
THE

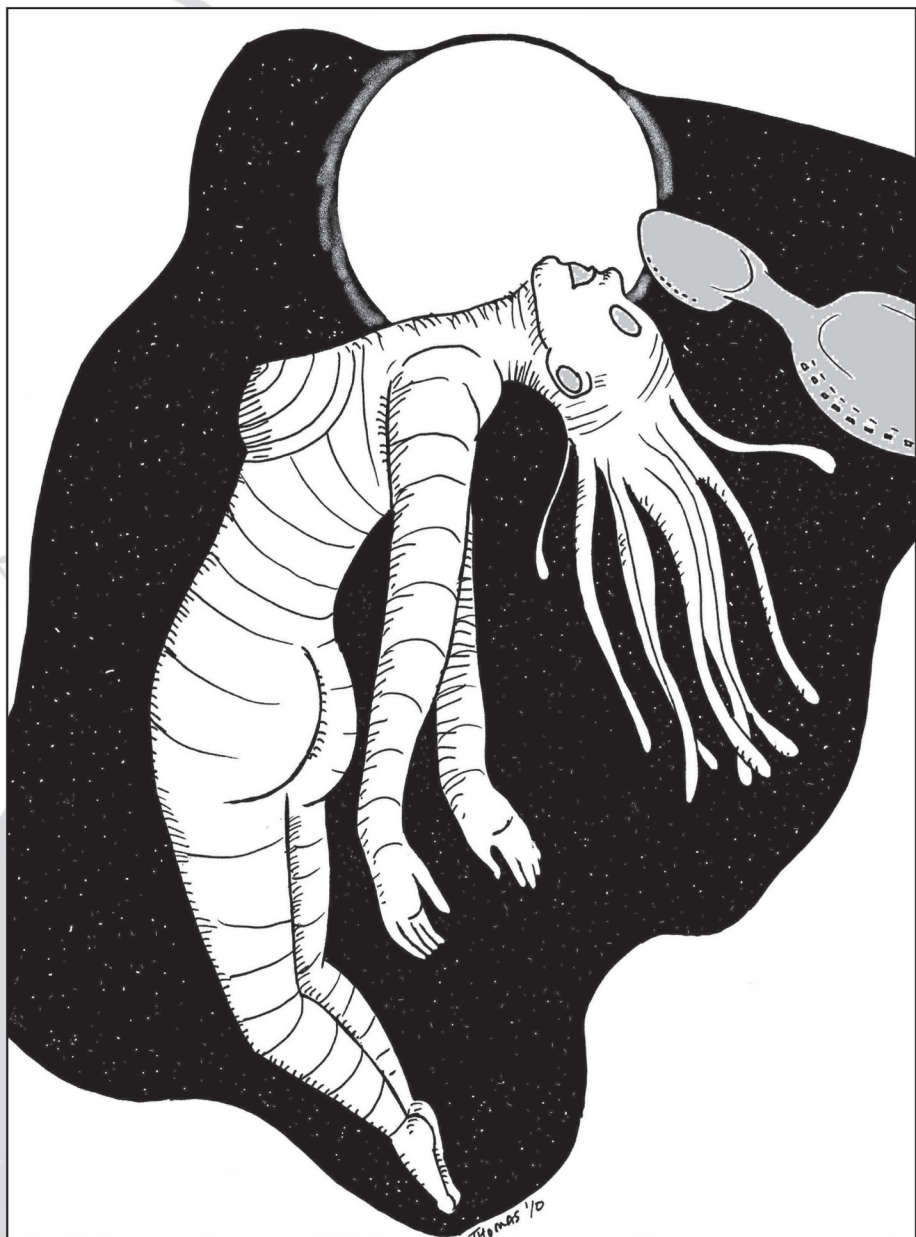
CRYO GAME

JACK MACKENZIE

Illustrated by G. W. Thomas



Rage Machine Books
British Columbia, Canada



Thomas '10

The Cryo Game

I can hear the grapple clamping itself onto the airlock of my ship and it feels like a violation. The sound of metal grinding against metal vibrates down the wall panels and my bare feet can feel the deck vibrating with it like a shudder. My body does likewise.

I pull my bomber jacket tighter around me but it doesn't help against the cold that I suddenly feel.

There's a an echoing boom and the sudden pressure differential makes my ears pop. The bastards have blown the hatch and ruined my airlock. I can feel the deck pounding under their weight as they pile in. The first one comes into view. It is a Rent-a-cop, which surprises me. He's big and armored in black and he is pointing a gigantic weapon in my direction.

In a moment I am surrounded by these thugs – mercenaries for hire – giant black suits that look vaguely insectoid and about a *bazillian* guns, their

business ends ready to hurl death at a bony young woman wearing a thin one-piece and a jacket that is too big for her.

I don't remember putting my hands up but the harsh metallic voice coming from one of the mercenaries' speaker units orders me down on the deck. I drop quickly before any of them decide to help me down. The deck's metal face feels cold against the front of my one-piece. Before I can open my mouth to say anything one of them grabs my wrists and forces them roughly around behind my back. I yelp in pain and am immediately told to shut my mouth, or else...

“Betratina Arris Rankin you are under arrest for the murder of Solianis Fendiarachelli. You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say will be recorded and used in evidence against you in a court of law.”

I shake my head. “You've got it wrong,” I manage, having found my voice at last. “Somebody moved the body! I didn't kill her! It was somebody else! They're setting me up!”

The metallic voice warns me again to shut my mouth. “If you resist arrest your recorded statement will be used in order to pronounce a posthumous judgment against you...”

“You've gotta believe me!” I continue stubbornly. “It wasn't me, it was one of them! Whoever moved the body and then put it back! They must have done something to it!”

Something hard presses into the small of my back. I hear a small, but evil electronic whine and then a snap and then all my nerve endings feel like they're

firing at once. My body goes rigid. I can feel the muscles of my face pulling my lips into a rictus grin.

The universe goes black.

This is why I hate taking on passengers.

The hatch opened with its usual scream of steel against steel and requisite hiss of coolant escaping unsealed pipes in the form of steam. The ramp dropped onto the deck with a clang that echoed loudly in the large open space of the Anathis Station's hanger deck. My new passengers were standing expectantly. I sauntered casually down the ramp as it descended to the steel floor, trying to look like a seasoned space woman and not to let the sinking feeling in my stomach show. They're probably just as disappointed with my appearance as I am with theirs.

