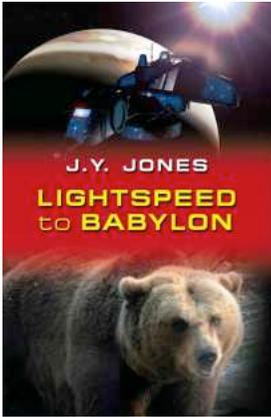




**J.Y. JONES**

**LIGHTSPEED  
to BABYLON**





*Buck Morgan goes on mankind's first interstellar journey, leaving behind a late twenty-first century world of progress and good stewardship, with both Christianity and the animal rights movements marginalized. He returns nine years older but 90 years later, and finds the animal rights movement in control through the ruling Antichrist. Conflict arises as Morgan seeks to help the resistance, in the process finding that events have placed mankind on the brink of the Apocalypse.*

# Lightspeed to Babylon

by J.Y. Jones

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2015

Revised Edition

# **Lightspeed to Babylon**

**J.Y. Jones**



## **DEDICATION**

To all who utilize and care for animals in any way, as domestic stock, companion animals, hunting prey, fisheries stock, working animals, wildlife observation, necessary research, performers, traditional and religious objects, and captive animals maintained for public enjoyment. May this book somehow stimulate all people to a realization that those who seek to limit human utilization of animals have a sinister and hidden agenda. Loss of animal utilization would be just as devastating to the person who enjoys a seafood dinner as to the individual who enjoys catching fish. With this dedication and this book I salute all who would resist misguided attempts to humanize animals, and to thus dehumanize mankind.



**ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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## CHAPTER 1

*October 2059*

It did not appear to be wild and savage outside. It looked wonderfully tranquil, the view down a winding country road towards low hills that were colored tan by an early killing frost. The western sky was pink with afterglow from the setting sun, an image stained only by dark wisps of cloud that banded the heavens. Venus, a gleaming gemstone in the twilight, dominated the horizon in its nearest approach to sister Earth. The scene beckoned irresistibly.

It was time for Alice Morgan to take her usual stroll, a ritual she had begun several years before as a means of staying fit. Rugged Kansas flint hills formed a dark palisade to the west, the escarpment dramatically backlit by the brilliant sunset. She momentarily gazed at the stark outlines of leafless trees against the panorama. She left her kitchen door slightly ajar and descended several low steps to an irregular gravel driveway.

The cool autumn evening caressed the young woman as she strolled among mature poplars and cottonwoods that lined the quaint lane. A deep breath of invigorating air was a welcome respite, clearing for the moment persistent cobwebs that inevitably crept into her mind after a long day's toil. The stress of running a prosperous farm was taking its toll. There were never-ending management decisions, supplies to order, bills to pay, countless data entries to complete, and a precocious five-year-old son to nurture. She needed this break. She released her long dark hair from an encumbering barrette and tossed her head a bit to feel the freedom. Her flowing locks rippled in the evening breeze like a flamboyant banner on a sailing mast.

Jim Morgan watched from a distance as his wife left the house, and he waved a weathered hand at her. A smile crossed his thin lips, and his sparkling blue eyes fixed on her with affection born of familiarity. He admired the ease of her gait, the sway of her pretty body, so youthful in appearance that nobody would suspect that she had ever borne a child. She waved back nonchalantly, leaving him to finalize preparations for night on the farm, gathering livestock into enclosures and assuring a flow of feed to the animals. Young James Lee Morgan, the couple's only progeny, was helping in his childlike way, and he too waved good-bye to his mother.

“Lee, I think there’s a memory chip problem in the Epsilon unit,” Morgan said to an old man at his side. “We’ll have to do a scan. That should isolate the glitch.”

“He’s still working. What makes you think there’s a malfunction?”

“The robot’s locking onto sheep like they’re an intruder. It lets them go okay. The programming checks out, so there has to be a hardware malfunction.”

“Let me see, Dad,” said the boy, his young mind straining to understand. The elder Morgan traced out the fault so his youngster could watch, and the old man nodded in agreement as a hidden defect became clear.

Departure of the young wife was only a momentary distraction from the labor at hand, which consisted primarily of supervising on a giant monitor the activity of a retinue of computer-controlled robots. Mechanization was the watchword for farmers of the late twenty-first century. Animals tagged with ubiquitous computer chips lit up the screen to reveal their locations flawlessly, while wheeled all-terrain robots did extensive legwork that had been accomplished by horses, cowboys, and stock dogs in centuries past.

In thickening dusk the woman walked briskly with a cool wind at her back, and fallen cottonwood leaves swirled like a miniature tempest around her feet. The brilliant crepuscule that surrounded her spoke of coming clear weather, the atmosphere transforming magically from softer pastel tones to a deep red. Winter can’t be far behind, she thought, gathering her velvety processed leather sweatshirt around her more tightly for added warmth as an involuntary shiver coursed her spine.

A flock of geese settled into a nearby farm pond to pass the night, and numerous big birds honked loudly as they glided on locked wings toward black water, where outstretched legs groped for the surface like extended landing gear on an airplane. Alice Morgan watched as a rabbit scampered across her path and disappeared into tall grass along a fencerow. Tilled bottomland beyond lay fallow now, but the harvest had been good and a rich supply of animal and human food was assured. It was a time of plenty, a time of gleanings, a time of blessing. The woman reflected silently as she walked and felt deeply grateful for all the good things that filled her life and times. As she meditated, a coyote howled in the distance, its plaintive notes causing her to hesitate momentarily. In that cry she discerned a sobering

reminder that wildness was never far from the cultivated fields and livestock.

The wind transmitted a more aggressive sentiment now, changing subtly in its firm current past the woman. The rising flow of air caused a faint change deep in her subconscious, imparting a different and disturbing character to this particular stroll. Now the winding path seemed unmistakably cold, making her short steps quicken, amplifying the noise of crunching dry leaves. She almost turned around and headed back the other way, back to the brightness of her kitchen and the glow of her cozy home. Instead she appealed to her logical mind, the normal thing to do in this age of omnipotent science, and stayed her course.

Just ahead, her sinuous hillside trail passed through a livestock gate and then crossed a brushy draw where dwarf maples grew deep and thick. Alice paused, contemplating her sense that the situation was somehow dreadfully wrong. *Don't be ridiculous*, she assured herself again. She had walked past here hundreds, maybe thousands, of times. *Just walk on by and don't think about it. Nothing's wrong*, she affirmed rationally.

