

Disclaimer: The following story was based on a heavily modded Rimworld playthrough. With the exception of a few debugs, the characters and events were all randomly generated. Some names have been altered to avoid copyright concerns. Elements of the story have been heavily altered and dramatized for a better reading experience. Any similarities to real and or fictional characters fall within fair use.

## **Chapter I - You have one message**

Darkness.

There are few things as feared and revered as true darkness. Even above the flaying of flesh and wrath of the gods, darkness instills a dread so palpable it tears the mind apart. In the years preceding the colonization of outer space, mankind developed the cryptosleep caskets; sarcophagi which could freeze organic life, preserving it safely while it floats through the endless expanse of cosmos, patiently waiting until the day it arrives at its destination. The organic life would then be reawakened after tens of thousands of years of interstellar travel in a safe environment. Travelers most often held a misconception that travel inside a cryptosleep casket would be a long dream. But in temperatures 273.15 below zero, electrical signals necessary for dreaming cannot travel between neurons. In the inconceivable years, there are no dreams. Only true restless sleep.

In a dark corridor, after more than ten thousand years in cryptosleep, one soul drew its first breath. Her neurons sent an electrical signal and made a connection. For the first time in an eternity, she had a thought.

*I'm cold.*

Her eyes slowly opened and beheld a dark ceiling above. She laid there for a while, her body and mind adjusting after the ten thousand year slumber. Going from absolute zero to room temperature takes a heavy toll on the sleepers. As the neurons in her brain began waking up, her eyes caught a glimpse of a flickering red light refracting from the ceiling. The cold numbness began giving away to faint aching of the muscles and a tightness of the heart. Her head moved, scouting the dark corridor, giving way to the fearful realization that she was completely alone.

Carefully, she sat in the casket and looked around. Her memory was fuzzy, and panic gripped her. There were dozens of pods lined up next to each other in the cramped hall, with just enough space in the middle for a person to pass through.

*Why is it so dark?*

Adrenaline kicking in, she decided to jump from the pod onto the floor below. But the moment she landed, her right leg gave away under her and she collapsed onto the cold metal. If the fear didn't get blood running through her brain, then the pulsating pain of her leg certainly did. She suddenly remembered the reason why; her leg was severely scarred, and so was her left arm. How she came to those scars though, she could not recall. She could not recall much at all.

Gaining her footing again, she looked towards the doorway at the end of the casket-lined corridor, and saw the thick darkness that light from the pods could not get through. When the human brain cannot understand what it sees, it fills in the blanks with the worst possible scenarios. From the darkness of the doorway, the girl with

the scarred leg suddenly saw a pair of eyes, looming over as if preparing to lunge at her. The humming of the pods became vague voices as her fear gave the creature a face. To her awakening brain, the monster lurking in the darkness seemed real. *But it's not.* She began rationalizing. *It's not real. There is nothing in the darkness.* She was a little calmer already. She commanded herself to move. *Take a step forward. There are no faces.*

Step by step, she approached the doorway. With each, the fear slowly receded into the back of her mind, until the voices went silent, and there truly were no more faces. The monster which had only existed in her mind was now a vague memory. The doorway was not right in front of her. A thought suddenly came to her.

*There should be a light switch on the right.*

Stepping into the darkness, she reached to the right with her scarred arm. The wall was cold to the touch, and she could not distinguish whether it was concrete, steel, or plastic. Perhaps it was all of them at once. After a few seconds of searching, her hand finally felt the touch of a switch. *Let there be light.*

In an instant, her sight was blinded by the bright light of a dozen lightbulbs. Her right eye hurt as she remembered it too was scarred from some previous injury. Taking a minute for her vision to adjust, she laid her eyes on a small room. *A living room.* A red armchair and a foosball table, both worn out from the many years of use, but kept in good shape. Glancing to the right, she noticed the entire wall was one huge blast door. *This thing must weigh at least five tons.* Approaching the door, a small green panel caught her eye. *This opens it, right?* She examined it from up close.

**>OPEN**

**>SEAL**

**>OPTIONS**

*Open.* She pressed the panel.

**PASSWORD**

*A password?* She didn't remember a password. She barely remembered where she was. At the same time, a sharp pain in her abdomen reminded her that she was on the verge of starving. She wasn't sure how the caskets worked, but she figured she went to sleep on an empty stomach. If she couldn't get through the door, she would either starve or have to risk crawling back to the cold darkness again. *It's just nine numbers. There can't be that many options.* Immediately, she went back to that thought. *There are nine digits, and each one can have any number from 0 to 9... That's...* She tried to remember logarithmic multiplying. *Three and a half million possible passwords.* Panic set in once again, this time from the possibility of impending doom. *I'm going to die here.* She set her eyes on the panel again. *Maybe there's something in the options.* Clicking the **>OPTIONS**, she was greeted with another panel.

