

Discovering the Rift

“Admiral!” A smartly dressed lieutenant saluted, “A. . .” Uncertainty eclipsed his spit-and-polish, “Well sir, someone calling himself a ‘messenger’ has arrived.”

Admiral Jennings looked up contemplatively. His eyes narrowed on the anxious lieutenant. “His credentials?” The lieutenant nodded to the desk, where the forms instantly appeared within the display surface. The Admiral barely glanced at them, “Is that all?”

“No sir.” The lieutenant surreptitiously wiped a hand against his pant leg but maintained his poise, “He also brought this.” Finally, something real rose to sit on the surface of the desk: a small blue and red seal that should have carried no significance at all. The Admiral picked it up carefully. “Of course. See that he is let in.”

The lieutenant visibly started, but the Admiral said nothing more. Finally, the lieutenant faded out of existence. The Admiral found himself wondering about the reality outside his office. Perhaps even the young lieutenant hadn’t been real. Certainly a projection could be faked. Had he even once met the lieutenant? He searched his memory fruitlessly. How long had it been since the Admiral had seen someone real other than his family? The world must be very different than it looked from his office. Every indication that had reached him in this safe nest was that the tiny red and blue seal should not be there.

As if held in stasis, silence filled the office for a long moment before footsteps could be heard outside the door. The Admiral remained seated and raised his eyebrows slightly in anticipation. The door slid open and a nicely dressed courier stood on the threshold. Already acquainted with other recipients’ discomfort at his company, the courier waited patiently. The Admiral nodded imperiously.

“Thank you, sir. I realize that this is unusual,” the courier stepped into the room and allowed the door to close behind him. The Admiral’s nostrils flared briefly.

“I’ve seen your credentials,” the Admiral gestured to the virtual forms on his desk as well as the small seal that had preceded the messenger.

“Yes sir. You realize this is of the utmost security?”

The Admiral nodded. His desk slid down into the floor so he could get up. The floor rolled over its top without disturbing the seal. He and his guest stood only three feet apart without the secure desk between them. “I suppose we need to find somewhere to talk.”

“Yes sir.”

“I find it hard to believe that these precautions are necessary.”

“They are, sir.” The courier stared around the office with a doleful expression, “I assure you they are.”

“I was led to believe that the only possible reason for someone to use this seal and send a physical messenger,” he made it sound as if the courier were a pack mule, “was virtually the end of the universe.”

The man said nothing aloud.

The Admiral’s expression hardened and drooped at the same time. His eyes saw conflicts centuries old. He had lived a long time, and had grown to like the state of the galaxy as it was: civilized, peaceful, and dull. He shook his head slowly, “Do you even know what you’re saying son?”

“Can you turn that thing off, sir? Before you say anything you’ll regret.” The young courier gestured to the nearly camouflaged silver sphere. The Admiral followed his gesture and blinked in surprise. He had forgotten that the sphere even existed. It was his shadow—his hourly companion. Even his wedding night had been duly witnessed. It was narrowing in for a historic close-up of the Admirals harrowed expression when the recording abruptly ended. It was one of only three times that the Admiral ever stopped the recording.

Sometimes, the most historic moments are the ones that never get recorded.

2 weeks later-

Arrangements had already been made for Jennings’ trip and he followed them blindly, heading outward from the core of human space.

All those present felt the stifling solemnity in the large conference room. As more people entered the room expanded and the seating formed into a circular stadium. It took a span of only ten minutes for the room to fill, although many of the participants had traveled light years to be present. There was no breath of conversation in the large crowd as they waited to hear from the Temporal Center’s specialist. Emblems, signets, and Ad-apts littered the garments of the crowd. These leaders and executives had no firm picture of why they had been called, but as each person entered they paused to survey the crowd and became even more subdued. Surely only the most serious of catastrophes could precipitate such a meeting.

Colleagues nodded to one another. A few even made the attempt at a handshake, as if to recognize the anachronistic aspect of the meeting. It was an indication of the importance of this news that security had been tightened to the level where dermal scans were necessary. Silver spheres, prerequisites for personalities whose lives should be documented for posterity, had even been excluded. Those present felt naked and crowded.

Jennings remained standing in the back of the room, grimly removed from the proceedings. The presentation began on time. It was efficient but outdated. Few visuals were used in case they could be detected at a distance. There were no 3-D representations, rotating displays, or probability tables. There was no need, since the scientist's message was perfectly clear. A Seismic Temporal Center detected a growing breach on the edge of human space. This breach was unique in a number of factors. People began to shift in their seats, even as the seats tried to responsively adjust to them. An air of fear tinged the crowd.

The presentation ended quietly. The room was silent, waiting for a prompt, until someone voiced the thought everyone shared. "It is not possible for a weakness in time to be used to wipe out an entire species!"

The crowded feeling exacerbated the tension in the room. The lone presenter in the center of the room examined the effect. He watched Admiral Jennings slip out of the room while the volume of the crowd grew deep and buzzing. Emotions bled from person to person. He maintained his calm since emotions weren't a part of his nature anymore. Although Bard was a scientist, he had only recently joined their ranks, and hadn't been fully initiated yet. He had been selected to present because he understood their fears, even if he couldn't share them.

