

RESTLESS UNIVERSE

The Continuing Saga of
Joe Justin and Selena Sakarov
Aboard the G.F.S. Sorceress





CHAPTER I: Mutiny and Murder

This has been one of those weeks that start badly and end worse. I am beginning to doubt either my memory or my sanity—probably my sanity is slipping away as I drift abandoned in interstellar space. One thing about being so absolutely alone: it gives me a good chance to review the events of the past week again and again . . .

“Up for some R-ball, Justin?”

It was that smart aleck Commander Bernard Taub. What he really meant was, “Care to get creamed again?” It isn’t that I mind losing, especially to the ship’s champion. It was the way Taub would smirk every time he made a good shot or I made a lousy one. And it wasn’t only my gripe—every R-ball player on the ship complained about his bad sportsmanship. He could rarely scare up an opponent except for the monthly round-robin tournaments he always won. But he also seemed to have a sixth sense about me, and he must have known that I was feeling feisty enough that day to take him on.

R-ball was invented over six centuries ago on earth, before more than several dozen people had been in space, as difficult as that is to imagine now. The game didn’t really get exciting, though, until we started playing it in the low-g sections of starships. It’s the perfect sport for Galactic Federation officers on deep patrol because it combines physical exercise in cramped spaces with training for quick reflexes. As Weapons Officer on the G.F.S. Rheingold, I appreciate the opportunity to flex my muscles and sharpen my reactions.

Taub was waiting at the R-ball court, already wearing his elbow pads, knee pads, and helmet, when I arrived a few minutes after my watch. I put on my gear, Taub said, “After you, Lieutenant,” and in we went.

I have to say for myself that I’ve never played a better game of R-ball. My racquet was magic as I slammed shot after shot, sending Taub scurrying from corner to corner in useless pursuit of the ball. After losing the first two games, Taub was a red-faced bundle of hostility. Suddenly, his face went white and he stopped panting. It was as if he had forced a wave of calm by sheer strength of will. He gave me one of his absolute-zero looks and asked, “Care to make it best three out of five, Justin?”

I said, “Why not?” I never figured that Taub would take it so seriously. The fundamental rule of R-ball has always been safety for the players. It has to be that way because even with the protective equipment, hitting another player on the fly or swatting him with your racquet can cause a serious injury. Taub seemed to be ignoring safety completely, both mine and his own. He was good, though, and we never actually collided, although there were at least two close calls every point.

The strange thing was that I felt my playing had improved for

the last three games, but Taub was unbeatable. There were times I would have sworn that there was no way he could reach the ball to make a shot, but somehow his reach was barely long enough every time. R-ball is a game of centimeters and he was getting all the breaks.

He took the third and fourth games, but not by much. That seemed to calm him down as we started the final match game, but it didn't take him long to get fired up again. It was my serve, and I tried a new trick shot I had been practicing earlier that week. It required the right combination of spin and angle to make the ball take an unexpected bounce after hitting a corner. As I said, R-ball is a game of centimeters and the split-second of surprise threw even old Taub off his stride. His return shot was weak and I was set up to put the ball where he couldn't possibly get to it in time. Or so I thought. I hadn't counted on his anticipation of my strategy. With utter disregard of his own safety, he shot by my blind side as I connected with the ball. My racquet caught him squarely on the arm as he swept by and I saw a nasty gash open and begin bleeding. I called, "Safety" as he returned my shot with one of the most effective ripostes I've ever seen in R-ball.

"What's the matter Justin, getting a little too fast for you?"

I couldn't believe he was so psyched that he ignored the pain of the gash. "Look at your arm," I suggested.

"What's wrong with it?"

"I opened a gash with that last shot that must be twenty centimeters long."

"Stop making excuses, Justin. There isn't a scratch on either arm."

I looked at his arms, and he was right. Could I have imagined it in the passion of the moment?

The rest of that game was a disaster for me. I kept thinking about the gash that wasn't there. My game was worth space dust without concentration. Taub won handily and left with his standard-issue smirk.

I walked slowly back to my cabin, convinced that I had let my emotions get the best of my judgment. After all, I had come the closest of anyone on the ship to taking a match from Taub. I admitted to myself that I had let his aggressive style of play worry me into projecting fears for my own safety into an imagined accident.

I took a quick sonic shower, noticing that I had only fifteen minutes before officer's mess. My cabin was in its usual borderline messy state. I got caught once as a midshipman with a less than ship-shape cabin during a surprise inspection and I vowed never to let it happen again. I haven't, either. I owe my success partly to keeping things under control and partly to luck. This time, my better instincts told me not to rely on luck.

