READING PREVIEW

The Complete Dead Letter Skies Saga

The Captain's Log

A Million Years from Home

Francisco M. Martinez

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First collected edition

The complete nine-book Dead Letter Skies saga, revised for The Captain's Log: A Million Years from Home.

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Opening Log

Beyond the Last Chart

Captain Aaron Digno
Exploration Survey Vessel Meridian
Registry ES-047
Commissioning authority: Aster Federation
Horizon class long-endurance survey ship
Stardate 2448.091, departure record
Mission: survey the Vesper Reach and establish a return navigation fix
Crew: twenty-four aboard
Power: twin deuterium-helium fusion generators, both operational
Drive: hyperspace translation assembly charged and aligned
Hull: serviceable; eighteen years since commissioning
Situation: entering hyperspace under autonomous control; all crew assigned to suspended animation

The last person I saw before suspension was Leena Rusk. She had one hand inside my open pod and the other around a cup of coffee.

"You intend to bring the cup in with you?" I asked.

"I intend to find the vibration you reported."

"With coffee?"

She placed the cup on the rim. A small ring spread across its surface every four seconds.

"With evidence."

I waited while she took the lower panel off. Beyond her shoulder, the suspension room was filling with the quiet clicks of lids coming down. Twenty-three other people had trusted their next breath to a pump, a valve and a schedule. I had signed the schedule that morning.

Leena tightened a mounting screw. The coffee stopped moving.

"There," she said. "Try to come back with the same number of complaints."

"No promises."

She took the cup away.

Meridian had crossed the outer navigation marker eleven minutes earlier. The forward camera showed a white survey buoy shrinking behind us. Beyond that buoy, our charts lost most of their names. The Vesper Reach contained three probable systems, a cloud of cold dust and an interference source which had refused to behave like any instrument fault we knew.

We had come to measure the interference.

Thirty-one days of hyperspace transit should have brought us outside its strongest band. We would wake, verify our position, and spend six months surveying from ordinary space. Our return reserve was sealed. Our generators had passed their load tests. We carried two surface boats, a fabrication shop, medical stores and enough food for a longer failure than any of us wished to discuss at dinner.

The clearance office had transmitted a sealed mission annex that morning. Its receipt described the packet as an authenticated continuation of the approved survey plan. The watch accepted the Federation signature. I accepted the receipt.

I gave the final authorization from the pod.

The bridge repeated the numbers. Both fusion generators came under translation load. Through the deck I felt the brief low vibration of the field taking hold. The camera image stretched, broke into pale squares and went dark.

“Transit established,” said the autonomous watch.

Leena's pod closed across the room.

Mine settled over me. The gasket pressed against its seat. Something cold entered the line at my wrist.

The last number on the display was thirty-one.

When I woke, someone was striking the lid above my face.

Three blows. A pause. Three more.

I tried to raise my hand and found the restraint still fastened. My throat hurt. The interior light came on, revealing a brown stain along the edge of the gasket.

“Release,” I said.

Nothing moved.

The striking resumed. A mechanical tapping from the hinge, not a person. The opening actuator had reached the end of its travel without releasing the lid.

I found the manual lever with two fingers. The first pull tore skin from my knuckle. On the second, the restraint let go. I worked the lever through its full arc and felt the seal break.

Cold air entered. It smelled of stale insulation.

I pushed the lid up.

The suspension room was dark except for the light inside my pod and a red lamp beside the exit. A strip of ceiling liner hung over the aisle. The deck around me glittered with flakes from its underside.

"Medical," I said.

My voice sounded too small.

The watch answered from a speaker above the door. "Command revival completed."

"Medical officer?"

"Suspended. Vital readings stable."

"The rest?"

"Twenty-three suspended. Twenty-three stable."

I made it repeat the count while I sat with my feet on the floor.

Across the aisle, Leena lay beneath clear glass. Her coffee cup was gone. A seam above her pod had split along its entire length.