Bard eyed the crowd, "Nothing is impossible; it is simply highly improbable."

"The Ants will reach the rift first and eliminate us?" another voice demanded, "Were there no contingency plans for this then?"

"You can't change the past. You just can't. It won't make a difference," the first voice insisted childishly.

The scientist wondered why they were looking for someone to blame, but the natural responses to bad news never really varied. It was unlikely that this meeting would produce any useful analysis but if events did not improve it would be important that the people present were aware of the situation.

Bard responded patiently to the questions put to him. "Odds stated that the probability of an anomaly developing, developing in a short amount of time, being in contested space where our enemies were closer, leading to a temporal weakness in time where time could actually be changed, and our finding about it first were infinitesimally low. The odds were with us."

"Not a thing to really bet on," the prime minister of Eliphis noted. His tone was calm. His quadrant was located in the interior of controlled space, so his paranoia factor was proportionately small. The scientist read several more faces, and paid special note to the Frontier General. Her post was at the edge of space. She would be what was archaically called a 'woman of action.' Predictably, she was frowning in concentration. The scientist passed the time the organics needed to process by running predictive scenarios. He correctly deduced that F.G.

would speak but he hadn't foreseen that the silver haired woman would stand, orator style, to make her pronouncement.

"I know all of you feel our peril as surely as I do," her blue eyes told the crowd that they certainly should, "so I will make my comments brief. Should we fail to block the Ants, I feel certain that no matter what changes they are able to wreak, our ancestors will recover. More than likely by the time the changes ebb out they will not even reach us. Time is self-correcting, and our race has always thrived on any challenge." She held up splay-fingered hand for emphasis, each digit reminding everyone present of man's individuality and specialized traits for adaptation. Each finger represented a facet of the human realm. A few hands jerked in response, but fewer than she would have liked.

The conference broke down into smaller groups, and clumps of people encircled the Frontier General and the scientist. Their questions were specific, as each quadrant leader wondered how events would impact them and their people. Bit players maneuvered for a role in the big production. Eventually the Frontier General excused herself, and headed for the scientist, "May I speak with you in private?"

"That went well," Bard observed quietly, as he joined F.G. on her swift travel down the hall.

She eyes him, "No need for irony."

"No irony."

"Did you hear that we're being..." she sought vainly for a word while she maintained her swift pace.

"Protested?"

"Protested." She spat the word out angrily, "So you've heard about the Ones Who Wait. What information do you have on how they learned about this meeting?" Her words were a challenge.

His expression remained implacable but a tiny trace of something slid along his familiar features. Her steps slowed for an instant when she saw it, but momentum carried her to the door they sought. He distracted her by answering her question, "They're too interwoven into space travel not to know, even if they weren't mostly a collection of level 8 and above psi's. They're being discreet. We're almost lucky that their religion *has* made them so fanatical. They haven't made the rest of the population aware."

"We arranged the transportation on my own military shuttles. Are you suggesting that this religion reaches the higher echelon of the Psi Corps?" She asked him harshly.

"I'm suggesting that they share the same beliefs. But those beliefs have always kept them loyal."

He felt nothing, but registered a dozen thoughts at once. She was very angry. She was dismissive. He put a hand out to her, "They feel this moment is important. You can't disagree with that. Whether or not this is the moment all their precogs and clairvoyants have been prophesying isn't really the issue. Couldn't we at least-?" she turned away from him and motioned the door open. His plea went unanswered.

They entered a chamber and saw that all but two seats were already filled.

The people present for this meeting displayed few medals and emblems. Each of the seat backs was fully upright, indicating that their postures must be demanding such a rigid response from the chairs. Since the Frontier General knew from experience that face-to-face meetings had their usefulness, they had met often enough to already feel comfortable in each other's company.

This small group of twenty people made up a core network. F.G. paused to greet all of them by name. There were only two newcomers to the group. One, a brown-haired youth named Riordan, had begun to prove himself innovative and had been invited to join them. The other, much older visitor was a familiar face. Admiral Jennings had not been seen at this table for almost a hundred years. He looked good for his age since the flesh was slow to change over time, but there was a pall that hung over him as if time were holding some part of him in the past. She smiled mechanically with recognition, and then moved on.

"Has a consensus been reached?" She didn't pretend that they had waited for her before making a decision. She headed the group but did not control it. If they had reached an agreement, then it would be a good one.

Riordan spoke for the group. Although new, he had the authority of familiarity. "The defensive station around the anomaly is only half completed. We had hoped to have the facility completed before there was a hint of danger. As it is," he paused for breath, not to prevent giving the bad news, "it is likely that the Anatolians will be able to defeat the station and reach the gate."

The General nodded, "What are the chances that they don't know about the anomaly, and are only contesting the station?"

A few heads around the table nodded cautiously. They didn't want to overreact and create more problems than existed. Inter-spatial politics were tricky. Humans were not renowned for their abilities.

