

Chapter 1

monstr-um –i n (latin) *sign, portent, wonder; warning; monster, monstrosity; atrocity; monstrous event*

“I saw the dull yellow eye of the creature open; it breathed hard, and a convulsive motion agitated its limbs.”

*Victor Frankenstein
Frankenstein or The Modern Prometheus
by
Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley*

The eternal, black vacuum swallowed the pyrotechnic display with indifference reducing Bounty’s plight to insignificance. Half of her support fighters nipped at the enemy warship, but generated only mild annoyance. The other half struggled to shield their mothership from the attacker’s accurate canon. Bounty’s regenerative hull laboured to rally against each enemy punch.

Klaxons ripped through her bridge. Laser cables slithered from consoles and snapped into brief explosive deaths. The transparent battle view flickered, threatening to blind the crew. One by one vital sensors blinked off. Her captain barked orders; her crew scurried over debris.

“Captain -- Chief needs you in engineering. Four crew down” The communications operator cursed, “...just lost internal com!”

“Re-establish!” Quinn roared over another hissing cable. The Bounty vibrated with a starboard strike throwing the com-operator off her station into unconsciousness. In two strides he reached her, found a faint pulse, and bellowed into his wristband, “Medic – bridge – now!” He turned to the com station and viewed a blackened mess. “Damn,” he swore in a low growl. “Commander, take the bridge.”

“Aye, Captain,” Sinclair answered in a tight tone.

“Order all Spider fighters back to Bay. They’re getting pulverised, and we need the extra hands on deck. Patch communications through your wristband if externals are offline.” Quinn found one working lift out of four and entered.

“External com still operational, Captain,” Sinclair shouted over as he ordered in the fighters.

Quinn flicked his eyes heavenward when the lift door jerked shut. As he descended to the engineering deck muffled sounds of battle followed him, and puzzled him. The Karlonians had changed tactics by evolving their normal defensive perimeter stance into an offensive push. How far would they take it? Although alerted, by the time Earth sent reinforcements the Bounty could be a cracked and bleeding shell. The lift stuttered to a stop and the auto door slid open only enough to allow Quinn a sideways squeeze. He marched down the corridor where the sickening noises of a distressed ship sounded much worse than the bridge. Engineering rang with a desperate timbre. Quinn clambered over a twisted girder to reach the main centre console. Four broken bodies guarded his progress. Each right arm lay out from the human pile in an unnatural angle. Their wristbands, blank and silent, testified to a morbid truth.

Chief Browning scowled and jerked his head toward the fifth level catwalk. “They never had a chance.”

Quinn glanced up at a mangled mess of hanging metal. “Where’s Taylor?”

“Rerouting on level six south.”

Quinn adjusted his vision further up and to the left where the engineer, teetering on a damaged perch, worked and bellowed instructions to two of his remaining techs.

“We need to readjust the flows, Captain,” Browning reminded.

“On it, Chief.” Quinn set to work on the opposite end of the circular console. Seconds later the Bounty shuddered with a hit. A yell from above diverted their attention. Taylor dangled, fingers clutching the catwalk. The two techs scrambled to reach him, but the ship conspired with another quiver. The engineer’s tentative finger-grip loosened. Of all the sickening sounds Quinn heard that day, the engineer’s crack as he hit the deck would remain the most memorable. Slight hope chimed from his wristband. The captain lifted his wrist, “Doctor, we need you in engineering.” A snapping cable grazed the Chief’s hand. He snarled and swore as they raced to contain a fire flare. When next they raised their heads the engineer was on a hover bed being guided out of the engineering mayhem.

A strange and sudden silence swept the Bounty. Quinn’s wristband beeped and Sinclair’s voice broke the silent spell. “Captain they’re moving off.” Disbelief touched the Commander’s tone. “Do I call in the rest of the fighters?”

“Only the damaged – keep two squadron strengths on patrol.”

“I can take it from here, Captain,” Browning said. Although the Chief’s bearded face hid his concern, Quinn picked up on it with an intuition born of a decade working together.

“I’ll check on Taylor, Chief. Get that hand looked after.”

Browning grunted.

Quinn’s steps slowed as he patrolled the damaged ship. Even though the battle sounds were gone, the excrement of it remained. As he manoeuvred toward sick bay he checked on the walking wounded and examined bulkheads scorched by wayward laser cables. He paused outside the medical unit and straightened his jacket – a ritual of preparation.

The wounded crouched in every corner, and lined every bulkhead. Here the sights and sounds of post battle contrasted with the outside corridors where smoke drifted dreamlike. Lucia Whitelaw strode from diagnostic bed to bed ever vigilant at the unrelenting demand on her attention. The self diagnostic cubicles were full and dispensing supplies to the lesser injured. As busy as the doctor appeared she noticed Quinn and approached. She jerked her head to the right. “Temporary morgue is through there.” Her tone was caustic; her expression grim. Before Quinn asked she said, “There was nothing we could do for him. Massive internal injuries.” She paused and conferred with one of her medics, and then turned back to Quinn. “Come with me.” He followed the doctor and hesitated for a brief moment before stepping across the threshold where the quiet dead reigned and whispered a thousand remembered conversations. Quinn counted ten bodies in stasis tubes – ten invaluable crew members – ten devastated families. Lucia followed him down the centre. She didn’t speak as he paused by each tube. At the end of the line he walked up to the front of the final tube. The engineer appeared to be sleeping. Quinn closed his eyes, but the only image which surged forward was Taylor’s horrific fall. Brief anger surged when he opened his eyes and noticed a small shaved patch with a half inch incision on the engineer’s head.

He whirled around to the doctor and pointed to it. “Is that really necessary?”

“You know as well as I, Philip, that the tissue must be taken within an hour of death or it isn’t viable.”

“Must it be taken at all?” he growled.

She sighed, "In a perfect world, no, but we don't live in a perfect world." She paused and in a softer voice added, "In a manner of speaking he will live on."

Quinn grunted, "But as what?"

