

The background is a dark blue space scene filled with stars. In the upper left, a person's face is visible inside a clear, rounded helmet. A bright yellow star is positioned near the top center. In the lower right, a crescent moon is visible. The bottom left corner shows the curved horizon of a planet with a blue and white gradient.

A Naomi Kinder Adventure

Godspeed
Inc.

Vincent Miskell

Godspeed Inc: A Naomi Kinder Adventure

by Vincent Miskell

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Smashwords Edition

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Godspeed Inc.

When you're making sweeps close to Pluto's orbit—okay, where Pluto's orbit *used to be*—the first thing you do when you're conscious is check voice, holo-vid, and text mail. No matter how much the techs compress a transmission, it still takes 5–6 hours to reach this far Out West after they get it all together. So news wise, you're always at least a half-day behind everybody else. But a few sports and news holo-vids, a perky or sultry hello from an old lover ("I miss you, Naomi"), even some bureaucratic smoke from the bubble heads at Godspeed Inc. help you feel less like Disembodied Ghost in Space.

So first thing, I check mail.

NOTHING. And no incoming either.

In fact, all the log files show empty as though an emergency system wipe blanked them. I figure a memory gelpak went overload, cascading through all the other gelpaks

—something that's not supposed to happen. But most sweepers experience this kind of gel crash enough times to know that it's not "user error."

That is, when there used to be other sweepers.

Until just a few years ago, this was a two-person job. And before that, right after Pluto got sucked through a rift in the spacetime fabric to dimensions unknown, Godspeed had a half dozen sweeper ships deployed here Out West, mending spacetime with special particle beams. A few even had faster-than-light Q-drives of their own—not that they were ever used.

Now, there's just me in Sweeper Two, with the Q-drive removed, of course.

Even after almost twenty years, some of the space environmentalists, especially on Mars, are still pissed about losing Pluto and Charon. Still jittery about Godspeed's FTL Q-drive punching holes in the universe, which is why they affectionately refer to my employer as "God Peed." Officially, of course, Godspeed doesn't admit direct responsibility for rifts—they just sometimes appear after a Q-drive launch.

Could Mars go missing in a spacetime rift? Sure, if some faster-than-light submoran pilot powered up near Mars orbit. But that isn't likely—not with UN Security Units on board every active Q-drive ship. And not with their hot little fingers on the remote control of the pilot's brain implant. One push and *KA-BOOM*: the inside of the pilot's skull is applesauce.

Fortunately, there's nothing but the usual pack of neurons inside my head. And nothing but some nutrient implants in my body. In fact, I had to lose some parts for medical reasons for this job, like my breasts and uterus, which I'll get put back when I retire in about ten months at 32, with a big Godspeed Inc. pension and bonus. As a googol-buck corporation though, Godspeed can afford full body and organ restoration, plus whatever genetically engineered cosmetics my seductive little heart desires. Just less than a year more cocooned as a Godspeed tomboy caterpillar—then I emerge on Earth or Luna as the Femme Fatale Butterfly Goddess of Endless Fertility and Love. I've got all my bodily specs and a three-world tour worked out, especially Mars—which is still 100 percent retrovirus free.

That's the plan anyway. The exact same one that my former partner, Bonnie Perez, is supposed to be enjoying.

Anyway, I'm not really worried about the gelpaks because anything quasi-electronic or mechanical eventually yields to my touch. Computers, particle drives, environmental control systems—all succumb to what others have called my "magic hands."

Before I go to work on the mail problem though, I check for rifts on the spacetime monitoring screens. Eleven standard days ago from this sector, Godspeed slammed its most expensive luxury liner, Pegasus IV, on a 30-light-year journey to what sweepers call the Wild, Wild West. But, so far, no rifts.

Then I see something suddenly burst behind me.

The whole aft monitor is strobing scarlet and probably screaming a siren too—but I disconnected the audio a year ago. Interfered too much with my sleep cycle—every piece of debris and dust set the damn thing off.

The aft holoivid cameras look offline now, unless a giant swirling Kandinsky painting has decided to join me for breakfast. Quickly, I switch everything aft over to my main screen. Graviton wave readings pop on and off like multi-colored ballooning fireworks.

The first thing I think is *Pluto's back!*

But I'm wrong. The wave readings should be periodic—not idiotic. Now X-ray squiggles jumble all over the screen in a dancing frenzy. *This is something else. Something really big*, and it's right on my ass. Maybe a whole alternative universe is trying to squeeze through a Godspeed spacetime rift.

An hour more dozing and I would have slept forever.

Instantly, I fire the aft particle gun at the *something really big*, and almost simultaneously I activate the magsail to catch any blow-back. Both should give me a little distance. I feel the dampening field rapidly turn up a few notches as I accelerate with a lot more kick than I expect. The magsail is billowing with all kinds of energy, and even through the damper, I can almost feel the ligament-ripping slam of hard acceleration.

Like the good Godspeed sweeper pilot I am, I transmit the tech and holoivid data to Godspeed Earth. But with almost a 12-hour transmission turnaround and at least a normal two-month trip West to me, I'm not counting on a quick rescue from the *something really big*. Following emergency protocol, I also pop a copy to Godspeed's Martian research center—not that the Ares Lab monkeys have any ships to deploy—but they'll get the data a little earlier. Maybe some of the lab techs there can hand out some quick life-saving advice.

I spend some time trying to make sense of the senseless graviton wave readings, looking for some pattern—and finally set one of the analysis computers to search for periods of up to a thousand. How could these readings not repeat?

Briefly, I think about dodging around the *something really big*, but its energy and gravity scare me into running away. Since I'm already roughly heading toward Uranus, and Neptune's on the other side of the Sun, I plot a course East toward Uranus since it is the closest planet and more or less lined up with Earth and Mars. The two big giants, Saturn and Jupiter, are about 90 degrees out, so I only have the little gas giant to use as a gravity assist or maybe act as a shield from the *something really big*. Trouble is, Uranus lies halfway home and will take me a month to reach. I check the *something really big's* speed. I let out a sigh: it's steady at two-thirds of mine and is probably being drawn toward Uranus, too.

Now there's nothing more I can do without more data, so I reconnect my audio alarms and put myself under for an 8-hour cycle.

As soon as I wake, I see the mail files streaming in. But the analysis computer is still chugging away—no results there.

I read the first mail file:

TO: SWEEPER TWO
FROM: BONNIEP@GODSPEED.ARESLAB1
HAIL NAOMI!
LONG TIME NO HEAR, SEE, OR READ.

