

The Stars Eternal

Written by

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Homestead on the Corner
Story 07

Stillness. Silence -- not as an absence of sound, but as an almost-physical presence. Then -- a voice.

CAS

(dislocated in time)

It must be so... Plato, thou
reason'st well! Else whence this
pleasing hope, this fond desire,
This longing after immortality?
Or whence this secret dread, and
inward horror, Of falling into
naught? Why shrinks the soul back
on herself, and startles at
destruction? 'Tis the divinity that
stirs within us; 'Tis heaven
itself, that points out a
hereafter, and intimates eternity
to man.

(beat)

Eternity! Thou pleasing, dreadful
thought! Through what variety of
untried being, Through what new
scenes and changes must we pass!
The wide, the unbounded prospect
lies before me... But shadows,
clouds, and darkness rest upon
it...

Throughout this speech, a sound like the ticking of a clock grows louder and louder, eventually fading into...

MAIN THEME

FADE IN:

INT. ISPHA HEADQUARTERS - OFFICERS RESIDENCE - 0400

A quiet but persistent alarm sounds. After a moment, someone rolls over in bed, GROANS, and presses a button.

CHIKERE ASTER

(more than half asleep)

This is the captain -- go ahead,
bridge.

(waits for reply)

Hello?

She sits up slightly, then GROANS when she realizes.

CHIKERE ASTER (CONT'D)

(grumbling)

Goddamnit.

She presses a button and turns the alarm clock off. YAWNING, she sits up and stretches.

CHIKERE ASTER (CONT'D)
 (needs caffeine STAT)
 Conn, what time is it?

CONN
 (a slightly tinny voice)
 0400 Bernard Standard Time,
 Captain.

CHIKERE ASTER
 (almost growling)
 And why am I awake at this unholy
 hour?

CONN
 Shiplside prep begins at 0600. You
 requested a two-hour period to
 handle the necessities of your
 biological...

CHIKERE ASTER
 (forced to agree)
 Right, right, I did. Remind me to
 punch myself for that later.

A small electronic chirp, like an old hard drive skipping.

CONN
 (amused)
 Reminder logged.

CHIKERE ASTER
 You're a doll, Conn. Go start the
 coffee, would you?

CONN
 You know, you could just put the
 kitchen systems on a timer. Easier
 than sending me every time you...

A lanky, slightly creaky robot exits the room, MUTTERING.
 Once he's gone, Aster BREATHES OUT, trying not to cry.

CHIKERE ASTER
 (despairing)
 Oh god, it's really happening.

In the next room, a tea kettle starts to boil, sound mixing
 with the whirl of servomotors. It's both familiar and alien.

Aster slowly turns, stands up, and crosses the room. A few gestures on the touchscreen wall open up a phone line.

It rings for a few moments, before...

ESEN
(a relaxed, deep voice)
Captain?

CHIKERE ASTER
(trying to sound
professional)
Good morning Esen. Are you awake?

ESEN
(a little sheepish)
To be perfectly frank, I haven't
slept. You?

CHIKERE ASTER
Only by the most technical
definition. Conn just woke me up.

ESEN
(conspiratorial whisper)
Are we... are we really doing this,
Chikere?

CHIKERE ASTER
(cutting them off)
Of course we are.

ESEN
(taken aback)
But...

CHIKERE ASTER
We've got orders, Esen. We're
soldiers.

ESEN
Funny, I seem to recall joining
ISPHA -- you know, the Interstellar
Peacekeeping and Humanitarian
Administration?

CHIKERE ASTER
Times change.

ESEN
Yes, they do.

CHIKERE ASTER
(strict)
None of that, Esen.

ESEN
I'm only saying...

CHIKERE ASTER
Esen...

ESEN
There were a lot of people on the
other side who could've said the
same thing.

CHIKERE ASTER
(losing control)
Esen!

Esen falls silent.

CHIKERE ASTER (CONT'D)
(BREATHES IN)
You'll be at the launch site at
0600. Understand?

A long silence.

ESEN
Understood. Sir.

The call ends with a chime. Aster SIGHS, then...

SLAMS HER FIST INTO THE WALL. The screen cracks. Behind her,
Conn opens the door.

CONN
Coffee's ready, Captain...
(sees the screen)
Captain! Are you alright?

CHIKERE ASTER
(barely holding it
together)
No, Conn. I'm not alright.

She EXHALES, collects her thoughts, and turns.

CHIKERE ASTER (CONT'D)
Give me that coffee. We have a job
to do.

CONN
 (uncertain)
 Yes -- sir.

FADE TO:

INT. ISC ELEMENTIS - CAPTAINS QUARTERS - 1200

An electronic console chirps awake.

CHIKERE ASTER

Ship log, entry 1A. Captain Chikere Aster in command of the ISC Elementis, on the Barnard to Outworld passage. The crew and I have embarked on our first mission since the revolution began almost five years ago. It feels good to be back at onboard the Elementis... it's about the only thing that feels good about this mission. Helmsman CON-187, Communications Officer Esen, and myself are the only flight crew on this mission. Conn can pretty much run the ship by himself, but Esen insisted on coming with us. There are also two additional passengers, and the less I say about them on this log, the better. Suffice to say that one of them is our mission, and the other is here to make sure that mission is executed. I tried telling command that, as I'm the only human on board, the crew wouldn't be comfortable with a Homeworld Security agent looking over our shoulders, but that request fell on deaf ears. And the other passenger...

A door *whooshes* open behind Chi. She spins in her chair, sees who it is, and SIGHS.

CHIKERE ASTER (CONT'D)

End log.

XANDER

(smiling)
 Captain Aster.

CHIKERE ASTER
 (barely-concealed spite)
 Citizen Xander.

XANDER
 (like he already knows)
 Am I interrupting something?

CHIKERE ASTER
 Nothing important.

She presses a button on the console, switching off the recorder. Xander walks in and sits down opposite.

XANDER
 I was just hoping to get a status report. If you're not too busy, of course.

CHIKERE ASTER
 (telling him to get lost)
 We've reached maximum acceleration now. We should arrive at Outworld transit station in about an hour. Plenty of time for you to get some rest, citizen.

