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about 32,000 words

THE STORY OF MR. J.P. STARWIND  
PART I: STAR BREAKER  
CHAPTER 1 EXCERPT

By  
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## CHAPTER I: STARPORT

*Actioni contrariam semper et æqualem esse reactionem: sive corporum duorum actiones in se mutuo semper esse æquales et in partes contrarias dirigi.*

~ Isaac Newton, 1643 - 1727 A.D.

*(Record Intact)*

507 A.E. MARCH 12, 20:25:33 LOCAL

JP "SOL" STARWIND

NEW EARTH IMPERIAL ORDER, DELAN III, 15.63 KM OUTSIDE RED HEAVEN

My quadlev comes to a stop as I reach the cliff's edge and I get off, walking a dozen steps further. I look down and out on Red Heaven, through the light, steady rain. From this height, I can see the city, nestled between the mountains near and the sea beyond. The whole of Red Heaven shines—as the name might suggest—with a variety of red lights, sleek buildings reaching up from the ground like—I don't know, some kind of organic crystals, maybe? —rising beyond the lesser developed and less important clusters around them.

As I survey the city, my NVD superimposes little details here and there. A helical building is the planetary headquarters of Dowin Engines. The center, prominent, and tallest quartet of multi-colored buildings called "Elemental" is actually a single casino and hotel. There's a highlighted region which my neural designates as a commercial sub district. And there's another cluster: transitory residential apartments that—.

"Alright, you have my curiosity," Danther, off his quadlev too now and next to me, says, sound interrupting the thrum of pattering rain. "Why are we standing out here in the cold?"

I look at him, chuckling. "Out in the cold"? That PES not keeping the little prince warm enough?"

"It's an expression."

“*Out in the cold.*”

“Oh, fuck off.”

I laugh. He rolls his eyes, reaches over and shoves me, but grins despite himself.

“Soberly, though, you get a message or something?” he asks. “Why’d you stop?”

I look out on the sea beyond Red Heaven, trying to guess which of the hundred or so building-sized pods will unfurl; I could check the data—the same data I checked to get the launch time in the first place—but I want this part to surprise me. It begins and I point. Lights on one of the platforms flash, forming a chasing pattern as the building begins to shift.

“Oh, come on, Sol, you’re going to see like a hundred of these over the next couple months.”

“Yeah, but this is the *first*,” I say. I wave my hand, impatient. “Red Heaven residents might get to see this a couple times a week—maybe even a day, who the hell knows—but the dinky little port in Fong wasn’t anything special and I want to appreciate this first liftoff.” I spare a moment to look over to Danther. “Besides, Red Heaven is known for these—it’s tourist-y and all that—and this is a spectacular view.”

He sighs, the sound obviously louder than natural.

I look back to the sea. From here the dock looks like a flower, two layers of six petal-like arms opening with a living sort of grace. Lights float up from the opening flower like something faeryish—*faerious? Faeryic? Whatever*—something or another from the Fantaziya sims—and the ship begins its ascent, floating up into the sky like it’s going up some invisible elevator.

“Can you believe ships used to use thrust to get out of the atmosphere?” Danther asks, now mildly interested.

“What?” I ask, tearing my attention away from the ship. “Like jet cross engines?”

He grins, looking out at the ascending vessel. “Sort of.”

I look back out too, the ship more up than away now. “How so?”

“Jet cross bikes use anti-grav windows to stay up and fuel based thrust for their velocity.”

He pauses, affording the listener—*me*—a couple moments to prepare for the brilliance of whatever he intends to say. “The early spacecraft combatted gravity directly with thrust; it meant the longer it took, the more energy was required. As you know, modern starship engines are completely internal now—no emissions—and a planet’s gravity can be entirely negated by...”

He continues on, but I filter the sound of his voice, having my sub-neural follow his words in case I need a summary. The ship, but a glowing dot now, seems to join the stars—still a bit brighter in the twilight than the real ones, but small and twinkling. I’m just glad the captain left it visible rather than enabling any stealth... uh *generators*? Is stealth gener—no, no stealth *systems*.

The whole thing is just so... I don’t know—magical?

