dead.”

“What?” Liz stopped in her tracks and shook his hands off.

Raymond pressed on. “In seven cycles our planet will cross paths with a strong gamma radiation blast of unknown origin. Our best chances of survival are to either vacate the planet, or to block the rays with an energy shield.”

Liz folded her arms. “Where’s your proof?” As interesting as this story may be, she would not risk her reputation on Ray’s opinions unless there was something behind them. Breaking a story like this would either jump start or end her career.

“Look at this.” Ray smiled as he handed over a 3D imager. He finally found a way to capture Liz’s attention without tripping over his own vocal chords.

She clicked through the holograms. The obviousness of the situation was apparent to her. Weighing her options carefully, she elected not to touch this hot topic for now.

“Do me a favor Ray. Talk to someone in the government. It may be a great story, but the authorities may already be dealing with it behind the scenes.”

Ray nodded. “I’ll return if they do nothing.”

#

Authority Ruling

Ray traveled to the capital of his Block on a high speed, public transporter. On the way he contemplated what he would say. After arriving at the monolithic Senator’s office, he nervously approached the receptionist.

Raymond blurted out, “I have something of dire consequence to discuss with Senator Thorn.”

The receptionist stopped doing her puzzles and looked at the poorly dressed visitor with contempt. “So does everyone else. What is the nature of your request?”

“My name is Raymond Frost. I’m an astronomy graduate student that has uncovered world threatening radiation observations in Sector G.”

Uncertain how to handle this odd request, the receptionist contacted the Senator’s executive assistant. She stated the nature of the inquiry and was later surprised to hear that the Senator would grant access to this inconsequential young man later in the starset.

“He’ll see you at the end of his work period. Sometimes he leaves early so be sure to be back here by H star-angles. Why don’t you tour the capital while you wait?”

A smile crossed Ray’s face. “Thanks for your help.”

The receptionist smiled and returned to her puzzles.

Given the unexpected extra time, Ray decided to take her recommendation. He visited the sites that he always heard about but never got around to seeing. Statues of the great people who had prevented world wars had stood the test of time. The great hall documented the changing of society to a Gray undertone. The difficulty in making the decision to control behavior and the satisfactory compromise was shown in graphic form. Technology had grown to the point where Gray control of the populace was the only effective means of preventing self-annihilation. Despite their best efforts to detect and prevent mental illness, a single, demented person armed with the right military tech could destroy the entire planet.

Although the device redirected violent thoughts, it also enabled rapid learning. There were limits to how fast the mind could absorb the information, but with time, concentration, and brain flexing, one could become an expert in any subject in a few star-angles. It was only when it came to research that the Gray device ran into limitations. Ray lacked the positive advantages of Gray Technology and had to learn through his superior intelligence, but when it came to new research, any such advantage was washed away.

Society was regulated by a world government divided into Blocks and further segmented by local sectors. Society's population was represented in one house, while society's wealth was represented in a second house. The dual house compromise of two millennia ago, finally removed the obvious brain washing effects of either viewpoint. The system worked as governmental officials controlled business leaders who controlled their employees. There had not been a world war in an entire millennium.

Time to leave the great hall and head back to the Senator's office, Ray thought. Ray rushed back to the leader's center and barely made the H star-angles time. He waited almost another star-angle before the Senator contacted the receptionist.

"He'll see you now. Remember to behave yourself."

The receptionist pushed a button allowing Ray to enter a secured area. A second door leading to the Senator's office opened before him.

Behind an old-fashioned, wooden desk sat a man in his early eighty cycles—at least he passed for that age. With the right youth treatments, he could easily be two hundred cycles. He wore formal business attire and every hair on his head was set in perfect position. The room smelled of a strange combination of lemony furniture polish and strong cinnamon candy.

"Senator Thorn, my name is Raymond Frost. I've discovered a world ending event in Sector G that I wanted to bring to your attention."

