

Rescued For Life

by CJ Carter

The first blackout event loomed as the stellar fragment crossed four-point-three million kilometers over Earth's north pole on its suicidal journey to the Sun. The electromagnetic radiation coming from the object, combined with its gravitation briefly focusing the solar wind onto the Earth, would disrupt all electronic devices for an estimated eighteen hours.

Lieutenant Colonel Lincoln Taub's job focused on ensuring the safety of the Space Department's resources. Satellites were now on standby mode. The secure fiber land-links were repurposed for interagency communication between the Space Department and the other branches of the military. The non-critical manned orbiting stations went to Level Two-Alpha status: survival-only mode for the duration. While this response mitigated the effects of the current crisis, the worst was yet to come.

In thirty-six hours and eight minutes, this fragment—most astronomers certain it was a piece of a fractured neutron star—would fall into the Sun. Its impact would temporarily scar the solar surface with a crater as large as Jupiter, sending up a huge spray of solar material. But this was not the threat that had Earth's civilization racing against the clock to protect itself. The threat was instead from the profound increase in electronics-disrupting radiation that would be focused on the blue planet's technology-based society. Almost all powered electronic devices, even those hardened for military-grade use, would suffer damage from the event. The only defense was to turn everything off. Following the crisis, systems could be powered on and life could resume as if nothing much had happened.

The best estimates suggested that the long-term effects would be no more bothersome than an extended period of increased solar activity.

Lincoln's immediate problem was communication. His temporary reassignment to oversee the Space Department's communications network put him half a continent away from his wife and young daughter. He hadn't talked to them in days, and it gnawed at him. With the planet powering down, even a simple personal call over the network was impossible. Only hardened land-based communications were working, and those were reserved for official use only—no exceptions.

After this initial blackout caused by the fragment's near pass, Lincoln Taub wouldn't have a chance to think about anything other than the race to "safe" all of the critical space hardware before the major event. Until then, there wasn't much to do except rest up for the next crisis. Having served more than two decades in space, Lincoln's fifty-year-old body was worn down by Earth's gravity quicker than most. During the past hour, his body occasionally trembled as it fought against its growing fatigue. If ever there was a time for a nap, this was it.

Hours later, light and noise flooded into the dark office lounge, jarring Lincoln awake. "Colonel Dickerson to see you, sir," announced a heavy-lidded sergeant standing in the now open doorway.

"Who?"

"Colonel Dickerson, sir."

"What time is it?"

The Sergeant's eyes searched for a clock, but not seeing one he replied, "Nighttime, sir."

"That will be all, Sergeant," Colonel Dicker-

son said hoarsely as Lincoln rose.

"Colonel," Lincoln said, "I thought you were supervising launch ops at White Sands."

"There's been a problem. Major Sandoval's plane crashed just outside of Alamogordo during approach. We no longer have a pilot for the Saturn transport, and launch is in seven hours."

Lincoln's mind was still foggy, but slowly wrapped his brain around what Dickerson was really saying. "No."

"Colonel—"

"No... Sir. I did my time. We both know it's a volunteer mission, and I'm not volunteering."

"You don't have the choice. That ship must go, and you're the only deep system qualified pilot still on active."

"Colonel," Lincoln pleaded, "I've logged my twenty-five years. I can't even lift my little girl because my bones aren't strong enough to take her weight. I'm lucky I can still live here on Earth. One more deep system flight and I'll never come back. I'll be stuck on Mars, or worse, the Moon. Don't do this. Please. I've paid my dues."

Damn the military. Since the deep system cargo vessel *Phoenix* needed to get out of harm's way and electronically safed before the Solar event, Lincoln had no time to settle any affairs. He was whisked to the White Sands spaceport to board a shuttle that would take him to his ship. He only had moments before launch to scrawl a short note and give it to a Lieutenant for delivery to his family.

An hour later, Lieutenant Colonel Taub was in a familiar situation: in orbit, strapped to the command chair, preparing to go to Saturn. When the *Phoenix* reached Earth's morning terminator, the mains fired and the ship accelerated at a relatively gentle rate of one-tenth gee. Twelve hours later, after burning twenty percent of the on-board fuel, the engines cut off.