ALL SIX OF US HERE AT ARES ARE WORKING THE DATA ROUND THE CLOCK. WE NOTIFIED UN AUTHORITIES AS PER PROTOCOL AND RETRANSMITTED YOUR INFO TO GODSPEED EARTH AND GODSPEED LUNA JUST IN CASE YOURS GETS DEFLECTED OR DISTORTED. AT LEAST THEY'LL KNOW WE ARE ALSO ANALYZING THE DATA.

WE SHOULD HAVE SOMETHING FOR YOU WITHIN THE HOUR.

BONNIE JUL 14 2097: 2313 ARES LAB TIME

It was just too incredible! When did Bonnie Perez come back to work for Godspeed? I guess three years of her femme fatale fling were enough for her—but signed on with the Ares Lab monkeys? That didn't sound like the Bonnie who swore off Godspeed forever. But at least there's somebody I can trust. Somebody who might not put Godspeed's image and profits before my well being.

The second and third files are long news vids with no mention of the *something really big*. I delete them after a quick scan. The fourth file is a bare acknowledgment from Godspeed Earth. They received my data—oh, how wonderful! The bastards.

I transmit a short thank you to Bonnie, using my pet name for her, "Bon-Bon." But don't get me wrong; we never really had a romance going like most sweeper mates. Just a little hugging and kissing whenever monotony and melancholy got to be too much. When you're both missing most of your reproductive gear, sex is more a juicy memory than the juiced intensity of sweaty body electricity. At least it was that way for us. If she'd been a man, my body might have risen to the occasion even so.

Not that I didn't fantasize about Bonnie a little, especially after she ran her stash of homemade holovid porn for me. Naturally, I laughed (and lost my breath a few times) at her wickedly scornful narration, but mentally I was participating in her holovid adventures and imagining she was doing the same with me.

But it never happened. She was just the only warm, fleshy body besides mine, for millions of kilometers.

In reality, I usually daydreamed about men with thick hairy forearms, high IQs, and other above-the-norm necessities. Musings I shared with Bonnie. Along with so many feelings, secrets, and follies during the 18 months we were so up close and personal. Point is: we loved each other, but we were not lovers. Nothing sexual haunted us—no erotic undertows, jealousies, or resentments to distort our close connection. So, I trusted her completely.

Whatever she told me to do, I'd do without question. Well, almost without question. I might have a few quibbles about life and death issues.

Bonnie is back:

TO: SWEEPER TWO
FROM: BONNIEP@GODSPEED.ARESLAB1
WELL NAOMI, YOU'RE NOT GOING TO BELIEVE THIS, BUT ALL OUR "MONKEY ANALYSIS" (REMEMBER WHAT WE USED TO CALL THESE GUYS?) SHOWS THAT A BIG FAT BLACK HOLE IS ON YOUR TAIL.

FOR NOW, JUST KEEP HEADING EAST TOWARD US. START DOING NAVIGATION COMPS TOWARD UMBRIEL. YOU MAY NEED TO SWITCH RIDES. NOT SURE YET. OH YEAH, SPEED UP A LITTLE, IF YOU CAN.

ALL HOPES WITH YOU.

BONNIE JUL 15 2097: 0016 ARES LAB TIME

Whoa! A goddamned black hole about to chew my ass!

I run some calculations. Then quickly, I wop the aft gun again for almost a minute and widen the magsail to the limit. Old Sweeper Two slams a little faster toward Uranus

and its darkest moon, Umbriel. Accelerating a little too suddenly, I feel a brief wave of nausea as the dampening field kicks in much harder this time. No crushing sense of pressure, just the woozy undulating sluggishness of moving underwater or swimming inside a giant gelpak.

I stop the analysis computer's fruitless attempt to make sense of the chaotic readings and set it to project the path of the black hole.

Then I reread Bonnie's message. Two parts really bother me: "You may need to switch rides" and "All hopes with you." What the hell do they mean?

"All hopes with you" sounds like doom or they're counting on me to do something about the black hole. Attempt to save the solar system or something equally foolhardy. Air blows out of my mouth sarcastically at the thought.

And how in Christ's name am I supposed to switch rides? Does she mean routes? Or is some other sweeper ship coming to rescue me? Not likely.

While I'm pondering these mysteries, the computer bleeps and displays the black hole's trajectory. Actually, five trajectories.

For minutes, my mouth hangs open, silently screaming just like my aft monitor yesterday. Slowly, my overheated haywire brain cools down and reorders itself. I force myself to think objectively.

The good news is that two of the five paths show the black hole careening close to Uranus, and then heading out Wild, Wild West into deep space. Unfortunately, in the other three, Uranus actually boosts it East toward the Sun, brushing Mars a little tidally. But the worst is that it then captures the Earth and Luna—swallowing them for lunch or dragging them along for a snack later as it sweeps out West past the Sun.

Serenely, I determine that such results may be very bad for Godspeed's business profile. All my retirement stock, for example, will be worth less than the aneurysm that's probably shaping up now in my brain.

Calmly, I scream, "YOU STUPID BASTARDS!" Referring, of course, to the bubble heads at Godspeed.

My first impulse is to send the projections to Bonnie and the other monkeys at Ares Lab. And so's my second impulse. I let them fly.

I switch off my nutrient implant and decide to pull a real meal from cold storage. My mind flitters East and West and all around the solar system a few times as I prepare something billed as "Hungarian goulash." Mentally, I keep repeating: *Maybe it isn't a black hole. Maybe the trajectories are all wrong.*

Now that the meal is over and my under-used digestive system is rumbling with surprise at something a little more solid to process than water, my mind seizes on Umbriel. What's there—a secret base? I know Bonnie's itching to share some big mystery. But she's not giving me more than a hint.

As though answering my thought, a transmission shows as incoming. I grab it for the main screen.

TO: SWEEPER TWO
FROM: BONNIEP@GODSPEED.ARESLAB1
NAOMI, JUST PASSING ON A HOLOVID I THOUGHT YOU'D LIKE TO LOOK AT.
I DON'T LOOK MY BEST, BUT I THOUGHT YOU'D LIKE TO SEE HOW THE ARES
LAB LOOKS NOW.

BONNIE JUL 15 2097: 0139 ARES LAB TIME: FILE ATTACHED

I prompt the holo vid file to play. Suddenly, the view from a handheld swoops around an ordinary lab from strange face to strange face, and all the chatter teases a tall man, who looks 40, about his retirement. High-pitched squeals and noises fill up the brief silences between catcalls and laughter. Then the focus lands on Bonnie. "You look too good to retire," she says with a laugh and then the holo vid abruptly ends.

"What the hell was that?!" I yell. But, of course, I know.

Her message is full of "look" and "looks." Since I've never been to the Ares Lab, how it "looks" now is part of Bonnie's obvious signal to me to look for a hidden message. The high pitched noises probably carry what I need.

