

# Cybercoaster

by  
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Walter Ashton tried to hide the yawn with the back of his hand, but the octopus of tubes and wires connecting him to the 'Chair' prevented complete coverage. He permitted himself an uncovered yawn, and two of the technicians decked out in navy blue labcoats spotted him and frowned disapprovingly. He returned their frown with a little topspin of his own and subsequently lowered his head, wishing they would just get on with the test. Sitting in the machine, waiting for them to calibrate all the meters, test-run all the computer programs, sync-up all the tape units, was boring him to tears. He tried to be patient, but the boredom was threatening to overwhelm all the excitement he had brought with him into the 'Warehouse' only a few hours ago.

He tugged slightly on the umbilical that attached in nine places to the couplings taped to his forehead, glued to his neck and affixed to a few select spots scattered amongst the thinning hairs on his scalp. This time, a red-coated technician working below the suspended Chair harrumphed loudly, and Ashton halted his attempt to get comfortable.

For a distraction, he raised his eyes to contemplate the vast and still amazing 'Chamber' around him. His Chair was one of a set of sixteen, grouped in four rows of four Chairs, that all attached to a large black apparatus that hung from the center of the Warehouse's ceiling. The apparatus looked like a cross between a construction crane and a massive ebony spider. Each Chair sat on a limb that suspended it two feet above the floor. Ashton's feet couldn't touch the floor even if he tried. He knew. He'd already tried twice, earning black looks from both green- and bluecoated techs nearby.

Ashton's gaze took in the nearest wall some twenty feet in front of him, although exact distance was hard to determine. The wall's surface was covered with all manner of glittering silvery spots, some as big as his fist, others mere pinpricks. But these reflective points were lost in the material that made up the rest of the wall, some form

of rubbery surface that seemed to absorb light, like the surface of one of those Manta stealth ships or a shiny old tire. Two barely detectable gaps existed in the otherwise flush surface, one about two feet off the ground and another almost eight feet higher up. From there, the wall arced up overhead in a perfect curve, meeting the other walls at its apogee, where the main support arm disappeared into it. The walls curved around on the other three sides so smoothly that when he contemplated the entire room, Ashton felt like a hamster imprisoned in a giant rubber ball.

The only real breaks in the wall were for the access ramp near the left wall, down which more technicians strolled, and the wide dark-glass observation booth on the wall behind him. Although he couldn't swing his head around just now to view it, he knew exactly where it was. He knew the Doctor was standing behind it at this moment, calmly overseeing the final preparations for tonight's special test. Most likely the room was packed with visiting dignitaries, Service personnel and other hot-shot government watchdogs down from Atlanta. The control room would be close and stuffy from all the extra visitors. *'Least I got a front row seat*, he joked to himself, trying to ease his own tension.

The fingers on his right hand began absently drumming the armrest, creating a soothing reverberating sound. The limb that supported his Chair was in reality a hollow cerama-steel tube that housed the hydraulic movement arms of the machine. It also served to protect the bundles of tubes and wires, electrical conduits and servomotor controls. The tube bent gracefully up over the other Chairs and melded seamlessly into the larger, thicker arm that shot straight up into the curved ceiling far overhead.

But all of these features were familiar to Walter Ashton, as familiar as his own ID badge. He dug around under the edge of the Chair's padded black arm with his left hand and found the piece of petrified gum he'd stashed there months ago. *Not under the right arm*, he reminded himself. *They always look under the right arm, but they never check under the left. Must think every test-pilot and jet-jockey comes out of the Services trained to be right-handed.* That gum was a little test of his own, to see how many of these Chairs they actually had and whether they switched them from test to test. But the Chair he sat in on Day One was the same one he was in now, though they had wheeled out the other fifteen for today's big demonstration.

*How long ago was that first ride?* he asked himself. *Four months? Five?* It seemed like they'd been working on the 'Ride' for the entire summer. When they had first started, Ashton was the only test pilot they used. They only had one Chair back then too, though the considerable population of multi-colored lab technicians never varied, no matter if there was one Chair or the full sixteen ready, like tonight.

