“Do you just look for ways to get us into trouble, Cade?” asked Elle. She looked back over her shoulder to make certain no one else had followed them down the dark hallway.

“Are you telling me you actually wanted to stay with the tour group?” Cade flashed the same grin he always used when he tried to convince Elle he could do no wrong.

Trouble Begins

Sneaking away from the rest of the class just as the tour of Gemini Station began was pure Cade. The two students were both convinced that listening to lectures on the history of computing and electronics during the pre-gateway period would have them yawning and looking for a quiet corner to sleep. Mrs. Hondulora and the the other two instructors had made the mistake of being at the head of the line, allowing Cade and Elle to drop their location beacons in the backpacks of two other students who weren’t paying attention before sneaking away.

“No, but you just know Mrs. H. is gonna pull a pop quiz on us next week about some little bit of trivia we’re going to miss,” replied Elle. “My grades aren’t bad, but if I fail a quiz my mom and dad’ll put me on a drop-ship to the outer ring.”

“You’ve got the best grades in the class, Elle. Give it a rest,” said Cade. “Hey, here we go.”

Elle followed Cade’s gaze to a digital display mounted at the edge of the intersection. Colored lines on the floor were finally given meaning as the pair read instructions color-coded to indicate which line to follow for various exhibits.

“Pre-2050 Video Game Technology,” said Cade. “Red line. That could be interesting.”

Elle shook her head. “No, the blue line. Hologram Storage Solutions 2020–2085. I’ve always been curious to know how they solved the distortion problem.”

Cade frowned and slowly turned his head to look at Elle. “You’re kidding, right.”

Elle tried to hold back the grin, but it lasted only a few seconds. “Almost had you.”
“Well, we’ve got five or six hours to burn and an entire station turned into a technology museum, so I thought you might be serious. You really do get into this stuff more than anyone else I know,” said Cade.

“How about that third option?” asked Elle. “Yellow line.”


Cade dodged just in time to avoid Elle’s hand aimed for the back of his head. “We’re running out of options,” she replied. “We can always just go back and see what the group is doing.”

Another grin crossed Cade’s face.

“I don’t like that smile,” said Elle.

“How many levels did Mrs. H. say were on this station?”

Elle shook her head. “No way, Cade. That’ll get us banned from field trips for the rest of the school year.”

“Come on, Elle. How many?”

**On the Level, or Not?**

Elle bit her lip and thought back to the small presentation the students had watched prior to the trip. The space station had been decommissioned back in 2091. The twenty-three levels that made up the cigar-shaped station circling M-392 were originally used for deep-space research and provisioning of outbound ships, but the station had been literally cut in two to form Gemini Station and Taurus Station. The latter had been towed to the opposite side of M-392 so both stations were in geosynchronous orbits above the two largest settlements, Gemini for mining and Taurus for energy production to power the gateway for this system. Elle had to concentrate to recall the number of levels on Gemini Station, but then one of her memory tricks fired and she saw twelve rocks arranged to form the letter G.

“Twelve for Gemini. Eleven for Taurus.”

Cade sighed and pointed at Elle’s forehead. “It’s really creepy how much information you store up there, you know that? I’ll bet you a week’s worth of ‘Net access tokens that you probably have the entire station’s layout memorized, don’t you? Come on. . . admit it.”

“The map was in the data pack. It might be on a test or something,” Elle replied, her face red.

“Yeah. A test or something.”

“Shutup.”

“So, twelve levels. The shuttle dock is what, level twelve?”

“Eleven. Command and Control is level twelve,” said Elle. “Think of it as a tube standing upright. Level twelve at the top. . .”

“And we took the elevators all the way down to the bottom. This big number one painted on all the walls seems to be important,” asked Cade. “I’m guessing restrooms?”

“Funny,” said Elle. “But the answer is still no. I’m not getting too far from the group, Cade.”