The flower-shaped hanger continues furling back up, having begun the process after the departing ship was a couple kilometers up or so. I imagine on a busier world another ship would replace it immediately, space at a premium near the more populated core of civilization. For now, the port just closes, lights dying away. At least here, with the lazier schedule, that’ll probably favor the maintenance crews, giving plenty of time for anything that needs to be done.

My sub-neural indicates Danther’s speech pattern is tending toward a final point of some sort and several key details of what he said pop up on my feed.

Another lecture, essentially.

The man sure does like his engines.

“...anyway, that’s just the way it works. No sense in trying to get around it.”

“Fair enough,” I reply vaguely. “Perhaps when we get our hands on a ship, you can show me.” I can sense him opening his mouth. “—no, I *don’t* want to do it in a sim.”

I glance over, seeing him shake his head.

“It just isn’t the same, man.”

He sighs. “I’m just never going to understand that about you.”

“Yeah, well, ready to head in?”

He just looks over at me, expression of annoyed boredom in his eyes.

“Alright then,” I reply, chuckling. I push off over the edge of the cliff, my quadlev picking up speed for a couple seconds and offering several trajectories. I decide to take the more scenic route, locking in a winding path that weaves through a dense forest of evergreen trees.

I expect Danther is well enough sick of all the nature we had to “endure” on our trek from Fong, but for my part, I kind of wish the journey wasn’t over; sure, I can see all that in a sim—Danther reminded me of that enough times already—but it just isn’t the same. Beyond that, I think it might be a fair degree easier to hide in the wilds.

Nevertheless, hiding won’t solve any of our problems.

The trees flash by in a dark undulation between deep, verdant green and empty blackness, nearest ones passing in a whip-whip-whip of sound. In a forest this thick, not even the light of Red Heaven makes it to me until I reach a clearing, which I do sometime later.

Red Heaven is still kilometers to the west and an idea occurs to me. “Danther, wanna race?”

“No,” he replies, the immediacy of it catching me.

“What? Why?”

“You’re too much of a risk taker,” he says simply. “I’d never win.”

“I—come on, Danther, that’s such a bullshit excuse!” I reply, laughing despite myself.

“Ah, but it *is* a valid one, is it not?”

I roll my eyes. “Whatever. I’ll just race myself.”

“I—,” he begins to reply, but I cut the channel and push the quadlev to its max acceleration.

Having my suit pop my helmet, I cry aloud, laughing and yelling. *This* is what a quadlev’s for!

I dip a branch and dodge around the occasional tree, feeling the pull up and down as I crest hills and sweep through valleys. The wind catches my hair and tears stream across my face. The rush is fantastic—like it must feel for the pro lev-cross racers.

This is *awesome!*

But then... it ends.

I grow still a ways beyond the grand outer walls of Red Heaven, not willing to do anything remotely threatening too near the city’s outer batteries. Twenty meters high and a hundred thick, it’s hard to make out the curve of the barrier encircling Red Heaven. I send a quick query on my feed; almost five million people live here.

Time to add two more ...for a while, anyway.

“*Entrance is about three more kilos to the south,*” Danther says over neural comm.; my feed indicates he’s somewhere behind me.

He kept up after all.

“*Sounds good,*” I reply.

We assume a closer formation as we make the final stretch, the cargo spheres that had been trailing us tightening ranks as well. The last several minutes go by in silence, I getting all my information in order—I assume Danther does the same.

The hanger opens and we enter, a uniformed greeter waving us in and pointing toward processing rooms; poor guy looks dead on his feet. We separate and enter our own isolated areas; once my cargo spheres assume a tight enough train for the door to close, it does and the room begins its scans. The white walls and bright lights look non-threatening and sterile, but behind the façade is enough weaponry and counter contagion equipment to... well, I don't much like thinking about it.

As I wait, my handler program begins interacting with that of customs, exchanging all the relevant information. I let the process fall to the sub-neural, the whole affair quite dull.

A while later, I'm released from holding. I get off my quadlev and enter the main waiting terminal as my belongings are subjected to further scans. Danther exits a couple minutes later, annoyed. "Why do you always get out first?"

"I don't audit everything. You hungry?"