The woman couldn't see a pair of curious yellow eyes watching her. Crouching now a scant twenty yards away, a hungry animal observed the young woman's approach and traced every move of her lithe body. Times were tough for the old cat, a huge tom cougar well past his prime. The creature was a fourth generation lion, descended from original stock planted in Kansas early in the century. Biologists had predicted that their kind would adapt readily to life amid active farmlands, and indeed the species had thrived. Catching farm deer and an occasional stray calf or lamb had been this cat's standard fare for over a decade. Recently one of the big predator's essential molars had loosened and separated, and other teeth in its mouth weren't far from suffering the same fate. Worse, agile deer could now outmaneuver the cat with unaccustomed ease. Livestock farmers were much too wise to leave precious domestic animals exposed at night, so meals were few and far between for the aging feline.

Humans had always been strictly off limits. They smelled like death to the cougar. They were disgusting and dangerous, creatures to be avoided, the tom knew instinctively. Still, it had been nearly two weeks since its last meal, and the movement of this woman was enticing. Its eyes narrowed a bit, and the tawny furred brow almost appeared to be frowning as the animal observed. Never had it contemplated charging one of these vertical forms before, but this one looked like a sure kill. An empty stomach gnawed

hungrily and insistently, triggering a desperate craving for self-preservation. The black tip of the long, serpentine tail twitched nervously, and the mountain lion hunkered unseen in the gully, every muscle quivering and every nerve tingling. Elongated pupils were almost fully dilated due to deepening twilight, while instinct and appetite waged a soundless battle in the cat's murky mind. Demand for food was the most compelling as crunching footsteps came nearer, and without further delay the muscular feline sprang into action!

Jim Morgan was finishing his chores at the big metal barn when he heard a chilling scream, one terrible shriek like he had not heard since his tour of combat duty in the Great Terror War. Alice's cry pierced the nearly dark sky with suddenness and force like a clap of thunder, conveying audibly the horror of an utterly terrified human being. He bolted toward the sound, leaving a startled old man and a deeply puzzled child to fend for themselves. He raced out the door and ran as hard as he could toward the fading commotion.

The cougar first bowled the woman over, hitting her high and sinking its long, sharp retractile claws into her sinuous back muscles. The cat buried its killing incisor teeth in the back of her neck while simultaneously slashing at her legs with rear claws. Her outfit was no protection at all, so soft and pliable was the leather, and it shredded immediately. Blood spilled from numerous wounds as the massive head and shoulders of the predator twisted and tossed its prey almost airborne. The earsplitting wail of anguish was over almost as soon as it began, and merciful unconsciousness engulfed the woman. All was quiet except for gentle rustling from final thrusts of the animal's back legs, and then absolute stillness reigned.

The cat crouched beside its meal, hesitating, uncertainty showing in its demeanor. Warm blood covered its muzzle and left a sweet, attractive taste in the cavernous mouth. It released the death grip slightly, noting intuitively that this creature had been much easier to dispatch than a nimble, muscular deer. There may have been a dim sensation in the cat's primitive mind that life could be good again on a diet of these hapless beings. The lion rolled its prey over and chewed tentatively on bared stomach muscles.

The cat's demeanor became more tense again as it detected the speedy approach of another of these upright creatures. It could hear noisy treading in the leaves, rapid and rhythmic, and could smell another human's foul scent wafting on the breeze. The feline leaped over its prey and partially concealed itself from the approaching intruder. Closer came the man, and

the cat's muscles contracted banjo-string tight. Yellow eyes now filled with hate at this meddler, who would perhaps try to steal this irreplaceable kill. A telltale nervous cadence of the tail foretold another deadly charge, and the next victim was now in view. Inborn defensive mechanisms surged, and nothing would be allowed to deprive the cougar of this sweet-tasting prize.

Morgan could see the bleeding body of his wife before the cat materialized, but he knew immediately what must have happened. He rushed through the fence gate breathing hard, and in failing light he spotted an unused metal post leaning idly against a top strand of wire. He resolutely grabbed it and proceeded quickly and without caution toward the bloody scene. He was within ten yards when he spied the cat, postured low behind the fallen woman, limbs pulled tautly into its body like an arrow ready for launch.

The man automatically shouldered the long, heavy metal shaft, unflinching as he readied his makeshift weapon. He knew that an attack was coming, and that he would have only one chance to save himself and retrieve his fallen wife. The creature sprang like an arrow leaving a bowstring, closing the distance in a flash. Its action was unexpectedly quick, even to a farmer accustomed to dealing with animals, but his critical swing with the post was only slightly late. It caught the big cat squarely on one side of its body and sent the heavy creature sprawling out of control, a sensation the animal had felt only rarely in many years of capturing prey. Not to be dissuaded, the giant whirled, fangs bared, snarling and slashing savagely with scalpel-sharp claws. Morgan flailed repeatedly, driven by the sure knowledge that if he could not drive the animal off, all was lost.

Several of Morgan's desperate blows found their mark and the old cat retreated, seeking shelter for a brief moment of nearby dense brush. Once in the thicket, it regrouped and spun once again to charge, all in a fraction of a second. Morgan planted his post firmly in the ground with its sharp end toward the advancing animal, his crouching posture reminiscent of a Masai warrior in the ritual of taking on an African lion. The animal leaped, striking the post slightly off center, but still partially impaling itself on the dull point. Finally defeated, the animal reluctantly withdrew bleeding to safety in deeper vegetation. It fled up and over nearby higher terrain and quickly disappeared from view.

Morgan ignored his own bleeding arm and thigh, caught incidentally by those lashing claws, and now approached Alice with more prudence, unsure if his adversary would return. He knelt tenderly by his wife's side, surveying

in disbelief the abject disarray of her familiar form. He removed his shirt and tried frantically to apply enough pressure to stop active spurting of blood from a gaping neck wound.

“Oh, God! Oh, God!” He prayed repeatedly aloud, addressing his petition in pure desperation. He failed to notice the approach of a light from the direction of the farmhouse until its beam fell on the awful bloodstained spectacle.

“Jim, what happened, son?” asked old Lee Shealy in a shaky, labored voice, his stiff and aged body shuffling as fast as he could move it. A light was welcome but it only revealed more gushing arterial bleeding, so much that the prospect of curbing it seemed hopeless.

“A cat. Give me your shirt, Lee. Hold pressure right here while I call for an ambulance,” Morgan commanded, reaching for his wallet personal computer as Shealy took over momentarily. The device gave instant coordinates of the calamity to authorities, and Morgan related a brief account of the tragedy, his voice strained and trembling with emotion. In a matter of mere minutes, lights of a jet rescue helicopter came into view, almost silently gliding with an emphatic hiss from the gloomy sky.

Emergency personnel swarmed over the injured woman, inserting intravenous catheters into her veins, attaching mysterious monitoring devices, and infusing massive doses of artificial blood into her limp body. The best emergency technology of the twenty-first century was focused intently on the injured woman from that instant, including dramatic live holographic hookup and monitoring by a distant trauma center.

“Lee, go check on Buck. I left him in the control room,” Morgan called from inside the craft as it took off. A twinge of added worry crept into his mind as the dark ground receded from view, and he could see Shealy shuffling hurriedly toward the farm operations center, his light glowing as he followed the unseen road.

