

An Unexpected Career Opportunity

By Mike Fang

Other characters are copyright their players.

Six shots left. That's all I had. Crouched down behind a desk crudely made from a couple of short metal filing cabinets and a plywood board, I was frankly in disbelief. After everything I'd been through in my lifetime – macros, insane magicians, international criminals, even God damn -aliens -, and this looked like the way I was going to go out: shot by some sleazy, two-bit, street-level drug dealers.

It had been my own fault I was in such a situation. It was a simple case, so I'd gotten careless. A local strip mall owner suspected local hoodlums were using his lot at night to peddle their wonder dust, so he asked me to gather evidence to get the police to arrest them. A late-night stake out here, a recorded conversation there, and I figured that's all I'd need. But like a dumb ass, I got myself noticed, and some drug lord recognized me and put a hit out on me.

If I'd been smart, I would've called a friend or two, had them root out the drug lord to get him off my back. But no, I decided "I can handle this just fine by myself," and so I sneak into the harbor warehouse that had been turned into the dealers' drug den to get ahold of evidence to send to the DEA, connecting them to their boss. Well I got the evidence, all right, and for the cherry on top, I get spotted by some out-of-town hitman while I'm there.

All this was running through my head as I was reloading my last six bullets into my gun. I'd locked the doors to the head dealer's "office" so I could copy emails and forward them to the authorities off the dealer's lap top. But careless as I'd been, the dirtbags were all piled up outside the door now, a dozen of 'em, armed and ready to blow me away. We'd exchanged shots through the doors, their bullets destroying the window behind the desk. Now it was just a matter of moments before they kicked the door in and swarmed me.

"C'mon, c'mon, dear God help me now...", I muttered under my breath. I'd already called 911, and was straining my ears to catch the sound of approaching sirens. No luck just yet, and I'd run out of time to wait. With a metallic screech, the doors were battered off the hinges they'd barely been hanging on by then. I brought up my gun and let off two shots. Then I registered what I was looking at; a monster crocodile sporting a kevlar vest and an assault rifle with an attached grenade launcher.

I turned and lunged for the blown-out window behind me. I'd looked out of it earlier and saw a metallic awning below. Too far for comfort, but I'd have a better chance of surviving that than a grenade to my face. I heard a POOMP behind me as I was climbing onto the sill. A heavy explosion at my back propelled me further than my jump was meant to take me. It went passed the awning; in fact, it went right passed the edge of the concrete and to a 100-foot drop off the edge of the harbor's docks to the low-tide water below.

My heart felt like it had stopped beating. I threw my arms up to cover my head and face. "God forgive me," was repeating over and over in my head. Then, a peculiar sensation went buzzing all over my skin. It was like a full-body case of static that was getting unnaturally strong. I briefly thought I saw a flash of electric blue light below me as I was suddenly overcome with the sensation of falling through some sort

of forcefield. I barely had time to register the sight of kalediscopic flashes of colored light before my vision faded to black.

The dull pounding of a headache slowly faded as I opened my eyes. My surroundings were immediately unfamiliar, and that put me on guard. I could tell I was laying on some sort of bed or gurney, and from the quiet hum I was hearing ever so faintly, there was definitely some sort of engine or generator nearby. The room I was in had the look of some kind of medical facility. However, there was an odd sense of contrast to the place. The furnishings, the room design, all seemed to look like a hospital out of the 1930's or 40's; white tile floors, plaster walls, and so forth. The nurse who came in was even wearing an outfit from that era; white blouse, matching skirt, nurse's cap with a red cross on it. But all the instruments in there were of a distinctly modern (or futuristic, if I were reckoning from my original time period) era. There were biological scanners, hypo injectors, and computer readout monitors on the walls.

I sat up and looked around, feeling rather confused. The nurse was an African American human woman, who'd been checking the stock on a supply cabinet with a tablet in hand. She must have heard me shifting on my gurney, because she immediately looked over at me.

"Oh good, you're awake!" she said brightly. "First time dimension-jumping, I presume. Everybody passes out the first time."

"Uhh, I guess so," I said, passing a hand through my hair, "I honestly can barely remember...,"

"Ahhh, one of the boss's emergency recruits," the nurse said. "That happens sometimes. Don't worry, the memory blur won't last long," The nurse walked over to one of the medical monitors and tapped a few icons on the screen. From the ceiling, a scanner attached to a robotic arm emerged, aiming in my direction.

"Now please hold still," she said. With a very slight feeling of unease, I complied; I figured the odds were good whoever these people were, they didn't want to do me harm, or they would have already. A yellow light blinked on, and I felt a mild tingling sensation as the machine took my vitals without the usual turn-your-head-and-cough you'd need from a physical.

"Heartbeat and breathing normal," the nurse said, looking at the readout. "Pulse slightly elevated, naturally. Neural activity normal, if a bit hyperactive. Well, looks like you check out!" The robotic arm retracted back into the ceiling as the nurse turned back to me.

"You've got a clean bill of health," she said, "I'll notify Mr. Morelevad that you've passed muster."

"Uh, thanks...who's Mr. Morelevad?" I asked, standing up from the gurney. I suddenly registered the fact I was still fully dressed, save for my hat, which, upon glancing around, I found hanging on a coat rack on the wall.

"That would be our director!" the nurse said brightly. "He'll be right with you; he always likes to meet new recruits personally."

"Oh, okay, thanks," I said, still trying to figure out where I was and how much time had passed since I was conked out. As the nurse left, I turned to the right, looking at a very large, wall to wall screen a few

feet above the floor. It was jet black, but something about it seemed off. As I stepped closer, the truth finally hit me. It wasn't a computer screen.

It was a window. And right outside it, in a starless, ink-black void, an electric blue bolt of energy suddenly tore through the blackness, widening like a rip in cloth to reveal a star-filled space on the other side.

"What....the...hell..." I whispered hoarsely, a cold drop going down my back and my stomach suddenly twisting into knots.

"Impressive, isn't it?" said a smooth voice behind me. I spun around. Walking through the door with a smile on his face was a gray-furred rat. The rat was the very definition of dapper, with finely groomed fur, perfectly manicured claws on fingers and toes, and a finely tailored blue suit worn open in the front with a white silk dress shirt and silver-gray waistcoat. The suit was topped off with a fedora that matched its brilliant blue tone. His built was similar to mine, if perhaps slightly more muscular.

"Mind-boggling, I'd say," I said with a slightly breathless chuckle. "Mr. Morelevad, I presume?"

"Correct, and you must be Mike Fang," the rat said, extending a hand to me, shaking mine with an appropriately firm grip. "I've seen the reports on your track record, and I'm very pleased we could get to you in time."