I had tidied up and was showing my R-ball equipment when I noticed something peculiar about the racquet. I took a closer look, and there it was—blood along the outer rim!

With two minutes until mess, there was no time for pondering the issue. I set the racquet in its place in my locker, closed the locker door, and was about to leave my cabin when the door burst open.

“Ten-Hut!”

There was Taub with his surprise inspection team. I suppose it was his little way of getting back at me for the first two games. He knew me well enough to have guessed that I might not have my cabin squared away if I were in a hurry to make mess call, which I was; Captain Wu was a stickler for punctuality at all times, meals especially.

Of course, by the rules of the ship Taub had every right, even a duty, to conduct surprise inspections. The smallest speck of misplaced dirt can cause a microcircuit to malfunction, and any malfunction in a starship years from home is serious. Part of the duty of the Executive Officer is dirt control, and Taub was earnest about it. Sometimes I wondered if he wasn't a bit too earnest and didn't harbor a perverse pleasure at poking about in other people's things.

Another thought crossed my mind in the split second I was coming to attention. Before I had joined the Galactic Federation Navy, officers had enlisted stewards to perform the routine housekeeping chores. The feeling had been that this would free the officers to concentrate on the more important command functions necessary for the safety of the ship and timely performance of its mission. During my term at the Academy, there had been an egalitarian-minded reform group with access to the Chief of Naval Policy at Federation Central on earth (his wife's cousin was the group's leader) who had pushed through a number of changes, among which was the abolition of personal service as “demeaning” to the enlisted men. I had as a child always hated cleaning my room. The prospect of being free from that and similar chores was an important reason for my choosing to become an officer. In my heart of hearts, I suppose I always felt cheated that they changed the rules after I signed up to play the game. Of course, there were other compensations for the extra responsibility of being an officer, but on this and similar occasions I had cause to regret the Officer's Paradise Lost that would never be mine.

This thought had become so routine with me that I had finished thinking it in less time than it took Taub to put on his white gloves, switch on his “dirt gun” (our slang for the inspector's flashlight), and begin his inspection. I couldn't help thinking to myself, “Taub, you old so-and-so, I outfoxed you this time by being prepared!”

Like all inspectors, Taub always found something to mark as a deficiency. He snooped and rubbed his white glove every place he could think of. A small but noticeable amount of dust will accumulate on any surface after only a few hours, but I had cleaned up so recently that his glove never got a mark on it.

I figured that I had it made when he opened up my sports equipment locker. Then I remember: the blood on the racquet! Taub had his back to all of us and we couldn't exactly see what he was doing. He turned around just as he finished removing his gloves and I barely noticed a brownish stain on one of them. "I've had it now," I thought.

"Mark Lieutenant Justin as satisfactory, yeoman. Justin, the Captain expects both of us at mess in thirty seconds."

The inspection was over in less than two minutes. Taub's efficiency hadn't suffered from the vigorous R-ball game, although I was feeling a bit tired myself, which after all is half of the reason for playing in the first place.

I didn't have much time to wonder why he had seemingly thrown away the opportunity to give me a perfectly well-deserved unsatisfactory mark. I raced up to "A" deck and made it to the table with ten seconds to spare. Taub sat down five seconds later.

I usually love G.F.N. chow. We have access to the foods of dozens of civilized worlds and even some uncivilized worlds—the uncivilized ones have the best food of all! It can get a bit stale after a few years in the deep freeze, but I still remember the Q-rations they fed us on earth when I was a civilian (another good reason to stay in the service) and the memory always improves my appetite for anything else.

Tonight's dinner, though, left me as cold as I eventually left it. After an unpleasant half-hour of staring at my uneaten food, I finally dumped the plate and utensils into the recycle chute, drew myself a hot cup of cocoa-coffee, and sat back down at the left side of Captain Wu to await the usual after-dinner conference.

As Weapons Officer and third in command on the Rheingold, my place by tradition is to the left of the Captain. Commander Taub, the Executive Officer and second in command, by tradition sits immediately to the right of the Captain. The other officers can sit as they wish, with the unspoken rule that senior officers can sit closer to the Captain than junior officers if they desire to. Several junior officers, who had received their meals and started eating after the Captain, noticed that the Captain was finished and so they quickly dumped their plates down the chute, finished or not, and began preparing the tables and chairs for the conference. Keeps them from getting fat and lazy.