The whine of the rescue chopper had long since faded by the time Shealy approached the farmyard. Several times he had to stop briefly and rest because his chest was heaving violently and his ailing heart was fluttering from unaccustomed exertion. With relief he noted the boy’s form, outlined by brilliant light emanating through the door. The old man entered and struggled to the nearest chair, where he collapsed to catch his failing breath and let his erratic pulse settle down.

“Where’s Dad, Pa Shealy?” asked the younger Morgan as the old man entered the light. “I stayed here like Dad said. I’m watching all our robots.”

“Yeah, infernal robots. Excuse me, Buck, I’m a little upset,” Shealy wheezed, using the youngster’s nickname and trying to get the words to come out intelligibly. “Your mom...had an accident. You...you heard...the chopper?”

“Yes sir. She’ll be okay, won’t she, Pa Shealy?” asked the child, his blue eyes staring intently, uncontrolled worry in his voice.

“I hope so, son,” replied the oldster tentatively. There was an unsettled and distinct hint of quandary in his gravely voice that the boy recognized immediately. Shealy rested a gnarled hand on Buck’s head and gently tousled his dark hair. He hadn’t driven a highway vehicle recently, but there seemed no choice. “Let’s head into town.”

The old man slowly rose to his feet and then waited until the floor stopped its treacherous spinning. He began a tentative walk toward the nearby garage where a farm truck was parked, steadying himself on the boy’s shoulder and whatever inanimate object he could reach. He thought briefly about calling someone to drive them, but decided he was feeling a bit better. Besides, he dreaded calling Alice’s nearby relatives, so he and the boy would go it alone. After all, he rationalized, there was no need to alarm anyone until he was certain of the situation. The steering wheel felt familiar enough as the pair eased down the lane toward highway pavement.

“Mommy’s okay?” petitioned Buck again as their vehicle motored onto the high-speed road. Shealy’s wrinkled face grimaced a bit as the youngster inquired, and his rounded cheeks almost visibly revealed pain.

“Son, some hard things happen in life. Remember when Ma Shealy died last year? Hard things.”

“Is Mommy dead?”

“Oh, no, son. I don’t think so,” Shealy answered, regretting his choice of words. “She got bit by a cougar, but let’s not speculate. Let’s wait until we get to the hospital.”

It seemed to take an eternity. Oncoming headlights were arrayed in contrary and deceptive concentric circles of light, and only extreme concentration on the illuminated midline kept the truck on course. Buck frowned deeply as they motored along, a maelstrom of doubt and discord swirling about him, posing fundamental questions about safety and security on their familiar farm. Finally, the glow of Adrian Community Hospital loomed in the distance, just off the freeway in a forest of artificial light. Soon the two were entering a spacious emergency waiting area, where sterile surroundings projected the impersonal, the fastidious, the intimidating. Jim Morgan was nowhere in evidence as they surveyed the room. A child sat alone in one corner, and Buck recognized him right away as Monty Archer, a kindergarten acquaintance.

“Hi, Monty,” said Buck. “Are you in the hospital?”

“No, my dad’s sick,” he answered. “He’s going to be okay, though. Are you sick, too?”

“No. Mommy got hurt by a cougar.”

“Really? Did it bite her?”

“Yep.”

“Come on, Buck,” said Shealy. “No time for talking right now.”

The boy and his elderly friend hurried on down the hallway, looking for direction.

“Isn’t that kid related to Sam Archer?” huffed Shealy as he shuffled along.

“I don’t know, Pa.”

“If I’m not mistaken, that’s who he is. Strange he should be here tonight. Sam’s dad, ol’ Clemon Archer, is the one who made sure we’ve got plenty of cougars in these parts. Sam’s really as bad as his father, down deep, though he seems to hide it better. I doubt if the kid knows anything about that, though, but he’ll probably be from the same mold. The whole controversy seems to have died down, at least until tonight. You’re both too young to know much about it, anyhow.”

Buck looked at him with a puzzled look, and then lost the thought amid overriding anxiety. He and Shealy hurried on towards the reception desk, where a pretty blonde with short, almost crew-cut hair, was sitting. She looked up indifferently from her reading, glanced at them in highly detached manner, and inquired with monotony, "May I help you?"

"We're looking for Morgan—Alice Morgan. Or her husband, Jim Morgan. Should have come here by rescue helicopter."

"Oh, yeah. Mr. Morgan's in the counseling room. A preacher or somebody just went in with him, I think."

"Counseling room?" the old man questioned quietly, his coarse voice shaking. "And where would that be?"

"Around that corner and then right, next to the chapel," she replied, her voice softening considerably. "Sure sorry about the accident, mister."

A pair of doctors dressed in timeless white coats met Shealy and Buck at the conclave door. Both had hurried, preoccupied expressions and neither spoke as they brushed past. Shealy caught the door before it could close, and with the boy in tow he entered the dim expanse. Two men sat at a long table, one with his head cradled in his hands, elbows resting on the table, staring downward at the blank surface. It was Jim Morgan. The other man was Pastor Don Tolbert, an elderly and portly clergyman. He greeted them quietly, his somber tone telling the entire story without a word. Buck ran immediately to his father.

"Dad, I want to see Mommy!"

Jim Morgan hugged him warmly, and the boy noticed that his father was crying. Buck's emotions overflowed, and before long both were sobbing. Sad eyes of a grizzled old man and a corpulent pastor met awkwardly, and neither of them spoke for a long, uneasy moment.

"Preacher, how'd you get here so quickly?" asked Shealy.

"I was already here. Jim had me paged when he found out I was in the hospital," the preacher answered, his ruddy complexion darker than usual, and his substantial jowls shaking as he spoke.

“What’s the story?” Shealy asked quietly. Tears welled up in the ancient farmer’s eyes as the minister related a hopeless battle to save Alice’s life.

“They did everything humanly possible,” said the preacher, straining as his jugular veins bulged unnaturally. “Her brain was dead. That cat severed two big arteries, one in the back of her neck and a main one in front. They think her neck was broken, too. She was neurologically dead almost immediately. They kept her body alive after the medics arrived, and her organs live on even now. They’re being transferred for transplant.”

Shealy nodded with understanding. Of course they would use her organs. Science being the primary basis of law, no one was allowed to bury perfectly functional organs at the whim of reluctant or superstitious relatives.

“When will we get the remains? I know Jim will want to use our old family plot, out behind the east gate,” his voice trailed off a bit, remembering the funeral of his wife so very recently.

Leaving the room to do the dreaded task of calling Alice’s family, Lee Shealy encountered Adrian County Sheriff Mahlon Hicks, accompanied by two deputies. All of them wore grim countenances like soldiers in battle. Their concern now was the cat, and they voiced this anxiety to Shealy, whom they knew to be owner of the parcel of ground where the attack had occurred.