**>BRIGHTNESS**

**>TINT**

**>VOLUME**

*This is absolutely useless.* Her composure began melting away. She was wounded,

starving and freezing to death in a room she could not escape from. Checking the casket hall, she found nothing but gathered dust and an old bottle cap. She lost track of time as slight delirium began setting in. Desperate, she started banging on the blast door. *Maybe there's someone on the other side.*

"Hello?! Is anyone there?"

No response.

"Please, someone help me! I'm trapped in here!"

She kept it up for several minutes, but each bang on the door only eroded her hope of survival. *I don't want to die like this.*

"I don't want to die like this!"

Carelessly, she kicked the blast door with her right leg, forgetting the scar which previously made her collapse. It gave out for the second time on that day, and the girl weakly fell on her scarred left arm. Pain jolted through her body, and combined with her hunger and dread sent tears to her eyes. "I don't want to die like this..." She used the moment to try to remember how she got to this point. She remembered her father and his surname, Richards, but could not remember his birth name. She remembered being taught about their faith in the goddess Hera, and that they had to hide from the world due to a war. *This is a bunker.* Those blast doors were there to protect them from the outside. *Is there anything still left out there?* Maybe she would be better off dead in there than living out there. *What if we lost the war?*

Suddenly, the lights went out, plunging the room into total darkness again. It lasted for only two minutes which felt like forever, after which they began faintly flickering again. Right as her eyes got used to the darkness, they were once again assaulted by the blinding brightness of the overhead lightbulbs. The blast door opened as the entire bunker rebooted. Expecting toxic fumes and radioactive material to fly into the room, the girl held her breath and braced herself for the inevitable. Yet after feeling neither a change in pressure and temperature nor the wind, she opened her eyes to see the blast door only led to more of the bunker. *How big is this place?*, she thought to herself. Regaining composure once more, she crawled towards the opened blast door before it had a chance to close again. It took some trying, but she got up on her feet and limped her way to the rest of the bunker. *No, not a bunker. This is a vault.*

Unlike the blinding light of the living room, the rest of the vault was illuminated with faint blue lights which gave off no warmth. To anyone else, its arrays of computers and automatization would have been a technological marvel, but the girl paid no mind. Instead, she paid attention to the pressing matter of her hunger. *There should be a room stuffed with food somewhere around here.* She didn't actually know, but she figured the vault must be liveable if there is a living room. *Maybe we ran out of food and that's why we're all sleeping? But then why was she awake? Did the casket malfunction? Can they even do that?*

Her doubts were quickly washed away as she saw a door with the letter T. *Tau. Τροφή.* *This is it!* She opened the door with her right arm, desperately hoping to find the food she needed. To her surprise and elation, the doors were hiding shelves

stocked with food. She grabbed the nearest one and read the label. The letters 'TE' were printed on the thick metal casing. *Please don't be rotten. If it's rotten, I will die.* Anxious, she tore away the plastic bag and opened the metal box.

For the next hour, she quietly ate the meal of potatoes and rice and contemplated her situation. Although the vault was sizeable, she was there alone, with the rest of the occupants sleeping in the cryptosleep caskets. The power outage opened all blast doors inside the bunker, but the door to the outside world was exempt, presumably exactly in case of a situation like this. Even if it was, she had no plans of going outside. The vault was well furnished, with recyclation, an electricity generator, hydroponics for growing food and running water. Her hunger for food was soon replaced by a hunger for answers as she finished her meal. Her eyes wandered to the central computer in the communication hall. Booting it up, she was treated to a terminal.

**%BOOTING...**

**1%**

**12%**

**45%**

**59%**

**78%**

**97%**

**100%**

**%BOOTUP COMPLETE**

**--WELCOME--**

**A. RICHARDS**

**YOU HAVE (1) UNREAD MESSAGE(S)**

Despite never using it before, the computer seemed to recognize her. She noticed the 'unread message' in the corner of her screen. Clicking on a little image of a letter, she was taken to a page within the system.

