

SWIMMERS

In the Sea of

TIME

Paul Dellinger



Finlay Gower fingered the key-pad in front of him and brought the *E.R.Burroughs* about, easing it into the gravity well surrounding the planet below him, whipping the spacecraft into a high orbit that would take it over most of the planet's northern hemisphere.

“Not too shabby,” said his wife from her position at the navigator’s console. “I barely felt it when you jinked the ship into orbit.”

“Thanks, Pris,” said Finlay, giving a final command to the computer, “your calculations were right on the money.”

“Oh, come on, are we going to have to listen to all this mutual admiration the whole mission?”

Finlay and Pris turned together in time to see Jules step fully into the pilot's cabin, with a big grin on his face.

"I see someone's glad to be here," observed Pris.

"Not just one," said Jules, "Joan's already getting our gear together." He moved up until he was standing between husband and wife, trying to see the planet's surface from the limited-area view port over the control console. "Have you tried to locate the site yet?"

"Not wasting any time, are you?" said Pris. "I haven't gotten to that yet, but if it'll make you happy..." She leaned forward and enabled the look-down sensor array that bristled on the underside of the spacecraft. Immediately, a variety of data leapt to screens spread out around her. A greenish glow suffused the cabin as computer enhanced grids, graphs and sine-waves registered their information. Under the woman's practiced eye, the confusing jumble of information came together and made sense. "We've covered most of this hemisphere on the way in; the sensors have something, but it's ill defined. As if something's distorting the readings."

"I'd say a planet whose surface is completely submerged in liquid methane would tend to be difficult to read," said Finlay.

"That shouldn't matter too much," Jules replied, not taking his eyes from the readings, "after all, the sensors aboard the Saint John of the Cross found the site pretty easy, and that was only a Naval cruiser."

"Don't kid yourself," said Pris. "Those military ships have sensor gear that'd put these survey vessels to

shame. The Empire gives them all the best.”

“Just the same, how about it?” asked Jules.

“Well, it’s here anyway. Maybe we won’t be able to identify it clearly, but we should be able to zero in on its general area as an anomaly against the remainder of the surface.” She sighed. “But I’ll need to map the whole area and have the computers study it all. It’ll take a few hours.”

Jules sighed. “Okay. Let us know when you’ve got something. I’ll be with Joan in the hanger.”

Jules exited the cabin and began making his way to the rear of the ship. He’d been with the Interplanetary Geological Survey for over ten years, since the war began winding down, spending most of that time with his wife cataloging near-Earth worlds prior to terra-forming operations. Before that, he put in time with military intelligence, science division, retro-engineering alien tech. It was challenging work but he’d finally had his fill and was ready for some pure research maybe with some travel attached to it. He’d got that when the most active phase of the war ended and he had a chance to team up with Joan, a xeno-geologist working for the Survey. But with little call for pure physics, he mostly ended up playing engineer aboard ship when he wasn’t providing muscle for Joan when off of it. It wasn’t the most glamorous of jobs, but it was something the Empire wanted done and it got them out of the solar system. This time however, was different, it was their first inter-stellar assignment and he intended to make the most of it.

Joan was still lugging heavy seeming equipment from the storeroom into the shuttle that sat in the center of

the hangar; her efforts made easier in the lighter gravity of the ship. Jules waited until she disappeared inside the shuttle before he dashed over and slipped in behind her.

“Jules!” she giggled, dropping the diving gear she held in her arms.

“How’d you know it was me?”

“Because Finlay wouldn’t dare do something like that.”

“Like what? Kiss the back of your neck?”

“No, squeezing my...”

“Hey if you’re going to make such a big deal of it, forget the whole thing,” said Jules in mock seriousness, gathering her into his arms and pressing his lips to hers. When he was much younger, he used to resent the Empire’s policy of allowing only single sex or married couples on interstellar flights. To avoid certain anarchic incidents similar to those that had plagued early forays in long distance space travel they said. But now, with Joan’s warm body pressed to his, he couldn’t imagine a more pleasant idea for long geological expeditions.

At last, they pulled themselves apart long enough for Joan to ask, “Has Pris found the site?”

“Not yet, but she’ll let us know soon.” Jules saw the look of impatience on his spouse’ face and cast a hurried question. “Is all the gear set?”

“I was just getting the last of the oxygen recycling units aboard. All that’s left is an itemized check.”

“No, I think there’ll be one more thing we have to do before casting off...”

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"All systems are green," said Pris' voice from the speaker.

"Initiating green sequence...now," said Jules as he rather heavily handedly entered the command in his keypad. Immediately, the on-board computer commenced a systems check that was completed before Jules' fingers could return to his lap. "All systems are green," he said.

"Acknowledged," said Pris. "We're making our final approach now, you two. Time minus eleven minutes and counting."

