

## THE LIGHTS DIE IN FIVE

By Anthony Pearce

It was pointless and he knew it.

At the edge of a celestial delta, hovering lazily in stationary orbit, Madagar peered over the edge of his palm monitor and glared bullets at the dripping tap.

He couldn't be certain precisely when, but sometime during his first week aboard the Syzygy, it had started. It *may* have begun recently, or its recital may have echoed for days before registering with Madagar, who had, admittedly, been distracted exploring the station's interior, learning his way around. Unfamiliar as he was with his new home, the faint, thump-Ting thump-Ting might have been the signature running sounds of any shipboard device. Certainly not his nemesis.

One week in, (as irrelevant as measuring a week was here, but a week back on Earth nonetheless), Madagar had been perusing a manual for one of the state of the art cooking utilities. He hadn't had a proper cup of coffee since heading offworld and it was beginning to show. So, in frustration, he'd arrived at what he honestly thought to be a fairly clever alternative. Perhaps this device wasn't *meant* for coffee, but he was certain he could coerce it. And so the manual. And the attempts. And finally the unfortunate, accidental crossing of wiring with lukewarm, recyc water.

There was a fzzting sound and the kitchen of the Syzygy united with the blackness of space. Sparks fired off around his hands as the overhead lights flashed and vanished. The light show hung, lingering in front of, or inside of, his eyes; a tiny cluster of novas dancing in the sudden darkness. The stillness of the empty infinite. And silence.

But for the tap.

With every electrical device on the deck shut down, one sound persisted, invading, marring the otherwise perfection of silence. It would not go unheard. It would not be ignored. A rhythmic thumping with a tinny, tympani signature. It sang from the polished steel basin, an aria demanding its audience. Whether born with his arrival or persisting through the millennia, it was clear as a bell now.

Madagar turned slowly, the hairs in his ears raising like hackles. His senses triangulated on the intruder, groped for an understanding of the source, invisible in the dark.

But as the spark rain faded from his eyes, he became aware of another light. It crept over his shoulder, tapping it with warmth. His eye curled to periphery and his head and body turned to follow.

Outside.

He crossed tentatively to the window. With the interior lights off, he no longer caught his own reflection, or the mirror image of the Syzygy's operations deck. To the left he could see one limb of the station extended, its flyspeck windows still alive with lights. At least he knew he hadn't entirely obliterated the station's power. No suffocation tonight.

And to the right....

He approached the window's edge. The nearer he drew, the more it slid into view, peering back at him from the border of the twelve-inch-thick pane. It was magnificent, a spherical angel burning in the not so distance. He stood for long moments, studying it in awe. Wiping moisture from one eye - the effect of staring into harsh light he assured himself - he said, "Ahh, you must be my assassin." Pausing before turning away, Madagar added, "I thought you'd be bigger."

The later years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century saw a tremendous surge in energy technologies. Politicians, previously lodged comfortably in the pockets of big energy, boldly instituted legislation minimizing negative impact and promoting healthier alternatives. With the depletion of fossil fuels and their harsh environmental consequences, science explored every alternative, no matter how odd. From the microscopic, such as firing excited eximers against one another, to large scale endeavors including tapping the steady force of the Earth's rotation. Lab after lab benefited from government grant after government grant. Still, nothing appeared to rival the convenience and affordability of traditional power sources.

Then, in 2178 a team of astronomers at Palomar spotted an object in near collision trajectory with Earth. It would take several months to actually arrive. After three weeks of observation, the ufo, now well inside our solar system, was identified as a returning deep space probe launched in the summer of 1994.

Five weeks later, the probe was approached by a team jettisoned from the United Nations orbital space station. It was recovered without incident and towed back to be gravilocked to the stations fixed center, the structure's pivotal foci, so as to not disrupt the calibrations for its rotating gimble arms.

Seven members from five nations joined the rotation of scientists on board and, within a week, news of the probe's discoveries were hitting the internet. Of course, there had been speculation when the probe's existence was discovered (primarily involving photos of alien civilizations), and then more when it was recovered (a conspiracy to contain an extraterrestrial virus topping the list), but the first 'official findings' released were these.