#### **A STATEMENT OF CONDUCT AND MISSION OBJECTIVES**

**HONORABLE MS. RICHARDS, CITIZEN OF THE VENERATED FEDERATION, MEMBER OF THE HERATHEUISTIC CONGREGATION AND INHABITANT OF VAULT ΨKA-512.**

**IN THE EVENT THAT YOU ARE READING THIS MESSAGE, THE WAR EFFORT IS STILL CONTINUING, AND OUR ENEMIES ARE STILL ALIVE. THIS MESSAGE HAS BEEN MANDATED BY HIGH COMMAND TO BE RELAYED TO EVERY INHABITANT OF THE VAULT, AWAKE OR IN SUSPENSION. IT IS WITH GREAT HONOR THAT YOU HAVE BEEN CHOSEN TO SERVE THE NATION, YOUR PLANET, AND YOUR GODS. DUE TO INCREASING SHORTAGES OF RESOURCES, AND THE LONG-TERM NATURE OF THE WAR, DECREE Ξ1-27 REQUIRES ALL ACTIVE VAULTS TO HAVE A MAXIMUM OF ONE (1) ACTIVE SOLDIERS NO OLDER THAN 90 SOLAR CYCLES ON DUTY. THE REST OF THE SOLDIERS ARE ORDERED TO ENTER SUSPENSION UNTIL THE PREVIOUS ACTIVE SOLDIER CAN NO LONGER SATISFY THE REQUIREMENTS FOR HIS SERVICE. SOLDIERS ON DUTY ARE ORDERED TO HOLD THEIR POSITIONS**

**AND WAIT FOR ORDERS FROM HIGH COMMAND. ADHERENCE TO THESE ORDERS IS MANDATORY, AND UNAUTHORIZED UNSEALING WILL WARRANT CAPITAL PROSECUTION.**

**HAIL HERA, QUEEN OF THE HEAVENS**

**HIGH COMMAND**

She stared at those words and attempted to process them. She was in a bunker called Vault ΨΚΛ-512, and she was to wait until she turned 90 or until High Command gave new orders. The prospect of waiting so many decades completely alone made her uneasy. *Won't I go mad from isolation?* She heard of such things happening to people stranded on deserted islands. Maybe High Command would call soon, though. Who were they fighting again? *Mechanoids from the orbit? Or were they from the underground?* She could not recall exactly, but she understood that to be the reason for her predicament. Curious, she returned to the main menu. There was a panel labeled **ORDERS FROM HIGH COMMAND**, though it did not flash with any new messages. Perhaps one of her predecessors opened them. Clicking on the panel, she was greeted to the full list of messages sent to her vault.

**LAST MESSAGE: 9153 YEARS AGO**

Her heart skipped a beat. *9000 years?! How long has the war been going on?! Something clearly wasn't right, they told her and everyone else the war would be over in 200 years. And that was just the last orders, the war could have been going on for much longer beforehand. The message itself was a long contrived document filled with abstracts, statistics, and constant reiterations of the High Command's confidence that the war would soon be won. She thought over the possibilities again and again. Maybe they just forgot about us?* There were thousands of vaults, maybe they forgot to open all of them. But even then, they would have sent all vaults a message that the war is won. *Unless we lost.* Such a conclusion was hardly farfetched. Regardless, she concluded that High Command was long gone. Her curiosity was not yet sated, though. *There must be a way to find out what's going on outside.* Returning to the main menu, she checked the systems tab.

**POWER GRID: 1023/893kWh (NEEDS REFUELING IN THREE DAYS)**

**BIOFUEL PRODUCTION: 10/12 DAY(S)**

*That's good, power shouldn't be a problem.*

**HYDROPONICS: CYCLE 67 DAY(S) IN (23 DAYS REMAINING)**

**WATER FILTRATION: 100%**

**WATER RECYCLATION: 89%**

**TEMPERATURE: 25°C**

*Someone left me food to eat. I'll have to learn how to work with the hydroponics.*

|  |                 |                       |
|--|-----------------|-----------------------|
| <b>VAULT</b>                                   | <b>DOORS:</b>   | <b>FUNCTIONAL</b>     |
| <b>FRONT</b>                                   | <b>BLAST</b>    | <b>SEALED</b>         |
| <b>EXTERIOR</b>                                | <b>CAMERAS:</b> | <b>NOT FUNCTIONAL</b> |
| <b>EXTERIOR DEFENSE SYSTEM: NOT FUNCTIONAL</b> |                 |                       |

*Darn it.* She wouldn't be able to gage if the outside was safe or not. However, the knowledge that High Command apparently ceased to exist 9000 years ago did not fill her with confidence regarding the state of the world. As far as she knew, she was

safe in the vault, as her predecessors had been for millenia beforehand. Thinking back to the pods, she didn't remember that many though. Just in case, she returned back to the casket hall and counted. 69... 70... 71. She thought hard. 10.000 years divided by 36 was... *140 years*. That was nearly twice the recommended age that had been ordered by High Command. And to think most of the soldiers were already adults. Several possibilities came to mind. The first one was that the vault's inhabitants somehow extended their lifespans beyond that is normally possible. And sure enough, she found a gene-tailoring pod in one of the side rooms near the hall. The other option was that some soldiers were raising new children to take their place. But then there weren't enough spaces in the caskets. She shuddered as she remembered the meal she had. Luckily, there was no meat, or it would really be a cause for concern. The last possibility was that some soldiers simply went to sleep without waking up their successors. But then why was she awake? Was it just a fluke? A malfunction? It would not be that unlikely that a malfunction had happened considering how long the vault stood.

