

Space 2099 U.G.
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He could see it all.

Fifteen Billion Years since the Big Bang, twenty-one hundred years since the birth of Christ, and one hundred years since the end of the first Heroic Age, and he saw lifespan of the universe in all its insignificance. No, he was looking at the size of the universe itself.

Truly, this is impressive, he thought. Hundreds of thousands of light years above the Earth, the planet was not even visible as a speck of light. The sun, a sphere so large that if it were to completely fill Earth's sky, it would still not be even close to the range of touch, was also impossible to see. The entire Milky Way galaxy itself appeared as cosmic dust on the horizon.

No, he could see it all. He was the center of the universe, having transcended telescopes and science fiction. The planets themselves rotated around him, the stars rotated around him, asteroids collided against him without causing even the tiniest amount of pain. The Earth, its moon, and the entire solar system were dust. He playfully pushed them away with a mere blow of his lips. They didn't matter, because they were an insignificant part of the greatness of the universe itself.

He felt it all, as well...black holes, gravitational forces, wormholes, stars going nova, that shaking feeling on his shoulder...

What?

" Come on, Nigel, wake up. Mr. Stone is due here for inspection any minute."

Reality painfully snapped back in on Nigel, as the universe condensed into a mere satellite image on the screen in front of him. He was no longer the center of the universe, but Dr. Nigel Cavalier, chief scientist of the (petty) Alchemax Aerospace Research Division. He was back in his middle-aged Caucasian body, medium build, brown hair in a Caucasian crew cut, corrective lenses, and all the other statistics that made him so blasted... human. Around him were his flat, 2-dimensional star charts, his model of the solar system he received as a child, and his barely competent staff. They were all enclosed, not in the deep, black beauty of space, but a grimy laboratory on the lower levels of the Alchemax building. It was a wonder the custodial staff ever came down there.

" All right" Nigel said to his chief assistant, Sadaad, " do we have our final progress reports ready for Stone's visit? I wouldn't want to disappoint him by actually showing any progress over the past year."

" Sir," Sadaad said with a forced smile " we have discovered five new star clusters in Sector 2812 since this morning. No signs of habitation yet, but since we haven't calculated in the space-time discrepancy..."

" Dammit...do we have anything that can make MONEY?"

" ...no sir" .

Nigel clenched his fists and slammed them on the controls of his monitor. The screen randomly spiraled about the galaxy, pointing in random directions across the starry sky. Looking through tear-blurred eyes, Nigel could see the universe passing him by, forever separated by...a computer screen.

A female voice came from the back of the room. " Taking out aggressions on the equipment again, are we? More proof you haven't been to my psychiatrist yet, Nigel."

He turned around and wiped his eyes. Not surprisingly, so did every male assistant who worked in the lab. There she was...Nigel's angel. In moments of despair, Nigel had always felt she would sprout wings and fly him to the stars. Erica Straussman, reporter for NYFax and all-around best thing Earth could possibly offer him.

She walked in the room, giving a toothy smile to a few staffers before joining her man. “Come on, Nigel, let’s just ditch your inspection. Go to lunch with me, turn in your resignation later, and move back to my apartment where I can take care of you forever.” She ran her finger playfully down his nose as she hopped into his lap.

Nigel stuttered, then took control of himself. “Honey...this is important to me. It’s budget time...the staff is depending on me...I have to prove myself to...”

“Shhhhhhh.” she said. “I know it’s important. And you know I’m there for you through this whole thing. I still believe you can find something out there...”

“You’d better pray he can find something ‘out there’” came a new, booming voice from where Erica just entered. Tyler Stone, in all his glory, and his cyborg bouncer Winston, to boot. Showtime.

Erica quickly jumped off Nigel’s lap and made herself indiscreet. The staff began to shuffle about, trying to look busy. Nigel himself slowly rose, then walked the small distance from his telescope monitor to where Stone was standing. Then they shook hands.

“Mister Stone...welcome. I hope your visit will be as...pleasurable as I can possibly make it.”

“Mmmm-hmmm.” Stone said. Hissed, almost. “Nigel, quite frankly, I can hardly justify the existence of AARD to the CEO anymore. In ten years, there hasn’t been anything worth spending money on that can’t be diverted to...oh, genetics, for example...So tell me, can you make this inspection last longer than the three minutes we shared last year?”

“Mister Stone...I know how important being able to exploit natural resources is to Alchemax...surely the recent Tritonium salvage from Jupiter is enough to convince you that there is something out there worth finding. We just haven’t found it yet.”

