

The First Chapters Writing Contest

Nor Gloom of Night by Elijah Mears

(Winning Entry from 2021)



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Parson Daley is just a simple mailman, the children of refugees trying to make his way in a solar system where the Earth was destroyed by war just as mankind was finding its feet on other planets. When a mysterious package is added to his load at the last minute, however, Parson becomes the unwilling focus of gang warfare between a cult of Elvis impersonators who think the King of Rock and Roll was the botched second coming of Christ and the crime family that controls the flow of drugs on half the moons of Jupiter. Joined on the journey by spunky, accidentally-kidnapped mechanic Rachel Smallwood, Parson will go to unforeseen lengths to meet his supervisor's directive: reach Ganymede on time, with his entire cargo intact, or else.

Chapter One: The Package

“Neither snow nor rain nor heat nor gloom of night stays these couriers from the swift completion of their appointed rounds.” — Herodotus, *Histories* (translated by George Herbert Palmer)

Parson Daley risked a quick glance at his wristwatch and pulled a face at what it told him. The subway car raced through the criss-crossed network of tunnels buried deep beneath the Martian surface, its gentle rocking complementing wonderfully the persistent buzzing of the phone in Parson's front-left pocket. Caffeine began to take over from the residual fuzziness lingering at the edges of his mind, a persistent buzzing feeling replacing it — the rewards of another sleepless night spent staring at the ceiling, wondering what it was even all for until his alarm went off.

The train pulled into the station, brakes squealing. Parson winced. A soft tone from the PA system was followed by a woman's voice: “Now Arriving at: SPACEPORT. Connections to trains B, D, F, Q, and R, and interplanetary flights to all major destinations. Thank you for choosing Ida Transit Authority: Your Best And Only Option.” The doors had hardly slid open before Parson was off like a shot, legs

pumping like pistons, one hand gripping the strap of his courier's bag, the other thrust out in front of him like the prow on an icebreaker. He wondered idly if this might be what salmon used to feel like migrating upstream, back in the days when there were still salmon. He caught only glimpses of startled faces bathed in alternating rays of fuchsia, goldenrod, and cerulean, calling out apologies as he pushed through the throng of evening commuters. Video screens lined the walls of the station, adding to the cacophony as they called out desperately to the masses, assuring them that the secret to happiness they'd been missing was new & improved Bone-Enhancing Coca Cola. On the other side of the crowd, the escalator up to street level sat motionless, off or broken. Parson didn't have time to think about which as he took it three steps at a time, practically bouncing upward. By the time he made it up to the street, the crowd had dissipated, leaving him with only ordinary foot traffic for company as he careened past the LEDs-imitating-neon glow of storefronts, billboards, falafel stands, and happiness hucksters that lined the road, bulkheads a blur as he shot through them.

The purple-and-gold logo of the Stellar Express Corporation was stamped onto the archway at the end of the corridor. Parson hurtled past it, heart nearly in his throat, digging in his bag for his dispatch tablet and his R Card. They both came free: he whooped triumphantly, startling a handful of nameless coworkers as they wandered by. They moved without an ounce of urgency, just another school of fish dressed in the same blue-shorts-blue-button-down-and-cap uniform. He pushed past them with renewed vigor, hoisting the paper-thin device in one hand, not even thinking as his feet led him along the familiar pathway to his assigned berth.

"Late again, Parson?" one of his coworkers — Parson couldn't remember their name — called after him.

"Just involved in an unconventional relationship with being on time!" he shouted back, not bothering to turn around. He crashed around the final corner and skidded into a halt outside the door marked 'Berth 102', chest heaving as he sucked at the stale air. A moment's rest, and then his R Card was in hand, pressed against the door's access pad, the door sliding open, and the grin on Parson's face falling away.

"Late again I see, Mr. Daley."

"H-hello, Miss Swann," Parson stuttered in reply.

