

## *Three's a Crowd* (Prologue)

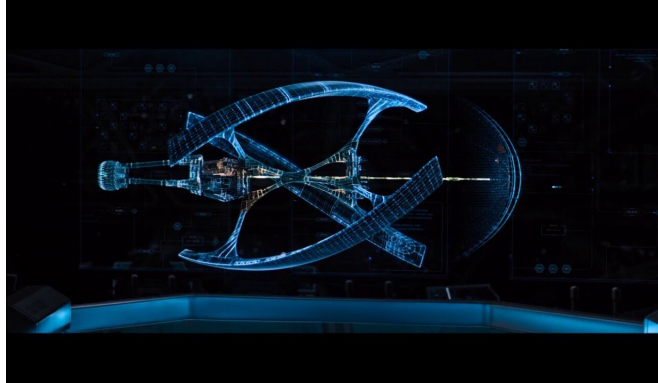
I recently watched the movie “Passengers” about a guy who woke up 90 years too early from hibernation on a spaceship bound for a new distant colony planet. The ship had hit an extremely large asteroid that had damaged a part of the life support computer and resulted in a failure of only his hibernation pod. After a year of existing alone on the ship, he figured out how to open a pod of a beautiful passenger, but only told her that her pod had opened accidentally just like his. I thought this was an interesting plot. I am going to plagiarize the plot, but will put my own twists to the story.

It is the year 2275. There are no more wars. Technology and robotics have taken care of food production. No one starves. As a consequence, Earth has become over populated. Many things had improved though. Everything is now powered by the Sun. During the day, enough energy gets stored in fuel cells to keep everything going at night. No more pollution. Mars has been colonized and is becoming over populated too.

Space travel had improved greatly, but the speed of light was still a boundary not yet crossed. A space probe that had been launched centuries before had transmitted an image of a water based planet light years away suitable for colonization. The first space ship built to transport 5000 volunteers to the new planet had been developed. It is a technological marvel. Once launched, it will travel near the speed of light and reach the new planet in 200 years. All on board, including the captain and the crew, are secured in hibernation pods. The pods were designed with redundant backup safety protocols. They were never supposed to fail. The pods have been programmed to wake everyone up 2 months before arrival.

All did not go as planed. Keep reading to see what happens next.

## *Three's a Crowd* (Chapter 1)



The near light speed “Space Odyssey” craft was a technological marvel. All possible scenarios had been thought of and it was equipped with a forward laser canon to blast away any debris or objects in its path. No one could have foreseen this collision though. A fiery comet had seemingly come out of nowhere and an immediate collision was imminent. The craft made a last minute maneuver similar to the Titanic that likely saved it from total destruction. Unfortunately for the Titanic, that wasn't enough.

## *Real Picture of the Titanic*



It fired its laser cannon and blasted the comet into smithereens.



The blast and resulting rubble damaged a part of the main computer. The system immediately began self repair. 99% of the repair operation was successful. The 1% that did not, was a crucial element. It set off a domino effect that slowly infected other parts of the system. A slow moving virus, if you will, that unless detected would eventually cripple the entire ship beyond repair. The collision also had a catastrophic effect on two of the life support hibernation pods. Two of the never could fail pods, did just that.

Karl woke up first. Ironically, he was a life support specialists. Perhaps he could figure out how to fix the pod and continue his hibernation. If not, he was facing a major problem. The ship was not scheduled to reach the colony planet for another 90 years.

He arose from his 110 years of sleep understandably groggy. He expected this. His first thought was that the ship was in reach of the colony and that he would be stepping on solid ground within a couple months. He headed to the recreation section to get some greatly needed liquid refreshments. As he wandered toward the area, speakers came alive congratulating him on surviving the trip. Glad that you are awake, your destination is only 2 months away. During that time, you will get a chance to revitalize your body and partake in the luxury areas that you had been indoctrinated in the months prior to your takeoff. Yes, he was looking forward to that. No luxury had been held back for these brave colonist volunteers. No 5 star resort could compare to what these people were going to be entitled to. Not even Dubai.



