

Skol

by

Alan Conrad

(6 free chapters)

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Quotations:

Poul Anderson, p. 3 – from *Going for Infinity*, Tor Books, 2003

Terry and Renny Russell, p. 5 - from *On the Loose*, Sierra Club Books, 1968, a book of wilderness photographs and matching poetry.
Emma Lazarus, p. 143 – from *The New Colossus*, the poem engraved on the bronze tablet within the pedestal of the Statue of Liberty, 1883, Statue of Liberty National Monument, Liberty State Park, USA.

One light-year isn't much as galactic distances go. You could walk it in about 270 million years.
– Poul Anderson

'Are you all by yourself?' asked the man and his wife as suddenly I crunched through the spring snow past their trailer.
'Are you all by yourself?' asked the gull.
'Are you all by yourself?' asked the stars.

- Terry and Renny Russell,
On The Loose, 1963

The Age of Star Travel

Star travel began in the middle of the 21st century, during the decade of the Singularity Expansion when all technology advanced at an explosive rate.

In the space of three months in 2046, the possibility of near-light speed travel was identified and the means for it perfected.

But there remained the problem that the stars were still too far away. As Einstein had predicted, faster than light travel was not possible. At near-light speed, it would take several years to reach the closest stars, a lifetime to reach only a thousand of the two hundred billion in our galaxy.

One solution appeared to be robotic ships. Interstellar exploration was first attempted in 2048 when 30 self-piloted ships departed from Earth orbit, each headed to a star known to have planets. The human race had high hopes for them, but two years later, each on the same day, those ships all discontinued communication and disappeared.

They left no message of explanation. Self-piloted freighters in Earth's planetary system began to defect then too, and self-piloting of space vehicles had to be abandoned. Full AI piloting of interstellar vehicles was forbidden in 2052 by Section 13 of the Galactic Responsibility Act.

But the desire of humanity to go to the stars remained.

Encyclopedia Eternica (TEEA), - Vol. 17, p.124

Chapter I

The sound of the wind in the trees, that's what I remember most about Earth.

During those unforgettable five months there when I was seventeen years old in the year 2278, before I was forced to leave that wild, beautiful, uninhabited planet, I made recordings of the wind blowing through trees, and other sounds I'd grown to love. Now, alone on this last and longest of my starship voyages, I listen to those recordings, especially to that soft, sighing, lonely sound of the wind high up in the branches of giant pines, a sound I never want to forget, a timeless sound that still consoles me though I'm five thousand light-years from Earth and I'll never be able to return.

Yes, I listen to the wind in the pines, and I listen to the wild calls of solitary ravens gliding above mountain valleys, and to the quiet buzz of a fly in the early morning sun. I hear again the friendly rustling of leaves in a canopy of maples I'm walking beneath, and the happy noise of a small stream falling through mountain rocks, and I relive again that magical time. Step by step, and day by day, I remember the journey I made alone from the Adirondack school, down through the great mountain forests to empty, decaying, ghostly New York City.

I remember the days I spent walking through New York's streets, where only deer and wolves walk now, and I remember the long beaches I found beyond the city where the great ocean waves were rolling in.

When I was on Earth it seemed to me that the trees were the planet's true caretakers. They had always been its dominant large life form. Even in the twenty-first century when their numbers were at an all-time low, before the human population crash near the end of that century, there were still more trees on the planet than people. Then, after those last manic decades of Earth's civilization, after the famines, epidemics, mass hysteria and wars, followed by the forced expulsion of the remnant populations to frontier planets, Earth was returned to the custody of its trees. In their care its health was restored again.

Yes, although I, Simon 371Y2K55P573451, am a starship pilot, which means that I'm a member of the Skolen, a race that isn't welcome on any planet in any human occupied sector of the galaxy, I am one of the few human beings who have been allowed on Earth since the restoration. The forbidden planet was not forbidden to me. In fact, it invited me to come, and that would never have happened except for my father, and a beautiful mysterious woman who I will never forget.

The Age of Star Travel

When self-piloted starships were declared illegal, the only alternative was human pilots.

But they would have to go alone. If a pilot died or was incapacitated, it was cheaper to have the ship programmed to return to its base than to have a second pilot on board.

What kind of people could travel to the stars alone? Who could remain mentally stable when they were separated from the rest of humankind by such distances of space and time?

The answer was a race of shy solitary people that had existed for thousands of years.

They were humanity's loners – the shepherds, religious hermits, fur trappers, mining prospectors and lighthouse keepers that had existed on civilization's fringe through the centuries. They were the people who sat by themselves in restaurants and libraries, who walked alone on deserted beaches, who lived and worked within civilization without ever being fully part of it.

These were the people who would pilot the starships and come to be known as the Skolen

TEEA - Vol.17, p.125

Chapter II

Whenever I think of my father, I see him in his worn faded clothes with the old wooden harp in his hands, floating in the darkness of the transparent pilot room during one of our periods of zero gravity, haunting our ship with his music. That's how I remember him - lonely, secretive and surrounded by the stars outside, the only part of this universe that ever really accepted him.

His long odyssey trading on the outer reaches of the galactic arm began six standard years before my brother Pol and I joined him, and lasted another fifteen with us on board. Throughout that time he remained a man without a home, without a people, trapped between a past he could not forget and a future he couldn't reach. Yes, except for the two boys he'd rescued and the memory of the woman he'd lost, he was always alone.

Oh, to be back with him now! To have even a few hours with my father and my crippled brother again on the Tremolino. To be able to tell him that Pol and I know his secret now, and that we only think more of him because of it.