Jinghua Swann stood like a colossus on the other side of the open doorway, the edges of her starched white pantsuit sharp as knives. Her lips were pressed tightly together, the corners of her mouth turned downward. Her right eyebrow quivered

ever so slightly. "This is the third time this month," she said. Her voice resonated with all the warmth and emotion of reinforced steel.

"Yes, Miss Swann," Parson mumbled, shoulders falling. Though he maintained an outward appearance of calm, he could feel his pulse quickening, thoughts of whatever cruel consequences he might be about to face flooding his brain. His muscles tensed like a coiled spring, readying themselves to run, energy building up with nowhere to go.

Swann shook her head deliberately. "Parson, we can't keep doing this."

"I- I know," he said, eyes dropping to the floor. "I just... I'm sorry."

She simply stood, waiting until he raised his head again. He searched Swann's face for an ounce of pity, feeling her eyes boring into his skull right back. Neither seemed to find whatever it was they were hoping to see in each other's expressions.

"Stellar Express is the foremost courier service in the entire solar system," Swann said. "A delay in departure holds up the next family member who needs to utilize your berth. This backs up the whole supply chain, and while it may seem like just a few minutes to you, the consequences of your actions can quickly ripple out of control, paralyzing our entire operation and threatening our contracts. Mars relies on us to move parcels throughout the solar system, and Oluranse are vultures waiting to swoop in the very minute that we slip up."

Parson jerked his head in a sharp, frenetic motion that might have been a nod.

Swann continued, her words measured and deliberate, "I want you to understand that it is a failure that I'm having to lecture you on this again. Parson, you are an excellent pilot and a stickler for following company policy in most regards, but you cannot keep being late, and you cannot drop your cargo again. I don't know what may need to change at home, and I don't really care. Fix it. You need to arrive at your next destination on time, with all parcels intact. I trust you understand the decision we'll be forced to make if you do not."

"I just—" he started to say.

"No excuses!" The words echoed down the corridor. "Do you understand me, Parson?"

His brow furrowed. "I do."

Swann nodded. "You are dismissed."

Parson kept his head down as he passed around her into his berth, pretending not to hear Swann mutter something about 'lazy Earther half-breeds' as he went.

A runway stretched off into the distance beneath a transparent ceiling, the Martian

sky a dusty gray above him. In the center of it all stood Parson's boat: the SE-10277. Ten meters tall from top to bottom, purple and orange racing stripes painted down the side of the hull. Like all Stellar Express boats, it was sort of an awkward, chunky thing — bought in bulk in some surplus sale, repurposed from whatever its original function was, gutted, and redesigned with full attention paid to the comfort and security of its cargo and none to the comfort and security of its pilots. The paint was chipped and it never handled quite right, but Parson thought it was the most beautiful space-faring vessel ever made. After all, it was his.

He was mid-stride toward the boat when another voice called out from behind.

"Hang on!"

Parson wheeled around, shoulders already tensing. The most frazzled person he had ever seen — and this was saying something, considering he owned a mirror — burst through the door, huffing and puffing as she drove a meter-long box forward on a dolly. The woman — older, white hair, uniform hanging like rags on a scarecrow — came to a stop in front of Parson and let out a great sigh, seeming almost to deflate as she did so. Parson blinked.

"Parson Daley?" she inquired, lowering her spectacles.

"Hi," Parson said, raising a lackluster hand to identify himself. "Right here." The strange little woman threw her hands skyward. "Thank heavens, I thought I'd never get to you before you left. I have a last minute addition bound for Ganymede, very irregular but needs to go out today." She gestured toward the package and shrugged, leaning in toward Parson. "They paid for priority," she added in a conspiratorial tone.

Parson's shoulders slumped. Always something. "Well," he said, "let's hurry and get it on board."

"Excellent, we'll load it on together and then you can get right to leaving. Careful with it now, it says 'biohazard', you can see, right here. Must be medicinal, I'd guess, but who knows?"