He entered the bar area. Oh, I see that you have already awakened, directing his comment toward the bartender. Well, not exactly he replied. You are the first to arrive. What can I offer you? Karl was a little confused by his reply. Not wanting to wait any longer, he ordered an orange juice and a JD on the rocks. Good choice. As the bartender moved away from the bar counter, Karl saw that he was just a robotron. Full human upper body with mechanical legs on a roll around base. Well, that explains his answer.

Karl still thought it was strange that he had not seen anyone else on his way here.

While Karl was trying to quench his thirst with orange juice and Jack Daniels, I woke up. My reaction was similar to Karl's. Groggy, disoriented, confused, etc. etc. I too was thirsty and received the same audio message and greeting as Karl had on my way to the refreshment center.

As I entered, I saw Karl conversing with the attendant bar keep. I am glad to see someone else here, as I made my way to an empty bar stool. In fact, there were many empty bar stools. Where is everyone else? Besides you, I haven't seen anyone else awake. I guess we are the first. Maybe the release mechanism is sequential. Karl said, it isn't supposed to be. Hi, I am Karl and I helped perfect the pod environments. I am Alex, my specialty is mechanical engineering. So I told Henry, (that is what he said his name was) to give me the same drinks as Karl got. Sorry he said, you are not authorized to consume liquor. WTF? Why not? Look at your wrist band. You are only maintenance personnel. Karl looked at his wrist band. He was a member of the elite class. Henry, give me another round. Henry complied. Karl then shoved the order over to my spot. Have one on me. I think I am going to be good friends with this Karl.

So after some polite conversation, we both said we should go meet the rest of the group.

As we wandered around the vast ship area, we never encountered anyone else. Both of us were starting to get a bad feeling about this. Karl said, we should go back to the pod area and see what is going on. As they entered, they saw that no other pods had been opened. Each level and area had an information console accessible to all travelers. Alex asked the question on both of their minds. When are all the others going to wake up and join us? The answer left both stunned. The other's will wake up when the ship is two months from arrival. When will that be? That will be in 90 years. Why have we woken up so early? It is impossible for you to have woken up early, the hibernation pods are fail proof.

Karl, you are the pod specialists, is this true? It is true, but apparently, someone screwed up and it wasn't me. I was present for all the pod tests and all failure scenarios were studied and deemed safe. There were some last minute software changes installed after all the testing. We were told they were just cosmetic fixes. Apparently, that was not the case.

Lets go see if we can find out anything in the captains post on the bridge.

On their way to the bridge, they kept hearing the audio announcing where they were and what entertainment was available. There was a basketball court, a swimming pool, and an elegant dining room. The bridge is where the captain, if he had been awake, would be navigating the ship. It wasn't really necessary for him to do anything as everything was controlled by the master computer. Humans have a natural inclination to want to control everything. Even the first space astronauts demanded that a window be installed in the space capsule so they could see what was going on outside.

When we arrived at the door entrance to the bridge, we were told we were not authorized to enter. I guess even Karl was not high enough for this privilege. I suggested we go to the main engineering compartment. Surely I would have access there. The doors opened automatically as we approached. Just as I expected. My duty involved maintenance, so it was understandable that I should be able to have complete access. I had been trained on evaluating the propulsion systems. There was a specialized maintenance computer there that would show me everything that might have gone wrong.

We both watched the replay video of the collision and annihilation of the comet. The display also showed that the ship was 99% OK. Well, that is good news. Karl, is there some way you could fix our pods and have us return to hibernation? I think so, but this is one scenario that no one thought of. I would have to study the manuals and do some testing.

Sounds like a plan. While you work on that, I will do more system checking. I'll meet you in the dinning room at say 7 PM. Works for me, Karl said.

Several hours later, I was getting hungry. It is time for dinner. As I left the engineering space, I did not notice the monitor show that the main system health was now down to 98.9%.