"Starving. Let's go find the food fabricators."

We walk a ways, passing several kiosks and stores, eventually coming to a food court. "Hey! Look!" I say, pointing.

"What is it?"

"I don't know. Let's check it out."

We approach the strange restaurant, immediately bombarded with appetizing smells and sights, a man in a strange uniform preparing food for a group of people. "Welcome! Welcome!" he says, laying strange looking meat on some kind of hot surface. "Are you gentlemen hungry?"

"Famished!" I reply, amused. "Are you... *cooking*?" I've seen the occasional person cook here and there—usually for some special occasion—but never someone doing it for a group of strangers at a restaurant.

“That I am. If you two like, sit down and pull up a menu.”

Danther, evidently reading said menu, looks skeptical. “The selection is so... *limited*.”

“When something is prepared, there are always limits.”

Danther shutters. “Shit, this is expensive!”

“What do you expect, Danther?” I reply. “The guy’s making it by hand.”

“Yeah, but I could get any of this for a quarter of the price in less than a minute, Sol!”

“With purely fabricated food, you merely wait on your stomach’s insisting to overcome your laziness,” he says and I laugh, finding the words strangely accurate. Danther, for his part, just snorts. “There is something beautifully human about the wait—enduring the discomfort of hunger for the way a preparing meal entices the nostrils with—.”

“Alright, *Gustavo*,” Danther interrupts and I lazily turn my head to stare at him; sometimes he’s such an ass. “*What are you selling*.”

“In a hurry, are we?”

“I’m in. How long does it take?” I ask, sitting down.

“Oh, come on, Sol. This is just tourist bait.”

“Ah, shut it. Have a seat and enjoy the presentation,” I say, gesturing to the cook, who now makes a show of juggling shrimp with implements I’ve never seen before—flat handled spoon-like things, but too big and with no bowl. “We’re here until our stuff is processed—what’s the harm?”

“*Teriyaki*?” Danther asks, leaning in toward a holographic cut of meat, eyes enhancing. “Sounds made up.”

I roll my eyes. “Just look it up, Danther,” I say, running a search. The entry pops into my interface window almost immediately. “It’s old Earth cuisine—completely val.”



“Sounds a lot better than ‘Flavor Pattern 034-B7,’ eh?” the cook asks with a grin.

Danther ignores us. “So... what is it? —the *meat*?”

“A blend between the patterns of Old Earth beef and dark turkey,” the vender replies, salesman’s pride and zeal—for the moment—still intact. “Has a good mix of—.”

“Completely Earth-spec my ass! Since when do bovines breed with poultry?”

The vendor shakes his head, looking at me.

“Everything smells great,” I offer, shrugging. “I’ll take some Teriyaki... uh, *turkey-steak*, some of that fried rice, a couple of those roll things, and uh, *uh*... what do you do drink wise?”

“Drinks are all standard fabrication, I’m afraid,” he says with a hint of regret. “We’re in the process of aging some alcoholic selections at the moment,” he says, laughing, “but I’m afraid it will be a couple years before that’s ready; believe it or not, that’s how long it used to take. Anyway, there’s not much point in not fabricating any standard drinks—nothing to be gained.”

“In that case, I’ll just take some water and CS 30-A2,” I say, interfacing with the menu.

“Vanilla root beer, eh?” he asks and I nod. “Good stuff.”

I glance over to Danther, who still has a look of hesitation in his stance. “Damn it, Danther, just order!”

“Fine! Fine,” he says, sitting. “I’ll have what he’s having.”

507 A.E. MARCH 12, 20:46:32 LOCAL

LUNA VERILEY

NEW EARTH IMPERIAL ORDER, DELAN III, RED HEAVEN, DOWIN ENGINEERING PLANETARY HEADQUARTERS

“Ms. Veriley,” Dern June says, appearing in my office.

“One second please, Mr. June,” I reply, bookmarking my thought and letting my vis windows go transparent. “Please,” I say, gesturing to a chair. “You have something to report, I expect?”

“Yes,” he says, the A.I. hologram chuckling as he sits. “Always with your little games at humanizing me.” He clears his throat and grins. “Two flagged individuals have entered the city.”

