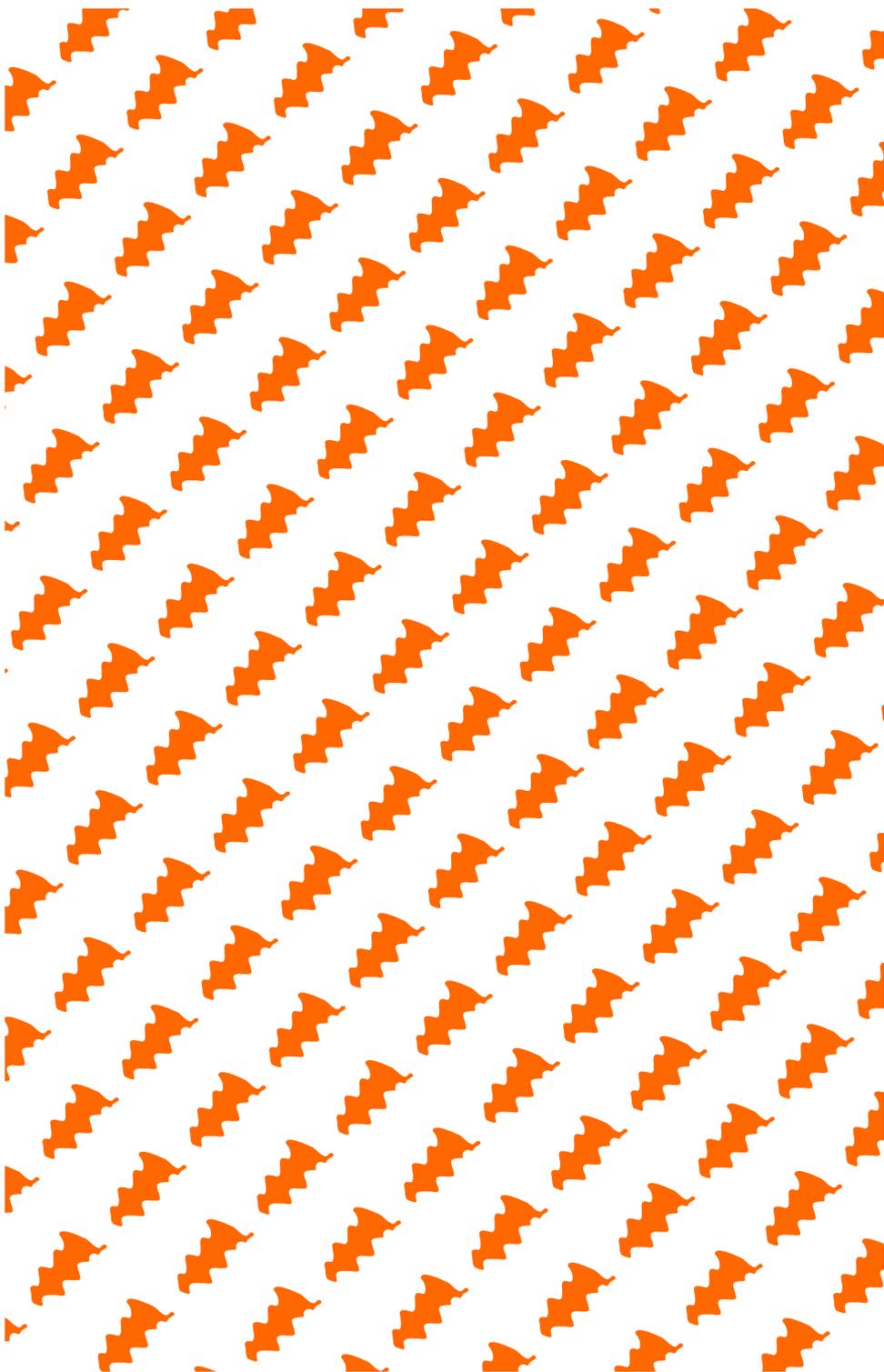


TALES FROM **POL**SIX THE
SYSTEM

OCT MELTDOWN



R.C. NECHAMKIN



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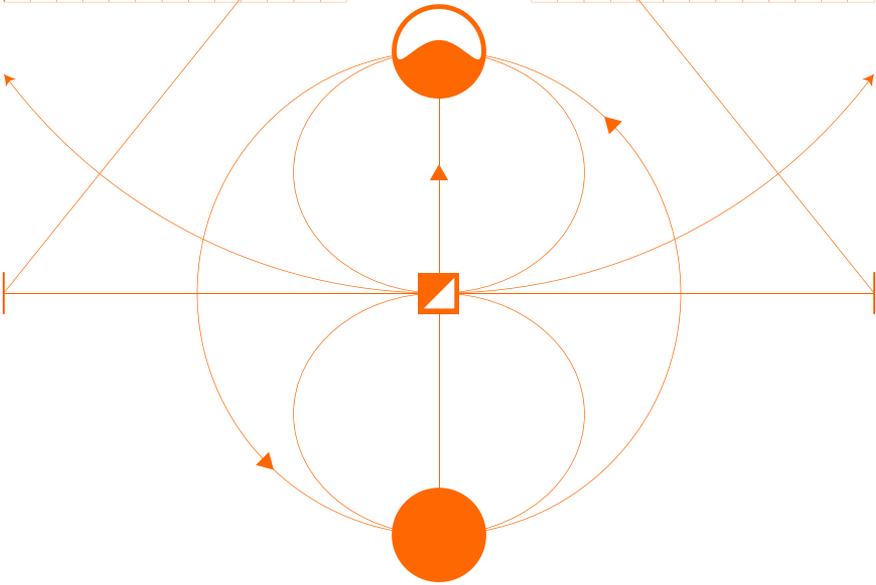
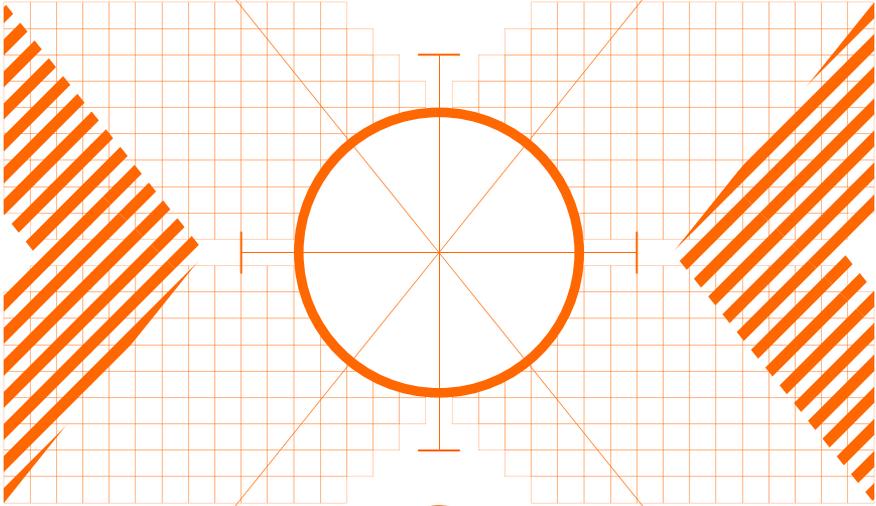
This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, business, events and incidents are the products of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

For the reader.

To those reading this tale, thank you for joining from the
beginning.



THE
POLSIX
SYSTEM



Brother Ark



Minerva (Sun)



Juno (Capital)



Oil Cosmotransport (OCT)



Sister Ark



Juventas (Oil Planet)

OCT MELTDOWN

After regaining consciousness, Fitz Warren immediately knew two things. The first was that somehow, an object crashed through the hull of their rocketing Oil Cosmotransport. Fitz gathered this based on his faint memory of the violent crash and coinciding power outage. The second was that his right leg was broken which only occurred to Fitz when he looked down and saw the open fracture. His broken tibia stuck out of his shin.

Fitz screamed into the dark crew members quarters. In the event of complete power outages, he remembered, the Cosmotransport draws enough oil from the onboard shipment to provide power for life support and other bare minimum essentials including a dim overhead light for each room. After more frantic screams, Fitz tried to recollect the events leading to the crash including who else was with him in the quarters.

“Will you quit yer yellin’?” a gravelly voice echoed back, “I’m almost there. Just shut up for a little bit until then, yeah?”

Fitz laid still and quiet. Since the darkness interrupted his field of vision, he could only listen closely to the distant approaching footsteps. As they drew closer, Fitz thought he heard faint cries in the further distance.

“Ah, hell, Brainiac, you look like shit,” the gravelly voice said upon reaching Fitz. “We gotta get you some medical attention.”

“Edwards?” Fitz couldn’t believe Lucas Edwards of all people was coming to his rescue. He figured Edwards hated him for many reasons, not the least of which included Edwards’ constant berating of Fitz over his political beliefs.

“Damn straight. Now I get to rescue you, and say I told you so since we’ve clearly been attacked by those damned Brother Ark terrorists,” Edwards smug words oozed from his mouth. All while staring at Fitz’s bone, Edwards tore off his shirt’s long sleeve and pulled out a flask from his cargo pants pocket. He set the items down and started looking all around the dark room.

