"This secret," the admiral interrupted, "is too important. We cannot afford to let anything stand in the way of keeping it."

"But firing on our own ships?" Skylarov asked incredulously. "Next thing you know, we're going to be blowing up Earth."

"Careful," Ramirez replied. "Everyone is replaceable—even you."

Is he threatening me? Skylarov wondered, horrified.

As Fleet Admiral Ramirez smiled cruelly, the look in his eyes told Skylarov all he needed to know.

I ripped the cover off a copy of this book, but it wasn't destroyed. Bummer.
—The one person who bought a copy.

Amazing. I've just discovered that a book can be self-levitating from all the hot air.
—Jacques Montgolfier

It's even better than asking yourself if you left the oven on.
—My method acting coach

You'll laugh. You'll cry. Mostly cry.
—An anonymous reviewer

Thanks to you, I lost my lawsuit for food poisoning. I told the judge what I was reading, and he dismissed the case.
—Some guy who's suing me

I've never been more bowled over by a book before.
—Victim, great book avalanche of 2023

I guess this is what happens when you make schoolchildren read Joseph Conrad. Sorry. My bad.
—My high school senior year English teacher

This is why engineers should never be allowed to write fiction.
—A reviewer under condition of anonymity

I know who you are, Jim.
—Me upon reading the previous comment

Patriots:

Beyond the Veil

Preview Edition

A novel by
David A. Gatwood

For uniting an alliance, and
for free Internet without a login screen.

A Word from the Author:

This book is the third in a series of three books. Unlike most trilogies, this book does not pick up where the last one left off, but if you're reading the third book, you probably guessed that already. Instead, it starts a few months before the first book, filling in the backstory as the first story slowly unravels in the fire of truth. It continues in parallel with the first two books, and ends a few days after the first two books ended.

This book tells the story of not only the people pulling the strings, but also the people who were just in the wrong place at the wrong time.

If you haven't read the first two books, now would be a good time to get a copy and read them. That having been said, I've tried to make sure that each book largely stands on its own, so maybe you won't be *too* confused....

The first book in the Patriots series, "Traitors in Waiting," explores the great colonial war from the perspective of military officers born and raised in a loyalist Earth colony who find out, to their horror, that the military is being manipulated by traitors in high-ranking positions.

The second book, "Enemies From Within," treats the story from a different perspective. In this story, which starts a few decades before the first, we learn that the colonies were actually a dumping ground for the least desirable elements of Earth's population—the terrorists, the underachievers, the hairdressers, the lawyers, and so on.

Both the first and second books end with certain key parts of the conspiracy largely intact, however, saving the ending for the third book.

The third book, "Beyond the Veil," tells the truth behind the war.

When reading this book, you may occasionally see things repeated. Sometimes, this is done to avoid making you turn back to a previous book in the series to follow the plot, but this is not always the case. Whenever you encounter such a familiar passage, you should always ask yourself what is different this time around. Is it just a change in perspective, or did the previous perspective omit certain details that completely change your interpretation of events?

After the book, be sure to read "Closing Thoughts", where I ruin it for everybody by explaining everything you wanted to know about the story (and probably a lot of things you never wanted to know).

Special Thanks:

to my reviewers for
faultlessly catching
all the mispelled words,

to my readers for reading
the previous thank-you
and humoring me,

to my family, friends,
coworkers, and teachers for
encouraging and shaping me
as a writer,

and to everyone who
ever asked, "Why not?"
when they could have
asked, "Why?"

Prologue:
November 26, 2390

Lieutenant Pierre DesChambres could already feel the effects of the sodium thiopental as his wrist slipped free from its restraint. He struggled to release the other wrist restraint, then unbuckled the straps holding his legs.

The door opened easily when he approached it from the inside, much to his amazement.

The sick bay was not designed as a prison, he mused. *Wait a minute. Does that mean I could have walked out of here at any time for the last two days?*

His hope was short-lived, however; within moments, he found himself wishing he had a good place to hide when the doctors appeared at one end of the corridor.

He quickly ran away from them to the opposite end of the hall, turned right, ran through a door into a larger hall, turned left, and finally ran through the double doors to his right.