"Thanks," I said, again scratching my head. "I don't want to sound ungrateful, but...I've got a lot of questions."

"Oh of course!" The rat said, his demeanor exuding a suave charisma and easygoing attitude. "But I'm sure you're starving; how about we get something to eat while I fill you in?"

"That sounds good to me," I said with an accompanying nod. The rat smiled, and with a truncated bow and a sweep of his arm, he lead the way out of the infirmary.

The curving, twisting hallway beyond was immense, with a ceiling that looked to be at least a hundred feet high, if not moreso. The area was done up in an art deco design worthy of Rockefeller, Vanderbilt, or for a fictional example, Gatsby. I crossed a polished granite floor to a brass banister, looking over it into a long empty space that revealed about 20 or more floors below, each with a similar walkways and bannisters. Along the walkways were various doors leading to inner rooms, giving the whole structure a look like a gigantic shopping mall done up in art deco style with floor upon floor of outlet stores. The lighting in the curved corridors was bright, but muted by the art deco designs of the fixtures just enough to not be glaring. Regularly spaced crosswalks allowed access from one side of the hallway to the other, and on the outer wall of the place were regular windows, allowing a view of the dark void outside, where periodic electric-blue tears would form, open, then seal shut again.

If the grandeur of the place I found myself in wasn't enough to leave a person gob-smacked, the inhabitants certainly would. These walkways were far from vacant, as large crowds of individuals were walking along them. I saw people of every gender and species I knew, and numerous others I don't even know where to begin to describe. There were reptilian beings, amphibians, arthropods, mammals and many with combined features of two or more. There were presumably sentient gelatinous and gaseous creatures, what appeared to be walking or floating conglomerations of energy, bipeds, tripeds, quadrupeds, and others with even more combinations of legs, arms, and other extremities.

“RedWolf would be right at home here,” I thought. At least, that’s what I thought in the back of my head. First and foremost in my mind was a sense of complete displacement; like I’d been suddenly yanked from the normal, familiar world I knew and flung carelessly into a drug-fueled dream that bore only the scantest resemblance to the existence I knew. It was a shock greater even than when I’d woken up from cryogenic stasis. At least then I’d still been on Earth. My stomach was in more knots than a seamanship practice rope. My head was about to float up and away from me while my legs felt ready to fall off. I turned and looked back at my host.

“Welcome to the D.I.F.!” Mr. Morelevad said, making another grand, sweeping gesture with his arm, grinning broadly.

The last thing I remembered for a time was the rat’s look of shock as I dropped to my elbows and knees like a bag of cement. Then like the view outside, everything went black.

My next memory was suddenly jolting awake like I’d been pinched unexpectedly, complete with an involuntary “GAH!” as I shot upright. I found myself sitting up on leather couch that I’d apparently been laying on. Reality, as it took me a few moments to register it actually WAS reality, slid back into my mind. I was in what looked like a personal study or office, 40’s style. Book cases built into the walls had a lot of various volumes, while off towards the back, in front of another one of those windows, was a hardwood desk with a banker’s green-shaded lamp, ink blotter, and a computer that seemed just slightly out-of-place with the rest of the décor. Sitting across the room from me in an overstuffed leather chair, Mr. Morelevad had himself apparently just jumped in surprise, judging from the way he was gripping the chair’s arms, his hat slightly off-kilter and a book dropped pages-down in his lap.

“Oh! Good, you’re awake again,” the rat said, hand on his chest as he closed the book properly with his other hand and set it on the end table between his chair and another. I swung my legs off the couch, leaning forward and putting my elbows on my knees, rubbing at my temples.

“Ooooooh God,” I groaned. “Ohhh damn, I’m sorry, I’ve never done that before...”

“No no, it’s fine,” the rat said, his brow knit as he came over and sat down next to me, hand on my shoulders. “And I’m sorry myself; I was too eager to show you the station that I forgot you might need to be warned beforehand and ease yourself into these surroundings.”

“Nah, you couldn’t have known,” I said, slowly feeling my nerve re-collecting. “I’ve never had a problem dealing with the unusual or unexpected...or at least, mentally digesting it. I guess, for some reason, this time...”

“It was too much, too fast?” The rat said, and I nodded. He nodded in reply. “It happens sometimes. We’ve even had a few recruits have a full on mental breakdown. But you seem to be coming to grips with it just fine.”

“Well you flatter me, Mr. Morelevad,” I said, the rat giving me a bemused smirk.

“Oh, call me Sapphire. Or Saph, whichever suits you,” he said. I smirked back.

“Only if you call me Mike,” I said, sitting back up.

“Works for me,” Sapphire said, leaning back himself and crossing his legs. “So, let’s try to avoid braining you with a 2x4 made of wtf again; you said you had questions, so, fire away.”

"Well, naturally, my first question would be what is this place," I said, feeling somewhat more comfortable. "You mentioned something about the D.I.F. before I acted like an ass."

"Ah yes, that would be the Dimensional Investigation Federation," the rat said, clapping his hands together, then pointing his fingers towards me. "You see, some of that science fiction that exists on your planet? Some of that is actually true. There -are- multiple parallel dimensions of space and time, though unlike some of that fiction, you're not going to find alternate versions of every person in each dimension. Each soul is unique to that individual, or so it would appear."

"Huh," I said. "Well, with a name like the D.I.F., I'm presuming you're some form of law enforcement? Also, how many dimensions are there?"

"To answer the latter, we don't know," Sapphire said. "To answer the former, in a way, yes. To explain what we do, I'll need to go into how the D.I.F. was formed. You see, my people are a race of dimension-traveling entities. We're born with the ability to channel an energy that crosses dimensions. Most of us can take a variety of different forms; this one you see here is just one of my favorites." The rat grinned and wiggled his black eyebrows at me. I was about to comment when the door to the study slid open. In walked a raccoon dressed in a white shirt, black vest, slacks...and a distinctly familiar blue fedora. The gray in his fur also held a similar hue to Sapphire's. As he left again after taking a book off of a shelf, I turned and pointed my thumb in the direction he went.

"A sibling?" I asked. Sapphire chuckled.

"Nope, that was me," he said, grinning broadly. Then, he must have noticed my incredulous expression. "Another of my powers is the ability to duplicate myself. All my...manifestations? Avatars? Clones? What's the best term...ah well, all my bodies act independently, but share a single mind."

"Shit," I muttered, "talk about multitasking. So if you can do that, why form an organization when you can BE an organization?"

"I don't like to divide my attention -too- much," he said. "A dozen or so bodies is the most I care to manage. Beyond that and I start getting serious headaches and I can't concentrate."

