

Bold Horizons

Bold Horizons sample

Prologue - Birth

1

The Early 22nd Century

Hell. I'm in Hell.

The Earth was scorched, once lush forests had been turned to ash, rivers flowed with lava instead of water, and the sky was a sheet of billowing sulphur, red and black clouds burning the horizon. Moments ago, the seas of the Arctic had boiled, the sands of the Sahara had turned to glass, and the once glorious cities of humanity had fallen to rubble.

The roar of harsh winds slowly died away around him. "Welcome to the end of the world." It was a woman's voice from behind him. Jason Mackenzie turned to face the source, his finger-length hair blowing wildly in the searing breeze. His dark eyes felt as if they were melting in their sockets, and concrete clusters rolled across the ground as he shuffled his feet. Dust spun in wild twisters that rose from the ground like towering infernos.

He saw the woman, he recognised her. Katy. *It can't be you, I killed you.* Watching the planet crumble around him, Jason was bewildered. He felt like he was the peace in the eye of a storm of hellfire. "The end of the world? I must be dreaming."

Katy smiled at him, that trademark grin he'd loved so much. "This is a nightmare, actually, but at the same time you really are here. It's confusing, but the world is about to end, and you *are here* to witness it." She pointed up at the sun, the clouds breaking above them as if by command. "This is the way the world ends." Suddenly feeling watched, Jason noticed a black figure in the corner of his eye. When he turned to look, it had disappeared.

Katy stepped closer to him, put her hands on his shoulders and kissed him, full of passion and longing, as if a thousand years had passed since they'd last seen one another. Hearing cracking and creaking around them, Jason opened his eyes to see the ground begin to crumble beneath his feet as the world fell away from them. Debris flew passed them in their embrace, swirling in a helix that encompassed them both. The water that should have been locked into the dirt evaporated in waves as the wind swept away layers of the Earth and the clouds above began to dissolve into nothingness. Moving apart, Katy's hand slipped into Jason's, fingers clenching tightly. Looking up, Jason saw the sun rapidly shrink, a black swarm consuming the light, causing the sky to turn darker than Jason had ever thought possible. Once the darkness finally consumed the world, the dead star above them burst into ribbons of rainbow light and all trace of gravity evaporated, Jason felt a planet give way beneath him, and he understood that the sun had exploded and Earth had been destroyed with it. Jason blinked and found himself in a blank white space. Katy relaxed her grip and stepped away still facing her beloved.

Jason stood still, shocked by what he had just seen. Finally his mouth began to form words. "Was that what happens if I fail?"

Katy stood still, no emotion evident on her face. Slowly, she began to shake her head. "No." Her voice was amazing, filled with a depth that was almost... alien. "That is what will happen if you succeed."

His patience had worn thin, he temper fuelled by the destruction he had witnessed. "How? How

could I have caused that?" Jason shook his head in confusion. *How could I have destroyed a world? Destroyed our home?*

Katy stepped forward, her hand stroking the side of Jason's face. A loving smile appeared on her angelic lips. "This isn't a warning. This is a gift. Soon you will know the truth, soon you will see the path that brings you here. Only then will you understand your role in this story. I will see you soon." Closing her eyes, she kissed him again, softly, gently, lovingly.

"This is the way the world ends, Jason, and you have to decide if it should be prevented."
Then Jason Mackenzie awoke.

"WHAT DO YOU WANT FROM ME?" Even as Jason Mackenzie's scream resounded throughout the laboratory, he collapsed unconscious into the unexpected arms of a trio of nurses.

"Get him onto the bed."

Jason began to shiver violently, his limbs flailing and striking the staff. "He's going into shock, dose him quickly." The nurses struggled to lift him onto the silken bed, the guards grasped his arms and legs and strapped them to the table as the anaesthetic took effect. Once Jason was secure and sleeping, the attending doctor gave a thumbs up to the observation room.

