

PART ONE:

THE COMPANY

A SERIES OF INTERCONNECTED SHORT STORIES

PART TWO:

A COLLECTION OF RANDOM SHORTS

PART THREE – *CHRONICLES OF KELVIN*

PART FOUR – *A CALL TO THE VOID*

Works of short fiction by: Mark Holyome

Table of Contents

"Hey, we've got an alarm here, main bus three, now four's on the blink too, five and six..."

"Welcome aboard the Non Sequitur capsule, flight commander..."

It's strange, the things you come to miss while out here...

"Yo, Daryl, you've been summoned."

"What do you remember about the accident out there, anything you can give us..."

"Good evening everyone, welcome to orientation!"

Pulling up the laneway to the massive Company induction office...

I can't believe I'm sitting here, cowering in my room like a god damn child...

"Do you have any idea how much these treatments are going to run The Company!"...

"What is it you said you guys do again?"...

"Dude... don't lump me in with THAT fucking Martian..."

"Rolling in five, four, three, two..."

The official report on the events surrounding the launch of Margot's Fever.

"And now - for the exciting conclusion to..."

"What an insufferable lot of twats these people are..."

"I heard you the first time..."

In the dead silence of my jumpsuit, the heavy rush of blood pumping...

"Some jobs are hard no matter where you work..."

"What's the matter Ted, you don't look so hot..."

PART TWO.

Let me off here, I'm good.

"What are you doing, you've had that song on repeat for like..."

I can see the shadows growing longer...

I can hear the clock, the seconds are ticking over as...

"Babe, can you come upstairs, Sarah's been sick again..."

"What do you think happened here?"

"Listen here dickhead, do you hear the words coming out of my mouth..."

"Can you at least look at me when I'm trying to talk to you..."

"Ugh, good god, was that you?"

"There are - certain harsh truths one has to come up against..."

The porch door opens with a gentle squeal...

PART THREE

You know, I've been down into...

"Congratulations Kelvin, you've failed in absolutely..."

"That is quite the bruise you've developed there..."

"Calvin are you listening to me? We have a problem..."

In the stark white brilliance of the medical pods internal lighting...

With the echoes of the scream still bouncing off the protective shielding...

PART FOUR

The deep space exploration beacon floated...

Amid the bustle and commotion in the...

"Do you suppose that you could describe a lone space probe as wistful"...

PART FIVE

"Holy suffering fuck it's hot out here... holy shit. I mean, God damn."

"What is it exactly, that you do here Mr. Kartcher?"...

The harsh crunch of gravel on sand underfoot reverberates through my jumpsuit...

PART ONE

The Company: A Series of Interconnected Short Stories

I. "You know what I love the most about being out here?..."

The unobstructed view of the galaxy around us. Don't you just love it!" She says, looking back at me, over her right shoulder. Her orange coveralls tied firmly around her waist. Her socks, and her shirt are a brilliant white, not a spec of dirt on them.

"Hmmm... no, all I keep thinking about is how isolated it is in here, and how far we are from anything, or anyone." I say, staring down at the now ice cold bulb of coffee. It's inky, black-brown packaging has golden markings all over it. I can't read it. It was a gift from the Chinese agency, from the launch. It smells faintly of roasted cinnamon.

"Well, I really can't get enough of this view, I mean what a breathtaking vista that is spread out before us." She says it with that ear to ear grin she always has. It makes her dimples pop, her ice blue eyes twinkle in the dim starlight. Every day, she comes to stand at the view port, always looking forward to the stars. Whereas I'm hunched over a tiny table that converts to tuck back into the bulkhead. I stand up, and toss my bulb of frozen black coffee into an incinerator bin. This capsule, the *Non Sequitur*, was meant for ten, still feels cramped, even with just the two of us. A long cylinder of off white padded curved walls, that have started to show some wear and tear. Not to brag, but I headed up the team that designed these things. But, I will give them this, The Company does love to recycle. This is my seventh uneventful mission out here with one of the jury rigged crafts. "You know... we... I... hmmm, that first twenty nine week stretch out to Mars was exceptionally tedious. I didn't get any worthwhile readings, and there is no sign of the anomaly." I am not happy. This line of work was supposed to be cutting edge. For fuck's sake, it's space travel, and The Company promised us adventure, aliens, or at the very least a chance to bring about the Singularity before the fall of mankind. We ventured out here in search of something, anything, anything at all that could be the key to unlocking our full potential as a species. And all I got was this lousy t-shirt. "I am not looking forward to eighty more weeks of this before we make it to Pluto." I have been glum for quite some time. I never could muster the same enthusiasm for these missions. Even with the pressure of the world on my shoulders. I just don't care anymore.

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"Same time tomorrow then darling." She giggles as she says it. Every time with this same schtick. I'm annoyed, but I chuckle anyway. "Of course babe, say hello to our girls for me." Jennifer turns to walk through the observation compartment but vanishes in the now dim light, leaving me all of the sparse, utilitarian room. The bright padding fades away from view to reveal the gathered filth and blood splatter, and signs of recent neglect. The fabric throughout the cabin is stained jet black in places, it reeks of smoke, and decay. The lights inside the observation pod have not come on in quite some time.

Outside the capsule, sparks continue to fall away from the craft's hull like a giant rooster tail of cascading embers. A large black burn mark stretches across the jagged edge of what's left of the crew quarters. There in the midst of the damage are vague forms of a woman and two children, suspended in their bed pods, both flash frozen, and their blood boiled in the vacuum of space. The capsule is half a million miles off course, even though the engines and navigation survived the attack in one piece. Self denial, much like the cold void of space, does not discriminate.

"Hey, we've got an alarm here, main bus three, now four's on the blink too, five and six..."

What the hell is happening." The control board is lit up like a Christmas tree, warning buzzers, klaxons and every light that blinks is going haywire. "Hey tech, are you seeing this... is this a glitch? This should absolutely not be happening. What is going on out there." Me and everyone else at Houston Central Control are on our feet, phones are ringing off the hook and support staff are being woken up. The room is in chaos. The Company builds these capsules to ridiculously stringent specifications. Each system built with three redundancies, all on separate breakers, housed in various locations across the bulk of the craft, shielded under plate steel, or lead casings. They recycle them, over and over again because they are so robust. You could plow a five tonne asteroid into the things, and they'd just... bounce. Took some engineering to achieve that feat. The "*Non Sequitur*", it really is a remarkable space faring craft. Ugly as sin, spartan in design, but it's gods be damned sturdy as a mother fucker.

"Can we get all team leads to the tenth floor conference room, repeat, all team leads to the tenth floor conference room, stat!" The voice on the pa system is tense, and the volume has been cranked to ten. No one is going to

want to claim they didn't hear the dispatch from the guys in charge. Something has gone terribly, terribly wrong.

Outside the control room, the tone is very somber, punctuated by flurries of activity, followed by countless hours of waiting. The shadows beyond the windows stretch and shrink, stretch and shrink as the hours bleed into days, then into weeks. The once eager faces have grown grey, pale and worn. Five o'clock shadow has become the norm, in what is usually a very rigorous and stringent dress code. Walk down any hall way and you'll find cots with passed out technicians, scattered across every corner, every nook and cranny crammed with unwashed bodies.

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"So you're telling me... after three weeks...that he's simply not responding to our calls? Do we know if the radio and antenna array are in working order? What do we know... people! Listen. Shut up. I need you to sound off. NOW." Bruce is about to snap, we've been coming to these meetings since day one of the catastrophic event aboard the *Non Sequitur*, waiting for something new to emerge from the raw data. He's worked Cap-Com control for two decades now, and nothing even remotely eventful has ever happened. Not even a dropped call. His skin has taken on a yellow tinge, and his eyes have sunk deeper into his broad face. He looks as though he hasn't showered or slept in days. He has picked up smoking again, so much so that his fingers tips are stained a dark mustard yellow. His over grown dirty fingernails are tap, tap, tapping on the conference table impatiently. "Well uh, we know that he's... um, Neil that is..., yes sorry, Flight Commander Neil Todd, we know he's still alive because he's the only one with the bio-metrics to log in to conduct the scans off of the sensor arrays. The data packets are flooding back in, terabyte by terabyte. It doesn't make much sense, what we are seeing." The under staffer is visibly nervous about relaying this information. "What?" Says Bruce "The radios are transmitting to us? But he isn't responding to our queries? That's very unlike Cmdr Todd. What the fuck happened up there." Bruce is not taking this new information well, he and Cmdr Todd go back quite a ways. Their kids were all born at the same time. "Well, we um... have some strange readings..." Terry, the capsule tech specialist chimes in. "The Co2 scrubbers must be malfunctioning, they are way below where they should be. They should need to be replaced every ten days, but we're what, twenty one days in, and still on the same one..." he is pacing around the room, fingers pinched on the bridge of his nose, grimacing over the incomplete data. A sudden bang at the door startles the group in the conference room. Opening the door is Dr. Sanjai, the loose bun on her head is dropping strands of hair over her face obscuring her now red rimmed eyes.

"I can elaborate on that Terry, we were finally able to scour through enough of the data packets in the information dumps to mine the medical subsets. I'm so sorry Bruce..." she says stepping passed the threshold, and into the room. "Jenny and both the girls were killed in a blast. They were exposed to the vacuum of space while asleep in their bed pods." Everyone is awestruck, Bruce sits down abruptly in his swivel chair at the head of the table. The crew quarters are the most heavily shielded and armored portion of the capsule. It's where protocol sends you to ride out a gamma burst, radiation, or an asteroid impact. "From what we can tell Cmdr Todd suffered a blunt force trauma to the head, his brain waves sank to near zero for a period of approximately sixteen hours. I think... I... I... I believe he may have suffered brain damage in the blast. And from our other metrics, probably a good chance of substantial blood loss. If it weren't for the antenna array logins noted on a daily basis, I would have believed him dead." She is standing stock still in front of the room, a stunned silence fills the space. A thick cloud of cigarette smoke covers the low hanging ceiling. There are water spots on some of the drop ceiling tiles. The Company likes to see its money go into the program, and not wasted on ground staff creature comforts. Bruce, after a brief pause is up on his feet again, he resumes pacing in front of the dusty blackboards. They are covered with all the minutiae of organized space flight. "What about guidance, navigation, payload, what are his consumables like, what state is he in. Best guesses, any details, no matter how fine, are welcome." Bruce falls back into his chair, as though the weight of the world is clutching at his shoulders and pulling him backward. A mousy slender wisp of a man steps through the gathered group. "Derick here, hi guys, from what we can tell both the navigation system and the engines themselves are fine. We have evidence that some of the crew quarters emergency lighting panels are sending out rapid fire bursts of current, there must be sparks firing almost constantly, like the tail of a comet down off the back of the capsule. I mean, like, this is crazy, whatever hit them managed to pin point the crew pods, out of ten pods, the only three grouped together that happened to have people occupying them got blasted, gutted, fucking near vaporized. I can't believe it..." he has his detailed spec print out nearly crushed in his hands. You can tell he is fighting the urge to gather a consensus among the gathered technicians and scientists, for just how insane the statistical probability of this is. "The math shows him to be heading off course, hard to gauge at this point, he must have caught one hell of a bounce, that's what I'm thinking, but right now he's about five hundred thousand thousands miles wide of where he should be. By the time he gets out to the elliptic range of Pluto it could be as much a sixteenth, maybe seventeen million miles off course. It's really worst case scenario at this point." The life drains out of him, and he staggers backwards, Dr. Sanjai points him toward an open chair. Once again Bruce comes alive, leaping up from his leather

chair. "But he could course correct right? We've heard that navigation and engine control are operational. What's our protocol for an override on a redirect from here?". He looks hopefully to Derick. All hopes are dashed as the single main priority of these missions comes crashing back into focus. There can be NO ability to redirect these missions from earth. Tensions are too high, too much is riding on their success to allow subterfuge from an errant tech or saboteur. He's got enough food and supplies for ten men over a five year journey. It's all down to Cmdr Todd. Isolated out in the far reaches of space, humanities success rests entirely upon his beaten, bloody shoulders - alone.

"Welcome aboard the *Non Sequitur* capsule, flight commander...

Neil Todd, it's a real pleasure to meet you in person. I mean, you know... I follow your missions very closely down at Houston Central Command, but as a capsule recycling technician I couldn't wait to welcome you back to your ship for your next mission." The tech is a portly woman of about twenty years of age. Her hair is pulled back in a tight braid. Her red coveralls covered in a slew of nicks and tears from repetitive injuries taken on the job. She must be very ambitious to have made lead at this age. It's not a glamorous position, but techs like her keep the craft in peak performing condition, and well stocked. "Will lieutenant Jenny Todd be joining us soon commander?" I can see her smile growing bigger with anticipation. My wife is a force to behold. She can capture the attention of a football stadium with her wit and charm. People gravitate to her, as though she had her own gravitational pull. "Flight Commander Jennifer Todd will be joining us at oh four hundred. So less than ten minutes if all our instrumentation is properly synchronized." I'm very attentive to even the merest of slights against my XO. She also happens to be the mother of my two daughters. And my reason to get up every morning. "Oh, yes... sorry. I forgot about the field promotion that Cmdr Jennifer Todd earned recently. Please excuse me..." the tech is crestfallen, she attempts to slink out of the airlock, and extricate herself from our encounter. "Oh, please... come on, stay. I'm just fucking with you... uh, Capsule Technician Stacie Bradley." A brief pause, then you can see the relief wash over her face, the twinkle in her eyes is back. Her shoulders relax out of their tensed up hunch.

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"Ok now, ease it back, that's it, nice and slow now... watch out for those waypoint markers, they're closer than the last time we shipped out." I say it in jest. My wife knows this ship better than I do. She is one of the best pilots I've ever flown with. We're the first mission ever to have two Flight Commanders, and we are proud of it. No way were going to split up just so we could captain our own capsules individually. No, the *Non Sequitur* was where we conceived both of our daughters, it's where we've raised them ever since. Except for the brief interludes between missions, spent in low gravity on the base around the dark side of the moon. Our girls have never known earth. They are brilliant, beautiful and talented junior cadets. A chip off the old block. Tenacious, just like their mother. A woman who is my second in command first, and a devoted wife and mother second. There is nobody else I trust my life, and ship with more. The *Non Sequitur* was the greatest engineering and design achievement of my career with The Company.

"The Company has asked us for a run down on the payload again. Seems like there might be an anomaly with the manifests. We are showing added weight on board that they can't account for... Yo! Yoo-hoo. Neil!... you reading me?" Jenny is barking into the intercom, she knows damn well I can hear her, especially at this range. "That's a copy, Cmdr Jenny. I was given a gift of some super expensive, but real artisanal Chinese coffee, has a hint of spice to it. It's lovely." I say it with a smile in my voice, I know what's coming next. "It's cinnamon isn't it. You fucking bastard, you know how much I hate cinnamon!" She enunciates each word harshly. "Well, more for me then I guess. Each bulb has this lovely poem on them, in a very traditional script. Mandarin, and Cantonese. They are a work of art. I'll read them to you some time soon. Shame we have to incinerate all trash for the recyclers, it'd be great to keep one around for posterity." We are making small talk. The first twenty nine weeks to get out past Mars are tedious and boring. We'll be testing out equipment as we slowly build up speed. Can't turn the main ion engines on until we have enough room out in front of us. That reminds me, I have to check in on the sensor and antenna arrays. Part of my daily ritual, I do it so often it becomes automated, deep in that reptilian part of the human brain.

Everyday, day after day, after the girls are asleep and her command shift has ended, Jenny comes to the observation port to gaze at the void before us. I'm always here, tucked behind the fold down table that nestles into the bulk head, eking out all that I can from the sensor and antenna arrays. She knows she'll find me here. The first time out to Pluto is something you never forget. So she comes up here and seems to be able to recapture the awe every single time. I am unable to do this, and I'm not mad. I love to see her smile. Just like our girls, her dimples pop when she is genuinely happy. Her orange flight suit is immaculate. Jen helps to run a tight ship. She keeps the girls

occupied with small science related tasks, and cleaning. Lots of cleaning. They got to skip basic, and flight training by virtue of having been born into it, so to save them getting too cocky, we have them wash everything imaginable. Not to mention their two famous, and intrepid parents, which may have had some influence on their ability to fly crew on such an important mission. Jen was popular and extremely talented as a test pilot in the air force. I garnered my accolades by designing a capsule for The Company that can take a hit from an asteroid and bounce rather than implode or burst into ten million one micron pieces, us passengers included. For that they let me fly with the best of the best of them. That's how I met my wife, she piloted the early makes and models of The Company's capsules. Love at first flight.

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There is a heavy layer of smoke, like a painted veil, or gauze in front of my face, it stinks of burning electrical compound. There are sparks shooting out wildly from exposed wires from the lighting. I'm tumbling end over end, with pitch and yaw, and roll. My vision is red, I can feel the sting of blood in my eyes. My head is pounding, I think I'm going to be sick. I can't tell which direction is up. What is that god damned noise... everything is going black. Why are there horns. God damn my head hurts. Fuck, I'm about to pass out. Fuck, fuck... fuck.

It's strange, the things you come to miss while out here...

The slow methodic drip of a faucet, or being bathed in the orange glow of the late afternoon sun, the singing of birds, or the sound of the wind rustling leaves across an old growth park. Echoes of children's laughter bouncing off of brick and concrete. There is none of that here. At first, that made me very happy, I could finally knuckle down and focus on the laundry list of experiments I was tasked with performing by the very savvy tech guys at The Company. But now, up here, alone and isolated in the cool blue glow of phosphorescent lighting, beige cloth walls with all that sound proofing and accident protection, it's driving me crazy. What I wouldn't give to turn back towards earth, and hear my three little girls squabble endlessly over dolls, crayons or whose turn it is to pick the next television show. The observation deck, a small bubble of a room, comprised mostly of a glass like dome where all of my technical equipment is housed. Can be quite chill, although sometimes tiny rivulets of condensation from my breath will gather on its

concave surface, and assemble in small pools along the outermost edges where it meets the soft padding of the bulkhead. I keep tiny Polaroids of my girls taped up in there. Reminding me, constantly why I do what I do. All alone, adrift in space.

I'm currently the lowest ranking member of The Company to captain his own ship. It wasn't always this way. When I started out this mission I had three other senior members of this crew. Three very brilliant, but problematic men. Part of an old school fraternity, a brotherhood of sociopaths and sexual deviants. I can almost imagine a large crowded meeting room down on earth at The Company HQ, where the last long amber rays of the afternoon sun would filter through some rustling leaves, and cast long deep shadows across some corporate types face. Slat shaped shadows from the tall Venetian blinds, creating a regular pattern of amber and darkness hiding portions of their faces. Phones ringing haphazardly, reams of papers all over the room, binders full of details and full ash trays and lit cigarettes with whirling eddies of smoke littering the rooms, and through it all, partial globs of conversations. "They came very highly recommended..."

"best in their fields..."

"brilliant minds..."

"oh no, not too many people choose to work with them a second time..."

"troubling attitudes, but gifted. Yes the three men achieve great results..."

"no, no, no one would step forward... yes, suicide, found by the wife. Yeah, twins on the way..."

"do not envy the fourth man on that next mission. Hope he knows how to comport himself during periods of high stress... can he take a joke?"

There would be chuckles, and giggles or guffaw, but in the end those three bastards would get cleared to fly with me. Nine hundred million miles between us and earth. There would be no second chances to make a first impression.

Now yes, it's true. I killed all three of my crew. I did not set out to do so. But I did it none the less. No, I will not go into it, suffice it to say that few things will test your resolve like suturing a tear to your own anus via a mirror and a needle and thread. I am not a weak man. I did not cow to them. But I exacted my revenge over the course of twenty four hours after they made their final play on my person. I've known military life. I can take an awful, awful lot of shit from my superiors, but not someone's misplaced sense of desire to dominate a subordinate. No, to the man who held me down, he lost an arm at the elbow to the pneumatic press I was operating. Turns out I'm not as fast on a tourniquet as I tested on earth during medical protocols training.

Whoops. To the gentleman who tricked me into the tightest spot on the ship, a technical corridor that houses all of the larger caliber electrical cabling, he got a sprinkle of cosmic fine dust from the Oort cloud in the rim of his helmet and gloves. Brilliant scientists, all of them. But bro's don't clean and

inspect their gear to the same degree a lowly generalist grunt like me does. Failure to secure a one hundred percent connection during a spacewalk left him dead instantaneously at the opening of the air lock. The same airlock I fired the acting commander out of. By purposefully failing to reach equilibrium with the vacuum outside our vessel when he had to go out for some last minute repairs. Launched him off the craft at nearly two hundred kilometers per second per second, from a cold stand still. Didn't even damage the doors as his body was sucked through before it had opened more than a few millimeters. Like I said, I didn't start this, but I fucking well ended it on my terms.

Truth is, we were way too far out for The Company to do anything about it. You don't send out the cops for triple homicide when the guy who did it confesses, but can still produce the same results, and will likely never return to earth, or come into contact with another living soul. I guess space madness runs in the family. My uncle was the engineer that built the now famous capsule the *Non Sequitur*. This vessel is a variation of that design.

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"Computer put a dozen new washers on the to build list, for when I'm in the machine shop next ok..." I'm currently shirtless in the dry, cool air of the *Give More* capsule. Also known more affectionately by the design staff as a mark five, or Mk.V . "Bzzrt... sorry inquiry invalid... please write down on the control pad, items to add to the official parts build list... dictation function not supported... dictation function not supported... dictation function not supported..." a red blinking light is flashing rapidly in case I missed the memo. "Useless, you know that Roger, you're absolutely useless... ableist too. What if I lose a hand or both arms huh, how you expect me to write this shit out then?" Crawling over some cabling, I find a wrist pad and write out the reminder. "Bzzrt... inquiry invalid. Roger is not my identifier. Also, crew shortage klaxon will sound off in twelve hours. We are understaffed for this mission. Crew levels are mission critical." The beaten up yellow box is present on every surface of the ship. Wired up nodes that criss-cross all systems and manned spaces, initially designed as part of the medical monitoring system, but evolved to speak and communicate with the ships hardware and software for ease of experimental program integration. Like the ships brain, but less exciting. I'm a pretty great science generalist, and a damn great machinist, but a programmer I am not. Fuck. Why'd Danny have to go and do me like that, before he could upgrade Roger to be able to take verbal commands, or at least hold a conversation that didn't pertain to ships diagnostics. Been a real dull thirty seven hundred days of this mission so far. Fuck him, fuck those goofs. Bastards, the lot of them. "How many times do I have to turn off that crew levels alarm... must you remind me

twice a day, every god damn day, what I've done. You, sir. Are a terrible, terrible friend. Fuck face."

Returning from the observation deck to the crew quarters I think, better go attune the sensor and radio antenna array sometime soon. Gotta tight beam all this data back to earth. God I miss my wife and kids. What I'd give to hear a faucet drip. Nothing here, but the cool empty chill of space, adrift in the void. Would be very easy to go insane up here. Gotta find Roger a suitable communications package, or patch, or something. Maybe medical systems has a psychiatrist plug-in I could tap into to get some rousing conversation going. "Hey Roger, make a note that I should check and see if you've got a psychiatric plug-in for meaningful conversation!". The yellow box in the crew pod chimes in. "Bzzrt... dictation function not supported for official programming inquiries. Incorrect inquiry format, message not recognized. Roger is not my identifier..." rolling to my side, as I zip myself into my bed ped. "Thanks Roger. Fuck you too." A heartbeat later a chime in reply can be heard. The lights grow dim as my resting heart rate shows me drifting off to sleep. It is currently two am ship time aboard the *Give More* capsule. Outside the vessel it is black and empty. Breakfast will be at oh nine hundred, same as the thirty seven hundred other days gone by.

V. "Hey, Dougie, wake up!, Somebody's called in sick and I need another able bodied mechanic for the..."

Last Great Venture capsule repair job on the docket today. Yo! Wakey wakey, we've only got forty minutes until shift change. You in, right? This comes at triple time for you if I have my math right." The half sized door to my bunk compartment is closing even as he continues to speak. Through the clamor behind my brother Daryl, I can see the other mechanics in the cramped company lounge getting ready for bed, or gearing up for another big day on the job. The dry dock is a massive hub of activity seventy miles off the dark side of the moon. A huge spinning torus with berths for all manner of vessels commissioned by The Company. A massive multi planetary conglomerate that footed a huge portion of the bill for manned space flight privately, and thus once it gained a foot hold in the business of exploration and mining, turned it into a choke hold that shows no sign of wavering in any capacity. Except for the ever increasing need for skilled labour and experienced flight crews, The Company looks to have a near endless trajectory towards growth and colonial expansion. The number of zeroes in their bank accounts boggles the mind. One reason why working for them is so lucrative, They put resources back into themselves, and make no

bones about rebuilding, retro fitting, or recycling parts and designs that are proven to work, no matter how costly. They pay well, if you know what you are doing. They care for the flight crews and mechanics just the same. Mind you, we eat better, but have very challenging continental shifts. Three eight hour stints every twenty four hours. Keeping a schedule is paramount to success around here.

Stepping out of my tiny bunk, and zipping myself into my red safety coveralls in one smooth motion, I give some serious thought to grabbing a long steam shower and forgoing food, but as I amble through the door I can see an absolute monster of a hot breakfast spread, set out for the last shift by the food service dept, and fix myself a plateful before the clock ticks down. Diving into the nearest open couch, to scoff my food down before my brother, and boss Daryl returns.. The lounge is cramped, with low ceilings, and walls covered in video screens and view ports of the vast expanse of dry dock. It has emergency seating available for a full crew compliment of about thirty burly mechanics with no elbow room to spare. Should the base suddenly lurch to life with an altitude correction there would be a mad scramble for everyone to find safe harbor in a crash couch, or their private travel pod that line the exterior walls making the lounge a sort of bull pen in the middle. The crash couches are beaten to hell and well worn, but each one has a crisp glowing green light to signify they are in prime working condition. The room, just like the whole base is colour coded. Mechanics rooms and work station areas are a dark rich red, food prep and entertainment levels are green, health care is blue and managerial posts are yellow. The top echelon gets to walk around in Orange jumpsuits. That consists of Flight Commanders, and the Board of Directors, Station Chiefs, The head of security and a handful of other people. Our coveralls generally match in style and design, except we all have separate load outs for pocket sizing and our everyday carry. The horn to signify the shift change is going to blare any second now, I can see my brother Daryl through the thick yellowing glass of a view port, as he's coming back to usher me into the dry dock. Parked beside our living quarters are all of our tool chests, equipped with magnetic levitation bases. Useful in low gravity situations. Those tool chests are our livelihood, and we protect our tools with biometric locks and a swift hammer to the skull for those dumb enough to have proclivities towards theft. Poking his head in through the door to the crew lounge Daryl says. "Dougie, *The Last Great Venture* is a mark eight, so we've got her parked down the far end by the exhaust vents. She's not in too bad of shape internally, but we've got to check the entire hull for environmental damages. Boring, time consuming, but I need a trusted set of eyes leading up the team. You up for it?" He's not as tall as me, but with the neck of a bull and a short temper, you wouldn't ever mistake him for me, though we look similar. He leads this team with gusto, and is an imposing figure all the same. His red

safety coveralls have been modified to suit his specific safety concerns and needs, namely a neck as thick as a child's torso. Out in the dry dock there is slim margin to survive should you fuck something up. Hence the gruff attitude. In his position you watch a lot of good people grow cocky, inattentive, then die horrible, gruesome deaths. A needless waste, so he has become hyper alert, and it wears on him around the edges very quickly. I'm up out of my seat, dropping my garbage in the recyclers and incinerators, hopping to the door in a single bound due to our low gravity. Daryl turns on his heels and I follow him down the gangway, passed the laundry dispenser, collecting my tool bench as we head to the berth at the far end where *The Last Great Venture* is docked. Along the gangway several other tool chests are parked and in various states of disrepair, as additional teams are working all over the massive ship.

"Wheew..." I whistle. "Jesus, she's beaten the fuck up. This is environmental damage? From where? the ice rings around Saturn mixed with a metric fuck tonne of shrapnel grenades, and a blown up parts depot?... my god, the whole hull is going to have to come off. Tell me you have extra crews crawling between the inner and outer hulls looking for micro punctures and penetration damage." The ship is huge, mark eights are the largest capsules made by The Company. Compared to the original bad boy, the *Non Sequitur*, this thing is twenty times the size, and just as durable. Unless you drive it at mach five through a parts counter consisting of nothing but industrial sized nuts and bolts and titanium tipped shrapnel. "What sort of moron do you take me for Dougie? Have some faith little brother. I had three rotating crews put on it the second I laid eyes on her. What a shit show eh? Oh look, here comes Andy, our beloved, and beleaguered apprentice. Shall I have him search for the... what was it again, the capacitor or the capacitator?" It's a tried and true make work prank we pull on all our apprentices, like searching for blinker fluid, or in our case finding a gasket for the flux capacitor. Hilarious, when done out of love. These behemoths have a parts count near nine million pieces, so the likelihood that a fresh out of school mechanics apprentice will get the joke right off the bat are slim to none. Plus, apprentices are typically shit on in the ship yards until they earn their full level one certification. We don't take on apprentices very often. Our nonspecific set of skills intimidates lots of people. Specificity is great, if you are a neurologist, but if you have the aptitude for it, a generalist mechanic is a very lucrative and exciting profession. Never a dull day when you're certified to do a bit of everything on all classifications of space faring vessel.

A short young man, of about twenty is racing along the gangway beside *The Last Great Venture*, pushing his equally spotless tool chest, his apprentice grade pink coveralls are sparkingly clean. His hands aren't permanently

stained grease black yet. He's been our trusted side kick for nearly eighteen months by now. He's beaming from ear to ear in the sight of the mark eight. She is a glorious piece of machinery. Her massive bulk dwarfing every other ship in our section of the dry dock. Would have been a real sight to witness the pilots maneuver this beast into its berth. The gantry operator was probably shitting himself trying not to rub the outer hull during docking. That would have been a sight to see. Our section of dry dock repair bay is just one of about three hundred on the outer ring of the torus. A truly magnificent sight. The torus itself is ugly in its utilitarian design, but awesome in scale. Part of why we're on the dark side of the moon, so as not to ruin the lunar view from the earth's surface. Andrew is rocking back and forth, eager to hear what he's going to work on today. Any other day and we'd fuck him over without even thinking about it, but this is a mark eight, and she needs millions of dollars worth of work done, and I don't think we can push our deadlines any more than what The Company has allotted us. "Andy, you bring your mag boots and mag lev harness connectors with you today?" Looking over Andy's shoulder at the hull of the ship before us. "If so, saddle up, we're on ship in fifteen minutes. Be at the aft articulated vent shielding, ready to climb up. Bring Visine, as this bitch will kill your eyes today." I can see his grin growing larger than his face can bear. To actually go up and walk the length and breadth of a mark eight, and see the berth from all angles is a once in a lifetime opportunity. Very rare for a green mechanics apprentice. Andrew is very lucky indeed. "Andy?..." turning from the ship to look directly at me Andrew responds. "Yeah Dougie?... erm,... Doug. Sorry." I chuckle, as I glower at him. "Put on your knee pads, otherwise your pristine coveralls will be charcoal black by the time you're done. Change out the inserts on your respirator too, that environmental shielding comes apart in your fingers and turns to super fine dust that will clog your lungs up real fuckin' quick." Packing up our gear, we head aft to climb aboard the hull of *The Last Great Venture*. The clock is ticking, credits are rolling and we've got several hundred thousand punctures to analyze and repair. The noise is cacophonous, and the air is tangy from the sparks and spent ozone. Pneumatic drills and die grinders are throwing up clouds of orange microscopic dust. The light is dim and has an amber glow from all the spent environmental hull plating. Water vapor is hanging over the ship like a woolly sweater. In among the sparks a chill settles over us as we trace every millimeter of the mark eight's external surface. Testing doors, vents and air locks. Checking welds, and rivets alike, all with an eye towards certain death if even the smallest wounds to the hull shielding aren't found and mended. Hours crawl by, as we sweat, swear, bleed, bow and scrape over every facet of *The Last Great Venture*. Shift change klaxons sound off, and we climb down, gingerly off the vessel exterior. Andy is so excited he practically jumps from the capsule to the

gantry, a solid fourteen foot gap. Us worn and weary guys use the hand rails and antenna arrays as make shift ladders and work platforms to get to the gangway instead. Pulling up beside our tool chests we unlatch the mag lev locks and push our gear back to our crew quarter storage spaces. Up ahead, there is a commotion at the main junction between the dry dock berths and our section of crew quarters. People are jostling each other, and a scuffle is breaking out. Before it really registers, Daryl is off like a shot, ready to take control and make sure cooler heads prevail. "Daryl!" I shout over the din, trying to get in through the tightly packed bodies, close to the scrum. I desperately want to stop anyone who might try to swing a wrench at the back of my brothers head in a fit of rage, or as an act of retaliation. "Daryl!, what's going on man?" I'm within arms reach of him, when the crowd around us starts to part. A slim, wiry fella is wrapped up in a full nelson, blood on his knuckles, his pink coveralls bunched up around his face. "Dougie!" Daryl says through gritted teeth. "Just the guy I was looking for... check his Id, I don't recognize this guy from our section." Daryl has the skinny, greasy man locked up tight in his grasp. "No id tags on him, what's the deal here bro, you trying to get into a tool chest that's not yours or somethin'?" The skinny man grins at me, a good selection of his teeth are missing, or have turned black. His hot breathe smells foul with decay. His lank hair is thinning and he smells like a bowl of hot shit. "Yeah nah man, yeah nah. You'se know, just doin' mah thang..." he's twitching and jerking with each word. A junkie of some sort. Probably found a jumpsuit in the laundry dump and thought he'd steal and sell off someone's hard earned tools. The gathered crowd wants to flush him out an air lock for suspected theft, but instead Daryl drags him over to a yellow cubicle stationed at the edge of the gangway, a good two hundred meters from any section of crew quarters. Standard hr protocol. We'll live where we work, but management can't get within one hundred meters of our recreational crew quarters. We have supervisors that are part of our crews for personnel matters outside of work hours. "No, we can't wheeze him, we're not murderers. He can go sit with HR, for a protocol rehabilitation session or ten to set him straight..." pushing the greasy looking man into a chair, his only slightly dusty pink apprentice uniform looking drastically out of place among all the men in filthy red coveralls after a full shift. "Dougie, you see Andy around, I want to discuss his progress on *The Last Great Venture* shielding before he retires to bed." Daryl, is looking at me, concern etched across his face. The dirty guys coveralls are awful pristine to have come out of this side of the laundry facility. "Eh no, I haven't seen him. He was so excited about the work today he raced on ahead of me." Andrew's grinning face is nowhere to be seen in the crowd, or through the dirty view port that looks into our crew lounge.