On the lower deck a large red dog yawned, oblivious to the plight of the Bounty and her crew. His companion scratched the dog's head, and flicked off the communication toggle. "Well, Mr. Christian that was a close call."

Mr. Christian lowered his head intent on enjoying the massaging movement the long fingers supplied. "Time for your walk," his companion said and stood to a striking height. Christian bounced to the door, tail wagging in anticipation to the promising tone. The tall figure waved his hand over the door sensor and Christian scabbled out to the mini eco system where he raced off to find a favourite bush.

"And so the story unfolds," the man muttered as he followed the red flash of fur.

"Ten dead; forty-two wounded," Quinn reported four days after the Bounty's battle.

"Any idea why the Karlonians have changed tactics?" the Admiral asked while staring out at a New London morning.

"None." Captain Philip Quinn shifted in the plush chair as he studied the Admiral's back, but, as usual, his superior's posture was unreadable. Even when the Admiral turned from the window to face Quinn, the Captain saw no emotive betrayal.

Admiral West looked down at his desk and tapped the computer plate Quinn handed him two minutes before. "You've lost your engineer." He looked the Captain in the eye. "We don't have a replacement for an experienced engineer." He paused. "You know what that means."

All too well, Quinn thought, and grimaced, "The doctor forwarded all pertinent tissue and information to the Temporal Ministry, Admiral."

West nodded once. "I'll see to the proper permissions." A slight sigh escaped him. "It won't be easy, but we can replace about half of your other casualties. Some of them will be damn green," he added as warning.

"As long as Bounty gets her engineer back, we'll cope."

The Admiral turned back to the window and raised his face to the brilliant sunshine. He grunted, "Transplants. Don't like 'em. Don't trust 'em."

"Nor do I, Admiral. Nor do I."

Twenty minutes later Quinn boarded the Bounty transport. "Temporal Ministry in New Edmonton, Ensign."

"Yes, sir. That will take about an hour, Captain," the young officer called back to the passenger area as Quinn loosened his jacket and sat down.

Quinn grimaced. An hour to think; an hour to brood, when dead faces would surface and condemn. Before reporting to Central Command he contacted the families in person. While not blaming or judging him, their eyes stabbed him with wet grief and a vulnerability which no one escaped. Any death triggered a twitch in the post-pandemic psyche where centuries of rumoured prophesy came to fruition. Without exception every family bore the same fate and consequence in the pandemic. Premature death, no longer random or unpredictable, tracked through every family the same way at the same time. Humanity struggled to overcome, but healing from the shared trauma would be a long time coming.

The transport dipped closer to the planet where the churning North American coastline caught his attention and coaxed memories from their shallow grave. Just prior to the pandemic's initial

strike Charlene won him over with a suggestion they move to the coast. She painted a picture of Oceanside breakfasts and walks along a breezy, sun-drenched shore. With effort the captain pulled away from the dangerous precipice of past plans and dreams, and back to more immediate concerns. Why the change of tactics from the Karlonians? And even more perplexing, why break off the attack when they held the advantage?

After Quinn had left sick bay and returned to the bridge he found Sinclair puzzling over sensor readings. Seconds before the Karlonian warship ceased its attack, the damaged sensors picked up two objects hovering on the periphery of sensor range. The timing suggested the new arrivals discouraged the first warship and in fact sent it into retreat. Yet because of the faulty equipment sensors confirmation was impossible.

The sound of the shuttle engine changed as the ensign began descent. The natural chaotic greens of the wild areas gave way to the uniform cultured green of civilization. The transport settled on a small concrete landing patch. "We're here, sir." The young officer announced.

Quinn zipped his jacket closed as he left the shuttle. Seven time zones separated him from New London, but the weather appeared the same. All major centres were climate controlled, and today the climate computers called for sun. Quinn remained amazed with humanity's paradox of progression and digression. Man could control his weather, but maintaining his own species remained elusive. "And hence the reason I am here," he muttered and looked over at a modest three storey building. It resembled a brick relic of the distant past. Nothing distinguished it as the Temporal Ministry except the typical nondescript government sign in front. Only as one approached the unmarked boundaries did one become aware of the building's special status through extraordinary security. Quinn's uniform did nothing to lessen the armed guards' enthusiastic searches, nor their insistence upon bio-screening. Once cleared Quinn was quick-marched through the building where several more security points were mastered. His escort led him to an alcove at the end of a long hall on the third floor where the guard instructed him to wait.

The building reeked of peace and calm. An attempt to put at ease any and all involved parties of temporal manipulation went way over the top and to Quinn's thinking accomplished the opposite effect. The blue walls were hypnotic, and the quiet Quinn noticed throughout his trek seemed most unnatural for a government structure where corridors usually hummed with activity. Uncomfortable with the peace surrounding him he gazed out the window where the green grounds only confirmed the odd peace.

"Captain Quinn?" a sharp tone intruded. "Captain," sharper yet.

"Yes," Quinn swivelled from the window, giving his blue leather jacket a quick tug as he held out his hand. It was ignored.

"Follow me, please."

Quinn quickened his usual stride to keep up to the white-clad figure. So quick and abrupt were the figure's movements, Quinn couldn't distinguish its gender. He supposed that didn't matter, but for some reason it irritated him. Even when the figure reached its objective and turned to face the Captain, sex remained indeterminate.

"The Administrator will be with you shortly," he/she flashed a brief, obligatory smile and scurried away.

Like the figure, the office lacked any defining features which might betray the character of its user. Unlike the rest of the building, all gleamed white. From the floors to the ceiling to the desk and furniture, sterile white glared back invading the retinas and caused one to stand straighter. Business remained the sole occupant. Quinn surmised the atmosphere it conveyed prevented

long discussions. So he was not surprised when the Administrator came in, and sat behind the desk without looking at him.

The dark clad man didn't fit the expanse of the room. The space augmented his diminutive stature. He concentrated on his computer plate, muttered and gnawed on his lower lip. Finally his head shot up, and he pointed to one of two chairs in front of his desk. "Please sit, Captain." Quinn took the other chair, and found to his amazement it was form-fitting and comfortable.

