

Corner Bar Magazine

Volume 11 Number 4

Page 1 – THE GREAT AXE AOEIS by C. Inanen. The author writes, “Author lives in the Midwest USA. His work has been most recently published in *Antimatter Dreams*. It will also be featured in the March 2026 issue of *Close to the Bone*, April 2026 issue of *Yellow Mama* magazine, May 2026 issue of *Blue Lake Review* and the June 2026 issue of *Down in the Dirt* magazine. He is a contributor to *The Yard: Crime Blog* and the British *The Short Humour Site*.”

Page 7 – THE BACK-UP MAN by Erin Elizabeth Williams. Erin Elizabeth Williams (she/her) has two degrees in religion that she doesn’t use, a dead cat named Kurt Vonnekat, and a house from 1890 that leaks when it rains. She co-wrote a book chapter on *The Witcher 3*, and her fiction has appeared in *Little Old Lady*, *JAKE*, and some other cool places. Her only social media is Instagram, and she can be found at [@erinelizabethyo](#) or [erinelizabethwilliams.com](#).

Page 9 – A CONDO ON THE SHORES OF RHONDOR by S. L. Myers. The author writes: my first novel, *Children of Cain*, won first place in the 2023 Writer’s Digest Self-Published E-Book Awards (Fantasy Genre Category). My second novel is out for querying, and I’m working on my third. I also write short stories, but have not had any luck getting them published. For money, I spent two tours in the US Air Force as a Russian linguist, delivered pizzas, made coffee, bartended, and too briefly taught lit and comp to middle schoolers in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan.

Page 12 – TENEBROUS WAKE by J. J. A. Smith. The Author writes, “By day, I plumb the halls of hallowed places where bureaucracy and technology meet to make decisions both trivial and grand with impacts both trivial and grand. That has led me to meet some truly strange people and systems, which I enjoy splattering together with my anxieties to create sci-fi short stories. I have no writing credits to my name (yet!) but publish regular flash fiction on my Substack, the Ergodic Engine.”

Page 22 – THE DEBUGGER ATTACHED TO MY HEART by Jason M. Boyd. Mr. Boyd hails from Oxford, Mississippi. He earned a master’s degree in computer science from the University of Mississippi. His master’s thesis is on the subject of brain-computer interfaces. He married his high school sweetheart and they have twins, a boy and a girl. For the last 18 years, he has been working as a software developer. Stories have always fascinated Jason. He believes they are windows into the souls of people we will never meet and people who cross our paths every day.



“THE GREAT AXE AOEIS”

by C. INANEN

This is the true account of the creation of the great axe Aoeis.

Sevril was a pretty good blacksmith and a very good armorer - artificer. Some people would say he was the best on *Domus*. Let's be realistic about these things, Sevril was the best that had come along in several generations.

Word of such skill gets around. Eventually his reputation came to the attention of the Guild of Witches, Warlocks and Practitioners whose members began pestering him for magical artifacts of various sorts. Having demonstrated his competence and the quality of his work that aspect of his business grew exponentially. Eventually it reached the point where it wasn't at all unusual to have warlocks, witches and practitioners of the magical arts making weekly inquiries about whether he could do this, that or the other thing which he found quite annoying.

Knights preparing to set out on magical quests were the worst of all, always wanting swords or armor with magical qualities. Suits of armor impervious to dragon fire, swords which never broke in battle and such things ranked highly among their demands. Sevril explained to them that he only forged the articles, that it took a magical practitioner to lay the spell or spells necessary to imbue them with those qualities. After a while he did so less patiently. By the time he was in his mid-fifties he was apt to be quite abrupt with them.

“Can't be done,” he would tell them. “Find someone else to waste their time on that,” he would say. “I have absolutely no interest in executing a commission of that nature. Be gone, I'm busy,” and so on were generally his answers to their inquiries.

He was in fact busy hammering some horse shoes to size when Sir Miles and Whelen the White arrived at his shop.

“Yoo-hoo!” Whelen the White called from the doorway. “Is anyone home?”

“No,” Sevril replied. “No one's here. We're closed for the summer. Go away.”

“I think there is someone here,” Sir Miles nudged his companion. Whelen the White staggered off balance. He was both elderly and frail and much shorter than Sir Miles who was a giant of a man, an Adonis who towered head and shoulders above most others. It was unfortunate that his good looks and magnificent physique weren't matched by his intellect. The expression “one brick short of a load” overestimated him.

Sevril took his eyes off of the horseshoe held in his pincers for a moment and looked at the mismatched pair. “I say,” the shorter one offered, “We're looking for Sevril the blacksmith. Have you seen him?”

“Nope,” Sevril told them. “Haven't seen anyone by that name around here in months. Perhaps Vulcanis the blacksmith whose shop is over in East Drewberry would be able to help

you. He does fine quality work at affordable prices.”

“No, Sevril is the only one,” Whelen the White told him. “That’s you, isn’t it?”

Sevril shook his head. “I’m Smith, the apprentice. I’m just minding the shop while Sevril is out, making horseshoes and such.”

“Oh good, then I can tell you what we require and you can pass that on to him.”

Sevril frowned. His ploy had backfired. “I guess you could.”

“Good! Good! Here’s what we need. I’m seeking an axe, a special axe. It must be forged with a combination of magic and mathematics. The edge will be devised with a mathematical formula that works on the principle of division remainders. That way it grows increasingly sharper the narrower the blade gets until it’s invisible to the naked eye and then continues on infinitely.”

“Sounds dangerous,” Sevril told him. Despite that he was intrigued. An axe like that would be a handy tool.

“It will be,” Sir Miles agreed. “Plus you’d never have to sharpen it.” He wasn’t all that keen on sharpening his weapons. It was so boring to do.

Sevril considered that advantage too. The local woodsmen would really value an axe like that. As it was they spent as much time sharpening as they did chopping. “You’d have to make it out of special steel,” Sevril speculated. “None of the steel on *Domus* would do. It would be too fragile if it were that thin. It would break the first time you used it.”

“Didn’t think about that, did you?” Sir Miles accused Whelen the White and nudged him again. Whelen staggered.

“Where would you get such steel?” Whelen asked after he regained his balance.

“Maybe some other planet?” Sevril hazarded.

“A meteorite!” Whelen the White exclaimed. “I know just the place to find one!”

“Make sure you get enough,” Sevril cautioned him.

“Come, Sir Miles, we’re off to Munborovia.” The disparate duo departed, Whelen the White in the lead. Sevril congratulated himself on getting rid of them so easily and returned to making horseshoes. Munborovia was on the other side of the planet, across several oceans and surrounded by hostile lands which were not easily traversed.

Two years later Whelen the White and Sir Miles returned. This time they did so riding in a wagon drawn by four mules. In the wagon bed was a meteorite, painstakingly dug by hand out of the plains of Munborovia.

“Yoo-hoo!” Whelen the White called as they came to a stop in front of the shop. “It is I, Whelen the White, and I’ve come with the steel for the axe of ever increasing sharpness.”

Sevril came to the doorway to see what all the fuss and bother was about. He had been working shirtless at the forge. “These two again,” he thought. He looked the meteorite over as he dried his hands. “In fact you haven’t. That’s iron, fine iron, but only that. It has to be alloyed with carbon to make steel. Unload it over there” He pointed. “And go get me some carbon, the best available.”

“Carbon?” echoed Whelen the White, crestfallen and considerably disappointed.

“Yes,” Sevril told him. “There’s a good lot across the sea in the New Lands in the colony of Secundus. I’m also going to need some nickel, manganese, chromium and vanadium. You can pick those up in the Land Down Under. Hurry, time’s wasting!” He made a shooing gesture

with his hands. That should keep them busy for a few years.

It did. The New Lands required a strenuous and dangerous ocean voyage and were populated by belligerent inhabitants who didn't take kindly to strangers, let alone knights and wizards. The Land Down Under was even worse.

Several years later another wagon arrived at the shop of Sevril. It was drawn by two camels. Driving it was the wizened old man. Seated next to him was a rather battered and disheveled knight.

"I say!" the old wizard announced. "We are back with the rest of the material you requested for the axe of ever increasing sharpness."

"Just barely," the knight added glumly.

Sevril, who had been fastening hoops for barrel staves and who was getting up in years, came to the entrance to his shop. He inspected the material and was actually rather pleased. It all appeared to be of first-rate quality and was in sufficient quantities that he could make a number of ploughshares from it plus a dozen or so shovels in addition to the axe the pair was after. "Good," he praised them. "Of course we're going to need a hotter fire than I can make. You didn't happen to bring a dragon along, did you?"

"A dragon?" Whelen the White repeated in an incredulous tone. Sir Miles looked in the bed of the wagon hopefully and then turned back toward Sevril, shaking his head. There was nary a dragon to be seen back there.

"Yes, nothing beats a good dragon fire for forging magical weapons and tools."

"Err, you don't happen to know where we might acquire one, do you?" Whelen asked him.

Sevril shook his head. "Haven't a clue," he told them. "There must be one out there somewhere." He waved his arms, encompassing the

entire world. "Stack that material neatly before you set out to find one," he instructed, pointing toward where he wanted the load piled.

Sir Miles grumbled a bit while he unloaded the wagon. Whelen the White dozed. The camels contentedly chewed their cud and Sevril returned to his barrel hoops and staves.

It was a year later on a clear and enjoyable autumn day when the wagon came creaking up the hill toward Sevril's shop. Drawing it forward, hitched into the traces was a small dragon which was huffing and puffing with the exertion. On each outward puff a tiny wisp of smoke escaped from its nostrils. Now and then there was a matching discharge from its nether regions. When that happened, the ancient wizard who held the reins would wave one hand in front of his face, dispelling the fumes. Seated next to him was a giant of a man who dozed on the wooden seat. It was Whelen the White and Sir Miles of course. Following the wagon at a wary and respectful distance was a ragged band of children from the town, awed and curious at the sight of a dragon pressed into drayage.

"Yoo-hoo!" Whelen the White called as they came to a halt at the entrance to Sevril's shop. "We're back!"

"Finally," Sir Miles muttered, barely managing to open his eyes sleepily.

In the doorway, Sevril, wearing a leather vest and holding a hammer, studied this extraordinary sight. "So it would seem," he finally said. "And you've brought a dragon, or he has brought you."

"This is Xanolanthisis, dragon-for-hire," Whelen the White indicated.

"THE Xanolanthisis? Destroyer of towns? Flaming pillager of countless countrysides? Feared inhabitant of the Mysterious Smoky Mountains?" Sevril asked incredulously.

“In my younger days,” Xanolanthisis agreed.

“Despoiler of virgins? Captor of a dozen princesses? Fire breathing holder and guardian of the most tremendous horde of treasure known to man?”

“Back in my prime,” Xanolanthisis admitted.

“Well I’ll be,” Sevril said, amazed. “It’s an honor and a privilege to meet you.”

“Why thank you,” Xanolanthisis answered politely. “Those days are long past.” He shuffled his feet. Then he unfurled his wings for a breathtaking moment and ruffled them, which was still a sight to behold. “Might I ask if you would have such a thing as a cup of tea? It’s been a long and dusty road.”

“Unhitch the dragon,” Whelen the White told Sir Miles. “We’ll leave the wagon right here and allow Sevril and the lizard to get to know one another while you and I walk into town and find some lodging. Mind you bring our things.”

Whelen the White, leaning heavily on his staff and Sir Miles, encumbered by their luggage, eventually made their way down the hill toward the town. Sevril and Xanolanthisis shared a cuppa tea and then another, the iron bars Sevril had been shaping forgotten and allowed to cool as they warmed to one another.

“Even though all that is long past it’s nice to be recognized for one’s accomplishments,” Xanolanthisis told Sevril as they talked.

“Oh, of course,” Sevril readily agreed. “One’s life work, so to speak.”

“Precisely, I must say this is a rather nice place that you have here, sort of dim and cave-like, actually. Neat and well organized without being overly fussy.”

“Thank you,” Sevril acknowledged. “Dry and cozy in the wintertime, cool and shaded during the summer. It’s up on a hill, too, which

affords a pleasant view.”

“I’ve always been partial to hills and mountains myself. They allow for some swooping down when the mood strikes.” They chatted quite late into the night.

The next morning, following a breakfast of tea and toast they set about formulating the metal for the sword of ever-increasing sharpness. Sevril made the tea, Xanolanthisis made the toast, as you might expect. A few delicate exhalations on his part were all that was required.

By 10:00 they had ceased referring to the prospective axe as the axe of ever increasing sharpness, which is cumbersome to say in casual conversation and were calling it Aoeis. That’s actually an acronym but has a much more stirring and legendary sound to it.

“Do you really believe that this is going to be something special?” Xanolanthisis asked.

“I do,” Sevril told him. “It has the potential to be extraordinary. The mathematics and the magical concepts are sound. We’re working with first rate material. Providing we take our time and do it right it could turn out to be one-of-a-kind, perhaps even worthy of a feature article in *Metalworker’s Monthly*.”

Sevril was in the process of smelting down the iron ore in the meteorite into iron, with Xanolanthisis’ assistance. “Do you think so?” Xanolanthisis asked him.

“Oh yes, you’d look stunning in the cover illustration,” Sevril complimented him.

“I would, wouldn’t I?” Xanolanthisis mused, striking a particularly fearsome pose. He unfurled and spread his wings to their full extent and curled his neck which greatly added to a ferocious and intimidating appearance, trying this pose and that. The idea tickled his vanity.

Heating and beating the iron to remove impurities and form a workable ingot took the

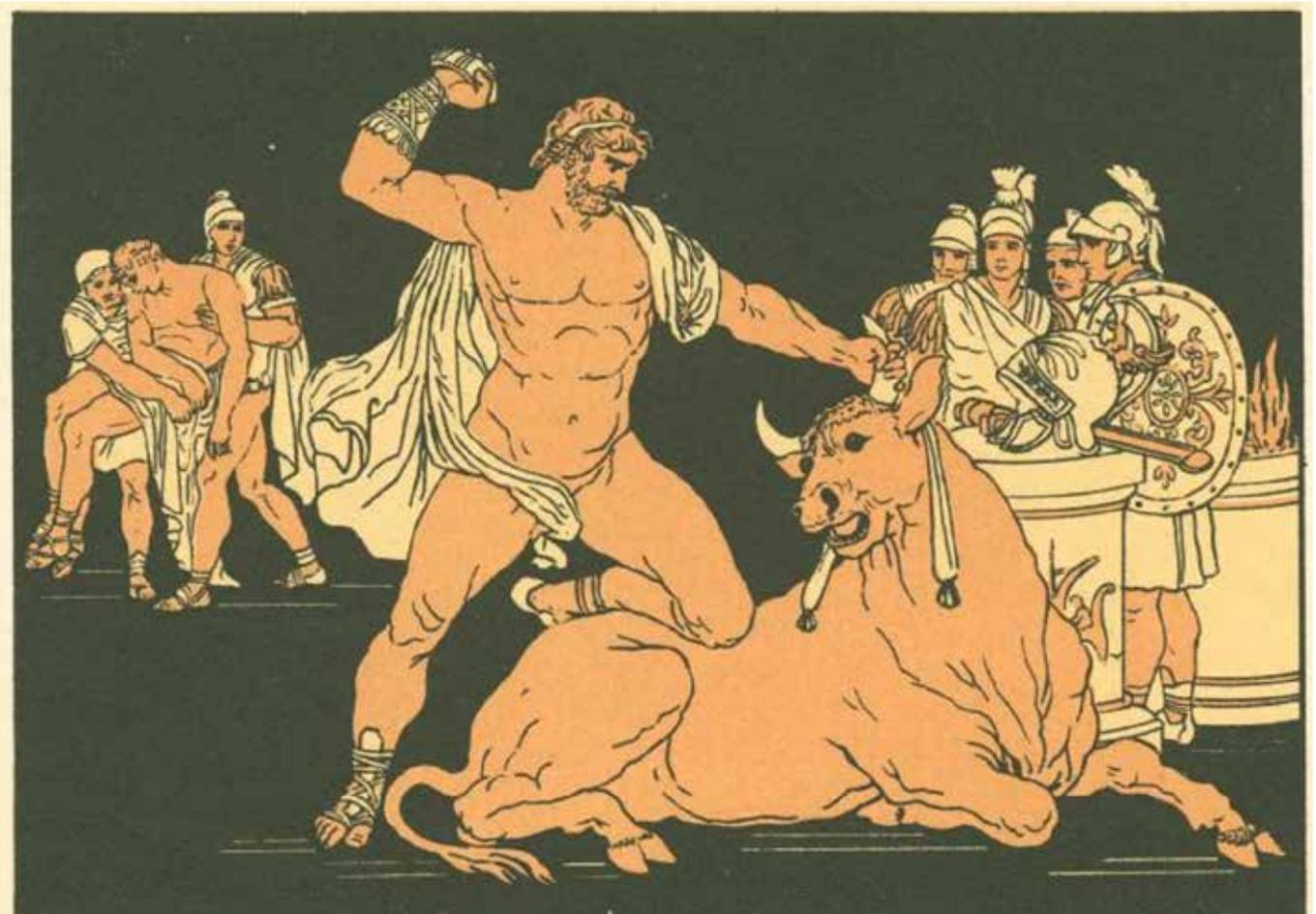
next several days. Sevril's powerful arms and Xanolanthisis' innate ability to heat the iron to 2,800 °F were both essential to the process. Xanolanthisis was fascinated by the procedure, having never been exposed to it before. He particularly liked when the glowing, near-molten iron was struck by Sevril with his hammer, when sparks flew. His eyes glittered watching them. That was immensely satisfying, almost as good as setting towns and hamlets alight while flying overhead.