I pull the holo vid file over to an analysis computer, and, within seconds, the embedded message appears:

NAOMI,

THANKS FOR FINDING THIS SECRET-SPY MESSAGE, BUT WE CAN'T TAKE THE CHANCE THAT GODSPEED EARTH OR UN UNITS MIGHT BE MONITORING. UNFORTUNATELY, EVERYONE HERE CONCURS WITH YOUR TRAJECTORIES OF THE BLACK HOLE—WITH MOST FAVORING THE WORST-CASE ONES.

HOWEVER, THE SURPRISE FOR YOU IS THAT SWEEPER SIX, WHICH IS EMERGENCY STORED ON UMBRIEL, HAS A FUNCTIONAL Q-DRIVE ALONG WITH SOME SPECIAL MONITORS. A FEW FUEL PACKS, PIECES OF EQUIPMENT, AND DATA UPDATES FROM SWEEPER TWO AND THE SHIP WILL BE AS GOOD AS NEW.

BECAUSE SWEEPER SIX HAS BEEN IN STORAGE SO MUCH LONGER THAN EXPECTED, IT WILL TAKE A MONTH TO OVERHAUL.

YOU'LL HAVE LESS THAN 23 DAYS. SINCE YOU'RE ALREADY ON COURSE FOR URANUS AND YOU ARE THE BEST MECHANIC/ELECTRONIC REPAIR EXPERT IN THE SOLAR SYSTEM, THIS DUTY FALLS TO YOU. BESIDES, ALL Q-DRIVE SHIPS ARE DEPLOYED WILD, WILD WEST AND NONE ARE DUE BACK FOR MONTHS.

SORRY, NAOMI, BUT YOU'RE LITERALLY THE ONLY ONE TO DO THIS.

HERE'S OUR ARES MONKEY PLAN:

1. YOU GET SWEEPER TWO'S MHD FISSION DRIVE ONLINE, GO COLD SLEEP, AND MAKE HASTE EAST FOR UMBRIEL.
2. LAND YOUR SWEEPER AS CLOSE TO SWEEPER SIX AS POSSIBLE IN THE FLUORESCENT CHEERIO CRATER.
3. INSPECT AND INVENTORY SWEEPER SIX. STRIP SWEEPER TWO OF ANYTHING SWEEPER SIX NEEDS TO BECOME OPERATIONAL.
4. THEN IN SWEEPER SIX, HEAD WEST TOWARD THE BLACK HOLE AND TRY TO CREATE RIFTS WITH THE Q-DRIVE—RIFTS THROUGH WHICH THE BLACK HOLE CAN ESCAPE TO ANOTHER UNIVERSE. SWEEPER SIX'S SPECIAL MONITORS WILL HELP.
5. RETURN EAST TO MARS AND THROW YOURSELF ON THE MERCY OF THE UN. WE WILL TAKE FULL RESPONSIBILITY HERE, BUT THAT WON'T

TECHNICALLY GET YOU OFF. AS YOU KNOW, A Q-DRIVE CRIME IS A CAPITAL CRIME. HOWEVER, YOUR HAVING JUST SAVED EARTH AND MOST OF THE CIVILIZED SOLAR SYSTEM SHOULD HELP YOUR DEFENSE MAGNIFICENTLY—AND PERHAPS LEAD TO A SLIGHTLY EARLIER RETIREMENT.

WE'RE COUNTING ON YOU.

AFTER ACKNOWLEDGING THIS MESSAGE INDIRECTLY, TAKE COMMUNICATIONS OFFLINE UNTIL END OF MISSION TO AVOID UN OR GODSPEED COUNTER-ORDERS.

BONNIE

P.S. YOU MAY ALSO WIN A NOBEL PRIZE FOR HAVING DISCOVERED THE FIRST "TRAVELING" BLACK HOLE—WOULDN'T THAT BE SOMETHING?

"NO!" I scream at the top of my lungs. "I can't do it!"

I need the MHD fission drive and cold sleep to return East to Earth at my retirement in ten months. About the same time that my replacement will be heading out West from Earth or Luna in cold sleep.

The magsail and the particle beam propulsion system are fine for cruising the Q-drive lanes and sealing spacetime holes. But when you're 39 AUs West, the MHD fission drive is the only serious non-FTL way to move East. Because of UN regs, the sweeper's MHD fission drive has what is called "a limited-range fission reactor." It carries only enough fissionable fuel and propellant for four "burns"—once to get here Out West and then decelerate and then once East to Earth with deceleration. And I don't want to waste my last two burns on some sorry ass Ares monkey plan to save the free solar system.

On the other hand, what choice do I have? If Mars is tidally stressed and destroyed and Earth and Luna get dragged along with the black hole, I have nowhere to go anyway—except the miserably hot penitentiary communities on Venus, where retro-viruses rule.

At my present speed, I'll reach the orbit of Uranus and hook up with Umbriel in less than a month with the black hole maybe a week behind me. Being twenty-three days ahead of it, by using the MHD fission burn instead, is a little better for doing the impossible. What's the old joke? The difficult, we do right away, but the impossible takes a little longer.

I transmit a thank-you message to Bonnie about the holo vid being a real "eye-opener," and tell her that I hope to see her months earlier than I previously expected. I also add that I'll be shutting down communications for repair. Just enough to let her know that I read the embedded message and will follow the monkey plan.

After taking communications off line, I spend a few hours triple checking that the navigation, fission burn, and cold sleep calculations are all correct. Next, I follow the online procedures to fire up the fission reactor.

Then I prepare the cold sleep box, which will protect me from the stresses of acceleration when the sweeper's dampening field shuts down and from any leakage of hard radiation. Once inside the box, I trigger the burn and cold sleep simultaneously.

While the cold sleep system checks me physically and prepares all the plug-ins, I call up holo vid and data files about Umbriel on my little cold box monitor. I try to process

the info as an electro-chemical wave the size of the Pacific Ocean pushes me deep into the dark oblivion of cold sleep.

I awake screaming. But I'm not the only screamer. The ship's alarm system is shrieking, too. I stare at the cold box monitor, trying to focus my eyes. But all I can see is dark gray. The fore monitor must be out. Then I think again. No, that's the dull, gloomy face of Umbriel. Something's wrong with deceleration or the navigational computer.

I emergency eject from the cold box and pull myself forward, slamming into my control chair. Umbriel's dark, ancient cratered image fills the main screen completely. I'm seconds from crashing. Hairs stand frozen on the back of my neck. I swallow hard and tense my muscles to suppress shivering spasms. A cold sweat soaks my body, which to my addled brain smells like stale beer.

I don't know if the MHD fission drive is still engaged, but panicking, I cut its power anyway. I fire all three particle guns aiming fore and, simultaneously, spread a magsail aft. The dampening field is still offline, so my head jerks forward rattling the teeth in my jaw as the ship pounds backward hard. Then as the magsail catches the blowback particles, I almost black out in the second brain-numbing jolt.

