THE FAST STUFF

Making a connection.

BY GEORGE ZEBROWSKI

Julian loved the sudden tug of acceleration as the ship slipped into the steady single g that ate up space, escaping the costly down payments of short boost’s beggarly months of powerless drift to a planetary destination. But even this steady push brought the stars no closer.

A catastrophe waited for the Universe at light speed for ships made of the periodic table’s answer to the questionings of the ancients; what is the world made of — so much better than the mythical charm of Earth, Air, Fire and Water.

It was, of course, only a logical catastrophe. A ship’s increasing mass as it reached for light speed would need infinite energy to keep moving, and would suck all the energy of a universe if it made light speed; but he liked to imagine pressing his foot down on the accelerator at 99.99 c and risking cosmic disaster. Infinite mass was an absurdity, but one day a pilot would take a ship from point A to D and not know how he did it. Great Laumer had braved it, and no one knew what happened to him when he met the demon lurking at light speed.

Julian’s coming to Lunar Farside, from which steady boost ships crossed the Solar System in weeks, had led him to dream of confronting the demon, logic be damned. The nearer stars, invisibly closer now, were still decades away relative to Earth clocks, 20 to 100 years’ round trip by ship time. But was anyone brave enough to provoke Einstein’s mass–energy prohibition, or just content to cower at subluminal velocities? It seemed a pity if anyone hesitated in those last moments before light speed, just because Albert had given the problem “a little think.”

Maybe the Universe would indulge a brave pilot.

Be happy with the fast ships we have.

The stars were brightest here at Lunar Farside, as Julian sat in the latest boost ship for a supply run to the Titan colony, trying not to think of the desert-strewn Earth hidden by the Moon, which he would see in a few moments. A home that had never afforded Lunar go in slow ships with no sure destinations.

Dreams are all we really have, he told himself, as the ship ramped up into the Lunar sky. He sat back and wished uselessly for a door—how long could anyone answer him across light years?

Suddenly he dropped down to a delusion, waiting to awaken to this greater unreality.

“Julian here,” he said into a silence. How could anyone answer him across light years? How far had he come; how long?

Farside’s base, or the colonies on Mars and Titan, priceless insurance prayers against human extinction, as his world struggled to rebuild.

Prisoners in our solar space, we can only

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