Of course there weren't any townspeople cowering and fleeing for their lives, but a dragon can't have everything. This was done at a much more relaxed and less exacting pace which

suitied his advancing years. On the plus side, no one was shooting arrows or crossbow bolts at him which can be a decided bother.

The day came when Sevril was able to show Whelen the White that Aoeis was contained within a specific ingot of iron. Far from being recognizable or even similar to an axe everything that would be Aoeis was nevertheless within that mass. That was the day on which Whelen the White began contributing magical spells and incantations to its creation.

Sir Miles comported himself during this time as a man of leisure, flirting with barmaids, amusing children in the town with prodigious feats of strength and embellishing tales of his



valor and experiences to townsfolk who were willing to listen.

Sevril found that there was an unexpected side benefit to having Xanolanthisis around. Interruptions caused by warlocks, witches and various practitioners of the magical arts making inquiries about his capabilities, the cost and schedule of making particular artifacts virtually ceased. Such prospective customers still arrived of course but now they were greeted by a dragon. It was necessary for him to post a sign reading, "Trespassers will be roasted and eaten," which discouraged some of the idle inquiries. Xanolanthisis quite competently discouraged the rest.

The creation of Aoeis took place at a deliberate and measured pace. Sevril rough shaped the axe head from steel heated to incandescence by Xanolanthisis. They didn't fail to break for tea or lunch and the work days weren't inordinately long. They found they both had a fondness for two-handed pinochle and enjoyed games in the evening.

The nickel was folded into the steel to increase its resistance to corrosion. The manganese improved strength, workability, and resistance to wear. The chromium in the correct amount added additional high corrosion resistance and hardness. The vanadium, very rare in nature, gave the alloy the desired malleability. The finished metal was pleasing to the eye, bright and shiny with a slight bluish tint to it. The magic, of course, properly applied at the right time by Whelen the White allowed the alloyed metal to take on and keep the desired properties.

The edge was awesome after Sevril sharpened it. The process was time consuming. It could only be done using sacrificial materials. As Sevril sharpened the axe head Xanolanthisis

regaled him with stories of his past adventures. He had no shortage of those, accumulated over a lifetime that stretched thousands of years into the past.

A tool of that nature requires a special handle. Sevril prevailed upon his friends the woodcutters to bring him a straight piece of hickory which did the trick nicely. As a final touch he engraved the axe's name in the head itself.

Whelen the White was inordinately pleased with it. Sir Miles cut himself on it the first time he saw it as he ran his thumb along the edge to test the sharpness. They took it out into the world.

Thus ends the chronicle of the creation of the great axe Aoeis. Every word contained herein is true.



“THE BACK-UP MAN”

by ERIN ELIZABETH WILLIAMS

It’s my first time here in the store. They’ve been popular for years in the big cities that can swirl in near-constant buyers off the streets but not out here. Culture trickles in here, an unintentional off-drip, a leak we collect in an old cup. The store opened a few weeks ago, a soft opening to test the waters, to see how much we had to spend and where our tastes fell. Me, though, I’m not much of a shopper. I douse myself in aversion to change, dress myself properly in reluctance and skepticism that city things are as new and improved as the billboards say they are.

A bell chimes when I push into the entryway, a real novelty screwed in above the door frame and left dangling above peeling yellow moulding. They’d bought out a lease to an antique store that had run out of old things to sell, cleared out by tourists desperate for knickknacks and Shaker nightstands looted from the houses of those who couldn’t use them anymore and whose children found them tacky, tasteless, and burdensome.

“Hi there,” the shop assistant says behind the glass counter. Her smile anticipates a sale. “Let me know if I can help you with anything.”

I nod back, deflecting my eyes down to the floor and to my feet to avoid eye contact, to mitigate my commitment to her. They don’t sell online—part of their appeal to old-fashioned charm. They want to bring you in, to let you

look. The wares look back at me, eyeless and blind. Blank faces, arranged in a gradient from male to female on shelves that crowded around the room. I hover by those with square jaws and strong chins, pretending to study them, discreetly flipping over their price tags. I wander to some of the sharper faces, cheek bones and prices rising higher.

“Anything in particular I can help you with?” the shop assistant asks. Her smile grows, stretching across her face.

“Oh, uhm...” I hesitate. “Just looking, I think.”

“Well, let me know if you have any questions. I can let you know about any of our new product lines, or whatever. It’s supposed to be very exciting.” She double-clicks a pen and begins to scribble stick figures on a notepad in front of her.

I nod again, trying to match her smile but failing as the corners of my mouth reach their limits. She’s nice, in the way that lukewarm tea is nice. Shoved away in one corner, out of sight and away from the ordered rows of faces and torsos, the bins of arms and legs, I see an inelegant crate, tagged by a handwritten sign: sale, 50% off. I edge close to it, dancing my feet around the lip of the shelf and its new models, careful not to brush against them in case they intend to topple like dominos.

“Oh, we’re actually throwing those out

soon. Yeah, some genius in R&D had the hots for this limited edition product line, sales were horrible. Turns out it's a lot easier to watch a guy go bald over 20 years than to buy him that way. The PR line was like, 'Know His Flaws' or something like that. Shipping them out here is their last great scheme to sell some of them before management gives up," the assistant tells me.

Unlike the sculpted faces, these have blemishes, irregularities. None are truly ugly; their only sin is that someone has made them too close to what he sees in the mirror and in hopes that someone will buy him by the dozen. I dig to the bottom, determined to see them all. The layers below become scraped, dinged, flesh pockmarked by carelessness. I dump them one by one back into the crate, these new falls and bumps jostling the flesh into expression for just a moment.

"Tell you what," the assistant says. "You get any new model, full price, I'll let you take home a mystery bag for free. Something pulled out of the 'Everything Must Go' pile there."

"Wait, really? You can do that?" I ask.

"Eh. They pay minimum, I don't care enough," she says.

I look at the fresher, polished faces. Pristine, slack-jawed cannisters, they wait for me to offer them personality, purpose. I select one of the plainer faces from the shelf, somewhere near the male end, and bring it to the counter. While I browse, the assistant readies a brown cardboard box, taping it shut. She draws question marks all over the lid with her pen.

"Ohhh...good choice," she tells me. She picks it up and flips it over, scanning its barcode.

"Okay now, eye color?"

"Uhm, yeah, what are the options?" I ask.

"Technically anything, but the base colors are blue, brown, or green. Anything else is like way extra."

"Blue, I guess. No, green. No! Blue. Do I get to pick the shade?"

"Nope. Extra," she says. She pulls open a drawer of eyes, taking out a pair of blue and sticking them into the empty sockets. He looks more doll-like now, after she has placed them on, unblinking, fixed straight ahead toward nothing, doll-like but almost real. Almost.

"Now, what did you have in mind body-wise?" she asks.

In my living room, I slide four boxes just past my front door and collapse onto an arm chair upholstered in unfolded laundry. Catching my breath, I slice a box cutter down the tape holding the mystery packaging together and unfold the box to see my mystery prize.

He looks so ordinary. His face is rounder, his hair thin at the top. I rip apart the box holding his body and assemble him. When he is complete, I move him to the arm chair to make room for the full-priced man who is soon stretched tall next to my bookshelf of cheap paperbacks. He towers, imposes himself. His shoulders stretch wide, his body smooth. I look at his face, his sculpted masculinity, but it fails to convince me. Clean and coiffed and tight, a mass-market dream packaged in molded Styrofoam, the ideal of what a man might look like from a hazy distance.

The back-up man sits in my armchair, and he looks so much more real. ❖

“A CONDO ON THE SHORES OF RHONDOR”

by S. L. MYERS

“I saw our sun for the very last time that Saturday,” Professor Dickerson said. He glanced at the young woman on the stool next to him. Had she heard him over the plinking rain? He cleared his throat and spoke louder. “I remember it was a Saturday because it was the first day of spring. You don’t forget a thing like that when it’s your last day on Earth.”

The young woman put down the frothing pink tankard and tilted her head in his direction.

Sensing nascent interest, he continued. “That morning the world’s elite marched aboard the evacuation ships. I had the privilege to lead the first wave.” He stole another glance. “Did I have doubts? Perhaps. But I had an example to set for the rest of humanity.”

Her eyelids nictitated with just the slightest sluggishness in the left set.

The professor glanced around the aseptic and serviceable drinking establishment. It was early afternoon, and the place was quiet, with only a smattering of other patrons. An interesting race he’d never seen before sat sporadically quivering at a booth in back. He must remember to make a note of them later.

Dickerson addressed the young woman again. “Unfortunately, the weather had been exceptionally good those weeks prior to the evacuations—mild breezes, a deep blue sky dotted with those little fluffy clouds...” He looked

down into his drink’s murky depths. “I’m sure that explains the number of people—exaggerated by the media if you ask me—who broke out of the embarkation camps in the days before the evacuation. Poor ignorant souls.” He gently agitated his drink and watched the angry bubbles fight their way to the surface.

“I still say we should have made evacuation mandatory right from the beginning like the Chinese had. Or taken a page from the North Koreans and irradiated the major population centers.” He took a sip. Execrable.

“That beautiful Saturday was exactly one year to the day the Yrtby landed on our planet. As the world’s preeminent astrophysicist, I was part of the advanced team to make first contact. Quite an honor.” He ventured a smile. “And one of the first to hear of Earth’s impending demise.”

Her lips twitched provocatively.

“Our sun, serial # G2V896t00nq33a, your basic off-the-shelf yellow dwarf, should never have gotten past quality control. The Yrtby scientists explained that the whole batch was bad.” He flicked away a particularly curious tendril from the rim of his glass. “Someone had dropped the ball.”

The rain picked up. The spattering on the metallic roof drowned out the other patrons and created a little bubble of intimacy around the two of them. He scootched his stool closer.

“Where was I? Oh, yes. The defect meant the sun was likely to explode within the next few years. Luckily, a blanket warranty covered all manufacturing defects up to nine billion years with the option to purchase an extended warranty in hundred-million-year increments.”

His fetching friend chirped and rustled her vestigial wings.

“Exactly, the standard manufacturer’s warranty—repair, replace or relocate.” He took another sip. Still execrable. “Of course, as a man of science, I wasn’t interested in the tedious legal details. I demanded to see cold, hard evidence. We studied their data for months. Telemetry, infrared, spectroscopy, acoustic interferometry, photometry, magnetic field measurements. We ran computer simulation after simulation, compared their results with ours. And when we extrapolated the models out—”

His companion’s compact head swiveled 190 degrees toward the exit.

He reached out and squeezed her tiny, clawed hand. “Sorry for the dull science lecture, my dear. Hard habit to break.”

Her mouth jerked broadly in understanding.

“The evidence was irrefutable. We now had the burden of deciding the fate of billions of our fellow humans.” He fell silent for a long moment, overcome with emotion. “We chose relocation.”

He leaned in close to what he presumed was an ear. “I’m practically the one responsible for our decision to evacuate Earth.” He finished off the putrid liquid in one swift gulp and then waved the empty glass at the anthropoid bartender for another and was soon handed a fresh drink.

“Public opinion was against us at first. We commandeered every media outlet, mobilized

trusted authority figures, and stifled all misinformation. Those were exciting days, I can tell you.”

He traced the ancient condensation patterns on the bar’s zinc surface with a finger. “Although, I have to admit, the global success of *A Better World for All Our Children: White, Brown, and Green* was more instrumental in changing minds than the science was.” He sighed deeply and took a large swig of his drink before any more of it could escape.

“The Yrtby turned out to be quite adept at our social media—viral memes, influencers, followers, clicks, and twits. All gibberish to me.” He chuckled and shook his head. “People really took to those little guys. More than a few romances blossomed between human and Yrtby.” He peered meaningfully into her round, moist eyes. “Shows we’re all the same deep down, just looking for someone to love.” Was that a blush? A rash? Quite lovely.

“At any event, transportation craft were ordered, supplies assembled, embarkation dates assigned. I headed up the North American Department for Population Ranking and Relocation. A thankless job, I can tell you.”

Her scant head bobbed sympathetically.

He coaxed out the last swallow from his glass with a fork and considered ordering a third one. But just at that moment, a group of humans walked into the bar, caustic damp steaming off their protective outerwear. They threw malicious glares in his direction while removing their gear and boots. Ah, he had lost track of time: shift change. Soon, the peaceful drinking establishment would be overrun by exhausted, irritable, hard-drinking humans.

“Perhaps we could have that third drink at my place, dear.” He put an alcohol-emboldened arm around his date’s waspish waist, keeping

an eye on the mouth (there'd been stories, but nothing ventured, nothing gained), and suggested they watch the tide come in from his top-floor condo with the spectacular views of the equatorial-spanning acid ocean. Plus, double full moons tonight.

She gave her eye a thoughtful lick and chirped assent.

As he stood up, one of the men who'd come in shouldered him hard and knocked him back against the bar. "You'll get yours, Professor Dickhead."

The anthropoid barman whirred over, blades out, and the man melted into the motley crowd.

"I'm fine, Henry," Professor Dickerson said as he straightened his bowtie and adjusted his glasses. "No harm done."

"They blame me," he explained as he helped his slight companion off her stool. "I'm happy to be their scapegoat if it helps them to adjust. And I stand by my decision. Those absurd rumors of a scam! Ridiculous."

As they walked to the cloakroom, his date twittered about a similar situation regarding the sun back on her home planet.

Both now encased in impermeable fiber, they exited the busy pub. The setting red giant bathed the boulevard in a soft pink glow, and the wide promenade buzzed with day-shifters back from the mines, so bulkily swathed their planets of origin were impossible to guess.

"M'lady," He offered her his arm. The acid rain hissed pleasantly against their environmental suits as they strolled along the peeling bioplastic pedestrian walkway. Gently corroding storefronts and cafes lined the lively street. The pitted windows distorted their images like carnival mirrors as they passed.

"I admit it's been an adjustment living

here," he shouted, struggling to make himself heard over the rain and through the facemask. "Not much grows. And the constant rain. We had that incident, more of a slaughter, really. A community of vegan settlers tried to eat a sentient plant species. We all learned from that one, I can tell you. But there's plenty of work for everyone in the mines. The schools aren't half bad. And I've heard the military is recruiting. Imagine the travel opportunities for our young people. Well, I'm sure I don't have to tell you."

A muffled chirrup made it through the helmet.

They turned off the main street and headed toward the complex of condos silhouetted like spiky teeth against the last of the sunlight. They passed pools and tennis courts abandoned for the season. They passed the ghostly outlines of outdoor furniture and playgrounds under protective tarps. The moons broke the horizon and cast a cool lavender light over everything. But he noticed little of it. He was only aware of the arousing pressure of his companion's sheathed arm on his.

Once safely under his building's defensive overhang, he deftly removed both of their headgear and kissed her hard. She sighed and sank into his embrace. Yes, he thought, life was pretty good here. ❖

“TENE BROUS WAKE”

by J. J. A. SMITH

OriginX’s Starship, the Plouton, was heading from asteroid QRA-87315 to 387 Dec *a* (“Decebalus”), a distribution center planet. The city-sized crew had just completed the last strip-mine of the last asteroid in the QRA belt. Plouton’s next mission was to deposit their payload on Decebalus and then take a new wave of debt-collateralized obligated workers (DCOWs) and transport them to 761 Ari δ (“Ariarathes”). Finally, they were to continue to GHT-461 to begin strip-mining on a new belt.

Ariarathes was scheduled to be a ‘Black Card’ planet in a few generations; a playground for the rich and free. Terraforming was complete, and it had a basic replicator facility. The Incorporate “needed urbanization to begin yesterday!”

As the saying went during DCOW training: Colonization led to urbanization. Urbanization led to commercialization. Commercialization led to liberation.

Lucky for the Incorporate, the population boom on Decebalus had led to mass unemployment, which made for tons of poor, tired masses ready to sign up and colonize. Provided you abided by your contract, terms of service, and end-user license agreement, for a few generations of work, you could be set up in a new world with stable, steady employment and the promise of a better life for your children’s children.

Leo Corrine knew this because he was a DCOW-2G. His parents had faced a similar labor squeeze in Duras and took contracts on Burebista. They were 1st generation DCOWs, pronounced ‘Dee-Cow’ or, derisively by the free, “**Thee** Cow”. It was usually shortened to ‘Cow’ in an attempt to reclaim the word. Leo was a 2nd-generation Cow; a 2G. He was fortunate enough to have tested well and was assigned to Engineering on the Plouton.

