

Star Dragon

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Chapter 1

*A journey of a thousand miles must begin with a
single step.*

—Chinese proverb

Unlike most first-time visitors entering the world headquarters of Biolathe, Inc., Dr. Samuel Fisher didn't pause at the moist cloying air that moved across the building's threshold like breath. If anything, his pace increased; he threw his shoulders forward and his stalker-clad feet rushed as if to prevent a fall, sinking into the plush rose ruglings with each step. Unlike the sunlit diamond and gold, seemingly mandatory in corporate buildings, this lobby throbbed pink and organic. The entire building was alive. De-

spite the omnipresence of biotechnology, walking inside it rather than sitting on it still made most hesitate.

Not Fisher – he was in the middle of five major projects. He didn't believe his life would be as transformed by the upcoming presentation as the Biolathe agent had hinted. He charged ahead, glancing about the nearly empty lobby for signs to guide him. What was this? He'd been here six seconds already! There was never enough time to waste any of it. He decided there was one thing he would hesitate over in the future: being talked into a physical meeting.

In the middle of the cavernous chamber Fisher stopped abruptly, brought up short by a bipedal mobile with wrinkled gray skin attached to the wall by a pulsing umbilical. Fisher said, "Excuse me."

"No excuses needed, Dr. Fisher." The biped had no openings, no visible external sensory or-

gans, and nothing at all resembling a head. Raw biomass, quickly shaped, without even a mouth. The words emanated from the ceiling, its surface a taut drum able to focus sound anywhere. The entire building was alive. “I am a mobile of our brain, here to escort you to your meeting.”

“Fine. Lead on.”

The mobile moved toward the rear of the lobby toward a tunnel, reversing its motion without turning around. No one-way joints, Fisher noticed, a more versatile design than most. The umbilical showed no slack, but grew or tightened as the distance to the malleable wall varied.

Fisher followed, buoyed up and forward by the plum-colored ruglings underfoot in the same direction as his steps. More good design in the carpeting, he noted. A lot of rugling lines didn't do anything but let themselves get walked on.

“Coffee?” asked the beamed voice.

“Please.”

Without breaking stride, the mobile pushed an arm back out of the formless trunk. The end of the appendage coalesced into a round shape that darkened, grew shimmery hard, then rolled down into a groove that formed before it.

Fisher caught the bulb and lifted it to his lips as they walked. The bulb opened into a bony, ceramic cup. He drank, grimacing, as they entered a circular hallway. *Instant.* Ah, well, not great but his usual. He efficiently drained the bulb.

“In here, please.” The mobile gestured with the coffee-delivering appendage, which then receded and melted back into its body.

Fisher stepped past the mobile into a circular room lit with blue-green tinged bioluminescence that made him feel as if he were underwater. A ring of five chairbeasts surrounded a picture tank squatting at the room’s focus. People sat in the chairbeasts, two women and two men.

One of the women rose as he approached the

vacant chairbeast. She was as tall as Fisher, just shy of two meters, and her white uniform showed no creases from sitting, although the crisp material appeared to be neither high-tech like his own duradenim nor alive like Rhynoskin. Her short blonde hair was similarly crisp, as perfect as a helmet. She offered a long-boned hand to shake.

“Captain Lena Fang, corporate fleet,” she said, words clipped, gripping firmly with rough fingers. Her almond-shaped eyes bore steadily ahead.

“Fisher,” he replied, his eyes sliding past her gaze onto her thin, fluted lips, which reminded him of a recurve bow. A vivid image sprang into his mind: barbed orders flying from her mouth like arrows. He wondered if her striking appearance resulted from bodmods, or, as suggested by her name, the unusual ethnic mixing that often occurred on colony worlds. The cause didn’t

much matter; she was striking. “Sam Fisher.”

“Fisher. Right. This is Henderson, biosystems,” she said, nodding toward a bulky, classically handsome man with a big cleft chin who gripped the lapels of his stylish green-scale coat, “Devereaux, physical sciences,” a brown woman with curves, dreads, and fleshy lips who sat as serenely as Buddha, “and Stearn, our Jack of All Trades,” a purple-colored man with a faddish wasp waist who flapped his ear wings at hearing his name. “My crew. But we still need an exobiology specialist with your track record for creative thought.”

“Is that what this is about, Biolathe?” Fisher said, letting irritation seep into his voice. “I told you I have a long-term contract with Whimsey. Why didn’t you tell me you wanted someone to go out-system?”

The voice of the Biolathe brain came warm and resonant from the ceiling, focused on Fisher.