I stood too quickly. My knees folded, and I caught the rim before my face struck the deck. For a while I stayed there with both hands on the pod, breathing through the nausea.

The maintenance plate beside my thumb had once been blue. The paint came away when I touched it.

I remembered watching a technician fit that plate six weeks before departure.

"Watch. Transit duration."

"Suspension core elapsed time: thirty-one days, four hours, seventeen minutes."

"Ship elapsed time."

"Clock disagreement. Exterior systems chronology rejected."

“Our position?”

“No accepted navigation solution.”

I looked down the aisle again. Every pod held someone I knew. Nobody looked older.

The ship did.

I woke Leena before I went to the bridge. Her lid opened on its second attempt. She stared at the hanging ceiling, then at the flakes stuck to my bare feet.

“Don't stand under that,” she whispered.

She tried to sit up, failed, and swore with enough force to reassure me.

We woke Dr. Edris Hale next. He checked us on the suspension-room floor, using a light held between his teeth while he secured the portable monitor to my arm. His own hands were shaking.

“Four minutes,” he said when I asked whether I was fit to walk.

“We need the bridge.”

“You need four minutes.”

Leena leaned against her pod beside me. “Give him five. He'll think he's won.”

At the end of five minutes, Hale gave us warm fluid from sealed packs and told us to stop at every compartment door. He remained with the sleepers.

The corridor handrail was rough beneath my palm. At the first junction we found a closed pressure door which should have been open. Beyond its inspection window, a cable loom sagged from the wall in gray loops.

Leena read the local gauge.

“Vacuum on the other side.”

“How long?”

She examined the door seals. “Long enough for the dust to settle somewhere else. Take the inner route.”

We passed the mess through its emergency access. Tables remained bolted to the deck. A chair lay beneath the forward one. Someone's spoon had fallen into a shallow drift of powdered ceiling material.

The hull monitor still described the compartment as habitable.

Leena changed the entry to restricted before we went on.

Something struck the pressure door behind us.

Leena stopped with her hand against the wall. I heard three blows, a pause, then three more. The same rhythm as my jammed pod lid.

"Another actuator?" I asked.

She went back to the inspection window. Her light passed through the thick pane and caught the loose cable ends. Nothing moved.

The blows came again. This time I felt them through the handrail.

"Hale," I said into the local line. "Count the sleepers."

He asked whether I meant their displayed readings.

"Their faces."

Leena pressed a contact probe against the door. Its little screen drew six peaks. She moved the probe to the jamb. The next six were stronger.

"From the far side," she said.

The passage beyond had carried spare medical stores. I had walked through it before suspension with a crate of clean tubing against my chest. There had been a yellow trolley beneath the service light. Now the trolley lay on its side. One wheel turned while I watched.

"Residual movement," I said.

"After what?"

I had no answer. The wheel stopped.

Hale began naming the people in their pods. He gave each name slowly enough for me to picture the face. I counted against his voice with my fingers pressed into my palm.

A mark appeared on the far side of the window.

At first I thought the glass was splitting. Five thin lines spread upward from a clouded patch, their ends slightly rounded. They made a hand too long for the palm beneath them. There was no arm behind it. Through the spaces between the lines I could see the fallen trolley.

Leena's probe went quiet.

"Aaron," said the speaker above the door.

Hale stopped counting.

The voice had come from a maintenance speaker which should have repeated compartment numbers. It sounded breathless, as though its owner had been running.

"Open. I missed the count."

I reached toward the release. Leena caught my wrist so hard the torn skin at my knuckle opened again.

"Look at the gauge."

The near side held pressure. The far side held none.

"Open," said the voice. "Please. I missed the count."

Hale resumed. I heard him moving from one pod to the next, tapping each clear lid with the back of his light. He named the last sleeper and then himself. Leena and I made twenty-four.

The mark on the glass had gained a sixth finger.

Leena pulled the speaker fuse. The voice stopped in the middle of please. For two seconds there was only the scrape of her sleeve against the open panel.