She prattled on in exactly that fashion, her bubbling, posh voice rolling over Parson like a wave as they offloaded the package from the dolly and walked it up the cargo ramp. It wasn't a considerable weight, particularly for the size, but holding it was awkward enough to be a challenge. At last, they set it down into an open slot in the dim confines of the hold. Parson locked the restraining belt into place over it and straightened up, wiping his hands off on his shorts.

"Perfect," Parson said, "there we go."

The woman contemplated the package for a moment and then turned to Parson, peering up at him from behind her spectacles. They sat on her face in much the same way that Mars' twin moons hung in the sky — that is, they looked horribly uneven and you were never quite sure if one of them might just go flying off into deep space on a moment's notice. She gestured; he leaned in. "You be careful with that one, Mr. Daley," she said in a hushed tone, the acrid smell of long-since-drunk coffee on her breath.

"What?" Parson said. She thrust a finger to her lips, eyebrows narrowed.

"Not so loud," she said, a grimace across her face. She jabbed a thumb at the package and added, "But mark my words, something doesn't add up about the paperwork on that one. Something not right. Way I see it, best bet is to keep your head down and just get on to Ganymede. None of our business what's inside but... whatever it is, be careful."

Parson raised his eyebrows. His mind raced — surely clerical errors happened from time to time, that didn't necessarily mean anything, but... he glanced at the package to discover that the woman's words had imbued it with a certain menacing quality. It would be a massive, unacceptable breach of policy to open it and find out what inside, of course. The integrity of the mail was sacrosanct, and besides, the 'biohazard' notice would have made him reluctant to open it even if his sense of ethics hadn't. But he couldn't deny he was curious.

He glanced one last time down the ramp. The woman had already turned to go, looming at the entrance in silhouette, a small halo around the outline of her figure. She nodded to him and then she was gone.

Parson shook his head. Nonsense, had to be. Stellar Express was the most efficient, most important, most reliable corporation in the entire solar system. For something dangerous to bypass all of its safeguards, make it through the system far enough to end up on his ship... unthinkable. So he simply wouldn't think it. Parson Daley, mailman, dismissed the idea and headed for the SE-10277's bridge.

The squeaky faux-leather of the captain's chair felt like home as he strapped himself down, his body sinking into the memory fabric. With the flick of a switch, the console came to life: a mix of screens, holograms, little LEDs, and physical inputs surrounded him like a cocoon, offering more readouts and data than he could ever hope to use. The push of a button switched it all to a more simplified view: shields bottom left, fuel bottom right, power and life support front-and-center, acceleration top-left, rear camera top-right. Right in the middle, a target sat layered over the

forward viewport, guiding him along the calculated vector. Tenderly grasping each corner of his dispatch tablet, he eased it into the slot on his console, loading in his flight plan: Ida, Mars to Galileo, Ganymede. Fuel topped off, shields at 100%, reactor running at 85% condition. As good as it had ever been. The runway was fully cleared, neither the woman who'd brought the package nor Miss Swann anywhere to be seen. Satisfied, he flipped on one of the overhead switches that hung above his head.

"This is Parson Daley of the SE-10277 requesting clearance for takeoff along flight plan MG-2369, over."

There was a moment of silence before the ship's comms crackled back to life. "You have clearance for takeoff, Parson. Fly safe, over and out."

Parson pressed another button. Behind, the cargo ramp whirred, sliding back into the ship. The door sealed shut behind it with a click, and with it, Swann's admonition faded from his mind. He finished locking in the flight plan just as butterflies began to dance deep in the pit of his stomach. The work of a long-distance parcel courier was rarely glamorous and often downright frustrating, but nothing in the universe beat this next part.

He pressed down on the ignition. The engine roared to life, plutonium fission propelling superheated hydrogen out the rear thrusters. The generated force sent the SE-10277 hurtling down the runway like a shot. Parson gripped the flight stick hard, g-forces slamming him into the back of the chair. The grin across his face was the size of Saturn.