Through my black-and-red brain fog, I focus on the main screen. Umbriel still fills up the monitor, but the shadowy craters look smaller. I fire the guns fore again. Now, I'm definitely out of danger, so I engage the dampening field and try to get my bearings. But the dampening field won't go online.

Once the entire sphere of the moon shows on the monitor, I reverse and accelerate slowly back toward its most prominent feature, the "fluorescent cheerio," a frost-white ring of ice lining the bottom of a 140-kilometer-wide crater. From my partial pre-cold sleep briefing, I know Umbriel is a dark frozen mix of rock, water, and methane—though its designation as "unexplored" means that precise data is not available.

But Godspeed must know something if at least two pilots landed two vehicles—Sweeper Six for storage and some other craft to return the pilots East. Somehow, Godspeed has kept Umbriel's dark mystery hidden. And since sweeper ships are not designed to land on anything, Umbriel is now a double mystery.

I'm not a bad pilot, but my ship looks like a giant silver metal spider that has lost half its legs. So, I initiate an emergency landing procedure for a slow collision with Umbriel, and aim for the middle of the ice-lined crater.

A few seconds into my descent, I finally get a reading for Sweeper Six and begin correcting to come within a half kilometer of its landing site. For a long moment, I hold my breath as my ship meanders slowly out of my control and falls obliquely toward a crater wall. I struggle with the stiff controls and begin to brace for a slow-motion crash that will probably kill me. But with only meters to spare, I manage to right the ship, and the crashing part of my crash landing is minimal. Nevertheless, I black out with impact.

I have a hammering left temple and some upper back pain, but nothing is broken. I press the analgesic button on my forearm, and let the chemical relief wash throughout my body. The beer odor evaporates.

Then I assess the damage.

The rear magsail array and the aft holovids are offline, but as long as Sweeper Six can lift off, I don't care. Everything else checks out okay.

I close my eyes for a minute and think about sending an “okay” message to Bonnie, but then recall that I’m remaining incommunicado until (or if) the black hole is exported elsewhere. No one has deliberately punched holes in the spacetime continuum before, so I will be the first. Lucky me.

From spare quilted insulation and some vacuum bags, I fashion a large white Santa Claus bag full of tools, fuel cells, gelpaks, electronics, and diagnostic modules that I hope won’t be destroyed by the moon’s airless, cold-hearted surface. Then I suit up and push the bag with gentle kicks of my boot to the port airlock and cycle through.

Outside, I feel like I’m pulling along a large party balloon without a string. In the distance, I see the white ice that rings the bottom two-thirds of the giant crater. With each footfall into the starry darkness, I sense the hard crunch of dark ice-gravel beneath my thick boots. A wave of utter loneliness almost doubles me over, down to the black alien surface. I shiver and feel unbearably naked without the cozy bulkheads and lights of the ship wrapped around me.

Umbriel’s mass is about three-one hundredths of Earth’s—about a fifth of Luna’s. Even with the suit, my weight feels less than two kilograms.

Suddenly, a reckless terror urges me to jump so high that I will fall off the moon and drift toward the merciless stars forever. My shivering only increases the pull—though I know the sensation is an illusion. I swallow hard and switch on a light, aiming it at the dark pockmarked surface, and avoid staring at the frozen dome of beckoning stars overhead or the distant ice ring of the crater wall.

Checking for Sweeper Six with a finder, I note very few obstructions and push forward with a hopping gait and a forward lean to counter the slight backward drag of my Santa Claus bundle. I fix my eyes on the darkly cratered and rilled surface.

I used to love the open stars. Twelve years ago during spring break, I had fun going outside on Luna for a few hours at a time. Once, a group of us got tanked, hopped wildly to a partially fallen mountain peak and lay back, lost in the multihued blaze of millions of stars. Their overwhelming beauty made us sob, so we were still weeping when a rescue team came to “save” us. Then we all laughed hysterically because we felt invulnerable.

I don’t feel that way now. One slip, one tear in my suit, and death will come in seconds. Hopping too high, my mass and the mass of my bundle could break my ankles or damage my suit if I landed the wrong way. Then I might have to crawl back inside Sweeper Two and sit out the gravitational avalanche of the black hole that’s falling toward Uranus. Umbriel could even get pulled along for the ride.

Since no rescue team will come for me, I yell with false bravado, “I am the rescue team for the entire solar system!” I laugh softly and check the finder, which tells me I am getting a little closer to Sweeper Six.

Now, I hop for distance but also to avoid all the small craters and rills. My hopping rhythm soon gets me to Sweeper Six, and I play the light over its surface. Instead of being all silver like my sweeper, it is painted white with Godspeed’s insignia in blue: Jove using his powerful breath to scatter stars like pollen in the wind—and the number “6” in orange near the airlock. But looked at against the ice ring, it is virtually invisible.

With no air to cycle and no power, I manually work the airlock. In minutes, I am inside with my bundle. Inside one of the darkest holes in the solar system. A little spooked, I wave the light around in wide arcs to prove to myself that I really am inside a

sweeper, just one without air or power. Dragging the bundle behind me, I slowly hop toward the command cabin.

Scanning with the light, I suddenly see in full yellow vacuum suit a pilot lying face-down on the floor of the cabin. Startled, I yell and let go of the bundle. It barely misses bumping my leg as it slowly drops like a drifting balloon. I want to leave the sweeper immediately and hop back to the safety of Sweeper Two. I make myself stay. I know that this corpse has been lying here in the cold dark for a long time.

Nausea almost doubles me over as I realize what I must do. Slowly, I move toward the pilot. Then I turn the body over to read the name tag: "R. Arnsdale." The vacuum suit has no handle or strap, so I grip the body like a drowning victim and hop backwards toward the airlock. Once outside, I lay the body gently down. I should find out who R. Arnsdale is. But the only way to do that is to restore power.

I go to work.

Countless quick trips back and forth and several days later, I have the power partially restored, at least enough to use some of the ship's own internal lights and maintain a breathable, though musty, atmosphere. Now, I feel less like a spooked spelunker. Slowly, I hop back to Sweeper Two and allow myself a short glimpse at the stars. I also see aqua-blue Uranus and a few moons to my far left, just above the dark crater ridge. If I weren't so tired and scared, I would sit and stare for an hour or two. Even so, I force myself to make a few high jumps and tumbles just to show I am not afraid, careful to land on all fours each time.

Back inside Sweeper Two, I download system upgrades, all sorts of software, and navigational data to a series of thirty-six gelpaks. While the computers take care of that, I put myself under for six hours and dream about how Bonnie and I are transporting some diplomat to Pluto. I keep telling him Pluto and the five researchers are gone, but he won't listen. Instead, he begins kissing me all over. Bonnie is jealous, and then I wake up.