There were three of them and I sized them up pretty quickly. Big Dude wore expensive clothes, fashion sunglasses and a scowl. Slightly behind him was Creepy Bald Guy. He was short, stout, and bespectacled with a completely round head that sported an unruly red beard.

In front of both of them was Pretty Girl. She was dark, small, delicate and expensive like a rare flower. She was the only one who smiled.

Suddenly I felt awkward and very conscious of my clothes. They're ship clothes – a one-piece that ends at my calves, ship slippers and over top of it all my oversized bomber jacket that I won from an old, drunk spacer in a card game and which really does nothing to make my bony frame look any bigger

than it is. My hair is a tangled mess that I can never do anything about.

“Hello, folks,” I managed, trying to sound confident and evidently failing. “Welcome aboard the *Cornwall*. I'm Captain Rankin.”

“We know who you are,” Big Dude said, brusquely. “Is this ship safe?”

I was not sure what to say to this open rudeness, but then, I never am sure what to say at the best of times. “She passed her last inspection.” I said.

Big Dude grunted, picked up his carrying case and strode past me into my ship. The others followed suit. Pretty Girl gave me a smile as she passed by and I tried to return it. I smiled at Creepy Bald guy but he was struggling under the weight of three carry cases and ignored it. I followed them up to direct them to the passenger cabins.

I hate transporting people.

My name is Betratina Rankin. My friends (well, other spacers I know... I don't really have any friends) call me *Bony*. That's pretty much me: bony. Thin – angular some call it. An ex-boyfriend once said that I had a face like a horse. That's not even one of the reasons why he is an ex-boyfriend. It's just true. I don't care. I like horses.

I inherited the *Cornwall* from an uncle. It's not a pretty ship. It looks like two lumpy boxes stuck on either side of a stick. One box is for cargo with minimal to no life support. The other is for cargo and for crew quarters. Of course, the crew is just me so the crew quarters are usually sealed off unless I carry passengers, which I don't because I don't like

them.

I could refuse to carry passengers up until about a year ago. See, I don't really get on well with people. People confuse me. What they say and what they mean are often not the same thing. There's this whole body language and inflection thing... subtext they call it... that I just don't get. I don't really listen very well, either. I tend to miss subtleties in what people tell me.

So when I delivered a cargo of concealed illegals to the wrong port and talked to the wrong person at customs... well, I spent a short time in jail. Worse than that, the guy who hired me was connected to a rather large criminal family. The interstellar courts used the cargo as evidence to bring down the entire organization. The guy, his family, and most of the population of the small planet he owned went to jail.

I got a fine and a slap on the wrist.

Naturally after that a lot of my business dried up. It didn't matter that I changed my policies and made sure I got all my instructions in writing. Not too many people will want to hire somebody who is so stupid.

I'm not stupid. I just don't want to play silly *people* games.

Now with my reputation virtually shot and next to no money, I cannot afford to turn down any work no matter how onerous. Even when it involves transporting passengers.

“We're going to *Pearl Seven*,” Big Dude, who I learned had the unlikely name Xeron King, said

gruffly. He hadn't bothered to take off his sunglasses which, I guess, was meant to be intimidating. It suited me just fine. I find eye contact problematical.

I nodded. "Yup. That's what the brief had said when I accepted it."

"Okay. So how long?"

I blinked. "Four standard days."

He nodded, still scowling. "That'll have to do."

I thought that was a stupid thing to say. Speeds through hyperspace are constant. You can't really shave off any extra time. It's pretty simple. Point A in space to Point B in space via hyperspace channel equals X amount of time. Nothing could change that.

Still, I smiled encouragingly. Or at least I tried to. Xeron seemed unimpressed.

Creepy Bald Guy was named Festerming. No one bothered to introduce him, they just called him Doctor Festerming. He didn't talk much.

Pretty Girl was Solianis Fendarachelli. She was an heiress of the Fendarachelli Fortune. So Xeron said, like it was important.

I showed them to the crew quarters. They were standard crew cubicles. The *Cornwall* was an old ship so they were pretty large. You could walk from the door to the rear panel in two steps. Even Xeron could walk in standing upright and not bump his head on the crossbeams in the ceiling. Luxury compared to some of the newer berths.

Of course it wasn't good enough. Xeron scowled some more and breathed out heavily. "I suppose they're all like this?" he said.

I nodded. He scowled at the room some more.

Then at me, his black sunglasses trying to look menacing, I guess. Then he looked away and I led the other two to their cabins.

Now, I lied when I said that all the cabins were the same. There is one that is bigger. Naturally that's my cabin. I've been living in it for years and all my stuff is in there and I'm not going to give it up.

Festerming didn't protest about the size of his cabin, nor did Solianis. She entered with a regal grace, as if she didn't want to be anywhere else in the universe. In the middle of the cabin she turned towards the door where I was standing and smiled.

Her smile was radiant and I think I managed to return it. I'm not sure. I was suddenly uncomfortable and turned away. I heard the door to her cabin slide shut behind me as I walked up the corridor towards the control room.

I settled into the comfortable routine of preflight checks. My communications console pinged, letting me know that the manifest had been squibbed to the ship's computer. I called it up. I don't give a damn what it is, I just like to know where it was all put.

Everything was loaded into the cargo areas below the crew quarters, which was fine. Those holds were all but empty most of the time. The cargo handlers at Anathis are really good, but since my little mistake handlers have tended to be less than thorough when handling my cargo. Either the Anathis handlers were consummate professionals or some representative of the Fendarachelli Fortune had greased a few palms. Probably the latter.

The cargo itself was standard except for one item, which was a stasis chamber. Those were used for

carrying perishables. It was a fairly large chamber. I figured it would be carrying food. Passage on my ship includes meals, but those are standard pre-packs – simple *re-heats*, that sort of thing. Nothing fancy. Not on my budget. If passengers want to dine on *foi-gras* they'll have to bring it themselves. Evidently these passengers had.

That suited me fine. I didn't care about Xeron or Festerming, but I would feel embarrassed having to offer standard pre-packs to someone as refined as Solianis Fendarachelli.

The pre-flight completed I signalled Station Control my readiness for departure and I waited for a slot.

As much as I don't like people, I love engines. Particularly Hyperspace engines. I love the sound of the coils as they spin up and the slight 'pop' sound when the hyperspace window is forced into existence. I love the way that they are integrated into the ships that house them. It is pure elegance to me.

