



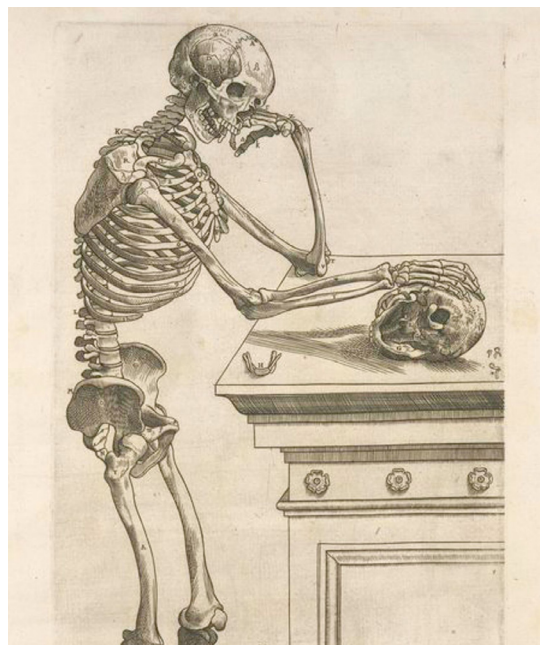
Corner Bar Magazine

Volume 9 Number 7

Page 1 – A CONFESSION FROM DRAGONHEARTH by James Moran. Mr. Moran is a professional astrologer who regularly publishes articles, fiction, and poetry. His published works can be found at <https://jamesmoran.org/the-creation-playpen>

Page 3 – JUST DESSERTS by Leslie Selbst. Mr. Selbst has co-authored a memoir entitled, *Surviving The Storm* (Kroshka Publications 1997). Under his own name, he has also published the short stories “Babushkas” (Eckleburg Review 2016) and “The Chosen People” (The Oracle Fine Arts Review 2016). He lives in Chapel Hill, North Carolina and is a member of the North Carolina Writer’s Network.

Page 6 – GONE BUT NOT RECYCLED by Jared Wynn. Mr. Wynn wrtes, “I spent twenty years in Hollywood coaching screenwriters and polishing content for production companies, but have always written short stories and novellas in my spare time. My first full-length novel was a winner in the 2017 RevPit contest. This one I’m submitting to you, *Gone but Not Recycled*, won an honorable mention in the 2024 1st quarter Writers of the Future contest.”



“A CONFESSION FROM DRAGONHEARTH”

by JAMES MORAN

Dear Jelad,

Here's my confession to you: my life before the Young Ambassadors' Conference in your lovely Shirock was like a like a story whispered to a vacant room. Then I saw a tall, handsome Shirockian boy standing in the conference registration line. The crisp air of Shirock penetrated all the way to my beating heart. Even though I had already registered moments earlier I stood back in line just to listen to that boy's deep voice.

That boy was you, Jelad.

The second time I saw you you were striding proudly into the auditorium to attend the opening address. I could hardly breathe.

I showed up early to all events and meals. I carried my Young Ambassador's pocket notebook everywhere I went so I could retrieve it and pause as if to capture an important thought whenever I neared you in the hallway.

Why am I confessing all of this to you now? Because the courier service is no more and I know you'll never read this. And if you did read this, if this letter did arrive at your doorstep, though I know it never will, I'd be happy this letter would be close to you even if I never will be again.

I wish your army would just break our defences and kill us already. We all know it's going to happen. Our soldiers are just for show.

I'll confide another secret: every family that sent a boy to the border said final goodbyes

upon sending him off. And every boy said his final goodbyes right back. It's not to say that everyone is going to die at the hands of your army. Certainly the boy soldiers will and some of their families. Maybe all of us.

Now I'll confide another secret, and it will make sense, and you'll understand a bit more about why we're so resigned, if not to death then at least to change, though that change will certainly kill us: those boys at our border, there to stall your army, have as much danger at their backs as they do at their fronts.

Smelda has laid an egg!

It's huge and glorious. Our men who descend into the vault beneath the crater to tend to Smelda have described this egg in such beautiful terminology. It's almost as large as her! Can you believe it?? In fact, they've taken to wondering if, for all these decades, Smelda hasn't been focused on gestating the egg the whole time. Perhaps all of the heat and power she's been generating for all the homes of Dragonhearth has been due to that egg growing inside her. Our officials were so alarmed they required all of Dragonhearth be sworn to secrecy.

I'm getting ahead of myself though, aren't I? There's so much to tell you!

Three years back we knew something had changed. Actually, we knew nothing, we just noticed a difference in the air that heats our homes and powers our machines. It blasted in from Smelda's lair through our network of tun-

nels and vents with more force than usual and with a different smell.

Our men who tend to Smelda, the Sandras, they're doctors and engineers combined in one! They care for the dragon and for the network of vents that direct her heat to all the conveniences she makes possible for us. Have you read about the Sandras in your young ambassador studies? Of course you have. You probably know more about them than me! Doesn't their job seem so dangerous? So many of them die. They reported Smelda's strange behavior to us. She seemed terribly restless. Then they reported the crowning of the egg. The fat beast had been roosting!

The laying of the egg was a slow process. Our air became oddly intoxicating during that month. I suppose that may have blinded us to the proposition of the birth. We were woken out of our frenzy of distractibility when the egg began to crack. It just happened to occur at the same time that your country launched its offensive. The radicals over here claim the two events are connected, but I don't believe them. Why would your Shirock claim something from which could hatch your own demise?

In the three months between my return from the Young Ambassadors' Conference and the cracking of the egg, I've fantasized so many times of defecting to Shirock just to be closer to you. Even if I couldn't ever see you, just breathing the same crisp air as you has been all I can ever think of.

But now the egg has cracked and the border needs defending and I'm trapped. We all are. Your army will defeat ours, and who knows what will hatch from that egg. Nothing will ever be the same. You know what? I don't care. Nothing was ever going to be the same after I saw you. I knew my world was over.

May you become the ambassador you've

always dreamed of becoming. If I had Smelda's power I would give it all to you so that you could achieve the success you've worked so hard for.

One who is yours with all her heart,

Teka



“JUST DESSERTS”

by LESLIE SELBST

Harold Schmernoff is into coffins. That is, he sells them. He used to sell used cars but got tired of the jokes, so he quit the business, at least that's what he tells everyone. The truth is Harold Schmernoff is king of the con. He holds the general public in contempt, with little preference for the honest sell. If the bottom line favors cutting a few corners, well, he's right there with a pair of scissors.

And he makes money, lots of it. He's big into flashy too. Hell, if you don't shine a little, how will anyone know you have any? He doesn't believe in anything conservative. Yep, Harold Schmernoff likes his cars chromed, his women painted, and his houses big—all three of them.

He doesn't think of himself as dishonest or immoral; he is just a businessman, and everyone knows that the business of America is business. My God, he's a patriot—priming the pump, keeping money circulating. Well, not all the money. You see, most of his businesses generate cash—lots of cash. And if some of it accidentally falls into a Swiss bank, who's to know?

He likes the Swiss—such a clean people, and the women, well, piles of blond hair and blue-eyed innocence. They remind him of being a kid again, waiting for the ice cream truck.

His latest flavor is Leonie, but he calls her Lee—women shouldn't be called by more than a single syllable; it makes them feel much too important. A night with Lee is better—well, almost better than dealing. Coming out ahead on

a transaction is an aphrodisiac, finer than any blue pill. However, with this new kitten, “Little Blue” is just the icing on the cake.

Harold's latest business is recycled coffins—although his patrons think them new. But then again, they don't seem to complain much. Harold not only thinks of himself as a great businessman but a conservationist as well. Hell, he is saving trees, and if the weather isn't too damp, he could sell the same coffin as many as three times.

His deal with the cemetery caretaker is sugar-sweet, though he does demand a big piece of the action for digging up and refurbishing the coffins. And that shylock at the crematorium that sends its latest client up the chimney, keeps raising his price. Still, by passing off that cheap veneer as solid mahogany, Harold makes a killing with every sale. He chuckles to himself at the joke. And the cash from every third sale goes right into his Swiss account.

His latest crush is also Swiss. They met, as chance would have it, at the bank. She was the officer who set up his secret account. And she's a looker. He's now on his way to see her. She'd texted him about a new deal. She called it an exciting investment but prefers to speak in person. They'll meet at a small bar around the corner from her apartment. Harold is all too eager to make extra cash, and who can tell, maybe with her apartment so close...

He deliberately arrives a few minutes late.

There's no sense in letting her think he is too eager. The bar is a small neighborhood affair. It doesn't appear too prosperous, even a bit run-down, but the address is correct, so he goes in. It takes a moment for his eyes to adjust, as the place keeps the lighting low—less for ambiance than to hide the dirt.

She's easy to spot, sitting at the only occupied table. Two men are with her. One is in an army uniform, and the other he knows is his crematorium connection.

#

It's been six months since Harold had made that sweet deal, and he's rolling in cash, not to mention that blond banker's bed. He needs the extra bread, as he's banging both broads, and they are high maintenance—in money and the sexual department. He needs to get some rest, though, as his headaches have been getting worse since taking on both women. But the deal is the sweetest.

He just hopes the war will go on forever. Each body sent home is worth its weight in hundred-dollar bills. All he does is make partitions that act as false bottoms. They fit perfectly into the government coffins. Those caskets are aluminum and fiberglass marvels—hermetically sealed against moisture and rot. It's a good waste of his taxpayer money if anyone should ask him, but no one does, and it's the perfect place to hide the drugs.

Who would open a dead soldier's coffin, especially one bearing the seal indicating mutilated remains? Even the dogs can't detect anything. His false bottoms are put in place before the coffins are shipped overseas. Once there, his army connection removes the partition, loads the drugs, and replaces the bottom. The guy then texts the coffin's serial number. As soon as the casket is occupied and sealed, it's immedi-

ately sent back to the States. Hell, it's like getting an express package.

Once here, that coffin is redirected to his connection at the crematorium, where the drugs are removed and a counterfeit seal applied. The casket is then returned to the official funeral facility that same night. Hell, Harold doesn't even have to torch the guy. The internment takes place right on time, with no one the wiser. It's like taking candy from a baby.

Grease the right hands, and everyone makes money. Even so, Harold figured he'd cut a few more corners. He'll sneak into the crematorium just after the drugs are removed and take back his false bottom. Harold has the key and hell, the soldier wouldn't mind. There's no point in wasting a good product he can recycle. The guy tasked with replacing the seal usually arrives after midnight. That gives Harold three hours, plenty of time. He only needs fifteen minutes.

He's been running this scam for three months now. At first, it was creepy having to touch those guys and lifting them to get to the false bottom. It's hard work too. Sometimes, he can barely lift the corpse, and twice, he's dropped the poor bastards, but the money is so good that it's worth the effort. Tonight, there are two coffins. He'll have to work fast. He parks across from the funeral home and waits until the druggies have removed the stuff and left.

The first coffin is easy-peasy, but this second guy must have been a cook 'cause he weighs a ton. His freaken eyes are open, and the bastard keeps staring at him. "Hey, I didn't ask you to volunteer for apple pie and baseball."

He chuckles and whispers. "Well, I'm going to eat your pie, and maybe if more of your buddies land here, I'll buy the whole fuckin baseball team. Now move the fuck over so's I can get this

bottom out.”

Harold strains and pulls with everything he has. Sadly, that was all it took for the small blood vessel responsible for his headaches to finally let go. Harold feels a spasm of pain and sees a flash of light just before blacking out.