Once again staring at his complate the little man continued, "You realize of course the risks involved in taking on a transplant."

"Risks?"

He looked at Quinn again, and pursed his mouth. "They can become ... unstable."

Quinn frowned, "Unstable? How?"

"We're not sure how. That's what makes it risky."

The captain bristled with the tacit comment on his level of intelligence.

The Administrator popped up from behind his desk and paced. "A certain percentage becomes rather unglued, and sometimes violent. We call it burnout. Fortunately, we know most of the warning signs ... now," he grimaced. "I will forward all information to your ship's doctor. Are you still willing to take on the responsibility, Captain?"

"Do I have a choice?"

Quinn noticed an almost imperceptible lift to one corner of his mouth, "In this day and age? Not really."

"How long will it take?"

"Retrieval of the transplant takes no time at all from our perspective since we can manipulate the time involved; however, the transplant will require a minimum of two weeks for the transplanting process, and orientation to his new life."

Quinn drew himself out of the chair, deciding that the comfort had shifted to discomfort. "I have to be back at the perimeter in less than two weeks."

The Administrator stopped in mid pace and gave Quinn a sideways glance. "That poses a slight problem. Two weeks is the minimum time we allow. If they are put out any sooner the possibility of burnout increases." He resumed his seat, and drummed his fingers on the desk. The last burnout wreaked havoc on one of the research and exploration cruisers. Unbeknownst to the crew the transplant procured several ball grenades, and one evening decided to attack the rec area as he ranted indecipherable warnings. Damage to the ship included a hull breach, but even more devastating were the five techs he killed. The Administrator squinted and stared at Quinn. "I'll tell you what, Captain, if you sign a waiver and take added responsibility for the transplant I will drop the processing time to ten days giving you four days to return to the perimeter."

Quinn paused as he wandered to the window and gazed out at the serene green. Odd patches of blooming colour broke in and interrupted the grassy monotone. The natural scene only reminded him of the unnatural situation being forced upon him. How could he agree to something he had fought against? Yet – what other option was available?

"Captain?" the Administrator prodded.

"Agreed."

A computer voice interrupted. "Captain Randolph has arrived."

"Send him up," the little man instructed and explained, "That's the Hopper captain who will be working your case."

Quinn turned from the window. "Eli Randolph?" The Fates could not be this cruel.

"Do you know him?"

“We used to be shipmates.”

“So this is a reunion of sorts.”

Quinn frowned. “Of sorts.” This was not a reunion he ever anticipated with anything but foreboding, and only desperate need kept the Captain in the office.

The Hopper Captain sauntered in.

“Being introductions are unnecessary we’ll get to business,” the Administrator turned his attention to the complate.

Quinn acknowledged the tall newcomer with a slight nod. Some things never changed. Randolph’s careless treatment of the academy dress code was still very much evident. The wide open blue leather jacket hung like a limp dishrag. In place of the traditional turtleneck he wore an ancient styled tee shirt spouting some inane nonsense about happiness. Railroad tracks instead of one precise crease ran down the black pants. Athletic shoes replaced the regulation boots.

“Been a long time, Quinn.” Randolph’s mellow baritone filled the room. He kept his hands stuffed in his jacket pockets. The deep-set eyes narrowed at the Bounty captain. They seemed neither surprised nor triumphant. “Heard you had a bit of trouble.”

“Indeed,” Quinn said.

The lack of a traditional handshake went unobserved by the Administrator as he tapped on his plate.

Randolf settled into the chair Quinn discarded earlier, but unlike the Bounty captain, elected to enjoy the comfort. The Hopper captain leaned back, stretched out his long legs and rested his elbows on the arms of the chair.

“Captain Quinn has requested a transplant to replace his engineering officer....”

Randolf looked up with a bemused expression. “Really?”

Quinn bristled. “Desperate times call for desperate measures.”

“They must be truly desperate.”

The Administrator continued, “I’ve entered the requirement and profile disk into the computer which will be transferred to your ship, Eli.” He looked from captain to captain oblivious to the tension.

Randolf turned his attention to the politician. “What time frame?”

“The computer suggests the early twenty-first.” He held up his hand as Randolph started to object. “Given the unfortunate results of our last transplant, the computer is adamant about the time period.”

Randolf rose from the chair and leaned across the desk, his face taut. “The computer isn’t the one who has to risk the lives of his crew and the safety of his ship!”

“What difference does it make what time period is chosen?” Quinn asked.

Randolf straightened. “Besides all the space junk, rampant technological advancement in weaponry and tracking increase the risk tenfold.”

“Precisely why the computer suggested it.”

“I think you better get that laser wonder into refit,” Randolph hissed.

“The computer calculates a human taken from that period will have an easier adjustment to life in the twenty-third century, thereby reducing the risk of burnout.” His little eyes flashed.

“Need I remind you of our last incident?”

Quinn stepped in. “I thought all Hoppers were fitted with the latest in shielding and camouflage equipment.”

“The cam device rarely works, and the shields use too much power to operate for any length of time,” Randolph answered without taking his eyes off the Administrator.

“Weapons?” Quinn asked.

“Too risky. The computer might engage them at the slightest provocation causing untold damage to our own past.”

“You have no weapons aboard?” Quinn’s tone rose.

“Pistols only.” Randolph settled back into his chair. His last excursion to the period proved disastrous. Quick deployment of Earth based fighters damaged an engine as the Hopper moved in to pick up the transplant. It took two days to repair in a moon orbit. Upon reaching home base three of his crew quit; a loss any ship could ill afford. Randolph curled his lip, “What year?”

“Anywhere between 2005 and 2015. The era is high density for disappearances – bodies never found,” the Administrator confirmed after checking his complate. “So it won't take long to find a match to the brain pattern of the engineer. You'll be in and out of there two days tops.” He picked up his plate and made for the door. “Well, gentlemen, this concludes our business. Captain Quinn you will be notified as soon as the retrieval is complete.” He left the same way he’d arrived – without the benefit of acknowledgment.

