

Excerpts from *Pearseus, Year 18: The Schism*

By *Nicholas C. Rossis*

<http://www.amazon.com/Pearseus-Year-18-Science-fiction-ebook/dp/B00FXOJQA8/>

Introduction

Lucas

First came the alarm. Seconds later, the first explosion. It ripped through UES *Pearseus*, bearing an eerie resemblance to the ripples caused by a pebble breaking the surface of a still lake. It made its way along the ship's axis in confident, devastating waves that disfigured its elegant form and dismembered its hull, sending twisted pieces of flesh and metal to impregnate the void.

Luckily for Second Engineer Lucas Rivera, the main engine in the ship's bowels exploded seconds before he entered the engine room of the UES *Pearseus*. A moment later and he would have been vaporised by the explosion or sucked into space. Instead, the violent shock threw him onto the floor. He watched with horror the entire section of the ship in front of him disintegrate before his eyes. The pressure sucked his friends out of the ship one after another, their mouths open in silent screams, their faces masks of agony.

Stop him! cried a crystalline voice in his head.

Lucas woke up with a jolt, covered in thick globs of sweat. He lay on the bed panting for a few minutes, then jumped to his feet and walked towards the small sink in the back of his cabin. He splashed some water on his face in a vain attempt to wash the nausea away and leaned against the sink for a while, head bowed, breath slowly returning to normal. For a moment he considered heading back to bed, then decided against it. Perhaps the bar would be a better choice. The nightmare had left a nasty taste in his mouth; he needed a drink. And to see some people, even the kind of people on UES *Pearseus*. After all, it *was* New Year's Eve.

The ship itself hardly qualified as the most beautiful vessel. It owed its unusual name to its pear-shaped body, the extra girth necessary in order to accommodate its FTL drive. These recently developed engines bent space around the vessel, allowing it to

cover vast distances in the blink of an eye. Of course, this would not be necessary on this occasion. Their destination was the heliopause, and the ship had almost reached it.

There were over five thousand people on board, if one included both crew and the extraordinary menagerie of people crazy enough to spend New Year's Eve on a spaceship and wealthy enough to afford it. Since the space cruise had been advertised as *the* place to be, with the new century dawning that very night, the world's most successful businessmen, politicians, actors and celebrities filled the ship. They all looked forward to the party of a lifetime on the edge of the solar system.

He stepped onto the narrow corridor and grinned a polite smile to a couple walking towards him. He took a deep breath; the corridor smelled of alcohol. The man tripped, and Lucas recognised a former President. His escort, a beautiful young blond half his age, held him steady. They both giggled as a bodyguard pushed Lucas aside. He stumbled, yet felt no resentment, his mind stuck at the explosion in his dream. *Stop him. Stop whom?* He could not shake the feeling something was wrong. *My place is at the engine room; not the bar.* He looked back at the people heading away from him and spun around, picking up his pace.

Lucas and Kate

Lucas

Lucas never thought of himself as particularly lucky. He never won anything, unlike his sister, who used to win everything she wanted. Lucas wished she could see him now, though. He had barely escaped a fiery death in the engineering room, jumping into the escape pod seconds before it ejected. He had even survived the descent onto the planet without a scratch, whereas most other survivors suffered anything from concussions to broken bones. *That would show her*, he thought with a childish pride, then wondered if he would ever see her again, and a pang of sadness shot through his heart. Still, he had always been an optimist, and his usual determination soon took over.

Lucas looked around him to get his bearings, scratching his head. They had landed in a valley on the dark side of the planet. It was a chilly night, with a clear sky and unfamiliar stars. Strange flowery smells filled the air; exotic yet pleasant. He saw the reflection of two moons in a small pool of water and remembered an old saying. *One moon shows in every pool; in every pool, the one moon, they say. Well, not in this one...* His shoulders sank as the realisation of how far away they were from home hit him. He heard a faint whistle above and looked up. Debris from their ship entered the atmosphere, lighting up the unfamiliar sky like eerie fireworks. The stunning effect only made him wonder how they could ever go back.