“No need to worry about that old cougar, Sheriff,” Shealy assured him. “With one holocom call I can get its carcass delivered to your door. And it won’t be tomorrow.”

“Really? How’s that?” asked the sheriff in honest skepticism.

“I’ll call Rocky Purdee. His dogs will have that cat cornered within an hour. They need to do it, too. A cat that kills a person doesn’t know when enough is enough, they say.”

“Why do you suppose that cat turned human-killer? I’ve heard of it other places, but never here. Ever since they stocked those things in Kansas, we’ve avoided any trouble in this county. But now this,” the sheriff

lamented, dreading the mountain of paperwork that routinely accompanied any such occurrence.

“Never should have brought them here, anyhow. It seems idiotic now, just like I told them. Idealistic fools back then wanted to see big predators everywhere. You youngsters can’t begin to remember the arguments. Some crazies were determined to put them in every state in the union. Besides government transplant programs, there were a lot of cats released illegally by God knows who. Big bears, uh, grizzlies, in a lot of places, too. And wolves wherever they could put them, legally or not,” Shealy raved. After a labored pause to catch his failing breath, he added as an afterthought, “You probably don’t know that a lot of these dangerous varmints are here illegally, do you?”

“Mmm, maybe so, old timer. However they got here, most of them are here to stay. Say, pull up that guy you mentioned and let’s put this one away before someone else gets hurt—or killed.”

A call to Rocky Purdee was accomplished, and then Shealy notified Bill Barnes, Alice’s brother. Even before the her family had arrived, the houndsman called back to report the job completed. Jim Morgan had not seriously wounded the cat, and it had put up a lot of resistance when caught. Entrenched in a deep rock cave, it had been hard to reach and to dispatch, but in the end an experienced veteran and his tenacious dogs had prevailed. Shealy felt but a trace of consolation in knowing the killer was dead.

Shealy returned to the conference room to tell Morgan, but there was no one there. He went next door to the chapel and pushed open the door. In the dim light he could see three figures, one small, one heavy-set, and one a trim adult. They were kneeling in prayer.

He closed the door quietly and bowed his head reverently. A wayward droplet coursed down his deeply creased face, and then another. His eyes welled with more, and then he began to sob quietly.

It had truly been a night for tears.

\* \* \*

*March 2060*

The Morgan farm had taken the route of most twenty-first century agricultural enterprises, specializing in only a few principal commodities. Jim Morgan worked hard producing an unending flow of animal protein, a desperately needed food product in a world of twelve billion people. Morgan's operation was mainly mammalian protein, which he grew in a variety of forms, principally sheep and cattle. His product underwent a final technological transformation at a protein processing plant in Adrian, and was distributed worldwide as the highly popular brand Promag, a balanced food blend of astounding nutritional content. Byproducts included wool and high quality skins for clothing and other uses, valuable merchandise that had become civilization's standard fabric, as well as complex hydrocarbon waste used for producing fuels.

Buck had arrived home a few minutes earlier than Morgan had expected, and as he drove up he could see the boy in a holding pen adjacent the sheep barn. That facility was a giant metal edifice containing the nerve center for all activities relating to sheep, from ministering health to the animals to painlessly shearing wool. These special creatures had been genetically engineered to fill an unused ecological niche on the dry plains, far surpassing their somewhat crude predecessors. They had been a resounding success in providing a bonanza of meat, skins, fiber, and fuel that was almost free for the taking.

Buck had always loved the coming of newborn lambs. The boy was sitting on the lower rail of a fence surrounded by a half dozen wobbly legged nymphs, each weighing only a few pounds. Their frolicking with him was quite natural, untainted by any sign of fear. Nervous ewes kept a respectful distance.

"Looks like we've got another good crop, huh?" Morgan queried as he walked up, a bit reluctant to break the magic of the moment. Buck stroked first one of the tiny creatures, then another, and allowed them to suckle his fingers in succession.

"They're special, Dad. I don't like for them to grow up to be sheep. I like them little."

"Everything and everybody has to grow up, son. You included. See you at the house."

As his father turned to walk away, a telltale frown creased the boy's brow, but Morgan failed to notice.

As he walked, Morgan deliberated how to approach the boy with his concerns. This was the first time in quite a while that Buck had gone near livestock when it wasn't required by his regimen of chores. Should he just stay quiet and let time take care of any reservations the boy might have? He honestly didn't know the answer.

That evening, Morgan pondered his dilemma as he prepared a meal. Supper was the time when his memory of Alice was strongest and her absence frequently became overpowering. He was particularly morose this evening. He plopped a pan of baked protein on the table without transferring it to a plate, and began slicing it into portions. Buck sat on his knees in a chair and puzzled over his father's gloomy countenance. He rested his head in his hands and propped his elbows on the table. The man glanced up at him as he worked, noting the probing stare.

"Son, I was certainly glad to see you enjoying the lambs today. I've been worried about you."

"Really?"

"You seem to be reluctant to help me these days. I know it's been tough lately, but I can't have my number one helper all hobbled up."

"What do you mean?"

"You don't go to the control room for roundup anymore. You don't want to be there when cows or sheep deliver newborns like you used to. It distresses me that you've lost your enthusiasm for feeding and tending the animals."

Buck swallowed hard. His mind raced seeking an explanation, but he was unable to formulate anything that seemed acceptable. Finally, he looked up from an uncomfortable moment of staring at the tablecloth.

"Dad, remember when that cow died trying to have her calf?" he said slowly, shifting in his seat.

“Yes. The calf was okay, even though we lost the cow. It happens sometimes. What about it?”

“That little calf doesn’t have a mother. Dad, do you wish Mommy were here?”

“Son, you know the answer to that. I miss her just like you do. But remember, animals don’t feel it like people do. That calf is being fed well and it’s growing. You can’t let unavoidable circumstances haunt you. Life is full of them.”

“Huh? Unavoidable? What’s that?”

“When something happens that we can’t avoid, and we have to live with it. Like what happened to Mommy.”

“Was that unavoidable?”

“As far as I know it was. It’s painful for a person to lose their mother, Buck. But you can’t compare it to an animal losing its mother. The two occurrences are of entirely different magnitude. Buck, I deeply loved your mother. Losing her has hurt me, too.”

“Can’t we kill all the cougars.”

Morgan stalled a little while he thought, going to the refrigerator for a glass of milk for each of them. He had actually considered doing exactly that, for a brief, angry period of time just after Alice’s death. It would have been quite possible with the right combination of DNA specific poison and a robot guard array with laser guns programmed to kill cats on detection. Both approaches were strictly illegal.

“You pose some tough questions, partner. Yes, I suppose that would eliminate any future possibility of such a tragedy. It still wouldn’t bring your mother back, though. Do you think we ought to get rid of vehicles because sometimes people get killed in them?”