“Who?” I ask, well able to get the information myself, but enjoying the discourse. “Officials? Criminals?”

“Personal interest,” he says with a grin.

I raise an eyebrow. “Who flagged them?”

“Why, *you* did.”

“I...?”

Dern chuckles and takes a sip from a teacup that materializes in his hand as I forgo further conversation. The video feed appears along with the two profiles.

“It has certainly been a while, has it not?” Dern asks.

“Almost a decade.” I lean back in my chair, staring. It’s amazing, but they’re just like I would imagine—memories all grown up.

Sol walks, slouched forward, hands in his pockets, brown hair just as disheveled as always; I switch the feed and see those dark bored eyes.... I grin, bored or alight with excitement, his mind is only rarely anywhere else.

Danther, short and striding to keep up with Sol, still retains his customary air of bemused irritation. That frown has always made him look petulant, but I know that’s just how he looks when he’s thinking.

The sight makes me feel young again. “What could they be doing here, I wonder?”

“Perhaps they seek you?”

“If that were the case, I suspect they would have contacted me first.”

“Then they do not know you are here?”

“Not inconceivable, as far as coincidences go,” I reply absentmindedly. He says something, but I only just realize. “Pardon, what?”

He chuckles again. “I shall put the rest of the day’s schedule on hold.”

507 A.E. MARCH 12, 21:11:34 LOCAL

DANTHER MINTH

NEW EARTH IMPERIAL ORDER, DELAN III, RED HEAVEN, DOWNTOWN

Sol takes a bite of the turkey steak as the quadlevs take us to the commercial district. It’s night by now, but in a city like this that hardly matters; sleep schedules as screwed up as ours are, it’ll be hours until I’m tired enough for bed, so it makes sense to check out the ship listings. Who knows, maybe we’ll get lucky and not need to get an apartment at all.

Yeah. That’ll happen.

I look over at Sol, unable to keep myself from grinning. —that stupid look of enjoyment on his face.

My grin sours.

He could be doing anything right now. He was always the most popular, the most athletic—the *coolest*.

Seven years—seven years he’s run with me... he’s kept me safe.

I shake my head.

Sometimes I wish I had the courage to leave. —to just disappear one night and let my friend get on with his life—start a real career—find a woman—start a family.

His life would be so much easier—*better*—without me.

“Damn,” Sol says, whistling after he swallows. “This is amazing.”

“He said the point of take away was eating it later.”

“I’m still hungry!”

“You’re always hungry,” I say, shaking my head. “You need to have your metabolism adjusted.”

He grins, mouth full. “Ven I uldn’t be able te eat es much!”

I look over to him as he takes another bite. “I could have talked him down, you know.”

He laughs. “If that’s what you think was going to happen, you—.”

“Oh, fuck off, Sol. If you think we are gunna to get a ship with what’s in the account: one, you’ll have to be a whole hell of a lot less naive and two, learn how to negotiate.”

He glares at me. “Ah yes, negotiating, the art of verbally tweaking someone to the point where they no longer want to do business.” I punch his shoulder. “Hey, man!”

“I’m serious,” I say, becoming a bit somber. “We’re not going to get shit without a miracle.”

He laughs, taking another bite. “You’re such a pessimist.”

“And you need to learn to be more frugal.”

“Damn...,” he says, biting his lip.

“What?” I ask, looking over.

He tilts his wooden bowl, showing the empty bottom.

I roll my eyes, handing him mine. “Here.”

“Soberly?”

“Yeah,” I reply, shaking my head. “Seeing you eat makes me lose my appetite anyway.”

He grins. “You’re like a goddan slop warthen.”

We walk for a while, Sol devouring my leftovers before fabricating a cup of iced lemonade for dessert. I swear, sometimes I can nearly picture the credits disappearing into that stomach of

his; then again, we could both save credits by dieting, I expect, but I think I'd rather not live off of PureCal for the sake of financial stability.

Eventually we make it to a commercial district, entering Inmar and Falden, a promising second hand ship dealer. The place is deserted, as expected, most potential customers using neural to do business. Even so, everything seems to be trending toward companies having some human-driven means to interact with potential customers; I think I read somewhere that studies indicated making things more personal helps business or something to that effect.