Once through those doors, he found himself inside the Crew's Quarter, a large eating establishment. Were it not for his medical gown, he probably could have gotten lost in the crowd, but alas, it was not to be, so all he could hope to do was to tell everyone what he knew.

"This is mad!" Pierre shouted at no one in particular. "I demand to be heard. The Alliance is corrupt!"

Suddenly, the elite security forces crashed through the doors behind him.

"They're killing us!" he screamed. "They're killing us! Their own people!"

As the security team wrestled him to the ground, he continued to try to speak. "You have to believe me! There are traitors in waiting!"

Then, he felt the familiar jab of a stunner in his back, and everything went black.

<p style="text-align:center">***</p>

<p style="text-align:center">*The next day*</p>

Pɪᴇʀʀᴇ awoke suddenly and glanced around the white room, its cushioned walls and padded floors a constant reminder of the state of the world around him. The creak of the giant door jostled him from his sleep as it opened slowly to reveal the hallway beyond. He glanced up to see if he could flee, but the men in white blocked his exit as they always did.

A man in a white lab coat pushed past the attendants.

"Hi, Pierre," the man said carefully. "Do you know who I am?"

"Of course I know who you are," Pierre replied in a deep Parisian accent. "You are Doctor Johnson."

The doctor nodded.

"Look, doc," he continued, "I am not crazy."

"Sure. That's what they all say," the doctor replied, chuckling.

"Zey really are out to get us."

"Who are?" the doctor asked.

"Ze aliens," Pierre replied calmly. "Zey are trying to destroy us all."

The doctor sighed and shook his head.

"There's no such thing as aliens, Pierre," he replied. "You're experiencing a paranoid delusion brought on by the stress of losing your job."

"I didn't lose my job. I'm on shore leave."

The doctor sighed. "You were fired for negligence, Pierre."

"No, it's not true," Pierre said, shaking his head as if to clear his thoughts. "I took shore leave because ze aliens were manipulating people. I'm not crazy. Zese drugs, they are making me crazy. I'm not crazy. I'm not, not crazy, not crazy."

"Someone is here to see you," the doctor interrupted. "Do you think you can keep your head together long enough to talk to him?"

Pierre nodded groggily.

"Okay, then," he said gently as he nodded to the attendants.

A moment later, a slightly obese man entered, his toupee blowing obviously in the breeze.

"Pierre, my good man," he said in a light British accent.

Pierre smiled. "Monsieur Jenkins," he replied. "Bonjour, bonjour. C'est une plaisir de vous voir."

Admiral Jenkins chuckled.

"Good to see you too, my old friend. Please. Call me Tom."

"Are you here to get me out?" Pierre asked.

The admiral sighed and lowered his head, turned around, walked a couple of steps, turned back, walked back, then looked up again.

"Pierre," he replied, "You know that I would if I could, but...."

"But you don't believe me," Pierre replied.

The admiral paused, angled his head, then replied, "I honestly don't know what to believe anymore. I want you to tell me exactly what happened."

"Well," Pierre replied, "It all began when...."

Chapter

One

October 30, 2390

Tᴴᴱ command and control center aboard the small Terran Command outpost in orbit around Beta Persei barely held three people, and for the moment, Pierre was its sole occupant, filling the only non-broken chair. Once a month, he had to hold down the night shift.

Pierre wondered what the day shift would do for seating, then realized that they would probably just go down to the mess hall and steal chairs from there. Pierre could just picture Leanna hauling one of those heavy mess hall monstrosities up three flights of stairs.

Suddenly, a burst of noise from the radio woke him from his reverie.

"Thees ees...", the man's voice crackled through the radio, "of sheep Hrabrost calling Terran Command Outpost 72.... Emergency... Come een, please."

Pierre spun around in his chair.

What the...

"Yes, Her...ah.. uh... what you said.... We read you," he replied.

"Vee hev... radiation leak," the radio crackled.

He smirked as his mind drifted back to old science fiction from the late 1900s.... *So it's a nuclear wessel?*

"Do you have navigation thrusters?" Pierre asked.

"Negative," the man replied.

"State your position and we will send tow ships to pull you in."