"Got it." Jules ordered the computer to open the hangar doors and in seconds felt the soft vibrations through the shuttle's deck that told him deep space was opening up directly beneath him.

"Time minus two minutes and counting."

"Line of approach is perfect," said Finlay.

"Time minus ten seconds and counting," said Pris at last. Jules began counting with her. "Eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two, one. Disengaged."

Only the instruments on his control console told Jules that the shuttle had been released from the parent ship and was in an orbit of its own that would take it into the preplanned flight path to the surface of the planet.

"Have they assigned a name to this planet yet?" asked Joan from where she was strapped in behind him.

"No, it's still just a number. Hold on."

In another few seconds, the shuttle was gliding only a

few hundred feet from the surface of the planet, the greenish waves of the methane ocean moving desultorily in the minuscule atmosphere and low, low temps of somewhere around -290 F. Then they were down, and being thrown forward in the terrific shock of the contact.

“Are you okay, honey?” asked Jules, with no little concern, he never got used to the rough landings.

“No problem,” was the reply, as Joan busily undid her straps.

“Don’t get up yet. Let me set the stabilizers first.” Jules flicked a switch that activated a separate bank of computers that would continually collect data on the planet’s gravitic forces and adjust the shuttle’s equilibrium on the surface of the ocean to keep it steady; an absolute necessity when its occupants would be three miles below the surface of that ocean.

“Are we positioned correctly?” asked Joan again, going through a series of calisthenic exercises to limber up before the dive.

“Right on top of it. And so far, no sign of life.”

“That’s good.” She had begun to empty out the equipment lockers leaving Jules nothing to do but stare in admiration. Since the planet had no atmosphere to speak of, the one real danger of diving through the liquid methane was eliminated: if there had been any oxygen in the atmosphere at all, one spark could have turned the entire world into a miniature sun. Otherwise, no special difficulty was expected.

They stripped and took turns in the microwave

shower that eliminated any bacteriological remains on their bodies that might have reacted negatively to anything native to the planet. It was a tricky business to put on the inner suits in the close confines of the shower, but it could be done in minutes. While Jules showered, Joan donned her outer suit that was more like an EVA harness than ordinary diving gear and clipped on her utility belt holding their equipment and portable data hook-up with the shuttle's computer. The planet's lighter gravity would make moving about outside almost like swimming back on Earth. When Jules had caught up to her, he pulled out the two pulse blasters they would carry with them, and checked the charges. He handed one to his wife and clipped the other to his harness.

“Are we set?” he asked.

“Let's go.” Together, they moved to the airlock and sealed themselves in. Before triggering the exit code, they double checked their re-breathing apparatus and throat microphones. “Can you hear me?”

“I wonder what it's like to make love under three miles of liquid methane?” said Jules in response. “Do you think...” But he didn't finish the thought; he heard the definitive click that told him she had turned off her receiver. He winked at her through his helmet's big visor. In response, she triggered the exit code and immediately, they were sinking slowly toward the surface of the greenish liquid at the bottom of the air-lock tube.

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Jn minutes, they were surrounded by the greenish haze of the sea with the broad underside of the shuttle blocking out the weak light from the planet's sun. Together, they moved to the forward end of the shuttle and manually opened a sliding panel beneath the nose that revealed a small cage-like device. Jules tugged on the cage and felt its hidden mechanism come to life. There was a man-sized door in its side, and when it came down even with the two of them, he opened it and waved Joan inside. After following her in, he hit a green foot switch that allowed the cage's powered descent to the ocean's floor.

An hour's uneventful ride later, the couple emerged a few hundred feet from the sea floor, the powerful set of lights mounted on the top of the cage were just enough to illuminate vague formations looming further below.

"How far off the mark are we?" asked Jules, pushing himself toward the bottom.

Joan consulted the computer. "If we aren't right on top of it, we're mighty close. All the computer can tell me is that it's having a hard time scanning the area."

Jules nodded inside his helmet. "Have any idea what we're looking for?" The question was a variation of one he'd been asking her since the *E.R. Burroughs* left Titan Station over six months before.

"No more than I did yesterday," Joan replied.

"What exactly does the Survey expect a xenogeological team to find out here, a radioactive volcano?"

“All we know is what the data from the ‘Cross told us; and that was made in haste.”

“Yeah, I know, it was limping back from action around Procyon, the Outer Arm Coalition tried to move in on some of our colonies out there.”

“Right. At first, the military thought it might have been a downed ship or something, but the readings were all wrong, not regular enough. So the whole thing was bumped down the ladder until it got to us.”

“Well, whatever gets us out of the Sol system is okay by me,” said Jules. “But if it is geological, you must have some ideas about it.”

“I did until a few minutes ago, but looking over these readings now, I’m being forced to go back to square one.”

“What kind of readings?” Jules used a hand thruster to drift closer to Joan to look over her shoulder at the data link on her cuff.