"So you have a limit," I said. The rat pursed his lips and put on a thoughtful expression.

"Probably," he said, "but I haven't tried to test it. If I divided myself enough, my intellect would probably drop to Neanderthal levels."

"Heh, now I'm picturing a bunch of grunting, slope-browed cave-rats, cave-raccoons, cave-whatever-else-you-like-to-be, dressed in loincloths and blue fedoras," I said, grinning as I got a chuckle out of Sapphire.

"Now," he said, getting back on track, "in addition to dimension-jumping and shape changing, many of my kind also have a variety of other powers. Most of us are benign, but there are some who...well..." the rat looked off to the side, rather shamefaced. "...I'm sorry to say your author H.P. Lovecraft's dreams weren't exactly just in his imagination. Some of those horrific, reality-bending monstrosities? They're out there."

“Ohhhh damn,” I said, putting a hand to my head and shaking it. I was starting to feel very small; not only was someone telling me that eldritch creatures of vast power were real, I was also being told I was sitting right next to one.

“Indeed,” Sapphire said. “Now most of my kind, as I said, are benign, but they also tend to be rather self-centered, and don’t care about the entities that don’t have the powers that we do. But me? I’ve traveled and actually interacted with the beings, and not just making myself some god-like figure to them to try and make them worship me. I’ve actually tried engaging with them on a personal level. I did it just for a lark to start, but then...I found that people can be just as intelligent and insightful as my kind.”

“How kind of you to say,” I said with a hopeless chuckle. The rat (for lack of a better term to use for him) gave me a sympathetic look and again put a hand on my shoulder.

“Don’t feel insignificant,” he said. “I’ve found that every person is unique, and even the greatest among my kind has weaknesses that can be exploited.”

“You’ve given this talk before, I take it,” I said. Sapphire nodded sagely.

“Indeed, and I’ll tell you something else I often say that may set your mind at ease. Though my dimensional wandering, I’ve encountered many societies. But you know what one of the most prevalent aspects of them has been? Religion and spirituality. And you know what else? Though many, MANY societies across dimensions, there have been recurring themes in religions. Specifically, religions that are based around a single deity, with a messianic manifestation, with teachings from the deity that focus on love, compassion, forgiveness and justice. Almost as if something were crossing dimensions to spread this belief.”

“Pff, one of your kin, I suppose?” I said ruefully. Sapphire shook his head.

“Nope,” he said. “Even the most benign of my people has never tried to preach love and peace; they’d much rather set up absurd superstitions and traditions for a laugh.”

“Huh...,” I said, ruminating. “So, you’re saying...”

“The idea of an omnipotent and benevolent creator of everything? Oh yes, it’s very possible,” Sapphire said.

“Well, that is reassuring,” I said, feeling slightly more at ease. “Spirituality’s tough enough, adding all this new dimensional stuff to the mix doesn’t help.”

“I know, right?!” the rat said with a laugh. “Now, in my travels, I eventually came across no less than five different dimensions in which there have been societies that have found a means of artificial dimensional travel. With what I’d learned about...well let’s just call them non-jumping races, I realized that there were a lot of threats to them in the multi-verse. So, I made contact with the leaders of these societies, got them around the negotiating table, and formed the D.I.F. The federation exists outside of the primary space/time dimensions in this pocket dimension that serves as a hub between them. We serve two purposes; to explore and study additional dimensions not already within the federation, making contact with other societies whenever we can do so without causing harm, and we combat threats to the safety of both individual and multiple dimensions.”

I let out a slow breath. I'd been looking at Sapphire with an increasingly widening gaze. Finally, I dropped backward against the couch, arms limp at my sides.

"Ho. Lee. Shit," I said.

"I take I've blown your mind?" The rat said, wry grin on his face with eyebrows raised.

"No," I said, "You didn't simply blow it. You took it out for dinner and dancing, wined and dined it at a five-star restaurant with a three-course, gourmet dinner, swept it off its feet on the dance floor, took it back to a penthouse apartment, made sweet love to it, during which it had multiple orgasms, and then snuggled with it post coitus while sharing a cigarette until it fell asleep."

"Mmm, so was it good for you too then?" Sapphire asked, grin only getting wider. I could only give him a half-hearted hyena snicker as I looked up at the ceiling.

"Well, I'm going to go out on a limb and say your next question is going to be why you've been brought here," the rat said, re-crossing his legs from one to the other.

"Sort of," I said. "I suspect you had me brought here to recruit me to your organization; but I'm wondering what made me a worthwhile prospect. Oh, and how out of all the people in multiple dimensions, I managed to stand out. I mean, you say everybody's unique, which is good, but that doesn't mean there can't be anyone else out there who can do whatever it is I could do for you."

"Well, you're probably right," Sapphire said, inclining his head to one side, "but that doesn't mean we don't have room for you, or that your contributions wouldn't be helpful or valuable. As to how you came to our attention, I don't mind saying I was informed of you personally. While your dimension isn't one of our members, yet, I've had contact with a particular individual who's developed multi-dimensional travel there, though he hasn't shared it publicly yet, which I consider to be his prerogative. I believe you're acquainted with a Mal Geneford?"

"Ahhhh, yes," I said. "So he's mastered dimensional travel has he? I had a sneaking suspicion his influence went beyond just one international secret society."

"Indeed, he's proven to be a leader of a byzantine organization that has influence that stretches beyond what many would consider even possible within your dimension," Sapphire said, "with many secrets and abilities that some would say borders on defying reality. We play poker on Thursdays."

I snorted a laugh. "So, I take it he put you onto me then?" I said. The rat nodded.

"I mentioned I've been looking for additional field agents, particularly ones in your current dimension, and he pointed you out. I had some of my people look into your personal history, and I'm quite impressed," he said.

"I'm flattered," I said, having trouble believing I could honestly have been that impressive.

"You've shown to be tenacious, adaptable, more concerned with the spirit of laws than the letter, but respectful of the letter when able, willing to stand up to those of greater power or authority than yourself and open-minded enough not to be vexed or resistant to the people and situations outside your norm," the rat said matter-of-factly. "You managed to adjust to a sudden change in the era you lived in

and to bounce back from what many would consider the end of their lives as they knew it; it's not everybody whose managed to get the better of those who put their brain in a jar."

"Well, I can't claim -all- the credit," I said. "Divine providence had to provide me with an opportunity and the means to get a new body."

"But how many would have taken the opportunity?" Sapphire said, pointing at me. I could only shrug in modesty; I generally don't like to blow my own horn too much.

"So, what sort of arrangement did you have in mind for us?" I asked.

"We'll get to that, but first, I believe we were going to get something to eat earlier," The rat said, standing back up. I followed suit.

