

STEPHEN MELLOR

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# THE LONG SLEEP



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For Candy.  
And for Max.

## Arrival

Thirty years pass quickly in Cold Sleep. Commander Francis Webster felt as if no time had passed between the moment he entered his Freezer Pod and being woken by computer administered stimulants. He yawned, stretched and climbed out of the Pod, looking around at the other members of his crew who were emerging at the same time.

“I feel like shit,” Nelson said.

“You always feel like shit, Nelson,” Vicki replied.

“Yeah, but I feel particularly shitty today. Sleeping Beauty ain’t got nothing on us,” he said.

“What, Nelson,” Webster said, “you waiting for a handsome prince to come and give you a kiss?”

“Yeah, boss. Come ‘ere,” Nelson pursed his lips and blew a kiss in Webster’s direction.

“You’re beautiful, Nelson, but you know my heart belongs to another,” Webster countered. “Now cover your skinny arse; we’ve got work to do and I want to go and take a look at our new home.”

The first and most important job of the entire journey was to check that their passengers had survived. The crew’s survival was a good sign, but their Pods were on a separate circuit to the rest of the ship. They were all fitted with back-up generators, but no-one knew what could happen in a thirty year trip.

“Twan, while we check this lot out, you and Juanita go and see to the animal ova,” Webster told him.

“Okay. I can’t wait until we thaw out those elephants. I mean, the cows and horses are all well and good, but a bunch of African Elephants? That is going to be so great!” Twan jogged off down the corridor, smiling happily at the thought of his first safari, followed closely by Juanita.

“Boss, these all check out. There haven’t been any glitches and the colonists are all healthy,” Nelson said.

“Something else the anti-colonists were wrong about,” Maggie said. “They were total idiots. Do you think they’re still arguing about it back home?”

“In a way, I can understand what they meant,” Webster said. “Yeah, they’re wrong, but they had some very strong, very emotive arguments.”

He turned to look out of the main view port at the green and blue globe that was to be his home for the rest of his life.

“If only they could see this,” he said. “They’d know we were right. Two centuries of work has made this – the biggest project in human history. It’s beautiful.”

The intercom chimed and Webster went across to it.

“Jenny?” he said into the microphone. “Is everything okay?”

“All ship systems read green across the board. Even the drinks maker is making perfect coffee. But we’re approaching orbital insertion and I think it would be a good idea if you were here.”

“Okay, I’ll be there in five minutes.”

He flicked the intercom off.

“Start waking up the passengers, Nelson. Mags. Go and check out the probes, I want to launch them in an hour, then go over the shuttlecraft.”

They both nodded their assent.

The next half hour was a tense time for Webster. Although the New Argo was perfect for crossing five light years of space, the small, delicate manoeuvres that were needed to achieve orbit were difficult. The ship had so much mass that it took a lot of fuel to get it to move and then even more to get it to stop. Still, it was only last week, as far as Webster was concerned, that he had run through the simulation for the final time. Eventually, the computer indicated that everything was as it should be. He sat back in his seat and heaved a deep sigh of relief.

“Why the hell they couldn’t just programme the computers to do that without me, I don’t know,” he said.

“Tell me about it. That was always the part I was least looking forward to about this whole trip,” Jenny replied.

Webster flicked a switch on the intercom.

“Mags, how are the probes?”

“They’re fine and ready to go on your command,” she told him.

“Well, consider the command given.”

“Sure thing, Francis.”

A couple of minutes later, Webster saw the probes falling to the planet below, swiftly shrinking to points of light as the sunlight caught their metallic shells before finally disappearing in to the atmosphere. Maggie entered the cockpit and sat in her seat, followed by the rest of the crew, except Nelson who was still busy waking the colonists.

Shortly afterwards, screens started to light up as the probes started to send back information.