I also know how to keep them running smoothly and sometimes the only way to do that is to get right inside them. Some spacers find that onerous. Spaces are cramped and the requisite lubricating fluids get everywhere. I find the best way to deal with that is to strip down to my bra and panties and climb in.

That's exactly where I was, in the *Cornwall's* drive room, just inside an open housing, my bare feet braced on two different support rods, my knees around my ears, my hands deep inside a relay box with a light welder, half naked, sweating and

covered in engine grease, when Solianis wandered in.

It was two days in to the passage. The passengers had spent most of their time in their cabins or the lounge, or the galley. I kept to my quarters, the control room and the drive room. I had barely caught glimpses of any of them in two days. I hadn't figured on either of them wanting to wander into the drive room, let alone the heiress.

"This is fascinating," she said. Her voice was lilting and musical but it startled me and I banged my head. I turned and there she was, her head stuck into the open housing, her perfect coif and all. She smiled up at me as if the situation were perfectly normal and not awkward at all.

Immediately I felt myself grow hot. I flushed. I could feel my face... hell, my whole body.. turning red. I cursed myself up and down for being so stupid. I knew I should have waited until the passengers were off the ship. What had I been thinking?

"Are you replacing relays?" she asked.

I nodded. That was exactly what I had been doing "Uhh... You... You shouldn't be in here."

"I was not told that there were areas to which I was restricted. I will go." Her head withdrew.

Crap. Now I'd offended her. "Wait." I said. I snapped in the last relay and I clambered out. She was standing in the middle of the drive room, wearing the same outfit she'd been wearing the day she came on board. I was covered in engine grease and sweat and probably stank. I grabbed the onepiece off the floor where I'd tossed it and hastily

shrugged it on.

“I’m sorry,” I kept saying, not meeting her eyes. My face felt hot and my guts clenched. This was an awkward situation and I had no idea how to get out of it. I don’t know why it was suddenly important that she not be offended by me, but it was. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to... I mean... It’s just the drive room is... you know. Passengers don’t usually...”

“I apologize if I have overstepped my bounds,” she said. She smiled what seemed like a well-practised smile. I guess when you’re an heiress you’re taught to smile no matter what. “Do you wish me to return to my quarters, Captain Rankin?”

“Please, call me Bo...” I was about to say *Bony*, but it would not have sounded right, somehow. “Call me Betratina. If you would like to... I mean...” suddenly I was uncertain about what I wanted. A moment ago I just wanted to be left in peace to do what I wanted to do. Now this girl was standing in my drive room, smiling like there was nothing wrong. Yes, I felt awkward like I usually do when I am talking to people, but this felt different.

Maybe she sensed some of what I was feeling. She cocked her head. “Would you like to talk?” she asked.

Oddly enough, I did.

We went to the galley and I poured coffee. We sat at the small table and talked. The words just seemed to pour out of me. I talked about the routines of running the *Cornwall*, her quirks, her capabilities. I talked about my life as a spacer. I told her about my childhood, how I used to play with my

cousins in this very same ship, finding secret passageways behind loose panels. I told her of my horrendous adolescence, my one boyfriend – the one who is now an ex-boyfriend – I even told her about my gaffe and my stint in jail and what resulted from that.

She sat across from me, her small delicate hands curled around her coffee cup, listening intently to everything I said, laughing at the funny parts and muttering sympathetic noises at the sad parts.

When I was finished with my life story I blinked and realized that I had been talking non-stop for over two hours. I blinked. “I'm sorry. I've been talking all this time and I haven't let you get a word in...”

She smiled. “It's okay. I like to listen.”

I laughed. “Your friends must love you.”

“I don't really have any friends.”

She said it so matter-of-factly. I stared at her, stunned. “How can you not have any friends? You're an heiress. Can't you... I don't know... *buy* friends if you want to?”

She didn't say anything, just continued to smile at me. “Would you like to be my friend?” she said after a moment.

I was so stunned by this simple statement. I felt a lump rising in my throat. I didn't trust myself to say anything. I just nodded and tried to smile.

“Good.” she said. “We are friends.”

Friends. The word sounded so foreign but I don't believe at that moment that any other word sounded sweeter.

Solianis smiled and stood up from the table. “It's

late. Good Night, Betratina” she said.

“Good Night... Solianis,” I managed as she returned to her cabin.

I picked up our coffee cups to wash them and was surprised to find that hers was still full. I couldn't recall seeing her take a single sup. I felt stupid and embarrassed then. Naturally she wouldn't have drunk my coffee. She probably only drank the finest coffee, not swill like she'd find on a run down spaceship like mine. She was just being polite. I dumped the coffee, washed the cups and went to the control room.

As I worked going through system checks and monitoring readouts I wondered why an heiress from such a rich family would have taken passage with such a cheap ship as mine. I mean, I love the *Cornwall*, and I'll slug anyone who says she's not a fine ship, but if I'm being honest... there are far better. Certainly more luxurious.

I hadn't thought about it before. I was just happy to have a paying job.

They could have contracted a luxury liner if they wanted to. Why had they decided to travel on my ship? Perhaps they were avoiding attention. Maybe they were in trouble. Perhaps the Fendarachelli Fortune wasn't worth as much as they made out. They wouldn't be the first of the Grand Houses to have squandered all their cash or lost it in bad investments.

After a few hours of pondering I realized that I stank. I was covered in sweat and engine grease and had been for most of the day. Yet Solianis had sat across from me and said nothing. Hadn't even

wrinkled her nose in distaste. That was class.

I cleaned up in my cabin and went to bed feeling better than I had in a long while.

I didn't see Solianis at all throughout the day. I went back to the drive room and fiddled about with the machinery. I kept my one-piece on and refrained from climbing inside any housings. I was anticipating that she would come and talk to me again.

The day went by. I did not see her. On the control room I checked the status of the cabin doors. Xeron King's door had opened and closed three times. Doctor Festerling's twice. Solianis's hadn't been opened once.

I knew it. I had talked too much the night before. She wanted to avoid me so had locked herself in her room.

But then, why had she said she wanted to be friends? Was she just being polite? Or had she, upon thinking about it, realized that having a smelly, bony space jockey as a friend just wasn't up to her standards?

I bounced back and forth between possibilities in my mind for several hours, feeling angry, embarrassed and hurt at turns. But at the end of it all it came down to one thing. I just didn't know. And there was no way that I would know.

Unless...