A few seconds went by in silence.

"Please state your pos..."

"Ve hev just emairged from the folding geht et Beta Persei and are adreeft," the man interrupted.

Pierre quickly keyed in instructions for tow ships to retrieve the stranded vessel, then began monitoring the transponder screen. The disabled ship was exactly where they said it was. Three tow ships were also visible on their way out towards the wreckage. Then, the transponder signal suddenly disappeared.

"Sir," another voice crackled, "This is Captain Paulson aboard the Aenid. The Russian ship just exploded. We don't detect any life signs or escape pod transponders."

No life signs, no escape pods, Pierre noted. *They didn't know it was coming until it was too late.*

"That's not the only thing," the lieutenant continued. "Just before the explosion, I thought I saw... something."

"Could you clarify that?" Pierre asked.

The request was met with silence.

"Lieutenant?"

Then, another transponder signal went dark.

Oh, crap.

<center>***</center>

As dawn broke over Pierre, South Dakota, Laura Rodolfo sat motionless in a sea of cars making their way towards the Tulip Festival.

"Damn it," she shouted to no one in particular as she slammed the palms of her hands into the steering wheel. "The one time I have a 9:00 meeting, and I'm stuck in this mess."

The traffic suddenly started moving, and she applied the gas. Ten feet later, she slammed on the brakes again.

The very second that the clock rolled over to 9:00, her phone started ringing. She answered it.

"Where are you!?!" the man at the other end shouted.

"Stuck in traffic," she replied, annoyed.

"You know what," he shouted angrily, "I really don't *care* where you are. If you aren't here in five minutes, you can find another job."

"Screw you," she shouted as she threw the phone out the window.

Damn, she thought. *I should have synced my contacts before I did that.... Oh, well. I needed a new phone anyway... and a new job.*

With that, she took the first exit and began pondering what she should do with her day off.

<p align="center">***</p>

ADMIRAL Skylarov pushed the hatch open and continued up the ladder onto the ship's bridge.

"Think you cut that close enough?" Fleet Admiral Ramirez asked him angrily. "He almost got a message off. We wouldn't want to have to shoot down a Terran Command outpost."

Admiral Skylarov bristled.

"Something wrong?" Ramirez asked.

Admiral Skylarov paused, then replied, "I think we may be going too far. This secret...."

"This secret," the admiral interrupted, "is too important. We cannot afford to let anything stand in the way of keeping it."

"But firing on our own ships?" Skylarov asked incredulously. "Next thing you know, we're going to be blowing up Earth."

"Careful," Ramirez replied. "Everyone is replaceable—even you."

Is he threatening me? Skylarov wondered, horrified.

As Fleet Admiral Ramirez smiled cruelly, the look in his eyes told Skylarov all he needed to know.

<div align="right">Chapter</div>

Two

Almost twenty-eight years earlier (January 26, 2363)

K LERN's footsteps echoed as he stepped into the ancient council chambers. The domed stained glass ceiling glistened in the morning sunlight, sending rays of sunshine streaming through the dusty air towards the white marble floor with its green and white mottled granite inlays. The dark wooden banisters still whispered memories of a forgotten era, their intricate carvings dating back thousands of years. It was against this ornate backdrop that Klern addressed the council of Ni'Utn.

"Councillors," he began, "it has been brought to my attention that you are gravely concerned about the experiments being conducted on Lenora Prime. Rest assured that we are dealing with the problem."

One of the councillors stood. "Mr. Klern, with all due respect, that is what the War Council has been saying for the past six months. Our scientists have detected dangerous levels of space-time distortion in the vicinity of Lenora Prime—distortions that, if allowed to continue, could rend the fabric of the universe as we know it."

The politician stuck out his chest as though it would somehow make him look more important than the junior

councillor that he was. Klern wanted to roll his eyes more than ever before.

"So you'll forgive me," the councillor continued, "if I'm not at all satisfied to merely be told that you are 'dealing with the problem'. Tell us what you are doing, how, and most importantly, when."