"Do you feel up for taking another jump into the deep end?" he asked.

"Now that I've adjusted to the water temperature," I said.

The menagerie out walking the concourse hallway was easier to take in this time, now that I'd had the time to mentally prepare myself for the vastly varied and unusual forms around me. I was hardly a stranger to variety in physical forms, between my home world's population, the uprising in genetic cosmetics, and my time among the canmephians. Still, there'd been a certain degree of uniformity. But now, even the state of matter that constituted a person's body, or even whether or not it was matter or energy, wasn't a guarantee. I did double takes several times as Sapphire lead the way, hands behind his back, smiling a bit at my surprise and frequent repetitions of "It takes all kinds..."

Finally we came to the door Sapphire had been taking me to; a sign overhead shifted its lettering into English, reading "Bubbling Kettle Cafeteria." Sapphire later told me all the signs in the D.I.F. station made use of a special technology that could pick up on individual neural impulses and project the proper written language into the mind of the viewer. After everything I'd seen so far, I was ready to take his word on it.

Inside, the cafeteria was set up, like before, with an art deco motif to it, with individual tables and booths for its diners. An elevator towards the back led to several different floors with different race's dishes served on them, so Sapphire told me. Thankfully food identical (or at least similar) to my own dimension was served on the very floor we were on, so I didn't have to wander to find enough food to make an appetizing plate. Being the leader of the federation, the rat had a private booth all his own, which at first I thought was conspicuously large so he could entertain sizeable groups for business lunches; I was going to find out otherwise.

"Were you not hungry yourself?" I said as I sat down. The rat chuckled, idly picking at his claws.

"Oh I called ahead to place an order," Sapphire said, a smug smirk creasing his muzzle. "It'll take a while yet, but please, don't wait for me."

I had an instinctive feeling I was going to like where this was going, so I didn't argue and, as the British say, tucked in. The food I selected based on scent rather than sight, since everything I'd chosen looked similar to something from Earth, but just different enough that it would have made me wary. "The nose knows" seemed like a good rule to go by, so I felt better trusting that sense to pick out dishes. Each one had been labeled on the sneeze guard of the lengthy buffet counters, with notations to say whether or

not it was safe for my species to eat; it stood to reason that with food from multiple dimensions, there would be plenty of truth to the phrase “one man’s mead is another man’s poison.”

“So,” I said, slicing into a stewed vegetable that smelled a bit like an orange but had the consistency of a pear and was a light blue in color, “what sort of work were you looking to bring me on to do?”

“What I’m looking for is pretty much the kind of work you do already,” Sapphire said, elbows on the table, his fingers laced together under his chin. “You’ll be given investigation assignments in a wide variety of forms; background checks, missing persons, criminal investigations, search and recovery, as well as information gathering and surveillance.”

“Sounds like a good gig,” I said, moving onto a cut of some form of meat with a flavor similar to honey baked ham. Sapphire assured me that all the meat served came from feral animals; he didn’t condone the killing of sentient races for food, something which not every society he’d come across agreed with, to his distinct displeasure and discomfort.

“So if you’ll pardon my asking a rather blunt question, how do you compensate your employees?”

“I actually prefer to think of them as my colleagues,” Sapphire said. “Through my various connections in each dimension, I’ve invested in the economies of a broad spectrum of societies. The dividends are used to provide stipends to the agents there.”

“Nice,” I said, taking a pull from a drink that was translucent, green in hue, but had the taste and consistency of milk. “Are there any other benefits; health insurance, dental?” I chuckled, being only half-serious. Sapphire smirked back.

“Due to the widely differing systems between societies and dimensions, I’ll need you to handle your own personal expenses,” the rat said. “But don’t worry, the federation makes sure that the stipend is large enough to handle its agents’ personal expenses while also providing them enough income to save money for eventual retirement. You won’t live like a celebrity, but we do our best to provide enough to live comfortably in whatever manner you prefer. Plus we’ll be providing you with training and equipment suitable to your skills and methods, as well as living quarters here for anytime you require them.”

“Sounds like a dream job to me,” I chuckled. “So, how much travel and how far are you going to want me to go? I gotta say, I feel like I’m from something of a backwater dimension, since nobody I’m aware of from my own dimension has made dimensional travel broadly available to their public.”

“Oh don’t feel bad about that,” the rat said, smiling and leaning back. “Truth be told, this federation is very much in its infancy. Each of the member civilizations has only explored a fraction of their own dimension. Believe me, your own is only a half-step behind the rest in some aspects, and in others its actually ahead of some of them. Did you know in one dimension, our member civilization is still struggling with the concept of permanent homes? Their races have all evolved so they can move between planets without mechanical aid, and so they spend their entire lives world-hopping; purely nomadic.”

“Wow,” I said. “That’s...a hard concept to wrap my brain around. Not the nomadic thing, the flying-between-planets-like-birds thing.”

"Indeed, almost as hard a concept as building a house and staying in one location longer than a single planetary orbit around a star is to them," Sapphire said with a smile. "But getting back to your question; we'll be sending you to various locations around your home dimension. You'll probably spend most of your time in familiar territory, since we have a vested interest in the wellbeing of our member (and prospective member) civilizations. However, we will have assignments to send you into unexplored territory in your dimension as well."

"Do you send people into other dimensions much?" I asked.

"Mmmm, very rarely," Sapphire said. "The only occasions when we do so are when particular people's skills are needed. While we're not like your 'Star Trek' federation and don't have a prime directive to never interfere with developing people, we try to avoid making planet-shattering impacts when possible."

"That's appreciable," I said, finishing off my meal and pushing my dishes aside. "You know, it sounds like your federation is openly associated with the societies in your member dimensions; what about mine? I can't say I've heard of you in my neck of the woods."

"Ahh yes," Sapphire said, biting at his lower lip a bit. "We've made attempts to make contact with your sentient races in the past. The response has been...varied, but not particularly promising until just recently."

"Ahh," I said. "I take it a lot of people thought your emissaries were playing a prank?"

"That was the milder of the reactions we got, yes," he said. "Some thought our agents were playing a joke. Some have pegged our agents for conspiracy nuts and just wrote us off. Still others thought we were crazy and we had to rescue some of our agents from various mental institutions. In the worst case scenarios, some societies were so primitive that they took our representatives for gods, monsters or witches and either started worshipping them or trying to execute them for heresy and sacrilege."

"Good Lord," I said, shaking my head.