Maybe she wanted me to come to her? Was that how it worked between friends? Maybe she was feeling just as angry and hurt that I had not come to her cabin to see her. I had not thought of that.

Perhaps she was waiting for me.

I jumped up from the control room chair made my way to the crew quarters. I stood in front of Soliana's closed cabin door and nervously keyed the enter request tab. My heart was pounding in my chest. I could smell my own sweat and nervousness was hoping that it was not as noticeable as I was afraid it was.

The door opened. Solianis stood in the entryway. "Come in," she said. She did not smile.

I entered the cabin. She did not close the door behind us. She still wore the same outfit she wore the day before. It was still pristine. I stood wondering if she had a portable 'fresher unit in her cabin or if she had multiple outfits all the exact same style. I looked around the cabin. Everything was neat. The bed was made. Everything was put away tidily. The room did not look lived in at all.

I was just wondering how someone could possibly do that when she spoke again.

"What do you want?" she asked. She still did not smile and her tone seemed flat.

I was uncertain. I felt my stomach twisting in queasy knots. I felt the old awkwardness creeping back. "I..." I managed to stammer. "I thought that... I mean... after yesterday that you might..."

"That I might want to talk?" she supplied.

I nodded uncertainly. "Do you... do you want to talk?"

She stared at me blankly for a moment and then she opened her mouth wide "NO!" she shouted, inhumanly loud. "I want NOTHING to do with you! GET OUT!"

The shock of her words felt like I was being drained of all warmth. The room began to spin. “But...” I managed to stutter. “You said we were friends...”

“FRIENDS?” she screamed. “WE’RE NOT FRIENDS! WE’RE ENEMIES! GET OUT!”

I managed somehow to back out of the cabin into the passageway where I fell back against the bulkhead and slid to the deck. She stood, framed by the doorway for a moment, looking down at me with an oddly blank expression. “AND STAY OUT!” she shrieked and slammed the cabin door closed.

The corridor spun around me. I felt cold and numb and my head felt like a big bell that somebody was constantly ringing. I stared at the closed door hoping beyond hope that I had fallen asleep and that this was all some sort of nightmare.

I looked over and was shocked to see both Xeron King and Doctor Festerling standing in the open doorways of their respective cabins. They were staring at me. Xeron scowled. Festerling regarded me like he was studying a particularly fascinating experiment.

I managed to find my feet and I stood, unsteadily. I kept my eyes to the deck as I made my way past the open doors. It must have been my imagination but I could feel both of their eyes on me.

I staggered up the passage to my cabin. When the door slid shut behind me I collapsed onto the cold deck. A sound came out of me and I did not recognize my own voice. It was a wordless cry that

expressed all of my anguish and embarrassment.

Why? What had I done? Had I got it all so terribly wrong? The night that we had talked... that *I* had talked... she must have just been listening out of politeness. Maybe I said something inadvertently that made her hate me? Was it the trouble I had gotten into? I shouldn't have told her about it. How could an heiress be friends with someone who had spent time in prison. But why had she insisted that we were friends? And why had she completely changed less than a day later?

My mind whirled like that while I lay curled up in a ball on the floor feeling the tears streaming down my face. I laid there sobbing, confused about her reaction and even more confused about why I felt so wounded to the very core by it. Mercifully I exhausted myself and finally fell into a troubled sleep.

The next day I felt sick and sore. The navcomputer announced that we were approaching our exit vector. I went through the prep routine like an automaton. My head felt hot. My body felt cold. But mostly I felt alone. More alone now than I did even three days ago. Even more alone than the worst moments after my arrest.

We slid easily out of hyperspace and the sublight engines kicked in seamlessly. I took over navigation. We were right on top of the Pearl system. I contacted space traffic control on Seven and announced our arrival. I was given an orbital slot. I keyed the coordinates into the navcomputer.

I sat back and stared at the viewscreen, watching

the *Cornwall's* slow approach and feeling nothing, almost numb.

“Captain Rankin,” Xeron King's voice from behind startled me. I jumped out of the captain's chair. He stood just outside the control room hatch. He was wearing his sunglasses and his scowl. “Can you unlock the doors to the cabins?”

The request did not make any sense to me. I stared at him like an idiot for a moment, not understanding what he was asking.

“Captain Rankin? Can you unlock the doors?”

“Are they locked?”

His scowl deepened. “Solianis' door is locked. I've pressed the entry tab and I've knocked but she won't come out. Can you unlock her door?”

I felt my face redden as the memory of our encounter last night flooded me with shame. “Maybe she just...” I started.

“Can you please unlock her cabin door,” King insisted. “I'm concerned about her safety.”

That woke me up. The crew cabin doors could be controlled from a panel in the control room. I pulled out the control key from the pocket of my jacket, keyed the override switch.. There was a red *locked* icon beside the indicator for Solianis' cabin. I toggled it open. The icon changed to green. “It's unlocked,” I said.

King moved back along the passage towards the cabin. I followed, although I'm not sure why.

King went right to Solians's door and opened it. He stepped inside. “Solianis?” he said. Then; “DOCTOR FESTERMING!”

Festerming came out of his cabin. He pushed me

aside and dashed into the open hatch of Solianis' cabin. I inched cautiously forward and peered inside.

Solianis was lying on the floor, her outfit, the same one she'd worn the entire trip, still looked immaculate. Xeron King and Doctor Festerling crouched on either side of her prone form. Festerling held up her wrist. Feeling for a pulse. He dropped her hand and pressed two stubby fingers to the side of her neck. He looked up at Xeron King and shook his head. "I'm afraid she's dead," he announced.

I felt my legs give way underneath me. I fell hard to the deck. My head suddenly felt like it was being squeezed, or that what was inside was suddenly too big to be contained by my skull. My chest felt tight and I couldn't breathe. "Dead?" I squeaked.

"She's been strangled." Festerling continued calmly. "You can see ligature marks on her neck."

"Murdered?" King said, then stood up. "I have to contact the authorities." he strode out of his cabin and went back into his, closing the hatch behind him.

I looked back into the open hatch. Festerling was still crouched over Solianis's body. He gently pulled away a few strands of loose hair that were covering her face. Then he looked up and fixed me with an impassive gaze. "Her cabin door was locked all night. Were you were the last one to see her alive?"

What little breath I had suddenly left my lungs. "What?" I managed, shocked at his words.

"It seems you were the only one who had access

to these cabins,” he said, calmly.

My head was spinning. “But... I didn't... You don't think that I..”

