

AN ORBIT NOVELLA



JAMES S. A. COREY

GOAPS OF RISK

AN EXPANSE NOVELLA

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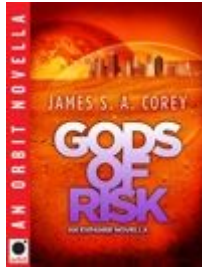
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Gods of Risk

What *kind* of problem?” Hutch asked. Even though he was from the settlements near Mariner Valley, he didn’t have the relaxed, drawling accent of that part of Mars. Hutch’s voice buzzed like a radio on just the wrong frequency.

“It’s not bad,” Leelee said, leaping to his defense. “It’s not bad, right, David? Not really a problem. Inconvenience maybe.”

“Inconvenience,” David echoed.

The silence was uncomfortable. David tugged his fingers, pulling each one straight out from the hand until the knuckle popped, then moving on to the next. He was half a head taller than Hutch, but he couldn’t seem to bring his gaze up higher than the thin man’s sternum. In two months, David would be sixteen, but he felt about six. Hutch’s meetings were always in small rooms, away from the main passages and corridors. This one had been a storage hole from the first generation of settlements. The walls were the polished stone of Mars covered with a clear insulative ceramic that was starting to bubble and gray with age. The light was a construction lantern, the burning white of the LED softened and made ruddy by Leelee’s paisley silk scarf draped over it. They sat on metal crates in the cold. Hutch scratched at the scars on his wrist.

“Don’t let it choke you, little man,” Hutch said. It was an old joke between them—David’s family were Polynesian before they were Martian, and between genetics and growing up at barely over a third of Terran g, David was over two meters tall and leaning toward pudgy. “Just say what it is. You got a bad batch, right?”

“No, nothing like that. The batch is fine. It’s just my aunt Bobbie’s come to live with us for a while. She’s always at the place now. Always. Anytime I get home, she’s there.”

Hutch frowned and tilted his head. Leelee put her arm around his shoulder, draping herself close to the man. Hutch shrugged her back but not off.

“She knows you’re cooking?”

“She doesn’t know anything,” David said. “She just lifts weights and watches video feeds all day.”

“Lifts weights?” Hutch asked.

There was an undercurrent of amusement in his voice that made David’s guts unknot. He risked a glance at the thin man’s tea-brown eyes.

“She used to be a Marine.”

“Used to be?”

“Something weird happened. She sort of quit.”

“So not a Marine anymore. And now what is she?”

“Just a fucking inconvenience,” David said. He took a little joy in the profanity. *Hell* and *damn* were the worst language tolerated in the Draper house. *Fuck* would have gotten him yelled at. Worse than that would be unthinkable. “The batch is fine. But it’s going to be harder to get the next one done. I can’t do any of the prep work at home now.”

Hutch leaned back, his laughter filling the air. Leelee’s face relaxed, all the little worry lines vanishing back into the eggshell smoothness of her skin.

“Shit,” Hutch said. “You had me thinking there was trouble for a minute there. Thought I was going to have to tell my people that my best cook fell down.”

David picked up his satchel, fumbled through it, and came out with a rattling plastic jar. Hutch took it, cracked the seal, and poured four or five of the small pink lozenges into his hand, then passed one to Leelee. She popped it in her mouth like it was hard candy. The 2,5-Dimethoxy-4-*n*-propylthiophenethylamine was a serotonin receptor agonist that broke down into—among other things—a 2,5 desmethoxy derivative that was a monoamine oxidase A inhibitor. The euphoric effects would start to tighten Leelee’s joints and lift her mood in the next half hour. The hallucinations wouldn’t kick in for an hour, maybe an hour and a half, and then they’d last her through the night. She rattled the lozenge across the

back of her teeth with her tongue, grinning at him. David felt the first stirrings of an erection and looked away from her.

“You do good work, little man,” Hutch said, taking out his hand terminal. The small chime meant the transfer was done. David’s secret account had a little more money in it, not that he was in this for the money. “Now, this auntie thing. What’s it going to do to your schedule?”

“I’ve still got the lab at school,” David said. “I can sign up for more time there. Seniors get preference, so it won’t be too hard. It’s just—”

“Yeah, no,” Hutch said. “Better we play safe. You tell me how much time you need to make the next batch; that’s how much time you can take.”

“I’m thinking a couple weeks at least,” David said.

“Take them, they’re yours,” Hutch said, waving his scarred hand. “We’re in this for the long haul, you and me. No reason to get greedy now.”

“Yeah.”

The thin man stood up. David was never sure how old Hutch really was. Older than him and Leelee and younger than David’s parents. That gulf of years seemed to fill infinite possibilities. Hutch shrugged on his dust-red overcoat and pulled his brown knit tuque out of a pocket, flapped it once like he was whipping the air, and pulled it down over white-blond hair. Leelee stood up with him, but Hutch put a hand on her bare shoulder, turning the girl toward David.

“You see my girl here back to the land of the living, eh, little man? I got a thing to do.”

“All right,” David said. Leelee pulled her scarf off the lantern, and the dirty little room went brighter. Hutch gave a mocking three-finger salute, then unsealed the door and left. The rule was that Hutch left first, and then ten minutes later David could go. He didn’t know exactly where Hutch went, and if Leelee was here with him, he didn’t care. She leaned against him, smelling like verbena and girl. She was a year

older than him, and he could have rested his chin on the top of her head.

“You’re doing all right?” he asked.

“Am,” she said, her voice slushy and soft. “It’s starting to come on.”

“That’s good.” He gathered her a little closer. She rested her head against his chest, and they waited quietly for the precious minutes to pass.

Seven communities—called the neighborhoods—scattered through the northern reach of the Aurorae Sinus made up Londres Nova. The city, such as it was, had burrowed deep into the flesh of Mars, using the soil as insulation and radiation shielding with only ten domes pressing out to the surface. Forty thousand people lived and worked there, carving new life into the unforgiving stone of humanity’s second home. Tube stations made a simple web topology that determined the social forms and structures. Aterpol was the only station with connections to every other neighborhood, and so it became the de facto downtown. Salton was under the biggest agricultural dome and had a surface monorail to the observatory at Dhanbad Nova, and so the upper university and technical clinics were concentrated there. The lower university was in Breach Candy, where David and his family lived. Nariman and Martineztown had been manufacturing and energy production sites in the first wave of colonization, and the displacement that came with new technologies meant both neighborhoods were struggling to reinvent and repurpose themselves. Innis Deep and Innis Shallows each had only a single tube route out, making them cul-de-sacs and havens for the sort of Martian who was almost a Belter—antisocial, independent, and intolerant. An address in either Innis was the mark of an outsider—someone dangerous or vulnerable. Leelee lived in the Shallows, and Hutch lived in the Deep.

As much as the neighborhoods differed, the tube stations were the same: high, arched ceilings bright with full-spectrum light and chaotic with echoes; thin-film video monitors pasted to the walls, blaring public information and entertainment feeds; kiosks selling food and clothes, the latest fads and

fashions cycled in and out as regularly as tides. Security cameras looked down on everything, identity-matching software tweaking the video feeds to put names with faces in the crowd. The air always seemed to have the faint scents of ozone and cheap food and piss. The plastic-film flyers always looked the same whether they were announcing yoga classes, lost pets, or independent music acts. David had been to the cities in Mariner Valley and the base of Olympus Mons, and the tube stations had been the same there too. The one unifying cultural product of Mars.

David led Leelee through the bustle of the Martineztown station. He shifted his satchel so that she could put her arm around his. The farther they walked the less steady her steps were. Her arm curled around him like ivy clinging to a pillar, and he could feel the stiffness in her muscles and hear it in her voice when she spoke. Her pupils were dilating with pleasure and the chemical cascade in her brain. He wondered what she was seeing.

“You never try the stuff yourself?” she asked again, unaware that it was the third time.

“No,” David said again. “I’m finishing up my senior labs. There isn’t really time for a night off. Later maybe. When I get my placement.”

“You’re so smart,” she said. “Hutch always says how you’re so smart.”

Ahead of them, near the platform, a crowd of something close to fifty people were chanting together and holding up signs. A dozen uniformed cops stood a few yards away, not interfering, but watching closely. David ducked his head and turned Leelee away at an angle. Maybe if they headed toward the restrooms there would be a way to the platform that didn’t involve walking a tripping girl past the police. Not that the police were paying much attention to the foot traffic. Their attention was all on the protest. The signs were hand lettered or printed on standard-sized paper and glued together. A couple had thin-film monitors playing looped images that fuzzed out to a psychedelic rainbow swirl when the signs flexed.

HIT BACK! and ARE WE WAITING UNTIL THEY KILL US? and EARTH STARTED IT. LET'S FINISH IT. This last slogan was accompanied by a bad homemade animation of a rock slamming into the Earth, a massive molten impact crater looking like a bloody bullet wound in the planet.

The protestors were a mixed group, but most were a little older than David or Leelee. Blood-dark faces and the square-gape mouths sent the sense of rage radiating out from them like heat. David paused, trying to make out what exactly they were chanting through the echoes, but all he could tell was that it had seven syllables, four in a call and three in response. One of the police shifted, looking at David, and he started walking again. It wasn't his fight. He didn't care.

By the time they reached the platform, Leelee had gone quiet. He led her to a formed plastic bench that was intended for three people, but was snug with just the two of them. It ticked and popped under his weight, and Leelee flinched from the sound. There were small, distressed lines between her brows. The arrival board listed six minutes for the tube that would eventually get them to Innis Shallows, the seconds counting down in clean-lined Arabic numerals. When Leelee spoke, her voice was tight. He didn't know if it was from sadness or the expected side effect of the drug.

"Everybody's so angry," she said. "I just wish people weren't so angry."

"They've got reason to be."

Her focus swam for a moment, her gaze fighting to find him.

"Everyone's got reasons to be," she said. "I've got reasons to be. You've got reasons to be. Doesn't mean we are, though. Doesn't mean we want to be. You aren't angry are you, David?" The question ended almost like a plea, and he wanted to tell her that he wasn't. He wanted to say whatever words would smooth her perfect brow, and then take her back to her room in the housing complex and kiss her and have her strip off his clothes. He wanted to see her naked and hear her laugh

and fall asleep, spent, in her arms. He coughed, shifting on the bench. “You aren’t angry, are you?” she asked again.

The soft tritone sounded.

“The tube car’s here,” he said, forcing a smile. “Everything’s going to be fine. Just relax, right?”

She nodded and tried to pull away from him.

“It’s all red. You’re red too. Like a great big cherry. You’re so *smart*,” she said. “So you never try the stuff yourself?”

On the tube car, things weren’t better. This leg of the trip was an express for Aterpol, and the men and women on it were older than he was by a decade. Their demographic weight had the public monitor set to a newsfeed. In some well-appointed newsroom on the planet, a thin, gray-haired man was shouting down a swarthy woman.

“I don’t care!” the man said. “The agent they weaponized came from some larger, extra-solar ecosystem, and I don’t care. I don’t care about Phoebe. I don’t care about Venus. What I care about is what they did. The fact is—and no one disputes this—the fact is that Earth bought those weapons and —”

“That’s a *gross* oversimplification. Evidence is that there were several bids, including one from—”

“Earth bought those weapons and they fired them at us. At you and me and our children and grandchildren.”

The doors slid silently closed and the car began its acceleration. The tubes themselves were in vacuum, the car riding on a bed of magnetic fields like a gauss round. The lurch of acceleration was gentle, though. They’d cover the distance to Aterpol in twenty minutes. Maybe less. Leelee closed her eyes and rested her head against the back of the car. Her lips pressed thin and her grip on his arm tightened. Maybe they should have waited for her to take the pill until she’d gotten to someplace quieter and better controlled.

“And Earth also provided the tracking data that shot them all down,” the woman on the screen said, pointing at the gray-haired man with her whole hand. “Yes, a rogue element in the

Earth military was involved, but to dismiss the role that the official, *sanctioned* military played—”

“Sanctioned military? You make it sound like there’s a civil war on Earth. I don’t see that. I don’t see that at all. I see Mars under a persistent, existential threat and the government sitting on its hands.”

“Tell me a story,” Leelee said. “Talk to me. Sing me a song. Something.”

“I’ve got music on the hand terminal if you want.”

“No,” she said. “You. Your voice.”

David tucked his satchel between his feet and turned toward her, dipping his head down close to her ear. He had to hunch a little. He licked his lips, trying to think of something. His mind was blank, and he grabbed at the first thought that came through him. He brought his mouth to the shell of her ear. When he sang, he tried to be quiet enough that no one else would hear him.

“Good King Wenceslas looked out on the feast of Stephen...”

Leelee didn’t open her eyes, but she smiled. That was good enough. For ten minutes, David went on, quietly singing Christmas carols to Leelee. Some he got into and didn’t remember the right words, so he just made things up. Nonsense that fit the rhythm of the music, or nearly did.

The detonation was the loudest thing David had ever heard, less a sound than a physical blow. The car pitched forward, rattling against the walls of the tube, throwing Leelee into him and then back. The lighting flickered, failed, and then came on in a different color. They were stopped between stations. The monitors clicked to a pinkish-gray as they rebooted, then glowered back to life with the emergency services trefoil.

“Is this happening?” Leelee asked. Her irises were tiny rings of brown around deep black. “David? Is this happening?”

“It is, and it’s all right,” he said. “I’m here. We’re fine.”

David checked his hand terminal, thinking that the newsfeeds might tell him what was going on—power failure, rioting, enemy attack—but the network was in lockdown. An almost supernaturally calm male voice came over the public monitors. “The public transport system has encountered a pressure anomaly and has been shut down to assure passenger safety. Stay calm and a maintenance crew will arrive shortly.” The message was less important than the tone of voice it was spoken in, and Leelee relaxed a little. She started to giggle.

