

PEARSEUS  
SCHISM

Book 1

NICHOLAS C. ROSSIS

## Year One

“The sole goal of schooling is to teach them simple arithmetic,  
nothing above the number 500, writing one’s name  
and the doctrine that it is divine law to obey the Germans...

I don’t think that reading is desirable.”

*Heinrich Himmler on the four years of elementary school,  
which was to be the only education of the Reich’s new subjects*

## ***December 31, 2099 AD, UES Pearseus***

### **Lucas**

First came the alarm. Seconds later, the first explosion. It traversed UES Pearseus, bearing an eerie resemblance to ripples caused by a pebble breaking the surface of a still lake. The shockwave made its way along the ship's axis in confident, devastating strides that disfigured its elegant form and dismembered its hull, sending twisted pieces of flesh and metal to impregnate the void. Alarms blared while pods shot from the mutilated spaceship, carrying people and equipment to the planet below.

Luckily for Second Engineer Lucas Rivera, the main engine in the ship's bowels exploded seconds before he entered the engine room. A moment later and he would have been vaporised by the explosion or sucked into space. Instead, the violent tremor threw him onto the floor. He watched with horror as the entire section in front of him disintegrated. 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 to stagger to the small sink in the back of his cabin. Splashing some water on his face in a vain attempt to wash the nausea away,

he leaned against the sink, head bowed, breath slowly returning to normal. For a moment he considered heading back to bed, then decided the bar would be a better choice. The nightmare had left a foul 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 could hardly be described as beautiful. It owed its unusual name to its pear-shaped body, the extra girth necessary in order to accommodate the recently developed Faster-Than-Light engines, known as FTL drives. These bent space around the vessel; engaging them could transport them to the far end of the galaxy in the blink of an eye. Of course, this would not be necessary on this occasion. Their destination had been the heliopause, the space at the very edge of our solar system. Since reaching it a few hours before, the ship had stood still, preparing for the centennial celebrations.

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.

Lucas stepped into the narrow corridor and grinned a polite smile to a couple walking towards him. He took a deep breath; the corridor reeked of alcohol. The man tripped, and Lucas recognised

Nicholas C. Rossis

a former president. His escort, a beautiful young blonde 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*, the voice had said. *Stop whom?* He could not shake the feeling something was wrong. *My place is at the engine room, not the bar.* He glanced at the people heading away from him and spun around, picking up his pace.

## Croix

At the opposite end of the ship, First Mate Gerard Croix staggered into the graceful bridge; a tall, gruff, heavy man in his late forties, with grey hair that looked yellowish somehow, hair that flowed dirty under his cap. His pale face and long black circles under his eyes bore witness to his lack of sleep. Even the waiter who had served him dinner earlier that evening had informed him that he looked like crap tonight. He had not been surprised. The constant pounding in his head forbade sleep, making it a particularly rare luxury ever since they had started this damned trip.

Every night he thought he might be able to rest, if anything simply out of sheer exhaustion. Instead, as soon as he shut his eyes, the nightmares started. Consisting of nothing but darkness at first, accompanied by a horrifying feeling of loss, dread and loneliness, they had soon changed to include a soft, golden pulsing light. Warmth and relief emanated from it, and he vaulted towards it, when a disorienting voice started whispering numbers in his head. While he paused to listen, the light would fade in the distance, leaving the voice the only presence in the darkness. Louder and louder it wailed, until he screamed, begging for it to stop. The dream ended invariably with a violent explosion that jolted him to his feet.

His lack of sleep made him drowsy and heavy. *This is just another dream*, he thought as he stepped into the bridge. Despite

the late hour, Captain Kibwe stood in the bridge, talking to two ensigns, their eyes glued to his mouth, hanging on his every word. Everyone respected Kibwe; his crew would go to hell and back for him. His nickname, *Commander Sisko*, had been given to him by Lucas, a short, nerdy Latino engineer whose passion was twentieth century science fiction. Everyone loved Kibwe, but Croix they feared, and that was fine by him. He stumbled to the main navigation grid, voices whispering ceaselessly in his pounding head. *Yep. This is just another one of these damn dreams.*

The voices reached a crescendo and a vein throbbed on his forehead as he approached the navigation console. He no longer cared what would happen, his only thought to punch in those damned numbers, in the off chance he might return to a peaceful sleep. No one paid any attention to him. The Captain had his back turned, still talking to the ensigns. Croix slinked over to the console and entered the coordinates with trembling hands, before disengaging the FTL alarms. The ship started its silent countdown to the new destination.

For one brief moment, the whispers in Croix's head finally stopped and his whole body relaxed. He took a deep breath, closed his eyes and raised his head to enjoy the feeling of calm. Then Kibwe glanced around, alarmed, sensing the ship's new mood the second the computer altered its course. He cocked his head first left, then right. *Like a dog, sniffing for a new smell*, thought Croix.

"Croix, good thing you're here. Could you check the nav comp? I've got a weird feeling the damn thing's off somehow."