*It isn't just a ride*, he reminded himself as the two red-coats raised up from below his Chair. He thought they'd spotted the hardened gum under the armrest, but they were merely interested in the couplings on his head. As they both in turn felt each contact, they checked them off on their hand-held compu-pads, scrolling down some special checklist visible only to them. No ride in the history of amusement parks had ever been treated with such care, such attention, or lavished with such excessive fondling as the Ride. And he reminded himself again, *this is no ordinary ride.*

The Black Hole. That was the name Doctor Minae had chosen for the Ride back when he had first begun its design. It had been his pet project for years, ever since he'd begun dabbling in hyper-spatial travel as a sixteen-year-old grad student. But as soon as the brass in Atlanta got hold of the project, they slapped on the title 'CyberCoaster' instead. Supposedly it appealed to the military big shots who had spending approval; they drool over adolescent names like that, the Doctor once commented wryly. But since the project's name had been officially changed to that designation, soon after Ashton came on board, neither he nor the Doctor could bring themselves to

use that unpleasant name. For them the machine would always be called The Black Hole, or more simply, the Ride.

Three technicians in teal wandered past, talking low among themselves as they regarded each of the test pilots in turn. Ashton followed their trek and scrutinized the other fifteen Chairs. The one on his immediate right was empty, but every other seat was filled. Each of the other fourteen testers were only half of Walter Ashton's forty-odd years. Ten men, four women, all with straight backs, short-cropped military hair styles and greygreen military jumpsuits with polished brass zippers down the front. The blankness of their expressions was due as much to their Service training as their probably limited briefing. *They have no idea*, Ashton said to himself, and a wide smile grew on his face. The nearest test pilot, a buffed African-American woman two seats over in the front row, noticed his smile and stared back dispassionately.

*You're gonna love this, honey*, Ashton laughed inwardly. *None of your Red Star instructors, nor any of your combat flights over Taiwan could ever prepare you for what's coming.* He managed a wave with his encumbered right hand, trailing a set of tubes and wires. "Hey there, Captain," he guessed, though none of the fourteen were allowed to wear rank or insignia. But Ashton expected no authorization for such a secret test could be given to any Service personnel lower than Captain. Their identities and rank were a mystery to him, probably to each other as well. She turned away and pretended not to be amused by the older man in blue jeans and the loud Hawaiian shirt.

But they all knew Walter Ashton, once Colonel Ashton, late of the ill-fated Aurora-Four. That was the code name for the joint NASA-Service effort to design a multi-Mach high-performance jet, capable of low-earth orbit. At the time, Ashton was the most decorated pilot in the Service. He'd flown more Ultra-level missions than anyone since the unification of the competing branches of the military, following the one-sided Yalu Skirmish back in Ought-Six. In those days, Ashton did his best to walk the razor-thin line between clean-nosed test pilot and concerned flier. He'd been on the Aurora project from its inception, had overseen the flights back at Area Fifty-Three and then at their new base in Colorado, and been the first to voice his concern over problems with the craft. The Service had never been able to correctly back-engineer all the 'loaner' technology, and when the gravi-traction powerplant began to show signs of failure, he had protested all the way up the chain of command to the Chief's Board.

The gold-braids all laughed at his fears, told him he was getting old, scrubbed any further flights for his well-worn seat. But when the prototype of the dash-Four tumbled out of the sky over Australia, causing a major incident and a Contam Alert Red, they silently drummed him out of the Service and shut him up with heavy-handed orders and a lien on his pension.

Ashton had served aimlessly among a half-dozen high-tech advisory boards before Doctor Minae tracked him down. Minae had stated during their first interview, in paternal tones, that if the Doctor had been running the Aurora project, Walter's concerns would have been listened to and implemented. That perked Ashton's ears right up. Here was a civilian who had Ultra-level clearance and guts enough to buck the top brass. Ashton signed on to the team fifteen minutes later.

Minae warned him right from the start that this would be no ordinary project, that it would exist beyond Ultra-level clearance, and that he would be allowed—encouraged, in fact—to mention any concerns he had about the new technology the Doctor had designed. This was a private operation, Minae had explained, though the Service did have their hands in the pie now and again. Their cover story was that they were preparing a new hi-tech amusement ride, scheduled for the state-of-the-art Millennia World under construction in San Deduco. But that was only a

cover story, and one of the main reasons the Doctor wanted Ashton in on the project was the actual destination for the Ride's technology.

For decades the Service and, prior to that, the various Armed Forces branches, had encountered difficulty piloting their 'borrowed' craft. They could dismantle them and even make use of certain appropriated parts, like the gravi-traction propulsion system in the Aurora-Four. But earth-born pilots never could control the craft like their original operators. Some complex form of interface was missing, not quite technology and not quite skill. The Doctor had theorized what that lost interface was, and had worked for years designing a device to stimulate that ability.