"Thank you doctor. Guards, take the pod down to R&D, we have some anxious researchers waiting." Kim Phan stepped into the adjoining decontamination unit, waited for the green light and walked into the research-turned-medical lab.

"Doctor, how is he?" Kim rubbed her hands with disinfectant as she approached the bed. The doctor finished injecting into the sleeper's arm and switched on the monitors.

"If you would give me a second Director, I've just injected the med-implant." The monitor readings spiked before settling into steady rhythms for heart rate and breathing. "He seems fine. Blood pressure and heart rate are ideal for his age, height and weight."

Kim smirked, a usual action for her. "What age, 25 or 83?" Towels surrounded the patient, drying up the thawed cryogenic liquid and heated blankets were draped over his naked form to warm him. "Will he be alright?"

The doctor checked the readings once again. "Physically, his vitals read almost normal. His vitals would suggest he's fast asleep, as if nothing had happened to him. Psychologically though? I simply don't know. This is unprecedented, to say the least, so I would suggest having an expert on hand."

Kim rolled her eyes. *Not a shrink, please*, she thought to herself. "Do you know anyone? We only had a few hours notice, and we spent that converting this research lab into a medical ward."

"Not on the permanent staff, I usually bring in a third party for annual evaluations. I can get them in if you like," the doctor offered.

I really hate shrinks. "Not at the moment, we must have somebody on the staff who could help. The director tapped the communicator hanging over left ear. "Computer, run staff search for anyone with a Psychology qualification."

The observation window flashed up with the search results. Kim walked over to it and used her finger to scroll through the roster, noting their departments. "Here, Katy Parell. Pilot, two years of undergrad psychology."

"An unfinished undergrad? That's hardly qualified, we can just call our usual agency and ask they -"

Phan looked to the doctor, and then to Jason. "She's an ex-airforce pilot, just like him. Bring her in."

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Part One - Crawl

2 Ignition

4 Years Later

Ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two, one and... the floor. Junior engineer Victoria finally let go of the ladder and pulled a palm light out of the back pocket of her jumpsuit trousers and flicked it on. The corridor was just under a meter wide, with a panelled wall on one side and open power conduits on the other. Vicki cursed the tiny vessel's designer for making the walkways so cramped. With her back to the bulkhead and the torch illuminating the way ahead, Vicki shuffled along slowly, carefully avoiding the power lines opposite her. At eighty meters long, *Home Free* was short compared to some of her rival freighters, but her mid section bulged out to the sides to contain four large cargo bays. With the exception of the bays and main engine section, *Home Free* and the other Colombo class ships had six decks. The upper two levels were for crew cabins and essentials such as a medical bay, kitchen and storeroom, the third deck was for main engineering and the various tubes used to flow fuel to the engines. Deck five was uninhabited and held the power reactor and gravity generator, and deck six held the landing gear.

Vicki was working on deck four, a deck which was only visited when all other options had been exhausted. Public knowledge of the fourth deck was that it held only support beams and struts to help keep the ship together. In actuality, deck four was the lifeline of the freighter, containing the air recycling system and the computer system core. The corridor Vicki was moving along spanned from bow to stern, and it served both purposes of the deck. Nicknamed the 'Northwest Passage', the corridor pumped air slowly from the recycler along the ship to the arterial tubes which carried the air to the decks above. The air would be warmed when breathed out by the crew, and convection funnelled it into ceiling pumps and down into the recyclers, continuing the circuit. As a result, the cold air kept the shipboard temperature around eleven degrees Celsius; making the Earth seem remarkably warm when the crew returned home.