The Sun would be getting thumped in seventy-one minutes. Saturn's position meant that Lincoln's course would keep him out of harm's way, assuming everyone's estimates were correct. To ensure the health of his on-board electronics, in sixty-five minutes he'd shut down every on-board system—including life support—so nothing would get fried. Then he'd be stuck in his flight suit for three hours until it was clearly safe to reactivate the ship. That was three hours longer than he liked being sealed in a flight suit, but with his life potentially at stake, he'd endure it. Once the ship was powered up again, it would coast for a little more than a year with only minor course corrections from the thrusters. Then another twelve-hour, point-one-gee burn would slow the ship down to orbital speed. Between now and then, Lincoln would have to endure weightlessness.

Deep system pilots were unique in their hatred of zero-gee. Ordinary travelers never experienced weightlessness for more than the two week cruise to Mars, and most spacers never spent more than four months in the micro-gravity of orbital stations. They all loved it. Of course they loved it. They didn't lose so much bone mass that normal gravity became dangerous. Their muscles didn't get so weakened by the lack of stress that they needed months of rehabilitation to be able to walk in whatever gravity they could survive. The human body wasn't meant for this. It adapted too easily to profound-duration zero gravity. Anything over a year was considered serious. Deep system pilots spent more than two years on a Saturn round trip.

Because of the physical toll, only ten people at any given time were allowed to wear the meteor-streaked wings of a deep system pilot. It was the only military duty that Lincoln knew of that paid well regardless of rank. As a result, he managed to provide very well for his wife Darlene,

his daughter Michelle, Michelle's future children, and (providing she didn't have too many) her grandchildren. Up to now, his duty-inflicted infirmity seemed worth it.

Lincoln's special-issue spring-wound watch indicated that the event was about to start. He began powering down ship's systems and waited out the next three hours in the dim glow of chemiluminescent panels as the ship grew colder. Since he couldn't risk activating any internal suit systems other than life support, there was nothing for him to do except stare at the watch's second hand as it swept around the dial. One... Two... Three... Four...

...One hundred seventy-eight... One hundred seventy-nine... One hundred eighty. Lincoln flipped a mechanical switch that had been jury-rigged to the power grid, and the emergency boot program brought the vessel back to life. After confirming that life support was nominal, it was with great relief that Lincoln removed his helmet.

So few were qualified for this job for one important reason: it was hard to maintain some semblance of sanity when forced into repeated year-long bouts of solitary confinement. Several times a day Lincoln checked his consumables, fuel, support systems, and active spectrum mappers. Each check lasted no more than ten minutes, leaving hours of personal time to fill. The only authorized diversions were a personal selection of music, vids, games, and books—there was computer storage to spare and it didn't cost any fuel.

Lincoln lasted less than a week before seeking out the most obvious diversion available—his cargo. He rationalized that since he didn't have a chance to inspect what was being loaded onto his ship before it launched, it was his duty to ascertain if any hazardous materials were on board without his knowledge. Besides, if they

found out, what more could they do to him?

He removed one of the Priority-one containers from the cargo bay and opened it. It was a space suit. At first glance, it wasn't impressive. The suit was bulky—not as bulky as the old pressurized models, but in comparison with the *Second-Skin* suits that replaced them in the mid twenty-first, it was huge. The cloth-textured shell seemed more durable than the standard issue suits, but the base tan color, with *Space-Glo* patches, did little for Lincoln's sense of aesthetics. He picked up the enclosed data pad and pressed the play sensor.

"This instruction pad is assigned to the PLS Mark 1 Experimental Personal Life Suit serial number RAH938IA12LN-X012. The PLS Mark 1 is designed to protect the wearer against both external and internal dangers in open space for an indefinite period until such time as a rescue can be made. Instructions are available in Standard English, Australian English, European—"

Lincoln paused the playback. He would listen to it later. For this he had to give up Earth? There *must* be something about this suit that was important enough that delivery couldn't be postponed. "Ship, time until the first trans-Mars gap?"