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"Sorry gentlemen" the HR flunky says, "They just found his stripped body buried in among the locked down tool chests. Looks like our greasy friend here came upon Andy unawares, while he was tying down his unit, hit him over the back of the head with a fire extinguisher. Direct hit to the base of the skull. It was quick. From the grin still on his face, he never felt a thing..." the words fade out to nothingness. A slight buzz fills my head. Another dead kid. This one, now he had potential. He's going to be difficult to replace. Somewhere external to us the shift change klaxon is going off. I have eight hours before I have to be back on. Daryl is going to be ornery for a while to come. Fucking junkie scum. Should have put him out on the float like the crowd wanted. I feel a stiff drink or ten are on my immediate horizon. Outside the bleak emptiness of space continues to float around us, undisturbed.

"Yo, Daryl, you've been summoned."

Says the giant of a Martian born man who works on smaller the single pilot vessels in our dry dock section of the torus. "Don't gimme that look man, they sent word down from above, the HR director herself wants a meet and greet with the illustrious Daryl "the minotaur" Bradley. She asked for you, by name, so go upstairs, and see what the fuck is going on." The Martian is a seven foot tall Hulk of a man, by the name of Barry Ludens, curt but a great shop foreman with a dry wit. A joke like this wouldn't even occur to him. People in the lounge wince when they hear Daryl's nickname said aloud, and to his face. People learn early on not to mention the modified red mechanics coveralls he wears with the ultra wide neck. Daryl is nestled into a crash couch winding down after a couple of shifts off, coping with the tragic death of his and his brother's last great apprentice Andy. His brother Doug is seated beside him, dinner plate in his lap, mouth full of diced steak. "Dougie, we been here, what... like twenty seven years now right? You ever, even once heard about a meet and greet with one of the fucking board of directors?" He is slowly climbing out of the industrial crash couch, groaning under the strain of his considerable bulk, and the pressure on his not so young knees. Even in low gravity, age, and stress catch up with the best of us. "No D, I ain't never heard of that before. You think we missed something on *The Last Great Venture* and someone else, or a whole crew died due to negligence? Maybe I should come too, you know, moral support or show our work order documentation. We certified that shit three times over, I know it!" Doug looks agitated, word from upstairs never comes down here to our

cramped crew quarters without passing through ten miles of interconnected HR flunkies asses and mouths. A human centipede of middle management tweaks to SOP directives. Daryl standing half in, half out of the door to the crew lounge, staring intently at the Martian foreman Barry. "How the fuck do I even get up there to see the big wig anyhow?" A look of sincere consternation upon his cracked and worn face. The last forty hours of mourning Andy's passing has hit the whole sector hard, and our crew quarters the hardest. The room is littered with empty beer bulbs and smells like salty tears and sweat. "Not a problem D, if you head over to HR cubicle seven beside the bay doors, there will be a flunkie there to take you up. Let us know what it looks like from up there in their ivory tower eh?". And with that last rejoinder, both men head out the door, down the gang plank and off to their separate duties.

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Pling, pling chimes the door to the board room. With a soft woosh the double doors open, and I step passed the threshold and into an immaculately clean office space, full of crystal, real leather and an actual wooden table, the air in here smells of sandalwood. Standing in front of the gigantic bay windows is the HR director, last name Taylor. That's as much as they were willing to tell me on my trip up here. Over her shoulders the large expanse of our particular dry dock operation can be seen. From this vantage point, we look like ants in a tilt shifted photograph, the scale of the dock yards, the full enclosure, and all of those people busy at work is dizzying. Even our massive moving gantries where we park our mobile tool benches and chests look like children's toys from up here. HR director Taylor is fitted out in a tasteful burgundy pant suit. It isn't baggy, but nor is it too tightly fitted. Turning away from the view, she finally registers my presence. "Daryl Bradley, so glad you could make it. I'm so glad you could find the time to come and see me. I know you've recently been struck by tragedy." Motioning towards the board room table and a couple of waiting seats, equipped with a view screen set to stand by and some bulbs of either pristine un recycled water or the purest vodka I've ever seen. "I didn't realize I had the option to decline, Ms. Taylor." Taking my seat opposite her, I marvel at how form fitting yet comfortable the chair is. Damn, this shit makes you want to fall asleep in it. However do these people stay awake during meetings. "Ah, yes... sorry. I do realize this is rather...unusual. To say the least. Certainly. Listen, you are an intelligent man, so I'll cut the shit. We here at The Company are terribly sad that your latest apprentice was murdered. You know, I oversee all three hundred of the dry docks on this station, and by far. By. Far. You have the best record on safety, and on people making their certs, and on satisfaction with your teams repairs. That mark eight was never

supposed to be anywhere near here. But the crew asked for you by name. Specifically. Do you know how rare it is that a flight crew out of Neptune knew who you were, or even bothered to bypass the appropriate channels to get that experimental craft in to your work shop, under your watchful eye. The logistics and insider knowledge is astounding! No, no. Don't worry I'm not accusing you of subterfuge. I'm paying you a compliment, that in the eighteen years I've been here, I have never once encountered the security forces asking for a specific shop by name. Now I know you're a god damn fantastic mechanic, and you stay on deadline, and keep your budget within reasonable margins. The best people working anywhere on this station came out from under your tutelage." Ms. Taylor is now up on her feet, gesticulating wildly, as she walks the length of the room. All I can do is sit quietly, astounded by what I'm hearing. Though I sense a terrible and foreboding but, coming. "Daryl, do you mind if I call you that? Daryl, I have zero technical skills. I understand very little of what you lot do here. I'm a people person. I get you the people and resources you need, then I get the fuck out of the way. You know, one of my fondest memories here was during the boom period of sixty three. I spend forty hours helping your crews find some compound W, and a much needed tube of preparation H. Now, I never did find those items, but you guys made me feel like I was a contributing part of the team. Everyone was so welcoming, and helpful. All smiles. Hell, the reason I got promoted so quickly onto the board of directors was because the two other junior directors I worked with got maimed or killed during their rotations on crews in other sections of the torus." She has a wistful look upon her face at the fleeting memories. "We've got a serious problem here Daryl. That jag off that killed you and your brother's apprentice, was moon lighting as a full blown separatist. If word gets out, this whole station will erupt and blow out at the seams. For morale's sake no one can know. The fewer the number of people who can recall that greasy fucks face, the better. That's why, for your exemplary ability to teach, I'm promoting you off the shop floor and into a tenured teaching position within the machine shop. New personalized quarters, full meal plan, and no more death defying shifts crawling over ships, brutalizing your body. No need to thank me, the paperwork has gone through. It cleared the moment you came up the lift. Biometric scans for the win!" She looks genuinely pleased with herself. And with a flourish, I find myself back out in the hall, being lead down to the elevator banks. Wondering, what the fuck just happened here anyhow?

"Hey, there's the big man. Back from the land of the lost I see. What's up D, you look stunned? Oh shit, you getting a stint in rehab or something?" The question is left hanging in the air. Silence floats up to meet it. With a dull thud, Daryl flops onto an open couch. Running his hands over the well worn cracks and creases. Admiring the brilliant green light shining on the

instrument panel. He turns around as though to talk to the whole room at once. "Doug has been promoted to Dock Section leader, all apprenticeship training in this sector of the docks are under his stewardship. All dockets and work orders, change orders etc, now run through him. He'll set the schedule from here on out. All foremen report directly to Doug. Notices have gone out all ready. I made a few notes, and some other long overdue promotions are going through, and a couple of raises. Those are my last acts before I leave for my new, university, full tenure position." An audible gasp, as though each pair of lungs has drawn in all available oxygen in the cramped room. A heart beat passes, then two, then four.

Out on the gangway a loud commotion can be heard, emanating from the central crew quarters where the dock section leader bunks down. The sound of raucous cheers and corks popping can be heard. Music begins to blare over the loud speakers. All thoughts of misery evaporates in the tidal wave of cheers and shouts of good will. Notifications of raises and promotions begin to chime in on personal communicators.

"What do you remember about the accident out there, anything you can give us..."

Could help us piece it all together more coherently." Says the mousey looking woman from the internal affairs office. If she didn't have such a short bob of a haircut, and refrained from looking so sincere or earnest you'd think she was a real hardnosed bitch. But such as it was, she came across as mild and genuinely compassionate. Both traits, I would imagine, she'd need to work extra hard at hiding if she ever wanted to make a full-fledged investigator or a detective, or be more than some hardnosed bastards go'fer. "Not much really. I don't even remember going in to work that day. I'm still foggy on how long ago this all went down." Sitting in the white plastic chair, chained to a soft cream coloured formica table with a reinforced plate steel under structure, I'm overcome by the itching of my wounds. "Can I get a... you know a hand, my face itches and I don't have arms anymore. Is it really necessary to restrain me, bodily. I can't even walk unassisted yet." The blast at the dock yards had done a real number to The Company. Not to mention, stolen my arms, killed a very promising career in robotics, and left me with ruptured tendons in both my legs. Those would heal, but my fine motor skills in welding robotic arms in zero g had all but evaporated in one loud, concussive boom. "Am I a suspect. I mean Jesus, that blast took both of my fucking arms man. That's my livelihood. Seven years at the university, four more years as an apprentice, and then having to get my level three certs

before doing anything even remotely close to the cusp of cutting edge. No, man. No, fuck. That. Bullshit. I ain't no suspect, I was fucking robbed. Someone took my life from me, took everything in one fell swoop. So you cut the shit. Cut these restraints off me, and tell me how long I've been in this hospital. I know I'm still aboard the station, as everything here is fucking blue!" God damn am I agitated. This line of questioning has been going on for what feels like twelve hours now. Maybe more than that. I don't know. My blue room, with blue lights and blue sheets, and blue curtains has no windows or media displays. The blue hallway I get frog marched down, on ruptured tendons no less, has no visible details telling me the date, nor time of day, or even what shift we're in. "Ok, Mr. Gendry, you're right. We don't need to put you in leg chains, that's me being a bit over zealous. This is my first real case as a lead investigator." There she goes, showing contrition, helping me out. I could learn to like this woman, if she weren't the first face I saw after losing my limbs and any future I had in robotics fabrication. "According to our records the blast happened twenty seven days ago, around oh three hundred hours. You were on the last shift, or first shift of the day. Not sure how you would describe that. Why don't you tell us again what you do, erm... did. If not that day, just on the regular. What your job was, is..." the formica table is empty, save for a few sheets of paper and a manila folder with my work history and medical reports printed inside. Leaning back in my chair, oddly off balance with no arms to cross over my chest, I start into my tale. "Listen, I'm kind of an animated talker. I'm going to need arms, robotics, prosthetics, or regenerative. Whatever they've got me insured for that I can try to recapture some of the old glory of my work/life balance. Just as an aside. You know. Robotic appendages are my passion. Wrote a thesis on them, did a practical application on them too. Got great marks. Top of my class. Even got a recommendation from the dean of the university, ole big D "the minotaur" Bradley." I am positively beaming, I'm so damn smug. "So as a typical dock worker, I bunk down in the standard crew quarters, you know the ones out on the torus, like less than five hundred meters from where I work sixteen hours a day. The glory of rotating continental shifts eh. Pays well though, huh. Yeah, buddy. Big bucks for those with a class three cert, like I got. Not many folks around here get that far along. Especially in robotics, and those outboard drill rig appendages." I can feel the storytelling juices flowing, getting into my story now. Hoo-boy! "Yeah, so lately I was tasked with building a real robust system that can switch seamlessly between ice hauling, towing and full on drilling. Those three elements all have very different tolerances and needs for stress loads, torque, and the ability to swap in/out bits on the fly. A real pig of a job. Designing one is difficult enough, but three, in tandem. Christ! The calculations on the timing alone was enough to write a year's worth of papers on. Chip load, bit speeds, stressors out the ying-yang. Anyway, I got it designed on paper and then had to

fabricate a proof of concept on an old mark twelve The Company had lying around, something called *The Jolene Roger*." A sudden jolt, as the investigator sits up straight, comes to life. "Wait, you built a test rig on a mark twelve that had just be laying around? Those were only put in use eight astronomical units, or (AU) passed Pluto. How is it one ended up here?" Writing furiously on her note pad, looking to the folder to see if she'd overlooked this interesting detail. "Yeah, I know what an (AU) is, 92,955,807 miles or 149,497,870.26 kilometers, but I don't know about the mark twelve, or how it came to be stored at the station. I don't ask where the resources come from, I just build what they ask me too. May I?" Looking up from her notes, the investigator motions for me to continue. "As I was saying, I had to fabricate my proof of concept. So I spent a huge number of hours gathering plate steel, titanium blocks and pistons and shielded hydraulics components and got about eighty hours in before, Boom! Do you know if the rig survived the blast? Some of my welds were exquisite. Like liquid pearl on glass." A tap on the window of the door brings our discussion to a sudden halt. From behind the door, I can see an older gentleman from the investigative team motion for the woman to step out into the hallway. Quickly, and quietly I watch her slip out of the room. My back is to the wall, and I'm sat facing the door with just the formica table and an empty chair in front of me. The older man is talking into her ear directly, she nods almost imperceptibly. They both look back through the window of the door at me. A flurry of activity ensues as the investigators leave, and a junior officer comes in to take me back to my hospital room. I never even learned her name. No idea what caused them to run off after all those hours of examination and questioning. Must have bigger fish to fry.

"Sorry for the wait Mr. Gendry, or Jack, is it? We had to wait for your official discharge to come through from both the police force and The Company investigators before we could release your new arms to you. They've been especially formulated for you based on your biometrics, and the last psych evaluation you had only a couple months ago. We realize the trauma might have pushed you outside your baseline, but we think you'll find that you can get back to work with only a minor period of adjustment. Seems that recco' you had from the dean of the university meant you got pushed to the top of the pile for these experimental limbs." The technician takes me through a laundry list of specifications regarding my new bionic arms, and how to best care for them. Three hours later and I'm heading down the lift to my crew quarters. Life is finally back on track for Jack! Arms synched up perfectly, work with no perceptible lag.

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Waiting patiently out on the gangway in the dry docks are a group of unruly out of system technicians. Desperate to harvest the secrets contained in the black boxes buried deep inside the mark twelve capsule *The Jolene Roger*. The explosive mining charges have been set all over the mobile gantries, the separatists are waiting for the right time to pounce. In the shadows of the torus, an insurgency is building.

"Good evening everyone, welcome to orientation!"

The lead instructor emphasizes her remarks with an all encompassing wave of her hands. Gathered around her are the newest three hundred people who are to travel from planet side up to the Torus station orbiting the moon. Many of the young adults gathered nearby have pensive, or outright terrified looks upon their faces. For most, this is their first experience with space travel, and the prospect of living in or near zero g for the next decade has worn some of their nerves to a frayed mess. The instructor, a Ms. Kim is about five feet tall, slim but fit. She is wearing a jumpsuit that is orange in colour, which signifies her as being a director or board of directors member. Turning a full three hundred and sixty degrees she surveils the large windowless reception hall and all of its eager occupants. She is standing in the middle of the nervous crowd wearing a head set and a sub vocal mic strapped to her throat, so as to not have to shout when she speaks. "For many of you, the next forty hours as we travel to near moon orbit will be the first experience you have with actual space flight, being under thrust, eating and defecating in near zero g. So, in short... a major shock to the system. We had all of you undergo strict medical testing, so no one is going to die of natural causes! Yay!..." a pause for nervous laughter, of which there is precious little. A smattering of claps can be heard in small patches of the crowd. Her voice reverberates off the painted undecorated cinder block walls. The hall is spartan in design, no pillars or knee walls to hide behind. "You've all passed your survival training and undergone several rigorous simulations, but fear not! The next seven to ten years will be some of the best you'll ever have." On the outer edges of the crowd more orange suited instructors are piling into the room, followed by red suited technicians wheeling in rack upon rack of cyan coloured safety suits. The meeting hall at the space port is starting to feel cramped with all the extra bodies, and suits and equipment. The air temperature is rising as the gathered crowd grows restless and afraid. "Our expected time of departure is four hours from now, so according to my watch, around oh six hundred. By then, you'll all have showered, trimmed your nails, shaved your heads & bodies, voided your bowels and bladders,

removed any extraneous jewelry, stripped down naked and put on The Company provided safety suits. We have a delicate balance of weight to account for when moving three hundred souls from earth side to outer space. No exceptions, zero religious exemptions permitted. I will now turn you over to our trusty lead technician Darnel, who will take you step by step on how your safety coveralls work, and the prep needed to get you into them safely. With that, my team will bid you ado." In a sweep of theatrics, the orange colour coded team leaves the hall, departing down a long winding ramp located near the front of the hall, and heads to the ship located three kilometers away, down the supply corridor that's buried one hundred meters below ground, and very heavily heat shielded. An extremely heavy set man dressed in a rich red set of coveralls steps out from behind a cluster of suits on a steel rack on large industrial rubber wheels. He is sweating under the anxious glare of three hundred, cold, tired and weary new recruits. The hour is late, and he has a long hard job ahead of him. Gathering himself, he straightens up and raises his arms to signal the crowd. "Thank you instructor Kim, hello all... I'm lead suit tech Darnel Smythe, and I will give you all a run down on some of the suit specifications, and why you need to prep your bodies accordingly for them to work properly in case of a sudden loss of atmosphere while in transit, or while on the station, in class, at work, on a mission, or just in general through ultimately unlucky circumstance. Ha. That was a mouthful." An audible gasp is heard throughout the crowd. Wide eyes, and a couple of horrified wails can be heard among the gathered recruits. This is information they have been given numerous times over, via document, speech, and in the simulations themselves, but never so bluntly, or all at once like that. The reality of their choice to pursue life in space is hitting home like a lead weight to the belly. In space, death lies in wait behind every choice you make. "Right, so from what I understand the majority of you are all from earth. My manifest shows a few here from Mars and a couple from the station off Venus. Now you lot have traveled previously, and can peel off from the main group as you've been fitted for suits, and are of course, still wearing them." Shocked noises from the group, again. "Oh yes people, these suits are all that you'll be wearing from here on out. They have an internal rigging we'll go over later, but you will eat, sleep, work, study, bathe, & exercise in these suits. Until, you earn a colour coded new one that corresponds to your vocation and training. Since you are all new, young and dumb. You will spend the entirety of your time in a jumpsuit. Can't be having green horns and noob students dying on us just because a micro-meteor poked a hole in a hallway, or training facility." The look on the gathered group is one of stunned incredulity. A very stout young man with blue hair and various facial piercings pipes up. "That can't be right, I have all these expensive clothes that I bought especially for going to university on the torus. I can't possibly be expected to dress exactly the same

as everyone else. I just can't!" Looking at the tech, the young man has his arms crossed over his chest, and his chin thrust outward. "Eh, sorry Chico, you all wear it. The bags you dropped off at kiosk by the front gates, all gone into lock up. All you get are what I'm about to give you. Now in order to get you to focus on the task at hand, I need everyone. Every. One. To strip naked, yes here, right now. Yup, peel down to what your mother's gave ya! You are all going to walk, naked, single file through the showers, then you'll be diverted to the void rooms, where a warm milky liquid will, well... void your innards. Then you'll have laser hair removal, yup, you guessed it, all of it. Bam! Gone. Your nails will get trimmed down to the quick and then we'll go over the suits, pack you into them safely with the aid of the medical teams, then march you to your seats aboard the ship. I do apologize for how cold the water is. This will be the last full flow shower you'll have for a very long time. I wish I could say the water is above fifty two degrees Fahrenheit, but... it isn't. Life in space is hard folks. You signed the waivers. Took the psych tests, completed very strenuous simulations and a multitude of training sessions. The movies are great, but this is the real world people. Oh, here we go, the doors are opening and the clock is ticking people. Move, move, move!" The sea of red tech's move down the line of helping the gathered masses to strip naked, organizing recruits, helping them to form a single file. A huge set of steel double doors pull open, from a false wall in the reception hall to reveal a dark and cavernous hallway starkly lined with black water spigots and jets of multi coloured fluids from nozzles located throughout the dark hall. Not mentioned in the documentation are the delousing treatments and the mild acid wash that'll take two full layers of skin off, and aid in the laser hair removal. Cutting weight is difficult at the best of times, so strict measures to save every possible ounce have been enacted. On the floor, a conveyor belt stirs to life, mild gasps and hearty screams of shock as the ice cold streams of water are doused over the glut of nude bodies. A flashing yellow strobe kicks up in the hallway, as men and women and the young and old are diverted one direction or another. The muffled sound of gagging and vomiting can be heard through the echoes of screaming and crying. The void process is harsh, and not limited to just bowels and bladder. Breakfast must be purged too. For the biological males, prostates get emptied, in a perfunctory & clinical manner. The milky medical cocktail liquid ingested is also used to dry up gastric juices and bile, so no one suffocates in their helmets during takeoff or during the forty hour trek to the moon. For some, prolonged exposure to near zero g will set off violent bouts of vertigo and nausea. In order to limit the transmission of any airborne illness among so many new recruits into what is essentially a closed ecosystem, drastic medical measures are undertaken. Drugs, needles, radiation baths, invasive biometric scans, the likes of which no one would willingly sign on for are done in secret while the recruits are voided. They're helpless and weak.

Totally disoriented. Sheep for the slaughter, as it were. Each one, though surrounded by hundreds of other people, are suffering in a desperate isolation of their own choosing. The truth is, the entire indoctrination process takes about twenty four hours total, not four, and the faces of the crowd will be hollow, teary eyed, and desperately weak when they are seated before the technician, medical staff, and his army of tailors. The processing has begun, it will be hours before Darnel need address the group again.

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"Welcome recruits. Glad to see so many familiar faces after your... ordeal. It isn't pleasant, but it is necessary. Now, on to the fun stuff. You will be given your safety jumpsuits, or coveralls, shortly. They are a very pretty shade of cyan. That denotes to everyone else aboard any base, capsule, rig or what have you that you don't know jack shit about living in space! That fact, quickly denoted, will save your life and theirs. Yes, there is a method to the madness. If and when you are somewhere that loses atmosphere, it happens real fucking quick, so you. Can't. Talk. Colour coding is now your friend. It's been drilled into you by many others, but you have to live it, to appreciate it's simple yet awesome effectiveness." Walking through the crowd of what looks like hung over freshman college students after a weeklong alcohol fueled binge session. Darnel looks over the neat formation of the gathered half conscious recruits. Each laid out on a mechanical surgical gurney, in equal lines, with equal spacing between them. The lead suit tech talks animatedly. Wild gesticulations, modulating his voice with precise changes to capture and maintain their waning attention. They've all been run through the ringer. A type of joint trauma most will likely never fully remember, as their bodies and brains will shut these memories out, for the sake of their sanity. Dark halls, screams, purging both fluids and matter, drugs and the bitter cold knowledge of true isolation. A harsh reality, one that is a secret hidden in plain sight.

"Ok kids, the suits go onto bare skin. That way you get the highest quality seal. It seals in numerous places, in case of a tear, or blow out, we can save the maximum quantity of your body in case of catastrophic failure. These bad boys seal at the ankle, calf, knee, thigh, waist, chest, neck, wrist, elbow, armpit." Darnel is ticking off the locations on his fingers as he speaks. "Each seal location comes equipped with an auto inflating cuff, that acts as a tourniquet. There is also an internal catheter system to expel and expunge bodily waste. Means you can work long hours in EVA, and not have to try and hold it in. There is also a function for hooking up to the steam showers on the station, to bathe, and flush out dead skin cells and such. Your biometrics work through the suit too. The ability to get food, drugs, sleeping quarters, into and out of your class rooms, job placements, entertainment

facilities all are tied to your own biometrics." The mention of drugs, food and entertainment brings some life into their worn and weary eyes. Some faces have a haunted thousand yard stare, that begins to melt away with the following message. "This wasn't on any program or documentation, but it's a gift from The Company to all those stationed on the torus, and any rig, vessel that they have commissioned. You are all allotted a prescribed amount of recreational drugs, access to sex workers, education, job training, food and entertainment. Do. Not. Under any circumstance go to a private, non sanctioned vendor for either drugs or sex. Our system is heavily regulated, taxed and monitored for your safety. You cannot OD on our supply, and when you have shift hours, or class hours or some regulated function to perform, your biometrics will cancel out and nullify the effects of whatever it is you chose to use. But only if it is from The Company, or one of our chartered pharmaceutical vendors. If you're brilliant, but socially awkward, the brothels in the green sector will take care of you. The healthcare, wages, hours of operation and peace of mind of our regulated sex workers are guarded heavily, so use them as needed, don't go private. Your tax dollars are there to provide you with what you need and keep us all healthy. Enjoy yourselves.... so on that note, my team will come around shortly, and fit you into your suits, boots, gloves and test your auto deploy helmets and respirators. Just lay back and let us work our magic." In the silence of three hundred exhausted newbies the experienced technicians set to work plying freshly scrubbed nude bodies into their spongy body socks with waste management system inserted and inflated, and coveralls on top. As each unit is inserted and inflated in bladders and bowels alike, for both the men and women, an occasional yelp, moan or cry can be heard among the group. Thousands of pairs of rubber gloves go into the recyclers, to be incinerated down to their constituent parts, and reassembled later as other synthetic latex products.

The three hundred bodies are wheeled down the subterranean hall way, on a long train of gurneys. Each body has been infused with a sturdy mixture of vitamins and minerals, so they will survive the next forty hour flight without food or water. The vast majority of cyan suited recruits are fast asleep, or are so over tired that they can only watch, wide eyed as they pass two and a half kilometers of cold yellow lighting, across damp concrete, in the musty smell of a tightly contained, low ceilinged, windowless, subterranean passage that seems to stretch on into utter blackness in the distance. As the long stretch of lights comes to an end, and the gurneys travel the last five hundred meters in utter darkness, the smell of the launch vehicle hits the nose like a punch. The mix of fuel, and astringent cleaners, oil and detergents wafts over the space like a damp towel over the head. It clings to the nostrils, and burns the lungs and stings the eyes. At the base of the launch vessel, a massive elevator sits, large enough to load up thirty gurneys and the eight techs required to haul

the recruits to their coffin sized berths. Slowly, the elevators move up and down, as the gurneys return collapsed, and empty, more recruits are loaded. Not long after an automated buggy interlinks with the collapsed gurneys and returns them to their resting spot, just outside of view of the welcoming grand hall. Hidden behind huge metal doors, stored just off a large empty hallway full of spigots and a conveyor belt floor.

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"Good morning freshmen, this is your captain speaking. I'm captain Hardy, flying with us today is your commanding officer Ms. Casey Phillips. We are approximately twenty hours away from Torus station, which is both the station name, and the design. She's ugly as fuck, but awesome in scale. Also your new home for the next seven to ten years. In case no one mentioned this, the station runs on continental shifts. That's right folks, she's a twenty four seven type of gal. Whether you are a worker, student or prostitute, you'll all live in rotating eight hour shifts. Congratulations on making it this far, you are now allowed to move freely about the common areas of the ship. There is a viewing deck at both the forward and aft sections of this vessel. If you are currently experiencing vertigo, or nausea please refrain from vomiting anywhere but in your immediate crew quarters, as they are designed for just such an occurrence. The Company, always thinking." With a loud click the pa system kicks back to the soothing soft jazz that had been slowly growing louder as more and more freshmen recruits regained consciousness after their ordeal during induction.

The personal crew quarters are more like prefabricated, pale blue cloth paneled coffins stacked into neat bundles of ten, with a singular soft yellow light embedded in the ceiling, to avoid any kind of head trauma. Inside the recruits are velcroed into a quilted padded blanket, to keep from bouncing off the loosely padded coffin walls during transit. At the foot of the tiny room is a media screen set to stand by, with stock images of the launch vessel, the torus and flight crew fading in and out as a screen saver. The passengers are equal parts students, vocational apprentices, and support staff for the immense Torus station. What was once just a ship yard for The Company, has now expanded to be a system wide university of choice, tradesmen learning center, and hub of activity. The entertainment sector has ballooned from three levels to a bustling thirty. It now boasts television stations, several movie studios, theme parks and casinos. The work force in the mechanical sector alone is upwards of eight thousand souls. Capsules don't just come here for repairs any more, they are designed, fabricated and manufactured by the score. Rivaling the designs and capabilities of anything produced by the old school earth bound teams from The Company HQ in Houston Texas. After the mark thirties were completed, the Daryl Bradley

Design Shop decided that they'd show off some of their new tricks, and in secret, built, tested, and flew a newly fashioned Minotaur class starship for the first time ever. With an entirely new design for propulsion their starship was able to make a successful jaunt out passed Pluto and back in three weeks time. What had previously taken one hundred and eighteen weeks one way, was now only twenty one days. The cosmos were finally opening up. After catching wind of this momentous achievement The Company swiftly stepped in to purchase, then patent all aspects of the design. They pride themselves on being beyond competition.

The first mission for this new vessel would be to go as far out as they could get, ping any sensor, or antenna arrays they could find, and report back. In truth, someone very high up with The Company wants to find *The Non Sequitur*, and figure out what had gone wrong all those centuries ago. The greatest thing about the vacuum of space was how well it could preserve anything it came into contact with.

Pulling up the laneway to the massive Company induction office...

I am struck by the sheer size of the building. It's an enormous rectangle of grey concrete, flat roofed, dotted with a plethora of long thin windows, set back in the wall, likely used as gun embankments during times of war and civil unrest. The building is the only thing around for miles. As the launch pad is only three kilometers from here, the blow back from lift off has kept much of the treeline at bay. Only the most sheltered portion directly in front of the building, by the entrance has any grass or vegetation. The air out here is dry, the remnants of the Texas afternoon heat is coming up off the sand, and rich black asphalt parking lot in dizzying waves, even at this late hour. The view of the front doors is obscured by waves of heat. From the taxi drop off and loading zone it is about a six hundred meter walk. The pavement is lined with hearty shrubs and low hanging pecan trees. There are yellowy pot lights shining up through the scrub in the planters, illuminating all manner of gnats, flies, moths and mosquitoes. The air is abuzz with the sound of wildlife. In the distance, through the heavy opaque steel doors, a muffled murmur can be heard. There are several hundred freshmen recruits gathering for our induction process to the university aboard the Torus. Earth's largest geosynchronous space station. By all accounts, it's absolutely enormous, but ugly as all get out. Very utilitarian in design. From all of our documentation

provided to us by The Company during the application process, it was once a glorified shipyard, a dry dock for capsule repairs. What was just a huge working platform has since morphed into the best university, and entertainment hub in the solar system. The only comparables are the floating station above Venus, known only for science research into energy and propulsion systems. But it is tiny by comparison. I myself am slated to attend the robotics program at the university. I garnered a full ride scholarship for excellence in translating theory into fabricated proof of concept. I was told by my mother that I get my smarts from her side of the family. My uncle was once blown up by separatists in a plot to destroy the Torus. Ultimately it failed, but he got a glorious set of bionic arms out of the deal. My scholarship is named after his combo drill appendage that revolutionized The Company's mining operations. I guess I'm what you'd call a legacy.