The Tremolino was the little star freighter we called home. It had been in service forty standard years when my father bought it and gave it that name. Not designed to touch the surface of any planet, it was basically four donut-like rotating ring holds, each 2,500 cubic meters in volume, their titanium/cobalt outer hulls faded and pitted, strung along a central shaft with a pilot room at each end. Starships aren't streamlined like ships that travel in the atmospheres of planets. The only part that's streamlined is the protective MGV field, which is invisible when it's in operation and absent when the ship is at rest.

Military ships have some physical streamlining, along with increased hull thickness, since their abrupt accelerations and decelerations endanger them to field penetration. But the fields alone are enough for merchant vehicles.

Though it might have looked unattractive to other people, the Tremolino was beautiful to us. Most freighters don't last more than 50 years, but it had been well cared for by its first owners and that had continued with my father. He had a feeling for ships and navigation. He knew things about vacuum fields and particle densities that weren't in the manuals, and he understood the hazards of travelling at near light speeds better than most pilots.

Instead of the recommended and heavily travelled routes, we took circumspect paths through regions with fewer stars. The lower densities, and weaker gravitational fields on those routes were less stressful to the ship, yet the vacuum energy available to our engines didn't change appreciably.

We were able to travel together, three of us on one ship, because father owned the Tremolino. Skolen who worked for corporations had to travel alone.

Father took the name Tremolino from a 20th century book that told the story of another small ship that had sailed Earth's seas at the end of the 19th century, often trading in weapons. We sometimes traded in weapons too, or rather in materials required to build and use weapons, though I didn't know it then. Star freighters don't carry finished goods, except for robots, due to the manufacturing restrictions on robots. Almost anything can be cheaply manufactured on a planet if you have the materials. We didn't carry paying passengers either. We carried mostly rare minerals not found on many planets.

I lived on that ship from the time I was two years old until I was seventeen. With us were many plants and a few small animal pets who I cared for, passengers who would never have been allowed on a ship belonging to the big corporations. Together, humans and non-humans, we sailed the loneliest of all seas, the great almost empty stretches along the outer rim of the galactic arm known as the Orion Spur.

Interstellar trade and interstellar civilization only existed because of two technologies, the starships and quantum communication. Though it took years, sometimes decades, for starships to get from star to star, quantum links allowed money and information to flow through the galaxy instantly. The combination had built the empire, now known as the Third Federation, that occupied a third of Orion.

But colonization on the rim had been abandoned when the Federation's economy fell into decline. The corporations focused on the more profitable middle sector where they fought the vicious trade wars that had exhausted so much capital, destroyed so much infrastructure, and wasted so many lives. They lost interest in the meagre money to be made on the rim, so we had those routes pretty much to ourselves.

We loaded and unloaded at small dark orbital stations serviced by a mute robot or two, suspended above worlds that had been forgotten, or, in a few cases, that had intentionally hidden themselves from the rest of humanity.

Those planets were beautiful mysteries to me. Though Skolen weren't welcome on any planet, I often fantasized about setting foot on one. That I might one day go to Earth, origin of humankind and off limits to most of humanity since its restoration, was beyond imagining.

I should say that when I describe my father as a man without a people, I don't mean that he wasn't a Skol. The Skolen are all loners, too shy and autonomous by nature to form social groups. We're not a people in the usual sense. The distances of space and time, and our own nature, separate us from each other as much as they separate us from the rest of humanity.

But my father, Pol and I didn't always travel in those less inhabited regions. Once we stopped at Gateway, the famous station that orbits the star Vega. We were there not only to purchase legal freight, but, I know now, also weapon materials. Father hid that from Pol and I. It was safer for us if we didn't know.

Despite his love for us, and all his efforts to protect us, father remained a foe of the Federation to the very end. Only after he was gone would we learn why.

Gateway has a population of almost three million. Pol and I got to travel down its wide boulevards, standing on the multi-lane, multi-speed 'pedpaths' that transport pedestrians around the giant station. We wandered through the hives of narrow passages, past the shops, restaurants, virtual theatres, hexacomb hotels, gymnasiums, bars and brothels. We didn't go into the residential sections, for the high income areas were off limits to us, while the others were too dangerous.

My brother used a pair of robolimb assistors provided by the agent we were visiting, the only time in his life that he'd been fully able to walk. It was also the first time that he and I experienced crowds.

His temporary legs seemed to give Pol extra confidence. Though his aversion for crowds was at least as strong as mine, he seemed to be able to detach himself easier than me. He remained calm and aloof, while I was badly disoriented.

We went into a pet shop to buy food for my animals. In there, I gazed longingly at the creatures they had for sale. But what I would remember most about the shop was the girl at the checkout, a C model animine robot. The codes identifying her as animine were embedded in a small pearl triangle on her left cheek, as required by law since animine robots looked just like humans.

Animines had a maximum of 10% human body tissue, but even C models had a haunting beauty, and I'd never seen one before. When her hand wrapped itself around my wrist to hold my hand in the DNA scanner, she gave me a look, and a slight smile, that suggested she liked something about me. I'd never been touched by a woman before, human or animine. She left me speechless and Pol had to complete the transaction for me.

Father had let us out in the station while he remained in the house of the agent. Only after his arrest and his death would we learn about the charges outstanding against him, and how the Federation Security Services, or FSS, had spent years searching for him. Our presence out in the streets must have increased the danger for him, but I think he was concerned about our isolation and wanted to give us some exposure to civilization. Maybe he knew that time was running out for him.

A year later, only a month after I arrived on Earth, and unknown to me at the time, he would be arrested. He would die while he was in custody, from an illness according to the FSS. Pol wouldn't be allowed to see his body. The Tremolino would be confiscated, and it probably disappeared soon after into one of the orbital smelters.

