



Episode 7 “Home”

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Space the final frontier, these are the continuing missions of the Starship Eagle, our goal is to advance federation knowledge and explore the unknown regions of space, we are the federations first lines in exploration and defense, The Year is 2290 and these are the adventures of the USS Eagle.

"Captain to all Department Heads. Please report to the briefing room in fifteen minutes. Carter out."

He re-read the data pad again with a sigh.

No sooner than the EAGLE had gotten into reliable communication range with the Star Fleet than a new order was sent down diverting them several hundred light years from their current course.

The captain reviewed the existing star charts, then brought up the information attached to the message. An automated reconnaissance probe through an area recently added to the Federation as a Territory had found something 'interesting' in an otherwise empty sector.

The information from the probe was sketchy, but there were some very tantalizing pictures and sensor readings. The machine had found something, just what was hard to say, but it had definitely found something. And Star Fleet wanted them to check it out unless there were serious problems with the ship or crew that needed immediate attention.

"It'll add at least another ten days to two weeks to our mission." Torrell said to confirm the captain's estimate. "Depending on several factors." She nodded to the group. "If we can find the object straight away where the probe said it was. How much time investigating it. Whether or not there are hostile aliens in the area who object to our presence." She paused.

"We understand." The captain nodded. He looked around the room. "If we're going to do this. We should do it right. Find the object, do a full survey and recon with away missions if possible. Catalog it and all that. Then resume course."

It was clear they all wanted to get home.

"It looks like... well... like space junk." Maxwell said evaluating the images as they replaced each other on the viewscreens.

"It probably is. But it's space junk in a sector that wasn't supposed to have space junk in it. And it doesn't register as anything anybody known to the Federation ever used. So, the brass wants to know what it is and whose it was."

O'Dell the engineer voiced the thought a lot of them were toying with. "Well, at least we'll be inside Federation Territory." He looked around. "Let's do it."

The EAGLE slowed slightly as it approached the indicated sector. They began full sensor sweeps to have some background information on the systems in the area. Namely, was anybody in the neighborhood that might object to their snooping around that hadn't noticed a small quiet automated probe?

"Sir! Multiple metallic objects dead ahead." Torrell said.

"Drop to impulse. Ahead point three."

"Aye sir. I'm picking up dozens of objects, many different sizes."

"Confirmed sir. And there are more of them to starboard as well. And to port now."

Lieutenant Commander Maxwell poured over his instruments. Then once convinced he wasn't seeing things he brought it to the Captain's attention as well. "Sir. I'm seeing traces of all sorts of energy outputs all over this sector. From the objects and otherwise. None if it looks like weapon's signatures, not yet anyway."

"Mr Berry?" The captain glanced over his shoulder at the com station.

"Some very faint low band static that doesn't look like static. We're trying to clear it up."

"Commander Torrell. Take us into that concentration of objects and bring us to a stop. Full sensor sweeps, let's see what we're dealing with."

"Sir, we're still a long way from the probe's coordinates." Nebrell said.

"Agreed. But Mr. Maxwell evaluated the object as space junk, and well, this stuff appears to be at least of the same species." He looked up at the Security Chief.

"It would appear to be sir." Maxwell said with almost a sneer.

"Lieutenant Mohammad?"

"Still evaluating the objects sir. But they seem to be from many different sources. I'm detecting some objects that appear to be wooden, others are aluminum or steel alloy. I'm reading a few unknown alloys as well."

"Parts of space ships?"

"It's possible sir. But any conclusion at this point would be pure speculation."

The rumor that they had come across a 'Graveyard of Ships' spread through the ship's rumor mill.

Some of the crew peered out of portals and whispered about curses for disturbing the slumber of the drifting hulks. Others wondered if there was alien technology or other material of value in them.

One of the older crewmen stopped Berry on his way into the Eyrie for a break.

"What destroyed all those alien ships?" They asked him.

Berry looked around, a couple of others were listening. He knew that as a bridge officer anything he said would instantly be repeated all over the ship.

"We don't know."

"Was it from big battle or maybe some sort of natural event?"

"How about: If technology can't explain it, maybe magic can."

"That's just one of your rules." The crewman said with his nose wrinkled up.

"Yeah. Can I get some coffee? I'm only on a break."