Joan shook her head. “Mostly the ship’s sensors just can’t penetrate the anomaly area. They can’t even give us accurate global mapping data.”

“You mean we’re swimming blind?” Jules hadn’t meant for the remark to sound like a joke.

“That’s exactly it.”

“What about life signs?”

“Right now I can’t get anything out of this thing, but according to our generalized readings before coming down, the sea holds only microbial life forms.”

Jules grunted and said, “You the boss down here, what do you want to do?”

“Are you kidding?” Joan punched off the data link and dove forward.

They continued to move about for another hour or so until, in the glare of their chest beams, the ocean bottom began to appear from the murk. Presently, the outlines of strange geological formations resolved themselves in the reaching light. They were high, conical, bee-hive like structures that, as they continued to move downward, reached up all around them, most with their crowns collapsed from the incessant erosion of millions of years of being the victims of corrosive methanol.

“What do you make of these?” asked Jules, peering down into the pitchy blackness of an open cone.

“Tectonic batholiths; sometimes when a planet’s tectonic plates are thin enough and its molten subsurface hot enough, magma can force its way through the thin crust in serial piercings.”

“Recent?”

“Hardly,” said Joan as she gently paddled over the black hole of one of the cones, directing her personal light source into its inky depths. Jules watched her from his position at the hole’s edge. Outlined in the greenish glow from the distant cage, he was still able to admire her graceful movements despite the EVA harness she wore.

“Jules, I think I saw something...” was all Jules had time to hear over his helmet speakers when he was thrown back by a sudden gust of pressure in the surrounding sea.

When he had recovered his balance, it was with

Joan's screams in his ears. Kicking furiously, he pulled his way back up the steep slope of the cone coming back into the circle of dim light and almost tumbling down the other side into the hole. Overhead, where only seconds before, he had admired his wife's beauty, there was now the horror of ropy tentacles, thick as a bundle of straw, whipping and waving in blind groping, as if the creature that owned them had been surprised by Joan's beam of light. Jules recognized the thing as a bio-weapon employed by the Coalition. Able to operate in extreme environments including a vacuum, it had proved an effective defense against EVA mobilized boarding parties earlier in the war.

Forcing himself to remain calm, he searched the confusion of limbs for a sign of Joan, unconsciously taking his blaster in hand. Perspiration creeping down his forehead, he began making his way around the rim of the hole, Joan's screams still in his helmet's receivers. "Joan! Joan, listen to me! I can't spot you! You have to get hold of yourself and help me find you." He waited three endless seconds before he noticed that her screams had faded and her voice began to come over the communications link.

"Jules, Jules, hurry, it's all around me! I can't see where..."

There was silence then, and Jules could only wait and agonize on the fate of his wife when he heard the unmistakable click of the homing beacon being tongued on from her helmet. Suddenly, the head-up display just over his eyes gave him an exact fix on her position. Purpose giving his actions impetus, he made his way in as

close as he could to where the beacon indicated Joan ought to be; she was still completely hidden from him by the cluster of tentacles. Using his pulse blaster as carefully as a surgeon might use a laser scalpel, he began to part the intervening limbs, opening a way to Joan. At last, a gasp of relief punctuated her pleas for haste.

“Jules, I can see you! And I think the creature’s grip is easing away.”

“Can you get your blaster free?” asked Jules.

“I think so.” A grunt. “I just have to squeeze past...I have it!”

“Good, start helping yourself out!”

Somewhat relieved, Jules risked taking his attention from Joan to look around for more of the creatures. There were none, or at least, none in sight.

“I can see you now, Joan,” he said. “Now direct your fire at the body of the thing. That should stun it enough so that you can work your way free.”

Following Jules’ suggestion, Joan finally freed herself from the last ropy appendage and the two Terrans began to swim away from over the opening as quickly as they could. But it wasn’t fast enough as they suddenly found themselves being pursued by a trio of alien shapes.

“Jules,” cried Joan, “those look like...”

“I know, Coalition troopers! We’ve got to get out of their reach as soon as possible.”

“But what are they doing here...?”

“No time! Go ahead another hundred feet or so then turn around and cover me.”

“But what are you going to...?”

“Do as I say! I’ve seen these tactics before. They’ll all come after me but when you’re out of reach turn around and lay a covering fire with your blaster.”

As Joan pulled away, Jules turned and fired his own blaster without taking time to aim. He was lucky. The pulse tore away a connection to one of the aliens’ pressure tanks sending the thing into a panic. As it struggled to contain the leak, the other two fired at Jules with cold beam weapons that missed by a wide margin. Apparently, the two failed to take the effects of their environment into account. Keeping the lesson in mind, Jules took more careful aim this time and caught a second Coalition trooper square in its middle. Simultaneously, the third was struck just below its vestigial set of arms as Joan brought her own blaster to bear.