XANDER
 (CHUCKLING)
 I don't need rest, but thank you for your concern, Captain.

CHIKERE ASTER
 (through her teeth)
 Of course.

XANDER
 (supervisor tone)
 And what would you say is the state of crew morale, at this point?

CHIKERE ASTER
 (holding back annoyance)
 I suggest you ask them.

XANDER
 (smiling)
 I'd have no assurance their answers would be honest -- at least in the case of Esen. I could always run a diagnostic on Conn...

CHIKERE ASTER
 (almost mocking)
 Not a good idea. We need him to
 pilot the ship, remember?

XANDER
 (didn't realize that)
 Oh.

CHIKERE ASTER
 (pressing her advantage)
 And besides, Conn's diagnostic
 circuit has been malfunctioning
 since before the war. I can't say
 it would be an accurate reflection
 of his "morale," as you put it.

XANDER
 (taunting)
 Well then. I guess I was right to
 ask you.

CHIKERE ASTER
 (kicking herself)
 Yes. I suppose you were.

XANDER
 Well? What's your evaluation,
 Captain Aster?

Chi sits a moment... Then SIGHS.

CHIKERE ASTER
 If I'm being honest with you,
 Xander...

XANDER
 I should hope you will be, for your
 sake.

CHIKERE ASTER
 (annoyed, but controlled)
If I'm being honest, they've all
 been better. *Much* better. There's
 a... general discontent with our
 mission.

XANDER
 (unhappy to hear it)
 General Discontent.

CHIKERE ASTER
 (not going to repeat
 herself)

Yes.

XANDER
 How general, would you say?

CHIKERE ASTER
 (as close as she can come
 to being honest)
 100%.

XANDER
 100? That doesn't reflect well on
 you, Captain...

CHIKERE ASTER
 (cutting him off)
 Citizen Xander, permission to speak
 freely... and off the record.

XANDER
 (SCOFFS)
 Why are you asking permission? This
 is your ship.

CHIKERE ASTER
 We both know that's not true. Not
 anymore.

Both stand in tense silence for a long moment.

XANDER
 Permission granted.
 (puts up one finger)
 Tread. Lightly.

CHIKERE ASTER
 The crew is not in support of this
 mission. And it's not hard to see
 why.

XANDER
 It's hard for me to see why they
 wouldn't be. She's a traitor.

CHIKERE ASTER
She, Citizen Xander, was a vital
 member of my crew. *She* started the
 revolution that put your bosses in
 power because she believed that
 humans could and should be free.
 (MORE)

CHIKERE ASTER (CONT'D)

She saved all our lives more times than I can remember, along with the lives of countless innocents. And now, for reasons that defy all comprehension, she's decided to take a life instead. If it's hard for you to see why we're discontented with our mission, it's because you don't know Cas. We've been ordered to oversee her execution, but she is not a traitor, whatever else she may be.

There's another long silence between the captain and the agent.

XANDER

(failing to hide his joy)
I'm afraid I will have to include that comment in my report.

CHIKERE ASTER

(defeatist)
Of course you will.

XANDER

And I'd like to inspect the brig before we reach Outworld station, if it's all the same to you.

CHIKERE ASTER

(taken aback)
The... the brig?

XANDER

I'd like to make sure the prisoner is secure before the transit jump. You know how tricky it can be to keep her locked up.

CHIKERE ASTER

(nervous)
R -- right.

Xander and Chikere exit, the door *whooshing* shut behind them.

INT. ISC ELEMENTIS - COMMAND DECK - CONTINUOUS

Computers and monitors beep and chime in an otherwise quiet, dry space.

CONN
(as though watching it
happen)
Aster and the Homeworld agent just
left the captain's quarters.
They're headed for the brig.

ESEN
(worried)
Oh god, they're going to see Cas.

CONN
(trying to be helpful)
I could always trigger a shipwide
alert. What do you think --
decompressing the lower decks
should get them back in a hurry,
right?

ESEN
(shocked)
Conn!

CONN
(genuine confusion)
What?

ESEN
We talked about this!

CONN
(called to heel)
Oh. Right. It was just a... joke?

ESEN
(gentle sarcasm)
Since when did you start telling
jokes?

CONN
(trying to be funny)
Since, I... uh, since I had a funny
bone installed?

ESEN
(CHUCKLING)
Conn, you and I both know you don't
have the hardware for humor.

CONN
(saddened)
I know. But sometimes I wish I did.

ESEN

Why?

CONN

So I could make you laugh.

A moment of meaningful silence -- then Esen leans over to him.

ESEN

It's okay if you can't make me laugh all the time, Conn. You make me smile every day.

Esen kisses Conn on the cheek. There's a small sparking of static electricity when they do.

CONN

(trying to sound annoyed)
You know, I wish you wouldn't do that while I'm lined in to the ship. There's about 10,000 volts running through me right now.

ESEN

(teasing)
Do you, though?

CONN

(reluctantly)
No.
(smiling)
No, I really don't.

INT. ISC ELEMENTIS - BRIG - CONTINUOUS

Chi and Xander are marching down the corridor, clearly in deep conversation.

XANDER

And Esen, she's a...

CHIKERE ASTER

They.

XANDER

What?

CHIKERE ASTER

Esen isn't a she, they're a they.

XANDER

Oh?

CHIKERE ASTER
They're a Temna.

XANDER
Temna?

CHIKERE ASTER
(irritated)
Asexual, agender, sentient plant species naive to Tau Ceti f. One of our strongest allies in the quadrant?

XANDER
(missing the point)
Huh. No wonder they look like a tree...

CHIKERE ASTER
(wincing)
I wouldn't say that around Esen if I were you, Citizen. A lot of Temna find that offensive.

XANDER
(clearly never thought of that)
Oh. Right. So, Esen, *they're* the ship's...

CHIKERE ASTER
Chief communications officer and shipboard diplomat. Temna work in a hive-mind on their homeworld, so they're all slightly telepathic.

XANDER
(impressed)
Must come in handy. And Conn's basically the ship's central computer, right?

CHIKERE ASTER
He's a bit more than that.

XANDER
(LAUGHING)
Oh come on Aster -- she's a they and it's a he? Please tell me you're joking!