“I doubt it, Edwards. It was probably just an asteroid or something,” Fitz mumbled.

Did the citizens of the seceded Brother Ark actually attack us? There’s no way to know that yet. Fitz’s mind spun. But what if? Were they after the oil?

“Well, we got a classic ‘good news, bad news, good news’ thing here,” Edwards said, returning to the scene. “The good news is I found the crew quarter’s medkit. The bad news is some bored crew mates already got to the painkillers, amphetamines, anesthesia, morphine, and numbing gel.” Holding up his hands, Edwards presented a set of metal rods and gauze tape. “The other good news is that I almost know what I’m doing here.”

First, Edwards offered Fitz a drink from his flask before he took a drink himself. He wrapped his separated shirtsleeves around one of the metal rods and encouraged Fitz to bite down on it for the rest of the process. Then, Edwards poured the contents of the flask onto the open wound.

A constant muffled scream filled the crew members quarters as Edwards wrapped the other metal rods to Fitz’s broken leg using the gauze tape and eventually covering the entire wound, including the bone, with all the gauze he found. Fitz’s mind, no longer spinning from hypotheses, slipped away from consciousness before being jerked back into the present.

“No way, Sleepyhead,” Edwards said as he shook Fitz by his

shoulders. “You ain’t passing out on me. I’m real sure you got a concussion.” Edwards pulled Fitz up from the ground and positioned himself to support Fitz as they started walking towards the door. “Besides,” he continues, “I only did a halfway decent job here. We oughta get to the medical facility still, and I ain’t lookin’ to carry you that whole way.”

Due to their notably massive size, standard OCTs — or Oil Cosmotransports — are the only extraorbital ships besides the Sibling Arks that never land on any surface. Amongst the billions of gallons of oil transported from one planet to the other, each is required to have amenities for the crew members during the several years-long journey including a kitchen, crew quarters, recreational rooms, and of course, a medical facility. Fortunately for Fitz and Edwards, the medical facility on any given OCT is always down the hall from the crew quarters, just beyond the rec room.