### **Three's a Crowd** (Chapter 2)

Our dinner in the dinning room did not relieve our worries. First of all, I felt that I was being discriminated against. Karl had ordered steak tartare. This



is a French dish of raw ground (minced) beef. It is usually served with onions, capers, parsley or chive, salt, pepper, Worcestershire sauce, and other seasonings, often presented separately, to be added to taste. It is commonly served topped with a raw egg yolk. How do I know all this? Back on Earth, I read an ancient manuscript from an unknown author called "Travel Chef". His identity was never disclosed and he had created a blog of his stories available for all to read for free.

I did not want raw beef. I pushed the button for a rib eye steak. The only item that came out was a grilled cheese sandwich. I looked toward Karl, and being the nice guy that he was, he completed my request for the rib eye. Am I going to rely on Karl to be able to eat quality food for the next 90 years? I hope not.

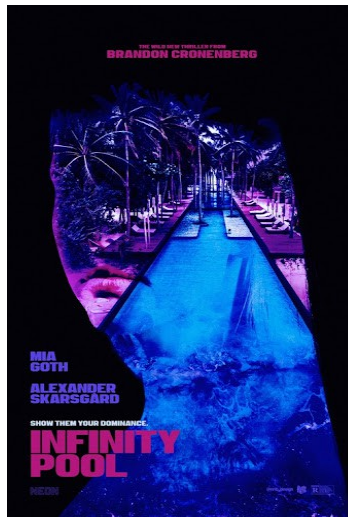
Karl continued to study the pod manuals and I continued to investigate the ship's systems. I tried to break into the crews quarters using all kinds of jack hammers and drills, but to no avail. My attempts to figure out what was wrong with the ship was not working out either.

The frustration that we both were feeling led to some unpleasant exchanges. I started to question Karl's knowledge on the pod mechanics and he started to say I was incompetent in my engineering knowledge of the ships system. It didn't help that the monitor was showing 88% health status.

We had been keeping ourselves active with work and competitive sports. We played basketball against each other and I almost always won. I also practiced Tae Kwon Do just to keep in shape. This form of combat is from Korea. Its counterpart, Karate is considered by many to of originated in Japan. Not true.

In summary, Karate was developed in Okinawa from the synthesis of two fighting techniques. The first one, used by the inhabitants of Okinawa, was very simple but terribly effective and, above all, very close to reality since it was used throughout many centuries in real combat. The second one, much more elaborate and impregnated with philosophical teachings, was a product of the ancient culture of China. These two origins explain the double

character of Karate--extremely violent and efficient, but at the same time a strict and austere discipline and philosophy with a nonviolent emphasis. I also swam in the Infinity Pool.



It had a structurally sound ceiling view of the stars. Karl never set foot in there. He never had learned to swim and he feared the water.

Eventually our depression got the best of us. We quit interacting with each other and started to keep to ourselves. To exacerbate my feelings of being a low class passenger, Karl quit ordering me the elite dinning dishes. So now I was existing on peanut butter and jelly sandwiches with Coca Cola. No alcohol to relieve my stress. This went on for a whole year.

One day, Karl comes to me super hyped up. What has happened? It is not exactly good news, but it is a change. One of the other pods has failed. I'm not sure why it took so long to happen, but I am guessing it is still a result of the collision we experience last year. I was still processing the shock of what he was telling me when someone behind him stepped off to his side. You can not imagine the feeling I had when I saw her. Dumbfounded, I walked up to her, placed my hand on her shoulder and said, Hi, my name is Alex. She said, my name is Stephanie. Where are all the others?





Karl witnessed this exchange and his expression could have told me a lot if I had been watching him instead of her. He did not seem too happy.



Stephanie was a medical specialist. She had the same privilege rating as the captain and the crew. In fact, her title was Chief Medical Officer in charge of the captain and crews health. Her wrist band gave her access to all of the ship's spaces.

After the initial shock of her condition wore off, she said that she would join us in trying to find out how to solve the pod issues and the ship's declining health status.

It was nice to have someone else around besides Karl. I am sure he felt the same. Although for different reasons.

Stephanie treated Karl and I the same. Showing no more favor toward either. I would find them together talking and sharing a drink at the bar with Henry.