I take inventory of myself. I still have several weeks on the nutrient implant, but I jettison it anyway and give myself a 90-day supply. Water is a bigger problem. If Sweeper Six's recycler is defective and I cannibalize Sweeper Two recklessly and lose all its water to vacuum, I might die of thirst after my suit runs dry. So, I pump water from the environmental system into spare tanks as a back-up plan. I pray that I don't wind up carrying them to Sweeper Six.

I restock my O₂, grab the gelpaks and a few more gizmos, and hop my way to Sweeper Six. Uranus hangs like a blue giant's head in the black starry sky.

Grimly, I say good morning to the yellow-suited corpse of Arnsdale as I shine my light on the orange 6 of the airlock.

After working nearly four hours on the ship's main computer, I realize I have a hardware problem and a software problem. More than a decade of unrelenting icy vacuum has leached away all the gelpaks, which is why I brought new ones. But the old hardware can't communicate with the new gelpaks. Short of transporting the computer from Sweeper Two to Sweeper Six, I've got to fabricate an interface device or rig something else. I hope Bonnie's twenty-three-day estimate included time for solving intractable problems, but I doubt it.

I already know what the solution is: transmit the complicated code directly from Sweeper Two's computer to Sweeper Six's. But I can't use normal means of transmission because of interference from the Uranian system's energy fluctuations. Only fiber optic cable can work precisely enough here, running a landline between the two ships.

My rough calculation is that I'm already behind schedule by at least three days. Running the cable will probably add two more days. But what can I do? I have to keep going. To gain some time, I decide not to take regular sleep breaks—but only nap when I can.

Measure twice and cut once would be great if I had a half kilometer of cable to roll out. Instead, I have to cannibalize meters and meters of vid and comm line and splice it all together. I waste a whole day carefully laying cable over Umbriel's dark, craggy surface. In the brutal cold of Umbriel, the brittle line snaps twice before I perfect my technique. How ironic that Umbriel gets a landline ahead of all the moons except Luna.

While the data streams from one computer to the other, I doze in Sweeper Two, letting my last working holo-vid camera and the computer monitor the line and the transmission. Twenty minutes into my nap, shock waves and alarms toss me awake. The line looks broken in at least several places and I access camera memory to see what's happened. All it shows is a suddenly shaking picture. "Moonquake?" I say aloud and suit up.

After tedious hours of repair, the cable is transmitting again. I doze once more and hope for a peaceful sleep without quakes or tremors—just long enough to transmit. I am pleasantly bleeped awake and all the parameters check. Suiting up, I head for Sweeper Six to finally get that ship's computer running, all the lights and vid cameras working—and then test the magsail, Q-drive, particle guns, and environmental subsystems. As I hop, I avoid touching the cable so I can check at least once more from Sweeper Six.

Just as I reach the airlock and open it, I see in my reflected light a yellow blur on my right and am grasped suddenly around the arms of my suit in a bear hug, except Umbriel has no bears. A jolt of electric terror makes me crouch down and then high jump toward the stars, but my assailant doesn't loosen his grip.

Arnsdale flashes through my head, but it can't be him. On one of the darkest and loneliest moons in the solar system, almost 3 billion kilometers from Earth, I'm being attacked.

Just as we start falling, without thinking I bicycle-kick backward, making contact against my assailant's suited legs, and tuck my head under, drawing my knees toward my chest. Slowly, I tumble forward and float free, landing on all fours. My assailant topples backward and hits the surface a microsecond or two after me, probably with yellow legs and arms writhing clumsily in the dark. I don't care if he's torn his suit, cracked his helmet, or damaged his environment pack—and is dying now or is already as dead as *Arnsdale*. Without looking, I propel myself into the airlock and cycle through, locking it down.

Shivering and breathing rapidly, I sit in the comfort of the thick, well-lit airlock walls without taking off my suit. I replay the nightmare like a vid in my head.

More minutes pass. Gradually, I remove the suit and force myself to ignore the menace outside.

Still shaking from adrenaline, I concentrate on rapidly getting the main computer and holo-vid cameras back online. I echo some signals back and forth to Sweeper Two's computer—and everything looks good. Once everything is humming, I focus lights and vid cameras on the outside of the airlock.

Only Arnsdale's yellow-suited corpse remains lying forever immobile among the dark rocks and icy sand immediately around the airlock. My assailant, assuming I didn't imagine the whole attack, is gone. Vacuum suits have a max capacity of 12 hours, so he can't last too long outside. Where could he go—except back where he came from? And where is that? And where is he now?

As if responding to my questions, gibberish begins to appear on the main screen, streaming in from the fiber optic cable.

My assailant is in Sweeper Two.

I enter, "Who are you?"

Gibberish.

"Don't understand you. Try changing the parameters."

Eventually, the text decrypts itself: "I am Leonid Baglinsov, your sweeper relief pilot. Are you getting this transmission?"

"Yes, what are you doing here ten months early? And why did you attack me like some lunatic?"

The pun is not wasted on Leonid; he replies with "Lunatic. Ha, ha." Then he continues: "Colonel Priestly and I were sent by the UN and Godspeed Luna to stop you from using the Q-drive. I did not mean to startle you, but I was told that you had gone crazy and had to be restrained. Priestly was killed when we both woke up from cold sleep just seconds before we crashed. I ejected from cold sleep and secured myself. Priestly ejected at the moment of impact."

I have no sympathy for the UN Security assassin.

I enter: "Yeah, there's some glitch in navigation when it comes to this moon. Maybe it's deliberate, now that I think about it. I can assure you that I am rational. Take a look at my holo-vid records."

"Okay, will do," he answers tersely.

I spend maybe thirty minutes checking the transferred programs and updates. For a change, everything works and none of the computers crash. Unfortunately, I discover that the recycler has almost no water. I start checking for breaks in the lines.

"Captain, are you there?" appears on my screen.

"Yes," I reply. "Let's switch from text to voice, okay? I'm sure you can find the menu to do that."

Twenty seconds pass.

"Okay. This makes more sense. Communication speed should triple now," he says in a moderately deep voice that has just the hint of a French accent. His voice fascinates me.

"Are you French?" I blurt out.

"No, Russian. But my parents joined Godspeed in Belgium when I was nine, so I speak French as well as any native."

"So, what do you think after seeing the records?"

He laughs. "You are not the only crazy one. The Ares Lab people are also quite insane to have one old ship with a Q-drive divert a black hole."

“But you believe them and me?”

“Yes.”

“Will you help me ready the ship?”

“Yes.”

I love to hear him say “Yes,” but I can’t think of more questions to keep getting yeses.