“Well this is fucked,” she said and grinned at him. “Fucked, fucked, fucked, fucked, *fucked*.”

“Yeah,” David said. His mind was already jumping ahead. He’d be late getting home. His father would want to know why, and when it came out he’d been in Martineztown, there’d be questions. What he’d been doing there, who had he been seeing, why hadn’t he told anybody. All around them, the other passengers were grumbling and sighing and arranging themselves into comfortable positions, waiting for the rescuers. David stood up and sat down again. Every passing minute seemed to relax Leelee and shunt that tension into his spine. When he caught a glimpse of his reflection in the glass of the tube doors, the boy looking back seemed furtive and scared.

Half an hour later, the emergency hatch at the end of the car creaked, popped, and opened. A man and a woman in matching blue security uniforms stepped in.

“Hey, folks,” the man said. “Everyone all right? Sorry about this, but some jackhole broke the vacuum seals. Whole system’s going to be down for about six hours, minimum. Some places longer. We’ve got service carts out here that can take folks to transport buses. Just line up single file, and we’ll get you where you’re going.”

Leelee was humming to herself as David drew her into line. He couldn’t get her to Innis Shallow and get back home. Not with the tubes down. He bit his lips and they moved forward one at a time, the other passengers vanishing through the emergency hatch and into the temporary airlock beyond it. It took forever to reach the front of the line.

“Where are you two headed?” the security man asked, consulting his hand terminal. It was working, even though David’s wasn’t. The man looked up, concerned. “Hermano. Where are you two headed?”

“Innis Shallows,” David said. And then, “She’s going to Innis Shallows. I was taking her there, because she’s not feeling so good. But I’ve got to get to Breach Candy. I’m going to miss my labs.” Leelee stiffened.

“Innis Shallows and Breach Candy. Step on through.”

The temporary airlock was made from smooth black Mylar, and walking through it was like going through the inside of a balloon. The pressure wasn’t calibrated very well, and when the outer seal opened, David’s ears popped. The hall was wide and low, the dull orange emergency lights filling the passage with shadows and leaching the color out of everything. The air was at least five degrees colder, enough to summon gooseflesh, and Leelee wasn’t holding his arm anymore. Her eyebrows were lifted and her mouth was set.

“It’ll be okay,” he said as they came close to the electric carts. “They’ll get you home all right.”

“Yeah, fine,” she said.

“I’m sorry. I’ve got to get home. My dad—”

She turned to him. In the dim light, her dilated eyes didn’t seem as out of place. Her sobriety made him wonder how much she’d really been feeling it before and how much had been a playful kind of acting.

“Don’t worry about it,” she said. “Not the first time I’ve been tripping in public, right? I can behave myself. Just thought you’d come play and I was wrong. Hard cheese for me and moving on now.”

“I’m sorry. Next time.”

“You call it,” she said with a shrug. “Next time.”

The driver of the cart for Innis Shallow called out, and Leelee clambered aboard, squeezed between a middle-aged man and a grandmotherly woman, and waved back at David

once. The middle-aged man glanced at David, back at Leelee, then down at the girl's body. The cart lurched, whined, and lurched again. David stood, watching it pull away. The mixture of shame, regret, and longing felt like an illness. Someone touched his elbow.

"Breach Candy?"

"Yes."

"Over here, then. Damn. You're a big one, aren't you? All right, though. We'll fit you in."

It was two years almost to the day since David had met Hutch at the lower university. David had been in the commons, the wide, carpeted benches with their soft, organic curves welcoming the students eating lunch. At thirteen, David had already been biochemistry track for two years. His last labs had been in tRNA transport systems, and he was reading through the outline for the carbon complex work that would take up his next six months when one of the seniors—an olive-skinned boy named Alwasi—had sat down beside him and said there was someone David should meet.

Hutch had made himself out as more of a scholar back then but still with an edge to him. For months, David had thought the man was an independent tutor; the kind of hired instructor a family might bring on if their children were falling behind. David still had seven rounds of lab to go before his placement, so he hadn't thought too much about Hutch. He'd just become another face in the whirl of the lower university, one more minor character in the cast of thousands. Or hundreds at least.

Looking back, David could sort of see how Hutch had tested him. It had begun with asking innocuous little favors—tell someone who shared David's table that Hutch was looking for her, get Hutch a few grams of some uncontrolled reagent, keep a box for him overnight. They were things that David could do easily, and so he did. Every time, Hutch praised him or paid him back with small favors. David began to notice the people Hutch knew—pretty girls and tough-looking men. Several of the low-tier instructors knew Hutch on sight, and if they weren't overly friendly to him, they were certainly respectful.

There hadn't been any one moment when David had crossed a line from being someone Hutch knew to cooking for him. It all happened so smoothly that he'd never felt a bump.

The fact was he would have done the side projects for Hutch without being paid. He couldn't spend the money on anything too extravagant for fear his parents would ask questions, so he used it here and there—a little present for Leelee or lunch on him for the other students at his table or the occasional indulgence that he could explain away. For the most part, it just sat in the account, growing slowly over time. The money wasn't precious because it was money. It was precious because it was secret and it was his.

When he had his placement and moved out to student housing in Salton, he'd have more freedom. Hutch's money would buy him a top-flight gaming deck or a better wardrobe. He could take Leelee out for fancy dinners without having to explain where he'd been or who he'd been with. The workload would be harder, especially if he got placed in medical or development. He'd heard stories about first-year placements on the development teams who pulled fifty-six hour shifts without sleep. Carving out another six hours after that for Hutch might be hard, but he'd worry about that when he got there. He had more immediate problems.

The transport buses were old, wheezing electrical carts, some of them dating back two generations. The drivetrain clicked under him, and the rubberized foam wheels made a constant sticky ripping noise. David hunched in a seat, trying to pull his elbows close in against his body. Around him, the other travelers looked bored and restless. The system was still locked down, his hand terminal restricted to what it held in local memory. He checked it every few seconds just to feel he had something to do. The wide access corridors passed slowly, the conduits and pipes like the circulatory system of some vast planetary behemoth. It seemed like the corridor would go on forever, even though the distance between Martineztown and Breach Candy wasn't more than forty kilometers.

He was supposed to be in his labs at the lower university. Even if all the public transport was locked down, it wasn't

more than a half-hour walk from there to home. David figured he could claim to have been in the middle of something and that it had taken longer than he'd expected to finish up the work. Except that was the excuse he'd been giving to cover the extra time he'd spent cooking for Hutch. His mother had already started wondering in her vague accusation-without-confrontation way whether he was losing focus on his work. If they found out he'd been outside the neighborhood, it would be bad. If they found out why, it would be apocalyptic. David cracked his knuckles and willed the bus to go faster.

It was easy to think of Londres Nova as existing only along its tube lines, but the truth was generations of colonists and prototerraformers had made a webwork of tunnels under the airless permafrost of Mars. Whole complexes of the original tunnels had gone fallow—sealed off and the atmosphere and heat allowed to flow away into the flesh of the planet. Supply passages linked to electrical maintenance lines. There were shortcuts, and the bus driver knew them. Just when David was about to weep or scream with frustration, he saw the edge of Levantine Park and the northernmost edge of Breach Candy. The bus was going faster than he could walk, but just knowing where he was, being able to map his own way home, made the frustration a little less. And the fear maybe a little more.

I didn't do anything wrong, he told himself. I was in my lab. There was a security alert and the network went down. I had to finish the experiment, and it took a little longer because everyone was trying to find out what had happened. That's all. Nothing else.

The fifth time the bus stopped, he was as close to his family's hole as he was going to be. He lumbered out into the corridors of his hometown, his head down and his shoulders tucked in toward his chest like he was trying to protect something.

The family lived in a series of eight rooms dug out of the stone and finished with textured organics. Rich brown bamboo floors met soft mushroom-brown walls. The lights were indirect LEDs alleged to match a sunny afternoon on Earth. To David, they were just the color house-lights were. A newsfeed

was muttering in the common rooms, so some portion of the system must have been taken off security lockdown. David closed the door behind him and stalked through the kitchen, fists against his thighs, breath shallow and fast.

Aunt Bobbie was alone in the den. In any other family, she'd have been huge. For a Draper, she was only about the middle of the bell curve in height, but athletic and strong. She wore a simple loose-cut outfit that lived somewhere between sweats and pajamas. It mostly hid the shape of her body. She looked away from the video feed, her dark eyes meeting his, and killed the sound. On the screen, a reporter was speaking earnestly into the camera. Behind him, a lifting mech was hauling a slab of ferrocete.

"Where's Dad?" he asked.

"Stuck in Salton with your mom," Bobbie said. "The blowout was on that line. Security's saying they'll have everything moving again in about ten hours, but your father said they'd probably be taking a room and coming home in the morning."

David blinked. No one was going to give him any grief. It should have felt like relief. He shrugged, trying to get the tension out of his shoulders, but it wouldn't go. He knew it didn't make sense to be irritated with his parents for not being there to fight with.

"Do we know what happened?" he asked, stepping into the room.

"Sabotage," Aunt Bobbie said. "Someone blew a hole between the tube and the maintenance corridor, sucked in a few thousand kilos of air. They took the vacuum seals off-line too, so the whole tube system popped like a balloon."

"Earth?"

Aunt Bobbie shook her head.

"Earth doesn't think that small," she said. "This is someone local trying to start something."

"Why would someone local blow up our own stuff if they're mad at Earth?"

“Because Earth’s too far away.”

It didn’t sound like an answer to his question, but David let it go with another shrug.

Aunt Bobbie’s gaze was on the monitor and not on it. Through it. Seeing something else. He knew she’d been on Ganymede when the fighting started and that something had happened so that she wasn’t in the military anymore and she had to live with them. The unfairness of her bringing her problems into his house chafed. She sighed and forced a smile.

“How’d things go at the lab?”

“All right,” he said.

“What’re you working on?”

“Just labs,” he said, not looking at her.

“Your dad said he expected your placement to come through soon. Find out what you’ll be doing for the next eight years.”

“Guess.”

Aunt Bobbie smiled.

“I remember when I first got into training. There was a breakdown in the notification system, and they wound up losing my placement for about six days. I was chewing through rocks until it came through. What about you? Are you more excited, scared, or pissed off?”

“I don’t know,” he said.

“Your dad’s really proud of you,” Aunt Bobbie said. “Whatever happens, he’s going to be really proud of you.”

David felt the flush of warmth rising in his neck and cheeks. For a second he thought he was embarrassed, but then he recognized the rage. He clamped his jaw tight and looked at the monitor so that he wouldn’t be looking at Aunt Bobbie. The mech was gesturing to a ragged hole two meters high and half a meter wide, the man controlling it speaking to the reporter as steel claws pointed out the fine cracks fanning unpredictably out from the breach. David’s teeth ached and he made himself relax his jaw. Aunt Bobbie turned back to the

screen. He couldn't read her expression, but he had the feeling that he'd exposed something about himself he didn't want her to know.

"We have anything for dinner?"

"I didn't make anything," she said. "Could, though."

"It's all right. I'll grab a bowl of rice. I have work I need to do. Lab stuff."

"Okay."

David's room was in the back. It had been cut from the ground with the image of a standard-sized person, and so it felt cramped to him. A standard bed would have left half a meter between the footboard and the wall; David's was almost flush. The gaming deck, the only thing he'd ever spent Hutch's illicit money on, sat at the side of the desk. The wall was set to a still from *Gods of Risk* where Caz Pratihari was about to duel Mikki Suhanam, both men looking strong, dangerous, and a bit melancholy. When the door was locked, he switched the wall to his favorite picture of Una Meing and threw himself to the bed. The newsfeed muttered from the common room, and under it—almost too faint to make out—Aunt Bobbie's slow, rhythmic grunting. Resistance training probably. He wished he could make all the noises go away. That he could have the house to himself for once. He wondered if Leelee was all right. If she'd made it home safe. If she was angry with him. Or disappointed.

His hand terminal chimed. The alert was from the lower university. In response to the terrorist attack on the tube lines, the labs would be closed the following day. Students with ongoing work that couldn't sit for an extra day were to reply to the section proctor who would either give them special authorization to come in or else do part of the work for them. He ran through a mental checklist. He didn't have anything that needed him to be there, and if he got a little behind, everyone else would, too. He didn't have any of Hutch's reagents in his lab, so if there was a security audit, he'd be all right. He had a day off, then.

Leelee's voice spoke in his memory. *You never try the stuff yourself?* Right now, somewhere in Innis Shallow, Leelee's brain chemistry was cascading through a long series of biochemical waterfalls, one imbalance slipping to another, slipping to another. Her visual cortex firing in strange waves, her hippocampus blurring. He rolled to his side, reached between the bed frame and the wall, and plucked out the little felt bag. The pink lozenge looked tiny in his vast palm. It tasted like strawberry flavoring and dextrose.

David laced his fingers behind his head, looked at the woman on his wall looking back at him, and waited, waited, waited for the euphoria to come.



The lower university was one of the oldest complexes in Londres Nova; the first marks had been made by automated construction mechs when there had been only a few thousand people on the planet. The halls were simple, direct, rectilinear, and hard. In the commons area—what everyone referred to as “outside”—there had been some attempt to soften and humanize the space, but within, it was low ceilings and right angles. It didn't help that the original colonial designs hadn't recessed any of the infrastructure. Halls that were narrow already had water pipes and electrical cables crowding in at the corners. The flooring was all metal grate, and David had to duck to get through the doorways. The suction from hundreds of fume hoods venting out to the atmosphere reclamation plants kept a constant breeze blowing against the main doors, pushing the students in and then keeping them from getting out.