Captain Wu tapped her cup with her laserpen for attention and the room instantly quieted. Louise Wu was the sort of person that one instinctually respected, trusted, and obeyed. Friends who are more inclined to the mystical than I claim that in a previous life she was empress during the Ming Dynasty in China on earth (if you remember your ancient history) and, in those days before political and economic equality for women, was the real power behind the throne of a weak husband. Whatever the truth of that financial tale, everyone knew she had a great future and could rise as far in the Galactic Federa-

tion power structure as her ambition would take her. She had already rejected dozens of proposals of marriage to key figures in politics and commerce, marriages that could have been springboards to the Chairmanship itself. We all suspected, and she never denied, that she loved the independence of command of her own starship too much to give it up for more mundane pursuits, whatever the nominal power planet-bound jobs might bestow. She was wise enough to realize that the normal course of events would promote her away from her command, but she was also wise enough not to hurry that day.

After the usual details of business, which scarcely captured a percent of my attention, the conference turned to the more important matter of the upcoming efficiency inspection by the Naval Office of Ordnance and Starship Equipment, or "NOOSE" as we always called them. Every officer on every starship will tell you publicly that NOOSE is vital for maintaining the operational safety of the fleet, and privately that he hates the guts of every NOOSE inspector he ever met.

It seemed to be a subject made to order for the officious Executive Officer. He hauled out a log book and proceeded to dress down, in person and detail, every officer in the room for errors and inefficiencies past, present, and future. He started at the most junior and worked his way up to me, of course.

"We come finally to the efficiency of the weapons group. As all of you know, this is an area where NOOSE will be concentrating. With pirates operating from a base somewhere in the Altair system, it is imperative that all starships keep their armaments operational at peak efficiency at all times.

"It really bothers me to say this, having the head of the weapons group as a personal friend, but our efficiency in this area is shockingly low." He pulled a memory card out of his log book and plugged it into the wardroom display computer.

"As can be clearly seen from these graphs of relative performance, our efficiency in every operation in the weapons department, from maintenance to power output to target tracking, falls well below equivalent ratings for the Flying Dutchman, our sister ship and squadron leader. If this persists, NOOSE will have no choice but to let the Dutchman continue for another year as squadron leader. I need not remind you officers what that will do to the morale in your sections."

What Taub was saying was, unfortunately, mostly true, even if he was hamming it up a bit. Captain Wu turned to me and said, "What do you have to say about this, Justin?"

I suppose I was tired from the R-ball game, confused about the accident on the court, and on the defensive about the efficiency of my department. That was no excuse, though, for what I replied.

"Captain, the Dutchman has been operating with the new Mark XX cannon system for a year and a half now. We got ours only three months ago. If you compare efficiencies for

equivalent break-in periods, we come out equal or ahead in most areas. If NOOSE doesn't like that, they can shove it down a black hole!"

Captain Wu gave me one of her you-screwed-up stares, although I didn't need it to know I had blundered. Wardroom etiquette demands that senior officers be respectful of authority when junior officers are present. Otherwise, the junior officers can become disillusioned too early, before there are better reasons for staying in than blind respect for superiors. I know this as well as anyone—I just seemed to have forgotten it for a moment.

"Lieutenant," said Captain Wu quietly, "you know that NOOSE does not care about excuses or some fanciful notion of fairness when it rates our efficiency. What counts is how well this ship can operate and defend itself if necessary, today—not next year. You will do whatever is necessary to insure that our men can be proud of their ship after the inspection."

"Aye, aye, Captain." She really put me in my place and I had it coming. She was right, too—NOOSE wouldn't care how long we had to practice with the Mark XX. The only thing that would matter would be our efficiency with it during the upcoming test.

I had the next eight-hour watch to think about what a fool I had made of myself. It wasn't really my turn to stand watch in the weapons pod, but I was doing a favor for an old Academy buddy who had a hot date that night. Her name was Katrina Petersen and I owed her one. Or a dozen. Without her help, I'd still be struggling through Freshman Tensor Calculus 101 at the Academy.

The Galactic Federation Navy has a double standard for dating between astronauts. The book says, "No." There are even some rather silly punishments for violating this rule, like polishing the outer hull of the ship. Any Captain worth his command reads between the lines and understands that the true purpose of this rule is to assure the politicians at home that the starships are not interstellar singles clubs. In practice, no one worries about dating as long as it is kept discrete.