Then the door struck three times against its frame.

"We have everyone," she said.

She was looking at me. I understood why. The voice had not sounded like anyone I knew, but it had used my name. Somebody had asked for help from the wrong side of a door. I had spent years learning how shame felt when I walked away from such a request.

"We have everyone," I repeated.

Leena fitted the mechanical lock over the release. Her fingers shook badly enough that I had to hold its two halves together. We used a wrench as a crossbar because the proper locking pin had corroded into its socket.

The tapping followed us as far as the junction. Six blows from the sealed passage, six lighter answers through the floor beneath the mess. I stopped once and felt Leena stop beside me.

"Keep walking," she said.

At the inner door she made me show Hale my bleeding hand through the camera. He told me to wrap it. Neither of us told him we were all right.

Leena marked the service branch for isolation. Until we could inspect it, the medical stores beyond that door would remain beyond our reach. We had carried replacements for nearly every ordinary failure. I had not expected to surrender a roomful of them on the first morning.

On the bridge, the forward screen was black. I opened the optical shutter by hand.

The stars were wrong.

There were more of them than I expected, crowded across a broad white band above the bow. A red star stood low against the damaged edge of the port radiator. Below it hung a crescent which resolved, as the shutter cleared, into the illuminated edge of an enormous worked stone. Lamps crossed its dark face.

I searched for the three reference stars of the Vesper approach. Then I searched for anything I recognized.

Leena reached past me and brought up the exterior cameras.

The first showed nothing. The second showed our own hull.

Meridian's forward service markings had vanished. Small impacts covered the plating. A radiator panel had separated along two supports and remained attached by the third. Near the bow, layers of protective material had peeled back from the pressure skin. The underlying metal was dull and pitted.

For a moment I thought the camera belonged to another ship.

Then I recognized the welded patch above the survey lock. I had signed its repair certificate.

“Eighteen years,” I said.

Leena did not answer.

The watch offered a navigation estimate. I read the first line, then asked for the calculation to be shown without rounding.

The fit combined candidate pulsar identities, stellar motion and a position search far beyond our assigned volume. Its preferred interval from our departure reference was one million and three thousand years.

Below the number, uncertainty warnings filled half the display.

“Does it know?” I asked.

“It has a model,” Leena said. “We have a damaged ship.”

“Look at her.”

“I'm looking.”

She opened the generator history. Both main plants had shut down after translation entry, as scheduled. The suspension core recorded the expected low-power interval. The fuel inventory agreed with those logs. We had not burned a million years of fuel. We did not carry a million years of fuel.

Outside the protected core, the clocks disagreed by amounts the diagnostic software could not display in its ordinary fields.

One fusion generator had restarted during emergency emergence. Its output was declining. The other had failed to establish containment and remained isolated. The hyperspace assembly showed an open break across its field ring.

“No second translation,” Leena said.

“Can you repair the ring?”

“I haven't seen the break.”

I waited.

“Don't spend a repair before I have one, Aaron.”

The watch requested permission to transmit our scheduled arrival report.

I looked at the unfamiliar lights below the bow.

“Keep it in the queue,” I said. “We haven't arrived where we said we would.”

For the next six hours we worked from the inner compartments. Hale woke two technicians and the navigation officer. Everyone else remained asleep while we tested the rooms which would have to keep them alive.

We isolated the leaking passage. We unfolded one undamaged radiator section and reduced the generator load. Leena checked the emergency fusion plant by hand before accepting its output. The navigation officer rejected eleven positions, returned to the first, and refused to label it confirmed.

I recorded a new log on the bridge.

Stardate: unverified. Departure reference retained as 2448.091.
Local mission time: Day One after emergency emergence.
Position: unknown system, near an inhabited structure of unrecognized design.
Crew: six awake; eighteen in stable suspension.
Power: one fusion generator at reduced output; second plant isolated.
Drive: hyperspace assembly inoperative; maneuvering propulsion available under restricted load.
Hull: extensive exterior degradation; two compartments sealed; occupied core holding pressure.
Situation: survey suspended. Priorities are life support, navigation and a safe receiving berth.
Chronology: exterior observations suggest extreme elapsed time. Approximately one million years remains a hypothesis, not an accepted ship date.

