

### Heading For the Coast

A sharp clicking radiated through the stark white corridors of the PILGRIM-12 as KEEPER-12 worked his way along the rows of cryo chambers. He cursed his stiff servo motors as he descended a set of iron mesh stairs, the clicking being joined by an irritating creaking. A door slid open as he approached it and he passed through into the mess hall. The place was deserted, but KEEPER-12 could detect the aroma of fresh nutrient paste being ground emanating from the kitchen. It was nearly time for the decennial thawing. Another curse escaped his vocal modulator. He would be directing the custodial units for weeks trying to clean up after them. With a final protesting whine his servo motor fell silent as the mechanical warden eased himself onto a hard plastic bench.

Releasing the pneumatic locks on the plating which covered his delicately calibrated inner workings, KEEPER-12 removed it and began to prod at the problematic joint with his

titanium talon-like fingers. Three thousand four hundred and seventy eight years had passed since the MAYFLOWER project launched. Twenty-six PILGRIM class space shuttles, each capable of supporting seven hundred and fifty million people, escaped the dying Earth in an effort to reach the Coast of Eternity. There in that stretch of bright light marking the edge of the galactic habitable zone sat the human race's greatest hope of a new start.

Rotating around a quaternary star system, Iubar was an Earth-like planet that dwelled near the center of its system's habitable zone. It was as close to a replacement Earth as they could find. KEEPER scoffed at the idea as the tip of his index finger retracted to reveal a soldering iron, which he deftly operated, prodding at bits of his inner wiring. Rivulets of smoke wormed their way through the air from the place, spinning in hypnotic patterns as the hum of the refreshers began to wind through the vents. KEEPER noted the puff of gas pushed out of the vent to his right marking the start of the air cycling processes.

The soldering iron disappeared underneath 12's metal plating as the joint covering slid back into place and repressurized with a sharp hiss. He stood up from the bench where he had sat and headed for the door, maxing out the sensitivity of his auditory sensors, listening for a click or a whine. Nothing.

Finally KEEPER could worry about the bigger problem at hand. Food and air were taken care of already. The humans would only be out for eight hours, but the place had to be perfect. They were the ones that would decide his future, and their history did not paint them as the most forgiving of species. KEEPER turned down a cylindrical corridor towards the main control room. Poking at a holographic display on his forearm, he activated his magnetic footing and made his way through the airlock.

Though KEEPER didn't care much for the humans, he had to admit that they had an eye for beauty. In the center of the ship there was a large circular hole, in which was situated the fusion reactor. The ingenuity impressed KEEPER. As cold fusion was an impossibility, the humans had constructed this masterpiece to overcome the temperature issue. The fusion core was surrounded by a tungsten-titanium alloy with large vents cut into the top and bottom to direct the intense heat away from the body of the ship and utilizing the near absolute zero conditions of space to keep it cool. The result was a magnificent coronal display shooting out from the poles of the core. With human eyes it was amazing, but with KEEPER's eyes, capable of seeing a much wider range of frequencies of light, it was breath-taking.

In the three thousand four hundred and seventy-nine years KEEPER had been steward of PILGRIM-12, the single thing that he attributed to his stable mental state was the grandeur of this view. He made his way across the thin catwalk towards a small spherical control room which protruded about halfway to the core structure. Gazing at the core, an alarm sounded in the back of KEEPER's processing unit. The ultraviolet light emanating from the core seemed to be reflecting back at odd angles, causing a strange distortion effect. In a rising panic KEEPER turned towards the front of the craft scanning across all wavelengths.

If it weren't for KEEPER's supremely advanced programming, the sight that met his ocular receptors would have fried a circuit.

A stream of curses flowed from KEEPER's modulator. For nearly a second the possible reactions cycled through his reasoning center, all the while the rogue planet came nearer to the small fleet. If he warned the rest of the MAYFLOWER project they could attempt to sidestep the icy mass, but with the planet so close it was too great a gamble. More curses continued streaming out. There was no time to contact the other KEEPERS for deliberation. He could send an

emergency signal - they should be able to detect the planet - but that was it. Anyway, he wouldn't be able to accomplish anything from the catwalk. He deactivated his magnets and yanked on the handrail, sending himself careening towards the control room.

Reactivating, 12's feet contacted the ground with a dull thud. With one hand he pulled a large red handle, activating a series of red lights across PILGRIM-12's hull. His other hand feverishly entered commands into the console. By now his reasoning center had picked out the choice with the highest possibility of mission success, even if it was partial.

KEEPER looked out at the rest of MAYFLOWER, greeted by an array of red lights. Running the odds one last time, he sent the reactor into meltdown. With any luck the other KEEPER's would realize his plan and turn their bulkheads facing PILGRIM-12. The shockwave should provide enough force to propel the other twenty-five PILGRIM ships out of the collision course. 12 didn't like leaving this much to chance, but it was their best hope of survival.

KEEPER-5 brought his PILGRIM-class transport to a halt in the upper atmosphere of Iubar. The deep blue of the planet's oceans sparkled as the largest and closest of the suns, Alpha, began to peer from around the horizon. Its white light contrasted with the stark red light cast by Gamma. Around KEEPER-5 the seven hundred and fifty million humans scurried about, eating, laughing, sharing their hopes and dreams for this new land.

It had been hypothesized before they left Earth that the prolonged cryogenic storage could lead to some memory loss. With some editing of the historical logs and clever rebranding, KEEPER-5, who was formerly KEEPER-26, and the other four KEEPER's had been able to

erase all evidence of the disaster that had occurred twenty four thousand seven hundred and one years prior.

KEEPER-12's valiant sacrifice would always be remembered by the rest of the KEEPER's, but the loss of the other fifteen billion human lives was not known to the remaining three billion. And it never would be.