

# PLUS OR MINUS

James Patrick Kelly

**Jim Kelly checked in from Dingle, Ireland, where he was teaching at the Stonecoast Creative Writing MFA program, to say, “The Asteroid Belt is one of the stops most science fiction writers make on their literary tour of the solar system. Here is my version of a future in which everyday folks working in space face the ultimate challenge.”**

Everything changed once Beep found out that Mariska’s mother was the famous Natalya Volochkova. Mariska’s life aboard the *Shining Legend* went immediately from bad to awful. Even before he singled her out, she had decided that there was no way she’d be spending the rest of her teen years crewing on an asteroid bucket. Once Beep started persecuting her, she began counting down the remaining days of the run as if she were a prisoner. She tried explaining that she had no use for Natalya Volochkova, who had never been much of a mother to her, but Beep wouldn’t hear it. He didn’t care that Mariska had only signed on to the *Shining Legend* to get back at her mother for ruining her life.

Somehow that hadn’t worked out quite the way she had planned.

For example, there was crud duty. With a twisting push Mariska sailed into the command module, caught herself on a handrail, and launched toward the starboard wall. The racks of instrument screens chirped and beeped and buzzed; Command was one of the loudest mods on the ship. She stuck her landing in front of navigation rack and her slippers caught on the deck burrs, anchoring her in the ship’s .0006 gravity. Sure enough, she could see new smears of mold growing from the crack where the nav screen fit into the wall. This was Beep’s fault, although he would never admit it. He kept the humidity jacked up in Command, said that dry air gave him nosebleeds. Richard FiveFord claimed they came from all the drugs Beep sniffed, but Mariska didn’t want to believe that. Also, Beep liked to sip his coffee from a cup instead of sucking it out of a bag, even though he slobbered all the time. Fungi loved the sugary spatters. She sniffed one particularly vile-looking smear of mold. It smelled faintly like the worms she used to grow back home on the Moon. She wiped her nose with the sleeve of her jersey and reached to the holster on her belt for her sponge. As she scrubbed, the bitter vinegar tang of disinfectant gel filled the mod. Not for the first time, she told herself that this job stunk.

She felt the tingle of Richard FiveFord offering a mindfeed and opened her head.  
=What?=-

His feed made a pleasant fizz behind her eyes, distracting her. =You done any time soon?=- Distraction was Richard’s specialty.

=No.=-

=Dedit is making a dream for us.=-

She slapped her sponge at the wall in frustration. =*This sucks*.= Mariska couldn't remember the last time Didit or Richard FiveFord had pulled crud duty.

=*Should we wait for you?*=

=*If you want*.= But she knew they wouldn't. =*Might be another hour*.=

"You're working, Volochkova." Beep's voice crackled over the loudspeaker. One of his quirks was snooping their private feeds and then yelling at them over the ship's com.

"Yes, sir," she said. Beep liked to be called sir. It made him feel like the captain of the *Shining Legend* instead of senior monkey of its maintenance crew.

"She's working, FiveFord. Leave our sweet young thing alone."

She felt Richard's feed pop like a bubble. He was more afraid of Beep than she was even though the old crank hardly ever bullied Richard. Mariska hated being called *sweet young thing*. She wasn't sweet and she wasn't all that young. She was already fifteen in conscious years, eighteen if you counted the time she had hibernated.

When Mariska finished wiping the wall down, she paused at the navigation rack. She let her gaze blur until all she saw was a meaningless shimmer of green and blue light. Not that she understood the rack much better once she focused again. She had been job-shadowing Beep for 410 million kilometers and eleven months now. They had traveled all the way to SinoStar's *Rising Dragon* station and were passing Mars orbit on the way back to the Moon, and she had mastered less than two-thirds of the nav rack's screens. If she had used a feed to learn the read-outs, she would have been nav qualified by now, but Beep wouldn't allow feed learning. He insisted that she shadow him. Another quirk. He was such a fossil.

She said, "Close astrometry, she ordered." The shipbrain cleared the readouts of the astrometry cluster from the screen. "Time?" A new cluster appeared. It was 14:03:34 on 5 July 2163. The mission was in its three hundred and ninth standard day. Enough water ice aboard for two hundred and eleven days of oxygen renewal. Mid-course switchover from acceleration to deceleration would take place in three days, two hours, and fifty-nine minutes. The ship's reaction mass reserves of hydrogen would permit braking for one hundred and seventy-three days. More than they needed. Acquisition of the approach signal for *Sweetspot* station would occur in just one hundred and fifteen days, three hours, forty-seven minutes.