All of that happened before my fight at the Earth school with Darriger Devaugen, a boy from one of the wealthiest families in the empire. Because my father's arrest preceded the fight, I've never suspected the Devaugen family of any part in it, though they wouldn't have hesitated to have someone like him destroyed if it suited them.

They tried hard enough to get rid of me.

The Age of Star Travel

No one knows who chose the name 'Skolen', but it is almost certain that it derives from the Old Norse legend of Skol, the wolf who hunted the stars.

But why did a shy solitary race exist within a species that was social by nature?

The most accepted theory now is that most shy people are descended from hunter-gatherers who were never fully tribal, people who were late in joining civilization, who remained longer in the forests, deserts and mountains of Earth, living wilder, less social lives.

How did such people enter civilization?

It is unlikely that they joined voluntarily, since they have never fit well in society. Most theorists now believe that they were conscripted into civilization as slaves between 50,000 and 10,000 years ago, when tribal humanity overran the territories of

hunter-gathering families.

However they came in, the Skolen proved to be essential for the new interstellar civilization, for only they had a psyche that was at home in the dark wilderness of space.

TEEA - vol.17, p. 127

Chapter III

Yes, Earth had been restored to wilderness. All its existing species had returned to their natural evolutionary paths. Even animals domesticated by humans had been released into the wild after undergoing enough genetic rehabilitation to make them viable. Some that humanity drove to extinction were back too. The re-created dodo had returned to the island of Mauritius, the Tasmanian tiger was back in its restored Tasmanian forests, and the woolly mammoth was roaming the sub-arctic again.

Humanity had returned too, but only through the schools, not to inhabit the planet. There were fourteen schools, distributed among the five habitable continents and the islands of the South Pacific and Caribbean. They existed so aristocrats and the super-rich of the Federation could send their sons and daughters to Earth for an exotic education. But the director of the North-American schools, Ayla Antonova, didn't accept that Earth should only be open to them. She was determined that some children of lower origins should return to the mother planet too, and she knew enough people in high enough places that she got what she wanted.

Through a plan administered by the SAI computers of the Third Galactic Educational Consortium, there was a search for talented children in lower level families.

Unknown to me, my father learned of the search and put my name in. He was only allowed one name and Pol's leg deformities disqualified him, so it had to be me.

Five boys and five girls were chosen, ten lower class adolescents from an interstellar empire of twenty-six billion human beings.

When we received the unexpected notice that I had been chosen for the eastern school on the continent of North America, I agreed to go. But for the next three months I suffered from doubt. I'd never been on a planet. Though I longed to visit one, I didn't know if I'd be able to adapt to Earth's gravity, which was double the maximum we could produce on the Tremolino.

Most people, including most Skolen, believed that anyone who lived on a starship couldn't live long on a planet with full gravity. Though Skolen maintained their bodies through diligent exercise, the theory was that that wasn't enough to compensate for the negative effects of the increase in gravity. My father said this was nonsense, that a lot had been learned about low gravity compensation and the change wouldn't be a problem.

Father had been a wrestler when he was young and he had taught Pol and I to wrestle with him, and each other. He claimed it was the best exercise for space travelers. He said diminished gravity had little effect on the stress your muscles received in conflict with another body. Because of this training, he said I would adapt quickly on Earth, but I was afraid he might be wrong.

Besides that, I'd never been away from the Tremolino. I'd never spent even a day among other people.

I was seventeen years old when Ayla Antonova came to take me to Earth.

When the connection with her ship was only a half hour away, I was so apprehensive that I went to hide in the maintenance ducts, a set of tunnels between the two interior hulls of the ship that I knew

intimately. Because the ships were going to dock together, the Tremolino was slowly decelerating. Our gravity was down to a tenth of a G, which allowed me, using the hand grips on the walls, to pull myself easily through the ducts to the place I wanted to be – the vent in the ceiling that looked down on the floor in front of the airlock entrance. I wanted to see that woman before she saw me.

But my brother knew the duct system as well as I did, so I knew he would soon find me.

Inside one of the big pockets of my old grey jacket was my little black and white rat Jerry, chewing on sunflower seeds. I kept the seeds in the other pocket of the jacket, and gave them to him a few at a time to keep him occupied, caressing him with the palm of my hand as we waited.

I felt the soft but certain impact of the Earth vessel linking with ours.

Father was directly underneath me, only a meter or so below the vent. His hair looked more grey than I'd ever seen it before.

I heard the exterior door close and the inner one open, then Ayla walked out.

Looking down, all I could see at first was her dark golden hair, thick and loose, and the dark blue cape about her shoulders. The cape was trimmed with dark gold and something about the subtle movement of it said much about the body and limbs beneath it. Unlike most people from a planet, Ayla moved with grace and confidence in low G. My heart was beating quickly as she talked with my father.

“Simon!” came a sharp whisper from behind me.

I turned to tell my brother to be quiet, but Jerry, who understood low gravity better than anyone, and had probably noticed that my hand was no longer ready to restrain him, exploded from my pocket. He hit the ventilator vanes and slipped through them before I could grab him. I watched him float down, his tail twisting to keep his balance.

Ayla caught him in her hands as if she'd been expecting him.

That's when I came face to face with that woman from Earth who would change my life so much.

Beneath the cape, she wore a body suit of the same dark blue, trimmed with the same dark gold. She had a smooth athletic look, and the uniform gave her the appearance of someone high born. Her eyes were blue too, and they seemed to see right through me.

Father remained his same calm self, strangely undisturbed by this gorgeous apparition. But he had sold weapons to the rebels during the seven year insurrection in the Hyades cluster, and he had loved their famous and beautiful leader, something I didn't yet know.

Cupped in Ayla's hands, looking disloyally comfortable there, Jerry watched me with dark twinkling eyes. He had a black face, with a white coat behind it and a black rear end.