CHIKERE ASTER
 (gritting her teeth)
 Citizen Xander, it may be hard for
 someone who's never left the core
 to understand, but there are more
 ways of existing than a strictly
 human experience would suggest.

XANDER
 (backtracking slightly)
 I'm sorry captain, I didn't mean to
 offend. While I'm onboard, I'll be
 sure to call your crew whatever
 they want to be called.

CHIKERE ASTER
 (not what she meant, but
 it's a start)
 I'm... sure they'll appreciate
 that.

XANDER
 And the Castaway? How do you refer
 to them?

CHIKERE ASTER
 (edge of annoyance)
She.

XANDER
 Really? I thought her file said...

CHIKERE ASTER
 She's a Zephryan. They take on the
 gender of the bodies they inhabit --
 at least, she does. Hard to say
 what the other Zephryan did before
 they were wiped out.

XANDER
 So even though she was male
 before...

CHIKERE ASTER
 She was female before that. And
 Temna, in a previous life.

XANDER
 (confused, but amused)
 Then why doesn't she go by *they*,
 then?

CAS
 (butting in)
 Because I happen to live in the
 moment. Unlike some humans I know.

Xander and Aster's footsteps stop. They've reached the
 bridge.

CAS (CONT'D)
 Hello, Chi.

CHIKERE ASTER
 Cas.

CAS
 Who's your small-minded friend?

XANDER
 I'm *Citizen* Xander of Homeworld
 Security, and the prisoner will
 address command staff with respect
 if she wishes to...

CAS
 (flippant)
 Oh give it a rest, comrade Kelvin.
 Not much more you can threaten me
 with when you're already going to
 execute me. Tactical misstep, that.

CHIKERE ASTER
 (to a troublesome friend)
 Cas, behave.

CAS
 (childish)
 Make me.

XANDER
 (with bravado)
 Miss... Cas. Space Command sent me
 to ensure that this mission
 proceeds according to plan by any
 means necessary. If you attempt to
 escape this cell or make any move I
 deem subterfuge, I will shoot you
 dead where you stand. Understood?

CAS
 My my my... Look at you two. An
 executioner and an assassin. I have
 to say, Chi, you haven't traded up.

CHIKERE ASTER
 (irritated)
 Citizen Xander, a word.

XANDER
 (thrown off his rhythm)
 Oh, umm... certainly, Captain.

Aster leads Xander off a little ways, then whispers to him.

CHIKERE ASTER
 You know full well I don't want to
 be here, but I have my orders:
 ensure the complete destruction of
 the Castaway in the Outworld
 singularity.

XANDER
 (annoyed)
 Don't read your orders back to me
 captain. *I* know why I'm here.

CHIKERE ASTER
 Then why, exactly, did you threaten
 to shoot her?

XANDER
 (lost)
 Excuse me?

CAS
 (calling across the room)
 Oh come on, Chi, just let him try
 it! It's the only way he'll learn.

CHIKERE ASTER
 (angry)
 Prisoner will remain silent!

CAS
 (muttering)
 Oh, yessir. I'll just sit here in
 the corner, pretending I can't hear
 you whispering about me.

XANDER
 (to Aster)
 What mistake?

CHIKERE ASTER
 You read her file. She's a Zephyrian
 -- a five-dimensional consciousness
 occupying a human brain and body.

XANDER
 (with disdain)
 I know. It's disgusting.

CHIKERE ASTER
 (explaining to a child)
 So what do you think putting a
 bullet in that brain would do?

XANDER
 It would... umm, well, I suppose it
 would...

CHIKERE ASTER
 It would free her consciousness to
 find a new body. Right now she's
 limited to this one -- so long as
 she's alive. Try to kill her,
 and...

XANDER
 (terribly confused)
 Then why would command order her
 execution?

CAS
 Oh, Space Command. You always send
 your best and brightest, don't you?

CHIKERE ASTER
 (warning her)
 Cas...

CAS
 What do you know about
 gravitational singularities,
 Citizen Xander? Or *black holes*, as
 you call them?

CHIKERE ASTER
 Cas, I will put up the sonic
 shielding if you don't...

XANDER
 (intrigued)
 No captain, it's fine. I want to
 talk to it.
 (to Cas)
 I know enough to stay away from
 them. They're blank spots on the
 map, from which no star cruisers
 ever return. Dead space.

CAS
 (disappointed)
 Hmm. Such a human perspective.

XANDER
 (amused)
 And what's the Zephyrian perspective
 on them?

CAS
 (grinning)
 They are the great monuments of our
 universe, Citizen Xander. The
 sepulchers of stars that burned for
 billions of years in the great
 unending darkness. Suns that saw
 empires fall to dust and planets
 blow away like smoke beneath them,
 that gave life to their children
 with endless, unfathomable love.

(pause)
 And then they fell, and great was
 the fall of them. Their hearts grew
 too great to go on, so they
 collapsed inwardly, drawing
 themselves to one single point of
 near-infinite density. Their
 gravity became so powerful that not
 even light could pass the event
 horizon. A point to which all is
 drawn, and nothing can escape. And
 when all the other stars have
 burned out and the universe grows
 cold, they will remain until the
 utter end -- the last testament to
 life in a dead reality. They're...
 beautiful.

XANDER
 (SCOFFS)
 So that's the Zephyrian perspective,
 huh? *Beautiful?* Hundreds of lives
 are lost every single year to black
 hole collisions, and you think
 they're *beautiful?*

CAS
 (TUTTING)
 Oh, humans. Always thinking in
 binaries. Of course they're
 dangerous. Anything grand is
 dangerous. Forests are dangerous.
 Elephants are dangerous.
 (MORE)

CAS (CONT'D)

Mountains are dangerous if you're standing on the edge of one -- but the view is still beautiful. The former does not preclude the latter.

XANDER

(confused)
Elephants?

CAS

What? Oh, right -- they're extinct, aren't they. Shame.

XANDER

If you're trying to throw me off, then I suggest...

CHIKERE ASTER

(not to be questioned)
Citizen Xander. I think you should return to the bridge. We should be approaching Outworld station by now.