“Thanks, honey!” gasped Jules, kicking out with a foot and sending the wounded trooper spinning head over feet. Not bothering with the niceties of the interstellar war council, he made sure the aliens would never pose a threat to them again by playing his blaster liberally over the bodies.

“I think they’ve had it,” Jules heard Joan saying over his helmet receiver.

“Guess so,” was all Jules could say.

“Was that how it really was on the front lines?” asked Joan.

“I thought you said there was no macro-life on this planet?” said Jules by way of reply. “How could you miss

those troopers?”

“I don’t understand, there wasn’t supposed to be anything,” said Joan, obviously confused. “Maybe something in the batholith formation’s composition was able to mask the troopers’ signature to our sensors.”

“Then the batholiths themselves might be the source of the anomaly we came here to investigate.”

“Possible. We’ll have to get inside one of them to get some definitive answers.”

“You’re getting ahead of yourself, my dear,” said Jules, chancing another look behind him. “Because if Pris and Finlay aren’t tracking us topside....what the hell?”

Joan hesitated, slowed and turned cautiously. “What’s the matter?”

“Depending on how you look at it, nothing. The troopers’ bodies, they seem to have vanished.”

“Vanished? No way they could move out of sight so fast in this medium.”

“And where’s the polymorph that attacked you? It’s gone too. They all couldn’t have just disappeared.”

Joan shrugged, checking her sensor pad. “Nothing registering here.”

“There wouldn’t be if those batholiths really do have interference properties,” said Jules, then “Hey, where are you going?”

“To check out the composition of that batholith,” said Joan fearlessly. “Wherever the bodies went, I doubt if they could have drifted back inside before we could spot them.”

“It sounds logical on the surface, but I wouldn’t take it to the bank,” said a wary Jules, moving quickly to catch up with her. “Hold it up a minute, Joan. Let me go first. There may be more troopers skulking around down there.”

Using his thrusters at maximum, Jules soon caught up to his wife and signaling her back, drifted over the rim of the batholith. Carefully, he peeked inside but the darkness that gathered only a few feet down prevented him from seeing much.

“Well, it looks quiet at least. Hold off a minute while I bring in the cage.”

A minute later, Jules had directed the shuttle to take up a position directly over the batholith. The two divers watched as the glaring cage was again lowered to the opening in the strange formation.

“Let me ride the cage down first, if it’s safe, I’ll signal you to follow,” said Jules.

“No argument,” Joan replied.

Jules entered the cage and shut the gate. In seconds, he was being lowered past the rim of the opening into the murky interior of the batholith. He just had time to catch a glimpse of his rocky, striated surroundings when the cage lights went out...then on again...then out again. It wasn’t a regular flicker but a more intermittent off and on effect. Sometimes the light would remain on for a few seconds, then a few minutes, creating a kind of off kilter strobe effect.

He checked the cage’s status board and could learn nothing from its conflicting signals. That was one thing,

but how to explain the fact that his own on-board instrument packages began to act up? Status lights began to flicker, digital readouts began to run on in endless streams of nonsensical data, range-finders and sensors went haywire. Jules, alarmed, stopped the cage, relieved that for the moment it still seemed to be functioning and motioned with his hand for his wife to hang back.

“What’s wrong?” asked Joan from where she hovered a few feet above the rim of the batholith.

“I don’t know for sure, but it looks like I’ve got a complete systems crash on my hands. How’s your suit behaving?”

Joan ran a fast systems check. “Okay for the most part, but my environment indicator is acting a bit wonky.”

“Then hold back while I troubleshoot.”

While he worked, he began to notice that he didn’t feel so good. Feelings of nausea alternated with those of unaccountable weakness, pain in his joints and irregularity in his heartbeat. In the meantime, he had to admit defeat in trying to determine what was wrong with his instruments. As far as he could tell, they were fine when they weren’t going haywire and when they were haywire, he couldn’t do a thing to run a diagnostic.

“How are you doing?” asked Joan, her voice moving in and out over Jules’ helmet receiver.

“Good question,” Jules admitted. “There’s definitely something down here that’s interfering with our instruments, but without them, I can’t identify it. Also, I’m starting to feel ill.”

“Anything serious? Should we pull back?”

“No, not yet. But I think we shouldn’t stay in the cage, there’s a chance we won’t be able to get out if its systems fail too.”

“What about sign of any more Coalition troopers?”

“Nothing yet.”

“Then I’m coming down.”

“Okay, but take it slow, honey.”

Joan began to move toward the flashing glare of the suspended cage, the figure of her husband now visible now hidden in darkness just outside its opened gate. As she neared him, not only did her own instruments begin to malfunction, but she began to experience the same physical symptoms as Jules.

“How are you feeling?” asked Jules when she reached his side.