Walking up to the immense steel double doors, we are met by teams of heavily armed guards, dressed in black uniforms. The line to get through the door is about one hundred people deep. The late evening air is insufferably oppressive. Littered among the crowds inside the main reception hall are men and women with tight buns, and razor sharp haircuts, decked out in orange jumpsuits. According to the many hours of simulations we had to run, over the last six months, those orange suited folks are among the board of directors. Very senior people. The thought of mingling with the upper echelon of The Company gives me tingles. We have been run through any number of physical and psychological testing to make sure we can handle not only the trip off the planet, but our extended stay in zero gravity. All the latest talk show vids off of Torus station mentioned just how excitingly thorough the induction process is. We had to read so many official company reports about why we have to undergo a purge to make weight for the launch. It all sounds so clinical, so removed. It's very difficult to get a sense of what it will ultimately be like. I'm so excited. Standing in the center of the hub bub, I notice the line has moved. Finally, it's my turn to scan my biometrics and pass through the last of the health screening. Walking through the doors, you can see how spartan the space is. The room is cavernous, with beige painted cinder block walls, a few posters and banners hung tastefully along the far wall. Oddly there are no windows inside the grand receiving hall. Before we can get too far in, there are illuminated signs hanging from the ceiling, and red clad technicians directing us to take our bags to the porters station. Our items will travel up to Torus station separately. Did not know that. That wasn't covered in any of the provided documentation. The queue moves quickly here. In a few moments I'm at the kiosk. A tall, slender woman tells me to scan my matching baggage tags and my biometric markers and to head straight into the hall. I both see and hear my duffle bag run along the raised conveyor belt that popped up from the tile floor and disappear behind a wall with a dull thud. Inside the great hall

nearly all three hundred members of our cohort are gathered tightly in a crowd. The temperature in here isn't much cooler than what is outside. Now I wish I hadn't worn all these new clothes. I layered up in case the place had ac blasting. Taking off my dress shirt, I let my fabulous blue hair out of its tight bun. Fanning my looser ponytail to let some air reach my hot and sweaty neck. A commotion stirs up near the center of the crowd. A petite woman, of Asian heritage can be seen raising her arms to garner attention. She's wearing a head set and around her throat is a sub vocal mic, guess she runs this show, and doesn't like to shout.

The crowd stops and stands at attention. The honourable Ms. Kim opens her hands wide and leads into her speech. "Good evening everyone, and welcome to orientation!" Madness ensues.

I can't believe I'm sitting here, cowering in my room like a god damn child...

I swear to god every time I leave though, I can feel an extra set of eyes on me, watching, observing, lying in wait for me. I constantly get chills, and the tiny hairs on my neck stand on end. But I have never, once ever seen anyone out of place near me. Sitting on my tiny bed, staring at the darkly coloured door, it's raised panels have scuffed paint, breaking the facade of the would be wood panel, instead it's just a faux paint job, on an atmosphere rated door. The crew quarters for entertainment staff, or "talent", as my manager Jimmy likes to refer to us as, is massive in comparison to the guys who work the dock yards out on the widest ring of the torus. Those guys sleep in glorified coffins, meant for one, with communal bathrooms, and leisure areas lit like an out of use subway platform. Hell they spend one hundred percent of their time not five hundred meters from where they work all day. You can see the individual berths and all the ships attendant staff from inside their sleeping chambers. Now my room, is about four meters wide, and a full two meters deep, with what looks like an inset bunkbed. But actually the bed is up top, there is a closet to one side from ceiling to floor, and a toilet, shower, sink combo unit on the other side. Below my bed is my crowded desk slash lounge. Littered with scripts, a media screen, a teleprompter and props I'm meant to learn to grow comfortable with. I can spin a six shooter like a son of a bitch. Years worth of side arms training, and all those tech guys on staff to vouch for me, but still not allowed to purchase a hand gun. The potential for calamity is much too high. Even the black uniformed guards all over the

station only have access to stun weapons, like bean bags or rubber pellets. At least that is the official word down from the board of directors and all The Company literature available on the subject. But, I'm wasting time, again. Stalling, instead of walking across the sector to go meet with my producer regarding the next season of my show. We've finally gotten picked up for primetime. That means bigger budgets, and greater expectations for ratings. I kind of like the idea of staying a big fish in a little pond, but... can't stop progress I suppose. "Buck up princess! Get that ass in gear." My father's old mantra. He was not one to mince words. A real rock you could count on to provide stability in an ever changing world. Standing up from the bed, I walk to the full length closet and pull on my green coveralls. "Ugh, this does nothing for me. Safety first!" Out here, in space, precautions and safety protocols take precedence over fashion. No exceptions, no exemptions. You learn that little quip the hard way. Well, unless you were born up here. But you'd have to overcome a whole slew of other issues if that was the case. I'm a working actor, so I've allotted some of my prescription allowance to the use of an IUD, so pregnancy isn't really a concern for me right now. Apparently a pregnant gun slinger doesn't test well with the exec's. After getting dressed and pulling my thick brown curls into a tight bun, I look back at the door, then to the clock on my desk. I really have to get moving if I don't want to be late. Checking my map for the tenth time, I approach the door and set off.

There is a soft woosh as my biometrics unlatches the atmosphere rated door to my quarters. I'm really very fortunate, I live in a quiet block within the all green entertainment sector. Being a semi famous actor, I get newer accommodations in a well lit portion of the upper torus. We have more gravity here, with an increased spin. It isn't exactly earth like, but we don't float like the people lower down, or further out on the mechanical rings. We have planters full of real greenery, in wall lighting that adjusts to the time of day. With the shift change about to happen within the next hour, all common areas, like the main concourse I'm strolling towards will brighten up, as crew and staff rush to or from their shifts. Every eight hours, like clockwork, the station bustles to life. I've heard, whispers, rumors, stories even, unverified mind you, but stories still the same of people having their biometrics spoofed, or copied outright by shady characters during these peak rush periods. Hard not to take them seriously when you are caught up in the swell of moving bodies, as everyone is hip to hip, shoulder to shoulder, in the hallways and power lifts. I try to move about the ship prior to these events, so as not to invite undue attention. Last thing I need is some crazy star stuck fan waiting naked for me in my bed, covered in mock rose petals. The thought sends a shiver down my spine. I glance over both of my shoulders. First the right, pause, walk several more steps, then glance over the left. Coast is clear. Not too many other people walking about at this time of shift.

This sector is a living, breathing maze. If you haven't planned where you are going in advance, or memorized the directions, you'll end up at some random dead end, on god knows what level of the entertainment hub. Not many windows up here. At least, not until you go up to the observation decks. Two whole floors of the torus, wide open space where tourists and the media go during a new vessel launch. The freedom of movement up there is exhilarating. The inner portion even has this majestic hanging garden, full of vibrant coloured rhododendrons and lush ferns, and ground covering ivy. The smell is divine! Lost in thought I nearly miss my turn off the main concourse. Located several meters down the narrow corridor is this tiny little hole in the wall bistro. Seated at one of the only two tables available is Gary my producer, and Jimmy my manager. They've taken the liberty of ordering garlic bread-sticks, cheese curds in gravy and some garden green salads for the table. Carbs, they must want to butter me up for something. Gary stands up, pulling out the third and final seat at our quaint little faux wood table. From the cool touch of the underside my guess is it's a formica shell over a plate steel skeleton bolted to the floor. Soon after sitting down our waiter drops off three glasses of pre poured red wine, in tall stem crystal glasses. This stuff must be expensive, as the gentleman swirl their glasses and sniff at the bouquet, a thin film coats the crystal goblet. Both men sip their drinks, and smile to me. Jimmy sits, arms wide and says "come on Ger', we've been here twenty minutes all ready, catch up. This is so delicious, almost like a porter. Watch yourself though, it's got some testicle tickling kick to it. Feels like seventy proof, if its ten!" Jimmy, not a big fan with HR, tends to speak from his gut and not his head. Taking a bite of a fantastically greasy garlic bread-stick, I lift my glass to my lips. "Salute!" We all say it. Smiles all across the table.

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I come to realize later that I'm being held up by two sets of arms. Half dragged, half carried through the corridors towards the power lift. Oh god, no. Not like this. I'm trying desperately to get my feet beneath me, find my bearings, but my vision is swimming and I think I'm going to vomit. I can feel upwards movement. We must be in one of the power lifts, Jesus that happened fast. Didn't even hear it open. Surely I could catch the eye of a passersby. With the urge to lie down and just drift off to sleep growing by the second, I try again to raise my head. It feels like I have a lead crown holding me down. No, not a crown, someone's hand is stopping me from looking at my surroundings. Panic is setting in. My heart rate is jumping through the roof. I don't recall stepping off the lift, or even noticing the upward motion stopping. We are crossing what feels like a massive, empty room. I feel myself slowly being lowered down onto a full length bench.

Smells and feels like real wood. The grain runs against the palm of my hands. My fingers are dancing in my field of view. I can feel the soft brush of fern leaves against my cheek. I can smell something like flower blossoms. The room is immense, yet dark. The only source of light is minimal, and it's coming from inside the shrubbery. "Jesus Ger', look at the state you're in. Jimmy, help me prop her up. Yes, under her arm, no not there, that's her tit! Dickhead! Don't laugh, I'm going to have to report that to HR. Do you realize how much paperwork is involved in that. Jesus man, she's the star of our first ever primetime serial. Fuck me. Just, you know what. Keep your hands to yourself, and just stand over there, by the windows." Gary is fuming, pointing towards the massive windows that cover the entire observation deck, from floor to ceiling. Only a handful of bulkheads are in place that could obscure the view of the void beyond. From the vantage point up here, you can see the lunar surface, earth, an endless field of stars and all of the traffic outside the station. A bustling scene of transports, crew moving vessels, supply boats and the guard shuttles. "Hey, Gerri, hon... how you feeling? You knocked that porter back a touch quickly. Had you eaten yet today?" Gary..., it's Gary, he's talking to me.

"Heeey Gar-ry, I didn't know you were a twin... what's... what's going up, down... on. What's going on here! Huh, buddy!" I'm finally sitting up, I point a finger deep into his squishy chest. The whole station is spinning around at an alarming rate. Gary takes a step back, and leans down towards me. "Well Ger', your pal Jimmy said you love to come up to the observation deck when The Company is going to launch a new boat. He was going to take you himself, but I took the liberty of tagging along. Well... tonight's the night girl! For the first time ever, the interstellar vessel *Margot's Fever*, is going to emerge from the ship yards and head out to the far reaches of known space. This is momentous! I apologize again, for Jimmy's choice of drink. I shouldn't have let Jimmy jostle you into chugging a sipping porter. But you'd downed the lot of it before I could chime in." Gary appears sincerely distraught. "Look, this might be a hard sell, but media will be here shortly for the launch, and what better time to announce your show to the whole of humanity than at the *Margot's Fever* launch event. I talked to legal, The Company is excited we'll help hype up the launch and our show. Synergy Gerri, suitable partnerships." Gary looks almost hot pink with the joy of his darling show going mainstream, onto the system wide network. The profits for his investment will be handsome. His jolly pink visage is jiggling with unbridled joy.

Within fifteen minutes the observation deck is littered with news anchors, late night hosts, spokes people and cameramen of every shape and size. After a brief pep talk from Gary, I take the stage to present a little speech

passed down by legal. Jimmy offers a sheepish thumbs up from his place by the windows. The station rumbles, a deep ominous sound. Jaws drop, as the most enormous starship ever built slowly comes to life. The three massive engine nose cones shake and with an eye watering flash, light up to a neon blue that bathes everyone in cold, yet intense light. Dust and parts of the hulls environmental shielding falls away in a shower of particles, like snow. As slow as a mountain being formed the entire ship crawls across the station, the view of the passing hull is incredible. Visible are the data gathering arrays, sensors, antenna, and port holes. There are still hundreds of people completing the final touches on the exterior hull. A million tiny fireflies, welding rigs shooting sparks into the air. The vessel is trailing sparks like a comet. As the ship comes about, a puff of smoke, so delicate, like the breath from a child on a cold winters day can be seen.

Klaxons blare, then immediately go silent. A rush of wind, like a full on tornado rips at the flesh of our faces as we are sucked out through the shattered glass of the observation deck. As we are torn bodily from the station, the last thing we see are sparks, muzzle flashes from black uniformed guards. But they are firing beyond us, out into the dark reaches of space. In mere moments the gathered mass of two hundred people are exposed to the void. Hard vacuum approaches, so fast our helmets and respirators can't deploy in time. Two hundred dead, all caught on camera, live cast for all humanity to see. A bad omen for *Margot's Fever*.

"Do you have any idea how much these treatments are going to run The Company!"...

Screams a ruffled angry man in a shabby orange jumpsuit. "Yes, I have some idea of the cost Gerald." My tone is neutral, even if my voice comes across as sardonic. "Well, why the fuck do you need it then. Do you know what this does to the bottom line?" He's just out of frame of the view screen, probably pouring himself a stiff drink. Why do they all do that. Any sign of an obstacle and they turn into booze hounds. Pathetic. Can't say that aloud, not yet. For now I have to keep Gerald placated. "Have you reviewed my sector's safety numbers, our billable hours, success rate with the trade school and university. We have so many award winning roboticists we've jumped ahead in ships ai service bots by about two hundred years. Our service records are impeccable. But to maintain all of this I have to work twenty

hours a day, every single day." Walking around the mechanics sector boardroom with the massive windows that overlook the dock yards to emphasize my point. My conference table camera tracks my movements throughout the room. It'll even zoom in for punctuation when I trigger the action on my palm control."Ms. Taylor, we are all well aware of your exemplary achievements with your posting. The rich burgundy suit you favour makes a striking impression on all board members." How humbling to hear Herald... grovel. "Ok, ok, the board of directors will approve the request for the continuation of the rejuvenation treatments. Provided the shop floor continues to outperform all other Company ship building facilities. Oh, one other minor thing. I know you have a lot on your plate right now..."

Oh shit, I can hear the trepidation in his voice, I need to cut the feed... cut the feed, cut the feed god damn it. I can't find the correct button on my palm control. Shutter speeds are fluttering, there's an extreme zoom. "...but, we're having a real tough time mediating the battle between the Janitorial union and the sanitation guys again. This is the sixth time in five weeks they've butted heads over their service overlap, and the infighting and politics is getting out of hand. We only just got them to settle on purple uniforms for the Janitors, and the Sani' guys were all too happy to have – brown, Of course! Fucking children, the lot of them. I'll have my undersecretary depose you of what road block we are currently dealing with." And in the blink of an eye, two more full departments have been dumped in my gods be damned lap. Going to have to add two new colour bands to my jumpsuit sleeve. And I thought the mechanics were a prickly bunch to deal with. Keeping the generalists, welders, hardware techs, programmers, fabricators and CNC guys all aligned was no small task. Add to that the training, and educational staff, and an onslaught of apprentices. Jesus, even the HR teams that run under my banner can be pedantic as fuck. Not the group to play scrabble with. Nerds. A loud ping sounds off, the paperwork for my next treatment has come through. Good old Gerald, kicked that order up the chain as fast as he could. Must mean this Janitor v. Sanitation hubbub is a real shit show. With a soft woosh the boardroom door opens onto a wide, well light corridor, replete with charming wall sconces, aromatic flowers in planters and various autonomous cleaning bots scrubbing each surface imaginable. Heading to the large corporate power lift, the attendant calls it down from storage, and operates the lift to the corresponding floor. Our lifts are pretty great they can travel laterally through the station too, so I can jump over the required sectors to the elite med bay.

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"Ok Catherine, how do you feel now?" The med tech dressed in blue coveralls with a stethoscope hung loosely from her neck is standing at the foot of the medical pod. I feel like I was dunked in a clear gel soup for an hour, but in actuality it was about forty five minutes. Time is money. No reason to pussy foot around. Get us up and at 'em. "Typically I'm referred to as Senior Director Taylor, ma'am, or Ms. Taylor... Jennifer, you know that." Chuckling to herself the medical technician turns away and says. "Yes, very well Cathy, you're cleared to go back to your duties. We'll see you again soon, no doubt." With a flurry of papers rustling on the medical chart the doctor exits the octagonal room housing the med pod. Stepping out of it requires a slight hop. The room is cool, bordering on cold. Pulling on my soft body sock, and all of its appropriate catheters and safety seals is a tedious and slow going job. Then sealing myself inside the more rigid and rigorous outer shell. The rich burgundy really pops in the light down here. These earth like sun bulbs are amazing. Tying my wet hair into a tight ponytail it's time to head back to my office block and get a hold of that undersecretary. What was his name again? Don't recall Gerald mentioning anyone specifically by name. Typical. No respect for their staff. It's all transactional with these people. Probably why they all die rich and alone, of a heart attack, surrounded by things and stuff. Leaving no loved ones behind, or as is the case with Gerald, just a few wealthy disaffected kids and an alienated trophy spouse.

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"For the last time guys, keep your voices down. Screaming isn't going to help resolve this matter." The union bosses for both the Janitorial guys and the Sanitation crews are red faced, sweaty and running dry at the mouth from their heated arguments. "Listen here fellas. I've had to spend the last three days combing forty thousand pages of documentation with my junior staff and I can't find any record of you guys having divided up your tasks, services or SOP's. Now that you've come under the umbrella of The Company, you no longer retain the rights to dictate what, where, when or how, or even who gets to perform what tasks. You signed away those rights for those awesome colour coded uniforms and our involvement in your organization. No. No, you keep your mouths shut. I get that you've always had your own say, and had control. But those shifts are gone. Do I have your undivided attention now." The room is silent, all bodies in the room, or seated at the conference table are stock still. "Now, as a matter of union dues, those all come to us to disburse. Schedules, vacation, benefits, workload, day to day activities will now be dictated to you. We OWN you now. So, first order of business. You will provide us with, in exacting detail, every single job description contained within your organization, their task

requirements, educational needs, training parameters, pay structure, a full organizational structure, and any issues you encounter, no matter how small, that disrupts your ability to perform your duties. Should we find overlap, we'll convene a task force, from both branches and we'll sort it out as we come to it. That is all." The shocked faces are quiet, dumbfounded by the enormity of what they had entered into. Stand up as one, and burst out into fits of laughter. Two men, twin brothers step around the far side of the board room table, putting themselves between me and the door. "Ms. Taylor, we have all that completed all ready. You see, we're a tad sneaky. We listen to every conversation aboard this station. We came to suspect that you were the one to lead us. Our fights are imaginary. We simply made them up, to tire out the other directors, so they'd dump us on you. They don't care. Those silly fucks always want to bury their noses in their own business and could care less about us janitors, and sanitation guys. But you!" They say it in unison, like they share one joint brain. It's quite alarming to hear this speech in stereo. "You know your people. You have a reputation for getting shit done. Finding the needed resources, then getting. The. Fuck. Out. The. Way!" Punctuated by finger guns, claps and stomping feet from the rest of the room. Oh these guys are good. They played all the senior staff like fiddles with vacuous time sucking squabbles. "Well, gents I'm glad to be of service. But that trick only works once. Now if you'll excuse me, we are about to launch the largest ever starship, *Margot's Fever*, and I have a live cast to catch from my quarters. You have my direct line." I can hear music playing, as the gathered team starts to pop bottles and dance in celebration. I leave feeling both relieved and shocked. How did they fool so many members of the board of directors. What did they mean about listening to every conversation. That tidbit might come in handy.

Down in the bowels of the station, the sanitation crews are hard at work, fixing, replacing, updating the hardware to all of the waste recyclers. Although the brown uniforms were a joke, the brave men and women who work with medical and human waste are a tight knit bunch. The joke is that once you go brown, you swirl down and never get seen again. People who don't work with feces just don't get their particular brand of humor. The accommodations down here are vastly superior to anywhere else on board the station. Even the upper echelon don't have rooms like these. No one bothers to check the specs when you deal with what's flushed down the shitter.

"What is it you said you guys do again?" ...

The sector HR director asks cheerfully. Ms. Catherine Taylor is known as a straight shooter, not much for small talk either. She is extraordinarily busy, so her questions tend to be thoughtful, penetrating and to the point. Gathered around her, in the media screening suite are a group of beautiful men and women, all of them look to be in their mid twenties. An immaculately kept blonde woman dressed in a tailored emerald green jumpsuit speaks up for the group. "We are the local chapter of sex workers. Yes, that's right prostitutes." Her matter of fact response shows just how resilient and well looked after the group is. "I see... so I understand we're here to vet a news piece about your lives and the conditions you work in?" The question is open ended with not a hint of judgment. Director Taylor is a well educated woman, she knows the value of morale among her work force. From the people at sanitation, food service, medical and the largest group under her purview, the mechanics. "Well, yes and no. We opted for an informative, but light hearted approach. We all chose this lifestyle. We feel we are making a difference. All of us gathered here work with... how to say this tastefully... um... challenging individuals that your average man or woman wouldn't be equipped to service safely." Stated so matter-of-factly, and with dignity. Cathy leans forward in her couch. "Challenging? How so? Are these violent people, are you telling me your safety, is being impinged upon!?" You can see a blood vessel starting to bulge out on her forehead. There is nothing HR director Taylor hates more than subordinates being taken advantage of by those with power or physical advantage. The young woman flushes a bright pink at the cheeks and chest. "Oh, no no no. Nothing of the sort. We have expert level care here, we went for nothing. We have access to therapy, and are able to option our extensive vacation leave at any time. No, we deal with physiological deformities." She is obviously uncomfortable discussing her patients / clientele. A brute of a man sitting across the large wooden conference table dressed in a forest green jump suit jumps in to the conversation when he sees the young woman balk at the question. "Um... well, Sadie and I..." the gorgeous blonde girl gives a small wave. "We share our client load... excuse the pun." A broad, yet sheepish grin from both. They lock eyes and share a charming chuckle. "Our clients share a similar physical attribute." Out from the back of the room, an ebony god chiseled out of obsidian chimes in. "Horse cocks! Those dudes all have monster cocks. Like twenty inches, down passed the knees, behemoths. Circumference like that coffee mug your clutching!" The room erupts in a fit of laughter. With a shocked chirp HR director Taylor chokes on her drink, dribbling a mouthful down the front of her burgundy suit. Gareth, the handsome man continues his story, unfazed by the outburst. "Yeah... that's

true. I know most people think that we don't work hard, and lay on our backs for the day, but we wanted to show the whole station that though we only work three hours a day, it really is work." With shock Cathy blurts out. "My god. You have penetrative sex three hours a day with various gentleman onboard this station armed with a horse's cock! Dear god." Leaping from her chair the fear on her face is visible, tension is palpable within the small room. "Oh no. Sorry if we gave you that idea. No we include ninety minutes of stretching. Whether that is vaginal or anal. You don't go in cold, not with our clientele. We make sure no one is under the effects of antidepressants, so the actual sex portion, lasts about forty minutes or so. We chat, cuddle and hang out. Then we have clean up, massage those orifices back to health and physical therapy to avoid tears, fissures or chafing. All in all, about three hours. Lovely gentleman, very aware of their... affliction." With a grimace that she can't quite hide, HR director Taylor settles back into her chair, as they dim the lights and roll the tape. The Company jingle plays, as their mining and exploration symbols flash on screen. Fade in from black, with the same group gathered in a small studio on screen seated in two rows, like a reality tv series reunion show.

After the credits have rolled, and all the workers have cleared the room HR director Taylor nods to her junior director and says. "That bit about the twin sisters, one who's a sex worker who gets all the clients that are looking to fuck her brilliant sister the asexual scientist down in the propulsion lab. I want to know more about that. Something there seems off. I need to know about the asexual sister, what she was working on now that she's transferred over to the Venus station. Why she left, under what circumstances, that sort of thing." The junior director has his face buried in his notes. "Yes, Ms. Taylor. I'll talk to the boys down in Sanitation and the Janitorial union guys, see what I can learn. I'll report back to you in twenty four hours. Do you need an escort to tonight's launch of *Margot's Fever*?" His biometrics are pinging with oncoming calls and alerts for his other duties aboard the Torus station. "No, that won't be necessary Todd. I'm taking some time to myself this evening. I'll catch the live cast from the comfort of my suite." Turning to leave the room, I can see a small face appear on Todd's wrist communicator. The Sanitation union rep is telling him how to go about getting to the sub basements where they are located.

"Enjoy the trip down below. Be safe. Keep your eyes and ears open while you're down there. And for fuck's sake, don't touch anything." The heavy doors close behind the director, leaving Todd the junior director alone in the dark media screening room.

"Dude... don't lump me in with THAT fucking Martian..."

Come on man, don't do me like that. Tsk. Dumb ass mother fucker. I'mma tag you back, you little punk ass bitch." The argument sounds heated, but those programmers are twin brothers and are just really into their game of robot wars. Honestly, they are probably only ninety pounds when all suited up in their cyan coveralls. As a bunch of truly gifted people, this group of students don't leave the university grounds much, if at all. Building miniature fighting robots and holding tournaments on the weekends is how they unwind. A few brave souls have gone up to the green sector for some sexual encounters, but it took a real long time to get up there from the university dormitory, and they got lost a few times on the trek back. That green sector is humongous, those labyrinthine corridors will mess with your mind. The GPS on their modified biometrics came in real handy the fourth time they wound up crossing the main concourse from yet another direction. Truly maddening.

Up in the highest level of the technical program's dormitory the gathered group of about twenty students are hard at work tweaking their entrants in the weeks bout. The fights aren't exactly a secret, but due to the potential for personal injury, the fights are generally frowned upon, but not entirely banned outright. A few of the younger robotics professors like to swing by, place a few bets (usually based on hours the older students will have to spend marking the robotics undergrads papers and assignments) in order to liven up the atmosphere. A bunch of asthmatics and robotics fanatics aren't known for throwing ragers on a Friday night. The room is twenty meters on each side, and four meters high. The small desks have been piled up in a corner, and some mag lev fitted portable work bench tool box combos have been brought in. There are bottles of oxygen and acetylene boxed up with a make shift welding rig tucked up against the far wall. These miniature robots can kick up sparks and chew through the composite materials their shells and armor plating is made from. It's as though Robot Jocks were taking place, if they were eight inches tall, and controlled with haptic gloves that link with a person's biometrics, and wrap up over a jumpsuit sleeve. Clunky, and definitely not sexy, but exhilarating all the same. Tiny LEDs, and sensor arrays beep, blink, and chime as the battles wear on. A thick layer of oil coats the floor, and the smell of ozone is thick in the air. Smoke swirls around the vents, seems to hang nearly motionless below the cold phosphorescent lights. The room has no windows, and is located in the center of torus station. This part of the station has hundreds of rooms just like it, though most of them are dark. A few have intrepid students pulling all fighters, working on homework projects, or filing applications for Grant's

for their professors. All very academic. A murmur of chatter and snark can be heard out in the halls. The security teams doing their regular rounds rarely come in here, they wave at whomever is at the door, usually it's Paco. Paco is a very petite fellow born and raised on Mars. He has an odd sense of humor, but is one of THE best welders in the program. He has this dream to work as an ice hauler, just touring the galaxy, fixing mining gear and getting old. "Hey Paco, why the fuck you even bother with school mang, you don't need a Ph D, just to work ice. That's stupid." Torrence, the local fire cracker, always stirring up shit. He's not gifted per se, but he can get shit done just the same, his grades are decent. Hates all the extraneous school work, but loves the program and his band of nerdy brothers and sisters. No relation. Turning back from his perch at the door, where he was leaning on his work bench, Paco with his shiny red coveralls looks like an oversized child, but with amazingly strange facial hair. "Tsk... you know what mang, they brought me here fo' free, mother fucker! I learn some shit, get a level three cert and it's all cooked mang! I'm outtie. Find me a sweet wife, have a few kids, haul some frosty and settle down. No stress, big money. Yeah." High fives and snickers of laughter all around. "You won't catch me doing military projects for The Company, no way mang!, free range, long hauls for ice. Pirates don't take down ice haulers. Those separatist goons don't hijack your ship and jettison you out into space so your lungs explode, or your blood turns to gas and tries to RIP you apart. Nah-uh dude. Not for this Martian, eh Julian." He pauses for effect. "I heard that shit you just said about me mang. I'm not four meters from you by the door, dumb ass. I'm not a lifeless corpse out on the float hey, stupid mother fucker." Paco, turns back to the door, exchanging rude gestures with Julian, who is hunched over his bot on the floor. Footsteps can be heard down the hall, Paco pipes up. "Hey, yo! Who's there? I see you man. Just cause you're dressed in bla..." the sound of rapid fire gun shots echoes loudly through the room. Paco comes apart at the hips, cut entirely in two. Blood splatters across the door, and the tool bench he was leaning against. Ricochets can be heard pinging off the metal surface, with metal slugs punching through ceiling tiles, walls and bodies alike. One double strike catches a tiny robot in the center of the floor and manages to ignite the oxygen tank at the rear of the room, which kicks off the acetylene bottle beside it. With a boom the room erupts into flames. With nowhere for the pressure to go, it blasts out the doorway and down the hall. The covert shooter is ripped apart by the shockwave and resulting wall of flame. The heat is so intense that the room melts into molten slag. All that is left are trails of smoke, and incinerated entrails. The group will later be identified by their bones, and those without shattered teeth, their dental records.

A mile above, both decks of the observation lounge have just been breached during a live cast of the launch ceremony for the new starship *Margot's*

Fever. Many of the stations most famous celebrities have been sucked out into space, and died horribly.

"Rolling in five, four, three, two..."

And the producer throws to the reporter seated on a plush white crash couch, in the middle of a small studio. The reporter is dressed in a bulky beige jumpsuit, capable of near instantaneous release of her atmospheric helmet and respirator re-breather. Not used to being in the studio, this intrepid reporter usually reports live from location, out on a ship's hull, the outer surface of a far off space station or in a war zone. The reporter, named Janet Hawke, is about forty years old, slightly graying down her part line, with her salt and pepper hair pulled back into a severe ponytail. "Good evening, this is Torus station news, channel seventy three. I'm your host this evening, Janet Hawke, filling in tonight for your regular host. Tonight we are welcoming a very special guest, an historian on the emergence and use of our current biometric interface." A brief pause. Cue music. "Welcome, welcome. Please have a seat." Gesturing off camera, the view pulls back to place the older gentleman in frame, as he steps through a dark purple curtain, to cross the few steps and step up onto the dais to his pristine white crash couch, under intense white lights, from a rig overhead. After a brief musical interlude the man scoots up into the raised gel couch and makes himself comfortable. "No!, thank you, it's a real pleasure to be here today. I was told I'd be interviewed by Rosie Reyes, but YOU, the one and only Janet Hawke wow!, you've reported on some truly auspicious events. I'm positively tickled pink, I am. Wait until my husband sees this!" With a charming giggle, he affixes his game face, and cues the producer with a subtle gesture that he is ready to proceed. "Now, Dr. Benjamin Hoyt, as I've come to understand, the history of our current technology stretches back more than five hundred years."

"Oh, yes, it really is a marvel, we have so much documentation, patents, interviews and research dating back to the nineteen fifties if you can believe that." The two, on camera appear to be talking directly to one another, but in studio you can see the fancy white gel couches are actually on gyroscopic frames, and are about three meters apart. Safety, and precaution preclude the old fashion face to face interviews of centuries gone by. The magic of editing, and camera work. Do wonders never cease. "That is truly astounding." "Quite, but things weren't

always so compact, nor nonintrusive like they are now... ah, may I?" Gesturing to a media monitor, cutting back to Ms. Hawke. "Oh, visuals!, please do." She says, leaning back into her couch and out of frame. Her pleasant smile slipping from her face in the brief time she is off camera. A water bottle at her side, she carefully unscrews the lid and takes a sip. "Here you see, are the originals... most archaic huh! A waist band, held with velcro and button snaps, loaded with only a few simple sensors and outputs, with leads to ECG Electrodes, attached to the heart, lungs, kidneys and a power source. This design stayed virtually untouched from the nineteen fifties until two thousand twenty one." The camera pulls backwards the screen then fades to black, then comes to life with a voice over, and the archival footage playing of ancient astronauts talking about their medical devices. "After this period, the devices were miniaturized but still held in place externally with a waist belt. That lasted from two thousand twenty one until roughly twenty sixty." A new slide show is queued up by the producers and the staff in the editing suite behind the cameras. "Things then start to get very exciting, now we enter the first draft of the wrist control. Though these units were bulky by today's standards, it was a massive leap forward in technological advancements. We now had a modicum of room in which to affect the body at the atomic level. By all accounts painful to wear, and we have numerous stories of people cutting themselves, and tearing through suits while maneuvering in EVA. These units didn't last much beyond four or five years, somewhere in the vicinity of twenty sixty to twenty sixty four... Yes, yes, we have a clip of one such incident. Sit back and watch." Dr. Benjamin Hoyt's feed is cut short, so that he might grab a quick drink, or flush his old suffering bladder. It always makes him pull a funny face as it happens. Makes his husband laugh hysterically every. Single. Time. The producers welcomed the insight given by his publicist Danielle, and built in several such cues into the segment. His inner ear piece clicks on. "We're back in three, two...." the voice fades out. "From this we leap forward to the first ever capsules designed by oh my, I can't quite recall..." From off camera the doctors chipper publicist named Danielle Del Veccio prompts him with the requisite information. "Flight commander Neil Todd and his wife Jen." Closing her binder, she steps away from the dais the crash couches are on, and out of the field of view of the studio lights overhead. With a slight flush to the cheeks, Dr. Hoyt starts in again. "Flight commander Neil Todd and his wife Jennifer Todd. Though their work on the *Non Sequitur* was seminal, they opted to have the sensors removed from their person and integrated thoroughly into the ships systems. Ugly hard shell yellow boxes were placed through all crew areas, and had redundancies built in that are the framework of the systems you see in use today. In my professional

opinion I think going external was a mistake, as when their cascading catastrophic failure happened, we weren't able to get a full diagnostic on his state for well over three weeks. But they were brilliant, so they must have known something I don't. However, given the era, and what was going on at the time politically, there was very little that could be done." A sweeping camera shot of the studio as the show moves to commercial break. The lights go up, as an indistinct murmur pervades the room. Notes are added to the script, and portions of the slide show are clipped and tightened up for the repeat cast in several hours time. A large red countdown clock ticks over, as the seconds drop away. The bright studio lights dim.

