

INDRAVATI

A science fiction novel by Doug Weldon
Approx. 121,000 words

CHAPTER 1

“Is there anything dangerous in our path or not?” Gideon Serrano asked. Concern gave his words a prickly feel, but there was no terrible urgency. “I get it--we all do--every scan before we dropped in showed this world’s orbit to be empty. No signs of life, no one hiding in the bushes, no signs of anything. Back then, our way was clear, now you’re telling me ... maybe. Not good enough, Nav. I need an answer one way or the other before I can clear the teams for work.”

The work at hand would be locating mineral resources on the planet below. Not the sort of work that would thrill anyone but a geologist but it was something. And something, even a minimal find, often led to something more. Something more could mean bonus pay and bragging rights, it could mean a good story. The crew of the *Indravati* were eager to return to port and spill out to the nightclubs, not once having to pay for drinks as long as they kept telling the riveting stories of their adventures, should they have any.

It had been known to happen. A rare occurrence to freight haulers, but there was talk. This one, a rotund starship of the Indus class, was an enormous heavy freighter bringing much needed cargo and brain-power to the more distant worlds of humanity. Her crew, though highly educated, naively dreamed of riches and adventure.

Gideon Serrano was second in command. Friends called him Ian. Deckhands called him Top Mate, his position on the ship. To most, he was simply known as Top. He held command while the captain was off duty in the second shift. Now, for the first time since they left their home port, he was faced with what might be a genuinely serious problem. He found himself relishing the thought of taking a swing at it.

The navigator, Kinatok, didn’t feel that way at all. He was stymied. His face, though attractive, a prominent mix of Nordic and Asiatic ancestry, was taut with a befuddlement rarely seen by anyone who ever worked with him. “I’m not entirely sure,” he said, standing by the side of a young deckhand at one of the scanning stations. “This doesn’t make any sense.” While the navigator’s own station showed the way ahead to be clear, this near-object warning panel kept giving intermittent readings to the contrary. The furrow in his brow suggested the panel might have sprouted a mouth and begun speaking the gibberish of a secret twin language. His hands never slowed but the discrepancy made everyone else more than a little uneasy. All expected a quick resolution. The top mate, his eyes boring into the back of his navigator’s head, was insisting on it.

“It’s been like that from the moment we entered orbit,” the young deckhand blurted, nervous that the navigator’s assistance would cast him in a poor light.

Kinatok shook his head, reassuring him, “This is nothing you’ve done.” His hands deftly played between the layers of holographic controls, ensuring the panel was correctly reading his movements and facial cues, making adjustments which should have cleared things up, but the discrepancy remained.

Ian couldn’t resist having a little fun with his navigator’s troubles. The two had served together on another ship, years before. When Ian signed on with the *Indravati*, they quickly renewed their old friendship. With a slow drawl that placed his ancestry in the American Southwest, he said, “Could it be that the calm and composed Georgio Kinatok is about to pitch a fit? I dare say no one has ever seen such a thing.”

Kinatok squared his shoulders, drawing himself up with feigned haughtiness. “Me, lose my cool?” he said. “C’mon Top, you know me better than that.”

“It’s that goop you put in your hair, it leeches out the brains.”

For Ian, Kinatok’s concern for his appearance made for a favorite target. His own appearance was far from flashy. Friends, looking beyond his coffee stained teeth, chose straightforward words to describe him, words like modest, neat, clean cut, squared away. A good enough looking man in his own right, but not in a way that left him fighting off the ladies; a face more suited to his job.

Kinatok offered some friendly advice. “You could use a touch of this goop, as you call it, or maybe run a comb through your hair once in a while.” He raised a hand and made a show of straightening his hair. “It must kill you that I can look this stylish and be such a brilliant navigator.”

“Don’t rightly think I’d use the word brilliant,” Ian said.

“Oh, but you *did*,” Kinatok shot back. “Proficiency and conduct reports--your reports--from our time on the *Mahakali*, and I quote: ‘repeatedly displays brilliance with navigational problems, for which he has a natural gift.’ Your words, right?”