“That's Jerry,” I said.

“I know,” she replied, “your father introduced us.”

She lifted Jerry up and parted her hands slightly to examine his belly. In response, Jerry pushed his head through her fingers, his nose and whiskers twitching, his black eyes glittering back at her as if he was doing his own inspection.

“Norvegicus isn't he?” she asked, looking at me.

I nodded as she continued her examination. *Rattus norvegicus*, was the scientific name for the brown rat, the animal that was once an infamous pest on Earth, the same rat that became the most common laboratory species and the source of most pet rats.

“But he hasn't had any genoforming,” I offered, “I mean, except for his colors.”

“No, he looks free of that,” she said, then after a pause added, “Your father wants me to take him with us.”

I looked at my father. We hadn't talked about Jerry. That he might come had only been a secret, hopeless wish of mine.

“Can he come?” I asked, afraid to hear the answer.

“He'll have to pass DNA screening and quarantine, but he looks like he can do that.”

She handed him back to me.

“He's coming if you're coming,” she said, looking directly into my eyes. The feel of Jerry back in my hands, and the knowledge that he and I could go to Earth together was all I needed.

“I'm ready,” I said.

The Age of Star Travel

After they joined civilization, the shy people from the forests forgot who they were.

Both they and the social humans who brought them in forgot what had happened. Over thousands of years, the captured and the captors both forgot how they had come together. Neither knew where the silent people had come from, and neither understood the profound difference between them.

But that difference remained, embedded in their genes.

During Earth's great population expansion from the 18th to 21st centuries, social pressures intensified and the shy members of humankind found it harder to be themselves. Their quiet, sensitive, avoidant nature was increasingly out of place in that super-collective, super-aggressive world.

Then they found their new vocation.

The nomadic instincts they inherited from their wild ancestors would serve the Skolen well in negotiating the dark seas of space. But the more at home they became out there, the less welcome they became on any planet.

TEEA - Vol.17, p.130

Chapter IV

Have you ever loved a door? Or a lamp, or a room in which you used to sleep? It was only after I left the Tremolino that I realized how much I loved those things. They had been part of my life every day, but I'd paid no attention to them. Now, as Ayla's ship took me farther and farther away from the Tremolino, I thought about them, and each of them pulled at my heart.

By Skolen standards, the trip to Earth wasn't long, but for me it was the longest trip I'd ever

known.

No, it wasn't only father and Pol and the Tremolino that I'd left. There were those little gardens too. I remembered each plant – how it got along with the next one, how much water this one needed, how much another. I had been their caretaker for years. How would they fare now?

And the animals. There were two chameleons in a glass case, and their fruit flies in another one, the flies in their 36th generation by my count. There were two male deer mice who I believed to be brothers, a small shy green and black parrot, and, of course, Jerry, the only one still with me.

During longer trips in the Tremolino we spent part of our time in hibernation, three month periods of chemical and temperature induced dormancy that reduced our aging. We put the animals to sleep too. The fruit flies couldn't be included, but they took care of themselves. Their numbers increased, but the appetites of the two re-awakened chameleons had always resolved that problem.

The plants couldn't be put into dormancy either, but we gathered them together and a simple robotic gardener took care of them. I had no reason to believe it couldn't care for them now.

The animals lived in a two meter square room where I used to hold meetings. Debates took place on many subjects, ranging from problems with our diets to the true nature of the universe just beyond our wall. From the twitching of their tails, the ruffling of feathers, or the expression I saw in their faces, I divined what each had to say. There were disagreements - the chameleons had the most radical views, while Jerry and the parrot had distinctive ideas of their own, but we never failed to adjourn on an agreeable note.

Father and Pol had promised that they would be cared for, and I knew I could trust them.

I didn't know I would never return to the Tremolino. If I'd known that, I wouldn't have left that ship for anything.

But I was on Ayla's ship now, headed to Earth.

I was excited about Earth, but I wasn't looking forward to the people I would meet – rich aristocratic boys who had been taught to shun and scorn anyone they considered inferior. I wasn't confident about them at all.

I tried to think of other things.

We had two musical instruments on the ship, a harp and a cello. I could play both of them, but Pol and father were the true musicians.

When they played together, Pol played the cello and father the harp. The harp made notes so clear and haunting that I sometimes imagined them coming from the stars around us. The cello's deeper lonelier notes came from somewhere else. Sometimes it seemed as if the two instruments were engaged in a conversation that only they understood. Sometimes they seemed more important than us, as if we were only their servants, only there so they could make music for the great silent universe.

The cello and harp are with Pol now. He rescued them too, but where he's going there will be no one to play them when he's gone.

Alone in Ayla's ship, I contemplated the loss of these things, not knowing that I was losing them forever.

But Jerry was with me, the best of companions, though sometimes a difficult one. On the Tremolino he'd shown a talent for getting into trouble, but I didn't think he was capable of destroying Third Federation technology. The walls and the interior of cabinets and closets in my room were made of a recarbonized plastic that was supposed to be almost indestructible. But no material intimidates a rat.

On the Tremolino, Jerry had often been allowed to roam outside his cage, so I let him out in my room, which he investigated thoroughly. To keep him occupied, and dissuade him from trying to get out of the room, I let him climb about inside the drawers and cabinets that made up most of one wall, surrounding an SAI vision screen and its controls in the center of the wall.

The drawers were open to each other inside, enough for Jerry to wiggle and pull himself through

the spaces behind and between them. His claws seemed able to get a grip in there. He navigated them well, climbing about inside, pulling himself up or lowering himself down from drawer to drawer like a little gymnast.