As the two crew members hobbled together toward the hallway, they heard a dastardly wailing. Whether it came from an injured crew member or something else entirely, it sent chills down Fitz’ back all the same. His heart rate felt like it doubled, and he stopped dead in his tracks. Edwards started dragging him as he pressed on.

“C’mon, Peg Leg, we gotta move,” Edwards grunted. “Don’t let them Brother Ark battle cries scare ya.”

“Y-you’ve heard that noise before?” Fitz whimpered. “I studied Brother Arkian culture throughout their history. Never heard of anything like that.”

“I know you have, nerd, but *I’m* familiar with that kind of tactic. They’re just tryna intimidate ya. I don’t need a fancy degree to know that. Don’t worry though,” Edwards, still dragging Fitz, nods to his holstered handgun, “I’m packing heat just for this type of situation.”

Fitz and Edwards, hobbling together again, made their way down the hallway to the medical facility while Edwards speculated all the different reasons the citizens of the Brother Ark would attack an OCT, his favorite being petty terrorism.

Eventually, they inched past the recreation room when they heard a faint whisper.

“It’s coming back.”

The two men turned toward the rec room doorway. The metallic door creaked open, and beyond the frame loomed complete darkness. Fitz’s heart pounded in his chest even worse than his brain pounded in his head when suddenly, reaching from the darkness, a bloodied hand slammed into the ground in front of them. The hallway echoed with Fitz’s yelps as a second, accompanying bloodied hand slammed into the ground and started dragging the owner of the hands forward.

“It’s coming back. Run,” the whisper drew closer. A fellow crew member, Rodney Parlor, slowly emerged on the ground into the light—bruised and bloodied.

“Holy Hell, it’s Parlor,” Edwards gasped. He steadied Fitz with one hand and reached for his crawling companion with the other. “Parlor, what happe-”

Edwards stopped when he pulled Parlor fully into the light to see his bottom half wasn’t hidden by the darkness; it was missing entirely. The bleeding top half of Rodney Parlor laid illuminated in the hallway which caused Fitz to faint.

A moment later, Edwards shook Fitz back to reality.

“G’morning, Concussion,” Edwards greeted him as he awoke next to Parlor’s remains. “So Parlor here didn’t last much longer after you passed out. Crazy he survived as long as he did. I didn’t get much out of him besides some creature attacked him and a few others in the rec room.”

Fitz sat up in a daze. He tried to make sense of what was happening. Parlor and some other crew mates were attacked by a creature after something crashed through the hull? Is that how the creature got on board? Why did I ever sign up for this oil delivery?

“No words, huh?” Edwards continued, standing over Fitz. “Yeah, no, shit’s pretty fucked. Don’t know how, but the Brother Ark sent this creature here. They must really want our oil. Anyways, we gotta move. The med facility is right here, so let’s hold up there until we come up with a plan.”

Edwards held his hand out to Fitz to lift him up. Fitz gloomed at Parlor. He had known him for seven year, met way back when the OCT first departed. He took a deep breath and accepted Edwards’ help,

and the two paced down the hallway where they discovered the medical facility door was locked.

“Hello? Helena? Is that you?” A muffled call came through the locked door.

“That sounds like the boss,” Fitz murmurs.

“Captain?” Edwards calls back. “It’s Lucas Edwards and Fitz Warren, sir. From Delta Crew.”

“And the creature’s not with you?”

Fitz looked up at Edwards in time to see him roll his eyes at The Captain's question.

“No, sir,” Edwards replied with decorum, “the creature is nowhere in sight, Captain.”

The scraping of furniture against tiled floor screeched loudly from inside the medical facility. After several screeches, a metallic tumbling followed, accompanied by the clicks of the inner workings of the med facility door. And eventually, the door opened.

An arm decorated in a navy coat and a white cuff-linked sleeve reached through a small crack in the doorway, and yanked the two men inside.

The medical facility was illuminated by multiple dim red lights making it difficult for Fitz to determine the color of the puddles on the ground. The Captain stood in the previously otherwise vacant room with a cowardly look on his face while he fidgeted with his standard-issue rifle. Fitz waited for somebody to say something, but nobody did. Instead Edwards dropped him off on a nearby examination table and then took inventory of the contents in the medical facility.

The Captain stared at Edwards as he ransacked the cabinets of any medical supplies. Eventually Edwards discovered the medicine cabinet. He rattled through the cabinet, picking up two bottles at a time, one in each hand. He gave a quick glance to about a dozen bottles of pills, throwing each behind him with a dissatisfied grunt, until eventually he found whatever pills he hoped to find. Then he ransacked a few more cabinets until he saw an ultra-collapsible wheelchair.

“So!” Edwards drew the attention of the two gentlemen awkwardly waiting in the room. “Here’s what I’m feelin’ – and feel free to chime in at any time, Captain – but I’m thinkin’ we gotta kill this

Brother Ark critter, and restore the power, yeah?”

He smirked while handing Fitz the bottle he kept, and he popped open the wheelchair in a single motion. Edwards looked at The Captain for affirmation or maybe guidance. Fitz glared at the vacant wheelchair. This was all too much.

When Fitz Warren signed up for the crew, he agreed to maintain the OCT during its twelve-year delivery through space. Hoping to receive enough financial compensation to continue his academic and activism careers, Fitz only feared boredom along the way as the other cost. He never expected an OCT could face such troubles especially since he still doubted the hostility of the citizens of the Brother Ark.

Determined to prove Edwards wrong about the creature’s origins, Fitz popped two of the pills (without reading the label) and jumped from the examination table to the wheelchair.

“Okay,” Fitz spoke with determination, “I’m in. Give me a gun. I can still shoot.”