“Seems like I was being a mite charitable. Back in Texas, we got a saying ...”

Kinatok groaned.

“... for folks with your *special* kind of brilliance. If brains were leather, son, you couldn’t saddle a flea.”

Kinatok grunted, saying something under his breath in an old Inuit language. Then he laughed to himself and said, “For someone who wants to be taken seriously on the matter of brilliance, you sure trumpet your upbringing. Not many people would even admit to being from Earth.”

“What’s that Navigator?” Ian said. His eyes, the murky blue of a storm at sea, flashed with mischief. Ian usually called his friend Kina. To refer to him by his position meant trouble. “You say you want a shift in waste reclamation?”

“Didn’t say a thing, Top.”

“Good. Keep it that way and get me an answer.” The glint of mischief remained. “Or do I need to bring in the first shift navigator?”

Kinatok grinned. “You do not.”

Ian smiled in silent agreement, then he addressed the ship’s artificial intelligence. “Adalia, please advise on near proximity navigational clearance.”

“Unable to comply, Top Mate Serrano. There is conflicting data.”

“Well, that’s no help,” he said. “How ‘bout optics?”

“Dark,” Kinatok replied. “We’re on the night side. There’s nothing in the visual spectrum. Other wavelengths show nothing more than random dust particles, but if anything starts to black out the stars in front of us, we’ll know it.”

“Not good enough, Nav. I do need an answer on this.”

Kinatok made his decision. “We’re good to go. It’s a glitch in this station, Top ... gotta be. I’ll have it cleared up in no time.”

“Very well. Maintain course.”

Ian kept a firm grip on a mug of coffee. Black, extra strong, he called it navy coffee. There were more healthy teas, brews and other concoctions suggested by the small cylindrical snack-bot which floated by, refilling his mug and offering him a sandwich before it made its exit from the bridge, but most of the time he wanted nothing more than plain coffee. A comforting habit leftover from his years in the service, where a strong unhealthy drink was still appreciated. He took a deep slug of it and leaned back in the captain’s chair, having faith in Kina’s abilities to correct any false readings.

To his great relief, Ian found almost everyone on the ship to be exceptionally hard workers. Not

being one to micro-manage, he gave them the freedom to do their work and felt rewarded by the results. Rarely did he have to, as he so eloquently put it, kick butt.

He cast an appreciative gaze around the bridge, called so by a naval tradition dating back to the days of paddlewheel steamers. The hub of command and control for the ship, it looked every bit like the nerve center it was. Thin conduits coursed in silvery rivulets across the ceiling to computer stations representing all the departments of the ship. The *Indravati* was not as big as the robotic behemoths which traveled in caravans between Alliance worlds, nor was it as fast or as powerful as the warships. However, if other freighters could feel envy--and with the level of AI some possessed there was debate on this point--they would want to be the *Indravati*. Ian took in the view from the seat of command, confident that he would be the captain of his own ship within a few short years. He noticed Kinatok glancing sidelong at him with a sly grin. It was no secret that Kina had an eye on command, as well. Ian returned a grin that had little mirth behind it, a warning. It wouldn't do for either of them to become distracted. The grin was an indication for the navigator to get back to the trouble at hand.

"Up for some poker tonight?" Kinatok asked, his attention focused on the faulty panel.

"Absolutely. I've got some genuine Earth coffee beans to buy in."

"*Shen-bang*," Kinatok said with appreciation. "I have one of those stink-pickles you used to smoke on the *Mahakali*."

"*Obsessáo*?"

"Yep."

"That, my friend, is a fine smoke. One of the better Erva Doce cigars."

Kinatok wrinkled his nose. "If you say so."

The *Indravati* traveled between stars with phase-drive engines, dropping back into normal phase with the rest of the universe at times to make observations of the nearby stars. Scant time had passed since the *Indravati* had come back into phase to assume orbit around the rocky world of Sanjeeb 228 C. Massive Hyperion Industries fusion engines crackled with the power they shunted to the forward thrusters which slowed the ship, letting it fall to the desired altitude.