"And we're back. If you are just joining us now, expert historian Dr. Benjamin Hoyt is giving us an in depth look at our current state of biometrics, and how it came about." Reporter Janet Hawke, once again smiling into the camera, her poised position on her gel couch a welcoming visage on the late hour news program. "Well, as I stated before the break, the *Non Sequitur* and all of the following designs are fairly similar, except that now you find our fully realized subcutaneous implants, with Nano bot technology. These units, buried just below the skin, the size of a match book, are now interlinked with Nano bots that infiltrate every organ and tissue fiber within the body. Just remarkable technology. We can now keep everyone from catching the common cold, flu, sinus infections, simple blood borne infections, ear aches, tooth aches, blood clots and even regulate the bodies temperature to stave off hypothermia, and hyperthermia." The camera pulls back to show the good doctor with a massive grin upon his face. Cut to video feed of crowds oohing and aahing, as though they were actually in the studio. "Though the system is great, we still have to go to medical bay for treatments for Cancer, Aids, and a few other radiation related maladies."

"That is truly, truly remarkable. Mankind has achieved so much!" Janet is gearing up for her closing remarks, but Dr. Benjamin chimes in. "Oh, for the layman, the best thing about the new Nano integration is that the innermost body suit waste system has been interfaced with Nano's, so no more catheters or Colostomy bags for waste expulsion!" "Can't forget that!, and with that bombshell, this is field reporter Janet Hawke signing off for channel seventy three news. Tune in next week as Dr. Jasleen Verhinder explores the history of the jumpsuit. Remember folks, as far as safety is concerned, no exceptions, and no exemptions!" Stepping in front of the cameras the producer announces. "Ok, and we're out, that's a wrap people..." the sight of sound boards clacking, lights

coming up to full strength, and studio personnel begin to walk about the small studio space. A very tall Venetian walks over to Janet to say. "If we have any pick-ups, or pre-roll we'll come find you in your dressing room. We might have to do a promo or two with Dr. Hoyt, so we'll keep him in the green room, and prepped to go on short notice." Without waiting for a response, the large individual from the Venus science base is heading back to her booth, to triple check the data, and facts on the time lines. Over Janet's ear piece she can hear her say, "We'll need to interject some graphics into the slide show that Flight commander Todd's *Non Sequitur* and subsequent classes of capsule ran circa twenty two forty until twenty two sixty. Let's make sure our time line display really pops this time."

XV. When they told me I had been selected for the maiden voyage of...

Margot's Fever I told them no thank you. When they asked me why I would turn down the opportunity to be a part of an historic crew going to the edges of the known universe in search of missing elements from our shared human past, I told them I was petrified of the ship, and the potential to be lost to both time and physical space. Too many unknowns, too many variables to weigh and calculate. It couldn't be done. I thought better of it, but I told them flat out that the fact we could warp space time, and the fabric of our reality scared me to death. Left me in a state of paralysis that could potentially doom the ship. The empty dull faces staring back at me in the board of directors chamber said those were perfect answers, and they saw no reason that I should not captain the ship out to the edge of oblivion with a full crew compliment of two thousand souls. I wept. Then I threw up. I thought about murder, I thought about suicide. I thought about walking through the nearest airlock with no suit on and embracing a heartless cruel death. Instead I shipped out. *Margot's Fever* would become a monument to hubris and human folly. And the weight of it all would rest firmly atop my shoulders to grind my soul to dust. And it all began the evening of the ships launch event. "Alright helmsman let's pull about on the starboard side and ignite the in system ion engines. Bathe those media bastards in brilliant blue light!" Seated in my captain's chair at the center of the bridge, I am surrounded by scores of officers, dutifully buried in their tasks. Noses pressed to screens,

tablets and work stations alike. Everyone wants to make The Company happy, and putting on this dog and pony show to hype up the mission goes a long way to accomplishing that. Great video feeds and network coverage can boost The Company on more fronts than they'd ever let us in on. Not just morale, but a moral victory for humanity. To finally be able to send man to the furthest reaches of the eternal abyss and live to tell the tale. What a thrill, or so they thought. Those desk jockeys never did anything real beyond count the zeros in The Company cheque book. Keep in black, we got your back. In the red, you best come back dead.

"Pulling about starboard side, captain. Ignition in three... two... one... firing all three engines, we are lit sir." The helmsman is an androgynous Ceresian individual of moderate height, with an undercut and long violet hair on top. Competent. But no ability for banter. The role of captain is very isolating when your subordinates don't have the confidence for exuberant banter. Where's my XO, the commanding officer can really give us all shit right when you need it the most. "Ok, now ease off, and let's float for fifteen kilometers then we should get the go ahead from transportation for us to make our way out of the system before firing off those Fabric of Reality engines." affectionately known as FOR E's, like four ease. Never want to be within one hundred AU's of any habitable system when you kick those fuckers off. They run on something like antimatter, would wipe out everything in the system and create a super massive black hole in its place. More of a devastating weapon than a mode of transport. And to think we have nineteen year old technicians trained on its maintenance like it's just any old engine. Oh, to be young and stupid. Too much ill placed regard for technology and personal skill. Some shit just wasn't meant to be bottled up and used at the whim of mankind.

Wee-ooh, wee-ooh, wah wah wah... warning bells are sounding, proximity alerts are buzzing, hull breach klaxons are blaring. *Margot's Fever* is starting to list dangerously toward the Torus station. "Navigation, how far out are we... engineering, status report on the hull damage, are we breached? Medical, are we showing many casualties? Sound off!"

"We're only point five of a kilometer from the station, we're falling back along the line. Somethings hit us. Whatever it was, it's massive. The thrusters aren't responding. I can't get the ship to course correct." The navigator is a pale, bald woman who is only about ninety pounds and four feet tall. She looks puzzled and bewildered at the same time.

"Engineering here sir. We have major malfunctions all across the board. Hull breaches, engine failures, and our sensors are getting peppered by biologicals. Jesus, I think those are bodies. Christ all mighty, the Torus is coming apart at the seams..."

"ok medical, I'll assume you're not in a state to collect any possible survivors from deep space?"

"No life signs sir. We've got enough problems from within the ship sir. Whole decks have lost atmosphere, suffered catastrophic decompression in the XO's crew compartments. I'll get back to you sir." A second violent shake pushes *Margot's Fever* right up against the outer torus of the space station. In the dark recesses behind the moon, the glow of the sun adds a beautiful halo around the torn and jagged edges of the outer ring sections. Bursts of flame, and geysers of escaping oxygen can be seen. Bodies, like a hail of bullets are sucked out of the station by the hundreds. Beyond the destruction the only thing visible are the exhaust blooms from other ships that are breaking their acceleration towards the dying station.

"We can't take much more of this abuse. What is our hull integrity like security?" By now everyone is shouting over the alarms, alerts, buzzers and klaxons. It is a cacophonous mess inside the bridge. From behind me a deep voice booms. "Hull integrity at fifty four percent and dropping sir. We need to get out of here now."

Inside the luxurious suite where HR director Catherine Taylor lives, a live cast is showing the horrific deaths, in gruesome detail of two hundred of the most rich and famous members of the torus station. The dead camera men floating out in the void with the gigantic listing ship *Margot's Fever* in frame. Gas and sparks and bits of shrapnel are jettisoning off the massive interstellar ships hull. Save for the timer blinking on the media screen, the room is empty and has been untouched for hours.

"Good evening Catherine, I didn't think we'd see you back in the med bay for another treatment so soon." The doctor, dressed from head to toe in blue, is the only person on board the torus station with the Cahonés to call her by her birth name and not by her hard earned title. "Isn't tonight the big launch event? What I would give for a chance to dress up and mingle on the observation decks. God, what a sight that must be. I bet the hors d'oeuvres must be spectacular." "Oh, you have no idea. Succulent culinary delights, to be certain. But with two new unions under my purview I'm exhausted. I can't even bring myself to watch it. I have it set to record. I'll skim the feed later on, I'm sure." "All right then Catherine! strip down and we'll get you sorted out ok. Do you need me to initiate it for you, or can you handle it now, by yourself?" Without waiting for a response the doctor strides across the brilliantly lit room to her office, a small alcove tucked against the far wall. There are several others just like it scattered about the octagonal med bay. "No, please, do it for me. Bitch." Catherine steps lightly on the cold metal floor and hops up into the medical pod. Pulling the heavy door closed over

the tube, the inner screen jumps to life. The biometrics scan immediately, and a cursor and prompt appear to flash before her eyes. Running through the checklist she decides to set the rejuvenation protocol to the three hour full tissue and fiber recalibration setting. More staff under her means she can take the resources appropriate to her station. With this expanded role, she is now, unofficially in charge of some fifty seven percent of all staff aboard the Torus station. She outranks every other senior member of the board of directors. With a smirk on her face she triggers the program count down. "This never gets old." She says out loud, it echoes within the small chamber. Over the med pod pa system the clock counts down. "Rejuvenation protocol four set to commence in five... four... three... two... Oooooo-ooonne...." with a sudden jolt, the coolant gel spurts out, as the med pod system jitters in the midst of the power grid overloading. A look of shock is frozen upon Catherine's face, as the med bay goes black, and the doctor is drawn helplessly out into the far reaches of space.

"There's no time. I don't know who, or what the fuck those exhaust blooms are, punch the FOR E's, and get us the fuck out of here, now!"
"Fucking hell sir. No. I can't authorize that. I refuse." Shouts the helmsman.
"You what? We're all going to die out here. The station. It's gone. Dead. Totally dark. In thirty seconds, those people..." I'm waving indistinctly at a general direction of what I can only assume are a collection of ships. "Killed about forty thousand people, and critically injured this vessel. We have to assume that they have, or will attack every base, rig, ship and station in this system. We must save ourselves. We were never going to make it back here to this time anyway. Fuck them. Punch it. NOW!" I am absolutely livid. In a panic, and can't give any thought to anyone who isn't under my direct supervision. "Forget it. I'll do it my damn self." Leaning over my console I punch in my seventeen letter override code, ease back the trigger and squeeze, the vision on screen before us goes entirely black.

Three years later, and I am still unable to come to terms with the choices I made while under extreme pressure. Duress, you might even say. Truth is, I wanted the helmsman to ignite the for ease so that I didn't have to live with the knowledge that I doomed our home solar system. You can't just extinguish eight billion human lives and go grab a cuppa with your pals after a long shift. For those who survived the initial attack, and weren't on the bridge, it was life as per usual. The weird thing about the drive was there was no sudden acceleration or thrust to denote we had moved so far so quickly. We folded the fabric of space and popped out the other side. The computer is still attempting to triangulate where we ended up. Three years and it's still counting ones and zeros to locate us. I jest, but I think we'd jumped through space and into pure nothingness. There are only a handful of

stars in view here. And it is unsettling to say the least. The damage we suffered means we only have one chance to make a successful jump anywhere else in the universe. We have to guard that option with our very lives.

Five years out here and we've finally had to put a mutinous insurrection to rest. It cost us dearly. Nearly a full two thirds of the crew were either killed in the fight, or jettisoned off the craft for their part in it. Seems the theory of relativity didn't occur to some members of staff until we had to float near dead in the water for a year. Some of the younger crew members were desperate to turn around and jump home. But you can't travel thousands of trillions of miles instantly, and turn around and go that same distance back and expect to find ma and pa waiting at home for you. Life as we know it is gone. We have become a myth, a legend. And the unending darkness in isolation is killing us all. But oh! What a fanciful tomb.

"Captain's journal, entry date, 3700 days since our initial jump. The ships ai has queried me for an update on our location. There are only a tenth of us left. We set out, ten years ago with a full crew compliment of two thousand souls. The last two hundred are a sad, feral bunch. Life is harsh here, among the living dead." With a loud ping the ships computer alerts me it has an answer ready on our actual location. Turning from the terminal in the bowels of engineering I stumble over to the ships ai compartment. A tiny room, with a gray box full of pink goo in it. "Captain."

"Good evening Margot."

"I have determined our location, would you care to know more?"

"Yes Margot, I would love to know where the fuck we are."

"We are currently less than one, one hundred thousandth of one percent of an astronomical unit from earth, in the sixth dimension. The reason there are so few stars here, is that we are witnessing the final stages of the universe. As the stars wink out, all becomes nothing, until it becomes something once more." Falling to the floor, dumbfounded. Silence. "If we jump, do we stay put but leap dimensions?" I croak out the question to the ships ai.

"Yes captain. Our initial projections for the engine were false. It is only a dimensional shift created, not forward movement."

"Do we... can we... can we go back to where we started?"

"Why yes captain. Though I would not advise it. Our reappearance could be violent."

"But if there's a chance we have to try!" Bolting to my feet, I race headlong through the ships corridors, charging toward the long unused bridge. Scanning my biometrics, retinas and finger prints, I breathe upon the service latch to release the biological locks I had put in place. Darting incoherently

for my captain's chair, I pull down the trigger on the for ease engine ignition override.

Resolving back into our regular third dimension with an incredible crash, not quite here, no longer there, we splice half in half out of reality atop of ourselves and the Torus station. Gutting the observation decks, and slicing off all thrusters on the starboard side of *Margot's Fever*.

The official report on the events surrounding the launch of Margot's Fever.

*Official Document_Mission Briefing for The
Company_Designation: CLASSIFIED: RE | Margot's Fever.
ORD NO. 200076317 - FAA*

After the events during the launch of Margot's Fever and it's alleged subsequent ten year absence [Captain's Psych evaluation attached in Appendix Sec. 29] we have determined that there was merely an unknown error type during the ships jump to safety after the initial destruction of the observation decks and the shearing off of the starboard thruster housing. The following excerpts are from the various in person interrogations The Company investigators conducted on behalf of the Torus station security council, joint chiefs and the entire board of directors.

Lt. Jenji Tashimoto: Engineering

"I'm not denying anything, sir. It's only that the events didn't unfold exactly like that sir. Yes sir. I understand I'm under oath. All I'm saying is, is that those reports you are quoting aren't one hundred percent accurate. That is all I am saying. I am not calling you a liar. No, No I'm not. Listen ok, I was there alright. Look at my fucking biometrics ok, just fucking read them. We've all aged ten years... Ok. It wasn't mass hysteria, it wasn't a hoax, we bled the leaders of the [REDACTED] out the god damned air locks, ok. We fucking ate a full two thirds of the [REDACTED] because there was no way we could have known how long the jump using the [REDACTED] engines would take. the math was off... I'm telling you the truth! Just look at the biometrics data..., let go of me... No don't you dare put that shit in my veins..."

Although some of the stories vary a little bit, the call to check the biometrics data is a popular refrain among the two hundred souls who reappeared after the failed jump by Margot's Fever. Lt. Tashimoto came very highly recommended for his position in engineering. Although he seems agitated and to suffer from PTSD. His manner was confrontational, and we were forced on more than eleven occasions to subdue him with Thorazine, and later on Fentanyl derivatives. He was adamant about the time span too. Although the on station sensors only registered their disappearance over the course of less than one half second.

Col. James O'Brien: Medical

"The captain is a good man. Given the circumstances, and the data sets we had he made a judgment call. I know how that goes. You're looking for a scapegoat, a way to tie this up with a clean little bow, and hang it around his god damned neck. Listen... I didn't agree with it, but his assessment of the situation was sound. But have you not checked the [REDACTED] scans, we're all ten fucking years [REDACTED]. many of those who survived are showing serious signs of malnourishment. That doesn't happen over a half a second trip, or if you skip your fucking breakfast. He told you. He told you outright that he did not want to captain that ship, and you sent him anyway. No, he didn't show signs of being suicidal, or murderous rage. he was a hard nose captain who could run a tight ship and get things done. It was a traumatic event, no wonder he's showing signs of psychosis. We had a mutiny to deal with. Jesus fucking Christ guys, aren't you listening to me. We ATE members of the crew! We ate friends, colleagues, mentors, everyone who couldn't cut in over the [REDACTED] gap, those who fought to turn around and jump back, when we thought we'd [REDACTED]...

The remaining medical staff from Margot's Fever all parrot the same thing, there was a mutiny, they had to kill the leaders of the challenge group, who wanted to turn around and come home. Many of them junior members of the crew. Those who didn't realize they were traveling trillions of miles in an instant with no hope of returning home to the same time frame they left. Relativity has eluded these select few. Though none lived to return in order to give us there side of the mutiny. we only have the resources provided to us by The Company, regarding personal notes, video logs and such.

Lt. Juniper Brash: Navigation

"He told us that we'd gone into the sixth dimension. That we never traveled forwards at all, we just sort of dissolved out of our reality, or existence or what have you, and wound up some billions of years in the future as the universe itself was ending. we saw the last handful of stars before they too winked out. just empty blackness. Ten years of looking at nothing. no light beyond our own ship board fixtures. no stimulus, nothing on the sensor arrays, nowhere to navigate to or from. He told us, he... he told us that the ships AI [Refer to Captain's Psych Eval*] told him, after ten years of compiling data, or counting one's and zero's as he was want to say. Listen I am telling you, that under no uncertain terms, this ship does not have an AI on board. The only items that you could even possible say had any sort of intelligence are the hull repair drones, and a tiny fraction of the cleaning bots. But their programming only helps them to not get stuck under doors, or tables, and how to recognize damage to the hull's shielding and environmental protection. It's just insane. He told us he was talking to a grey metal box full of pink goo, and it straight up talked tyo him, via the ships intercom. That's fucking nuts, the guy is in-fucking-sane. Sir."

We have reason to believe that we've got enough anecdotal eye witness accounts of the Captain, to place him under protective custody and have him removed to a soft location out beyond Charon. The penal colony there won't recognize him, and he can undergo the therapy he requires to live a long and prosperous life. Other such similar recommendations are being discussed for all other surviving members of Margot's Fever crew. Those that confessed to murdering and eating the rest of the crew may be quietly euthanized in transit.

It has come down from the top brass that any and all data pertaining the event be purged, or moved off sight to our nondisclosed operations out beyond UB313. However the security guys have requested data on the Fabric of Reality Engine. They want any operations system wide diagnostics that may have been run during transit, and the flight plan, navigational data. Basically everything about the ship, except data regarding the crew, or their personal logs. Although any entries originating from the bridge, engineering decks, or the sensor arrays will be transferred to them as well.

*Official Document_Mission Briefing for The Company_Designation:
CLASSIFIED: RE | Margot's Fever. ORD NO. 200076318 -
FAA_Continued*

How can there be this much data in the black boxes. They must have been corrupted. There are millions of terabytes of information in here. The sensors and antenna array data is off the fucking charts. They are recording Gamma burst from detonating neutron stars for fuck's sake. The coordinates are bonkers. The data is so complex, it's not even relevant to three, four or even five dimensions. I think they went to the sixth fucking dimension. I believe that they managed to time travel. Or shift, no phase is a better term, they phased back just milliseconds before they left. The time loop, fate, theoretics on this will make someone an absolute fortune. It'll take us decades to cover all the data here. Then we'll have to parse it all for errors, corruption in the data, or sensor malfunctions. Whatever happened here, it was not what the simulations and math predicted. Glad it didn't really. If it had, the entire solar system would have compressed down into a black hole and killed all eight billion of us, once they kicked off those experimental engines.

Black Sight: UB313 Research Base

From the limited amount of data given to us, we think that by all accounts the engines worked, just not how we had originally planned. We think what happened was that the trip was not instantaneous, at least not how we humans think of it. Even light takes years to travel vast distances. We believe that they got spooked in transit, and that they panicked. Made the jump back so quickly that they damn near landed on themselves as they were just about to jump out. We haven't worked out the temporal science yet. The math guys are trying to work it out now. Once the off sight guys review the data, they think they can figure it out fairly shortly. It was a less than one half second jump. We have been given no data regarding the crew of the ship, so we have no information to give there. We suggest that you commandeer Margot's fever, send it out to us here, and let us test drive the engines for further insight.

*Official Document_Mission Briefing for The Company_Designation:
CLASSIFIED: RE | Margot's Fever. ORD NO. 200076689 -
FAA_Continued*

Absolutely not. The ship has been decommissioned, and the program jettisoned from the university archives, and all knowledge therein has been purged, in unofficial terms.

Torus Station : Two years after the events of Margot's Fever.

Inside the media screening suite, sits the HR director Ms. Taylor. She is surrounded by members of the security council, joint chiefs of staff and the full board of directors. The room is quite cramped with all those orange jumpsuits, and their attendant staff. The room smells of rich cologne, Bourbon and some cigar smoke. The walls are painted a mixture of dark green, yellow, red and a rich burgundy. Ms. Taylor has to be conscious of where she stands, otherwise she might fade into the scenery behind her. Her crisp, tailored jumpsuit, a deep burgundy, with Green, Yellow, Red, and Brown arm bands is standing at the head of the table ready to lead the group through vetting The Company's Official re-enactment of the events that will be released to the masses. "Thank you for joining us here today ladies and gentlemen." A sweeping arm wave, a gesture of welcoming and of a collaborative tone. Ms. Taylor looks to be about twenty years of age, though she is far older than that. The counterparts in the room are all in their seventies, and are too far gone for the rejuvenation treatments she frequents. She caught that train right on time. The lights in the room go dim, and the movie flashes up on screen.

"So what do you think?" announces the most junior member of the board of directors. Looking around the room Ms. Taylor pipes up. "I think that this fictional recounting of those events is a travesty, a total miscarriage of justice. Like a prolapsed anus, that script is both painful and messy. It skips over so much, and portrays that captain as a loon right from the get go. If I know my people, and I know them well, a good portion will hate this. Hate. It. But for the masses, it's perfect." with a clap of her hands, the room breaks up and everyone filters out and back to their living quarters.

The rebuild has been tough for everyone over the last two years. The last thing HR Director Taylor wants is to fuel the conspiracies, and set some growing agitation alight. She would have preferred that they answer a few of the tougher questions surrounding the events, and the disappearance of the crew, but she didn't produce this film, and it's not her place to edit it. Just vet it with an eye towards morale, and the new normal aboard the torus station. Her inability to know more chafes at her

neck. Perhaps a visit down to the Sanitation department might provide some much needed answers. Seeing as how she has had them under her purview for more than two years now, a visit down below might actually be in order. Calling up a display inside the media suite, in the dim lights, she waits while the pinging noise from her wrist biometrics chimes softly in the empty room.

"And now - for the exciting conclusion to..."

Booms the deep gravelly voice from the media screen. "Oh turn the crap off would you. I'm sick to death of hearing about that stupid fucking ship." She says it to me from behind her console. Lt. Anise Rashida. Dressed in her baggy black jumpsuit, her maroon hair braided tightly to her scalp. The pale mocca colour of her skin looks vaguely blue in the backwash of her monitors glow. From the rolling nature of the glow I can tell that the security data she is looking through is scrolling at an incredible rate. If it weren't for her slight modifications from a childhood injury she would never have been able to take it all in. Bionic eye implants gives her an extra external memory core so that visual data can be saved in snap shots and rendered into code directly inputted into her brain and via her visual enhancement processors. Makes for a great cop who can recall everything she has ever seen. "Babe, you know that whatever info they are releasing about the event will be heavily doctored or reframed to depict The Company in the best light possible. What a crock. I see "official" documents all day long. Some of them are from cases I worked and what gets archived or purged from the system, or even reported up the chain of command can be wildly different from the actual events on the ground." She is non plussed by her admission. Just a matter of fact. Well, more like fiction. But to the masses still aboard the torus station, what gets passed down to them is expected to be taken as gospel. Loose lips sink ships, so they have cracked down hard on the conspiracy theorists, and anarchists alike. Quietly transporting them off station, never to be seen or heard from again. Only their closest friends and family know that their presence has been totally erased from the ship board archives. Some real Gestapo shit. But, we're paid well, always busy, and are provided with more entertainment options than you could ever grow tired off.

"Don't you think it's weird that the station has become so empty over the last few years? Like shift change used to be this momentous thing, three times a day. Now you'll be lucky to get eight people in a power lift down to the main concourse. Where has everyone gone?" I ask this question daily, and my glorious security chief wife just rolls her eyes at me and continues to work from her spot in our joint gel couch. The covers pulled down around her waist in a fluffy puddle of fabric. Although she is still wearing her coveralls she has removed all her webbing, strapping and holsters. Her cache of side arms and her baton and cuffs are securely squared away in her closet lock box. If we are ever hit with a pocket sized nuke, right in our rooms, that thing will still manage to survive unscathed. Without those bodily restrictions her coveralls look rather baggy and almost comfortable. The tough teflon weaved fabric can soak up a knife stab as well as a ballistic projectile from a small to medium sized weapon. Up to a .45 caliber bullet, but that would likely break the bones directly behind the path of the projectile. Not that the station engages in much small arms fire. We're more likely to suffer meteorites, close calls by comets or kamikaze spaceships or crewed transports. The criminal element aboard the torus is mostly fixated on unlicensed sex and drugs. Quick and easy, simple to hide. Except when a curious case of VD sweeps through certain sections of the station. Things are drying up, now that the station is not the huge concentration of people it once was. The remaining security teams are bored, and spend most of their time on rounds checking for hull breaches or previously undiagnosed damage from the fallout of the events that surround *Margot's Fever*.

"Jesus." A loud in draw of breath from the bedroom. A gasp. Something Anise has never done before. Ever. And she was a part of the crew that had to go out and collect the masses of corpses from around the station after the accident. "What is it? What's the matter?" In the span of a heart beat I'm up off my chair, across the adjoining room and at the foot of our bed. "I'm being transferred. To someplace listed only as UB313. Where the fuck is that? There's no sector on this ship with that designation." A strange look is upon her face. She must be trying to access the external visual memory to cross reference the place name. "How are you finding out about this now, at this hour?" I ask. "Oh, well you know that Lt. Dave is dealing with his daughters leukemia, and he gave me a field promotion and access to the intranet within the security force. Who boy, and I thought I knew a lot of shit before. Some of the notes, appendices and evaluations logged here are super strange. I don't even know why we'd even have half of this stuff. Looks like I'll get notified on Friday morning. With orders to ship out on Saturday night.

Says you aren't on the manifest to join me. Well, fuck me. How do you like that, fucking bullshit." A mask of calm covers her face, the briefest moment of rage suppressed by years of training and personal will power. "Right. Well I'll have to get that sorted. Don't worry babe, I'll not leave you behind."

Dear god, why didn't she just leave me behind. The cramped dark cell is wet from the damp air, and human waste. There isn't even room to stretch out my legs, or to raise an arm. The only light visible through the bars of the dog kennel sized door is a sickly pale green. I have not seen nor heard from anyone since I boarded the security vessel on our trip out to UB313. I was directed to climb into a separate crew compartment than my wife, and the last thing I remember was falling to the ground. Like succumbing to a gas attack, or anesthesia. Then I woke up in here. I screamed myself hoarse over the course of three days. Not a soul responded to me. This cage is so tight I am unable to look at my biometrics implant in my forearm. I think I've been left here to die.

"Right this way Lt. Col Rashida, we have a med pod couch for you up at the front. This will be an extensive trip and your duties rigorous. We have some rejuvenation treatments set up for you as well." The ship's captain is leading her away from me. A tug on my right elbow is the only direction I get as I'm led to a soldier's bare bones gel couch at the rear of the vessel. There are a whole slew of empty berths surrounding a huge metal canister. I'm roughly placed into my couch and the glass door shut unceremoniously. Before I can even say thanks, the room goes black. My vision immediately begins to swim as a soft hiss can be heard by the vents near the headrest. There's no coolant gel, no sedation. This is different. I can hardly breath. What the fuck is going on here...

"Welcome back to the land of the living Lt. Col. Rashida. We have some troubling news for you. Your husband Ravindar didn't survive the transit. The far crew compartment suffered an ammonia leak from a micro meteorite shower we were breaking through upon deceleration out near Saturn. We are so sorry for your loss ma'am." The junior office starts to turn away from the gel couch, as the Lt. Col starts to ask a question. "Please, can I see the body. I'd like to gather his personal effects." Rising from the couch, feeling slightly woozy from the rejuvenation treatments. "That will not be possible. Company protocol is to jettison all dead crew from the ship upon detection, so as to limit any possible exposure to decay, bacteria and airborne contamination." With a crisp salute, he exits the med bay where the pod is located. A few

members of the medical staff can be seen milling about. Death in transit has unfortunately become very common place these days. No one is safe. Before she can even think to dwell her wrist chirps with her new orders. Looks like she has about twenty weeks of intensive zero g combat training to augment her current skill sets. No time to think. Her wrist alarm is telling her she is late to meet her XO, and get debriefed. The darkness out here is pervasive and deeply oppressive. The black ops site runs dark both figuratively and quite literally.

"What an insufferable lot of twats these people are..."

Wouldn't you agree Todd?" Quips Ms. Taylor the current senior director of HR to her deputy minister Todd Gaines. He has worked under her for years. Come to learn a number of handy tricks when it comes to dealing with the geriatric portion of the board of directors, joint chiefs of staff and now the security council. Todd was a part of the diplomatic endeavor that brought the warring factions of janitors and sanitation departments to heel. He was also a part of a top secret delegation that went deep underground to learn many of the stations deepest, darkest and most highly guarded secrets. Didn't hurt that he fell in love with and married both twins that run the waste management services aboard Torus station. "Not sure how I should answer that ma'am. More than a few are on their last legs, and a good shouting match, or a tough row might keel them over." He hasn't looked up from his binder. It's full of today's agenda, with all sorts of interesting tidbits regarding the goings on of many groups aboard the station. "I'm getting pinged by several junior staffers ma'am so we best head in and confront this mess head on. Give'em a jolt, perhaps shake some positions loose on the board? Just a thought." Finally looking up, he smirks at me. Yes, we certainly think on similar wave lengths. But it won't suit my needs today to have any of these old farts drop dead mid conference from an aneurysm. "You go in first Todd, and I'll be in shortly. I just have a quick call to make to shore up some possible gaps in our gathered intelligence." Without missing a beat, Todd is through the double doors to the enormous luxury suites where the upper echelon conducts their business these days. Plush seats, expensive booze, cigars and the like. The air scrubbers here work desperately to clear the air, and the cool rush of recycled air makes the hard fabric on Catherine's burgundy jumpsuit flutter. She has no calls to

make, her arguments are airtight. Her case is going to ruffle some feathers. Make a few old men blush. Also, the chance to make them wait for her, and fluster themselves by realizing they no longer carry the balance of power aboard the Torus is just too good a chance to pass up. She can hear the rising voices, and the murmur turns to a din as she waits beyond the atmosphere rated conference room doors. Standing with her back to the wall, the subtle texture of the door frame glides under her fingers. Cool to the touch. Once she can clearly make out the shouting from inside she opens the door to stride in confidently, head held high. "Good afternoon ladies and gents. It is with great sadness today that I called you here. We have much to discuss." Looking around the large room, the board members are seated, the underlings placed around them evenly, the joint chiefs seated on the far side, and the three chairs set aside for the security council are empty. With a puzzled look Catherine looks to Todd who shakes his head. "Well where the fuck are they?" She snaps. "Well, no matter. The security council is on the agenda today, so makes sense they would be absent to provide any further clarification with what I am about to say." Walking down the length of the table, each member in turn swiveling in their seats to maintain visual on her. "I have convened this urgent meeting to discuss a most troubling matter. Seems the newly formed, and entirely secretive security council has been up to no good. I have here with me now, here today, evidence that the security council has been transporting members of Torus station off sight to conduct vile, inhumane experiments. Seems the sudden increase of in transit deaths has been a cover for creating an army of untold numbers of Guinea pigs for their medical black sites, located out in the far reaches of our solar system." From a morbidly obese woman in the joint chiefs ranks, a shrill screech of a voice kicks up. "That's utterly preposterous. No one could do that. Who would fund it. Who would follow orders to kidnap our own people." She shrieks. "Exactly, Janice, my sentiments mirror your own." Replies Cathy. Suddenly caught off guard by the calm reply, Janice shakes her head and mutters something only her junior staffers can hear. A few underlings start making calls from their wrist communicators. Another older gentleman says "These are some extraordinary accusations you are making senior director." He spits out each word around his loose dentures. "Perhaps we should call down from the C Suites The Company administrator to peruse this so called evidence you've gathered. Who are your sources if I might be so bold - Cat?" The old man flails about, until his junior deputy rushes to his aid to lift him from his heavily cushioned seat. "No, you may not. Don't bother calling the administrator, she'll not answer." Ms. Taylor hisses. "Ridiculous! Nonsense, we're the board of directors. We run the day to day operations

of this station. They'll answer to us, to ME! I fucking well guarantee it!" Whirling in place, he turns to see all twenty of the gathered junior staffers all dialing, hanging up and recalling, again and again, to no avail. "No, I'm afraid The Company abandoned us some time ago, isn't that right Todd? Our best guess is that the administrator and her staff ventured off the station in the weeks just after *Margot's Fever* crashed and fizzled. Their offices look to have been abandoned for what? Todd you thought it was somewhere in the vicinity of twelve months?" The crowd looks beyond Cathy to the lithe man sat grinning with his nose in a gargantuan binder. "Best guess places it around twenty seven months ago, ma'am. They have been forwarding incoming calls to an emitter which cuts down the lag time for responses within the system. They could be anywhere within thirty AU's of us here and we would never know it." A laugh from the gathered crowd. "Not possible! There is no way anyone in their right mind, that would walk away from those C Suite offices and living quarters. No, never. I don't believe you." With a chime, the media screen at the back of the room comes alive, to show a group of janitors and sanitation workers walking through a clearly abandoned office block. Papers are scattered on the floors, piles of ash gathered in puddles on file cabinets, scorched by fire. Frozen mugs of coffee, and half eaten bagels are on desk tops, the greenery has all overgrown their individual planters due to the automated feeders. The board room is taken over with a shocked hush. In unison, each of the geriatric members of the board say aloud. "They abandoned us. How did we not know. What is going on here?" Collapsing deep into their seats, the look of defeat etched on their pale, wrinkled faces. "That's what I am here to tell you. If you have any insights, you voice them right here, right now. No point of interest is too small, too minute." With a flash of colour the media screen starts to come alive with names, dates, redacted files that were surreptitiously pulled off of the security teams intranet.