"We have identified a young member of the team who is an ideal candidate to be 'replaced'," Klern replied. "His name is Cadet Mikhail Skylarov. He is scheduled for shore leave from his assignment to Lenora Prime. He is going to come down with Montezuma's revenge. He will call in sick, but the reply will be intercepted. By the time he returns, the Ackerman crystal will be long gone and the witnesses will be dead."

"Excellent," the councillor replied. "This will be a perfect test for our veiling technology. It will last long enough to confirm whether the veil will fool the Terran Alliance into believing our operative is this Skylarov fellow, but will end soon enough that our limited knowledge of their internal operations should not betray our operative's true identity."

"Excellent, indeed," Klern confirmed. "I will put one of my top operatives on the project. I will not fail you."

"See that you don't," the councillor replied, "or you will be demoted to a foot soldier."

Chapter

Three

Almost twenty-eight years later (October 31, 2390)

L AURA collapsed on the sofa as the dog ran up and playfully licked at her toes and sandals. With her left hand, she keyed an access code into the data pad on the arm of her couch; then she leaned back.

"I never thought I'd say this," Laura muttered, "but unemployment is kind of fun. I just wish that rat bastard had fired me a week earlier so I could have been at Sydney's wedding. Speaking of which, let's see if Sydney sent me any more pictures from her cruise."

She quickly flipped through the images. Ooh. *Looks like they did a flyby of Beta Persei for their honeymoon,* she noted.

Suddenly, something caught her eye in one of the pictures. A cluster of ships hovered outside the folding gate, which was odd in and of itself. One ship was venting atmosphere and some sort of plasma. Its side was blackened by scorch marks as though it had been in a battle. That was also somewhat odd, given that it was so far from any disputed territories.

But what most caught her attention was a bright spot about fifty meters below the ship. In the photo before it, no spot. In the photo after it, the spot was closer. The next

photo showed the ship engulfed in a giant fireball, its metal hull burning in the ship's atmosphere.

Her eyes widened. The photos were taken a few tenths of a second apart. She quickly did some math, extrapolating where the light should have been in the previous photo.

That's impossible. It just... appeared....

With that realization, she quickly copied the photos to an encrypted disk image on a keychain drive, slipped it into her pocket, then pressed a button on her data pad. Sydney's face appeared on the viewscreen a few moments later.

"This better be important," Sydney said. "We're on vacation, you know."

That's when Laura realized that Sydney had no idea what she had witnessed.

"You... didn't look at these pictures before you sent them, did you, Syd?"

Sydney's eyes widened. "I'm not naked, am I?"

Laura nearly hit the floor laughing.

"Pictures 95274 through 95279," she replied after regaining her composure.

Sydney stared at them in silence, flipping back and forth, back and forth. After nearly five minutes, she stopped and turned towards the camera, white as a sheet.

Sydney stammered.

"Wh... wh... what... w... w... was th... th... that?" she asked.

Laura shook her head.

"We have to tell someone," Sydney said.

"Who?" Laura asked. "This looks like some military secret. If we tell anyone, we could be in serious danger."

Sydney thought about this for a moment.

"Someone has an invisible warship. If we don't tell anyone, we're all in danger."

Laura couldn't argue with that logic.

"Come pick me up," Laura said.

"Where are we going?" Sydney asked.

"Where do you think?" Laura replied. "We're going to Beta Persei."

<center>***</center>

Pierre stood as the station commander entered the engineering deck.

Commander Fred Ebberstein was a swarthy gentleman, his dark hair and Middle Eastern features betraying his Israeli heritage.

"What are you still doing here?" the commander asked. "Your shift ended an hour ago."

Pierre spun around and quickly placed himself between the monitors and his commander.

"I'm just going over some sensor readings," Pierre replied. "I thought I noticed a glitch earlier, so I'm just making sure all our equipment is okay."

"If you find anything, let me know immediately," the commander replied.

Pierre shivered. He couldn't place it, but something seemed very wrong.

"Will do."

"Carry on," the commander said as he stepped out.