The sound of the access door to the control-viewing room opened with a *whoosh* of air and closed almost as softly. Ashton didn't need to turn his head around to know that Doctor Minae was descending the access rungs, since he was the only one with clearance to use that door in anything other than a life-threatening emergency. The Doctor's face was hidden by his purple-labcoated body as he slowly descended the steps, a shortcut that saved him a good five minutes from the standard trip of leaving the control room, making the circuit all the way around to the main entrance and taking the long rampway down to the front of the room. Ashton knew, as the Doctor planted his feet on the smooth blacksteel floor of the rubber-ball room, that the Doctor needed every one of those five minutes. As the Doctor pivoted around and his ancient, white-haired face became visible to those in the room who were in a position to see, Ashton repeated his silent prayer. *I hope we finish it in time*, then added just as silently, *before the Doctor goes*.

Minae had been diagnosed with Hapley's Condition of Aging Prematurely, or Hap-Cap, on his twelfth birthday. Genetic research had discovered that the process could be reversed, but only at the cost of a substantial decrease in alpha-wave output and cognizance skills in both hemispheres of the brain. Minae had explained the option to Ashton once as they drove home after a late night of testing, as 'living older but living stupid,' an option his strict grandfather would never allow. In the sixteen years that followed, Minae had aged almost sixty years in appearance, though his mind was as sharp as ever. While others had interpreted his illness as a terrible burden, Minae had accepted it as a tremendous challenge. He would finish this project, he had vowed, and leave the working model behind as a testament to overcoming hurdles with nothing more than the power of the mind—and a couple thousand million in private donations, he always added with a smile.

Doctor Minae stretched his legs briefly before shuffling out onto the floor where the Chairs sat in menacing silence. The omnipresent lab technicians in their solid colored coats either saluted privately or tried their best to ignore him as he hobbled past. This was indeed one of the most sought-after positions in any advanced field right now, and every unindentured math whiz and physics phenom with the price of a shuttle ticket had flown here from across the world, hoping to be chosen for the team. But while a handful of them could barely comprehend the chaos theories and structural requirements behind the mechanism, none of them had been brave enough to try to understand the genius who had created the unique machine.

As the blood began to circulate again in his failing joints, Minae approached the back left Chair and dropped a calming hand onto the occupant there. The young man—boy, really, he couldn't have been more than nineteen—almost jumped from the suddenness of human contact. "Easy, son. This'll be the most fun you've had since you earned your wings." The boy smiled weakly and nodded his head, sending the tubes and connections into a minor explosion of movement. Four different techs in three different colors leapt to his side, making instantly sure that none of the connections had come loose as the Doctor, smiling, continued along his way.

He waved serenely down each of the rows to the occupants there, bolstering their fairly obvious attempts at confidence, until he closed in on Walter Ashton's Chair. With his crackling, elderly voice, he playful said, "I have some good news and some bad news, Walt."

With a slow smile, Ashton decided to play along. "What is it, Doc? Want me to get out and push?"

Minae smiled warmly. "The bad news first then? I just received word that Colonel MacGloughlin won't be joining you on this historic journey."

Ashton's eyes widened. "Really? I thought the 'Big Log' wouldn't have missed this for the world." His comment must have been overheard by the female Captain, for she snorted a laugh before regaining her composure.

The Doctor continued his explanation while watching the Captain from under lidded eyes. "I'm told he was called away on an Ultra-level request. Something about a border incursion in the North."

Ashton chuckled aloud. No amount of veiled concern could remove the impression he had that the Colonel had chickened out. The image of the boastful, hard-headed Colonel shaking in terror on the john back in his hotel room flashed through Ashton's mind. "Incursion in the North, my ass! More like an expulsion from the south!" This time, all of the first row and a good portion of the second laughed along at his humor. Actually, Ashton felt relieved that the Colonel wasn't going to be with them. They'd banged heads more than once over the running of the project. If it hadn't been for the Doctor's support, Ashton would have dropped out of the program long ago, but only after giving MacGloughlin a piece of his mind.