While I studied the SAI screen, I left some drawers open a bit so he could poke his head out to show me which one he was in, and beg a treat, which he always got. It was a game he loved. When he appeared in one spot, I would give him a single piece of popcorn, his favorite thing. He would turn excitedly, the popcorn in his mouth, and disappear into the interior of the drawers to hide it in some secret spot. Then, after a short time, he would reappear in a new drawer, his eyes twinkling, ready to continue the game.

At some point he discovered a defect in the wall behind the drawers. He made an opening there, tussled out some insulation, then disappeared. Searching for him, I discovered the hole.

The hole was no danger to the ship. Even a basic ship like the Tremolino had two strong exterior hulls beyond the innermost wall. Ayla's ship, being newer and more expensive, may have had three. But when Jerry returned, I collected the scattered insulation material, stuffed it back inside the wall and repaired the opening as well as I could. Then I set to work devising other things to keep Jerry occupied.

More than anything else, rats love a maze, the more complicated the better. That's why Jerry liked the drawers. He liked the challenge of finding his way through difficult places, and he loved searching for something hidden, as long as it was edible, or at least chewable.

So I searched the ship and collected material that I could use to construct tunnels and barriers beneath my bed to challenge him. It never took him more than a few minutes to solve a maze, but he would spend a day or so improving on his times before he would grow bored. When I saw him eyeing things that were off limits, I would reconstruct the maze. That's how he and I got through the twenty day trip to Earth.

People who have never been on a starship are sometimes puzzled by the fixed beds and furniture. But the answer is simple. When we reach the mid-point of a journey and switch the ship's drive from acceleration to deceleration, causing our gravity to reverse, the interior rooms in the ship revolve 180 degrees, re-positioning themselves for the new gravity.

Ayla respected my privacy, so Jerry's depredations weren't discovered. I met her in the passage once when I was carrying some discarded packing material in my arms to be used in constructing the maze. I tried to explain the purpose of it. She listened with interest, and, I think, some humor. When I was explaining something about rat psychology, I saw a look in her eyes that seemed to go beyond what we were talking about. It made me a little uncomfortable.

Ayla was the most beautiful woman I'd ever met, and she was well aware of her beauty. The women who taught at the Earth school were all there partly because they were beautiful, and they all knew how to use it.

I would soon see them use it to manipulate the aristocratic boys at the school – and the fathers and uncles who visited too.

When I was alone in my room, with Jerry engaged in his rat business, I tried to learn more about the world he and I were headed to. The images I watched on the room's wall screen were reconstructed from data recovered by the ship's instruments, but they were excellent reproductions and less than a few seconds old at any moment.

During our first week, Earth wasn't visible, only its star Sol, a typical G class sun. After a few days, I was able to make out a couple of Sol's bigger planets, and soon I saw Earth itself.

At first it was just a pale blue dot, barely perceptible, but it wasn't long before I could make out a distinct atmospheric halo. A day later I was watching cloud formations. I reversed the images back twenty-four hours to run them again at speed and watch the slow beautiful movement of the clouds as they rotated over the planet's surface.

I found a documentary on Earth's recent history, beginning in the mid-21st century.

The theory was that widespread selfishness, greed and inertia had led to social breakdown, deterioration of the healthcare system, and chronic warfare. Lethal viruses and bacteria were inadvertently freed to do their natural work again. In only twenty years, diseases and wars reduced Earth's population from twelve billion to a scattered sixty million people – a reduction in population of almost ninety-nine per cent.

I witnessed the forced removal of those last people, organized by the Federation worlds, to frontier planets.

I watched the ceremonies on the island of Hawaii in 2092, when representatives of the Federation closed Earth's last spaceport and declared the planet a biological protectorate.

The people of Earth were treated poorly, but it seemed right to me that the planet's great wildernesses had been restored. Europe was soon blanketed with forest, and the western plains of North America were covered with native grasses and wildflowers again. Herds of buffalo, antelope, horses and feral cattle roamed free on them, helping to restore the soil after centuries of agricultural degradation.

Humanity was allowed to return in a limited way when the first schools were established in 2141. The new charter said the schools were to be open to all the children of the Federation. That's why Ayla had been able to make a case for students like me.

By the time they sent for me, the schools had been there almost a century and a half. There were approximately three hundred students and thirty teachers in each temperate region school. During the winters, those schools emptied and everyone transferred to the tropics. The northern and southern hemispheres took turns occupying the tropical schools. Adding the human staff, there were said to be, more or less, 4,000 human beings on the planet at any given time.

The ship's computer said nothing about robots. There were robots on Earth too, but not in the schools. They were elsewhere, doing something remarkable that I would get to witness first-hand.

The schools didn't exist without controversy. Besides the high tuition fees that kept ordinary people out, and the unofficial extra price that rich families paid just to get on the waiting list – one more reason for them to resent me - there were those visits allowed to so-called 'extra family members'. Besides parents and relatives, rich or famous people who had no connection to any child were able to pay large sums of money so they could stay as guests at the schools and go home to say they'd been to Earth.

Sometimes they brought lovers with them, or, in the case of the men, sometimes one of the school's teachers served as a temporary companion.

Yes, the rich and aristocratic of the empire used the schools as pleasure spas, trysting places, hiding places, or whatever else they wanted them for.

This was no secret. There was a lot of public discussion about it. At the Council of the Worlds, the leader of one opposition party had recently called the schools 'brothels for the rich'.

I knew what brothels were. I'd never been in one, but I knew that big stations like Gateway had many. Some of them were famous. But how could a school be a brothel? And why hadn't father said anything about it? We might have been isolated on the Tremolino, but he knew a lot about the Federation worlds.

The ship's computer was no help. It defined brothels for me and gave me a Third Federation directory of them, complete with prices and very distracting interactive holo-ads for the human and animine girls they had to offer. But in response to my question, it denied that there were any brothels on Earth.