“Atmosphere composition is looking good,” Maggie said. “So is temperature... Gravity is slightly less than Earth-like, but we knew that. The first probe is coming in for a soft landing in ten seconds... five... four... three... two... one... touchdown. The first probe has landed. Second probe is due to land in thirty seconds. We should have pictures from the first probe any second now... Yes, here they come.”

She transferred the pictures to the main screen. They showed a lush, green plain, trees in full blossom could be seen in the distance.

“Looks like we did it right, we’ve arrived in spring. What sort of trees are they, Juanita?”

“That looks like apple blossom, Francis,” she said. “The seeding looks to be a complete success.”

“So, would you all agree that there appears to be no problems and we can continue with the next stage?”

They all nodded.

Webster turned to his co-pilot.

“Well, Jenny, it’s time to tell the folks back on Earth we’ve arrived safe and sound,” he said to her.

She turned to the communications console, pressed a series of buttons, flicked a switch and then nodded to Webster.

“This is Commander Francis Webster of the New Argo. We have achieved orbit around Gamma Six and are preparing to land. We have had no problems with the Freezer Pods and we are reading green across the board. The Seeder Ship reports no problems with its cargo. The probes report that the air is good and clean, the soil is fertile, all the flora appears to be growing well and it’s a really nice day. Repeating.”

He signalled to Jenny and she flicked the switch again and then pressed another button, marked ‘Transmit’.

In another part of the ship a circuit was completed.

The New Argo’s engine capsule burst open as a silent explosion ripped through it. The resulting shock wave sent the ship careening into the atmosphere. A series of smaller explosions flowered throughout the hull, exposing those within to a near vacuum. The sudden entry into the atmosphere at completely the wrong angle tore the ship apart as if it were made of paper instead of inch thick toughened steel. Those few who were actually out of stasis and had survived the explosions and sudden decompression were left to fall their deaths.

A gentle rain of metallic and organic ash and debris fell upon the virgin earth of Gamma Six.

# One

The two women were sitting together in bed watching the news channel - a documentary on the attempts to regenerate the South East, still highly radioactive, even so long after the London Blitz meltdown. One of the women was petite and slender, with brunette hair that she kept short and very dark brown eyes, hidden behind glasses. She was sitting stiffly in the bed, watching the programme intently, absently stroking a sleek, black cat that lay stretched between them. The other, taller, with long blonde hair was lying back against the pillows, her arm cradled around the base of the first woman's spine. Suddenly, the documentary was interrupted by an incoming com-net message.

The blonde woman sighed.

"There goes the evening, Lize. Damn, I wanted to watch 'Strongman and Cramp' later, as well."

"It might be nothing, Saffia. Anyway, we can record it. Although why you like it, I don't know. It was bloody awful when I watched it as a kid and it hasn't aged at all well."

Saffia shrugged. Lize pressed a button on the remote control she was holding. The screen fuzzed and cleared to show a man wearing a dark grey jump-suit. On his chest was the SETI logo.

"Executive Carr, sorry to interrupt your evening," he said.

"That's okay, Alex. What's wrong?"

"We've just received a communication from Commander Webster."

"They've arrived? Wonderful!"

"Well, his message said that they'd arrived, but we also got a message from the New Argo AI. It was a distress signal and it was cut off mid-way through."

"What?"

"The AI said that multiple explosions had occurred throughout the ship. We think it's been destroyed."

Lize paused to let the news sink in.

"Thank you, Alex," she said at last. "Can you send me copies of the messages?"

"I've mailed them to your computer already, Executive Carr."

"Thank you. Good night."

Lize shut the screen off and threw the covers back, the cat mewing a protest as it was dislodged. She started to get up, her silken night-dress falling down around her knees, stopped and then fell back onto the bed, tears filling her eyes and slowly, heavily running down her cheeks.

"Shit," she said, loudly. "Shit, shit, shit."

Removing her glasses, she wiped her hand across her eyes before taking several deep breaths, visibly fighting to regain control of her emotions.

"I've got to get to work," she said, "I need to decide what to do. Two hundred years and then the bloody ship blows up."

"I'll come with you," said Saffia.