“No tricks and no more attacks, right?”

He answers swiftly, “Of course not! You have my word. Naturally, if Colonel Priestly were alive, he might still insist that you be taken into custody or—”

“Killed?”

“Yes, my sweeper had UN armaments, and Priestly carried several guns himself. The threat of causing a rift even this far from Mars panicked everyone, which is why we were dispatched so quickly.”

Involuntarily, I blow air from my mouth. “What about the black hole? Didn’t anyone consider that a major threat? Jesus!”

“Before now, I hadn’t seen the evidence. I was told you had fabricated the whole black hole story. As we launched, I heard that the UN was arresting everyone at Ares Lab, but heard no details—no connection was made to you. I am so sorry for grabbing you. I must have scared you.”

“Okay, Leonid—”

“Call me ‘Leo,’ okay?”

“Okay, Leo. I am going to trust you—but not so much that I won’t put unbreakable passcodes on everything in this ship. If something happens to me, you will join Arnsdale.”

“Arnsdale?”

“Yes, the corpse by the airlock—that Arnsdale,” I say a little sarcastically.

He laughs. “Oh, yes, Captain. I know of him. He was part of my Umbriel briefing.”

“You can call me ‘Naomi,’ instead of ‘Captain.’ And you can tell me all about Arnsdale later.”

“Ah, maybe Captain Naomi then?”

My turn to laugh. “Okay, Leo. Your first assignment is to replenish your suit and maybe replace your nutrient implant. Next, you’ve got to get me a few hundred liters of water. I’ve stored most of it in tanks on Sweeper Two.”

“Aye, aye,” he says, which sounds almost as cute as “yes.”

“Let me know when you’re on your way. And don’t go near the cable. It breaks if you stare at it too hard.”

He agrees and I start replacing seals and fixing conduits on the water recycler. Hours go by and I wonder if Leo is hatching some new surprise attack. Putting the paranoia out of my head, I nod out.

“Naomi! Naomi!” someone is shouting. I look at the screen. A dozen white ships with Godspeed’s blue insignia are landing on Umbriel’s surface all around me. I know they are going to kill me. I scream and try to power up my ship, but I remember that I haven’t checked the power cells for the particle guns.

“No!” I shout. “This can’t be happening!”

“Naomi, what’s wrong?” says Leo’s melodious voice.

No invading ships show on the screen. “Nothing, Leo. I guess I was dreaming. Are you ready with the tanks?”

“Sorry, Captain Naomi. These tanks won’t work very well.”

“What do you mean?”

“They’re aluminized plastic—just thin internal storage tanks,” he says.

Suddenly, I recognize the trouble. The storage tanks couldn’t be used outside the ship’s interior, not in space and not even briefly on surface of Umbriel. Quickly freezing water in a vacuum would probably burst their seams explosively. And even if they didn’t explode, melting ice in leaky tanks would create a mess once inside Sweeper Six. Some water might even boil off before Leo got it in the ship. Another intractable problem.

My mind races. “Maybe, we can take some ice from the crater wall.”

“That ice is contaminated with methane, microparticles, and who knows what else. I already thought of mining it for water—too much trouble. But I’ve got a better idea.”

“Yes?”

“A vacuum suit,” he says enthusiastically.

“Leo, suits only hold a few liters at a time. We’d need a hundred trips to get enough water.”

“No, we can fill a whole vacuum suit with water. The environmental controls can keep the water from freezing. And even if it does freeze, a suit is flexible and will expand, instead of bursting. Several trips and we’ll have all the water we need.”

“Leo, you are a genius! It would have taken me days to think of that.”

“We did stuff like that on Luna all the time,” he says, suddenly reminding me of how much I miss that world of shops, parks, nightclubs, and heated swimming pools.

While Leo fills up Bonnie’s spare suit, I do another rough calculation. The black hole will enter the Uranian system in roughly two weeks. So, if I create a large enough spacetime rift with the Q-drive, it’s got to be *before* it gets this far. Otherwise, we might lose a few moons or Uranus itself. That means we’ve got ten days, tops.

And I haven’t even met Leo face-to-face yet.

Ten minutes after Leo signals he’s leaving Sweeper Two, I pull the holoport side view over to the main screen. In the harsh exterior lights around the airlock, I see three suited creatures in brilliant yellow, blazing against Umbriel’s night of shadows and starlight. One is Arnsdale, a frozen corpse. Another is Leo, who dances and bounces up and down like a boxer on Luna. And the last one is a slightly bloated manikin, made entirely of water, floating behind and tethered to Leo’s shoulder.

I unlock the airlock and hope that my paranoid vision of Colonel Priestly hiding inside that floating yellow suit turns out to be a pure fear fantasy. As Leo cycles through, I begin to panic and frantically search among my tools for something that I can use as a weapon. I grab a laser fuser and hold it tightly in my left hand behind my back. Close up, it can make a nasty burn.

“Captain Naomi honey, I’m home!” Leo’s voice rings melodiously through to me. I hear him laughing. Suddenly, a handsome, unshaven man, who looks around 35 garbed in a UN dress blue uniform, appears before me.

He quickly notices that my eyes are bugging out at the uniform. Smiling, he says, “Don’t worry about the uniform. I was only conscripted for this mission—something Priestly insisted on. I’m really a Godspeed pilot, just like you, Naomi.”

“But your height and your face . . .” I blurt out.

“Oh, yeah. Sorry. I *am* a little big for sweeper pilot. And I didn’t have time to undergo any modifications.”

“So, you still have your beard and—and all the rest?”

He laughs. “Yes, I’m quite intact reproductively, too. The launch was done in a rush. My modifications weren’t scheduled for several months.”

He pauses and says to himself, “Why not?”

Then he turns around, undoes his dress pants, bends forward, and shows me the cheeks of his butt. “Can you *zee zem*?” he asks, comically exaggerating his French accent.

“Is this how you greet people when you come to visit?” I ask, teasing. Of course, I can see the twin infinity signs in bright blue, one on each cheek—standard tattoos for Godspeed pilots. Both Bonnie and I have the same ones.

He pulls up his pants and turns around smiling.

Reflexively, I smile, and hold up the laser fuser. “See this?” I say. “I was going to use this on you, if you tried to trick me. But no UN officer would get a Godspeed tattoo just to fool me.” I toss the fuser back in my Santa bag, and pray I am right.

Leo bursts out laughing again, and I join him. If he really is a UN Security assassin, then I will at least die laughing.

After adding the suit full of water to the recycler, we spend almost two hours refining a plan to meet the ten-day deadline. Then we go to work like space demons. At least seven times, Leo returns to the wreck of his ship to cannibalize parts.