Not knowing when the sun would rise, he decided to use the lights from the pods and small fires lit by the survivors to work. People gathered around their respective pods like lost tribes around ancestral fires. He helped his people – it is funny how he now thought of the people in his pod as “his” – be as comfortable as possible, and wondered if there might be something he could do for the others. The pods could provide them with energy and shelter for years. They also contained limited supplies of food and drink, medicine and various portable scanners, as well as a small cache of weapons – although he had not seen anything dangerous yet. He saw almost all pods had made it to the surface, so most of the people on board should have survived.

Their supplies could cover their needs for a few days, but they needed to find drinkable water and shelter in the morning.

He heard a soft sob nearby and followed the sound to a young woman sitting on the ground with her back against the pod, hands covering her face. He leaned down and held her hands. She plaintively repeated a man's name again and again between sobs; perhaps a friend or relative.

"What's your name, love?" he asked in as soothing and calm a voice as he could manage.

"Katie," she replied with a choked voice.

He caught a slight whiff of alcohol in her breath and remembered it was still New Year's Eve. He glanced at his watch, then glanced again to double-check. The watch showed a few minutes past midnight. *Not New Year's Eve, not anymore. It's the New Year. First day, first year of a new century; first people on a new planet. So where's the bubbly?* He felt like laughing, then something within stirred and he started singing to the woman instead, softly at first, then louder.

Should old acquaintance be forgot,

and never brought to mind ?

Should old acquaintance be forgot,

and old lang syne ?

He heard a man's voice join his, slightly off-key, then a broken woman's voice, followed by a clear soprano one. The woman fell in his arms and joined them between sobs. Soon the song spread all around them, warming them like the soothing glow of the fire that danced on their faces.

For auld lang syne, my dear,

for auld lang syne,

we'll take a cup of kindness yet,

for auld lang syne.

The woman had stopped crying. She now stared with unseeing eyes into the consoling fire. She had not moved, so he kept his arms around her and they sat

together for the longest time, until she finally fell asleep. He laid her down as softly as he could and covered her with his jacket. Much as he would have liked to stay there, he could make out smoke coming from a nearby pod and wanted to check on it. He stood up and stretched his arms to let blood flow again as he walked towards the pod. As he approached, he saw Captain Kibwe lying unconscious next to the fire, face brown with dried blood, soiled bandages covering the top of his head. Someone had placed his arm in a splint and a fetching young nurse hovered over him like a worried mother hen.

Lucas smiled at her, then noticed First Mate Croix spread on the ground. He seemed unconscious as well, but when Lucas approached he heard him mumble and saw that the man had no discernible wounds. *Sleeping. Well, good for him.* He left him alone, picked up a toolbox with weary hands and walked around the damaged pod. A movement not too far away caught his eye and he turned to look.

His toolbox fell on the ground, tools scattering everywhere. He blinked at the sight of the biggest, fiercest man he had ever laid his eyes upon. Around him people gasped in alarm as they noticed the newcomer approaching in slow, uncertain steps. No-one else moved. Lucas held his breath and took a step towards the man. He looked into his eyes and saw ferocity and strength, but also compassion and wisdom. The two men stood facing each other for a moment, then the stranger spoke a single word with an unexpected melodic softness.

Lucas' eyes opened wide. At first, he felt sure he had misheard, but the monstrous man repeated it, with the same pleasant accent: "Welcome."

Before he could reply, he heard a loud bang behind him.

Mutiny

Lucas

Lucas looked around him. Their small assembly read like a regular who's who of their community, with Joe, Richard and Barrett sitting around a small table. Katie sat down next to him. She had discovered her cooking talents on the planet, acquiring quite a reputation among their friends. They had gotten married five years after their first meeting at the crash site. She touched his hand and he smiled at her.

The dinner on their plates would have been wolfed down any other day, but now everyone seemed to have lost their appetite, playing with their food. Everyone but Joe; having spent much of his life as a poor farmer, Joe never let a good meal go to waste. Only the crackle of a small fire in the corner and the sound of Joe's wooden spoon attacking his clay plate interrupted the quiet of the small, dark room. Lucas was the first to break the silence.

"Thank you all for joining us tonight. I thought it'd give us an opportunity to discuss last week's riot."