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The cells are buried in rigidly cold rock. The air is thick with mould and mildew. The stale air is damp and musty. The cells are little more than dog kennel sized holes in the rock walls with large heavy titanium bars for a door. The light is a sickly pale green. Somewhere the slow drip of water can be heard. The smell of human waste is strong from inside the cell that Ravindar Rashida is held inside. After the fifth day with no food and no water, he was able to shimmy about in the cell to get a look at his biometrics. The Nano bots he had recently upgraded to were working extraordinarily hard to keep him alive. Burning off sugars and

fats at a drastically reduced rate, reclaiming water he still retained to maintain organ function at the minimum rates allowable to survive. From the logs the biometrics keep it shows he suffered ammonia poisoning, but was able to live through it. Though it burned his lungs and eyes, and left him weakened. But where the hell did that happen. He didn't recognize the rock from Torus station. His GPS unit couldn't place him anywhere in the mechanical sector of the station. From off in the darkness of the extensive corridor the soft footfalls of someone walking can be heard. As it draws closer, Ravindar realizes it isn't one set but multiple. The soft mumble of a quiet conversation can just be made out. "Please... please I need some water. I don't know where I am... how did I get here... please, you have to help me!" The panic and adrenaline in his voice startles the group as they pass by. "Well now, aren't you the tenacious one. Yes, yes. Please come with me. I will set you straight." The science officer lifts a tag on the outside of the cage door, a sardonic smile upon his face. "Mr. Ravindar Rashida. Yes. Let's get you down to my office. Shall we?" The door latch is unhooked as the weakened man falls out onto the floor. He lands with a hard thud. Turning over on the floor the man stares into the empty eye sockets of the skeletal remains of a small child. It shrieks in pain with a long and pitiful muah!, as Ravindar scrambles to back away from the horribly emaciated figure packed inside a dark cell. She was not three feet below him this whole time. In the cages surrounding him are hundreds, no thousands of other mindless near dead people. Strong hands pull him up to his feet then he is place unceremoniously onto an ice cold gurney and wheeled off into the darkness. The medical officer and his underlings continue their conversations, as though nothing had happened.

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"Let us begin with what we know. We believe that a black site has been created to house various secret operations. Our intelligence on what they are doing is sketchy at best. But we know the place is named UB313, and that is actually where it is too. They chose a dwarf planet out beyond Pluto. So no one is just going to stumble upon it. And we lack the resources to storm the place, even if we felt so inclined. We also know, because we have their official communications, that all surviving members of *Margot's Fever* have been sequestered there. And we believe the stations missing people have been shipped there too. Lots of talk about squashing conspiracy theorists, quelling rebellious groups, and "ethanizing" troublesome persons in transit. I mean, Jesus. They have sop's for gassing people in their berths for fuck's sake." Senior

director Taylor is almost as red in the face as her burgundy jumpsuit. The room is full of shocked silence. Heads are held low, and not a single person is fidgeting. Near the back of the room a nondescript individual taps out a short code on her wrist communicator. The station emitter barks out a pulse and then goes dark.

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"Hello Ravindar, glad you are finally awake. Well, well, well... look at you. Tell me, how do you feel?" The scientist has a glowing bed side manner, or so it would seem. "Please, water... so thirsty."
"Yes, yes, you've said so before. But I have a few questions for you my boy. How did you do it, huh? How did you manage to survive the ammonia leak we set off in your gel couch during transit? Hm... no, please do share." With a smile the man pulls up a stool, a pad of paper and a pencil and waits patiently. "What?, huh... I don't know - please you have to help me!" Ravindars pleas are a soft whistle, through his dry cracked lips. His eye lids begin to flutter heavily. "Oh no you don't. No sense you go dying on me now. Nurse, please set him up with an iv, and let me know when he regains consciousness, we'll start him on Project Cerebus after we gather a suitable baseline for him." The short nurse moves in on the motionless body of Ravindar Rashida as he is strapped down to the metal gurney. The lab is fairly large, covered top to bottom in large white subway tiles, with a polished cement floor. Huge dust extraction units hang from each end of the room. There is a viewing gallery behind a mirrored glass panel near the top of the far wall. Several camera rigs with booms and stabilizers hang down from the ceiling. The scientist likes to capture every second of Project Cerebus on film for protocol review and quality control regarding his surgical precision. Written above the door in bold red letters are the words "Welcome to Hell."

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"Did no one other than myself and my immediate staff think it was strange that our security forces just spontaneously erupted up out of the ether over night? With access to ballistic weapons, armor and those teflon weave coveralls. Who designed, manufactured and brought on board all those arms and ammunition. The webbing, holsters and such? Do we have any leads on where it originated from? Anyone?" Head shakes all around the table. A somber mood pervades the conference

hall. There is only standing room now, as each director brought in more and more junior staffers and advisors to help shed light on what was being uncovered by Ms. Taylor and her covert web of spies.

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The lab is dimly lit as Ravindar awakes. His throat is dry, but he desperately needs to urinate. Beside his bed, a large bag is full of a dark orange brown liquid. The foul smell of urine lingers in his nostrils. The urge to itch his genitals rushes to him, until he realizes they have inserted a catheter for him. They must not realize he upgraded to Nano technology for use with his new wave biometrics unit. The lights click on and suddenly the room is too bright for Ravindar to see. Blinded by the pale white light, and the glare off the pristine white glass tile, he tries to bring his arms up to guard his face, only to find the end of the slop in his restraints. Beside him is a large media screen, a head set and some sort of clamps. "Good afternoon Ravindar. Glad you could be here with us. Nothing hard in store for you today my friend. Just some research for you to watch ok buddy." With a quick jerk the gurney transforms from a bed to a chair. Stepping off the levers at the head of the gurney, the science officer twirls Ravindar around to face the screen. Pulling a leather strap from behind the head rest, he wraps it around his head. Looking at the monitors he decides to nudge the gurney just a hair closer to the monitors. "Ok, so big picture here. You have to be close enough that all you can see is the screen. Can't have you staring at the bevels or off into the distance. You have to see everything on the monitors, ok? Also, in case you were hoping to sleep or shut those beautiful eyes, we're going to keep your peepers wide open. I have numbing drops and a hyper hydrator for your pupils too. Great stuff. Great stuff. Now, you're new here, so your first day with Project Cerebus is going to be a long one. I think we've trimmed this presentation down to ninety six hours. We'll push some food through a feeding tube every six hours or so, but just sit back, relax, and enjoy the show!" As the lights are dimmed the medical officer turns to leave. "Oop almost forgot the headphones. You need to hear this to truly appreciate the situation you find yourself in." The monitor flickers to life, with a short countdown. The medical staffer vanishes from the room. In the darkness, Ravindar can see a young girl being wheeled into the lab on a gurney similar to his. Visions of hell unfold before him. The panicked screams reverberate off the hard surfaces throughout the subterranean portion of the UB313 medical wing. In his large office, the scientist turns from his CCTV showing a bucking and wrenching

Ravindar, to turn on his stereo and listen to Holst's the planets on near constant repeat.

With a tremble Ravindar crushes his eyes closed in an attempt to stop the horrific stream of visions burned into his retinas. A small man enters the room. "Good morning Ravindar. Do you understand what you are here for now? Do you have some idea of what we are attempting to do, for all of mankind?" The young man looks to be of Japanese decent, with thinning jet black hair, a wide grin, and soft friendly blue eyes. "Wh.. wh.. what's going to happen to me?" Ravindar exclaims. "Well you see. That parts up to you. If you help us figure something out, we can put you through different tests, until you either a.) Succumb to the testing, or b.) Solve our issue and get thrown at another issue, ad infinitum." "But, wh... why, why though. What can we do. Why do this to us." "For all mankind, you silly goose. We have to find a suitable way to get around Galactic Cosmic Radiation, surviving Solar Proton Events, finding if a miniaturized Magnetic Field Generator can stop you from dying in the face of extreme radiation. Among other things, we want to see people become heartier in regards to inhospitable environments, toxins and a laundry list of other imminent threats." The small doctor drops the seated gurney back into a bed. Unlocking the wheels, he pushes the cool gurney over to an air lock. "Ok my good friend, today we're going to test your bodies response to oxygen deprivation. I have the cameras and lights set up in there all ready, so feel free to moon for the camera." With a metal woosh, the heavy doors close, to leave a trembling Ravindar to wait on the soft hiss of escaping oxygen. The visceral stench of dread fills the room in place of the missing oxygen. Much to Ravindar's chagrin, his Nano tech keeps him alive under the stress.

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"Wait, wait, wait. The time lines seems screwy. You said they fled the Torus almost immediately, in the aftermath of the *Margot's Fever* event. They must have thought it was something else than an engine malfunction. Might explain the live recordings showing black uniformed guards firing ballistic weapons out into the void, before those images were purged from the archives, and a sanitized account of events was delivered to the masses. So who did they think it was?" Again an agitated silence hangs over the gathered group. The attendants are so many the overflow is now out into the hall, and out the corridor to the lobby. The whole discussion is being broadcast across the whole floor. Some three hundred members of the Torus station are gathered to give input or just

listen. "What could they possibly be doing out there in UB313. What are they trying to do?"

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A long low whistle. "Well fuck me, you must be a gods be damned superman. I did not think you'd survive exposure to total vacuum. You surprise us at every turn. But what we gather from our instrumentation, you aren't much different than myself or anyone else for that matter. How do you do it Ravindar." It's more of a statement at this point than a question. The life in his eyes fades a little bit every day. For months now, he has been subject to all manner of torture, or testing as they call it. Ravindar's best guess is they want to beef up humans to survive interstellar travel over incredibly long periods of time and distance.

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"Can I get a tally of what suits the administrators and attendant staff were wearing when they fled? Personal artifacts, food, supplies, anything like that. Compare it to the missing people and those who "died" in transit over the last decade. Cross reference, and cross check all of it, on screen, now please." With a blip, the data spools on screen as tiny packets of data are pooled into larger groups, on and on, with each variable listed in the query. Todd is typing furiously.

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"Seriously Ravindar, how the fuck do you do it? How the fuck are you still alive!" Shouts Dr. Jang directly into the unresponsive Ravindar's face. Though not dead, he has retreated far back into the dark reaches of his mind. Sanity has long since fled his clutches. In a fit on anger the doctor kicks the gurney, breaking his big toe on his right foot. "FUCK!" The call echoes down the halls.

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"The only thing that ninety nine point nine nine percent have in common are the jumpsuits they were issued. Our standard Scalzi model coverall. Replete with catheter system as part of the internal rigging. The only one not wearing that was Ravindar Rashida, a level three cert generalist mechanic who was married to Lt. Anise Rashida, a security chief in your section ma'am." Cathy Taylor looks up from her large stack of reading

materials. "Wait. What was he wearing?" "According to the visitor logs, and the crew manifest from the capsule named *Gemini*, he had on the new experimental Nano infused system, that melds with his DNA/RNA identifiers. Pretty high tech stuff. I guess he was gearing up to work deep space, or now this is sketchy but, I saw mention that he had been selected to be working on something called a Fabric of Reality field generator. The Company had it listed as an Zulu Alpha Prometheus level priority. Never heard of that before. But I can't cross reference that with anything else, so it could be nothing but a red herring." Says Todd.

"Incoming call on line one for HR Senior director Catherine Taylor. Priority one call from the off station CEO of The Company." The automated pa system rings straight through to Cathy's suites. Sitting up in bed, in the darkness of night, a handful of words are displayed on the wall opposite her bed. "An emissary from The Company has been dispatched to Torus station. ETA ninety days - end transmission." "Well now, this is an interesting development." Cathy flops back into bed. The darkness surrounds her.

"I heard you the first time..."

Why don't you fuck off Lou, huh. I've got an important message here, direct from The Company that Ms. Taylor wants me to analyze. So just piss off, I don't have time for your shit today." Todd is livid, but their playful game of cat and mouse usually plays out with a more fanciful fanfare. The tall mountain of a man named Lou side steps the door to the now abandoned C Suites block, and Todd scurries along inside. Down the main thoroughfare, passed a massive row of desks and a palatial lobby, big enough you could host multiple robot fights in here simultaneously. Turning at a t junction, Todd locates the security details hidden terminal. Tucked back behind a generic looking cabinet, in a non descript portion of the office block. The beige angular box boots up at the touch of an analog key. It always strikes Todd as crazy, just how old the tech is that The Company's security forces are utilising. Punching in a few key strokes, the prompts for the intranet come up on screen. Clicking a short message into his wrist comms Catherine suddenly appears face to face with him. The new holographic interface is really something of a marvel. "Great, now load in the whole message, do a search for any extraneous

code, or tags, or what have you that might be embedded in the message itself. These are crafty buggers, must have a secret message in there to pass along covert data." Her face is a mottled red and blue, slightly pixelated in the rendering in three dimensional space. "No, not much showing up here." Says Todd. "Hey, wait a second. There's a broken link to an image here. The corporate logo looks corrupted. I'll scan that for....oh woah, here we go..." in the blink of an eye a wall of text begins to spool on screen. Directives, missives, commands and appendices. "Good catch Todd. Those tags look ominous." She half chuckles. "Yeah - I'd say so. They have you flagged as a target. Jesus, they have you listed for Euthanization. Looks like a strike team located on the station has the green light to terminate your contract. As it were." Looking down her nose Cathy says, "These people and their fucking euphemisms. Grow a pair will yah!" With a laugh she waves him off. "Ok log out, and get back to my offices. Take care to not be seen exiting the offices. Say hello to Lou, you saucy minx." The display winks out. Moments later the lithe body of Todd is seen slipping into the shadows of the corridors directly outside the C Suites.

"I don't understand you. How. Are. You. Still. Alive. Gods damn it! You should have been dead more than one hundred times over. I've stabbed you, burned you, given you viral loads of vast quantities, blood borne illnesses, hypothermia, hyperthermia. Are you a fucking demon!" Dr. Jang is pacing the laboratory, under the brilliant lights, in view of the camera rigs. His slow decent into absolute frustration with the near lifeless lump that is Ravindar Rashida is bringing him to his wits end. Soft steps can be heard in the halls. In comes the lead medical officer in charge of Project Cerebus on UB313. A man of medium height and build. Plain in look. Would be nearly impossible to pin point him from a line up. Nothing to distinguish him from countless other white men his age. "What seems to irk you so Dr. Jang?" He nearly croons the loaded question. For he is always watching on the far end of the lab's CCTV link. "You've gone over, and over, and over this man. Do you have the answers we seek? We're under - direct - pressure to produce results. I did not personally engage in subterfuge, fuelling a separatist movement and various terrorist plots, just to get stumped by physiology, and losing my grasp on a several trillion dollar contract with The Company." The man's sing song voice belies the true raw nature of his anger and loathing. His greed has led him to do some truly awful things for the sake of progress and an enormous payout that would take generations of poor choices to spend in its entirety.

"I have it on good authority that the dispatch from The Company is a trap. A time wasting trap. Now, as far as we can tell all members of the security forces have fled the station, so no one is here to read and carry out their directives." Says Ms. Taylor to her gathered junior staffers. All of them trusted members of her inner circle. The vast majority of people may have left the Torus, but her staff stayed on. Todd coming through the doors, his nose in a binder - again. "What do you know about a guy named Dr. Douglas Jang, and an independently wealthy figure known only by the moniker Jones." Crossing the room, over to her desk, he lays a print out on the work station before her. Looking it over, her thumb on her lip. "Well, if I recall, Dr. Jang was disgraced about twenty years ago, and banned from practicing. Had a penchant for unnecessary surgery. Seems he was a part of an older religious movement that shunned Nano technology. Was in such a state of denial, it was nearly pathological." Leaning back in her chair. Stretching her back. "I have no idea whom this Jones character is. Financier? Patron? Alias? Hard to say. With a name that generic it could be nearly impossible to find him." After a brief pause, the room stirs back to life.

In the dead silence of my jumpsuit, the heavy rush of blood pumping...

In my ears is deafening. The constant pounding of my pulse and rush of ragged breath inside my tight and claustrophobic helmet is awfully distracting. Strapped into the makeshift gel couch, I can feel my hands tremble in the zero gravity. I swear that my eyes are rolling in my head, and I'm so nauseous from the zero gravity vertigo. This is nothing like what we trained for. The deep pools we used back on earth just didn't prepare me for how this would feel on the day. Every so often I switch between feeling as though I'm looking down on the ceiling from between my feet, to hanging there helplessly like a bat. Good thing our weapons are strapped to our legs via synthetic webbing. I'm so nervous I might twitch and pull the trigger if I had to hold it during transit. The trip so far hasn't been too rough, the empty cargo container all sixteen of us are stuffed into is unpressurized, and without any form of life support, or entertainment. The only indication we have that time is passing, are the readouts on our wrists that monitor our oxygen use, and the build up of CO2 in the molecular scrubbers. The container is a dingy rusted orange,

little more than a transport truck container from earth with a heavy duty tactical light welded in our field of view, affixed to the floor in front of our row of gel couches. Though it has been retro fit with explosive bolts to pop off the top and full front side. We're all strapped into our make shift couches oriented towards the same wall. When the red light in the middle of the container goes out, the bolts will blow the container in two, and we unstrap and go to war.

The container we're all strapped into is windowless, we are floating blindly. We are expecting to show up less than half a kilometer from Torus station, to be able to meet at our target. We've been given enough oxygen to make it through to our target, a few hours of a fire fight, then we're on our own to make it to our evacuation points for extraction. The rallying point is *Margot's Fever*. Today, in front of the whole Sol system The Company will launch their new experimental star ship, and we're about to fuck her up but good. Live on the evenings broadcast, for everyone to see. But we have to get to the coordinates first.

The inner system tug boats that we high-jacked are built to maneuver these cargo crates around with ease. For some reason, the depot where they were stationed wasn't guarded at all. We staked our whole mission on gaining access to more than two dozen of them at once. Our knowledge of them is weak at best. The minds behind the operation didn't share many details about them with us. That operational intel went to the drone operators alone. We can travel with them, we just have no control over them from inside the containers. An entirely separate compartmentalized team is running that show from the drone bay they stormed yesterday, down somewhere in Arizona. We have no idea if they still hold the controls, or if we're being sent off to die unknowingly. We are counting on them to get us within range. We've been running this whole trip on our self contained environmental rigs and we have to complete our mission and get to the rendezvous point before we asphyxiate. Hard on the nerves, to say the least. Every so often I look down at the read outs on my wrist control units. Monitoring the oxygen levels and CO2 present in my rig. The whole trip is supposed to take us at least forty hours, and we have fifty two hours of oxygen. Things are tight, and we are all extremely tense. This is our first real mission out. Four fire teams made up of four people. We're all vying for the same objectives in mind. Redundancies in case we catch heavy fire, or get caught out on our way in. We aren't exactly tech savvy, but we've gathered enough C4, and other various explosives and weapons that we think we can absolutely

total *Margot's Fever* and make ourselves known in the system as people not to fuck with.

The static of the mic hisses. "Somethings fucky here guys, my oxygen tanks are reading only eight hours left." Says a muffled voice, can't tell if it's from my fire team, or another group in a separate cargo container. "Well ride it out, then switch to your reserve when you get down below one hour, just don't..." The words come tumbling out of my mouth without me realizing it. "Ok, I've switched over, What! - Now I only have three hours left, what the Fuck!" He starts to scream into his head set, the mechanical whine from the feedback is ear splitting. Trying to calmly talk over him I answer. "As I was about to finish, DON'T switch over until you are below one hour because the reserve tanks are greatly reduced in capacity." I finish, slightly flustered. "You fucking asshole, you've fucked me. I'm going to die before we even reach the target. Holy fuck, switch it back, switch it back. Help me!" The panic in his voice is palpable. "That's just it." I say. "You can't switch it back. All of our equipment is designed to be scuttled after use, no traces, remember. Surprise, attack, then vanish into thin air. That's what the leaders trained us to do. Calm down, remember your training. Take small shallow breaths and you'll just have to jettison your materiel for the mission to your fire team commander and bolt for the rendezvous point. Now stay off the fucking mics people. We need absolute radio silence." without a hesitation I cut the feed from outside my own suit. I can't be listening to someone have a panic attack mere hours before the greatest moment of my life. Listening to a fellow team mate slowly die while strapped to a gel couch will not do much for morale, and it'll just put a damper on our mission.

Playing through my mind are all the ways this thing could go south on us, in a heartbeat. The tug boat drone pilots could get caught, and we get jettisoned towards the sun, to either starve to death or asphyxiate. They could be infiltrated and crash land us into the side of an asteroid or the station. Deliver us entirely strapped down directly to The Company security forces on the station. The bolts could fail to blow and we get caught stranded in our tin cans. They blow too hard and we get pulverized before we accomplish anything. The bolts could blow without enough force to remove the front and top plates, and they shift in space to crush us with their heavy mass, and inertia. *Margot's Fever* could see us on their sensor array and melt us to slag with their thrusters. Our jury rigged suits and weapons could totally fail us and kill us all before we even get within a thousand miles of the station. A laundry list of terrible, horrible, awful things could happen. Which doesn't include the all out fire fight we're expecting to engage in as a show of

separatist force. With no windows, and no way of knowing if everything has gone off the rails, we just have to lie in wait. Pray that we're on the right path, and that our glorious sacrifices will be met with great gifts in our next lives.

In the vastness of space, a series of black containers race towards their targets tucked underneath the unmanned tug boat drones favoured by corporations other than The Company. The pressure and strain of the bobbing and weaving has the occupants deeply rattled. The pull of thrust has them pinned deep into the backs of their gel couches. The pressure upon their chests is so great they can hardly breath let alone talk. Their old jury rigged suits don't have the pressurized seals that help to keep the blood up in their heads. Many have vomited inside their helmets. The near constant jostling has broken bones, and rattled skulls hard enough to afflict multiple concussions. The jumpsuits are a much older style, and not the tactical sort now in use by The Company security forces. They have been provided with no radiation shielding, and zero armor plating. This gaggle of separatist insurgents are deeply unaware of how they are being manipulated and are staged to be used as canon fodder. The deep rumble of the maneuvering thrusters causes their limbs to grow numb over time. The constant pinging of micro meteorites off of the containers starts to develop into a series of portholes where the action outside can be seen. Small pin holes become massive deep dents, which tear open to reveal the empty blackness of the void beyond. In several containers the torn open shell shards shear off to impale those unfortunate enough to be in the direct flight path of the pieces. Several insurgents are shredded by the barrage of space junk left floating out around the shipping lanes that surrounds the Torus Station. Barely visible at this distance is the Torus station itself, and the myriad service vehicles and exterior traffic that surrounds it. The tug boat drones are so much slower than The Company shuttles, that it'll be close to a full day before they are within range of the station to blow their explosive safety bolts and release the hyped up, separatist martyrs inside. Not a single one of them will make it.

"Some jobs are hard no matter where you work..."

Like for instance take my job. I shovel stuff; rocks, dirt, faeces you name it. It's hot and sweaty and not least of all it gets really dirty. Now I used to work landscaping back on earth, and I was a real model employee. Ten hours a day, inclement weather not withstanding, I'd be on a job site shoveling

whatever my boss asked me too. Big heavy steel shovels, to tackle river rock, or top soil or straight up horse shit. I didn't care. I'd turn up at seven am sharp, grab my trusty tool and fuck off down some massive hole and shovel. All gods be damned day long. I don't love it, but it means I don't have to talk to anyone, and I can listen to whatever I want while I work. I can move close to twenty five yards of regolith on an average day. Yeah, my hands and back don't like me much. But it pays good. The boss man sends me cold drinks and a decent sandwich every couple of hours for my trouble. He doesn't do that for everybody, just little old me.

So, as it turns out the union guys up on Torus station are taking on apprentices in the new year and my supervisor signed me up, unbeknownst to me. Well he captured some candid video of the big boss man singing my praises and attached it to my application. Turns out, boss man has a very powerful aunt in HR up on the Torus station. She snagged me out of a pile of fifteen thousand applicants. Now I'm headed to the moon, or some such to shovel shit for the sanitation union guys. I looked over the job offer, and holy shit does The Company pay out the nose for this sort of thing. Like a mother fucker. I'll be swimming in cash or credits, slugs, dollars or ingots or whatever currency the station uses. I get private accommodations onboard the station too. Plus these brown coveralls, or a jumpsuit, or a body sock or some shit. I don't know, I skimmed everything after the job description and the salary expectations. The packet that came in the mail also had a small leaflet regarding the orientation at the launch site, and that I'd have to undergo some psych evaluations, and run some safety simulations at an accredited testing location somewhere nearby here, in Arizona. I guess the big boss man likes me because I bitch while I work, and only to myself. With everything else it's all yes sir, no sir, three bags full sir. Smiles, a can do attitude and firm hand shakes all around. Get them while they're hot! But I digress. Not much can be found regarding the orientation, just the location and a notice not to eat six hours prior. That's kind of weird. I have an induction day scheduled several months from now, so in between shifts I have to go meet my company organized psychiatrist for screening tests and interviews. That's going to suck the sweat off a hot horse's balls. Also will have to log some hours in a zero g simulator. That could be interesting. Oh, the info packet says that the entertainment hub has grown from three decks to ten or more. I wonder what it'll be like to cut a rug in space, but I'm day dreaming. "Hey, Stevo! - what's with the shit eating grin? Here's a sandwich, egg and cheese with mock bacon. You think you'll have this pool floor flattened out by end of day today?" Says the big boss man. He's over six foot six, and gotta be near to two hundred seventy pounds. He's a looker, if you're of that persuasion. I'm not, but you do you. I like tits, I'd do a lot of stupid

shit for access to titties. Mm mm delicious. But the big boss man is named Roger Taylor, and his aunt is the illustrious Catherine Taylor, senior HR director aboard Torus station. She's got quite the reputation, even down here on earth. "Yeah, yeah - no problem sir. I can have this all squared away for you by about six pm today." He smiles down at me from up on the mound of dirt next to the newly excavated pool I'm standing ten feet down in. I'm of modest height, and weight. I'm not ugly, but I ain't no looker neither, you know what I mean. I like to make music, and can shovel dirt like I was built by god to do so. The ladies aren't so hot on the state of my hands, you know? calluses and manual labour and shit. I keep those finger nails clean and trimmed though, eh! Wink wink, nudge nudge. Coming from a lower class family as I do, I love to moonlight as a DJ, makes me feel loved, adored even. A real rush compared to digging ditches and working in enormous holes. I hope my less than stellar academic prowess won't keep me from all that cool hard cash The Company has on offer. I've got five months to impress Ms. Taylor, and keep the big boss man happy so I don't wind up homeless before that life boat ships out to space on Christmas Eve. Jesus, I hope they don't want to go over my school transcripts, I passed by the skin of my teeth.

Those psych evals are super fucking strange, with word games and shit. Nosey bastards too, poking around in my personal life. Awful interested in my thirteen siblings, and my geriatric parents. No I don't see them anymore. No I don't care to "divulge" the reasons surrounding my departure from my family home. No I don't care to refute any rumors of any sort. Fuck them and fuck you too. Hell, I told some of my best jokes and the lady never even chuckled. That doesn't exactly bode well. Bitch.

Zero g simulations are the fucking shit! Man that stuff is fucking fun as hell. Bounce and float, use your arms to crawl. Being weightless is a real trip. Not a big fan of all the other folks puking their guts out though. Could do without that. Ha. Losers!

So the psychiatrist keeps asking me about how I feel about isolation, and "the void" or some shit. Who cares! Space mother fuckers! Like do I care about asphyxiation, or hard vacuum, or wearing a catheter, being alone for days on end. Can I handle being far below decks working with human waste. Why do I like shoveling so much. I do realize that I'll have a much larger shovel and equal weight to move when in the sanitation department? Why manual labour jobs with no responsibility? Why no advancement in the eight years I worked for the big boss man? What are my coping mechanisms? Do I have any friends, a girlfriend, family connections of any sort. How will I

cope with a vastly increased salary. So many god damned questions, my head hurts. I gotta go lay down.

So it looks as though I've been delayed, again. Not going to ship out for Christmas. The psychiatrist thinks I need more therapy or some shit. Turns out my humor tripped some red flags or they want more info on my background. God, don't let this take my money! Oh, all that glorious money. I could afford to send most of my younger brothers and sisters to vocational school with all that dough. Get them out of that shit hole. There's a reason I like to dig and shovel all alone in one hundred twenty degree heat. Pure heaven compared to my childhood. Ain't nobody ever stubbed out a cigar on my balls when I'm running a fucking shovel in a pit.

I finally have a provisional offer to go up to work on the Torus. I just have to go through with induction and get my ass to the Torus station. That's a cinch.

Well - fuck me. That was a process. They underplayed that spectacularly. I demanded they unstrap me from the gurney and I walked my ass that three kilometers to my coffin sized berth. You want to know why? Because fuck them, that's why. Should have seen the medical technicians faces. That's a look I'll not soon forget. Lock that look into the ole spank bank for future reference.

"Welcome aboard the Torus station ladies and gentlemen." Announces some HR flunky dressed head to toe in a bright yellow jumpsuit. A real Curious George looking goofball. The banana man and his troupe of minions is redirecting a sea of cyan blue jump suits, this way and that. Separating the students, from the security trainees, and apprentices from support staff. Finally after two hours in the massive receiving chamber, I'm the last one left floating against a bare wall. With a last glance the man in yellow looks through the room and pauses when he sees me. "Hello, can I help you? Mr...?" His soft lilting voice rising with the question. "Steve... erm... Stephen James Ortiz, sir. A new sanitation apprentice." I say it quietly. No need to yell, he's only inches from me at this point. "Oh. Well they know better than to bring you people in through the main gates. The service entrance is back down the hall, six flights down the stairwell, and where ever the fuck it is you guys conduct your business. Tell Terry that I don't appreciate any browns up here on my flight deck. Fucking asshole. Shit shovellers in my reception hall. What the fuck. Wait until I tell everybody about this bullshit. Why you still here dickhead, go down into the bowels of the station with all the other half brained dipshits. Go on, fuck off then!" He makes as if you punch me. I stare at him, unmoved. Turning on my heel, I head for the

stairwell located back down the hall. After a few minutes of float walking, gliding I come to a deep pit in the floor. A long deep dark corridor covered in netting that looks to go deep into the depths of the station. Taped one floor down is a simple note that says. "Normies stay away. Only the floaters are welcome here!" Nice - a shit joke, just what I was hoping for. What the hell have i done. As i head deeper down the shaft, a soft green light can be seen. As i pull myself, hand over hand towards the sixth floor of the subbasement I pull into a small anteroom with a round pressure door, equipped with a red circular wheel to open the seal. As it glides open soundlessly a flash of light temporarily blinds me. A loud whistle sounds, and I'm hit with the smell of astringent cleaners and sanitizer spray. The inner room is crowded with hundreds of brown uniformed workers and Curious George himself. "Surprise!" They shriek in well organized unison. Floating towards me banana man says. "Welcome aboard Stevo! Sorry for the harsh hazing, we play a trick on all newbies, we use you as a prop to maintain a certain level of distance between the upper deckers and us. Welcome to the best years of your life!" Turning to float beside me, facing the crowd, he takes my hand raising my arm like the champ in a boxing match. The group erupts into chants of Stevo! Stevo! Stevo! A grin begins to creep across my face. "Oh, you mother fuckers." I half choke it out. Terry, the banana man, strips off his yellow costume to reveal his solid brown jumpsuit, and a union rep insignia on his chest. "Don't worry, we'll get you squared away and sorted out sharpish. You've got three days to acclimate, we'll put you through our training programme, then you'll be all set to do your designated service task. You're going to be scraping down and shoveling shit in the huge containment tanks that are positioned under each sector. It's lonely work, but it pays well. You'll be trained on the respirator units we use, and will get your own magnetic levitating cart for tools and moving bagged waste materials between the enormous tanks and the recycler or incinerators. We have a party scheduled for tonight, as an ice breaker. I understand you moonlight as a DJ, if you'd care to share your music with us, we'd love to hear it!" Terry leads me to a gigantic lobby, with hallways leading off in every direction. "This is the dormitory, you can find your room by using your wrist communicator. It'll key you into your rooms, and can dispense food from our commissary. You've got your own private bathroom, and you will get your actual uniform after the safety programme is completed. No exceptions, no exemptions!" With a quick hand shake, he leaves me to my own thoughts. The lobby is silent, well lit, with pristine gel couches arranged in a circle with a display in the center. There is so much room, I can't believe my eyes. Tears well up on my face, and cluster on the bridge of my nose. I could get used to this.