"So who takes his place, Doctor?" the Captain asked. "We've...*paid* for fifteen seats. We have three more volunteers standing by. Just give me twenty minutes—"

"That won't be necessary, Captain Frandsen," the Doctor interrupted, using her name and rank. "We have another willing subject ready to travel, fully briefed and, I might add, quite eager."

Ashton studied the impish grin on Minae's face before sprouting a wide smile of his own. "Well, welcome aboard, Doc," he said conspiratorially. He continued sarcastically, "You'll find the seat belts are a bit snug in the crotch, but then I've been complaining about them since the first time I locked in."

A knot of labcoats in all the colors of the rainbow had formed behind Doctor Minae, and as he approached the last open Chair, they sprung into action. A woman in blue offered her hands as Minae removed his purple labcoat, then slipped into the suspended Chair. Three redcoats began hooking the Doctor into vital sign detection contacts, two in green smocks checked the Chair's mechanical apparatus while a half-dozen more did things the Doctor paid no attention to at all. "You'll find, as I've continually said, that the snugness will come in handy—"

An oddly familiar voice came over a speaker in the upper right corner of the stanchion connected to each Chair. "There are now five minutes before Final Lockdown, five minutes," it calmly intoned. "Please recheck all vitrolinks and stabilizer conduits, and begin System Autonomy procedures." The Captain on Minae's right glanced over at the Doctor when she recognized his voice as the one on the speaker.

"Pre-recorded, Captain, as are the following messages you'll hear tonight. Everything's automated from this point on." He instructed two of the labcoats to adjust the wiring that fed from his left legstrap into the umbilical behind him, and described to another holding a compu-pad what his last meal consisted of, followed by a long string of medication he was currently taking.

The warning had sent the already busy techs into a flurry of activity. Two of the three moveable consoles

were being unhooked and wheeled up the lone ramp out of the chamber, while behind the Chairs, special panels began to lower down over the control windows. As the panels descended, they locked into place with loud, low *thunks* and blended perfectly into the surface above and below them. When the fourth and final panel snapped tight, no sign remained of the control room at all, just the smooth, rubber-steel surface with its glittering silver spots.

The voice in the speaker spoke again. "There are now four minutes before Final Lockdown, four minutes. Please disconnect all safety latches and remove nonessential gear." Ashton watched disconcertedly as four separate yellow-clad techs spread out across his field of vision and removed free-standing fire extinguishers from their floor mounts, then carried them up the ramp. All of his previous rides on the Black Hole had come within the reassuring safety of bright lights and a stable laboratory, where the walls were brushed aluminum and sanely flat. Tonight's ride, he had been informed, would be vastly different. The third and last computer console, trailing wires from its back like a cheap electric piano, was shuffled up the ramp and out of sight.

"There are now three minutes before Final Lockdown, three minutes. Please inspect all Cerebro-Lattice Fallbacks and Organ-Reacquaintance hookups." The Doctor had created two ingenious devices specifically for the Black Hole that so far had never been tested on humans, but would be crucial for tonight's ride. The cerebro-lattice fallback would, theoretically, keep certain select areas of the brain stimulated if the 'me inside,' as Minae called it, failed to return during the Ride. The organ-reacquaintance attachment would then stimulate the intestines to, in the Doctor's droll language, 'mess up a bit,' thereby forcing conscious awareness and aiding the recovery of the mind, if not the rediscovery of the rider's last meal.

"There are now two minutes before Final Lockdown, two minutes. Please check Chamber integrity and Chair latitudes." One team of greencoats walked the perimeter of the Chamber, inspecting the rubber-steel wall and concentrating on the connections where the control room once peeked in. Another set of greencoats progressed down each aisle, working the Chairs in sequence to see that they spun, rotated and pivoted within the limiting framework of their overhead supports. A second set followed them, guaranteeing that all connections remained secure. They finished quickly then moved as a group to the ramp and out. Now only four teal-coated techs remained behind, each watching a row with his hand in the air and a thumb pointing skyward. Their job was to make sure that all of the test-pilots were mentally stable and prepared to ride. While Ashton shared a private handshake with Doctor Minae, each of the fourteen service men and women shook their hands and legs out, rolled their heads on their necks, and then did something truly odd: they held their hands over their heads as if they were going up a real roller-coaster.

Ashton smiled warmly, first at the Captain, then to the other Servicicers in his field of vision. It was a tribute to Ashton, really, an honor to his trailblazing work on the Ride, that they would duplicate something he had been doing since early on in the program. Now it had been adopted as SOP by the rest of the testers, and Ashton and the Doctor joined in, raising their hands as high as their umbilicals allowed.