Scientific American dedicated an entire net-issue to exploring the ramifications of the discovery, but it was a small publication out of Buloxi, Mississippi that yielded the most memorable headline: Dinosaurs Discovered on Mars!

While light years from accurate (both literally and figuratively), this did succeed in capturing a distorted gist of the news.

First, it was not Mars. In fact, the planet in question was an orbitally married pair of sister worlds with no known designation, but in a constellation beyond our own known as R-117. The two worlds were quickly assigned the names Rhea-5 and Rhiannon-9. And what we knew about them was this.

Both worlds had a nitrogen rich atmosphere strikingly similar to primitive Earth's. Not in the way that Titan's atmosphere bears similarities to our planet's infancy, waiting for only a few dozen millennia of cosmic evolution to catch up. Rather, both worlds were the same in atmospheric make-up to Earth during the cretaceous, when life had not only already flourished for 35 million years, but when countless species had already vanished into the soil.

And so it was with the twins. Their cores had not settled, if ours could be said to have done so, and at fairly regular intervals (of 90,000 years or so) eruptions would coat the surface in a thick, nutrient rich layer.

Carbon based life flourished in vast variety, but springing anew from each extinction cycle. There were no sentient species, as none had the time to evolve beyond animal and plant before starting again, but the troposphere was ripe with the building blocks of life.

On the surface, no pun intended, Rhea and Riah were priceless discoveries as parallel Darwinian studies. The similarities and differences in both flora and fauna promised to become their own fields of scientific study.

But beneath the surface, well...

Riah's core sat seventeen hundred kilometers from the surface, Rhea's twenty-one. Over forty-three percent of each, represented rich fossil deposits, a thousand miles deep.

Two worlds, both potential goldmines of naturally replenishing fossil fuel. Now the question was how to get it here.

And so the race began. Focus shifted from terrestrial transportation to inexpensive propulsion systems for space travel. Hundreds of theories were suggested, dozens explored. None bore fruit, initially.

On the fourth day of a five-day summit, as the crowd stood to stretch following a fanciful lecture on folding space, Dr. Cylus Buchannon made his way to the podium. As with George Washington Carver when introducing the Senate to the versatility of peanuts, Buchannon had been given five minutes and proceeded to speak for two hours. It was an antiquated idea, largely unexplored since early speculations on monorail transport in the 1940s. Buchannon spoke about superconductor electromagnets. And those audience members who were still in earshot when he reached the third sentence of his notes, took their seats again and listened.

His illustrations were crude, his powerpoint amateur, but anyone at the summit within earshot knew that this was the way to go. Buchannon's plan was essentially a train that pulled itself through space. A rotating undercarriage of track would extend itself out before the nose of the vehicle (or the tail as eventual designs would enable the return trip to be made in reverse). A light electrical charge would run through the track's rails, attracting a bay of superconductive electromagnets at its front. And that was it. The vehicle would start slowly, crawling from its origin, but momentum and an absence of friction via design would equal a gradual acceleration to near light speed. Only occasional bursts of electricity would be required to maintain the vehicle's acceleration. And deceleration was achieved by shutting down the forward feeds a sufficient distance from the goal - roughly two-thirds of the journey - switching to counter bursts in the opposite direction. The power required for the interval pulses at either stage was a transcendent fraction of that required by any other mode.

When challenged, Buchannon acknowledged the system was nearly useless for terrestrial transportation and merely handy for manned exploration within the Sol system. However, for interstellar mass transport, it was ideal.

Big energy sought to dominate the new technology, as did the travel industry, but Buchannon was the son of a union man and so, the final proprietary development rights went to the Teamsters.

Thus was born the Interstellar Trucking Union.

Madagar sat with his back to the console. He sipped the recyc wine, his finger absently tracing the glass's rim. A song he'd never paid attention to the lyrics of wafted down from the overhead speakers. Behind him, soft lights blinked and twittered impotently, but he paid no attention. He wasn't on deck to work. This was just the most comfortable chair with the best view. The dimming screen hung at mid mast, casting a grey pall over the ultraviolets cutting through the window's upper half.

It was beautiful, he thought, this ball of fire lingering so near that without the Syzygy's protective shields he and it would deconstruct to floating liquid flesh and metal in an instant, before evaporating completely.

