

# THE VOYAGE OF THE TITAN

## Zak Schmoll on Wanting Something Better

"It could *never* happen here."

Thomas was aghast. Although he was typically quite restrained, his face betrayed his frustration as he continued expressing his opposition to Julian's almost unbelievable proposal.

"It is impossible. And we only have so much oxygen as it is. We have 500 people to worry about in this galactic aluminum can, and you are seriously suggesting that we use some of the reserves we have to run some experiment? What if you are wrong? We stop breathing that much sooner."

Julian's face dropped as he saw the rest of the Executive Council nodding in silent agreement as Thomas crescendoed to his finale and finally sat down in his black leather chair.

The nine-member assembly governed all activities on the starship *Titan*. While joining the voyage to Alpha Centauri was technically voluntary, following the leadership of this Council was not optional. They rationed everything from food to water to even exercise; it was believed that vigorous exercise led to increased oxygen consumption, a valuable commodity seemingly being used up much more quickly than they had calculated.

Julian cleared his throat and began to reiterate his position, "I don't know how it happened. I wish I did. The simple fact of the matter is that we do not have enough oxygen to make it the rest of the way. Our velocity has remained constant; we are going to arrive at Alpha Centauri right on time. Physically, we cannot go any faster. Our fuel is burning at maximum efficiency, and we are not encountering any unplanned meteoric resistance. Everything is running according to plan, except the oxygen. It is dropping too quickly."

"But what you are proposing is crazy. You are seriously suggesting that we can alter the composition of matter itself, on a starship, with limited equipment and not even the best team of scientists Earth has to offer. It looks like the smart ones might have stayed home. We might as well address the elephant in the room right now. Even with this oxygen problem, we have enough oxygen to get back to Earth. It will be close, but I can guarantee you we can make it home. If you let Julian run this madcap science fair project and it fails, we will not have enough oxygen to even make it back to Earth. We will just be waiting to die."

It took all his self-control to control his rage, but Julian could not help but let out a small sigh as Thomas saw remaining on Earth as a better option than trying to find something better. It had become nothing but a cesspool of corruption. No one could be trusted, and the world was suffering for it. The voyage on the *Titan* was a chance for a fresh start. It was an opportunity for those who wanted something better to at least try to find a sanctuary in the stars. Embarking on such a journey had its risks, but Julian could not see any alternative. When a

house is on fire and the fire is too large for you to contain, your only option is to get out.

Not only that, but he didn't even want to think about the implications of landing back on Earth. When their project had been discovered, the Emperor did not take kindly to their endeavor. He did everything in his power to stymie their progress, short of a full-on military assault. Military assaults often light the fuses leading to the gunpowder kegs of revolution. He restricted the purchasing ability of every member of the Executive Council. He prohibited all international travel for anyone he thought might be affiliated with Project Mythos. He prohibited any gatherings that could not be observed by the Optical Guardian, recording every word and every frame. Naturally, he couched all of this in the name of planetary safety, but Julian, and the entire Executive Council at the time, felt as if these restrictions were holding them hostage on their own planet.

Through a wide network of connections, they were able to creatively cobble together the resources to create the *Titan*, but there is no subtle way to land a starship. The Emperor would undoubtedly be aware of the return of those he painted as "discontents," and their blood might not be quite as explosive as when they were just ordinary civilians.

Julian drew in his breath deliberately. He spoke in a grave, measured tone, "Have you considered how you want to draw your last breath? Do you want to do it with the iron boot of the Emperor on your throat? Even if this plan *might* not work, we have to try. We cannot go back."

The unsettling imagery had an indiscernible effect on the remaining members of the Council. Thomas was momentarily silent, raising his eyebrows and folding his

hands under his chin. He appeared to be in thought, but Julian was pretty confident that his mind was made up. The remaining seven members of the Council showed characteristic signs of indecision. They shuffled in their chairs, rearranged papers, ran their fingers through their hair, and a few even started cleaning off their glasses. They were the elected leaders of this project. The lives of hundreds of people had been put in their hands, and they had to make a decision that possibly led to death no matter which way they proceeded.

Julian rose and strode over to the large window at the front of the chamber. He saw an uncountable number of stars laid out in a beautiful tapestry outside. Ever since Project Mythos began, he looked at the sky differently. Not only was it beautiful, but it was also an opportunity. It provided him with an option. As the world got darker and darker, the stars were beacons of hope. As they toiled to make this voyage a reality, the stars served as a nightly reminder of their operational objective. He did not have to be tied up in the turmoil that devastated Earth; he had set his sights on something higher.