Katrina and Wolf Big Sky had been close for a few months, but somehow whenever the duty roster came out of Taub's computer, they never had the same times off duty. It was either coincidence or another mean trick of Taub's. I couldn't do anything about it directly, but I was willing to go as far as making a technically illegal duty switch with Katrina.

Every person serving in the G.F.N. is assigned a "dog tag" when he begins duty. (The origin of this name is shrouded in ancient tradition, but apparently has something to do with an extinct earth animal that was one of the last food resources before Q-rations were introduced.) The tag is inserted into the computer console at the duty station before and after each watch or other assignment. The ship's computers record the crew member's performance and a condensed summary is incorporated in that person's permanent service record. For obvious reasons, "borrowing" another crew member's tag is a

serious infraction and the Navy does not look kindly on offenders.

I knew there could be unpleasant consequences if we were caught, but I figured that I could make some excuse about sending Lieutenant Petersen on an errand while I temporarily watched the weapons console. I also figured that going way out on a limb like this would retire a good part of my debt to her.

I relieved Wolf Big Sky and he gave me an ear-to-ear grin. He was a lucky guy. I inserted Katrina's tag and settled down to the usual eight boring hours.

Most of the watches in the weapons pod are uneventful. An officer is required at all times so that there is someone in authority to use deadly force in case the ship must suddenly defend itself from attack. The chance of this happening in the vastness of interstellar space is between zero and none. Most surprise attacks occur just as a ship is leaving a planet, because it is then that its trajectory is hardest to change to avoid the attack.

It is common for the officer on watch in the weapons pod not to touch the console from the time he inserts his tag to the time he removes it. This was essential to the success of our charade. Normally, each officer has a unique style when operating equipment. This style can be compared with past records by the ship's computers to verify that the correct tag has been inserted. In this unique situation, I was almost guaranteed to escape giving myself away to the computer.

As the hours passed, my thoughts always returned to the curious non-injury of Taub. Even more curious was his behavior at the surprise inspection. Undisposed blood is potentially the most serious of all grime aboard a starship. Most planetlubbers forget that every human being harbors in his blood amoeboid creatures that were the result of an accident in early genetic engineering experiments. There are normally less than a dozen of these beasts in the blood at any given time and they cause no trouble. However, when exposed to the activated xenon gas from a leak in a starship's fuel tanks, an amoeboid can grow very quickly to an alarming size and become a menace to the safety of the entire ship. When that happens, standard weapons are of no avail because the creatures are able to absorb energy or projectiles. The only solution is for some brave volunteer to duck by the amoeboid (which never goes far from the source of the xenon) and patch the leak or shut the open valve. Once the source of the xenon is removed, the amoeboid quickly dies of malnutrition and shrinks back to microscopic size.

That's what made Taub's behavior at the inspection so strange. Not only did he pass up a chance to give me a bad mark, the exposed blood was just as much a threat to him as to everyone on the ship. I should have cleaned it myself, late to mess or not. I'm sure I'd have had second thoughts about not taking care of it if he hadn't showed up. It would have been very unlikely, of course, that one of the few amoeboids in Taub

would have been in the small sample of his blood or that any free xenon gas would be in my cabin. No sense taking chances, though. I recalled that he was careful to remove all of the blood before leaving my cabin.

Wolf arrived eight hours later and gave me a knowing wink. Taub had scheduled Katrina to relieve him, and Wolf to relieve Katrina in turn after eight hours: It was so obvious that coincidence was out of the question. It had backfired on Taub, though, because it gave us the opportunity to switch without getting someone else involved. I removed Katrina's tag and left, congratulating myself privately at having pulled off two coups against Taub's schemes within one day: cleaning my cabin immediately before inspection and foiling his plan to keep Katrina and Wolf apart.

I stopped by Katrina's cabin on the way back to my own. We exchanged tags, smiles, hugs, but no words. I was feeling very sleepy and I settled down after returning to my cabin to what I expected would be eight hours of uninterrupted rest.

As I closed my eyes, the hatch to my cabin flew open and Taub rushed in, hollering, "Here he is! I'll get him!" He wrestled me off the bunk and rolled on the floor with me. It was as good a fake wrestling match as I'd ever seen on the 3-D. Two Marine burlies charged in as a xenon pistol I'd never seen before went skittering into a corner. The safety must have been on because the Rheingold is still intact and I'm still alive. The Marines hauled me to my feet as Taub got up and straightened his uniform.