Quinn snorted, “He could use a quick course in manners.”

“Not everyone is up to ‘code’, Quinn.” No further words were exchanged until they navigated the secure halls and stopped at the top of the entrance steps.

With his hands once again jammed into his pockets Randolph said, “You were the last one I expected to see in that office.”

“Like I said...”

“Yeah, yeah, desperate times, desperate measures.” He paused and studied Quinn. “I could refuse this mission.”

“And will you?” Quinn countered the unspoken challenge by lifting his chin.

Randolf paused. “If you, Captain Philip Quinn actually admit desperation, then you are truly in need.” He shrugged his shoulders. “Anyway I owe you one.”

Quinn's expression betrayed neither agreement nor disagreement.

Randolf continued down the steps. “I've got a crew to brief.”

Quinn grunted as he watched Randolph leave. He spoke into his wristband. “Ensign, it’s time to go home.”

Chapter 2

“... when I considered the improvement which every day takes place in science and mechanics, I was encouraged to hope my present attempts would at least lay the foundations of future success.”

Victor Frankenstein

Upon completion of the Hopper prototype one of the project engineers shook his head and stated, “Only an entomologist could love this thing.”

Although no bug enthusiast, Eli Randolph’s affinity for the homely ships outweighed that of any other ship in the fleet. They represented man’s ability to go beyond the accepted realms and to take a more proactive role in humanity’s future.

He entered the hangar and surveyed the monstrosity. With landing gear down it resembled a giant grasshopper and looked nothing like the original designs. Because of the vessel’s experimental nature, the need to modify during development created the insect characteristics.

A door slammed by the far corner of the hangar. Jimmy Bay, his second in command, strode across the hangar floor.

“Hey, Captain.”

“Jimmy.”

“We got a job?”

Randolf smiled at the young blonde. “Yep.”

“When to?”

Randolf gazed back up at the dark, green monster. “Get everybody together in the canteen. I’ll be in after I file a flight plan.”

“Yes, sir.” Jimmy bounded up the midsection plank to the top deck where crew quarters were located. He pounded doors and yelled, “O group in the canteen!”

Moans, groans and one, “Piss off, kid!” accosted his wake up call.

He continued to the stern down the spiral stairs to the lower deck, through a dark passageway, past the engine room, cargo bay, watchers’ consoles, sick bay and into the canteen. Like everything else aboard, the canteen was cramped. The specialized engines, computers, and reinforced hull sections challenged the humans for space.

Jimmy grabbed his coffee cup off the sideboard and slid it into a small alcove. “Coffee please – cream, three sugar.”

The computer identified the mug. “Your sugar request is too high for optimum health, Lieutenant Bay, and will be decreased.”

Even though he expected the response Jimmy rolled his eyes. “Just pour.”

Paul Kramer, the ship engineer, sauntered through the doorway first. Soon all eight were assembled with mugs in hand and waiting when Randolph stooped through the hatch.

“Good day, people.”

Low mutters and wide yawns responded. Sleep remained the main casualty of a recent two week portal shift.

“What’s up?” the stocky engineer asked.

Randolf poured a coffee, leaned against the front sideboard and grinned. “In a word -- transplant.”

A chorus of complaints erupted.

“And the best part . . .,” he looked from face to face. “We're going back to early twenty-first.” Uncomfortable silence followed. Randolph allowed a few seconds for the news to sink in and continued. “The Bounty lost her engineering officer during a Karlonian attack, and there are no matches here.”

“Why the early twenty-first?” Kramer asked.

Eli slurped his coffee. “According to the Administrator there's more of a choice, and since the inhabitants are already living in an age of swift technological change, the computer calculates there will be less transplant shock, and reduce the burnout factor.”

Kramer glowered, “I don't like it. Mid twentieth is safer”

“When do we go?” Jimmy asked.

“As soon as you finish your coffee.” Eli tossed his back and replaced the cup. The crew murmured among themselves. Eli left to prepare for departure.

As Jimmy entered the cockpit, Randolph finished coordinating the preliminary temporal programming. He looked up as the co-pilot squeezed through the small hatch. “How are the natives?”

Jimmy shrugged. “Restless, but they'll adjust.” He waited until Eli slid his chair along the track back to his pilot station before taking his co-pilot position.

The front half of the three-person cockpit was a transparent dome where the sensation of being part of space felt all too real. Before Jimmy, many co-pilots who couldn't overcome their sudden agoraphobic tendencies filed through the position in rapid succession.

Behind the pilots, the ship master computer, and communication post completed the cockpit. Tracks along the deck led from each crew position to the master computer, giving every member direct access. The engineers promised to remedy the convoluted system when time permitted, but priorities rarely allowed for the luxury of a non-essential retrofit. The cockpit crew had developed an elegant ballet to deal with the tracking afterthought, and no matter how hot a crisis escalated they never crossed paths.

“You didn't have to accept this, Eli,” a feminine voice rebuked from behind. Sherry Waters, the communications operator, plunked down at her post.

Eli gave a broad smile as he turned to face the forever-glum officer. “Hey, Sunshine.”

She curled her lip and turned her attention to the console and screens in front. Sherry was a vital link between them and survival. While they orbited twenty-first century Earth, she searched the planet's communications, listening in for possible situations brewing if the Hopper were sighted, and instructed the crew on how to avert unwanted close encounters.

“Incoming from Kramer, Eli,” she stated without looking up.

“Paul,” Eli responded.

“Ready down here, Captain,” the engineer's voice shouted above the drumming of his engine room.

“So soon?” Eli asked, surprised.

The voice growled, “Engines hardly cooled from portal duty.”

“Sherry, check on the others.” Affirmative voices drifted through her console.

“It's a go, Captain,” she announced.

“Clear us, Sherry.”

Within three minutes they hovered above the cross-shaped hangar complex. The insect shadow cast gloom and menace below as its legs retracted. With swift silence the gloom lifted as the craft shot through the layered atmosphere. Eli's heart skipped a beat with the surge of

adrenaline produced by the abrupt appearance of space. Not even eight years of repetition prepared him.