"Yes, my receptionist informed me why you're here. Have a seat." Senator Bernard Thorn gestured to a seat before his desk.

"Yes sir."

Ray took the visitor's chair and looked around the Senator's pristine office. The Senator's large wooden desk's chair level ensured that he always looked down upon his visitors. Ray shivered as the senator glanced at him. Part of Ray's confidence had parted from him.

"Young man, you've stumbled upon a great problem that our society will soon face. We know full well about the radiation band that has knocked out several probes. The evidence cannot be refuted. Our scientific community believes the radiation will subside by the time we rotate to that part of the galaxy. If my consultants find otherwise, we'll get the Spacers to help us. The most important thing you can do is to remain quiet. There's no need to create a public panic. Understood?" The Senator leaned backwards in his chair and held his tented fingers behind his head.

The Spacers were a population sect that had left the planet long ago to avoid Gray manipulation. They were self-sufficient with ships huge enough to house large vegetable fields and animals. They had perfected the technology to interchange oxygen and carbon dioxide between the animals and plants on their ships. Artificial gravity was created by placing extremely dense/heavy material on one side of the ship. Acceleration methods of creating extra gravity were considered a waste of fuel. Although there was an old rift between the Spacers and world regarding Gray Technology implementation, the rift had been repaired in recent cycles. The world government let the Spacers live by their standards, and the Spacers let the world live with their Gray Technology. Their space mining explorations served a lucrative purpose of finding rare mineral deposits. The trade of minerals for seeds served both parties well.

Raymond nodded and looked down. He had placed himself into another protective, invisible jar. “Yes sir. I thought you didn’t know.”

The senator smiled when he realized his tactics were working. “We know more than we release to the public. Please grant me this one favor, don’t tell anyone.”

Ray nodded.

“Good. Thank you for bringing this to my attention. Have a good dark period, Mr. Frost.”

The Senator pushed a button on his desk and motioned for Raymond to leave.

Ray felt no compulsion, but he knew that his time was up.

#

Conversation

“Who’s monitoring Raymond Frost? I want him on a leash!” Senator Thorn’s red face and deep lined forehead projected across the Dean’s communicator. Not only was Thorn putting up with scientists’ opinions in his own legislation house, now he dealt with them as they flocked to his office.

The Dean of Students didn’t even know that Raymond Frost was one of his graduate students until his administrative assistant pulled Raymond’s file.

“One moment please, Senator.” The administrative assistant set Raymond’s file before the Dean. The Dean was in his late sixty cycles with a patchwork of black and gray hair. His full gray beard gave people the impression that he was wise. He enjoyed his position and maintained control over the students and on rare occasions over the professors as well.

“Yes, Raymond Frost is studying for his PhD in astrophysics under the direction of Dr. Harry Brown. He’s expected to complete his thesis in the next half cycle. Would you please explain the nature of this call?” The Dean tilted his head and fidgeted with a light pen.

“Mr. Frost stumbled into some highly sensitive information by examining restricted probe observations. I want Dr. Brown to control him. If Frost minds his own business, the leash

can be loose, but if he disobeys, you'll have to exercise Gray control over him. Understood?" The Senator leaned forward. His index finger drew near the gray control button on his desk.

Seeing the Senator's response and wishing to remain unaltered, the Dean set down the pen and looked the senator in the eye. "Don't worry, Senator Thorn. Mr. Frost wants to graduate, and if he does not work on his assigned thesis to his advisor's satisfaction, he won't receive his PhD. It may not be necessary to exercise Gray control." The Dean leaned backwards in his chair when he saw the Senator backing away from the gray button. His body tenseness subsided.

"Good. I don't want to discuss this topic again. Thank you for your support." The screen went blank. The Dean breathed a sigh of relief as he managed to avoid Gray reconditioning. *Brown better handle this.*

#

Revelation

Ray imagined a warm light period in a park enjoying a sticket game where he connected with an underhand slow pitched ball. He rounded the five bases and managed to safely return to the plate. After his friends congratulated him, Liz wrapped her arms around him and planted a firm, wet kiss on his lips as they embraced in a tight interlock.