“We didn’t want to bias you against our venture. We believe you’ll be interested. Please, if you would, be seated for our presentation.”

In his century of life, Fisher had been outside the solar system on three expeditions. Relativity made it a total of seventy years of Earth time lost in the process. He’d danced with star wisps while the radiation of Sirius B tanned his face, floated in the powerful tug of more than one gas giant chasing balloonoids, and swum with the stellated molluskites of Apollonia. After those wonders, nothing he could think of would be enticing enough to make him endure the culture shocks of returning to the rapidly changing Earth. Biolathe had to anticipate his hesitation. Corporate brains were smart, and this one had certainly done its research before contacting him. The proposal had to be good.

“Okay.” The vacant chairbeast scuttled into optimal position as he sat. The superlative

biotech in the rest of the building suggested that he guard himself against getting too comfortable in the chairbeast. It usually took a chairbeast a few days to grow into an owner's shape and preferences for temperature and vibration, but Fisher didn't want to risk even a fraction of that level of relaxation. He held himself upright on the beast and intended to bolt the moment he could dismiss Biolathe's pitch.

The bioluminescence faded. Twin glows kindled within the picture tank: a ruddy, distended blob floated in space feeding a brighter swirling disk of plasma that brightened to a burning pinprick of hell at its core. The blob was stretched out toward the disk into a teardrop, and the tip of that teardrop was pulled like taffy around the differentially spinning whirlpool of fire. Fisher realize he was looking at a binary star system locked in a gravitational dance. The larger but fainter blob was the secondary star, a relatively

normal star like the sun despite the way its dance partner had twisted it. That pinprick, that was the deceptively diminutive primary star – a white dwarf the size of Earth and the mass of the sun, formed of condensed degenerate matter. This had to be a late stage in the pair's evolution, the primary having already shucked the husk of its outer envelope, no longer burning hydrogen and essentially dead as stars go.

Not exactly dead, Fisher surmised. More undead than dead. It burned on still as it stole fuel from its younger, bloated mate. He imagined a starving space vampire at the center of that swirling disk, sucking down a giant teardrop of blood that was the universe itself gashed open.

“The classic dwarf nova system, SS Cygni,” announced the brain as the stars orbited in the tank.

Fisher wiggled on his chairbeast, refusing to lean back into the creature despite the minor

aches in a back he was always too busy to get redesigned. The physical irritation faded with stone-still incredulity as his encyclopedic database inserted the basic characteristics of SS Cygni into his awareness. The distance couldn't be correct. "Two hundred and forty-five light years? You're joking!"

"We don't joke," reassured the voice in a flat tone that was not at all reassuring. "Please allow us to continue. The data you are watching came from a *Prospector*-class deep space probe launched in the late twenty-first century. We acquired proprietary rights from a subsidiary who realized our likely interest. Instrumentation on the tiny probe was primitive, but proximity more than compensates."

Fisher did the math. The fastest human-supporting ships would only take months of on-board time to reach SS Cygni, but the special relativity that made such a trip possible also

cursed it. Five hundred years would pass on Earth. There was no way around it. Two hundred forty-five years times two for a round trip time estimate, and the fact that the probe had been launched five hundred years ago drove home those laws of physics. Would a corporation really make a five-hundred-year investment? Who would go on such a trip?

Many people, he realized, but certainly not him. It would be like suiciding to gamble on an afterlife. A one-way trip into an unknown future with no guarantees about anything. People might not even exist when they returned, or at least not in a form he would recognize.

“Magnifying,” announced the brain. The image in the tank ballooned, centered just off the hot spot where the secondary star’s accretion stream splashed into the disk. Accretion disk, his database labeled it, the way station for gas sucked off the secondary before it shed enough

angular momentum to reach the blazing dwarf. Spiral waves of fire churned across the surface of the flared disk, and magnetic instabilities erupted like planet-sized sunspots as they came into focus on the whirlpool of plasma.

Something moved there that was not plasma.

Fisher leaned toward the tank.

The image grew larger. A serpentine form, a sharp dark green against the blaze, rolled in a spiral along the edge of one of the magnetic eruptions, lazily twisting under great arcs of violet lightning. Then it *turned* in a manner that suggested intention. It was *alive*.

Fisher dug into his breast pocket absent-mindedly, his unwavering gaze fixed on this amazing thing, and pulled out an ampoule of Forget-Me-Not. He popped the top and snorted the pink powder. He would chemically etch every detail into his mind.

“We are calling it a star dragon.”