Croix's shoulders tightened, but he said nothing. He pretended to examine the navigation data on the computer when the FTL drive engaged with a hard jolt. Since the jump had not been properly calibrated, only the emergency systems prevented crew and passengers from becoming red blots on the walls. Although he had disabled most alarms, various independent systems announced their imminent failure. The noise deafened him, and the renewed pain in his head made him clutch it with both hands and howl as he crashed onto the floor. Deadly sparks danced around, barely visible through the thick smoke that filled the room.

A sudden jerk as the ship ripped through time and space to travel to its new destination threw Croix against the metal wall, crushing his head. Blood gushed, soiling the white of the wall with bright red stains. He blinked, feeling his eyelids hot and heavy, and wiped the wound with his hand. He stared at the red liquid covering his fingers in disbelief. *It's OK, I deserve it. I caused this. This is all my fault.* He staggered to his feet in shock.

A moment later, the ship exited FTL with another jolt and a vicious explosion sent him flying over a console. He noticed the Captain lying under a broken beam from the gutted room. Croix had no idea what to do next. His legs hurt as he found his footing, trembling with pain. He stared at the reports coming in from every corner of the injured ship. A monitor displayed the engine room, where a raging fire had erupted. The computer closed the bulkheads and vacuumed the entire compartment in a desperate attempt to stop the flames from spreading. This saved the ship,

but killed any surviving engineers. Green lights turned to red, one after another, to signify loss of life support as structural integrity failed. The acrid smoke brought tears to his eyes and his lungs convulsed in a desperate attempt to expel the poisonous air, triggering a choking cough. For some reason, an image of the smoke-filled clubs he frequented as a young man flashed momentarily in his head. Like then, he could barely make out the figures of the dancers around him, only now they wore masks of pain instead of joy.

One of the dancing figures around him crashed onto the floor like a broken mannequin, falling debris piling over him. Cold sweat dripped on Croix's back as he realised he had just killed dozens, perhaps even hundreds of people. His mind felt numb and he brought his bloodied fist to his mouth to stop a scream, taking an unconscious step backwards. He slipped on the still body of another crew member and crashed onto the floor, eyes inches from the man's dead eyes and bloody face. The room went dark and he looked around in panic. A reassuring dim light shone nearby and he crawled towards it. He recognised it as part of the escape pods' navigation system. The voice in his head returned, whispering more numbers, and he cried out in a vain attempt to make it stop. It only got louder though, leaving him no option but to punch the numbers into the computer.

He jumped when a hand touched his shoulder and whirled around to see the injured captain. Glancing back to the console, Croix pushed some buttons with twitching fingers.

"What are you doing?" Kibwe demanded.

“There’s a planet” Croix said with a certainty he did not feel. His voice sounded hoarse. “We have to get down there. The ship won’t last much longer.”

He had no idea why he had said that; it felt like someone else was talking through him.

“Where are we?” Kibwe whispered, trying to make sense of the unfamiliar chart on the radar.

Croix raised his shoulders. He had entered the coordinates as the whispers in his head uttered them, with no consideration as to where they led. The FTL drive could have propelled them to the far end of the galaxy in the short time it was active. “Nowhere close to Earth,” he said, glancing at the screen.

The Captain stared at him with blank eyes for a moment, then stumbled. Croix held him steady, grinding his teeth.

“Come on, sir, we have to leave.”

“How did you know about the planet?”

“I saw it on the nav-grid just before it blew up,” Croix lied.

Kibwe looked uncertain for a moment, then nodded. “Go!”

A computer voice over their heads urged passengers and crew to head to the nearest escape pod. Another explosion threw them against the wall as they stumbled out of the bridge. Mercifully, they found a half-empty pod just outside and the people inside helped them climb in. As soon as they entered, yet another, deafening blast shook the whole ship. Metal trembled and ground against metal, then they were free. As they shot away from Pearseus, a final explosion ripped its hull open from bow to stern.

Nicholas C. Rossis

Croix fell back on his seat with a satisfied sigh and closed his eyes, his head finally silent, all pain gone.

The last voice he heard before losing himself to the darkness belonged to a startled passenger: "How can that guy sleep?"

***January 1, 2100 AD (1 After Landing),  
Pearseus***

**Lucas**

Lucas never thought of himself as particularly lucky. He had 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, catapulting 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 all kinds of injuries, from concussions to broken bones. *That would show her*, he thought with a childish sneer, then wondered if he would ever see her again, and a pang of sadness shot through his heart.

He glanced 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.'* Well, *not in this one...* His shoulders sank as the realisation of how far away they were from home hit him. Hearing a faint whistle above, he 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 – strange how he now thought of the people in his pod as “his” – get as comfortable as possible, and wondered if there might be something he could do for the rest. The pods would provide them with energy and shelter for years, but the survivors needed to start searching for resources as soon as possible, perhaps even that very morning. They had 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. These, however, would dwindle fast.