Festerming stood up. “I don't know what to think. But the evidence points a certain way. In order to be certain, I need to get some equipment from my case. Can you open the cargo hatches?”

I stared at him for a moment, then I stood. The ship spun around me as I made my unsteady way back to the control room where I again used my key and unlocked the cargo hold that held the passenger's belongings.

I sat heavily in the command chair. I keyed the intercom. “The cargo hatch is open.” I announced. “It's number four.”

“Thank you,” Festerming's response came through the speaker. I flicked it off and sat back in my chair.

None of this made sense. It was like a nightmare that I couldn't make myself wake up from. I hadn't killed Solianis. I couldn't have. Even though she had shouted at me – called me her enemy – I wouldn't have hurt her.

Then who did? King? Festerming? But no one could have gotten into her cabin. The door was locked. Unless she let someone in.

I checked the ship's records. The door had remained locked all night. But that was impossible.

I sat up, thinking furiously. Perhaps someone had been in her cabin all along. After she had closed the door in my face last night I had seen King and Festerming in their cabins. It couldn't have been one of them.

A stowaway? It seemed impossible but it made sense. A stowaway would have had to have been hiding in her cabin. Would have to have been in there all night, murdered her, then waited until...

Until the doors were unlocked and opened!

I leaped out of my chair and dashed down the corridor to the still open hatch of Solianis' room. When I got to the hatch I stopped and stared inside, frozen in disbelief.

The body wasn't there. The cabin was empty and the body was gone.

I stood staring at the empty space on the deck where Solianis's body had been a moment before. Had Doctor Festerming moved the body? Had the stowaway taken the body and escaped? But why?

I didn't know, but I did know that something strange was going on. I ran back the passage to the control room. I had to contact somebody. I was in over my head and I needed to contact some kind of authority. I closed the control room hatch and reached for my keys to lock it.

My keys were gone. I had a moment of panic but I forced myself to calm down and think rationally. I must have dropped them along the passage.

I went back down the passage and spied them on the floor just outside Solianis' cabin. As I stooped to pick them up I looked in to the still open hatch. Again, I froze in shock.

I stared in disbelief as Doctor Festerming crouched over the body of Solianis. She was back on the floor, lying in exactly the same position and just as dead as she had been before.

Festerming was staring down at the body and his

face wore the first discernible expression I had seen on it since he came onboard. It looked like an expression of revulsion.

He looked up at me, then stood up, grabbed a blanket from the bed. He had to pull it free because the bed was made as if it had not been slept in. Then he draped it over Solianis' corpse.

I backed down the passageway, my keys in my hands. Once in the control room I closed and sealed the hatch. Then I contacted space traffic authority and informed them that one of the passengers had died while in transit.

“Okay. Sit tight,” the calm voice ordered through the speaker grill. “A shuttle is already on its way to you. The passengers will be collected. You will remain with your ship until we can assess the situation.”

“But there's something odd. The body was moved and then...”

“A shuttle is already on its way to you. The passengers will be collected. You will remain...” the voice would not listen to any of my protests. It just kept repeating the same instruction.

I had no choice but to wait for the ship that was on its way. I had no idea until they docked that they were the armoured rentacops that Xeron King had called in. The ones with the big guns. And the stunner.

I have no idea how long I've been unconscious. I come to and open my eyes but everything is still black. Either the stunner has blinded me or the room I'm in has no lights.

I'm lying on the cold deck. I try to roll over and every single muscle in my body screams in protest. I ignore it and find a bulkhead. It helps me to stand up. Along the way I find the lights. I blink while my eyes adjust. I'm a little confused at first, then I realize where I am and I let out a little laugh.

The idiots have put me in the one storage unit on the main crew deck. It's a small room, supposedly used for crew storage. All my stuff is in my cabin so I always keep this storage compartment empty. The rentacops probably thought it was some kind of brig.

Which was foolish because they don't know about the escape hatch.

It was at the rear bulkhead. I'd found it even before I'd inherited the *Cornwall*. My cousins and I used to play all over the ship as children. I know every bolt and panel on my own damn ship and I sure as hell know which bolts and panels can be removed to allow a quick escape.

I slither behind the panel and allow it to fall back in place behind me. The rentacops would be in for quite a surprise when they came to check on me, but it wouldn't take them long to figure out what had likely happened. I have to move fast.

I clamber through a tangle of wiring and slip around a series of crossbeams. I undulate through an access shaft to a short drop at the end, then squeeze underneath a bulkhead.

I end up in a crawlspace behind the cargo units. It's narrow but my bony frame is able to move unerringly along until I find the one that I'm looking for.

I pull off the back panel of cargo unit number four and slip inside. I flick on a small service light and survey what's around me.

Their luggage is still here. King's, Festerming's, Solianis'. I figured that the passenger's gear would still be here. Personal possessions are usually impounded until the investigation is over. I don't know how long the rentacops will be lumbering around my ship and I'm taking a bit of a risk that one of them isn't going to be pawing through it at some point, but I need to have a look through it first if I am to find any evidence of who had actually killed Solianis.

The storage units are large but they're a bit awkward for crawling around in when they're full. I squeeze around a stack of cases that's been pushed to the back. Near the front, towards the access hatch is clearer. Sitting right at the hatch is the stasis unit.

It's huge! They must have brought several banquets with them for the voyage. My stomach growls at the thought of food. I haven't eaten anything since just before I'd had my awful encounter with Solianis

I have never opened a passenger's case before, but I'm a fugitive now, at least until I can clear my name, and I'm starving. I reach over and fumble a couple of buttons and latches until the top of the unit unseals and slides open.

I stare into the unit in absolute shock. Solianis' corpse has been placed inside the unit. It isn't a stasis chamber. It's a cryo unit.

The blood drains from my face and suddenly I can't breathe. There she is in all her finery, still

wearing the same outfit that still looks immaculately pressed. I am shocked even further when she opens her eyes, catches sight of me and breaks into a smile. "Betratina!" she says.

For a moment I'm telling myself that this isn't real, that I'm still locked in the storage cabin, unconscious on the floor having some sort of post-stun hallucination. I fall back, my ass hitting the cold floor of the storage unit hard. I try to scramble away from the suddenly animate corpse.

"Betratina, what's wrong? Are we both in Doctor Festerling's lab?"