The sky turned dark. Breathing became difficult. The sun's color turned brown as gamma rays scorched their bodies. The world's last scream occurred in united agony.

Ray jerked awake and sat on the side of his bed. Something about the Senator's response bothered him. There was no way to judge his honesty.

#

Late Dark Period Activity

Grabbing his robe, Ray tromped across campus to the observatory in the middle of the dark period. He planned to examine the probe files for a decrease in gamma radiation as they entered Sector G. If the radiation levels decreased, he would trust the Senator's assessment. If the data showed otherwise, it would be time to visit Liz again.

Before reaching his destination, he managed to bump into Liz. Their mutual timing was impeccable.

Liz smiled and asked, "Were you satisfied with the government's response?"

"Not entirely. I had a dream that I have to check out." With his foreboding knowledge, Ray's bashfulness subsided. If there was any time to act, it was now.

“Oh, what did you dream about?” Liz smiled as she twirled her hair and tilted her head to the left.

“I can’t talk about it, but you were in it.”

“I was? What was I doing?” Liz continued to play with her hair strand.

Ray blushed.

Now Liz looked embarrassed. She wondered if it was some kind of sexual fantasy involving her. “Oh, you wish. You’ve had your chances, Mr. Frost.”

“What chance was that?”

“Forget that I was nice to you.” Liz turned and walked off.

“Women!” Ray screamed out.

“Men!”

They departed in opposite directions. These late-night encounters were hell on their mutual acquaintance, if you could call it that.

Ray got into the observatory and checked the records of every probe entering Sector G using copies of the keys that he obtained. Tracking the probe data versus time, he came to the startling conclusion that although the radiation levels tracked downwards, they remained far too high. The world was doomed after all. At least he had a good backup topic for his dissertation: Impending Doom and Methods to Survive It. Seven cycles were barely enough time to complete an energy shield.

#

Subsequent Morning

Returning to the observatory after a good night sleep, Ray found his advisor waiting for him. The glum look on Brown’s face said it all.

“Come with me. We need to talk.”

Brown led Ray up into the rafters of the observatory. Light shined in from the domed windows that surrounded the egress of a huge telescope. With the configuration of the panels, a lined grating showed across Raymond’s face as they occupied two chairs near the telescope.

“You made another unauthorized visit to the observatory last night. Give me your keys.”

Ray handed over his keys.

“From now on, you’ll only visit the observatory under my supervision, and your security card will only grant you limited campus access. I insist that you finish your studies in your dorm.”

Ray lowered his head. When his advisor finished, he voiced his concerns.

“But sir, I’ve plotted the radiation levels versus time. The moment we enter Sector G, our ozone layer will be destroyed.”

Brown glared at Raymond. The determination shown by his graduate student was beyond his control. He wished that it hadn’t come to this. Reconditioning his favorite student could limit his aptitude in the future.

“I’m sorry that I have to do this. “Brown pushed the gray control button on a remote unit that he carried. “Ray you will no longer consume yourself with gamma radiation levels. Understood?”

Frost felt no compulsion to follow his orders, but he knew that he’d better act subserviently.

“Yes, Sir.”

“Good, continue writing your thesis and graduate. I’ll give you a great recommendation when you’re done.”

Ray gloomily departed from the observation tower. The politics of the situation sank his heart.

Later that morning, Dr. Brown picked up his communicator. “Dean, I had to exercise Gray control over Ray. It’s a shame that his own drive works against him. This adjustment may limit him in the future.” He owed the Dean a favor for supporting his tenure.

“Thanks Harry. I wish it hadn’t come to this.”