"Two hours, fifty-three minutes."

More than enough time to try on the suit and see what exactly was so special about it. He'd wear the PLS Mark 1 during the asteroid belt crossing. If nothing else, at least it brought some novelty to the non-event.

Like all standard suits, this new model was one-size-fits-most. That's where the similarity ended. The durable elasticized shell was married to *SmartSizing* components derived from the synthetic muscles developed for robotics and cybernetics. The composite neck ring unlocked into four sub-units, allowing entry into the body cavity via the neck opening... after the occupant

donned the diaper-like waste recovery brief specially made for this design. Lincoln thought that was a nice addition. No matter how absorbent they made the lining, it was still embarrassing to take off a standard suit after you had relieved yourself in it.

With entry mode switched on, the suit's *SmartSizing* elements fully extended, allowing Lincoln to slip easily into the now too-large cavity. Once positioned, he said, "Suit, relaxed fit."

The artificial muscles relaxed and the suit contracted down to a near-perfect fit. The four neck ring segments mated and fused into a seamless whole. The internal computer came to life, as well as the myriad thin-level displays now positioned about cheek-high for easy viewing. "Size suit," Lincoln commanded.

The near-perfect fit became a part of his body as the suit adjusted itself to fit the spacer's every contour—a thick second skin with almost no restriction of movement.

The design of the integrated helmet and power/replenisher unit was typical: a bubble helmet of radiation-impermeable near-unbreakable polymer attached to a fifteen-centimeter-thick back unit. The unit's compact nature belied its importance as the repository of the suit's self-sustaining primary power source, its power storage, the consumables replenisher, and the chemical and inertial stabilizers. The rails on the back unit slipped easily into the large V-shaped guide on the suit's spine. The helmet flange mated easily into the neck ring. "Lock suit," Lincoln said.

Air breezed through the ventilator. The inertial stabilizers subtly whirled to life. The computer reported, "Personal Life Suit functioning. All interlocks are sealed. Occupant life signs are nominal. Power systems running. Battery storage at ninety-one percent and charging. Consumables at one hundred percent. Skin integrity at one hundred percent; no repairs have been made. Please

state new password for suit unlock."

That's a new one, Lincoln thought. What would he be likely to remember in a crisis? "Get me out of this damn thing," he said.

"Password accepted," the computer said.

Lincoln tested the unlock password, locking and unlocking the helmet unit three times. Satisfied that it worked, he sealed himself back in the suit and floated to the command station. The size of the back unit was wider than standard and required major readjustments to his chair.

A few seconds of ionic sparks from micro-explosions flashed on the windows as the ship passed through the Rinaldi dust cloud, the first of five major dust events to endure while traversing the debris field between Mars and Jupiter. The belt crossing was nothing a pilot with average experience couldn't normally handle, since the significant planetesimals were hundreds of thousands to millions of kilometers apart, but every now and again something surprising would happen. Such as when a one-meter rock in a slightly eccentric retrograde orbit slammed into the *Phoenix's* eighty-percent full fuel tanks.

Since the earliest days of space exploration, hypergolic fuels were preferred for their stability and simplicity. Mix fuel component A with component B and boom, instant thrust. It was a chemical certainty that carried only one significant risk: there was the potential for a "Criticality-A" event if the tanks for component A and B both failed, allowing their contents to mix uncontrollably.

When he came to, Lincoln experienced the worst vertigo in his life. He had trouble focusing. His ship was gone. He was floating free in interplanetary space. "Status report," he said.

The computer replied, "External vacuum detected following explosive decompression. All suit safeguards tested and activated. Thrusters and stabilizers—"

"Stop. Computer, if you have a conversation mode, please active it."

"Activated. Would you like to continue with the status report?" the computer asked.

"Please."

"All suit systems are functioning normally and the rescue beacon has been activated. You were unconscious for approximately five-point-five minutes. Your vital signs are now normal."

"What happened?"

"I don't know."

Great. "Computer, where am I?"