“Incoming from the Perimeter Defence Cruiser Bounty, Captain,” Sherry announced with a surprised lift to her voice. PDCs and Hoppers didn't communicate unless necessary. Although considered a valuable addition to the fleet by most, the Hoppers were judged as unruly and not up to 'code'.

“Hopper One, this is PDC Bounty,” an unfamiliar voice relayed, “wishing you success, and a speedy return.”

Randolf smiled, and manoeuvred the Hopper in a circular pattern well above the Bounty's bridge. Just like Quinn to do the polite and proper thing. “Roger, Bounty. Hopper One out,” he acknowledged.

To the Bounty and Earth only a few hours separated the Hopper's departure and return, but ship and crew would age many days before they crossed back through the portal.

“Portal course plotted, Captain.”

With a light touch on the console Eli directed the ship and the Hopper accelerated, leaving only a thin trail of light in its wake.

“Ten minutes to portal,” Jimmy chanted.

The portal, discovered fifteen years earlier on the other side of Jupiter, remained inactive for the first five years. Eli and Quinn, during their research and exploration days, discovered the anomaly which defied explanation. It didn't fit the parameters of any theory either past or present. Randolf and Quinn stumbled into the small space tear with their Class 5RE pod while mapping the trajectory of a rogue asteroid. For twenty seconds they battled for control as the pod bounced between invisible barriers. Once expelled from the anomaly the two young officers were faced with empty space where the RE mother ship should have been anchored. A quick reckoning by Quinn using sensors and astronomical markers told the astronauts their position remained the same despite the violent ride. As Eli monitored Earth communications the answer to their dilemma clarified. They had jumped back in time two days.

When the two young officers came to grips with the situation they spent the next 48 hours experimenting and debating. Using the data collected by the pod on their ride through time, they programmed several probes with varying angles and velocities, and discovered an emerging geometric pattern similar to a game of pool. Velocity acted as the pool cue, and angle determined ‘when’ the probe arrived. Once they collected and documented all the information possible the two men were left with spare time which escalated into debate. What to do with the anomaly? Eli believed all data should be turned over to higher authority who could evaluate its validity. After some contemplation Quinn disagreed, pointing out the potential damage to Earth and its history, and consequent present or future, if such a discovery fell into the wrong hands. Eli questioned what gave them the right to withhold such a monumental discovery? Quinn cited chapter and verse from the Research and Exploration protocol which stated the release of potentially hazardous discoveries lay with the ethical consideration of the discoverer. What could be more hazardous to humankind than to have the tools to play with history? With some reluctance Eli agreed with Quinn, but not with his insistence upon deleting the files. Against his better judgement Quinn agreed to place half the collected material in his personal files and half in Randolf's so neither one could gain exclusive use to the portal. They erased all relevant documentation in the pod. To prevent further accidental discovery they positioned a warning buoy outside the location which informed any wayward traveller that the presence of an unknown gas in a weak orbit affected all propulsion systems. Such buoys were always heeded.

For five years the portal stayed a secret until an unknown virus brought by an unknown carrier tracked through Earth's population in pandemic proportions.

People across the globe dropped like insects being bug-bombed in a closet. The population teetered on the brink of being unsustainable and the last bastion of defence became quarantine. While the science community discovered how to detect the virus, they were powerless to stop it. Cultures and families were ripped apart as the uninfected were spirited away and the infected were left to die in private homes and government institutions ill-equipped to provide proper care or dignity.

Remaining scientists in all fields entered a war against human extinction. Life extension and artificial intelligence advanced like never before, but humanity didn't stop there. Concerted efforts were expended on study of the human brain. Transplantation of one person's knowledge into another without destroying the recipient evolved from the archaic rat experimentation of the twentieth century to a viable twenty-third century fact. Death no longer meant the end of one's expertise. Transplants were poised to fill the gaps the other advancements couldn't, but because of the decimated population suitable matches became rare even after the viral trek weakened with distribution of a vaccine. A devastating side effect added further complications. The survivors of the modern plague often suffered infertility bringing the future of the human race into question.

Humanity needed a solution and Eli decided he had one. He contacted Quinn with a proposal that they combine their five year old files into an answer. With the resources of a world government, opening the portal and harvesting the past of missing persons was at most two years away if the anomaly proved to be a stable passage through time. Quinn expressed horror and refused. All Eli's counters to Quinn's objections came to naught, but Eli would not be deterred. He presented his proposal to the Central Government with proof of the temporal anomaly.

To his surprise the governing body not only received the idea with enthusiasm, but pushed to explore the possibility. Unbeknownst to most on Earth, rumours of a hostile alien presence loomed and the Central Government needed any and all solutions to the population problem. If the alien rumour proved accurate the fleet needed expansion, and while they could draft the able-bodied from land based positions that were becoming more automated, the question of replacing crew in a quick, efficient manner had to be addressed. Quinn was contacted and ordered to hand over the rest of the files. In compensation they gave him command of the Bounty a little earlier than expected.

The project whipped into action. From the rudimentary records engineers refitted a small exploratory ship with Eli as commander over a two person crew. For two months they experimented with various time distances until they finally reached the twentieth century and started mapping the missing from old Earth computers. The most reliable records came from the latter half of the twentieth century, and the first quarter of the twenty-first. Post 2025 record keeping was vague. Man's advancement and dependency upon global communication and economics proved to be a double edge. Terrorism infected the interconnected system and collapsed it. People scrambled to scratch out the basics of life. Food and cargo shipments no longer made their destinations. Cities teetered on the edge of barbarism when the lack of oil plunged them into regular and persistent blackouts. Another dark age swept into history, yet like centuries before, a second renaissance evolved. Mankind dusted off the self-help books, dragged out all the alternative energy theories and set to recreating civilization. Earth spent the next five decades getting back on her feet, and no one wanted to risk the slow healing. Thus, the first rule of temporal travel was created – no travel beyond 2025.

