

An Adjournment in Saturn by Rian Davis

If someone were to remind Kaspar Goodsmith of all the useful advancements and general good service to the Central Order that he had been responsible for, he would have scoffed in a most humble fashion. He felt his life — though highly accomplished for a Dessalian — had been wasted. He couldn't quite put his finger on it. The usual repressives — those artificial enhancements piped to the bloodstream through his SIC visor — were of course not the cause: he hadn't been taking them — though this was, of course, contrary to the law. In fact, if he had, he may not have felt so utterly empty.

Once, while returning to his living quarters he looked out through the window of the CAV — or Condensed Automated Vehicle — and saw the oceans of Saturn in all their violent glory. Surrounding the CAV, which held about one hundred people, but probably had almost twice that at the time, were oceans of amber mixed with bronze, topaz, scarlet and silver. There were no fish in these oceans, only sparkling anomalies of what were identified as dragon tails — or better known in the scientific community as Sub Atomic Traceback (SAB). They had been first discovered nearly fifty years before by accident. Some argued that they were merely static from the powerfully enigmatic core of Saturn, but others said that they were life in their own way — pure, chaotic life. They weaved through the thick hydrogen soup that surrounded their living station for hundreds of thousands of miles — an ocean of colorful desolation. Blinding flashes of dynamic azure marked the presence of the dragon tails. There was no knowing where they would hit or when, but one thing was certain: they were deadly to anyone, Dessalians or non. Mostly, they struck well away from any of the places where the colony dwelled. But there had been some close calls — and of course the reason how they had known that the dragon tails were deadly. One had struck a wayward scouting vessel. Of course the driver had been foolish — it had been one of the fractals, after all. Fractals, as Kaspar well knew, were those who had undergone minimal genetic modification and grooming.

The scouting vessel nonetheless would have been safe if it hadn't been struck. Internal tapes revealed a sudden surge of all computer systems inside. The lights went on, blinding the passengers if they hadn't been killed already. But the worst of it was that the craft had been utterly preserved in every way — except for the bodies inside and any computer systems. All had disappeared. No one knew why the computer data material had been vaporized. Perhaps it was the mysterious properties of the materials they had used, for they no longer used silicone from the ancient times. Progress had led them to some material — dubbed Santhium — which allowed for nearly infinite amounts of data. It was produced using a mix of high-temperature superconductors and quantum computing that had been thought to be utterly impervious to even the most violent of shocks.

The CAV flitted its way from one platform to another, and Kaspar knew it was a good twenty minutes — in self-referential time of course — before he would arrive at his destination: station 246, a fusion plant that tapped the rotating magnetic sphere of Saturn to propel a highly efficient turbine to produce energy for that sector. Kaspar knew that he was a highly valuable commodity to the Intergalactic Power Solutions Firmament (IPSF), and that his status was not carried by all, not even close. He looked around at the crowded platform. He enjoyed a comfortable chair near the window, while nearly everyone else — mostly those who were not Dessalians and thus had no real technical capital — were forced to squish themselves together. They were used for very simple tasks — cleaning the insides of mainframes, oiling loose parts,

checking the status of superconducting nanodiscs — and that these tasks would soon be automated. Kaspar had no doubt that once that happened and there were no more uses for the fractals and other non-educated and non-essential personnel (collectively known as “froths”) they would all be “phased out”. What that really meant is that their energy supplies would be reduced to essentially nothing. Since communication relied on energy and the froths could not integrate and communicate directly with each other since they were arbitrarily and carefully separated, there was no real way to organize resistance. Plus all froths were secretly subdued with a cocktail of suppressives anyway. Of course they weren’t as extensive and pleasantly enhance (and thus expensive) as repressives given to Kaspar and his order, suppressives served their basic function if not anything more.

All of this played out on Kaspar’s emotion in the most depressive way. He knew it was the lack of the repressives that was causing it, but he did not consider it an unreasonable cost. He had been like the pilot in intergalactic space travel to finally pull the helmet off and smell the galaxy for the first time: real galactic air (enhanced, of course with lifesaving molecules), but it felt right somehow.

For months he had been surreptitiously tapping in to the vast literature supply contained in the data banks. Of course all other Dessalian engineers had full access to these files and much more, but the problem was that they would be tracked. There was no more need for literature. Who cared what the meaning of Ulysses was? Shakespeare? How did that help energy become more efficiently extracted from fusion processes?