The four tealcoats smiled confidently in return, then lowered their lands and began their slow march up the ramp. They were the last technicians in the Chamber, and when they exited through the double door, the ramp began silently retracting into the wall. As it drew back and disappeared, Doctor Minae's recorded voice spoke up once more, "There is now one minute to Final Lockdown, one minute." The voice paused as if searching for something more to say, perhaps some words of encouragement, but remained silent. The ramp finished retracting and two rubber-steel panels slowly dropped into place over the doorway, sealing the room completely. The lighting in the

Chamber, recessed globes of dull yellow, faded to a faint radiance, barely enough for Ashton to see his hand resting calmly on the armrests of his Chair. Instinctively, he felt for the dried gum under the left arm as the real Doctor Minae said, "Must be comforting to know some things don't change, eh, Walt?" Ashton realized he must have been aware of his little trick with the gum for some time.

On the wall directly in front of the sixteen-Chair rig, a rectangle of light flared into creation. It was an image of the Doctor, standing calmly beside a Chair in the bright lab that was their home until last week. "Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. I would like to welcome you to the first-ever test of the Black Hole, complete with working Chamber. As many of you are doubtlessly aware, we have been perfecting the Chairs to accommodate the human body in simulated high-speed, maximum-gee, low-orbit conditions, to further prepare test pilots for the Aurora program and other technical innovations to come." The electronic Minae smiled and patted the Chair beside him affectionately. "What you may not know, although some of you may have guessed, is that the Chair has been created to afford the rider an experience that is crucial to piloting, shall we say, 'borrowed' craft, but something that cannot be taught." He walked half way around the back of the Chair and was momentarily lost to view, while his commentary continued.

"For many decades we have attempted to assimilate such craft, with varying degrees of success. Certainly we can duplicate their technology, as the various new military vehicles we've built can attest to. But our grasp of their operation has always been less than perfect." He reemerged from behind the Chair, smiling softly. "The Chair, and its accompanying Chamber, will provide you ladies and gentlemen assembled here tonight, with the first fully controlled, mechanically induced out-of-body experience ever attempted by our government. Yes, I did say out-of-body experience. *That* is what we have been missing, or so my research indicates. The true interface in many of these 'borrowed' vehicles lies beyond the physical realm, in a dimension normally blocked to us." The expression on the Doctor's face was earnest, almost childlike. "The Ride will help you...no, that's not quite the right word...*induce*, yes, that's it, *induce* an altered state of consciousness for you lucky few."

"When this brief introduction ends, the Chamber and the Chairs will begin a coordinated operation that will send you somewhere outside of your bodies. Where it is that each of you will go, I cannot say. We have had reports from some non-Service volunteers that many of you will wander through your own dream-memories, others may venture into possible futures. You may even be lucky enough to visit a theoretical location that's been called the Hall of Records, a sort of celestial library in deep space, but that's mere speculation at this point. What I do know is that each of you that successfully returns," he paused for the briefest of moments before continuing, "will carry with you a new awareness of space-time and an ability to duplicate this feat more or less at will."

The picture changed to a close-up of the Doctor's aged, lined face, as his smile dropped away. "Ever since I began the work that has led up to this moment, I have always dreamed of having an actual OBE myself. At first, I thought that our work would be completed in time for me to try out the Ride when its sanitized version was released to the public. But I know now," he continued sadly, "that our six-hundred-pound gorilla of a government—"

A brief interruption occurred from somewhere off-camera, but the Doctor shooed the concern away with a mere wave of his wrinkled hand. "No, no, it's all right, keep filming. What can they do to me now? They can't finish the project without me, and they certainly can't operate it unguided. Where was I? Oh, yes, yes. Once our pack of Atlanta hounds gets a look at the results of tonight's test, they'll place it under such a lid of secrecy and red tape that an Ultra clearance won't even get you within ten miles of the building. I will simply run out of time, waiting."

“So I mean it when I say, I wish I were going with you, I truly do. It will be difficult, and the strains, both mental and physical, will be intense, but oh, how I envy you!” He turned away from the camera with what may have been tears, but the viewer couldn’t be sure. Ashton turned to his right and tried to spot the real Doctor’s face in the dim light, but now, not even the Chair beside him was visible.