"Current position is approximately four-hundred-twenty-one million kilometers from the Sun and fifteen thousand kilometers below the ecliptic. Our course is minus six degrees from solar perpendicular and minus thirty-nine degrees from the orbital plane. At ejection seat end-burn, our velocity reached eight-point-two kilometers per second."

This was not good. He was falling out of the solar system at interplanetary speed. What had happened? All he could see was interstellar space. "Rotate me so I can see where I've been."

It took four minutes to turn the suit. The computer refused to use the thrusters in a non-emergency, and no amount of cajoling during that four minutes would get it to change its mind. Thruster fuel was one of the few non-renewable consumables, and it wasn't going to be wasted. The gyroscopic stabilizers, on the other hand, were electrically powered. Though slower than thrusters, they were reliable and gentle.

The glowing nebula-like cloud of still-burning chemicals pinpointed where the *Phoenix* had once been. It was a beautiful sight. A cloud of debris speckled outward from the maelstrom. Reflected flashes highlighted some of the cargo debris from the dull composite remains from the ship. One hundred thirty—or rather one hundred twenty-nine—life suits, twenty medbots, six

thousand kilos of raw materials, and a pair of new MRKSAC quantum computers were just so much flotsam now. Lincoln stared at the detritus. He must have ejected from the cockpit before the meat of the blast blew everything apart: there was no way he would have survived otherwise. If he hadn't broken regs and donned this life suit, he'd be little pieces of freeze-dried human. He wished he could have said good-bye to Michelle.

Stop it, he thought. I'm still alive. If I get rescued soon enough, maybe I can still return to Earth. This might actually be a good thing.

He stared at the dimming fireball for nearly half an hour when a thought hit him. He said, "Computer, are you receiving any other distress beacons?"

"Yes. I'm receiving five hundred thirty-seven distinct distress beacons."

"How many are coming from where we've been?"

"One hundred twenty-nine."

Great, Lincoln thought. They'll think I'm just another empty suit. Then again... This suit's an anomaly. It's the only one not near the debris. They'd have to investigate. Still, it could take a while. Might as well relax and enjoy the view. "Computer, what do we have for entertainment?"

"Personalized entertainment logs have not been loaded."

What? This wasn't possible. No, wait. Yes it was. He only put on the suit. He hadn't loaded his entertainment programs. Nuts. Regardless, every computer system had something installed for distraction. It was tradition. "Computer, display file list."

A search through the files showed slim pickings: a basic game suite which included backgammon, chess, checkers, and various card games; the suit's operations manuals and help files; and a collection of the complete works of Shakespeare, since it always topped the "stranded

island" wish list. In an obscure file tree, there was a sampler of one thousand musical selections ranging from seventeenth century symphonies to modern day *clickos*. It wasn't much, but for a few weeks or months it would have to do.

The first item of business was survival. That required information, and that meant reading the operations manuals. They revealed how impressive, and expensive, the suit really was. Leave it to the military to over-design, Lincoln thought.

The foundation of the suit lay with power management. In addition to the latest superconductive batteries for storage, it had three different sources of power generation: a small nuclear generator provided primary power; a state-of-the-art fuel cell supplied extraordinary and emergency power needs; and in a surprisingly esoteric choice, the nanotube and micro-crystal fiber outer skin of the suit served not only as an effective radiation shield, but also passively converted several types of common radiation, such as light, cosmic rays, and x-rays, into suit power—though not very efficiently.

The electrolytic and chemical subsystems were nothing short of amazing. Many ships had systems that were more capable of recycling and repurposing waste chemicals, but nothing could compare to the specs of this system for size and efficiency. It could reconstitute not only food, drink, and air from Lincoln's own waste products, augmented by the raw chemicals in the back unit, but it would also construct necessary medicines as needed.

The internals of the suit also left little to chance. Unlike standard *Second-Skin* suits, this shell would periodically circulate air next to the body, keeping the wearer's skin in good health over the long term. The shell reclaimed sloughed off skin and hair and featured an epilating laser tuned to keratin to take care of the problems of unrestrained nail and hair growth in low-gravity.