The local signal reached us before I closed the entry. It repeated a number sequence, paused, and transmitted a diagram of a vessel approaching a marked boundary. Our receiver recognized the structure of a navigation exchange, but none of the words.

We answered with our crew count and a pressure-loss diagram. Leena checked the image before I sent it. The diagram showed two failed compartments and twenty-four occupied pods. Six of those pods were now open. I made the distinction visible.

The reply included an instruction to hold position. It took the translator forty minutes to establish enough agreement for the first short exchange. The sender adjusted its own messages when we returned an uncertainty mark. Somebody on the other side was helping.

“Incoming vessel,” the translated voice said. “State the people requiring immediate medical assistance.”

I gave Hale the circuit.

The object ahead was Tallow Junction. The name meant nothing to us. The control officer sent a local chart and repeated the exclusion boundaries until our receiver showed each one correctly. Ships were

moving between structures on that chart. Some were making passages our instruments could not follow.

“Can they tow us?” Leena asked.

I sent the question with our measured mass and the sections which could bear a line.

The answer came with a price.

It should have frightened me. Instead I felt such relief that I had to grip the console. Somebody expected us to be alive when a bill arrived.

I could not pay in a recognized currency. The receiving office offered a temporary rescue berth against a surveyed claim on movable equipment, subject to a hearing once we were safe. Hale made me send the crew list separately from the equipment list. I did not yet understand why he insisted.

Two tugs reached us during the next watch. Their crews wore unfamiliar badges and carried tools made for hands of more than one shape. They tested Meridian's attachment points instead of trusting the drawing. One point failed. We used another.

I stood at the bridge window while the tow came under load. The broken radiator trembled. I thought it would tear away and strike the nearest tug. Leena cut the last support after the tugs changed position, and we watched the panel pass clear. The tow master charged the lost time to the rescue account.

We entered the outer layby with one generator running and no accepted date.

The medical station was called the Kettle. Its staff sent us verified support equipment and came aboard to examine the sleepers. Revival took place in groups small enough for the rooms, the supplies and the available hands. Nobody woke a person because I wanted all the names marked complete before nightfall.

By the sixteenth day after emergence, all twenty-four of us were awake.

The receiving crew opened the sealed medical passage under vacuum, using a camera on a pole. They found the trolley, loose cable and a layer of translucent material behind the speaker grille. No person.

No extra body. The material cracked when their cutter touched it and remained still in the specimen jar. The six-fingered mark had dried into ridges on the glass. They removed the whole pane rather than clean it in place.

We bought tubing from the Kettle. The unopened supplies from that passage went into quarantine with the speaker. At night, when a pump knocked, I counted people before I counted strokes.

Before the pane left the berth, I asked to see the mark once more. The receiving technician held the sealed case beneath a white lamp. What I had taken for fingers consisted of branching tubes, each ending in a flattened cup. One cup lay folded beneath another. There had been six from the beginning.

"Did you measure the pressure while it moved?" he asked.

"The compartment gauge read vacuum."

He wrote that down. He did not write impossible.

The case was cold enough to gather moisture. Through its lid I could see the translucent material they had scraped from behind the speaker. It occupied one shallow dish. The technician turned the lamp toward his form, and a loose edge in the dish lifted toward the retreating warmth.

"Leave the lamp where it was," Leena said.

He did. Nothing moved for almost a minute. Then the edge rose again, slowly enough that I doubted my own eyes until it touched the side of the dish.

The technician set the case inside a second case and fastened the lid.

I asked whether we had brought something dangerous into the port.

"You reported it before unloading," he said. "We have a room for things we don't understand."

"And if the room isn't enough?"

"Then I need your report to be accurate."