The *riot*. That is what Croix called it afterwards, minimising his role in it. Mercifully, no-one had died, although a great number of people had been injured. Still, the physical damage was nothing compared to the wedge it had driven among the survivors. Croix had presented it as an affront to both Lucas and the memory of Captain Kibwe; and as an unfortunate proof of the validity of his arguments. Lucas had been surprised at how many supported Croix. Most had been frightened enough by his words to trust him and his new army with the city's safety. They called themselves Loyalists to display their loyalty for their late Captain and, by extension, his erstwhile First Mate. Lucas felt pretty sure Kibwe would have resented that, but the man's statue was unable to protest.

"What can we do? The man will surely come to his senses." Joe shrugged, then a content sigh left his lips as he put the last spoonful of pumpkin soup with honey and some of the tangy yoghurt they were experimenting with into his mouth.

Barrett twitched on her chair. "Will he? How many e-libs are left now?"

“I assume all of them,” Richard said in a soft voice. “Unless you mean how many are left out of Croix’s hands, in which case the answer is I don’t know; perhaps a handful?”

They looked at each other. “Am I the only one who refused to give it? My e-lib contains all the legislation from Earth. Without it, there can be no justice,” said Barrett, placing the thin glass frame on the table.

“Sure, but what about his Armbands?” Richard asked. That was the name they had given the boys Croix had recruited, because of the black armbands they wore. “What will you do when they come to your house? You all know what happened to Fred.”

The old man had tried to stop the boys from entering his house. In the scuffle he had hit his head. He was now in the hospital and Croix had used the incident to declare unlawful any attempt to interfere with the Armbands.

Lucas drummed his fingers on the table, holding his forgotten spoon in mid-air with the other hand. “Do they even have the right to enter your home like that? What does the law say about this?”

Barrett leaned forward, picked up her e-lib and tapped on it, a bemused look on her face. “Whose law? Croix dubbed this a crisis and dissolved the City Council. His word’s now law. So, does that make his actions legal? I have an e-lib filled to the brim with legislation. Any law passed by man, from Hammurabi’s code to twenty-first century common intellectual property rights is in here. Thousands of pages dealing with mergers and acquisitions alone. What good does that do us here?”

She shook her head, placed the e-lib back on the table and continued. “On a ship, the Captain’s word is law, yet the law’s nothing more than people’s beliefs in what’s right and wrong. As these change, so does legislation.” She dropped back onto her chair. “So, what *is* law? Law’s just people’s preconceptions and common sense put into rules. The law’s what *we* make of it. Tyrants use it to rule and citizens as protection against them. The worst atrocities have been committed by men believing they were doing what law required of them.”

“That’s not –” Joe started, but she ignored him.

“A nation’s worst shortcoming is when courts uphold the letter of the law instead of serving justice. Man’s natural state is one of cruelty and only faith in justice can help

us overcome this. The first law of justice is that the law must *always* be balanced with compassion. Law without compassion allows men to be as cruel as their worst nature. It's no better than tyranny."

"Law *needs* to be strict if it's to be obeyed," Joe interrupted her.

"Yes," Barrett said, "but what kind of law? Allow me an example. A king dreamt that a baby boy would destroy him. He ordered a general to abandon it in the wild. The general delivered it to a shepherd instead, who raised it as his own –"

Joe rolled his eyes. "Seriously? A fairy tale?"

Barrett's face tightened. "Actually, it's told by Herodotus. The story takes place around 550 BC. The king was called Astyages. Now if I may continue..."

She looked around her, but no-one spoke. "As I was saying, when the king discovered this, he punished his general with unusual cruelty. Not only did he have the general's own son murdered, but he also served his body to his father during a banquet. Would you call this justice, Joe?"

He shrugged. "The general should have obeyed his king. He's only got himself to blame."

The others looked at him wide-eyed. Katie blushed with anger. "What are you saying, Joe? That it's OK for everyone to make up their own laws? That we have to obey them, or they'll murder our children? That's not law; that's evil!"