The specs of this personal lifeboat astounded Lincoln. As lousy as his situation was, at least he wouldn't want for the basics any time soon. He'd been on transports with fewer amenities. He could survive this, no sweat...

After eight months, Lincoln began to grow a little suit-happy. He lost interest with the games. Playing the computer wasn't like playing against a human. It didn't care if it won or lost, and that was boring.

More challenging and entertaining was Lincoln's attempt to memorize Shakespeare's plays. So far, he had mastered six. He assumed the role of each character in turn while the computer synthesized the other parts, gaining in ability as it learned the inflections of the speeches from Lincoln's performances. And performances they were, as the solo actor strode, danced, fenced, lighted, and otherwise pantomimed his way through the stories.

This activity more than consumed the two hours of exercise the suit required of the space-actor every day. When Lincoln moved, the robotic muscles surrounding him created resistance to stave off bone loss and muscle atrophy for as long as possible. Nevertheless, as each month went by, the castaway's bones grew more and more brittle and could withstand less and less resistance.

In spite of the thespian diversion, there was a lot of time to kill, and therein was the greatest danger of being stranded in space. People were vulnerable to various psychotic episodes when confronted with the incredible hugeness of space one-on-one. Some succumbed quickly, but given enough time, even the most seasoned space jockey's mind would lose itself. To forestall this condition, the suit opaqued the helmet's bubble and dimmed the internal displays to simulate a day/night cycle. It kept the situation "normal" for

Lincoln. What the suit couldn't do was keep him from thinking about his abandoned wife and child. During the quiet periods, he focused on them.

Darlene suffered being a spacer's wife for twenty-five of their twenty-eight years together. They delayed having a child until family could take precedence over career. When little Michelle came into his life, Lincoln was transformed. No general ever had him wrapped around a finger as completely as his absolutely normal and guileless four-year-old.

When he was rescued, he'd make it up to them. Somehow.

Lincoln had been adrift seven hundred twenty-seven days—three days shy of two years. During a rehearsal of *Hamlet*, for a second anniversary performance, he suddenly felt an intense pain. As he lunged for the imagined Tybalt, he broke his third lumbar vertebra. The crippling pain traveled from his lower back into his legs until the appropriate meds were injected into his system. The suit's skin stiffened to act as a body cast.

Lincoln had unrealistically hoped that maybe his exertion would prevent this. He had avoided asking the computer about his condition since the first day because he didn't want to hear the answer—there was no way the news would be good. He couldn't put it off any longer. "My fracture was a symptom of massive bone loss, wasn't it?"

"Yes."

Damn. He'd already known the answer, but damn. "With rehabilitation, how strong a gravity field can I survive?"

"Based on your pre-existing loss, your current acclimation to micro-gravity, and established bone regrowth and organ reconditioning procedures, you could be trained to withstand the equivalent of zero-point-one-three of Earth-normal

gravity."

Lincoln's heart sank. That was less than the gravity on the Moon. It wasn't much more than standard ship acceleration. Before too long he wouldn't be in any physical condition to be rescued at all.

His long decline began. Without the hope of rejoining his family on some world, or even on a station, Lincoln sank into a deep depression. In the following weeks, his health deteriorated drastically. He rarely ate and he stopped exercising—not that the stiffened suit allowed for much movement. The plays and other entertainments became unused and forgotten memories.

The PLS Mark 1 found this situation difficult, having been built under the assumption that the occupant wanted to live. It installed the integrated intravenous plugs so that Lincoln's body could be maintained independent of his wishes. The suit would now nourish him as necessary if he wouldn't eat, and clean his blood if required if he wouldn't excrete. The suit designers wanted injured crew to be tended to if they couldn't fend for themselves, so the single-minded intelligence contained in the suit's computers now assumed that function.

After several weeks, Lincoln hoarsely said, "Computer, unlock the suit."

"No."

"Override all safeties. This is an order. Unlock the suit. Password, get me out of this damn thing."