Edwards smiled eagerly before unholstering his pistol and handing it to Fitz. He stepped out of the red lighting, towards the darkest corner of the medical facility, and reemerged with an emergency ax.

“Very well, Crew,” The Captain finally said, clearly performatively snapping into his captain role. “We must restore the power first as that would make tracking, containing, and killing the creature easy.”

Moments later, Edwards pushed Fitz’s wheelchair down the long, dark hallway with The Captain in the rear. Everyone strangled their weapons. Captain acted as the navigator to the power chamber while he guarded the backs of his surviving crew members. Fortunately they didn’t have a lot of horizontal ground to cover. The real issue came when they arrived at the antechamber to the vertical zero gravity shafts leading to the power chambers.

Since OCTs typically run for decades on end, energy conservation is employed in every given opportunity. A prime example of this includes the horizontal and vertical zero gravity shafts. Each of which is a long corridor through open space containing an airlocked shuttle to get from one end of the vast ship to the other. Not fighting the

inertia byproduct of artificial gravity kills two energy concerns in one design. Unfortunately when an OCT runs on emergency power, the airlocked shuttles shutdown, forcing travelers to wear antiquated space suits to traverse manually along the shafts.

Edwards distributed the space suits. The antechamber immediately filled with the buckling and clanking of the suit equipment. Fitz blankly stared at his space suit in his lap. While those mystery pills practically eliminated the pain in his leg, maneuvering through zero gravity was never his forte. Coordination in general was never his forte.

“Hurry it up, Hot Wheels,” Edwards snapped at Fitz, “Before the Brother Ark’s pet catches up.” His tone was as serious as ever.

Fitz inevitably struggled through putting the suit on over his open fracture and holstered his gifted gun in a spare pouch on the suit. Finally he gave his impatient partners a thumbs up. As The Captain reached for the first of the two levers that mechanically controlled the zero gravity shaft airlock doorways, a bone-chilling heavy-breathing echoed from the hallway.

The trio paused to look at each other. Terror struck their eyes as the breathing—no, panting—crescendoed. The Captain hesitated no longer and started to pull the heavy lever controlling the doorway. The door was at their waists when the panting arrived at the antechamber and revealed: the silhouette of a female crew member desperately trying to enter.

“Wait! Help me!” cried the crew member, but the Captain persisted in his pursuit in closing the gap. She started to crawl through the heavy metallic door inching towards the ground. “Don’t let it ge-”

A deep, harsh snarl roared over her remaining words as some unseen force yanks the crew member out of sight. The door slams shut.

“Helmets on, Crew,” Captain said immediately. “I’m ready to pull the airlock lever.”

“You son of a bitch!” Edwards barked. “Was that Helena?” He slammed his helmet into The Captain’s chest. “You owe us an explanation.”

The Captain looked past Edwards to see Fitz horrified in his wheelchair.

“No,” the Captain spoke sternly, looking into Edwards’ eyes. “I am your Captain. I don’t owe you anything. That creature would have gotten through that doorway had I stopped.” He raises his voice “We need to survive to get this shipment to its destination, and more importantly inform The Collective that Brother Ark has committed an act of terrorism.”

“We don’t know that!” Fitz interjected, surprising everyone even himself with his assertiveness.

Boom!

All tension ceased. The three looked at the closed door that produced the metallic crash.

Boom!

Fitz, Edwards, and The Captain raced to throw their helmets on as the assumed attempts to break through the door continued. The Captain pulled the lever proceeding the previous one and the door to the zero gravity lift crept open.

The sound of air rushed out quickly until there were no sounds or air in the antechamber. Inside his suit, Fitz grew uncomfortably conscious of the sound of his breathing. Starting to slowly eject from his wheelchair, he grabbed a nearby handrail to lift out of the chair and orient himself towards the now opening door.

Steadying himself with the handrail, Fitz reached down to collapse the wheelchair and clipped it to his suit when out of the corner of his eye, he noticed Edwards presenting something with one hand and pointing to his helmet with his other hand.

Fitz inspected the object in Edwards’ hand. It looked like a rice grain maybe. Shrugging, he looked up at Edwards to see him silently, dramatically mouthing something.

“Brain-Ee-Ack,” his mouth moved obnoxiously slow. “You. For-got. Your. Ray-Dee-Oh.” Edwards turned his head and pointed in his helmet to the rice grain placed in front of his ear.

Fitz cursed to himself and rolled his eyes. When they came back into focus he noticed the hallway door continued to take hits from whatever got Helena. Fitz frantically waved his arms and pointed to the door. The Captain and Edwards, still bickering about something, paused their inaudible conversation to assess Fitz’s silent screams.

They all watched as the hallway door convexed even further. Suddenly a strange curiosity washed over Fitz.

I wonder if the creature could survive in space or if the creature was only fighting through the door to die. I know some microscopic organisms famously survived in the vacuum of space, but most other creatures die within a few minutes. Maybe it's been genetically modified or-

Edwards, not much of a man of science himself, derailed Fitz's train of thought by throwing him into the zero gravity shaft where the Captain was already shutting the door to the antechamber.

When the door shut, darkness completely consumed the corridor. Fitz's anxious breaths flooded his helmet. It reminded him of Helena's panting. Struggling to find his equilibrium, he flailed his arms into the darkness, grasping for anything to find balance. Eventually he received help when Edwards and the Captain activated the sharp red lights on their helmets. Fitz grabbed the ladder on the wall and reached around for his own helmet light.