A quick glance told him most pods had made it to the surface, even if some looked half-empty. He wondered how many of the people on board had survived, then his breath caught at the sight of a blinking red light in the distance. Squinting his eyes, he spotted a red cross on its side, illuminated by the crimson glare, and his lips curled upwards. He started towards it, his heart filling with hope. A med-bay would be equipped with all the essentials needed to ensure medical care for the survivors. Pearseus had maybe a dozen of those, but he had no idea how many had survived the explosion.

His steps faltered at the sound of a soft sob. Changing direction, he followed it to a young woman sprawled on the ground, her

back against the pod, hands pressed against her face. He leaned down to gently take her hands into his. 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 whiff of alcohol on her breath and remembered it was still New Year's Eve. He glanced at his watch; it 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, softly at first, then louder.

*Should auld acquaintance be forgot,  
and never brought to mind ?*

*Should auld acquaintance be forgot,  
and auld 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 snuggled in his arms and joined the singing between sobs. Soon the song spread all around, warming them like the soothing glow of the fire that danced on their faces.

*For auld lang syne, my jo,  
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 it out. He stood up to stretch his arms and legs before walking towards it.

Captain Kibwe lay unconscious next to the fire, face brown with caked blood, and soiled bandages covering the top of his head. A fetching young nurse had placed his arm in a splint and hovered over him like a worried mother hen.

Lucas exchanged a smile with 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 with weary hands a toolbox and dragged it around the damaged pod. A movement not too far away caught his eye and he spun around.

His toolbox crashed 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, noticing the newcomer approach in slow, uncertain steps. No-one else moved. Lucas' breath caught as he took a fearful step towards the man. When he looked into his eyes, he 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 popped open. At first he felt sure he had misheard, but the monstrous man repeated it, with the same pleasant accent: "Welcome."

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

## Croix

Moments earlier, Croix had been dreaming. A joyful light surrounded him as he sat on a hill overlooking a lush forest. The sun warmed his bones and he closed his eyes, stretching cat-like to enjoy it. The light danced on his skin while the grass caressed his body. He could not remember the last time he had felt so serene and sighed contentedly as a deep sense of calmness permeated every fibre of his body, making him lose track of time. A voice called him. He could not see who it belonged to, but did not care either. He shut his eyes and tried to ignore it, succeeding only for a while.

“Gerard?” whispered the voice.

His fists clenched, tearing up a few blades of grass. “Yes...”

“Welcome to your new home.”

“It’s beautiful...”

“You will make it even more so. Your name will be sung forever.”

A satisfied smile crawled on his face. Then he noticed a second presence; a sweet, sad, melodic voice that chilled him.

“Gerard, don’t listen to them. They lied to you. *They* made you come here, made you kill everyone.”

“Not everyone! Many survived!” Blood rushed to his head, painting his face crimson.

“For how long? Can’t you see the danger all around you?” the voice insisted.

Darkness rushed to meet him as fear overwhelmed him. He started to tremble when a fog of sadness surrounded him, drowning out the light. The two voices fought in his head.

“Gerard! Don’t listen to them! They are lying!”

“Lying?” the other voice rasped. “The whispers brought you here, didn’t they? Did they tell you why? Did they tell you what was here?”

“A new world, that’s what. A world we’ll help you build. People will remember you forever!”

The voices confused him and he shivered as they now made him feel cold and scared. He jumped to his feet and bolted away from the voices, into a dark forest, away from the light-kissed precipice. Whispers and voices followed him, while strange silhouettes hurried behind him. His heart pounded as fear grew into panic and he stumbled on a root, falling hard on the ground. He bit his tongue and felt the sharp pain as the metallic taste of blood filled his mouth and he spat, cursing. He jerked back on his feet, his whole body trembling. The voices around him reached a crescendo, some whispering, others yelling.

The hair on the back of his neck stood on end as a terrible creature stood over him, a wild man taller and bigger than anyone he had ever seen. The creature raised a huge axe to lunge at him. Croix vaulted to the side, narrowly escaping the first strike, but the man swung his monstrous axe once again. This time it struck Croix right in the chest, almost cutting him in half, and he screamed in agony. Thick blood gushed from the wound as the man removed his axe and whirled it around for the final blow.

Croix woke up with a loud cry. Thick sweat covered his trembling body. In his confusion, he felt certain it was blood. He felt his chest for the wound, his fingers pressing instead against a small gun. His brow furrowed in confusion, then he remembered taking it from the pod's small armoury before going to sleep. He examined the small but lethal weapon, still trying to tell reality from dream, when he heard alarmed cries. He froze, seeing the creature from his dream about to attack one of the engineers. *Why isn't anyone doing something?* Then he realised he probably held the only weapon outside the pod.

Removing the gun's safety, he held it with both his shaking hands. His finger squeezed the trigger, as a whisper at the back of his head turned into a laugh so loud that it drowned out the cries telling him to stop. The creature growled and spun around. Then he shot again. And again.