Vicki kept shuffling until she reached the primary power junction. A power overload had fused the relay several hours ago and since then Vicki had been trying to reroute power through the secondary junction. Having completed that, she now had to inspect and repair the primary relay. Thick bundles of fibre optic cabling bound together in black rubber looked as though they had been injected randomly into the control box. Putting her palm light to rest on top of the junction, Vicki pulled out a handheld computer from her pocket and fed a loose cable from the control box into the tiny computer's input socket. The small screen sprang to life as the connection was established. Setting the computer to run a diagnostic on the junction, Vicki used her ear-comm to report the repair status to the captain on the Bridge. Her computer beeped indicating the primary diagnostic had finished and it told her exactly what she'd expected it to say. Pulling off the junction box cover, she reached her hand in and curled it up behind the control board. Her deft fingers quickly found the melted mass that was once a system processor and removed it with a sharp tug. Without a spare on board, the system would have to survive without it until they reached a dock. She replaced the cover and tapped on her tablet a few times to start the repair program which would automatically recalibrate the power transformer settings to use the secondary processor. Realising that the

automatic repairs would take several hours to fine tune, Vicki left the computer where it was and returned slowly to the ladder. She had climbed two rungs when the freighter shook violently. *Home Free* was under attack.

Pirates! "Broadcast a distress call on all frequencies, I want the *Ranger* here now! Menezes, evade their fire; Patrice, power the EM generator and deflect those bullets." As the pirate's heavily modified courier vessel swept in front of the Bridge window, the Captain held down a comm. button on her console, "Vicki, the chief is down, I need a damage report!"

Two decks down, Vicki scrambled over the Engineering room, redistributing power around the damaged sections. Glancing at the status monitor on the main wall console, the engineer tapped her ear-comm, "Engines one through four are offline, probably destroyed; five is under fire. One more hit and we're adrift." Dashing to the console, she slapped off a warning light that had begun to strobe, "Shit! We're leaking engine coolant into space!"

"What about the AM drive?"

She quickly checked Anti-Matter control board, flicking some of the power switches on and off, waiting for some effect. "Sorry Captain, the Arms have been damaged, we'd only blow ourselves up if we tried." The antimatter containment ball stood empty in the middle of the room, its lead shell an ugly sight against the brushed aluminium background. The status monitor showed that the Arms, exhaust tubes that channelled the antimatter out through the rear of the ship to provide massive thrust, had indeed been almost destroyed. As suddenly as it had begun, the shooting stopped. Vicki spent the next few seconds trying to manipulate the remaining engine before a heavy thud reverberated through the deck plates. One look at the overview monitor told her everything. "Captain, we're being boarded."

5 Days Later

"What would your girlfriend think if she knew about this?" Stephanie Pearson rocked carefully in her chair, the steel legs clacking on the deck plates of the mess room. Her hair, black with fading red colouring, was tied up in a ponytail and swung quite freely in the eighty-six percent Earth standard gravity. Her two-card hand lay face down next to a stack of multi-coloured plastic poker chips on the camping-style table. Sitting opposite, Jason Mackenzie was staring at his own hand and the upturned river of cards. "Jason?"

The executive officer rolled his dark brown eyes and threw the last of his chips into the pile. "She broke up with me. I got the mail this morning. Pair of nines." He let the cards slip onto the table.

Stephanie settled her chair. "*Let's be friends?*" Full house."

"Something like that."

Stephanie stretched her arm over the table. "Hand them over."

Jason was surprised, before realising that he knew her well enough to have expected this. "No sympathy? I've just been dumped, my heart ripped from my chest and thrown out to rot in the cold expanse of space," Jason said whilst mocking up a sad face.

Stephanie chuckled. "Hell no, Boss. I've gotten to know you well enough to know that you saw this coming, and that you could've prevented it. And you try to convince her to take you back, except that..."

"That I know her reasons and I agree with them. I wasn't on Earth with her; I'm too focused on what I want to do with my career."

Stephanie stood and looked down at her friend. "Exactly. Now, boxers mister. You lose again." Sighing, Jason tucked his thumbs into the waist band before Stephanie's polite cough stopped him.

"Standing I think."

Jason stood reluctantly and repositioned his thumbs. "You're evil, you know that right?" The

ship shuddered suddenly. Jason gave his friend a querying look. "Attack?" He asked as he picked his clothes up from the floor.