The three compactly floated in the zero gravity shaft, only illuminated by the conical red beams from their heads. Fitz looked up to see the ceiling right above them, closer than he realized. Rotating to adjust for his discomfort, he looked down the zero gravity shaft as down became up. As far as the red lights could beam, the corridor stretched. Endlessly and awesomely. Disorientation overcame Fitz. He grew dizzier and queasier. The red beams slowly faded to black when suddenly Edwards tapped on the glass viewport of Fitz's helmet.

"Wake. Up. Ass-hole." Edwards mouthed. "Got. To. Go!" He pointed to what was now up. Edwards kicked open an emergency release hatch beneath them to reveal an open window to the vacuum of space. Stars brightly shined into the shaft and onto Edwards speaking to the Captain too quickly for Fitz to keep up by reading his lips.

Edwards grabbed the ladder leading all the way through the corridor. He positioned his hands around the outside and aimed his course before flinging himself along. Fitz and the Captain looked up at Edwards who paced through the zero gravity shaft effortlessly by repeating his flinging maneuver. The Captain followed Edwards, and Fitz – slow to the draw – followed the Captain.

One after the other, they rowed along the ladder, floating deeper through the corridor. Fitz struggled in the rear to keep up with the pack and stay on track with the ladder, so after a while he accepted his own pace. The entire journey took Fitz longer than he expected. When he eventually caught up with the Captain and Edwards, they were already hard at work, trying to overcome the next obstacle.

The passenger shuttle laid directly in front of the power chambers. Somebody visited the chambers right before the power outage, leaving the shuttle to block the three crew members' entry point. Edwards, using the pick side of his emergency ax, pried at the apparent locked hatch on the exterior of the shuttle.

The Captain watched Edwards do all the work. Fitz gazed back at the abyss they came from, staring directly at the blip at the end: the open space window Edwards opened before their traverse. The light at the end of the tunnel. Dead, open space. The void called out to Fitz, taunting him.

Edwards grabbed Fitz by the arm and pointed his attention towards the newly opened hatch to the shuttle where the Captain was already squeezing himself through. The two gently pushed off the wall and slowly floated towards the shuttle. Once the Captain pinched through to the other side, Fitz followed him with ease.

The interior of the shuttle already glowed red from Fitz and the Captain's lights when Edwards' third light emerged from the opening. Edwards slowly inched to a halt when he reached his hands out, looking for help, ax still in hand. The image of only the top of his torso reminded Fitz of Parlor's.

The Captain and Fitz reached for Edwards' hands when his face instantly went flush and his eyebrows shot up. The resistance grew as Fitz pulled tighter, trying to get Edwards through the opening into the shuttle. Edwards locked eyes with Fitz.

"Something's got me!" he clearly shouted.

Fitz tried to look past Edwards who unfortunately took up the entirety of the opening. He placed his feet firmly against the inside of the shuttle to pull Edwards with all of his might when a pain shot through the effects of the pills to remind him of his broken leg.

Fitz screamed. The pain in his leg entirely too much, he dropped

Edwards, leaving the Captain to pull him through. Then the resistant force instantly caused the Captain to release him. Edwards quickly fell through the hatch. He grabbed the edges of the opening with his free hand in a final attempt to hold on but almost immediately let go.

Creeping his head over the opening, Fitz watched Edwards' red beam violently thrash around while sinking through the corridor. Suddenly, a bright white light flashed through Fitz's field of vision, quickly followed by three more. The red beam stopped thrashing. It stopped moving entirely besides its slow sink into void.

"Edwards!" Fitz cried out hopelessly to himself inside his helmet. He looked up at the Captain to see him holding his rifle, aiming the barrel through the opening. His finger still rested on the trigger. Reacting entirely on instinct Fitz shoves the Captain pushing them both back from each other and into the walls of the shuttle.

The Captain regained balance quicker than Fitz. Partially blinded by the Captain's red light, Fitz only saw the rifle now aiming towards him, and not whatever the Captain was attempting to mouth to him. After de-escalating the situation by cowering and raising his hands in surrender, Fitz gave one more look through the open hatch.

Although Edwards' red beam was no longer visible, his silhouette partially eclipsed the open window at the end of the shaft along with another, much larger and less anthropomorphic silhouette. Edwards and the creature lifelessly drifted down and through the light at the end of the tunnel into the dead, open space.

"Damn it, Edwards," Fitz whispered and closed his eyes for a brief moment. When he opened them, he saw the Captain open the door to the power chamber.

The power chamber sat ominously in silence. The massive stadium-sized room traditionally occupied only by two levels of a total of eight nuclear reactors hosted an unexpected, ninth object. The massive, egg-shaped intruder rested against one of the reactors on the bottom level. The silence in the chamber broke when the airlock to the zero gravity lift antechamber hissed open and revealed the Captain standing tall with rifle in hand, next to Fitz slouching in his wheelchair.

Footsteps and squeaky wheels echoed as they approached the power control console. The Captain slung his rifle over his shoulder and

pressed multiple buttons in a specific order and then waited for diagnostics. He touched the grain-sized radio he still wore before turning to Fitz.

“Somebody sabotaged the power from the console itself,” the Captain said. “The impact of this egg-ship-thing had no effect on the power supply.” The Captain looked back at the console and pressed a couple more buttons. “I think I can fix it. I’m not Parlor, but since I still went through the same engineering programs, I may have a shot at restoring the power yet.”

Somebody sabotaged the power. Those words swirled around in Fitz’s already dizzy head. Is Brother Ark behind this after all? Fitz wheeled over to the large egg. He toured around the base of the ship and eventually found an entry point. A huge section of the egg-shaped ship opened up like just another door on the OCT.

Fitz shielded his eyes from the bright glare of the lights inside the egg-ship reflecting off the pristine white interior. His eyes adjusted and focused on the enormous, open kennel in the middle of the ship. He progressed into the egg to investigate further.