“Can’t we at least kill all of them on our farm? Robots can kill instead of sending shock warnings.”

“Son, animals do what comes naturally. They don’t reason things out like we do. We can’t kill off a species because one of them does something bad. There’s nothing inherently wrong with big cats. As long as we constantly harvest a few of them—like Rocky Purdee does—the older and more aggressive ones, as well as those in declining health, can be removed to prevent most tragedies. I know it’s hard to understand, son, but we don’t want to go out and kill all the cougars. Besides, it would break a bunch of very good game laws.”

Morgan’s forehead was beading up with sweat, which he wiped away with his sleeve.

“Dad, I don’t like cougars. I like sheep and cows. And bird dogs. But not cougars. Dad, did you know that Spot Prestone is glad Mommy got killed?”

“Oh, son, I don’t think he’d actually mean anything like that.”

“Oh, yes he does. He told me Mommy got what she deserved for going where only cougars ought to live. He always says to me real mean, ‘Too late, cougar bait.’”

“He doesn’t understand our circumstances here. She was in her own back yard, literally. And as far as the loss of Mommy, we’re going to have to get over it together, to the best of our ability. Cats serve a very useful function as long as they keep their normal fear of people, and we control them with proper management. I’m just worried you may make some wrong judgments—come to some wrong conclusions—with the direction your reasoning seems to be taking you. And don’t make Spot out to be an enemy, just because he says childish things about matters he doesn’t understand.”

“I can’t help it, Dad. Any more than a cougar can help killing a deer. Or Mommy.”

Morgan drew the boy to his breast and hugged him like he had done so many times before, and neither one of them spoke. Father and son embraced for the longest time, and Morgan felt a hot tear burn down his cheek. Buck noticed the tear as he pulled away, and he hugged his father again.

**CHAPTER 13***December 2135*

Leroy and Jeremy, two Barnes farm hands, were off on a routine run to the protein plant to make a delivery, a task they accomplished several times per week. Jeremy fingered an automatic weapon on his lap, lifting its black metal barrel so it would be easily visible to any observer. He also played absent-mindedly with a control panel that governed an array of electric mini-guns mounted like stingers in strategic locations about the vehicle exterior.

There were marauding bands of thieves that preyed on truckers along all highways, and some fairly effective countermeasures had been permitted by the authorities. This kind of destructive armament had been contraband for many decades, but now necessarily the populace defended itself any way it could. Bandits were usually armed in like manner, so it was simply fighting fire with fire.

With precision moves like those of a fine watch, a band of men moved their vehicles into position just out of sight of the protein processing facility. That they were heavily armed was not easily detectable, since the only external evidence of their deadly purpose was their grim, determined expressions. One man watched from a nearby hill, keeping the others apprised of their objective, the protein-laden farm truck that was moving rapidly toward them.

In centuries past, such a transport would not have been a likely target for major crime unless it carried gold, money, or some other precious commodity. In the twenty-second century economy, protein was becoming so valuable that it was more guarded than legal tender. There was a lucrative and growing black market for it in any big city.

Stopping the truck by force would not be easy, and these criminals were too experienced and smart to make that mistake. This particular band of outlaws was a cut above average and had devised ingenious techniques to succeed consistently. They knew that the truck's guard would start shooting wildly at the slightest hint of trouble. Newer protein trucks were outfitted with as much firepower as an old time attack helicopter.

Rather than a direct shootout, there was a much more effective and safer way to get the job accomplished. The trick was to kill both occupants, yet leave the vehicle functional and intact for a quick getaway. There was only one way to carry out the task, a ploy that had worked repeatedly. It seemed these dirt farmers never learned.

The scheme involved setting up a license check roadblock, where two fake police vehicles were used to create realism. Dressed in the uniforms of state patrolmen, four of the bandits looked every bit the part, down to nearly shaved heads and black leather shoes. Three more gang members posed as halted motorists, with their vehicles pulled over on the roadside. The key man was the hilltop spotter, who also was the main gunner. He kept his laser scoped rifle, a heavy yet compact shooting machine, sitting at ready as the truck moved ever closer.

The two rough-talking men in the farm truck were not particularly concerned about the possibility of a heist. They were longtime partying buddies and both of them had a hot date that night at the Hat Trick Bar in nearby Adrian. This was a routine run they had made dozens, perhaps hundreds, of times, and they continued describing to each other the particulars of their recent performances with the local ladies.

“Stupid police,” said Leroy as they encountered the tangle of vehicles and flashing lights ahead. “We’ll never get this load off fast enough to make quitting time. They’ll want to check every permit we’ve got. And probably do a computer check on our love life to boot. Curse the luck.”

“No sweat. Your girl will still be there if you’re lucky. And the drinks will be as cold as ever,” said Jeremy.

A counterfeit patrolman motioned both men to step down, so LeRoy secured the truck and left its engine running. Jeremy dug in the storage compartment for necessary papers, and then both men descended. Their deadly automatic rifle, technically illegal, was left forgotten on the seat as they assembled before the uniformed man.

The advanced multiple objective sniper rifle held by the unseen gunman fired twin bullets traveling at over 4,000 feet per second, both projectiles guided by individual laser beams, and each entered the frontal bone of its victim almost exactly at the slight depression between the eyebrows. Both men simultaneously collapsed into lifeless piles beside the truck. Blood and scrambled nervous tissue spewed from the exit wounds and

splattered several yards beyond them. The shooter was a terrific executioner, and he had never hit any of his teammates or any important vehicles. Such talent could earn one a lot of money, and his cut of the profits would be considerable.

The team immediately shed their deception and jumped into highly practiced activity. Two fake patrolmen quickly dragged both dead workers into a ditch and hurriedly draped the bodies with leather netting. Another team member leaped into the truck cab and roared away to a predetermined rendezvous point on an out-of-way back road. Within minutes, the two phony patrol cars and the other vehicles arrived at the stolen truck in a cloud of dust. A swarm of thieves utterly transformed the truck with a new paint job and a new logo, complete with a fresh set of false papers. The designated driver and his appointed guard then set out for Denver, where a hefty profit would be made selling raw protein to unscrupulous grocery dealers. There was a waiting buyer for the truck, as well. The job would be complete before anybody locally was even aware a crime had been committed. The rest of the band set up nearby for a quick series of hit-or-miss robberies of passing motorists.

\* \* \*

Elderly Jerry Barnes arrived for midweek church service that evening more pessimistic than he had ever been in his life. He had learned of the tragedy that befell his workers, and the loss of his vehicle, only moments before he was to leave home. His snow-capped head was still spinning, trying to adjust to the shock. The shrinking number of Christian believers left him very few solid friends in whom he could confide, but his desperation begged expression. He was glad for the small congregation that still attended his church.