“Coming up on the portal, Captain,” Jimmy informed.

“Hopper Two wishes us good hunting, sir,” Sherry relayed the message from the other ship on duty.

“Buckle in,” Eli's order resonated through the ship.

Eli stared ahead at the ripple in space. “Computers set and ready,” he intoned and manoeuvred the giant insect into position. Each crewmember braced for the sudden acceleration.

Noise and sensation were nullified. Absolute dark folded the ship and crew into a temporary mini-death. Automation grabbed control as disorientation seized the crew.

When they popped from the portal an alarm triggered Eli from his stupor. He smiled at the reappearance of the stars one more time. Unbuckling, Eli turned to Sherry. “Well, Sunshine, are we where we're supposed to be?”

Already monitoring, Sherry announced, “2011 -- Northern Hemisphere is in winter -- January.”

“Course plotted for Earth orbit, Captain.”

“Thank you, Mr. Bay.” His mouth straightened into a thin line. “Let's go get us an engineer.”

In a few minutes they orbited Earth between two discarded satellites. Eli set up the camouflage cloak. Even though visible, their cloaking efforts would confuse any detection devices on the ground or in orbit.

“Captain,” Sherry frowned, her attention still on the board.

Eli swung around. “Did they spot us?”

“No,” she answered, “But they could.” She glanced up from the console. “They're sending up a shuttle in four days.”

“Damn!” A cat and mouse game only worked until they had to break orbit and collect the transplant. Then the shuttle would spot them. “I'll talk to our snoops ... see if there's any way they can move this along.”

The Watchers, or snoops as Eli coined them, were psychoanalysts trained to pick out the best subjects. Nine soon-to-be missing people with similar brain patterns and body chemistries to the dead engineer were chosen from the Hopper's extensive records, and over the course of a week their lives were dissected and watched with a room full of sensitive surveillance equipment.

Eli tensed as he hunched down through the Watcher's hatch. Losing three days of observation would not be well received.

“Uh oh,” one of the Watchers groaned as Eli walked in.

“What?” Eli asked.

“The only time you walk in here this early into a mission is as the bearer of bad tidings.” Louise folded her arms across her chest. “Out with it, Eli.” The other two swivelled in their seats, and centred attention upon the Captain. Nine screens observed nine unsuspecting subjects in the midst of their daily activities.

Eli jammed his hands into his pockets and shrugged. “There's a shuttle launch in four days.”

“Come on, Eli, this is hard enough to figure out in seven days,” Louise protested.

“Maybe not,” one of the Watchers said as he turned back to his consoles.

Louise walked over to his station. “What have you got, Jacob?”

Eli followed behind, studying the three observation screens in front of the young psychoanalyst.

“Good profile here, right age, good match, medically fit for almost immediate duty and,” he grinned up at Louise and Eli, “she goes missing three days from now in a deserted location.”

“Name?” Louise questioned.

“Harriette Calder.”

Chapter 3

"Whence, I often asked myself, did the principle of life proceed? It was a bold question and one which has ever been considered as a mystery; yet with how many things are we upon the brink of becoming acquainted, if cowardice or carelessness did not restrain our inquiries."

Victor Frankenstein

Quinn stood at the front of the bridge and watched the Hopper's Jupiter-bound stream of fading light. A strange, conflicted expression twisted his features for a moment.

"Captain?" Sinclair called from the communications console. "The Hopper is away."

"I am aware of that, Commander," Quinn's controlled tone held an edge.

"Of course, sir."

In a softer manner Quinn asked, "So what do you think about this whole Transplant idea, Commander?" He turned from space and studied his second officer.

"As I see it, sir, we don't have much choice."

"But if we did have a choice, what then?"

Sinclair pushed his fingers through his hair and frowned, "I'd have to refuse the offer, Captain." He paused before continuing as if choosing his next words with great care. "There are rumours, sir, rumours that Transplants may not be as reliable as their press might suggest."

Quinn smiled, "Diplomatically put, Commander. That being the case I will expect you to be extra observant when our new engineer arrives."

"Yes, sir."

Quinn tugged on the edge of his jacket and strode to the lifts. "If needed I will be in my quarters."

"Aye, Captain."

The tube opened fifty feet from his cabin. A curious quiet paralyzed the passageways. Only a negligible hum from the life support equipment marred the silence -- a transient ghost ship. Most nonessential crew were planet-side enjoying an unforeseen break in duty.

His cabin door recognized him coming down the passage and opened with a tiny pop of suctioned air. Similar quarters housed all crew members. A narrow hallway branched off to a study and bedroom/bath then opened up into a larger sitting room.

Where many preferred a bright, sparse space Philip Quinn leaned toward a darker retreat. Except for his study, lights were a rarity. Small illuminators over the oil paintings in the hall whispered of a pre-millennial ancestral past. Sombre antique furniture touched the modern walls with dignity. Mono colour hand carved rugs soothed the bare floors, and deep red drapes splashed a daring dash of colour. His cabin was the antithesis of what he experienced in the bright ship.

Entering the sanctum always proved as beneficial as a masseuse's fingers. Muscles, joints and ligaments loosened as peace stretched over him. He threw his jacket into a nearby chair and spread out on the couch. "Brandy," he ordered. The knee-high robotic valet whirred into action and presented the amber liquid. With a brief command the heavy drapes parted and boasted a spatial view dominated by the globe of blue Earth touched with green and white. On occasion the view blinked as a repair technician followed by a platoon of electronic assistants jetted from place to place erasing signs of the Bounty's Karlonian encounter.