Lights far brighter than anything Fitz had seen in the past seven years forced him to squint as he peered around the inside of the egg-ship. He first inspected the kennel. A standard animal containment contraption, he gathered, though he’d never seen one this big before. He backed up and rotated around the kennel.

“Oh, shit.” Fitz muttered when he found on the other end of the kennel, eight unoccupied, human-sized suspended animation pods, all linked into an intricate navigational display on a display screen that burned at Fitz’s eyes.

There’s no way Brother Ark did this. The navigational chart is all wrong. According to the blinding display readout, this egg came from beyond the furthest reaches of the Polsix system. Surely Brother Ark would’ve literally taken a different approach.

Fitz examined the pods closer. Standard stasis pods—just like the elites use on the capital planet—as far as he could tell until he noticed the interface on the other end of the row of pods. A foreign text inscribed on the buttons vaguely reminded Fitz of something he’d seen in his studies. Abruptly, deep-rooted knowledge came to the surface. This was an archaic language used on the Sibling Arks in the early

Odyssey Era.

"Warren!" The Captain called out to Fitz from outside the egg-ship. "We have a problem."

"What is it, Captain?" Fitz replied, rubbing his eyes as he approached the Captain at the console.

"Warren," the Captain gravely spoke with his back still turned, "the power outage was just the beginning. The Brother Arkian who sabotaged the power programmed the nuclear reactors to meltdown. This whole Cosmotransport is going to blow. Our best hope," he turned and placed his hand on Fitz's shoulder, "is to go further through the zero gravity lift shaft to get to the emergency escape raft."

Taking a moment to process the information the Captain shared with him, he forgot his own discovery. The OCT is going to explode. We have to go through more zero gravity. All while eight introducers roam free, who knows where. Oh shit, the introducers.

"Captain, there's something I need to tell you-" Fitz stopped, interrupted by the *spranging* of something ricocheting off of the console.

The two men looked up to see eight humanoid figures wearing large, round, black helmets pointing foreign weaponry in their direction. The Captain and Fitz scurried behind the console for cover as slugs started to spray in their direction. Fitz leapt out of his wheelchair and onto the ground, further into cover.

The Captain gripped his rifle tightly. Fitz grabbed his gifted handgun. They shared a long exchange while they waited for an opportunity to fire back that never came.

Bullets continued to fly all around the now smoking console. The Captain let out a few blind shots from behind cover in hopes to deter the attackers from advancing. The attackers pressed on all the same when the Captain acted on an idea. He kicked Fitz's wheelchair into the line of fire which briefly drew the attention of all eight attackers.

"C'mon, Brother Ark sons of bitches!" The Captain shouted.

He jumped out from behind the console and let out four quick shots, each hitting an attacker that stood in the open. He quickly leaned back behind the flaming console before springing back up and shooting two more attackers through their black helmets. The two, unharmed attackers fired back at the Captain from behind their own cover.

“Let’s go!” The Captain yelled at Fitz. As a few more stray shots poured into the combusting console, a shock wave rippled through the air. Fitz heard the explosion before he felt it.

The Captain dove away from the console right as their cover detonated. Quickly he gathered himself and looked back to see Fitz either passed out or dead from the console explosion. Either way, the Captain saw yet another crew member as dead weight and continued on back to the zero gravity lift, leaving Fitz behind.

Fitz Warren regained consciousness. Again. His head rang like dissonant bells. His body ached like he had taken a beating. His leg pulsed in agony. His eyes burned from the screen inside the egg. Fitz laid still and quiet, hurting in ways he didn’t know possible. Beyond that, he felt hopeless and scared. He knew he didn’t stand a chance to catch up with the Captain. Flames scattered around him that at this point he honestly wished could speed up the meltdown process.

The sounds of the flames whirring and the console sparking kept Fitz’s attention enough to ground him. He listened closer to hear commotion on the other side of the console. Straining to not cry at his pain, Fitz pulled himself past the side of the console and saw the two surviving attackers dragging their dead partners onto the egg. Once they finished moving the dead, the two attackers silently returned through the doorway towards the communication hub.

Fitz sat up and reached in his pocket for the bottle of pills Edwards gifted him. Uncapping the bottle, he poured the remaining handful of pills into his mouth without giving it much thought. He figured the OCT would explode anyways, so he might as well eliminate what pain he could. After guzzling down the last of the pills, he finally decided to look at the label.

Trial C: Sucrose - Placebo

“Damn it, Edwards,” Fitz slightly chuckled to himself and realized he may have a broken rib. His eyes shut gently. His curious mind whirled around all the reasons this happened to him and this OCT. He then wondered if the terrorists now on board the egg held any answers. His eyes flicked open and locked onto his wheelchair. If he

must die, he figured he should know why.

The egg remained open still and accepted Fitz's reentry. Squinting again in the brightness of the interior, Fitz investigated the bodies of the attackers. Six dead humanoid figures laid wearing their round, black helmets in their respective stasis pods. What were these things? Fitz thought as he searched for a means to remove the helmet of the figure on the end. With no clear latches or buttons, he gave up his search on the helmet and started checking the body's clothing.

The humanoid figure dressed entirely in a baggy, black nylon material. Fitz patted the figure down and scanned for potential pockets. He found nothing. He continued his search on the next figure, again finding nothing. On the fifth figure down the line, he noticed strange markings on their nylon suit, perhaps indicating a military ranking? Certainly not of the Brother Arkian military, he noted.