“Evening, Roger,” he greeted a younger farmer on entering the darkened sanctuary. The only light emanated from two dim candles burning at the altar, since the church could no longer afford to pay an electric bill. Roger Walker had purchased the fertile farm that had previously belonged to Jerry’s father Bill after the old man had died. “How’re things at your place?”

“As good as can be expected under the circumstances, Jerry,” responded Roger, intense concern creasing his round, tanned face. An ample abdomen tented his leather coveralls, but despite his workman’s dress he

was clean, neat, and closely shaved. “To tell you the truth, I’m worried to death about Leon. He comes home from school with such crazy notions.”

“Crazy notions?” asked Jerry. “Sounds like what I used to say about my own kids.”

“Probably. I just hope I can get his head back on straight. He’s been to that pagan church, or whatever it is, a couple of times lately, and he’s really taken to Ryan Raymaker, the guy they call a priest,” said Walker. He sighed deeply before looking directly at Barnes. “How’s it going at your place?”

“Terrible. Our latest shipment to the storage warehouse was hijacked today. Stolen. They even took our truck,” lamented the aging farmer. “We can’t afford another. We’ll just have to make do with the old one, and it’s got no external armament. But it’s all we’ve got. I left Billy in the garage trying to get it operational.”

“That’s pretty awful, but I can’t say I’m surprised. If we didn’t ride armed nothing would ever get through.”

“I haven’t told you the worst part. They killed our driver and guard.”

“Oh, no, Jerry! Things are going from bad to worse. What are we going to do?” asked Walker. “Were they family men?”

“No, solo drifters like most of them, but they had an honest streak that’s rare. I sure hated to lose them.”

“Did they catch the culprits?”

“Of course not. If they did, they’d be out for lack of evidence in a day. Nobody—and I mean nobody—will testify against anybody. It’s sad, but it’s every man for himself,” Jerry responded, patting the automatic pistol on his hip. “Having to tote a gun to church, of all things.”

“It makes the species equality protesters seem pretty innocent by comparison,” said Walker. “After the Continental Humane Society banquet they hold in Adrian every year, they get pretty bad for a while. It’s been especially bad this year, with an Adrian native now at the head of that outfit, and him being here as guest speaker.”

“Yeah, I remember Waymon Prestone when he was growing up,” said Jerry. “He always was as strange as a hoot owl in panty hose. But at least his kind never kills anybody.”

Bob Hancock was also on his way to that same church building, and his silent vehicle hummed along with well-oiled efficiency. His sky blue eyes squinted as flashing lights materialized out of deep darkness. High intensity strobes cast an uncanny ricochet effect in the evening’s gathering fog, blinding and eerie as dancing light reflected off innumerable moisture droplets. Bob rode alone, and his instincts urged extreme caution as he approached the beacons blocking his way. He still had not heard about the piracy of the farm truck, but he was nevertheless aware of dangers awaiting the unsuspecting.

A man in an officer’s uniform motioned him to pull off the road, pointing to a space between two patrol cars. He complied reluctantly but promptly, not wishing to incur the wrath of authorities. They could and would make life at the protein plant unbearable if he were identified as a troublemaker. Caution was in order in all one’s dealings with the police or anyone else in a position of power.

As he glided into the space between vehicles, he could not escape a sensation that something was amiss. There was another vehicle pulled over up ahead, but he could see no occupants in the vehicle, in the patrol cars, or outside. He squinted through the misty darkness, hoping to see the vehicle’s driver. Abruptly he noticed that the police vehicle in front of him had a private license plate, rather than the distinctive state seal that appeared on legitimate patrol cars. Something was not right about this roadblock.

He let his right hand drop to a .44 Magnum pistol at his side, a constant companion that was situated inconspicuously in a gap beside the seat. The hammer rested safely on an empty chamber, but he applied a crisp cocking motion to the mechanism and the cylinder rotated to put a deadly cartridge in launch position. One of the patrolmen approached in nonchalant fashion as if on routine assignment, holding in one hand a computer that flashed signals suggesting constant activity. Everything looked pretty standard except for the absence of people in the other stopped car, and the disturbing private tag on the patrol car. The officer’s uniform seemed to be quite regulation, crisp and wrinkle-free, and his badge appeared authentic. Bob relaxed slightly, but he scanned the surrounding area for anything else that might offer a clue. He subtly dimmed the car’s interior lights in order to gain an extra thin margin of safety.

The patrolman passed through the headlight beam, and when he was clear Bob hit the bright switch, illuminating much more surrounding terrain. Though his view was hampered by obstructions, there was a flash of color in some tall prairie grass along the road, just beyond where another officer stood. Was that a prone figure he could see? He couldn't be certain. The glimpse was enough to keep his suspicions at a high level, especially when the officer he could see acted inordinately irritated by the bright lights.

The officer now stood at his window, holding what appeared to be a glowing supercomputer linkup, and motioned for him to disembark. Bob had seen enough that he closed his hand around his pistol and deftly took it with him as he commanded the door to open. He emerged without arousing any obvious doubts that he was anything but completely compliant, but he kept the hand holding the pistol in the obscurity of the car's dark interior.

"Your vehicle scans in violation of the tax code," said the uniformed man. "Mind getting your registration for me?"

"No problem, officer. Must be a computer glitch."

"We'll see. Just get your papers."

Bob now knew beyond doubt that this was a trap. His automobile had been checked by legitimate authorities a few days before and it had easily passed. He warily edged back into his car, never taking his eyes off the impostor. He knew trouble was coming, and that the unlucky driver of the other car had already paid an awful price. He took advantage of the darkness to feign groping in the recesses of the vehicle for the requested papers. He moved his weapon into the ready position, fully realizing that he had to be absolutely certain he was right, because there was no turning back if he made a mistake.

One of the uniformed man's hands was in clear view, handling the computer linkup, so the other hand would reveal his intentions, and Bob concentrated on that extremity with all his being. Suddenly, there it was, an electric auto weapon rising in slow motion from the man's side. It never made it to lethal position, though, because Bob's .44 Magnum exploded with ghastly effect, striking the man's mouth and practically decapitating him. Bob commanded his vehicle to maximum acceleration and thundered away in a spray of lead particles from the other bandits, several of whom had remained hidden until his desperate gunshot. He called the sheriff within seconds to report the incident, but by the time deputies arrived there

was nothing they could do except notify the next of kin of the murdered citizen.

As he slipped in the door of the little church, Bob was still trembling badly. Had he been only a micron less wary, he surely would have died. His only child, Daryl, needed him in order to have any chance of surviving. As he approached this gathering, he couldn't help but notice a particularly somber mood. *Well*, he thought gloomily, *I'm going to have a hard time brightening things up any tonight.*

"Evening, Bob. How's everything with you?" asked Roger Walker.