"I cannot unlock the suit if it would endanger your life."

"Unlock the suit, dammit! Unlock it! Now!"

Lincoln was in tears, partly out of frustration, and partly because his outburst caused a hairline fracture of one of his ribs. He was rewarded by silence from the computer, and then sleep as the suit injected a sedative to prevent him from injuring himself further.

As days stretched into months, and months stretched into years, the suit tried to rouse Lincoln out of his self-imposed vegetative state. It talked to him. It flashed games on the heads-up display. It even wasted precious thruster fuel to nudge its occupant gently, after stiffening the suit's skin to prevent significant injury. Sometimes a shot of epinephrine, or a stimulant, would be used for variety. Nothing helped for long. Lincoln had developed the *far look*.

The sheer vastness of space had overwhelmed even this experienced pilot. His mind relaxed and fixated on the infinite far black of space. He had no thought. He just stared and breathed while his marrow produced the blood that his heart pumped. In three-to-four days he would be dead because it would not occur to him to drink.

The suit's pathological beneficence wouldn't allow that. Whenever neural scans indicated that the *far look* had taken hold, the suit harassed Lincoln until a semblance of lucidity returned. Years passed with this cycle constantly repeating. Slowly, Lincoln learned to not completely abandon his mind to the void of space. He maintained a sufficient level of consciousness so that the suit wouldn't interfere and interrupt his thoughts. It was thought, albeit very slow thought, that preserved whatever humanity remained to the once impressive space pilot. Time had lost meaning. He had nothing left to care about. Once Lincoln abandoned hope of rejoining Darlene and Michelle, he didn't think of them again. What was the point?

For seventeen years, Lincoln pondered with molasses-like efficiency one question: if no one knew you were alive, did you exist? The traditional "If a tree falls in a forest" query was the logical place to start. After eight years, he explored Descartes' postulate of *cogito ergo sum*. Five years later, he approached the problem from

the point of view of non-existence and tried to work it out backwards. He felt he was close to a breakthrough when his concentration was broken.

A fast moving micro-meteoroid cut across the surface of the suit's right leg. After years of silence, the stabilizers whirled to stop the sudden rotation. Two quick thruster bursts cancelled out the jarring rotation of the impact.

The violent movements seriously hurt Lincoln. His bones were no longer useful for support; they were as delicate as the skin of a fine porcelain doll. It didn't take much to shatter them—far less than what he'd just been put through.

Pain radiated from his leg, back, chest, and neck. The computer reported, "Warning! Suit impact. Skin integrity at one hundred percent following automatic repair. You have sustained eleven major fractures to your left femur, multiple fractures of the third, fourth, and sixth ribs. Fracture of the third and fourth cervical vertebrae. Meds being administered."

The situation was grave. Even with the suit's ministrations, Lincoln's body would not be able to repair the damage to his skeleton. The suit adjusted compression areas and temperature to control the swelling and internal bleeding while also adjusting Lincoln's blood chemistry to prevent embolisms. Over the years, the suit had caused his body fat percentage to increase to compensate for the lack of muscle mass; safety required that the suit be skin tight, and that foresight gave Lincoln the margin necessary to survive this incident.

Lincoln wanted to tell the suit not to bother with the meds. He tried, but he couldn't. His vocal muscles had atrophied from more than a decade of disuse, and his jaw was so weak that speech would probably shatter it in any case. Even the thought of trying to move exhausted him. What did it matter, anyway? As the pain

subsided, he returned to his contemplation.

Thirty-eight years, four months, seven days, three hours, and eight-point-two minutes after having been ejected into space wearing a life-protecting micro-prison, Lincoln finally received long awaited news. Over the span of two hours the PLS Mark 1's computer reported, "Alert! Spacecraft approaching. Broadcasting all greetings."

Lincoln barely noticed. While the computer had dilated its messaging to compensate for Lincoln's slowed mental processes, the external world adhered to no such compensation. To the now eighty-nine year old man, it seemed as if the ship had suddenly appeared before him. But it didn't matter. He hadn't finished thinking about the fragile nature of God. He was close to understanding it. He didn't need these interruptions.