Stone walked across the room. All eyes were now on him, as he moved to the telescope monitor that pointed at a big, black nothing. Looking up blankly at it, he said, “No...you have discovered something. A great, vast, empty NOTHING with no energy readings, no life forms, nothing worth spending billions of dollars on over the past decade. When will you people finally realize that the Earth is the center of the universe, and Alchemax is its axis?”

Nigel was flabbergasted. His assistants all looked at the floor in shame. If Winston weren’t breathing so heavily behind them, you could have heard a proverbial pin drop.

It was Erica who suddenly broke the silence. “Mr. Stone...look at the shockin’ screen again!!!”

With that, everyone turned around to look at the monitor. They couldn’t quite tell what they were looking at, because the entire sector of space they were looking at was flaring in a bright light. If the staff had been stunned before, then they were just plain numb now.

Nigel snapped to his senses. Something’s happening. Here, now, right in the middle of Stone’s visit, something’s finally happening. Oh my God. “Everyone get to your posts!” he shouted.

Reports started coming in immediately.

“Energy readings off the scale!”

“...not solar radiation...can’t be a nova...”

“...entire solar systems are being affected by this thing...”

Stone himself was shaking his head in disbelief. For a moment, he looked as though he didn’t want this to be happening.

“Do we have to have this damned reporter in here?”

“Sorry, Mr. Stone. Freedom of the press, and all.”

“Please. That went out with bell-bottoms and gasoline-powered cars.”

If the table in the Alchemax meeting room hadn't been made of a high-density polymer, Nigel would have sworn that Tyler Stone's hands would have cracked right through it. The pressure coming from his clenched fists could probably turn diamond into coal.

For some reason he couldn't figure, Stone was visibly upset at the AARD's newfound discovery. Could be because of all the new money he'd have to plug into the department...or maybe Stone just didn't like to be proved wrong. In any event, Nigel hoped that the presentation he was about to put on would cancel out his negative reaction. Or at least cause any reaction from the silent Alchemax Board of Trustees.

"Mister Stone...what I am about to present to Erica, the board and yourself is nothing short of astounding, I assure you. I doubt anything like this has been seen since the Heroic Age itself. In fact, compared to a few notes of Reed Richards' ..."

"...the point, Dr. Cavalier." Stone said through...well...stone cold eyes.

Nigel dimmed the lights, and activated a 3-dimensional holographic display of the solar system (for effect...he knew how superficial Alchemax staffers could be). He then highlighted the relative position of Earth, and then the distant area where the event was located.

"This, Mr. Stone, is a region of space roughly 100 light years from where we are now. It's a relatively uncharted, and thus unnamed section of the universe. From what I gathered, the area was thought to be so barren with cosmic activity, that AARD never even considered scanning the sector."

Sadaad chimed in from his seat. "It was through pure chance that we happened to be looking at that region when you walked in. Dr. Cavalier happened to...manipulate the controls in an unusual way today."

"Ahem." Nigel continued. Pressing another button, the aforementioned sector of space became encompassed in a flare of light. "This is as close an approximation of 'the event' as I can create on this hologram. The area it encompasses is approximately one tenth of a light year. It's inconceivable how much larger that area is than our own solar system, let alone the Earth itself."

"We're not entirely sure what happened here. The closest form of energy we can compare this to is the occasional cosmic radiation flashstorms which occur within our own solar system. But this is on a much. Greater. Scale."

Stone was sitting in the same, uncaring position he had been in before. "And...how much greater is it?"

"Mr. Stone..." Nigel said with almost a gasp, "apparently, this cosmic energy was enough to obliterate everything...I mean, EVERYTHING...in that sector of space. It's just a large hole now. I don't know where else in the galaxy you'd find that kind of power."

The entire board turned their heads toward Stone. Clearly, they were surprised by this sudden turn of events. Buzzing could be heard throughout the room. Erica put her hand proudly on Nigel's shoulder. He flashed her a quick grin in the dark.

Stone interrupted. "My, my...this is all so...how should I say this...irrelevant? I might as well care about the next time Haley's comet is flying over my head. You've still to explain to me why Alchemax should be interested in some kind of cosmic...phenomenon...that is clearly beyond our reach?"

Nigel knew this was coming, and he immediately pressed another button. A small line went back from where "the event" occurred, all the way to Earth itself.

"Mister Stone...we've uncovered a small energy trail that leads right here, to this very planet! Whatever it was out there...it has something to do with Earth!"

The buzzing started again.

This time, it was Erica who stepped forward. "That's where I come in. If you know anything about space-time, you know that the event you just saw occurred about 100 years ago. Because of the time it takes light to travel in one year, you understand. But I shan't elaborate."

And now it was Nigel's turn to be proud of her. Here she was, a NyFax reporter, probably hated by every executive in the room...and she was in on one of their greatest discoveries. Nigel imagined a Pulitzer in her future. No wonder they worked so well together.