“Weird, like my body doesn’t know whether it has a cold, the flu, or malaria...” For a moment, she held a hand over her visor in an unconscious attempt to rub her head.

Jules held her by the shoulders and drew her close, tapping their helmets together. When Joan removed her hand from her visor her face was hidden in darkness from the momentary failure of her interior instrument lights. Then the lights came back on and Jules had the shock of his life. But then, in a flash, what he thought he had seen was gone.

The surprise and consternation must have been written on his face, because Joan, her eyes wide and riveted to his, asked, “Jules, what’s wrong? Are you all

right?”

Jules shook himself. “Yeah, yeah, I guess so...say, you’ll never guess what I spotted on the bottom of this batholith!”

Relieved to see Jules back to normal, Joan was eager to play along with his enthusiasm. “More aliens?”

“No, a spacecraft!”

“Makes sense. Where else would those troopers have come from?”

“It must have crashed here somehow. It’s hard to judge for sure in this on again, off again light, but it looks like a Coalition ship but of a design I’ve never seen before.”

“A Coalition ship? Then it must be hiding here from their defeat at Procyon!”

“I don’t think it’s hiding, although it’s possible that that may have been its original intention,” said Jules. “But from what I can see, it looks severely damaged. Ruptured hull, crushed bow. I think it was forced to make a crash landing here and sunk like a rock. Uhh...”

“What’s wrong, darling?” said Joan, gripping Jules’ arm in sudden desperation.

“Don’t know, just another of the weird bodily effects this place is causing. Wish I could figure out why...” He stopped suddenly, looking intently at the shipwreck hundreds of feet below him. Straightening, he took hold of Joan, and again pressed his helmet to hers, again waited for the light inside her helmet to come on and allow him a good look at her face.

“What?” asked Joan worriedly.

Jules didn’t answer, but kept studying her instead. For a brief moment the same look of shock had flickered across his face to be quickly replaced with a frown; the kind of frown Joan was used to seeing on him when he was concentrating on a particularly knotty problem.

He whirled suddenly, involuntarily moving in closer to the Coalition wreck below them.

“Well, I’ll be damned...!” he said at last.

“Jules, what’s wrong?”

For a few more minutes, Jules remained silent then, turning slowly, said, “Joan, I think I’ve got the answer for what’s happening to our instruments, to us, hell, to what’s even been effecting the sensors of the *Burroughs* and military craft farther out in space. It’s that ship down there.” He took hold of Joan and directed her gaze at the spot where the Coalition craft lay. “Look closely at the area immediately surrounding it.”

Joan, still holding her husband’s arm, did so, but saw nothing.

“Look harder.”

“There’s some kind of shimmer...”

“Exactly. That distortion in the sea surrounding the ship is the only clue we have to what’s causing all the trouble.” He spun her around and tapped his helmet to hers. “Watch my face closely and tell me what you see.”

For a few minutes, Joan’s face remained blank then, eyes wide, recoiled and would have lost her equilibrium if Jules hadn’t had a good hold on her. He drew her closer

again until once more they could observe each other's faces. "Do you see what I'm talking about?"

"I...I don't know. I thought I saw you as an old man...I mean...the way you'd look if you were seventy or eighty years old! But it must have been a trick of the light." Just the same, she resisted looking directly at his face again.

"No darling, it's not a trick of the light," said Jules. "The feelings of nausea and weakness we've been having are because our bodies have been shifting back and forth from youth to advanced age at a rapid rate. As a matter of fact, the shifts have been keeping almost regular time with the flickering of the cage lights and our suit systems. Joan, we're being shifted in time from the present, to the past and to the future! When we're shifted to our future, aged selves we feel the symptoms of age: heart disease, arthritis, shortness of breath and when we shift to the past, our strength is renewed. The nausea comes in the moments of transition. Even our instruments, the cage, everything around us as a matter of fact, is caught up in the same phenomenon. That's why the lights keep flickering: they keep shifting from different points in their powered lives from high power reserves to low. And the gibberish our instruments keep reading isn't just nonsense, its the readings for this place in different times, but because the changes come so fast, our instruments can't keep up with them!"

"Jules, you're rambling!" complained Joan, hardly able to keep up with her husband's speculations. "How can time be shifting like you say?"

Jules let her go and turned his body enough to throw

his glance back down toward the wrecked spacecraft. He nodded inside his helmet.

“It’s coming from that ship. I’ve seen something like this before. I think the Coalition have been secretly using some form of faster-than-light temporal technology to power their ships...”

“What kind of technology?”

“Temporal technology; a way to travel faster than the speed of light using time,” said Jules. “The Empire experimented with it years ago. The Coalition had it first and after managing to get our hands on some of it, we reverse engineered it. It showed promise but we were forced to discontinue the research when it became apparent that there was no way to guarantee containment if there was an accident with the technology. After all, if it could be used, temporal technology would have been applied first to war craft, and during battle the likelihood of a hit striking the temporal equipment was way too high to risk.”

