

Eclipse of the Soul

“All rise.”

Arlen Rowell had heard the bailiff’s directive before. Now he and other convicted prisoners awaited their sentencing, conveniently done *en masse*.

With narrowed eyes, the judge sent his contempt to the six men and one woman who stood before him. “Killers, all,” he snarled, “but I’m about to give you another swing at the piñata, not for treats, for years.”

Silently the courtroom waited for the judge’s next words. “Instead of what you deserve, death by brain shut-down, I’m offering you life.”

The courtroom buzzed. The judge held up his hand. “Not a good life. In fact, some of you may prefer your easy death.” A light murmur began then died away to hear the terms. “You will be sent to serve aboard one of the Interstellar Havens for Plague Victims…”

The woman prisoner took a step forward. “Freak Ships? Pass. Kill me.”

Such was the reputation of the Freak Ships.

The buzz escalated into a roar. The judge’s raised hand took time to quiet the noise. “Those of you who want to live,” he indicated a woman standing next to an antechamber door, “follow her.”

The woman’s pointed features resembled the rats Arlen trapped in his store’s basement. Unlike the painless death of the rodent box, where a quick dose of gas eliminated the creature, this woman looked as if she were about to be cornered, ready to bite.

Arlen and three other men followed rat-lady. As they left the courtroom, the judge sentenced the remaining prisoners who elected death over life on the ships, the huge crafts holding the survivors of the Fall-Out Plague.

Inside the antechamber, the woman nodded to a guard who shut the door. She glared at the men. "Sit. I'm Loren Drutz, Assistant to the Secretary of Humane Welfare. It's my unpleasant duty to be in charge of the..."

The man next to Arlen finished her sentence. "Freak Ships."

Loren Drutz scowled. "When you get to your ships you can call them whatever you wish, no one will know; no one will care. For the record, your names will appear on the executed list. You will never return to Earth." She smirked. "And I doubt you'll ever set foot on any other planet. You will become the ship's single Normal human, the Liaison."

The guard thudded a valise on the table and opened it.

Loren Drutz removed four black notebooks and pitched them to each prisoner. "Once you've left Earth your only Normal contact will be a space clerk, the unlucky fellow who takes your reports, in person." She tapped the valise. "The only communication allowed from the ships is the six month visit from the clerk. The ship bringing him does not get close. The Humane Welfare clerk flies a capsule, which docks at a special airlock to meet you. As the sole Normal aboard the ships, you, and you alone, can interact with him. Between reports, believe me, the clerk will do his best to forget you, the craft, and the..." She shuddered.

Another man at the table said, "Freaks."

Loren Drutz snarled, "Plague Survivors."

The same man held up his hand. "I have questions."

The corner of Drutz's lip curled. "No you don't. Everything you need to know is in that notebook." She snapped the valise shut and headed toward the door. With her back to them, she tossed her words to the guard. "They're all yours."

The guard pushed a rear door opening into a dark tunnel. “Come with me.” He ushered them into the shadowy space. A whoosh heralded an air shuttle that stopped without sound. They all boarded. The smooth ride through the dimness lasted a few minutes.

No one spoke, giving Arlen a chance to think about what he’d agreed to. What other choice could he make? He’d never see his family again with either decision, but at least he’d duck the death penalty. He wasn’t even thirty and he wanted to live. Live for what? Freaks? He’d missed the chance to square things with his father. He’d never given the man a single opportunity to feel proud. So, life on the mutant ships or death. What did it matter?

Everyone knew about the Freak Ships, but no one mentioned them, as if thinking about the victims of the Fall-Out Plague might bring the curse to you. Perhaps data existed regarding how many people had perished, and how many survived, but it was history, a past well worth forgetting. The government had done a good job helping people forget.

The craft came to an easy stop and the guard cleared his throat. “We’ll wait in that room over there,” he indicated a round chamber a few feet away from the shuttle. “It’s a subterranean room under the rocket port.”

The guard sat down in one of the seats rimming the room. He offered no other explanation.