Once the introduction was switched off, Ashton was moderately surprised to notice that the small dots and fist-sized patches of silver along the walls began to glow with their own luminance, soft and star-like. He would have used the opportunity to look at the Doctor again, but something else drew his attention, something totally unexpected and bizarre, simultaneously impossible and spectacular: the room began to spin!

He had become used to the spinning, reeling motion that the Chairs imparted during his year and a half of test piloting them. But his Chair remained perfectly still, motionless. The walls tricked his mind into thinking he was spinning, but his well-conditioned body knew better. In the stronger light, he quickly noticed that the flat floor had disappeared and the Chamber was now completely spherical. The absolute size of the Chamber was quite large now, the floor almost as far away as the distant opaque ceiling, both lost in shadow.

His attention jumped back to the walls before him. His eyes searched for and found the crevice between the lower panel and the middle one, separated by a black void where no silver patches glowed. Suddenly, the middle section stopped rotating, allowing the upper and lower sections to continue their clockwise movement. In the space of two gasped breaths, the wider central section began counter-rotating, quickly matching speed to the bands above and below it. In another few breaths the top band also stopped, and now began to rotate in sync with the middle band.

Over the course of the next—minute? Hour? Time had suddenly become quite irrelevant to Ashton—the three bands repetitively synced up, then opposed and returned to coordination again. The effect by itself would have been quite disconcerting and exhilarating, were it not for the movement of the Chair.

The Chair’s movement had been what Ashton had been anticipating, expecting, but the Chamber’s revolutions had made him forget. Now he realized that the chair was beginning its own rotation, probably in sync with the other fifteen though he could not view them. He could discern the Chair’s movements through two pieces of evidence: gravity’s pull on his body as he hung by the straps of the Chair as it spun and twisted to and fro, and his own memory of the acrobatics he’d done in testing the rig. But the combination of spinning Chair and rotating Chamber did something to his stomach, something to his mind that left him feeling out of sorts, like he’d just downed an alcoholic milkshake.

At first, part of his brain tried to command his eyes to remain focused on the silver spots that flashed past in a blur on the nearly invisible walls. The worry crept up on him that once he let them leave his vision, he’d never find his way home. But he ordered his brain to relax and enjoy the Ride, just as he had commanded his muscles to relax in all the previous tests. *Funny*, he thought, *if it takes more mind control than muscle ability to withstand the Ride’s effects.*

Once he had sufficiently relaxed to allow the Ride to have its way with him, he felt free, exhilaratingly free, free of cares and worries and expectations, free of all doubt, too. When he realized he also felt free of physical restraint, he sensed an odd looseness in the straps that should have held him in. He suddenly missed the satisfyingly tight hold they had on his body and wondered whether the Chair was coming apart under the strain of its furious movement. He attempted to slip his right hand down to touch the lower of the two aluminum buckles, but found no buckle there at all. The room was so dark now that he couldn’t see the armrest of the Chair, then realized the armrests

had vanished too, along with the straps. An instant of panic gripped him before he reigned in his emotions and took stock of his situation.

He realized that he was no longer in the Chair, or even in the Chamber for that matter. *This must be the beginning of the dislocation the Doctor spoke of*, Ashton noted dispassionately. *But where am I going?*

He noticed an object at the edge of his peripheral view high overhead, and he craned his neck way back to see it. A long, thin silvery cord stretched far off into the distance, as far as he could see. He knew from his previous briefings that he might see something like this, an ethereal connection to his inner consciousness, back wherever his body was. It seemed so vulnerable, this metaphysical lifeline to his body, and he wondered how something so delicate could be relied on to bring him back.

Images flew past his mind, and he shot into and through scene after scene, all the meaningful moments of his life, one after another like meteors roaring through his head:

The first flight he'd ever done, as a teenager in an old F-15 Eagle-T, with his uncle strapped in beside him...

His training for the F-26 Supernova above the deserts of New Australia...

Dogfighting with Chinese Dragonflies over the Straights of Hormuz...

Taking the Aurora-Two into low-earth orbit for the first time, watching the curve of the planet slip away, gazing in awe at the fragility of the thin atmosphere, so thin, as thin as the silvery cord that floated away above him...

Crashing into the South Pacific with the survivors of the Aurora-Four after the gravi-traction plant malfunction, knowing the disaster could have been prevented, watching helplessly as two of his crewmates died slowly of exposure and radiation burns while they waited to be rescued from a mission almost no one knew about...