“What would they be risking?”

“A rupture in time. No one knew exactly what that would mean, but there were theories: time could be bent, twisted, mixed, the immutable laws of nature would become elastic and unpredictable. It would make civilization itself an impossibility. Even individual human life would become unrecognizable as it was shifted from the past to the future at always alternating speeds. Just the effects we’re experiencing right now.”

“But...what’s doing it?”

“I think the Coalition is using black hole technology. They’ve managed to somehow create...or trap...a temporal black hole and install it in their ships or at least in the one we have here. Maybe it was damaged in the action off Procyon, the protective casing used to contain the black hole was damaged and now the temporal distortion effects have become loosed, if they’re not stopped, they’ll keep spreading at a geometrical pace until they’ve encompassed the entire galaxy!”

“And it’s this temporal black hole that they’ve used to travel faster than light?”

“Right. It’s a lot more efficient than your standard photon drive that the Empire uses. Properly controlled, the temporal black hole can be made to fold time; in effect, transporting the ship that contains it from one place to another in no time at all. You can see the advantages such a system would have for any spacefaring civilization.”

“According to reports, the action off Procyon began suddenly, when Coalition ships ambushed the fleet...”

“Now we know; it wasn’t so much an ambush as the Coalition ships appearing instantaneously among the Empire’s and getting the drop on them. It was only because of the quality of their training that our sailors were able to keep their heads and turn the tables on the enemy.”

“But Jules,” said Joan, “if Coalition ships are using this technology, the authorities have to be warned. Any strike on an enemy ship could risk breaching a casing and loosing this same kind of danger!”

“We’ll warn them but right now, there’s no time,” shouted Jules through his balky helmet microphone. “Already the event horizon is moving outward, at the speed it’s expanding, it’ll engulf this whole planet in a few hours, after that, it’ll be too late for anyone to do anything about it; by the time help can arrive here from Sol the temporal effects will be so pronounced so far beyond the planet’s surface, that they’ll disrupt anyone trying to make an approach. On the other hand, there is one chance to stop it, but it might be dangerous...”

“For who? You? Jules, I won’t...”

“It’s our only chance, the only chance for the whole galaxy,” said Jules desperately.

“If I don’t take this chance now, it’ll be too late later.”

“All right, all right, I guess I have no good argument against it if you feel it’s that important.” If Jules’ guesses about the danger were right, then she could have no logical objection to his trying to end it except that she loved him and didn’t want to see him dead. But that was illogical wasn’t it? She had to keep telling herself that, otherwise she might pull her blaster and force him to come away with her. Instead, she said, “But what can you do about it now? You can’t put the genie back in the bottle.”

“That’s a good analogy Joan,” said Jules, fighting a twinge of nausea. “But in this case, the genie has peculiar qualities that might allow me to do just that.”

“How?”

“Well, it’s only theory of course,” Jules admitted. “But if

my guess about this being a temporal black hole is right, and if I can place myself at its core, I might be able to restore whatever containment mechanism its coalition designers had used to keep the time fluctuations in check.”