Pierre looked down at the screen. He saw thousands of log messages. One caught his attention:

```
03:45:12.105 dev 01,35 ioctl(0x00310017):
Error 01 Operation not permitted
```

It wasn't so much the message—it was borderline gibberish to him—but he thought he had seen it before. Sure enough, five seconds earlier in the log, he saw the same message.

```
03:45:07.105 dev 01,35 ioctl(0x00310017):
Error 01 Operation not permitted
```

And five seconds before that and five seconds after. So he opened up a new terminal window and typed:

```
grep 0x00310017 /var/log/system.log
```

And he got thousands of them, but he only cared about the lines at or around 3:46 in the morning. Then, he saw it.

```
03:45:12.105 dev 01,35 ioctl(0x00310017):
Error 01 Operation not permitted
03:45:17.105 dev 01,35 ioctl(0x00310017):
Error 01 Operation not permitted
03:45:22.104 dev 01,35 ioctl(0x00310017):
Error 01 Operation not permitted
03:45:27.105 dev 01,35 ioctl(0x00310017):
Error 01 Operation not permitted
03:46:02.106 dev 01,35 ioctl(0x00310017):
Error 01 Operation not permitted
```

Pierre stared at the screen blankly for nearly five minutes trying to convince himself that his eyes were not deceiving him.

Thirty-five seconds. It can't be.... That means... someone doctored the station's system logs. Ah, how I love automatic checkpointing; it's rollback time.

***

THE sound of her front door opening in the middle of the night and the growl of her dog made Laura jump straight up in the air.

Her dog's growl was punctuated by the too familiar chirp of a gunshot through a silencer.

She quickly rolled out of bed and moved to the door so that she could see around the corner.

Three men in Terran Command uniforms stood in the foyer discussing something. She could barely make out what they were saying.

Search... upstairs... downstairs... bedroom... girl... shoot to kill.

That's when they started moving towards her.

What can I do? The closet!

She slipped into the closet, closed the doors, and ripped the cover off the large air vent. On the other side of the opening lay her bathroom. In the dim light of the skylight overhead, she could barely make out the man's shoes as he walked into the bathroom.

Seeing no one, the man quickly left. A moment later, she heard the door to her room creak open.

I am SO glad I didn't oil that thing.

As soon as he entered her room, she carefully pushed on the other side of the duct, gripping it with her fingernails so that it would not drop to the floor. A moment later, she was standing in the bathroom. She pulled the closet-side vent back into place a mere fraction of a second before the closet door opened, then closed again.

She quickly slipped the vent back off, crawled back into the closet, and reinstalled both vents.

As soon as she heard the door creak shut, she waited for about a minute, listening intently for any signs of the intruders. The creaking of the steps told her that it was safe, but just to be certain, she peered through the barely cracked closet door for a few seconds before opening it.

As soon as she reentered her room, she made a beeline for the window, unlocked it, and crawled out onto the window ledge. She knew that if she could make it to the roof, she could climb across the trellis in the garden and into the neighbor's yard.

That's when the door opened again. She had less than a second to react. She jumped straight down, grabbing the ledge as she fell. By the time the lights in her room came on, she was hanging from the windowsill by her fingertips.

Laura clung to the side of the house for what seemed like an eternity before the lights in her room went off again. From the sound of papers rustling, she thought perhaps they were searching for more than just her.

The photos!

For once, she appreciated her friend's paranoia. She never understood why Sydney insisted that Laura use encrypted local storage, but suddenly all that inconvenience was worth it. *Too bad she sent the photos in the clear,* Laura noted. *It might have saved us both some trouble. Not quite paranoid enough, I guess.*

Laura struggled to pull her weight up to the ledge again. She finally managed to get her leg over the edge and pull herself up. Then, she grabbed a shutter and pulled herself up another couple of feet.

Please don't break! Please don't break! Please don't break!

Reaching over her head, she grabbed the gutter, but it bent down instantly in her hand. She forced herself up higher on the shutter, standing on top of it while maintaining her grip on the gutter to keep from falling sideways. Slipping her fingertips underneath the bottom shingles, she got a better grip on the back edge of the gutter and slowly pulled herself up.

Suddenly, the gutter broke loose from the house. Suspended in midair, she swung out over the yard. The gutter drooped slowly downwards as it continued to swing farther away from the house, until at last it came to rest above the garden trellis.