"Go on." The crewman said. Then added. "Sir."

Berry half listened as the crewman rejoined a small group and complained that you just can't get any good scuttlebutt from the bridge crew.

Slowly they put together the clues.

"Most of the objects came from one source." Mohammad said. "We're trying to work out what the original was, but there seem to be a lot of parts missing. There seem to be interior furnishings from a habitable area, but there's no exterior components. Like

shielding or pressure vessel walls."

The captain nodded thoughtfully. "What happened to the original? What destroyed it?"

"Old age." O'Dell said. The captain looked his way. "We've been able to date some of the composites in the material to from three to five hundred years old. I'm pretty sure one section we got a sample of had been exposed to space for about a hundred and fifty years."

"OK. So it's been out here awhile. What was it?"

The officers were quiet.

"No idea sir. But whatever it was was big. We're detecting objects as far as we can scan in every direction." Nebrell said.

"Is there a pattern to their drifting?"

"Not that we've been able to discern to this point."

They discussed some other information then the Captain asked if there was anything further they could learn where they were.

"Not really very likely. We've got samples of several of the pieces."

Carter nodded with both hands flat on the table. "In that case. Set course for the probe's coordinates. Half impulse. Scan everything we can en route."

"Yes sir."

The Helmsman and the Navigator were forced to make innumerable course corrections as they sought to avoid as much of the drifting wreckage as possible. But even then, the forward navigational shields were constantly flaring as tiny particles of metal and other small objects impacted against the protective screen.

"Large object to the port bow."

"Let's see it."

The screen changed to show a larger than usual section of whatever it had been. Except this one had some features the others were missing.

"Heavy steel plating and energy dampening material. That's an exterior section." Mohammad said.

"No weapons' signatures here either. Although I am detecting some chemical residue."

"Oh?" Carter questioned. "What kind of chemicals?"

"Quat-ox-acetylene." Maxwell said. "Somebody took a cutting torch to it. And my guess would be that it's recent."

The bridge crew exchanged incredulous looks.

Mohammad confirmed it. "Heavy residue along some of the dampening material. It left scorch marks." She brought up a magnified view of the section.

Carter appraised the artifact. It was obvious it had been cut, and not by an expert. From where he sat it looked like it had been hacked up in a hurry by some sort of remotely operated vehicle or even a robot scrap processing machine that had only completed part of the job. "They were taking the hull plating off the interior structure. Probably for salvage. Think they'll be back to finish the job?"

"Possibly." Maxwell said. "And I'd like to keep our hull plating right where it is."

"Agreed." Carter said. "Let's keep moving."

The EAGLE moved on through the field of debris. Sometimes the material was so thick as to create a meaningful cloud that the ship went around to avoid. At other times large areas would be nearly empty.

"Another large section sir. And it has the outer hull intact."

"I'm reading traces of oxygen, carbon dioxide, some hydrocarbons, and even some frozen water." Mohammad looked up. "This section could have been recently inhabited before it was exposed to space."

"How long ago?" Carter asked as the view screen switched to the new find.

"Several months to a year. Maybe somewhat longer depending on its condition before it was cut from a larger structure."

"Residual energy sir." Maxwell said. "Looks like an old style tractor beam. As well as some low emissions from what seem to be lighting units and a couple of barely functioning gravity plates. They're generating about one fifth of a G."

The object was croissant shaped with several independent units that divided the section almost equally. Carter stared at it as it sat in space.

The crew knew exactly what he was thinking about.

"They'd have to wear full environmental suits and maintain open com lines to the ship." Torrell said.

Carter nodded. He looked over at Maxwell and Mohammad.

"Yes sir."

"Standard away team. Maintain open channels and transporter lock." He ordered. "Who's on the xeno-technology rotation list?"

Lieutenant Commander Berry brought up the names. "One of the Ardanians, sir. Lead Centurion Calit TaFa sir."

Maxwell frowned. "He's supposed to only be an observer for this mission. He's not authorized for Away Duty."

Carter shook his head. "It'd be good for him, and us. Let him observe from over there. If there was a risk of contact with whoever built it, I'd say no."

Maxwell shrugged. "It's your call." He nodded to Berry.