Was it brighter today? No, probably not. The printouts this morning showed nothing alarming, (there he went again, "morning." After forty-two years on Earth he found it simply impossible to let go of terrestrial time and adopt offworld chronology).

One of the blinking lights buzzed. This inspired in Madagar the same mix of anticipation and fear as always. Today, apathy won the day. The light buzzed four times before he reluctantly spun the console chair about and flicked the screen on. The overhead music automatically cut out as the monitor came to life, casting a pale counter glow against the brilliance from outside.

"Happy anniversary," said a cheerful voice from the overhead speakers. It seemed disassociated, not originating from anywhere near the image slowly taking form on the monitor. Madagar cocked an eyebrow, chasing it with more wine.

"Is that meant to be funny?"

"It's officially been one year, amigo. You ready to quit yet?" The image laughed.

"I've lived through worse for longer."

"Have a last minute update for you, compadre."

Last minute, Madagar grunted. You recorded this days ago.

"Got a fleet of L-class freighters moving through your space in seventeen hours. Twenty-two of them. Got some science guys on one. Y'know, greengeeks. Need you to make sure they've got safe escort past Rachel."

Madagar sparked. He glared through his eyebrows at the monitor, knowing the figure on the screen could neither see nor hear him. "That's not her name, Deverough" he snarled. "She won't answer to it."

Deverough continued, undaunted. "How *is* our girl? Nothing concerning, I hope."

"She's not *our* girl, gaswad. You've never even met her." He flicked off the message. He'd come back to the rest of it later. He'd prefer not to, but even if every other care muscle had atrophied, self-preservation was alive and well. For the moment.

His butt shifted in the console chair as he sat up, leaned forward, and activated the I-mail screen. He typed out a snide response, deleted it, pecked out "Happy to help," with two fingers and sent it off. The console chair complained in a leathery croak as he settled back, slowly spinning back toward the window. A year, he thought. Damn. He was sure it had been longer.

In the absence of music or message, the tap nagged from the next room.

"What?!" Madagar barked.

"It's *our* anniversary too," the drip demanded. "What did you get me?"

Madagar eyed the pile of luggage as Veruca wheeled out another case. "You know we're only going for three days. Do you need all this?"

If she paused it was brief enough not to lose stride. She disappeared back into the bedroom.

"You know what?" he called. "Never mind. There's room. Take whatever you want."

There was no response. No sound at all from the bedroom. He started to repack an open case, incorporation through better geometry. A few of the items inside, he was certain she wouldn't need, but he still felt badly about last year. He'd been too busy with work and failed to make plans in time, so he was willing to cut Veruca whatever slack she needed to make up for it.

"Albert?" Her voice was soft and a little congested. She cleared her throat and tried again. "Albert, could you come in here?"

An invitation to the bedroom. One might suspect this was a good thing, if they weren't pressed for time. Madagar knew better. He closed the case and rose, left knee complaining.

Veruca sat on the bed, a space cleared opposite her. "Have a seat."

Madagar paused in the doorway, one shoulder instinctively dropping against the jam. "I'm good. What's up? You know we've got about forty -- "

"I'm leaving."

He thought of the bags in the living room, the reservations, the tickets. Well, of course we're leaving, he thought, and chuckled.

She got that look. The one he knew and loathed, in which she'd read his mind incorrectly, misinterpreted its contents, and judged him into a hole it would take him an hour to dig his way out of.

"I have to go," she said with a snuffle. "I'm staying at Lorraine's until I work out something else."

He got it now. It made no sense, but there was clarity and he was cold with it.

"Okay," he managed. "Well, we'd talked about a separation. I mean, I understand that with your work and the travel it's been tough. I don't think you're as alone here as you think. It's been..." He trailed off as she pulled back the bedcover to reveal the many pages of a document spread methodically over their marital bed. He stared at the papers. Even upside down he could tell they were legal.

"I've marked all the places you need to sign and which things you should make copies of."

His eyes were transfixed on the folder, the yellow tabs marking its pages. It seemed so thick.

How many pages does it take to deconstruct a life?