Well, that wasn't the plan, but it will work, she thought.

As soon as she was certain she would actually land on the trellis, she let herself drop, spreading her arms wide to spread her impact as much as possible. Remarkably, though

the trellis made a cracking sound, the grape vines prevented its collapse.

She quickly stood and ran across the trellis. With a running jump, she leapt across the three foot gap onto the slanted roof of her storage building. Barely managing to keep her balance, she kept running, then jumped across the next gap and landed squarely atop the neighbor's shrubs just beyond the fence.

Ouch! Holly bushes! I really didn't think this through.

By the time she reached the ground, she looked like she had been in a fight with a feral cat (and lost), but she was alive. She slipped through the gate into the next neighbor's yard, grabbed some oily rags from their carport, then ran through another gate into a darkened alley beyond it.

When she reached the alley, she collapsed onto a pile of garbage bags, covered herself with the oily rags, and slept through the night.

<div align="center">***</div>

Pierre created a new filesystem view based off a snapshot from about five minutes after the explosion.

> 03:45:27.105 dev 01,35 ioctl(0x00310017): Error 01 Operation not permitted
>
> 03:45:32.679 logd: received data burst from 64:de:65:af:63:ba:6f:be
>
> 03:45:32.721 logd: received data burst from 64:de:65:af:63:ba:6f:be
>
> 03:45:32.732 logd: received data burst from 64:de:17:25:ac:19:3a:cc
>
> 03:45:32.679 logd: received data burst from 64:de:65:af:63:ba:6f:be

```
03:45:33.109  logd:  received  data  burst
from 64:de:65:af:63:ba:6f:be

03:45:33.729  logd:  received  data  burst
from 64:de:65:af:63:ba:6f:be
```

Oof, he thought. *We got telemetry data dumps from the ship right before the explosion. Now where in hell did it log the actual data?*

He looked in the dumps directory and found the received files, but the data was garbage. A few keystrokes later, he began constructing probability plots of the data that was there. When the results came back, he concluded that the data was probably not from a Gaussian distribution. In fact, the data looked like a uniform distribution—every possible value equally likely—as though the data had been deliberately wiped.

We definitely have a problem, he thought. *Deleted logs could be a random glitch. Files overwritten with pure random data... not so much.*

He started thinking about possibilities—maybe the data blocks never got written because of a power failure, maybe the data files were overwritten by a computer virus or worm, maybe the data burst occurred after the explosion and the data was truly random electrical noise—but the IT guys would have mentioned it if they had seen a virus or worm in the wild lately, and all of the others should have produced decidedly nonrandom data.

He knew that electrical noise should tend to have significantly higher than random percentages of 0s or 1s unless the noise voltage range varied randomly within a very narrow band between 0V and V_{CC}, and even then, the odds of it being so random over such a small sample size were slim to none.

There can be only one conclusion, he realized. *We have a saboteur on board. Fortunately, I've been testing a comms sniffer.*

No sooner had he logged in than he realized why the logs had been deleted. They contained confidential information about a battle, ship's logs, and other information that was way above his pay grade. He carefully skipped through that information and focused on the telemetry data from just before the explosion.

> *Reactor: stable*
>
> *Water level: 95% of nominal*
>
> *Water level decay: 1% per hour*
>
> *Repairs strongly recommended*
>
> *Hull integrity: nominal*
>
> *Shields: 65% of nominal*
>
> *Pulse cannons: offline/standby*

Where's the problem? Why did this thing explode? Service messages?

> 034549 NAV1: FAIL 075 INRTL SNS
>
> 034552 FC1: FAIL 621, 622 NAV1 NAV2
>
> 034552 NAV2: FAIL 397 PWR BUS
>
> 034554 FC2: FAIL 621 NAV1
>
> 034555 FC3: FAIL 622 NAV2
>
> 034556 FC2: FAIL 631 FC1
>
> 034556 FC3: FAIL 631 FC1
>
> 034556 COM: FAIL 631 FC1
>
> 034557 FC2: FAIL 933 CABIN PRESS
>
> 034557 FC3: FAIL 933 CABIN PRESS
>
> 034557 COM: 621,622,632,633 FAIL NAV1,NAV2,FC2,FC3

He quickly puzzled it out.