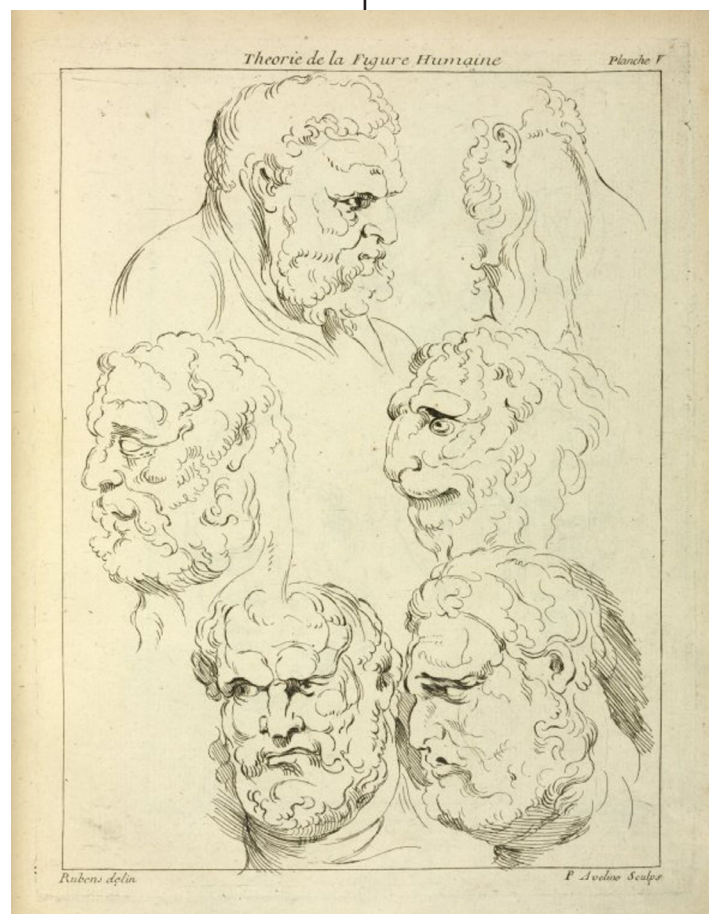
Due to his struggles, he’s suffered a massive stroke and falls into the arms of that poor bastard in uniform. Worse, the inertia of his collapse causes the coffin lid to shut.

Harold awakens in total darkness, utterly paralyzed. He can’t move or call out, but by some vindictive quirk of fate, he can breathe and hear. As the air grows stale and heavy, he listens as the counterfeit seal is applied and feels the jostling as the coffin is lifted into the waiting hearse. Harold’s last touch with the living is the sound of Taps and the saluting gunfire as he is lowered into the grave.

#

Each Memorial Day, the nation pays tribute to its fallen heroes. Crowds flood Arlington National Cemetery to offer prayers for the dead as thousands of American flags are planted at the foot of each grave.

On a beautiful May morning, a soldier plants a flag, then salutes the grave of one Harold Schermnoff, the only civilian draft dodger to find his final resting place in that hallowed ground the nation reserves for its fallen heroes.



“GONE BUT NOT RECYCLED”

by JARED WYNN

“I’m not exactly dying to make a new friend right now,” sobbed the man to the gravestone. He sat beside it with his arm around its shoulders, somehow managing to look handsome despite wearing what looked like a wetsuit. A helmet lay on the dry soil beside him. Banks of cold, unused lightbulbs nestled in the ceiling above him. A dozen alarms screamed at him from every corner of the room, but he didn’t seem to hear anything other than his own voice.

“But everyone else will die if I don’t.” The headstone was rough-hewn and rustic-looking, with the name *Rachel Sabrosky* hand-carved in uneven letters, followed by the epitaph *Gone but Not Recycled*.

Suddenly, the alarms were replaced by a little girl’s voice. “Captain Malone. Orbital degradation terminal in thirty minutes. Orbital degradation...”

“Computer, cancel voice alert!” Malone shouted. The child’s voice disappeared and the dozen blaring alarms returned.

“It’s like a curse.” He sighed, produced a piece of paper from somewhere within his bodysuit, and deftly folded it into an origami flower. He poked a hole in the hard-packed dirt in front of the tombstone with his index finger, planted the paper flower in it, and pinched the soil tight around the stem. He patted the top of the headstone and whispered, “Even if I could forget you, I never would.”

He stood and stared at it sadly for a mo-

ment, then picked up his helmet and sprinted at an impossible speed toward an open door, emerging into a brightly-lit, grey hallway on the other side. Without breaking stride or even breathing hard, he said, “Computer, open module five inner gate.” What looked like a massive garage door at the end of the hallway, some two thousand meters ahead of him, lifted. Once he was about a thousand meters from it, he said, “Computer, close module five inner gate.”

Malone picked up his pace as the door came down and managed to slip under it like a batter sliding into first base before it slammed shut. He looked like an ant being blown across a tarmac, as his slide took him almost all the way to the far side of the room. The “room” was large enough to fit a landing shuttle, with enough room to spare for a couple jumbo jets.

He donned his helmet and said, “Computer, disengage gravity in module five airlock and open the outer gate.” He grabbed a mooring clamp in the floor just as his feet began to float.

His feet pointed toward the outer gate as it opened, threatening to flush him out into the void along with all the air in the room. Once the gate was fully opened and the room around him perfectly silent, he planted his feet on the floor and kicked upward toward one side of the open door. He caught the lip of the door and swung himself around onto a handhold on the outside of the ship, which he clung to in a crouching position.

“Malone,” the computer’s child-like voice reached him through his helmet, “untethered spacewalking is not advised.” He looked down the length of the ship and launched himself by way of reply. As he leapt, he turned so that his back was to the ship.

“Computer, tell me about Rachel’s friend,” Malone said while sailing through the empty space above the ship. He held a hand out by his side as he floated past module four, and once sunlight touched his palm, he began counting. The ship’s AI had managed to park them in a tidally-locked orbit around a previously unvisited star. The closest planet to them was a gas giant with several moons that Malone had never bothered to name. This particular orbit meant that one side of the ship always faced the star, while the other side always faced the planet, which was massive but still barely visible to the naked eye at this distance.

“Her name is Kimber Wenman,” the computer replied. “Born 2479 in Shenzhen, Zhongguo, to a Swedish father and Taiwanese mother, in violation of interpolitical fraternization laws. Emigrated to the North American Federation after being granted asylum in 2491. Earned their PhD in Terraform Engineering from the California North Polytechnic Institute in 2501. Female. Never married. Hobbies include...”

“Thanks, computer,” Malone interrupted. The light on his hand flashed on and off a couple times in a staccato rhythm, letting Malone know that he’d passed module four and was now flying past what remained of module three. The BeLaU or beryllium/lanthanum/uranium alloy frames of the freight cars remained intact enough to keep the control and drive modules on the same electrical system, but the outer walls and contents of those cars were long gone. “I’m not ready to learn about her hobbies yet,”

he mumbled.

“I did not hear that,” the computer complained. The ship, commissioned by the Jansky Mayflower Corporation, was designed to function as a sort of interstellar freight train. The first module, with the bridge and crew quarters, was only a kilometer and a half in length. The last module, the main drive, housed a nuclear reactor which had long since gone cold and several square kilometers of dry soil that were supposed to be used for growing food.

The middle of the ship was made up of however many freight modules the client could afford – which was three, in this particular mission. “I don’t need personal details,” Malone explained. The light on his palm disappeared again, letting him know he was passing module two, which was still mostly intact.

He counted off the seconds until he reached the control module, then reached up and, without looking, grabbed a sensor arm next to one of the stabilizing engines. “Computer, open module one outer gate,” he said while crab walking across the hull toward the airlock. Once he’d levered himself inside, he grabbed onto a mooring clamp and said, “Computer, resume gravity and cycle airlock.” Suddenly, he was lying on the floor next to the mooring clamp. The sound of the alarm again filled the space around him.

The airlock was as large as the one in module five, and almost as empty, save for a folded jumpsuit and a coffin-sized box in the center of the room. Malone thought of these devices as coffins, although that wasn’t the preferred nomenclature. It was supposed to be called a “Preservation Berth,” but when an executive for the Chinese manufacturer filled out the American Federation patent application, they swapped the word “preservation” (bǎohù) with the nearly

synonymous and much more pleasant-sounding word “stillness” (jìngzhǐ). The word was then shortened to “still” by an unnamed translator, resulting in the device being patented as a “Still Berth,” an unfortunate pun which stuck despite the company’s efforts to rebrand it as a “Cryobed.”

Malone quickly removed the helmet and suit, laying them on the floor next to the coffin. He donned the jumpsuit in a swift, practiced motion, then he wedged his thumbs into a small crack in the lid and slid a panel down, revealing a transparent touchscreen over a saggy, exsanguinated face. He swiped his hand across the screen to activate it, keyed in a six-digit PIN, and tapped an icon featuring what appeared to be a pitcher next to a gingerbread man mold. The pitcher poured its contents into the mold while the face beneath the screen gradually filled out.

After about a minute, two lines of teal/green text appeared on the screen: DECONTAMINATE, followed by, COMMENCING RESUSCITATION. The face twitched a couple times, the eyelids fluttered. All of a sudden, Kimber Wenman opened her eyes and screamed. Then she started coughing violently.

Malone released a latch and lifted the lid on the coffin before stepping back. Kimber sat up, leaned over the edge, and dry heaved a couple times.

Malone felt an old, familiar hunger at the sight of her bare skin, but knew it would subside soon enough. “Try and take even, measured breaths,” he shouted, but she couldn’t hear him over the din of the alarm.

“Computer, cancel alert!” Kimber shouted, but the computer didn’t respond to her voice. Her knuckles were white on the edge of the coffin. “There aren’t supposed to be any men

on the ship!”

“There weren’t supposed to be any men in the colony!” Malone shouted back loud enough for her to hear him over the blaring alarm, “I’m the Captain! But you can call me Malone!”

“Where are we, Captain!” Kimber demanded.

“On what’s left of the Nomad!” he replied.

“What do you mean, ‘what’s left of it!’”

“A meteor took out half the ship!”

“Which half?” Kimber shouted.

Malone picked up the folded garment while shouting, “The main drive, most of the stabilizing engines, all four landing shuttles, the terraform spores, the shelter kits, the seedbank, the livestock, the food supply, the medical supplies...”

“The other colonists!” Kimber asked.

“...and about eight hundred gallons of sperm!” Malone finished.

“That’s unnecessarily specific!”

“I rounded down!” Malone handed her the atmosphere suit.

“What’s this!” she asked.

“I was hoping you’d be up for a quick space-walk!” Malone shouted.

“What!” Kimber tried to cup her hands over her ears to hear better.

Suddenly, the alarms were replaced by the computer’s child-like voice. “Malone. Orbital degradation terminal in twenty-five minutes. Orbital degradation terminal in twenty-five minutes.” Kimber looked bewildered for a moment, then flinched when the alarms started blaring again.

“Computer, cancel alert,” Malone said, and the alarms turned off. Kimber pointed up at the ceiling and opened her mouth to ask a question, but Malone kept talking. “We’re tidally locked in a synchronous orbit around Sargasso

IV,” he continued casually. “One of the stabilizing engines is malfunctioning. I’d repair it myself, but someone needs to run the tests from the bridge, so unless you know how to pilot a JMC Colonial Transport....”

“Why does the computer sound like a little girl?” Kimber interrupted.

“It would literally kill me to answer that right now,” Malone replied.

“It can’t be that complicated.”

“Normally I’d agree, but we only have twenty-four minutes to get that engine back online, so...” He turned around to give her privacy.

He listened as she clambered out of the box and picked up the suit. “Aren’t you supposed to be suiting up too?” she asked. “In case something happens while I’m out there?”

Malone shook his head. “That’s the last one we’ve got.”

#

“Don’t worry, I’ve done this at least a thousand times,” said Malone. He was a kilometer away on the bridge, but the way his voice came through her helmet made it sound like he was even further away.