An underground chamber? For people like us? Arlen had not become accustomed to the treatment of criminals. It had all gone so fast. The break-in of his store, the confrontation of the robber. His small grocery store had done well, made money, and filled a need in that neighborhood. The late hours paid off until the drunken son of the Fire Chief tried his hand at robbery. Arlen tackled the mature teen who pointed a gun that went off during the fight and killed the young man. Arlen’s security camera had caught it all on tape, enough visual

evidence to clear him. Curiously, the tape was lost before the trial. The bereaved Chief and his wife wanted “closure” they said. Their son was no robber, just a kid wanting a candy bar on his way home. Arlen had been railroaded to protect the reputation of the city official.

He looked around him. Although he didn’t know the story of the other three prisoners, they would be thinking about their decision to live as well. Would one of them regret having a fistfight with his father? Had any one of them let pride keep him from making amends before his old man died? Or, was any other man, innocent of a convicted crime, be guilty of not doing one single thing to make his father proud?

The drips of the leaky water fountain echoed in the chamber as each man kept to himself. Arlen hated the quiet moments; they allowed too much time for remorse and he had experienced a lot of them in the past weeks.

The sound of the keyed entry preceded the open door. “Let’s go,” a new guard said. They rode a dingy elevator upwards. Rocket ports were known for their elegant designs, but like life, the ports had their dark side, the hidden underbelly, places good citizens didn’t know about and wouldn’t want to.

The elevator jerked to a stop. “This is the hold of the rocket,” the guard said. Arlen had been on rockets before but didn’t know the hold had seats—with chains.

Inside, the guard tapped a narrow metal door. “Pee now.”

They took turns using the room and were shackled afterwards. Each seat had a single bottle of water. The guard checked the chains and left.

Arlen drank his water. Soon after take-off, the rocket’s pressurized gasses would induce sleep for the faster than light journey. He wondered where they were going and how long it would take. The noise from the engines deafened him. Sleep couldn’t come soon

enough. During the gas-induced sleep, he dreamed of his father, a common theme. He heard the shouts of the argument and telling Dad to shove the Water Filtration business up his ass. He rewound the tape of him stomping out of the house ready to take on the world—by himself. The emotions nearly overwhelmed him, not the least being regret.

When he awoke, the short blasts of the rockets meant the ship was maneuvering into port. Which port? Arlen had enjoyed his prior rocket trips. He paid extra for a porthole so he could see the planet from orbit, watch the landing, and admire the pilot's skill as the vessel lowered into the concave cradle. He would marvel when the stilts unfolded like a ballet dancer to stabilize the craft. There were no windows in this part of the ship. He wouldn't get the landing show. Only the soft bump of the pad meant setting down.

Arlen eyed the narrow metal door and squirmed. Probably a twenty-four hour flight, by his urgent need to pee. Most likely, the passengers would disembark before the men in the hold were taken away. The interminable wait became more of an emergency, but the other men were eyeing the same door. He relaxed; what else could he do?

Finally, two men in air police uniforms unshackled the first prisoner, who headed for the toilet. One by one, they were freed from the chains. They walked single file, with an air cop at both ends of the line. The dark and dusty hallways weren't part of the fancy rocket ports above them. They came to a stop at a hub, a junction of multiple tunnels. After a short wait, each man was escorted by two air cops who took them in different directions.

Arlen's quiet demeanor, his post FTL lag, and the depression regarding his future stifled conversation with his attendants. They stopped at a small office where one cop rang the bell.

A small man, bathed in unhappiness answered. An engraved sign on his desk said “E. Blake.” He gave Arlen the once-over. “You’re the Normal for the Freak Ship, I assume. No, don’t talk; just listen. We’re leaving immediately on a transit ship, headed for the *Benevolence*.” He shook his head and gave a cold laugh. “Benevolence, my ass. If it was up to me...” Blake pulled the trigger on an invisible gun.

Arlen cleared his throat to speak.

“No talking. I’ll tell you what you need to know, which is when we get to the Freak ship, I’ll take the remains of the former Liaison, and you will take his place.”

“Wait,” Arlen said.

The man ripped open his desk drawer, pulled out an injection unit, and slammed its needle into Arlen’s arm through his prison overalls.

Nausea waved through Arlen’s body and the last thing he heard was Blake saying, “I told you not to talk.”