"Yes, it was pretty frustrating," Sapphire said ruefully. "We haven't given up, but for now we've decided to wait for your societies to discover dimensional travel for themselves before openly approaching again. However, since your Mr. Geneford has already made contact with us, we'd like to have some activity in your dimension. So out of respect for Mr. Geneford's request for his activity to remain undisclosed to the remainder of your dimension, we're keeping our own activity there relatively covert. We trust our agents in your dimension, which are admittedly few in number and very spread out, to be discreet and to know who to trust with knowledge of our existence."

"So," the rat said, leaning back with his arms crossed over his chest, "I think that covers the nitty-gritty of D.I.F. Unless you have any other questions, the one thing that remains is this: do you want to join us? I know it's a big decision, but I think you'd do well with us."

Lacing my fingers together, I put my elbows on the table, rested my face on my hands, and thought. This was an opportunity, no doubt about it, practically undreamed of. To be a part of an organization that spanned not only worlds, but dimensions. Granted, I'd mostly be doing their local field work, but my efforts would contribute to a vastly grander scheme. But this would also be a big responsibility; the hours sounded long, the work tough, and with plenty of risk involved. And just who was I, out of my

entire dimension, with its people who were akin to demigods, to take a position among those who were also demigod-like in power? Some puny mortal. That's all.

Was I ready for something like this?

Could I -ever- be ready for something like this?

"Fuck it," I thought to myself. "I may as well try."

"Alright," I said. Sapphire grinned broadly.

"Excellent!" he said, reaching over and clapping me on the shoulder. "I know it seems daunting, but don't worry, you're not going to be alone on this. You'll have resources to use and we have no qualms about you contracting out for help when you need it; again, just be discreet about D.I.F. involvement."

"I think I can manage that," I said.

"I'm sure you can too," the rat said brightly, just as a waiter came up, pushing a rolling food trolley.

"Ahh, and right on cue..." Sapphire said, tucking a napkin into his shirt collar. Movement behind the waiter drew my eye; no matter how many times I see such sights (and given the company I keep that's pretty often) it always impresses me when I see things like a line of wait staff stretching all the way across the floor of a restaurant. In this case, that line snaked like a boa constrictor around tables and reached what appeared to be the doors of an elevator.

"I see you like to have all your meals at once," I said with a smirk. Sapphire grinned in a way that was almost evil.

"Meals? I was only feeling peckish, so I ordered a good-sized snack," he said as the first platter was set on the table in front of him, the cover withdrawn to reveal some sort of dish that smelled excellent, but was made up of foods that must have come from another dimension than my own, since I couldn't even begin to identify them.

"The only downside is often by the time the last few plates get here, they've gone cold..." the rat said. That was all the encouragement I needed. Standing up, I rolled up my sleeves.

"Well, let's solve THAT problem right now..." I said, feeling a familiar gleam building in my eyes.

"How are you-GULK!" the rat said, before I quickly grabbed a serving utensil and shoved a huge helping of God-only-knows-what into Sapphire's muzzle. I proceeded to quickly empty the serving platter into the rat's maw; he quickly got into the swing of things. I may've initially caught him by surprise, but Sapphire quickly relaxed, leaning back a bit, putting his hands behind his head and stretching his legs out, crossing his footpaws at the ankles.

I got into a rhythm to keep the line of waiters, waitresses and wait-whatever-they-called-their-genders moving. They put down a tray, I'd take several large helpings off the top and pack them into Sapphire's seemingly insatiable maw, then pick the tray up and put it to his mouth, sliding the contents into his gullet like I was throwing them away, then I'd hand off the empty tray as the next one was set down. But no food was getting wasted around THIS rat. The endless hunger of this gluttonous rodent kept him mmmm'ing with every tray, then making faux-regal gestures with his hand that said "keep it coming!"

And keep it coming we did. Tray after tray of dishes were scraped clean into Sapphire's mouth. The rat's belly began to billow forth, stretching outward as the wait staff and I did our level best to appease his peckish-ness. That gray-furred gut gurgled, groaned loud enough to be heard from every corner of the station, and stretched like a balloon on a helium tank. Shirt buttons stretched, strained mightily to hold it in, and then failed in a spectacular display as they were launched through the air. As his belly threatened to do the same to his trousers, the rat snapped his fingers a couple times and pointed down at his gut, then made a lifting motion. I got the hint; sliding my hands under Sapphire's globular ball belly, I lifted it back from where it rested on the table so the rat could slide the waistband of his pants off of his girth and re-secure it underneath and behind the curve of his belly. Thus freed from physical constraint, the tumultuously rumbling belly of the rat swelled unabated across the surface of the table as we packed more and more food into it.

Time seemed to slow down, though as Sapphire later told me, the idea of time being an illusion is just a funny line from a Douglas Adams novel. In reality, I spent over an hour packing was seemed like well over five dozen heaping trays of food from several dimensions of the space-time continuum into Sapphire's insatiably gluttonous gut. In the process, I was pretty sure he also grew slightly. Well, certainly not slightly in terms of his girth, but he also seemed to gain size all around as well. His musculature seemed to wax larger, his arms, legs, chest, back and shoulder muscles becoming noticeably more defined and burly. He even appeared to gain height as well. When I first met the rat, he was the same height as me. But as I scooped the last bit of the final tray of food (which was surprisingly familiar to me, being three prime rib steaks, mashed potatoes with gravy and string bean casserole) into his muzzle, he now appeared to be a head taller than me.

Sapphire swallowed as I handed off the final tray to a waitress, dusting my hands and unrolling my sleeves.

"PHEW!" I said, shaking my arms. "That was a workout."

"BEEEEEEEEUUUUUUUUUUURRRRRRRRRRRROOOOOOOOOORRRRRRRRRRP!" The rat's eyes crossed and he let out a thunderous belch. His gaseous blast was such that every single plate, glass and utensil on every floor of the multi-level restaurant that didn't have food in it bounced and shook. Even those that were filled vibrated and slid slightly across the surface of counters and tables. Sapphire grinned, putting both hands on top of his belly. That huge, packed, spherical bulge stretched across every square inch of the surface of the table; a table that was designed to seat eight. The rat slowly stood up, grunting as he heaved his massive girth upward. I got the sneaking suspicion that it actually didn't encumber him, but that he was behaving that way for dramatic effect and his own amusement.

"Heh, did we sate your peckishness?" I asked him. The rat, whose shoulders were now even with my eye level, smiled toothily at me and clapped a noticeably bigger hand on my shoulder.

"Oh I think we're gonna have FUN with YOU onboard our team," Sapphire said, clapping me on the back firmly enough to make me stumble against his engorged belly. My collision make it let out a GLURP, as I chuckled and gave the rat's gut a few pats. He patted my back in return.