XANDER

(unaccustomed to
spaceflight)
Oh... yes, I probably should.
Which... which seat on the bridge is safest? For the transit jump?

CHIKERE ASTER

(this conversation is
over)
Ask Conn.

XANDER

(trying to maintain his
dignity)
Ah. Right. Thank you, Captain.

CHIKERE ASTER

(go already)
Citizen.

Xander's footsteps retreat up the corridor. After he's gone, Chi SIGHS in relief.

CAS

And here I thought you and I started the rebellion to get the jackboots out of power.

CHIKERE ASTER

(defeated)

He was a Homeworld Security agent during the war. He defected just before the surrender.

CAS

(knowingly)

Ah. I thought I recognized his eyes.

CHIKERE ASTER

Eyes?

CAS

(nodding)

He has the eyes of a man who needs orders just to keep going, and doesn't much care who gives them -- or what they entail. I saw more than a few of those eyes at Nuremberg.

CHIKERE ASTER

(annoyed)

Cas, how many times do I have to tell you...

CAS

(waving it off)

Yes, yes, you're not a student of history, I know. There's still time to learn it, though. Might help you get out of this mess.

CHIKERE ASTER

(irritated, but tired)

We made our own beds, Cas. We both have to sleep in them.

CAS

(statement of fact)

You mean I have to die.

CHIKERE ASTER

You seem pretty okay with that.

CAS

I have my reasons.

CHIKERE ASTER

I'm sure you do.

A long silence passes between the old friends.

CHIKERE ASTER (CONT'D)
Why did you do it?

CAS
Do what?

CHIKERE ASTER
Kill general Rakesh.

CAS
Oh. Right.

CHIKERE ASTER
Well?

CAS
I don't know if I owe you an
explanation.

CHIKERE ASTER
(desperate to understand)
You know you do. We'd won. The war
was over. He was about to become
president. Why would you shoot him?

There's a long pause as Cas tried to formulate an answer Chi
will understand.

CAS
Let's just say I -- I'd seen his
eyes before, too.

Before Chi can reply, the intercom activates.

ESEN
(V.O.)
Captain, we've reached Outworld
station. Ready for transit.

CHIKERE ASTER
(to Esen)
Copy that, on my way.

The intercom shuts off.

CHIKERE ASTER (CONT'D)
(to Cas)
I'm sure you have something up your
sleeve. Don't try it. This is going
to be hard enough for everyone
without you making more trouble.

CAS
 (mischievous, but sad)
 My dear Chi, when have I ever
 caused anyone trouble?

Chi doesn't dignify that with a response, but turns and
 marches out. In her cell, Cas CHUCKLES to herself.

INT. ISC ELEMENTIS - COMMAND DECK - CONTINUOUS

The door of the bridge *whooshes* open and Chi marches in.

CONN
 Captain on deck!

CHIKERE ASTER
 (before anyone can stand)
 At ease. Status report?

CONN
 Outworld station reports ready for
 de-mat. Quantum link established
 with receiver.

CHIKERE ASTER
 (to esen)
 Any local interference?

ESEN
 Negative, captain. Scope is clear
 to 10 AU.

CHIKERE ASTER
 (to conn)
 Systems?

CONN
 All vital systems fully charged,
 captain. Reactor at 90% max output.

CHIKERE ASTER
 Very good. Conn take us into the
 gate. Esen, inform Zephyrus station
 that we are ready for de-mat.

ESEN
 Ay, sir.

XANDER
 (trying to be noticed)
 Anything I should do?

ESEN
 (looks him up and down)
 Is this your first transit jump?

XANDER
 (embarrassed)
 Well... yes.

Esen reaches over, opens a compartment, and pulls out a small metal trash can.

ESEN
 (like it's the most
 important thing)
 Hold on to this. *Tightly.*

XANDER
 (uncertain)
 Um... okay.

Huge mechanical clamps grab hold of the ship, echoing through the hull. Computers beep around them.

CONN
 Station reports ready. Ship scans
 complete. Initializing de-mat in --
 10. 9. 8. 7...

ESEN
 (to the whole crew)
 See you on the other side.

CHIKERE ASTER
 See you there.

XANDER
 (suddenly nervous)
 Wait, what?

CONN
 (in background)
 6. 5. Primaries charged.
 Secondaries scanning... emergency
 backup completed and stored. 2.
 Dematerialization in pro...

A wave of energy passes through the ship, disintegrating the entire crew. Xander SCREAMS before he's atomized.

A long moment of silence before...

INT. ISC ELEMENTIS - COMMAND DECK - A FEW SECONDS LATER

The same wave of energy in reverse as the ship is reconstituted at the receiver. Xander is STILL SCREAMING.

CONN
 (as though nothing has
 changed)
 ...Progress. De-mat complete, re-
 materialization at 90% and rising.

CHIKERE ASTER
 (a little groggy)
 All hands, report.

ESEN
 (almost sounding drunk)
 No contact, captain, scope is
 clear.
 (BURPS)
 Oh, pardon me, Captain...

Xander THROWS UP into the bucket, drowning out Esen's voice.

CHIKERE ASTER
 (after Xander's done)
 Esen, did you inform the citizen
 not to eat his ration pack until
after the transit?

ESEN
 (mischievous)
 It must have slipped my mind. I did
 provide him with a bucket.

CHIKERE ASTER
 Welcome to the far side of the
 worlds, Citizen Xander.

Xander COUGHS pitifully.

CHIKERE ASTER (CONT'D)
 Conn, what's the ship's status?

CONN
 Processing, captain. One moment.
 One moment. One moment...

Conn makes a sound like a mechanical hard drive skipping.

CONN (CONT'D)
 Processing complete. All systems
 reconstituted within...
 (MORE)

CONN (CONT'D)

acceptable parameters. All crew and passenger life signs are normal...

Xander DRY HEAVES.

CONN (CONT'D)

...with the notable exception of Citizen Xander. Recommend removing him from the bridge.

XANDER

(COUGHING)

Listen here, tin-man, I'm not going anywhere until...

CONN

Then keep your seat until the worst of the transit sickness has passed.

XANDER

Oh, so you're giving the orders now, huh? Why I aught to...