David's locker was in the third hall corridor. Senior's row. It was twice as wide as the one he'd had just the year before, and the locking mechanism didn't stick the way the old one had. He'd put a couple decals on the outer face—a picture of Caz Pratihari, a kanji-print cartoon—but nothing like the multicolored glow of the one next to him. It belonged to an

industrial engineering girl who he never saw unless they were in the hall at the same time. All the lockers had something, though—a picture, a whiteboard, some in-joke one-liner printed on plastic and fused to the metal. Some little mark to say that this space belongs to someone in particular, someone a little—but only a little—different from the others.

At the end of the cycle, everyone in the senior's row would get their placements, empty the lockers, and go to wherever they were put next. The lockers would be scrubbed clean, decontaminated, sealed, and made anonymous again for whichever student was assigned it next. David had heard about sand castles on beaches being washed away by the tide, but he'd never seen an ocean. The lockers of senior's row were the closest analogue among things he actually knew.

David closed the door and turned down toward his workstation. With the tube stations running, his parents back at the house, and the lower university open, the lab was the place he disliked least. The long muscles in his back and legs still ached a little after his night sampling his own wares, and he was half relieved that he could tell Leelee he'd tried it and half relieved that his schedule wouldn't let him try it again. The whole thing had been like having a very long, pleasant, but kind of boring dream. And it had left his head feeling a little hazy in a way he didn't enjoy.

His lab work was almost at its final phase. The terminal built into his desk was arranged to display the data on all seven studies that were making up the complex tissue of his senior labs. They were all built around the single unified idea of trying to build complex cell structures that would sequester ferrous products. It wasn't a holy grail, but it was a good, solid puzzle with a lot of applications for the terraforming efforts if it worked out. With the day out of lab, he had a double handful of data to look over and incorporate.

And so did everyone else.

“Hey? Big Dave?”

Steppan was one of the other four students under Mr. Oke. He stood in the doorway, leaning on a crutch and smiling

uncomfortably. He was pale as bleached flour and allergic to the pharmaceutical cocktail that kept bones dense and muscles functioning in the low Martian gravity. He's broken his leg twice since the year began.

"Hey," David said.

"Pretty crazy about that tube blowout, eh?"

"Bizarre," David said.

"So look, I was wondering...ah..."

"You need something," David said.

"Yeah."

David tapped his wide fingers across the display screen, letting the data batch process without him. Steppan limped into the room. With both of them there, the lab seemed too small.

"I've got an anomaly on one of my runs. I mean way off. Three standard deviations."

"You're fucked, cousin."

"I know. I think I may have gotten some bad reagent."

"Bad? Or wrong?"

"Wrong would be bad. Anyway, I know you've got some extras, and I was wondering—"

"Extras?"

A little knot squeezed in David's chest. Steppan shrugged and looked away like he'd said something he hadn't wanted to.

"Sure. It's no big deal, right? But my chromium stuff has a lot of the same reagents. If I can scrounge enough together to do another run, I could discard the bad data."

"I don't have that much stuff."

Steppan nodded, his head bowed down, eyes to the floor. He licked his lips, and David could see the desperation in the way he held his shoulders. David had imagined a million times what it would be like if his labs went pear-shaped. Especially right before placements. It was everyone's nightmare.

“Sure you do,” Steppan said. “You’re always getting equipment and supplies out of that other locker, right? I mean. You know.”

“I don’t know,” David said. His mouth tasted like copper.

“Sure you do,” Steppan said, not looking up.

The tension in the room was vicious. Steppan hung his head like a whipped dog, but he wouldn’t back away. The walls were too close, the air too stale. Steppan was breathing all the oxygen. The boy’s gaze flickered up to meet David’s and then away again. How much did Steppan know? How much did he suspect? Who else knew?

“I’ll help you,” David said, speaking like the words would cut his tongue if he spoke too fast. “You let me know what you need for another run, and I’ll help you get it, okay? You can have a fresh run. We’ll make the dataset work.”

“Sure, thanks,” Steppan said. The relief in his shoulders wasn’t faked. “Thank you.”

“Does Mr. Oke know about the other locker?”

“No,” Steppan said with a grin that was almost camaraderie. “And never will, right?”

So instead of working his datasets, David spent the morning going through the labs, looking for anyone he knew well enough to talk to. There were fewer than he’d hoped for, and the tension in the air made people short-tempered. Everyone was behind. Everyone had their own problems. Everyone was worried about their labs and their placements and whatever issues their families put on them. By afternoon, he’d given up. The only option left was to get on the network and order a fresh supply for Steppan from the distributor. It didn’t take out too much from his secret account, and he wasn’t the only one scrambling at the last minute to supply a lab. It was usually students buying their own things, he thought, but it wouldn’t seem that odd to have someone doing a favor for a friend. As long as no one asked where the money came from, he’d be fine. When he got back to his actual labs, he felt like he’d already done a full day’s work and he’d hardly started.

The hours passed quickly. By dinnertime, he'd cleared and processed all the data from the day the tubes went down and started on the data for the day after. Just in time for the data that had been accruing while he'd been wandering around the labs to start showing up in the queue. With each batch file that appeared, David felt the night stretching out ahead of him. Maybe he just wouldn't sleep. If he could get through tomorrow, he'd have the whole backlog cleared. Unless someone blew something up, or Steppan decided he wanted something else to keep quiet, or Aunt Bobbie decided to come lift weights at him or something. David tried to stretch the headache out of the base of his skull and got back to work.

At seven minutes past dinnertime, his hand terminal chimed. He accepted the connection with his thumb.

"You aren't coming home for dinner?" his mother asked. Her voice was tinny and small, like air pressed into a straw.

"No," David replied. "I've got to finish my datasets."

"I thought they gave you the daytime to do that," she said. On the hand terminal screen, she looked different than in person. Not older or younger, but both. It was like being shrunk down rubbed out all the wrinkles around her eyes and mouth, but at the same time it made all the gray show in her hair.

"I had some other stuff I needed to take care of."

The small screen version of her face went cool and distant. The tightness in David's shoulders started to feel like a weight.

"Time management is an important skill, David," she said, as if it were just a random thought. Not anything to do with him.

"I know," he said.

"I'll put your meal up for when you get home. Don't be later than midnight."

"I won't."

The connection dropped, and David turned back to his data, growled, and slammed his fist into the display. The monitor

didn't break. It didn't even error out. He might as well not have done anything. The next alert came in the middle of the evening when the labs were starting to empty. The voices in the hallways were fainter, almost lost in the drone and drum of music from the construction labs. The maintenance workers were coming through, old men and women with damp mops and desiccant powders. David almost ignored his hand terminal's tritone chime. It only started to bother him a little, wondering who would have sent a message rather than just opening a connection. He looked over. It was from Leelee, and the header read OPEN WHEN YOU'RE ALONE. David's concentration broke. His imagination leapt to the sorts of messages that girls sent to boys to be watched in private. He reached over and closed the door to his lab and hunched over the hand terminal.

She was in a dark place, the light catching her from the side. In the background, a rai song was playing, all trumpets and ululating male voices. She licked her lips, her gaze flicked to the terminal's control display, and then back to him.

"David, I think I'm in trouble," she said. Her voice shook, her breath pressing into the words. "I need help, okay? I'm going to need help, and I know you like me. And I like you too, and I think you'll help me out, right? I need to borrow some money. Maybe...maybe kind of a lot. I'll know soon. Tomorrow maybe. Just send a message back if you can. And don't talk to Hutch."

A woman's voice called from the background, rising over the music, and Leelee surged forward. The display went back to default, and David put in a connection request that timed out with an offer to leave a message instead. Grunting with frustration, he put in another request. Then another. Leelee's system was off-line. He had the powerful urge to get to the tube station and go to Innis Shallows in person, but he didn't know where to find her once he was there. Didn't even know for sure she'd been there when she sent the message. Curiosity and dread spun up a hundred scenarios. Leelee had been caught with some product and had to bribe the police or she'd be jailed. One of Hutch's enemies had found her and was threatening to kill her if she didn't tell how to find him so now

she needed to get off planet. Or she was pregnant and she had to get to Dhanbad Nova for the abortion. He wondered how much money she'd need. He imagined the smile on her face when he gave it to her. When he saved her from whatever it was.

But first he had to fix his data and get home. No one could know that something was happening. He set the hand terminal to record and placed himself in the center of the image.

"I'll do whatever I can, Leelee. Just you need to get in touch with me. Tell me what's going on, and I'll do whatever you need. Promise." He felt like there was more. Something else he should add. He didn't know what. "Whatever it is, we'll get through it, right? Just call me."

He set the headers and delivered the message. For the rest of the evening, he waited for the chime of a connection request. It never came.

When he got home, it was near midnight but his father and Aunt Bobbie were still awake. The living room monitor was set to a popular feed with a silver-haired, rugged-faced man talking animatedly. With the sound muted, he seemed to be trying to get their attention. David's father sat on the couch, the mass of his body commanding the space from armrest to armrest like a king on his throne. Aunt Bobbie leaned against the wall, lifting a thirty-kilo weight with one arm as she spoke, then gently letting it descend.

"That's how I see it," she said.

"But it *isn't* like that," his father said. "You are a highly trained professional. How much did Mars invest in you over those years you were in the Corps? The resources that you took up didn't come from nowhere. Mars gave something up to give you those opportunities, those skill sets."

It was a tone of voice David had heard all his life, and it tightened his gut. The man on the monitor lifted his hands in outrage over something, then cracked what was meant to be a charming smile.

“And I appreciate that,” Aunt Bobbie said, her voice low and calm in a way that sounded more like shouting than his father’s raised voice. “I’ve served. And those opportunities involved a lot of eighteen-hour days and—”

“No, no, no, no,” his father said, massive hands waving in the air like he was trying to blow away smoke. “You don’t get to complain about the work. Engineering is just as demanding as—”

“—and watching a lot of my friends die in front of me,” Aunt Bobbie finished. The free weight rose and fell in the sudden silence. She shifted it to her other hand. His father’s face was dark with blood, his hands grasping his knees. Aunt Bobbie smiled. Her voice was sad. “You’re thinking about how you can top me on that, aren’t you? Go ahead. Take your time.”

David put his hand terminal down on the kitchen table, the click of plastic on plastic enough to announce him. When they turned to look at him, David could see the family resemblance. For a moment, they were an older brother and a younger sister locked in the same conversation they’d been having since they were children. David nodded to them and looked away, unsettled by the thought and vaguely embarrassed.

“Welcome home,” his father said, rising up from the couch. “How are things at the lab?”

“Fine,” David said. “Mom said she’d put dinner up for me.”

“There’s some curry in the refrigerator.”

David nodded. He didn’t like curry, but he didn’t dislike it. He put a double serving into a self-heating ceramic bowl and set it to warm. He kept his eyes down, wishing that they’d go on with whatever they’d been talking about so they’d forget about him yet dreading listening to them fight if they did. Aunt Bobbie cleared her throat.

“Did they find anything more about the tube thing?” she asked. David could tell from the shift in her tone of voice that she’d put up the white flag. His father took a deep breath, letting it out slowly through his nose. David’s curry tasted

more of ginger than usual, and he wondered whether Aunt Bobbie had made it.

“Newsfeed says they have leads,” his father said at last. “I imagine they’ll get someone in custody by the end of the week.”

“Are they saying outside involvement?”

“No. Some idiot protestor trying to make a point about how vulnerable we are,” his father said as if he actually knew. “It’s happening everywhere. Selfish crap, if you ask me. We were on our way to making the schedule for the month before this happened. Now everyone’s lost a day at least. That’s not so much when it’s just one person, but there were thousands of people thrown out off schedule. It’s like Dad always says: Three hundred sixty-five people miss one shift, that’s a year gone in a day, you know?”

“Yeah, sort of,” Aunt Bobbie said. “I remember it being nine thousand people miss an hour.”

“Same thought.”

David’s hand terminal chimed its tritone and his heart raced, but when he pulled it closer, it was only the lower university’s automated system posting the lab schedule for the next week. He looked through it without really taking it in. No surprises. He’d get his work done somehow. He killed the sound on his terminal and switched back to Leelee’s message just to see her face, the way her shoulders moved. She licked her lips again, looked down, and then up. He heard her voice in his memory. Not the message she’d sent him tonight, but the last thing she said the night the tube broke down. *Just thought you’d come play and I was wrong.*

Oh, God. Had she been thinking about having *sex* with him? Wouldn’t Hutch have been angry? Or was that why Hutch had sent them away together? Was that what this was all about? Humiliation and a barely controlled erotic thrill mixed in his blood and left the curry seeming bland. He had to find Leelee. Tomorrow, if he hadn’t heard from her, he’d go to Innis Shallows. He could just ask around. Someone would know

her. Maybe he could put off his data checking for one day. Or make Steppan do it. Guy owed him one after all...

"Well, kid," his father said, stepping into the room. David flipped his hand terminal facedown. "It's late and I've got work tomorrow."

"Me too," David said.

"Don't stay up too late."

"Fine."

His father's hand gripped his shoulder briefly, the pressure there and gone again. David ate the last few bites of curry and washed it down with a cup of cold water. In the living room, Aunt Bobbie changed feeds on the monitor. A small, old, dark-skinned woman in an orange sari appeared on the screen, leaning forward and listening to an interviewer's question with an expression of polite contempt. Aunt Bobbie coughed out a single sour laugh and turned off the screen.

She walked up to the kitchen, massaging her left bicep with her right hand and grimacing. She wasn't really any bigger than his father, but she was much stronger and it made her carry herself like she was. David tried to remember if she'd killed anyone. He was pretty sure he'd heard a story about her killing someone, but he hadn't been paying attention. She looked down, maybe at his hand terminal turned with its face to the table. Her smile looked almost wistful, which was weird. She leaned against the sink and began pulling her fingers backward, pushing out her palm, stretching out the tendons and muscles of her wrist.

"You ever go free-climbing?" she asked.