Stephanie took a moment to feel the deck beneath her feet. "No," replied the engineer, her eyes turned from playfulness to dread. "Worse."

Jason raced onto the tiny bridge. Captain Reynolds, who both owned and ran the Bold Horizons freighter, sat in the centre seat atop a raised platform that allowed him full view of each of the five bridge crewmembers and their stations. In his hand he held an outdated command interface pad, indicative of the years of service both ship and commander had behind them. Horizons was the fifth Colombo-class freighter ever built, and the current captain only her second commander. Such pads had long since been replaced by a fold away display on command chairs such as those on the new Leonov-class SpaceScope patrol ships.

"We've blown an engine coolant tank," Jason announced.

Reynolds looked away from the small terminal. "I can see that. I'm going below to help Pearson, you have the bridge Mackenzie."

Jason moved the block the captain's exit. "Sir, in an emergency the captain's place is in command. I can help her..."

Reynolds smiled and shook his head. "Jason, never ask your crew of anything you're not prepared to do yourself. Besides," he patted the arm rest of his chair. "She's my ship; I have to take care of her." The captain ducked through the hatchways and ran towards the engine deck.

Jason settled into the chair and turned towards the communications station. "Find the closest SpaceScope patrol ship and request assistance, I want them on hand in case we lose containment."

Stephanie checked the pressure gauge for the number two engine and cursed aloud.

"Never swear at a lady, Stef." Reynolds jumped the last couple of steps down to where the engineer was busy at work. "Especially when she's unwell. What's the pressure?"

"Three times over safety levels, I'm surprised we haven't blown this engine either." Stef unwound a release valve, the last of three that controlled plasma flow from this particular engine.

Reynolds checked the number one engine gauge and swore himself. "We must have run into dust and clogged the exhaust. I'm going to EVA to clear it."

The captain was in a spacesuit in a matter of minutes, and outside the ship quickly after. His heavy breathing crackled over the radio channel, breaking the waiting silence inside the ship. "Christ Pearson, how did this much crap build up so quickly?"

Stephanie kept an eye on the captain on a wall monitor, watching the feed from one of the hull cameras. "We didn't exactly get a lot of downtime last time where we were in dock," she said half-sarcastically. "There must have been a pocket of dust already inside the vent when we left Earth."

"Hear that Mackenzie? Always listen to your engineer when they say they need maintenance time."

Jason smirked at the advice. "I'll remember that one. How long until you get it cleared? I don't like you being outside."

"No idea. We've never had a blockage this bad. Stef, you wanna talk me through this?"

The engineer clicked her fingers rapidly as she thought about the problem. "You're going to have to take off the vent mesh and we'll try a blow-out."

Everyone heard the captain sigh. "I'm unscrewing it now."

Stephanie switched off all the engines completely and waited for the captain to finish his part of the work. Outside, Reynolds pocketed the last of the screws into his suit pocket and grabbed hold of the mesh grill. "Stef, I'm going to give myself a short burst on the retro thrusters, keep track of me." A second later, his EVA chair let out a short burst of gas, and captain and grill began moving away from the ship. Releasing the grill, the captain guided his unit back to the hull and secured a cable to one of the many fastening hooks dotted around. "I'm clear of the grill."

A few dozen meters below him, Stephanie got to work. "I'm bringing the engine back up to full. The pressure should push the blockage into space." The pressure bars began rising once again, already well past the blue safety and rushing past the red line. "Anything?"

Reynolds carefully peered into the exhaust. The thick grey and brown pate was stubbornly refusing to move. "Nothing. How about I use one of my spare thruster packs and ignite it inside the blockage?"

Stef took a moment. "That would clear it, but you're taking a big risk. I'm shutting the engine down again."

Outside, the captain unbuckled himself from the thruster cradle and began removing one of the gas canisters.

Stephanie banged the pressure gauge repeatedly. "Captain, the engine isn't shutting down again, the pressure's still building."

