They all nodded.

"It'll be like putting the chem into a golem," said Amira. "Do you know the legend of the golem?"

"No. But otherwise it sounds fine. If you all think that we can save the station this way, then I definitely believe you. And who's going?"
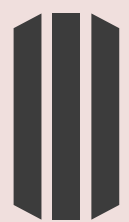
They all looked at him.

"No!"

Oliver burst out laughing. "I know that you've been writing a news report all this time, but the rest of us have important work. I can't fly through space and type on my tablet at the same time."

"But I'm not right for this! I've never been in EVA!"

"None of us has," said Amira. "But a spacesuit has buffer thrusters, a safety cable with ascenders and there are rails all around the station's external perimeter. So you'll just need to go hand over hand to the reactor and stick in the chip. It's quite simple. You can do it!"

Oliver helped Nick into a spacesuit. He put Carol's data chip into one of the suit's breast pockets. Into the other went his comlink, which he connected to the suit's transmitter, so the hackers could hear him.

Then the airlock's inner door closed behind him.

"Don't be afraid," said Oliver, in his earphones. "I once got a spacesuit flight in space as a present. You know those experience voucher things?"

"Yeah, and how did it go?"

"I upchucked before the training even started. They didn't let me go into space."

Nick wanted to say something caustic, but the outer door was already opening.

Into his head popped the memory of his journey on the *Gloriana*, and how he had thought about not being in space for a long time.
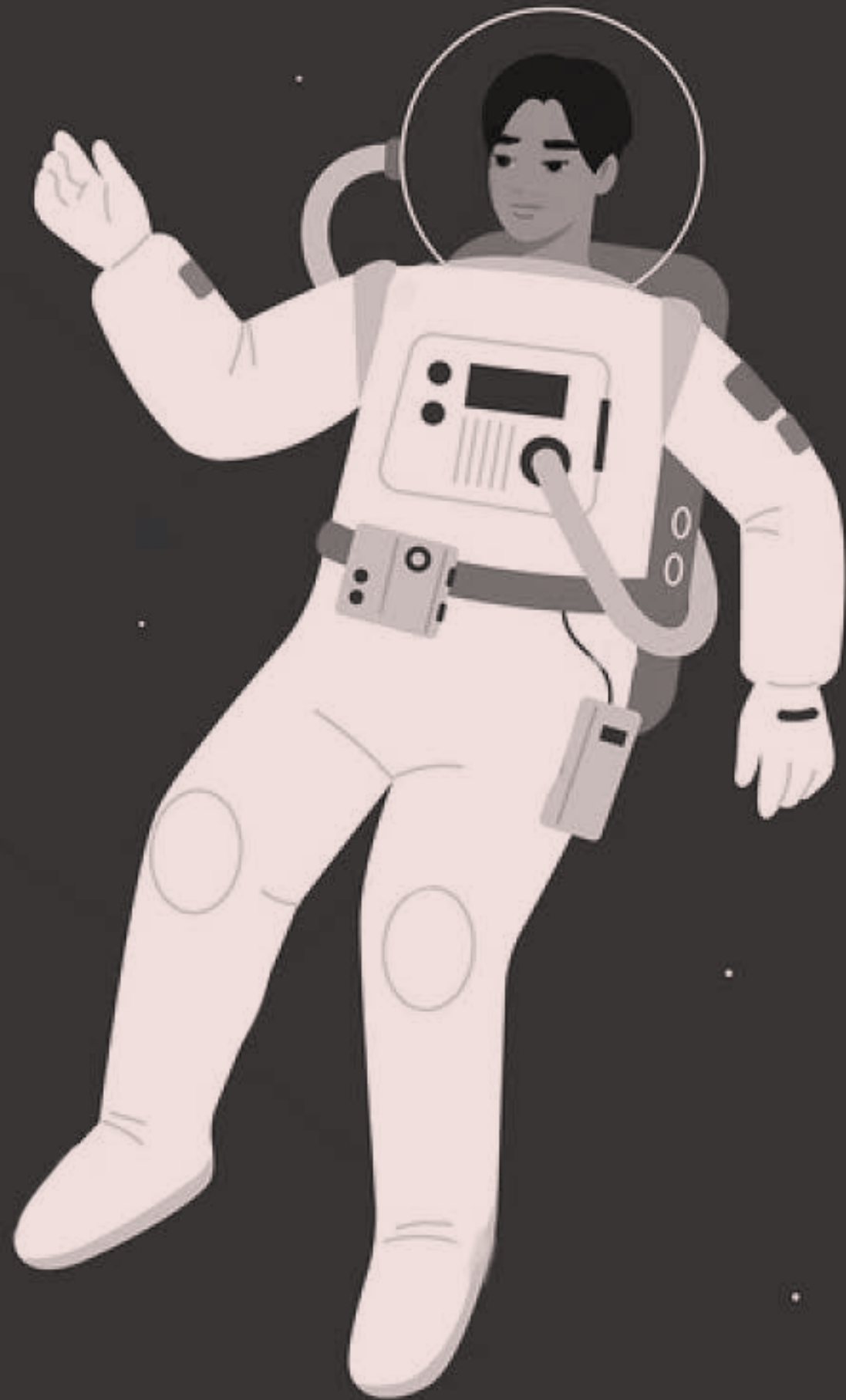
However he really did not want to go outside like this.