There is a moment anyone who's ridden in a spacecraft will be familiar with: the magical instant when the vehicle starts generating enough upward thrust and reaches a sufficient speed such that the surface of the planet falls away from beneath it like a curtain dropping. The wheels lift off, the vibrations cease, and everything is smooth as suddenly you're in the sky, nothing between you and the abyss but a metal fuselage and plasma shielding. It was the kind of feeling that could make someone believe in God.

The SE-10277 pushed through the energy field that separated the pressurized environment of the dock from the thin Martian atmosphere and turned skyward. The dark surface of the red planet shrank away in the rear camera, the Sun's rays framing it like a crown. Parson relaxed his grip and engaged the boat's autopilot. Smooth sailing from here, he thought. Just get to the destination, keep Swann happy, and keep biding his time at Stellar Express until he'd earned enough credit toward citizenship. A little more than five days of travel found him deep into the asteroid belt, legs up on

his dashboard, drifting in and out of sleep as Mars Public Radio played over the communicator.

"...And in your government news, Red Soil's federal executive committee has opened an investigation into Emmanuel Cortez, long time Senator for the Aonia Planum, after he appeared wearing green robes on the Senate floor Monday. Sources within the Red Soil Party say that there has been considerable pressure to pull the whip and suspend him from his constituency after this clear betrayal of his party's values..."

Parson's eyelids grew heavy as the flat, dulcet tones of MPR's Tiwa Abimbola droned on about everything from politics to the solar weather. He stretched, yawned, and pulled his cap down over his eyes, settling in for a nap. He'd probably make a pit stop somewhere in the asteroid belt, but aside from that, it would be a few more weeks of boredom between here and Jupiter. This was the part of long missions he liked best. Out in the black like this, away from the pressure and the anxiety and the fear, he could actually sleep.

He managed a few entire hours before he was jostled awake by something slamming into the boat's port side. The SE-20177 rolled to the right. In a level voice, the computer announced, "Impact detected."

Adrenaline rocketed through Parson's veins, shattering his state of unconsciousness. He shook his head, trying to cast off the residual grasp of sleep as an uncomfortable throbbing threatened to overtake his frontal lobe. The HUD's familiar orange glow had changed to a deep amber, the color of blood filling out the shadowy recesses of the boat's cockpit. A small, repetitive beeping sound drew his attention immediately to a holographic schematic of the full ship: a red glow on the port side demonstrated the place of impact. Shields, it noted, were now running at only 78% capacity.

"Status update," Parson called out, slurring his words slightly as he rubbed at his eyes.

"Projectile impacted hull; autopilot was able to course correct; no serious damage." Parson nodded, stroking his chin. Probably nothing, he told himself. Probably just a bit of space dust, it wasn't common to get hit by something at random, but it did happen, that's why mail vehicles had shields in the first place, that and—

Another impact rocked the boat forward, derailing his train of thought. The computer announced, "Projectile impact to rear; rear shields at 74%."

Definitely not space dust. Parson wrenched at a knob below the rear-view display, enlarging it until it nearly filled the cockpit. His heart dropped.

A group of six light craft, bright pink with big fins, was in hot pursuit. He had to imagine they were also laughing at him for so obviously falling asleep at the wheel. He grabbed the flight stick and rolled hard to starboard, the field of stars in front of him turning counterclockwise as the engine whirred in protest. He shook his head, trying to recall what the employee manual had said about pirates, but for some reason, nothing came to mind.

A burst of green light flew off into space from behind. The boat rocked toward port as another hit home — “shields at 68%” — and the assailing craft spread out behind him. Parson jammed the flight stick upward, pitching into a great arc, like the videos he had seen in school of breaching whales back on Earth. He flipped one of the switches that hung overhead.

“This is Parson Daley of SE-10277 hailing my pursuers. This is a peaceful vessel on a simple courier mission, please disengage.”

A moment of silence, then another burst of green light hit the SE-10277’s rear.