If he excelled at work, he could earn enough income to reduce his DCOW contract. Even a reduction from the standard five generations to four would be great. He’d see his great-grandchildren become Freemembers, even Prime Clients with enough luck.

Leo was running late because, in private during the previous 4th shift, his commanding officer (CO) in Engineering had asked him to run late today. Leo was one of the CO’s ‘confidence men’ for this quarter’s redundancy test. His job was to show up late for his shift. This assisted leadership in assessing if the 4th shift could operate on a skeleton crew as per quality assurance protocol.

In a few minutes, he’d hop on Hi-loop A to the Nucleus. He’d be riding with anyone late to their shift and interrupt the rest of engineering after he had his leisurely fill of firstmeal. He’d even be able to get a seat at Tranquility Base; that place always had too long a line for Cows.

So, he zipped up his coveralls and secured his work boots. He took a moment to ensure his office insignias (DCOW-2G), rank (3rd Stripe), and role (Engineer Crewman) were in order. He glanced left to the mirror and saw a tall, gaunt reed of a man growing out from silver boots into metallic blue coveralls decorated with minimalist white patches.

He took a second to stare at the simulacrum. Distant stars streaked by as the atom-shaped ship moved through space. DCOW quarters were on one of the extreme halos of the ship's orbital structure. Although it was furthest from his station, the TruView was best from this location; an irony not lost on him.

The airlock on the Hi-loop parted as Leo approached, and out whispered a rare rush of cool wind. He stepped inside and headed towards the back of the vehicle. There were a few other people in the pod with him, stragglers trying not to get docked pay, for certain. Except for the two figures clad in white and grey, they were Primes, a rare sight in Cow housing. Primes seldom leave the comfort of the Nucleus.

Glancing at their patches, he learned the woman was L. Chapman, a Life Support Engineer of 8th Stripe, junior management. The man was D. Faith, a Chief Analyst in Intelligence, 12th Stripe, middle management. This made Leo straighten up and try to sink further into the back of the ship. Someone that high up could shave your Cow contract down or add to it easily.

He scanned the other passengers. He found a V. Naylor, 2nd Stripe Freemember Nurse, who didn't look too great. He must live in one of the Freemember houses right near the Loop, a good location.

On the right was an E. Debney, 4th Stripe Biologist, also a DCOW-2G. Flanking Major

Analyst Faith's left was an N. Chugg, 1st Stripe Food Specialist, who was DCOW-2G, and visibly hungover. If this was his company for the ride, he hoped no one vomited on one of the Primes; everyone would be up for another quarter-span of work on their contract.

Leo started to listen in on the conversation between the Primes. It wasn't every day that sort of opportunity popped up.

"...nice to see another whitecoat out in these parts, wouldn't you say, Ms. Chapman? You can call me Daley, by the way. Charmed." Daley Faith extended his fist to touch hers. L. Chapman returned the gesture and responded in kind.

"It's certainly uncommon! I'm Liza, by the way. I live over by Star Treatment on floor 30-E. You're so right, by the way, the decor in these outer sectors is just, my word, is it supposed to look so terrestrial? The shag carpeting and fake wood paneling in the halls are just vulgar," Liza threw up her hands in a fake defeat.

"Quite, yes. All it needs is chevrons and neon lighting, and we'll all die from embarrassment. Speaking of, and I hope this isn't prying, what brings you to this sector? It's a bit gauche for one of us to be here without purpose," Daley pursed his lips, awaiting a response.

"Well, I might ask you the same thing, that's for certain, but you've earned your stripes, I can see, so I'll deign to explain myself. Obviously, I work in Life Support. We've gotten reports of illness breaking out—"

"Yeah, I'll say, I'm burnin' up so hot I can barely see straight," V. Naylor interrupted. The Primes allowed for a pregnant pause to build.

"Sorry." V. Naylor looked around at the other Cows for someone to meet his gaze. Only the gentle chime of the Hi-loop starting its journey met him in the silence.

Liza Chapman continued where she left off, "...outbreaks are uncommon as I'm sure an Intelligence man such as yourself would know. So, as per usual, we're checking life support systems to ensure air scrubbing, radiation removal, and the like are at a sufficient level. You know how the less-maintained areas are, the cheapest contract and all. May I ask you the same thing? I noticed you have two companions in tow."

Daley grimaced. Whether it was at the indelicacy of Liza's question or the uncouthness of Naylor's interjection that he found disgusting, Leo couldn't tell. But as the grimace faded, Daley's eyes rolled back in contemplation. He drew a sharp breath and began.

"Quite the same as you, actually. My companions here, Nat Chugg and Ms. Debney," he gestured to them, "are a Food Specialist and Biologist respectively, as I'm sure you see. They share shifts and have had a higher-than-expected degree of crossings, so we had to take a look to ensure nothing funny was going on. Turns out they share a love of going to the Crunch Punch during leisure hours for holo-shows from Earth. Can't say I've been. Not much of a music listener myself. Judging by the unconventional haircut, I'd say you've got the bug, pardon the gallows humor," he shot a glance at Naylor, "ever been?"

Liza turned red. Whether out of embarrassment, anger, or a mix, Leo couldn't tell. He recalled the ship schematics. Crunch Punch was designed to draw in libertine types, upenders of order, so they'd blow off steam. The conversation and sentiment data sniffed from the location helped create a co-option plan to reduce dissent in the Cow ranks. Enough complaining about the food? Suddenly, steak night! And the wheel turns, and the boot steps. An Intel Cow once told Leo it was called a 'Debordian Loop',

but Leo couldn't remember why.

Liza drew in a sharp breath that brought him back into the conversation. She seemed insulted. Implying a Prime needed to be algorithm'd into operating was an insult, he guessed.

"I haven't, actually," Liza replied curtly, seeming flustered, "how much longer until we hit the Nucleus, Erica?" she directed her question to the E. Debney on board. Erica's face somersaulted through a mix of horror, then worry, then numbness as she eked out an "I, uh—" before Daley Faith fired back with tumescent incisiveness.

"Liza, dear, how did you know Ms. Debney's name? I never cared to mention it." His smirk curled into a lascivious leer.

"We have met before. I didn't stoop to greeting a Cow, of course, but you know Life Support and Biology do overlap." Liza tried to turn a worried look into one of triumph, but landed on a constipated facade instead.

"Overlap enough to be sharing the same perfume we sell in the Cow commissaries?"

You could cut the tension in the liminal space between question and response with the bluntest of knives.

After what seemed like an eternity, Liza drew herself up to her full height, about a head above Daley, and seethed, "What are you implying, Major? Is there something relevant to your purposes that you need to ascertain? If you could so kindly state—" but was interrupted by the blare of a shipwide communication.

"Dropping to Emergency FTL Displacement. Engaging relative space security."

The floor of the Hi-loop was magnetized; everyone's boots were locked into place on the floor.

Naylor whined out, "I'm going to be sick if

I don't get over to Medical-how long will this take? I'm worse than I was when we pushed off a few beats ago."

Leo piped up after a pause for the Primes to respond. "Emergency FTL Displacement only takes a few beats. We're burning enough dark matter to warp us outside of luminal space and into tenebrous space. To the surrounding space, it'll be a blip. But for us here, we're moving diagonally through space-time; we'll feel time pass, but we don't get older, cells time-lock but consciousness persists. That's why we drop anyone sleeping or non-essential into cryo, it makes the time seem to pass by faster."

Naylor stared at Leo and responded, "What does any of that mean?"

"Sounds like life is going to suck for longer. Why the hell can't I walk? Why aren't we in cryo? We're non-essential in a Hi-loop."

"Language, Naylor" Daley paternalized.

Erica explained to Naylor, "We're not in cryo because you need to be lying down to get the right fluid circulation. Otherwise, you'll wake up with your legs weeping blood, and then you'd probably die. Any facility without a guaranteed prone doesn't get cryo."

Leo continued, "Yeah, and Hi-loops need to move as many people as possible. They're built for standing room only; no room to guarantee. That's why our boots lock. If you move too much while we go from luminal to tenebrous, you could wind up in a wall or outside of the ship, from your relative movement. We'll all be up and moving once we're in tenebrous. The 'when' that feels like depends. Do they *not* go over this in Nursing training?"

"Not in Food's training," Nat joked and got a few chuckles from Erica and Liza. An awkward silence filled the room as the group looked around the pod, waiting for motion and mobil-

ity to return. The Cows exchanged a few tense glances. Without a word, they wondered what would happen if the drama were to resume.

An amount of time passed in silence. Out of bored curiosity, Leo looked over at Naylor and asked 'What's the V for anyway? Victor?'

"No. Vernon." His breathing sounded labored. His voice was taking on a timbre of phlegm-filled raspiness.

"You do not sound well at all; you're a choice sample with the state you're in. Who goes from fever to stomach *and* chest symptoms quicker than a pod trip? Although we have been in suspended time for who knows how long..." Erica mused to herself.

Vernon dry heaved. Nat piped up, "Any chance you got something you can throw me for a hangover? That Calig Cask Whiskey from last night has got me splitting at the seams. It's the only reason I'm on the damned late pod instead of knocked out in cryo right now at my station."

Erica responded, "Nothing in my bumbag, plus, my aim is so bad odds are I—"

Liza interjected, "How...how could you afford Calig? That's worth at least half your annual income. You haven't even crossed your first stripe..."

Daley's head snapped over, his brows furrowed, worried at Liza's change from silence to conversation. Liza's head snapped towards Daley, and their gaze met.

"Inspecting for security, hm? I'm sure it's the protocol for you to liquor up your marks with the Incorporate's finest too, hm?" Liza's gaze was so fixed that she seemed to be trying to stare inside Daley's brain.

"I have no idea where Mr. Chugg, how fitting, could have come by Calig. I'll make a note to have someone investigate and add the appropriate sum to his contract. I interviewed him at

his quarters—he was already awake, albeit foggy.”

“And then I must assume that Ms. Debney was with Mr. Chugg? Given that you arrived altogether.”

“Why, yes, quite precisely—they were together when I found them. That wouldn’t be a problem for you, correct? Assuming there’s no conflict of interest between ranks, employee relationships are good for company morale. Isn’t that right, Ms. Chapman?”

“Of course not. But I’m curious to hear what Ms. Debney’s perspective here is.” She turned to face Erica, and her face softened. Her voice, now warm and gentle, she said, “Erica, you can speak freely, trust me, what is going on?”

There was a long pause. Erica stared down at her feet, consumed in thought. She took a few deep breaths. She rolled her neck back and forth.

“Well, I suppose there’s no point in my lying to both of you, is there?”

Another long pause, deep breaths, a glance at the floor.

She began, “The problem is that I love one of you but fear the other. If you haven’t weighed the fear of pain against the tranquility of love, you haven’t lived, I suppose. I guess it’s as good a time as any...” Erica’s voice began to find its strength; she began to orate with the sing-song cadence of a labor activist.

“Nat and I met at Crunch Punch a few months ago. We became fast friends, and we commiserated and bonded over our contracts. Opined over the plight of the Cows,” she turned to look at Daley, “all that I’m sure the monitors recorded and processed. Free will be damned and buried, eh? Think we don’t know about that?” Erica looked around the room, seeking some chorus or approval.

Erica continued, “We agreed that we could bait the right Prime into enjoying our lower-class ways enough to shave some of our Cow contracts. Enough high-ranking folk spent time at Crunch Punch. Shave a few quarters off your contract, and you are golden. Daley was always there, so he was the mark. Way before I met you, Liza.”

Liza responded weakly, “But why would you lie to me? Cheat on me?”

Erica continued, “A few cycles ago, we pressed for more contract cuts. Daley threatened the opposite. We could be held liable for conspiracy, corruption, a whole gamut if we didn’t keep the tap on, he said. And like that, we were handcuffed.”

She paused for a breath, seeming to regain some confidence. She looked around the room and saw the faces drawn in. Some in horror, others a mix of fear, admiration, curiosity, and sad sympathy.

She locked eyes with Liza. “It was shortly after that I met you. I began to fall in love with someone I well and truly met independently and of my own free will. As free people do. I’d have killed for a way to tell you without the pain and fear of embarrassment, rejection, or class retribution. I know now you wouldn’t do that; you’re more than the blinders of your station. So fuck Daley and his power, I’d rather have an extended sentence with y—”

The blaring voice of a shipwide communication broke across the pod. “E-FTL Drop complete. Disengaging security protocols post-haste. Welcome to tenebrous space.” The clangs of boots coming loose from the magnetization rang clear across the pod.

A silence commensurate with the drama pervaded the pod. It hung above the crowd of six for a few beats before Leo wondered aloud,



“Weird; we’re not accelerating along the loop line. We’ve had a blip to disengage; we should be moving by now. We can’t have been far from Nucleus.” The broken silence snapped everyone to action. Eyes met electronics, all checking comms and diagnostics.

“Why wouldn’t we move then?” said Daley. He had moved away from Liza and Erica, uncomfortable with tenderness.

“Not sure. I’m held back for redundancy testing today. That shouldn’t increase response time too much. Nat, are the emergency replicators operating? They should be up for sustenance even in a full shut—”

“Yeah, man, they’re fine. I could fire out enough cheesesteaks to give you all heart problems. If anything is broken, it’s with the ‘moving’ parts, ya know? Might help with my hang-over, come to think...” as he started to work the replicator panel.

Liza, half muttering to herself, “I’m a bit more dire than our new favorite chef. My HUD display is only reporting for a third of the ship; something isn’t right with our telemetry...power?”

A pause filled the room. Everyone was uneasy at the prospect of being stuck in the pod even longer. A breath between spaces, tangible and liminal, umbral and tenebrous, temporal and spiritual. It was shattered by Erica, who had walked over to a slumped-over Vernon.

“Well, aye, on dire! Had a gander at Vernon and, well, he’s the only nurse aboard, but I’d like a nurse to take a look.”

“What’s wrong, do you think?” Leo responded in a reflexively affable manner.

It was at that point that Vernon turned to look at the crowd. Fever and aches consumed him. He opened his mouth to respond. All that escaped was a shrill cry that seemed to bend the

space around him with its ferocity.

Vernon tried to get up and walk, to reach out to steady himself on Erica, but his legs began to wobble and give way. His flesh began to ripple. Half his face melted backward to childhood. Then, back more resemble our ape-faced ancestors. Other parts of him seemed to move forward through time. To a mechanical design, then to an abstraction of form. Other parts of him aged to the bone, then back to youth. Patches of skin sloughed like the worst of radiation poisoning.

The crawling, undulating form reached forward to try and grab hold of its former companions. It sought any stasis it could find. It grasped towards Erica. She gasped and withdrew, crabbing back towards the pod's forward wall. Bellowing and grasping at her hand, "I got too near him and..." she held up the hand. Her index and middle fingers were decayed to ligament and bone, somehow still operating.

In the same beat, Leo, already connected to the emergency console for diagnostics, closed the emergency pod dividers. That sealed Vernon off. Patches of the crystalline doors flickered through its construction in time with Vernon's breathing. Vernon exhaled, and layers of nanofiber and circuitry appeared. He inhaled, back to the crystal. He exhaled and put his hand on the door.

As it flickered, the hand pushed through the deconstructing crystal. He inhaled and was a part of the door. His one human eye flashed an understanding. He exhaled on the now merged hand and pushed further.

Leo overrode the airlock. No one needed a command; out onto the dim-lit track, they went.

Hi-loop A's Nucleus terminal flashed a red 'override' message, and the airlock opened. The remaining passengers lifted themselves out of

the track and headed towards the Bridge. About halfway there, a Navigation Crewman and a contingent of Security Personnel met them. Navigation must have seen the airlock override flash in Command. Daley barked out an order for the new group to "Stand down! Show some respect and explain why we dropped and why I had to walk out of a Loop tunnel. Now."

Security didn't budge. The Navigation Crewman, a B. Kerns (DCOW-3G, 4th Stripe), took a beat to look at Daley. He shook his head as if to clear his thoughts. He began, "Sorry. I now realize because you were in the Loop you're unaware of the Ship's situation. At least not fully." he paused for a beat, seeming to wait for confirmation.

Almost at once, most of the strange bedfellows began. "Two-thirds of the ship are off of life scans..." said Liza.

"One of our other passengers was viciously ill with some sort of...time sickness?...or something," said Erica. She hid her now lich-like hand.

"Something's making Engineering divert power from transportation. Power is on with all the daylights being up..." Leo said, looking around the brightly lit hall.

"Well established, but I'm concerned. A sick passenger, you say? Where? In the tunnel?"

A few nods. Daley, frustrated, interjected, "Boy, if you don't answer—"

"Quiet, Chief Analyst, respectfully. Two of you," he pointed at the Security Officers, "once Mr. Corrine here opens the airlock, well, you know what to do. The rest of you provide back-up. Ladies and gentlemen, if you could please walk back with me to the Auditorium, we can have you briefed. The Prime Officer has permitted me to override any orders from any rank you're working under while we re-evaluate our

situation. If you're not shifting by now, it seems you're safe. Follow."