Mariska bit her lip. Even if by some miracle she could get home the day after tomorrow, it wouldn't be soon enough for her. She glanced up at the tangle of cables that Beep had strung from nav's access port to its backup rack. They swayed weightlessly in the currents of the air recycling system. Were those blue-black splotches on that cable sheath? They were. With a groan, Mariska peeled her slippers from the deck and launched herself toward the ceiling, sponge at the ready.

It took almost two hours to finish—although crud duty was never-ending. In another week it would be back; crud had been climbing the walls of spaceships for two hundred years now. The stuff offended Mariska's lunar sensibilities. There had been none of it on the Moon, or if there had been, she had never seen any. But Haworth, the crater city where she had grown up, was a huge environment. Compared to it, the *Shining Legend* was a drop in the Muoi swimming pool.

By the time she flew back to Wardroom C, Glint, Didit, and Richard were already lost in the dream. Each had tethered themselves to the wall and drifted aimlessly, occasionally nudging into one another. They weren't asleep exactly. It was just that linking feeds to create a communal dream took concentration. Reality just got in the way. But Richard noticed when Mariska came through the hatchway and roused himself.

"Mariska." His voice drowsed. "Hey monkeys, it's Mariska."

Glint blinked as if she were a mirage. "Mariska." To Glint she probably was. " 'S not too late."

She knew it was, but she opened her head a crack to take in their common feed. Did-

it had created a circus framework; she was good at dream narratives. She had raised a striped tent and a rusting iron pyramid from a grassy field. A parade of outsized animals trudged down a dirt road: cows and polar bears and elephants and a whale with squat legs. Glint's contribution was sensory. She was an amateur artist and had painted the feed with moist summer heat, the smell of popcorn and barns and sweat, the tootling of a pipe organ, and the delicate taste of dust from the road. But what Mariska liked most was her sky. It was the deep blue of the oceans as seen from space and had a kind of delicious weight, as if it had been filled with more air than any sky had ever been. Richard supplied the details. He was the only one of them who had actually lived on Earth and had seen an elephant or had walked on living grass.

If Mariska had spotted any of her bunkmates in the dream, she might have tried to catch up to them, even though they had created the feed without her and were already deep into its mysteries. She gave up looking when she heard laughter and applause coming from the tent. She was alone again. So what was new? She closed her head and left them to their fun.

Mariska was the youngest of the five-person crew assigned to the *Shining Legend*. There were three other maintenance monkeys job-shadowing Beep. This was her first—and last—asteroid run. Being the rookie shadow meant getting stuck with the worst chores, having no say about anything, and getting left out half the time. She stripped off her coverall and underwear, wadded the lot into a ball, and crammed it into the clothes processor. She didn't know which she hated more, the mindless work or the smothering boredom when there was no work to do. She heaved herself into the cleanser, zipped the seal shut, and slipped the spray wand from its slot. On the Moon, she could have let the cleanser fill with steam. Warm mist would bead on her skin and trickle deliciously down her body. But in space, there was no down. The wand's vacuum nozzle sucked the water off her before she had a chance to savor it. She came out of the cleanser free of mold spores but chilled. She snatched a fresh coverall from the processor's drawer.

As she dressed she tried to convince herself that getting left out didn't matter, that she didn't even like the other monkeys. Of course, this wasn't true. She would have done almost anything to get them to accept her as an equal. She jammed her arm into a sleeve. She was irked that Richard hadn't made the others wait for her. She knew he wanted to have sex with her and recently she had been surprised to find herself warming to him, despite his nightmarish body. Even though he had lived in space for four of his nineteen years, Richard had been warped by Earth's freakish gravity. He was tall and his head was way too big and all those grotesque muscles scared her. If she was a monkey, then he was a gorilla.

Mariska had made out a couple of times with Glint, but it wasn't very good for either of them. Glint and Didit were sister clones of a woman named Xu Jingchu, a big name at SinoStar Ltd. Glint was eighteen and Didit was fifteen. Genetically tweaked for weightlessness, they were as dainty as Richard was gross. They had slender limbs and beautifully defined ribcages and were so tiny that they might have been mistaken for elves or fourth graders. Their delicate bones were continually reinforced by some kind of super powered osteoblasts or something. They had thick pubic hair and small breasts but no wasteful reproductive systems. People living on the Moon or Mars or in space didn't make babies by having sex. Their kids would have two heads or no lungs because of the cosmic radiation. At the start of the run Mariska had hoped that she and the Jingchu sisters might be friends. But it never really happened, despite all her efforts to reach out. Didit and Glint treated her like the rookie she was.

Mariska was a clone too, but Natalya Volochkova had had her daughter tweaked to go to the stars. Mariska hadn't asked for the genes that made it possible for her to hibernate and she didn't want to crew on a starship. But her mother had made those

decisions for her—or thought she had until Mariska had run away to crew on an asteroid bucket. She had hoped to keep her past a secret from the little crew of the *Shining Legend*. But Beep had found her out and told everyone and now she was sure they resented her for throwing away a chance they all would have jumped at.