I shook my head but it was no good. I'm still really here in this cramped storage locker talking to a girl who is supposed to be dead. "You're... you're alive!" I manage. Then suddenly nothing else seems to matter. I throw my arms around her and hold her close. She places her arms around me and we hold each other.

"I don't understand," I mumble into her hair. "I saw you on the floor. Xeron and Festerling said that you were dead."

She pulls away from me and looks into my face. Then she looks away for a moment. She seems to be thinking about something very calmly, as if she were calculating re-entry vectors. She looks back at me.

"Solianis Fendarachelli *is* dead," she says. "She was murdered on *Anathis*."

"Anathis?" I shake my head. "You were alive on Anathis! That was where I picked you up!"

"Solianis was dead when she came aboard your ship."

“But I saw you!”

“You saw me. Not Solianis. Solianis was in this,” she says, tapping the side of the cryo unit.

“You're not Solianis?”

She smiles and shakes her head. “No. I regret having to deceive you. I also regret making you upset. I was only following instructions. I hope that we can still be friends.”

None of this is making any kind of sense. My mind is whirling and threatening to keep whirling until it's out of control. “Who are you, then?”

She smiles. “I am MRA-77654-8. Although Doctor Festerling calls me Maria.” and right before my eyes she changes. Her skin seems to melt and shrink. The colour fades away. The life seems to drain out and all that is left is metal. I look into her... its... eyes. They are shiny, black and reflective.

She's an android – sitting up in a cryo unit and wearing an expensive dress. She's my only friend in the world and she's a damned android.

It all makes sense. That was why she never changed her outfit. Why her bed was never slept in. It explains why she was suddenly not there dead on the floor and then there again.

“You pretended to be dead,” I say. “Then when the door was open...”

The android nodded. “You unlocked the cargo container,” she... it... *she*... looked around the cargo room. “...*this* one. Doctor Festerling and I retrieved the body from this cryo chamber. I carried her to her cabin and arranged her on the floor to match my position. Then I came back here and Doctor Festerling sealed me inside.”

I stared at the android. “So he made you to look like Solianis? Why?”

“Solianis was worth a lot of money. Sometimes, when the risk of her being kidnapped was deemed too great, I would take her place.”

It all made sense. Except for one thing. “Who killed her? The real Solianis, I mean?”

“Xeron King, of course.”

“Xeron King?”

She nodded. “He and Festerling cooked up this plan to frame someone else for the murder.”

Someone else. *Me*. Who better to take the rap than a disgraced spacer that nobody would miss?

I can hear heavy footsteps approaching from outside the storage compartments and my guts are seized with panic for a moment. There could be only one reason that they would be down here. They're coming to collect the passenger's luggage. I have to get out of here now, but I haven't found anything that proves that I'm innocent.

Nothing, that is, except for the android.

I grab her hand. “You're coming with me,” I order.

The android – Maria –climbs the rest of the way out of the cryo chamber. I pull her to the back of the compartment and I slip through the loose panel, dragging her after me.

With her wrist firmly in my grip I lead her through the narrow, in-between ways inside my ship. The android can move in ways that a human being cannot. Her outfit catches on some exposed wiring and she is forced to slip out of it, but she keeps up with me as I make my way further into the

lower cargo areas.

There is a tiny auxiliary airlock that is non-standard. It's an escape hatch if I'm ever in bad trouble. Today I figure the trouble is bad enough.

There is an atmosphere suit in a small locker. Both tanks are full.

"Can you survive – can you function in a vacuum?" I ask the android as I pulled on my suit. She nods.

I check my suit's seal as best I can. I close the inner airlock, cycle out the air. I attach a clip to my suit and I take hold of the android's wrist. The android surprises me by wrapping her arms around me and holding me tight. I reach out and open the outer door.

The outrush of air knocks both of us off our feet. The safety clip prevents us from tumbling out the airlock and I note that the android was right to hold on to me as tight as she does. I would not have been able to keep a grip on her wrist.

There are a series of rungs outside the ship. I grip one tightly and detach the clip from inside the airlock. I swing us out of the airlock, the android keeping her firm grip around me. Our feet are pointing outwards and my hand are above me gripping the rung. I reach out and grip the second rung. Once I'm sure of my grip I let go of the first, then slowly swing us towards the second.

The android, either through impatience or concern about my air supply, suddenly shifts herself. She wraps her legs around my torso and reaches up with both hands and grabs on to the rungs. She takes over, moving more quickly and

unerringly than I or any human being ever could. All I can do is hang on tight and hope she knows what she is doing.

She gets to the end of the row of rungs, then turns her black, reflective eyes to me. I look about to get my bearings. We're just at the ship's central stanchion. The control hub and the major cargo hold – the two lumpy boxes – are at either side. We need to cross over to the other side. There's just storage over there – no life support – but it's a perfect place to hide for the moment.

I'm just trying to figure out how to indicate to the android which direction I want to go in when her voice comes through my suit's internal headphones. “Which way?” she asks.

I'm startled for a moment until I figure out that she must have an internal transmitter and has found the frequency for my suit's radio.

I explain to her where we need to go. “There's a small hatch just a little over the rise of the hull,” I explain.

She's off and gone, hand over hand, moving quickly. She's grabbing onto rungs, protrusions, anything she can get the slightest grip in. I have to close my eyes against the dizzying pace.

Soon we're at the hatch. I climb up and key in the entry code and we're inside again.

I keep a reserve of oxygen in the major cargo hub. I choose a medium size cargo hold and divert the oxygen there. Once it's pressurized I remove my suit.

The android's skin becomes opaque. She is

Solianis again, pale, naked and bald. “How do you do that?” I ask.

“I have a polymer resin coating around my frame that I can control. I can make it transparent or I can add pigments and change its shape. The hair is polymer filaments that I can control.” As she says this her hair grows from her scalp and becomes Solianis' hair. “I can control its shape and color.” The hair goes curly, then straight, then wavy. It turns auburn, blonde, red, green and then purple and finally back to black again.

For a moment I am envious. I would like to be able to change my hair and my body at a whim. It would certainly help me to get out of this jam that I am in. I breathe a heavy sigh. “How did Solianis die?” I ask

The android – Maria – tells me. I have to ask a lot of specific questions, but eventually I get the whole story.

Xeron King was an employee of Fendarachelli incorporated, an organization which is dedicated to maintaining the Fendarachelli Fortune and helping it grow. He was hired to protect Solianis from others who would do her harm but also from herself. She was a very young and very rich woman and getting into trouble was not difficult.

