

The child clung to him in the darkness, propped in his arms, ship humming around them, a cocoon of steel and plastic spinning through a womb of emptiness and stars. Console glow on his cheek, ear to Papa's chest. Tiny hands clutching. Dangling feet which knew no steps. Rocking back and forth, the rhythm of music fading into the rhythm of Papa's heart. Papa's heart in the darkness. Listening until its pulse carried him past the starless shores of sleep.

He waited until the last note before closing the lid on the music box. Chime tones of "Jupiter." Then killed the running lights and cranked life support to minimum. Wrapped the blanket close around the boy's ears to soften the groans when the hull compressed in the cold.

He'd turn five before Neptune. Twelve before the blue-green glow of Earth filled the forward viewport. If they got that far. The solar coating scraped a frail crop of photons from the black but left the ship's power banks hungry. A slow starvation. Neptune would have something. It had to. But he couldn't raise anyone on the station there either.

He sank into the pilot's chair, cradling the boy. "Wakea 7 on unscheduled course for Neptune 3. Position 97, 23, 51; heading 174 mark 48; speed thirt— Nala, can you hear me? He sang to me today. Just a few notes. He sang in my arms. I ... Are you still out there, Nala?"

He listened to the empty static. The chatter of distant stars. Each hiss and crackle older than the child nestled against him. Then he pulled up the blanket and drifted into blackness.

The boy didn't always know what Papa said, but he always understood. Mama was there, too. A distant light in that black abyss behind them. A place to which they could not return. In his dreams, turned so he could not see her face, he'd crawl for her. Cry out to her. But even there he could never reach her. He'd wake crying and kicking at the covers until the freezing air rushed on. Then Papa would hold him and rock him and sing to him and point at the lights in the window and say their names until he knew each one like the notes of a song.