The fact was that the froths clung to it — they absolutely adored Shakespeare. They were not supposed to have it, but somehow they did. Perhaps they wrote it down. Kaspar was not sure on that point even, but he strongly suspected that they did because he heard talk of it during the security councils on the matter, and he being a high ranking engineer had access to a lot of information. They were supposedly drugged into complete submission, yet somehow they found a way to read the literature of a past age. There was even muted talk of making the drugs stronger, but that direction was ignored when it was realized by all that the froths would soon become redundant, and besides, there was no immediate danger in the future.

A SAB flashed violently from behind Kaspar’s window, and he shuddered. The flash so blinding that for a moment he had to turn away from the window. The froths that stood nearby made nearly no reaction — some didn’t even look at it. But for Kaspar, fear was an ever present friend without the repressives. It would probably take about twenty more minutes to arrive at the station for the day’s work. It would be an easy job, but there was still a need for his skills. No automated system could yet do what Kaspar had to offer. Kaspar had no doubt that one day, once the automated system figured out how to do what he did, he would share the same fate as the froths would. Then what would be left? It may be the automated systems, perhaps. And it was not even clear who ran those — or if they were human derived. Even Kaspar did not have access to that information.

The CAV shook, and so did all of its inhabitants. Kaspar’s body rolled as the vessel struggled to set itself again after succumbing to the vicissitudes of Saturn’s strange forces. Some of the froths were knocked off their feet, and a loud cracking noise ripped through the entire compartment. It was the most shocking experience Kaspar had ever been through. His heart pounded like a caged rabbit beating against its prison.

He found he was gripping the railing against the wall rather strongly — a useless gesture of course. He thought for a moment that he had experienced the fear of death, something that

was impossible with the suppressives. There was something else he was aware of, but he could not quite grasp it — something in that feeling which both appalled and compelled him.

A young girl called out — she was one of the froths, had to have been, but what of her suppressives? Hadn't she taken those? If so, she would not have cried as all fear and pain would have been whisked away. He looked over to find the source of the noise, and then he spotted her. She was leaning in a corner, and there was something she was holding. Kaspar couldn't see it from his vantage point, so he stood up in order to get a better glance. Then he saw it: it was a baby that she was holding, but it was not crying — perhaps the mother had given all of her suppressives to the baby, but, of course, it was not known what such mind enhancements would do to someone so young. And besides, babies were outlawed, or rather erased as a practice from society. Humans were, of course, incubated until the age of sixteen. Exercises, cognitive training enhancements, and other development were all fed into the body via complex algorithms and programming in order to ready the person for the rigors of modern society. Kaspar had no idea how she even brought the baby onto the CAV, let alone had one to begin with.

He studied the girl. She must have emerged rather recently from her formative incubation, as she looked so young. But how was that possible? Since she was a froth, and she was created for a reason, there had to be some hidden story behind her presence, though sometimes they did make mistakes. Sometimes in the formation of Dessalians the genetic formation created an error which led to something less than desired, and thus another froth was created. And of course, there were very few froths needed in this day and age, so it was surprising that the girl was even let to live since the energy required to nurture her and feed her would far outweigh the benefits of her labor.

She must have been the creation of someone very well connected.

But that was a crazy idea too. Very few had utter seclusion from others, and no one was exempted from the system. Everything was tracked, and thus the very few mistakes that were made were rooted out. But nonetheless, there she was, sitting in the corner with a baby in her hands and a frightened expression on her face.

At that moment, there was a buzzing sound in his breast pocket. It was from his automated communication device, which was normally used by feeding signals directly into his brain, but he had had that shut off as well. He did not want the system going into his innermost thoughts. Of course, he would be caught and it was only a matter of time before he was purged, but he had his tricks to stay alive. It was all a part of his steady resistance to what he felt was an overly intrusive environment.

He pulled out the communication device and read what was printed on it. It was the same message that was obviously sending signals towards his brain, but with no success since he had found ways of removing those connections too.