The only sound he could hear was the echo of his own breath in his helmet. He slowly made his way to the edge and left the station's gravitational field.

He weighed nothing again.

He looked around at the infinite horizon and tried not to think that, if the thrusters failed or if he made a mistake when attaching the safety cable's ascender, he would fly off into open space and nobody would ever find him.

He wasn't surprised that EVAs induced agoraphobia in many people.

Fine, Nick, just keep calm, he repeated to himself, as he listened to his own breathing. *Keep calm. It's like the low-grav gym that we had in school. Nothing unusual.*

He had hated low-grav gym class. He tried to ignore this fact.

He maneuvered around the ascender that was designed to secure the cable even if he himself let go. Hand over hand he went, on and on.

Although he theoretically weighed nothing, he was still perspiring so heavily that the spacesuit must contain a puddle of sweat.

The advantage of moving like this was that he was looking at the station, not into open space.

"You're nearly there already," said Amira, in his ear.

"And that means how long?"

"Maybe another ten minutes."

Nick's impression was that he had been here for several infinities, and that several more awaited him.

"Talk to me!" he begged the hackers. They were all engrossed in their work and nobody was bothering to make conversation.

"The fucker has infected all the station's systems. It's trying to deactivate all the backup life-support too," said Amira.

"My scripts are preventing that," said Carol. "It's already managed to knock some stuff out, but fortunately it will be hours, probably

days, before the air on the station becomes unbreathable, even if the air purifier fails."

"I'm following its expansion and trying to find out how far it's penetrated," said Oliver. "And I'm providing the systems it controls with their own cyber-attacks."

This time, Nick was glad even of their catastrophic reports. He didn't have to think about where he was.

"I'm really not right for this!" he complained.

"You're the only one in the group we could do without," said Amira.

"Yeah, not to mention that not many people with your education are employed in the field," added Oliver, and Nick could even see his sneer. "You're lucky that you're not serving fries!"

Nick's breathing in his helmet was replaced by the sound of grinding teeth. Those comments about his education were embarrassing.

Then, suddenly, he was where he was meant to be. He saw the gigantic dome of the reactor located below the station hull. What is "up" in space, and what is "down" is, of course, arbitrary, even though "above" him Nick could see the unending universe, then closer, Phoebe, one of Saturn's moons, above which the stations *Gar K. Nelson* and *Adamcak* were positioned, so from the perspective of Phoebe, at least, he was "below" the station.

"Well, here I am," he said with relief, dragging himself over the reactor. "Do you have any idea where that access port is?"

"Two seconds..." Amira searched on her tablet. Nick kept on hauling himself round, hand over hand. "Yes, there are two. One on each side of service shield V-18."

"Where's that?"

"There's a sort of yellow board there, maybe a meter wide, on either side."

Nick visualized a yellow board, then hauled himself back to the other side. He found exactly what he was looking for. The port looked like any other port.

"I'm here, and I can see it."

"So insert the chip... yeah, and take care that the little thing doesn't fly off."

"Thanks. I hadn't realized I should be afraid of that as well."

The vision of letting go the data chip and seeing it fly off into infinity danced before his eyes.

He unfastened his pocket, and with his hand encased in the skin-tight glove, pulled out the chip and inserted it into the slot.

During that time, nothing reverberated in his suit helmet, because he wasn't breathing.

"It's in. Do I need to press anything?"

"No, that's enough," said Oliver, and chuckled. "Excellent. You pulled it off! a lot of us computer nerds never manage that!"

"It's starting up," Carol interrupted him. "Yes... yes... yeah! We did it!" The young woman burst out laughing. "Yeah, the reactor is stabilizing. And my firewalls will stop the AI bastard from crawling in again."

Nick heaved a sigh of relief.

"What about the rest of the station?"

"We're working on it," said Amira, for all of them. "We've already isolated the bastard. Hold on for a moment."

Nick was suddenly flooded with euphoria.

The fear of the infinite universe and everything was gone. They had saved the station. He'd done it. He was a hero.

Another of the things he'd never reckoned on at the faculty. That he would be a hero.

"Nick, are you there?" asked Amira.

"Yes, I'm here. I'm giving myself a moment of rest."

"Nick, we have a problem!"

"A fucking huge problem!" added Oliver.

Nick did not like their tones.

"What is it? is it the reactor?"

"No... that is... not this one."

"But this station has only one reactor."

"Yeah, true, but that fucking *fucker* has sent a signal to the reactor on *Adamcak* station."

"What? How?"