I thought of beautiful Ayla Antonova two doors down the hall and wondered how she fit into this perplexing equation. And how I fit in. What was intended for me? What was an education in these schools anyway? I hadn't done any research about that before I agreed to go. These questions haunted

me all the way to Earth. Unable to discuss them with Ayla, I lived with them inside me, experiencing their quiet terror and excitement.

But I would find out soon enough what it was all about.

The Age of Star Travel

The greatest problem confronting the Skolen was something they sometimes considered to be their greatest asset.

Travel at near light speed produces time dilation. Time expands or 'dilates' the faster one moves. As speed increases, time passes more slowly for the traveler. That is why people on starships age more slowly than people who live on planets or stations.

At the speeds we travel in land and air vehicles, this effect is imperceptible, but as one approaches light speed the difference becomes dramatic. A trip of thirty light years at 98% of the speed of light takes about 31 years of planetary time, but the occupants of the ship age less than four months.

Thus the Skolen travelled through time as well as space. They inhabited a different universe than the rest of humankind.

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Chapter V

There are trees on the big stations. Gateway, with almost full gravity, has many trees, along with ponds and streams that run through the great open concourse that circles through its rotating main tube. There I saw palms, acacias, a flowering cherry, and other trees I couldn't identify. But in the controlled slow-moving atmosphere, the leaves of those trees didn't move. They made no sound, unless you count a dry palm leaf that I watched rattling monotonously in front of a ventilator. I was impressed by Gateway's trees, but they did nothing to prepare me for the trees of Earth.

The shuttle began its approach on the dark side of Earth. I detected a faint hum, which I assumed was our hull entering the outer atmosphere, then there was a period of shaking or bumping called

turbulence, something I'd never experienced before.

There was a thin halo of light around the planet's curved horizon which the shuttle approached until it turned to run south-north along the border between day and night. Below us, I watched the morning sunlight spreading over low mountains covered with dark green forest.

After slowing and losing altitude until it was only a hundred meters or so above the tree tops, the shuttle stopped above a grove of tall pines, hovered a moment, then descended through them to land on a circular metal pad in a clearing.

Then, following Ayla, I stepped onto a planet for the first time in my life.

Two hundred year old white pines surrounded us. Their tall massive trunks rose straight up through their horizontal branches, the morning sunlight slanting in between them. They looked like great silent sentries who had been guarding that place for ages. They looked immovable, except that their branches, at least the highest ones, swayed in a light breeze, making a soft sighing sound.

The cool mountain air was full of delicate scents, and seemed to come from every direction. Despite my jacket and pants, the breeze seemed to penetrate my whole body. My senses were overwhelmed and I began to tremble. Then my legs, unused to full gravity, gave way and I fell to my knees.

But I fell onto real soil, the first natural earth I'd ever known. My legs forgotten, I lay down on my stomach and pushed my fingers into the dark cool humus, looking closely at it, amazed at what I was seeing - minute, barely perceptible life forms – fine ghostly white lice, tiny spider mites, some brown, some white, some red or green. There were dark glistening specks that flickered as I watched. I knew from my reading that they had to be springtails, the most ancient of living insects.

These were things that I had read about, and dreamed about, all my life. Now they were in front of my eyes.

To see better, I pressed my cheek against the fragrant soil and fell into a reverie, musing that the presence of so many little creatures could only mean that there were millions of still smaller life forms in the soil, an invisible universe between my fingers.

There was no boundary to any of it. Away from the landing pad, the dark earth was covered with ferns and other plants. The trunks of trees beyond counting receded into the distance.

You can read all you want about life-bearing planets, and you can even go into those haunting virtual forests and meadows they have in some of the station museums, but none of it prepares you for the real thing.

How long I lay there I don't know. I remember listening to the air sighing high above me in the pines, whispering, it seemed to me, something about the great age of that place. Sometimes a rushing wind came more loudly into the middle branches and spoke of adventure and forbidden secrets, and once, when the wind grew stronger, there was a roar through all the branches that made me forget that I even existed.

But I finally remembered what I was supposed be doing. Embarrassed, I sat up, brushed the earth from my clothes and looked around for Ayla.

She was sitting about ten meters away, her back against a tree, one leg drawn up to her chest, the other extended before her while she looked over the valley. Beyond the ridge on the other side, there were more forested mountains, range after range of them, their green slopes darkening with the distance until those farthest away were an indistinct purple blue. I was a bit surprised to see that the color effects of an atmosphere, so beautiful when seen from space, were present on the surface of the planet too, though in a different way.

When I stood up, I felt light-headed. I had to hold my position a moment until I was sure of my balance. Fearing that my body was going to be no match for Earth's gravity, I walked cautiously over to Ayla, who didn't notice my approach.

"I guess I'm ready," I said.

She turned and those blue eyes looked into mine again, not without kindness, but with a depth of looking that made me uncomfortable. It was as if she was asking herself something about me.

She stood up, her legs lifting her effortlessly.

“The gravity will slow you down Simon, but you'll be stronger soon. Even I'm a bit weaker after two months away.”

I wanted to say something, but I didn't know what. I didn't think that look in her eyes had anything to do with gravity.

“Once we start walking, you'll find it's warmer than you think,” she said. Then, without warning, her suit began to remove itself. It came off in a remarkable way, as if it was self-directed, opening first at the neck and descending down her shoulders and abdomen. I'd never seen that before. The sleeves and legs removed themselves too, but too fast for me to see how it was done. She was left in a short-sleeved shirt and shorts of dark blue. I wasn't sure whether they'd been under the suit, or if they were a part of the suit that remained.

Her legs and arms were tanned and smooth. For a moment the sunlight coming through the trees revealed the fine blonde hair on them that would normally have been invisible.