When Fitz patted down the military-ranked figure, his right hand felt creases along the hip. A small flap opened up and revealed the tail end of a paper slip. When Fitz pulled the sheet out of the figure's pocket and unfolded it, he couldn't believe his eyes. In plain common language, the sheet contained a manifesto pinning the OCT attack on Brother Ark.

At the bottom and along the sides of the manifesto, Fitz saw the same archaic Arkian language from before. He at once returned to the suspended animation pod interface at the end of the row to compare it to the characters and words annotated on the manifesto. His eyes dashed back and forth from the manifesto to the interface as he began to translate.

"Be careful... not [to have a] regional accent. We want to ensure they believe [that in the] broadcast you [are] a true Brother Arkian... Frame the deserters... Leave no survivors..."

In the engulfing white light, Fitz couldn't help but let out an ironic laugh. What are the odds? They wanted to frame Brother Ark the whole time. Edwards and the Captain played right into their plan by believing we were attacked by the desolate, seceded Sibling Ark. When the two remaining attackers broadcast this manifesto, tensions between

The Collective and Brother Ark could reach a snapping point. There would be total war.

If they broadcast the manifesto.

Fitz threw his head back in annoyance and squeezed his eyes shut tight, for he realized the gravity of his situation. The Captain's abandoned ship. Edwards is gone. Everybody else is gone. He believed at that moment that the job of preventing a civil war came down to him.

The two surviving humanoid figures silently stood in front of the double doors to the OCT communication hub. The one on the right kneeled down to confront the locked door handles in the center of the doors. The kneeling figure opened a pouch on their right hip and pushed their right hand down into the pocket, past the folded manifesto to unsheathe a set of lockpicking tools. The figure tinkered away as their companion stood watching.

Crack! A gunshot struck out. The silence broke.

The kneeling figure stopped tinkering and looked back. The standing figure dropped to the floor and red blood quickly began to spread. Looking further back, down the hallway, the figure saw Fitz barrelling down, accompanied by a rain of fire from his handgun.

Adrenaline charging through his veins, Fitz yelled as he shot from the hip in between pushing his wheelchair. He luckily hit his first target with one shot, but with every shot following, his accuracy decreased. The remaining figure kneeled back down and faced the doors. Fitz wheeled faster, pausing his attacks, until he approached a 10-yard distance between him and his target.

Fitz lifted his gun, but by the time he took the shot, the figure unlocked the doors and proceeded into the communication hub. The doors slam shut. Fitz approached in time for him to hear the click of the lock, and he sighed.

Wiggling the locked door handles in place, Fitz grew desperate. His heart pounded in his chest, but his pain no longer concerned him.

Hormones fueled his attempts to pry open the doors with his bare fingers. For once in his life his fight-or-flight mechanism chose the former, and he intended to see it through. His fingers slipped, spreading streaks of blood across the doors.

Fitz sighed again and tried to think of another approach when suddenly he heard it. He heard the familiar dastardly wail. The one he heard before him and Edwards found Parlor.

His wheelchair slowly circled around until Fitz faced away from the door and down the long dim hall. And there it was. The source of the dastardly wail. The creature from the kennel on the egg. The creature that killed so many crew mates.

The vague silhouette Fitz last saw floating down the zero gravity shaft now faintly took form as it crept along the ground down the hallway towards him. The dim lights casted small shadows along its textured gray skin. Fitz almost didn't want to shoot the creature. His curiosity about the creature's survivability almost enamored him to the point of pacifism. Almost.

Fitz raised his gun towards the creature, remembering all the lives the creature's stolen. He didn't know what damage his firearm could even inflict, but he was ready to fight. The creature crept closer to Fitz when he heard another familiar sound.

"Hey, asshole!" a gravelly voice shouted out.

Fitz smiled incredulously. He could not believe Lucas Edwards was coming to his rescue.

"Not you, Warren," Edwards yelled past the creature. "Me and this Brother Ark critter have unfinished business."

The creature rotated towards Edwards. Edwards held an emergency ax and one of the intruders' foreign weaponry he must've found in the power chamber.

Fitz watched, and his smile faded immediately when he remembered they're dead anyways. He quickly came up with a simplified explanation.

"Edwards!" Fitz called out. "The OCT is going to explode. The last terrorist is still alive inside the communication center trying to send out a manifesto!"

"Okay, so what?" Edwards started backing up as the creature now crept towards him.

“Throw me the ax!” Fitz yelled.

But as he yelled, the creature lunged at Edwards who immediately shot up at the airborne creature, hitting the light overhead. Fitz could only listen as shots continued to ring out along with grunts and snarls. The cacophony continued when unexpectedly an ax slid into the light glowing from above the double doors.

Fitz strained as he leaned down to grab the ax from the ground. He hastily started prying at the door to the communication hub. The shots and snarls grew more faint as Fitz attempted to force himself inside. After several attempts, the door finally jolted open. Immediately, the final humanoid figure, who stood at the console across the room, grabbed his gun and turned around to shoot Fitz in his right shoulder.

The momentum of the bullet pushed Fitz back into the hallway where he quickly threw the ax before he felt any more pain. The ax flew across the communication hub, and the figure dove towards the ground. Fitz watched from the hall as the ax missed his intended target, the attacker, and instead hit the console that the attacker planned to use to broadcast the manifesto.

Sparks showered from the console at the impact point. Fitz grasped his profusely bleeding shoulder and smirked. He knew he won.

An instant later he grabbed his gun when he saw the figure slowly rise from the ground to inspect the console. The figure ignored Fitz for a moment. The figure knew they lost.

The figure turned around for one final attack, but this time Fitz was ready.

Crack! Crack! Crack! Fitz's gun repeated.