Xeron King, unfortunately was trouble. He would turn a blind eye to her excesses, clean up the mess afterwards and collect a lot of cash in return for keeping quiet. Solianis thought she could turn the tables on him and initiated a sexual relationship. Perhaps she thought that she could control him in this way. It backfired.

Maria did not know exactly what happened. They were taking a tour of the Fendarachelli Holdings. It was pure public relations. Solianis was to show up at events, meet and greet investors, that sort of thing. That was why Doctor Festerling was along with Maria who would occasionally stand in for Solianis when things were deemed too dangerous.

Having a perfect double that could perform all your boring duties was an ideal situation for a young woman with a taste for trouble. Maria wasn't certain what had happened but soon Xeron King found himself in over his head. Solianis threatened to bring rape charges against him if he did not agree to her every whim.

Perhaps it was an argument, perhaps an accident, Maria didn't know, but King ended up strangling Solianis. Then he threatened Festerling into going along with his plan to cover up the murder.

Festerling put the body in the cryo unit to confuse the time of death. He then did some research to find a transport ship captained by a spacer with a history. He needed one who had spent time in jail, who was not well regarded and who could not afford decent legal counsel. I fit the bill nicely.

Festerling instructed Maria to talk to me. He just wanted to establish that I had spent some time with "Solianis". After that Festerling instructed Maria to make me angry. That would establish an enmity between us and give enough of a motive for me to kill her.

It wasn't perfect, but with the right timing there

would have been no doubt that only I could have killed her.

“So you only became friends with me because Festerling asked you to?”

“No,” Maria says. “Festerling only asked that I spend time with you. The rest was up to my own discretion. You talked. I listened.”

I let out a mirthless laugh. “I talked you ear off. I’m sorry.”

“An apology is unnecessary. I had to convince you that I was Solianis and it occurred to me that it would be natural that we would become friends. So I did. I owe you an apology for making you upset. Friends, I understand, do not do that to one another. I had to because I was following Doctor Festerling’s instructions. I did not anticipate having a chance to apologize to you as, had all gone as planned, you would be arrested for murder and I would never see you again.”

“Well, I’m happy that I’m not under arrest and I’m happy to be able to accept your apology.”

“Then are we still friends?”

I stare at her for a moment not sure what to say. Just hours before I was patching up my battered feelings after she rejected me. Feeling a heart sickness I had never felt before. I shook my head and squinted my eyes as I tried to process my feelings about all of this. Then it came to me clearly. She’s an android. A machine, like the engines of my ship. I always felt that I got on better with machines than with people. I guess this just proves it. “Yes,” I tell her. “Yes. We are still friends.”

She smiles. I know it's just a programmed response, but it still feels good to see it and I smile back. "Will you help me?"

"Of course I will. That is what friends do, isn't it?"

I have a friend. And my new friend is going to help me get out of this predicament. I feel as relieved as I do profoundly sad.

They start towing the ship. It's not under power, but I can feel that we are moving. They must have realized that I've escaped. They're probably going to dock us at Pearl Seven Station then try to flush me out.

That suits me fine.

I strip off my one-piece and give it to Maria along with the ship slippers. We're going to have to make an appearance sooner or later and I do not want any unnecessary distractions. I pull the atmosphere suit back on and we make our way back to the airlock. As soon as the airlock hatch opens to hard vacuum Maria takes over, wrapping her legs around my waist and grabbing the rungs, hand-over-hand.

I look up and I can see Pearl Seven Station looming large. I can't see the tug that's towing us and I hope that no one spots us. They could pick us off easily. I look up at Maria. She still looks like Solianis and for a moment I panic. She looks so vulnerable, a tiny girl in a one-piece climbing like a monkey, her hair flowing weightless about her face, yet in her sure grip I feel perfectly safe.

Soon we're back into the habitable area. It's

deserted. The rentacops have gone and they've left a mess everywhere. Almost everything is broken and the cargo hatches have all been forced. For a moment all I want to do is collapse and cry. I'll never be able to afford to fix it all.

Perhaps Maria senses my distress. All she does is put a hand on my shoulder. It is the lightest touch, but it is enough to galvanize me back into action. I dash to the drive room. There are serious offences for damaging hyperspace drives and I hope that the rentacops knew that. They've obviously done a search, but the drives look like they haven't been touched. I open up a panel to satisfy myself. Even the light welder is still where I left it.

The ship shudders. We've docked. I grab the light welder and we make our way to the forward hatch. Along the way I explain my plan to Maria.

The forward hatch opens with a scream of metal and steam. I can hear sounds in the hanger bay – voices startled by the sudden opening of the hatch of my ship. I don't know if I actually hear it or just imagine the sounds of big guns being cocked and aimed unerringly at the hatch.

My heart is in my throat as I grab Maria and point the light welder to her face. “Don't shoot!” I shout out the hatch. “I'm coming out!”

Nervously we make our way down the ramp. There only about half a *bazillian* rentacops in the hanger, their guns pointing in my direction. There are some official looking station crew. Off to the side I can see Xeron King and Doctor Festerming.

Perfect.

“Don't shoot!” I yell again, trying to sound menacing but only sounding desperate. That's okay. Desperate works just as well. “Don't shoot or I'll kill Solianis Fendiarachelli!”

My statement has its intended effect. Everybody is confused now and uncertain. All except for Xeron King and Doctor Festerling who begin to panic.

I keep moving forward. I give Maria her cue. “Help!” she screams in Solianis' voice “Please do what she says! She's going to kill me!”

The rentacops are fidgeting now, torn between what they want to do and what they know they shouldn't (at least not with so many people watching). The more interesting reactions come from Xeron King, who begins to back away. Looking for a way out, and Doctor Festerling who moves towards us, his hands outstretched. “NO!” he shouts his voice choked with fear. “Don't hurt her!”

“Please, help me!” Solianis wails so convincingly that I almost lose track of what I'm doing. I wave the light welder menacingly.

“I'll kill her!” I threaten.

“No, please!” Doctor Festerling is right in front of us and tears are streaming from his eyes. “Don't hurt her. She is a very valuable piece of equipment! Please!” Festerling of course means the android and I am surprised to see him so emotional. He was like a robot himself while on board. This is the first sign of any humanity he has shown and it is over his own machine.

This has caused incredible confusion and I can see Xeron King about to use that to make his getaway. That doesn't work for me.