The encounter still puzzled Quinn. Why, when the Karlonians held the upper hand, did they cease their attack? In all the war history Quinn studied he'd never heard of such a lapse without some sort of logic. Yet – this was a war unlike any before in human history. One couldn't even really call it a war. No formal declaration was given from either side. The first attack by the Karlonians upon a human vessel occurred just after humanity started to fit the post pandemic pieces back together. A private research and exploration cruiser limped back to port with tales of an unprovoked alien assault. While Quinn considered the tales inflated, the wick to conflict was lit. Humankind ran with the threat deriving some sort of perverse enjoyment for physical conflict – for an enemy with a 'face' and not just simple viral cells. This need for a flesh and blood enemy created all manner of rumour until no one knew or cared to seek other possible truths. Tenuous attempts made by a sensible minority to communicate with the enemy didn't succeed because a righteous, swelling majority superseded all logical thought. Humanity stumbled into a headlong rush, and every incident or scrap of half truth armed the idea of threatened survival. Yet could they afford not to address even perceived danger? It didn't seem to matter anymore. They had long since passed any threshold of going back. Everything rolled blindly forward.

Quinn thought back to a pre-pandemic time when much more than the Bounty and the mysterious Karlonians occupied life. A time when exploration and the excitement of discovery dominated ... when his family was whole ... when his life was whole ... when guilt only occurred in a dictionary. His jaw clenched; his teeth ground together; his hand tightened around the snifter.

"Dr. Whitelaw to see you," the door announced in a tinny tone.

Quinn gulped his brandy. "Enter."

Lucia Whitelaw's simplicity begged attention. Short, blonde hair framed a triangular face. Individual features were plain, but stunned the observer when viewed as a whole. She leaned her head to one side and smiled, "Brooding doesn't become you, Captain."

"Brooding?"

"Philip, you're talking to a psychoanalyst who's known you for years. I've seen that look before and it's called brooding."

Quinn grunted and then sighed. "Memories and guilt, Lucia."

She scowled. "The worst kind of brooding."

Quinn held up his glass. "Brandy?" She nodded and he ordered two more. "So," he sipped, "is this a social call or otherwise?"

She settled into a wingback chair. "Bit of both. Sick Bay is actually empty for the first time in a long while." She laughed. "You'd think I'd revel in the peace," her face clouded, "but it's oppressive. I needed some company." Sipping on the brandy she asked, "How far did you get with the transplant request?"

"We were approved. Hopper One left a little while ago." He frowned.

"Good," she said. "Then all that transplant research I did while you were gone won't be wasted." She noted his frown. "What's wrong?"

He paused and sipped, the frown deepened. "It's not natural."

"What? Transplants?" She shrugged. "What is natural these days?" She smiled with confidence. "Everything will work out. Before you know it she, or he, will be a normal part of the crew." Her wristband beeped. "So much for boredom," she swallowed the rest of her brandy. "I'd better run."

Before leaving she turned, "Free prescription -- stop brooding and enjoy the spare time while you have it."

Chapter 4

“After having formed this determination, and having spent some months in successfully collecting and arranging my materials, I began.”

Victor Frankenstein

“Thank you for calling Dash. My name is Harriette. How may I help you today?”

“Why is my bill so high?” Seven out of ten calls started this way. At least her first call of the shift didn’t question her lack of intelligence in dangerous decibels. Could be a good sign, Harry thought. As she worked through the customer’s account and pinpointed why her cell bill teetered on the edge of insanity, Harry wondered if today she might be informed of her promotion from floor to office. For six months now the company promised her a promotion. The Bachelor of Arts Degree she had worked so hard for might be about to pay off. A move up meant more money and more time to pursue a graduate Degree for which she already had a working thesis.

A whine crept into the customer’s tone when Harry informed her the reason her bill ran an average of three hundred dollars per month for the last six months was due to per minute overages on her 39.99 monthly plan. If she were to change her plan to the 99.99 All-In-One she would no longer experience any kind of overages and her bill would be reduced by two hundred per month.

“But I can’t afford a hundred dollars a month,” she whined.

Harry shook her head. She was no math major, but even she could see the obvious numbers. The customer couldn’t grasp the logic, or she was fishing for a credit. So Harry dangled a twenty percent credit if the customer changed her plan today. Harry then checked the account history further and found several credits listed on the account – all due to per minute overages. Harry hit the mute button. “Definitely on a fishing trip,” she expressed aloud. Jenny grinned from the next cubicle.

“Can’t you just credit my overages today and I’ll think about the new plan?”

Despite working at the job for over a year Harry was consistently amazed and dismayed with the deplorable state of mankind’s integrity.

Harry pushed the mute off. “I’m sorry, Ma’am. The account has been credited several times over the last few months, and the computer system won’t allow any more unless the plan is changed.” Harry decided her white lie was in far better taste than her customer’s grab for cash.

“Fine!” the client’s phone etiquette changed in a blink. “I’ll just call back and get somebody else who’ll do their job and give me my credit.” The line buzzed closed.

“Not when they read my note,” Harry chuckled and tapped retribution over the keyboard.

Four more Why-is-my-bill-so-high, two new activations, and one screamer who Harry talked out of escalation by explaining details never before explained, found the CSR desperate to get outside for a break. The snowflakes were thick and menacing and didn’t bode well for an easy drive home when her shift ended. If the highways were too bad she could stay in town with her aunt and phone her neighbour to check on the kids.

When Harry returned to the cubicle her shift spiralled down at an alarming rate. Call after call found her fixing stupid mistakes made by other call centres which depleted her credits reserve. If it continued she would be credit blocked by the end of the evening. Because of the extra amount

of time she spent on each call her notes took longer and longer to complete. The ACW, or after-call-work, 'police' pestered her length of time offline for each call. Just as she was about to take her second fifteen minute break her supervisor called her over. He wanted to review her new CSATs. At least it gave her a few more minutes off the phones.

Her customer service reviews were dismal, but not because of customer complaints. The company had introduced copious more rules the previous week which lowered scores and in turn lowered bonuses. Her supervisor, fifteen years her junior without a Degree or Diploma of any description, proceeded to tell her she failed all ten evaluations due to her omitting the now accepted closing 'Have I resolved all your issues today?'. In fact Harry loathed the new closing and could not in clear conscience parrot it to her customers. It sounded inane and insulted any intelligence involved in the conversation and many times didn't come close to fitting the context. Any relationship built with the client over the course of the discussion degraded into cookie cutter treatment, and she prided herself in treating each customer as an individual. Her repertoire did not include pat answers and generic statements. So she continued to her break after the review and took fifteen minutes. A foot of snow had gathered around her car. She called her kids. Her fifteen year old son answered and reported the two younger ones were home safe and sound. "Listen," she said, "I may have to stay in town tonight by the look of this snow. I'll call Linda and she'll check in on you. If you need anything call her, and I'll be in touch after work."