"You don't need to."

"Yes, I do. It's my job."

Lize sat at her desk, waiting for her com-net call to be taken off hold.

Finally, the screen cleared to show a handsome young man with heavy brows and deep set brown eyes.

"Lize?" he asked, through a yawn. "Sorry, the AI woke me up rather than the chief. Can I help at all?"

"Sorry, Rae," Lize replied. "I'm afraid I really need to speak to him."

"The programmer rather than the avatar?" he asked, jokingly.

"Something like that," Lize said, feeling a smile crease his face. Once again, she thought that Rae had been one of her father's better decisions.

"Okay, give me a few minutes," Rae told her. The screen returned to a hold pattern.

After a few minutes, a tall, old man, his long white hair, tied into a pony tail and blue eyes that had lost none of their cold sharpness with age answered.

"Sorry to make you wait, Lize. It's – ha – rather late for you, isn't it?"

"I've just received some news from SETI," she said. "Something has happened to the New Argo."

"What sort of thing?"

"We don't know. The AI sent a distress signal and it appears to have been destroyed."

"Ha. How terrible. That is a shame," he said.

"What are we going to do about it?"

"Do? What can we do?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, we can't investigate. It would take thirty years to get there."

"What are we going to say to the public?" Lize asked.

"Do we need to say anything? It's not as if they've been very interested. Don't you think that it would be best to keep quiet about it all?"

"No. Definitely not. How can you even consider that?"

“It would be easiest, I think. Leave it with me, I’ll come up with something,” he told her.

“No, wait, father!” she started to protest, but he interrupted.

“Good night, Lize. Get some sleep, don’t worry about it. You look tired.”

The screen went blank again.

“I know he’s your father,” Saffia said. “But he can be a real pain sometimes.”

Lize grunted in agreement.

“What now?”

“Do you still have that anonymous mail account?” Lize asked.

“Yes, I do. Why?”

“I think I need to force his hand.”

Kem grunted as he woke up. His head was pounding as if someone were demolishing the entire Arcology in there. This was always the result of a night with Jah. Why did he never manage to remember to set the Neumanns before he went to bed? Jah always managed it – the bastard never, ever showed any ill effects.

He forced open one eye and tried to focus on the clock next to his bed. Eight-thirty.

“Oh, shit.”

Pushing himself up, he staggered to his feet. The house computer, sensing movement, cleared the windows, allowing a bright, clean, yellow light to stream in, catching Kem full in the face. His already abused head gave an almighty ‘thud’. Groaning loudly, he almost fell back onto the bed, saving himself only by holding onto the table.

Shading his eyes, he stumbled across to the house console and plugged himself in through the socket in the back of his neck. He punched the command to get the Neumanns working to clean up the toxins in his bloodstream. Unplugging himself, he got into the shower.

Afterwards, clean and dry, he pulled his breakfast tray from where it was sitting in the dumb waiter, sent up from the food prep centre. He blanched at the sight of the bacon and eggs, still feeling fragile and dumped it in the recycler. Dry toast - that would be enough for the moment.

He quickly dressed in his usual navy-blue suit and tie – it was old-fashioned, but it was stylish, or at least, he always thought so. Then downing his orange juice and gripping a slice of toast between his teeth, he headed out and down the three flights of stairs to street level.

Lize pushed her chair away from her desk and stood. Stretching and yawning she padded across to the floor-to-ceiling picture window to look out and down the long drop of the atrium to the ground, half a mile below. People would be just going out to work now, she thought.

There was a gentle knock on the door at the far end of the room. Without waiting for a reply, Saffia came in carrying a cup of coffee and a piece of paper.

“Lize? I thought you might need this. It’s been a long night,” she said.

“Just as long for you as it has been for me,” Lize told her.

Saffia spoke a command to the AI and a screen changed to show a sim of Lize.

“Here’s the press release you asked for.”

“Thanks.”