He left us the quarantine number. Beneath it was a place for the name of the person who would receive any later finding. I put mine

there. It seemed a small task after everything we had lost: remain somewhere an answer could reach me.

That evening the receiving room called to ask which instrument had supplied the voice.

"A speaker," I said. "A maintenance speaker."

"There is membrane across its coil. We need the original drawing."

Leena found the drawing in the service archive. It showed bare metal, a paper cone and a grille. She made the copy herself. When she brought it to me, she had circled the empty space behind the cone.

"We will keep an account of what belongs in this ship," she said.

I put the drawing beside the crew list.

We had local residence applications, temporary service agreements and a growing vocabulary. Portable translation cuffs carried most conversations. We kept their doubtful terms visible and asked local readers to check important pages. Our own date remained on our records as a departure reference. It no longer told anybody when a bill fell due.

Tallow's people knew ancient machinery. They lived around it, charged for passage through it and argued about who had to repair it. They knew of vanished builders and old empires. They did not recognize the state which had sent Meridian into the Vesper Reach.

Some called us survivors. Others called us an unregistered crew occupying a salvage hull. One woman at the receiving desk read both entries, pushed them aside and asked whether we had eaten.

I put her question into the watch handover because it was the first one I knew how to answer without a qualification.

That night Leena placed our broken circulation pump on my bunk. The Kettle's dispensary opened at the first meal bell. She wanted me to take the actual part, not another description of what we wished it would do.

"And leave the command seal," she said. "It won't fit the connection."

From the layby window I could see the breakers' yard. A little postal runner stood on a cradle beneath its work lamps. Clothes hung in one of its open hatches. Someone was cooking aboard.

The name on the hull was Second Post.

I went to sleep knowing only that its people had found a way to live inside an old ship.

Dead Letter Skies • Book One

Postage for a Dead Moon

Francisco M. Martinez

Chapter One

Priced by the Kilo

Somebody had priced Ada's bed while she was asleep. The little cream tag swung from her toe when she threw off the blanket. Eight kilos of iron, the tag said. Mattress extra.

From the bunk below came Bram Ledo's voice. "If yours is worth eight, I want mine weighed again."

Ada unhooked the tag. Across the aisle Ulo sat on the floor with her ankles in a basin. The water was the color of weak tea. She had polished the two little brass buttons on her cuffs and had put on her good collar, things she did when she expected to lose an argument in public. Beyond the door a boy called prices in the slow, falling notes used to sell fish.

"I paid through the end of the month," Ada said.

"So did the dead," said Bram. "They're having a better morning."

"Did either of you sign anything?"

"I signed for the room," Ulo said. "The woman put her thumb over the sentence about the floor. I made her lift it. I remember the sentence. We have the use of the room so long as the room remains in the possession of the yard."

"Then the floor's gone," Bram said.

Ada pulled on her trousers and fed her gray braid through the brass washer she wore at the nape of her neck. A red circle from her pillow still marked her cheek. She would have liked to meet whoever was selling her bed with her face properly assembled.

"Will they sell the things in my drawer?" Ulo asked.

"What things?"

"A comb my sister gave me. Four letters from her. I sleep with them under the socks. If somebody says 'contents of room' and somebody else buys a drawer, I want to hear from a person who speaks this language whether the letters have gone with it."

"The Crown protects a letter even when the drawer changes hands," Ada told her.

"What about a comb?"

"You'll have to stick it in your pocket."

"I have done that already. I dislike a law which expects me to put such faith in a pocket."

"Put the letters in mine if you're that worried about it," said Bram. "This morning I've got nothing but pockets. All the money that goes in them is being held for me, out of professional affection, by a contractor whose front door has just been bought by a person in a yellow hat."

"What would you put in your pocket," Ulo asked Ada, "if this were the last time you got to look around this room?"

"The door handle."

"Why?"

"Because there were nine months when I had a place to go in and close a door, and it was the only thing I owned I ever looked forward to putting my hand on at the end of a day."