“When you say you’ve done it,” Kimber started to say. She was taking short, measured breaths in an effort to not let the panic overwhelm her. “You mean you’ve talked people through fixing an engine,” she drew a breath, “or you’ve done what I’m doing now?”

“Both,” he replied, adding, “Wait, what are you doing now?”

She was disconnecting the tether from her belt and feeding it through one of the metal handholds, spaced out every two meters around the hull. The tether was attached to a winch in the airlock, and it had looked safe enough when Malone walked her through the procedure a few minutes before. But then she’d noticed all

the pockmarks from small meteor strikes on the hull – there were more of those than handholds – and suddenly the tether didn’t feel safe anymore. “Insurance, in case something happens,” she replied breathlessly while reattaching the tether to her waist.

“You won’t fit through those handholds,” Malone said. “If something happens to you, I won’t be able to reel you in.”

“Then let’s make sure nothing happens,” she replied. She let go the handhold and pushed off toward the next one, which she managed to grab onto despite her brain telling her she would miss. Experienced engineers used those handholds like rock climbers while working on the hull, but this was Kimber’s first solo spacewalk, and the only person she trusted less than herself was the strange man talking to her from a warm and cozy room somewhere inside the ship.

“You’re moving toward a hot engine, your next jump needs to be lateral,” Malone said. The airlock was on the top side of the module, facing away from the star. The malfunctioning engine was on the south starboard side, but the hull was mostly uniform in appearance, and it was easy to forget where one was once they were outside the airlock.

She timed her next jump perfectly. For someone so terrified of drifting off into space, she was proving remarkably capable. “What will happen if I can’t get this thing online?” she asked.

“If we’re lucky, we’ll drift into that big gas giant behind you. If we aren’t, we’ll just drift away,” he replied. “One more lateral jump and you’ll see it,” he added.

It took her a while to reply as she assessed and made her next jump, but she saw what he meant once she was in position. There was a

recessed hole hiding four, cone-shaped nozzles, each about four meters in diameter. To Kimber's eyes, they looked a bit like the business ends of blunderbusses. They were ensconced in the side of the ship to reduce the risk of glancing blows from meteors and orbital debris, but one of the four barrels had taken a direct hit.

"How is falling into a gas giant better than not falling into one?" Kimber asked.

"We're at the first LaGrange Point, with enough hydrogen around us to power the stabilizing engines and life support. It's also where we expend the least amount of energy necessary to remain here, but..." he started to say.

"Skip the science lesson," Kimber interrupted. She took another breath and added, "Please."

"If we fall into the planet, the ship will get crushed. If we don't, we'll freeze to death. Either way we die, but atmospheric entry is faster," he replied. "Now look at the engine and hold still please, I need to..." His voice drifted off.

"What?" Kimber asked.

"I think I know why the sensors couldn't tell me anything," he said after a moment. The engine that had taken a direct hit wasn't just damaged, it was demolished. "Do you see the access panel? It's about a meter to your left."

"Yes," she rapped her knuckles on it, then grimaced because she'd forgotten where she was and had actually expected to hear something. She found and released a latch on the panel. "Why don't the sensors work?"

"There aren't any," Malone replied. "I don't think that one's repairable. But the other engines should still work. There's a mechanical valve that shuts off in the event of a hydrogen leak. I need you to climb in there and decouple the damaged engine."

She lifted the panel lid, revealing what looked like a small crawlspace rather than the bunch of lights and switches she'd been expecting. "So, do you have time to tell me about the computer's voice?" she asked while climbing inside the space.

"It's my daughter's. Was my daughter's," he corrected himself. "I used to have imaginary conversations with her, then I woke up one day and realized I couldn't hear her replies. I'd forgotten what she sounded like. So I found some old recordings and gave the ship her voice." He took a deep breath and said, "Anyway, you should see two pipes beneath each of the engine cones. First, I need you to disconnect the ones feeding into the broken engine."

Kimber released the latches on the clamps holding the pipes in place. To her surprise, they weren't pipes so much as metallic-looking hoses that were easily bent and pulled away. "I'm sorry. It must have been awful, having to leave her behind. How much did she know?"

"Next, look for valves where the pipes connect with the floor. Turn them counterclockwise." Once she did that, he said, "How much did she know about what?"

"Only two kinds of people sign up for your job, and no one hires a Vampire to pilot a colony ship." Her breathing was steadier, she was able to complete longer sentences now. "So, you must be a convict."

"I was, in another lifetime," he replied. "I need you to get out of there now, get at least eight meters away so I can test the engine."

Kimber crawled back out, grabbed the nearest handhold, and closed the panel. She glanced to either side of herself and started hyperventilating again. "Can you wait until," she took a breath, "until I'm back in the airlock?"

"Sorry. If the engines don't come online,

we won't have time to send you back out again," Malone replied.

She nodded, mostly to herself, then gauged her next leap and took it. "Eight meters, four handholds," she mumbled. "Is that enough?"

"It will be if you hang on tight, I'm just going to do a short burst to test the engine," he said.

She jumped to the next handhold, then asked, "Do you mind telling me," she took a breath, "what your crime was?"

"I'll tell you anything you want to know, once we finish this job," Malone replied.

Her next jump was successful. "I think I deserve to know," she took a breath, "you can't just say it was another lifetime."

"Six meters down, one handhold to go," he said.

She made the next leap, grabbed onto the bar, then risked a glance to her right. "Wait," she said. The tether snaked down and around the side of the ship. "I want to get to the handhold," she heaved a ragged breath, "that I fed the tether through."

"We're running out of time," he cautioned, but she gauged her jump and took it before he finished the sentence.

"If I'm going to be stranded on a ship with someone," she said once she reached her handhold, "I have a right to know who I'm stuck with."

"I agree. And I'll tell you everything, I promise," Malone repeated. "Right now, put your arm through the handhold. And a leg, if you can fit it. I don't know how long it'll take for the engines to come back online, so I really need you to hold on, OK?"

"Uh huh," Kimber nodded absently. She snaked an arm through the handhold, then risked a glance to her left. She was on the dark

side of the ship, but she could still make out some of the damage to the other modules. She took her arm out of the metal bar and held it with one hand so she could lean out and get a better view.

Suddenly, the engine blasted into life, pushing the massive ship away and jarring her loose from her handhold. "Malone!" she screamed.

"Hold on!" he shouted. "I'm firing the opposing engines, whatever you do don't pull on the tether," but she couldn't hear him over the sound of her own screams. She pulled hard on the rope and tried and haul herself back in just as the ship rushed back to meet her.

She slammed sideways into the hull. The compression suit and helmet absorbed most of the shock, but the line between her oxygen tank and helmet ruptured, spewing air out from her neck toward the ship and jetting her body in the opposite direction.

"Kimber!" Malone shouted.

"I can't," she breathed, "I'm trying..." She managed to grab the tether before hauling in a last breath. "So many stars," she whispered right before she passed out.

#

Malone took off at a dead sprint from the bridge down the kilometer-long hallway to the airlock.

"Computer, close module one outer gate, then open module one inner gate," he said. It took him the same amount of time to cover the distance between the bridge and the airlock as it took for the ship to close the outer gate – about three seconds.

Once inside the airlock, he ran past Kimber's coffin. "Computer, prep the still berth for resuscitation, close module one inner gate, disengage gravity, and open module one outer gate," he said.

“Spacewalking without a compression suit is not advised,” came the voice of his dead daughter.

“Soon as I’m back inside the ship, close the outer gate and resume gravity, but do not open the inner gate,” Malone replied. He grabbed one of the mooring clamps and emptied his lungs of air just as the outer gate opened.

He crab-walked to the edge of the void and gauged his distance to Kimber, the direction she was moving, and the amount of slack left in her tether. She was almost directly in front of him, in the shadow of the ship, drifting sideways.

Malone aimed his body about twelve degrees to his left, in the direction she was floating, and leapt. He ignored the sensation of moisture boiling on his tongue as he flew headfirst with his arms at his sides, reaching out just in time to tackle her. She wasn’t breathing. He hurriedly checked her waist to make sure the tether was properly fastened – it was – while his momentum pushed them both further out. He held on until the line drew taut.

As they bounced back toward the ship, he pulled her tether to speed them up. Then he angled his body so that he landed feet-first on the top of the ship. His face and eyes were swelling and he was losing vision, but he managed to grab onto a handhold just before his corneas ruptured. Some moisture escaped and started to boil on his deflating eyeballs, but he was too distracted by Kimber dying to be bothered by something as trivial as blindness.

He felt around her waist and disconnected the tether. Then he grabbed her belt with one hand and jumped toward the airlock, using memory and his free hand to guide him. His movements became progressively slower as he got closer.

He entered the airlock a little over thirty

seconds after he’d left it. The outer gate closed and the room filled with air. He squatted down and ran his hand over the floor until he felt one of the mooring clamps, which he used to orient himself. He stumbled toward the center of the room with his free hand in front of his face until he ran into her coffin.

He placed her gingerly inside, removed her helmet, and said, “Computer, close still berth, initiate resuscitation, and open module one inner gate.” He dimly heard the inner door open and used the sound to guide himself toward it as the lid on Kimber’s coffin closed behind him.

He emerged in the hallway between the airlock and the bridge and felt his way along with his hand on the wall. After about a hundred meters, his corneas regrew. Squinting, he shielded his new eyes from the overhead lights and sprinted the rest of the way to the nearest food printer.

Kimber staggered into the hallway a few minutes later to find Malone hurrying toward her with a bag in his hand and tears streaming down his cheeks. She did her best to put one foot in front of the other while making words come out of her mouth in the right order, but being resuscitated twice in as many hours left her with a massive amount of lactic acid in her muscles and a staggering lack of coherence in her speech. “What... how... alive,” she managed to say before collapsing.

Malone reached her just in time to catch her and ease her fall. “You’re safe, you made it,” he said. She was on her back now, looking at the man squatting beside her in bewilderment. Almost as an afterthought, he showed her the bag in his hand.

“I don’t think you’re ready for solid food yet, but this will replenish your electrolytes and

enzymes,” he explained while pressing it into her hand. “Fun fact, it’s called a nutrient bladder. This ship is full of fortunate things with unfortunate names, but if you can look past that, it should keep you from hurling all over the place.”

She took a deep breath, sat up, and dropped the bag. “What happened?” she asked.

“Sorry, I got a little verklempt,” he said, wiping his eyes with his shoulders. “You went silent when you bounced off the hull, I thought for sure you were unconscious.” He picked up the nutrient bag and, instead of trying to press it into her hand again, held it out like a gift.

She ignored it and said, “Not to you, to me.” She closed her eyes. “I was trying to see the damage to the other modules when the ship started moving, I was in freefall, then it came back and hit me, and I think...” She felt around her neck at the connection point where the oxygen line fed into the helmet. “I crashed into a handhold.”

“Were you hyperventilating, or did you maybe...” Malone said. He set down the nutrient bladder and asked, “May I?” She nodded reflexively, but still cringed when he put his hands on her neck to inspect the collar.

“Well, the seal is broken, but it’s...”

“You lied,” she said, cutting him off. “Please tell me I’m right. You lied about not having another compression suit.”

Malone wiped another flood of tears from his eyes and said, “I wasn’t lying.”

“But the longest anyone’s ever survived without one is sixteen seconds,” she insisted.

“Well, I’m just glad you made it.” He sat back on his haunches and held up the drink pouch again, not so much offering it this time as showing it. “The sooner we get some calories in you, the sooner you’ll start to feel...”

“What’s it taste like?” she asked.

He frowned. “I’m told it’s like liquified sauerkraut...”

She snatched it from his hands, put the corner in her mouth, and bit down on the seal to break it. Malone watched as she drank, fascinated for a brief moment before catching himself and looking away. “Ungh,” she finished, swallowed a burp, and tossed the empty pouch aside. “Bladder’s an apt name.”