"What's wrong with it? Scratch that, how long until it blows?"

The deck plates started vibrating violently. "A minute, maybe two."

Reynolds grabbed the canisters with one hand and pulled himself into the exhaust with his other. "Come on Horizons, don't let me down." He pushed the canister into the muck a few centimetres with his hand. Flipping over in the null gravity, the captain braced himself against the sides of the pipe and pushed with both feet, feeling relieved as he felt the canister sink into the debris. Feeling the ship shake as he pulled himself out, he screamed down the radio "I'm blowing the tank."

Jason was watching the monitor and the captain hit the remote on his suit's arm just as he noticed the cradle just off camera, anchored a few meters away from its user. "Wait, the cradle!"

Inside the vent, the canister released its gas in a single burst, driving a hole through the dust back into the exhaust. With a tunnel to follow, the pressurised engine coolant burst through, throwing the blockage into space. On the rim of the vent, the captain smiled as he watched his task complete. "...cradle!" The EVA cradle smashed into the captain's back, throwing him into space as well. Still tethered, the cradle began spinning around in circles.

On the bridge, Jason stood up and fiddled with the monitor. "Come on come on come on." Eventually the screen turned to the spacesuit's life support readings. The steady beeps of Reynolds' heartbeat slowed to a painful silence.

3 Experience

It was late afternoon, local time, as *Bold Horizons* drifted into *Olympus* station above Mars. The patrol ship *Ranger* had towed the freighter for almost a week after the engines had burnt out clearing the exhaust. Jason used the retro thrusters to slow the ship to a stop relative to the station's orbit and notified the dock master when the anchors and airlocks had sealed.

With his body unrecoverable in the void, a memorial service was held aboard the station in Reynolds' memory. Kim Phan, CEO of SpaceScope and personal friend of the late captain, was on Mars commissioning a new patrol ship when she had received word. The middle-aged woman had proceeded to organise the memorial and reading of Reynolds' will. It was a small service held on observation deck at the top of the station. Phan read a heartfelt eulogy and led a toast in his name. With no family, Reynolds had almost adopted his crew, and each member had a thousand stories to share. As the night was winding down and crew members returned to guest cabins on the station, Phan found Jason leaning against one of the windows, gazing towards the sun.

"It's been a little while." Phan patted her protegee's shoulder. "There's something I want to talk to you about. I was going to talk with you when you got back to Earth, but since you're here... Tony would've wanted some good news to cheer this place up." Jason smiled at the sound of Reynolds' first name. Nobody had ever called him that, only ever 'Cap' or 'Sir'.

Jason turned around and looked at Phan. "He was a good man, a good captain."

"And a good friend. And hopefully, a good judge of character too. In with his will I found a glowing personal review with your name on it, and a recommendation. You might have heard mumblings about a new project we've been working on at SpaceScope."

Jason took a sip from his glass as he tried to remember something Stephanie had told him. "A new engine? Lightspeed or close right?"

Kim smirked coyly. "Something like that. Some of the R&D guys have been playing with the antimatter engines that power all our interplanetary drives, and they think we might be able to use the same system to give a higher power output and breach the light barrier."

Suddenly curious, Jason pushed her with a quizzical look. "But we're not talking about supply and material runs here are we?"

Phan turned away from the sun and pointed in the opposite direction. "No, we're talking about going way out there. Intra-galactic exploration. Think about it, colony worlds outside the solar system. No more overcrowding, no more food shortages or energy troubles, no more war; humans living in peace amongst the stars."

"I never took you for a dreamer Kim."

"Why do you think I took this job in the first place? If the tests work out I'm going to fast track a project to develop an exploratory ship." The CEO finished her drink and called a waiter over to replace it.

Picking up another glass himself, Jason glanced down at the broken freighter, held in the scaffolding of the dock below, now so small to him. "We're talking decades away though."