"Best leave it where it is," Bram said. "I find a handle considerably easier to keep hold of when there's a whole door attached."

In the corridor someone had taken down the bulbs at alternate doors. The length of her home showed itself in pieces. Here was the dent from Bram's first attempt to bring a stove aboard. Here, where Ulo had slapped the wall with a dripping hand, a pale five-fingered patch persisted in the rust. Under half an inch of institutional green the brass builder's letters still said SECOND POST. For nine months Ada had washed her smalls in a postal star-runner and had kept herself from asking if the helm worked.

At the foot of the gangway the auctioneer stood on an upturned washtub. People bought with colored sticks. A brown stick entitled the bearer to a door. Two yellow ones bought a length of pipe. The boy who called the weights had lost his front teeth and had to whistle through the word fixtures. It brought out a motherly tenderness in people otherwise content to bid on his neighbors' clothes hooks.

Edie Rann, who had found Ada the bunk, was taking objections at a card table. The sight of a grown woman seated at a table as narrow as

an ironing board, with thirty people trying to get their lives onto it, made Ada furious.

"Did he give you a time?" she asked.

"Good morning to you, too." Edie crossed out an address for a man holding a pair of boots. "Try your wife's old address. Spell it the way she did when you met. Machines are sentimental about spelling."

"Edie."

"He's got until the second meal bell to clear the bed charges. Afterward they're part of the hull."

"And the people who paid them?"

"House Moss. Down in the lower sorting works. Beds for thirty-four if thirty-four of us agree to sleep two deep."

"You coming?"

Edie tapped the pencil against the edge of the table. "Some of us have parents in there. We used to call them walls, when our parents were alive."

Ada crouched to get below the buyers' din. "Tell me what you need moved first."

"My book, the little one in blue cloth. My outside coat. And if you can get him with the thick neck to keep his hands off my ribs, I'd appreciate that too."

The thick-necked man was leaning over her chair to put a yellow stick between two of the ship's windows. He moved when Ada took his elbow. He was young enough to blush. He left the stick sticking out of his pocket like the tail of an embarrassed bird.

Something tightened in the floor. Ada felt the pull through the soles of her shoes before anybody called it. The long cradle under Second Post was taking the weight of the ship. Beyond the crowd its bearing wheels began to turn. The boy stopped calling prices. In the sudden space his voice left, somebody kept bidding for a bath.

"That's early," Edie said. She threw the contents of the table into her apron. "Get our two back aboard. I'll get the book."

A man with an iron-gray mustache stepped off the washtub. No buyer's stick for him. His cuffs were edged with the gray felt of Tallow Breakers. "Nothing moves between lots once the cradle's in motion. Lady, I'm speaking to you."

"Then use my name," said Edie and stepped onto the moving gangway.

Ada knew the man. Vil Dain. He had signed nine monthly receipts for forty crowns each with no visible distress at the thought of her using his ship for a house. "There are people on it," she told him.

"Your landlord had the whole morning to get them off. I gave her twenty minutes over. Anybody still aboard can ride the cradle to the shed and walk back here warm."

"Where's the end of your gangway going?"

He looked. To their right a freight shutter was coming down. The gangway had an extra leaf fitted for the old people who lived aboard. Dain had measured without the leaf. Its rail was going to meet the shutter sideways, hard enough to fold.

"Get it stopped," he called. The auctioneer blew her whistle. People stepped back to see what had gone wrong. Almost nobody let go of what they had bought.

Edie had reached the far end of the gangway. The rail caught her apron strings and turned her neatly as a dancer. Ada saw the surprised round O of her mouth. Edie went down into the narrow valley between two rails.

"Bram!" Ada heard the ugly old authority in her voice, still there after twelve years. "Twenty seconds. Lift from your side."

"Lift what? The woman or the bloody bridge?"

"The woman. Ulo, he needs both hands."