One of the Marines was about to pick up the pistol when Taub snapped, "Don't touch that pistol, it's evidence!"

I couldn't help wondering how the pistol could be evidence of the illegal duty switch? I could see now that Taub had been setting us up and that we had played right into his trap. Polishing the hull would be the easiest punishment we could expect.

I was thrown into the brig immediately. That seemed unusually severe for this type of infraction. I had expected a simple confinement to quarters while off duty. I became suspicious that something much more important was going on when twenty-four hours passed without a word from anyone, not even my stone-faced Marine guards. I couldn't understand why Captain Wu would have let me be kept incommunicado for this long.

The guards opened the energy field around my cell the next day and led me to the wardroom. The tables and chairs had been set up for a formal court martial. The ship's central computer was connected to the wardroom computer and would serve as judge and jury in this proceeding. The twenty-four hour delay must have been for the transit time to beam the advanced judicial programming from the nearest Federation relay station. That alone meant the charge was serious.

Taub was sitting in the prosecutor's chair. Most of the officers were present, with the notable exception of Captain Wu. I wondered where she was.

The computer intoned, "All rise," and the room came to attention.

"This court martial is open in the year 2582, in the month 5, in the day 23, in the hour 9, on the minute 21. The Beings of the Federation and the Department of the Navy versus Lieutenant Joseph Henry Justin. All be seated except the defendant."

The officers and enlisted persons present sat down, except for myself and the guards. They wouldn't let their eyes wander from me for a moment, not even to blink.

"Lieutenant Joseph Henry Justin, you are charged with mutiny and the murder of Captain Louise Ming Wu. How do you plead?"

My knees buckled and the guards had to support me. The room seemed to swim and my vision narrowed down to a tunnel with Taub at the end. I must have mumbled something about, "Not guilty" because the computer continued:

"The defendant indicates 'not guilty' and so the record shall read. The defendant shall take his seat. Commander Bernard Xavier Taub, acting Captain of the Galactic Federation Ship Rheingold, shall act as prosecutor. Prosecutor, proceed with your case."

What followed next can only be described as a nightmare. Witness after witness swore under oath that he had seen me enter the command module, quarrel with Captain Wu, threaten to take over the ship, blast her with a xenon pistol, and run away. The pistol was produced as evidence and lab reports found not only my fingerprints but also traces of organic matter which had come from my body. No other fingerprints or organic matter had been found.

The most damaging evidence of all was the 3D record of those fateful minutes. It's standard operating procedure for starships to record the activities in the command module so that in case of accident or act of war, the cause of a ship's loss can be determined by a computer reconstruction of the situation. Bad command decisions can be reviewed and hopefully the rest of the fleet can learn from an unfortunate ship's destruction.

I sat in dumb amazement as I watched myself enter the command module, argue with the Captain, and shoot her, as the witnesses had testified. If I hadn't known I was in the weapons pod at the time, I might have believed it myself.

The 3-D record was Taub's last piece of evidence. He concluded his arguments and the computer said, "Does the defendant wish to call witnesses on his behalf?"

I was plenty scared by that point. I asked Katrina and Wolf to testify on my behalf, although I knew it would get them in trouble whether they were believed or not. Each quietly testified about our duty switch and the reasons for it. The computer record showed that a person, whom the computer assumed without

sufficient evidence to the contrary to be Katrina, had been standing solitary watch in the weapons pod when the incident in the command module began; that said person withdrew Katrina's tag as I was alleged to have threatened to take over the ship; and that Wolf relieved said person on schedule. It wasn't enough to stand against the other evidence.

The judicial program wasted no time coming to its decision:

"This court martial has weighed all the evidence provided by the crew members and computers of the ship. It is our judgment that the testimony of Lieutenant Katrina Noel Petersen and Lieutenant Wolf Big Sky must be discounted because of their personal friendship with the defendant. On the weight of the remaining evidence, the defendant is guilty beyond a reasonable doubt.

"Lieutenant Katrina Noel Petersen: You are hereby convicted of perjury and sentenced to ten years hard labor in the manufacturing colony on the moon Ganymede of the planet Jupiter in the Sol system.

"Lieutenant Wolf Big Sky: You are hereby convicted of perjury and sentenced to ten years hard labor in the mining colony on the planetoid Ceres in the Sol system.