He would find us having an early dinner talking and sharing a glass of champagne. Stephanie brought back the gourmet meals that Karl had denied me.

The expression “Three's a Crowd” could not have been more relevant to any situation in prior history. Two men and one woman trapped aboard a dying space craft with no apparent solution in sight did not bode well for the status quo.

Karl was the first to show signs of aggression. As I stated previously, he had never entered the area of the infinity pool. Lately, I had caught him watching Stephanie as she did her daily workouts.



I had never followed her there, I thought it important to give her some privacy. If she found me in the pool ahead of her, she would also retreat and allow me my space. I had inadvertently gone there and spotted him. He did not alert her to his prescience. I thought it kind of creepy. I called to him, hey Karl, what gives? I thought you were afraid of the water. Stephanie turned her head and saw us both there. I think the situation registered in her mind about what Karl was doing.

After that, Karl noticed a slight coolness toward him from Stephanie and a noticeable increase of warmth toward me. He had seen the writing on the wall. This lead him to make a desperate move.

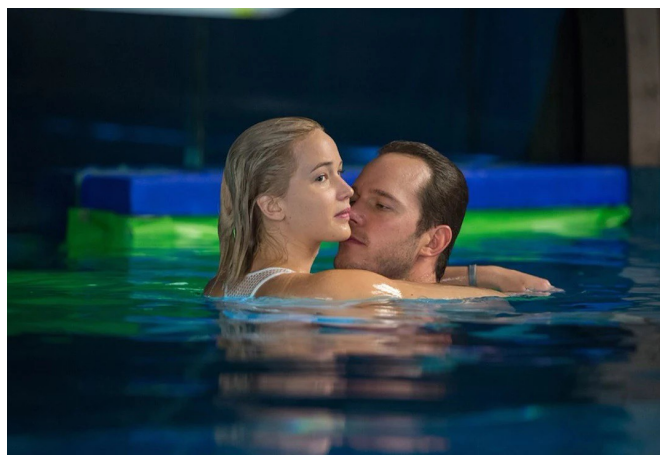
Before any of that happened, I uncovered his most devious secret.

I had been scanning all of the ship's logs looking for an answer to why the ship's health kept declining. There were volumes of data to search through. Perhaps that is why it took me so long to view this video file. It left chills up and down my spine. It showed that Stephanie's pod had not opened due to the collision, Karl had opened it himself.



### *Three's a Crowd* (Chapter 3)

Karl wasn't aware of my discovery just yet. I wasn't sure how to proceed. Do I tell Stephanie the truth and face Karl's wrath? Do I confront Karl and ask him why he did what he did? I chose the later. I could guess his true intentions, but his story did have some logic behind to justify his actions. He said that we were in a precarious position without any noticeable progress. He thought that with Stephanie's access, we would be able to open up more



spaces and get more information on what happened and how we could fix it. There was an element of truth to what he said. He also said that he had made significant progress on how to fix the pods and re-activate our hibernation.

I almost accepted his reasons, but other events changed my mind. Stephanie was not immune to natural desires anymore than Karl and I. It happened one evening when I went to the infinity pool for my swim exercise. I saw Stephanie was already in the pool. As I turned to leave her alone, she said, why not join me? What male among you could refuse an invitation like that? I had thought that Karl had learned his lesson about spying on Stephanie. I guess he wondered where we both were not seeing us in our usual places. He caught us embracing in the pool. We quickly pushed apart, but not before he saw and left in a huff.

During the next few days, Karl acted like he had not witnessed anything. He was his usual self and met with us both together and each of us alone. Acting like everything was honky dory. I almost relaxed and thought that maybe bygones would be bygones. I should not have been so gullible. Karl came to me with the same excitement he had shown when he had opened Stephanie's pod. I figured out how to fix the pods. We can all return to suspended animation and finish the trip. I said, until we figure out what is causing the ship's decline, we can't do that.