The women he'd known, loved, put aside for the Air Force, then the Service, a pilot dedicated to the last degree and rewarded with a slap in the face and a kick in the ass...

Ashton felt like he was losing some battle, as if he was being diverted from some higher goal. He fought for direction, but where was he to head for? Where should he aim? With superhuman effort, he closed his mind to the the turning points of his career and life, and stared out into the blank emptiness of nothing.

The emptiness slowly distilled to a dark grey, then a dot-filled black balloon, and the dots into vast star-filled galaxies. Off to his right—it *felt* like his right—he discerned nebulae of blue-green and orange thousands of light-years across, beside an accretion disk of a huge singularity. Pulsars and quasars burned like interstellar spotlights. Massive spirals and huge jellyfish clusters surrounded him, superclusters stretched out and away like the arms and roots of a giant tree, farther than his mind could comprehend.

But then he spotted something else ahead of him, something unusual and quite extraordinary, and he headed straight for it. It wasn't flight that carried him there; the movement was almost as instantaneous as thought. In a void of its own, with seemingly no other objects anywhere nearby, as if it had been located in this emptiest spot of deep space of its own volition, a small purple-black oasis of right angles grew in size until it loomed before him.

He alighted on a long flat platform that jutted out into an ether devoid of all nearby matter, and attempted to take in the grandeur of the place. It was empyrean, heavenlike in its perfection and simple in construction: a central cylinder of a gem-embedded schist-like stone, dark matter with reflective purple-blue crystals within, rose up like a celestial lighthouse. Along both sides of the smooth cylinder, encompassing it tenderly like lover's hands, stretched two curving marble stairways, wide, beautiful, elegant, with a balustrade on the outer edges that appeared to float

upward to the top level of their own accord. It seemed small in comparison to the vast galaxies that floated trillions of millions of light years away, yet it might have been vast if set up next to a terrestrial building. The beauty, the perfect elegance of the simple structure threatened to overwhelm him, but he calmed himself like he did so many times before in the tests, and continued.

Two human bodies lay on the long platform, and Ashton knew within his being that both were from the row of Chairs behind him. One shook like a freezing man lost in a snowstorm, the other moved not at all, except for shallow breathing. Both remained attached to the luminescent cord above their heads though the radiance from them was dimmer than he expected. He checked absently for his own, noted how it stretched away into the vastness behind him, then continued walking down the platform.

At the base of the tower, the two stairways met at almost right angles to each other. There was no compelling reason to take either the left or the right, but somehow the left one presented itself as the more direct route. He placed one bare foot down upon its cool white marble and heard a bell chime faintly, as if struck by a miniature angel. When his second step produced another musical tone, equally as pleasing, he realized it was the stairway creating the sounds. A thought crystallized unbidden in his mind that it was, more accurately, a collaboration of his foot and the stair that created the beautiful music. Not a second of thought was wasted wondering how he had lost his clothes, let alone found this wondrous place, as he climbed the stairs to the accompaniment of the marvelous tones.

He noticed a woman near the top steps, a beautiful Amazon, whom he recognized as the Captain from two Chairs down. Her form was subtly altered, as if the restricting Service regimen she had so studiously applied had been stripped from her, leaving only the best and purest of her self behind. She turned and smiled warmly at Ashton as he ascended to the top, then turned her attention back across the terrace.

For that was what the summit contained: a gigantic courtyard, open to the blazing star-filled sky. It was constructed as a recessed rectangle set three steps down that went off into the distance, dotted here and there with a series of exquisite sculptures and playful fountains. Couches of some unstable material lined the sides, and every third one or so harbored a couple or three creatures, some human, others not even bipedal. The consciousness within Ashton's body instinctively knew these creatures had come seeking knowledge and truth, and were no threat to him. He also sensed they all shared one element in common: they had entered the great Hall of Records and had found whatever truth they'd been searching for.

"They are at peace, yet they cannot return," a deep voice spoke beside him. Ashton turned to see a vigorous, youthful man standing near the central cylinder. His energy and vitality seemed to radiate like rays from a human-sized sun. He appeared to have just exited a simple single glass door, behind which were the silhouettes of numerous people within the cylinder. "They have been inside, Walter, and have found their answers. As I have."