David glanced up at her and shrugged.

"When I was about your age, I used to go all the time," she said. "Get a breather and a couple of friends. Head up to the surface. Or down. I went to Big Man's Cave a couple times right before my placement. No safety equipment. Usually just enough bottled air to go, do the thing, and get back to the closest ingress. The whole point was to try and carry as little as we possibly could. The thinnest suits. No ropes or pitons.

There was one time, I was on this cliff face about half a kilometer up from the ground with my fist wedged into a crack to keep me in place while a windstorm came through. All I could hear was the grit hitting my helmet and my climbing buddies screaming at me to get out of there.”

“Scary,” David said flatly. She didn’t notice the sarcasm, or she chose not to.

“It was *great*. One of the best climbs ever. Your grandfather didn’t like it, though. That was the only time he’s ever called me stupid.”

David filled another glass of water and drank it. He had a hard time imagining it. Pop-Pop was always praising everyone for everything. To the point sometimes that it seemed like none of it really meant anything. He couldn’t imagine his grandfather getting that angry. His father sometimes called Pop-Pop “the Sergeant Major” when he was angry with him. It was almost like he was talking about another person, someone David had never met.

“There was context,” Aunt Bobbie said. “A guy I knew died in a fall about a month before. Troy.”

“What happened?”

Now it was her turn to shrug. “He was way up on a cliff, and he lost his grip. The fall cracked his air bottle, and by the time anyone could get to him, he’d choked out. I wasn’t there. We weren’t friends. But to Dad, everyone who free-climbed was the same, and anything that had happened to Troy could happen to me. He was right about that. He just, y’know, thought I didn’t know it.”

“Only you did.”

“Of course I did. That was the point,” she said. She pointed to the hand terminal with her chin. “If you flip it like that when he comes over, it makes him curious.”

David tasted the copper of fear and pushed back from the table a few centimeters.

“It wasn’t anything. It was the lab schedule.”

“All right. But when you flip it over, it makes him curious.”

“There’s nothing to be curious about,” David said, his voice getting louder.

“All right,” she said, and her voice was gentle and strong and David didn’t want to talk about it or look at her. Aunt Bobbie walked back toward the guest room and bed. When he heard her shower go on, he picked up his hand terminal again and checked in case something had come through from Leelee. Nothing had. He put what was left of his dinner into the recycler and headed for his room. As soon as he hit the mattress, his mind started racing. All of the things Leelee might need money for started spinning through his mind—drugs or an attorney or a passage off Mars. As soon as he thought that she might be leaving, he was sure that she was, and it left his chest feeling hollow and hopeless. And she’d told him not to talk to Hutch. Maybe she’d done something to piss him off, and now she had to get away before he caught her.

He drifted to sleep imagining himself standing between Hutch and Leelee, facing him down to protect her. He’d run the scenario from the start. He walked in on the two of them fighting, and he pushed Hutch away. Or was with Leelee and Hutch came after her. He tried out lines—*Hurt her, and I’ll make your life hell* or *You think you’ve got all the power, but I’m David fucking Draper, cousin*—and imagined their effects. Leelee’s gratitude shifted into kissing and from there to her taking his hand and slipping it under her shirt. He could almost feel her body pressed against him. Could almost smell her. The dream shifted, and it was all about getting the datasets finished, only Leelee needed the money to change the results of her pregnancy test, and the bank was in a tiny crevasse in the back of his living room, and his hands were too thick to reach it.

When his alarm went off, he thought it had broken. His body still had the too heavy, weak feeling of the middle of the night. But no, it was morning time. He pulled himself to the edge of his bed, let his feet swing down to the floor, and pressed his palms against his eyes. Even through the air filters,

he caught the usually welcome scents of breakfast sausage and coffee. Una Meing looked out from his wall, eyes promising him something deep and mysterious. A diffuse resentment flowed through him and he switched the image away from her to a generic preset of sunrise at Olympus Mons. Touristy.

He had to make a plan. Maybe he could talk to Hutch after all. Not say Leelee had talked to him, just that he was worried about her. That he wanted to find her. Because that was true. He had to find Leelee, wherever she was, and make sure she was all right. Then he had to finish his datasets. It was almost two hours to Innis Shallows and back, but if he just planned to work through lunchtime, or else eat in the labs, he'd only be losing one hour for travel. He had to think about how to find her once he was there. He wished there was someone to talk to. Even Hutch. There wasn't, though, and so he was going to have to solve this on his own. Go out, ask, look. She was counting on him. For a moment, he could feel her head resting against him, smell the subtle musk of her hair. So yes. He'd go do this.

No problem.

Only one tube ran to Innis Shallows, back and forth along the same stretch. Since the sabotage of the tube system, there was more security present, men and women with pistols and gas grenades scowling and walking through the cars. The tube station at Innis Shallows didn't even have the usual perfunctory signs announcing that the end destination was Aterpol, like there were only two kinds of places in the universe: Innis Shallows and anywhere else. The official stats said that six thousand people lived and worked in the Shallows, but walking out of the tube station, David still felt overwhelmed. The main halls were old stone behind clear sealant. White scars marked the places where decades of minor accidents had dug into it. Men and women walked or rode electric carts, moving up ramps from level to level. Most ignored him but a few made a point of staring. He knew he didn't belong there. His clothes and the way he walked marked him. He stood for almost a minute in the center of the corridor, his hand in his pocket, fingers wrapped around his hand terminal. Behind him, the soft chimes of the tube preparing to

leave again were like a friend's voice: *Get on. Get out of here. This is dumb.*

He would have, too, turned back around and gotten on the tube and headed back without spending more than five minutes in the neighborhood. Except for Leelee.

David scowled, shook his head, and trudged down the corridor, heading off to his left for no reason. His throat felt tight and uncomfortable and he needed to pee. After about twenty meters of cart rental kiosks and monitors set to entertainment newsfeeds, he found a little restaurant and stepped in. The woman behind the counter could have been a Belter: thin body, too-large head. She lifted her chin at him and nodded back toward half a dozen chipped formed plastic tables.

"Anywhere you want," she said in a thick accent David couldn't place.

David didn't move, looking for the courage to speak for so long the woman raised her eyebrows. He yanked his hand terminal out of his pocket and held it out to her. He'd gotten a still from the message Leelee had left him. It wasn't great, but the shape of her face was clear and she wasn't in the middle of a word or anything.

"I'm looking for her," David said. He sounded terse in his own ears. Almost resentful. "You know her?"

Her eyes flickered down and she shrugged.

"Don't know her. You want to stay, you got to eat. Anywhere you want."

"Her name's Leelee."

She hoisted her eyebrows. David felt a blush rising in his cheeks.

"Do you know where I could look for her?"

"Not here?" the woman suggested. David shoved the terminal back into his pocket and walked out. It was a stupid plan. Walk around the tube station, asking people at random? It was dumb and it was humiliating, but it was Leelee so he

did it. The hour was blank stares and shrugs and the growing sense that everyone he talked to was embarrassed for him. When the tube car returned, he'd found nothing. He sat alone on a formed plastic bench. The monitor shifted to a video review by a pretty girl whose voice made it sound like she was shouting every word. "Dika Adalai's best story ever!" David looked up and down the sparsely populated car and came to the conclusion that he was the one who'd triggered the review. It said something about who the ad systems thought he was. What he cared about. Like they knew.

He pulled up his hand terminal. Made another connection request, and Leelee didn't answer. He pulled up her message, playing it low. *I need help, okay?* and *Don't talk to Hutch.* Only there wasn't anyone else to talk to.

He spent the afternoon catching up on his datasets, horrified to realize how far behind he'd let himself fall. He ran through number and correlations, checking the data against expected norms with the practice and contempt of long experience. He needed to put in extra time. Get everything taken care of. If he fell too far behind, Mr. Oke would start noticing, and if there was a full audit, the extra lab work he'd done for Hutch would come out, and then he'd be screwed. He weighed calling in a favor from Steppan, but his mind kept shifting back to Leelee and the closed faces of Innis Shallows. Someone had to know where she was. Who she was.

He had to work.

For the first hour, reviewing and processing the data felt like hard labor, but then slowly, his mind fell into the rhythm. He managed the statistical input and brought out the correlations, fitting each one into the larger spreadsheet waiting for meta-analysis, and he could feel himself relax a little. The different catalytic mixes felt more like home than home did, and here like nowhere else in his life, he was in control. Between the comfort and concentration of the work and his exhaustion, he fell into something like a trance. Time passed without any sense of duration. When he came to the end of the run, he could have been going for minutes or hours. Either one

seemed plausible. He didn't think to check his hand terminal until he was almost home.

There were four new messages waiting, none of them from Leelee. The first was a correction to the lab schedule, then two posts from a gaming forum he subscribed to even though he barely played any of the games. The last one was from the central educational authority in Salton, the upper university. He flicked it open and his head went as light as a balloon.

He walked into the common room. His mother and father sat before the living room monitor, just far enough away from each other that their legs didn't touch. On the screen, an older man was leaning forward earnestly. "The Martian project is the single most ambitious endeavor in human history. It is all of our duties to see that the threat of Earth..."

"What's the matter?" his father said.

David lifted his hand terminal as if that was explanation enough. And then, when they didn't understand, he spoke. His voice had a distance to it.

"My placement came," he said. "I'm going to development."

His father whooped, stood so violently that the couch almost tipped over. As his dad's arms wrapped around him, lifting him up toward the ceiling, and his mother wept joyful tears into her hands, all David could think was *I'm supposed to be happy about this*.

After that, everything changed and nothing did. He'd been working toward his placement for the last five sections, or looked at another way, his whole life. He'd known it was coming—everyone had—and still it felt like it had snuck up on him. Surprised him. All of the things that had to happen after—the things he hadn't bothered thinking about because they were for later—had to be done now. There was the application for living space in the dormitories of the upper university, the coordination of his long-run experiments with Mr. Oke so that some new second-year could step in and see them to completion, and the preparations and purchases that would, in the coming months, lead to David moving out of his

room, out of his home, away from his family for the first time in his life. The times when the idea wouldn't scare him, it couldn't come fast enough.

He could see it in his parents too. The way his mother kept quietly weeping and grinning at the same time, the way his father made a point of sitting with him while he filled out his paperwork and put in for time off so he could go with David to the orientation in Salton next month and brought him sandwiches and coffee for lunch. David had done everything he was supposed to do, had gotten the grades and the attention and the status for the highest placement he'd qualified for, and the reward was even less freedom. It was like his parents had suddenly realized he wouldn't be there forever, and now their love was like a police state; he couldn't escape it. He couldn't go look for Leelee or even send out connection requests. The only one who didn't seem to react one way or the other was Aunt Bobbie who just kept her weird, vaguely intrusive habits of watching the newsfeeds and lifting weights.

Three days after the letter came, David was set to go to the lower university for his first transition meeting with Mr. Oke. His father went with him. Dad held his head high, chin up, beaming like he'd been the one to do something. They walked up the stairs to the lower university commons together, David shrinking into his own chest with the discomfort. This was his world—his friends and enemies, the people who knew him for himself—and Dad didn't belong there. Steppan nodded to him but didn't approach. The girl who'd borrowed his stats array last year frowned at his dad, strutting at David's side. They knew that his being there was wrong, and they drew back, keeping the separation. They all had two lives too, and they weren't supposed to mix like this. Everybody knew that.

"Mr. Oke!" his father said as they rounded one of the seating areas. The research advisor smiled politely, walking toward them.

"Mr. Draper," Mr. Oke said. "It's good of you to come."

"Just want to make sure everything's smooth," Dad said, caressing the air as he said it. "Development's a good

placement, but it's a hard one. David doesn't need any distractions."

"Of course not," Mr. Oke agreed.

Over the old man's shoulder, David caught sight of Hutch. He was standing with a couple of the second-years, smiling and listening to a girl whose hands were fluttering and tapping at the air as she explained something. Leelee wasn't with him. David felt his heart rate spike. It was an epinephrine dump. His mind jumped back a section to his physiology labs. Epinephrine was binding to alpha-adrenergic sites, dropping insulin production, upping glycogenolysis and lipolysis. Standard fight-or-flight. Hutch glanced over, nodded politely. David pointed toward the men's room with his chin. Hutch's expression slipped a notch darker and he shook his head, not more than a few millimeters and unmistakable. David scowled and nodded toward the men's room again.

"Are you all right?" his dad asked.

"I have to pee," David said. "I'll be right back."

He left his father and Mr. Oke bantering. The white tile and video mirrors of the men's room were like a retreat to his world. And escape. He stood at the urinal, pretending to piss until the one other student washed his hands and left. Hutch walked in.

"What's the word, friend?" Hutch said, but David could hear annoyance in the syllables. "Saw you got family with today. Good to see a father so concerned with his son's business."

David zipped his fly and trundled over to Hutch. He kept his voice low.

"He's just being an asshole. It's nothing. We've got to meet," David said. "We have to talk. Not now, but we've got to."

"Slow, slow, slow," Hutch said. "Now's not a good time."

"Tomorrow night," David said. "The usual place."

"Can't do that. Other plans."

“Tonight, then,” David hissed.

David’s hand terminal chimed, and a moment later, Hutch’s did too. The local newsfeed pushing a breaking story. David didn’t look away. Hutch’s expression shifted from annoyance into anger and then a wary kind of amusement. He shrugged.

“See you tonight then, little man,” Hutch said. His lopsided smile looked dangerous. David nodded and trotted back out to the commons. He wouldn’t tell Hutch about the message or about Leelee being in trouble. He’d just say he wanted to find her. He’d say it was about his placement because that made it seem like there was something else. Distracting. He got back to Mr. Oke and his father, gathering himself back together, willing himself to act normal, before he noticed that the commons was silent. Everyone was hunched over their hand terminals, their faces gray or flushed. Even his father and Mr. Oke. The newsfeed push had a picture of a public corridor, the air hazed by smoke. A policeman hunched over something, one hand on his hip. The header read EXPLOSION IN SALTON.