CONN

Any attempt to inflict violence on me will result in further damage to your already frail biological architecture.

XANDER

Oh, now I'm *really* going to...

ESEN

Oh, just sit down and rest Xander -- Conn doesn't have a concept of ego. He doesn't realize he's injured yours.

XANDER

(muttering)

No concept of an ego, my ass. Stuck up little sunuva...

Even as he says it, he takes his seat.

CHIKERE ASTER

(trying to get back on course)

Time to target?

CONN

The Outworld singularity is approximately ten minutes away under full engine power.

CHIKERE ASTER

Get us there -- carefully. Esen,
Xander, accompany me to the brig to
secure...

ESEN

One moment, captain -- I'm picking
up a signal.

CHIKERE ASTER

What kind of signal?

ESEN

Not sure yet -- it's being
distorted by the singularity.

CHIKERE ASTER

Another cruiser on the far side?

CONN

Negative captain: the Outworld
transit has been inactive for five
years, and there are no settlements
within conventional engine range.

ESEN

Be that as it may Conn, that signal
is a ship to ship hail, universal
high-band.

CHIKERE ASTER

Are you sure?

ESEN

(incredulous)

I'm the communications officer --
I'd damn well better be.

CHIKERE ASTER

Conn, are you sure there are no
ships in range?

CONN

I already told you that!

XANDER

Well clearly, you were wrong!

CONN

There's no engine signature on
scope! Unless you want to check it
yourself, I suggest you...

ESEN
That signal's getting stronger
Captain... we should be able to get
a visual.

CHIKERE ASTER
Focus monitor one on Esen's
coordinates, Conn.

CONN
Ay ay, Sir.

The console beeps.

CHIKERE ASTER
Conn, what am I looking at here?

CONN
Seems to be... an electrical
disturbance of some description.

ESEN
It's beautiful.

CHIKERE ASTER
But what's conducting it?

CONN
It could be a change in vacuum
state moving along a gravitational
wave. It's never been observed, but
it is theoretically possible...

ESEN
Whatever it is, captain, it's still
transmitting. Should I activate our
receiver?

CHIKERE ASTER
Conn, do you see any risk?

CONN
Negligible, captain.

CHIKERE ASTER
Alright. Esen, open a shielded high-
band channel and prepare to...

CAS
DON'T!

Everyone on the bridge freezes. There's a long, stunned
silence.

CAS (CONT'D)
(genuinely fearful)
Captain... Disable to communication
relay and raise shields.
Oscillating polarity. Now.

ESEN
Holy shit...

Xander suddenly draws his gun.

CONN
Citizen Xander, holster that
weapon.

XANDER
I told that thing I'd shoot it if
it tried to escape, and by god I
will...

CONN
Rethink your course of action
before I undertake violent
countermeasures.

XANDER
(incredulous)
Are you threatening me now?

ESEN
Citizen Xander, I'd highly
recommend taking the helmsman's
advice.

XANDER
Oh yeah? And why's that?

ESEN
Because there's approximately one
half-inch of high-grade aluminum
between us and the infinite vacuum
of space. The last thing any of us
need is a stray bullet puncturing
the hull.

XANDER
I'm just about done being talked
down to by a bunch of alien...

CHIKERE ASTER
Conn, raise shields and de-power
communications immediately.

CONN
Ay ay, sir.

CHIKERE ASTER
Xander, holster your weapon.

Xander doesn't move.

CHIKERE ASTER (CONT'D)
(strong)
Xander, that's a direct order from
the commanding officer of this
ship. Holster. Your. Weapon.

After a moment, he finally lowers his gun.

CHIKERE ASTER (CONT'D)
Good. Now, Cas, I suggest you
explain what exactly you're...

The ship rocks with a sudden impact, shaking. Xander GRUNTS
as he falls over.

CHIKERE ASTER (CONT'D)
Conn, why aren't those shields up?

CONN
Shields are active and operating at
full capacity Captain! It wasn't a
physical impact.

CHIKERE ASTER
Then what was...

ESEN
Captain, I'm getting massive power
fluctuations in the communications
circuits!

XANDER
I thought you shut them off!

ESEN
I did! Someone's trying to overload
them and break through!

CONN
Energy surge is causing a blow-back
effect on the shields -- we're
being pushed off course!

CHIKERE ASTER
Maximum acceleration Conn -- get us
out of here!

CONN
Ay, sir!

CHIKERE ASTER
All hands to battle stations, Alert
5!

A constant, droning alarm begins in the background.

CHIKERE ASTER (CONT'D)
Xander, strap in, now!

XANDER
(freaked out)
Yes ma'am!

The engines roar, but the shaking continues.

CHIKERE ASTER
Conn, they're still on us.

CONN
I know! I know!

CHIKERE ASTER
Esen, switch to visual scanner -
screen 1.

ESEN
Ay sir!

A few buttons beep as they're pressed.

XANDER
Jezo Chris, what is that?

CHIKERE ASTER
(forced calm)
Cas, you have exactly thirty
seconds to tell me what's chasing
my ship, and how to stop it.

CAS
I can do the first, but not the
second. Short answer -- it's a
Jovian.

XANDER
(disbelieving)
What? That's...!

CHIKERE ASTER
Xander, what do you know about
this?

XANDER

It's an old-earth legend -- aliens who lived in the clouds of Jupiter. Beings of pure energy and thought. The commander of the first human colony craft supposedly encountered them in year 1 A.C.E...

CAS

Not supposedly. He did. Adam Ainsley spoke with one of the entities, convinced it to let humanity leave the solar system, and never saw them again.

CHIKERE ASTER

But I'm guessing you have.

CAS

(sadly)
Yes. Many times.

CHIKERE ASTER

What did they do to you?

CAS

If you want to know that, then look out the window. That's where Zephyrus used to be.

ESEN

The... the black hole?

CAS

My people were ancient, but we were only just starting to spread beyond our homeworld. I couldn't wait for the space program to catch up with me, though, so I stole a cruiser and flew out of the solar system. The Jovians detected it and sent one of their entities to investigate. They decided an immortal spacefaring species was too dangerous to spread, and so... well, you can see what they did. I was the only survivor.

CONN

What is this "Jovian"'s intention in attacking us?