The rocky planet was the third body orbiting a common orange star, hardly more than a tiny brown smudge against the black. Lifeless, airless, barren, and holding the possibility of a trove of valuable mineral resources; the metallicity of the star's spectrum suggested as much. Discovering such worlds was one of the reasons they ventured so far into space. Human expansion required metal and industrial minerals. Any world near the outlying colonies which held significant quantities of useful resources was one that cried out for humans to come and get their hands dirty. This far out, nearing one thousand light years from home port, there were few colonies and only a sparse scattering of scientific outposts. Establishing a robotic mining rig on worlds so distant would not benefit the core worlds of the Alliance, but would be a tremendous asset to the colonies.

Teams in the science department began signaling their readiness to begin work. Ian skimmed over the requests, giving the okay to begin or ordering them to wait.

Kinatok was stubbornly trying to find out why the lookout's watch board would act the way it did. "This must be a malfunction," he mumbled. Then, cocking his head back towards Ian, he said, "Just doesn't act like one. A malfunction, I mean. You have any ideas? I know I said I could get it, but now ..." With his mind running through the scanner's schematics, he suddenly had as much difficulty finding words as finding the answer. "I'm almost ready to give in and call Systems."

Ian considered the twofold problem. There was the scanner glitch, which Kinatok would no doubt correct. Then there was the problem of Kinatok himself. He rivaled the ship's systems officer in his knowledge of the sensors, but often seemed more comfortable when he had input from others. Standing, he stretched his tall, lanky form, straightening his ship's jacket as he had seen the captain do on many

occasions. Ian addressed another of his bridge officers. “Inyaro, could there be radiation from the planet or sun interfering with the readouts?”

“No chance,” Inyaro said with certainty. His voice was deep, breathy, alien. “Planetary radiation levels are minimal, the stellar winds are not reacting with the magnetosphere in any way which might smell unsavory.” Inyaro was not human. He was a Ratharjan, a vulpini humanoid with vaguely canine facial features. A shaggy mane of golden brown hair running down the back of his thick neck brought images of a fox or hyena to mind. His immediate duties, as chief of the intelligence department, required a mineral radiological scan of the planet beneath them. Redirecting his scans, he performed a forward sweep. “I do believe, however, that my own scans are also returning misleading data. I should be able to analyze any particle collisions or radiation fluctuations in our path, but the way ahead is unnaturally dark.”

“Do you think it’s a problem within the sensors themselves?”

“Unsure.”

Mathias Larsen stepped onto the bridge. As soon as he did, he couldn’t pass up the opportunity to first needle his nemesis. “Did you break the ship already, Gideon?” He was the loud, overbearing, operations officer for the ship. People called him Ops. Larsen managed the logistics and schedules of the work being done by the crew. He was also well known for a distinctly grouchy temperament.

Larsen only called him Gideon when he wanted to annoy him. Ian held back a chuckle. “Is that really the best you can come up with, Ops?” he replied, shaking his head with an exaggerated weariness. “You could start an argument in an empty room, but I had come to expect at least a little wit behind that yammering hole.”

“Just three months into the run,” Larsen went on, his voice held a strong Nordic accent. “Sad to see your career end like this.”

“Any problem I have with the sensors won’t put you in this chair.”

“Like I want it,” Larsen shot back. “I just don’t want *you* in it.” Then, with a more concerned, professional tone, he asked, “What’s the problem?”

“Thought it was a faulty scanner at the lookout post,” Ian said, “but Inyaro has come across the same glitch.”

“Called the captain yet?”

“No.” Ian gave the man a sharp look. “I’ve got this.”