I peruse the listings while Sol talks to the guy at the front. It doesn't look promising, everything either way outside our price range or too small for anything other than travel. Perhaps if we were desperate—*more desperate*—one of them might work, but really only as a means to get off the planet and make enough to get a bigger ship.

“Danther,” Sol says and I look up. “What do you think?”

I look at the listing, appraising it. “Are you fucking kidding me?” I ask, staring at the older representative. “Sixty million for *that*?”

He stares at me, patronizing. “Sixty-one million, five.”

“There's nothing cheaper?” Sol asks, mouth open.

“Nothing meeting your specifications and operational, no.” He sighs. “Like I said, we primarily deal with retired F-Class ships of a military lean and all our ships are on the listings. Ours and every other reputable shipyard's listings are all posted, *per regulation*. If I might be frank,” he says, a look of concern on his face, “you two are going to waste a lot of credits traveling around looking for something that isn't there—that is, if you don't intent to enjoy the journey.”

I roll my eyes. “Well thanks for—.”

“I'm decent with a fabricator,” Sol says, interrupting me. “Are there any repairable—?”

“Honestly, *we’re* in the business of retrofitting,” he says, sympathetic. “If there’s any worthwhile wrecks within two gates, we’re probably already processing it for resale.”

“Ai, tell them about The Walnut,” another says from a back room, the man leaning back in his chair, legs propped up.

Our salesman rolls his eyes. “I’m not—.”

“What walnut?” Sol asks.

Our salesman shakes his head, sighing. “They’re yours, Jin.”

“Why thank you, Tarner,” he says with a cavalier energy to his voice, getting up as the other leaves.

“So, what’s this ‘Walnut’?” I ask, skeptical. I get the feeling it’s a load of garble, but Sol seems excited enough. Who knows.

“So The Walnut—or at least that’s what we’ve been calling it—is a ship that’s been with the city—*the planet*—for as long as anyone can remember. It comes and goes now and then, but mostly it just stays in its dock and does nothing.”

“Is it for sale?” Sol asks.

“No,” Jin says, but grins.

Annoyance flickers and I start. “Then wha—?”

“If you can figure out how to get rid of her, she’s free.”

“Free?” Sol asks.

“What’s the catch?” I ask, sighing as I rub my temples. Whenever something like this presents itself to Sol, he just can’t let it go. It’s like he thinks fate is conspiring to fix all his problems if he believes hard enough; all the times we’ve got screwed and he still hasn’t figured out that people lie.

“Like I said, she’s been at the docks for as long as anyone can remember. Over the years, people have tried to get rid of her, but she just comes and goes as she pleases.”

“Without a crew?” Sol asks, genuinely confused.

“Near as we can tell,” Jin says, grin widening like this is some sort of amusing game. “Every so often she’ll leave for a while and then come back.”

“Why not revoke the ship’s access to port?” I ask, just about ready to unravel the story.

“They’ve tried,” he replies, laughing now. “She just gets back into the system and returns the registry. One time another vessel took her dock while she was away and, upon return, she just *moved* the other ship—*hacked* into the piloting system or something like that and just *moved it*.”

I roll my eyes. I’ve had about enough—

“What about defabricating the dock itself?” Sol asks.

“Tried that too. She just took another.” He laughs. “And get this: some nobin tries to pull a fast one—defabricate for credits things he knew the ship would just fabricate again, right? But the ship *hacks* the guy’s bank account and ‘as him pay for it all. The idiot then tries to report it—the wank!”

“Have they tried firing on her?”

“Yup and get this.” He stares at Sol, look significant. “Whenever the city’s—*hell*, even the *orbital defense network*’s—weapons lock on her, they just... won’t... fire. No worrying about shields, no warp defense, nothing.”

“Where is she?”

Jin walks out from behind the desk and opens a group holo window, everything between here and the “Walnut” going transparent as he magnifies. “Kinda...,” I begin, trying to find the right word, “*archaic* looking, isn’t it?”

“Old Tor thinks it’s an *Earth ship*.”