“Yeah, it’s ironic how the ingredients that are supposed to reduce nausea have a taste that creates it.” He picked up her litter as though she’d thoughtfully handed it to him. On his face sat the perfectly composed smile of a Buddhist monk who’d spent a hundred lifetimes working in customer service. “When you’re ready for real food, I’ll show you the food printer, we have a pretty extensive menu.”

She blushed ever so slightly. “Sorry, I was going to get that, I just don’t know where the recyc is.”

“We can worry about ship etiquette after I’ve given you a tour of the ship,” he replied, offering her a hand. “Or I can just tell you where it is, if you want some alone time? You can’t miss it, the thing is huge.”

“No,” she planted her palms on the floor and stood up without taking his hand, “I have questions.”

Malone motioned for her to walk with him toward the bridge. “You were a terraform engineer, right?”

“Am,” she corrected him, “I *am* a terraform engineer.”

“I never really understood all the different types of engineering,” he nodded. She smiled awkwardly, unable to come up with a reply inane enough to match his small talk. He continued, “We’re on the top deck now, the com-

mand level. Everything is pretty standard for a colonial transport, we have stairwells instead of lifts,” he gestured at a door as they passed it, “but there’s enough hydrogen in this region that we can pretty much leave the gravity on full-time.”

“Who’s we?” she asked.

“The royal ‘we,’” he replied with a laugh. “Sorry, I’m in the habit of speaking collectively. But you’re part of this collective now, so if you ever get tired of walking...”

“Why are you male?” she suddenly asked.

“Um,” he stammered.

“Our mission leader said we contracted a female pilot,” Kimber explained.

“Oh, you mean Zawi,” he said wistfully. “I don’t know the details. All I know is, I got offered double the normal rate to fly a freezer full of lesbians out into the middle of nowhere, the caveat being...”

“Is that another one of your unfortunate names?” she interrupted.

“Sorry,” Malone spread his hands wide in supplication, “freezer is Space Force slang for a colony ship. My boss is ex-military.”

“We aren’t all lesbians,” Kimber said before correcting herself, “I mean we weren’t.” They’d reached the door to the bridge at the end of the corridor. She suddenly wobbled like a marathon runner at the finish line.

“Kimber?” Malone said.

She put a hand on the wall to steady herself. “All we wanted was one generation, that’s all it would take, to build a matriarchal society...”

He put his hands out to steady her, but she flinched at that, so he withdrew and sat down instead. “Let’s take a break,” he patted the floor next to him.

“It wasn’t to get away from men.” She sat

down on the other side of the corridor, facing him. “It was to get away from Vampires, and the men in government who keep allowing them to live in society like humans.”

He crossed his legs and laid his hands on his thighs above the knees, palms up. “Have you ever met a Vampire?” he asked.

“Have you?” she replied, then continued before he could answer. “The point isn’t that they can walk and talk and pay taxes like everyone else, it’s that they don’t have to. And I don’t want to live on a planet where every day I wake up to the possibility that they’ll get tired of playing along with mortal law and go back to the old ways.”

Malone sighed. “But they’ve been playing along with mortal law for centuries. They came out long before you were born.”

“You mean before *we* were born,” Kimber corrected him.

“The royal ‘we,’” he agreed.

She stared at him for a few moments, her face inscrutable. Finally, she said, “Maybe I just woke up on the wrong side of the berth. There’s a lot for me to process.”

“Do you want to rest?” he asked. She nodded by way of reply. “OK,” he gestured back down the corridor, “go down that stairwell I showed you, there are two levels, habitation and observation. Observation is empty, but the gravity’s uneven, so watch your step. Habitation, pick any room you want except the last one.”

“Where are your quarters?” she asked.

He gestured with a thumb over his shoulder at the open door. “Captain’s quarters are off the bridge, so you have the whole middle level to yourself.”

She nodded and stood up. Before she could say something, Malone said, “You did good work out there, you know. We’re not dying right

now because of you.”

She opened her mouth to say something in reply, thought better of it, and instead said, “I’m going to have more questions.”

“There’s an intercom in every room,” he replied. She nodded as she walked away.

#

Kimber lifted her hand to the door as if she were going to knock. Then she lowered her hand, stuck her fingers in the recessed latch, and slid it open. The door itself had a magnetized rubber lining which reduced noise while giving it what the design team called a “bias toward closure.” It was supposed to protect the occupants from explosive depressurization in much the same way that oxygen masks in terrestrial airliners were designed to protect fliers from hypoxia. Which is to say it probably wouldn’t save any lives, but it would give people a bit of hope to cling to while dying.

She peeked inside; most of the space was taken up by three bunk beds. Each bed sported a plastic-wrapped linen and pillow set behind a bungee net. And just as Malone said, there was an ancient-looking intercom system inside the door. It would be useless to a crew member with a ship-issued comm pad, which meant the bunks were probably meant for passengers rather than crew. Which, in turn, meant that the ship was probably built before the widespread use of cryosleep tech. Kimber couldn’t imagine why someone would pay money to spend a year or more in one of these cramped rooms.

She slid the door shut and went back to the stairwell, asking aloud, “Computer, what did he mean when he said the gravity on the lower level was uneven?” A moment passed, but no reply came. “Computer, what level access do I have?” she asked, but again, no reply.

Miffed, she strode back out into the corri-

dor toward one end, where she found a little alcove with a console and a small door set into the wall. She tapped the console, but it didn’t light up. She tried opening the small door, but it didn’t budge. She backed out of the alcove and entered the closest dorm room, where she pressed the call button on the intercom. “Yes? What can I do for...” Malone’s voice responded.

She interrupted, “I need access.”

“Oh, of course, sorry,” he replied. “I forgot, just a sec... and there we go, you should be able to order anything you want, open any door you want now. Is there anything...”

Kimber backed out of the room and shut the door on his voice. She went back to the console in the alcove and said, “Computer, what is the last meal Captain Malone ordered?”

“I am not at liberty to disclose crew members’ personal details,” replied the ship’s childish voice.

“Was it at least solid?”

“I am not at liberty to...”

“Can you make me a slice of cheesecake?”

Kimber asked.

The console lit up. “I would be happy to,” said the ship. “What flavor would you like?”

“Can you make things other than food?”

“I can produce a variety of items. What do you have in mind?”

“How about a compression suit?” Kimber asked.

“Unfortunately, no, as there is a testing process which I cannot perform,” the computer replied. “May I ask, what is wrong with the one you are wearing?”

“I soiled it when I was unconscious,” Kimber said. “Can you make parts of a compression suit? Like the respirator tube?”

“I can do that for you right now,” said the computer. A light came on behind the opaque

door above the console, followed by some whirring and clicking sounds while the computer continued talking. "I am sorry that you soiled your compression suit. Would you like to take a shower?"

Something about the voice made Kimber smile; maybe it was that the voice didn't match the accent, or the way it somehow managed to sound earnest and emotionless at the same time. "That's very kind of you, but I don't know how much time I have." The whirring and clicking sounds stopped. A green light came on over the door. Kimber yanked it open and snatched the long, rubbery-looking tube off a tray in the middle. "Can you also make the tools necessary to install it?"

"Yes," replied the cartoonishly cute voice, "although there are several standard toolkits already printed and stored, including in a cupboard inside the module one inner gate, near where you left your helmet."

"Show me." Kimber raced back down the corridor and up the stairs. She peeked around the corner at the top of the stairwell to make sure the hallway beyond was clear; it was. "Computer, open module one inner gate, and as soon as I'm inside, close it behind me," she said while running toward the airlock. She was struggling to breathe while she ran, so it almost sounded like she was being strangled. But the computer understood her well enough; the gate opened as she approached, and promptly closed behind her.

Once inside, she stopped and stared at the massive room. "Kimber?" the computer inquired, snapping her out of her daydream.

Kimber shook her head. "Sorry, I was just..." Her voice trailed off. She shook her head again and spied the helmet, which looked like it had been kicked toward the far wall, closer to

the outer gate.

"There is a row of five cabinets in the wall," came the computer's voice. "The four closest to the outer gate each contain..."

"First one's a winch and tether, last one's a toolkit," Kimber said as she approached the cabinets. "I'm an engineer," she added while yanking open the fifth cabinet and pulling out a flat, plastic toolbox. "A terraform engineer, but still." She unfastened the front of the suit, grabbed the right sleeve at the wrist, and pulled her arm out, releasing her right breast and an invisible olfactory cloud in the process. "Phwoo," she curled her nose up.

"In answer to your earlier question, the gravity field on the lower level is uneven due to the uneven placement of the gravimetric generators," the computer said conversationally. "The designers of this ship prioritized the scenic experience over comfort."

"Wait, this crate has *windows*?" Kimber asked while feeling around the hem of her collar. She found where the respirator tube connected to the hunch-like oxygen compartment at her back, used a small wrench to disconnect it.

"Yes, this ship is the oldest in the JMC fleet. It was commissioned when tourism was still the greatest economic driver of spaceflight technology, before the colonial exodus," the computer said.

"Before cryosleep tech was invented, judging from the berths upstairs," Kimber replied while threading in the replacement part and connecting it at both ends. She refastened the collar and donned the helmet.

"May I inquire," the computer said while Kimber opened one of the other cabinets and fastened a tether to her waist, "how much space-walk training do you have?"

She attached the tether to her waist and said, "Computer, cancel gravity and open module one outer gate."

"I'll be happy to, but first, may I ask, what is your level of training for this?" the computer said.

"I'm not at liberty to disclose that," Kimber said petulantly.

"Might I at least suggest that you hold on to something?" the computer said.

Kimber reached down and grabbed a mooring clamp just as her feet began to float. A moment later, the massive outer gate opened, and her feet pointed toward it as the air escaped. After about a second, she was able to push off toward the edge of a gate and peer down the side of the ship. Which may have been the top of bottom for all she knew. She stared with every muscle in her body clenched.

"Kimber?" asked the computer, breaking her out of her trance.

"Sorry," Kimber said. She moved her body outside the ship and grabbed onto her first external handhold. "Anyone ever tell you your voice is weirdly comforting?"

"Yes, many people have told me that."

"Many people?" Kimber jumped to the next handhold. "How many people have been on this ship since you got that voice?"

"Unfortunately, I am not at liberty to discuss personnel-related matters," the computer replied.

Kimber made another leap, then another. "Are there any other personnel on the ship, aside from Malone and myself?"

"There are no other crew members active at this time," the computer answered.

Kimber made another few leaps, then asked, "Are there any inactive crew members?"

"Define: inactive."

Kimber arrived at the end of the module and stared at the next one, or rather at the big hole at the far end – the side with the power and oxygen generators. But there was no visible damage to or around the airlock; all that stood between her and it were about four meters of mostly vacant space.

She looked down at the link between the two modules, a four-meter-thick pipe containing wires, pipes, and explosives. "Computer, are there separation charges in the power coupling between modules one and two?"

"Yes. As a matter of policy, there are separation charges in all JMC colonial transport power couplings," said the computer.

"Why didn't Malone blow them when the modules were damaged?"

"Unfortunately, I am not able to divulge command-level decisions with..."

"Yeah, yeah, are you at least able to open module two outer gate?" Kimber asked.

"Module one provides enough power for non-gravimetric operations through the coupling, however, your tether is not long enough to reach module two," the ship warned.

Kimber looked over her shoulder, and sure enough, the tether was practically vibrating with tension behind her. She unclipped it from her waist and fastened it to the handhold. Then she looked back at the four long meters of dead space in front of her. She would need to launch herself perfectly perpendicular to the ship in order to catch a handhold and leverage herself inside. She almost wished someone would just push her.

"Kimber, if you are in need of assistance, I can alert Captain Malone," the computer said.