"Bridge to Lead Centurion Calit TaFa, report to transporter room two for away duty. Standard gear. Environmental suit required."

"Calit. Understood Bridge." The alien officer said with a very clipped and exacting speech pattern.

"OK." Maxwell said and headed for the turbolift.

The team beamed into the eerily empty and silent housing section.

"Away team to EAGLE. All accounted for, situation normal. Com lines open." Maxwell reported once they had materialized. "Let's get to it. And stay away from that." He gestured to the gaping hole where the section had joined onto the main structure.

Then they got a surprise. When they moved at all, they'd lift off the decking for a few seconds.

It took them a minute or so to learn how to stay in control as they moved.

"Take it easy, we're not in any hurry." Maxwell said into the com. "Centurion. See if you can get anything out of that panel. It looks like a control unit to me."

"Sir." The man nodded sharply and sort of bounced that way.

Mohammad was scanning some of the furnishings that were laying around. "All

synthetic alloys. Made for use in the station." She moved gracefully and almost elegantly to a housing unit door. "Commander, can you open this?" She asked.

"I'll try." Maxwell wasn't nearly so graceful.

The engineering assistant was carefully removing panels from another section of the main area. "Commander. I think I've got something." She said. "Permission to try to give the systems some power."

Maxwell glanced over at the Centurion. He had to pause a second to pronounce the name correctly. "Calit?"

"I'm not able to access anything the way it is sir. The unit is intact, if it was activated, I might be able to retrieve whatever information it contains."

"I'll make sure I don't blow it up Commander."

"OK Ensign Willis. Do it." Maxwell said. Then he went back to pushing the door open.

"Thank you Commander." Mohammad said.

Willis had a small power generator beamed over, then she used some patch cables to tie it into the housing unit's system. She worked for some time before she was satisfied with it. "OK, it's going to leak, but we should get something."

Maxwell looked at it with some open skepticism but the Centurion approved of the rigging. Maxwell nodded and the engineer turned it on. Instantly a small amount of thin white smoke appeared around the interface and began to spread.

"If that gets too bad, turn it off." Maxwell said. "We need to see what we're doing in here."

"Yes sir."

At first nothing seemed to happen. Then several of the larger area lights began to glow.

As the power worked through the system several indicators began to flash and a couple of the doors to housing units opened up. The gravity never got any stronger, evidently it was on another power system. The engineer and the xeno-technologist spent some time discussing it and looking around for another panel.

"SIR!" Willis shouted and pointed toward the other side of the unit.

They all looked that way.

A corpse had tumbled through an open door and was lazily sliding down a long curving stairway along the far wall.

"EAGLE. We have a dead alien." Maxwell reported.

The science officer was already making her way to the body with her tricorder at the ready.

"We see it away team." Carter said from the ship. They were watching a couple of the team's point of view cameras imbedded in their suit's helmets. The still body of what appeared to be an elderly humanoid shimmered in their lights.

"Its frozen captain. And it's been exposed to space for several months at least. Probably more." Mohammad reported. "Authorization requested to beam it aboard for full autopsy."

"Granted. Full containment." Carter said nodding to Torrell.

"Bridge to Doctor T'Mier. Stand by for direct transport to containment." Torrell said to the com.

"We're ready Commander Torrell. Energize at your will."

The away team watched the alien body dematerialize. Then Maxwell and Mohammad backtracked the path the body had taken down the stairs. Calit went to the control panel and began scanning it and working controls. Almost immediately information began to flash on small narrow screens. The engineer worked on trying to bring more of the unit's systems on line.

"Oh wow." Maxwell said as he stepped into the room. "Bridge, do you see this?"

"Yes Commander."

It was evident that the alien hadn't been dead when the section had been cut away from whatever it had been part of. Clothing and a plasticized wrapping had been stuffed around the door and covered a vent to try to keep air in the unit. There was a bundle of possessions ready to be taken out in a hurry. Most poignant of all was several hand written pages of a looping script written with a soft pencil type of implement that looked like it had been sharpened by the alien gnawing on it.

"That's coming with us." Maxwell said as Mohammad inspected the documents. He looked around the quarters with the glaringly bright lights of his helmet highlighting everything in stark relief. "These too." He picked up what appeared to be personal recording devices.