Three bleary eyed days later my alarm buzzed at eleven pm. I had an hour to dress, eat and get over to sector two's waste containment tank to meet my supervisor and start to learn the ropes. I was so anxious I ate on the trip, and good thing too, as sector two was a fair distance from the main dormitory I was lodged in. The huge Warren of tunnels, pipes, chambers, dials and vents was spotless, and repeated in a pattern every three hundred meters or so. Rounding a bend I found Terry and a smaller woman, both dressed in brown standing beside a floating cart full of equipment. "Hey Stevo, glad to see you are as punctual as your references suggested. This is sector two's smallest waste containment tank, and Jordie here will lead you through your hoops to get in and out alive, and accomplish your required tasks." Terry was beaming, and cheerful. Hard not to be when everything is spotless and shining, and smells of lemons or berries. "I thought I had to undertake a safety programme or something?" I sputter. "Yeah, you do. But it's on the job training here bud. You're in the shit now, as it were. Ha! So listen close, don't die, and Jordie will make a fully functional member of the team out of you in no time flat!" With that he left us alone, at the mouth of a huge airlock type chamber. The small red haired woman looked me over before she spoke. "They vet us types pretty good eh? Want people who don't need to be babysat, and can do shit work with a grin on our face. Terry likes to find us underprivileged types and lift us out of poverty, if we've shown we got the goods. Out of the frying pan and into the potty. Ha!" The sudden burst of laughter seems to be a common affectation among Terry's crew leaders. "So couple of tips. Always use your PE. It gets hot in there, but you worked in Arizona so the ninety five degrees won't bother you much. Use the respirator at all times when in the airlock or inside the container. Never, ever remove it, the methane will gravely injure you. Not to mention the bacterial load inside these things. Yeesh. Wash your hands as often as you can. Your cart comes equipped with a fresh water recycler so you won't run dry. We don't shake hands much until out of our gear and showered. Elbow bumps if you must, but don't touch anyone in uniform if you can help it. I'll show you how to suit up, and in what order. I'll test you on as we go. I'll leave a checklist you'll want to memorize over time, but no harm if you use it forever more. I do. Any questions?" I nod that I'm ready to rock and roll.

After three hours, I'm left to scrape and shovel massive loads of shit. It's hot, and this stuff gets heavy. But I'd much rather be here in a chemical toilet storage tank than back on earth that's for damn sure. With sweat stinging my eyes, I use my magnetic boots to walk up the walls of the fifty meter tall tank, the fifteen meter diameter makes it seem like the most wide open space on the ship. I am amazed that this is a small tertiary tank. The big ones must be mental.

"What's the matter Ted, you don't look so hot..."

Is it the turbulence or the magnitude of what we're about to do that has you looking all green and grey around the edges?" Barks the Sargeant at the rear of the rickety personnel carrier. A haphazardly made drop ship amounting to little more than a transport container with a heat shield and a few hours of life support bolted into the roof. The interior is colourless, except for the rust and burn marks from previous drops. Timidly the young trooper responds "Is it, is... is it always like this?" He stammers his way through the question as the drop ship rocks violently in the brutal atmospheric turbulence. Small bits of rust and debris fling about the interior as the planets gravity well starts to take hold. With a terrible lurch and a muffled cut-off shriek, the sargeant, who is sat opposite the meek trooper at the rear of the vessel, leans forward with a vicious grin and snarls "Every mother fucking time my son! , isn't that right boys and girls?" From all around the cramped vessel chants of "Urrah!" Can be heard. For several heart beats they repeat it in unison, with the echoes reverberating off the rusty & bare tin walls. Leaning back against the walls the sargeant bellows "Any second now boys and girls, the ship will kick on its reversing thrusters, we'll then have to hit the ground running!" With a violent jolt, and the screaming of the jets, soldiers are rammed back into their spartan seats, a cold hard chunk of reinforced pipe with spare bits of rubber zip tied to it. Not much better than just having to squat or stand for the duration of their orbital drop. Given the speed at which they descend, the seats provide almost no safety whatsoever. But these troops aren't careening through space in a mad dive for the surface for their own safety or for anyone else's for that matter. They have one goal in mind and it isn't for the faint of heart. The bland and timid trooper begins to shake violently, and vomits all down his front. The other troopers seated around him, affix their bayonets, testing the triangular serrated blades against their thumbs, and tighten down their helmet chin straps with a quick and knowing grin. Everyone pukes on their first run. There are no simulations here, no dry runs afforded to new converts. Not when you're the rebellious underdog in this intergalactic battle for the soul of humanity. You either exalt in the mayhem and bloodshed and live to fight another day, or you end up as a pieces of the body count. Whimpering softly to himself, the coarse chunks of his breakfast clinging to his make shift tactical vest, the trooper looks to be in no condition to

have to savagely murder his way to the rendezvous point several kilometers away, north of the drop zone through densely populated urban living quarters. These aren't soldiers that the troopers are looking to massacre, they're just ordinary folks who happen to live under The Company's occupation. But they failed to heed the call to rise up, and are now just another line item and tally for the profit loss section of The Company's ledger. It is all very cold and calculating, if it were not, you might just go mad. Peering over the heads of the seated troopers the sergeant calls out his trusted few with his all too familiar refrain "\$1000 Credits to anyone who can prove they killed more than their assigned 300 women & children!".

On a quiet summer day, as the wisps of soft clouds swirled in the sky, a company family fun day at the park is underway. Thousands of families have gathered for picnics and games at the expense of The Company. The rising sounds of laughter and sport drift lazily on the summer's breeze. In the small gaps between bursts of laughter the rustling of brilliant blue leaves can just be heard, punctuated by the odd lilting bird calls native to this foreign world. With little warning the wisps of smoke suddenly materialize into hundreds of clunky metallic drop ships littering the sky. With the echoes of laughter still in the air, tens of thousands of mismatched black clad troops storm out of their drop ships and grind their way through the gathered masses. In a flourish of blades, knives, swords, guns and a hail of bullets the shock troopers gain purchase on this world and settle in for the fight of their lives. None of the inhabitants are armed, no one is prepared. There was no warning, no issuing of a declaration of war, no established protocol being followed. In the fetid wake of the troops are naught but the final screams of pain and horror as bits of bodies are left strewn about the town. Within the blink of an eye, the black mass of shock troops have ripped through the inhabitants and fled across field and wood and town to their rendezvous. All but one. A tallish, bland and timid new soldier, who isn't wearing a helmet and is covered in vomit. He simply stands numbly, hands at his sides, pupils madly dilated, dizzy in the mid day sun. Head baking in the glare of the hot sunlight as he stands utterly still in the ghastly aftermath. With a violent lurch he crumples to the ground to retch, spilling bile and the last vestiges of his breakfast on the blood soaked ground. All ready the noise from the flies and carrion birds is settling in, soon it will be deafening. Falling face first, tears soaking his eyes, laying prone upon the ground he reaches out his hands to curl his fingers about the sticky hot entrails littering the park, the young timid trooper gasps in horror and passes out.

In the distance the sounds of rocket thrusters boom. The sudden raucous explosions and the wafting smell of fumes causes the timid man to stir. There, not five kilometers to the north of him are streams of jet blast as the rescue ships depart the planet. In less than fifteen minutes, they had entered the atmosphere undetected, mutilated vast swathes of a town's population and fled for their next attack. All non combatants, no military or intelligence objectives taken, just sheer violence and unadulterated terror. Then vanish back to the stars never to be seen again.

PART TWO.

A Collection of Random Shorts

Let me off here, I'm good.

I say quietly to the driver, he lets off the gas, eases the car out of traffic and pulls up to the curb. Looking over the head rest of the dirty, sweat stained cab, I can see the driver has a photo of two little children hanging from the meter. They're young, smiling in a sun dappled park from some unknown portion of god knows where. They are wearing matching dresses, the kind that are ubiquitous at the Gap. It looks like there used to be a third person in the photo, an adult also wearing the same simple sun dress. But her face is obscured by dark tape, looks to have been scratched quite heavily where the face should have been. The driver turns to look at me, eyes turning up slowly. Notices I'm looking at his worn photograph and says "that'll be \$13.75." He's not exactly curt, but neither is he asking for any kind of rapport. Fumbling in my back pocket I open my wallet and hand him \$15 bucks. "No change, thanks." I spit out the words. The door locks pop, and I slide across the back seats and step out into a foggy night, it has begun to drizzle. Before I can turn to the driver and retch out another word, he pulls off, closing the door with a practiced impatience a cabbie learns after many years on the job. It slams, and the wheels screech, indistinct words tumble out of the cab. I didn't even look to see his name. The cold chill of the drizzle has begun bleeding it's way through my jacket. I turn from the street to realize I mistook the road sign in the loose fog, and am many, many blocks from home. "Fuck." I say, as I'm pulling up my collar. Turning on my

heels I begin sauntering up the tree lined street. The cool wind, and the harsh sounds of traffic fading behind me - FIN.

"What are you doing, you've had that song on repeat for like...

A full fucking hour." She says, lifting the headphones up and off my ear. Just as suddenly, she falls backwards into her torn armchair, resuming reading her book. I sit forward in my seat, and put my pen down on my desk. It rolls away from my finger tips, falling down to the floor with a clatter. Angrily adjusting my head phones I turn towards her and say " Jesus!, it's so close, it's right there, I just can't figure out what that idea was. It was so vivid last night. I'm sure I was listening to this song when it came to me." Clearly, I am irritable, and slightly disheveled, as I gesticulate wildly. The paper in front of me is blank, except for crossed out half thoughts and angry scribbles. Lowering her book down slightly, peering over the top she remarks. "Babe, you fell asleep on the couch last night. You didn't even make it past Jeopardy." Sitting stock still with my fingers pinching the bridge of my nose. "Well,... shit. I dreamt that?" Rocking back deeper into her arm chair, it's hard stripes at odds with the growing shadows of the late afternoon, she laughs. A full throated bark. It echoes in our quiet mid town apartment. Softly, I can hear the neighbours dog yapping in reply. The old plaster walls really don't dampen much between units here. Standing up from my chair, I grab the sheet of paper, cross the room, haphazardly covered with crumpled pieces of paper, I fold it a couple times and drop it into the recycling. I stop a moment to watch it float soundlessly into the bin. Car horns can be heard outside, a bird chirps and a siren screams in passing. The sun has begun to set, and along the sidewalk street lamps are starting to stir.

I can see the shadows growing longer...

As the sun sets back behind the row of old mangled spruce trees. They really haven't been the same since that last wind storm. It just blew through here like a god damned menace. Took half the shingles off the west side of the fucking barn. It was absolutely mental. You really couldn't even hear yourself think, for the howl of the wind and the screech of twisting fencing. God, what an awful mess the last few weeks have been.

The last few moments of mottled sunlight pierce my eyes like Knives. "You know, mum really loves this view because of those trees. You remember how fucking mad she was when dad tried his hand at pruning them...". My younger brother is standing beside me, dressed in a drab grey suit, clinging to his coffee cup, like it's a life raft in a raging river. It's cold, icy black waters threatening to swallow him whole. Pull him underneath, drag him down in the fast flowing current. I turn away from the view, it's the same stretch of lawn I'd known for as long as I can remember. Turning my back to my brother, I cross the room, it's somber dressing a reminder that things have changed. Nothing is the same, even as everything here is the same. Stopping at the door I say "It was a nice service. Food was a bit shit, for what they charged us... Bastards". Twirling around, as though jolted out of his reverie, my brother quips " And what's up with the vicar, what a thick fuck he is. Got her bloody name wrong, twice!". The sun has totally disappeared behind the stand of trees, the farm is that strange mix of dark but also still light out. The carpet smells a bit musty. There is cigarette smoke lingering on the walls, embedded in the paint, like so many other things left unsaid.

I can hear the clock, the seconds are ticking over as...

I sit here, in the stuffy, cramped, poorly lit waiting room that stinks of passed gas and desperation. The drab walls are covered in old posters, they look as though they came with the building. Torn, creased posters of a time gone by. Taped up and taped over with each successive room owner. Between coughs, burps and the occasional gasp of pain, all you can really hear is the soft murmur of far off voices, hidden down the long hall, behind a beaten up partition of dubious make. The neon lights are buzzing, the quality of air in here is making me uncomfortable. Why are there no windows? Why are there no vents? Why did I wear such a heavy jacket, there's never anywhere to hang it, and I'm sweating through my shirt. I'm increasingly aware of the unpleasant aroma emanating from my work shoes. Blessed with foul smelling feet, halitosis and psoriasis. Even though everyone here is lost in their own pain or suffering, I feel everyone's eyes upon me, flickering back and forth, from flat out stares to furtive glances. I fucking hate it here. A printer chimes to life, and a warm slip of paper pops out, only the flop to the floor. The receptionist is no where to be seen. A pile of papers has begun to form. I fucking hate it here. "What was that?" The elderly lady beside me who reeks of death quietly asks, her hot sickly breath filling my face, eeking it's way into my lungs. I feel as though I can taste her. "Hmmm. What?"

Nothing. Nothing." I squirm in my soft pleather seat, hating the soreness in my back and the ache between my shoulder blades. My hair has started to mat to my head in the places that static hasn't made it stand up on end. The heat in here is oppressive. The printer comes alive - again, more papers flit to the floor. We are all unattended.

"Babe, can you come upstairs, Sarah's been sick again..."

And it's all over her bed sheets, her carpet, down the hall and seeping into the heating vents by the toilet." With fuzzy, light blinded eyes I catch a glimpse of my wife walking back up the stairs from the landing. Pulling my sheets back, I feel the bracing chill of the late night air in my room. "God damn!" I blurt out as I step down, bare footed on the cold vinyl flooring, it feels like I'm standing on a sheet of ice. Lumbering half awake, I come to the stairs. My legs not yet functioning, my ankles creaking along with the old steps. Rubbing my hands on my thighs, feeling the fleece of my pants against my palms. Flexing my fingers, I mount the last few steps. Coming to the main floor I'm hit with the stench of it all. From the bathroom I can hear my daughter weeping, my wife a gentle murmur in the distance. I can hear snippets of their conversations..."No, no baby, you're not in trouble, it's ok, don't cry, I know, I know." There is a flurry of activity as my wife strips off the soiled pajamas and lays down towels to soak up some of the mess. I turn down the hallway, and grab a mop and bucket. I squeeze out some lemon scented soap and I can feel the steam from the hot water. The vapour is condensing on the cold window over the sink, rivulets of water pooling at the base of the sill. I pull down some paper towels, and grab an old plastic bag from a drawer. It's sticky, and has an old crumpled up receipt in it, something that was beige had been in this bag.

"You two go curl up in bed, I've got you some water to drink, and I'll strip off your bed after I wash the floors." It's the same script as before. We've done it so many times, I can move through the motions without having to think about it anymore. Afterwards I'll fall asleep on the floor of my daughter's room. I crash about, like a drunk searching for a full bottle among all of the empties strewn about the house. The smell is what gets me, never the sight of it. How can so much come out of such a small child. Looks the same, regardless of the end it originated.

After a time, I notice there is a sliver of light in the master bedroom, standing in the hall I can hear softly spoken words, lilting in a sing song fashion. Sarah is falling asleep in my wife's tired arms. They are sharing a pillow as they cuddle. I can see sweat on my daughters brow. "This fever

just won't fucking break". I say it aloud, but quietly, to myself. I need to grab more pain meds from the drugstore tomorrow. Turning from the doorway, I shut off the lights, and I collapse onto a pile of stuffed animals. Everything goes black.

"What do you think happened here"

He says from over my shoulder. I am looking at the body in front of me, laid prone on the floor in a massive puddle of dark fluid. "Well, hmmm... from the looks of it, I'd say he put two in the chest, and one in his head, painting that wall over there with bits of brains, skull fragments and hair." I stand up slowly, have been having nasty head rushes as of late, when getting up from a crouch. "No, not that, my sandwich! Look there's like one strip of bacon, and like half a leaf of lettuce. Jesus, don't the rookies even look at this shit before they bring it to us." He's mad, turning this way and that, looking to get up in someone's face, anyone within arms reach. "Oh come off it. Lunch was an hour ago, put that down and help me put together a reasonable theory of the case." I spit the words out, realizing my lunch didn't do much to satisfy my hunger today either. Irritated, we walk out the front door of this rat infested apartment, with its dangling light bulbs, and chipped paint on all the trim. The shared hall is choked with cops, and partially dressed angry neighbours. They're all in a huff over the noise, and foot traffic coming and going at all hours. Really they're just mad they can't smoke crack or meth while so many cops are around. The floors creak under the additional strain of so many bodies. The temperature inside this hundred year old building is intense. Humidity of high summer has condensed on the walls, dribbling down to make foul smelling pools mixed with discarded cigarette ash, and garbage.

"Oh hey! Mind that puddle over there by that green door." An elderly gentleman says, he has an indistinct, yet exotic look to him. Thinning dark hair, and a far too short kimono over what I could only describe as neon pink fishnets. "Huh? What's that sir?". I shout over the din of the gathered crowd. "Well, just steer clear of that shit. You know old lady Darcy's a hoarder. That cloying smell of rot, vomit, and god knows what is her doing! Can't even open her front door, it's so chock full of shit in there." He is becoming animated with all the young officers around, staring at him. "Some delivery dude came round here last week in fucking flip flops, had to go see a doctor because that puddle of sludge caused a pus ridden growth on both his feet. Fuck'in nasty. Banged on her door for like an hour, in a rage, he was. Poor

kid. But what do I know..." My partner mimics the wanking motion with his left hand, the poor man's soggy BLT flopping about in his right. Mayo has collected on his lip, mixed in to his five o'clock shadow. He smells of cheap cologne, and sweat. We turn for the stairs, the black railing is peeling, it shows about twenty layers of caked on lead paint, and walk down the five flights to our squad car. The temperature outside isn't any better, neither is the smell. Through a cracked window the radio cackles with an indecipherable muffled call. Followed by several clipped responses. In a rumpled tan suit, my partner shouts over the top of the car to me. I don't hear it.

"Listen here dickhead, do you hear the words coming out of my mouth..."

I know what I saw, ok, I mean Jesus, why you guys always gotta give me shit about this stuff. Fuck!" She's leaning against the wall, the torn Gucci shirt has fallen over the edge of her shoulder. She is visibly shaken, the incident has taken some of the polish off her demeanor, but my god is she ever mad. You do not want to get within arms reach of her now. We've only gone and pissed her off further with our line of questioning. Standing across from her in the tiny interrogation room, she moves to lift her leg to scratch at a newly formed scab on her calf, she stops abruptly and pulls a long drag off of her cigarette instead. The accumulated ash tumbles off the edge, and lands on the front of her skirt. It's tweed, an A-line cut, as my wife would later describe it to me, and looks to have been expensive, that is, until some dipshit bro thought she needed a date for the evening.

"Look, I am not here to bust your balls, ok? I just need some answers. Your clothes are all kinds of fucked up, and we've got what's left of some dudes corpse downstairs." She flinches at the mention of the body, I can tell she's more shaken than she's letting on. I should offer the counselors services again, but the last one got an earful, and a gold pen to the kneecap.

The smoke she is exhaling is hanging above us in lazy curls. Wafting up to the ceiling, and settling in a haze by the flickering phosphorescent lights. The tiles on the wall are chipped and cracking. The light here is a dim blue, meant to stop junkies from easily finding a vein. The chatter from out in the hallway is just barely audible. A constant smattering of barks, shouts and ringing phones. I can hear a reel to reel recorder in the next room, tick, tick, ticking as the end of the tape flaps freely. Restless people are watching us

from behind a smudged, and dirty two way mirror. They are shuffling in their seats, it's the squeak of the vinyl that gives them away.

"Why does it always stink like farts in here man, like, what the fuck you guys eat in here anyhow?" Trying to antagonize us - always brings a smile to her face. Underneath that Sephora make up is a ruthless, cunning lawyer with sharks teeth in her vagina. She's not going to give us anything. Running down the clock, and we'll just stand here, dicks in our hands, mouths agape while she lights up cigarette after cigarette. They are a crisp bright white, and that very fine linen paper, with the ultra wide filter tips. The brown matches her shoes. I have no clue if that's intentional with Sophie or not, you just can't tell with her.

"Can you at least look at me when I'm trying to talk to you..."

Scott. Put down the controller, take off the head set, and talk to me. God. You're a big fucking man child. No! No, don't you dare put that head set back on. Fuck you Scott, Fuck. You." I'm standing in the doorway to the den, the walls to this windowless room are covered in old creased band posters, and framed sports memorabilia. The room is cluttered with comic books, action figures and empty beer cans. It smells like a gym sock, mixed with a cheap dive bar. I'm surprised there's no stripper pole in there. The vents are always shut, and he can never be bothered to vacuum. The old dull grey carpet feels gritty underfoot.

"Huh? What's that? Oh, oh, hey hold up. Sorry fellas..." he's so calm, talking to his buddies through his head set, getting off the line, logging out as slowly as fucking possible. I can feel my pulse begin to rise. "Baby, babe! Yo... you ok, what's goin' on now?" He's trying me, good god, lord above he's trying out his, Hi I'm this super charming guy, voice on me. I could just slap him. My blood is pumping, and I'm not in the mood for this frat boy, laid back bullshit. "You know damn well what's up. You man child! You fucking man baby! Look at all this shit, toys?, Scott really?, you got children's toys in here. Comic books, toys, video games and fucking model kits. What. The. Fuck!" I clap my hands to punctuate each word. I turn from the doorway, and storm down the hall. It's the longest stretch of our apartment, it makes for wonderful dramatic effect. I know he's watching my ass as I storm away. I know it, and I'll use it against him.

"This again, Christ all mighty baby, you gonna do me like that, here? now!" He's storming down the hall behind me, all one hundred eighty five pounds

of him, he is chiseled like marble. He stops outside of arms reach. I can hear his breath coming faster. I can see spittle flecked on his lips as he gets going. "No, no Cheryl, not here. I told you I have to keep things stress free here. You know how bad work gets! You know. You KNOW!" His voice is quavering, and starts to take on a pleading tone. "No, you know what baby, you don't know. No, don't shake your finger at me. You want to know what I did yesterday. Do you, do you want to know?" He steps in close to me, I can see it in the whites of his hazel brown eyes, he ain't going to hold back, he's going to drop some hot scathing truth in my lap, and I'll feel both intense love for him for it, and I'll absolutely hate that I can't even comprehend it. "Do you want to know what I came across yesterday, at work!... I came across a mini van, with three kids in the back with their heads cut off at the base of the jaw...". "Baby, God no, no... don't say it Honey... please." I'm pulled into his arms but the dam has broken and he's not going to stop until it's burned permanently into my heart. Like surgery done with an ice pick and a blow torch. "Seems the parents were junkies, love doing smack. But what they don't know is, is that shit got fentanyl in it. Wife was driving, she's dead as soon as the plunger drops the load in her veins, hot and thick. She couldn't even pull off the road she was so hot for a quick taste. Crosses through the median, under an oncoming truck full of steel pipes. BAM. bitch, cut those sweet little Angel's heads right off they necks... they wasn't even in fucking car seats. Those kids was loose. LOOSE!" I can feel the room start to spin around us. He's holding onto me just as hard as I hold onto him for support. We collapse together, a puddle of anger, loathing and despair. I think the floor might open up and swallow us whole. Before I can even lean in to stroke his hair, his pager is buzzing on the kitchen counter. Like a shot, he's up and out the door. I hear something, but it is muffled by the closing door. I can't make out what it was.

"Well, Cheryl I'm so sorry to hear of your husband's passing. At least you told him you love him as he left for work that day. Few of us get the chance. It's not like you two had a fight that day. I mean Jesus, could you imagine?" She leans in towards me. "I hear Janis and Robert had a real banger the day he died. It's eating her alive. But not us. No, we spent the last moments with our noble hunks in the throes of passion." She's smiling at me over her wine glass. The red wine must be good, it leaves a slight film on the glass every time she gesticulates with her hands. She smells of flowery perfume, and cigarette smoke. I look through her, to the open bay window beyond. Outside children can be heard playing. They're laughing, and giggling. "Yeah... at least I have that."

"Ugh, good god, was that you?"

She says sitting up from her lounged position on the soft brown leather couch. Her face ashen, with just a tinge of green around the edges. "Of course not." I laugh. "It's the damn dog. You know your mother feeds him raw hamburger all the time." Getting up from the couch quickly, the stench wafting through the air between them. To avoid a second breaths worth of horrific stink, I bounce over to the fridge to grab a cold drink. The door jingles as the jars inside clink together with the motion. "Jesus, Dog! that's rotten! You foul little beastie." Waving both arms about, moving foul jetties of air about the adjoining kitchen. It's enough to make the nostrils sting, and your eyes water. "Babe - do you need a refill on your drink while I'm up?" Peeling her eyes from her novel, she waves off the question with a limp flap of her hand. "No, I'm good. I have a glass of water over here that I haven't touched yet, from earlier." The hour is late, the hall lights are off and only a few sparse beams from headlights can be seen playing down the walls of the living room. The trailing red fading off the tiles in the kitchen as the cars pull down the street. The house is small but cozy, settled on the corner of an intersection. Outside the moon is large overhead, and the street lights have been on for a while. The sounds of kids playing in the street has long since stopped. Called in for dinner by harried mothers and rushed fathers. Now the muffled shouts of teenagers takes its place. It's a Tuesday night, and our show is about to come on. With a soft whimper, the dog fidgets and shakes as though chasing prey in his sleep. A soft hiss, a subtle wag of a tail, and another wave of the dogs gut rot permeates the couch and its occupants. Suburban bliss at its finest.

"There are - certain harsh truths one has to come up against..."

Before they can truly learn what it means to be an adult. Although, we may find some individuals who believe that they have this whole thing down pat. That just isn't true. However, you know, ignorance is bliss. Sometimes not knowing what it is you don't know can be sort of freeing. The truth is, we're all floating together on a rock, specks of carbon in a vast, unyielding and uncaring universe. Fairness, equality, equity... these things are not real. Much like time - memory, or love at first sight. Constructs we built that we choose to live in. The sun does not care. Clouds do not care. No one knows how this thing called life plays out. Existential dread is just the human body coming to terms with how loose a collection of things, and stuff, our lives are made from. We have fooled ourselves into believing in order, and

goodness, and the basic underlying tenets of a civil society. But you pull out one stitch, and more often than not the whole thing crumbles." The sky in the park is vast, and open. The velvety blackness dotted with hundreds of thousands of stars. From their position, lying in the grass upon a gentle rolling hill, the slight breeze sends ripples through the tall grasses surrounding them. The evening is cool, but not cold. The soft call of crickets can be heard in the distance across the wide, and sprawling park. Fire flies have gathered in the low spots between the hill and the plateau where the soccer fields are. Puffs of smoke can be seen weaving lazy trails on the breeze above the teens heads. For the neighbours who back onto the park, the heavy sent of marijuana, and the carried sound of voices is common place. "You know what, Gina... I have to disagree with you on that. I... I think. Gah!" A hearty cough, harsh enough to bring tears to her eyes. "Oh man, I think I just swallowed a bug!" Coughing fit. Scurried fingers scraping at a tongue. "What - what were we even talking about again? I lost track." Says the younger of the two prone girls, laying head first down the hill, while watching the stars between their feet. "Can you feel the world spinning right now. I think I can feel the world spinning right now. How awesome is that, eh?" "Dude, now that you say it, I kinda do." "That's, like... fucked up and shit." From down the street, laughter can be heard. The lone street light in the park flickers, but never actually manages to come on. Clouds form to cover the moon low in the night sky.

The porch door opens with a gentle squeal...

Masked in part by the large crowd of gathered children playing road hockey in the street right out front of the house. The shadows are slowly growing long along the front yard. Birds are chirping, and a subtle wind is rustling the leaves of the two large maple trees obscuring the view of the street from the porch. Stepping out of the house onto the wooden deck, she carries a glass of red wine, a cold beer in her manicured hands, and a box of crackers under one arm. Seated in a wicker chair, her husband is engrossed in the game going on with the children. "What's the score?" She asks. "I have no idea, but you just missed an epic collision. More of a pile-on really. The girls are watching the ball and their sticks instead of where they are running. Going to have quite the knot on their heads tomorrow. Ha." He says it nonchalantly, we've always given the girls the space to play, and ultimately hurt themselves with the pride of knowledge gained in the disaster. Reaching over his shoulder he takes the proffered beer. Sitting down gingerly, her

glass held in her finger tips so as to not spill she pulls up the matching worn white wicker chair. The cushions are well weathered, and covered in maple keys and pollen. She'll have to dust off her bum when she heads inside later. "Cracker? - no. Suit yourself." The children are running about, it is semi organized chaos. Children strip the ball from teammates, kids run into one another. Tired kids fall over on the curb and wrestle on the manicured lawns. "So, can we talk about this now - or?" The question left to hang in the hot humid air between them. "Yeah, I guess so. Not like the girls will be able to hear us from here. Look at those muppets, it's pure melee combat out there! Keep your head up! Look around you! See who's open." He shouts in a sudden lively burst. The girls, red faced, continue to battle it out on the street vying for the ball. The neighbourhood kids are all in a giant tangle of limbs and hockey sticks. "So, what's the deal then. What do her teachers say?" He blurts out the question. Angst writ large across his creased forehead, his greying hair cut short at the temples, with a longer mop on top. "That's just it, they love her. Say she's just lovely, a real helper, a good listener, and she's one of the better students academically." She says it with a huge rush of outward breath, as though deflating with the sentiment. "Well - fuck. So we get the asshole at night, everyone else gets a lovely child. That's just perfect." He says it with a hint of a hysterical laugh underneath. "According to what I've read, it means they're just really comfortable at home with us. They feel our unconditional love, and can drop the goody goody act and be more natural. Or so some child psychiatrists said. I don't know." Swishing her red wine around the glass, she looks down the front lawn to the two menacing, but beautiful daughters playing hockey, for keeps. "Good thing they're cute. I could just strangle those two some times." "Eh? You fucking think! You saw me, last summer trying to teach her her letters and numbers. Like pulling her god damned teeth out of her head. What a pain in the ass. Then she gets tired at night, cuddles up next me and says she loves me. I melt. Adorable. I love her so much, but what an asshole." The last part is said in unison. A common refrain among the two parents. "Ok, girls. Ten minutes then you gotta come in to wash up for dinner, ok!" More of a statement than a question. The girls bark back in answer. "Was that a yes?" She asks. "Fuck if I know. They're still growing, so we must be doing something right. It's tacos tonight, so I don't foresee a huge fight to get the youngest one to eat." Standing up, he dusts off his beige cargo shorts, slips on his berks, and wanders down to the curb. His white plain t-shirt almost amber in the waning sun. The late afternoon sky is a lovely rich blue. Squirrels can be heard chattering in the large fir tree beside the driveway.

PART THREE
The Company : Chronicles of Kelvin

You know, I've been down into...