#

Broadcast Plan

Ray knew that his plan needed investors, and the only way to get them was to broadcast what was about to happen and scare society into funding an escape plan, whether it employed his energy shield or someone else’s idea. He didn’t care what the authorities thought anymore; they either mitigated the threat or didn’t believe the overwhelming scientific evidence. Either way, he would not let apathy to win.

Ray sighed. *Time to visit Elizabeth again.* He would visit her when her talk show was over. It was the only place where he knew Liz would be at a specific star-angle.

#

Broadcast News

Elizabeth saw the boy-man approaching her again. She looked at him as if to question what could Ray possibly want now.

Maintaining pace beside her, Ray said, “You remember that gamma radiation scenario that I discussed with you.”

Liz shook her head affirmatively and continued walking.

“I’ve just gathered enough evidence to know that our government is making a rash decision that threatens our existence.”

“And you expect me to just broadcast this?”

“That’s exactly what I expect. The only way to save our planet now is to let people know what’s about to happen and jump start an energy shield plan.”

Liz shivered. After weighing whether this news breaking event would bolster her ratings versus the discipline she may receive if her superiors objected, she supported Ray’s proposal. Sometimes opportunity presented itself in the least likely package. Ray certainly fit that bill.

“What you propose is risky: save the world, or deal with an authority backlash. Are you sure you want to go through with this?” Wanting to ensure that her contact would not back out, she asked this question to test Ray’s caliber.

“I don’t care what happens to me. The world counts more.”

For the first time in their impossible relationship, Ray said something that appealed to Liz.

“Ok, Ray. I’m in.”

Liz and Raymond turned around and entered the broadcast facility. Fred Hammond, Liz’s boss who also served as the second shift radio announcer, had replaced her and was already working the booth.

Observing that Fred was airing an advertisement, she peeked in on him and asked, “Fred, would you let me make a brief announcement?”

“Sure, I’m going to get a beverage.” Fred left the studio booth and relinquished broadcast control to Liz.

Elizabeth adroitly adjusted the dials and buttons and nodded to Ray when she was ready. Ray had his data prepared in presentation format and would go through it slide by slide so that a young elementary student would understand it. Even if the audience couldn’t see the slides, the presentation would keep Raymond focused and on track.

She counted down. “In five, four, three. . .” mouthing two and one. “This is Elizabeth Allen breaking into your normal scheduled programming. With me today is Raymond Frost, a

research student from Apex University who has uncovered a world shattering event. His research reveals that a gamma ray blast will threaten our planet in seven cycles. Mr. Frost, would you go over your results for our listeners?"

After clearing his throat, Ray started his prepared speech. "Our world will be destroyed by radiation in seven cycles. The data to support this claim is irrefutable. If you examine the data in this diagram from every probe that has ever entered Sector G, the gamma radiation levels have tracked like this." Ray pointed to a green screen and showed how the graph trended. "Every single deep probe that has entered this region has been destroyed. If one were to plot the radiation level that interrupted each probe against time, it is estimated that the minimum gamma ray radiation level will be 500 kiloelectron volts when our world passes through it. At that level our protective ozone layer and all surface life will be destroyed. There are only two ways to survive. The first is to construct an energy shield. The second is to create enough escape spaceships to temporarily leave our world. Going underground won't work given the radiation shield requirements and the depth required. I'm open to other alternative ideas, but our time is limited. Please encourage the authorities to support this measure. I thank you for your time."

Fred barged back into the studio from his break. A grim look appeared across his face. "Elizabeth, gather your things, you're fired."

"But Fred, aren't we supposed to air important news bulletins?" Her arms were outstretched as she asked this question.

"This decision came directly from the network president. I'm been ordered to refute what you've just reported. I've also been ordered to do this." Fred pushed a gray button on his desk. "Pack your things and never repeat this story to anyone again, understood?"

Liz's facial expressions froze as she nodded her head lightly. She went to her desk with Raymond by her side where she broke down into tears. Her plan to push this credible news story had backfired. The only warm body nearby was Ray's. She buried her face into Ray's shoulder and wept quietly.