CAS
 (SCOFFS)
 Same as it ever was. Trying to
 finish the job.

XANDER
 (darkly)
 I say we let it, then.

Xander raises his gun again.

CHIKERE ASTER
 Xander...

ESEN
 Pardon me, captain.

CHIKERE ASTER
 For what...

Esen punches Xander in the face. He GRUNTS, staggers back,
 and tumbles to the floor unconscious.

ESEN
 (smiling)
 For how much I enjoyed that.

CHIKERE ASTER
 (smiling too)
 I don't think anyone can blame you.

CAS
 Chikere, Focus.

CHIKERE ASTER
 (back to business)
 Right. This thing wants to kill
 you. I'm guessing it doesn't care
 if it kills us all to do it?

CAS
 No more than you would care about
 swatting flies. Jovians share a
 collective conscious -- they see
 individual lives as irrelevant.

ESEN
 (muttering)
 I know a few people like that in
 space command.

CHIKERE ASTER
 How long can we outrun them?

CAS
We can't. They're pure energy --
Lightspeed is their only speed
limit.

CHIKERE ASTER
So they're toying with us.

CAS
(flippantly)
Or hoping you'll fly too close to
the singularity. Save them the
trouble.

CHIKERE ASTER
(suddenly worried)
Conn!?

CONN
We're well beyond the event horizon
captain, but we're starting to
experience some gravitational
shearing.

CHIKERE ASTER
Keep us on a vector away from the
singularity at all times, no matter
what happens.

CONN
Ay captain.

CHIKERE ASTER
How long can the shields hold up?

CAS
They should be able to repel it
indefinitely. But if it manages to
break into the Communications
system...

ESEN
It'll have a way in.

CAS
Pure energy, pure signal. Once
there's a circuit open, it can get
inside the ship and kill us all.

CHIKERE ASTER
Esen, is there a way to isolate the
communications array from the rest
of the ship?

ESEN

Negative captain, the conduits are embedded in the hull and have redundant backups all across the ship. Maybe if I had a day, I could get close, but...

The ship shakes again. A faint, buzzing static begins to come through the console.

ESEN (CONT'D)

Weak signal getting through, captain, trying to scramble!

CHIKERE ASTER

Any bright ideas, Cas?

CAS

I thought you'd never ask, *mon capitaine*.

(taking charge)

Conn, bring us about. Increase reactor level to one twenty and put everything you can into the engines without losing shields.

CONN

(unsure)

Captain?

CHIKERE ASTER

Do it.

CONN

(more than happy to obey)

Good to have you back, Cas.

CAS

Don't get used to it.

(to Esen)

Esen! Take that signal input and splice the cable into the output. The feedback loop should buy us some time.

ESEN

At your service, ma'am.

Esen starts cutting and splicing wires. The engines change pitch as the ship goes into overdrive.

CHIKERE ASTER

(quietly, to Cas)

What are you playing at, Cas?

CAS
 (CHUCKLING)
 You should know better than to ask
 me that. I'm not even sure myself.

CONN
 We're turned around, Cas.

CAS
 Put us on a collision course with
 the transit station, full speed.

CONN
 What?

CHIKERE ASTER
What?

CAS
 You've trusted me this far, now
 trust me a little further. Fast as
 we can go, straight at the receiver
 station!

CONN
 (unsure)
 Captain?

CHIKERE ASTER
 (nodding)
 Do it.

CONN
 Well, it's your funeral.

Conn presses a few buttons. The engines roar.

ESEN
 The entity overshot us, but it's
 catching up.

CHIKERE ASTER
 Hold course, increase speed.

CONN
 Ay... sir.

CHIKERE ASTER
 (to Cas)
 I hope you know what you're doing.

CAS
 And I hope this old bird still has
 a few maneuvers left in her.

CHIKERE ASTER
 (suddenly realizing)
 What did you have in mind?

CAS
 (devilish grin)
 Oh, I don't know... Caseod 6,
 maybe?

CHIKERE ASTER
 (finally seeing it)
 Helmsman Conn! Caseod 6 on my mark!

CONN
 Caseod...
 (grinning)
 Caseod 6 maneuver locked in and
 ready captain. Transit station 10
 seconds and closing. 8. 7. 6. 5. 4.
 3...

CHIKERE ASTER
 Execute maneuver!

A sound like an explosion as the maneuvering thrusters fire.
 For a moment, the sound of the de-mat energy is heard, but it
 doesn't last.

CHIKERE ASTER (CONT'D)
 Status report, Esen?

ESEN
 Minor hull damage along the upper
 portion of the ship -- we must have
 scraped the station on the way
 past.
 (pause - then, confused)
 What is a Caseod 6?

CHIKERE ASTER
 What? Oh, right -- I forgot you
 weren't onboard then. Caseod
 system, planet 6 -- we got mixed up
 in a border skirmish there. Both
 sides decided to attack us at once,
 so Cas suggested plotting a
 collision course towards the larger
 ship. At the last second, we fire
 our maneuvering thrusters with all
 the energy we can give them, drop
 just below the target ship...

CAS

...and the one chasing us collides with it at full speed. Only in this case, it's the Jovian that collided with a transit receiver.

CONN

But what happened to it? My processors were too occupied to see.

CHIKERE ASTER

Transit stations are designed to take energy transmissions and translate them into matter. I'm guessing our disembodied friend there flew into the receiver, tripped the circuit, and suddenly found themselves much less mobile.

(to Cas)

I'm guessing Jovians can't survive in physical form?

CAS

That they cannot.

CONN

Ingenious!

CAS

Elementary, my dear helmsman.

ESEN

Well? What now?

CAS

Now...

Suddenly, a pistol charges.

XANDER

(pissed off)

Now, I place you all under arrest.

CHIKERE ASTER

(out of patience)

Citizen Xander, how many times do I have to tell you to stow that pistol?

XANDER

If you tell me one more time, you won't be able to tell me again. Everyone, hands up. *You* especially.

CAS

For goodness sake Xander dear, you don't need to point that pistol at me -- I'm unarmed. As usual.

XANDER

That's what everyone was counting on the day you killed General Rakesh.