That was all the push she needed. "Computer, open module two outer gate," she said as she leapt.

Two things hit her as she crossed those four meters of dead space: light from the nearby star, which was much brighter than she'd anticipated, and the realization that she'd misgauged her jump. She was about to hit the hull a full ten meters short of the airlock.

She skidded into the ship and bounced off it like a skipping stone, flailing her arms about. In her panic, she somehow managed to hit and then grab onto a handhold before floating off into the void. "Why does everything have to be a near-death experience out here?" she gasped while trying to get her breathing back under control.

"Your oxygen reserves are at sixty-one percent," the computer with Malone's daughter's voice informed her.

"How much time does that translate to?" Kimber asked while hopping across handholds toward the airlock.

"That will depend on your rate of exertion," the computer replied. "If you'd like, I can alert you when your oxygen reserves reach a certain level."

Kimber paused on one of the handholds, both to catch her breath and to think. "Tell me when I'm at two percent," she finally said.

"Depending on your proximity to the module one outer gate, a two percent oxygen store may not be enough to ensure survival," the child's voice said.

"Ever heard the one about the three explorers and the cannibal tribe?" Kimber asked.

"I am familiar with several such stories, both fictional and anecdotal," replied the computer.

She took her last leap to a handhold, this one just outside the airlock. She swung her legs around and pushed herself inside. "So the cannibals tell the first guy, 'we're gonna eat

your flesh, use your bones for tools, and make a canoe out of your hide. But first, we'll grant you one wish.' So he asked for a last meal, they gave it to him, and then they ate him."

The inner gate was already open, which wasn't alarming since the module couldn't generate oxygen. Kimber planted her feet on the wall and pushed off toward the smaller door. When she landed there, she looked across the loading bay – the direction felt like up to her, given her position – and saw that the outer gate was already closed.

She launched herself through the inner door into the corridor while continuing, "The next day, they go to the second guy and tell him the same thing: 'we're gonna eat your flesh, use your bones for tools, and make a canoe out of your skin, but we'll grant you one wish.' So he got the same treatment; he asked for a last meal, got it, and then they killed him and ate him."

The corridor here was wider and shorter than the one in the command module; more like a foyer than a hallway. "The next day they go and say the same thing to the third guy," Kimber continued while taking in her surroundings. The floor beneath her feet bore several sets of metal tracks which the ship's bots used to move cargo back and forth between the hold and the airlock. The walls and ceiling also held rows of tracks, which made sense since cargo ships like this one usually loaded and offloaded their wares in zero gravity.

"So the third guy says, 'I want a fork.'" To her right were a couple dozen robots, bolted or strapped to work benches in varying states of disassembly; it looked like they'd been stripped for parts. To her left, the floor and tracks ended in a sudden drop off. "They look at him like he's crazy, so he tries to explain what a fork is, and they're like, 'we know what it is, we just

don't know why you want it.”

Kimber dug her fingers into one of the tracks and used it to push herself toward the ledge, stopping short unnecessarily as though afraid she might fall into the hold itself. “The guy is like, ‘I’ve just always had a thing for forks, and you said I can have anything I want before I die, so that’s what I want: a fork.’” The cargo hold is so massive, that if she were to go over the ledge while the gravity was turned on, the fall would probably kill her. Especially if it were empty, which it wasn’t; hundreds of still berths like the one Kimber had woken up in twice that day were packed into and around the room, taking up most of the space.

She kicked off toward a row of them while finishing her story. “They give him the fork, and he starts stabbing himself in the chest and stomach and thighs, over and over again. Screaming the whole time.” She landed on one of the still berths and tried to peer through the window to see what was inside, but the window was too opaque.

She examined the console. “And the cannibals, they’re freaking out, they’re like, ‘What is wrong with you?’” She found the standby button and pressed it. Some LED lights came on while the processor booted up. “And he handed them the fork back, and said, ‘You can eat my flesh and make tools from my bones, but screw your canoe!’”

A light came on inside the still berth, illuminating a face. The skin sagged, and there were more wrinkles around the eyes and mouth than she expected to see, but only because, in Kimber’s mind, she’d last seen this face two days ago, when they all cued up to go into cryosleep for the journey.

“That was a very interesting joke,” the computer said in its little girl voice. “Captain

Malone once told a similar one, except the punchline was ‘death by ooga booga.’ Have you heard that variation?”

“Is the Captain a Vampire?” Kimber asked.

“Unfortunately, I am not at liberty to disclose a crew member’s medical details without authorization.”

Kimber pushed back from her friend’s still berth so she could count the rows and occupants in the room. “There were supposed to be sixteen hundred of us,” she observed. “Computer, how many were lost when the meteor hit?”

“I should clarify first,” the computer with Malone’s daughter’s voice said, “the meteor did not hit the ship directly; we were impacted by debris from the tail, smaller pieces ranging in mass between one and one-hundred-and-fifty kilograms. They were traveling at slightly over two-hundred-thousand kilometers per hour...”

“Computer, how many colonists were lost to meteor debris?” Kimber interrupted.

“One hundred and ninety-one,” the computer said.

“I’m only seeing a thousand here. What happened to the other four hundred?”

“There are one thousand and one colonists in cryosleep on this module. However, as an operations AI, I am unable to divulge personnel-related outcomes without authorization from said personnel or the Captain,” the computer replied.

“Computer,” Kimber interrupted again, “I understand you can’t discuss personnel-related outcomes, but can you at least tell me where said personnel are?”

“Yes,” said the computer. “The remaining four hundred and seven colonists are in module five.”

#

She’d flown past the rest of her friends and

colleagues to inspect modules three and four, or what was left of them. There hadn't been much more to see; just the frame remained of module three, and though module four still had much of its hull, it only took a glance to confirm that none of their supplies survived the meteor strike. On the other hand, module five, often referred to as the agricultural module or the farm car, looked unscathed.

Kimber hadn't been party to the mission plans, but she knew what the caboose in a colonial transport was for. On most missions, the ones that aren't cut short by freak meteor strikes, the horticulturists would be thawed midjourney to plant and cultivate seedlings. A few months later, upon arriving in-system, the engineers would be thawed to erect biodomes and spread terraforming spores on the surface. Once that was underway, the rest of the crew would set about offloading the ship. Finally, the horticulturists would follow with the starter farm they'd grown in orbit. If all went according to design, the first harvest would be underway before the initial food stores ran out. The method saved far more colonists' lives than they would by just dropping another kiloton of dried beans and hoping for the best.

So when Kimber removed her helmet and stepped out of the module five airlock, she was expecting to find a well-lit, heavily oxygenated biosphere. Not a dry field of dirt with a bunch of gravestones on it. They were rough-hewn from rock, probably some species of space rock like the meteoric shotgun blast that'd punched through modules three and four.

At first glance, they looked like stone polyps. As she got closer, they almost looked like naturally-occurring outcroppings, except for the fact that they were arranged in a perfect grid. And had names and an epitaph carved into

them.

"*Gone but not recycled?*" she wondered aloud.

"I'm afraid I do not understand the question," the computer said.

"Are these the remaining four hundred and seven colonists?"

"What remains of them, yes."

The helmet and toolkit fell from Kimber's hands. "How did they die?" she asked in a whisper.

"Unfortunately, I am unable to divulge personnel-related outcomes without authorization from the Captain."

"But these were people like me. Like family to me." She walked across a row of headstones, reading the names aloud. "Mira Vazquez. Jiemba Mille. Soleil Solange." Her voice took on a shade of anger when she read one name in particular: "Rachel Sabrosky?"

"I'm afraid I do not understand the question," the computer said.

Kimber dragged her boot over the loosely-packed dirt around Rachel's headstone. Then she did the same with the next headstone over. Both patches of soil were dry, but the second one looked and felt like it had had more time to settle. "Computer, I understand you can't divulge outcomes, but can you at least tell me whether they had the same level access as me?"

"I can confirm that they all had the same crew-level access that you currently have."

"He plays with his food," she whispered to herself.

"I did not hear that." The computer's childish voice seemed to take on a petulant tone.

Kimber ran over to her toolkit, grabbed a screwdriver, and ran back to Rachel's grave. She got on her knees and stabbed the dirt over and over again. Then she dug her fingers into the soil and started scooping and pulling out

clumps.

"May I ask what you are doing?"

"How deep do I have to dig?" Kimber replied.

"May I ask why you are digging?"

"I need to know how she died."

It actually took the computer a moment to respond. Right when Kimber's fingertips touched fabric, it said, "You will need to dig to a depth of approximately thirty centimeters."

Kimber was already brushing away dirt to reveal a bit of blue fabric with an embroidered patch over the left breast pocket. She dug in further toward the headstone, scooping more dirt out of the shallow grave to reveal a face. She carefully brushed soil away from the eyes and mouth.

She recognized that face, even though it looked radically different from when Kimber had last laid eyes on her. It reminded her of the faces of the colonists still in cryosleep in that it looked like it had more lines and wrinkles and skin than someone their age should have. As colonists, they'd all been exsanguinated during the cryosleep interment process, a necessary step to prevent ice crystals from rupturing capillaries. The still berths were designed to store and reinject their blood back into their bodies during the resuscitation process.

"She was my best friend," Kimber whispered while brushing dirt back onto Rachel's face. "I wouldn't have even gotten onto this mission without her recommendation."

"I would offer condolences, but I understand my voice lacks the depth of both age and emotional inflection," the computer said. "Perhaps Captain Malone could be more consoling; would you like me to alert him to your location?"

Kimber looked up with tears in her eyes,

as if remembering suddenly that she was not alone. "No, I would not like that. It's not like he can just come over here anyway." After just a second or two, the look on her face hardened. "Or can he? How many compression suits are on the Nomad?"

"Including the one you are wearing," the computer said, "one."

Kimber brushed the dirt back onto her friend's face, reburying her. "So if I were hurt, he wouldn't be able to come here and help me, right?"

"Not necessarily. The captain is remarkably resourceful."

"Would I be able to? Move between modules without a compression suit, I mean."

"No," the computer said. "Would you like me to alert Captain Malone?"

Kimber picked up the helmet and toolkit and headed toward the corridor. "How much oxygen do I have left?"

"Twenty-one percent."

Kimber looked around herself; the computer's voice followed her from the room into the corridor, coming from whichever speaker was closest to her as she walked. It felt like she was being followed by an omniscient being with a lisp. Or the ghost of a child who died while they were still getting used to their adult teeth.

After a couple hundred meters, she broke into a jog. "Computer, alert me when my oxygen level reaches five percent."

"Given your average rate of oxygen consumption thus far, it is unlikely that you will need this alert. Or are you not returning directly to module one?"

"Computer," she replied as she picked up speed, "open module five inner gate."

#

The computer informed her that her oxygen

level was at five percent when she was already almost back inside the command module. She smiled to herself, pleased that she hadn't run out of air despite her little detour.

"Computer, cycle module one airlock and resume gravity," she said while grabbing onto a mooring clamp. She touched down at an awkward angle, with her right knee on her right hand, so that she almost toppled over when gravity resumed.

"Kimber, are you alright?" the computer asked.

She stood and removed her helmet. "Computer, what is the location of the captain?"

"Captain Malone is in his quarters."

She stowed the toolkit, but grabbed a long-handled screwdriver before closing the cabinet. She started to unzip the compression suit, but she smelled something and quickly zipped it back up. "OK, I'm gonna need to do something about that," she mumbled to herself.

"If you are concerned about dermatitis, it might help to know that Captain Malone has extensive medical training," the computer offered.

"Computer, open module one inner gate."