"It will be all right, Liz." Ray consoled her by patting the back of her head. He whispered, "You weren't affected by your Gray Splinter, were you?"

Liz continued to mute her crying by pushing her mouth against Ray's shoulder. If anyone were to hear their conversation or sense that she reacted this way, they would know that either her Gray Splinter failed, or she was an anomaly. She whispered, "No, I wasn't affected."

"I thought I was alone." Ray took solace in knowing that he was no longer the only person that he knew that resisted Gray Technology. He helped her pack and carry her personal items back to her apartment.

An awkward moment arose when they reached her front door sill. "Ray, do you want to come in for some coffee?"

Ray nodded and entered. He set her things near the front door. She lived in a meager three room apartment consisting of a combined kitchen-living room, bedroom, and a bathroom. Passing through the living room, Ray sat at the kitchen table awaiting coffee. His leg constantly

flexed to and fro; he was still nervous being around her. Liz tended to the coffee and then poured him a cup.

Ray took a sip and went for broke. “Liz, I’m sorry that you were fired. I feel responsible for this.” He paused for a moment and then looked directly into her beautiful eyes. He managed to stop shaking. “Liz, my timing is terrible and I have nothing to stand on, but I wanted you to know that you’ve the most beautiful woman that I’ve ever met. I’ve always wanted to get to know you better, but my insane shyness has prevented me from telling you this until now.”

Liz remained silent. She was shocked by his confession as her mouth drooped open.

Ray finally managed to piece together the words that he wanted to say for some time. He shook his head up and down lightly and gulped. At last his true feelings had been revealed. Feeling that he had caused her enough harm, he didn’t want to add to her troubles. “Liz, I never wanted to hurt you.” Ray stood and slowly turned toward the door. He could not bear to hurt her anymore.

Elizabeth reached out and grabbed Ray’s arm before he left the kitchen. Holding his arm firmly, she rose and used her other hand to guide Ray’s face towards her. Ray’s eyes opened wide when Liz planted a firm kiss on his lips. She separated from him to read his reaction. Ray responded by grabbing her lower back and planting a firm wet kiss on her moist lips as she returned his advance. They started breathing harder and turned their faces several times to kiss the opposite side of their lips. Then Liz loosened her bra. Grabbing Ray’s right hand, she placed it on her breast. He massaged both breasts as she thrust her tongue into his mouth. She stopped kissing him and stood back a few feet and seductively lowered her pants. She kept her panties in place to see what he would do next. Maybe it was the thrill of letting the man take control by removing her last ounce of clothing that she desperately wanted. Ray gently lowered her on her kitchen table and removed her panties. He removed his clothes and returned to kissing her. Liz gasped when Ray entered her. They made love in the kitchen and then retired to her bedroom for the remainder of the dark period.

The subsequent light period, they awoke and realized that they were more than just friends.

#

Push-Back

Early the next starset, Ray found that his security card would not allow him to enter any of the University’s buildings. After squeezing through the door after another graduate student, Ray sought his advisor.

Dr. Brown was sitting in his office grading finals when Ray knocked on his open door.

“Dr. Brown, my security card doesn’t work.”

Brown pushed his computer out of the way. A stern look crossed his face as he motioned for Ray to take a seat.

“What did you expect after the stunt you pulled? You were nearly expelled from the university until I begged and pleaded with them to allow you to finish your degree. The only way they would permit you to stay was to lock you out of every secure facility including this one. Ray, you’re on probation. Don’t push it. If you do, you’re sacrificing your career over speculative findings. I like you, Ray. Don’t do this.”

For the first time in Ray’s life, Ray argued back.

“There’s nothing speculative about it. It’s not about me.”

Brown shook his head. “It’s more complicated than that. Did you really believe that the Senator would share confidential information with you?” Brown pushed his gray control button. It didn’t work.