"The being appeared to have been able to survive in here for a long time. I wonder why they weren't rescued." Mohammad said.

Maxwell was examining one of the instruments. "This might tell us."

"Sir. We're going to have to shut the power down in a few minutes. It's drawing more than our generator can deliver."

"OK." Maxwell said. "Let's check the other units."

"Yes sir."

They didn't find any more corpses, but they did find more personal effects and even some containers.

"Organic compounds. It used to be food." Mohammad said in one room.

"We'll take it too." He put a couple of them in an improvised bag he was carrying.

"And no, I'm not hungry. For in depth analysis."

"Excellent." She replied.

"Ready sir?" The engineer called on the com.

Maxwell bounce-stepped to the rail in front of the upper level of rooms. "Go ahead."

Willis touched the control panel of the power unit. Immediately the lights dimmed and the panels went dark.

After a few more minutes of investigation, they beamed back to the EAGLE.

"Resume course and speed. Let's not wait and see if the scavengers come back for it." Carter said after his people were aboard.

Torrell worked her controls and the starship turned slightly in space and left the cold silent housing unit to its fate.

It took them several solid hours of work to go through the information, samples, and the body from the housing unit.

The hard science side of the puzzle was easy compared to the rest of it. The food had been reconstituted from dehydrated 'raw' ingredients of basic chemicals like protein,

carbohydrates, and other materials, then combined according to specific recipes and processed for consumption.

The housing unit structure itself was somewhat younger than the other pieces they had found and scanned. But it was still several hundred years old.

The medical department worked up the data on the alien corpse to include everything down to the fact that as a child he had badly injured his left second wrist and had it surgically repaired by a very sophisticated technique. His was an advanced civilization.

While they answered many questions, there were several things that just seemed open ended and left them wondering just who the dead alien was and what was he doing on the housing unit to begin with.

"He asphyxiated before he froze." Dr. T'Mier said as the briefing opened and the Captain asked her about the alien. "But he did live in his room for some time after it had been cut from the main structure. There had been an atmospheric containment force field over the rupture that only failed when the power backup ran out of energy. It was about the same time that the heating units stopped working. But he was able to survive in his quarters after both events for several days at least. He was in there as we found him for approximately three to five years. Difficult to tell exactly."

"Has there been any more success in translating his papers? Like what do they call themselves?"

Riley Berry nodded. "With what Calit retrieved we've been able to run it through the Universal Translator. Most of it has been rendered into English, but some of it is still stumping us. Most of his papers looked like a will. The words and phrases that we can't translate may be slang and proper names. As for their species name... I have no idea."

Carter sat there and waited as the communications officer brought up the translation to replace images of the curving handwritten script.

"It's rather wordy. They use a lot of almost flowery descriptions and almost too many adjectives and things, even in technical documentation."

Chief Engineer O'Dell thought that was funny and asked for an example.

"You got it." Berry said and ran through several things on his pad quickly, then he brought up one in particular and read it. "The graciously approved temperature range for deliciously hot dispensed beverages in attractive and efficient serving containers that resist spilling while holding the wonderful drink is between 8.7 and 9.5 lengs. If so requested the thoughtfully designed system of reconstitutors and dispensers may vary by between 1.3 and 1.8 lengs."

"That sounds like a promotion for the dispenser." Carter said.

"There's more." Berry touched the pad again.

O'Dell looked at it and started reading out loud. "Tomorrow's most accommodating training schedule for the enthusiastic emergency containment crew will include a delightfully entertaining and informative presentation of the deadly hazard of posi-D radiation leakage from the most dependably designed Thiripst 19 thruster pack." He blinked. "They're kidding."

"No sir." Berry flashed a couple of more examples onto the screen. Even the most mundane instruction or report was written the same way. "... homelike living accommodation section 17 with easy access to Habitat Relcom. I Fisct Jea am happy to

submit my weekly accurate accounting of well used and discarded items and bulk living waste which can't be further recycled ..."

"We get the idea." Carter sighed. "OK, they like to sound like shore leave schedulers for Risa. What happened to the housing unit?"