GO INTO THE RESTROOM FACILITIES THIS VERY INSTANT

He looked at the message once, twice then a third in utter bewilderment. It flashed the message once more without his initiation, but this time it sent a shock that reverberated throughout his body. He cringed as the shock pulsed to his very bones, and he did not want another dose, so he moved instantly after receiving it. He moved the wrong way at first, such a panic he was in. Then, he righted himself. Going to the bathroom would have been a normal thing during normal times. More than ten thousand years of technological progress and they still

hadn't figured out a way for living things to relieve themselves without the messy process they were created with.

He pulled out the device once more and awaited further instructions. The device seemed to be receiving the information from elsewhere (which it probably was), and then flashed the following message:

WARNING: IN APPROXIMATELY FIVE MINUTES THE VESSEL YOU ARE ON WILL ENTANGLE WITH AN ESPECIALLY VIOLENT SUB ATOMIC TRACEBACK. ENTER THE ENCLOSED SELF PROTECTION UNI IMMEDIATELY. – THIS MESSAGE HAS BEEN PROVIDED BY NEBULAE INSURANCE SERVICES, FORESEEING THE INCOMING DISASTER FOR OUR VALUED CUSTOMERS FOR OVER THREE CENTURIES. PLEASE INSERT 45 CREDITS TO SAVE YOURSELF FROM CERTAIN EXPULSION.

Kaspar read it and looked around. On the floor was a Universal Morphing Unit, which would be his ticket out of the catastrophe that the device had predicted. Apparently, it was downloading instructions and would change into a personalized craft that could protect him from the impending disaster.

He had to move fast.

At first he had to fish out the credit device from his personal integrated payment chip. It had 14324 credits remaining, so he was in luck. He transferred the credits over by tapping the end of the chip to the morphing unit. Immediately, it sprang into life, filling up like a balloon and then growing into a kind of liquid tent. It was just barely enough for him to squeeze through. He climbed inside and was about to close the door when he remembered the girl in the corner with the small baby. What would happen to her? The answer was immediate and obvious, and yet he could not bring himself to completely shut his mind to her.

WARNING: FOUR MINUTES REMAINING UNTIL IMPENDING DISASTER. CLOSE THE HATCH IMMEDIATELY AND PREPARE FOR IMPACT.

He just stood there. His fingers had brought the ends of the door together and had nearly completed the process that would save him, but his hands would not let him finalize the process. He listened to the noises outside. There was nothing out of the ordinary. All of the other passengers were standing and waiting for their fates. He did not detect any other like himself who was aware of the oncoming situation.

Perhaps it was a hoax after all?

But that was highly unlikely. He knew that the service was never wrong with their predictions — that's why he had hired them in the first place. Their track record was impeccable. They used modern technology and the latest in scientific advances to detect the patterns in order to predict disaster. In a way, they were like the strange daemons from the old stories that could affect the future by viewing it ahead of time.

He nearly was able to do it, to shut the hatch, but his fingers fell flat again. Instead, he walked out of his escape pod and went back into the passenger room he had originally been in. The girl was there in the corner, caressing her baby. She sat there with a vacant expression without looking at him. She had long hair that was tied up into a French braid. Her face had a pale, calm placidness about it, and her eyebrows were shaped like beautiful halos over her cool

blue eyes. There was a symmetry about her face and body that was unmistakable. She was as beautiful as any other female of any species he had ever seen — perhaps the most beautiful of all.

He wanted to help her in some way, but there was no obvious way to do it. Should he carry her into the bathroom with him? That would be nothing short of crazy. He wasn't supposed to interact with froths directly, and only the limits in resources prevented them from being in separate transportation vehicles altogether. There was also the question of whether she would accept his offer of help. Somewhere below him the machine buzzed:

THREE MINUTES TO DISASTER. EVACUATE IMMEDIATELY.

This gave him the courage to approach her after all.

"Miss, please come with me," he said in a flat voice. What else could he say? There was no time!

She didn't look at him at first.

"Miss, you must come with me. Please," he said, his voice rising. Others, even in their drug induced stupor, began to study him closer. It was an odd sight to be sure, and he could definitely ruin his own chances of safety should he tip them off to the information of the coming danger.

TWO MINUTES TO UTTER DESTRUCTION. YOU WILL BE DEAD IF YOU DO NOT HEED THIS WARNING. OUR FIRM IS NOT LIABLE IN ANY WAY FOR YOUR DESTRUCTION. FOR FURTHER INFORMATION, SEE ARTICLE 9 SECTION 642.