Of course they were. The dragon continued to spiral up the flux tube, moving in what appeared slow motion. The resolution showed little more than form and color (and surely pseudo-color to cover an extended spectrum at that). There was no real texture or sharp features. It appeared as if one end might be akin to a head, but no sensory apparatus were visible. The slow motion ... “What’s the scale?”

“A little more than a kilometer from end to end,” a coarse, sultry female voice answered. Devereaux he presumed, but Fisher didn’t spare a glance to confirm.

The brain said, “We believe it is deriving its energy from magnetically confined fusion rather than simply being a photovore. A biological fusion reactor, with a biosystem capable of exploiting it, could provide the means for engineering on a stellar scale. Securing this technology is worth a modest long-term investment.”

Fisher caressed the twisting dragon with his gaze. It was a thing that had no right to exist, an impossibility floating there before him. “It’s magnificent.”

“It would be the ultimate trophy,” came Fang’s voice, an icy dagger slicing through the firelight.

Fisher did break his gaze now and regarded the captain. She looked exactly as before, from the shiny helmet of her hair to the pursed bow-lips, but the intensity with which she watched the dragon startled Fisher. He was always surprised when he came across passion matching his own. These thoughts all in a heartbeat, then he was staring at the tank again.

“How much data do you have?” Fisher asked.

Devereaux answered, “On the binary, pretty near everything. On the dragon, just this video of four and a half minutes, from the near-infrared to soft X-rays, at very low spectral resolution. Those old probes weren’t very capable.”

Capable enough to discover such a marvel. In the tank, lightning arcs surrounding the dragon like a nimbus flashed, and the creature rolled into a vortex of turbulence, vanishing into the disk's photosphere. No trace in the frothing plasma of the lake of fire marked its passage.

"Play it again," Fisher said, welcoming the old hunger rising within him, unable to resist its siren's call. The Forget-Me-Not would kick in soon, but he wanted the dragon *now*.

Responding to his request, the image within the tank shimmered and looped back.

The brain said, "We are sending a ship to SS Cygni, newly christened the *Karamojo* and specially equipped for this extreme environment, under Captain Fang's command. Our forecasts suggest the presence of someone with your background would increase the chances for success for the mission: study the dragon, learn its biotechnology, and if possible, return with a

specimen.”

In his gut, Fisher wanted to go, *needed* to go. But everything had happened so fast. There was much to consider. This was a thing that just a few minutes ago seemed impossible. “I assume you have a detailed offer prepared.”

“Of course. We will squirt it to you, along with a timed data worm to protect our proprietary information. You have a week to respond. On a negative response, all information on the dragon will be erased. Do you accept these terms?”

Erase his dragon? The worm would nest in his biochip along with the proposal and would affect his memory of this meeting – even with the Forget-Me-Not – using the same circuits and glands that the chip used to insert data. Such a data worm constituted standard operating procedure, but sweat broke on his brow. After all of his studies of alien parasites, he didn’t like the notion of a foreign agent in his brain adjust-

ing his memories, despite their excellent safety record. But what choice did he have? He had to learn more. “I agree to the terms.”

“If you accept our proposal, the voyage will require about three years of your subjective time. Assuming no catastrophes or other changes that might derail human civilization too extensively in the next half millennium, you will be quite wealthy when you return to – and we anticipate playing a significant role in this – Earth’s glorious future.”

Fisher ignored the corporate hyperbole. The dragon mesmerized him. *Tell me your secrets*, Fisher thought. *How can you be?*

He was going to go. He knew it. He could do it. His primary thread of research concerned Cetan mollusk shell structures and was not exactly hot stuff. The previous interstellar trips had made him accustomed to an unsettled social life without long-term permanence, losing track

of more family and friends each time. Nothing held him here. He was going to meet this creature on its home turf and look it in the eye, and then return to a new world. Maybe it would even be a glorious world. His stale tired universe shattered further with each passing second, and this magnificent dragon building a new celestial edifice from its shards. Gods, a real *dragon* . . .

Someone blocked his view. The captain, Fang.

Irritated, Fisher looked up at her, but said nothing in the face of her imposing glare.

After a moment of silence, Fang said, “Bio-lathe may think you’re up to snuff, Dr. Fisher, but I like to take the measure of a man before welcoming him on board and trusting him on my ship.”

“Call me Sam,” Fisher replied, suddenly realizing he found her more than a little attractive. That was good. Not necessary, but good. “I can do anything I have to,” Fisher replied.

“Anything, hmm?” A tiny smile lifted one corner of Fang’s mouth. “But can you box?”