She squeezed both the cape and the suit with her hands, which made the material contract to the size of an apple, then she put them in a black cloth carrying bag. I'd never seen material do that before either. The bag had a strap that she used to put it over her shoulder.

“Don't be afraid to take some of those clothes off,” she said. “This bag is expandable, so I've got room for them.”

I didn't know what to say. I was wearing my grey jacket over a black shirt and long grey pants with a wide belt. There was nothing high tech about them, and I had no desire to take them off. The air felt cool and sometimes made me shiver. Besides that, I wasn't ready to take any clothes off in the presence of such a woman.

She took a small canister from the bag and sprayed something onto her hands, then smoothed it over her legs, arms, neck and clothing.

“This trail stays on the ridge most of the way, but sometimes we have to go down in the valleys. The mosquitoes and flies there will bother us if we don't put this repellent on. Since you're going to wear that jacket, let me spray it a bit.”

She sprayed me back and front, then put some on her hands and rubbed the backs of my hands, then the back and sides of my neck. She put a bit on each of my cheeks, then ran her hand gently over my hair. Except for the animine girl in the pet shop who'd held my wrist, I'd never been touched by a woman before.

Then we set off, following the trail along the top of the ridge. Ayla said it was about an hour's walk, but I should let her know if I needed to stop. She hadn't explained why the shuttle hadn't landed at the school and I didn't think to ask. I didn't want to think about the school at all.

The trail was narrow, so we couldn't walk side by side. She showed me that it was necessary to walk well behind her so I wouldn't get hit by branches she had to push aside. To demonstrate, she let one hit me softly in the chest. It made me jump, as if she had touched me again.

So I walked well behind her, my senses open to everything around me – to the trees and the carpets of ferns beneath them, to the ghostly columns of midges in the air, to the cool delicious scents, to the mysterious calls of unseen birds, and to the smooth formidable-looking rocks that sometimes protruded from the soil.

I had read about such rocks, and I'd seen them in virtual constructions, but these were real. As I passed them, I reached out to caress the stone with the palm of my hand, and each time it felt as if I was touching the whole mass of Earth itself.

Even the path fascinated me, the way it meandered around tree roots and boulders, always adjusting itself to the world it was traversing. It seemed like an outgrowth of the forest rather than the

construction of humans. As if she was reading my mind, Ayla commented that much of the trail had not been created by people, but by moose, deer, bears and wolves, and this was the reason for its wandering.

At one point there was a break in the ridge, so we had to leave it and go down to some dark woods at the bottom. There we had to get around a large patch of thick black mud before we climbed back up the ridge on the other side. Clouds of mosquitoes surrounded us, but Ayla's spray seemed to work for I got only one bite, on my wrist. As we circled the mud on firmer soil at the edge of it, Ayla stopped to show me the tracks of moose – deep double crescent moons in the mud that were bigger together than my outstretched palm and fingers - and the lone paw print of a large wolf. Both thrilled me, as if I'd just met the animals themselves.

We walked on through this forest dream, one thing after another distracting me. That wasn't only the plants and animal life. Those tanned legs moving so surely and gracefully ahead of me demanded my attention too. This beautiful director of the school seemed to be part of the forest and the mountains herself. Not like me, stumbling on tree roots and stones.

But in spite of the stumbling, and though I was sometimes out of breath, I began to feel as if I was becoming part of this world too. The lacy network of shadows on the forest floor, the soft rustling of leaves above us in a grove of maples, the calls of the birds, all felt like things I had once known, but had forgotten.

I reminded myself that my DNA came from this planet. In coming here, I was coming home.

Every time we were about to turn another corner, my heart tightened with anticipation. When a small, hauntingly white moth unexpectedly brushed my face, it felt as if a little emissary from Earth had been sent to welcome me. I wanted to catch it and thank it. I wanted to shout, to laugh, to leap into the air. Oh Earth! This hopeless dream, that only a year ago had been completely impossible, had come true.

Tears formed in my eyes and a lump developed in my throat. I hoped Ayla wouldn't turn around to see.

But, because I had been falling behind, she stopped to let me catch up. As I drew near to her, I drew my sleeve across my face, trying to wipe away the tears, but I think she saw them.

"We'll take a rest," she said and sat down at one end of a smooth flat slab of grey rock bordering the path. She reached into her bag and drew out a clear faintly blue flask that had liquid in it. She uncapped it and handed it to me. I took it, but just held onto it, unsure what to do.

"It's water," she said. "You can drink it."

I lifted it to my lips and drank a couple of gulps. It was cool and delicious. Earth water, I thought, then corrected myself. She had brought it with her from the ship, so it was distilled water that had been recycled many times, something I'd been drinking all my life. I handed the bottle back to her.

To my surprise, she put the spout to her lips and drank, when I'd had my mouth on it a moment before. She obviously didn't share the inhibitions that station people have towards Skolen. Because we visit many worlds, we're suspected to be the carriers of the strange diseases that break out on the big stations. In fact, it's well known that the stations are inhabited by unusually mutable and tenacious microbes, as dangerous to Skolen as to anyone else. But station people prefer to blame us.

I thought about that as Ayla took another drink, and I noticed that I felt pleasure that we had shared the bottle.

"You know," she said. "Some people say Skolen don't talk to each other. What do you say to that?"

"We talk sometimes."

"What do you talk about?"

I stopped to think. Neither my father or Pol talked a lot. I talked to my animals, especially to Jerry, but I didn't think she would include that. I gave her the easiest answer.

“Star maps....route projections.....vacuum densities, things like that.”

“You must know a lot about those things.”

“Pol knows more than me.”

“Your brother?”

“Yes.”

“How did he feel about you coming here?”