Then finally after nine frantic, almost sleepless days, Sweeper Six is ready. Unfortunately, with all our lugging and hopping around, the air smells faintly like unwashed socks. And it’s not the fault of the environmental system. We just stink. Occasionally, Leo rubs his nose, but says nothing. But I know what he’s thinking.

“Okay, Leo,” I say. “We have enough water for a quick shower. So, let’s heat some up.”

Before I know it, we are lathering up in the most luxurious hot shower I can recall. And before long, we are lathering each other. Waves of hot water transport us far away from Umbriel, and slowly, tentatively we progress toward lovemaking. Leo doesn’t seem deterred by my tomboy appearance, and the ravenous lust that his large naked, hairy body ignites in me catches me completely by ecstatic surprise.

Almost breathlessly, we fall asleep together for a full nine hours. I awake to see Leo leaning over me, dressed in his formal blue uniform. “Captain Naomi, by the power vested in me by the authority of the UN, I am placing you in my protective custody.”

He smiles.

“Not funny, Leo,” I say and swat at his head.

“But I’m really serious,” he says. “Why don’t you return to Sweeper Two? Only one pilot is needed for this insane mission. And if the black hole captures me, you’ll have a chance to make it to Venus.”

I make a face. “What chance is that, Leo? We’ve gutted Sweeper Two.”

“Ah, yes. But together with my wrecked ship, surely you could—“

“Forget it, Leo. This is my mission. If you want to take your chances in Sweeper Two, you are welcome.”

“No, no! It’s just that this is so dangerous.”

“Well, unless you are staying, then we’re both going, right?”

“*Oui*, yes, both.”

Sweeper Six launches awkwardly, but within hours we are heading West toward the probable path of the black hole. The special spacetime monitors that Bonnie mentioned bring tears of anger and frustration to our eyes. The three monitors take normal holoivid camera images and show the stresses and strains—the swirling fractal-like fabric of spacetime. Our old monitors only show actual rifts—these show weak areas in spacetime. Why weren’t sweepers equipped with these more sophisticated monitors?

“We work for criminals, Naomi,” Leo announces. “Godspeed wanted to pretend that the spacetime rifts appeared anomalously, as an occasional byproduct of faster than light speed. So, sweepers had only monitors that detected actual rifts—not ones that show degraded spacetime from each Q-drive launch.”

What can I say? We both know that if data from these monitors got out, then the UN and space environmentalists might have tried to stop FTL travel altogether—or at least forced Godspeed to use the Q-drive just East or even West of the Kuiper Belt. But all along, Q-pilots could have avoided stressed parts of space using these monitors. Just as we can use them now to know where to keep using the Q-drive. Once the shock of Godspeed’s machinations lessen, I ask about Arnsdale.

Leo shakes his head. “They are truly bastards, Naomi.” Then he tells me Godspeed’s brilliant emergency plan, which he’s pieced together from Godspeed’s official briefing and several stories from retired pilots.

Fifteen years ago, a Godspeed ship’s Q-drive failed on a non-cold sleep ship. Two UN Security Councilors were aboard, stuck, after over two months travel, about 40 AUs West of Earth. Godspeed had no provision for rescuing them—and they spent two months griping on their return to Mars. Reparations were embarrassing and costly.

So, Godspeed execs invented “The Plan.” Secretly, a sweeper ship with a Q-drive needed to be stored somewhere safe, stable, and close enough to the launching area of Pluto’s old orbit—and yet not impossibly far from Mars. Moons of Saturn or Jupiter were the most likely candidates. But those systems were still too dynamic and regularly explored by geologists and astronomers to safely and inconspicuously hide a sweeper for the four or five years they wanted. Umbriel with its millions of years of stability and its fluorescent cheerio marker was perfect. And it was one of the last moons anyone would want to explore.

To preserve secrecy, Godspeed also needed a willing suicide. Some pilot who’d land Sweeper Six and die. That was R. Arnsdale. Even so, word eventually got out about a pilot suffering from a terminal disease, who’d been willing to sacrifice his last months of life for permanent financial security for his family. As Arnsdale headed West in cold sleep, supposedly Godspeed faked his death on Luna. The UN knew nothing—

or pretended not to know an unregulated Q-ship was illegally stored far beyond its control.

Colonel Priestly got a more dramatic version of “The Plan”: a criminal faction in Godspeed had supposedly stored the sweeper—unknown to Godspeed execs—for some smuggling operation that fell through. And now I knew why the Ares monkeys and Bonnie had been arrested. Some members of that team must have worked on part of “The Plan”—and knew where the sweeper was stored. Godspeed shifted blame to them. If we pulled this off, I’d have to do something to stop their executions.

Ironically, Leo was sent not just to stop me, but to bring Sweeper Six back to Mars, where some Godspeed execs probably waited to take a sudden trip Wild Wild West while the black hole swept through the solar system, destroying any evidence of their malfeasance.

I guess they didn’t believe in our monkey plan.

About fifty-million kilometers from Uranus is where we want to “cut” spacetime. But we’re not Q-drive pilots, so once we reach that point, we stall—constantly rechecking and reprogramming the Q-drive to buy some time. Then feeling like a diver jumping off a cliff into a cold lake, I push the launch initiator.

Now, my body is being snapped, displaced forward and then back a hundred eighty degrees, faster and faster until suddenly I break into little hard marbles that swarm up and crash explosively against some unyielding metal barrier, bounce back and reform into me again. The process repeats endlessly. Whether as a displacing whole or as crashing hard marbles, I scream with all my being, partly in pain, partly in frustration, but mostly because I have no choice. My whole identity is in the scream. And suddenly, the screaming stops.

Leo is swearing in long and colorful strings of insults made from three languages. He goes on so long and so profanely that I break into hysterical laughter. He ends with, “I PISS ON THEM ALL—THOSE BASTARDS!” and then breaks into uproarious laughter himself. Now I am laughing so hard that tears drown my cheeks, and I struggle to breathe.

Once I catch my breath, I do my impression of a Godspeed promotional holovid: “Passengers may experience some momentary discomfort as the Q-drive engages.”

“Yes, if being diced into little pieces and slammed against a wall is your idea of a little discomfort,” Leo says, shaking his head.

“Add it to the list,” I say, laughing again—referring to our running list of Godspeed’s crimes.

We try to relax because the Q-drive is about to bring us back from a quarter light year away to where we started our “cut.” The agony does not lessen, but Leo’s swearing has less English this time, and so I laugh less hysterically.

The new monitors show just what we hoped—fraying fractals of spacetime, partial disconnects in the swirl. We repeat the trip to nowhere and back seven times. By the third time, the rift is so large that we have to avoid falling into it ourselves. With each use of the Q-drive the rift gets massively, geometrically bigger. When it is about five times larger than our estimate of the black hole, we stop. Frazzled from Q-drive trips, we use the magsail and the particle guns to move toward the black hole. Then with the alarms set, we both go under for a few hours.