Navigation 1 failed with an inertial sensor failure, he noted. *There are any number of things that could cause that. Ignore it.*

Flight control 1 reported that NAV1 and NAV2 failed in some way, but flight control 2 only showed failure in NAV1, not NAV2. Flight control 2 and 3 reported failure of flight control 1, which may mean its messages are suspect.

By this point, his head was already hurting. It felt like trying to solve a puzzle with only half the pieces. He had to be missing something.

So flight control 2 and 3 disagree about which nav system is dead? Software bug? Cabling failure?

He began looking through the cable layout for the ship in question looking for anything that FC1, NAV1, and NAV2 had in common.

NAV2 reported a power bus failure. Obviously, that must be the main power bus, which would have taken flight control 1 offline, too, but why four seconds later? It can't be the secondary bus, because FC3 would be dead and couldn't have reported the failure of FC1, he reasoned.

But try as he might, he couldn't find even one place where all of the optical cables went through the same conduits with the power cables. He did see one conduit for both of the data cables that terminated just below a junction box where a power transformer stepped AC down and rectified it to feed backup power to NAV2.

If that failed, it would have killed FC3. That can't be it, he realized.

NAV1 and NAV2 were, however, in the same room, albeit on opposite sides.

What about a large fire? Maybe the reactor explosion melted the plastic optical cables before the glass cables? But that room is near the hull on the underside of the ship. And the ship didn't explode until nearly five seconds after that. A tenth of a second, I could believe. Five seconds? No way.

What happened on the underside of that ship?

He scratched his head in disbelief.

<p align="center">***</p>

Laura awoke in a pile of stench. For a moment, she wondered if she had forgotten to take out the trash. Then, she remembered what had happened the night before.

She slowly pulled herself out of the pile of garbage bags, looking around for any latent military forces nearby before pulling the rags off her face.

This stinks, she thought, then giggled at the double entendre.

As she rounded the corner, she looked down at her house and saw four black vans parked across the street. She shivered as she slipped back into the alley. When she reached the pile of garbage bags, she picked up the rags and covered herself with them as best she could, then rounded the corner, walking quickly away from her house.

First things first, she thought. *I need cash—lots of cash. I can't use plastic or they'll track me, so I'll have to use an ATM, then quickly catch a cab.*

She walked to an ATM next to a hotel, swiped her card, and took out the maximum daily amount—1500 Euros. She then immediately ran to the corner and flashed a hundred Euro bill at a cab.

"Taxi!" she shouted.

The cab driver looked at her awkwardly, but the cash spoke volumes.

"Wheah to?" he asked.

"Anywhere but here," she replied.

The driver began driving. After a couple of blocks, she had him make a series of seemingly random turns, eventually putting them on the freeway. They got off at the next exit and pulled up to a hospital. She got out and paid the taxi driver double the fare for his troubles.

She walked into the hospital and waited for the taxi to be out of sight, then walked back out, around the corner and into an alley. She followed the alley to the next street, walked a block, took a different alley over another block, then turned left and right again to put her on a major street several blocks from where the cab dropped her off.

She then continued walking for about an hour before she finally reached a hotel in which she had never stayed, where she checked in under a false name and prepaid in cash.

<div align="center">***</div>

THE shuttle Europa's manipulator arms groaned as Pierre began his preflight check.

I can't figure anything out from the sensor logs, he mused, *so let's see if we can find that black box.*

The engines screamed to life, whining like a male cocker spaniel upon catching a whiff of a bitch in heat, the slow, rhythmic hum of the scrubbers adding a bass line to support it in a cacophonic symphony that would make even Schoenberg proud.

The shuttle slowly lolled its way to the shuttle bay doors as they crept open about a quarter of the way. A low frequency radio beacon pinged in the distance, creating an occasional tiny glow in the top left corner of his heads-up display.

Pierre guided the ship in the general direction of the beacon, knowing that (at least in theory) the data recorder should be attached. When he reached the transponder, though, the black box was nowhere to be seen. That's when it hit him.

Literally.