Fitz tensed up and closed his eyes, expecting another gunshot wound himself. When he opened his eyes, he watched the final humanoid attacker lifelessly slouch towards the ground. Fitz was amazed with himself. He felt a wave of accomplishment wash over him, and he euphorically closed his eyes, waiting for the OCT reactors to meltdown and wash away all his pain.

His euphoria ended immediately when a voice chopped through static emanating from a short-range radio on the wall.

“This is Captain *static* of OCT Centurion... *static*...”

Please, send for retrieval. OCT Centurion and its payload lost... *static* attacked by Brother Ark in an act of terrorism."

The cowardly Captain, on board the emergency raft, still blamed Brother Ark. Fitz could not believe his ears. He wished the Captain would've stayed behind to go down with his ship. With the scarce energy remaining, Fitz rolled to the short-range radio to respond.

The Captain sat in one of the hundreds of seats on the emergency raft. He repeated the same phrase into emergency broadcast radio stretched out from the wall. Although he didn't expect a response anytime soon, the Captain persisted. After his eighth or ninth time pleading his emergency message into the radio, much to his surprise, he received a response

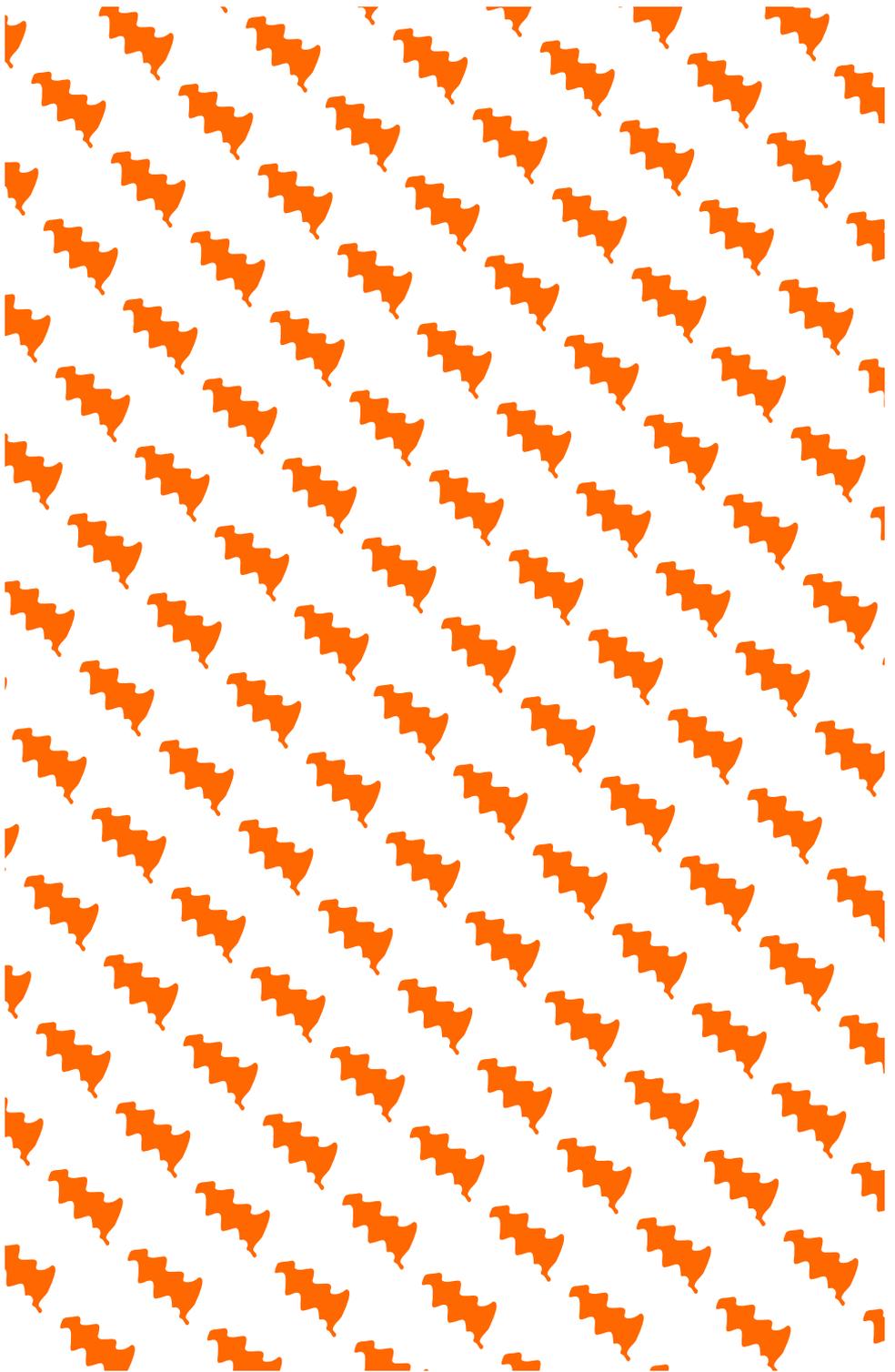
"Captain... *static.* This is Fitz Warren. Brother Ark did *static* attack us. I repeat Brother Ark *static* us! The culprits were terrorists that... *static*"

The radio went silent, and he cursed Brother Ark. The Captain looked back through the rear viewport just in time to see in the distant open space, his OCT exploded in a fiery rage.

R.C. NECHAMKIN

is a part-time fiction writer (currently) living in McKinney, TX with his adoring wife and dog. He's loved creating fantastic stories since he was young with his longest work thus far being a campaign for a space-fantasy franchise tabletop roleplaying game.

In his spare time, he works full-time at a corporate coffee chain where he toils away, making people's day a little less annoying. In his other spare time, he reads and writes.



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