Joe grinned. "Is it? What *is* evil anyway? It's considered evil to kill a man, but we're encouraged to do so in war. In Barrett's story, the king's deed is only evil because the boy died so young. Had he died at an old age, it might have been considered natural. And people might consider his death a good thing if he were a criminal. So even death's not evil in itself. Is there truly evil in the world, or does an action become evil simply because it happens outside the right time or place?"

Katie's face turned an even deeper red; she seemed about to have a stroke. "You –"

Joe cut her off with his hand and continued. "Anyway, that's not the point. I grew up a poor farmer's son in India. I can't remember how many times my family almost starved to death. Do you know how we survived? By obeying my father. He made us do things we were not proud of, *evil* things you might say, but we stayed alive.

That's when I learned my lesson. We must do whatever it takes to survive. Find a strong leader and follow him, that's my advice. Croix has proven he can be that leader, so I say we let him lead."

Katie drew a deep breath and Lucas squeezed her hand to calm her down, but Barrett spoke before she had a chance to respond.

"Before all this madness, we'd been talking with Richard about starting our legislation from scratch. I believe we all agree that help is not going to arrive after all this time?" She looked around her and everyone nodded. "Then, we agree: we're probably spending the rest of our lives here. So, I propose we put forward a motion to start our legislation afresh, to write our own Declaration of Independence, so to speak. A constitution to guide us and our children through the days to come. The problem with our legislation is that it's too detailed and complex. That makes people come up with tricks and ways to ignore it. The more the prohibitions, the more the law-breakers. That's why law only needs general principles. Judges shouldn't worry about the letter of the law. They must focus on people's actions: do they comply with the spirit of the law? I mean, God only gave mankind ten commandments to follow. *So few*, you may say. And yet, if everyone followed half of these, we wouldn't be in the sad state we're in."

"That's great, but what do we do now? With Croix?" asked Katie.

Barrett looked at her e-lib and stroked it to remove an invisible smudge. "Croix proves how desperately we need a constitution. But that can't help us now. Even if we accused him of breaking the law, who's gonna arrest him? We have no police – except for his henchmen." She raised her eyes and looked at them. "My friends, make no mistake: we now live in a dictatorship. How the hell did we let this happen?"

"Even more important, what are we going to do about it?" Richard asked.

Joe looked at the baffled faces around him. "Am I the only one to think this is crazy? Before we do anything rash, can't we try and reason with him? I'm sure the man's not the monster you all seem to think."

"There can be no reasoning with a madman," Richard retorted. "We should–"

Lucas raised his hand to stop him. “Perhaps Joe is right. How about the two of us go and talk to him before we do anything?”

Barrett and Richard exchanged an uneasy look. “He’s broken every law I know,” she said finally. “I can’t let him get away with it.”

“Sure, and how’re you gonna convince him to surrender?” asked Richard.

Instead of replying, Barrett returned to her preoccupation with the invisible blot on her e-lib. Katie looked away and Lucas rubbed his temples, lost in thought.

“So, we’re all agreed the two of us go and talk to him?” asked Joe, breaking the uncomfortable silence.

“Well, *you* can go if you wish” said Richard. “Me, I’d rather make an army first. If push comes to shove, I want to know I can defend myself.” He turned to Barrett.

“Jenny, I need your advice on this. Will I be breaking any laws?”

She sighed and looked up from her e-lib. “I don’t know, Richard. I really don’t know. Let them talk to Croix and see what happens. In the meantime, you do what you must. *Speak softly and carry a big stick*, as the saying goes.”

They kept talking well into the night, breaking up their gathering long after midnight. Katie started cleaning up the table while Lucas did the washing up. It had been their agreement since moving in together; she was a great cook, so it made no sense for Lucas to try that, but he took pride in his washing up, now possible to do indoors thanks to running water; his pride and joy. He placed the leftovers into a wooden barrel for the chicken to eat and spent a minute gazing at it. His next project would be a plastics factory, he decided.

Katie saw his troubled look. “Are you worried?” she asked.

He knew she was not referring to the plastics. With an absent-minded look on his tired face, he rubbed a dark spot on the clay plate in his hands, until it disappeared under his fingernails.

“Yes. Very,” he said at last.