Kimber marched toward the door as it opened and peeked around the corner. Satisfied that the corridor was clear, she bolted out into the hallway, down the stairs, and into one of the empty dorm rooms. "Computer, I'd like to rinse off," she announced as she tossed the screwdriver on the bed and hurriedly peeled off the smelly compression suit. A door on one side of the room opened to reveal a small shower, the ceiling, floor, and walls of which were studded with tiny water nozzles. She chunked the suit into a corner and stepped into the shower cubicle, letting the water run over her.

"One Mississippi, two Mississippi..." she

counted until she reached twenty, then stepped out of the shower, ripped the plastic off the ship-issued jumpsuit, and donned it without bothering to towel off.

She grabbed the screwdriver, opened the door and peeked out into the hallway again. "Is the captain still in his quarters?"

"Yes."

She sprinted into the hallway and down the stairs to the bottom level, where she almost ran into a door at the bottom of the stairwell. It had no handle or button to open it. "Computer, why is this door here?"

"If you are asking why it is different from other interior doors on the ship, doors on observation decks are often sealed to protect against atmospheric decompression," the computer said. "Although it does not access an airlock, it was designed to meet the same safety standards as..."

"Can you open it?" Kimber interrupted to ask.

"Yes." A whooshing sound came from the wall as if some hydraulic valve had been released. The door slid open silently a moment later.

Kimber gasped in pain as she was flooded with a light so bright that, when she closed her eyelids, she could see blood vessels inside her eyelids. She'd thought the local star was overwhelmingly bright when she was wearing a helmet with a tinted visor, but this was so bad she had to turn her head. She breathed hard and tried to give herself time to adjust.

After a few moments, she was able to turn around with her eyes open in a tight squint. She stepped into the room, which was colder than the stairwell, presumably to offset the heat from the star's light. She was able – sort of – to look at the source of the light, a row of rectangular

viewports set into the wall. Except they weren't viewports, they were windows, starting at about her knee level and ending in the wall over her head, about half a meter from the ceiling. "Computer, what are the specs on those windows?"

"They were engineered from a composite of aluminum and carbon with small amounts of..."

"I mean, how thick are they?"

"They are one-point-two-two meters in thickness."

"How thick is the hull?"

"Approximately one-point-eight-two meters thick." Kimber took a few more steps and stumbled, overcome suddenly with vertigo, while the computer blathered on with some high school-level engineering factoid about how the material was technically stronger than the hull and was made convex, not to magnify celestial objects for economically privileged space tourists, but to compensate for the reduction in light caused by the X-ray and gamma-ray filters...

"Kimber? Are you in need of assistance?" the computer suddenly asked.

"I'm..." She tried looking up, only to realize that up was in front of her. She was on her back, on the floor. "I think I'm still getting used to your voice." She rolled to her side and stood up slowly. She had to squint to pick up the screwdriver by her feet, and not because of the bright light in the room, but because she was exhausted.

"I am sorry. I understand that my voice can be disconcerting to some," said the computer.

Kimber took a couple more steps toward the window, and suddenly felt vertigo again. She closed her eyes, pinched the bridge of her nose, breathed in through her nostrils and out through her mouth. "Is this what Malone meant when he said the gravity was uneven

down here?"

"Yes. The spacing of the gravimetric generators in the hull is necessarily uneven on this level due to the spacing of the windows."

"Due to the fact that someone who's probably never even been past the Kuiper belt looked at the blueprints for this ship and decided that the thing their customers would most want when they're a million light years from nowhere would be some windows, so they could see with their own eyes just how vast and expansive nothingness can be."

"I am not sure that is..."

"Computer," Kimber looked around the room until she spotted a screen in the wall next to the stairwell. She walked toward it carefully, feeling the nausea come and go as she crossed the floor. "Can you show me the blueprint for module five?"

"Yes." The screen lit up with a cross section diagram of the ship's caboose. There were two levels from the bow to the midship, and a large engine with a nuclear hazmat symbol taking up most of the stern. Of the two levels toward the front, the topmost one featured icons of farmers admiring what appeared to be icons of sunflowers, while the bottom level was stamped with the word "storage" in block letters. There were no windows in this one.

"Computer, can you show me just the exterior?"

"Certainly." The image was replaced by a simplified drawing of the module from the outside. Large blast cones protruded from the engine toward the rear. Kimber pinched the screen to zoom in and examine those, but gave up and zoomed back out after a few seconds. The bow looked more promising; it sported four stabilizing engines ensconced in the hull, very much like the one Kimber had helped

repair just hours ago on module one.

"How poetic, that the star is on the starboard side," she whispered to herself.

"I did not hear that," the computer said.

"Computer, I want you to open a channel to Malone, but don't tell him where I am."

"I am afraid that, as an operations AI, I am unable to mislead crew as to the whereabouts of other crew members without..."

"Computer," Kimber interrupted, "it's a practical joke. The captain and I got off on the wrong foot, and I want to fix that. This is something we humans do to bond with one another."

"I understand. Captain Malone has been known to engage in acts of humorous deception as well."

"I'm sure he has."

"Very well," the computer said. A chime rang through the speakers, followed by Malone's voice.

"Kimber, what can I do for you?"

"Help!" she shouted frantically.

"Where are you?"

"I'm running out of oxygen!" she cried.

"Hang on!" The speaker cut out for a second, then came back on again. "The computer can't tell me where you are, I need to know where you are."

"I'm on module five!"

"You're... Kimber, module five has full life support..."

"I'm not in it, I'm on it! The stabilizing engine on the starboard side!"

A pause, followed by, "Shit." The speaker cut out again, then came back on again a second later. "Kimber, I'm going to talk you through how to get back inside, OK?"

"I'm at five percent oxygen! It's not enough!"

"You don't need to come back to module one, you just need to..."

"I can't move!" she shouted. "I tried but I almost... I can't let go. I don't wanna die out here!" Her voice cracked convincingly at that last part.

The speaker cut out and came back on again. "Kimber, listen to me. I'm going to come get you, you just need to hang on for a few minutes, OK?"

"I'm going to suffocate!"

"The rule of thumb is, one percent equals one minute of air. And there's a bit of reserve in there, you've got more than five minutes, but I'm going to be incommunicado for at least one of those, so you need to just hang on and trust me, OK?"

"Hurry!"

The speaker cut out and came back on again, this time with the computer's voice. "I am happy to assist you in bonding with the Captain. If I may ask, why did you elect to stage this joke from the observation deck?"

Kimber flipped the screwdriver over in her hand like a knife fighter, from a forward grip to a reverse grip and back again. "Wanted to work on my tan."

"If you are concerned about the effects of starlight deprivation on your mental health status, I recommend printing a vitamin-D supplement instead."

"Well, when you say it like that." Kimber tapped the diagram on the screen. "But later. Right now, can you show me where Malone is?"

"Unfortunately, I am not authorized to divulge his location at this time."

"What? Why?"

"The Captain also enjoys bonding exercises based on deception."

Kimber spun around suddenly, screwdriver

in hand, ready to stab the first person she saw. Which of course was Captain Malone, who stood conveniently within stabbing distance in the compression suit. But she wasn't fast enough; he caught her wrist.

She tried to pull her hand back, but his grip on her wrist was like hardened cement. A sound came from her throat she'd never heard before, a vocal amalgam of a battle cry and dying breath.

"Just let me help you before I die!" he yelled loud enough for her to hear over her own inarticulate screaming.

"Ow!" she suddenly clamped her free hand over her captive elbow. Her arms and shoulders relaxed, almost going completely limp. She stopped struggling. Malone loosened his grip on her wrist.

She yanked her hand free and swung the screwdriver again, this time aiming for his helmet – the visor protecting his eyes from starlight – but he rolled back on his heels and dodged that blow almost languidly. She went for a backhanded return swipe, which he parried with the back of his wrist. Every time she swung the screwdriver, he dodged or deflected the blow while stepping back, forcing her to take a step forward.

She lunged in deep, trying to close the distance with a blow to his groin. This time, instead of stepping back, he caught her wrist and gave it a tiny tug, just enough to break her balance. He rotated her wrist as she stumbled, effectively leading her into a turn like a ballroom dancer and wrapping her own arm around her while drawing her into a hug. She might as well have been wearing a straight jacket. "The ship won't recognize a change in command authorization if it's issued under duress," he explained.

"Oh, that makes... total sense," Kimber

panted, nearly but not quite out of breath.

"Ow," she added, relaxing in his grip.

"Whenever you're ready," Malone sighed. He released her while stepping back far enough to dodge her next blow. "I see you've never met a Vampire before," he remarked.

She gulped down a couple lungfulls of air, then renewed her attack, swinging and stabbing and advancing while he parried and yielded. When they reached a corner of the room, he pivoted and continued stepping back while she followed. After about a minute, when she was finally completely winded, she went for an overhead blow but lost her grip on the screwdriver. It thunked into the floor, sticking point-first into the space between them with the handle up.

Gasping, she fell to her knees. Her whole body shook, completely spent of energy. The last bit of tension in her shoulders and arms fled. She lifted her neck and leaned back.

Malone watched her impassively, his face hidden behind the mirrored visor of the space-suit. After a few seconds, when her breathing started to normalize, he reached down, yanked the screwdriver out of the floor, and offered it to her handle-first.

"You like playing with your food?" she asked.

"I'm just letting you wear yourself out."

"Do people taste better when they're tired?"

"No, but they do tend to listen better."

Kimber reached up slowly, gently accepting the proffered screwdriver. She tried turning it over in her hand but it fell through her fingers to the floor. She reached down as if to pick it up, but brushed it aside instead. She lifted her head and leaned back, offering her throat. "Make it fast," she whispered.

"I made a vow not to take another life be-

fore your great, great grandparents were born,” he replied while sitting down cross-legged in front of her. “Do you have any idea how awful it would feel to break that vow now?”

She stared at him, uncomprehending. “Why me?”

“Rachel said you had an engineering background and were good with...”

“Rachel Sabrosky?”

“There were eleven Charlottes on the manifest, nine Evas, eight Ellies, seven Sophias, six Aishas, five Emilies, four Olivias, four Yumis, three Camillas, three Meis, two Caihongs, two Binhs, two Svetlanas, two Irinas, two Lumis, two Arbans, and two Nyalas, but only one Rachel.”

“Are you reciting the manifest or the menu?”

Malone sighed. “And only one Kimber. Rachel warned me about your wit.”

“You’re lying.”

“You can read the roster yourself.”

“I mean about Rachel. You must have twisted something she said, she knows I hate Vampires.” Kimber looked down, suddenly saddened. “Knew.” She shifted from a kneeling position so that she could sit cross-legged, mirroring his posture. “Did you sleep with her?”

“She was gay.”

“How do you know?”

“You live with someone for forty years, that sort of thing tends to come up.”

Kimber shook her head. “Or you could have read it in her personnel file. Tell me something only a real friend of Rachel would know.”

Malone held perfectly still for a moment. She couldn’t see his face, but when he spoke, his voice cracked. “She was really fond of nonsequiturs, like you’d be in the middle of a conversation and suddenly she’d spit out the most bizarre statement. Mostly aphorisms that made no

sense, but if you asked what she meant, she’d act like she never heard the question. Took me years to figure out some of it.”

Kimber slumped to the side, then tried to hide this sign of her exhaustion by casually leaning on her arm. “Like what?”

“Like, ‘It ain’t a costume, it’s my wardrobe.’ She said that the first time I saw her drinking scotch. It was her way of saying she’d always liked whiskey; she wasn’t just trying it.” Malone’s eyes lit up. “Another one was, ‘Icarus would appreciate the irony,’ shorthand for her belief that the universe might be cold, but it was too cruel to be uncaring. Oh, and then there was, ‘My ass is on fire, where’s my fan?’ I never figured out what that one was supposed to mean.”

“Her vibrator.”

“Excuse me?”