CAS

Well, it would be pretty stupid of me to try the same trick twice, wouldn't it?

XANDER

Up against the wall!

ESEN

Show a little more respect Xander, she did just save all our lives...

XANDER

The same goes for all of you! Step away from the controls and put your hands up!

CHIKERE ASTER

Citizen Xander, you will stand down immediately, or I will put you under arrest for endangering my crew.

XANDER

Space Command regulation 1.45-9: in times of war, Homeworld Security may seize command of any civilian, commercial, or fleet vessel necessary to ensure the safety of the species.

CONN

There is an error in your logic -- we are not at war.

XANDER

Oh, shut up you toaster. We're at war until that *thing* is dead.

ESEN

Um... Captain...

XANDER
 Captain Aster is no longer in
 command of this vessel... and I
 told you to move away from that
 console!

ESEN
 Captain, we have...

XANDER
 (flat, threatening)
 Move. Away. Now.

ESEN
 We have incoming!

Everything falls silent for a moment.

XANDER
 What?

CAS
 Oh yeah, I was about to mention --
 Jovians hunt in packs. That was the
 advanced scout.

XANDER
 (sudden terror)
 How... how many of them?

CAS
 A good twenty, I suspect. Possibly
 more, since they're hunting me.

XANDER
 Oh god...

Someone moves, and Xander CRIES OUT in pain, dropping his
 gun.

CONN
 (surprised)
 Captain!

XANDER
 (pained)
 You broke my hand...!

CHIKERE ASTER
 Threaten my *crew* again, and I'll
 break you. That, Citizen Xander, is
 a promise.

Xander WHIMPERS.

CAS
 (admiringly)
 O captain, my captain!

CHIKERE ASTER
 (grim)
 Battle stations.
 (smiling)
 Once more unto the breach, dear
 friends?

CAS
 Once more.

ESEN
 Once more.

CONN
 Once more!

CHIKERE ASTER
 Conn, get us away from those
 things.

CONN
 (finally with conviction)
 Ay ay Captain!

The engines fire, and the ship rocks.

ESEN
 They're firing on us, Chikere --
 directed electrical charges, by the
 look of it.

CHIKERE ASTER
 (incredulous)
 They're throwing lightning at us.
 Any effect?

CONN
 Negligible -- shields are still at
 75%.

CAS
 They're just probing the shield...
 Hoping to find an opening.

CHIKERE ASTER
 And if that fails?

CAS
Then I suspect there's going to be
another singularity in the Zephyrus
system very soon.

CHIKERE ASTER
(urgent)
Conn! Give it everything we've got!

CONN
I am, captain! We're barely staying
ahead of them!

CHIKERE ASTER
Cas, now would be a good time for a
bad ideas.

CAS
(hesitant)
I've got one -- but you're not
going to like it.

CHIKERE ASTER
When do I ever?

CAS
(hesitant)
Let me rephrase... I'm not even
sure *I* like it.

CHIKERE ASTER
Cas -- I still trust you.

ESEN
As do I.

CON
Me too.

XANDER
I don't...!

CONN
Nobody asked you!

CAS
After it all?

CHIKERE ASTER
After it all.

Cas hesitates a moment, then...

CAS
 Conn, new heading -- 0, 1, -4.
 Maintain acceleration.

CONN
 Ay ay, Cas... oh. Um, Cas...?

CAS
 I know. Trust me.

CONN
 Captain?

CHIKERE ASTER
 I see it too. Do it.

CONN
 (uncertain)
 Ay ay, captain.

The ship rocks again, and something spark off the console.

XANDER
 What's going on? Will someone tell
 me what the hell is going on?

ESEN
 I do believe we're flying into the
 singularity.

XANDER
 WHAT!?

Xander stands up and rushes towards Conn.

CHIKERE ASTER
 Citizen Xander, stand down
 before...

Conn punches Xander in the face, knocking him unconscious
 again.

CONN
 Course maintained, captain.

ESEN
 Conn, are you alright?

CONN
 Of course I am -- he's a
 lightweight. And it was my turn,
 after all.

CHIKERE ASTER
What's the status of the shields?

CONN
Still holding at 73%... Wait.
Energy levels dropping... energy
levels critical! The shields are
down...!

Static explodes from the console. A moment later, ten beings
of pure energy stand sparking and buzzing inside the ship.

ENTITY 1
Which of you is the Castaway?

ENTITY 2
Surrender the Zephyran and you all
will live.

ESEN
(terrified)
Great mother protect us...

CHIKERE ASTER
(worried)
Cas...

XANDER
(GROANING)
So you finally caught up with me,
eh? Took you long enough.

CAS
Goodness, he didn't stay down very
long that time...

ENTITY 1
You are the fugitive Zephyran?

XANDER
What, you don't recognize me in a
new body? I mean, it's not much
like the last one, but I think it
suits me quite nicely.

ENTITY 2
Human communications indicated that
your form was female.

XANDER
Well...

ENTITY 1

What assurance can you give us that you are truly the Castaway?

XANDER

Oh come on guys, you're hurting my feelings here! And I thought we understood each other...

ENTITY 2

You are stalling. This ship is falling towards the singularity. In a matter of minutes it will be engulfed.

XANDER

(darkly)

Well then... guess the question's about to become academic. Too bad you won't be around to debate it.

ENTITY 1

What does the creature mean?

XANDER

The creature means... Conn, what is the status of our shields?

CONN

Shields are... shields are back up!?

CHIKERE ASTER

What?

XANDER

They really should make it harder to access those controls -- anyone with half a brain can initiate a shield disruption without anyone noticing.

CHIKERE ASTER

What have you done?

XANDER

Oldest trick in naval history, captain -- I've lured the enemy onto a sinking ship.

ENTITY 1

(statement of fact)

You will die for your deception, human.

XANDER

(quoting)

"And how can man die better, than
facing fearful odds..."

Xander is cut off by a bolt of electricity. He doesn't even
cry out as he falls.

CAS

"...for the ashes of his fathers,
and the temples of his gods."

ENTITY 1

Lower the shields, or you die next.

CONN

No... I don't think I will.

ESEN

(terrified)

Conn!

CONN

It's okay, Esen. It's okay.