"With think it has something to do with whatever incident brought about the end of the Heroic Age. Obviously, records are spotty as to exactly what happened in that era. What we do know is that this was the period in which all...supposed...alien contact with Earth simply ceased."

Nigel stepped in again. "Now, the problem is that AARD simply does not have the technology to investigate what happened out there, 100 years ago. We need to know if the power source out there is still accessible in this day. Which is why..." Nigel paused for a moment, then closed his eyes. "Which is why we ask permission to move to Mars One Colony for the time being, and make use of the much more sophisticated astronomy equipment there. And from there...we'd like to get an expeditionary team into space itself."

Erica added, "And I'd like to come along. If there is a story to be told, NyFax wants to be the first to get it. I promise you, the public will hear about it the correct way."

And with that, everyone turned to Tyler Stone. Stone, still sitting in the same position as when the meeting started. The lights came on, the hologram shut down.

And he spoke.

"Permission...denied."

Before the words could even sink into Nigel's brain, Stone stood up and continued. "You said this occurred one hundred years ago, and in a system which is probably far beyond our reach. Sorry, Dr. Cavalier, but I'm not convinced that the cost of all this can outweigh any findings which you probably would never get in this lifetime anyway."

"B-b-but this is outrageous..." Nigel began...

Stone walked right up to Nigel and smugly looked at him. "Please. As if no one here knew that AARD's existence was on the line." With that, he turned to the door and did not look back. "Meeting adjourned."

An hour later, Stone sat in his darkened office. He stared at a lukewarm cup of coffee and his own thoughts.

"Winston" he said, "give me a holofeed to the CEO"

With a holographic distortion, Stone "found" himself in Avatar's office. How very much Tyler hated those blank, golden eyes looking back at him. Tyler looked at his coffee instead. "Sir...they've found it."

"Stone, you will stand in my presence."

Tyler rose from his chair, still looking at his coffee. "Sir...they've found it."

Avatar touched the tips of his fingers together and put them in front of his face. If people thought Tyler was cold, he couldn't imagine what they would say about his boss.

"I...see. How many people know?"

"The entire AARD. The board. At least one person at NyFax, but possibly more."

"And...to what extent does their knowledge range?"

"Their understanding of 'the event' is as good as mine, sir. They are only aware of its existence, and their curiosity is rising exponentially."

"Your response?"

"I shut them down. I told them it would have been impractical for Alchemax to exploit this...thing."

Now Avatar rose from his chair. “ Stone, were I not a holoprojection in your office, I would have killed you seconds ago. You fool.”

The CEO flashed his teeth into a sneer, then calmed down and placed his hands behind his back. “ Stone...the reason humanity is such a danger to itself is because of its inevitable curiosity. Its explorative nature. From the gossip among old crones, to the datafeed two ‘ net-surfers’ share, humans have been possessed by this thirst for information. It is a deadly thing, which Alchemax has sworn to suppress for decades.”

Tyler continued to look at the coffee. He swore he could feel it get colder.

“ You will reverse your decision. You will allow a continued ‘ investigation’ into this phenomenon, guided by the hand of Alchemax. And then...” Tyler would swear that Avatar turned a shade darker. “ ...you will lull them into a false sense of security, and then...you will have them killed. After all...even if AARD does make it into space...you and I both know they’ ll never make it past The Barrier.”

“ See that they don’ t even get close. I expect no less.”

The room became distorted again, and Stone was back in his office.

The coffee grew colder.

And so, fifteen billion years since the Big Bang, and for the first time since his birth, Nigel Cavalier was on another planet. And as an added bonus, he had Erica right there with him.

“ Welcome to Mars One Colony. Please enjoy your stay” a female voice chimed from overhead, as they headed from the landing docks to the city entrance. The warm red glow of the sky could be seen through the glass overhead. Maintenance workers moved here and there, although a few, preliminary colonists added a nice sense of atmosphere. It almost made the alien world seem like home.

Nigel looked into Erica’ s eyes as they held hands. “ Who’ d have thought that a week ago, I’ d could have been at the unemployment lines, while you would be chasing typical...Earth stories?”

“ Not me.” she replied. “ I never doubted you’ d get us here. This was...meant to happen, can’ t you feel it?” She then pulled her floating camera out from her handbag. “ And this little baby will ensure that we can remember it.”

Before the couple could continue to share the moment, a large steel hand slammed onto the camera. Erica hadn’ t even turned it on yet.

Winston.

“ Sorry, no cameras until Mars One officially opens.” He flashed his white teeth as his third, cyborg hand crushed the thing. “ Mister Stone’ s orders.” Then he walked away.