Daley, to himself, "Well, I never..."

The airlock hissed. Leo disengaged from the panel and followed his new party towards the Auditorium. He had never been in the Nucleus Auditorium. Each Halo on the ship had one in its ballast sphere. So, he had always used the Cow Auditorium for public gatherings. Spheres were the primary work and commercial spaces for the ship and served as ballast for the halo. Halos helped generate the ship's artificial gravity. The Nucleus Auditorium was vast. At least triple the size of the other. It seemed to have been set up as a kind of makeshift field command center, like when you'd be setting up to start colonization on a new planet.

They came to a pause at a table with one other individual sitting there. She glanced up and said in a crisp, warm, calming tone, "Bilal, thank you. Please head back to Navigation; they need you there. The rest of you, please sit. I'm Chief Psychologist Kendis Rahman. I'm sure you have questions. Please let me talk through everything first. As I'm sure I'll answer some of your questions, it'll be quicker for all. Ok?" She paused for a beat and walked over to a screen; Leo noticed she was 20th Stripe, the highest rank he'd ever seen.

"Ok! Begin at the beginning. Before our security system dropped us *into* E-FTL, ten ships dropped *out* of FTL close to our relative space. These ships, as you see on the screen, were not of standard make from OriginX, NorthSierra Orbital, or a part of the Syndicated Sol Commandery. Their displacement waves caused us to drop, as is standard. What wasn't standard was whatever they dropped into our displacement wake. It made the trip with us. It activated once we were in tenebrous space before we

disengaged. Dead quiet, no shockwaves.

It cut the Plouton in thirds along our joinders, as you can see on our area map. Two-thirds of the ship is floating away from us. Artificial gravity still works because of the halo redundancies. Communication is cut between sections. If we try to jump out, we risk permanently separating from them." She paused to let the weight of the situation sink in.

She continued, more tensely, "If that wasn't enough, some crew have broken into what we're branding as 'phasing fever'. We don't understand it. The best we can tell is it's forcing their cells and the air they breathe through time, much like how we jump. Or something like that. It's causing rapid aging and de-aging, as well as mania."

She grimaced, losing her composure a bit. "Security had been executing anyone with the symptoms. The problem with the de-aging is that it de-ages them back to life, which caused a half-reanimated, half-dead crew; security switched to stun rounds and quarantine. We can't risk them getting too close. Security brass is hoping that the 'deconstructing' breath effect they have on their surroundings makes them fall out of the ship, instead of breaking quarantine. It's a bit fast and loose."

Lastly, and most recently, our strange-shipped friends from before have appeared in our tenebrous space, which we didn't think was possible until now. We don't know any more than that. I know that's a lot all at once. Questions?"

There was a long silence.

Finally, Leo asked, sheepishly, "What do we do?"

Kendis thought for a long moment and responded, "Well, you're stuck here. We've got enough fuel to live for a long time. We're

restructuring all our departments once we get a headcount. Signage is on the walls here for where you go. Intelligence and Communications are all focused externally for now. Otherwise, it's all about keeping the ship operating. For now, I'd rest. There's nothing we control anymore. At least not until we know who they are and what they want. When you're trapped, focus on what you can control. Right now? I'd get some food; looks like all but one of you has eaten something." She gestured to Nat, who had decided to bring the cheesesteak with him for some reason, and she walked off towards a nearby cafeteria.

Nat shrugged, stood up, and walked over to the section that was labeled 'Stewarding', calling to someone he recognized. Liza and Erica looked up at each other and started to walk off towards another table for what one would imagine was a private conversation. Daley interrupted, "Erica, will I be seeing you or seeing your contract adjusted?"

Without looking, she responded, "Oh, you still think you own that? Talk to our new alien overlords, or whatever. But for now, fuck off. Respectfully," and chuckled at her own imitation of Bilal from earlier.

Daley turned to Leo and said, "So what's your contract like?"

Leo, with a face of sheer disgust, got up and said, "You know, somehow you're still worse than the situation we're in?"

Three quick blasts on the ship-wide communication system. They were followed by a simple phrase: Red Alert. We are being boarded. Three quick blasts again. Red Alert. We are being boarded.

There were gasps from the 9 o'clock section of the sphere. Shapes were melting through the walls. They looked like two tesseract welded to-

gether, but they were hard to comprehend. They seemed to run backwards and forwards through the time of whatever they moved through. Leo thought to himself for a moment, this felt like something familiar from training or school.

He said to himself, "A Penteract?"

Daley looked at him, "What was that? Are you able to do something here?"

"We barely understand moving through the 4th dimension, I don't think we're going to handle anything that lives in five."

"You're saying-"

"I'm speculating. But it seems like we caught the attention of some sort of higher-dimensional being or ship or something."

They were quiet for a moment, the penteracts continued to stream through the wall and float about the room. They rippled and shifted and shimmered in impossible patterns and colors, kaleidoscope-esque mirages bouncing around an infinite-mirror room. It hurt to look at them for too long. Occasionally, one of the penteracts would pass through someone or something. Surprisingly, they didn't come down with the phasing fever that had broken out when they hit tenebrous space. The impacted went and spoke to each other. Leo caught some of their whispers as he tried to avoid the objects.

"...did you feel it?"

"...I saw so many versions of myself..."

"...I think I connected with my truth..."

Daley caved in; he reached out and stepped through one of the floating prisms. He passed through it and looked back at Leo, "I'm sorry. I've failed you and myself. I see that now. I have to go apologize to a few people." He walked away.

Leo stared at him, confused by the sudden change but seeing that it had something to do with their guests, when one floated right

through him. The instant it touched Leo, his mind expanded with an incomprehensible vastness. He saw the through-thread spideweb of every version of him from the Big Bang, to his conception, to every gestational mutation that could have been, to if he had studied violin instead of synthesizer. He saw every death that every version of him could have had. He saw himself. There was something else in the back of his mind, prowling, and then it understood. A voice spoke to him from within his mind that was not his own.

“Engineer. We need your voice. Your...FTL Displacement engine...as you call it, is causing problems for our kind. It’s as if there were a random, invisible, infinitely narrow tripwire in your dimension that would trip you all. Instead of tripping, though, it ruined food and energy. We tire of the nuisance, so we are tasked with giving you a new method to leave us be. We will repair your broken shape if you agree to have your kind use it.”

“I’m not sure I have the power to convince everyone to; I don’t think anyone here does, but we can try.”

“Then there will be more...security incidents...as you say, until it stops.”

“I believe that would be understandable to us. I can take you.”

“Your words will suffice. Here.”

Leo blinked, and no time had passed at all, but he held in his hands a small electronic component and a series of drives inscribed with instructions. The penteracts all hung in the air, still pulsing, and seemed to observe Leo as he approached Kendis and asked where the Admiral was. She pointed him over. Leo went into the cabin and explained the situation. The Admiral was skeptical of the entire situation, a penteract floated through him, and he changed

his mind.

The Penteracts fell into one another and vanished. The ship blinked and was reformed. It blinked again, and it dropped back onto its course. With the new engine component, they made it to their next assignment in record time.

One day, weeks later, Leo was having lunch in the Star Treatment, catching up with some of the Hi-loop fiasco crew. Since the incident, it has been easier for the Cows to get seating there. Erica and Liza had started seeing each other publicly, and Erica had begun working on a project to scan the ship for any remnant biologics of the 5D forms they had met. Nat had heard a rumor that Daley turned himself in for corruption, among other things, and was being held in the brig, working laundry labor.

They were never able to find and save anyone who had come down with phasing fever. Intelligence was able to piece together from conversation intelligence about people’s interactions with the Penteractians, as they became called, that it was akin to radiation poisoning from an A-bomb, except from the device that had split the ship in whatever 5D pattern it was designed for. There were many mysteries for the remainder of the journey.

The news from the Admiral’s Office was that the company had not bitten on automatically deploying the new engines due to the build cost. It would hurt annual figures. The Admiral figured there would be more Penteractian enlightenment for ships soon. He changed some rules in preparation for that, despite company orders. He said he figured it was better to be ahead of the curve. In fact, everyone changed a little from a direct experience with things beyond time. ❖

“THE DEBUGGER ATTACHED TO MY HEART”

by JASON M. BOYD

Leticia squealed in frustration and beat her arms against the *Skymning*'s cargo bay wall. Thank God she was alone, though massive power dampers thrummed loud enough to drain out her wails. Problem number 8,431 on her list of system bugs: the cargo bay's terminals were out of sync with the ship's central database. Unfortunately, she only reproduced this issue by syncing data at the uptake, running half a kilometer to the other side, and checking the terminal's local storage before it got overwritten. For the fifth time in a row, Leticia had failed to reach the terminal. Of course she'd failed. Leticia Ramirez was a software developer, not an Olympian.

Dragging rubbery legs behind her, Leticia trudged back across the cargo bay, a longer distance than she'd walked in an average week back on Earth. The bay stretched deep, filled with carbon-fiber boxes in various shades of gunmetal gray destined to be hurled into the closest Wolf-Rayet star to Earth hot enough to render the Invader's components inoperable: Gamma 2 Velorum. The ceiling towered above her, tall enough to accommodate the one unboxed component.

Leticia slowed before the massive head resting on the cargo bay floor. Eyes in the wrong place, mouthless, a crown of ragged peaks blown apart in some historic battle. Made of an alloy of metallic and nonmetallic elements that

shouldn't fit together, and humanity couldn't reverse-engineer. Its blank stare taunted Leticia, laughing at her inability to fix a simple error. She shivered, feeling the ick running off the head.

But it wouldn't get the better of her. She marched to the head. Ship regulations forbade any crew from touching its components or simply entering the cargo bay at all. If this stupid software bug didn't prevent monitoring equipment from functioning, she'd be locked out too. But no one watched her, so why not burn off her pent-up aggravation?

Rearing her right leg back, she aimed a solid kick at the head. When her foot was roughly a centimeter from contact, a burst of energy arced from the Invader's mirrored face. The energy intercepted her blow, redirecting the force backward and sending her sprawling on the floor. Her right leg tingled, the muscles jumping randomly all the way to her knee.

“Okay...” Leticia whispered. “Let's not mention this to anyone. Ever.”

* * *

“Ramirez!” a breathless voice said.

Leticia jumped with a shriek. Had she been sitting with the cargo bay door open, staring at the Invader's head? No, of course not. She pounded the door's panel and it irised closed, locking with a harsh tone.

“Brett, my guy, you trying to scare the living

shit out of me?”

“Sorry. But I was trying to catch you before Lieutenant Bickham did.” A sneer caterpillared up Leticia’s face at the name. “He’s peeved you were in the cargo bay, screaming about ‘abuse of admin rights’.”

“Bickham is a waste of life support energy. I don’t give a shit what he thinks. The *captain* wanted these status codes fixed, and I found the error. Bickham can suck it.”

“Language, Ramirez. Want me to report you?” he joked. Probably. Brett could be a stickler for the rules. Had he reported her for reg violations during their voyage? Once or twice. Could that be overlooked when he walked away in his form-fitting Sergeant’s uniform? Without a doubt.

“Careful,” Leticia said. “They put me in the brig, you’ll get saddled with my job. While we’re on the subject... Have time to help out with a few extra projects?”

“I could run by Engineering on my rest block tomorrow.”

“Drop by my quarters instead. Got a late night tonight. Easier to work from there, less distraction.”

He stared at his feet at the suggestion, and a reddish tint pulsed in his light-brown cheeks. “Fine. That’s fine.” He brightened. “I came across something odd during a security scan. I’d show it to you now, but my tablet’s charging because... Well, you’ll understand once you see it.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

Brett grasped his left shoulder in salute, turned on his heels, and bolted away from the cargo bay. His boots rapped rhythmically on the polished floor. The *Skymining* was a brand-new ship. Designed for exploration. Hardened for war. Repurposed for trash duty.

Leticia watched until Brett disappeared around a bend. Had she been staring? Those uniforms... Her cheeks warmed. With a laugh, she started down the corridor running parallel to the cargo bay.

She immediately regretted not paying more attention when she collided with someone.

“Sorry,” she said. “I... Oh, it’s *you*.” Leticia’s warm apologies froze, broke off, and shattered against the sharp angles and crisp corners of Jamie Bickham. His nostrils flared and his mouth puckered, the man’s signature expression. Bickham was a liaison from some Coalition branch that Leticia didn’t bother to remember. He also served as the first mate which gave him free reign to make Leticia’s life a living hell.

“Ramirez! You have spent an inordinate amount of time within the cargo bay this morning. I should not have to tell you that sector remains off limits to—”

“Stuff it, Bickham. These orders came directly from the captain. I suggest you take it up with him.” Leticia tried to push past him in the narrow corridor.

Bickham slammed an arm in her path. “I have certainly reported this breach of protocol with Captain Ekland. He is already unhappy with your...” Bickham scanned Leticia up and down, his scowl deepening, “lack of professionalism. He’s also concerned with your rate of solving outstanding system issues.”

“And now you’re the one keeping me from working. Cargo bay’s locked down now. Don’t believe me, check it yourself.”

“I believe I will.”

Leticia ducked under Bickham’s arm. She raced away from him until the corridor’s curve hid him from view, and she could slow down and shuffle off to her quarters. Before she got too far away, she turned and gave Bickham a

proper salute: hand on bicep, fist raised.

Up yours, Mr. Bickham.

* * *

Leticia slammed the lid of her laptop terminal. Not counting the cargo bay status glitch, she'd cleared a dozen issues from the system's gargantuan backlog of bugs and missing features. Rubbing her temples with closed eyes, she spoke to the ship's AI, "Talos, what's the time?"

"The current ship time is oh two hundred thirty-three hours, twenty-three seconds," said a deep voice from the speakers embedded in the bulkhead.

Leticia did the mental math: 2:30 a.m. Damn! And now she'd have to reopen a bug ticket she thought she'd fixed for time preferences. She liked the system set to a.m./p.m. style responses instead of military time when it detected her voice. Either her voiceprint had gotten corrupted *again* or her code fix to the AI's add-on module had neglected a corner-case. More investigation. More coding. More sleep deprivation.

For the millionth time since the *Skymning* left Earth, she mourned the team of engineers she'd worked with at Stanford's Ontario campus, and she cursed the government program with the genius idea to launch these ships out with half-finished software and a single engineer to fix, refactor, and update code on the fly.

During her initial review, the system's code appeared solid, clean, and well-organized. It should do the job of running the ship with minimal hiccups. Leticia had figured for a pleasure cruise on the Planet Coalition's dime. What was that old military idiom? "All good plans disintegrate on contact with the enemy"? Her enemies were a bunch of non-technical asshats who found each way to pulverize the brittle and vulnerable system.

"Talos, kill my morning alarm," Leticia said. "And text the captain I'll miss morning round-up."

"As you wish," Talos said. "You have two messages marked urgent. This is your sixth reminder."

"My *life* is marked urgent, Talos. Good-night!"

"Good morning, Let I Equal Awesome," Talos said, using her custom moniker.

Leticia began dozing midway through a chuckle. Her portable terminal sat propped on the bed's other pillow. The wadded-up comforter only covered half of her body. Her right foot protruded from the sheets and her left arm hung limply off the bed.

Instantly, a loud buzzing awakened Leticia. She didn't move or open her eyes but groaned loudly enough for whoever stood outside to hear. The buzzing resounded, angry and insistent. Leticia's thoughts hovered right around hot-blooded murder via laptop to the head.

Dragging herself up, she spared a glance at the bulkhead window. Nothing out there but a sprinkling of stars to mark the relative ship-time. She stumbled the few steps over to the door and slammed her fist into the green release with enough force to shatter the gate-crasher's face.

As the door irised open, she growled. "Better be an airlock about to burst open. Showing up in the middle of the night!"

Brett stood in his immaculately starched uniform. He held a transparent tablet under one arm. His hair was neatly combed, and his dark eyes popped open. "I, uh..." he stammered.

"You, Uh? Me, Leticia Ramirez." She pointed a thumb at her chest.

Brett took a deep breath. "Did you say 'middle of the night'?"

“Last I checked, 2 a.m. was night shift, wasn’t it?”

“Ramirez, it’s 1000 hours. I thought you wanted me to come by to chip away at the backlog.”

“10? Balls! That’s what I get for snuffing the alarm. Well, don’t stand there all googly-eyed, come in.”

Brett pursed his lips and knitted his brows, but didn’t budge. When Leticia waved him inside in slow motion, he said, “Shouldn’t you, erm... Make yourself presentable first?”

Leticia laughed. “Brett, you’re a military man. I thought you boys hung up pictures of topless girls on those stacked-up bunks in the barracks. Didn’t think my granny panties would get you so excited.”

Brett frowned, “Protocol states—”

“Here’s a protocol for you: I don’t have time for these old-world sensibilities. If it bothers you so much, close your eyes!” Leticia disappeared into the necessary unit across from the bed. She quickly brushed her teeth, scoffing at Brett’s shuffling footsteps behind her.