"It took some sorting out, but he blamed somebody called the 'Swirlers'." Berry showed them a small but clear video image the alien had evidently taken through his quarter's window of a long narrow ship with three engines on long thin pylons that seemed to rotate around the body of the ship as if flew past the window between the drifting unit and what appeared to be what it had been part of. "These Swirlers are the scavengers and they've been preying on these people's habitat for years."

"For years? And they're still doing it? How big is it?"

"We've got that." He skipped forward through several images. "There it is." He enlarged the image until it became a little grainy.

"OK. It's big." O'Dell said as his eyes adjusted to the scale of the object.

"Give me a size estimate." Carter said.

Nebrell answered him. "If the size of the housing units is consistent from the one we investigated at one hundred ten meters by thirty two meters, and they appear to be, based on this information..." He paused the recording then backed it up slightly. "This long axis on this part of the structure is... approximately... one thousand six hundred eighty five meters."

"Sixteen Hundred..."

"Yes sir. It's several times our ship's... well... several times our everything."

"And that's just this one piece. Sir." Berry added. "Look at this view." He changed the picture.

"That's got to be hundreds of kilometers."

"No sir." Nebrell said. "Thousands." They all looked at him. "It's hard to get a precise measurement, but working from these images and the ones from the probe. I've estimated the overall visible length of the primary structure at just over seven thousand kilometers. I've isolated some twenty two thousand five hundred visible housing units. As well as eight hundred fifty four other pods of unknown type and use."

The room was silent as the view shifted slightly and the dimensions sank in.

"How long until we reach the coordinates?" Carter asked softly.

"Four hours, twenty minutes. Present speed." Torrell answered.

He put his hands on the table and nodded. "Let's be ready for it."

They had the translator working almost seamlessly before the sensors reported contact with the object.

"Bridge to Captain Carter."

Carter heard the call the second time. He was in the Eyrie having a break before what he knew was going to be a long session once they made contact. "Carter here. We've got the structure on sensors. "

"Yes sir. And sir.... It's even bigger than we estimated. And it's moving through a small asteroid cloud."

"I'm on my way. Notify the department heads."

"Yes sir."

The scale of the object defied easy categorization. Some of the science section began to refer to it as a Dyson Sphere without the star. Then they found several enormous power generating nodes on the structure and amended that to say they had built their own stars to go with it.

Individual sections were roughly on scale with the habitat they had encountered. Most were attached to a veritable maze of passages with some of the connecting tubes being kilometers long while others had little more than a meter or two of separation. Other sections were at the end of long tethers while some appeared to have docking mechanisms and thrusters built in so they could move around. Still other smaller machines were moving around on the outside of the main housing unit.

"Is there any sign of life?" Carter asked.

"Yes sir."

The captain waited but no further explanation was coming. He had to ask the follow up question. "Where are they?"

"All over sir. Scattered throughout the structure. All told, there could be millions in it." Mohammad looked at the view screen. "I'm not able to discern a centralized authority. Yet." She turned back to her station.

The Security Chief was unsure about getting closer to something so huge until he scanned it. "Sir, I'm not seeing anything on it weapons wise that are any threat to us. They've got standard navigational shields and a few category two turbo-lasers, but they're mounted almost randomly. It's not either an offensive or even really a defensive array."

Nebrell had been busy too. "I don't see any engines. A few thrusters and stabilizers. But nothing powerful enough to really move it."

"Sir." Maxwell said suddenly. "Activity on a branch of the... Thing."

"Show me."

The screen changed to show an end unit of the structure. Several automated devices were building more of the structure.

"Mohammad?"

"Yes sir. They are building more. And apparently using material mined from asteroids they've captured to do it." She made some adjustments to her console.

The screen changed to show several large space rocks being devoured by a large processing unit.

"The asteroids are iron and nickel. With various trace elements. They seem to be using the majority of the material with very little waste."

"I've got some of them sir." Berry said. He changed the picture. "This is a video feed from nearby. Working on an audio feed."

The screen showed several members of the same species engaging in routine activities. Then the picture changed to show three of them monitoring a large complicated panel. In a minute it changed again to show a corridor with a few of them walking along. Then it changed to show a large circular structure full of machinery. The images seemed to be real time as they were able to identify a couple of the views with information the ship's sensors was returning.

Then the universal translator began in mid-sentence. "... bountiful resources identified through spectacular effort by the intensely devoted deep void scanning team from the beautiful Cerfta Level Habitat section of the advanced living enclosure section...."