“ Bad sign?” Nigel asked rhetorically.

“ Don’ t even think it.”

The two continued along, holding hands. They decided to explore as much of Mars One as they could before checking into their habitats. The couple went past the shopping areas, the living areas, the mining facility and the Observatory where Nigel would be working. Yet, somewhere around the time they made their way back to the landing bay where they first arrived, the two had once again become enamored by each other. Nigel and Erica became more concerned with holding hands than anything else.

So transfixed were they, that Nigel didn’ t notice the man coming toward them, carrying heavy equipment that obscured his own vision...

“ Hey, watch it!”

Naturally, whatever the man was carrying was the first thing to drop to the ground with a resounding “ thud” . Next went Nigel, then the man, then Erica as well.

“ Terrific” said the man. He was a mousy fellow, about a head shorter than Nigel himself. He had semi-curved short brown hair, glasses, and a goatee. His attire consisted of a bleach-white labcoat with an Alchemax proudly fastened to the pocket. Nigel

wondered where his pocket protector was hidden. Overall, the fellow had an air of pretentiousness about him.

“ Sorry about that...we were...” Nigel began as they got to their feet.

“ ...staring lovingly into each other’ s eyes, more concerned with the twinkling of your lady’ s optics than the important matters at hand. I’ m sure Stone will love to hear how you’ re using your time on the clock” the man finished.

Nigel extended his hand, half wanting to punch the fellow. But with Erica’ s presence, he found his hand becoming an open palm. “ Nigel Cavalier, Alchemax Aerospace. And this is Erica Straussman, journalist and keeper of my heart. And you...?”

“ Don’ t care.” he said. “ But if you must know...I’ m Snyder Harris, chief researcher of Virtual Unreality here on Mars One. An important project, you know, so you may want to be more careful around my equipment.” Snyder began to pick up the apparently undamaged machinery, which looked something like an electronic cannon.

Nigel bent over to help him. “ Ah, yes. You replaced Jordan Boone, didn’ t you? I understand your people had some trouble with the project a few months back...?”

Snyder clutched the thing like a newborn baby, then continued on his way. Not looking back, he said “ Problems with a super-villain and Spider-Man. Stone ordered the research moved off-world to prevent those kinds of problems from happening again.”

As he moved into a side corridor, Nigel could hear him say “ War, and now love. The two most destructive forces in the universe. I wonder if Stone really wants VU to work...?”

“ Jerk” said Erica. Let’ s move on.

That evening, Nigel had taken Erica to the Mars One Observatory. Although the rest of his staff wouldn’ t arrive until tomorrow, Nigel couldn’ t wait to begin some preliminary observations. Plus, Erica always found something romantic about an observatory.

Nigel was looking through a much more sophisticated telescope than the one he had back on Earth, and relaying the information onto the large screen next to him. “ And if you look over here” he said “ you can see the a black hole discovered in 2054. Or rather, you can’ t see it...but the power on this system actually lets us see entire planets get absorbed, if they happen to venture too close. Shall I zoom in?”

Erica walked forward with two steaming cups of tea. “ Oh, I don’ t know...I always like it when you show me something with a little more...light...”

He smiled as he put the cup to his lips. Earl grey. Just like she made for him at home.

“ Hmmm...” he said. “ How about the Crab Nebula. Remember that? I think it was the first system I ever showed, back when you interviewed me four years ago.”

As he zoomed in on that part of the galaxy, a wave of nostalgia washed over the couple. Nigel turned around to say something, but his train of thought vanished as he looked into her eyes. And she looked into his.

“ Lights to one quarter.” he said.

He stood up. She moved toward him. Behind them, comets zoomed, stars went nova, and the galaxy teemed with life on the screen behind them.

They didn’ t care.

The two slowly lowered to the floor. An inexplicable new emotion came across the two of them. For the first, real time ever, Nigel felt as though the entire universe was at peace with itself.

A fatal mistake. So enraptured were they, that they took no notice of the shadowed figure who silently entered the observatory. Nor did they take note of the sophisticated weapon he carried...and prepared to use...

NEXT ISSUE

Had enough of the cheesy romance? Good, because things really begin to heat up in our next issue. Should Nigel and Erica survive this encounter (and you shockin' well know they will), they' ll be on the run with nowhere to go. Nigel will encounter an old friend from Earth, Tyler Stone continues to scheme, and where does the sneaky Snyder Harris fit in it all? And how does a guest appearance by Transverse City' s own Ghost Rider affect what' s coming up? Find out, as we move into the outer reaches of the Solar System and beyond in the Mighty Marvel Manner, in SPACE 2099 #2!!!