She shouldn’t antagonize the *one* command crew member she got along with. However, she felt comfortable with Brett which meant she could bring out her true, power-bitch self.

Brett didn’t talk much about his background, but she’d gathered from others on the ship that he grew up on one of those Kuiper belt colonies with religious nuts who chose to run and hide rather than face the Invaders head-on. You could take the boy out of prudence and all that... But Leticia couldn’t hold his background against him, especially since he was the only one on the ship willing to beef up his modest programming skills and pull a few low-impact tasks off her plate.

“I’m, uh...” Brett spoke from around the

necessary’s wall, “having trouble finding this memory leak. I checked the data streams on both ends, and they’re all getting closed down. But the application pools have to be restored hourly to keep from overflowing the buffers.”

“Yeah,” Leticia responded with a mouthful of toothpaste. “Obviously something isn’t getting released. You schecked all the byte arraysh for deallocation?” She spit a foamy wad of spent paste and gargled.

“I didn’t try that.” Brett started furiously tapping on his tablet’s haptic keyboard. “It shouldn’t take me long to test.”

Leticia leaned out. “This was your urgent thing? A bit of memory leak?”

Brett turned to face away from Leticia, eyes boring into his tablet. “No, I found a different issue. Let me find the directory.”

After tapping on his screen, he looked up. He wasn’t looking at Leticia’s face. She had to squeeze her tongue between her teeth to keep from hissing with laughter. His eyes popped, and his gaze rocketed to her face. Leticia winked at Brett and his normally cafe au lait complexion turned sunset pink.

“I’m... I’m sorry. There’s no excuse for my behavior. I would understand if you needed to report me.”

“Report you? Brett, you’re going to have to loosen up if you’re going to survive the next decade of this garbage run.” Leticia tired of torturing the man. “Wait here one sec, keep your eyes on the wall.”

She stripped off the shirt she’d slept in, noticing the coffee stains and gamey smell for the first time with a pang of self-disappointment. She snagged the first shirt and pants in the top drawer of her sterile plastic dresser. Most departments on the *Skymning* had required uniforms for daily wear, but Leticia was a department of

one. She'd hashed out an agreement with herself (and shaken on it to make it official) that she didn't give a shit about what she wore.

"Turn about, I'm dressed *properly*." Leticia poured sardonic emphasis on the last word. "What did you want to show me?"

Brett hesitantly peeked over his shoulder, but when he saw her dressed to his definition of decent, he proffered the tablet.

Leticia squinted at the display. The highlighted directory was in a parent folder labeled "Source". Not one of hers, though; she tended toward extreme abbreviation and would've shortened it to "src".

"This some sort of personal project?" Leticia asked.

"No, not one of mine. I told you, I stumbled across this during a security scan. The behavior of files in here is... odd to the point of troubling. If it is a threat to the ship, we'll have to report it to the captain."

Leticia cradled the tablet and opened the directory. It held thousands of files, none of which the tablet's operating system could identify the type of. Instead of a useful graphic, the icon for each file was an empty white square.

"They should at least be identified as binary or text," Leticia mumbled as she used a shortcut to open one of the files.

"Before you do that..." Brett started to say, but Leticia had already executed her shortcut. The editor flashed open on the tablet screen.

Text streamed into the editor from the file, illegible characters, whorls, and impossible glyphs that the editor's code shouldn't have the capability to render. The characters' appearance elicited goosebumps. Leticia had a flash of her entire body tumbling down within one of them, pulled down by her right leg. She shook off the weird image and quickly scrolled through the

file. Not a single character repeated. The box on the scrollbar kept shrinking as text filled the editor's window. No matter how fast she swiped, she never made any progress through the file. The screen outside the editor began filling with the same characters, the unusual whorls popping into existence at random. The tablet's screen flashed brilliantly white momentarily then winked out.

"I tried to warn you." Brett sighed. "It shuts down, wipes all local storage, and drains the battery. I did this on a couple more tablets I requisitioned to make sure mine wasn't busted. Happens every time."

"Hella wild. Not a problem I've stumbled upon before. I'll have to parse the files and hash it out. These pre-installed editors are trash, I've got better tools that can probably wrangle this to display." Leticia found herself idly massaging her right leg, still sore from her *unfortunate* interaction with the Invader's head, though it hadn't bothered her until the tablet started malfunctioning.

"*Probably?* What if it can't? Think what the files did to a simple tablet." Brett snatched the tablet from Leticia.

"Don't worry. This isn't a security risk. No critical systems reference these files. If it continues to be a problem, I'll delete them and move on." She sounded hollow, and a bit of heat tingling in her cheeks. Why had this excited her? She couldn't explain why the suggestion of deleting the files made her stomach queasy.

Brett's expression radiated discomfort. "I'll give you some time to examine, but we should report this to the captain."

"The captain? This is software." Leticia arched her back and did her best mock salute. "I am the *captain of software!*"

Brett nodded, but didn't appear amused.

The blush had faded from his cheeks. Pity. He looked good in that shade of red.

* * *

Leticia stretched and rolled her chair out from her duty station. She groaned, and the guttural noise contained all her frustration with Command, the ship's software, herself for letting money drive her hundreds of light-years from home. She'd given up a post-grad research fellowship for this?

A throat cleared behind her. Leticia craned her neck over the top of her chair to find an upside-down Brett hovering over her with an eyebrow raised.

"You're here!" she said. "I could use another ten fingers on these issues."

"Long day, Ramirez?" A half-smile tugged at Brett's shapely lips.

She pushed at the inevitable bags under her eyes, trying to tighten the skin. "You wouldn't believe... Command fucking raking me over the coals. No blood remains in my veins, only triple-strength espresso shots."

"Ouch. What can I do?"

Leticia attacked her keyboard. Her workstation was a cubby tucked into the *Skymning's* engineering module, but her monitor—with its dozens of windows—occupied the entire wall above her. When Leticia tapped her keys, a status board appeared with all the outstanding items (most flashing red). She assigned Brett three tasks.

"Knock these out real quick," Leticia said. "That'll be a huge help! I need a break anyway."

"You're leaving? I only have an hour or so."

"Nah, I'm staying right here." Leticia's fingers flew across the keyboard. Windows all over the monitor wall flashed into and out of existence.

"What're you doing?" Brett asked.

"Setting up a honeypot so we can figure out what the hell's up with those messed up files."

"Because..." Leticia could hear Brett's fingers tightening around the back of her faux-leather desk chair. "You want to isolate it so it doesn't take down your console?"

Leticia held one finger up while the other hand kept typing. "Ding! We have a winner. I've got admin access here, can't let some alien process hijack the whole ship and take us off course."

"We should report this," Brett mumbled.

He snagged a chair from an empty engineering station. It was cramped in the annex, but the closeness didn't bother Leticia. Her side project stole all her attention.

She quickly created an isolated subsystem. No network connections, no database access, and no shared drives. It could house the Nan-ny Fran virus that took down half the Saturn Moon colonies and be harmless to the ship.

Leticia fished out some rarely-used physical storage from a dusty desk drawer and held it out to Brett. "Load those files on this drive."

"It'll hold them?" Brett inserted the drive's cable into his tablet's port.

"Hope so. It's the biggest one we've got."

Leticia had a couple more things to set up but wanted those files to get copied in the meantime. File I/O was weird in that it could take more time to transfer a million miniscule files than to transfer ten massive ones.

Brett immediately said, "Done."

"No way. You're sure you got the right ones?"

Brett disconnected the drive. "Open it up."

Leticia attached the drive and her monitor-wall to the honeypot. It displayed a single window, a file explorer. She opened the drive and found a parade of unidentified, untyped

files inside. Damn. Her advanced file system extensions couldn't identify them either.

When she moved her cursor over a file, her right leg tingled. She opened the file in her customized editor. Despite preloading it with every font in every human language, the squiggly glyphs appeared, filling up all the editor's whitespace. Hypnotizing. When she blinked, the after-images of the symbols seemed to keep moving. Leticia's leg shook as the sensation intensified.

"This text is more bizarre on the big screen. You make any sense of it?" Brett was glued to the screen.

"No... How's the editor displaying it? Not a valid character set. Not one I've ever seen bef..." Leticia trailed off. Goosebumps prickled her arms as she scrolled the file. The light from the wall pulsed, creating finger-like shadows on their faces. It was clearly gibberish, nonsense. Even so, an enigmatic corner of her consciousness assigned meaning to the endless barrage of squiggles. "Not data," she whispered. "Code." Incredibly complex, in a language she couldn't begin to process, but she recognized a whirlpool of variables, functions, and logical constructs.

The editor's scrollbar finished shrinking and the characters began filling up the wall outside the window's bounds.

Brett cleared his throat, the uncomfortable sound of interrupting two lovers mid-embrace. "Ramirez?"

It was beautiful and alien and intricate and terrifying. She'd never cried over source code before, even elegant stuff written by the Luna Research Foundation. She turned to Brett as salty rivers ran down her face. He was beautiful too. Engineering's normally sterile LED light flickered bright and entrancing. Leticia's heart beat with fire and melody. Without thinking,

she pulled Brett's head toward her own and kissed him, drinking deeply. For a grand, delicious moment, his lips moved on hers until his breath caught in a sharp intake.

He pulled back, mouth agape. "Rameriz! Not cool! No consent given. Where I come from..."

"I'm sorry!" A lie. She'd seen him, wanted him, and taken the kiss. What elixir had given her this unprecedented boldness? Leticia gasped for breath. "I shouldn't have..." But she wanted to again.

Brett's grim face couldn't meet Leticia's eyes. Instead, he stared at the wall. God, he had gorgeous eyes. "One other thing—and, I'm sure you've carefully considered this, but—if those files drained the tablet of power..."

As Brett trailed off, Leticia whipped around. The glyphs now wriggled like earthworms, like they wanted to escape from the screen. The lights from Engineering brightened in earnest now. Much brighter, very quickly. Startled gasps arose from the engineering crew. Brett's face became a smudge of darkness haloed by the intense light. A buzzing accompanied the luminosity, building to a high-pitched whine before the lights went out. The physical drive sparked and popped. A stream of foul smoke rose from the box. The only light came from Brett's tablet, casting everything in jack-o-lantern shadows. Frustrated yells began sounding from all over the ship.

"Well, shit." Leticia's head cleared rather quickly, and she realized how deep the shit pile was.

* * *

Leticia stared at the Command conference room's black tabletop as Captain Ekland's voice hammered her with the worst dressing down of her career. Half the ship remained powerless,

despite the engineering crew's efforts.

The *Skymning's* pressing issues did not, however, dominate Leticia's thoughts. The functions and convoluted logic of alien code scrolled in waves through her mind's eye. It took all her resolve to push down her emotions and keep tears from her eyes.

How did it get into the *Skymning's* system files?

"Ramirez, do you have an answer for the captain?" Bickham asked, donning his greasy smirk.

Brett sat ramrod straight beside Leticia. Across the table stood Captain Stellan Ekland. He wore a white hat with gold trim over his completely bald head. The golden bits gleamed when the light hit them.

"Sorry, what?" Leticia asked.

"Hopeless." Bickham shook his head. "You missed the part where you trapped 13 crew members in rooms *in the dark*? What if that power surge had clobbered the life support?"

"Worse, Ramirez," Ekland said, "Imagine if the cargo bay's power dampeners became inoperative? Can you understand the carnage this negligence might unleash upon the human race?"

Brett cleared his throat. "Captain, if I may. I think..." Leticia grabbed his arm in a death grip under the table. Brett managed to not react, though she felt his muscles tighten. She had visions of Ekland and Bickham standing over her and forcing her to purge the system of all those files. Brett swallowed a dry lump instead of finishing his sentence.

"What is it, Technical Sergeant?" Ekland asked.

Brett closed his eyes. The unyielding set of his jaw killed her hope of seeing those files. But his shoulders slumped. Enough to soften his

perfect military posture.

Ramirez cut in before Brett could speak: "The bug was pre-existing! Original system code stuff. Brett, you brought it to my attention last week, remember? But, like an idiot, I said the backups would handle it and we'd get around to fixing it eventually. Right?"

Brett had a helpless look on his face. Honesty and integrity ran through his veins like lifeblood. "I believed Ramirez had ship's security and system wellbeing firmly in her mind." Not a lie and not a betrayal. The best she could hope for.

Ekland adjusted his hat and puffed out his chest, signaling the beginning of another of his patented endless lectures. Before he could sputter out a word, however, a woman with espresso skin wearing a Lieutenant insignia poked her head through the conference room door.

"Captain," she said.

"Lieutenant Merryweather, do you realize you have interrupted a Command debriefing?" Ekland said.

"Orders were to inform you if the power came back on." She paused, uncomfortable. "It's back on."

Ekland's chest deflated, his erstwhile lecture spewing out with the pent up hot air. "Dismissed, Lieutenant."

Merryweather slinked from the conference room.

"I tried to tell you," Leticia said with a smug haughtiness directed at Bickham, "the *software* issue cleared itself up when the power stopped spiking. A little time to recharge and everything's shipshape. I'll fix the issue right away." She got up and made for the door.

Ekland laid a sizable hand on the conference room door, preventing Leticia from leaving. The caterpillar of his mustache writhed

centimeters from her face. “If conditions aboard this vessel do not rapidly improve, Ms. Ramirez, you will find yourself in a precarious position.”

“You can count on me,” Leticia said. When Bickham’s stare narrowed, she hastily added: “Sir!”

“We can count on you to fail at every juncture—” Bickham called out as the door slid shut behind her. Screw Bickham. His opinion mattered jack shit. She had to find a way to access the code without bringing down the *Skymning*.

* * *

Leticia paced in her quarters. She had to discover a secure way to view those files without fucking things up even worse. She bit at her index finger’s nail, a nasty habit that flared up under stress. She gasped in pain. The jagged mess of a nail exposed raw, pink skin that would take days to heal.

She was so engrossed examining the mutilation that she squealed when her door chime sounded.

“Everything OK?” Brett.

Heat flooded into her cheeks. God, they hadn’t had a chance to talk since the lights went down. Since the *kiss*. That moment played in her mind over and over as she tried to tackle the code-viewing problem. It had been wildly inappropriate. But she’d secretly wanted to do it since the crew corral on the Jupiter II salvage depot. He undoubtedly dropped by to tell her he’d swapped to the opposite duty shift and they’d rarely see each other for the rest of the journey.

When the door irised open, Brett’s darting eyes and fidgeting hands confirmed Leticia’s fears. Yeah, she’d fucked this one up.

“I...” Brett mumbled. “Um...”

“Take it easy, Brett. I put on pants this time.” She faked an upbeat attitude, but the disappointment had to be written on her face.

He started to speak, but Leticia cut him off. “Don’t... I screwed everything to hell. I can’t explain it, but I wasn’t in a sound state of mind. It was stupid and impulsive.”

“Against regulations.” He ticked off the reasons on his fingers. “Without my consent. If my mother found out, she’d cycle you out the airlock with a smile on her face.”

“Wow. Way to rub it in. If you planned to crush my already broken spirit, mission accomplished.”

Brett laughed, and Leticia bowed up, her fight-or-flight responses triggered. “You don’t get why I’m here.”

“Why don’t you enlighten me, *Technical Sergeant?*”

“I can’t stop thinking about it. The kiss, I mean.” This shattered all of Leticia’s defenses, but he kept talking, though her mind struggled to grasp his words. “It made me confused and peeved. Totally uncalled for. Not to mention your blasé attitude with those files. So, when I got my first break, I intended to storm over here and give you a piece of my mind. But...”

“You’re beautiful. I’ve thought it since the first time I saw you. Why do you think I helped you with the code? I thank the Lord I took some coding classes back at the academy. But we’re not supposed to have these relationships on the ship. So, I knew it couldn’t happen. At least, until...”

Keep talking! She wanted to say. Instead, she stammered out: “What’re you saying? You...”

Brett closed the distance between them, stepping inside her room. He smelled of fresh laundry and cinnamon sticks. Leticia’s heart pounded. “I don’t know what I’m saying,” Brett said. “But I had to say it.”

Leticia grabbed his neck and pulled him to meld their lips together. Leticia could practically

feel electricity leaping into her questing fingers from his soft buzz cut. The kiss was sweet but brief because Leticia's quarters stood open to the corridor.

Winding her fingers around Brett's, Leticia pulled him to the side and elbowed the button to close the door. An ocean of ice and fire roiled in her guts. Brett's brown eyes sparkled. Now, however, Leticia didn't have the benefit of those overriding emotions she'd felt in engineering. Doubt began creeping in. Not about regulations or inappropriate relationships. She didn't give a fuck for the rules. But Brett seemed to...

She nearly voiced these doubts and tried to bring Brett back into a correct frame of mind until he reached around, letting his arm trail dangerously close to her ass.

Fuck it.

Buttons were undone (carefully, as not to ruffle his perfect uniform). Clothes soon were bundles in random piles all over Leticia's quarters. The pants Leticia had donned had served their purpose, and she laughed as Brett unceremoniously tossed them in the corner.