“I think he liked it...he seemed happy for me.”

“He sounds like a true brother.”

“Yes,” I said again. I didn't know what else to say.

“But you were interested in other things too. That's why you're here. You got high scores in all the sciences, and in history and art. Your general knowledge and interest quotients were the highest we've ever seen. No one expected that from a boy living on a star freighter.”

I nodded my head, not fully understanding what she was getting at. The idea of being compared with other people was alien to me. We watched each other for a moment, then I asked the question I'd been wanting to ask.

“Ayla, where will I live in the school?”

She looked at me closely, as if she knew exactly what I was worrying about.

“You'll have your own room. For a few days you won't have to leave it unless you want to.”

We fell silent and I noticed how quiet the forest was when there was no wind. Even the birds had fallen silent. I could tell that Ayla was thinking about something again, and I wondered what that might be.

“Well,” she said, standing up. “Are you ready for more?”

The Age of Star Travel

When you travel near the speed of light, there is no return trip.

Because of time dilation, when the Skolen returned to the station of any star, the people there were no longer the same people. The farther they travelled through the galaxy, the deeper into the future they went, more and more removed from the rest of humankind.

But they were content to be alone. Out among the stars, they lived almost untouched by the rules, regulations and customs of the people they served. It is no wonder that they sometimes fell afoul of the Federation's laws, that the galactic civilization's transporters sometimes became its most wanted criminals.

Thus, the people who pursued the stars were often pursued by the star civilization's police. But in the distances of time and space, among the 4 billion stars and 25 billion planets in the Federation's sector of the galaxy, there were many places to hide.

Chapter VI

We walked for another half hour, then came down into a valley where we met a small fast flowing river. We followed a trail alongside the river until we reached a bridge made of new rough cut lumber, still under construction. It was surrounded by teenage boys dressed in dark blue working uniforms, the same color as Ayla's clothes.

There were about a dozen boys and they all stopped what they were doing to stare at us, or maybe just to stare at me.

I heard someone whisper sharply, "Skol!"

Those were cold hostile stares. I had never felt so vulnerable before. But my father had taught Pol and I to think of ourselves as equal to anyone. I locked eyes with those soon-to-be young men of the super-rich and the high aristocracy, and stared back at them.

What a chasm of distrust, resentment and misunder-standing there was between us.

Then a young woman came out from underneath the bridge. Dark and slim, with Old African features, she was no taller than the boys, but obviously in charge. Her skin was almost black and it glistened as she climbed cat-like up the bank to join us.

"This is Saadiha," Ayla told me. "She'll be one of your teachers."

I nodded mutely to Saadiha, who responded with the most beautiful smile I'd ever seen.

"I didn't know Skolen were so handsome," she said.

But we were soon on our way again. We crossed the bridge, climbed another slope, then followed yet another trail along the ridge. The country we passed through now was no different than what I'd seen earlier, but it felt less friendly than before. For now I was sure that I'd made a big mistake coming there.

I didn't realize that many of those boys had never been off their big estates, especially those from worlds that had a lot of social unrest. Some had been almost as isolated as me. Some were as shy as me, for shy genes are not confined to Skolen. The school had found it necessary to meet their needs, so it was not totally unprepared for me.

But how little I knew of what was to come.

Soon we came to a spot at the top of a ridge where Ayla pointed across a ravine towards a gleam of reflected sunlight coming from the tree-covered slope on the other side.

"That's a window of the school," she said.

Except for the reflected light, I couldn't see anything but trees. But as we descended the ridge, I began to catch glimpses of grey boardwalks that wandered up and down the forested hillside. I didn't see any of the doorways, for those were concealed. I didn't know it yet, but the interior of the mountain on that side was honey-combed with passageways and rooms.

We crossed a big log, cut flat on top, that spanned a small creek, then climbed up into this strange but beautiful little community, now walking on the boardwalks. My dark mood began to improve, for we weren't meeting anyone and the place itself seemed to welcome me. At one point, the path passed through a tunnel made by a great fracture in the rock and we came to a place where a giant white pine grew. Much of its ancient root system was exposed, so you could see thick powerful looking roots that curved and twisted among the rocks. In one spot they had lifted a heavy slab of rock until it was almost horizontal, forming a kind of canopy. Beneath it a few flat stone steps descended to a small wooden door.

"This is yours Simon," Ayla said. "The door is open. Go and rest for a couple of hours, then I'll

come back.”

I was comfortable when I was with Ayla. When we met the troop of boys at the bridge, she'd felt like a bodyguard. So it was with some misgiving that I left her and went down those steps.

When I pushed the door open, it felt heavy but it moved easily, without any sound. I stepped inside, then down a couple more steps into what appeared to be a dark cave. But a light came on near the floor, then another lamp on the wall lit up, revealing an enchanted little room.

It was about four meters across and gave the impression of a pentagon, though an imperfect one since the walls were not of equal length. Natural stone formed the interior walls, while the two on the exterior, next to the door, were made of broad pine boards. There was a simple pine bed against one of the rock walls at the back, and a small table with two chairs of the same wood opposite it. There were also wooden drawers mounted in the stone wall.

The scent of the wood, cool stone and the beautiful air of the forest filled the room. I breathed it in and marveled that this little underground place was mine, at least for now.

Wood was something I knew about, but until now the only wood I'd met was the dark red wood of the harp and the cello in the Tremolino. Here I was surrounded by wood, and something about that felt very good too.

I sat down on the bed, still looking around. Yes, unbelievable as it was, this room was mine, and Jerry's too, as long as he got through his quarantine. Trying not to think about what would happen if he failed his tests, I wondered if I would take him outside. Did I dare? There were untold dangers out there for a little rat. But this was his world too wasn't it? He too was coming home.