All these thoughts filled her day as she went on with her life. Hours turned into days, days turned into weeks, and weeks turned into months as she settled into her toil. Her days consisted of refueling the generator, waiting for hydroponics to finish growing their crops, playing foosball alone and reading books on the red armchair. They were mostly educational books, but she figured if she was to stay there for the rest of her life, she might as well learn how to fix the vault. Her leg and arm still hurt, but she learned to work through the pain. In the first few months she would check the terminal every morning for new orders, just in case, but she quickly gave up like many before her.

It was almost a year into her stay. The day began like all the days before with her waking up and grabbing a meal from the storage room. Passing through the communications room, she noticed that the computer screen was lit. In the corner of her eye, she saw the words.

#### **YOU HAVE ONE (1) MESSAGE(S)**

She nearly dropped her plate. Her heart began beating with the possibilities. *Did High Command finally come back? Is it a system error?* Setting her plate to the nearest table, she clicked the letter icon.

#### **COMMUNICATIONS - FRONT BLAST DOOR**

*Front blast door.*

She looked to the blast door which lined the opposing wall. Someone was at the front gate. The message read as followed;

**COM.FRONT BLAST DOOR: TESTING**

**COM.FRONT BLAST DOOR: IS ANYONE THERE**

Overjoyed, she began typing an answer. Yet right as she was about to hit 'reply', a concern came to her. *I don't know who that is*. The orders said to leave the vault sealed and let no one in. *But High Command is gone*. If there were people at the door, she could let them in. *If they are people. What if they're mechanoids pretending to be people?* It wasn't unheard of in fiction for machines to trick humans by taking their form, though she had never heard of that happening in real

life. Then again, she was in suspension for more than 10.000 years. She decided to test her luck and sent a reply.

**COM.MAIN: WHO ARE YOU**

Within a few seconds, she got another reply.

**COM.FRONT BLAST DOOR: I AM ONE OF YOU**

*That's not convincing.* She decided to test them.

**COM.MAIN: WHO IS OUR LADY**

**COM.FRONT BLAST DOOR: HERA**

**COM.MAIN: HOW DID YOU FIND THIS VAULT**

**COM.FRONT BLAST DOOR: THE WAR IS OVER, WE WERE SENT TO RELAY THE INFORMATION TO YOU**

Her heart began beating again. If the war is over, why did they have to wait ten thousand years?

**COM.MAIN: HIGH COMMAND HASN'T SENT A MESSAGE IN 9000 YEARS**

**COM.FRONT BLAST DOOR: YOUR COMMUNICATION SYSTEMS ARE BROKEN, WE HAVE TRIED TO REACH YOU**

She was skeptical, but the more she thought about it, the more she found it believable. Maybe the communication systems really are broken. The vaults are so remote and hidden away from the world that they could sit there without being found for hundreds of thousands of years.

**COM.FRONT BLAST DOOR: IT IS SAFE TO COME OUT**

**COM.MAIN: HOW DO I KNOW YOU ARE NOT A MECHANOID**

**COM.FRONT BLAST DOOR: YOU CAN TEST ME WITH A PARADOX**

**COM.MAIN: THIS SENTENCE IS A LIE**

**COM.FRONT BLAST DOOR: I AM STILL HERE, THE PARADOX DIDN'T KILL ME**

*Alright, they're not a mechanoid. Still, I don't know if I can trust them.*

**COM.MAIN: HIGH COMMAND ORDERED THIS VAULT SEALED INDEFINITELY**

**COM.MAIN: DISOBEYING ORDERS FROM HIGH COMMAND WARRANTS CAPITAL PROSECUTION**

**COM.FRONT BLAST DOOR: HIGH COMMAND ORDERS THE VAULT TO BE UNSEALED**

**COM.FRONT BLAST DOOR: DISOBEYING THIS ORDER WILL WARRANT CAPITAL PROSECUTION**

Her heart was beating out of her chest now. *If this is High Command and I disobey the order, they will **kill** me. But if it isn't High Command and I open the door, I will also disobey the order. What do I do now?* She contemplated the decision for several minutes. She considered asking Hera, but she doubted it would result in anything.

