

THE BLACKEST SEA

RICHARD BEAUCHAMP

PROLOGUE

His feet were bare, and slapped quietly against the metal floor as he walked. He proceeded at an unhurried, leisurely pace, hands crossed behind his back, head slowly swiveling from side to side like a comm-array as he took in the deserted corridors of the Regis-VII.

His first stop of the day was hydroponics. He entered the vast, self-contained arboretum and performed soil PH analyses on all of the vertical gardens. So far they'd only grown chaff crops since the maiden voyage, ensuring there would be plenty of natural detritus to let decay and provide the needed oxygen and nitrogen balance. As he cleared away some of the dying vines and added them to the compost recycler, the four self-contained oak trees in the back pushed against their glass domes like prisoners pushing against cell bars. Special vents built into the glass allowed the verdant aromas to escape, adding to the immersion.

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He inhaled deeply of the natural scents here, savoring the earthy musk. Ironical, considering he'd never been to Earth. He was told Mars, now that it had been almost completely terraformed, had a similar smell.

He double-checked to make sure the seed banks had been in steady rotation, ensuring that the food crops would be ready to plant six months prior to the crew's awakening.

Satisfied, he nodded, then moved on to the rest of his maintenance tasks.

He did a quick once-over of the medical bay. Its many lifesaving machines were still ensconced in the vacuum-sealed packaging, except for the one neuro-link interface bay where he was required to port-in once a month so his neurochemical levels could be analyzed in conjunction with his journal entries. The farther they got from Intergalactic Commerce Federation (ICF) headquarters in Olympus Mons, the longer he had to wait for any post-analysis report. Even LightLink, with its faster-than-light data-speed transmission, had limitations this far out.

He checked his wrist interface to see what day it was, though this was a trained affectation, part of his integration process. He knew the day and time down to the millisecond. He also knew today was a neuro-link day. He perfunctorily went about the task of lying back in the comfy S-shaped, body-conforming, shock-gel

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cushion and extended his right arm, palm up.

A cream-colored apparatus descended from a ceiling-mounted aperture and snaked around to his outstretched limb. A needle slid from the machine appendage and gently pierced the small, unseen port in his palm covered by a layer of subcutaneous tissue. He winced as the needle went in. This was *not* an affectation; he had pain receptors. The process took three Mars-standard minutes to complete.

Next stop: engineering. He did not spend long there, simply perused the cramped confines where all the excavation and agricultural equipment is stored alongside a few self-contained research stations, making sure no equipment had shifted or was damaged during the last high-G maneuver. None had, of course. High-strength alloy-weave winch straps kept the multiton machinery from budging a centimeter.

He passed by recreation, with its full-sized gym and adjoining amenities. Then there were the procreation pods: soundproof rooms complete with 3D hologram wall displays that immersed users in either a beachside vista of cerulean blue waters or a mountaintop cabin with an ancient wood-combustion hearth and exposed timber walls. The pods were furnished with shape-changing shock-gel beds that could be configured for optimal positioning and compartments stocked with various

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lubricants, aphrodisiac drugs, and handheld sexual augmentation devices. Being in the procreation pods sector always made him uncomfortable for some reason, a fact he'd been forced to divulge in his journal. The very idea of "organic procreation," especially at the human level, unnerved him.

His standard was perfection, and perfect things were made, not born.

He made a brief stop by the engine bay at the very rear of the ship, checking the wall-mounted displays which showed rapidly generating walls of text that detailed continuous diagnostic information on the *Regis-VII's* reactor core drive. Another affectation, as he could access any diagnostic information from any part of the ship at any time with a blink of his eye. Still, visual confirmation on the reactor core drive was needed by ICF engineers back home. He stared in through the heavily tinted viewport situated within thick, triple-layer titanium-cored barriers to protect the rest of the ship from the incredible amounts of ionizing radiation the drive emitted. He always found himself entranced by the mini star contained within the heart of the ship, its plasma blue core of raw, unfathomable power and the concentric, steadily oscillating rings surrounding it reflecting in the slate gray of his irises.

His final stop was the cryostasis quarters, which he knew