“You’d better. We are a long way from any worlds of the Terran Alliance and the crew is eager to get to work searching for a mineral payday.” Larsen, like many others, chose to pepper his speech with profanity cobbled together from old Nordic languages. “There will be no *drittiski* finder’s commission if we don’t register a *drittiski* site with the Syndicate, and if we don’t find anything because you broke the *drittiski* scanners--”

“That’s enough, Larsen,” Ian said. “*Skammelig*.” It was an old word, used when proper restraint was not shown, to condemn someone’s words or behavior as un-Nordic. “Take your post or get off the bridge.”

“*Ja*, alright,” he groused. Larsen was the older of the two. His many years in space had given him a close familiarity with a starships’ inner workings. There was a love he felt for these large ships. It showed in his professionalism. However intense his dislike of Ian might be, he would never let that prevent him from offering assistance to the ship. “Kina’s and Inyaro’s stations use different external hardware, but the data for both comes through the same signal processor. We ought to have it checked for faults.”

“Yes. Do that, Piper,” Ian said. It was a slip of the tongue to call Larsen a piper. Though technically true, this wouldn’t help smooth over their relationship. Larsen, like the systems officer, knew enough about running this ship to be two steps from the captaincy. He should be called Ops.

Pipers made up most of the senior staff. A position equal to the second or third mate of smaller ships. Pipers, like Kinatok, were in the pipeline of command over the entire ship, whereas a chief in medical, propulsion or intelligence, was not.

“Ops,” Ian said, slipping in the correction while addressing him. “Run diagnostics but don’t pull the unit yet. Raise the navigational deflector shields, just in case.”

“Raise shields, aye,” Larsen coldly replied.

“I’m not ready to dismiss this as nothing more than an equipment malfunction, I need to know for sure. It’s a bur under my saddle. One of those things that I get fixated on and won’t let go of.” Ian hoped conveying his inner struggle with the issue would draw some empathy from Larsen, to make working together easier. Ian took a gulp of his coffee. “Know what I mean, Ops?”

Larsen ignored him.

Kinatok’s eyes lit up with an idea. “This bears a really strong resemblance to a type of sensor jamming I once encountered.” He rushed to his own station. “Optics may hold the answer. Adi, pull the optical data from the time the forward thrusters were engaged.” He made an adjustment to his instruments and explained to the top mate, “I’m analyzing the data for any reflections from our thrusters. If there’s anything in orbit with us I should be able to map out--” A single beep interrupted him. The analysis was complete. Startled by the results but with no hesitation, he yelled out, “Object, port! Collision imminent!”

There’s more to this chapter.

Indravati can be found on Amazon in print and Kindle.

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Dylan Miller woke with a jarring fright. Red flashes of the emergency lights stabbed at his blurry eyes. Klaxons did worse to his ears, putting an abrupt end to a wonderful dream of flapjacks smothered in real maple syrup, of venison sausages and cherry pastries. He loved cherry pastries. A wet spot of drool spread across his pillow. Rubbing his face with his hands, he found another sticky spot on his cheek. He rolled out of his bunk, making a dizzy, lurching rush to his locker to draw a pressure suit and emergency gear. Fear faded, replaced by annoyance at the thought of another drill. Mumbled curses spilled from his lips.

The cabin to which he had been assigned was a dark metal box with disturbing similarities to the cargo containers in the ship’s hold. He opened the locker then fell, knocked off his feet by an impact which made the deck jump. The screech of tearing metal was followed by the orders of the operations officer, “*Action, action, action! All hands to emergency stations. Damage control, port. Captain to the bridge. This is not a drill.*”

Fear returned. This was real.

The pressure suit had large criss-cross patterns of green adhesive tape to let others know he was a greenhorn. Halfway into the smelly suit, a shaky hand reached back into the locker to pull out a tool pack issued to damage control personnel. He addressed the ship’s AI, “Adi, what’s going on?”

“All hands are to report to their assigned emergency stations at once. Your own maintenance section, crewman Miller, is assembling at the local magnetic tram terminal.”

“Are we under attack?”

“That information is not available.”

“Was anyone hurt?”

“That information is restricted to officers, senior staff and medical personnel.” Adalia, the AI, was

notoriously uncharitable with details of ship news.