“No!” Sol says, enthusiasm doubling. “Really?”

“He compared it with the old structures on New Jerusalem,” the salesman says, though he sounds less than convinced. “Said there was some resemblance.”

“Yeah, I think I see it!” Sol turns to me. “This might be just what we’ve been looking for!”

“That ship’s a unicorn, Sol,” I reply.

“Danther, you’re such a pessimist.”

I turn to Jin. “How long have people been trying to get access to this ship?”

“Since this planet was discovered, near as we can tell—around a hundred years or so,”  
Turner replies, bored.

“Well I’m going to give it a shot! What’s the worst that could happen?” Sol asks.

“You could offend her,” Turner says, disinterest gone.

“I... —what?”

“Oh, here we go,” Jin says, rolling his eyes.

“These boys ought to know,” he says, glaring at Jin. “Anyway, there have been a couple of times people inquired after that ship and didn’t live long after.”

“What? Why?” Sol asks.

“Not sure. We think one tried to break in—.”

“—that’s the one that got the gantry blown up and—.”

“Hey, you had your turn,” Turner says, leveling a stare. “You gunna let me talk?”

Jin holds up his hands, conceding.

“I’m sorry,” I say, cold. “Did you say ‘blown up’?”



“Took him out and a group of mercenaries he hired to breach the hull about a decade ago. And there were others too.”

“Such as?” I ask, hoping the stories will dissuade Sol.

“She took out a small cruiser that tried to destroy her—a couple others who looked into the whole ‘free ship’ idea showed up in the morgue, too.”

Jin raises his hands, wagging his fingers. “Some *disappeared*.”

Turner rolls his eyes. “If you want to check out ‘The Walnut,’ you’re welcome to do so—hell, used to be a pretty big tourist destination, that ship’s gantry, up until all the commotion. I just want you to be forewarned. Common courtesy, right?”

“Well thanks,” I say, mind already onto the next goal. “Come on, Sol.”

“Alright,” he says. “Thanks for your time, gentlemen.”

“Your welcome,” Turner says. “And if you change your mind about a ship, feel free to check Inmar and Falden’s listings or set up an automated notification with your specs.”

We say our goodbyes and begin away.

After a block or so, we enter a more casual commercial area. More food stalls—all glitzy fabricator clusters with flashy holographics and annoying A.I. sales personas that will conversationally latch onto anyone getting too close—interspersed with stores and displays. Several sim cafés draw crowds, some new program in the Violet Star series out today, as I recall—borderline softcore porn pseudoscience drivel, in my opinion. There are also a couple specialty shops, but most of the timeshare parcels of commercial real estate are in the process of transitioning over to the night businesses.

It’s nothing I haven’t seen in every other city, save a little more budget and slightly newer specs.

Losing myself in a muse, I wonder if perhaps there are some private listings with a ship worth buying. That, or it finally might be time to take another go at trying to convince Sol to consider a lease or a sponsor. —that, or just trying to build our own ship like I did with the quadlevs... I have been toying with the specs for months, and.... “Sol, I—?”

“I think—.”

We both look at each other.

“Go ahead,” I say.

“No, you,” he replies.

“Nah, let’s hear it.”

“I think I’m gunna go check out that ship.”

I sigh.

“What?” he asks, surprised—*surprised*. How the hell can he be surprised?

“That story about the ship’s a load of shit, Sol. —something they tell tourists to have a laugh.”

“Nah, come on!”

“They’ll be watching you walk up to that thing, laughing their asses off as the owner’s security escorts you away.”

“And risk their jobs on a bad review for Inmar and Falden? You think that’s worth a joke on a couple strangers? Besides,” he says and looks off to what I presume is information on a personal holo screen, “I just searched all the review sites and there is nothing about the thing being a joke—hell, there’s a ton about the ship itself—theories and such.”

“And yet when it comes to trusting information about ship listings...,” I say under my breath, shaking my head.

“What?”

“Nothing,” I say, just about to where I can take of this newest empty hope. “If you want, go check the thing out. I’ll head off and get us a room for the night.”

“Uh, yeah,” he says, grinning. “Comm. me.”

“Yeah, sure.”