"Now, how 'bout I show you 'round the station?" the rat said. Arm moved back to my shoulders, draped across them, he ushered me along at his side, his gait now with a pronounced swagger, making his gargantuan gut sway from side to side, it's top level with his pectorals, the bottom coming close to his

knees, and much further out from him than he could ever hope to get his arms around (at normal length anyway). Wait staff, with practiced efficiency, slid tables out of the rat's way as he guided me out the doors and back out into the winding hallways.

"Funny, but I get the impression that you could've gone even bigger with all the food we packed into you," I said, giving Sapphire's belly a couple light, backhanded pats. The rat grinned magnanimously.

"Oh sure!" he said, "but from the reports I've seen, you seem to prefer these kinds of sizes with your 'playmates,'" and I figured after the shock you've had, you could use something more your taste to help you feel at ease, so I adjusted my metabolism accordingly."

"You're too kind," I said with a grin, unable to resist sliding my hand over the rat's immensely swollen belly. Sapphire smiled, patted my shoulder a couple times, then with a look of outright pride, let out a belch like a fog horn.

For three weeks after my arrival, I was given a formal orientation to the D.I.F. At first I was concerned about my absence back home, but Sapphire assured me that Mal's people had handled things like putting my mail and utilities on hold. I was provided with a combined office and living space, located in a block of the station's snake-like winding path overlooking a large open space, giving me a pretty scenic view of the levels beyond. The place was organized with sectors devoted to various dimensions, each one with sub-sectors for things like station staff, R&D, interdimensional transit and trade, and the like.

I quickly discovered being an agent of the D.I.F. was going to come with some definite perks. In addition to in-station housing, I was also provided with some new "toys". I put away my Equalizer II for safekeeping and was issued something a bit more...updated. The federation had a well-stocked and well-staffed armory section, and after being given my choice of armaments, I chose a specialized plasma launcher pistol that I was told was essentially the magnum variant of its line, as well as a larger, longarm plasma launcher in the event I should find myself in a -really- hairy situation. The sidearm launcher bore a stunning resemblance to a revolver, while the longarm was similar to a double-barreled coach gun, both with a silvery finish to them heavily reminiscent of stainless steel. The sidearm, which they customized for me by engraving "Equalizer Mk. III" on the barrel, even had a revolving action to its firing mechanism; I was told the reason was due to the requirements of firing plasma bolts. Apparently in order to prevent overheating, the sidearm had rotating firing chambers where the plasma was superheated, in order to give each chamber time to cool down between shots. It was a 10-shot weapon loaded with two different forms of plasma that I could swap between with the flick of a switch. The longarm launcher, meanwhile, had a break-open action for reloading its two-shot chamber, with the act of reloading generally long enough to allow both chambers to cool down from the act of firing its even-more-powerful plasma loads. The longarm lacked a switch to swap between ammunition types, but could be loaded with either kind.

One form of plasma (the standard form for this sort of weaponry, I was told) used thermal energy to do its damage. The second form was something developed by the D.I.F. with Sapphire's consent and semi-reluctant cooperation. The secondary plasma was designed to react to a specific form of energy particular to living organisms; upon contact, the plasma would generate a miniature, temporary black hole to crush whatever organism it struck, then after about three seconds collapse in on itself. Sapphire

told me, with noticeable gravity in his words, that it was one of the scant few ways known to injure or kill the Lovecraftian-in-power entities, like his own kind, that sometimes became a threat to vast numbers of people or civilizations. I had no issue swearing an oath to never use that particular munition unless faced with such an entity that couldn't be handled by any other means at my disposal.

Additional new toys I got included a new tablet (or what equated to a tablet) with an incredibly powerful wireless receptor, capable of tapping into both local networks and even satellite networks. The D.I.F. had relay stations in various dimensions that allowed them to surreptitiously piggyback onto existing civilizations' satellites, allowing me to stay in direct connection with the D.I.F. network as long as I was in an area of sufficient technological progress. Even if I ever found myself "roughing it" with a less-advanced culture, the tablet still had a lot of information and programs in its memory, including a regularly updated encyclopedic compendium on its various member dimensions.

I also received some fairly standard fare for somebody who suddenly found themselves living a sci fi fan's wet dream; a lower facial mask that could function both as a re-breather underwater and as a filtration device/gas mask in low-air or non-air environments, a set of goggles that provided binocular zoom, infrared, night vision, light filtration (like sunglasses) and could take still image pictures; a wrist band that launched a miniature grappling hook with super-high-tensile-strength wire; a communicator designed to resemble a smartphone that, like my new "tablet" could keep me in direct contact with the D.I.F. as well as local communications networks (and social media), some survival gear if I found myself in a wilderness environment and finally a combination sonic vibration and electronic signal device used for bypassing physical and electronic door locks.

My new gig also came with a company car. Or to be precise, a company spaceship. In order to be as inconspicuous as possible, the D.I.F. worked with Mal's organization to arrange for me to act as the recipient and test pilot of my planet's first personal star ship. A small, experimental vessel produced by a company native to Earth, with Mal's assistance it had also been outfitted with the necessary tech to dimension jump, carefully concealed to avoid detection by any inspectors by making it look like a backup system for the engine. The design itself was, much like my new weapons, designed with simple elegance in mind, heavily reminiscent of a starship from an old adventure game I played when I was a kid, only a bit larger and more spacious.

The front was a curved dome of transparent, plexiglass-like material which contained the cockpit controls. Behind it, along the lefthand side of the interior were four seats for passengers, while on the left was storage space for personal items and a collapsible cot for long missions that, in emergencies, could also double as a stasis pod (though I definitely wasn't eager to use it for that purpose). On the underside of the ship was a small hold for carrying additional cargo; it wasn't very large, being a crawlspace high enough that I could comfortably kneel in it, but not stand upright.

Outside the ship, the overall shape was slightly birdlike, sleek and chromed with two landing struts in front and two in back, an upper hatch and a side hatch with extending ladder. Two wing-like protrusions were on either side of the body; isosceles triangles with the narrowest tips starting slightly behind the cockpit and widening towards the back. These pseudo-wings, designed to help stabilize the craft when moving through a planetary atmosphere, housed two circular thrusters used for maneuvering, while the primary propulsion thrusters were in the direct back of the body.

My orientation included training for all my new equipment and my new transportation. Thankfully, the D.I.F. had practically invented the term “user-friendly.” I was still nervous about what would happen once I was given my first assignment, but Sapphire assured me I’d be doing work I was familiar with, just with one specific “client.”