Carter waved at him to shut it off. "What is that about?"

"I have no idea sir. There's two other channels of it. One of those seems to be several dozen private conversations."

"Are they like that?"

"Pretty much."

"Skip it." He looked back at the screen. "Let's keep looking."

The EAGLE cruised slowly around the enormous construction.

Lieutenant Commander Berry had checked his board three times. "Still no hails or communication directed at us from ... them. Sir." Then he pursed his lips. "But I've been monitoring some of their internal communications. They've seen us, and are talking About us, just not To us."

"Let's hear it."

Berry hit several buttons and waited a second. "Got it. Here it goes."

The speakers picked up the conversation. "... not boldly evil Swirler with hateful efficient cutting beam of gloriously brilliant energy of pure destruction."

Then another voice came on. "This elegantly swift vessel is from Beyond in the Darkness. Wonderfully designed by creative power of dark flight for times away with greatest efficiency."

"Wonderfully designed. Most assuredly awesomely powerful moreso than the nasty design Swirler..."

Carter waved his hand for Berry to shut it off. "Yeah, OK. They've seen us."

Mohammad got his attention. "I believe, although I am not certain, that I have identified a central control area. Although I would not call it a command and control area. It appears that they operate the communications and life support for this immediate area of the habitat."

"That'll do. Can we talk to them?"

"That remains to be seen sir."

Carter thought she was joking, however her face was still very serious. "I too have been monitoring their communications channels. I've yet to find a vacant one to use."

Carter turned to Berry.

"No sir. Every channel I've identified so far has been in constant use. Sometimes by three or four different conversations at once."

Carter stared at the massive structure on the screen. "OK, pick one that is in use by that control room and... break in."

"Yes sir. Give me a second to get the Translator on the line for two way."

They waited.

Suddenly there were several overlapping conversations going at once.

"You're on sir."

"This is Captain Carter of the USS EAGLE. May I please speak to someone in charge on the habitat we are orbiting?"

The conversations continued uninterrupted for a moment.

He turned to Berry. "Can they hear me?"

Berry started checking his equipment.

"Of course we can clearly hear you honorable Captain Carter. Your dynamic conversation transmission is most efficient and enjoyable." The conflicting conversations

were now somewhat muted.

"oh." Carter said. He looked back at the screen. "We'd like to learn more about you and your habitat."

There was a delay while the message was translated and sent then the process was reversed when the reply was received.

Then Carter thought about it. "We'd like to... We'd greatly enjoy and are most interested in learning more, a great deal more, about your glorious habitat and ... " He glanced around for help.

"Your most extraordinary way of life." Berry added.

Torrell smiled and nodded. "Speak to them in their language." She whispered.

"I'll try." Carter replied.

The reply came. "And we share boundless curiosity and interest in learning all things now unknown most distinguished captain."

Several minutes later Carter slouched into his seat. "We're muted right?" He said to Berry.

"Yessir. All outbound is severed."

"THAT was the most exhausting conversation I've ever had." He rubbed his temples.

"But you handled that First Contact with absolute professionalism." Torrell said with a smile.

"Yes sir." Berry added.

"I feel like I just had a creative writing pop quiz on adjectives and adverbs."

"You did." Mohammad said.

"And I think you got a passing grade." Maxwell grinned at him. "Your first one?"

"Absolutely." Carter sighed. "OK, run every scan you can. Preparatory First Contact staff meeting in, give me ten minutes to get rid of this headache..."

"The Vakets, or the Lenisians, or the THallites, or the... well, they've got about nineteen different names for themselves that they seem to use interchangeably with all sorts of modifiers, even in the same sentence." Mr Berry said. "Some of them appear to be family names, but they don't use them with any exclusivity that I can find."

Maxwell agreed. "Once you sort through all the flowery language, their technology and methodologies really aren't very sophisticated."

"Explain that."

"Well sir. I scanned everything I could find in their communications trying to find out more about the predatory power they call the Swirlers. From what I've been able to learn, other than their cutting beams, the Swirler ships are not armed. If these..." He gestured to the portal to indicate the gigantic habitat. "Whatever they are. If they mounted a serious resistance with the arms they posses, they could blow the Swirlers out of the sky."