“Why not? I recognized the danger that we’ll soon face, and I wanted to do something about it.” Ray rose. This time he didn’t back down.

“How are you resisting your Gray Splinter?” Brown pushed the gray control button so many times that his thumb became numb. Ray should have become docile by now.

“I’m not giving in. If I have to go door to door, I’ll do it.”

Brown rose and hit the security button.

“Ray, I’ve summoned security. If you don’t leave the building, they will escort you to the hospital where they will replace your defective Gray Splinter.”

Raymond Frost left the office determined to sway the world.

#

Ultimatum

Ray and Elizabeth hit the social air-ways by using amateur radio sets and open forums on the Internet. They pushed for the energy shield project since no other alternatives would save the entire world. Slowly they got support, first from individuals and then from anonymous underground groups. Many people proposed thick iron and other higher nuclei atoms to block the rays, but with the timing involved and the number of spaceflights that it would take to transport the needed dense mass, this strategy was deemed impossible. The only way was to create a massive energy shield. It would take numerous space flights to do it, but it was possible given the timing constraints.

Ray’s and Elizabeth’s plan was coming together until government officials cracked down on their limited resources. The government could not put up with any more resource diversification. The legislation argued the energy shield and escape plan to the bitter end. Senator

Thorn finally got his way when the legislative house backed his less risky escape proposal. With the necessary votes in hand, Thorn arranged to have the world leader, Robert Cooper, speak on the subject across the airways.

Robert Cooper addressed the world. “It is with deep regret that I’ve called for military law. The rumors of deadly gamma radiation in Sector G are true. This is why it has become necessary to take these drastic measures. This decision did not come easily, but we must focus our attention on a single objective, and these alternative plans have fragmented our efforts. From this point forward, only sanctioned spaceflights will be permitted. I’m sorry that it has come to this, but our very existence depends on it.”

The message probably contained subliminal Gray altering to make the masses amenable. Neither Ray nor Liz felt any additional compulsion; they both represented a small segment of the population that had evolved past their Gray Implants. It was nature’s way of breaking mankind free of Gray Technology.

#

Military Law

With their hardened stance, the authorities discovered that a few individuals had evolved past Gray Technology and cracked down upon them. Stronger Gray connections to the occipital lobe were invented to exercise firmer control. Individuals who did not fall under Gray control were rounded up. Their own communications were used to track their locations. Only soldiers and government individuals stayed out past curfew to hunt down those who were suspected of being immune to Gray control.

With their mutual airing of the imminent threat, Ray and Liz had become wanted fugitives. To avoid detection, Ray and Liz went from friend to friend’s house in the late dark period or through underground tunnels and high speed transports. Their plan to create a large protective shield was hopelessly shattered. On one occasion, they hid in the basement of a building as the owners were interrogated and removed from their home for additional Gray adjustment.

Ray and Liz’s friends were reconditioned one by one. The only place left to hide now was in unpopulated caves and forests.

One light period while Ray was out gathering food, an emergency text came across his mobile. Liz needed him to come back to their cave shelter immediately. He sprinted home as quickly as his legs would carry him. Inside the cave Liz wrapped her arms around him and said, “Ray, the new Gray Technology isn’t so bad. I’ve adapted to it. You should too.”

Soldiers came into view and turned on a remote Gray control to full intensity. Raymond Frost remained unaffected. He removed Liz’s arms and held her arms by their wrists. “What did they do to you?” She struggled with him. Then he cupped her face as if to shake her free from the spell she was under. “What did they do to you?” Tears flowed from Ray’s eyes. Liz’s reception turned as cold as ice – not even a smirk or glimmer of hope appeared in her eyes.

The soldiers took Raymond Frost into custody. He struggled as they placed his limbs into shackles.

“You’re under arrest.”

#

Gray Control

Ray’s Gray operation was overseen by Senator Thorn himself.