Depressurization alarms went off like bottle rockets in January, then rapidly grew quiet. Pierre knew what this meant: outside his helmet, there was no air.

Meanwhile, the black box, having already pierced the front window, proceeded to do its best to break everything else, bouncing first off the controls on the ceiling, then off Pierre's visor, finally coming to rest lodged in one of the air vents that were useless now anyway in light of the lack of a windshield.

Pierre let out a string of obscenities in French that would make even George Carlin blush, then turned the shuttle around and landed in the shuttle bay.

As the shuttle passed through the energy shield, air flooded back into the cabin; the resulting pressure wave momentarily knocked his breath out.

After he had regained his composure, Pierre walked across the deck, entered the airlock, removed his helmet, and swore some more when he realized he'd left the black box wedged in the console, whereupon he replaced the helmet, grabbed a crowbar, and got to work.

<center>***</center>

LAURA stopped briefly at the concierge desk. The concierge was, true to his title, a short, balding Frenchman with a handlebar moustache and a tiny goatee.

"Bonjour, Mademoiselle," he said in an accent so thick you could use it as a couch cushion.

"Hello, sir. Would you be a dear and call me a cab?" she asked.

"Certainment," he replied. "Un moment."

She smiled.

"Zee cab will be outside momentarily."

"Merci," she replied.

"Tout de temps."

With that, she walked outside to the taxi stand. The cab pulled up in front as she opened the door.

"Airport, please," she said as she got in.

The cabbie nodded.

Ten minutes later, they reached the airport.

"Which airline?" the cab driver asked.

"Rental car garage, actually," she replied.

The cab driver drove her around to the arrivals area.

She paid in cash, then stepped out of the cab and walked to the airport's rental car pickup area. She quickly walked through it, paralleling the road in the opposite direction until she reached the terminal A taxi stand some two blocks back.

"I need you to take me to the Vanderbilt Hotel on 37th," she said as she climbed into a waiting cab, but first I need to stop at "Tech Sector Electronics."

"No problem," the cabbie said, his thick Brooklyn accent cutting like a razor.

They drove for a few minutes to the electronics store. Laura paid the fare and gave the cab driver an extra twenty Euros to wait for her.

She quickly jogged inside, picked up a VoIP adapter, paid in cash, and walked back out to the waiting cab.

About five minutes later, they arrived at the hotel, and she paid the additional fare. Then, she pulled out another twenty Euros.

"Here's twenty Euros. I want you to wait for me around on the back side of the hotel. If I'm not out in thirty minutes, call the police."

The cabbie looked at her incredulously for a moment, paused, then shrugged his shoulders.

"Whatevah. Your money."

***

Pɪᴇʀʀᴇ connected the black box to a diagnostic station and began running system checks.

> *LENSYS SK-1072-A CORE DIAGNOSTICS*
>
> *v.1.07.216*
>
> *System storage is encrypted. Insert encryption dongle or press Escape to perform diagnostics without testing storage.*

Merde, Pierre thought. *There's no way I'll get anything from this.*

Then he saw the charred remains of a data cartridge attached to the underside with duct tape.

Can't be.... That would be like finding the root password on a sticky note under the keyboard....

He quickly reached into a desk drawer, pulled out some contact cleaner and cotton swabs, scrubbed the contacts, connected the data cartridge to the storage port on his diagnostic station, and copied the cartridge to a fresh cartridge. He then attached the new cartridge to the charred storage port on the black box.

> *LENSYS SK-1072-A CORE DIAGNOSTICS*
>
> *v.1.07.216*
>
> *Encryption key accepted. Uploading core data.*

Pierre smiled. *Jackpot.*

About the Author:

David is an avid musician, writer, photographer, videographer, musical composer, and hard-core geek with a Master's degree in computer science and a Bachelor's degree in communications (broadcasting) and computer science.

In addition to writing this book, David also created various workflow tools used in its production, did all of the content production and design, redesigned many of the fonts, and drew the cover art.

His choral music has been performed by the Diocesan Choir of Monterey, California and the contemporary choir at Holy Cross Catholic Church in Santa Cruz, CA. He spends much of his spare time performing with musical ensembles in the greater Santa Cruz area.

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