Lize watched her avatar speaking lines they had spent the night writing, nodding to herself. It sounded fine. She felt herself getting upset again, but held it back. If there was one thing that she had learned over the years it was that crying didn’t get you anything. You needed to get out there and do it for yourself. Make everyone else see things your way.

“Have you managed to get the meeting set up? I want an investigation started before I release this,” she asked.

“Yes, they’ll be available in half an hour.”

Saffia paused.

“Are you all right, Lize?”

“Yes, thank you. I’m sorry about last night. I didn’t mean to break down like that, it was just a shock.”

“Hey, no. It’s okay. I understand. I think you’re handling this marvellously. If it was me, the last thing I’d be worrying about would be a press release. I’d be curled up in a corner somewhere.”

Lize smiled warmly at her.

“No, you wouldn’t,” she said, softly. “You’d be perfect. Just like always.”

The main doors slid open and Kem stepped out into the warm, bright day that was the standard for NovoCastia. Pausing at the entrance, he closed his eyes and took a deep breath of the clean, fresh, air. He was late, but without indulging himself with this ritual, the rest of the day just wouldn’t feel right. It tuned him in to the city that he loved. The city that he had never left for long. That he never wanted to leave.

NovoCastia Arcology was one of the first arcologies to be built, a couple of hundred years ago. It covered most of the area around the mouth of the River Tyne. Four huge pillars, nearly half a mile high, topped by a single great slab. Enormous flying buttresses taking the strain flared out from the legs on

all sides - the longest were almost three times as long as the towers were high. The pillars were actually the top two-thirds of huge blocks, the top slab consisted of the offices and living quarters for the European branch of the Executive Committee. Overall, the general effect was of a giant's table. Kem loved it for its mix of old and new. Many of the sights of Old Newcastle survived – ruins now, admittedly – but in other places, like NYA or Tokyo, nothing was intact. It had all been replaced, which was one more reason why he wanted to stay here. NovoCastria had so much original architecture that had been carefully preserved – from Grainger town with its statuary and beautiful stone clad buildings to the huge imposing edifice of St. James's Park Auditorium.

Kem slowly breathed out, opened his eyes and saw his h-tram just pulling away from the stop.

“Shit,” he said, again.

He walked across to the stop and looked at the timetable, although he knew exactly what it said, having studied it many times over the ten years that he had lived here in Jesmond Block. Ten minutes to wait.

Pulling out his computer pad, he called up the book he was reading – Raymond Chandler's *Farewell, My Lovely*. Kem was one of a very small number of people who still read Chandler. Actually, Kem was one of a small number of people who still read. Most had never heard of Philip Marlowe; those who had would associate him with Humphrey Bogart, which was no bad thing, but Kem preferred the original. He had been introduced to Chandler by Jah, shortly after they had first met, initially as a joke and a wry comment on Kem's chosen profession. However, the joke had backfired somewhat when Kem had come to think that Chandler's detective was the epitome of who he could be and started to model himself on the laconic P.I.

Suddenly, the public amps blared into life. It was nine a.m. Although Kem loved the city, there were still things he would change. His major choice would be to get rid of the public amps. He was not happy about being forced to listen to Jam-Fuze - the latest sound that was all the rage and was played almost constantly on the Castle Tower radio station from nine in the morning until seven in the evening. As far as Kem was concerned it was talentless, electronic noise. He slipped in his earplugs, adjusting them until the music had faded to a faint whisper.

Finally, the h-tram arrived, Kem checked the time – five past nine, damn, he was really late - and boarded. As usual for this time in the morning, it was full and he had to stand for the fifteen minutes it was going to take for him to reach the Benwell–Fenham Business Park, where his office was situated. He tried to read his book, but was constantly distracted by two teenage girls who were constantly looking at him, whispering and giggling. He really wasn't in the mood – his hangover hadn't fully dissipated yet, although the Neumanns had definitely wrestled it into submission – and anyway, Kem preferred the attention of women a little closer to his own age. They, however, were studiously ignoring him.