The sound of electricity grows louder and louder.

CAS

Wait!

She charges Xander's pistol, and everyone turns to look at
her.

CAS (CONT'D)

I'm the Castaway. I'm the one
you're looking for.

CHIKERE ASTER

Cas...!

CAS

If you kill one more person on this
ship, then I'll shoot myself and
slip away into a new body. And I
promise you, you'll never find me
again.

There's a long tense silence.

ENTITY 1

Your compatriots will not be
harmd. Surrender, and your death
will be quick.

CAS
 (wickedly)
 So will yours.

ENTITY 1
 You dare to threaten us?

CAS
 (mocking)
 Of course I do. I dare a lot of things. And... oh! Do you all feel that?

The ship is shaking, worse than ever before.

CAS (CONT'D)
 That's the tidal force of a class 9 singularity, about to tear this ship apart.

ENTITY 2
 What!?

CAS
 You lit this fire, gentlemen... now burn in it.

CHIKERE ASTER
 Cas, you didn't...

CAS
 Do you still trust me?

CHIKERE ASTER
 I...
 (long pause)
 Of course I do.

CAS
 You're going to be alright. All of you. I promise.

CHIKERE ASTER
 All of us? What about you?

CAS
 (SCOFFS)
 I'm 8 and a half billion years old. *Billion*. That's too long for anyone to stick around. Even me.

CHIKERE ASTER
 What are you saying...?

CAS

(SIGHS - she's tired)

I've watched the universe expand around me, Chi. I've watched stars die. Every time I look up at the night sky, I know that the constellations I learned as a child have been gone so long that no one remembers their names. That I am older than any world I stand upon. That my own planet is less than dust and ashes.

CHIKERE ASTER

(putting it together)

You... you let yourself be taken prisoner. You knew this would happen.

CAS

If Rakesh had taken power, the whole rebellion wouldn't been for nothing. At least now, humanity has a chance.

(hopeful)

And besides... I've spent my whole life chasing the horizon. This is the only unknown left. The last great adventure of the Castaway.

CHIKERE ASTER

No...

CAS

(no fear, but some regret)

I'm sorry, Chi. Esen. Conn. I wish I didn't have to say goodbye like this. But everything ends. Eventually.

(SIGHS)

The soul, secured in her existence, smiles at the drawn dagger, and defies its point. The stars shall fade away, the sun himself grow dim with age, and nature sink in years; But thou shalt flourish in immortal youth, unhurt amidst the war of elements, the wreck of matter, and the crush of worlds.

CHIKERE ASTER

What?

CAS
 (sheepish)
 Cato. Felt appropriate.
 (smiling)
 See you on the other side, my
 friend.

The ship shakes. The hull shatters. And then...

All is silent.

INT. ISC ELEMENTIS - COMMAND DECK - LATER

The sound of a de-mat fades away to reveal everyone COUGHING,
 GASPING for air.

CHIKERE ASTER
 C -- Conn, status report?

CONN
 Um...
 (pats himself)
 Not dead?

CHIKERE ASTER
 Esen?

ESEN
 Same, captain.

CHIKERE ASTER
 Does anyone know what the hell just
 happened?

CONN
 Reconstituting fragmented memory
 segment.

ESEN
 I don't know either, captain.

CHIKERE ASTER
 Where's Cas?

ESEN
 Isn't she... oh. No, she's not
 here. I could've sworn she was...

CONN
 Memory encode error. Timecode
 conflict - Purging data.

ESEN
 Weren't we just somewhere... I
 don't know, else?

CHIKERE ASTER
 I can't... remember.

ESEN
 I think... I think Cas is...

CHIKERE ASTER
 Cas is gone.

The ship falls silent. Suddenly, Esen's console activates.

ESEN
 Incoming message from Space
 Command, priority one.
 (pause)
 Captain?

CHIKERE ASTER
 Yeah.

ESEN
 Ay, captain.

The communicator beeps as the message comes through.

CHIKERE ASTER
 This is Captain Aster, go ahead
 command.

GENERAL ECHO
 Aster, this is Echo. I hope you
 have a damn good explanation for
 what's going on here.

CHIKERE ASTER
 I'm sorry General, I'm afraid I
 don't know what you're talking
 about.

GENERAL ECHO
 (annoyed)
 You left Outworld transit station
 three days ago, and we haven't
 heard a word from you since. Now
 the station activates on its own
 and re-materialized your ship based
 on the de-mat backup. Except now
 there are only three life signs on
 board.

CHIKERE ASTER
Oh. That would be the bridge crew.

GENERAL ECHO
Aster, I'm only going to ask this
once: where are Xander and Cas?

CHIKERE ASTER
They're... they're...

GENERAL ECHO
(worried)
Captain Aster?

CHIKERE ASTER
(mostly to herself)
Unhurt amidst the war of
elements... the wreck of matter...
and the crush of worlds.

GENERAL ECHO
What?

CHIKERE ASTER
I... Esen, mute channel.

GENERAL ECHO
Captain Chiker...!

General Echo's voice disappears in a wash of static.

CONN
Captain?

CHIKERE ASTER
How do I remember that?

ESEN
I remember it too Captain. But I
shouldn't.

CHIKERE ASTER
You remember dying?

CONN
Likely a hallucination caused by
emergency re-materialization,
Captain. It's a biological
impossibility to remember dying.

CHIKERE ASTER
Cas could remember it. Several
deaths, actually.

The crew falls silent. The communication console beeps.

ESEN
Echo's still on the line, Chikere.
Should I reopen the channel?

CHIKERE ASTER
And tell him what, exactly?

No one has an answer for that. There's a long silence.

ESEN
I... I don't think Space Command
needs an answer that urgently,
Chikere.

CHIKERE ASTER
(grinning)
Conn?

CONN
Yes captain?

CHIKERE ASTER
Take us out of here. Maximum
acceleration.

CONN
Heading?
(pause)
Captain?

CHIKERE ASTER
Surprise me. Let's chase that
horizon.

CONN
(smiling)
Aye aye, Captain.

The ship's engines fire, and the Elementis and her crew take
off into the unknown.

ROLL END THEME
AND CREDITS