The final day of my orientation found me in “Perfect Fit,” a clothing store which offered tailor-made outfits as well as off-the-rack clothes. Much like Sapphire, I was and still am a fan of the 30’s and 40’s aesthetic, but I also appreciate a lot of modern conveniences and a few updated styles. That in mind, I decided it was time to get an alternate, updated look about myself, something more fitting for the era I was now living in. As I stood looking in the shop’s traditional 3-way mirror, a sentient android tailor brushing at me, I felt a bit like I was back in college, putting on my graduation robes. Only this outfit was going to last me a lot longer than just one walk down an aisle.

My new outfit was heavily reminiscent of my old one, and could’ve been considered a blend of both my traditional detective noir look and the “cyberpunk” aesthetic. I’d traded my tan trench coat for a dark gray one of similar length, but with a more streamlined design. Instead of buttons, it was designed with three clasps along the front, and lacked the shoulder straps traditionally included on a trench coat, and came with several inner pockets. A matching dark gray fedora went nicely with the coat (though I thought the outfit would look good even without the hat) and featured a dark green hat band around the crown to accent it.

The band was the same shade of green as the waistcoat I now wore, snap button holding it shut around my torso. A well-made white dress shirt fit me well; I was pleasantly surprised to find several off-the-rack that didn’t hang absurdly loose on my torso while still having enough length in the sleeves that they didn’t expose my wrists every time I bent my elbow. A matching tie came with the waistcoat, which covered the belt that went with the dark gray slacks that matched my coat; a handy part of my new outfit for securing my sidearm holster. The pants, like the entire outfit, was what I’d personally consider “semi-formal,” good-looking enough to pass for office wear at a glance, but tough and comfortable enough to not restrict my movement. In addition to the regular pockets on either hip, the trousers also had an additional pair of pockets on the side of each leg at about thigh height.

Finally, instead of laces, a new pair of black, high boots I wore were equipped with adjustable straps with ratcheting clasps. They came halfway up my shins and had the same metallic toe protection as my old boots, though these ones were on the outside, with a matte finish to them so they wouldn’t look garishly shiny.

With my new ensemble complete, I paid the tailor (still impressed at how quickly the D.I.F. had set up an exchange rate for my society’s currency) and made my way through the crowds on the winding walkway of the station to Sapphire’s office. I hadn’t seen him for a little over a week as I’d gotten wrapped up with a combination of flight training and organizing my new on-station quarters. Stopping outside his office door, I pushed the call button, which rang like an old-fashioned doorbell, and the door slid open.

“Come on in!” I heard Sapphire say, sounding like he was talking with his mouth full.

“Heh, catch you while you’re eating?” I said as I stepped in the rat’s office. I was looking down, picking a stray bit of hair off my coat, so it wasn’t until the door slid shut behind me that I looked up and took in the sight of the rat.

"What do you think of the new outWHOA!" I said. Now, I'm no stranger to all sorts of forms of expansion. However, there's no denying some are stranger than others. And I wasn't quite expecting what I found myself facing. The rat was at his desk, leaned back in his no-doubt well-reinforced chair, footpaws up on the desk's surface. Since it sounded like he'd been eating, I'd anticipated finding him in some sort of engorged state.

What I didn't expect, however, was to see that his gut, approximately the size it had been when we'd left the Bubbling Kettle, was apparently stuffed with several PEOPLE. That grayish orb was moving and shifting with the sound of internal squirming, while out of Sapphire's open maw were sticking three pairs of footpaws and two tails. With a dramatic GULP, the rat slurped down the appendages that had been protruding from his muzzle and let out a prolonged BAAAAAAAARRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRP that flipped my hat off my head from across the room.

"Oh hey there Mike," the rat said with a proud, somewhat lazy grin. His belly continued to gurgle and churn as it shifted with what sounded like a small office party inside it. "Nice new thrURRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRP, threads you've got there. G'HIC!"

"Thaaaaaanks...", I said, giving Sapphire an unsure look as I felt around for my hat, not taking my eyes off the shifting mass of his gut. "Am I...uh, interrupting anything?"

"Oh not at all, I was just entertaining some guests," the rat said, still grinning as he took his hands and slapped them against his squirming belly. The sound of muffled giggling came from inside it.

"I see," I said, eyebrow firmly raised. "I -hope- you don't make such arrangements...permanent, if you follow me."

"Oh NO no no no!" he said, waving both hands while shaking his head. "I never digest my guests, that would make me a -very- poor host. But holding vore parties is one of my favorite passtimes, G'HIC!" Sapphire gave me a grin and eyed me up and down. "Would you care to join the festivities?"

"Ahhh, no thanks," I said. "I'm a bit of a wallflower."

"That's fine," the rat said, giving me a nonchalant shrug. "I never engulf without permission. Well....," he suddenly looked off to the side, then gave me a mischevious grin. "Unless its in such a way they don't notice....,"

"Pff, how could they not?" I said, eyebrow raised.

"WELL....," Sapphire said, oh-so-casually examining his claws. "When one engulfs an entire planet or solar system...or two...or three...or so on..., it tends to, shall we say, go over people's heads, heh heh heh, BORRRRRRRRP!"

"Say WHAT?" I said, feeling like if I widened my eyes much more, I'd need a bigger skull for them. Sapphire gave me a wicked grin.

"Oh it's just something I like to do sometimes: engulf some of, or most of, or all of, a cosmos. Or two. Nothing quite like the sensation of not just filling space, but containing it. Though I enjoy smaller scale shin digs like this too," Sapphire again drummed on his belly, doing shave-and-a-haircut, with the entire party in his belly bouncing in time to respond.

"MMmmm, I love the way they squirm," the rat said, dopey grin on his face, punctuated with another G'HIC!

"Heh, well as long as everybody's happy, or oblivious, and above all unharmed...", I said with a shrug. "Though, that does raise a question..."

"Do tell," Sapphire said, head cocked to one side.

"Well, y'know those special black hole rounds you've created? Well, space is full of black holes; how is it you can eat 'em without it hurting?"

"Ahh, those rounds create -artificial- black holes, specifically designed to be ten times stronger than natural ones," he said, scratching at his gut. "That's what makes them harmful. Though I'll be honest, if the natural ones brush up against my insides, they do give me a bit of a stomach cramp."

"Oh you poor baby," I said with a sarcastic smirk, earning a stuck-out tongue from the rat. He then swung his legs off his desk and stood up with a perfectly timed fatty grunt, his belly's occupants giggling.

"Well, I could stand to stretch my legs as well as my girth," Sapphire said, and with a hand on my shoulder again, he escorted me back out into the promenade hallway.

"So, got yourself squared away with our operation, I hope?" the rat said as we strolled along, his belly swaying to and fro with the rollicking that was evidently going on inside him.

"Yep, I think I'm...well, as ready as I'll ever be," I said, rubbing the back of my neck. "Got to admit, I'm still nervous about this."