"I blocked all the bastard's attempts at outgoing communication, both via the FTL receiver and via the normal channels," said Carol. For the first time, there was something like real horror in her voice. "Only the reactor itself has a transmitter, for sending data to other reactors. I don't know why they built it into this model, maybe as an emergency backup in case there were two reactors on one station, so that one of them could immediately cover if the other one outed. It's not normally used, I couldn't have known it was there...!"

"In practice, it means that *Adamcak*'s reactor now has the same problem that ours had!" exclaimed Amira. Carol probably needed to compose herself a little. Nick had no idea whether she was more horrified by her own failure or the vision of the second station exploding.

"What about the rest of *Adamcak*?"

"I sent the procedures for eliminating the shit to their user interface," said Carol again, a little calmer now. "It won't go anywhere, but their reactor is out of operation again and I don't know if the team who take care of the reactor is alive! And if anyone

is, then I don't know if they can do anything with it, depending on what we can see from here—Amira's hacked into the station sensors—so their reactor will go to hell."

"What can we do?" asked Nick. Another station, as big as *Nelson*. Also full of people...

"We have one solution," said Amira. "Actually, a simple one."

"Yes?"

"Take out the data chip. it doesn't need to stay in this reactor."

Nick did so. Again he placed it in his suit's breast pocket. "Fine. Now what?"

"We'll give you a trajectory. Disconnect the ascender, push off from the station using the thrusters and then fly to *Adamcak* and do the same thing on their reactor."

"What?!"

"Disconnect the ascender and safety cable, use the thrusters to push off..."

"I fucking understood that, but it's madness. I can't do that!"

"You must, Nick! Otherwise *Adamcak* will explode in two hours' time!"

"But... but... how far away is it?"

"If you push off and burn the thrusters at maximum for at least fifteen minutes, you can fly on inertia to *Adamcak* in an hour and a half."

"And then your suit's computer will slow you down again. The same length of time that you accelerated," Oliver reminded him. "Otherwise you'll smash into the station!"

"But you must set the trajectory exactly," said Amira. "Or else you'll just miss the station and nobody will ever find you. Your spacesuit wasn't made for this, but unfortunately we don't have any other sort!"

Nick no longer had the strength even to curse.

According to both Amira and Oliver, Nick pushed off correctly. This changed nothing about the fact that he was terrified half to death as he flew through the vast emptiness. The stations were on opposite sides of Phoebe, barely 500 km apart in stationary orbit of the small moon, but he had to approach *Adamcak* on an orbital trajectory.

For the first few minutes of flight, Nick simply screamed in terror until he ran out of breath. Then Oliver warned him that the more he roared, the faster his oxygen would run out.

He was also glad that the suit had connections and tubing everywhere, because he had lost control of his bladder.

Then he simply flew, and flew. The hackers sometimes called him

with new information. Carol and Oliver already had ready a system for removing the whole virus from *Nelson*. After an hour they reported that *Nelson* was practically clean and Carol was extending her antivirus network and firewalls.

By then Nick was already quite close to *Adamcak*. The suit computer automatically turned him around and began to slow him down using the reaction thrusters.

According to the hackers, he should have enough fuel left to maneuver around the station and get to the reactor.

"Nick, are you there?" said Amira's voice in his earphones.

"Yes, I haven't gone anywhere. I'm still decelerating and…"

"Where is your PDA comlink?"

"What? in the other breast pocket of my suit. The one that doesn't have your chip in it. I'm talking to you through it!"

"Destroy it. Immediately."

"What?"

"Don't argue! The bastard came from your comlink! it activated as soon as you switched it to audio in the lounge with us! We only just figured that out now!"

"But… but… how… one second!"

Nick remembered. Mr. Henry had uploaded data about the three cyber-security firms and instructions on where he was to meet their representatives. He'd uploaded it from his comlink onto Nick's.

"That came from Henry!"

"Henry really won't be a saboteur," said Oliver.

"I know he isn't, but somebody must have hacked his comlink and then it infected mine. Nobody even knew that I was flying. Where is Henry now?"

"Still aboard the *Gloriana* on the way to Iapetus."

"Send him a message! Tell him that he must destroy his comlink as well! Now!"

"Yeah, fine, we will, the station's communication systems are starting up," said Amira. "But you destroy yours right now too."

"But then you won't be able to talk to me. If the communications are only starting up now, the spacesuit is normally connected to them…"

"So you'll cope on your own. Just do the same thing you did on *Nelson*! But you must destroy that comlink. If you get too close to the station with it, it could hack its entire system."

"And how will they find me afterwards?"

"The spacesuit's transmitter and emergency beacon will work and maybe they'll notice someone flying round their reactor!"

The helmet filled with Nick's sigh. "Well, only if they're observant enough there!"

He pulled his PDA comlink from his pocket. it was a new Arcane 9.1 and he had bought it only three months ago. it was tough and sturdy.

Fortunately, the standard equipment in the spacesuit's pockets included enough tools to make destroying the comlink quite easy.