As he turned away from the window, nothing had really changed around the walnut table. Everyone avoided eye contact, and the only noise was the humming of the propulsion system, pushing the starship into deeper space.

Thomas looked over at Julian, standing by the window. He, too, dreamed of escaping Earth. As a young boy, his parents worked every day until they were shells, devoid of physical and emotional strength. No matter how hard they worked, nothing seemed to change for the better. He saw the injustice; the fruit of their labor went into the vaults of the Emperor, never to be enjoyed by

those who created it. Thomas knew there had to be a better way. When he became involved with Project Mythos, it was nothing more than a dream. But it was a good dream, and, most importantly, it was not impossible. It might be crazy, improbable, unlikely, unrealistic, or downright dumb, but it was not impossible.

However, what Julian was proposing *was* impossible. Thomas was not a world-renowned scientist, but he had understood that the universe contained laws, and one of them was that matter could not be created or destroyed. Julian had framed his original plan as a sophisticated conversion of recycled energy to matter, but it seemed to draw much closer to creation instead of recycling. It is impossible to create something out of nothing. If Julian had suggested anything that seemed remotely possible, he was willing to buy in. This was just plain insanity.

"Julian, you are like a brother to me. We have been through plenty together. We had succeeded when everyone told us we were going to fail. Everyone at the table knows what we went through to get where we are right now. We are here right now because we want to get there," and he pointed to Alpha Centauri on the large multicolored map spread out on the table in front of them. "But getting there from here can't happen right now. I wish it could, but it can't. Your plan of converting recycled energy to oxygen is fantasy."

Julian's blue eyes sparked. It was now his turn to express his frustration. "We are here because we want something better. In order to get something better, we have to do something. You cannot get anything out if you don't put anything in. Some of us left behind fortunes and family. Some of us left behind what little peace and

quiet remained in the remote corners of the Earth. All of us have given something, but we did it to get something. As it turns out, getting what we want is going to take something more. It is going to take hope right now. It is not a step we planned on, but it is going to require hope. You say that my plan violates the laws of the universe. You say that it is impossible to convert energy back into the oxygen we need to continue this voyage. You say that we don't have the equipment to do what needs to be done. I will admit that I have never executed this procedure before, but it most certainly does not violate the laws of nature. It may push them, but it does not break them. It can be done."

"And why should I care about hope?" Thomas replied. "We all know Earth is going to collapse. Returning to what we tried so hard to escape will be terrible. But we will be alive. Our hope will live on. We will live to plan this voyage again. We will take another shot and do better next time. We will make sure this oxygen shortage does not ruin our journey again. We did it once, we can do it again, and we can do it better."

"When we started building the ship, everyone thought we were crazy. They didn't understand. They thought we were alarmists. Those that didn't outright oppose us at least laughed at us. We saw something different. We saw a world that we had to escape from, yes, but we also saw more than that. We saw what could be. We saw a fresh start with a small group of people committed to doing things the right way, not the way of the Emperor. This entire project has been nothing but hope. It was never just about escape, but it was about doing better."

Julian had never thought of himself as a particularly eloquent speaker, but he felt good about the case he had made. He wasn't sure if the engineering team could even do what he thought they could do. While he had the most scientific training of anyone on the Executive Council, he was a world-renowned biologist, not a chemist. While he truly believed that he could duplicate molecules like cells, he wasn't absolutely sure. Even if he brought together the best of the pioneers on board, he wasn't sure if they could do it. But they *might* be able to do it. The science made sense in theory; he could not be faulted for that. In practice, anything could go wrong, but it had a chance of going right.

However, that was not the point, at least as far as he was concerned. The entire voyage to Alpha Centauri was nothing if not an arrow of hope shot at the sky. Most people believed their mission could never happen. They said it was impossible, but it was real and possible so far. Aeneas persevered on his way to Italy. Moses brought the people of Israel across the Red Sea. They were on their way to build a haven. They were on their way to protect humanity and then ultimately revitalize not only their new home but perhaps return to Earth one day and pick up the pieces left behind after the coming devastation. But building that sanctuary would take sacrifice and a great deal of hope. Julian prayed under his breath to Whoever might be listening that the Council would not lose faith.

The elderly Chairman of the Executive Council raised his hand, signaling an end to the conversation.

"Esteemed colleagues, the time has come for a vote .