He was strapping the tool pack around his waist and thigh when he stepped out into the common area between crew quarters. Beyond stretched a long hallway filled with panic-stricken people running everywhere. Dylan ran ahead, turning onto a crossing hall where a number of battered and scuffed, bright orange repair-bots swept across the open passageway on their way into service.

The hallway was wide with elegantly simple directional markings. Interspersed along the clean, uncluttered bulkheads were computer panels which served as notice boards. Normally, these held daily posts of marginally useful information, but now they flashed the words: EMERGENCY STATIONS. Running outboard from the center of the ship and curving downward in the distance, the hallway led to an airlock, the same one through which he had taken his first steps onto the ship. He recalled how he and the other new crewmen had been greeted. *Hey Top*, someone had said, *we thought you were gonna take the trash out, not bring more back on.* *Hey Top*, another called out, *what hole did you flush these scum-bags out of? They look too dumb to be our newbies.* He could tell that it had been nothing more than good-natured ribbing, with no real malice in anything said to them; easy to tell from their faces, which were so unlike the hard, unfriendly faces of his home-town on Earth.

He had worked hard to get away from there.

But the faces on everyone in the hall now were taut with apprehension. Minor damage to the ship could be deadly. No other ships were near enough to offer timely assistance. Any crisis was theirs alone to deal with. So, like stampeding cattle, they ran the passageway to the intra-ship magnetic tram.

Dylan felt a rush of *why-am-I-here* thoughts. He had been working as a geologist on a world called Alheim. It was good work, he felt comfortable there. He could have stayed on that world and told the Vesta Magnus recruiter to shove it. The recruiter had actually tried to steer Dylan into one of the Syndicate's mining companies like Iommi Mantlewyrn or Fripp Deep Space Metals. He didn't think Dylan would be the right fit for a starship. *What had been so damn attractive about deep space freight, anyway? I chose this*, he thought incredulously. *I actually signed a contract. I voluntarily stepped foot onto an Indus class freighter.*

He'd been warned of the dangers. Faced with the reality of it, he imagined the work he would soon be engaged in would feel less like star-faring and more like slavery. While there was no harsh taskmaster, he would have no choice but to do the work. His life may well depend on it.

The passageway ended at a wide platform. The bulkheads were covered with digital tiles glowing with a pale, pearly white light. Tram pods were *whooshing* out of the tubes, one after another, gliding over to the embarkation platform where a deck boss stood in front of the growing crowd, back-lit by the pale white light, assigning hands to each pod by pointing and shouting, "You ... You ... You ..."

Dylan approached the front of the platform and the deck boss pointed at him. "You."

The deck boss pointed over Dylan's shoulder where his friend, Cable Fretley, a young man with unkempt, spiky hair had just sidled up. "And you," the deck boss said. "On the tram, now."

They squeezed in, the tram took off at once, shooting across to the left side of the ship. A ship with a belly large enough to surround a small town needed such a transit system for work crews to quickly cross the distance.

Dylan was hanging on to a hand-rail above his head, crammed into a standing-room-only center isle with an uncomfortable closeness to those around him. "What have you heard, Cab?" he asked his friend, trying to keep his voice from quavering, to breathe steadily, without any crack or sharp intake of air that might betray his dread. "Are we venting air or water?"

"Don't worry *Estilo*." He had his own nickname for Dylan. "They'll have it patched up before we even get there."

"You sound sure of it, but we could be under attack from an alien ship. I hear aliens are not so

uncommon this far out.”

“Yeah,” Fretley said with a shrug. “Hell, it could even be a human ship. We’ve been spreading out for three hundred years. In all that time, a colony as far out as we are now would have different ways--might not be so friendly, you know?”

“There’s no way to know what’s going on. Not until we get there, eh?”

“Good enough for me,” Fretley said with a placid smile.

“How can you be so calm? This is bad--seriously, seriously bad.”