“Shields at 64%.”

“This is Parson Daley of SE-10277 hailing my pursuers. I repeat, this is a peaceful vessel, please disengage.”

No response. Beads of sweat hung on Parson’s brow. The grooves of the flight stick dug into his skin, his grip tightening to keep it from slipping out of his palm. Then they opened up on him: the boat began to tumble and roll as a sustained barrage of plasma bursts came at him from six directions. Parson wrestled for control, pushing hard forward as if sheer force of will could squeeze more power out of his engines. The SE-10277 burst forth from the crisscrossed beams of light — “shields at 32%” — and Parson suddenly found he remembered what the Stellar Express training manual said on pirates:

“Pirates typically seek to compromise mailcraft to the point of depressurization so they can board and harvest cargo without fear of retaliation from the crew, who will have asphyxiated by this point. Given that pirates usually choose lighter, faster craft than the SE series, the best strategy for evading pirates is not to encounter them in the first place.”

Parson shivered. The boat rolled to port as his assailants’ barrage refocused. Another hit to the rear. “Shields at 28%.”

‘God’, he thought, ‘You know I’m not a praying man, and I know I don’t really check in as often as I should, but please, if You’re up there...’

His prayer was interrupted by another blast. “Shields at 23%; minor damage sustained to rear thrusters.” He wrinkled his nose as the boat listed to port.

The beating of Parson's heart threatened to drown out the whine of the boat's engines. He imagined the final blow of hot plasma melting a hole through the SE-10277's fuselage, the breath being ripped from his lungs as the void of space greedily swallowed the cabin pressure. He thought for a moment about opening up the cargo bay door, letting all the parcels tumble out into space. He'd only encountered pirates once before, years ago, but Swann's words kept cycling on repeat in the back of his head. He'd be toast either way.

Then, something inside of Parson Daley shifted: a weight lifted off of his shoulders and a sense of eerie calm descended upon them in its place.

'Unless.'

He gestured at the HUD: a holographic list appeared in front of him, names and numbers, populations and distances. He glanced between it and the various screens as he juggled scrolling through it with evading fire from the pirates. No, no, no, no, too small, too far, aha!

A wireframe of an asteroid appeared in the viewport. Mining colony, siliceous, primarily exporting iron, only about 5 kilometers across, and — it would be tight, he thought — within reach if he really gunned it.

"Set detour," Parson shouted, "to 3836 Lem!"

The computer gurgled in a chipper sort of way and the target on his screen shifted to the new vector. He threw all his weight against the flight stick; the engines whined in protest as they tried to compensate for the damaged thruster. Parson patted the console gently with his free hand. *'I know,'* he thought, *'but make it out of this together and I promise I'll get you into the shop for some love.'*

The way Stellar Express maintained these things, you couldn't push past the normal boundaries forever, but maybe, just maybe, the SE-10277 would hold out long enough. Behind him, the light craft had fanned out into a V-formation. Blasts of green light went sailing past into the void. One landed on the boat's rear. "Shields at 19%." Parson cursed under his breath and gripped the flight stick even harder. Ahead, what had been empty space, indistinguishable against the bright tapestry of stars behind it, had resolved into a little point of light, growing larger by the second.

"10,000 kilometers to destination," the computer announced. The diffuse point of light was just becoming discernible as a bright lump floating in the void. Another blast glanced off the side of the hull. "Shields 17%."

Parson tried desperately to work out the math in his head. The edges of his vision blurred, a dark tunnel blocking out his peripherals. *'I can make this,'* he thought.

Behind, the pirate craft kept close on his tail.

8,000 kilometers out. The lump had become an asteroid. He flipped the overhead switch that opened the comms channel and hailed the local tower.

“Lem Station, this is Parson Daley of SE-10277 requesting permission for an emergency landing, I have enemies in pursuit, over!”

His breath caught in his throat, not daring to disturb the silence.