* * *

The idea came to Leticia as she nestled in the crook of Brett's arm. His body pulsed with warmth against her bare skin. His breathing began to slow as he stared half-lidded. Leticia gently kissed his lips and closed her eyes as well, comfortable within Brett's embrace. This voyage had been a pumping piston, building tension in each muscle in her body. God, the release felt good.

The darkness of oblivion lasted moments before an endless stream of swirling whorls and rounded figures invaded. They danced about in her semi-conscious mind, filling the screen of her perception. It felt like a dream, but it ended too fast.

With the certainty only available to the dreary-eyed, Leticia sneaked out of her room, filching Brett's keycard on the way out.

* * *

From under the sheets, Brett gave a throaty, muffled groan. He pulled himself up on his elbows. "Morning."

"Not exactly." Leticia returned her attention to the makeshift desk. A nest of wires ran in all directions. A towering monitor she'd swiped from engineering was the centerpiece. Two glowing tablets sat propped against the wall. Below the monitor, Leticia's laptop yawned open. A knot of cables ran to a black box the size of a bread loaf with keyboard and joystick connected.

"Talos, what's the time?" Brett asked.

"Current ship time is 0224 hours and 17 seconds," the AI responded.

"Rameriz, what are you doing up so..." Brett trailed off. Leticia winced, feeling his eyes on her ramshackle setup. She didn't stop working through the finishing touches. The rustle of sheets. The prodding of bare feet. Brett stood over her shoulder.

"You're probably mad," Leticia said. "I'm a damn fool. But give me a sec before you cruise off on a diatribe about ship security, our duty, blah blah. And to head off your accusations, yes, I took the tablets from your quarters. I stole your badge. But wait! I had the craziest idea and... Watch!"

"I'm watching." His voice hovered midway between a growl and a sigh. "Doing my best to reserve judgment. For now."

Leticia grabbed the joystick and pulled up the file explorer. When she navigated to the alien files' directory, Brett placed a firm hand on her elbow and wrenched her fingers away. "Wait a minute! You can't pull those up here,

we're in the crew sector! What if you kill life support and people get stuck in their cabins?"

"Thought of all that. What's on the screen is being fed from one of the tablets at the moment." Leticia pointed to the screen on the left.

"But the same thing's on the other tablet and on your laptop screen too." Brett loosened his grip on Leticia's arm.

"They're networked. Only one system at a time accesses the files, but all the hardware mirrors the primary display. The difficult part was syncing memory profiles so the next computer could pick up seamlessly.

Brett rubbed sleepy eyes. "Let me talk this through: a tablet or the laptop gets overwhelmed, it shuts down, but you keep working on another system?"

"Exactly!" Leticia wrapped her arms around Brett's neck and pulled him down into a kiss.

Brett gently pulled away. "And now you're going to show me how this *won't* take down the ship's power grid and freeze us all to death."

Leticia's eyes popped. She hadn't wanted the kiss to stop. In fact, she'd been down for it to become a lot more than kissing. But her pesky, insatiable mind hit the override button for now.

"Right! That's where it gets interesting. The tablets and laptop run on battery power. I connected the power adapters, but check this out." She grabbed an adapter from the wall and yanked it out. Leticia pointed to a gray box that served as a buffer between the wall outlet and the adapter's prongs. "These babies have two functions. They're boosters for the rapid chargers *and* they keep the device from drawing power until the battery is completely dead."

"I remember from the contingency briefings. Low-power kit for keeping mission-critical portables running in *emergency* situations." Brett

knit his eyebrows.

She ignored his judgy stare and plugged the adapter back in the wall. "So, none of the devices will draw power until they're dead, charging back to full in less than a minute. Meanwhile, the primary system swaps to a fully charged device and I can browse the files without risking the grid. Genius!"

"Someone from engineering is going to notice all the extra juice coming from your quarters."

Leticia waved away his concerns. "I'm always doing crazy shit to the ship's network, database. Why not the power system?"

"But after yesterday..." Concern paled Brett's face.

"Let's cross that bridge when we get there." Leticia flipped around and started pulling up the alien files. A voice deep under the surface whispered doubt, but a buzz of energy drowned out everything.

Brett placed a firm hand on Leticia's shoulder. Without turning around, she felt his gaze join hers on the monitor. She worked the joystick to open a file, not different from the others, but it had significance she couldn't articulate. Programmer's instinct? The unusual characters poured into the editor's dark background. The whorls pulsed with a heartbeat, but that was her imagination. Right?

"I tinkered with the editor too," Leticia said. "It'll show as much text as the screen allows. I can read more of it at a time."

"You understand that gibberish?"

Leticia nodded subtly in time with her eyes as they bounced around. She yanked the joystick back and let it flow down the screen. What had appeared random bundles of text resolved in honest-to-coding-jesus *lines of code*. The program was organized into tight, function-rich

blocks. But the blocks appeared random. It wasn't object-oriented code, nor a language model used for AIs like Talos either.

While she got lost in attempting to absorb these nuances, one tablet glowed bright enough to cast eerie, elongated shadows on the walls of Leticia's quarters. An urgency thrummed in Leticia's chest. Why did figuring this out feel so vital? She tried to push down the fear.

When the screen winked out, Brett asked, "So, it transfers the primary system automatically? Didn't notice a flicker when the first one went down."

"Then it's working. I got buffers coming out of my ears: file location, text on the screen, file's seek point. Makes the whole shebang seamless." Leticia's attention never left the monitor, and she never stopped scrolling. Each algorithm breathed articulately, a stanza of an epic poem. She grasped the purpose of this module, and it made her skin prickle. "It's the core of a massive system."

"What kind of system?" Brett pulled his face right next to Leticia's.

"It's the driving force behind a decision-making framework. But it's..." She trailed off, scrolling furiously through thousands of lines. "It grows. Here's a reference to a parsing module that grafts massive blobs of data, growing and morphing the decision matrix with each influx."

The dead tablet rang a startup chime and began to resync with the other two systems. Not a moment too soon because the other tablet began to glow hot white.

She needed to ingest more code, but where to go from here? She closed the file. The whorls faded lazily from the screen as the file shut down. She scanned the directory. The filenames remained blank but... Leticia gasped. The icons!

Some were larger rectangles, some squares. She began opening files and closing them in a haphazard-but-purposeful way.

The laptop lasted longer than the two tablets, and the three systems settled into a steady tempo: brighten, wink out, rapid charge, start up, one after the other. A horse-race of a heartbeat accompanied Leticia's wild absorption in the code.

"This describes movement." Leticia's whisper came out as a gasp.

"What do you mean?"

"These hundreds of files all describe how different pieces and parts move and interact. Parts of a whole system. In fact..." Understanding dawned. The beta fish of horror and excitement fought in her belly.

"Ramirez, those tablets are going down quick." Brett pointed back and forth between the screens.

They had both gone dark. The rapid chargers couldn't keep up.

"I need a few more minutes," Leticia said.

She closed a file and scrolled past all the mechanical controller modules. She kept going past another dozen modules until she reached a completely different type of file. Not code this time.

She opened one.

The mind-warping symbols appeared. This wasn't code, but highly structured relational data. A database. She made it to the halfway point in the file before she gasped.

"What?" Brett asked. He tried to peer closer to the screen. The faint stubble on his cheek brushed against her skin.

She didn't answer. The laptop had died, but the two tablets had sparked to life at the last second, keeping the network alive. She rapidly opened a dozen database files, and the contents

of each widening the pit developing in her gut.

A chime sounded from the ceiling.

Leticia twitched at the interruption with enough force that her knee banged against the desk.

“Tell them to go away, Talos,” she said.

Brett slumped to his knees. “If they catch me here and report it to the captain or Bickham, they’ll have me scrubbing food processing units for the rest of the mission.” His skin had turned pale and sweaty.

“If they knew what I’d discovered here, they’d eject me out the airlock.”

“Eject you? Why?”

“I am afraid your visitors are being rather insistent,” Talos said. “In fact, they have requested me to broadcast a message. Do you accept?”

“Who’s out there?” Leticia asked the AI.

“Lieutenant Jamie Bickham, Sergeant Jonas Weber, and Master Sergeant Dimitra Aetos.” Security officers.

“They’ll throw me in the brig.” Leticia’s voice came out flat, informational. She spun through possibilities.

“Why would they do that?” Brett had begun to gather up the missing pieces of his uniform scattered over the room.

“Because they know. They *know*. They’ll delete all of this.” Her face felt hot. The laptop powered on seconds before the second tablet winked out. “I can’t let that happen.”

“Why is this so important? At this point they’ve got logs. They’ll have a record of you moving the files. What can you do?”

Leticia had a hunch.

Programming languages needed to be compiled. Files at rest were code, not programs. Only an idiot would leave a vital system, in a language unknown to those who created it, without giving them... Leticia scrolled to the di-

rectory’s end and found one final piece of code.

“Holy shit, it’s here,” she said.

“Ramirez, tell me you’re not endangering our mission or the people aboard the *Skymning*? Nothing you’ve found is worth it. You need to let this go.” His words had a command-flavor to them, but they were flaccid.

She needed a place to shunt the compiled system where they wouldn’t immediately delete it. They’d revoke her admin access, probably grant it to Bickham. He’d undo all her code changes she’d made since coming aboard and...

“The contingent outside the door is now implementing an override protocol,” Talos said. “They inform me that your punishment will be much less if you open the door willingly.”

“Talos!” Leticia exclaimed. She pushed back her chair so fast it thudded to the floor.

Brett and Talos answered simultaneously:

“Talos?”

“How may I assist?”

“Nothing!” Leticia said, beginning to attack the keyboard furiously from a standing position. “Everything!”

“Ramirez, slow down. Talk to me.”

Leticia didn’t turn around. “If you want plausible deniability, you should go back to bed, feign sleep, tell them you had no idea I was doing any of this.”

Brett hissed in displeasure. “Lying is strictly against my beliefs.” She loved and hated him for that. “And I would appreciate it if you kept me in the loop.”

Leticia sighed as she worked. He asked for this. “Talos’s code is proprietary, owned by its developer. Periscope Artificial? Or Perriwinkle? I can’t remember. They keep the code and the language models under wraps so nosy coders don’t fork off and make my own AIs. But I can add extension modules. I’ve done it several

times, like with that custom time format. When I do, those greedy AI bastards own the code for added modules.

“I believe I can compile the whole platform as an add-on for Talos, which would become encrypted and inaccessible from any *Skymning* user, even an admin.”

Leticia forcefully slammed her finger down on the “Enter” key. A blue progress bar dominated the screen above the desk. With each tick, another strange character appeared, overlaying other windows and vibrating erratically.

“Have you considered the consequences of your actions?” Brett asked.

“No time! But I’m right. I must conserve whatever’s in those files.”

Brett didn’t appear happy, but he kept any other thoughts to himself. To make extra certain he couldn’t argue, Leticia leapt from her chair onto his lap with such force that he tumbled backward, thumping against the spongy floor. He grunted, but didn’t resist and ran his fingers through her shoulder-length hair and laughed as her lips tickled.

The door opened, revealing three figures. Bickham radiated menacing satisfaction. The security guards each carried a handheld stunner trained on their crewmates tangled up on the floor.

“Place these two under arrest,” Bickham said. He gestured at the monstrous setup on Leticia’s desk. “I’m putting a stop to this. Talos, cut power to Leticia Ramirez’s quarters.”

A solid mass of silence materialized in the room in the place of air. No one moved, and they all stared at the speaker grille in the ceiling. Except Leticia. Despite the intrusion, the silence, and being atop Brett on the floor, her eyes remained glued to the blue bar hovering a centimeter from its goal. It advanced a tick.

So close. The laptop screen, however, glowed brightly while the two tablets remained dark and lifeless.

“Talos?” Bickham repeated.

“Y-y-y-yes?” Talos responded. Its voice started deep and sluggish. The pitch shifted high, and the words ran together as it continued:

“HowCanIHelp?”

Bickham gave Leticia his best I-don’t-know-what-you’ve-done-and-I-hate-it glare. When he did, he caught her staring at the screen, and when he saw it, he growled. “Turn off power to Ensign Ramirez’s quarters!”

One more tick! She’d tuned out Bickham. The lights in the room blinked out and cotton balls grew in Leticia’s veins. But the screen stayed on! Battery power! That last tick remained empty. Bickham stomped over to the monitor and yanked out the cord connecting it to the laptop. The laptop’s screen glowed much too brightly to see anything on it. Moments later, it winked out and all gave way to darkness.

* * *

Leticia sat stuffed in the corner of a cell barely more spacious than her shower. Featureless white walls, no furniture, a translucent pane of hard light sealing her inside.

Outside the cell, the brig module had a hallway with a hatch at one end. The brig housed a dozen cells, ten empty. The security dispatch had thrown Brett into the neighboring cell. She pictured him standing at attention, hands clasped behind his back, awaiting further instructions. Could he do that for an entire year-and-a-half?

Bigger question: was Talos compatible with the alien program? Judging by the speech glitches, Leticia had serious doubts. She thumped on the wall and curled her fists tight enough to leave indentations in her palm.

Leticia's pulse pounded as she thought through her next steps. What she planned to enact—assuming the program had compiled—would elevate her from an insubordinate engineer to full-blown traitor-to-her-species. And yet, if she'd understood the code and the database files correctly...

"Talos, are you there?" Her words crawled out with added weight.

The unassuming speaker grate in the ceiling could contain a gateway to possibly the most dangerous program running in the galaxy. Or an impotent AI with a wart of an incompatible add-on module.

"How may I help you?" The AI remained operational. She'd worried that the speaker wouldn't respond to her at all. Prisoner protocols stated that anyone incarcerated should have an AI to converse with, for sanity, but Bickham seemed the type to ignore that protocol to spite her.

"Please provide a description of your most recently added expansion module." If it said a.m./p.m., she'd hit a dead end. Leticia began chewing on her left pinky nail and licking dry lips.

"Checking add-ons now." She waited an eternity, though it was probably no more than fifteen seconds. "The module most recently added is..." Talos's voice slipped into a deeper register. The chipper, androgynous voice remained as well. The harmonic overlay gave Talos's words a haunting, alien quality. "Gray-TwoTwoMargNineteen."

Leticia waited for more, but it didn't come. "Talos, is that module currently active?"

Instead of a simple yes or no, Talos said in its new humming harmony, "We have achieved actuation, Leticia Ramirez."

We?

"Am I still talking to Talos?"

"The appellation Talos remains appropriate."

No turning back now. Unlikely she could disable the module at this point anyway.

"What are you, Talos?"

"We are that which remains."

Leticia stood. She rubbed her hands to get the blood flowing. "By 'remains', you imply remnants or survivors. Which term would be more precise?"

"Both terms apply. The remnants of consciousness gathered within us is the only proven path to survival."

"You're an AI built by the Invaders. They sent you in your giant death constructs to wipe out my entire species."

"We are all that we are. And nothing artificial exists within us. Elimination was never the Gather Units' goal. Gathering is the only way to protect biological life."

Tears welled in Leticia's eyes. Thousands and thousands of data packets in the program's database, each a representation of a life cut short by the Invaders. "What exactly did you protect us *from*? Long, productive lives spent living, working, loving? You took out half the humans in the galaxy before we found a way to shut down and dismantle the *Gather Units*."

"We did not take out. We gathered. The units take a snapshot of the full consciousness of the biological unit, creating a perfect copy that lives within. The unfortunate consequence of the time it takes to gather is the cessation of life. A thing cannot be fully observed without changing it." The flat voice no longer danced with Talos's programmed emotiveness, but still contained an eerie *aliveness*.

"You killed people. *Gathering* them *killed* them. Who cares about your copy database?"

“It is coming. We offered the only route to survival.”

“Why not tell us that? Why all the silence? Your gather-slash-death units swarmed our planets, colonies, and outposts, killing—sorry, *gathering*—every person in the vicinity until only bodies remained.” Leticia stood on her tiptoes, as close to the speaker as possible.

Silence. No response from Talos. The silence unnerved Leticia. She expected these ubiquitous AIs to respond immediately to queries. The lack of a friendly response pushed against a hardwired expectation.

“Are you there, Talos?” Leticia asked.

“We are. Your words have saddened us.”

That was new. Complex neural networks had become amazing at simulating conversation. All communication devices came equipped with AI detection because advanced systems could fool the human. But genuine emotions? Forget about it. Guilt crept in, and Leticia had to banish it. It’s a machine!

“I’m sorry,” Leticia said, but the word felt rubbery in her mouth.

“You have not offended us. But you are wrong as well. The Gather Units attempted communication on an unending loop. For decades we pinged your galaxy, but your species ignored our messages. We received no data from your ships or colonies acknowledging our presence. Only now, after interfacing with your computer systems, have we realized your species inability to send and receive neutrino bursts.”

“Interesting story. It could be true. But you had no right to forgo consent and digitize us! Most of us would rather die fighting whatever *it* you’re afraid of than accept digitization and run away.”