The deepest depths of the ocean on a year long solo mission, I've been left stranded on a rocky out cropping of an island somewhere in the south Pacific for what I later learned was nearly three years, and now I work hauling minerals and ore for The Company out in deep space on an immense refinery freighter. Do you know what these three things all have in common? Isolation, misery and a total lack of any kind of quality amenities. Put those locations together with a vivid and increasing sense of impending doom and you've got yourself a recipe for disaster. You know it's kind of funny how we always assumed that our salvation would come in the form of a generational colony starship that could shuttle humanity off deep into the cosmos. But, as a species, humans we aren't very well equipped to deal with the dread and despair associated with the isolation that accompanies deep space exploration, and trans generational travel. It takes a certain type of psychopathy to be able to deal with those particular stressors found during extreme cases of isolation. I for one, am just the right kind of crazy to pursue those types of careers where these issues are present. I'm as close to a recluse as you can get. Like a full on level ninety nine introvert. Nothing makes me happier than to spend time alone working on all sorts of shit. I also have little concern over tight spaces, like those found in the void between a star ships double hulls. To perform such pleasures required of me during regular maintenance I get to play BDSM dress up in various harnesses and tight fitting gear over top of my jumpsuit and poke around in these labyrinthine crawl spaces that criss cross these massive vessels in a lattice work of dead ends, bolt holes and conduits full of cabling and pipes. Deep, dark and for the most part endured in entire radio silence. The captain of my last vessel said that when his ship runs out of coolant they will ask me for a blood transfusion so that my life blood could keep the transport running ice cold. My nick name is Zero K, the K is for Kelvin. People who don't like me much call me absolute zero, but eh, fuck them. I enjoy hard labour away from crowds of people. I'm the guy who volunteers for shite details so I can work off peak hours, and all alone. Or at least with minimal supervision. I have

one friend. An angry, short & hirsute fella who doesn't know how to speak in anything other than a yell, or monotone. We usually sit in silence and drink until one of us slinks off to bed without saying good bye or goodnight. A lot of guttural grunts and groans pass between us as a kind of idiosyncratic language. He's great. Likes the same beer, works similar shifts doing the same work as I do. We have matching burns and scars. We'd have made an excellent couple if either of us were gay. Well, you know we would have if he hadn't of gotten killed during an ammonia leak from a pierced pipe. What do you know, done in by a random sharp edge on our industrial strength PPE. You see, technically we're considered to be inside the ship, even if we are actually between the inner and outer hull plates where all the majestic inner workings of the ship are contained. That means we don't qualify for the over the head fully encased respirators with individual environmental controls. We just get an over the mouth and nose mask with change out pads for dust, debris and moderate airborne contaminants. He stood no chance against that leak. It blew aerosolized ammonia right over his face at point blank range. Hell, at 8 PPM, that shit kills, let alone a full jet stream dumped over the back of your head. After that I filed down every hook, link and carabiner on my tattered, dusty red jumpsuit. No point in repeating the sins of my only friend. Crawling in there after him and having to drag his cold lifeless body through the darkest reaches of the ship was not something I ever wish to do again. As it would happen, I would never have to. As all of them, the whole crew that is, all seven hundred of them just up and died while I was doing maintenance on the main bus panel wiring underneath the bridge several months ago. A fucking dick of a job too. The sort of job that requires about sixteen hours of crawling, bending and twisting to contort my body through the minimum sized access ports that are located around a massive water bladder just to get to the appropriate junction, then only needs forty minutes of upkeep performed on it. Like, what a piece of shit. Then you guessed it, another sixteen hours to extricate myself. All told - with food breaks, sleep and an abominable amount of crawling, that job was fifty two hours on. I went in and everything was hunky dory, I come out to a ghost ship with nothing but the dead bodies of the crew laying around. Mysteriously, with no known reason that was readily apparent. And just like that, I find myself in isolation again. For what it's worth, our course through the stars was predetermined, and we will come home after our five year mission is completed. I have enough resources for seven hundred people over a five year term, so I shall not starve, nor will I be dehydrated. I just have to remain sane, and do my scheduled tasks, and pray. In the sage words of the twentieth century philosopher Jean-Luc Picard "You can do everything right and still lose. This is not a personal failing, but a fact of life." I read that quote every day at the start and end of each shift. I have it

etched into the bulkhead over my bunk in my crew quarters. Really makes you think - huh.

The loud hum of the air vent is echoing deep in my ears as I float, eyes closed, with the gale force breeze blowing into my face. The ship as a whole gets very quiet these days, and the loudness of the moving air makes me forget the ominous lack of activity aboard. I can almost imagine the sound of passing cars, birds or the far off indistinct muffle of an overhead conversation. When you spend years alone you learn to developed methods of finding inner peace and forgetting the banal repetition of your average day. My current trick is to crank up the lights, close my eyes tightly, and bury my face in the central air vent in the commissary. It moves the most air, and offers me enough room to just float in place while my imagination runs wild. Auditory hallucinations abound. Sometimes I can even feel the sensation of my communicator buzzing or hear an alarm sound. As I while away my time, face buried in the vent, the ship continues to perform the vast majority of it's automated tasks. I keep to my work schedule, and eat the same things on the same decks as before. I know all too well the dangers of getting trapped somewhere strange by myself. That is not something I wish to repeat. I made a tough decision that weekend, and I still have the scars and emotional baggage associated with my extrication. Crawling three kilometers through the bowels of the ship to reattach my left arm at the elbow in the med-bay medical pods is not something I will likely ever forget. The trail of blood was gone by the time I felt well enough to leave that pristine white pod. The ai infused scrubbers had removed all trace of my nightmare. I kept the scar so that I know it really happened and I didn't just dream it up. I do that a lot these days. I leave notes and etchings and drawings so that I remember having been there, and not run around the whole ship thinking I'm not actually here alone. When I am. Entirely alone. Isolated. With another three years and eight months left to go. In the cool cacophonous hum of the air vent I almost feel normal.

"Congratulations Kelvin, you've failed in absolutely...

Spectacular fashion", chimes the uppity education bot sitting behind me in the science departments largest lab. The robust orange cube like unit was typically used to tutor grad students during their first rotations aboard a science vessel, but I had it dumb things down for me so that I could try to figure out what had happened to my ships crew. About a year ago while I was crawling between the inner and outer hull plates of this ship, all seven

hundred members of the crew just up and died simultaneously. At some point during the fifty two hours I was under radio silence, something catastrophic happened. Something that was not readily apparent upon my return. I admit, I took to denial and burying my head in the sand for a while afterwards, but one evening while floating in the commissary with my eyes shut and a gale force wind was blowing in my face I had an epiphany. Now, I'm just a mid level technician. I do a bunch of general tasks associated with small engines, electrical and mill work. But my forte is that I don't mind isolation, small confined spaces or hard laborious tasks. The 'epiphany', as such was that I needed to gain access to as many of the ships systems as I could using the integrated biological over rides. In a moment of clarity while gathering up the deceased, I decided that storing the dead crew in our largest airlock cargo hold might be useful. And after using the ai enhanced scrubbers and cleaners to drag the bodies to one such location, disrobe them and store the associated ID tags and key cards on the right wrists of each of the dead. I made a point of having officers, or as high up the chain of command for each department set aside at the head of each enormous pile of bodies. I had a plan. An unpleasant plan at that, but desperate times called for desperate measures.

It took quite some doing to gain entry to all of the other departments but a little bit of ingenuity and a whole lot of free time meant I could figure out how to do it. So with the help of a reciprocating saw and the right hands of every department head and their personal ID cards, I had a chance to figure out how everything turned to shit on me.

"Kelvin, I do not understand how you failed to account for so many variables when preparing the simulations and models. Your ineptitude should have disqualified you from serving on a science vessel." Quips the EDU bot again, disrupting my deep thought. "Fuck you Ed. I've told you repeatedly, I'm not a part of the science team, I'm a mechanical technician, I maintain the ships closed systems between the double hulls. I'm more of a spelunker than anything else. And, by the way - fuck you." I curse at the beaten up orange bot. It has been seated in front of me in the lab for the last three hours as I attempt to run simulations on what could kill several hundred people without leaving a mark on them. "Apologies Kelvin, I was built to tutor grad student level science majors, and their speech patterns and repeated turns of phrase are logged and reused according to my learning algorithms. I assure you, my 'personality' is purely unintentional." The units lights blink and glow softly as if showing some kind of contrition. I think it's more a case of me going slowly insane, rather than the EDU bot gaining sentience. "Well, thank you, I suppose. Do you know anything about what happened? Have

any additional insights I can add to these simulations we're running?" I ask it again, hoping for a better answer. "We both know that I am unable to do your homework and/or assignments for you Kelvin. That is cheating and outside my operational parameters." With a hum and the whirl of internal fans, the EDU bot continues to sit still doing very little to help me figure things out. "Tell you what Ed, I'm going aft to grab a helping hand from one of the science officers, I'll be back shortly and I'd just love it if you could put any new information we uncover into layman's terms for me. Could you do that for me, huh?" Sitting across from one another at the lab table, ED visibly grows taller in response. "Oh, yes. That is something I can do. Shame you don't know any of my hot button commands, we could do so much more if you knew them." Chirps the bot, as its head and neck extends out of the cube base where the tank tracks are mounted. "Why are you telling me this now! We've been at this for months, with little to no new knowledge uncovered. Jesus. Maybe lead with that info next time!" Rising out of my chair, visibly angry, face going red, veins in my forehead and neck throbbing. "Apologies Kelvin, I assumed you knew. All EDU bots have an extensive list of hot button commands for analysis and a laundry list of practical science related tasks we are capable of performing." Answers the bot quietly. "Ok well, riddle me this Ed. After I return from the aft airlock with a severed hand and appropriate ID card to over ride the login commands on the research decks work terminal, could you direct me to where I would find those commands. Like a document, book, binder or app located somewhere on this ship? Do you think you could do that for he, huh?" Looking at the bot from behind the desk, I walk out the door and head aft of the ship. From behind me I can hear Ed nearly shout in the affirmative.

Walking down the spotlessly clean halls with their brilliant white lights, it can be easy to imagine that on a vessel this size that you are merely out of view of others and not entirely alone. Thinking about the mysterious deaths of the crew has brought a new vigor to my daily life. Though morbid, it has allowed me to channel my efforts into something constructive. While I still fulfill my assigned duties, it seems as though without any additional wear and tear from a crew that I can go longer and longer between maintenance checks. I wired the duty logs to ping my wrist biometrics when something pops up. So now that I have down time I figured I'd try to have some answers ready when the mission ends in another two and a half years. Turning the corner at the last T junction on the ship I come face to face with a massive set of atmosphere rated titanium double doors. Looking at a hand written sign posted on the door I can find the helping hand I'm after without having to dally among the dead. Smell isn't really an issue, neither is decay. I keep the airlock in vacuum ninety nine percent of the time. After I

dehydrated the bodies, I used the coldness of space to flash freeze them all in place. Locating the senior science deck officer, I pressurize the airlock. With a loud clunk I can hear the air tanks pumping oxygen back into the cargo hold within. As the doors glide open, the dimness of the space within takes over. Near the front of the room is a small table with a reciprocating saw, a charging station, cloth bags and box of masks and goggles. Picking up the PPE and saw I wander down the aisles to find the appropriate body. Kneeling down beside her, I set about gathering up the helpful hand. Having done something similar to myself only a year or so ago, I feel a strange sort of kinship with the lifeless body. Picking up the hand I place it gently in the beige cloth bag and head back to my work station. Keeping everything orderly and in its place. With a soft goodbye I close the airlock doors and depressurize the cargo hold. With a soft hiss the air returns to the tanks and the room's temperature drops to below freezing.

"Welcome back Kelvin. And who do we have here?" The bot crawls over to me at the lead science officer's work station. I run her ID card through the input, and when the login prompt comes alive I place the severed right hand, with its manicured metallic flecked green nails on the biological scan pad. A brief pause, and then the screen jumps with streams of data, and unintelligible code. "Whoa, holy shit. Looks like we might be able to get some answers after all. So Ed, where do I go, and what do I need to do?" Standing beside the EDU bot at the terminal, a previously undisclosed view screen flips out of the bot's belly, and a blue schematic and a list of directions appears. "You may take this tablet with you, go grab the command codes and the command key and we can go over the new directives step by step." Looking down at the schematic I feel a sudden sense of dread and fear trickle down my spine. Oh fuck no, I do not want to go back there. Not now, not ever. Why did they have to keep the command keys down in the sanitation department. Stored right next door to the waste containment canisters and that mother fucking thresher unit. Yeah, the one that took my arm off at the fucking elbow. "God damn it." I shout. Ed pulls back several paces. "Is there an issue Kelvin?" He nearly whispers the question to me, either that or my ears are ringing from shouting at the top of my lungs in the lab. I can't even clearly recall just how it happened either. I know I was drinking, and thought I'd have an adventure down in the bowels of the ship. I came out of the service tunnels I had been exploring and entered into a cavernous room with these massive steel tanks, they extended upwards like sixty or seventy meters. The tops disappeared in the dimness of the rafters. I was looking up, and up and up at one of the largest canisters, and fell backwards into something sharp. And immediately knew I had fucked up. My jumpsuit got caught and these exposed gears pulled my arm into the mix

and then jammed. I had to use a miniaturized saws all strapped to my harness to cut my arm free at the elbow. Screaming and shrieking along with the tool as it cut through bones, muscle and sinew. Then in a foul daze I crawled to the medical bay and holed up in one of the few pristine white medical pods with automated surgery technology. Carrying my own arm, or what was left of it with me in my teeth, after I somehow managed to pry it out of the gears. God, that was a waking nightmare. The thought of going back down there for this fucking key is really giving me cause to pause.

Sitting on my bunk staring blankly at the Jean-Luc Picard quote etched into the bulkhead over my doorway I breath in sharply, and exhale in a long slow whistle. Steeling myself for all of the feelings I fear might paralyze me as I venture down below decks to the sanitation department and the waste storage canisters. Dressed in my dirty red jumpsuit, I dress in my work gear. Adding my various harnesses, links, hooks and carabiners. No real need for them, but that crushing hug from the tight fitting gear makes me feel complete, and thus comfortable. Rising to stand, I kiss my finger tips and press the pads of my fingers to the roughly etched proverb. Hoping against hope that I will come back unscathed and still in one piece.

Walking the three kilometer stretch between my crew quarters and the sanitation decks below. I follow the winding path, that winds and rises and leads me along gangways, gantries, stair cases and finally a large service power lift. The tablet has been invaluable in getting me down below with the most straight forward route. After about thirty minutes I'm looking at the brown signage that denotes the sanitation sector. Looking around I am amazed at how spotlessly clean the waste reclamation processors are. You could eat off of every surface down here. Following the schematic I realize I am only ten meters from where I found calamity as a drunken fool. Still quite taken by the sheer size of everything down here. Across the hexagonal room, flanked by several waste containment canisters is the storage lock up. A beaten brown steel safe with no discernible locking mechanism. As I get within a meter of the unit the tablet chimes, a green light flashes suddenly, and the doors unlatch and pop open silently. I am met by a strong citrus scent, the stringent cleaning agents sting the inside of my nostrils. Inside hanging among some goggles, a couple of canvas aprons, rubber boots and several buckets of industrial cleaners is a sizable black and yellow hand held unit. It has the words BOTKEY stenciled in white spray painted on it. A matching icon on the tablet is rotating 360 degrees in an isometric view. Looking around, as though something or someone might burst out of a corner and toss me bodily into the thresher unit, I hesitantly grab a hold of the BOTKEY and gingerly close the doors. With an anticlimactic shrug, i

turn back to the hallway to walk up to the science lab. Looking over my shoulder at the thresher unit as I pass, I can see a tiny streak of red down the front of a bent guard plate. With a laconic smirk I say aloud "Not today mother fucker." And promptly slip on a tile transition and fall flat on my ass, bumping my tailbone in the process. "Ok, you got me! I'll just get the fuck out of here now!" Punching the communicator at my wrist I call up Ed to let it know to meet me at the science officers terminal post haste.

"Thank you Kelvin, I am now able to interpret, analyze and utilize the data from the ships sensor arrays to answer your queries. What would you like to do first?" The timbre of Ed's voice has dropped with the operational parameters being edited. The unit is standing taller than before, and several extra data screen and ports have materialized on the bots cubic chest cavity. Rubbing my sore tailbone I say "Ok, Ed. Well... if you could take a look over the sensor data and see if the cause for all of the crew deaths was either internal or external. That makes for a great start. Can you give me a sense of how much data you have to sift through?" Standing shoulder to shoulder with the EDU bot at the dimly lit terminal on the work station underneath massive video monitors. Ed is currently plugged in using a hard line direct into the ships data banks. With a deep boom Ed says "There is approximately six thousand teraflops of data from the external sensor arrays. It could take anywhere between seventy two weeks and three hundred weeks to find the pertinent data sub sets..." blurts the EDU bot unit. "Well... shit. What if you look at the data just before I logged the second crew death aboard this vessel?" I offer in rebuttal. "That would narrow things down quite considerably. Might I ask why only at the time of the second death logged?" "The first death aboard was my best friend Keith. The second death logged would be the first of the seven hundred crew that died all together. Thanks." I say gruffly. Turning away to sniff back the worrisome threat of a tear. Not sure why I care so much about getting emotional around Ed the tutor bot. A brief pause, then "Kelvin, this ship experienced a catastrophic dose of GCR from a localized supernova. Traveling at a speed of C.99 the speed of light there was no warning possible and they all received many times the allowable Sieverts/Rems of cosmic radiation. How you managed to survive is beyond my ability to compute." Ed disengages from the terminal and rolls back across the room to the well lit work tables. Standing there dumbfounded I follow behind him. Out of the dimness by the huge wall monitors showing massive streams of code and data, towards the low hanging spot lights, and the lighted table top surface. "Jesus. GCR huh? Damn. Microwaved their brains in a nanosecond. God damn." A lone tear wells up and threatens to pull more out of my eye. Hanging on the surface of my eye like a ten tonne weight. With a snap of my fingers. "The bladder!, it

was the water bladder. I had to contort myself to get around it, underneath it. Practically in it to fix a wiring issue under the bridge. I was hidden behind eighty thousand gallons of plain water. It protected me, by fluke. God damn." With a beep and a blinking series of lights Ed does a few calculations and concurs with my hypothesis. Millions of miles from anywhere, the answer provides little comfort to me. "Hey Ed, I think I saw some psychiatric protocols in that menu that would allow us to chat without me having to ask any task related questions. You feel like a conversational upgrade or what?" With a series of blinks and beeps I have my answer.

"That is quite the bruise you've developed there...

Kelvin, perhaps you need to visit a med pod down in the sick bay?" Croons the orange EDU bot I've nick named Ed. I know, I know, not exactly the most original thing I could have come up with, but Cunt Mc Cuntface or Sir ShitTeeth just don't slide off the tongue so gracefully. "Oh this?" I say pointing down to the purple and yellow cluster that rings my left elbow just below the bicep. "It's just an artefact of the reattachment surgery. I set it to leave a noticeable scar so I would know that the accident had actually happened and I didn't dream it up one night. I suppose part of leaving a scar meant leaving some issues in the blood vessels or capillaries or some shit. I don't know, I'm not a doctor. Doesn't hurt though, so that's nice." We are currently in the massive and wide open commissary. The scrubbers keep this whole ship immaculately clean. Plus with no other people alive on board besides me and the Educational tutor bot Ed, it doesn't gather up much dirt. A vast white walled room with massive round tables bolted to the floors with permanent stools surrounding them. Spartan and very utilitarian, designed to keep servicemen moving, so they don't linger after eating. A place to rest your backside long enough to gorge on a meal, but not something you want to hang on to for hours on end for social calls. The outer most portion has a bank of floor to ceiling windows that look out to the stars, with a portion of the vessel splayed out below it in a rather grand vista. Dotted with blinking running lights, and radar dishes and a few other observation domes. Just at the very edge of visibility is a massive grey bulge. Nothing beyond that point can be seen from this vantage point. Part of my daily routine is coming in here to eat and chat with Ed as I float in front of the enormous air vent with the output set to maximum. Imagine floating on the edge of some bluffs as you are perpetually buffeted by gale force winds rushing in off of the coast. Makes me feel like I'm back on earth. Although it makes carrying on a meaningful conversation with Ed a challenge. It's starting to feel like a

residual habit from an earlier, and less successful coping mechanism. As an early attempt at escapism, bury my face in a windy vent sounds fairly stupid, but it was the best thing I could come up with that offered me even a sliver of comfort. Drinking was what got me a long, arduous crawl into the sick bay while carrying my severed arm in my teeth in the first place, so I cut way back on the booze. Seemed like a prudent thing to do. It was a total fluke that I discovered Ed in the science departments largest lab. Gaining access was, and still is a disquieting and upsetting task. My collection of 'helping hands' has grown over the years. As new needs and requirements made themselves known. For example, as I wore out my slippers from three years of walking all over the ship, and doing extensive maintenance tasks across all of the various departments. I had to gain access to the procurement depot and upgrade my footwear, harnesses, jumpsuit, the inner body sock, oh, oh and I even switched over to the new fangled Nanoparticles that removes the need for a colostomy bag, and catheter for urine collection. That was an amazing day, let me tell you. Removing the catheter for the last time was a moment I will cherish for the rest of my life. The technological upgrades that materialized in my wrist communicator and biometrics was nothing short of dazzling. Like it now has the ability to project a three dimensional holographic display. My eyes can adjust to near total darkness, and I just don't feel cold or hot anymore. I feel like a god. It's truly remarkable.

With the sound of drive wheels whirling, and the harsh patter of tank treads hitting the metal grating on the floor, I'm pulled out of my reverie by Ed moving to position himself directly below me, and closer to the exhaust port of the central commissary fan. Opening my eyes makes them water in the down draft, so I pull away from the stainless steel vent hood, and float back down to the floor. Once I make contact the magnetic locks contained in my jumpsuit keeps me firmly planted on the ground, but free to move about without too much lag. "Hey Ed, i have a strange question. One i wouldn't really have ever thought much about." Standing face to face with the EDU bot, or what I approximate as a face for Ed. A plate at chest height, that can extend upwards on a neck like column, full of lights, lenses, a speaker and various sensor arrays. "I'd expect no less from you Kelvin, the lack of questions that is." Blurts out the bot. "Gee, thanks Ed. My question is... what the fuck is the name of this ship anyway?" I ask in as casual a manner as I can muster, seeing as how I've been employed, and deployed on this vessel for little more than three years now. "Well, Kelvin. We are on The Company research vessel *The Lark Song*. How does that make you feel?" Chirps the lump of orange tech on tank treads. It is rather disjointed how such a formerly stuffy grad student science tutor has started to look so drab and

beaten up around the edges after two years of being my daily companion. I've put him through his paces helping me run maintenance jobs around the ship. "*The Lark Song* huh? That's not anything like what I thought you'd say. Not even close. Ha." I chuckle to myself. Thank god for the BOTKEY and the command codes that I discovered only months ago. Being able to trigger real time conversation in psychiatric mode has really brought me out of my shell. Though, I prefer being introverted on a busy ship, and not being extroverted with a machine because I have no other choice. See the difference there? It's subtle, but meaningful. "Ed, I've been thinking. I have looked through every deck on this ship and I can not for the life of me figure out where, or what that massive blister is that you can see from the commissary windows at the very edge of visibility." Pointing back through the brilliant white room to the black empty windows. "I would have to observe it for myself, and I could extrapolate approximate coordinates from the schematics I downloaded when I hard wired to the ship. Since I don't have GPS, I will have to guess rather than give you a definitive answer." Ed turns about on a zero radius, a space saving feature thanks to his tank treads. A neat feature we didn't initially know was that he has a two tonne towing capacity. Would have come in very handy when stacking the bodies of the dead, but I digress. Taking the forty or so paces from the central vent out to the windows we stand motionless shoulder to orange coloured chest cube. "Kelvin, that particular portion of the ship is not listed under any directory I have seen or accessed. But I estimate it to be about twenty one hundred meters forward of us, and possibly eight to ten decks below. Near the waste water treatment sector, on top of the sanitation department faring." Turning to look at each other Ed speaks before I have the chance. "Kelvin, not to be morbid but we might need to go aft to dig up an extra 'helping hand' to gain access." His low tone is somber. Snapping my fingers I say "Beat me to it. Yeah, but who do we borrow from? Sanitation? Water works? Engineering?" I say with a shrug of my shoulders. "Might I suggest we use the commanding officer, and bypass any extraneous jury rigged surgery." Beeps Ed in response. "Good call, nice to know that at least one of us is on the ball." I chuckled, to which Ed whistles in rapid succession. "Well Ed, we don't have any scheduled maintenance tasks for ninety six hours, so let's bag some food, and go-go juice, and have ourselves an adventure!" Looking back to the boundless void beyond the windows I guffaw wistfully while I clap my hands once, loudly.

"Calvin are you listening to me? We have a problem..."

That needs your undivided attention." Drones the beaten up orange cube of an educational tutor bot named Ed. The tank like treads have begun to wear away very rapidly over the last six months, and the noise Ed makes while maneuvering on the ships metal grated floors is unpleasant in my ears. "I'm sorry, did you just call me Calvin, Ed?" I say, coming out of my revelry rather sluggish. "No Kelvin, you must have misheard me while your attention was wandering. I was in the process of explaining to you the dire situation in which we now find ourselves." Barks the science tutor bot. "Wait, wait. I thought we decided to sleep on the bad news then come back here today to gather up our stuff for the grand adventure! I was so excited last night I could hardly sleep. I was kinda hoping we'd find some tucked away corner of *The Lark Song* that still had living people in it. Silly dream to get swept up in, I know. But, the hope is still there. The dreams are so vivid Ed. I can touch, and taste and feel it. It's really all I can think about Ed. So what say you? You in, for some gallivanting about today?" I say it with a dopey grin upon my face, with a thousand mile stare in my moist eyes. Sweat has started to dapple my brow. The daft hope of human companionship this far into my forced isolation is tearing me up inside. The sheen of sweat upon my brow glints in the brilliant phosphorescent lights. "I fear that we will have to put the adventure on hold, for now Calvert." Says Ed in a monotone. We are sitting facing each other, at one of the science labs work benches, even though Ed's built in sensor array could locate and analyze me from any angle within a fifty meter radius. His sitting and 'looking' at me is just an artifact of my personal preferences, stored up in his memory and doled back out to me by his learning algorithms. "You did it again, Kelvin, my name is Kelvin. What's wrong with you Ed." I say. "Kelvin, pay attention. I'm not calling you by the wrong name. I said we have some major issues to attend to before we go traipsing over the ship to find that massive blister at the for of the vessel. Can you focus. What is the matter with you Calvin?" the pitch of Ed's voice has begun to rise. To think of it, Ed's voice modulation has been all over the place recently. Some times instead of talking he just emits a high pitched whine that rings throughout my head for hours at a time. Hours at a time. Huh. Funny turn of phrase that. I used to crawl through the virtual darkness with only a helmet lamp on to direct me through my adventures between the vessels double hulls. Now that I am out in the open, there is just so much brilliant white light. I can see everything even through my eyelids. The deck lights have begun to emit a strong halo, and a stretched glare across my eyes. Oh lord, I can hear Ed nattering on at me again. Jesus it's getting hot in here isn't it. "What did you say Ed? Sorry, I'm just all over the place lately. Oh wow, would you look at

that..." waving my hands in front of our faces, I can see a delayed staccato view of my hand as it passes by, as though a blinking strobe light were blasting in my eyes. I can feel the distinct sting of sweat pooling on the surface of my eye balls. Colours are beginning to run together as I feel like I might just drift off to sleep. "Kelvin, my sensors are showing you with a heightened temperature of forty one degrees Celsius. Perhaps you should lie down." Ed pulls back from the spotless work table we are seated at, and comes around to my side. In the growing dimness of the ship, I try to swat him away. "Leaf me, Leaf me!" I shout, but only a garbled jumble echoes about the room. "Kelvin, I'm going to deliver you to sick bay, and then I have to get to the command deck and check on the status of a few things. I'm going to slave your wrist comm's to my internal sensor bank so I can monitor you from afar. I'm going to have to leave you unattended for quite some time Kelvin, do you understand?" All around me is dimming into total darkness. I can hear the tank treads rolling over the floors in the halls, and the power lifts whirring under the burden of our weight. Sudden flashes of light, and waves of pain take me as I am jostled harshly. I come to rest in the cool embrace of the med pod quite some time later. I feel the Nano bots streaming through my bloodstream, and it feels like I am awash in a thick cool liquid. Then silence. With a loud gust of air, all becomes still.

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With tortured movements the orange cube continues to circle the vessel as a silent guard. Stopping in at the science labs, command decks and engineering to perform as many of the required tasks as it is able. To conserve power all life support throughout the ship has been disabled except for the portion of the sick bay where Kelvin sleeps motionless in isolation. His weakened body was put into a medically induced coma once his brain had started to swell. Even in a mostly empty ship a microbial vector had managed to lodge itself deep inside Kelvin. Seems our DIY approach to implanting the new fangled Nano tech left a gaping blind spot in which a bug managed to manifest itself. Having worked it's way through his ventricular, respiratory, gastrointestinal systems it managed to find an even more dangerous purchase in the brain. Kelvin had been quietly fighting a vicious internal battle, while slowly depleting the sick bays med pod of vital medicines and resources. After a while the med pod had requested Kelvin be transferred out to palliative care where he could be fed a steady drip of whatever could keep him comfortable. But Ed came by every few days to kick on the over rides from various high ranking helping hands. But as the flesh was deteriorated from age and use that would not be an option for too much longer. Ed was the first EDU bot to have ever had all his ai infused

programs enabled at once. He had managed to tailor his speech patterns and work schedule to Kelvin specifically. Though Ed was not sentient, he was functionally closer to being so than any other mechanical bot ever created. This left Ed with the knowledge of emptiness, but no ability to feel anything specific about it.

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Once it started to take Ed four days to travel between engineering and the sick bay med pod he had to make a difficult choice. Either maintain Kelvin's over rides or remain within crawling distance of his charging station where his malfunctioning battery could be juiced up, and do whatever operations he could still perform for the now badly failing ship. Having spent four and a half years with Kelvin, it would prove to be the hardest decision the beaten, and badly abused orange cube had ever been entrusted to make. Let the sole survivor of the GCR burst aboard *The Lark Song* die in the hands of a doubtful med pod algorithm while convalescing, or let the badly damaged research vessel continue to drift off course and succumb to a cascading series of malfunctions and errors. The warning klaxons had long ago burned themselves out. Warnings and blinking lights had all gone cold due to negligence. As the vessel struggles to stay together, a difficult choice remains to be made.

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Sitting still in the pitch black sick bay med pod isolation room Ed's last blinking light has transitioned from a vibrant green, to a bold amber, then to a violent red, and was in the last waning stages of a faintly visible brown. In the vast blackness of the room, a cold Ed has come to rest with his finger poised above the override button. Manually keeping the heavy red button depressed, so that the med pod could not eject the sleeping patient.

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After the ship has passed beyond the realm of human explored space, floated through the cold, isolated depths of the cosmos. Inside a massive research vessel *The Lark Song* a lone, and sudden cough can be heard followed by a sharp and deep gasp for breath. The med pod springs to life, with its white lights sparking to life, to reveal Kelvin, emaciated, cold and many years older encased in a small isolation room with only his jumpsuit, and no way to get out buried in the depths of a dying ship.

In the stark white brilliance of the medical pods internal lighting...

My vision fades in from an inky blackness to a dazzling white hot fire. Through the fuzz of far too dilated eyes in an all too sudden brightness I can just make out my greyed, and cracked skeletal hand pressed upon the domed glass. The sensation of a deep cold burning the palm of my hand slowly crawls its way into my thoughts. Jerking my weak and flimsy hand back off the glass while tearing off the finger pads with the motion. The tear of the skin is audible like a seam popping on cheaply made pants. In the stifling silence I realize that I am alive, barely, and I do not know why. Left upon the surface of the glass are five perfect finger prints which start to flake off the frozen glass before my eyes.