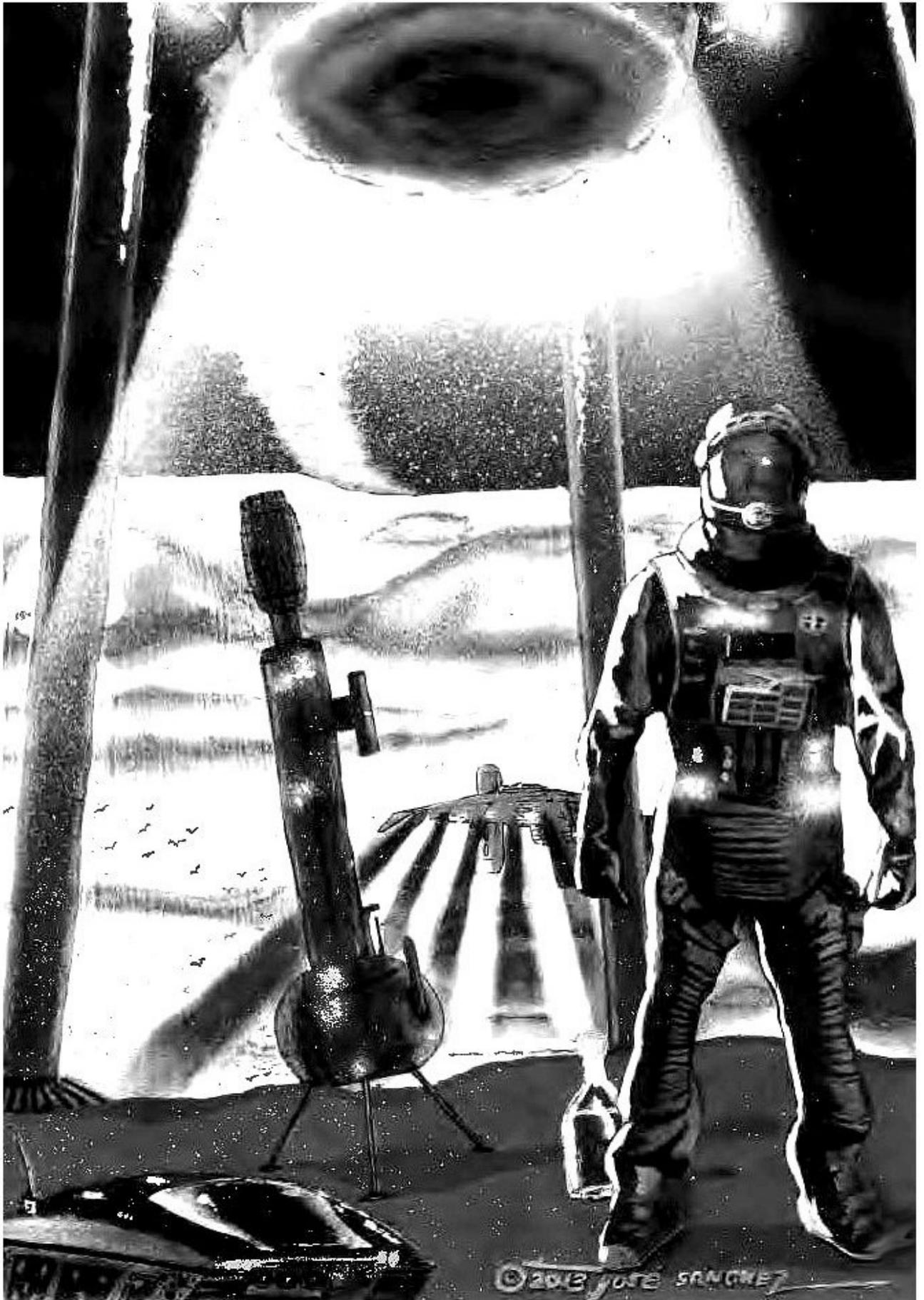
“Those are a lot of ifs.”

“Nevertheless, the more I think about it, the more I feel it can be done,” said Jules, “providing I don’t get caught in a time stream where I’ve died already...”

Joan’s eyes grew big but Jules cut her off before she could say anything more.

“Just hold my legs as I reach out for the event horizon. There’ll be some physical distortion as I move closer to the black hole, but don’t worry, they’ll be kind of like the distortion you see in an object lowered in the water. From my perspective beyond the horizon, I’ll be perfectly normal. Ready?”

“What do you want me to do?”



- Jose Sanchez

“That’s a brave girl. Let’s move in a little closer.”

They drifted downward a few dozen feet more until Joan could plainly see the distortion effect in the surrounding sea as it shifted from how it would be in the future to what it had been in the past.

“Anchor me here,” said Jules as he stretched himself out.

Joan did as she was asked and watched in amazement as Jules’ body seemed to stretch and lengthen toward the alien vessel. Soon it appeared to her that he must be hundreds of feet long, stretched taut like an elastic band ready to snap. She fought down an urge to panic, to yank him back; repeating to herself over and over again that it was only a trick of the eyes...

Farther down, near the rocky, uneven floor of the batholith, Jules was making his approach to the downed spacecraft. As he swam closer, the alternating effects of the area’s temporal flux became more pronounced. At times, he could hardly concentrate on what he was doing the pain was so great. He felt certain that he was in a race not only against the rate of expansion of the event horizon, but of the rate of shift from his own past and future selves. If he didn’t find a solution to the crisis fast, he’d be dead of old age. Nevertheless, he took the time for a quick glance back at Joan. His heart leapt, not with the effects of the black hole this time, and a lump rose unbidden in his throat. He could barely make her out beyond the event horizon, but his knowledge of her presence spurred him on to the task he had set himself.

His thoughts were interrupted by movement in the direction of the breach in the wreck's hull. There, three figures emerged followed by a ropy horror that quickly overtook and passed the others on its way out of the Batholith. It was the party of alien troopers on their way to attack he and Joan a few minutes before. They must have been survivors of the crash still bent on protecting their ship even at the cost of potential rescue. Trusting to the fact that the troopers had already been successfully taken care of, Jules ignored the time anomaly and continued his downward course.

Now the Coalition craft loomed above him as he swam in close. He passed the ruined bow where the ship's crew would normally have stayed and continued on to the gaping slash in its rear portion. Careful to avoid snagging his EVA suit on the ragged edges of the ruptured hull, Jules slipped into the darkened interior. Inside, in the strobe-flicker of his personal light source, he could make out the tangled remains of the ship's propulsion system. Vast conduits and thick, ropy cables twisted off into the gloom in either direction. Recognizing the conventional configurations of standard sub-photon drive engines, he ignored them and moved deeper into the ship's insides.