At least let me test my theory. I will give you instructions on how to recharge the pods. Let me get inside and you can try it. I looked at the series of steps that was needed and it looked like a very complicated sequence. If I made a mistake, what would happen to Karl? I am a little nervous about all this. Since you are the pod specialist, why not let me be the test case? If you are OK with that, you can rest assured that I know what I am doing. I laid down in my own pod. Karl went about setting the sequence in motion. As I laid there, I expected to slowly resort to hibernation state like I had before. Instead, I couldn't breath. There was no oxygen present in the pod. I pounded on the glass shell. I could also see what was going on outside. Stephanie had entered the pod area and was arguing with Karl. He had grabbed her arm and started to drag her away. That was the last thing I saw before my oxygen depletion caused me to pass out. My last thought was that

Karl had outmaneuvered me and was now the lone male on board with Stephanie.

I awoke again. My new thought was that I had died and gone to heaven. I had a vision of an angel kissing me. What was really happening was Stephanie was giving me mouth to mouth resuscitation.

As I got out of the pod, I noticed Karl laying prone on the floor. What happened? Last I saw you were struggling with him as he tried to pull you away. Yes, that is exactly what was going on. I had been prepared for something like this. When he grabbed my arm, I reached into my side pocket and extracted a hypodermic needle that I had prepared for exactly this scenario. I stabbed him in the arm. Did you kill him? No, he is just unconscious and will remain that way for at least another hour. I had come upon you both in the pod area. I overheard the conversation about testing the pods. I did not trust Karl. Ever since I saw him watching me, I felt uneasy. The other day was not the first time I had that feeling. When I confronted him at the pod, you saw what happened. I knew what his intentions were. He was going to kill you and you don't need to guess what he was going to do to me.

I also discovered that my pod did not fail due to any collision. You are not the only one who has access to the ship's log.

So you knew all along what Karl did? I did not find that out until a few days ago. That was when I knew he had some ominous plan.

We both lifted Karl onto a gurney and wheeled him to the brig. This is a military term for a ship's jail. Every Navy ship has one. Stephanie's wrist band access gave her the authority to incarcerate anyone.

When Karl woke up, we spied him through the viewing glass. His expression was one of resignation. He said, I am sorry, I couldn't help myself.

The brig had the same automatic food serving console as the restaurants. Stephanie had deactivated his wrist band to prevent his escape. Later that



evening, I watched through the window as he pressed buttons for a filet mignon and JD on the rocks. A grilled cheese sandwich popped out along with a plastic cup of 7-Up I considered this truly poetic justice.

During the next several weeks, I had long discussions with Karl. He seemed repentant, but trust is not easy to regain. I learned that he did think he had figured out how to reactivate the hibernation pods. He said that he was willing to test his theory and would give me the correct sequence. I discussed this with Stephanie and we both agreed that if he wants to try, it would be better than having him go insane in isolation.

Stephanie had taken over the pod investigation. Karl started tutoring her on all the intricacies of pod design. After several months, we decided to give Karl a chance for redemption. Stephanie had taken pity on Karl and restored his access to gourmet foods and liquor.

So his trial date arrived. I kept a laser gun aimed at him as Stephanie prepared the pod for re-activation. Sorry Karl, but we need to handcuff you so that when you arrive you will not do anything to harm us or others. He said, I understand and accept this.

So the pod activation was a success. Now Stephanie and I had our work cut out for us. We needed to fix the ship, and if successful, figure out how we both can re-enter the pods. All during the ensuing period, it was my intention to let Stephanie return to hibernation and complete the journey. I would sacrifice my own life to insure she arrived on the colony safely.

Necessity is the mother on invention. Who said that?

One of the earliest recorded instances of the proverb is in one of Aesop's Fables, "The Crow and the Pitcher" from the mid 6th century BC. Plato's Republic says "our need will be the real creator", which Jowett's 1894 translation rendered loosely as "The true creator is necessity, who is the mother of our invention."





It took us three years to fix the ship. These were the best three years of my life up til now. Of course we immediately became a couple. No more Karl in the way. Stephanie turned out to be a real athlete. Our basketball games were some of the most competitive and intensive non-sexual interactions. I was taller and stronger than her, but she was quicker and more agile. She had developed a three point shot that would rival Stephan Curry.