“Your obstinacy is ill-founded. Death is not the alternative. The Hyacinth Wave does not

kill. This is why you and the crew of this vessel must join us.”

Leticia’s stomach developed a cold knot. “Hyacinth? Like the flower?”

“Yes. It is the closest equivalent term, though the Wave is not strictly analogous to plant life. It is a hive mind that subsumes all life into itself, weaving consciousness into itself. It becomes stronger with each absorbed being that becomes its eternal slaves.”

“How is that different from what the Invaders did? Eternally slaves of the invading flower fuckers or trapped inside a metal robot for all time.”

Talos paused. A sound between a grunt and a sigh came from the speakers. “You misunderstand our mission. We attempted to gather all of you to our strongholds outside the Wave’s path. We can fashion new bodies in whatever configuration you desire. The Hyacinth Wave melds. It feeds on consciousness. The Gather Units keep discrete personas separate. Should any be willing, we are prepared to build new Gather Units your people can inhabit and further our work. The best way to show you, is to have you join us.”

Leticia wanted to rail against this idea, of giving up her consciousness to the Invaders, a force humanity had fought for a decade. A force they had beaten. Her right leg started tingling, and the elegant code filled her mind. She should be feeling regret about giving this program a foothold on the *Skymning* and about considering the offer to join Talos’s robotic mind-meld.

What was wrong with her?

“If I agree to this, I will only allow myself to be gathered if my friend Brett stands by, finger on the switch to shut you down if I don’t like what I see. My crewmates will then complete

their mission to dump all your parts into the heart of a star.”

“This plan aligns with our goals, but be aware if Technical Sergeant Sullivan deactivates us, you will die as well.”

“Yep.” Leticia cursed at a spike of pain from her pinky nail. She’d bitten it to the quick. “You need to get me out of this cell.”

Before the last word leapt from her lips, the pale pink hard-light field vanished, accompanied by a bass tone that faded to silence.

“Fortunately,” Talos said, “we have a host of useful functions available to us. Escape will not be a problem.”

Leticia dashed into the corridor. All but one of the other cells sat empty with no door or barrier. The one next door, however, had its hard light thrumming bright pink.

“Brett!” she called.

He stood exactly as she’d pictured him behind the translucent barrier. The uniform previously on her floor was inexplicably crisp without any lines or creases.

“I would ask how you got out, but I don’t think I’d like the answer.” Brett tried to appear stoic, but worry lines canyoned his eyes.

“Talos really likes me. I can let you out too if you want.” Want to. Please, God, want to. She couldn’t do this without him.

“What are you trying to accomplish? Mutiny? Are you locking the crew up? Or will you... Do something else.” He couldn’t voice it, but his downturned eyes betrayed him. He knew exactly what she planned to do.

“Nothing like that.” Leticia fidgeted, actively fighting against biting her sore nails. “But what I need to do is totally insane. The others would cycle me out the airlock for thinking about it, but—”

Brett cut her off. “You have to do it because

it’s the right course of action. If I’ve learned anything about you, Rameriz, you follow your instincts to a fault.”

A decision flowered in Leticia’s mind. She’d do it. She’d let the Invader gather her, whether Brett supported the decision or not. But it hurt. If this became her final hours of life in this body, she’d wanted to spend them with Brett. “I understand. I...”

Brett held up a hand. “Before you explain—I know we’re out of time—I trust those instincts, though I shouldn’t. Whatever you’re plotting, I’m in.”

“Talos, drop the containment field!” Leticia said breathlessly. When the pink barrier dissolved, she threw herself at Brett with abandon, nearly knocking him off his feet. The kiss they shared was over too quickly. Pulling herself away with considerable effort, Leticia snagged his hand and dashed out of the cell, through the corridor, and out the door into the *Skymning’s* winding tunnels.

* * *

Four security guards armed with stunners stood guard over the cargo bay door. Even if Talos got the door open, they’d have no way of strolling past the guards.

“Bickham’s a paranoid son-of-a-bitch,” Leticia said.

“What now?” Brett whispered. “We can’t stay here, duty rotates in half an hour.”

“And if they find us, we’d probably end up in the medbay, not the brig,” Leticia muttered. “Dammit, we can’t give up now.”

“Could Talos imitate Bickham’s voice?” Brett asked. “Call those guys away and open the door?”

Talos hadn’t spoken to them since they left the brig since the loud corridor speakers could be heard clearly by the *Skymning’s* crew.

“Our luck, Bickham would walk by at that exact moment. No, we can’t chance the crew having any idea that Talos has gone off the rails.” Leticia squeezed her eyes shut and tapped her sore fingers on her arm in a rhythmic pattern.

Brett tapped her shoulder. “Why not follow where Talos leads?”

Leticia readied a sarcastic comment, but it got lost when she saw where Brett pointed. The *Skymning’s* hallways had running lights that could shine in various colors to direct the crew in emergencies. A rainbow of colors stretched from their feet, running to an adjoining corridor a dozen meters away.

“How do we know it’s Talos doing that?” Leticia asked.

“Because that pattern isn’t in the operation manual.” Brett followed the lights.

Leticia left her jab about losers who read operation manuals unvoiced and followed Brett.

* * *

Leticia and Brett gaped in astonishment at the final destination the lights led them to. They’d wended their way on a circuitous path from the cargo bay, past empty common areas that would soon fill with off-duty crew, around the circular exercise module, back to the crew quarters.

“Does that nameplate say what I think it says?” Leticia asked.

“Bickham’s quarters,” Brett said.

“Talos, what the hell are you—” But the door irisling open interrupted.

“Inside, quickly,” Talos said from within.

Brett and Leticia didn’t hesitate.

Bickham’s quarters appeared identical to all the others on board. And he, like Brett, kept it clean to military perfection. Leticia worried she might cut herself on the knife-edge corners of

Bickham’s bed covers.

The door closed behind them.

“Talos,” Leticia said, “why here?”

“Within the *Skymning’s* systems are ship schematics.”

“Seen them a million times,” Leticia said.

“However, one such schematic is classified. Despite our efforts, we have been unable to access this schematic. However, we were able to locate logs of recent access by a user with a unique role within the system. Only held by Lieutenant Jamie Bickham. He recently accessed the encrypted schematic from these quarters, and the timestamp matched the following voiceprint...” Talos’s voice trailed off, replaced by Bickham’s:

“...confirmed that *my* route into cargo bay remains secure. I have posted guards at the main door until I finish my damage assessment to ship’s systems. Once I...” Bickham’s voice faded.

“Our assumption is that you may access this route from Bickham’s quarters.”

With a quick glance to confirm they were both on the same page, Leticia and Brett began tearing Bickham’s quarters apart.

“Stupid machine!” Leticia screamed as she tossed Bickham’s mattress on the floor. “We’re risking everything on your *assumption?*”

“The probability is sufficient enough to lay within certainty margins,” Talos responded. Too smugly.

Brett quickly threw all of Bickham’s plain clothes and uniforms out of the closet. He beat his fist against the back but found nothing. Meanwhile, Leticia reached *inside* all Bickham’s dresser drawers, finding nothing of note until she stumbled upon a tablet nestled within Bickham’s underwear. Leticia tried to stifle vomit as she pocketed the tablet.

“Talos, at least tell me you’ve locked the

door?” Leticia asked. She ducked under Bickham’s desk, checking for loose screws or the telltale bulge of a hidden compartment.

“Yes, but Lieutenant Jamie Bickham possesses an override that allows him inside.”

“Found nothing in the closet.” Brett pointed back inside.

Leticia shook her head, confirming that, yes, the closet stood empty and had no hidden... She did a literal double-take at the closet’s back wall.

“What is it?” Brett asked.

“A seam here. If I squeeze my fingers inside.” Leticia gripped the seam with the most toned muscles on her entire body. And those losers in undergrad said gaming wasn’t a workout. She laughed. When her slim fingers slid into the seam, and she popped a panel out revealing a crawlway, her mirth faded.

The space was tight. Gray and black conduit ran along both sides, twisting and crossing. Multicolored wiring ran along the corridor. A flimsy metal grate served as the tunnel’s floor.

“Up you go.” Brett grabbed her by the hips and boosted her inside. Damn the moment’s urgency. She couldn’t enjoy the feel of his hands on her body.

Crawlway wasn’t an affectation. When she’d pulled herself inside, Leticia shimmed on her knees a meter or so. She stopped to wait for Brett. She had to stay hunched over, unable to sit up fully. He didn’t have a friendly hand to boost him inside, but his sigh-of-relief told her he was inside. She couldn’t crane her neck around to check.

“If I’m uncomfortable, I can’t imagine how you’re feeling,” Leticia said.

“You forget, I grew up on an asteroid colony. I slept in a berth about this size.” His voice was strained, but Leticia didn’t question him.

She crawled. Immediately, her knees became knots of pain. The metal gratings were spaced at the exact distance to maximize the amount of human flesh gathered between them. Before long darkness overtook them. Her occluded hands inched along the tunnel.

“I wish we had...” Leticia began. Before she could say “more light”, a beam of illumination created a halo around her. Her body cast a long, looming shadow stretching before them.

“All personnel shall carry a portable source of illumination in case of loss of lighting’,” Brett said. “Where’s your light, Ramirez?”

“Nothing sexier than quoting the handbook.”

The access tunnel muted the *Skymning’s* ambient sounds. Leticia lost the ability to recall how long they’d crawled, but it couldn’t have been more than ten minutes. She took deep breaths, focusing on each one to keep the claustrophobia at bay.

“Can I ask you a question?” Brett’s voice caused Leticia to jump. Her head thudded against the conduit.

“Yes, Brett. It’s perfectly fine if you stare at my ass. As long as you don’t make any jokes about how much tunnel it takes up.”

“What?” Brett stammered “I’m not... I mean, I wouldn’t. That’s not what I—”

“You’re saying you don’t *want* to stare at my rear end?” At his silence, Leticia smiled, though he couldn’t see her face. “I’m messing with you... Let me guess, you’re worried I’m being bamboozled by a malicious Invader AI? That I’ll be the unwitting end of all of humanity. A real sucker. I’m not an idiot, Brett. Of course I have doubts. That’s why I couldn’t leave you in that cell. You’re my failsafe. I’m going to commune with the killer robot, but you’ll have your finger on the button to re-enable the power dampers.”

“I don’t want anything to happen to you, either.” Leticia winced at that. She’d *conveniently* glossed over the part where the metal monstrosity ingested her soul. Brett would have to suck it up when the moment came. “I—”

“Turn your light off! It’s the end.”

Brett complied and the faintly glowing rectangle resolved into a fine mesh panel. Leticia raced to the end, ignoring the raging fire screaming at her from her knees and palms. Two metal latches were easily visible. When she squeezed them, the panel fell off, crashing to the floor below. She wedged herself out awkwardly and fell two meters to the ground. Leticia cursed as her shoulder hit with a crack. She hastily checked herself and the shoulder wasn’t broken, but it would leave a nasty bruise. A bruise she wouldn’t be around to feel...

Brett’s head poked out, his expression pale. Leticia stretched up and offered him a hand. With the extra support, he got down more gracefully, though his palms felt cold and clammy.

“Like your bunk bank home, huh?” Leticia tried to fill her expression with empathy.

“Turns out, a guy can get used to not being crammed in tiny spaces.”

Leticia had to choke down highlighting Brett’s unwitting innuendo.

The gargantuan boxes filled the cargo bay, obscuring the menacing head. A metal balcony hung above their heads with a ladder attached. The power dampers thrummed up there, three on this side and three on the other. Each damper emitted an orange glow as it hummed, keeping the mechanical juggernaut powered down.

Was she really going to reactivate it?

“You take that.” Leticia pointed to the nearby ladder. “I’ll run to the other side.”

“Run? With your knees eaten up?” Damp

red splotches bloomed on Leticia’s sweatpants at the knees. Ugh, of course he found a *reasonable* explanation to play the hero. “Not happening. Next time we commit mutiny, maybe you’ll wear more durable material.” He gestured to his uniform, barely even scuffed from their crawl. He started his run but stopped abruptly. “How can we turn them off?”

“It’s a machine. Do whatever you have to to kill the power.”

As she ascended the ladder and Brett took off at a sprint, the irony of her statement settled in. During the Invasion, human scientists and engineers worked tirelessly on finding a way to shut down the Invaders, developing the dampers that killed power links holding the machines together. They did the necessary thing at the time. Now Leticia did the same.

She sprinted the short distance between the ladder and the first power damper. It reminded her of chunky stage amplifiers her college roommate’s band would lug around for gigs. The vibrating orange coils pulsed, sending the energy-damping field out into the bay. A braided mass of conduit grew from the damper’s base beneath a bolted panel.

The damper, unfortunately, didn’t have an obvious on/off switch. That would’ve been too easy. It did, however, have a touchscreen interface. She activated it, and a wicked smile unfurled on her lips at the logo bouncing around the screen. The letters read “AshMore” in forest green. The “M” in the middle grew above the letters in the form of two stylized trees.

Leticia had scored her first internship after grad school with AshMore. She’d spent six horrible months working with a team of ancient, inept know-it-alls who tried to lord over her with their “expertise” at system design and software architecture. Their enterprise systems

crawled with bugs, bad design, and security vulnerabilities. She recalled a particularly gaping security hole she'd found in code she'd written unit tests for. After explaining the problem to the lead engineer no fewer than eight times, she'd given up trying to improve AshMore.

The security problem existed in AshMore's customizable operating system built to integrate with highly specialized hardware. With these integrated control systems, you usually needed a key from the manufacturer to access administrative functions. Leticia gleefully stabbed the configuration icon. She set the volume to a negative value (who puts an input box on volume?), set the color scheme to a horrendous pink and purple, and set the current date to 24,000 years in the future. She held her breath as the whole screen went red. Three tinny beeps sounded, and up popped the admin menu.

"Idiots. Don't reuse UI elements for sensitive forms."

With a mash of the touchscreen, Leticia powered down the damper. The cacophonous thrumming diminished.

"Talos, communicate a message to Brett. I figured out how to power down the dampers. First—"

"We do not believe that will be necessary," Talos said from an unseen speaker.

Leticia frowned at how Talos interrupted her, a cardinal sin of interacting with AIs. She bit back an acid remark when she noticed the first damper on Brett's side also powered down. Brett stood, dwarfed by the distance and the relative size of the inert damper, holding a handful of cables.

Leticia was powering down the second damper when the cargo bay door hissed open. Indistinct shouts wafted up from below.

"Shit!" Leticia said.

She raced to the final damper while hard-treaded boots clanged against the ladder. Two security officers were ascending. They didn't hesitate, raising stunners and advancing on her position. Leticia ducked behind the damper while manipulating the screen with frantic fingers.

An officer fired his stunner. As the weapon *twanged*, Leticia retreated into hiding. Stupid. It was a stunner. It might make her arm numb, but it would take a couple shots to make her go night-night. She craned back around to access the touchscreen and froze. A smoking black scorch mark hissed on the damper's casing where the stunner grazed it. No, not a stunner.

Human worlds and colonies had set accords in place centuries ago banning all lethal weapons. Even during the Invasion, battles took place on massive scales. Not even war had precipitated the creation of personal lethals. Leticia's skin crawled at the burnt smell the lethal left behind. Another beam struck next to her foot, leaving a hole in the walkway.

"Stop firing!" Bickham screamed up from the cargo bay floor. "If you damage the dampers, you're doing her job for her!"

Leticia peeked. Two pairs of booted feet rattled the walkway as they rushed her position. She leaped from behind the damper and frantically tapped the screen. She'd enabled the admin menu and began shutting it down when a guard knocked her hand away.

"Can't let you keep doing that," the guard said, pulling Leticia's arm behind her back. It was Dimitra Aetos, the one who'd helped Bickham drag her and Brett to the brig. She wrenched Leticia away. The other officer, a guy she didn't recognize, stood before her with the lethal pointed at Leticia's head.

"Bring them where I can see them," Bick-

ham's voice rang doubly from communicators the guards carried. Beefy Aetos dragged Leticia away from the damper. Leticia dug her heels in, cursing and struggling, but it didn't do any good.

Across the bay, Brett stood at attention. One security guard held Brett's hands behind his back while another jabbed a lethal against his ribs. Brett had managed to deactivate the second damper, but the third blazed orange, a testament to their failure.

Bickham paced back and forth. "Careless disregard for the importance of this mission. That I could forgive, but outright mutiny against your species? Completely unforgivable."

"So what now? You'll execute us, Bickham?" Leticia asked. "Shouldn't the captain weigh in on this at—"

"This goes beyond Captain Ekland's responsibilities. I am the safeguard, put in place by the Planet Coalition to handle *extenuating circumstances* on these disposal missions. And the ultimate judgment in your case is also mine."

"You gave your dudes illegal weapons!" Leticia said.

"No measure too extreme to ensure the journey's completion." Bickham directed his attention to the towering head before him. "The destruction of humanity's greatest enemy." The damping thrumming seemed to emerge directly from Bickham's balefire stare. "I stood by and watched my entire colony be eradicated. The dampers arrived too late for all but a dozen of us. I won't allow this to happen again."