Now Kim laughed aloud. "If someone else were in charge, maybe. We begin testing in a few weeks. The technology is sound, we've been using AM devices for years, and we just need to extend

the theory. If it works, I aim to have a ship ready before the decade is out. And if we can do it, I want you in charge of the project.”

Silence followed as Jason downed his whisky. “Why me?”

“Because I’ve been watching you since... you know. I’ve seen you rise quickly, adapting fast to this changing world. You have a passion for space. I don’t know whether it’s because of what happened to you, or whether you were born with it, but you’re the man for the job. It just so happens that Tony Reynolds agreed with me. And that’s something that happened so rarely it must be true.”

Kim calmed herself down before finishing with a more realistic tone. “Don’t give me an answer now. Unless we can do it, it’s not relevant anyway. Think about it though. For the foreseeable future, you’re in command of the *Bold Horizons*. You’ve gained the crew’s respect, and they need one of their own in charge right now. It’s still an independent ship, not under SpaceScope’s authority; but if you need anything at all give me a call.”

Noticing Jason was busy, Stephanie decided to find the command centre. In the hub of the station, the command centre served as traffic control for Mars’ airspace ensuring the skies were clear for freighters, tugs and the like to stock up on material from the planet below. Weaving her way around the technicians and staff, Stephanie found the arrivals board and checked for a specific ship. Finding no mention of it, she checked departures in case she had gotten her timing wrong. No mention either. One of the technicians had notice her confused look and asked if she required any assistance.

“I’m looking for my sister’s freighter, the *Home Free*?” Several technicians had overheard and were looking around with sombre faces. “I’m afraid the *Home Free* was raided a few days ago. She’s been missing ever since.”

Shocked, Stephanie looked around for the officer in charge. Unable to find them, she turned back to the tech. “You must have some idea where it went. Or was it destroyed?” *My little sister can’t be dead, she can’t, she can’t.*

The young man looked around at his co-workers for support. “We think they may have been taken into the Belt.”

Stephanie didn’t respond, she simply ran back up the stairs to the observation deck and found Jason alone, back looking out at the stars. “Jason!” She ran over to him and grabbed his arm.

Her friend held her tightly, sensing the need for comfort and asked the obvious question. “What happened?”

Tearing up, Stephanie tried breathlessly to answer. “The *Home Free*... they raided the ship... took my sister... into the Belt.”

Dread covered Jason’s face as he realised her request. “We can’t enter the Belt. You know we can’t. That’s pirate territory, not even SpaceScope enters the asteroid belt anymore.”

“You have to help me.”

Jason was swallowed in regret. “We wouldn’t stand a chance. We’d be killed. Or worse.”

Stephanie bit her lip, “And what do you think they’ll do to my sister?”

Because the stars were always out, night could only mimicked on board ships and stations, necessary to feed the evolved human need for a day and night cycle. The conditions were very similar on board all ships and stations. The lights were dimmed, secondary monitors and redundant systems turned off to reduce light and noise, and the bulkheads were closed to quieten the essential systems and allow the crews to sleep. With the crew sleeping in more spacious beds on the station, Jason was alone on the bridge of the ship, *my ship*, he thought to himself, wishing he had earned it under better circumstances. He sat back in the chair and called up the repair team reports. Engineers from the *Olympus* had been over since the rendezvous helping to fix the engines, and the station’s staff had completed the job during the memorial. With the cargo holds already emptied, all Jason had to do was buy another full load of Martian iron and coal, and return it to Earth for a profit.

The rusted world, which once held a variety of early life forms millions of years ago, had been

found to contain oil beneath the surface. All evidence now supported the theory that Mars was once very Earth like, with ice-capped poles, oceans and plants. Colonies of microbial life had been found many kilometres under the surface where it was still warm enough for liquid water. Some scientists theorised that Mars had once suffered an asteroid impact such as the one that killed off Earth's dinosaurs. This impact had stripped the planet to a minimal atmosphere and led it to the rusty red world it had become. As such, ancient plant life had been transformed into vast seas of sub-surface oil and fields of coal, the likes of which Earth was running quickly out of.