“What happened?” he asked.

“Protestors,” his father said, and the anger in his voice was startling. “Anti-Earth protestors.”

David’s hand terminal chimed again. The header shifted.

EXPLOSION IN SALTON; THREE CONFIRMED DEAD



Aunt Bobbie was tight-lipped when they got home, sitting in the common room with a massive black weight in her hand that she held without lifting, like a child clutching a favorite toy. The monitor was set to a newsfeed with the sound turned low. Live feeds of the damage in Salton played out in the four corners of the monitor, but she didn’t seem to be looking at them. David’s mother sat at the table scrolling through her hand terminal. When David and his father walked in, there was a moment of eye contact between his parents that had the

weight of significance. He didn't know what it meant. His father tapped David's shoulder in a kind of farewell, then stepped over to the railing.

"Hey, sis."

"Hey," Aunt Bobbie said.

"Did security talk to you?"

"Not yet," Aunt Bobbie said. "They know how to find me if they want to."

David scowled toward his mother. He couldn't think of a reason that security would want to talk with Aunt Bobbie. He tried to make it into a threat against him, that they'd be looking to her for information about the batches he'd cooked for Hutch, but that felt too wrong. It had to be about the bombing, but he couldn't make sense of that either. His mother only lifted her eyebrows and asked how the meeting with Mr. Oke had gone. His father answered for him, and the uncomfortable tension around Aunt Bobbie shifted into the background.

There was going to be a party for the whole family tomorrow night, his mother told him. Pop-Pop and the cousins were coming from Aterpol, and Uncle Istvan and his new wife were making the trip from Dhanbad Nova. They'd rented a room at the best restaurant in Breach Candy. David gave a quiet, generalized thanks to the universe that he'd arranged to see Hutch tonight instead. Slipping away from his own celebration would have been impossible.

After dinner, David said some vague things about friends from school and celebrating, promised not to go to Salton, and ducked out the door before anyone could get too inquisitive. Once he was out walking to the tube station, he felt a moment of relaxation. Almost peace. The whole ride out to Martineztown, David felt almost like he was floating. His datasets were done or else not his anymore, and even with all the rest of it—Leelee and Hutch, the protestors and the bombings, the family party and the prospect of leaving home—just not having the lab work hanging over him was like taking a vise off his ribs. Once he was in Salton, working

development would be a thousand times worse than anything in the lower university. But that was later. For now, he could set his hand terminal to play bebapapu tunes and relax. Even if it was only for the length of the tube ride to Martineztown, it was still the most peace he'd had for himself in as long as he could remember.

Hutch was waiting for him when he got there. The construction lamp threw off harsh white light, the battery hissing almost silently. The shadows seemed to have eaten Hutch's eyes.

"Little man," he said as David stepped into the room. "Wasn't thinking to hear from you. Was risky, talking to me with family and authority right there beside us. You were looking jumpy. People notice that kind of thing."

"Sorry," David said. He sat down on a crate, rough plastic clinging to the fabric of his pants and pulling his cuffs up around his ankles. "I just needed to talk to you."

"I'm always here for you, my friend," Hutch said. "You know that. You're my number one guy. Any problem you've got, I've got."

David nodded, picking absently at his fingernail beds. Now that he was here, he found the subject of Leelee was harder to bring up than he'd expected.

"I got into development."

"Knew it. Development's always the place for the smart ones. Play your cards, and you'll be riding this planet like a private cart," Hutch said. "That's not why we're here, though. Is it?"

"No, I was...I wanted to get in touch with Leelee. See if maybe she wanted to come celebrate it with me. Only my hand terminal went corrupt and I didn't have her information on backup and I was thinking that since you..." David swallowed, trying to work the knot out of his throat. "Since you know her better than anyone."

He chanced a look at Hutch's face. The man was expressionless as stone, turned in and silent. It was more

threatening than bared teeth.

“She came to you.” David had promised himself that he wouldn’t tell Hutch about the message, and technically he didn’t, but the silence implicated him. Hutch drew a deep breath and ran his hands through his hair. “Don’t worry about Leelee. I’m taking care of Leelee.”

“She seemed like she was in trouble.”

“Okay, little man. You don’t follow what’s happening here, so I’m going to help. I *own* Leelee. She’s mine. Property, see? And she screwed up, started being with the wrong crowd. She got political. People like us don’t do that. Earth. Mars. OPA. That shit is for citizens. It just draws attention for people like us.”

“She looked scared,” David said. He could hear the whine in his voice, and he hated that he couldn’t keep it out. He sounded like a kid. “She said she needed money.”

Hutch laughed. “Don’t ever give that bitch money.”

“Property,” David said. “She wanted...she wanted to buy herself. Didn’t she?”

Hutch’s expression softened to something like sympathy. Pity, maybe. He leaned forward and put a hand on David’s knee.

“Leelee is a slice of poison with a pretty mouth, little man. That’s the truth. She did a bad, stupid thing, and now she’s working that mistake off. That’s all. I know how much money you have because I’m the guy that gave it to you. You don’t have enough to clear her debts.”

“Maybe I could—”

“You don’t have half. You’ve got *maybe* a quarter. There’s nothing you can do for that girl. She gave you a hard-on, and that was nice for you. Don’t make it more than that. You understand what I’m saying to you?”

The deep, sickening tug of humiliation pulled at David’s heart. He looked down, willing himself not to cry. He hated the reaction. He was angry with it and with himself and with

Hutch and his parents and the world. He burned with embarrassment and rage and impotence. Hutch stood up, his shadow spilling across floor and wall like spent engine oil.

“Best we don’t talk for a while,” Hutch said. “You got a lot in the air. Don’t worry about the cooking. We’ll get that all smoothed out when you’re in Salton. Then we can go into production for real, eh? See some money worth having.”

“Okay,” David said.

Hutch sighed and pulled up his hand terminal. As he tapped at its keyboard, he kept talking.

“I’m going to slip a little something in that account of yours, right? Call it a bonus. Take and get yourself something nice, right.”

“Right.”

And then Hutch was gone, walking out toward Martineztown and the tube station and the world. David sat alone where he’d sat with Leelee not all that long before. The sense of peace and calm was gone. His hands balled in fists, and he had nothing he could hit. He felt cored out. Hollowed. He waited ten minutes the way he was supposed to and then took himself home.

The next night was the party. His party. Pop-Pop was there, smiling a little lopsided since the stroke and thinner than David had ever seen him, but still strong voiced and chipper. Aunt Bobbie sat on one side of him, David’s father on the other, like they were propping him up. Muted sounds of silverware against plates and voices raised in conversation competed with a three-piece band set up on a dais by the front doors that filtered into the private back room. Green and gold tablecloths stretched over three tables to make it all seem like it connected. The meal itself had been chicken in black sauce with rice and fresh vegetables, and David had eaten two helpings without really tasting them. His father had taken on the expense of an open bar and Uncle Istvan’s new wife was already well on her way to drunk and sort of hitting on one of the older cousins. David’s mother paced the back of the room touching shoulders, dropping in and out of conversations like

she was running for office. David wanted badly to be anywhere else.

“You know, back in the ancient days,” Pop-Pop said, gesturing with a glass of whiskey, “they built cathedrals. Massive churches lifted up to the glory of God. Far, far beyond what you’d expect people to manage with just quarry stone and trees and a few steel knives, you know. Just a few simple tools.”

“We’ve heard about the cathedrals,” Aunt Bobbie said. She had a drink too, but David couldn’t tell what it was. Legally, David wasn’t supposed to drink alcohol for another year, but he had a bulb of beer in his hand. He didn’t actually like the taste of it, but he drank it anyway.

“The thing that’s important, though, is the time, you see?” Pop-Pop said. “The *time*. Raising up one of those cathedrals would take whole generations. The men who drew the plans, who envisioned the final form of the thing? They would be dead long before it was finished. It might be their grandsons or their great-grandsons or their great-great-grandsons who saw the work complete.”

Across the room, one of the younger cousins was crying, and David’s mother sloped over and knelt, taking the squalling kid’s hand in her own and leading him to his mother. David choked down another mouthful of beer. Next year, he’d be in Salton, so busy that he wouldn’t have to come to these things anymore.

“There’s a beauty in that,” Pop-Pop said earnestly to everyone and no one. “Such a massive plan, such ambition. A man might be setting the final stone and think back to his own father who’d set the stones below him and his grandfather who’d set the stones below that. To have a place in the great scheme, that was the beauty of it. To be part of something you didn’t begin and you would not see completed. It was beautiful.”

“I love you, Dad,” Aunt Bobbie said, “but that’s bullshit.”

David blinked. He looked from Pop-Pop to his own father and back. The men looked embarrassed. It was like she’d

farted. Aunt Bobbie took another sip of her drink.

“Bobbie,” David’s father said, “maybe you should ease up on that stuff.”

“I’m fine. It’s just that I’ve been hearing about the cathedrals since I was a kid, and it’s bullshit. Seriously, who were they to decide what everyone was going to be doing for the next four generations? It’s not like they asked their however many great-grandkids if they wanted to be stonecutters. Maybe some of them wanted to...be musicians. Hell, be architects and do something of their own. Deciding what everyone’s going to do...what we’re going to be. It’s hubris, isn’t it?”

“We’re not talking about cathedrals anymore, are we, sis?”

“Yeah, because it was a really obscure metaphor,” Aunt Bobbie replied. “I’m just saying that the plan may be great as long as you’re inside it. You step outside, though, and then what?”

There was a pain in her voice that David couldn’t fathom, but he saw it reflected in his grandfather’s eyes. The old man put his hand on Aunt Bobbie’s, and she held it like she was a little girl about to be led off to her bath time. David’s father, on the other side, looked peevish.

“Don’t take her seriously, Pop-Pop. She was talking to security all day, and she’s still cranky.”

“Is there a reason I shouldn’t be? It’s like every time anything strange happens, let’s go talk to Draper again.”

“You had to expect that, Roberta,” his father said. He only called her Roberta when he was angry. “It’s the consequence of your decision.”

“And what decision is that?” she snapped. Her voice was getting louder. Some of the cousins were looking over at them now, their own conversations fading.

David’s father laughed. “You aren’t working. What are they calling it? Indefinite administrative leave?”

“Psychological furlough,” Aunt Bobbie said. “What’s your point?”

“My point is that of course they’re going to want to talk to you when things get weird. You can’t blame them for being suspicious. We were almost killed by Earthers. Everyone in this room and those rooms out there and the corridors. And you were working for them.”

“I was not!” It wasn’t a shout because it didn’t have the gravel and roughness of shouting. It was loud, though, and it carried power along with it like a punch. “I worked *with* the faction that was trying to avert the war. The one that did avert the war. Everyone in these rooms is alive because of the people I helped. But *with* them, not *for* them.”

The room was quiet, but David’s father was too deep into the fight to notice. He rolled his eyes.

“Really? Who was paying your wages? Earth was. The people that hate us.”

“They don’t hate us,” Bobbie said, her voice tired. “They’re afraid of us.”

“Then why do they act like they hate us?” David’s father said with something like triumph.

“Because that’s what fear looks like when it needs someplace to go.”

David’s mother seemed to appear behind the three of them like some sort of magic trick. She wasn’t there, and then she was, her restraining hand on her husband’s shoulder. Her smile was humorless and undeniable.

“We’re here for David tonight,” she said.

“Yes,” Pop-Pop said, rubbing his palm against the back of Aunt Bobbie’s hand, soothing her. “For David.”

His father’s face set into an annoyed mask, but Aunt Bobbie nodded.

“You’re right,” she said. “I’m sorry, David. Dad, I’m sorry. I’ve just had a really rough day and probably too much to drink.”

“It’s all right, angel,” Pop-Pop said. Tears brightened his eyes.

“I just thought that by now I’d have some idea of...of who I was. Of what I was going to do next, and...”

“I know, angel. We all know what you’re going through.”

She laughed at that, wiping her eyes with the back of her hand. “All us of but me, then.”

The rest of the evening went just the way those things were supposed to go. People laughed and argued and drank. His father tried to call for silence and make a little speech about how proud he was, but one of the kid cousins was whispering and tapping on his hand terminal all the way through it. A few people gave David small, discreet presents of money to help him set up his dorm in Salton. Uncle Istvan’s new wife gave him an unpleasant, boozy kiss before gathering herself up and walking out with Istvan on her arm. They took a rental cart back home, his parents and Aunt Bobbie and him. He couldn’t shake the image of her weeping at the table. *You step outside, though, and then what?*

The cart’s wheels sounded sticky against the corridor floors. The lights had dimmed all through Breach Candy, simulating a twilight he’d never actually seen. Somewhere, the sun would slip below a horizon, a blue sky darken. He’d seen it in pictures, on video. In his life, though, it was just that the LEDs changed color and intensity. David leaned his head against one of the cart’s support poles, letting the vibration of the engines and the wheels translate directly into his skull. It felt comfortable. His mother, sitting beside him, pressed her hand against his shoulder, and he had the powerful physical memory of coming back from a party when he’d been very young. Six, maybe seven years old. He remembered putting his head in her lap, fading into sleep with the texture of her slacks against his cheek. That was never going to happen again. The woman beside him hardly even seemed to be the same person, and in a few months, he wouldn’t see her anymore. Not like he did now. And what would she have done if she knew about Hutch? About Leelee? His mother smiled at him, and it looked like

love, but it was love for some other boy. The one she thought he was. He smiled back because he was supposed to.