“Look at my pressure suit,” Fretley said, pointing to the green stripes. “We’re greenhorns *Estilo*, that means we don’t know what we’re doing. They’re not going to put us someplace where we could screw things up worse than they are now.”

“Yeah,” Dylan said with sudden hope. “We do make mistakes, don’t we?”

“Damn right we do, and these stripes are to warn others than we might make more. That, and to single out who to pull the pranks on.”

Dylan nodded. “The pranks are starting to get old.”

“At least they care enough about you to give you a really *shen-bang* nickname.”

“I can’t go by that name,” Dylan blurted, not so much to his friend as it was a desperate plea to the fates that this particular lot not be cast just yet. Some of the deckhands had given him a nickname. There was a reason behind it, but it was awful. “No one will take me seriously.”

“I tried to get *estilo* to catch on, *Estilo*. No such luck--looks like I’m the only one. You know what they’re calling me? *Cabello*. It’s Portuguese, it means hair. That’s all I get. I’m *Cabello*, the guy with the hair.”

The tram came to a halt and the crewmen poured out, racing down the halls towards the damaged areas of the ship. Piper Jarvis Brolin stood at the end of a hall assigning people to repair teams. He made sure they knew their tasks and had the proper equipment before they were sealed inside their pressure suits. Then he directed each of them into dark passageways, sealing the air-tight hatches behind them. He saw the last of his greenhorns. “*Cabello* and Dragon-titties, right on time. You two kids are gonna follow me in. The inner hull wasn’t breeched so there’s no decompression. There’s no atmosphere in the outer holds anyways, but between here and there we got some some toxic vapors, so get your helmets on and seal-up.”

“I’m twenty-four, Jarvis,” Dylan said. “I’m hardly a kid.”

“That so,” Brolin replied. “Get yourself an advanced degree, a few years in deep space, then we’ll talk about it. When we were choosing the new deckhands, I spoke up for you. I wanted you specifically for your experience with gas pipelines, in spite of you being too young and being from Earth.”

“Hey Jarvis,” Fretley said, “I think my being the same age makes me way too young for all this. May I be excused from this detail?”

“Shut up, hair-ball. The Captain’s the *only* one that wanted you. Now both of you get sealed-up.”

He checked their pressure suits, then led them through a hatch into a short passageway, closing the hatch behind them. “This hatch is part of a fail-safe system,” Brolin said. “If there’s any decompression or if a fire breaks out, we’re going to need to bleed off the air. A series of air-tight hatches between us and the damage will contain it.”

“Jarvis,” Dylan spoke, trying to keep his worry from showing. “Are we under attack?”

“I seriously doubt it. What we are is a ship with a damaged hull. Stay focused, kid.”

A portal with uncomfortable similarities to a yawning maw opened at the end of the hallway, connecting it to the vertical hall beyond. Areas of micro-gravity allowed for a hop between the two. After Brolin made the hop, Dylan and Fretley crossed over, awkwardly righting themselves to the gravity of the

new hallway. They followed Brolin through the outward bound radius that lead up between the outer holds.

He ushered them through a side hatch and another transition in gravity. Brolin sealed the hatch behind them. Dylan watched, then turned to view the cavernous hold. He was immediately struck by the memory of an arduous hike through the South Saskatchewan Canyon. Great work-lights dimmed by distance did the best they could to spread light around the cargo stacks, enough to see the curvature of the walls stretching beyond them and high above, following the spherical belly of the ship. Long manipulator arms perched high overhead. Transport lifts lined the walls, ready to move cargo containers down to the barges. Row upon row of cargo containers were secured in high, floor to ceiling racks. Enough to sustain a colony of thousands. But not even all this material would last long. It made them feel quite small. "I'm not about to send you someplace where you'll be in a lot of danger," Brolin said to them, "so you're both gonna stay right here. Fretley, you're gonna be scanning the integrity of the containers. Dragon-titties, you scan the bulkheads. Map the weak-points and stress fractures. The damage is just on the other side. If anything goes wrong in here, you call me. Don't try to handle anything on your own."