The once plush and padded all white interior on which I am splayed is now all grey and faded to a crusty brown, spattered with spots of orange, yellow and mustard coloured stains. As I wriggle around in search of the internal release latch, dust plumes fill the air making me cough violently. The claustrophobic tightness of the painfully cold harness, the dazzlingly bright white lights, and choking clouds of dust add to my confusion and panic. The interior of the med pod is freezing cold, so cold I can see wisps of breathe and a crystalline pattern on the domed glass matching the outline of my hand print, now contrasted greatly by the dust particles cascading off my dissolving finger pads. The radiant glare of the lights is awfully blinding. My eyes feel as though they are on fire, as though I haven't blinked in weeks. My throat is parched and feels cracked. My tongue thick and numb inside my mouth. My breath rattles thickly in my chest. I can feel my ribs creaking beneath my coveralls. An audible rumble of my intestines disrupts the silence, punctuated only by the ragged short breaths I'm taking. Peering through the frosted glass looking outside the medical pod I catch sight of something that is down beside and below me, decayed and worn is an oddly familiar Edubot of an orange colour. It is in a terrible state of disrepair. The tank like track treads have worn through completely and peeled off the guide wheels. It appears to have crept over to the side of the med pod to manually interface with the pods override functions. It's lone protruding finger pressed firmly against the med pod reset button. But why? What possible reason would the ships medical bay have for cutting off life support. All I can see within the medical bay is the small pale blue illuminated circle encased in our atmospheric protection dome. A shimmering curtain of pure energy. The

ship must truly be in trouble for this last ditch security feature to have deployed. By the state of the looming darkness beyond, the ship has been derelict for quite some time. Finding and triggering the latch to release the pods internal restraints with a loud click. Reaching up to push the fabric harness to the med pod out of my way I can see the ghastly grey pallor of my skin beginning to fade, and a bluish tinted pink replace it. As I watch there is a certain plumpness that seems to fill out my emaciated hands and arms. A flush of warmth rushing to my extremities, filling my chest and clearing my head. A sudden chirp from the biometrics on my wristband has started to chime with notifications. An error code I don't recognize is flashing double time on the small OLED screen on my wrist, I must plug in to the med bays internal computer to figure out what is going on. I have never seen such a code before. The interface on my wrist biometrics is brand new, and not a model that I've ever seen. Everything is so strange. Colours and sounds are off kilter, at once too sharp and yet fuzzy. My balance is shot even as I am laying down. My limbs feel foreign to me. I begin to panic while I can't find my equilibrium. My heart is thumping savagely in my chest. As I thrash about inside the med pod I finally pull the main release latch and the outer dome sweeps out into the open room. A faint tinge of machine oil and stringent cleaners can be tasted on the stale air. Mixed with ozone burning off the protective energy shield. A massive cloud of dust bursts forth with the air pressure change. Trying to calm myself I swing my legs around to try and step out of the raised pod. The once soft padding crumbling under my shifting weight. The cloth comes apart like parchment paper. There is a significant lag between thinking about putting my feet down on the step just outside the pod and my limbs actually doing it. The sensation is uncomfortable, like trying to pilot my own body from seven feet in the air above my head. Trying to swallow my rising panic I have to reach out and put my weight down on the Edubot as I clamber out of the medical pod. The sole of my foot sticks to the ice cold metal step, and the pain of the icy burn races up my leg. Peeling my foot slowly off the step, skin sticking to the surface, the pain makes me focus. Looking around at the pale blue shimmering safety curtain of energy surrounding the pod my attention is called back to the insistent chime of my wrist biometric monitor. "What is going on?" I croak into the silence of the illuminated med bay. My voice, not quite my own, or how I remember it, reverberates off the powerful safety shielding. Looking beyond the sizzling ghostly curtain of the atmospheric safety dome I catch my first glimpse of my reflection. I am not myself. The surface of my skin is visibly crawling. I scream.

With the echoes of the scream still bouncing off the protective shielding...

The man falls heavily to his knees. The harsh bitter cold of the metal floor is bone chilling, and it seeps through the rough canvas coveralls at the point where his knees touch the ground. The thick icy grasp of the medical bay floor hits him quickly. With puffs of breath raggedly exhaled into the cold chamber the man is stricken with waves of fear. Bursts of crystallized breath plum out of his mouth with his dogged panted breathing. Outside of view beyond the protective barrier, ensconced in utter blackness, the rest of the medical bay appears to have deteriorated considerably. Heard amongst the rattle of his breathing are the insistent chimes of his wrist biometrics unit churning out error codes and warning notifications. Slowly rising to his feet, with a frail wobble to his steps, as though he hasn't stood up in weeks or months the man stumbles towards the pale blue glow of the protective shielding he is standing within. The static fuzz ignites off of his finger tips, radiating through his palms and up above his elbows. The skin on his hands shimmers and pulses under the low voltage passing through it. Turning to sit with his back resting against the security shielding the man limply slides back down to sit upon the freezing cold floor. Feeling the harsh bite of the frosty metal against his rump. The static pulse of the shielding is accompanied by the shrill urgent chiming of the wrist biometrics notifications throwing up error codes and streams of data too small for the man to read. Looking down at the shimmering, rippling skin on his hands, his focus pulled away from the odd undulation of his flesh from the static from the security shield, he stares blankly at the wrist biometric unit. This is brand new he thinks soundlessly. "Yes... Yes it is". Answers the empty darkness. Jumping to his feet, turning around, bare feet pattering the ground, the numbness now reaching his hips, the man screams again. A blood curdling, epic scream of madness. "Don't be alarmed, we are you, that is to say, you are us. We are one. Do you understand?" speaks the disembodied voice, as clear as day, as though it were stood mere centimeters from his ear. Jumping with fright at each punctuated word, turning both this way and that, the man is frantic. Scattering bits of dust and debris, he searches the small med pod bay looking for the source of the voice. "No need to look for us, we are you, you are us, we are one. Together. Do you understand us. We know

you speak a variant of the English language. Not American, nor British by Canadian English... yes?" speaks the voice in a slow drawl. Nod if you can hear us, do you understand the words you are hearing - Oh no. Here we go! Brace for impact... protect the head, protect the head! , make sure the tongue doesn't slide back down the throat!". The man crumples into a heap and promptly passes out. "Well, this is no good. We have to clear these notifications and sort out our access if we're ever going to do anything useful with this vessel. We know, we know. Yes, I am aware of that. It does pose considerable challenges. No I am not currently aware of anything or anyone else quite like us, we... me." The voices which can be heard sound muffled as though they were coming from another room down a shared hallway. Certain words are distinct but much of it flows together and is incomprehensible. Slowly everything fades to black, again.

PART FOUR

The Company : A Call To The Void

The deep space exploration beacon floated...

Around in the vast expanse of nothingness that made up the majority of the dark and empty cosmos. Its many rows of small green and blue and amber indicator lights blinking steadily in the near perfect darkness as the large autonomous bulk drifted aimlessly along its course. The beacon, a long lost science tool several centuries out of main stream use, was various shades of a drab grey with only a few pops of bright orange and yellow painted onto the many metal panels and facets of its exterior. Weathered and worn, battered by debris, ice and the increasingly less common collision. With four massive booms with the now defunct sun light catching solar panels reaching out from the central body, like the dead arms of a desiccated witch, with gnarled and withered fingers at the ends. Between those four gangly booms are four matching but tattered solar sails which haven't billowed with the

energy of light particles in quite some time. Hanging limp, like a lifeless flag with no energy with which to fill them. Those ghastly witches fingers were actually the clumps of gathered sensors and radar dishes and the tight beam radio antennas. The unmanned science beacon had been gathering vast stores of near worthless data for many, many decades now. With the satellites battery drawing so few amps, and the solar panels gathering next to no power the beacon is nearing the end of its life cycle. That is until an unexpected blip of the dimmest and softest glow of light became visible in the near endless ocean of black. Ever so slowly the dim pinprick of light grew to that of a grain of sand, a pea, a fat blueberry, then a grape, and with the sudden increase in light the sails ballooned full and the solar panels tattered as they were began to pull in and store energy. The jump in size from a grape to a melon to a gigantic mass of flaming gas was extraordinary. Near instantaneous compared to the many lifetimes it had spent careening through the farthest reaches of space with nary a hint of anything besides radiation and microwaves. As the beacon gathered up momentum and incredible speed it sent off one last tight beam of interesting information before plunging deep into the gravity well of a massive new star, and melting away into its constituent molecules and then atoms. Not even a whiff of smoke to denote the centuries old satellites passing. The ignominy of it all.

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"Oh... Jorec we have something substantial coming in via the old tight beam network. Doesn't appear to be the same old shit as before. Want to give it a look over?" Says Jaz the junior science officer on duty. Jaz has been one of three people in charge of monitoring the science decks tight beam communications system. Now that it is several centuries out of date, with it having been decades since they had anything worth looking at, it was primed to be dealt with by fresh out of the academy science grads. Archiving data and doing maintenance on non essential programs and hardware. Perfect for busy work and the day care of green horns. The slightly senior science officer, named Jorec looked up from his interface where he was storing old data clusters on physical hard drives. "Oh really? Wow - huh. Would you look at that. Must have seen something way out there, the file size alone is insane compared to the last, what, four thousand nearly identical recorded info dumps. Strange eh? Usually the signal decays to the point of the data being a corrupted useless tranche of absolute garbage. But this one, this one looks to have managed to catch all of the working repeaters to get back here." Typing in a few short commands on his hand held tablet Jorec looks deeper into the incoming stream of information. "Wow man, the lag on this

is atrocious. Like billions of light years. How did this ever get to us in such good condition? I don't know of any overriding command codes that would trigger all of our deep space repeaters to function at top notch quality. The power consumption alone would be astronomical. We're talking enough juice to power three Torus stations for a thousand years a piece. Holy shit Jaz, this could get interesting. Might be our ticket out of here early!" Says Jorec standing up from his chair. Turning around in the cramped room, switching the scrolling text from his personal lab view screen to the large central monitor hanging from the wall in the claustrophobic room as the data really begins to stream passed their eyes in lines of green code on a black background. "Oh - fuck. Call the CO, call the Captain, call the Admiral... call every fucking one!" Shouts Jorec in a frenzy. His face flushed red, as the veins in his neck and forehead nearly jump out of his body. Intermingled among the lines of code from the farthest reaching sensor arrays is an SOS, of human origin. From an area of space that no human has ever been recorded going to, or being from before. Accompanied by a very weak biometric life sign. Life for Jorec and Jaz was about to turn upside down, with them planted up to their knees in feces, while they are in the wrong orientation.

Amid the bustle and commotion in the...

Command deck's stately ready room, a very startled Jaz was huddled by a bulkhead staring blankly out into the inky black depths of endless space. As commanders with their cadres of junior officers rushed about the room, pulled out sheets of paper, maps and rushing to monitors to account for this point of conjecture or that. Raised voices and shouting permeates the massive room. With sixty people plus their retinue of advisors, councillors and experts the room was a shambles of order and coherence. Arguments bursting here and there, with academics butting heads regarding every single data point imaginable. It was heaven for those inclined to be pedantic, and hell for everyone else. The slow moving bureaucratic creep of something completely unexpected.

For Jaz and Jorec it had been seventy two hours of hostile interrogation and questioning, and unabashed harassment from the security divisions, senior science officers and almost the entire rank and file aboard the UB313 research outpost. Jorec wasn't in much better shape for being slightly more senior than Jaz. Seems that in their vigor to get a jump out of archiving the old tight beam network they had maneuvered themselves, by leaps and

bounds no less, over top of the appropriate chain of command with the news of a far off human distress signal. The Admiral, captain and station CO were not impressed to say the least. Both of the recent science grads had been separated and grilled harshly on the finest details and minutia of their seemingly tall tale. But after blood tests, psychological evaluations, additional strenuous back ground checks, extreme vetting of their lineage and current health records the command team had no choice but to review the details of this once in a lifetime dispatch from the brink of the void. A call from some where out passed the boundaries of the known universe. It was pretty tense for all involved. The security team had not only withheld food, water and sleep in an attempt to coax out even one millimeter of difference in their statements, but pulled out each science graduates catheter and colostomy bag. Rendering them dependent on an actual physically working toilet which the security forces guarded fiercely. The inquisition team had a plan of repeatedly attacking their recollections of time stamps, and the order to the series of events. Was this a direct quote, was that paraphrased, how do you know if you remembered seeing it, did the other person tell you to say this, to say that, did either of you attach a contraband device to initiate the call. Do you have friends working with you on this, are you a terrorist, an insurgent, do you realize the enormity of what you are saying here today? Would you testify to this in a court of law, will you sign away your life on the strength of not only your recollections but that of your colleague. That sort of thing. Extraordinary - high intensity, with no rest, no bathroom breaks except under direct personal supervision. Which in the case of Jorec meant a security escort would have to hold his member in order to allow him to evacuate his bladder into a sealed and then later tested container. They even pulled their biometrics out to monitor the internal body receptors at specific time stamps to make sure each aspect of their subconscious bodily responses were genuine. In the case of Jorec, he suffered many - very real hours, of government mandated torture. He was currently wrapped in a thermal blanket hiding his sudden lack of finger nails and all of his broken toes from the rest of the gathered group. His swollen visage dismissed by everyone in an orange or maroon coloured jumpsuit. His lowly cyan coveralls soaked in blood and vomit didn't even register with this crowd. He just sat in a heap, rocking himself almost imperceptibly as he too stared out the view ports in the cavernous ready room. Watching Pluto, which was the only thing that could be seen with the human eye way out by the UB313 research outpost anyway.

Up until recently this branch of humanity had assumed they were the furthest humans from earth. During an early schism among the highest ranks of The Company one intrepid individual broke away from the monolithic business

entity and struck out on his own and fled beyond the easy grasp of the populations of the earth and moon. This particular order of scientists had not been present during the Nano Tech boom, nor were they aware of the technological breakthroughs that came about decades after the For E's engine debacle aboard *Margot's Fever* or the mysterious disappearance of the oil refinery come research flag ship *The Lark Song* some five hundred years ago. In fact this faction of people was not privy to a great many important details surrounding humanity as a whole. Being fractious and isolationist meant that they were only as good as their echo chamber allowed them to be.

Back in the cacophany of the ready room the question at hand was what to do with the news of this distress call. If they'd managed to hear the call then surely The Company back on earth would have heard it too. Do we ignore it, or do we send a probe back to gather more intelligence? At no point did anyone seem to care that the message had travelled several billion light years one way and thus whomsoever set the distress call was likely long dead. This discussion revolved around the potential to discover new territory and to lay claim to new resources. But primarily they wanted to know if the call was a trap. An ambush lying in wait for them. The heated and tumultuous discussion carried on for months. In the mean time two new items were able to be seen by the naked eye from the ready rooms observation windows. Those were the flash frozen, and boiled bodies of a badly beaten Jaz and Jorec, recent graduates of the Torus Station science academy post graduate program being taught on UB313 with five hundred year old out of date knowledge.

"Do you suppose that you could describe a lone space probe as wistful"...

Mused the middle aged communication's technician to himself quietly while seated in front of his old and grimy beige-grey terminal. The man and the large analog terminal were situated well away from the hum of the science decks closer to the moons surface, stashed way down in a long forgotten corner of an unused deck aboard the lunar base. The walls in this buried portion of the base were a deep grey, nearly black silica rock that absorbed all of the heat in the room, leaving the technician and all of his instruments a clammy and tepid temperature. Not exactly cold but not in the least bit welcoming. The dimness of the light down here was not a function of neglect, but rather due to the technician's desire to view a live stream of what data the probe was sending back to him from deep in the void. He had

various readouts of the data code playing alongside his monitor which for the most part was essentially just black with slow moving pin pricks of light scattered across it. Looking at the blackness was hard enough to do let alone having a bright glare present from an all too bright overhead lighting system that permeated the lunar base. So dimness was the order of the day for Bertrick. He was stationed in a U shaped room with his massive three hundred channel analog control terminal to one side and slightly in front, like an L shaped sectional, with a massive central video monitor hung on the wall directly above the console and six smaller monitors showing the data from the major sensor arrays from the probe hanging on the exposed portion of the wall to his right. Each item broken down into their own designated stream. Radar, lidar, spectrometer, GPS / Navigation, engineering and a cluster of other more niche sensors. The technician did not design the probe, or have any input on what went on it for the expedition. He just happened to have a love for oversized and deeply complicated analog twentieth century technology. The terminal itself, all grungy shades of grey and beige and possibly off white, was a jumble of toggles, switches, buttons, sliders and dials. In amongst that were pops of orange and yellow labels that had their most pertinent data faded into oblivion. This particular item, once at the forefront of audio wizardry was now so completely foreign to most humans it could have been alien technology. Bertrick's great great grandfather's grandad has once been a pastor and musician who had hours and hours of home video showcasing his mixing and overdubbing skills. Skills which Bertrick was fascinated with, and had thus purloined his knowledge over four decades of pursuing his hobby in wrangling one such audio board. That endeavour brought him to his dream job of watching the latest probe data for two shifts per day for the next ten to fifteen years. He had no idea why it was sent or what they expected to find. Turns out they withheld the reasoning so as to not colour the analysis. They wanted the data reporting to be as unbiased as humanly possible. But job security was nothing to pass up, and Bertrick wasn't afraid to work unsupervised and virtually alone in his mostly comfy work station. To keep himself from falling asleep he ran the feed through his audio terminal and narrated everything he saw that warranted an explanation. But mostly to make certain he scrutinized every single second of audio and visual data he received. For Bertrick knew, surreptitiously that this particular probe had been launched not on a whim of the science academy but with a specific set of coordinates in mind. It was mostly hearsay and rumor, but to launch such an extraordinarily overpowered probe out to the middle of nowhere was not exactly the type of science that Torus Station science graduates are known for. The Company has a reason for everything, no exceptions and no exemptions!

Bertrick sat watching the screen twisting knobs and turning dials as he attempted to hone in on a certain pitch of whine that was being transmitted back to him from the probe. It, the probe had an official designation but they were long and dull and full of strings of letters and numbers. Although since Bertrick only had to monitor and report on one such probe, he had shortened it down to an easily identifiable acronym. One which the higher ranking science officers didn't reject out of hand. So the probe a.k.a. St3v3 or now "Steve" was the main focus of Bertrick's every waking moment. Though Bertrick was mainly an audio and visual technician it was his responsibility to plug in any navigational changes sent to him by the other divisions attached to this expedition. Which didn't bother Bert in the least. If he logged enough of them over the next few years he could earn another new designation and an ample raise. Praise be! To The Company. They really did pride themselves in continuing education and certifications. Given the time lag between himself and Steve, Bert's slow typing speed was not going to be an issue. As he could follow along with each message to see it ping off of and get pushed through all of the repeaters on its way out to the far flung edges of who the fuck knows where.

"So Steve, what are you going to show me today? Come on gimme something extravagant to monologue to!" Whispered Bert to his terminal in a sing song fashion. News had come down from above that some of the ranking officers were gathering from different divisions just to watch and listen to the high light reels Bert provided as part of his analysis. He'd fought the urge to sneak into the briefing room to see for himself, but after sixteen hours of every twenty four devoted to Steve, he couldn't muster the energy or the enthusiasm. Bertrick knew he could sing, his deep bellowing voice came from the pipes he inherited from his great, great, great, on and on, grand father who lived his whole life in one town on earth. He was a pastor with an outsized congregation due to his musical ability and skills as an orator. He might have had a flair for the dramatic, but he never strayed from the path, though to hear the elements of ole Maw-maw he had plenty of offers and propositions. The deep south might have gotten him all hot and bothered, but the press of young available ladies didn't turn his focus away from his love for Maw-maw. To hear it told she was a wild and sordid sort in the sheets, so he was perhaps too tired and worn out to pursue other such feminine wiles. Much to Bertrick's surprise he had become rather deeply in tune with the 'sounds' of the cosmos. He had managed to fine tune his sound board to a degree where even the casual listeners to his analytical reports could tell the differences between items that Steve had flown by. The ability to isolate and achieve the cleanest output of unadulterated signal was truly mental. It was a factor of the many lonely months Bertrick spent pouring

over the terminal tweaking, and twisting and dialing in each little snippet of audio that piqued his ears. Bertrick was becoming renowned for his audio specificity. He was a rock star in the sciences, something he didn't realize he was able to achieve. The fidelity of his craftsmanship was being broadcast throughout the system and requests for him to take up a teaching position with **Torus** Station were becoming hard for the science division to ignore. The supposedly confidential mission was starting to turn a profit for the lunar base with the streaming of Bertrick's audio visual logs of Steve's expedition. His 'Steve-Cast' was number two on The Company's educational broadcasts provided to the whole Sol system. Advertisers had requested on air plugs, and the Torus station entertainment sector wanted pre-roll and end-roll video commercials for their numerous science fiction books, movies and television shows. None of this was ever disclosed to Bertrick, but he was given a substantial raise for his part in the covert business venture. The popularity of the 'Steve-Cast' stemmed from Bertrick's use of colourful, yet poignant prose. His ability to humanize the Steve probe, and its lonely trek out to no where. By musing on the state of humanity, while simultaneously explaining the audio & spectacular visuals of the long and worrisome trek, billions of paying consumers were hooked. The deep baritone register he played in vocally could really set a sub woofer to purring. His velvety smoothness intermingled with a breathy occasional rasp set most people's speakers on fire. Figuratively speaking. Through the broadcast, Bertrick had laid bare his lonesome soul, and honed his craft to an especially fine point.

AU after AU traveled, Steve just kept on keeping on. He performed admirably doing fly bys of nebulae, quasars, black holes, dust clouds, radiation clouds, and all sorts of colorful and interesting things. But whatever he was supposed to find, those weren't it. Every so often Bertrick would key in some minor course corrections, or make a note on the navigational logs and sit back and hum to himself in the dim isolation of his work station. The years of watching and waiting had little affect on Bertrick's mood or attention span. He was as faithful an analyst as one could pray for. Never missing a beat. He logged every single item, anomaly, hiccup or obstacle that presented itself. Regardless of whether or not Steve sent back the desired final outcome Bertrick was on track for several commendations and a sweet posting of his choice anywhere within Sol system once the ten to fifteen years were up. Unless they offered an extension on the expedition Bertrick was to start to think about where he wanted to go next. And if that was to teach at Torus Station, it meant only a move of some seventy miles up from the surface of the moon to the massive floating bulk of the Torus itself.

PART FIVE

The Company : Sisters in Arms

"Holy suffering fuck it's hot out here... holy shit. I mean, God damn."

She howls, as she stumbles under the immense heat from the triumvirate of sun's high in the reddish tinged sky. Beads of thick sweat pour down her ebony hued forehead inside her make shift helmet. The barren steppe upon which they've crashed is strewn with only a handful of scrub foliage, and no shade or cover from the glaring, harsh suns. Behind her lies a badly damaged Falcon-Heavy Class star hopper, it has a massive black scar along one side of the hull. A cavernous gash exposing all manner of wiring, pipes and life support systems to the open vacuum of space prior to falling out of the sky and crashing like a putelant child, into a lump of crumpled steel on a rugged strip of dirt on some unknown planet. "Fuck me." Shouts her copilot from inside the wreckage. "We have a couple of weeks of repairs to undertake here Katayna. And that's if, if, our stores hold enough raw materials for the mill and lathe units to process us our replacement parts... not only structural pieces but full fucking hull plates too. Nozzles and fairings. Fucking hell." The co pilot is diminutive three foot tall, three armed blue-purple biped with large bulbous multi faceted eyes, and is completely hairless. Besides being a copilot come navigator, Errebor is also a mill Wright and does all of the ships servicing herself. Katayna, the lithe pilot and owner of the vessel is standing stock still admiring the damage wrought by their tumultuous landing. Muttering to herself soundlessly with her microphone turned off. making a mental list of parts and repairs that will need to be made to the exterior hull plating, and environmental shielding apparatus. "Does this planet look really red to you Kat?" Pipes in Errebor over the helmets comm's unit. Taking a step back from the massive stretch of ragged black burned and torn hull, Katayna turns to look out over the steppe and really take in her surroundings. "Why yes, yes it does. Almost rusty. Why?" Asks Kat while

standing motionless in the stifling heat of the mid day glare. "I'd wager a fuck tonne of that Pengar cock you love so much that this here planet is ferrous. I don't think we'll have to dig that far down to gather enough materials to smelt us up some ore of a useful sort. That's what the fuck I'm thinking, Kat". The short co pilot is now hanging from the mangled rear bay doors, observing the barren wasteland through a pair of range finding binoculars. With four limbs hanging from any available surface, and the last available arm clutching onto her binoculars she has a higher vantage point than Kat, and notices rising clouds of dust well into the distance. Alerted to the motion Kat moves along the steppe to the edge of a precipice. Way down below, in what could have once been a valley are strange beings. Strange hairy four legged creatures that appear to be running at an enormous rate of speed. "Oh me, oh my. Oh me, oh my!" Quips Errebor. "From here to there, strange things are everywhere." Responds Katayna with a slight smirk.

"What is it exactly, that you do here Mr. Kartcher?"...

Asks the Company lawyer, a Mrs. Kinsey, from across the cramped drab meeting room, buried deep inside a bunker on a remote outpost. The level of security and secrecy undertaken to get her there for this particular interview was no small feat. She had had to withstand many months of rigorous and down right invasive scrutiny to take the role of lead investigator on this case for the Company. The momentous amount of strain and shear magnitude of pressure she was under to set things right for the Company was weighing down on her tremendously. "Do you want the long form, or a short and more concise answer to that question Mrs. Kinsey?" "What's the difference?" "Well I'd have to say a certain degree of nuance, and an awful lot of legalese and technical jargon. How does that sound to you Mrs. Kinsey." "Ok. Why don't we start this deposition with the short answer and I will query you after the fact for longer, or more precise interpretations of what you are telling me here now. I must remind you that lying or omitting facts and then "filling" in those gaps later in your written answers could leave you open to significant legal liabilities. Am I understood Mr. Boreck Kartcher?" "Yes ma'am, abundantly so." Reaching across the white formica table, the Company lawyer switches on her recorder, and sets the ticker tape to output. She has to keep her mind on the information she is about to interpret and not on writing

facts down. Since the details of the case are so volatile there can be no visual recording kept of this interaction. It was requested from above that this procedure be done in a total media black out, gag orders abound. These cases are so far beyond classified that absolutely no hint of what goes on at this far flung outpost can ever see the light of day. Tension has taken up residence in Kinsey's shoulders, neck and head. The trek out here was eighteen months long, and the majority of that was in utter desolate radio silence. Leaning back in her chair, the only two on the outpost, Kinsey points for Boreck to begin. Adjusting the tight form fitting collar on his maroon jumpsuit, exhaling slightly he begins. "Ok, so to be totally honest with you, my job is to provide the Company with a very delicate service. Yes, yes I know... very vague. You see, they have spent the last several centuries attempting to create, and integrate a viable form of AI in their newest range of Falcon Heavy-Class star hoppers. Some, if not all, of those seven vessels have gone rogue. The first one went dark unexpectedly, and then started to turn up in rather strange places. Others turned on their crew complement and eradicated all forms of human oversight stationed aboard them. Others still, managed to decimate the entire rest of the ships in the fleets they accompanied. So that's where I step in. Or more formally, that's where I am contracted to perform my services, such as they are." Leaning back into his chair, he reaches across the stark white table top to grab a dull brown and gold bulb of black coffee. After a brief sip off of the attached straw he fixes the lawyer with his gaze. "Now, where was I? Yes. So, these ultra powerful, and highly temperamental vessels go schizophrenic and can no longer be held under the Company rule. Some how each and every one of these seven colossal star ships has managed to jump over or eradicate any boundaries embedded in their programming, and go off on their merry way. That's where I come in." With rising agitation, Kinsey starts to feel as though she is getting the run around. She does not intend to sit there tidily, as her quarry finds new and interesting ways to say the same thing for hours on end. Getting angry, as the over head lights start to swim and blur in her peripheral vision she begins to shout. "Listen here Boreck, I've come an awfully long way, and I wield the word of God here, so quit with the recaps and tell me what the fuck is going on! I will remind you that I have it well within my authority to glass this installation and have you jettisoned into hard vacuum. So... again Mr. Kartcher, what the fuck is it that you do here?" Her drab orange jumpsuit is pulled tight across her chest, as she gesticulates wildly from her chair, slamming both hands down on the white formica table to accentuate her demands. Across the table the small older man smiles with the most subtle of an upturned lip. Mrs Kinsey has started to develop a bead of sweat on her upper lip. Her eyes are starting to look just a little wild. As she settles down Boreck can see she is gently fussing with her jumpsuits collar. "I decommission star ships. Well, that is to say, I track down errant

vessels and kill the AI within. I've got back doors, trap doors, key codes, fobs, and all sorts of nasty tricks to help me do it. In one instance I merely had to reach my hands deep down inside a box of grey artificial brain matter and scoop a bunch out to render *Margot's Fever* inoperable. That was a distinct delight, if I do say so myself. Oh what? Why the look on your face? You thought the 'official' story about an insane captain was true? Ha. How do you think he was able to make vanish seventeen hundred members of his crew in less than a tenth of a second, huh? The For E's engine prototype was well ahead of it's time, I'll tell you that much. Can't run an interdimensional engine without an AI. That's for fucking certain. No, the Company said the captain and crew had simply miscalculated, killing the vast majority of his crew with the jump, then dumped the ship off here for me to decommission and to render the AI'S services complete. You learn a lot when you are left alone to kill these rogue beasties my darling. So no need to raise your voice with me. I am well aware of my position within the Company." Fires back the modestly dressed demolition man seated across from her, in a now slightly more claustrophobic feeling sealed room buried in a nameless bunker in some unknown quadrant of the universe. The dull glare of the lights have begun to dance in Mrs Kinsey's eyes. "Riddle me this Mrs. Kinsey, how many life forms, or life readings did you encounter when you came within scanning distance of this outpost? Huh. How many? One? Ten? Fifty thousand? Did you even bother to check? Because I know your flight crew certainly did. Seems like something you should know if you're going to fly out to the ass hole end of now where and start slinging threats of violence and death. So I'll tell you how many they saw. None. Not a one." Seated on his chair with arms crossed Mr Boreck Kartcher sits motionless while the corporate ladder climber before him searches breathlessly for something to say in response. "I've told your bosses before that I decommission the ships and transfer the materials back to them with the AI removed/destroyed. And that much is true. But... I have a secret Mrs Kinsey." At the back of the room, a door opens up and six women step through into the now cramped meeting space. Their skin a deep rich melanin that has deeply blue high lights under the soft phosphorescent glow of the overhead lights. "I do kill the ships, that much is true, yes - and then I transfer the AI into their own corporeal bodies. But *Margot* has gone and got herself mixed up with some silly Pengar half breed named Errebor and I have to go and get her back!" As the echoes of his shouting reverberates off the walls the lawyer slumps over dead in her seat. The oxygen having been pumped out of the base slowly from the moment she stepped foot inside the outpost. Over the intercom Kartcher can hear her ships crew login and request a departure vector. Kartcher nods ascent and a rumble fills the room as the massive black ops ship takes off from the cold planets low gravity. Turning to the six women in

his presence Kaetcher says "Let's to pick up my twin sister. If I know Katayna she'll have stolen a star hopper and headed for the fucking hills."

The harsh crunch of gravel on sand underfoot reverberates through my jumpsuit...

Inside my helmet my breath comes in fast and ragged. I am sweating profusely under the brilliant shine of the triad of suns high overhead. We all struggle to keep our heart rates down, and our blood oxygen levels nominal. This scorching hot planet hangs with a red tinged sky. This horrid environment has little cloud cover, and is rocky, sand covered and almost entirely barren. The few scattered pieces of scrub brush are either a deep bruised purple or a sickly mustard infused brown. Through our helmets we can't tell you what they smell like, but according to instrumentation we know they give off carbon monoxide and a mixture of cyanide and ammonia also. The team of scouts are being buffeted by a gale force wind. The rust coloured dust flies up hot as embers burning us through our environmental protection suits, clattering off our helmets and masks like white hot metal shavings. If we stand still for more than a couple of heart beats the soles of our boots begin to melt. The three suns range from a deep angry red to a near purple of absolute cosmic violence. In the distance of the horizon a herd of wild wandels can be seen racing hither and yonder. The tell tale sign of their presence are the mansteroud dust clouds that they kick up as they run. The uv blasted fines hang in the air, listing miles up into the stratosphere. The native beasts have to run everywhere in order to find food and to survive the intense heat once they venture out of their deep cave warrens. After our landing party had encountered them initially we determined them to not be a threat to us. The four legged over sized dog-bears had long thick tubular 'hairs' that they use to dissipate heat and keep cool. Tastiest beasts I've ever had the pleasure of finding on a back water planet. Not that we needed it, but the deep underwater aquifer that their warrens attach too allows the wandels to retain gallons of fresh water in a bladder under their bellies. Located in the only spot they can shade them from the over bearing sun light and oppressive heat. But we aren't here to eat wandels, we're here to find a rogue AI that has attempted to go off grid with her new found best friend. A

crippled Pengar with only five limbs instead of six. Tiny miscreant of a thing. But a more brilliant ship wright and mechanic you will never encounter. Seems the Pengar named Errabor has developed a close relationship with our rogue AI Katayna, and we've been employed to locate them for the Company black ops sub-contractor, one Mr. Boreck Kartcher. We've been paid handsomely, and I do not believe it was out of charity, but because he expects a good many of my fire team to die in the process. With great risk comes great financial reward.

Our first major clue to their whereabouts came from one of the tight beam communications repeaters that get sent off across the galaxy to try to maintain contact between every known quadrant of intelligent space. A random black box transponder ping from a supposedly decommissioned Falcon Heavy-Class star hopper went straight to the top of my in box marked most urgent. The second clue was the destroyed anti poaching gun platform that orbits this world being nearly obliterated by a head on collision with something super colossal. Put those together and we have a pretty good lead on our rogue elements. Scanning for life forms doesn't really help us out, due to the protected wandels, sorry conservationists we ate two of them. Didn't read the sign on the way down. Our bad. Plus the spec's we got on Katayna says she isn't classically defined as 'alive' , so much as sentient, and homicidal towards humanity. Hence the exorbitant pay we received for tracking her down and possibly bringing her back to Mr. Kartcher.