In a flight of panic, he grabbed her arm. To his surprise, she did not resist, at least not until they reached the edge of the bathroom.

"No," she sobbed in a voice, barely above a whisper, but her resistance to his efforts was firmer still. She would not willingly go in there with him.

Then he understood how the situation must have seemed to her.

"No, you don't understand. I am here to help you," he said, even as he acknowledged the ridiculousness of his words. "This ship will be destroyed in less than two minutes if you do not come in here with me. Do it quick!"

"But I was taken by another man," she said faintly. "That's how I have her," she said, nodding vaguely to her child.

Kaspar thought. That's it. She must have been raped by one of the coordinators, those whose authority is not questioned by anyone. That answers how she had been able to keep the child. Perhaps a twinge of guilt had prevented her from being dismantled.

"I promise I won't hurt you. I need you to come in here now. I promise that I won't harm you in any way."

She looked up at him then, and in that moment, perhaps it was her naivety, or his genuine, honest insistence, she accepted his offer, and they both went into the bathroom together. The escape pod was there still, ready to be used, but time was running out.

ONE MINUTE UNTIL IMPACT. THIS IS YOUR FINAL WARNING. ANY FAILURE TO...

He switched the device off and tossed it into the sink. He wouldn't need it anymore. He had had all the information he needed, enough to last a lifetime in fact.

“Go in there. You will die if you don’t,” he nearly shouted at her. Meekly, she moved inside the pod, carrying her daughter with her. The baby made no noise. Perhaps the baby had taken suppressives through her mother after all.

He helped her in before he realized that with the girl and the baby, there was no more room for himself. There would be no way for them all to survive. How were they to make it? He had perhaps thirty seconds left before the question would become moot.

Think, he told himself. You’re an engineer and a scientist rolled into one.

But the answers wouldn’t come. He was fresh out of ideas. His mind told him he had maybe twenty seconds left. He thought harder, and his bowels flattened. The fear of death could not be tamed. If he did not start moving, he would surely be vaporized in a few more moments.

For some reason, that close to death, he thought about a former resistance group called the Adjournment on Saturn. They had tried to restore the freedom of the individual — as they put it — by simply broadcasting the classical music of the late second millennium. Of course the music had been banned because it had severe effects on the individual being and had even been known to wipe away the effects of the suppressives. That was why the group had been so dangerous. The local sheriff had taken the matter into his own hands personally, and had quickly weeded out the group and had all involved incinerated as soon as they were captured. There were no mind enhancements used, so angry was this man of law. Kaspar himself had unwittingly aided the group. One of the girls who had been in the group — they were all really just teenagers with no clear plan — had looked up at him after being captured. He remembered now: she looked very similar to the girl with the baby. Their eyes had that same innocence (despite her rebellious spirit), that same motionless beauty.

Could it have been a coincidence? He had heard that the sheriff had been a lascivious man, one who refused the suppressives since they robbed him of his sexual drive and mischievous tendencies, or so the rumors said. Instinctively, he knew that the sheriff was the one who had raped her. It made sense. It was only the sheriff who could have authorized such a girl to carry a child unobstructed for so long. Not even the coordinators had that kind of power.

He remembered listening to a few of the recordings of the group just after they had been destroyed. The music had such a powerful effect on him — perhaps it was the reason for him refusing any form of mind enhancements. In that sense of it then, the group’s mission had been effective, at least on him.

It was “The Planets” that they broadcasted by Holst. For the first time, something had awakened. What it was could not be described in words, but it awakened a resistance in Kaspar that he could no more control than contain. It flooded his body in a much more natural way than any artificial mind enhancement. That feeling recovered within him.

He moved with a grace unknown to him before. With his right hand he closed the lid on the escape hatch. He did so without clumsiness or remorse. Once he was satisfied she was safe, he took the moment to do exactly what he had done when he had first heard the music: he danced.

Without hesitation, without hindrance, he moved through the tiny bathroom, sweeping his arms in a bizarre pattern. He did so without any prompting. There was something within him that emanated naturally and would not keep quiet. He realized after a while that he was dancing, just like he had heard about in the banned books. It was the only natural thing he had experienced in all of his life. Everything else had been conditioned into him since the very early cells had divided. It was something beyond what his society could control.

His movements were elegant and graceful when it finally happened.