“She had this portable fan that always seemed to need new batteries. One time, her vibrator fell out of her sleep kit. She said, ‘Whoops, dropped my fan,’ and it became a running joke.”

“Oh. That was not what I expected.”

“Are you surprised that women masturbate?”

“No, I’m surprised that you guys used disposable batteries.” He bowed his head, his shoulders shaking as he chuckled. “That was the hardest thing for me to learn, that when you really want to know someone, forty years isn’t enough.”

“Well, the point was just to familiarize ourselves with the field kit. The batteries we take to the surface have seeds and fertilizer in them. Had, I mean...” Kimber couldn’t see his face through the mask, but she noticed that his shoulders were shaking ever so slightly. What she mistook for laughter was something else.

“Are you crying?”

Malone cleared his throat and looked up at the ceiling. “Computer, give Kimber Wenman full command-level access and authorization.”

“It is done,” the computer replied in its comically cute voice.

“So here’s the thing,” Malone continued, “to kill a Vampire, you have to separate the head from the heart.”

“Wait, no, I’m not...” Kimber cut him off.

But Malone continued talking over her. “The other ways you know, or think you know, aren’t permanent. Like you can float me out the airlock, but if someone finds me and warms me up, I’ll just wake up again.”

“Malone,” Kimber tried again to interject.

But Malone wasn’t having it. “All I ask is that we do it upstairs, I don’t want to die in starlight. And let me strip down first, you don’t want to damage this compression suit. I wasn’t lying when I said it was your last one.”

“Don’t say, ‘my last one,’ it’s not mine.” Kimber’s arm gave out from under her. She laid down on her back and closed her eyes. “The computer’s voice, is that really...”

“She was so much more than just a daughter. I thought I was so selfless and noble for parenting her, but it turns out I needed her more than she needed me. Anyway, it’s just a voiceprint now, I kept it to remind me of who I was, and who I resolved to be. So that’s the only other thing I’ll ask of you, wait till I’m gone before you swap it out.”

A soft snore rumbled out of her throat in response. She was completely passed out. Malone sighed. “Computer, do we know what Kimber’s favorite dish is?” he asked as he stood.

“According to her personnel file, her favorite dish is *chǎo qīngdòu*, a Taiwanese dish consisting of garlic and green beans.”

“What’s her second favorite dish?”

“Other culinary items mentioned in her personnel file include garlic confit, honey garlic meatballs, garlic bread, crispy garlic wings, garlic mashed potatoes, onion garlic soup, garlic fish curry, and garlic achaar on roti.”

“Rachel was right,” he sighed as he bent down and picked Kimber up. “Icarus would have laughed his ass off.”

#

When Kimber came to, she was reclining in a large chair in a small room, the walls of which were plastered with monitors and buttons and pictures of a small, blond Asian child. And a roaring sound that she realized was her stomach growling. And the smell of her mother’s cooking.

She sat up with a start. Next to her chair on a small table was a glass of water and what looked and smelled like her favorite dish. Next to that was the compression suit, neatly folded with the helmet perched on top. On the other side of that dish stood Malone, the Vampire, looking tragically handsome in a blue, ship-issue jumpsuit as he stifled a yawn. “This is so much better than a nutrient bladder,” she remarked. “Or the stuff they fed us in mission training. I didn’t think I’d ever taste this dish again.”

Malone shrugged. “If it makes you feel any better, those beans were printed from processed biowaste.”

A fork and a pair of chopsticks lay next to the plate. She reached for the chopsticks first, but noticed her hands were shaking, so she picked up the fork instead, carefully speared one of the green beans, and put it in her mouth. “It’s good shit,” she moaned with pleasure. “My mom used to call these squeaky beans, she said they make you squeak when you chew. They also make you squeak when you walk.”

Malone laughed. He stole a glance at one of the pictures of the child on the wall. "My daughter would have liked you. She loved fart jokes."

Kimber looked at the picture and said, "I see the resemblance." Before Malone could reply, she continued, "How old was she when you adopted her? Sorry if I'm assuming too much, but she doesn't look hapa."

"She was sixteen when she adopted me." Kimber looked at the picture again, perplexed, so he continued. "She died after her two hundred and tenth birthday. Best two centuries of my life."

"Oh. Did you turn her?"

Malone looked at the picture. "She was ten when she was turned. I met her six years later. Fearless, and one of the smartest people I ever knew, but she never got to grow up, never went through puberty, never experienced adolescence or adulthood. The Vampires who did that to her died before I met her." He looked back at Kimber. "No, I never turned anyone."

Kimber nodded and went back to eating, satisfied with the answer. She couldn't take her eyes off him, even as she shoveled beans into her mouth. About halfway through her dish, he stifled another yawn. Except she realized it wasn't a yawn, he was hiding the fact that he was nauseated. "Sorry, I didn't mean to stink up your bridge."

"Don't worry, I cleaned out the urine," he said with a nod toward the compression suit. When Kimber blushed, he hurriedly continued, "I'm kidding. But seriously, don't worry about the garlic. It's your bridge now."

She shook her head. "It's a lovely gift, but I still have so many questions. Like, how many were there before me? How many colonists did you revive?"

"Four hundred and seven. But you already knew that."

"And they all just lived out their lives? Alone with you, on this disabled ship in the middle of nowhere?"

"The question you really want to ask is, why have I been reviving them one-by-one?" Kimber nodded, so he continued, "The short answer is, we only have enough biowaste to feed two people."

Kimber scowled. "If you recycled them rather than bury them in the garden like household pets..."

"I vowed never to eat another person, or even a product made from a person."

"Wow. I'd heard about Vampires like you." She mulled it over for a moment. "Like vegans, but Vampires. I thought it was just government propaganda."

"Blood isn't the only thing we can drink."

"You sound like you've had this conversation before."

"Four hundred and seven times."

"So why even revive us in the first place?"

He paused to collect his thoughts, then said, "After the meteor storm, I tried to get the reactor back online so I could get you guys home. I spent two hundred years working alone on that while having imaginary conversations with my daughter. One day, she stopped talking back. I'd forgotten what her voice sounded like. So..."

"So you dug up an old recording and reprogrammed the computer with it," Kimber nodded. "That doesn't sound so creepy now."

"Except all I could do was make it sound like her, it didn't have her personality, or anyone's, for that matter. And I was getting nowhere on the reactor problem, so I thawed Zawi. But we worked on it together for just six years,

because it turns out she had leukemia. Before she passed, she recommended I try again with Yumi Reyes. But after forty-two years, Yumi and I didn't get anywhere either, so she recommended Katya Kovac, and four hundred and five generations later, Rachel recommended you."

"What are you going to do when you run out of colonists?"

"I won't," he said with enough vehemence to make Kimber sink back in her seat. "Sorry," he continued, "I'm just, I've been trying to turn the mission over to the colonists since Katya, but no one wants to recycle me. Until you, you're the first person to even try."

Kimber sighed, set down her squeaky beans. "I'm not going to kill you. How would I? Are you going to hold still while I stab you in the face with a screwdriver?"

"In the cabinet next to the toolkit in the airlock is a working plasma saw."

She looked around the bridge, at the cleaned and folded compression suit, the plate of garlic beans, the pictures of his daughter on the wall. The seat she was sitting in. The handsome Vampire who'd saved her life. "Do you want to know why I hated Vampires?"

"No."

Kimber flinched. "Why not?"

"Because when I get to know you, I'll get close to you. And then you'll die and I won't."

"You say that like it's the worst thing in the world."

He looked at her calmly, but there was a wrinkle in his voice as he explained, "Spend three or four decades with someone. When they die, you'll feel like they took a piece of you with them. Not a piece with nerves, though, this wound is deeper. It's like having a hole punched through the part of you that cares enough to keep trying. And in case you're wondering...

No. It does not heal."

"Wow. I mean, sorry." She looked at the pictures of the little girl on the wall again. "Did you have this same conversation with Zawi?"

He nodded. "And everyone ever since. If you want to know where it goes from here, you're going to realize that I tried sticking you with a really unpleasant dilemma. You're going to resent that, and I'm going to wait and let you bring it up when you're ready instead of trying to force another unpleasant conversation, or else you'll say something in anger and spend the rest of your life feeling bad about that. So, I'm going to wait and let you vent, then I'm going to apologize. And I'm going to mean it."

Kimber processed that for a moment. "Let's try another tack." She sat up in her chair. "Why don't you tell me about your daughter?"

"I don't even know where to begin."

"Maybe you could start with her name?" Kimber suggested.

"OK," Malone nodded. He had a smile on his face now – a sad, wistful smile, but it was an improvement. "Her name was Bai."

Suddenly, the floor beneath them shifted a couple millimeters to one side. Kimber's eyes went wide. "That's what you were doing with the power coupling? You rigged the separation charge to trigger on a voice command?" Malone asked. He reached over her and laid his hand on the console to bring up the control panel. He pressed a button to activate one of the monitors, and was rewarded with the moving image of module five slowly drifting away into the darkness.

"You were watching..." Kimber stuttered. "Of course you were, a ship without external imaging is..."

"...hard to dock," he finished the sentence for her as he grabbed the compression suit and

helmet and took off down the hallway.

Kimber got up to run after him, but he was running impossibly fast. “Malone, wait!” she shouted as she slowed down, already winded after just a few meters. “It’s too dangerous!”

“They deserve better!” he shouted back as he came to a sudden stop right outside the airlock. He started stripping down while saying, “I need you on the console.”

She nodded, but her eyes remained on him as he stepped into the compression suit. “Do you want me to try and maneuver us closer?” she offered.

“The ship’s safety protocols won’t let it approach an unsecured object of that size. I have to bring it back before it gets too far.” He held the helmet over his head and added, “There isn’t much for you to do, but I wouldn’t mind some company.” He nodded toward the bridge behind her, then he donned the helmet and entered the airlock.

#

Kimber raced back to the bridge, arriving just in time to hear Malone instruct the computer to override its usual safety prompts. The console was still lit up, as was one of the monitors above it, with module five taking up less and less of the screen as it slowly drifted away.

“Computer, show me Captain Malone,” she said. The image of module five was replaced by Malone in the airlock just in time to watch him rip a winch out of one of the cabinets. Her eyes went wide; it was the same tether line she’d used on her two spacewalks, two kilometers of ultrafine rope attached to a spool that was strong enough to hold hundreds of tons of cargo.

“Computer, cancel gravity in module one airlock and open module one outer gate,” Malone said. He grabbed a mooring clamp with

one hand while holding the spool of tether line in the other just as his feet began to float.

After the air in the room finished evacuating, he pushed off toward the edge of the airlock. From Kimber’s perspective, it looked like he was standing at the edge of a bottomless void. “Malone?” she said. “I’m really sorry.”

“It’s not gone yet,” he replied. The monitor feed switched to another camera as he perched on the lip of the airlock and turned his head to gaze down the length of the ship.

“I mean, I’m sorry I put you through this,” she explained as he tucked the spool under one arm and launched himself down the length of the ship.

He was silent until he grabbed onto a handhold near the end of the module. “What you pulled off was pretty impressive,” he replied.

“You must be angry,” she said as he launched himself toward module two, which was jutting out and away from module one at a slight angle.

He grabbed onto another handhold and positioned himself for another jump. “Anger’s not my thing,” he said as he leapt. The monitor in front of Kimber switched camera feeds to track him as he sailed down the length of the module. He reached the end, grabbed onto another handhold, and said, “I don’t even remember what it feels like, to be honest.”

“How can you forget a feeling?” Kimber asked.

“I’ve had time to figure a few things out.” He gauged and took his next leap. Once he latched onto module three, he said, “I remember realizing, when I got to college, that I could only remember the name of one of my middle school teachers. Two hundred years later, I still remembered that same name. The one I thought was the worst teacher.”