"Not too good, Roger," said Bob, his voice unsteady. "I had to kill a man about thirty minutes ago."

Jerry Barnes' mouth dropped open.

"What? You killed somebody?"

"Fake officers. They'd already murdered another motorist. Fortunately, I spotted the body—and a couple of other inconsistencies. I took quite a few hits on my car as I left, but nothing serious."

"Did you hear about my guys getting blown away today?"

"Your protein truck? No! I knew it didn't come in as we expected."

"Killed our men, and then stole our truck and goods. Got away clean. I just found out about it when they didn't come back and we started looking for them. Their bodies were in a ditch not far from your plant."

"Oh, no! Was it Jeremy and Leroy?" asked Bob as Jerry nodded grimly. "Pretty good pair, in some ways. I'm sure sorry, Jerry."

"Yep, I hated to lose them. If it was the same bunch, I'm glad you got one of them. But you know that won't stop them, unfortunately. What's going to happen, Bob?"

"I wish I knew. Mom always said that society was disintegrating. She could see it coming."

“I wish your mom were still alive so she could talk to Leon. I don’t know what I’m going to do with that boy,” said Walker.

“My kids were the same way, Roger, and look what a solid citizen Billy is now,” said Jerry. “But I think our grandson, Jamie, is worse than Billy ever was. He’s just gotten into his teenage years, but he’s already a pill. I think of my old cousin Buck Morgan tonight, too. Jamie’s named after Buck, and Jamie’s out with some pagan friends tonight. Let’s pray for all of them.”

“I’m ready,” answered Bob. “Yeah, Buck’s been gone, let’s see, over forty-five years now. Someday he might return to Earth and be absolutely astounded at the changes. You know, my mom said to never forget him, but I think the rest of the world already has.”

\* \* \*

At the time the meeting in the tiny church was in progress, another meeting was taking place some forty-four light years distant. James Lee “Buck” Morgan was within a few hundred million miles of his destination, and he was filled with inestimable marvel. The alien sun was so much like his home star that it triggered nostalgia. Forty-seven Ursae Majoris had a distinctive corona that was exceptionally prominent, a crown that gave the star a kingly appearance. Buck concluded a bit smugly that his was the most magnificent of obsessions.

Buck had initiated a smooth deceleration of the craft a billion miles out in interstellar space, a transition that super-intelligent Calvin supervised expertly. He orbited the *Ursa C* some 100 million miles from the star for a good view, then set a complete array of scientific experiments into motion. The ship’s telescopes scanned nearby space efficiently, and quickly pinpointed virtually every sizable hunk of matter within hundreds of millions of miles. Radiotelescopes, spectroscopes, and intricate radiation analyzers hummed as he quickly and effectively became familiar with a new system of planets, moons, and other orbiting bodies. All sizes, orbits, and trajectories were shortly calculated perfectly.

“Reminds me of the time when you and Jeremiah Smith explored Mercury, Bucko,” stated Calvin. “Same thrill, same feeling of exploration—and perhaps the same sense of danger.”

Buck thought momentarily about how similar Calvin had been made to his old friend Smitty, who had married Buck's first heartthrob, JoEllen Thacker, retired from the Astronaut Corps, and moved back to his native Montana. Their many space adventures and hunting trips together came racing back to his mind as he considered Calvin's words.

"I remember, Calvin. What continues to surprise me is how you delve into my friend's past and make it your own. I appreciate you, but every time you come up with something like that, it makes me homesick."

"Homesick is defined as a powerful, irrational desire to be in a familiar place, sometimes to the point of nausea or depression. Shall I remove the Smitty function for a while, Bucko?"

"No, no, really it helps to keep me sane. Just keep in mind that old remembrances are a bit tough sometimes. I know you don't understand fully the concept of emotions, but it's a weakness I can't avoid."

"I'll do my best to be conscious of the effect, Bucko," replied Calvin. "The ship is ready for an influx of new facts, with all memory banks cleared of unnecessary data. Shall I begin planning a surface foray?"

"Do it, Smitty—I mean Calvin. Check out all systems on the lander while you're at it. The fuel cells especially."

The mission was four years, eight months, and four days old, slightly more time than anticipated. Slowing to examine the binary stars and a bit more interstellar matter than anticipated accounted for the extra time consumed. The Earth calendar/clock showed a little over forty-five years had elapsed back home.

With regularity the interstellar man longed for human companionship, but finding another person willing to make this voyage had been insurmountable. Too, the renewables section had been conservatively calculated as borderline for two people, though he had found that there was plenty of production to support several more.

A smaller person, such as a woman, would have satisfied the scientists when it came to resources, but no female astronaut had shown the slightest interest. Buck sometimes wished such a situation had developed. Every time he thought about the idea, beautiful JoEllen Thacker in an astronaut's

uniform flashed through his mind. He kept quite busy with his scientific observations, as well as performing necessary work in the renewables garden, and he found the solo situation tolerable though depressingly inadequate. Still, Calvin was so cleverly designed that he helped greatly.

The 47 Ursae Majoris stellar system was phenomenal in every way. There were twelve planets, one of them a giant that dwarfed Buck's old friend Jupiter, being some three and one half times larger. The huge planet orbited some 190 million miles from the star, and was dusky orange in color with a plethora of gargantuan elliptical storms. It had an array of several dozen moons, but none as large as Ganymede, and none with any detectable atmosphere. Two moons orbited in tandem, and the amount of rocky space debris around the conflicting moons indicated that they sometimes collided with thunderous consequence.

There were three ringed planets, too, all more distant from 47 Ursae Majoris than the giant planet, which Buck tentatively named *Oculi* because of its eye-like storms. There were multiple moons around each ringed planet, too. The nearest ringed planet was 260 million miles from the star, much too distant for life-giving warmth. Buck determined to explore each planet in detail before leaving for Earth, but the outer bodies were no more promising than those in the home Solar System.

There were only two planets, plus myriad sub-planetary asteroids, orbiting nearer than 190 million miles from the star. Both planets had atmospheres, but the inner one had the same hot, suffocating gases as Venus, with impenetrable cloud cover and thousand-degree surface temperatures. The planet orbited a scant fifty million miles from the star, so that Buck marveled that the atmosphere had not been blown away by intense stellar wind, like on Mercury. The astronaut concentrated his exploration efforts initially on the more interesting of the two inner planets, one he unofficially dubbed *Schultzi*, in honor of starship designer and pragmatist pioneer Dr. Gerald Schultz.

The emerald green second planet appeared superficially similar to Earth, but it lacked the characteristic blueness. It orbited 100 million miles from the star in an elliptical orbit. Both poles were capped with an Earth-like white, and in the southern zone this mantle extended almost a third of the way to the planet's equator. Swirling clouds of white mimicked the storms and frontal systems of Earth. Unfortunately, spectroscopic analysis revealed that the churning weather systems were not made primarily of water vapor.