The crew of the *Mary Elaine* was surprised to find anything remotely human out in this section of space, far below the orbital plane of the solar system. Assuming a straight-line course, this suit had traveled a little over nine-point-eight billion kilometers from the asteroid belt, almost the radius of Eris's orbit. Its velocity indicated that the poor soul inside had been drifting for between thirty-eight and thirty-nine years. Since the *Mary Elaine* had received a distress message, as well as a plethora of greetings, the law required at least a cursory investigation. The crew was stunned when their computer reported that the suit's occupant was still alive.

Their communication attempts yielded an unexpected reply: the suit communicated back that there would be a delay as the message was slowed down for the survivor to process. While they waited, they downloaded Lincoln's medical data. It revealed that the elderly man was barely more than a jellyfish. The suit was feeding him and breathing for him. Although it was tragically

sad, it wasn't surprising. These early attempts at life suits proved to be almost psychotically insistent about keeping their wearers alive.

They ran the required database search on the suit's serial number. It was part of a shipment that was lost more than thirty-eight years ago from a ship with one pilot, listed as Lieutenant Colonel Lincoln Taub, MIA presumed KIA. Digging into the suit's memory confirmed the ident. The military database information on Taub showed him to be a high-quality pilot and a patriot. It also reported that he had a daughter now living on an Earth station.

Lincoln barely noticed the message he had been sent. Damn interruptions. The thought, Go away, was the only acknowledgment he deigned to offer. Not that he was capable of much more in any case.

The *Mary Elaine* paralleled Lincoln's trajectory for two hours waiting for a reply that never came. None was expected, but the company's legal department would have the captain's hide if she abandoned the castaway too soon. Since the medical records made it obvious that he was no longer capable of surviving a rescue, the *Mary Elaine* returned to its mission and sent word back to Earth of what they had found.

One day shy of Lincoln's fortieth anniversary of being marooned in space, another space ship, the *Dutch Savior*, matched his speed and course. Strictly speaking, he was still alive.

A woman wearing a *Second-Skin* space suit traversed the distance between the ship and the long-floating man. She hovered in front of him, helmet to helmet. She stared through the two transparent bubbles but wasn't certain what she was looking at. It was a lumpy and fleshy mass—bloated, with little form. "Daddy? Daddy, it's me, Michelle."

It took eighty-four minutes to slow down

the message for Lincoln to understand it. The suit had informed Michelle of the slowed translation. She never moved away.

Michelle? A sudden rush of adrenaline gave Lincoln a moment of real-time thought for the first time in many decades. He fully opened his eyes and focused on the space-walker in front of him. God, that woman looked a lot like Darlene. His family. He had left behind his family. This woman said she was Michelle. Lovely Michelle. He left her without saying goodbye. Or did he only think he didn't say goodbye? It was so long ago, he wasn't sure. She was only a little girl then.

His mind slowed again, unaccustomed to the energy required to maintain that level of mental activity. He felt drained.

"I love you, Daddy. I always have."

One hundred five minutes passed for the message to translate. Michelle watched her father the entire time. Though choked with emotion, it wasn't difficult for her. She still kept the note he had sent her and her mother. Even with a life filled with school, marriage, career, and motherhood, a week never went by that she didn't read

it. Though he was never there in body, his example of duty and loyalty stuck with her. She always missed him, but she never stopped loving him. She wasn't willing to waste any of these precious moments.

The message finished. It was clear the man behind the bubble couldn't respond, but he seemed to understand. There was a little more humanity behind those gray-blue eyes than there had been when she'd first looked at him. Michelle never said goodbye, not even in her mind. The goodbye was forty years ago. This was hello. For both of them. She now knew her duty more than ever before. Her father had given enough. She was happy that she was able to give something back.

Lincoln still couldn't perceive events at normal speed. He didn't notice that Michelle had left any more than he noticed the plasma cannon on the ship glowing with merciful destruction moments before the energy pulse rescued him from his well-meaning and well-intended prison.

THE END