Presently, he came upon the expected photon shifters and beyond them the glare of the singularity. He hadn't known quite what to expect when he finally came into the direct presence of a temporal black hole, but somehow the glaring white, the absolute absence of not only color, but shadow and substance, texture and even place did not surprise him. He moved forward, slow not with hesitancy

but with careful appreciation for the marvel he found himself suddenly a part of. Terror then, slipped from him, replaced with awe and wonder and curiosity. Time continued to fracture, but with such a rapid pace that it ceased to be differentiated as past, present, future. Now it was all one. A smile of delight came unbidden to his lips. Then he laughed. Not with madness but with sudden knowledge and appreciation. How simple it all seemed now/then. His body had ceased to give him trouble. He felt the best he ever had/did. In a moment of severe clarity, he knew how it felt to be God...to be able to see the past, present, future all at the same time. To see every choice, every random event, and all their attendant effects on the time stream. It was like a vast pool constantly aflicker, ashimmer with change. Oh, how wonderful it all was!

But amid that transcendent feeling, he seemed to remember another life and another soul. Dimly at first, then more strongly, he recalled...Joan. And he at last remembered that he was but a man after all.

Outside, in the glare of Procyon A the brighter, main sequence star of the system's binary arrangement, the navies of two warring interstellar leagues crashed in an unplanned encounter. Molecular borers and photon pulse guns exchanged fire as the Empire's ships managed to evade direct hits. Luck was with them as their own return fire struck home again and again forcing the Coalition vessels to fall back around the white dwarf of Procyon B. And among the retreating vessels was that upon which Jules labored in the black hole containment chamber.

Focusing all the consciousness he could, he forced

the infinity of happenings, occurrences, possibilities aside; he threaded his way past the surface of the shimmering lake to the underlying fabric. He found the human texture of its strands and thrust apart the individual events of a universe of chance until at last, he arrived in the here and the now. He remembered the reason he had come, shifted a bit this way then a bit that way and found what he was looking for.

Suddenly, a loud booming rang through the ship followed by a lurch that forced him to concentrate on retaining his balance for a moment. Steadying himself, he looked around and suddenly, he was back in Joan's arms.

"What...happened?" was all she could muster. The last she remembered was holding onto Jules for dear life. Then, she experienced some kind of instinctual understanding and she threw her arms around his neck. The embrace was awkward in the EVA harnesses and bulky helmets, but the emotions exchanged were nonetheless real. After a few moments, they came apart.

"I fixed it," said Jules finally.

"The containment unit for the black hole?"

"Right. Oh, I guess I could've fixed it so that the hull rupture had never occurred, but then that would've left us aboard a Coalition war craft with no explanation of why we were aboard, let alone while wearing EVA harnesses! Instead, I got the idea of restoring the containment unit only a few minutes before I dove down to fix it in the first place; this way, the ship stays here as proof of the technology's danger and allows the Empire to negotiate with the Coalition to refrain from using such technology. Hopefully

the enemy will come to realize that not using it is to their advantage as well as ours.”

“But how did you do it? Contain the black hole that is.”

“Oh that.” Jules shrugged. “I’ll admit those Coalition scientists were ingenious in finding a way to contain and at the same time harness for use a temporal black hole. They built a radical cube and then grew the temporal black hole inside it. It must have been a long process so my hope is that this ship and the handful of others that appeared off Procyon were actually only a few working models. It’ll make stopping the use of such technology so much easier.”

“You’re getting ahead of me, Jules. What’s a radical cube?”

“A concept that we’ve known about for a while, but never dared build. A radical cube exists in four dimensions at the same time: height, width, depth and time. It’s the last quality that makes it perfect for containing a temporal black hole. The only problem is, the part of it that exists in time is the easiest part to disrupt. That was the part that gave in when the ship was struck, releasing the time distortion effects of the black hole. What I did was to go to the moment just before the ship was hit off Procyon, dismantle the cube myself, take it with me to a point in time just before I began my descent over the event horizon and rebuild it around the black hole. That way, time wasn’t changed, the effects of the black hole were still released during the battle, but this time not as a result of battle, but because I had dismantled the

cube. The resultant time distortions affected the crew enough to make them once again crash land here thus allowing us to do again what we had done in the previous reality. Get it?"

Joan shook her head. "No, but just so long as you're safe."

They held hands then and didn't let go until the cage had deposited them back on the shuttle.

There were some things, however, that Jules would never tell Joan about his experiences within the time flux, but unknown to him, there was nothing more she needed to hear from him that she did not learn in the many secret lovers' embraces they would share in the years to come.



"Steel Rider" - Jose Sanchez

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