The nearness of Schultzi to 47 Ursae Majoris fell within the envelope for life-sustaining temperatures and radiation levels, so the planet was still a possibility. The big gaseous planet only ninety million miles away was a definite negative, because of its tidal gravity pull on Schultzi, but calculations still showed marginal habitability. Two gorgeous moons about half the size of Earth's satellite traveled at about 200,000 and 300,000 miles from the planet, respectively. Analysis of the new world's atmosphere revealed more carbon dioxide than Earth, but also more oxygen. Equatorial diameter was greater than Earth's by about twenty percent, so a person walking on the surface would have to adjust for increased gravity. There appeared to be no oceans, but equatorial surface temperature was a balmy sixty degrees Fahrenheit. There were a number of large blue spots which analysis revealed to be that rarest of extraterrestrial commodities, liquid water.

It was essential to make a run to the surface, so Buck checked out the planetary lander in detail. Calvin already held a program for such a mission, but Buck nevertheless briefed him extensively, including instructions on how to complete the mission back to Earth without him if something went wrong. Buck was confident as he unpacked a long-dormant outside suit, and found that it was extremely well preserved and no worse for the passage of years.

Disconnect and descent were uneventful, except that the atmosphere was a bit thicker and the heat of deceleration caused Buck some concern, as the planetary lander was better suited to landing on sparsely aired planets or moons. A stiff wind was blowing on the surface, and he knew that a mistake could be deadly. He relied heavily on a computer feed from Calvin to correct for drift, and set the machine down next to a greenish-blue lake on a stretch of rock that was almost as smooth as a polished mirror.

Buck repeated essential measurements before disembarking. On reaching ground level, he sank mooring cables into the hard surface to prevent the brisk wind from upsetting his ride back to the *Ursa C*.

There was a strong hint of sulfur in the atmosphere, its identity and amount confirmed by a special analyzer belt he wore. Indications were unequivocal: The toxicity level of the planet's atmosphere would be outside tolerances for life. His analyzer belt also rapidly confirmed the spectroscope's indication that the greenish color was from oxidized copper, an element that comprised a major portion of the new world's surface metal. Oxidized metal heavily tainted the lake water.

He chanced a short breath of ambient air to make certain his instrument readings were correct, and then withdrew choking to the safety of his artificial environment. This was not science fiction's Earth-like world, but it would be a wonderful and comfortable location for a truly deep space station, one exceedingly rich in natural resources. He collected samples of surface ore and some small containers of atmosphere and water.

He briefly considered siphoning a load of water to replenish his supply, but decided against it. It might be dangerous to introduce metal-tainted water into his system, since he was unsure what effect it might have on his living ecosystems. Additionally, he needed to save weight for his ascent, since it would require a heavier fuel burn than for most such missions, due to stronger gravity and atmospheric resistance.

The data he collected were extraordinary, and Buck was already anticipating the day when he could share it with excited twenty-second century scientists. His transmission to home base was progressing well, but he knew that most of the material would be terribly delayed in arriving.

The planetary lander docked back at the orbiting starship unscathed by its excursion. Now he would be unable to use the lander again without robbing hydrogen and oxygen from the renewables garden, critically depriving it of precious water. As he stowed the craft, he fretted briefly about not siphoning a partial load of water onboard anyway, just in case another landing were needed. That shouldn't be necessary, because he would doubtless be given a royal ride in an updated space shuttle once he got back to Space Station Delta some four and a half years future.

As he rejoiced and rested after his successful exploration, music by his ancient hero Chopin filled his head. After completing necessary tasks and filing a debriefing in the computer log, he retired to the piano to soothe his tired mind. The music spoke well to the happy situation he now faced, that of carrying some good news back to planet Earth. He deftly glided his fingers over the precision keys, making wonderful sounds. The ivory felt solid, and the flexible rubato tempo of Chopin's "F Minor Fantasy" permeated the *Ursa C*. He retired to bed where he slept soundly and without dreams.

\* \* \*

Meanwhile back on Earth, the deterioration of the space program was appalling. Exploration incentives had rapidly been exhausted by flights of

efficient nuclear pulse cruisers, and reports of new journeys had long since assumed a boring sameness. Mining, once touted as the great salvation of the space effort, ultimately proved expensive and economically unprofitable. Moreover, minerals found on distant planets and moons differed little from Earth's basic composition, and precious few rich deposits of rare metals were discovered elsewhere. Worse, the problem of ferrying almost a cubic mile of metal blocks down to the surface was never solved. Only cessation of regular cruiser runs to the mines halted the foreboding accumulation alongside Space Station Delta.

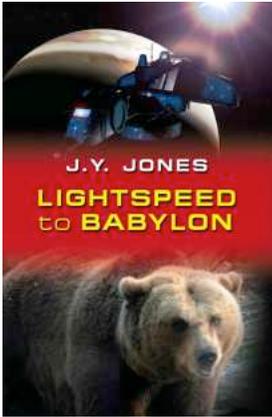
As Buck orbited 47 Ursae Majoris unaware, an order was issued to abandon all deep space bases. The proud Astronaut Corps, that indomitable legion of the elite, was reduced to a fraction of its former membership by additional decrees. Moon Base lasted a few more years before it, too, was deactivated and deserted.

The most devastating destruction of the space program came when Space Station Delta was vacated. Shuttles could easily keep any needed satellites in orbit, and servicing deep space stations was no longer necessary. Complex nuclear pulse cruisers were soon docked idly at all bays.

Elderly Father Ryan Raymaker, along with millions of fellow pagans worldwide, celebrated as each new shutdown was announced. Aerospace experts insisted in vain that a certain amount of maintenance was necessary to counter orbital decay of the space station. Regular firings of booster rockets were more essential than ever to keep the artificial moon aloft. These firings had been done automatically for decades, and subsequent to its abandonment the station was visited on a fixed schedule by shuttles as they maintained various communications satellites. The danger always existed that the unstable and bankrupt governments on the surface would fail to live up to their commitment to maintain the station.

Buck Morgan had no way of knowing any of this. His data stream from Earth was over forty years old as he explored the planetary system of his objective star. Experimental runs before his departure had confirmed the impossibility of communication while approaching a radio source at pragmatic  $c$ , so he would still be effectively out of contact on the return leg.

Buck Morgan was now firmly in the hands of destiny.



*Buck Morgan goes on mankind's first interstellar journey, leaving behind a late twenty-first century world of progress and good stewardship, with both Christianity and the animal rights movements marginalized. He returns nine years older but 90 years later, and finds the animal rights movement in control through the ruling Antichrist. Conflict arises as Morgan seeks to help the resistance, in the process finding that events have placed mankind on the brink of the Apocalypse.*

# Lightspeed to Babylon

by J.Y. Jones

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