With the ship so empty, the tiniest sounds echoed as if made in a hollow shell. When the airlock opened, Jason felt the door seals lock from two decks away. Judging by their volume, the source of footsteps was approaching the bridge. Finally, the heavy vacuum door opened. Jason spun his chair around to face the entrance. "Good morning, Miss Pearson," he announced, a sly smile on his face.

Stephanie did not even jump, instead mockingly replying: "On no Jason, you scared the life out of me." She continued along the consoles, flipping archaic-style switches and activating monitors, bringing the small ship to life once again.

"You can't take this ship out, the dock master won't let you out without my authorisation."

Stephanie opened the shield over the main window and lent back on the rail. "I'm glad you're here then."

"And why do you think I'd..."

Stephanie raced forward and put a finger to her captain's lips, stopping him mid-sentence. "This could go on all day. You knew I'd come here, you knew that you wouldn't be able to talk me out of entering the Belt. So why are you here? It can't be to stop me, so it must be to help me. So shush, I know this is a stupid thing to do, but it's family, and you more than anyone else understand what it's like to lose family."

His reluctance fading fast, Jason grabbed the command pad and hit the radio button. "Dock master, this is Captain Mackenzie of the Bold Horizons, I'm taking the ship out for a trial run to test our rebuilt engine, request clearance to leave dock."

Stef looked up at him anxiously. "What if they don't let us go."

"I always have a plan B," he said cockily, smirking.

An older woman's voice crackled from the speakers, wished him luck and ordered the clamps and airlocks released. Taking the familiar helm controls, Jason asked for power to the engines, and Stephanie descended to the engineering deck.

Main engineering consisted of a sphere-shaped room with exits at the fore and rear. The walkway was a honeycomb mesh steel plating that orbited a lead sphere a metre or so in diameter. Thick cables secured the orb to the bulkheads above and below the deck, and a thick tube protruded from the aft wall into the black shell.

"Powering up the AM drive." Stephanie manipulated the control board whilst she kept a watchful eye on the monitors. A microphone extended from the board and fed her voice to the bridge. "Emitters are charged, opening the first portal."

Inside the vacuumed sphere, four tiny pin-shaped gamma radiation emitters removed their covers, pushing gamma rays to stream into the sphere. Accelerated by a powerful electromagnetic field, the beams focused inside the sphere, just off centre to its axis. A few seconds of charge disrupted the bonds of matter that floated around the sphere, ripping a small hole in the fabric of the universe.

Outside, Stephanie closed the emitter covers and unlocked a second set. "First portal opened, opening the vortex." Inside the first green-hued portal, a second began to form. White swirled from the middle until it covered over the green. "AM portal opened, drawing antimatter." The emitters retracted from the sphere and the EM field changed configuration. On the outside, a ring of magnetic coils began spinning around the ball, containing the antimatter that now flowed to fill the vacuum. The portals collapsed on themselves slowly, unable to remain open without a stable energy source. Her task complete, the engineer checked the scans. "We've got 50% containment, plenty to get us to the belt."

Jason was sat at the navigation station on the bridge reorienting the ship towards Checkpoint Charlie, a SpaceScope stationary probe marking the boundary between patrolled space and the Belt. "Alright, prepare for antimatter burst."

A tap on the navigation controls and a valve opened in the AM ball. Magnets controlled the flow of negative particles through the pipe, keeping them away from the matter of the lead channel. The stream of anti-particles emerged into a shielded bubble at the rear of the ship. The Horizon's computers had already calculated the burst, and released the shield automatically. The anti-particles collided with the free hydrogen atoms that populated space, and both materials annihilated one another, producing a shockwave more destructive than the first nuclear bomb. Horizons' electromagnetic reflector, correctly calibrated, took the brunt of the force, and protected the ship as she rode the wave towards the asteroid belt.