“Where are you going, Xeron King?” I shout. He freezes just as he is about to turn and run. “Don't you want to see how this plays out! This is your game, after all!”

King turns back to face me, a look of unreserved hatred on his face. I decide to make him angrier. “After all, you killed the real Solianis Fendarachelli!”

I give maria her second cue and her skin melts away to reveal the android beneath. In that moment everyone in the hanger is stunned taking in this new twist. No one sees Xeron King pull out a gun and aim it at my face, but I do. I can see down the barrel of his energy weapon.

What happens next is a blur. Maria jumps in front of me, wrapping herself around me, shielding me from impending death. I can hear the weapon fire. Someone screams and so do I. Suddenly the air is alive with gunfire and I drop to the deck with Maria sprawled on top of me.

Maria goes stiff and suddenly I fear the worst. “Maria! MARIA!” I scream, trying to lift the android off of me so I can see if she is alright. She holds me down and she is strong. I cannot resist.

Suddenly her face is over mine. “Are you hurt?” both of us say in unison.

I laugh. I cannot help it. The android cocks her head and, although her skin is translucent, revealing the metal structure underneath, somehow I sense that she is smiling.

When the armoured rentacops pull me up I see Xeron King's body lying on the deck. Much of it has been burned away. I see Doctor Festerling

lying dead on the deck as well, shot in the back by King's weapon.

Naturally I am under arrest. Again. They throw me into a featureless cell. The first thing I do in the cell is lay on the hard bunk. Pretty soon I'm asleep.

I am woken by the arrival of three representatives from the Fendarachelli Fortune. Maria had told the whole story in exhaustive detail. As an android her memory is admissible as evidence, so the case against Xeron King is all tied up neat and pretty.

The Fendarachelli family is, naturally, grieving the loss of their daughter, but they want to make absolutely certain that I know that they acknowledge that the murderer was Xeron King and that justice has been done in his untimely death and the fact that I have been a victim of his attempt to cover up his acts is not, in any way, the responsibility of the Fendarachelli family or any of its holdings. The various divisions of Fendarachelli Holdings rely heavily on spacers for transporting goods and would not like to have any representative of that profession feeling any sort of ill-will towards the Fendarachelli Family or any of its Holdings...

They go on like that for a while before coming to the meat of the issue. The Fendarachelli fortune will pay for any damages incurred to my ship during the passage from Anathis Station, up to and including its docking at Pearl Seven. All I have to do is agree not to take any sort of legal action against them.

Maybe I should hold out for more. They seem

really keen to avoid any scandal and maybe I could get a better deal than the one they're offering me. Maybe if I had time to contact a lawyer.

But honestly, there's only one piece of Fendarachelli property that I'm interested in.

The *Cornwall's* forward hatch opens silently. No coolant escapes as steam and the ramp pads softly on the deck with barely any noise at all. I stroll down the ramp in my new shipsuit. My hair is freshly cut and is pulled back into a neat braid.

There are a number of people wandering around the hanger deck of Pearl Seven. I'm just happy not to see any rentacops or guns. I scan the sparse crowd but I cannot find the face that I am looking for.

"Betratina?" a quiet voice nearby says. I look down and see an unfamiliar young woman with pale skin and red hair carrying a suitcase. "Betratina!" she says again. "It's me!"

"Maria?" I approach her and she smiles. I can't help myself. I throw my arms around her and she returns the embrace. It feels good. Very, very good.

"You look different," I say, stepping back to look. She's the same height and build, but a different face and hair.

"I couldn't continue looking like Solianis Fendarachelli," she says and that is true. Solianis Fendarachelli's horrendous murder was all over the news. "I've deleted that template from my memory. Is this form not suitable? I can choose a different one."

Suddenly there is a beautiful young man

standing in front of me. The transition is so smooth I nearly miss it. She's suddenly gained height as well – she... *he* – is just slightly taller than me. “Perhaps this,” she says in a perfectly masculine voice.

My eyes must have widened in surprise. I can feel my face turn red. Suddenly she is back to being a pale young woman. She looks troubled. “I’ve embarrassed you.”

I shake my head and laugh. “I’m sorry. It’s alright. It was just... unexpected.”

I smile at her for a moment before taking the suitcase she is holding. “Come on. I’ll show you to our quarters, then we can hit the stars.”

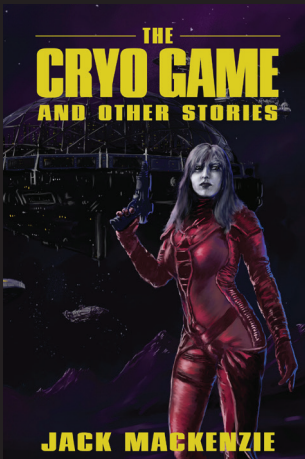
“Will you teach me how to fly the ship?”

I smile as we enter the control room. “This is courtesy of Fendarachelli Holdings.” I say proudly standing behind her brand new co-pilot’s chair.

FROM THE DARKEST RECESSES OF THE MIND TO THE DARKEST CORNERS OF THE GALAXY

These are tales of the future twisted and turned by the trends of the present. Like a funhouse mirror that reflects imperfectly, these are tales seen through a glass darkly.

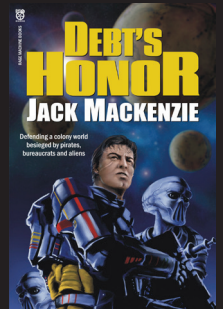
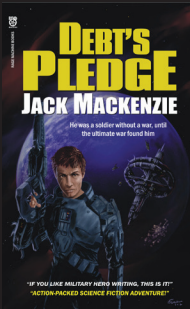
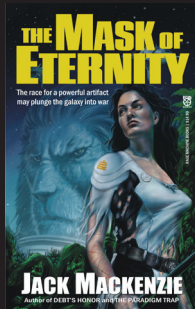
From a new consciousness birthed in a glitchy computer program, to a warning of the future unheeded by the first emperor of Rome.



From the events of H. G. Wells' *The Time Machine* told from the Morlocks' point of view, to a look at the Beatles if they had never become famous. From a brain in a jar who solves galactic mysteries, to a space jockey accused of murdering a very rich passenger

These are tales from dark worlds, encounters with the fantastic and brushes with eternity.

DON'T MISS THESE OTHER EXCITING SCIENCE FICTION ADVENTURES!



Visit us online:

darkworldsquarterly.gwthomas.org

Author's website:

jackmackenziewriter.wordpress.com