When they got home, he went straight back to his room. He'd been around people enough. The cheesy generic wall was still up, and he shifted it back to Una Meing. Massive dark eyes with mascara on the lashes looked out at him. He dropped to the bed. Outside, Aunt Bobbie and his father were talking. He listened for a buzz of anger in their voices, but it wasn't there. They were just talking. The water pipes started to whine. His mother taking her evening bath. Everything small and domestic and safe, and out there somewhere, Leelee was working off her debt. She'd asked for his help, and he'd failed. And Hutch. Maybe he'd always been scared of Hutch. Maybe that was what had made cooking for him seem like the right thing. The wise thing, even. Hutch was the kind of dangerous that could make people into property. Could take them and make them disappear. Being part of that world was fun. Exciting. It was a way to step outside all the good student, good son, good prospects crap that was his life. So what that it scared him now? So what that Leelee was probably being rented out to whoever had the money and David wouldn't see her again? He'd made his choice, and this was the consequence.

Una Meing stared out at him, soulful and erotic. David turned out the lights, grabbed a pillow, and pulled it over his head. As his mind began to fragment down into sleep, Leelee kept coming back to him. Her face. Her voice. The soft, almost gentle way Hutch had said, *I own Leelee and You don't have enough to clear her debts*. He wished that he did. He walked into a bleak, prison-like room that was half dream and half imagination. Leelee shied back from the sudden light and then saw who it was, and her face lit up. *David*, she said, *how did you do it? How did you save me?*

And with an almost electrical shock, he knew the answer.

He sat up, turned on the light. Una Meing's sly-sad smile seemed more knowing than it had before. *Took you long enough*. He checked the time: well past midnight. It didn't matter. It wouldn't wait. He listened at his door for a few

seconds. No voices except the professional enunciation of the newsfeed announcer. David took his hand terminal out of his satchel, sat on the edge of his bed, and put in the connection request. He didn't expect an answer, but Steppan's face appeared on the screen almost instantly.

"Big Dave! Hey," Steppan said. "Heard about your placement. Good going, cousin."

"Thanks," David said, keeping his voice low. "But look, I need a favor."

"Sure," Steppan said.

"You have lab time?"

"More time than sleep," Steppan said ruefully. "But you've got placement. You don't need to scrounge for lab hours anymore."

"Kind of do. And I could use an extra hand."

"How long are we talking about?"

"Ten hours," David said. "Maybe a little more. But some of that's waiting, so you can do your own stuff too. And I'll help with your work if you help with mine."

Steppan shrugged.

"All right. I've got hours tomorrow starting at eight. You know where my space is?"

"Do," David said.

"See you there," Steppan said and dropped the connection. So that was the first part. David's mind was already leaping ahead to the rest. He had enough tryptamine to build from, and the catalysts were always easy. What he didn't have was sodium borohydride or amoproxan in anything like the volume he'd need. Closing his eyes, he went through the inventory of his secret locker, thinking about each reagent and what he could gracefully change it into. Carbon double bonds cleaved, ketones formed, inactive isomers were forced into different configurations. Slowly, certainly, a clear biochemical path formed. He opened his eyes, jotted down a quick flowchart of the reactions, and built a wish list. When he was done, he

switched his hand terminal over to the main distributor's site and ordered the reagents he'd need with immediate delivery to Steppan's lab. The total bill was enough to clean out his secret account, but that was fine with him. He'd never cared about the money.

When his hand terminal chirped the morning's alarm, he'd managed a two-hour nap. He changed into clean clothes, ducked into the bathroom to wet down his hair and shave. His mind was already three steps ahead. His hand terminal chimed with breaking news, and he almost dreaded to look, but for once it was something good. Eight people had been arrested in connection with the pressure loss on the tube system and were being actively questioned about the bomb in Salton. While David brushed his teeth, he watched the newsfeed play. When the scroll of mug shots came, he had a moment's anxiety—*What if Leelee was one of them? What if that was what Hutch meant by her getting political?*—but none of the faces was familiar. They were young people, none of them over eighteen, but well-worn. Two had black eyes and one of the women had been crying. Or else she'd been teargassed. David dismissed them.

"Where are you going?" his mother asked as he walked, head bowed and shoulders hunched, for the door.

"Friend needs help," he said. He'd meant the lie that Steppan needed an extra hand at the labs, but halfway to the lower university, he noticed that by not elaborating, he'd sort of told the truth. The fact was weirdly disturbing.

The day was a massive cook. With the two of them in the space, it was crowded, and Steppan, sleepless, hadn't showered recently. Between the chemical vapors that the fume hood didn't whisk away and the stink of adolescent boy, the heat of the burners, and Steppan's constant, nearly intimate presence, the day passed slowly. But it passed well. Steppan didn't ask what David's experiment was, and during the quiet times, David ran Steppan's datasets and even pointed out a flaw in the statistical assumptions he was making that made the final data prettier when he corrected it. When the early afternoon came and they were flagging, David measured out a

small dose of amphetamine and split it between them. When his mother requested a connection, he didn't answer, just sent back the message that he'd be home late, to eat dinner without him. Instead of the usual indirect disapproval, she sent back a note that she supposed she'd have to get used to that. It left him sad until the timer went off and he had to cool the batch and add catalyst and the work took his attention. There was a real pleasure to the work, something he hadn't felt in years. He knew each reaction, each bond he was breaking, each molecular reconfiguration. He could look at the milky suspension, see a subtle change in the texture, and know what had happened. This, he thought, was what mastery felt like.

The last of his run was finished, the powder measured out into pale pink gelcaps and melted into sugared lozenges. His satchel was thick with them and heavy as a bowling ball. At a guess, he had the equivalent of his father's retirement account on his hip. The public LEDs were dim as he walked home. His eyes felt bloodshot and gritty, but his step was light.

Aunt Bobbie was in the common room, the way she always was, doing deep lunges and watching the monitor. A young woman with skin the color of coffee and cream and pale lips was speaking seriously into the camera. A red band around her had SECURITY ALERT HIGH scrolling in four languages. David paused. When Aunt Bobbie looked back at him, not pausing in her exercises, he nodded toward the screen.

"They found plans for another bomb," Aunt Bobbie said.

"Oh," David said, then shrugged. It was probably better that way. Let security focus on the political intrigue. It just meant there'd be fewer eyes looking at him.

"Your mother's asleep."

"Where's Dad?"

"Nariman. Work emergency."

"All right," David said and headed back to his room. Aunt Bobbie hadn't noticed the bulk of his satchel, or if she had, she hadn't mentioned it. With his door safely closed, he checked the time. Late but not too late, and between the late afternoon

amphetamines and the excitement and anxiety, trying to rest wasn't an option. Now that he had the product, all he wanted to do was get rid of it. Get it all away from him so that no one would stumble across it, get this all over with. He pulled out his hand terminal and put through a connection request to the contact Hutch had given him for emergencies only. He waited. Seconds stretched. A minute passed, and the tight feeling of panic grew in David's gut.

The screen jumped, and Hutch was there, scowling into the camera. He was naked from the waist up, his pale hair messy. The hardness in his expression was clear, even through the connection.

"Yeah?" Hutch said. It was a noncommittal greeting. If security had been watching over David's shoulder, they wouldn't even be sure that he and Hutch knew each other.

"We need to meet," David said. "Tonight. It's important."

Hutch was silent. A dry tongue ran across the man's lower lip and he shook his ragged head. David's heart was thudding like little hammer blows against his rib cage.

"Don't know what you mean, cousin," Hutch said.

"No one's listening in. I'm not busted. But we have to talk. Tonight," David said. "And you have to bring Leelee."

"You want to say that again?"

"One hour. The usual place. You have to bring Leelee."

"Yeah, I thought maybe you were giving me some kind of order there, little man," Hutch said, his voice buzzing with anger. "I'm going to tell myself that you burned this number because you got a little drunk or some shit. Out of my deep fucking kindness, I'm going to pretend you didn't forget yourself, yeah? So you get yourself back to bed and sleep until you're sober."

"I am sober," David said. "But it has to be tonight. It has to be now."

"Not going to happen," Hutch said and leaned forward to shut off the connection.

“I’ll call security,” David said. “If you don’t, I’ll call security. I’ll tell them everything.”

Hutch froze. Sat back. He pressed his hands together palm to palm, index fingers touching his lips like he was praying. David squeezed his hands into fists, then released them, squeezed and released. An uncomfortable creeping moved up the back of his neck and onto his scalp. Hutch drew in a long breath and let it out slow.

“All right,” he said. “You come to me. One hour.”

“And Leelee.”

“Heard you the first time,” Hutch said, his voice cool and gray as slate. “But anything smells like a setup, and your little girlfriend dies first. You savvy?”

“You don’t need to hurt her. This isn’t a setup. It’s business.”

“So you say,” Hutch said and cut the feed. David’s hands were trembling. He shouldn’t have said that about going to security, but it was the only leverage he had. The only thing that would make Hutch listen. When he got there, he could explain it all. It would be all right. He stuffed the hand terminal in his pocket, stood silently for a moment, then shifted the wall to the still from *Gods of Risk*. Two men facing each other with the fate of everything in the balance. David lifted his chin and picked up the satchel.

When he came into the common room, Aunt Bobbie frowned.

“Going somewhere?” she asked.

“Friend,” he said, shrugging and pulling the satchel closer to his hip. “Just a thing.”

“But it’s here, right? In Breach Candy?”

A new tickle of anxiety lifted the hair at the back of his neck. Her tone wasn’t accusing or suspicious. That made it worse.

“Why?”

Aunt Bobbie nodded toward the monitor with its red border and earnest announcer.

“Curfew,” she said.

David could feel the word trying to get into his mind, trying to mean something that he didn’t let it mean.

“What curfew?”

“They put the whole city on first-stage lockdown. No unaccompanied minors on the tube system or service tunnels, no gatherings in the common areas after seven. Doubled patrols too. If you’re heading out of the neighborhood, you may have to send your regrets,” she said. Then, “David? Are you okay?”

He didn’t remember sitting down. He was just on the kitchen floor, his legs folded under him like some kind of Zen monk. His skin was slick with sweat even though he didn’t feel hot. Hutch was going to meet him and he wouldn’t be there. He’d think it was a setup. And he’d have Leelee with him because David had told him to. Had insisted. Threatened even. Without thinking, he pulled out his hand terminal and requested a connection to Hutch. The address came back invalid. It had already been deleted.

“David, what’s the matter?”

She was leaning over him now, her face a mask of concern. David waved his hand, feeling like he was underwater. No unaccompanied minors. He had to get to Martineztown. He had to go now.

“I need a favor,” he said, and his voice sounded thin and strangled.

“All right.”

“Come with me. Just so I can use the tube.”

“Um. Okay,” she said. “Let me grab a clean shirt.”

They walked the half kilometer to the tube station in silence. David kept his hands in his pockets and his satchel on the other side of his body so that Aunt Bobbie might not see how full it was. He hated this. His chest felt tight and he needed to

pee even though he didn't really. At the tube station, a red-haired security man in body armor and carrying an automatic rifle stopped them. David felt the mass of the drugs pulling at his shoulder like a lead weight. If they asked to see what was in the satchel, he'd go to prison forever. Leelee would be killed. He'd lose his place in Salton.

"Name and destination, please?"

"Gunnery Sergeant Roberta Draper, MCRM," Aunt Bobbie said. "This is my nephew, David. He just got his placement, and I'm taking him to a party."

"Sergeant?" the security man said. "Marines, huh?"

A shadow passed over her face, but her smile dispelled it.

"Yes, sir."

The security man turned to David. His expression seemed friendly. David tasted vomit and fear at the back of his throat.

"Party?"

"Yes. Sir," he said, "yes, sir."

"Well, don't do any permanent damage, son," the security man said, chuckling. "Carry on, Sergeant."

And then they were past him and into the tube station proper. The white LEDs seemed brighter than usual, and his knees struggled to support him as he walked up to the kiosk. When he got the tickets for Martineztown, Aunt Bobbie looked at him quizzically but didn't say anything. Fifteen minutes to Aterpol, then a change of cars, and twenty to Martineztown. The other people in the car were grubby, their clothes rough at the edges. An old man with an exhausted expression and yellowed eyes sat across from them with a crying infant ignored in his arms. An immensely fat woman in the back of the car shouted obscenities into her hand terminal, someone on the other side of the connection shouting back. The air smelled of bodies and old air filters. With every passing kilometer, Aunt Bobby's expression grew cooler and less trusting. He wanted to be angry with her for thinking that he wouldn't have friends in Martineztown, for being prejudiced against the neighborhood just because it was older

and working class. It would have been easier if she hadn't been right.

At the Martineztown station, David turned to her and put his hand to her, palm out.

"Okay, thank you," he said. "Now just stay here, and I'll be right back."

"What's going on here, kid?" Aunt Bobbie asked.

"Nothing. Don't worry about it. Just wait for me here, and I'll be right back."

Aunt Bobbie crossed her arms. All warmth was gone from her face. A bright flare of resentment lit David's mind. He didn't have time to reassure her.

"Just wait," he said sharply, then spun on his heel and hurried off. A few seconds later, he risked a glance back over his shoulder. Aunt Bobbie hadn't moved. Her crossed arms and disapproving scowl could have been carved into stone. The LEDs of the tube station turned her into a black silhouette. David turned the corner, and she was gone. His satchel bounced against his hip, and he ran. It wasn't more than fifty meters before he was winded, but he pushed on the best he could. He didn't have time. Hutch might be there already.

And in point of fact, he was.

The crates had been rearranged. All them were stacked against the walls, packed tight so that no one and nothing could hide behind them. The only exception was a doubled stack standing to Hutch's left and right like bodyguards. Like the massive sides of a great throne. Hutch stood in the shadows between them, a thin black cigarette clinging to his lip. His yellow shirt hung loose against his frame, and the muscles of his arms each seemed to cast their own shadows. The brushed black pistol in his hand made his scars seem like an omen.