Ashton frowned at the man. The voice was quite familiar, the face more so, but some logical connection couldn't click into place. Until the youthful man smiled, and suddenly Ashton realized he was seeing for the first time Doctor Minae's unravaged form, unwrinkled, alive, fresh. As if he had broadcast his thoughts, Minae looked down at his own strong hands and said, "Within each of us, we maintain the links to the real Us, the true Us that is not old, never diseased, never crippled. The unwounded inner Us, as perfect as we know we can be. That is who we are in this place, Walter."

"Why can't they all go home, Doctor?" the Captain asked sincerely.

"Because, Rebecca," he said, looking off across the vast courtyard of contemplative creatures, "now that they know the answers to such mysteries, they would be out of place with mere mortals. Their desire would be to pull and drag their compatriots to the same understanding they now possess, with tragic consequences. You see, we cannot force others to understand what we know. They can only reach such understanding by taking their own journeys, undergoing their own searches in their own way and time.

"This is where I always hoped to be, though I could not have voiced it myself at the time, back there on our small blue sphere. Here, many of the theories I had harbored have been proven erroneous, yet a handful were accurate and true, and that gives me great pleasure. And I have seen where the population we call Humans will travel to and where we will wind up." He smiled at both of them and gazed again across the courtyard at the myriad of races, each distinct and perfect yet all striving towards some important goal. "Once we accept we are all brothers and sisters on our tiny planet, then we will have taken a great step toward being ready."

"Ready for what?" Ashton asked, trying to see past the vaguely translucent glass door.

"Ready for our next step," he replied. "Humanity is but a young child, just learning to walk and form words. We have much to learn. That is to say, *you* have much to learn."

"You're not coming back with us," Rebecca spoke in realization.

"No. My future is here now. I could never have imagined so perfect a place. All human scientists live with the knowledge that they will be ridiculed for a good portion of their careers, and that our greatest work will be challenged, time after time. Here, no such conflict exists, only the reality of permanent Truth, devoid of personal interpretation. But eventually I will grow tired of even this splendid place and desire to return. I'll be reborn as we all are, and I'll start the human adventure all over again."

"Tell me the truth, Doctor. You did something to Colonel MacGloughlin, didn't you?"

Minae smiled and returned his attention to the two humans beside him. "In such a place as this, lies cannot exist. Yes, Walter, I did. I placed a small amount of ammoniumdisotochoraldehyde into his coffee, which gave him the runs something fierce. I daresay he wasn't off the throne for more than thirty minutes over the next six hours."

The three shared a laugh together, stalling for time, wishing to stay as long as possible beside the doorway without voicing the thought. Doctor Minae motioned with his hand down the stairs and said, "You must leave soon. The distance from your corporeal forms is great, and the strain on your inner selves may be too much."

"Why can't we stay with you, Doc?" Ashton said, his eyes still trying to encompass the magnitude of the courtyard. "I have nothing to go back to."

"You have two comrades down below who need your assistance, and it will take one of you to help each of them back." Minae cocked his head to one side. "Besides, what if I told you you still have much to accomplish back home, and that you'll return here more than once?"

Ashton nodded and lowered his eyes. "I guess you'd know best."

"That I do, Walter."

They shook hands somberly, sincerely, then parted slowly. Rebecca began her descent down the staircase and took one of the Servicemen under the arm. Gently, they floated up away from the platform, and in a twinkling they accelerated towards one of the branches of the superclusters and were gone.

"I won't forget you, Doc. I'll make sure everyone knows what a wonderful gift you've given us here."

"This place?" Minae said, indicating the cylinder and the courtyard with both outstretched arms. "Walter, I only created the trolley car that brought us here. There are Others to thank for this place." He lowered his arms and approached closer. "You must go now. Remember that you now hold the ability within you to return here whenever you wish, though the experience will be draining and the journey difficult."

"Never stopped me before, Doc."

Minae smiled. "Goodbye, Walt. Give my regards to the rest of the planet."

Walter Ashton woke up back in the Chair, with two pinkcoats hovering over his semi-conscious form. He checked out AOK, was whisked aside so that more techs could check the Doctor's inert form, and found himself alone near one of the open doors that led to the back parking lot. He unrolled a stick of gum and popped it into his mouth as he stared up at the bright desert skyfield high overhead.

"Nuts," he commented drily. "If I'd have been thinking, I could have left a piece of gum under the banister up there. Oh, well," he said, chewing thoughtfully, "maybe next time."