Ada got herself through the postal door and took the companionway in three strides. The pilot seat was full of wool. She pitched a half-finished sock, two balls and the basket into the navigator's footwell. The main bank lit at her touch. Ninety charge. Three wrapped salt bricks still sat under the wire seal marked FURNACE TRANSFER. Somebody had prepared a perfectly good star-runner to make the most expensive trip of its life into the teeth of a furnace. She had a brief, shameful moment of gratitude for a conscientious employee.

"Second Post requesting local thrust," she said. She had forgotten the ritual until it issued intact from her mouth. The pilot's glass showed

her the long underside of the shutter and a row of picking teeth smeared with the red paint of other people's hulls.

"Six feet," Dain said from the bridge circuit. He sounded capable and unpanicked. For those few seconds she liked him. "Six feet to port will lift the gangway leaf. You mind the people on the apron."

"I can see them."

"Then you can see my boy with the whistle. He's looking at you. Don't make me tell his mother about this."

Ada moved her left hand. Second Post leaned into her palm. A woman who had once flown by the seat of her good trousers and the ache in one crowned tooth found the old vocabulary intact. The apron slipped down. Through the side panel she saw Bram's white eyebrow and the top of Ulo's bald wet head as they bent together. Edie's right foot, still wearing its brown slipper, rose clear of the folding rail.

"Six," Dain said. "That's your six. Thank you, pilot. Cut thrust and come down."

Bram's voice came through the companionway. "We've got her. We haven't got a whole lot of her breathing right."

"The infirmary's over the other way," Ulo called. "She says take her to the Kettle. Those were her words."

"Ambulance can take her," Dain said. "There are two orderlies on their way. If you lift clear with that ship you are taking a purchased thing from the man who paid for it."

Ada could see the orderlies on the apron. One had a stretcher unfolded. One was pushing the buyers away to leave a way through. There was a lawful course and it might even have been the sensible one. She wanted, fiercely, to keep the hands on the little gray sticks out of her home.

From the corridor Edie said, audible word by audible word, "I paid my last installment Friday."

Dain heard her. "A bunk payment doesn't buy a ship, Miss Rann."

"No," said Ada. "I expect it doesn't."

She released the cradle catches. Second Post came off the rollers so sweetly the boy outside kept his feet. On the glass he got smaller, holding his little brass whistle to his lips. The air doors at the apron mouth were open for a tub of outgoing scrap. Ada took the place ahead

of it and saw a crescent of black grow around the edge of the glass. The stars of Tallow Junction lay behind a film of soap from the last time somebody had washed the window. Her passenger's bedroom slippers landed side by side in the navigator's well.

"Pilot," said Dain, "I need your name for what you just did."

"I'll give it to you," she said. "Will you tell the woman who bought the beds that she can have her money back?"

"She'll get her money back. And you'll get to be known for this whether you give me the name or not. I'd rather be able to spell it properly."

"Ada Soria."

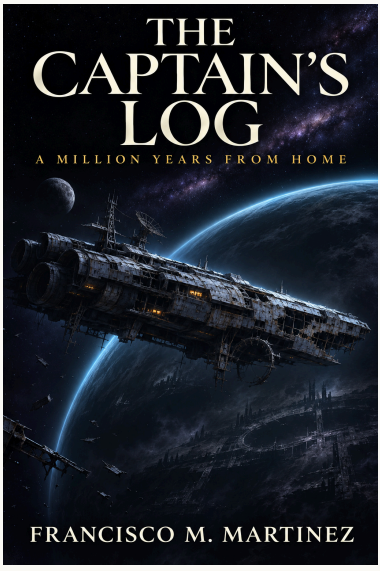
Ulo appeared in the doorway, one hand slick to the wrist. "Edie would like to know who has her blue book."

"Did we leave it behind?"

"Yes," said Ulo. "I was hoping you had a kinder word for that."

Behind them the auction resumed. The little boy's voice carried to the edge of the yard circuit. His next lot was the pilot's seat in which Ada sat.

THE COMPLETE DEAD LETTER SKIES SAGA



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The Captain?s Log

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