Struggling within his gurney restraints, Ray said, “Why is this necessary, Senator Thorn? You’ve lied to me and set the world on a collision course with disaster. Why? Can you tell me why?”

“Young man, I’m here because I admire your determination. There’s only one possible outcome to this calamity. Those who have enough funding and government support will board spacecraft and depart at the last minute to reseed our world. The rest will die. It’s the only foolproof way of preserving our kind. We’ve debated the energy shield versus the planned escape proposal for many starsets, and the escape proposal got more votes.”

“But Senator, the energy shield could have saved everyone!”

“No, Mr. Frost. The only way for your plan to work would be if everyone, and I mean everyone, fully believed in it and sacrificed their entire earnings. Unfortunately, even with our Gray controlled world, congress acting under no Gray influence can never achieve complete agreement. Would you really want our government to be in the hands of a single dictator?” Senator Thorn paused. “I’m sorry, Mr. Frost, but our decision is final.”

The Senator motioned the doctors to put Ray under as he walked away leaving Ray to his Gray surgery. Evolution’s last ditch effort to grow past Gray control had been thwarted.

#

Final Starset

Shortly after receiving his advanced Gray reconditioning, Ray graduated. He and his wife settled down at a modest observatory to search for a new planet in all Sectors except for Sector G. That sector was off limits. Elizabeth’s talk show was put back on the air by an anonymous, high ranking supporter. Society’s harmony had been restored.

Six cycles later during a warm light period, Raymond and an expecting Liz went for a picnic. They settled under the tree where they got engaged. It was a special place for them. Ray nearly emptied his entire saving account to ensure his engagement ring would capture Liz’s attention, especially considering the way their romance had begun. He felt he owed her that much. At the time, they made love under the tree to consummate their engagement. Today they

drank one glass of wine – a pregnant Liz only took one sip. They ate sandwiches and expressed their feelings toward each other.

“Liz, I feel terrible that I didn’t share my true feelings with you sooner. My heart aches every moment that we’re apart. Can you forgive me?”

“Ray, that was a long time ago. Romance never comes easily.”

Ray leaned forward for a kiss, and Liz met him half way.

They kissed each other ardently and rolled onto their picnic blanket below their favorite tree when it happened. Gamma radiation struck their planet a full year ahead of schedule. The sky darkened as piercing sunlight destroyed everything in its path.

The firm congressional ruling outlawing observations in Sector G had sealed the planet’s fate. Not a single planet bound spacecraft escaped before the gamma ray blast destroyed the entire planet.

Man’s last gasp of air occurred in total harmony.

#

Aftermath

A Spacer’s ship returned to the home world ten cycles after the gamma radiation subsided. Their world had been fried to a crisp. Nothing lived on the surface and the protective ozone layer had been removed. The captain of the vessel recorded his thoughts.

“This is the worst catastrophe that we’ve ever faced. Our home world has been destroyed because we couldn’t work together to preserve it. We have to find a better way of living with each other without Gray Technology. The only thing we can do now is reseed the planet, so it may flourish again.”

The captain put down his recording device and shook his head.

“What a waste.” He rocked backwards into his chair.

His engineering staff prepared to terra-form the world. Some of the Spacers would remain behind; others chose to take their chances with alien worlds. Oxygen producing plants and bacteria that tolerated higher radiation levels would be sprayed across the sea and then on land. Other seeds would be deposited after sufficient oxygen was generated to repair the ozone layer. Service satellites would automatically bring the raw materials to the planet when the timing was right. This allowed the Spacers the freedom to visit other planets or asteroids in pursuit of raw materials.

One of the lieutenants spoke his mind. “Sir, where are we going after we’re finished here?”

“Our crew voted to leave for another planet that is many thousands of cycles away. By the time we get there, the inhabitants will be of equal or possibly greater technological level as ourselves. It all depends upon how well they control their advances.”

“What’s the name of this planet?”

“Their inhabitants call it Earth.”