"Ahh don't worry, you'll do fine!" Sapphire said, smiling magnanimously. "Like I told you at the start, most of your work's gonna be the same as you've been doing; you're just doing it for one specific client: us."

"Yeah, I try to remind myself of th-", I said, cutting myself off mid sentence. As we walked along, a D.I.F. staff member was coming the opposite way, absorbed in whatever they had on their tablet screen. With practiced ease, Sapphire leaned over, caught them under the waist, hoisted them up, and with a surprised "YEEEEK!" from his "victim", the rat slurped them down in one smooth gulp!

"UUUuuuhhhh," I said, once more looking askance at the massively gluttonous rodent.

"I know what you're, UUUUUURRRRRRRRP, gonna say," Sapphire said, holding a hand up. "But don't worry, I pre-arrange this stuff. Anyone with the D.I.F. that wears a particular blue wrist bracelet has signed an agreement to allow me to swallow 'em whenever I feel like having someone in my gut. Heh, they extra pay for it."

"You have an entire system set up to indulge your fetish for eating people," I said in disbelief. Sapphire rubbed his claws on his lapel.

"E'yup, HICCUP!" he said. I could only shake my head.

One additional week of settling in later, and my final day had arrived. I was being re-deployed back to Earth to take up my position as a D.I.F. field agent. Gathering up my tools, both old and new, I suited up, locked up my on-station quarters and headed out to the elevator that lead to the docking hangar. I'd finally grown accustomed enough to the motley display of races traversing the hallways that I didn't bump into things anymore from making sidelong glances at every other person I passed. Reaching the elevator, I was a bit surprised to see Sapphire himself there, slimmed down to his normal size.

"Oh hey there Saph," I said; I didn't bother to reach for the call button since I figured he'd already done so himself. The rat turned and smiled.

"Ah, Mike! Ready for your deployment?" he said, tail lazily swaying behind him.

"As I'll ever be," I said. "I haven't been told if I have an assignment yet."

"Usually we let our agents have at least a day or so to re-settle back into their dimensional locations before we start tossing them assignments," the rat said as the doors slid open. "There's always stuff to handle after returning from a long absence; questions to answer, services to renew, and so forth."

"That's true," I said, stepping into the elevator as the animatronic lift operator, dressed in an appropriate 1930's uniform, pulled back a lever on the wall after picking up Sapphire's verbal request for the hangar.

"Oh, I meant to ask, will I be dealing with any of your subordinates in particular?" I asked, the elevator smoothly gliding downward, the music a swing band piece that was easy on the ears.

"No one specific; you'll be sent mission offers from anyone who has need of a field agent," the rat said. "And you'll certainly be hearing from myself as well; Earth happens to be growing on me as a regular haunt."

"Heh, is that so?" I said, eyebrow cocked. "Well that's nice to hear. Have to admit, I am wondering a bit why I've continued to warrant this much personal interest."

"You've certainly been proving to live up to your reputation, from what I've heard from your orientation instructors," Sapphire said. "Truth be told, I always try to develop a personal rapport with the federation staff, though the majority of them find me and my pass times a bit odd, so it's always nice to find someone like-minded."

"That I can appreciate," I said. The elevator slid to a stop, opening onto a huge open bay, filled with spaceships in a wide variety of sizes and shapes. In addition to the regular flight crews running around, there were also about a hundred or so people gathered in a cluster near a small podium. I recognized a number of them as other new recruits into the federation, and gave a few of them nods and waves as I joined the crowd while Sapphire stepped up to the podium.

"Ladies, gentlemen, hermaphrodites, nixarps, sibots, alvas, beuchams and j'nutar," the rat said, looking out at the crowd. "You are all to be congratulated for taking on your shoulders this new and, for many of you, unexpected duty. You go forth today to represent those who stand for solidarity and peaceful coexistence, to explore and gather vital information to learning about all the cultures, societies and environments that make up the vast and varied worlds we live in. In the times ahead, you will be called on to perform a variety of tasks; peacekeeping, investigation, research, scouting and even diplomacy."

“Not everyone is willing to take such responsibilities on themselves,” Sapphire said, eyes sweeping the crowd. “And make no mistake, there will be mistakes. No one is expected to be perfect. But as long as you stay true to our cause, follow your conscience, and make the best decision you can based on the best information you have, you will do our federation proud. May whatever deity you follow, if you follow any, look with favor on you, for you now set out on a great and noble endeavor!”

The crowd burst into applause as Sapphire beamed from the podium, chest puffed out with pride. Our unofficial graduation ceremony drawing to a close, the rat stepped back down, the podium sliding down into a compartment on the floor. We all got to shake his hand one more time as he presented each of us with the ignition device for our ships. For me, it was a key fob that on a glance would only look like the kind of button used for a printer or copy machine.

The landing strut on my ship had a small compartment with a hand print scanner to open the side door and lower the entry ladder. Inside, I took a deep breath and strapped myself into the cockpit, powering up the engines and letting them idle a few moments while other ships were taking off.

“Docking control, this is Fang,” I said, holding down the radio switch. “Requesting permission to take off.”

“Copy that, Mr. Fang,” the controller responded. “We have three ahead of you, stand by for permission to launch.”

“Copy that control,” I said, releasing the switch. Sitting back and waiting, my head was still trying to digest the gravity of what was happening. Once again, life had come out of nowhere and thrown a wicked curve ball my way. This was the kind of bizarre turn of events I would have expected while dreaming. Even after all my training and preparations, I didn’t know if I was going to be able to handle this.

But how often is life that certain? I asked myself. *If you’re going to get ahead, sometimes you’ve got to take a leap.*

“Control to Fang, you are go for launch.”

“Copy that control.” I said. The ship hummed a bit louder as I increased the vertical lift and gave it a little impulse power. Carefully I slid out of my docking space and curved around until I was looking through the bay doors, like I was emerging from a cave (or perhaps looking out from the inside of Sapphire’s mouth...)

Smirking at the thought, I piloted my ship out of the station. I did a short lap around it just to get settled, then activated my navigation computer. Setting a point-by-point course, I activated the dimensional gate generator and set the frequency to my home dimension. That kaleidoscope of light and colors surrounded me again as I squinted through it, the gravity in the dimensional wormhole drawing me through until I emerged in a brief, electric-blue flash of light. Familiar constellations formed in the space I saw in front of me, and I felt a deep sense of familiarity.

“Never thought I’d get that feeling from an entire dimension,” I said to myself. Checking my nav com, I turned on the layover display, a translucent guiding line appearing to run out into space ahead of me and curve slightly to the left.

“Look out people,” I said, engaging the interplanetary engines, “I’m back, and I’ve learned some new tricks!”