"Lieutenant Joseph Henry Justin: You are hereby convicted of mutiny and murder and sentenced to be cast from the airlock of this ship in a Navy-issue recycling spacesuit from which the maneuvering thrusters have been removed, to spend the remainder of your natural days in interstellar space; sentence to be carried out immediately."

Katrina burst into tears, and I felt like it myself. Wolf stood up and asked, "Is there to be no appeal, then?"

The computer replied, "Convictions for perjury can be appealed and reversed at any time. Convictions for mutiny can have no appeal."

Wolf, always a fighter, wasn't satisfied. "Why is that?"

The computer seemed to hesitate for a fraction of a second. It must have been consulting memory in the mass storage archive.

"The earliest precedent for mutiny is to be found in the Coda Galactica which was intercepted and decoded from interstellar radio signals at the dawn of human science. It is stated there that mutiny is the most disruptive of antisocial behaviors and therefore society must take extraordinary measures to restore the broken web of interrelationships after this crime. Permanent solitary confinement and no contact with fellow beings is the prescribed punishment in the Coda. The next bits of information in the Coda were garbled by sunspot activity when received and a more authoritative copy has never been found. However, it is clear from the best reconstructions of the data that the circumstances for appeal or retrial are so unlikely as to be effectively zero.

"The conviction for murder could be appealed at a later date. The normal penalty for murder would be return to earth for execution. However, the conviction for mutiny takes precedence. It is the opinion of this court that the two charges are inextricably bound together.

"Are there any further questions? Does the defendant wish to make a statement?"

I sure did. "Taub, you slimy devil! You set me up! You're behind this and somehow I'll be back to prove it!"

The computer waited a few seconds after I finished my outburst. What else could I have done? Taub sat there with his triumphant grin.

The computer was ready to conclude the proceedings. "Is there any additional discussion? The record shall show no response. This court martial is closed in the year 2582, in the month 5, in the day 23, in the hour 12, on the minute 38." It had taken little more than three hours to dash my future to pieces.

Since the sentence was to be carried out immediately, the guards hustled me off to the airlock with Taub leading the way. They put on spacesuits while Taub directed Ensign Singh to help me with mine and remove the thrusters. At first, Singh refused because I had befriended him when he arrived with the ink on his commission still wet. I had gotten him out of a number of the scrapes junior officers typically get in and he was shaping up to be a fine officer. I didn't want to ruin his career as I had Katrina's and Wolf's, and so I shook his hand and told him it was O.K., that he should follow Commander Taub's orders and I wouldn't think less of him. He got my suit on, removed the thruster pack, and directed me to the airlock hatch. I felt something as he brushed against my utility pouch, but thought no more of it as the guards and I entered the airlock.

One of the guards closed the black plastic inner hatch and the pressure dropped quickly to near vacuum. The other guard unsealed the outer hatch, which promptly sprang open and released the small amount of remaining air. It was the last sound outside my suit that I heard. I faced the open door and the beautiful but cold and distant stars against the velvet blackness of space. I hesitated to make the final leap, and so the first guard gave me a kick in the seat of the pants that sent me spinning out of the airlock and into space. I couldn't blame him for how he felt; the evidence was all against me and the young Marines had regarded Captain Wu as their foster mother.

My spinning presented some difficulties in getting a good last look at the Rheingold as its engines turned on and it sped away.

After a few hours of spinning, in desperation I began to wave my arms and legs in a vain attempt to stop. If a body in a frictionless environment has a given quantum of rotational energy and cannot interact with another body, then it will spin for all eternity. My physics courses in elementary school taught me

that. My instincts, honed by a million years of dropping from trees on earth, told me to wave my arms and legs, and so I did. My left arm brushed against my utility pack and I was reminded of the incident with Ensign Singh. I reached in, and there was—a thruster pack! I knew Singh would catch it from Taub when the thruster pack was missed at the next inventory. I hoped he would remember some of the tricks I had taught him for getting out of trouble. Meanwhile, I was overjoyed to be able to snap the pack back in place on my spacesuit and stop spinning using the ion impulse jets. I said to myself, "Justin, you're in a heck of a pickle and no mistake." I laughed when I remembered that talking to oneself is the first sign of insanity in solitary confinement . . .

Well, that was yet another rerun of my sad tale. I'm now quite certain that total insanity is right around the corner. Wait a minute . . . I thought I saw a flash over there. There seems to be a faint ion trail leading in the general direction of the flash! My instincts tell me there's danger ahead, but if my life is to have another chapter, I'd better follow that ion trail

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