He took another leap and landed on module four before continuing. "Imagine hating your seventh-grade algebra teacher for two hundred years. His own descendants didn't even know who he was, but I was still upset about the time he told the entire class that I was overweight because I was too weak to turn down chocolate."

"That's like a double insult," Kimber remarked.

"Right? At least, that's how I rationalized my anger. But then I met a Vampire who tried to kill my daughter because she looked like someone who mocked him in the bronze age." He jumped again, latching onto a handhold next to the module four airlock before continuing. "I realized it wasn't anger I'd been rationalizing, it was misery. Our capacity for hatred is deeper than our lives are long."

"My dad left my mom for a Vampire," Kimber blurted out. "I mean, he left to become one, apparently he always wanted to, but my mom refused to go with him, so he wound up leaving her for the woman who turned him. I'm sorry, I know you didn't want to hear that."

"I just wasn't ready," he replied. He held onto the ship with one hand and, with the other, held the spool in front of him and let go, so that it floated in the absence of gravity. "I didn't think I'd ever be ready, after Rachel died. But I always think that." He took the end of the tether and whipped his arm around the spool in circles like he was throwing a lasso. "Did you ever see your dad again?"

"No, but I was two years old when it happened. I have no memory of him." She sat back in her seat and watched on the monitor as the spool released a length of rope that floated in big, wide loops around him. "I spent half my life hating someone I didn't even know."

Malone hooked a boot under a handhold, took both ends of the rope, tied one end to the spool, and said, "Computer, open module four outer gate." As soon as the airlock door started to open, he tossed the spool inside and said, "Computer, close module four outer gate." The gate had only opened about a meter before it closed again, clamping down on and anchoring the tether line.

"Now comes the dangerous part," he said. Kimber sat forward in the seat, her eyes fixed on the monitor as Malone leapt into the void. Module five had taken up half the screen a minute ago; now it looked to be about the size of a soda can. Malone, smaller and moving much faster, shrank from view after about twenty long and painful seconds.

#

"Malone, can you see me?" came Kimber's voice.

He looked down past his feet. The tether in his hand seemed to disappear long before it reached the ship, which was slowly receding in the distance. "I haven't been this far from the Nomad since before the mission," he said. "It's beautiful."

"Well, I can still see module five, but you're completely out of sight," she said.

He looked ahead at his target, which loomed larger, filling his field of vision and blotting out half the stars. He brought his knees up to his chest, leaned back, and extended his legs so that his toes pointed at the hull. A moment later, he landed on his feet like a parachutist, rolling to the side and grabbing onto a handhold so he didn't just bounce off it. "Touch-down!" he announced.

The tether was growing taut behind him; he only had a few seconds to pull this off. "I'm going to try a trucker's hitch," he said. He looped

the end of the rope through the handhold a couple times and back through the loop he created, repeating the process a couple more times until he ran out of rope.

“That’s all I can do; heading back to module four.” He planted his boot on the handhold and gauged his next jump, but the line looked completely straight now. “Change of plans.” He snaked an arm and leg through the handhold, pressing the inside of his elbow and the back of his knee against the metal bar.

He held on as tightly as he could as the line suddenly and violently pulled the module in a new direction. He’d anchored the tether to the side of the ship and not the front part facing the Nomad, so instead of arresting the module’s movement, it made it bounce like a yo-yo, spinning on its axis as it mindlessly began to wrap the tether line around itself. The metal beneath him vibrated with the strain, but the line seemed to be holding until...

It snapped. About twenty meters of it whipped past him, missing his feet as it lashed the hull. The other nineteen hundred and eighty meters of rope bounced back toward the Nomad.

“Malone, what’s happening?” Kimber shouted. “Module five is spinning!”

“I’m OK, but the line...”

“The computer says you’re drifting away from the LaGrange point, and I can’t see...”

“I’m alright!” he said forcefully to get her attention. “The line got wrapped around the module, too much stress.” He clung to his handhold while the module spun like a top, causing the Nomad to flash in and out of sight every few seconds.

“Module five is done,” he said. “But I’m on the side facing into the spin. The centrifugal force is pushing me against the hull.”

“That doesn’t sound good,” came Kimber’s voice in his helmet, which brought a smile to his lips.

“It’s not great,” he conceded. “But it makes it easier to hold on.” He didn’t mention that, if he were to let go of his grip, he’d slide down the length of the hull and get slung into space.

Malone lay on his stomach with both hands gripping the handhold, pointed his toes at the next bar, and extended his arms before letting go and sliding a couple meters down the hull. He managed to hook his foot into the handhold and draw the rest of his body toward it. He repeated this twice more until he reached the edge of the hull. But he’d been focusing so hard on getting there that he hadn’t been paying attention to the rate at which the module was drifting away from the Nomad.

“I’m in position,” he said. He had both hands on the handhold to steady himself, and brought both feet under him in a squat. He finally looked at the Nomad, but he could only catch a brief glimpse as it quickly swung in and out of view. “This will be my first spacewalk from a spinning platform,” he said.

He went through another spin, then kicked upward, using the centrifugal momentum from the spinning module as much as his own leg strength to launch himself home. If his guesstimation was correct, he’d touch down on module four after about a minute of freefall.

He was about to ask Kimber for some in-flight entertainment when he looked up at the Nomad and realized he was going to miss it. He’d get within a hundred meters, but then he’d just drift past it toward the gas giant a few million kilometers in the distance. And Kimber couldn’t save him because he was wearing their last compression suit.

“Kimber?” he called out. “I never thought

I'd say this, but I'm going to miss the ship. And I mean that both literally and emotionally."

"Malone!" she replied, audibly relieved to hear his voice. "Where are you?"

"I didn't account for drift. Please listen to me very closely, because we don't have much time."

"Wait, what do you mean, you didn't account for..."

"Just listen," he cut her off mid-question. "I lied when I said there was enough biowaste to feed two people. It's more like one and a half people, or a mortal and a Vampire. Our metabolism is more efficient."

"Malone, you're scaring me," she said, panicked.

"You know how you guys packed eight hundred gallons of sperm?"

"Can we please not talk about sperm right now? That was for farming."

"It wasn't all just for animal husbandry. You can't build a colony with sixteen hundred women and no human sperm. So, one of the ideas Zawi and I came up with..."

"How close are you going to get when you pass by?"

"Waving distance. Anyway, hear me out. There are four moons orbiting the gas giant. Most of the supplies that got lost in the meteor storm ended up on one of them. It's hard to say for sure how much of it survived atmospheric entry, but the moon's color changed in the last few thousand years, so at least the terraforming spores..."

"Wait," she said, "I could tie something to a tether and throw it..."

"You'd have to close your eyes or you'd go blind by the time the outer gate finished opening. I'm sorry, but please let me say this, we only have a few minutes..."

"Wait, Malone," she said. "When my oxygen valve broke, you were able to bring me back without a compression suit. What if I put a bag over my head? You could catch me and reel us back in together."

"You were twenty meters out when I did it, and I survived because I'm a Vampire. Anyway, this is embarrassing, but it has to do with one of the plans that Zawi and I came up with. In the last crew cabin on level two, there's a freezer..."

"I'M NOT GONNA LET YOU DIE!" she screamed.

He waited in case she had more to say, but she seemed to be waiting too, so he continued. "I'm sorry, but there's no way you can save me without killing yourself. So, listen, Zawi and I came up with a plan. You don't have a lot of resources, but I've been dismantling the still berths, and I just needed three or four more. Yumi Reyes designed a shuttle, just ask the computer..."

"Can I ask you something?" she interrupted, suddenly calm.

"We don't have time."

"That's why I need to ask you now. It's a favor."

"Well, I can listen, if that's the favor. There's not much else I can do."

"Promise you'll recycle me."

"Of the billions and trillions of things I can't do for you right now, that's one of them."

"I'm not asking you to drink Kimber-flavored milkshakes. I'm not asking for anything else, what you do after is up to you. But this is what I want. For both of us."

He sighed. "I wish I'd had more time with you. It's moot now, but please believe me when I say that, if I could recycle you, I would."

It was her turn to sigh. "I suppose that will do."

“Great, is it my turn now?” He waited a moment, but she didn’t reply. “I’m sorry if I sound frustrated, but we’re almost at waving distance. A couple more kilometers, and I’ll be out of communication range.” Still nothing. “Please, Kimber, we don’t have much time.” Silence.

“Computer, what is the location of Kimber Wenman?” he asked.

“Unfortunately, I am not authorized to reveal her location at this time,” the machine with his daughter’s voice replied.

He turned to face the airlock. Just as he was about to reach the perpendicular distance, the point in his path that came closest to the ship, the airlock door opened. A moment later, Kimber came sailing out with a tether line tied to her ankle and her arms stretched forward like she was sailing into an embrace.

“NO!” He screamed. “I lived my life! I’ve lived so many lives! Zawi, and Yumi, and Katya, and Apinya, and...” he went down the roster, but didn’t even make it through the first fifty names before Kimber reached him.

He caught her arms and wrapped them around himself, exhaled, and used his ankle to snag and pull the tether line up to his left hand while ripping the helmet off his head with his right. He put it over her head without looking at her empty eye sockets, and gave the rope a mighty tug.

He hugged her tight, over and over again, trying to perform chest compressions while his eyes ruptured. It was all he could do; his tear ducts were gone, and there was no air left in his lungs to cry.

When he reached the airlock, the outer gate closed behind him, gravity was restored, and air started to flow. He managed to get Kimber into her still berth despite being completely blind, then he stumbled out into the corridor

and found his way to the food printer where he chugged a nutrient shake.

He found his way back to Kimber just as his eyesight returned. But all there was to see on the biometric readout was a flat line.

After a couple hours, or maybe it was a couple days, he emerged from the fog to find himself sitting with his back against her coffin. “I never did show you where the recyc was,” he said. He lifted her out of the box and carried her in his arms down the corridor toward the bridge, where he laid her gently in the captain’s chair. “Just hang out here for a minute, there’s a couple things I need to do first.”

He went to the food printer in the corridor, stood in front of the monitor, and said, “Computer, begin recording.” A red light turned on above the monitor. A mirror image of himself filled the screen. He uttered all the last words that he’d tried to share with Kimber before she died. When he was done, he said, “Computer, end recording.”

Next, he went back to the airlock and retrieved the tether line that Kimber had used. He took a short spacewalk to module two, where he selected three still berths. He tied them together and hauled them back to module one, where he set them up next to Kimber’s empty coffin. He went back to the food printer, ordered up three fresh nutrient bladders, and returned to the airlock, where he began decanting the three new colonists. He stripped out of the compression suit, folded it neatly, and laid it on the floor before them.

Finally, he returned to the bridge, picked Kimber up, and gently carried her down the corridor to the recyc. “The first thing they did in pilot school was ask if we knew why the recyclers were so large,” he told her. The inner door to the airlock was open, he could hear coughing in

the distance, but he didn't let that distract him. "I'd already lived longer and seen more death than everyone else in that class combined, so I don't know why it bothered me so much."

He placed her inside, smoothed the hair from her eye sockets, arranged her arms by her sides, and straightened her legs. "In hindsight, I wasn't bothered when they said it, I was bothered when I saw it, because it was large enough to fit two people. Two bodies. Like a pauper's grave. It was dehumanizing."

He climbed in with her, laying on top because the chamber was only as tall as it was deep. "It bothered me ever since, for thousands of years, every time I put an empty nutrient bladder or dirty dish in one of these boxes. It took knowing you for me to finally get over that."

He snaked an arm out of the recyc toward the panel. His finger hovered over the start button. "There's something I said to everyone before you, something you never got to hear. We barely had a day together. But I never meant it as much as I do now."

He pressed the button and withdrew his hand. As the door closed, he said, "I'm sorry it ended like this. But I'm glad I got to know you."



END TRANSMISSION