"How..." he began and realized that his throat was thick with tears. He choked on the words, gestured to the papers, and tried again. "How long... have you been planning this?"

She shrugged, said something about not wanting to hurt him. He tried to be strong, but it made it all the harder to see that this was not easy for her either. In that, he saw hope. That perhaps this was to scare him, one last desperate weapon against his habitual procrastination. Hope that at the end of this they would hold each other and continue on as it had always been. Each of them in their separate misery.

And so he begged. He wept. He was supportive and pathetic and desperate. He danced as fast as he could. And after a torrent of words in which he could not hear himself speaking, they sat facing each other, cheeks stiffening with drying salt.

“I just don’t want to be married to you anymore,” she said plainly. “And I have to go.” And that was the end of it.

An hour later she was gone. Two decades of his life departed leaving empty shelves and a silence as deep as space. He could not stop crying. And when it did seem that he had run out of tears he would find more. He stood in the hollow entryway - the only bag remaining, his own - and spoke so quietly that he was not certain he had uttered the words aloud, “But it’s our anniversary.”

“It’s expensive cargo,” said Deverough, walking Madagar through the endless halls of the launch center. “Worth a looootta money.”

“I’ve read the brochure,” Madagar chimed. He eyed Deverough. The man was thin, but solid with wavy hair and a voice that seemed to echo from a much larger chest.

“Oh, sure, sure. So whadya do?”

“I write.”

Deverough’s reaction could not accurately be described as subtle. He took in Madagar; not a large man, but his shoulders were broad and his eyes had a hooded quality that at times could be read as threatening, or brooding. Still, the way Deverough eyed him now, he may well have been wearing a sun dress and open toed pumps.

“You do what?” He broke stride.

“Oh,” Madagar covered. “I worked security. Long boring hours.”

“Right, so this is perfect for you.” He paused, gears rotating in his head, “You’re union, right?”

“I’m legacy. Two uncles on my father’s side. Dad died before getting his card, but he would have been 324.”

This appeared to placate Deverough whose generally cheery disposition seemed to be looking for an excuse to be placated. They turned a corner into a hall with windows for walls down the right-hand side. Outside, the concrete expanse was abuzz with large vehicles. “You get all your stuff stowed away,” Deverough asked, as though reminded by the monstrous trucks.

“Yup, everything I own is in storage. They comp all that.”

“Nice of ‘em,” Deverough said with a smile.

Madagar thought it was the least they could do, considering. “Yeah, buncha’ regular guys,” he offered.

“That’s what *I’m* sayin’”

As they walked, Deverough asked him questions he’d answered a dozen times before. Madagar provided his medical releases, the badges he’d been issued. They passed a series of checkpoints which required them to flash badges and scan IDs. They covered the length of the trip, the launch and docking procedures, the initial checklist of duties once Madagar reached the Syzygy. It was all old news and by the time they reached the final gate, Madagar was glad to be rid of Deverough. To leave this god awful, sunny planet and its foul, cheery denizens was exactly what he needed.

Three days later, Madagar woke. The lid of the somnupod, frosted over with settled gases and warm breath, hummed open with a hydraulic hush. Madagar felt like his eyes should operate with an equally mechanized sound effect as they gradually adapted to the overhead fluorescents.

One of the crew, a woman with short hair and wide hips ushered him through the ship. "As you know, The Gaines utilizes the 'cannon drive.'"

Madagar nodded.

"So we can't slow down to drop you at the Syzygy."

"Yes, I know."

They reached a port, which she unbolted and swung open with a rush of pressure. Madagar slid through it and into a smaller vehicle. "Any last minute questions about the procedure?"

Madagar shook his head. "Don't suppose I have time for a cup of coffee?" He asked. She chuckled and slid the door closed, fastening it behind him.

Finally alone, Madagar closed his eyes. On Earth he had suffered from motion sickness. While the same issues did not apply here, he still felt pangs of the accompanying anxiety. His palms grew damp and he wiped them on his pants, which were too slick to be of any real help. What he wouldn't give for a handkerchief made of something even remotely absorbent.

A speaker at his left ear kicked in with a crackle. A male voice spoke with a hint of an accent Madagar couldn't place. "Alright, we have visual. Hello, Mr. Madagar. Can you hear me okay?"