Brolin further explained the functions of their equipment. When he was satisfied that they knew what to do, he left them to do their work. He disappeared through another hatch, moving towards the ruptured outer hull.

"Adi, show me the engineering tags," Dylan said to the ever present AI. At once, a heads-up display on his helmet faceplate showed him the damage tagged by a passing repair-bot as well as all the pipes and machinery behind the bulkheads. He drew his hand scanner, linking it to the repair project data-site through a small computer device, a doodlebug, clipped on his suit arm.

"Hey Dylan," Fretley said, grinning and holding one hand up. "I'm practicing that twitchy finger language."

Dylan stared at the fingers for a moment, then looked away with exasperation. "Down to your knees, eh? Don't really need to know that, but good for you."

"Why do we even need to know this shit? Get a tech implant right behind the ear and you can talk over the data-net. We've got computers everywhere else; doodlebugs, visors, jewelry, tattoos--"

"Don't mention tattoos."

"Hell, we've got 'em woven into our clothes, *Estilo*. I tell ya, get an implant and you don't even have to open your mouth to talk. Nobody else hears anything."

"They say it's to talk when there's no access to computers or the data-net. And ear problems are pretty common, what with accidents involving air pressure and stuff."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah; I went to orientation. To me, it seems like something out of a spy story, like cold war espionage."

Dylan paid little attention to him, more interested in mapping stress fractures.

"At least, I think it's like the cold war. That's the one with the communists and the great wall, right?"

"I remember reading something about a wall, but not the great wall. That's in China."

"Well? Chinese were communists, weren't they?"

"I think so, yeah, but they didn't have much to do with that one. That was more like two philosophies of government that mixed like oil and water. Then came the pork wars, those were about money. China was an ally to the West in that, back when the *change-your-mind* cymplify philosophy was beginning to catch on and America was one country."

"Was that your country?"

"No, I'm from Canada, but it was bigger then, too. Quebec split off. Alaska and parts of the Northwest split off. I think everything was bigger then. Countries like Brazil, Portugal, Sweden and Norway came through pretty much untouched, which I guess is why so much of Alliance culture has

those Nordic and Portuguese influences.”

“Love those names, though: holy wars, cold wars, cyber wars, pork wars ... What’s with pork anyway? Somebody kill a neighbor’s pig?”

“Nah, nothing like that. A bunch of global businesses got really, really powerful. Started pushing governments into fights over which countries would have which factories, which would have the shops and who would supply the raw materials. They began pushing for laws to require purchases from people--that’s when it got messy. Most of the Alliance worlds have a governing framework that owes a lot to what came out of that; limits on the size of government, no corporate involvement, stuff like that.”

“That’s all fine by me but, for what came out of it, everybody should just love you guys. What is it with other people and Earth?”

Dylan shook his head. “We don’t have a very good reputation, do we?”

“So why would they give these ships Earth names? *Kundali*, *Mahakali*, *Indrayani*, *Sharavathi*--all rivers on Earth, right? Some kind of homage to old Earth’s East India trading companies?”

“So they say. These days, Earth is chock full of bitter, aimless people who try to make everybody the same and, unfortunately, most everybody goes along with it. If you excel at anything, you’re looked down on as some kind of elitist or a freak. People there do only enough to get by, but when they go off-world they don’t understand that people get ahead by trying to excel. They expect everything to be given to them.”

“They give you stuff? *Shen-bang*. What did you get?”

“My family got a basic food and housing allowance. I got assigned to a job at a gas mine.”

“Speaking of gas,” Fretley said, “looks like most of these containers are full of merchlorolene.”

“*Kjala-koussega!*” he swore. “That’s some nasty stuff. Any of ‘em damaged?”

“No damage; and yep, this stuff can ruin your day. If there were a fire in here, I bet these containers would go off like big ol’ bombs.”

Dylan felt something in his feet. Startled by the timing of it, he glanced down in confusion.

“I felt it too,” Fretley said.

There’s more to this chapter.

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