"But they don't."

"And they haven't for hundreds of years."

They sat there for a second.

"That's another question. How long have they been out here and where did they come from?"

"They're from a small system not far from here. Some time ago their sun began a hyperactive phase and they moved a small orbital habitat out of the system with the majority of their population on it. They mine asteroids to expand it and it just drifted instead of orbiting their system." Nebrell said.

"But it's twice the station they need for the population on it. What's with all the extra room?" O'Dell asked.

Nebrell didn't have much of an answer. "They began the building program, and never stopped it."

"So who are the Swirlers?" The Captain asked.

Berry shook his head, then answered. "That's more complicated. It seems they used to be part of the same group, but not really. I couldn't make all the connections." He shook his head again.

Carter looked at him. "Under any other circumstances that would be a totally unacceptable answer. But with this bunch... I understand." He looked over at the engineer. "So what's those power supplies?"

"Mostly nuclear reactors fed by anything they mine from the asteroids. I've seen fusion, fission, some reactable ion chambers. They can evidently use whatever they find."

"Where do they get their air?"

"Same place. They break down rock into constituent particles, then re-circulate it endlessly. Also some of those little crawler units we've seen on the outside of the habitat, they're tracking down leaks and plugging them."

"Efficient."

"Yes sir. And that's the only thing we could find as a common thread through any of what we've learned about them. They're efficient in everything except their language."

"And that's probably efficient to them in their way." Mohammad surmised.

Carter agreed. "As with any first contact, we shouldn't pre-judge anything. What seems incomprehensible to us is absolutely routine to them."

"We all understand with absolute clarity your ability to travel without mobility most noble Captain of the magnificent EAGLE. Please good sir, at your most available and convenient opportunity come visit our dreary and humble habitat with your brave and dedicated officers. I've taken upon myself the astonishingly humbling duty of contacting other honored district facility managers so they may come and praise you for your fortitude upon braving the Darkness to come inspect our Home."

All Carter could say was. "Thank you."

The EAGLE slowly maneuvered away from the structure still running full scans.

They had spent three full days visiting and interacting with the inhabitants. Once during the visit a Swirler had appeared at the edge of sensor range. It swooped in toward the 'back' end of the unit then just as the EAGLE detected the low power sensors the small ship used the scavenger broke off and retreated running its inefficient engines at full power.

But the brief encounter had been enough. The EAGLE crew had determined that the pilot was of the same species, and much of the technology was the same. The officials of the habitat treated the raid as a matter of course. And they pointed out that the

scavengers always went after the oldest and least used sections of the habitat.

The EAGLE's officers took their leave with many half-bows and lots of adjectives.

"Well. For the record. Impressions. Observations. Comments." Carter looked around the briefing room table.

"To use an adjective, Fascinating." Mohammad said.

"I think I'm going to avoid using adjectives for... months. Thank you." Carter said half seriously.

"Their death ritual was most interesting as well." Torrell said.

"You mean their recycling ritual." O'Dell said. "That was what the old guy was trying to avoid by going out there. He didn't want to be recycled." The engineer huffed. "Neither would I."

"It's their way." Carter said. "What about the habitat?"

"Spectacular."

"Thank you for another adjective, Lieutenant."

"My pleasure sir." Mohammad said. "But it does fit. The structure, the way it is constructed, used, and then disposed of, is, in a word, Spectacular."

"I'm amazed that the Swirlers can make a go of it living off the leavings of the main group."

"Smaller population, simpler needs. And they have an almost endless supply of raw materials. They both do. Really."

"They've been out here so long it's become natural to them."

"From what I gathered from interviewing several of the residents, only a few of the older people remember their grandparents talking about the early days of the colony when it was still in their solar system. And even then they had been in space for several decades." Torrell said.

"And it's those older ones that object to being recycled." O'Dell added.

"We should go to the system and scan the star and planet." Mohammad said.

Carter nodded.

Nebrell pushed several buttons on his pad. "I've already identified the system and plotted the course sir."

"Very good." Carter looked at the screen. Then he put his hands on the table and stood. "Set course. Put everything in your reports. We'll check out their home system, then we'll be on our way..." He paused. "Home."

-end home-