Instinctively, Madagar gave a thumbs up. Then, realizing they probably couldn't see him, he started to speak.

"That's fine," the accent said.

Oh, he thought. I guess they can.

"Okay, you'll feel a few gees with the launch, but nothing too jarring. Just relax. The Gaines will be in position in T-minus 90 seconds." Madagar heard switches being flipped and saw a series of lights come to life in front of him. "Alright, Mr. Madagar, now the process is entirely automated. The interceptor knows what to do and we'll be monitoring your progress. If there are any problems we'll correct it remotely. Do you see the blue circle on the panel to your right?"

He looked. At first, the rest of the lights were playing on his eyes, but he focused and saw the one they meant. He gave a thumbs up.

"Fine. If for any reason, we lose your signal and the magni-bilicals don't launch properly, that's your failsafe. Push that when you see the Syzygy. Got that?"

This time he gestured with thumb and forefinger looped, just for variety.

"Great. Just make sure you hit that button before the Syzygy fills your viewscreen. Alright, T-minus ten..."

Madagar tried to wrap his head around those instructions. If the system failed would he know it before it was too late?

"Nine...eight...seven..."

How long did he have between the interceptor's attempt, the Gaines' backup, and his own need to execute the failsafe?

"Six...five...four..."

How would he know if there was a malfunction? Was there any indication that others were trying to correct and failing?

“Three... interceptor launching.”

“Um...” he said, and then the gees were pressing him forcefully back against his seat. Space flew by the view screen, tiny flames blurred across blackness like frosting smeared by the fingers of a thousand children. How was he expected to identify anything in this? He was not actually launched at increased speed. Rather, the interceptor had been disconnected, cut loose, essentially flung into a rapid deceleration.

Gradually, the stars began to slow and take shape. Madagar sucked in and out, shallow panicked breaths. So many stars, and none of them taking the shape of a station. He lied to himself, an unconvincing assurance of calm, but his anxiety was given truth by the slickness of his palms. Lights in 360 degrees, but none of them were it? Really?

His head bucked on his neck, battling the constraints of the seat. Without orientation, the Syzygy could be in any direction. It might wipe the edge of his view and be gone before he'd seen it. The old, familiar urge to vomit, rose. He glanced down to the blue button. His anxiety was not eased by the moment it took his eyes to adjust from the rushing starfield outside. He could lose his window in that chasm of critical time.

His life was not flashing before his eyes but his nightmare future was. Missing his target and careening off into the infinity of space. This was not the alone time he signed up for. How long would it take him to die, drifting. Would he starve? Slowly decay, an emaciated cadaver in a jumpsuit. No, the oxygen would surely run out before that. Madagar would be a pale blue as he passed, his hands clutching into rictus claws as they grasped for air. As if they could hold it, store it, save it for later. He imagined his neck, his cheeks, sucking inward like an empty --

What was that?

A shape, roundish, had flashed past the corner of the lower window. Or had it? Squirming about, the silhouette of his own knees had blocked most of the view in the instant it passed. Or did it? What had he seen at his periphery? Anything? Nothing? An illusion born of contrast? He could only --

There it was again. Bobbing in and out of the far corner. He pulled himself against the seat, through it if he could have, to clear the line of site to that window's edge. It was the Syzygy, no doubt. But, why just this glimpse? Shit. Was it behind him? Had he passed it? Or maybe he was above it. Fucking space.

How was he supposed to see it? What use was the main viewscreen if the damn thing wasn't even facing... Whatever. It was gone now. No Syzygy in any window and it seemed like forever since he'd seen it. God, how long since he'd been jettisoned? The magni-bilicals; shouldn't they have fired ages ago? One hand gripped the edge of his seat, helping to pull him back to alignment. Even as he was getting reoriented, the other hand reached for the blue button.

There was a popping sound. Or several. And before his finger could press the button, Madagar was jerked back and sideways. The vomit that had threatened became real.

“And your locked into the docking port.”

Madagar was startled by the voice, so alone in his terror. And not glad for the reminder that they were there, were still watching, and had seen him puke on himself.