Nothing yet. 6,000 kilometers out. Another blast flew past the viewport. Prickles ran up and down his neck and shoulders. Parson’s cheeks and ears grew hot. His pulse quickened.

A woman’s voice materialized over the radio channel. “Receiving you loud and clear, Mr. Daley, please orient approach vector to Lem Dock, over.”

Parson glanced at the boat’s speedometer and groaned. “Negative,” he replied into the communicator. “Coming in too hot, this is going to be an emergency landing, over.”

Silence again. 4,000 kilometers out. The asteroid grew to the size of a basketball in the viewscreen, the reflection of the distant Sun on the daylight side nearly blinding him. If he squinted, he could almost make out the telltale signs of human habitation on the surface.

“God help you, Mr. Daley,” the woman’s reply came. “Don’t fuck up my rock.”

Lem dominated Parson’s field of view. He began chanting a string of curses under his breath, easing off on the throttle just a little. The pirates drew closer. Another volley of green plasma flew off into the void. Parson’s gaze flicked between the rear and forward viewports, measuring the approaching asteroid against the closing distance between him and his pursuers.

3,000 kilometers.

“Pirates typically seek to compromise mailcraft to the point of depressurization so they can board and harvest cargo without fear of retaliation from the crew, who will have asphyxiated by this point.”

2,000 kilometers.

“Given that pirates usually choose lighter, faster craft than the SE series, the best strategy for evading pirates is not to encounter them in the first place.”

1,000 kilometers.

The cluster of metallic buildings below looked like children’s toys scattered in a sandbox. The SE-10277 banked right, aiming toward the horizon. The gap between Parson and the pirates was closing almost as quickly as the distance to the asteroid’s

surface. *'Come on,'* he urged them, *'come on.'*

500 kilometers.

"Divert all power to lower and forward shields!" Parson shouted, pulling up hard on the flight stick and reversing thrusters at the last moment. The ship slammed into the asteroid at a low angle, skidding forward like a rock skipping across a pond. Parson was thrown against his chair, the restraints digging into his body. He tasted iron, but he kept his hands wrapped tight around the flight stick, pulling back for all he was worth. A shower of dust and debris sprayed upward into the asteroid's thin atmosphere in the SE-10277's wake, cresting like some strange wave that only halfway came back down, the rest of it flying off into the abyssal darkness of space. Crackles of electricity rippled across the forward viewport as the boat's shield strained against the onslaught of rock and dust.

The SE-10277 finally came to a halt buried nose-deep in the regolith. Parson slumped back into his chair, groaning as a hand went to his mouth. A little blood, but nothing major. He let out all the breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding in. "Shields at 1%," the boat's computer announced. "No major damage sustained to cargo."

'Well,' Parson thought, *'thank God for small mercies.'* He took a few measured breaths, trying to slow his pulse as the adrenaline drained away. He hailed the tower.

"I said don't fuck up my rock, Mr. Daley," came the woman's voice over the radio before he could get two words out. A second passed before she remembered to add, "Over." Parson couldn't help but laugh.

"If it helps," he offered, wincing at the number of warnings and alarms currently flashing across the console, "the front of my boat is definitely in worse shape for it. I could use a tow and a repair, over."

"You've come to the right place," the voice said. "Rachel Smallwood, chief mechanic, at your service. You sit tight, we'll have someone right there. Over and out."

Parson scanned the instruments lining the boat's console for any sign of the pirates. Not a single massive pink fin in sight. Whatever it was they'd wanted, they were clearly smart enough not to crash into an asteroid at full speed to get it.

He rubbed at his temples — the throbbing sensation was returning to the part of his brain directly behind his eyes. What had compelled him to try a stunt like that? He shook his head, chasing the thought away, but the one that replaced it was worse. Maybe he was being paranoid, but he couldn't help but wonder if the attack was connected to the strange, last minute package. The woman's words back at the dock

were like the voice of a ghost in his ear — “you be careful with that one, Mr. Daley.”