Smashed into little pieces, I *become* screaming again. Screaming is everywhere, and I feel I am launching the Q-drive. But I'm not. I am only waking from a nightmare. The alarms, Leo, and I are all screaming at once. I force myself to stop and Leo stops, too. Only the alarm continues until Leo hits the reset.

The black hole is dead ahead. Graviton and X-ray readings explode whirling rockets across the main screen.

Head on, the black hole is a gigantic maw of chaotic hell. I imagine that millions of black, nearly invisible teeth are gnashing under a glimmering darkness that smudges out the rest of the universe. Such a dark hypnotic mouth cannot be satisfied, eating everything until it explodes in a new Big Bang or spirals down and winks out of existence.

Then I hit myself in the head. "Leo!" I cry. "We've got to transmit this to Earth, Mars—everywhere. Even if we fail, Bonnie and the Ares lab monkeys shouldn't spend their last month locked up."

Together, we slowly maneuver the ship and pan the holovid cameras so that astronomers can get an easy fix on the stars. Godspeed Inc. might downplay our vids as fakes, but the millions of professional and amateur astronomers will vindicate us.

For close to 30 minutes, we transmit the images on several commercial channels—as well as official Godspeed frequencies. Then we cut off communications again.

We need to shadow the black hole to make sure it enters the rift, but we cannot get so close that we lose ourselves to either. "Scylla and Charybdis," I say aloud.

"What?" Leo asks.

"Nothing, Leo." I smile, and add, "Just remembering Odysseus in similar straits with two monsters."

Leo wants to station the sweeper a few million kilometers from the rift and use instruments to track the black hole's disappearance into the rift before we swoop in to close it. But I need a closer look. We settle on 800,000 kilometers, more than twice the distance between Earth and Luna.

Several hours later, we are holoviding the black hole's slow push through the fabric of spacetime and begin transmitting the images toward Earth and Mars again. A few seconds before the black hole disappears, an urgent aud message bypasses our security filters and blasts our ears: "DEPLOY MAGSAIL AFT! FIRE ALL PARTICLE GUNS FORE! FIRE ALL PARTICLE GUNS FORE! NOW!" At first, I think the voice is Bonnie's—familiar all right, but no, not Bonnie's.

Just as I switch on my aud to reply, the rift implodes and then expands again—only the dampening field keeps us from having our heads torn off as the ship lurches forward, accelerating recklessly toward the rift. Somehow the implosion acts as a graviton lens for the black hole, snagging the ship. Now, both monsters may swallow us, first the rift and then the black hole, one after the other.

Fortunately, I have my lines all ready: "DEPLOY MAGSAIL AFT! FIRE ALL PARTICLE GUNS FORE! FIRE ALL PARTICLE GUNS FORE! NOW!"

While Leo spreads the magsail behind us, I start firing the particle guns. Neither seems to have any effect, but I keep firing. Waves of gravitons are hitting us in long pulses now, but the dampening field stops us from being rattled around like beans in a glass jar—still, we can feel each pulse.

“Get the Q-drive back online!” I order. Leo has no time to program it, but any Q-drive trip has to be better than piercing spacetime, only to become a meal for a black hole.

As the dampening field kicks in harder and harder against the pulsing acceleration, my vision begins to blur. We must be less than a minute away from the rift. So, I yell for Leo to launch the Q-drive initiator while I keep firing the particle guns.

Leo is yelling something back, but I cannot hear him. He grabs my head and kisses me hard on the mouth. I push him away to keep firing. “You crazy Russian! What are you doing?!” I scream at him.

“You’ve done it, Naomi. Look at the monitors.” Now I can see that my firings are mending the swirls of spacetime and that the ship is starting to pull backward. The black hole and its pulsing waves of gravitons and X-ray pandemonium blink out.

I let out a whoop and kiss Leo back.

We spend almost four hours mending spacetime. While we realign the swirls, I ask Leo about the urgent message to deploy the magsail and fire the guns fore—my own voice transmitting orders to us seconds before I spoke them. “What was that?”

“An echo,” he says simply.

“How can that be, Leo? I gave those orders *after* we heard the message.”

“A time echo. Everything goes mad around a black hole. Or maybe another Captain Naomi on the other side of the rift gave the order.”

Then we shoot a vid that makes us celebrities.

We include everything we can think of—“The Plan,” Leo’s orders, as well as the criminal nature of Godspeed’s execs—and transmit it everywhere.

Passing through the Uranian system again a few days later, we get a vid from Bonnie. She is back in the lab, which is decorated festively. She looks ravishing and reminds me of my own body restoration plans.

Quickly, she says, “We’re getting ready for a party here, Naomi. Partly to celebrate our release from jail, and partly to celebrate you and Leo as heroes. The images of the black hole, especially disappearing in that rift, have made you and Leo famous. See the banner?”

The holo-vid camera pans to her left. Gigantic holo-vid images of us from our vid play in a short loop on a huge banner that reads, “Naomi and Leo, Godspeed Employees of the Millennium.”

When the camera focuses back on her lovely face, she continues: “And your vid just blew away the UN and Godspeed’s Board of Directors. The Board acted quickly to replace the president, five vice-presidents, and about a dozen directors, especially since they’re all in UN custody now. Word is that the Board will honor you and Leo with big bonuses and promotions. The UN will probably give you metals, a parade, or something, too. Anyway, have fun on the trip home.”

We could rig up the ship for cold sleep and get the MHD fission drive online. But Leo and I want to enjoy a quiet month or so together. I wonder whether he’ll like me better when I’m not a tomboy anymore, but I don’t ask him. I’ll make it a surprise.

###

If you've enjoyed this novelette (long short story) of Naomi's adventure, please post a review and look for the upcoming full-length novel, ***Rescuing the Future***. Here's a brief description:

Naomi Kinder's saving the solar system from a black hole makes her the most celebrated hero of 2097. But a capsule from 2313, teeming with new technologies and warning of the future nanobot invasion of the Earth, challenges Naomi, her Russian-Belgian lover Leo, and her best friend Bonnie to travel more than 200 years forward in time to prevent humanity's destruction.

Two more Naomi adventure novels are in the works.

Vin Miskell

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#### **About the author:**

Originally from New Jersey, **Vincent Miskell** lives in the Miami-Ft. Lauderdale area of Florida with his wife Jane, Border Collie Bridget, and two cats (Joey and Maggie). Vin works as a writing instructor at two universities and has published nonfiction, fiction, and poetry, including poems in ***Asimov's Science Fiction*** magazine. In 2006, his poem "Screen Savior" was nominated for a Rhysling Award.