The brown-haired youth had not learned to hide his doubt, "It's just as likely they want us to under-react. Just in my own experience at the border I've recently noticed more activity."

No one argued. First-hand experience meant a lot. Within the human confines events were perfected and predicted to the movement of each photon. The border was wild country that only the hardiest individuals dared.

The General let her final card fall to the table. This group was the only one in human space that could handle it. "A contingency plan *was* created for this emergency, but it is less than ideal."

Once more the scientist stated his facts and figures. No defensive ship could reach the anomaly before the Anatolians. The anomaly would be open within weeks, and the Anatolians could defeat the station's defenses and pass in even if they sent only a standard Anatolian cruiser.

In conclusion the Frontier General added, "The anomaly covers a stretch of maybe twenty years weakness on Earth. We can't stop them from reaching the station. We have to stop them from reaching the weakness. The contingency plan, then, calls for sending a cork through the anomaly."

For his display Bard borrowed the shiny blue sash of a territory governor and an electron needle. Reminiscent of old beauty pageant sashes, the loop of fabric had almost no stretch and was densely woven. "The anomaly," he ripped a hole in the sash, "makes a hole in time that leads to another period of time." He held the sash by the top, so that the hole fell against the inside of the opposing piece of blue fabric. "The two times never really mix, they just connect enough that you can reach the other period."

He then held up the needle. He grabbed a loose thread from the edge of the hole and threaded it. Next he pierced the back piece of fabric and used the thread to pull the two pieces together. "Anything passing through the anomaly from this time, like the thread belongs in this part of the fabric, can temporarily hold the two times together, at the instant he or she is existing. It is a time that moves with the person, and no one else can enter that time unless they enter at exactly the same moment. The anomaly is effectively closed for that period because ten minutes for that person is ten minutes in both worlds." The scientist smiled in recognition of the desires of human nature, "You can't be any younger or older than you would have been if you had stayed in this time all along, because you can't really leave it. Nature is very detail oriented.

He paused for them to appreciate his insight, but they were more interested in his words. Riordon smiled with anticipation, "So we could send someone to plug the hole until we our ships arrive."

"Almost." He continued as if he hadn't paused. "Unlike the sash, time and space have definite shape. They push back out." The scientist rearranged the sash on the table so that it made a circle, and the thread pulled back out. "There's no way for us to deduce how long a person will stay in the other period of time.

"Our real problem is that the hole is over a weakness in the fabric," he ran his needle through the soft fabric until it shredded rattily. He sewed the front piece to the back piece again, but this time when he pulled the fabric back into a circle, the stitch ripped through the cloth.

"Of course, it is very simple. If I had a loom I could explain it better. It's more a change in the pattern, since you don't get permanent holes in the fabric of reality. Time is self-healing.

Once again Riordan irritatingly re-phrased the scientists words, "So we'll send someone we trust through, and buy ourselves some time."

"The station is unmanned while it's being constructed." The Frontier General didn't need to explain further. Materials could travel faster and more cheaply than humans, and unmanned stations were less likely to be contested. Besides, people who dealt well with being in constant danger were few and far between.

She stared around the table, "We have already sent a message to a student who monitors the border stations, and are optimistic that he can reach the anomaly in time. But he is Eletheman. We are exploring other options in the meantime."

Everyone else stood, recognizing that the meeting was over. They received specific instructions, and agreed to proceed as planned. Before they left every man and woman gave the Frontier General a splay fingered pat on the back. Riordon's chair gently held him in place, and his eyes met the General's.

The room became silent and empty. Admiral Jennings had not moved during the entire lecture. He sat heavily in his chair. Riordon glanced questioningly at him, but the Frontier General frowned slightly at him letting him know that the older man was not to be questioned. He did not understand why she had indicated to him that he should stay. "Is there anything that I can do to help?"

"We have one more concern." The Frontier General shrunk the table so that his seat moved next to hers. The other chairs melted back into flat panels on the floor. Her fingers fiddled with the silky sash on the tabletop. "It's bad enough that anomalies exist. It now seems the Ants may have learned how to guide anomalies. Didn't you wonder how such an unlikely anomaly could arise? And how the Ants got word of it when we were so careful? It might be that they weren't lucky that it happened, but unlucky that it needed to be connected there in order to reach a weakness on earth. This may even be the reason that they've been contesting that stretch of space for so long. It is impossible to say when they might have set creation underway. We might have surprised them at how fast our holdings have expanded."

Riordon realized what she was saying, "You think they could do this again?"

"We need to find that out."

He swallowed his next impetuous phrase. Finally, "Sir, I'll do whatever needs to be done."

She nodded without surprise. "Go with Bard. He'll fill you in."

The two men left, and finally only the Frontier General and the Admiral were left.

The Admiral's large frame shifted with life, giving a sense of latent power. His bushy eyebrows rose as his eyes met the Frontier General's. The two of them had not seen each other in a long

time. His lips parted, air squeezing out between clenched teeth. Finally he spoke. “Well, this sucks.”

This short story accompanies the full-length sci-fi novel **Fractured Horizon**, by H.E. Roulo.

For more extras, go to www.fracturedhorizonnovel.com