"Don't worry, Mom, I'm not a kid."

"So you keep telling me. And don't open the door to anyone but Linda."

"Mom!" the tone accused her of taking her mother act too far.

"Love you," she added as the phone clicked into a dial tone. By the time she informed Linda of her predicament and asked her to look in on the kids fifteen minutes turned into sixteen and she scurried inside.

Her evening continued to degrade. Each subsequent call grew in intensity and she evolved from being a "dyslexic moron" to a "stupid-assed bitch", and several well-intentioned souls explained how she might improve her sex life with various cell phone parts. "Must be a full moon out there," she said to Jenny during a brief lull.

For two and a half days Jacob paid particular attention to Harry in his observation. Unlike his other two subjects, Harry coped with constant and varied challenges. Her house conspired daily through the abuse of water, and the car stopped or started as it pleased. Lack of finances drove her to uncertain creativity when trying to keep her services. An ex-husband harassed her phone every day, yet never provided the monetary support the courts ordered. Her children, aged fifteen, seven and five were surprisingly good, but typical kids nonetheless. Jacob wondered how Harry would react to the back basement window, and then realised she'd never see the damage a small wayward foot inflicted and now she dealt with a very ugly side of humanity. A segment of the population emboldened by the lack of face-to-face contact seemed to think it their right to berate without mercy. Jacob was stunned by the absence of restraint on the side of many of Harry's callers. His subject exhibited a patience and empathy he seldom witnessed.

"Well that's it," Louise said in disgust as she shut down her third screen. "The only one with any hope just murdered his mother-in-law. I thought the computer said there were more choices in this time frame. All I'm getting are more crazies!" She looked over at the other Watcher. "How are you faring, Peter my lad?"

The red head's eyes never wavered from his screens. "I had to shut one down. She was light-fingered." He sighed. "This one's no good either. He's a bundle of nerves with no mechanical

aptitude. He just mistook the accelerator for the brake and is now trying to explain why he and his car are sitting in a neighbour's living room." He rolled his eyes, and shook his head. "He'd be a fine one to let loose in a PDC engine room." Pete stretched and yawned, "The last one is hopeful."

Louise turned to Jacob. "How goes Harriette?"

"She prefers to be called Harry," he smiled, "and I think we've got a winner here. Patient and stable under adverse conditions; imaginative and quick on her feet"

"Sounds encouraging. Keep a close eye on her though. We don't want to send a closet pyromaniac to the Bounty."

"Is everyone there as stupid as you? Get me your supervisor."

Harry ignored the ranting woman's request, and explained with tight control for the third time, the long overdue bill must be paid before the system would reactivate her phone. Poking the mute button on, Harry muttered, "Hope you're listening to this one, Quality Control." She left the mute on, while the customer raved, just to cover any rancorous retort which might slip from her mouth. Leaning forward Harry rubbed her temples. All the while the client continued her tirade. Would this shift ever end? According to the phone clock she had two hours left. A hand tapped her shoulder, and she glanced around. Bradley, the senior supervisor motioned her to his office when the call ended. She nodded and pushed the mute off. Normally sympathetic to clients who struggled to meet their bills because of her own daily struggle, Harry's empathy disintegrated for this one since the start of her verbal assault. In a hard, blunt tenor Harry repeated the solution to reactivate the phone and asked, "Is there any other issue I may help you with this evening?" The woman stammered a curse and slammed the receiver of an old style landline phone. Harry put her phone into AUX three and closed for the benefit of Quality Control, "Thank you for choosing Dash. You have a good evening!" She massaged the back of her neck and sighed, "I need a new job."

Jacob chuckled, "You may have you wish within the hour, Harry."

The final decision rested with Louise. She paced between Jacob and Pete's screens weighing the pros and cons.

Jacob spoke up, "We've got about one hour on Harry, Louise. The police report says she disappeared between seven and nine p.m. We've got to make a decision soon."

"I know. I know." Louise snapped. "Damn it!" she cursed and paused, "Who's got the better chemical match?"

"Pete's does, but...."

"I know. It's not carved in stone. Give me another half hour."

"You're the boss," Jacob said returning to his screen.

Through Bradley's office window Harry watched snowflakes sprinkle the dark like summer fireflies. He shuffled papers on his desk as if playing for time. Harry's intuition prickled. Pushing the feeling aside she willed her heart rate to slow by telling herself everything was fine. Given present economic times there might be a slight delay with her promotion. Another couple of weeks on the phones wouldn't kill her. If she could survive this night, by far one of the worst, her patience could stretch a little longer.

Bradley's apparent reluctance to start continued to unnerve her. The senior supervisor, never at a loss to listen to his own voice whether delivering good or bad news, looked up from his papers and grimaced. For a brief moment Harry feared she had lost her promotion.

"I am truly sorry to tell you this Harry, but we have to lay you off as of tonight."

"What?" Harry whispered. He did not just say that.

"With this recession, people aren't using their cell phones as much. And we're not getting the new client turnover like before. The company is downsizing."

Harry closed her mouth attempting to generate some dignity. This couldn't be happening. "But I was promised a promotion," she protested.

"All promotions are frozen."

She took a breath. "Okay – but surely I can keep the job I have."

Bradley shook his head. "Like I said we're downsizing."

She could tell he was starting to lose interest, shutting down. Harry wanted to scream at the smug, young face. She had three kids to feed, a house that needed the desperate services of a kind plumber ... she needed another fucking car! But she remained silent because if she started telling this insipid Mama's boy about the realities of life she wouldn't be able to stop and he might, just possibly, get hurt.