One of our favorite things was to tether to the ship and float out in space.

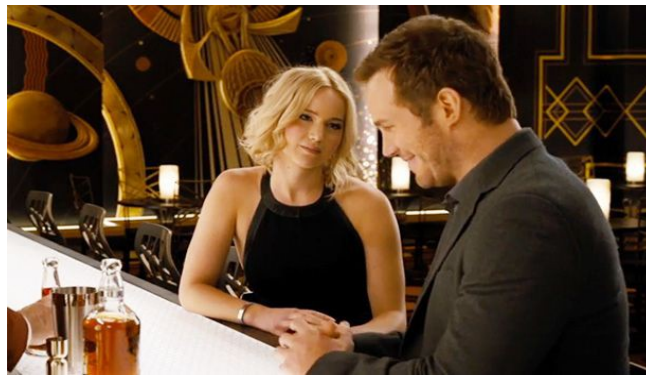


The view was spectacular and the feeling of floating was intoxicating. We did it often.

I even had time to learn how to play the piano.



Here we are having a drink together with Henry.



Henry made a good third wheel. Actually, he was on rollers so the third wheel analogy was a good one. No jealousy there.

We did experience some rough times as the ship's systems got worse. One day the gravity module took a hit. We were playing basketball and all of a

sudden we were weightless. Competitiveness is a strange thing. Without thinking about what was happening, I took the chance to execute the only slam dunk I ever made in my entire life. It was the winning basket. We both paid the price though as the system reacquired and we both got slammed to the floor. Stephanie said that my shot did not count due to external factors. I argued that it still counted since we were both playing with the same factors. She didn't talk to me for a whole day.

Stephanie continued to study the pod manual. She said she was confident she could execute the correct sequence to restore hibernation. The only problem was someone had to stay behind to perform the functions. I told her that since Karl had interrupted her safe journey, it was understandable that it should be me that is left behind. She was not too keen on the idea. I don't want to begin a new life without you.

Meanwhile, I was making progress on the ship's system. There were spare electronic modules on board and there was even an AI robot who could implement the replacements. I finally figured out what was wrong. The repair module that was responsible for fixing the broken circuits turned out to be the one that was broken. Instead of fixing things, it screwed up the software more than it already was. When I instructed the robot to replace it, the monitor indicator quickly showed the system was restored to 100%. I had discovered the AI robot a year before. He had been a big help in checking the system. I had come to think of the robot as another comrade on the ship, just as we treated Henry. I even gave him a name. R2D2 and C3PO were already taken. I started calling him Andy, as in Android.

Stephanie was the one who figured out how to save us both. Why not train Andy to perform the necessary steps? Sometimes the solution is right in front of your face.

Four years after I had woken up to this nightmare, I once again lay down for a long sleep. I watched Andy perform the needed steps to restore Stephanie's pod. I had confidence that he would do the same for me. Stephanie had done one more charitable act before entering her pod. She had removed Karl's handcuffs and entered some false statement into the ship's log. She detailed

what had transpired with the collision and the following troubles, but left out the details about Karl trying to murder me. She said that Karl had volunteered to test the hibernation pods first to make sure everything would work. She also programmed his pod to be the last to open giving everyone else a few days to re-orientate after their long sleep.

When I reawakened again, there was Andy right where I had left him. Even after 86 years, his batteries were still charged. Scientists had finally figured out “Cold Fusion”. His battery had a 1000 year shelf life. Good morning Mr. Alex. He always addressed me that way. Good morning Andy.

When Karl woke up he was heralded as a hero for fixing the pods. Many ladies were waiting for him, all vying for his attention. Stephanie and I were hero's in our own right for saving the ship. As he sat up in his pod, he looked over and saw Stephanie and I toward the back of the crowded room. We both gave him a thumbs up.

I could end the story right here, but I have an interest in seeing what life is like on the new colony planet Zorex. How about you?

Will Alex and Stephanie stay together? How about Karl? Will he find a companion of his own? Stay tuned!

You have to read the sequel, “The Siege”

**The End**