Leelee knelt in front of him, in the center of the room, hugging herself. Her hair was lank and greasy looking. Her skin was pale except right around her eyes where the rash-red of crying stained her. She was wearing a man's shirt that was

too big for her and a pair of work pants stained by something dark and washed pale again. When David cleared his throat and stepped into the room, her expression went from surprise to despair. David wished like hell he'd thought to stop at a bathroom.

"Hey there, little man," Hutch said. The insincerity of his casualness was a threat. "Now then, there was something you wanted to see me about, yeah?"

David nodded. The thickness in his throat almost kept him from speaking.

"I want to buy her," David said. "Buy her debt."

Hutch laughed softly, then took a drag on his cigarette. The ember flared bright and then dimmed.

"Pretty sure we covered that already," Hutch said, and the words were smoke. "You don't have that kind of cash."

"A quarter. You said I had a quarter."

Hutch's eyes narrowed and he tilted his head to the side. David dropped his satchel to the floor and slid it toward Leelee with his toe. She reached out a thin hand toward it.

"If you touch that bag, I will end you," Hutch said to Leelee, and she flinched back. "How about you tell me what that's supposed to be?"

"I cooked a batch. A big one. The biggest I've ever done," David said. "Mostly, it's 3,4-methylenedioxy-N-methylamphetamine. I did a run of 5-hydroxytryptophan too since I didn't need to order anything extra to do it. And 2,5-Dimethoxy-4-bromophenethylamine. Some of that too. I got all the reagents myself. I did all the work. It's got to be worth more than four times what I put into it, and you get all of it free. That's the deal."

"You...", Hutch said, then paused, bit his lip. When he spoke again, he had a buzz of outrage in his voice. "You cooked a batch."

"It's got plenty. Lots."

“You. Stupid. Fuck,” Hutch said. “Do you have any idea how much trouble you just handed me? How am I going to move that much shit? Who’s going to buy it?”

“But you get it free.”

Hutch pointed the gun at the satchel.

“I flood the market, and the prices go down. Not just for me. For everybody. You understand that? Everyone. People start coming up from Dhanbad Nova because they hear we’ve got cheap shit. All the sellers up there start wondering what I mean by it, and I’ve got drama.”

“You could wait. Just hold on to it.”

“I’m going to have to, right? Only it gets out that I’m sitting on an egg like that, someone gets greedy. Decides maybe it’s time to take me on. And boom, I got drama again. Cut it how you want, kid. You just fucked me.”

“He didn’t know, Hutch,” Leelee said. She sounded so tired.

Hutch’s pistol barked once, shockingly loud in the small space. A gouge appeared in the floor next to Leelee’s knee like a magic trick. She started crying.

“Yeah,” Hutch said. “I didn’t think you wanted to interrupt me again. David, you’re a sweet kid, but you’re dumb as a fucking bag of sand. What you just handed me here? It’s a problem.”

“I’m...I’m sorry. I just...”

“And it’s going to require a little”—Hutch took a drag on his cigarette and raised the pistol until David could see him staring down the black barrel—“risk management.”

The air in the room changed as the door behind him opened. He turned to look, but someone big moved past him too fast to follow. Something quick and violent happened, the sounds of a fight. David was hit in the back, hard. He pitched forward, unable to get his hands out fast enough to stop his fall. His head bounced off the sealed stone floor, and for a breathless second, he was sure he’d been shot. Been killed. Then the fight ended with Hutch screaming, crates crashing. The

crackle of plastic splintering. David rose to his elbows. His nose was bleeding.

Aunt Bobbie stood where Hutch's crate shelter had been. She had the pistol in her hand and was considering it with a professional calm. Leelee had scooted across the floor toward David, as if to seek shelter behind him. Hutch, his cigarette gone, was cradling his right hand in his left. The index finger of his right hand—his trigger finger—stood off at an improbable angle.

"Who the fuck are you!" Hutch growled. His voice was low. Feral.

"I'm Gunny Draper," Aunt Bobbie said, ejecting the clip. She cleared the chamber and grabbed the thin brass glimmer out of the air. "So we should talk about this."

Leelee pressed her hand against David's arm. He shifted, gathered her close against him. She smelled rank—body odor and smoke and something else he couldn't identify—but he didn't care. Aunt Bobbie pressed something, and the top of the gun slipped off the grip.

"What've you got to say to me, dead girl?" Hutch asked. His voice didn't sound as tough as he probably hoped. Aunt Bobbie pulled the barrel out of the gun and tossed it into a corner of the room, in the narrow space between some crates and the wall. She didn't look up from the gun, but she smiled.

"The boy made a mistake," she said, "but he treated you with respect. He didn't steal from you. He didn't try to track the girl down on his own. He didn't go to security. He didn't even try to sell the product and get the money."

Leelee shivered. Or maybe David did and it only seemed like it was her. Hutch scowled, but a thoughtful look stole into his eyes.

Aunt Bobbie plucked a long, thin bit of metal out of the gun and then a small black spring and tossed both behind a different crate. "You're a tough guy in a tough business, and I respect that. Maybe you've killed some people. But you're also a businessman. Rational. Able to see the big picture." She

looked up at Hutch, smiled, and tossed him the grip of his gun. "So here's what I'm thinking. Take the bag. Sell it, bury it. Drop it in the recycler. It's yours. Do what you want with it."

"Would anyway," Hutch said, but she ignored him.

"The girl's debt's paid, and David walks away. He's out. You don't come for him, he doesn't come for you. I don't come for you, either." She tossed him the empty top half of his gun, and he caught it with his uninjured hand. From where David was, hunched on the floor, both of them looked larger than life.

"Girl's nothing," Hutch said. "All drama and easy to replace. Boy's something special, though. Good cooks can't be swapped out just like that."

Aunt Bobbie started working the bullets out of the magazine with one thumb, dropping each one into her wide, powerful palm. "Everyone's replaceable in work like yours. You've got four or five like him already I bet." She took out the last of the bullets and put them in her pocket, then passed him the empty magazine. "David's the one that got away. No disrespect. Not a risk to the operation. Just worked out until it didn't. That's the deal."

"And if I say no?"

"I'll kill you," Aunt Bobbie said in the same matter-of-fact tone. "I'd prefer not to, but that's what happens if you say no."

"That easy?" Hutch said with a scowl. "Maybe not that easy."

"You're a tough guy, but I'm a nightmare wrapped in the apocalypse. And David is my beloved nephew. If you fuck with him after this, I will end every piece of you," Bobbie said, her own smile sad. "No disrespect."

Hutch's scowl twitched into a flicker of a smile.

"They grow 'em big where you come from," he said and held up the disassembled pistol. "You broke my gun."

"I noticed the spare magazine in your left pocket," she said. "David, stand up. We're leaving now."

He walked ahead, Leelee holding him and weeping quietly. Aunt Bobbie took the rear, keeping them going quickly without quite making them run and looking back behind her often. When they got near the tube station, Aunt Bobbie put a hand on David's shoulder.

"I can get you through the checkpoint, but I can't get her."

Leelee's eyes were soft and wet, her expression calm and serene. Filthy and stinking, she was still beautiful. She was redeemed.

"Do you have somewhere you can go?" David asked. "Someplace here in Martineztown where he can't find you?"

"I've got friends," she said. "They'll help."

"Go to them," Aunt Bobbie said. "Stay out of sight."

David didn't want to let her go, didn't want to lose the contact of her arm against his. He saw her understand. She didn't step into his arms as much as flow there, soft and supple and changing as water. For a moment, her body was pressed against his perfectly, without a millimeter of space in between. Her lips were against his cheek, her breath in his ear. She was Una Meing for a moment, and he was Caz Pratihari, and the world was a heady, powerful, romantic place. She shifted against him and her lips against his were soft and warm and they tasted like a promise.

"I'll find you," she whispered, and then the moment was over, and she was walking a little unsteadily down the corridor, her head high. He wanted to run after her, to kiss her again, to take her home with him and fold her into his bed. He could feel his heartbeat in his neck. He had an erection.

"Come on," Aunt Bobbie said. "Let's go home."

From Martineztown to Aterpol, she said nothing, just sat with her elbows resting on her knees, squeezing one of the bullets she'd taken between two fingers, then running it across her knuckles like a magic trick. Even through the chemical rush of relief, he dreaded what would come next. The disapproval, the lecture, the threats. When she spoke, with five

minutes still before they reached Breach Candy, it wasn't what he'd expected to hear.

"That girl. You saved her. You know that? You saved her."

"Yeah."

"You feel good about that. You did a right thing, and that feels good."

"Yeah," he said.

"That good feeling is the most that girl will ever be able to give you."

The tube car's vibration was almost imperceptible. The monitors had tuned themselves to a newsfeed, unable to find any common ground between him and his aunt. David looked at his hands.

"She doesn't like me," he said. "She just acted like she did because he told her to. And then she knew I had money."

"She knew you had money and she knew you were a good guy," Aunt Bobbie said. "That's different."

David smiled and was surprised to kind of mean it. Aunt Bobbie leaned back, stretched. When she shifted her head, the joints in her neck popped like firecrackers.

"I need to move out," she said.

"Okay," David said, suddenly finding himself wishing she wouldn't. Too many losses today already, and this was one he hadn't even known would hurt. "Where will you go?"

"Back to work." Bobbie flipped the bullet up and caught it, then juggled it across her fingers again. "I need to find something to do." She pointed at the news on the monitors with her chin. It was all about Earth and Mars and angry people with bombs. "Maybe I can help."

"Okay," David said again. Then a moment later, "I'm glad you stayed with us."

"I should take you free-climbing," she said. "You'd love it."



David only saw Leelee one more time. It was his second year in development, about three weeks after he'd turned eighteen. He was in a noodle bar with the three other members of his team and their advisor, Dr. Fousek. The wall was playing a live feed of the football match from the Mariner Valley with the sound turned low enough to talk over. The table screen, on the other hand—they'd tunneled into the arrays at the upper university, and between bottles of beer and tea and black ceramic bowls of noodles and sauce, their latest simulation models were running.

Jeremy Ng, his dorm mate and the only other biochemist on the team, was shaking his head and pointing at the imagined surface of Mars that the computers back at their official labs were generating.

“But the salt—”

“Salinity's not an issue,” David said, his frustration clear in his voice. “That's why we put the sodium pumps in, remember? It won't build up across the membrane.”

“Gentlemen,” Dr. Fousek said, her tone both authoritative and amused. “You have spent fifty hours a week arguing this for the last seven months. No point rethinking it now. We'll have solid projections soon enough.”

Jeremy started to object, then stopped, started again, and ground to a halt. Beside him Cassie Estinrad, their hydro systems expert, grinned. “If this really works, you guys will put the terraforming project a couple decades ahead of schedule. You know that.”

Dr. Fousek raised her hand, commanding silence. The simulation was almost done. Everyone at the table held their breath.

David couldn't say what made him look up. A sense of being watched maybe. A feeling of unease crawling up the back of his neck. Leelee was there at the back by the bar, looking toward him without seeing him. The years hadn't been

kind. Her skin belonged on a woman twice her age and the elfin chin now just looked small. She had a child on her hip that looked about six months old and still too unformed to have a gender. She could have been anyone, except he had no question. A thin, electric jolt passed through him. For a split second he was fifteen again, on the edge of sixteen, and reckless as a fire. He remembered the way her kiss had felt, and almost without meaning to, he lifted his hand in a little wave.

He saw it when she recognized him; a widening of the eyes, a shift in the angle of her shoulders. Her expression tightened with something like anger. Fear looking for somewhere to go. The man sitting beside her touched her shoulder and said something. She shook her head, faced away. The man turned, scowling at the crowd. He met David's eyes for a moment, but there was nothing like understanding in them. David looked away from her for the last time.

"Here we go," Cassie said as the first results began to come. David put his elbows against the table as one by one values within his error bars clicked into place. He watched Dr. Fousek's eyebrows lift, watched Jeremy start to grin.

The euphoria came.

Meet the Author

James S.A. Corey is the pen name of fantasy author Daniel Abraham and Ty Franck.

Also by James S. A. Corey.

THE EXPANSE

Leviathan Wakes

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If you enjoyed GODS OF RISK,
look out for

ABADDON'S GATE

THE EXPANSE, BOOK₃
by James S. A. Corey

Chapter One: Bobbie

Snoopy's out again," Private Hillman said. "I think his CO must be pissed at him."

Gunnery Sergeant Roberta Draper of the Martian Marine Corps upped the magnification on her armor's heads-up display and looked in the direction Hillman was pointing. Twenty-five hundred meters away, a squad of four United Nations Marines were tromping around their outpost, backlit by the giant greenhouse dome they were guarding. A greenhouse dome identical in nearly all respects to the dome her own squad was currently guarding.

One of the four UN Marines had black smudges on the sides of his helmet that looked like beagle ears.

"Yep, that's Snoopy," Bobbie said. "Been on every patrol detail so far today. Wonder what he did."

Guard duty around the greenhouses on Ganymede meant doing what you could to keep your mind occupied. Including speculating on the lives of the Marines on the other side.

The other side. Eighteen months before, there hadn't been sides. The inner planets had all been one big, happy, slightly dysfunctional family. Then Eros, and now the two superpowers were dividing up the solar system between them, and the one moon neither side was willing to give up was Ganymede, breadbasket of the Jovian system.

As the only moon with any magnetosphere, it was the only place where dome-grown crops stood a chance in Jupiter's harsh radiation belt, and even then the domes and habitats still had to be shielded to protect civilians from the eight rem a day burning off Jupiter and onto the moon's surface.

Bobbie's armor had been designed to let a soldier walk through a nuclear bomb crater minutes after the blast. It also worked well at keeping Jupiter from frying Martian Marines.

Behind the Earth soldiers on patrol, their dome glowed in a shaft of weak sunlight captured by enormous orbital mirrors.