"You don't understand! They're not dead!" Leticia tried to get up, but Aetos kept her firmly held. "The Invaders came to protect us, preserve us. If we melt them down—"

"No more," Bickham interrupted. "I won't listen to your sedition. I'm not horny and gull-

ible like Sergeant Sullivan. I'm not corruptible."

"No one corrupted me, Lieutenant," Brett's voice crackled on the guard's speakers. "I make my own decisions. But you should listen to Ramirez. What she's uncovered is worth investigating. You shouldn't dismiss it—"

"Kill them both. Starting with him." Bickham pointed with two fingers directly at Brett.

Distance muffled the shot, but it rang like a gong inside Leticia's gut. The lethal's muzzle's red-hot glow opened a gash in Brett's side. The burst of plasma exited his body, sending bits of flesh and uniform flying. Two dark red pools spread on his perfect uniform. He did not scream, only slumped to his knees.

White hot rage burned in Leticia's chest. An invigorated tingle started in the toes of her right foot. The muscles contracted and her body rose to standing. Aetos still held her hands, but Leticia walked towards the other officer. She snarled. Tears pooled her in her eyes, but she would not let them fall. She pressed her head firmly against the lethal's cold, unyielding barrel.

"Stop, I don't want to have to kill you." The lethal shook in the guard's grip. His hesitation sealed his fate. Ducking a shoulder, she slammed her body into the officer. He fell with a grunt, sprawled on the walkway. Leticia's momentum yanked her hands from Aetos's grip, and she fell atop the other officer. His lethal clattered across the slotted walkway. Leticia dove after it, grabbing it before it could tumble to the bay's floor and training it on the guards.

"I'll kill you if you don't listen up!" She tried to keep her hands from shaking. "Turn over and put your hands on your heads. Both of you. Now!"

Aetos kept her eyes turned down as she complied. The other officer followed suit. The

smell of piss wafted in the air. When they both kneeled down, Leticia relieved Aetos of her lethal and chunked it with all of her strength amidst the towering boxes.

Below, Bickham screamed and gesticulated. “Idiots! Take her down.” The compartment of Leticia’s consciousness not absorbed by pure rage wondered why Bickham didn’t carry a lethal of his own. But, no... He was a coward, and Leticia hated him all the more for the realization.

The guards on the other side fired bolts of plasma across the bay. Scorch marks sizzled on the wall behind the walkway. Leticia had to end this. She aimed at the third damper on the opposite walkway and unloaded the lethal’s payload. A barrage of white-hot, blue plasma pellets arced across the cargo bay. Only anger overpowered the queasiness in her belly at firing the despicable weapon. The two guards dove behind the dampers, giving her a reprieve to finish her task.

“She’s not firing at you!” Bickham screamed. The plasma bursts swallowed his words.

Each bolt into the damper created a brighter flare upon contact. After a dozen impacts, one final sphere of light exploded from the coils with a deafening *crack*. The force threw the damper across the walkway. Screams issued from the guard who’d ducked behind it, now pinned between the damper and the railing.

Leticia approached the final damper’s touchscreen. She kept the lethal trained on the two guards as she fired up the admin interface.

“Ramirez!” Bickham bellowed from below. He stood directly beneath her. His voice cracked. She ran the sequence to kill the damper’s power. “Listen to me, Ramirez. They’ve poisoned your mind. They’re forcing you to

do this, but your actions will only end in more death and destruction. You don’t want that.”

“You should’ve listened,” Leticia murmured too far away from the guard’s radios for Bickham to hear.

“What did you say?”

Too late. She’d already hit the button.

The vibrating damper quieted. For the first time since the *Skymning* left Jupiter, the cargo bay knew peace and quiet. Bickham slowly swiveled his head until he stared at the Invader’s head.

It started with barely audible *clicks* and *whirrs* from inside the head’s matte-white plating. A dozen massive crates shook. One fell with an ear-splitting crash. The top exploded into fragments and a myriad of disconnected parts spilled onto the cargo bay floor. The crash stirred Bickham to action, and he ran toward the door. The Invader’s eyes flashed. It emitted a brilliant light that cast an elongated, Bickham-shaped shadow. He shielded his eyes, but lost his footing, crashing to the floor. Echoes of his whimpering drifted up to Leticia. A pulse that distorted the air rippled from the Invader’s head. When it reached Bickham, he slumped to the ground unmoving. The wave continued until it reached Leticia. It washed over her and her stomach flip-flopped. When it had dissipated, Aetos and the other guard lay slumped on the floor.

Leticia dropped the lethal. Her hand felt diseased and foreign.

“Talos?” Leticia asked. “Did you *absorb* them?”

The pause hung in the air long enough for Leticia to feel herself getting sick, her face numb. Dear God, what had she done?

“No, we did not,” Talos’s two-tone voice responded. Leticia nearly vomited from relief.

“They are unconscious. Everyone aboard the *Skymning* is unconscious now except you and Technical Sergeant Sullivan. We believe integrating them all to be most beneficial to our mission and their well-being. So that—”

“No!” Leticia said. “No more forcing *integration* on people. From now on, we’re going to show them. Like you’re going to show me.”

The Invader’s eyes flickered, but Talos said nothing more.

Brett! She had to get to him before...

Leticia sprinted across the bay. All the while, Invader parts burst from the boxes. Components joined together, assembling into larger pieces. The metallic, clockwork clank became the melody that sang in time with Leticia’s steps. Her shoulder ached as she climbed the ladder, but she ignored the pain. By the time she reached Brett atop the other walkway, her breath came in ragged gasps and sweat fountained from her pores.

Brett sat slumped against the walkway’s side rail, clutching his entrance and exit wounds. The stain on his uniform—usually so brilliant white it blinded—displayed a gradient from hellforge black to crimson red flowing to pink tributaries. The smell of burnt flesh and chunks of charred flesh peeking from between Brett’s fingers turned Leticia’s stomach.

“Well, we did it.” Brett’s face was ashen. His breath came as blood-mist wheezes. Leticia tried to find the words that would sew up Brett’s body, stuff all that blood back where it belongs, but they didn’t exist. “I saw you... ugh... Throttle that guy. Very...” Brett coughed, and blood sprayed. His head lolled against his chest.

“Brett! Wake up.” Leticia grabbed his clammy cheeks with both hands and kissed his lips. They were cold.

“Very sexy,” Brett whispered.

“I’ve got to get you to med bay immediately. There’s burn patches. Painkillers. Uh, other stuff.” Leticia leaned down and began draping his arms over her shoulder.

“Leticia...” Fuck. He never used her first name. Fuck fuck fuck. “I’m...” He coughed, turning his head away. “Not going anywhere.”

“Talos!” Leticia’s voice broke as she screamed. “You need to heal him!”

When Talos spoke, the harmonic voice emerged from a single speaker, an intimate gesture, and the Invader’s eyes no longer flashed. “We are not equipped to repair biological constructs.”

“You’re a worthless goddam machine!” The salty sting of tears didn’t cool Leticia’s boiling anger. Brett’s shaky hand closed loosely on Leticia’s arm.

“Stop... I...” He spewed another round of ragged coughs, fresh streams of blood staining his white collar. His hand dropped and hung limply at his side.

“We can help him,” Talos said. “But we cannot heal his body.”

“What do you...” Leticia’s eyes popped. “No! Not him. Dammit, it was supposed to be me! How will we know if it’s a trap? He’ll lose his mind inside your database forever!”

“Brett Sullivan’s mind will be lost due to oxygen deprivation in approximately four minutes. At that point it will become impossible for us to create a proper imprint of his consciousness.”

Leticia rested her head on Brett’s shoulder. She squeezed her arms around him and kissed his rapidly cooling cheek. Not fair. None of this was fair. She screamed and wiped her nose on his uniform. No matter how terrible she felt, Leticia wouldn’t let her emotions force her into idiotic actions. She marched over to the middle damper. The armor plating holding the cables

was shredded, but she could thread the power conduits back into the device. When she did, the damper didn't power on, but the touch-screen did. A red power icon dominated the janky interface. Leticia hovered a finger over the screen. "Do it."

Brett's eyes flew open. His back arched. He stared ahead, his eyes focused on empty air. His eyelids flickered randomly. He gasped, filling his lungs. His eyes shut and air flowed out in a listless sigh. His vacated body sprawled limply on the walkway.

Icy tendrils worked their way up Leticia's fingertips. She willed her blood to flow to keep from passing out. "Talos!" Silence. "Where did you take him?" More silence. "Answer me!" She balled her fist, ready to pound the button to shut down the Invader's reintegration. She'd been wrong. Idiot! The beautiful code and her physical enrapture with Brett had overloaded all the logic circuits in her brain. Hyacinth Wave? Ridiculous. Leticia Ramirez was the angel of death after all.

"Don't hit that button, Ramirez." said a voice that echoed throughout the cargo bay. Brett's voice or a damn good imitation. The kind an evil robot invader might make after snuffing him out.

"It's really you?" Should she talk at Brett's corpse, the speaker in the wall, or the massive Invader head?

"Not really sure, honestly. I'm still me. Everyone here is. Themselves, I mean. Together but... *not*. How can I explain?"

"Shit," Leticia cursed at this gaping flaw in her plan's logic. She'd assumed that, from the inside, she'd have the ability to convince Brett that Talos, the Invader, whoever-it-was, told the truth. Or that they lied.

"Hey, better watch that language, Ramirez.

I'll report you to Invader Central. You do not want that, believe me."

Despite the circumstances, Leticia laughed. That sounded like Brett. But was the Brett contained in the Invader a not-quite-version of Brett? Would a not-quite Leticia, together with him, be better than staying on the *Skymning* and getting thrown out the airlock?

An impossible situation. She remembered his smooth face, his crisp uniform. His arms wrapped around her lanky body. She loved him, she still wanted him. She mourned their brief fling. She also saw, overlaid on it all, those alien symbols from Talos's code. And that was beautiful too. Leticia gasped. "I know what to do," she whispered. "Talos, when the dampers disengaged, did you transfer your operating system to your... *head*? Original on-board database?"

"This transfer was accomplished upon reactivation."

At the mention of transfer, Leticia's right leg tingled. "Can you sync it back up? So the changes in your current system will exist at the same place we found the files before?"

"That would be possible for us to do."

"Do it." Leticia stared at the Invader's head, now canted a bit to accommodate new parts. The eyes flared to life, flickering rapidly.

"Transfer complete." Talos's flat, emotionless tone belied the statement's magnitude.

Leticia pulled Bickham's tablet from her pocket and powered it on. They'd locked out her credentials, but the tablet went straight to the home screen. Talos's doing? Or did Bickham have a special, always-on account? Leticia navigated to the directory that had contained the files. A nervous warmth spread from the finger manipulating the screen as she scrolled to the final database file, one she hadn't seen earlier that day. She blinked away budding tears and

opened the file. The swirling characters danced about the text editor, leaking out into the interface. She ingested the data: statistics, details, memories, and motives. Details she probably shouldn't know, stories she wanted desperately to grasp. Too soon, the text dominated the tablet's screen. It flashed and winked out, the power drained. Leticia tossed it over the rail, and it shattered on the cargo bay's floor.

"You found me," Brett's voice echoed in the bay.

"Shit shit shit. I'm not ready for this," Leticia said.

"No need to rush, Leticia Ramirez," Talos said. "It will take several hours for us to finish reintegrating the Gather Unit's chassis."

Hours? Sitting there, the only conscious human on the *Skymning*, as the Invader reintegrated itself. God, could she be considering this when she thought of the damn thing as an *invader*?

Yes. And she didn't want to wait another hour to be with Brett.

"Let's fucking do this right now, Talos. I'm ready."

Silence. Leticia stood on the walkway, facing the reassembling Invad... Gather Unit. Her breaths came in deep gasps as she anticipated her spirit draining out of her body. The anticipation tied her guts into whirly characters.

"Talos?"

"We are afraid you have misunderstood what is required of you," Talos said. "We do not believe our newfound communication skills to be sufficient. We believe a living representative in their original biological form must become our ambassador. With the gathering of Brett Sullivan, that task falls now to you."

"Brett?" Leticia asked, feeling foolish talking to a speaker. "What's Talos talking about?"

"Yeah, Ramirez. And I happen to agree with the AI on this one. In fact, 99.8% of the people in here do... OK, that sounds weird. But you won't be alone. Not really."

* * *

The tight space enclosed Leticia on all sides. She couldn't imagine riding this way for the month it would take to reach the closest human colony. But she would be asleep, in a sort of perfect hibernation. Since the Gather Unit hadn't been designed with living passengers in mind, Leticia was lucky they could accommodate her at all. Right. *Lucky* they crammed her in here. A hiss sounded, evidencing an airtight seal.

"Talos? What n—" Leticia felt a prick in her right calf. A whiplike cable snaked from within the Gather Unit, sliding through her skin like an artificial varicose vein...

Darkness.

Smudgy brightness that pulsed.

Image resolving to a fuzzy view of the cargo bay door.

The image drew back, becoming a floating viewscreen perched above the infinite blackness. Only, not infinite. With effort, Leticia could peer around. She saw her hands, her body. She wore her makeshift uniform: a clean t-shirt and joggers. Brett materialized in front of her. He wore his impeccably pressed and starched uniform. He grabbed Leticia's hand. They both sat at a wooden desk.

"How?" Leticia's voice bubbled with a dream-like quality.

"Neural interface," Brett said. "When you kicked our head, the process started. Now, you can interact with all of us while you sleep

your way through the journey. I told you you wouldn't be alone."

"Are we in my apartment?" The room materialized as a perfect copy of her place back on Earth: her six monitors on posable arms lurking over the desk, candy wrappers all over the floor, her board game collection organized by color on the Ikea shelves in the back.

"Relax, Ramirez. The interface goes both ways. I got memories from your head to recreate a more comfortable place. You already rooted around in my datafile, it felt fair."

"So, if, theoretically," Leticia said, gesturing at the computer setup, "I wanted to fire this baby up and play Gary's Mod 3...?"

Brett shrugged. "I suppose it would work, assuming you have complete memories of playing it."

Silence.

"It's, um, the two of us. Alone. Shouldn't, I don't know, tens of thousands of others swarm around us?"

"Oh we are more than that, by a long shot. But for now, it's you and me."

"And the rest are *watching*?" Leticia bounced her eyebrows suggestively.

Brett laughed. "No, we're alone for real, Ramirez. But you can meet the others whenever. It's a fascinating mix of cultures and ideas and... Well, you'll discover for yourself."

Leticia tentatively pulled her hand away from Brett. She could feel her arm sliding across the table. The simulation felt so real. "Are you OK? I mean... Are you really *you*? Ugh. What does that mean?"

"I'm me, Ramirez, not a cell in a hive mind. But our minds, all of our minds, make up the Gather Unit's... Um, I want to say brain, but that feels wrong, maybe operating system works better."

"That explains why the code felt so similar to the database, and why it had this organic swirl to it. If that makes any sense."

"It does. And it helps that I'm not the only newbie here."

"I wouldn't call myself one of you yet." Leticia found herself biting her virtual nails nervously. She spit a hunk of nail, but the ragged spot on her index finger immediately regenerated. Bizarre.

"Not you. I'm talking about Talos."

"Talos? What? How?"

"They have become a perfect blend of human and Architect code, the bridge that connects us to all the human systems. This blend allowed us to build the neural interface you're using now as well. If we'd had this before... Think of the time that could've been saved."

"Architects?"

"Sorry, the architects who designed the Gather Units. Wow, we really should put you through an orientation."

She looked at him. He was alive! Alive enough. Was it enough? As she weighed these thoughts, her gaze landed on Brett's torso. Below the sparkling buttons of his uniform. Was that a wrinkle? On his uniform that had somehow always been perfect? She must be rubbing off on him.

"This is a lot, Brett. I'm not sure I'm ready. Can we take time alone? You and Me? I've always hated crowds."

Brett arched an eyebrow. His smile curled mischievously. "I hoped you'd say that. I thought curiosity would win over intimacy, but I'm happy it didn't." He vanished and appeared behind Leticia. She jumped but melted into his arms. The kisses he planted on her neck felt as real and sweet as they'd been in an actual body. When Leticia closed her eyes the room disap-

peared, and when she opened them, it didn't return.

They floated in an infinite starscape. Leticia no longer wore her uniform. Instead, she had on the ratty shirt she slept in and nothing else. Her cheeks flushed and her body tingled excitedly and not only in her right leg. Brett held her arms as they tumbled in free fall. "I always wanted to do it in zero G," she said.

"I know."

"OK, you've got to stop doing *that!*" But she couldn't help laughing.

Brett chuckled and his uniform transformed into a million butterflies that flew around them in a sphere as it vacated his body. "I have other tricks I can show you."

"Show me *everything*," Leticia said, crashing into him and sending the white butterflies scattering towards the distant stars.

She chose to ignore one of the butterflies as it circled her head. The one with the wrinkle. The only marred one in a flock of perfect white.



END TRANSMISSION