**COM.FRONT BLAST DOOR: COME OUT NOW**

In the end, she decided to give in to the thinly veiled threat. Making a quick trip to her wardrobe, she grabbed a cyan mask, as was the custom for her faith. She now stood before the blast door, gathering courage to let the monster into the darkness.

"Alright, this is it. No coming back. Let's make High Command proud."

With her scarred hand, she reached for the panel and pressed "Unseal". The

unbelievably ancient door creaked as it was opened for the first time in ten millenia. Before she could even react, her vision was completely blinded by the sunlight. She felt the warm spring air rush into the vault, and the smell of long forgotten plants filled her nose.

As her eyes adjusted to the new sensation like they did almost a year before, she noticed the muzzle of a handgun pointed right in her face. Before her stood a woman twice her age, of light complexion and dark hair worn in a braid. Her large belt stood in contrast to her fairly light clothing. Though she was still partially blinded, she could make out her tensed concentrated eyebrows.

"Y-you are not from High Command."

A smirk spread through the woman's face. "Smart girl." The woman took a few steps forward, pressing the muzzle into her forehead. "How many more tombs?"

After a few seconds of no response, she pressed the gun further, causing the vault keeper to take a step back.

"I am deaf. You need to look at me when you're talking to me." The woman, perhaps taking pity, decided to stop pressing her handgun into the keeper's face. She stared right at her, and spoke more clearly so she could understand her.

"How many more tombs are out there in the world?"

"I don't know." There was a somber tone in her voice. The woman was not satisfied with the answer.

"I don't believe you. How many more?"

The keeper thought for a second. "Eight? Twenty? Forty two? Two hundred? A hundred thousand?"

Concluding that she was not going to get an answer, the raider decided she was going to move the topic. "Is anyone else awake?"

"No, there's only me.", the keeper answered.

This elicited a smile in response. "How long have you been there?"

"Since the beginning."

"How long was that?"

The keeper answered. "I have lost count."

"Let's get inside for a tour, shall we?" The raider now held the keeper hostage, making her show her around the vault. She was particularly impressed by the ancient computers, but oddly enough seemed not to be interested in any supplies. Eventually, their tour landed them in the generator room, where the keeper stored chemfuel.

"Pour it on the ground." She ordered.

The keeper protested, not understanding the order. "But then it will go to waste--"

A shot was fired, narrowly missing her and instead hitting one of the walls. She gave in, and began pouring the chemfuel onto the floor.

"Why are you doing this?" She could not understand what reason she might have for endangering her. They were both humans. They had a common enemy in the mechanoids, she thought. After a good fifteen minutes of pouring, all of the canisters were empty. The raider pulled out a matchbox from her pockets and lit one up. She thought for a moment about what she would say. This was a grand day,



after all. Eventually, she settled on a "Bon Voyage" and dropped the match into the chemfuel, igniting it just in time to hear the sound of a door closing behind her.

On the other side of the door, the keeper pressed the **>SEAL** option as fast as she could, sentencing the woman on the other side to a slow and painful doom. She pressed herself against the vault door in a half-hearted attempt to keep it closed, despite not actually needing to do it. Moreso, she just needed to collapse after the stress it had caused her. She contemplated what just happened to her. She broke the orders of High Command and unsealed the vault. A woman, a fellow human threatened her life and almost set the vault on fire. And now, she had taken a life, glad for her deaf ears which spared her from having to listen to her screams. She reprimanded herself for feeling bad. She was not a normal person. Instead of the natural way, she was born from a vat to be a soldier for Hera. She was taught to not react in this way. And yet, all conditioning and hormonal experimentation gave away to a primal feeling of dread and guilt. Her heart was beating out of her chest like never before, and she felt a burning sensation in her limbs and torso.

*I'm burning.*

The realization hit her like a train as she jumped away from the blast door. She could not hear it, but the smell of burning fuel coming through the ventilation and the increasing heat could not be ignored. The fire might have killed the raider, but it also ignited the fuel, generators, and everything else inside. Quickly, smoke started filling the vault. With no other option, the keeper decided to brave the outside and ventured out of the vault for the first time in an eternity.

Despite already figuring out the outside must be safe, she was amazed by the beauty of it. The vault was situated in a steep cliff, which had mostly eroded away in the 10.000 years, leaving the vault exposed. She walked in the meadow, which was surrounded by a birch forest. Spotting the raider's supplies near the vault, she grabbed what she could before running north into the wilderness.