Even with the mirrors, most terrestrial plants would have died, starved of sunlight. Only the heavily modified versions the Ganymede scientists cranked out could hope to survive in the trickle of light the mirrors fed them.

“Be sunset soon,” Bobbie said, still watching the Earth Marines outside their little guard hut, knowing they were watching her too. In addition to Snoopy, she spotted the one they called Stumpy because he or she couldn’t be much over a meter and a quarter tall. She wondered what their nickname for her was. Maybe Big Red. Her armor still had the Martian surface camouflage on it. She hadn’t been on Ganymede long enough to get it resurfaced with mottled gray and white.

One by one over the course of five minutes, the orbital mirrors winked out as Ganymede passed behind Jupiter for a few hours. The glow from the greenhouse behind her changed to actinic blue as the artificial lights came on. While the overall light level didn’t go down much, the shadows shifted in strange and subtle ways. Above, the sun—not even a disk from here as much as the brightest star—flashed as it passed behind Jupiter’s limb, and for a moment the planet’s faint ring system was visible.

“They’re going back in,” Corporal Travis said. “Snoop’s bringing up the rear. Poor guy. Can we bail too?”

Bobbie looked around at the featureless dirty ice of Ganymede. Even in her high-tech armor she could feel the moon’s chill.

“Nope.”

Her squad grumbled but fell in line as she led them on a slow low-gravity shuffle around the dome. In addition to Hillman and Travis, she had a green private named Gourab on this particular patrol. And even though he’d been in the Marines all of about a minute and a half, he grumbled just as loud as the other two in his Mariner Valley drawl.

She couldn’t blame them. It was make-work. Something for the Martian soldiers on Ganymede to do to keep them busy. If Earth decided it needed Ganymede all to itself, four grunts walking around the greenhouse dome wouldn’t stop them.

With dozens of Earth and Mars warships in a tense standoff in orbit, if hostilities broke out the ground pounders would probably find out only when the surface bombardment began.

To her left, the dome rose to almost half a kilometer: triangular glass panels separated by gleaming copper-colored struts that turned the entire structure into a massive Faraday cage. Bobbie had never been inside one of the greenhouse domes. She'd been sent out from Mars as part of a surge in troops to the outer planets and had been walking patrols on the surface almost since day one. Ganymede to her was a spaceport, a small Marine base, and the even smaller guard outpost she currently called home.

As they shuffled around the dome, Bobbie watched the unremarkable landscape. Ganymede didn't change much without a catastrophic event. The surface was mostly silicate rock and water ice a few degrees warmer than space. The atmosphere was oxygen so thin it could pass as an industrial vacuum. Ganymede didn't erode or weather. It changed when rocks fell on it from space, or when warm water from the liquid core forced itself onto the surface and created short-lived lakes. Neither thing happened all that often. At home on Mars, wind and dust changed the landscape hourly. Here, she was walking through the footsteps of the day before and the day before and the day before. And if she never came back, those footprints would outlive her. Privately, she thought it was sort of creepy.

A rhythmic squeaking started to cut through the normally smooth hiss and thump sounds her powered armor made. She usually kept the suit's HUD minimized. It got so crowded with information that a marine knew everything except what was actually in front of her. Now she pulled it up, using blinks and eye movements to page over to the suit diagnostic screen. A yellow telltale warned her that the suit's left knee actuator was low on hydraulic fluid. Must be a leak somewhere, but a slow one, because the suit couldn't find it.

"Hey, guys, hold up a minute," Bobbie said. "Hilly, you have any extra hydraulic fluid in your pack?"

"Yep," said Hillman, already pulling it out.

“Give my left knee a squirt, would you?”

While Hillman crouched in front of her, working on her suit, Gourab and Travis began an argument that seemed to be about sports. Bobbie tuned it out.

“This suit is ancient,” Hillman said. “You really oughta upgrade. This sort of thing is just going to happen more and more often, you know.”

“Yeah, I should,” Bobbie said. But the truth was that was easier said than done. Bobbie was not the right shape to fit into one of the standard suits, and the Marines made her jump through a series of flaming hoops every time she requisitioned a new custom one. At a bit over two meters tall, she was only slightly above average height for a Martian male, but thanks in part to her Polynesian ancestry, she weighed in at over a hundred kilos at one g. None of it was fat, but her muscles seemed to get bigger every time she even walked through a weight room. As a marine, she trained all the time.

The suit she had now was the first one in twelve years of active duty that actually fit well. And even though it was beginning to show its age, it was just easier to try to keep it running than beg and plead for a new one.

Hillman was starting to put his tools away when Bobbie’s radio crackled to life.

“Outpost four to stickman. Come in, stickman.”

“Roger four,” Bobbie replied. “This is stickman one. Go ahead.”

“Stickman one, where are you guys? You’re half an hour late and some shit is going down over here.”

“Sorry, four, equipment trouble,” Bobbie said, wondering what sort of shit might be going down, but not enough to ask about it over an open frequency.

“Return to the outpost immediately. We have shots fired at the UN outpost. We’re going into lockdown.”

It took Bobbie a moment to parse that. She could see her men staring at her, their faces a mix of puzzlement and fear.

“Uh, the Earth guys are shooting at you?” she finally asked.

“Not yet, but they’re shooting. Get your asses back here.”

Hillman pushed to his feet. Bobbie flexed her knee once and got greens on her diagnostic. She gave Hilly a nod of thanks, then said, “Double-time it back to the outpost. Go.”



Bobbie and her squad were still half a kilometer from the outpost when the general alert went out. Her suit’s HUD came up on its own, switching to combat mode. The sensor package went to work looking for hostiles and linked up to one of the satellites for a top-down view. She felt the click as the gun built into the suit’s right arm switched to free-fire mode.

A thousand alarms would be sounding if an orbital bombardment had begun, but she couldn’t help looking up at the sky anyway. No flashes or missile trails. Nothing but Jupiter’s bulk.

Bobbie took off for the outpost in a long, loping run. Her squad followed without a word. A person trained in the use of a strength-augmenting suit running in low gravity could cover a lot of ground quickly. The outpost came into view around the curve of the dome in just a few seconds, and a few seconds after that, the cause of the alarm.

UN Marines were charging the Martian outpost. The yearlong cold war was going hot. Somewhere deep behind the cool mental habits of training and discipline, she was surprised. She hadn’t really thought this day would come.

The rest of her platoon were out of the outpost and arranged in a firing line facing the UN position. Someone had driven *Yojimbo* out onto the line, and the four-meter-tall combat mech towered over the other marines, looking like a headless giant in power armor, its massive cannon moving slowly as it tracked the incoming Earth troops. The UN soldiers were covering the 2,500 meters between the two outposts at a dead run.

Why isn't anyone talking? she wondered. The silence coming from her platoon was eerie.

And then, just as her squad got to the firing line, her suit squealed a jamming warning at her. The top-down vanished as she lost contact with the satellite. Her team's life signs and equipment status reports went dead as her link to their suits was cut off. The faint static of the open comm channel disappeared, leaving an even more unsettling silence.

She used hand motions to place her team at the right flank, then moved up the line to find Lieutenant Givens, her CO. She spotted his suit right at the center of the line, standing almost directly under *Yojimbo*. She ran up and placed her helmet against his.

"What the fuck is going on, El Tee?" she shouted.

He gave her an irritated look and yelled, "Your guess is as good as mine. We can't tell them to back off because of the jamming, and visual warnings are being ignored. Before the radio cut out, I got authorization to fire if they come within half a klick of our position."

Bobbie had a couple hundred more questions, but the UN troops would cross the five-hundred-meter mark in just a few more seconds, so she ran back to anchor the right flank with her squad. Along the way, she had her suit count the incoming forces and mark them all as hostiles. The suit reported seven targets. Less than a third of the UN troops at their outpost.

This makes no sense.

She had her suit draw a line on the HUD at the five-hundred-meter mark. She didn't tell her boys that was the free-fire zone. She didn't need to. They'd open fire when she did without needing to know why.

The UN soldiers had crossed the one-kilometer mark, still without firing a shot. They were coming in a scattered formation, with six out front in a ragged line and a seventh bringing up the rear about seventy meters behind. Her suit HUD selected the figure on the far left of the enemy line as her target, picking the one closest to her by default. Something

itched at the back of her brain, and she overrode the suit and selected the target at the rear and told it to magnify.

The small figure suddenly enlarged in her targeting reticule. She felt a chill move down her back, and magnified again.

The figure chasing the six UN Marines wasn't wearing an environment suit. Nor was it, properly speaking, human. Its skin was covered in chitinous plates, like large black scales. Its head was a massive horror, easily twice as large as it should have been and covered in strange protruding growths.

But most disturbing of all were its hands. Far too large for its body, and too long for their width, they were a childhood nightmare version of hands. The hands of the troll under the bed or the witch sneaking in through the window. They flexed and grasped at nothing with a constant manic energy.

The Earth forces weren't attacking. They were retreating.

"Shoot the thing chasing them," Bobbie yelled to no one.

Before the UN soldiers could cross the half-kilometer line that would cause the Martians to open fire, the thing caught them.

"Oh, holy shit," Bobbie whispered. "Holy *shit*."

It grabbed one UN Marine in its huge hands and tore him in half like paper. Titanium-and-ceramic armor ripped as easily as the flesh inside, spilling broken bits of technology and wet human viscera indiscriminately onto the ice. The remaining five soldiers ran even harder, but the monster chasing them barely slowed as it killed.

"Shoot it shoot it shoot it," Bobbie yelled, and opened fire. Her training and the technology of her combat suit combined to make her an extremely efficient killing machine. As soon as her finger pulled the trigger on her suit's gun, a stream of two-millimeter armor-piercing rounds streaked out at the creature at more than a thousand meters per second. In just under a second she'd fired fifty rounds at it. The creature was a relatively slow-moving human-sized target, running in a straight line. Her targeting computer could do ballistic corrections that would let her hit a softball-sized object

moving at supersonic speeds. Every bullet she fired at the monster hit.

It didn't matter.

The rounds went through it, probably not slowing appreciably before they exited. Each exit wound sprouted a spray of black filaments that fell onto the snow instead of blood. It was like shooting water. The wounds closed almost faster than they were created; the only sign the thing had even been hit was the trail of black fibers in its wake.

And then it caught a second UN Marine. Instead of tearing him to pieces like it had the last one, it spun and hurled the fully armored Earther—probably massing more than five hundred kilos total—toward Bobbie. Her HUD tracked the UN soldier on his upward arc and helpfully informed her that the monster had thrown him not *toward* her but *at* her. In a very flat trajectory. Which meant fast.

She dove to the side as quickly as her bulky suit would let her. The hapless UN Marine swiped Hillman, who'd been standing next to her, and then both of them were gone, bouncing down the ice at lethal speeds.

By the time she'd turned back to the monster, it had killed two more UN soldiers.

The entire Martian line opened fire on it, including *Yojimbo's* big cannon. The two remaining Earth soldiers diverged and ran at angles away from the thing, trying to give their Martian counterparts an open firing lane. The creature was hit hundreds, thousands of times. It stitched itself back together while remaining at a full run, never more than slowing when one of *Yojimbo's* cannon shots detonated nearby.

Bobbie, back on her feet, joined in the barrage of fire but it didn't make any difference. The creature slammed into the Martian line, killing two marines faster than the eye could follow. *Yojimbo* slid to one side, far more nimble than a machine of its size should be. Bobbie thought Sa'id must be driving it. He bragged he could make the big mech dance the tango when he wanted to. That didn't matter either. Even

before Sa'id could bring the mech's cannon around for a point-blank shot, the creature ran right up its side, gripped the pilot hatch, and tore the door off its hinges. Sa'id was snatched from his cockpit harness and hurled sixty meters straight up.

The other marines had begun to fall back, firing as they went. Without radio, there was no way to coordinate the retreat. Bobbie found herself running toward the dome with the rest. The small and distant part of her mind that wasn't panicking knew that the dome's glass and metal would offer no protection against something that could tear an armored man in half or rip a nine-ton mech to pieces. That part of her mind recognized the futility in attempting to override her terror.

By the time she found the external door into the dome, there was only one other marine left with her. Gourab. Up close, she could see his face through the armored glass of his helmet. He screamed something at her she couldn't hear. She started to lean forward to touch helmets with him when he shoved her backward onto the ice. He was hammering on the door controls with one metal fist, trying to smash his way in, when the creature caught him and peeled the helmet off his suit with one casual swipe. Gourab stood for a moment, face in vacuum, eyes blinking and mouth open in a soundless scream; then the creature tore off his head as easily as it had his helmet.

It turned and looked at Bobbie, still flat on her back.

Up close, she could see that it had bright blue eyes. A glowing, electric blue. They were beautiful. She raised her gun and held down the trigger for half a second before she realized she'd run out of ammo long before. The creature looked at her gun with what she would have sworn was curiosity, then looked into her eyes and cocked its head to one side.

This is it, she thought. This is how I go out, and I'm not going to know what did it, or why. Dying she could handle. Dying without any answers seemed terribly cruel.

The creature took one step toward her, then stopped and shuddered. A new pair of limbs burst out of its midsection and writhed in the air like tentacles. Its head, already grotesque,

seemed to swell up. The blue eyes flashed as bright as the lights in the domes.

And then it exploded in a ball of fire that hurled her away across the ice and slammed her into a low ridge hard enough for the impact-absorbing gel in her suit to go rigid, freezing her in place.

She lay on her back, fading toward unconsciousness. The night sky above her began to flash with light. The ships in orbit, shooting each other.

Cease fire, she thought, pressing it out into the blackness. *They were retreating. Cease fire.* Her radio was still out, her suit dead. She couldn't tell anyone that the UN Marines hadn't been attacking.

Or that something else had.

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