When Didit's arm brushed her sister's face, she murmured something that Mariska didn't catch. She studied the two sisters and wondered if maybe her body unnerved them as much as Richard's unnerved her.

"Moo," said Glint. "Moooo."

Mariska had an impulse to yank on her tether, pull the little monkey down and tell her to start the dream over. Include her this time. "Moo yourself," said Mariska. She flipped out of the wardroom and angrily pulled herself upspine toward Galley.

Mariska shook a sippy cup of borscht until it was hot. She bungeed herself to a dining stand and woke up the screen beside it. Lately she had been looking at the news. Even though it was boring, it made her feel grown-up. Today was all about Mars. Construction of the last phase of the Martinez space elevator had finally been funded. Maybe a job there for her? Vids of genetically tweaked Martians picketing the domes of Earth-standard Martians. Never mind—she was never going to Mars. They were taking applications again for emigration to the colony on Delta Pavonis 4, the terrestrial planet that the *Gorshkov* had just discovered. Natalya Volochkova had been chief medical officer on that mission. Mariska didn't get why the *Gorshkov* crew hadn't given it a real name. Who would want to move to a planet called 4?

She sipped some of the borscht and sighed. Another thing that she hated about space was everything tasted bland, like oatmeal or crackers.

She checked her inbox and as usual there was a message from her mother. *Golubushka, nothing, nothing, nothing, can't wait to see you again, love, Mama*. She deleted it, as usual. Once again, nothing from Jak. Back on the Moon they had been all but engaged to be married and become deep spacers and go to the stars together. But she was over him now. Still, it would be nice to hear something, seeing as how she would have gladly had sex with *him* if only *he* had waited for her. Maybe he was applying to emigrate to Planet 4. Maybe he was already there. Good riddance.

She missed him.

"Mind if I join you?"

She hadn't heard Beep slip into the stand beside her. With its clatter of fans, pumps, and compressors, Galley was almost as noisy as Command. The creak of the hull expanding and contracting was particularly bad here. "No sir," she said, and wiped the screen.

Beep was maybe forty, maybe eighty. She couldn't tell. Living in space faded different people at different rates. The stubble on his head and chin had gone gray and there was a dimpled scar on his cheek where the cancer had been carved out. He had the slouch that all bucket monkeys got from spending too much time weightless. There was nothing special about his coveralls, but one of the *Shining Legend's* two override cards hung from his neck on a green lanyard.

"I had a message today from your mother." He scanned the galley menu. "I was given instruction." His eyes were watery and vague.

"Really?" She felt her cheeks flush. "What did she say?"

"To take good care of you." He pointed at the menu. "Ha-ha-ha." Seconds passed and then the oven stuck its tongue out at him. On it was a steaming tart. He swiped it into the air, caught it before it could fly across the room, then juggled it from hand to hand until it floated, cooling, in front of him. "We go way back, Natalya and I," he said at last. "A thick stick now, isn't she?"

There was nothing safe she could say about that.

"Your mother doesn't understand you, young Volochkova. She wants you to be a deep spacer, not a bucket monkey."

"She's never bothered to understand me."

"You had the tweak. You can hibernate, sleep your way to the stars. So why are you dancing on one foot?"

She snorted in derision. "Only losers hibernate. You wake up and nothing is the same. You lose everything."

He shook his head as if he didn't believe her. "You know, I was supposed to be a spacer. Zoom through the wormhole to the stars." He sailed a flat hand back and forth imitating a spaceship. "Your mother Natalya pronounced me unfit." He caught his tart and bit into it. "Thinner than water, I was back then." Mariska watched crumbs fly out of his mouth. More crud duty.

"That has nothing to do with me . . . sir." She realized that she had been forgetting to say it.

"One generation plants the tree, the next gets the shade." His laugh was like a grunt. "I met her when she wasn't much older than you."

Mariska jacked her guess about his age way, way up.

He stuffed the rest of the tart into his mouth and took his time chewing. "I'd say that you remind me of her, but then you *are* her." He held a finger to his lips, cutting off her objection. "What's my name, young Volochkova? No, not Beep."

"Lincoln Larrabee, sir." This was the longest conversation they'd had in months. She wished she knew how to end it.

"Good of you to know that." He considered the back of his hand for a moment. "So if we have to share the same sky, we should help each other. I'm worried about FiveFord."

She hadn't noticed anything odd about Richard, other than that he wouldn't take no for an answer. "Why?"

"Space blues. Apathy. Burn out. Maybe you've missed the signs, but he won't be worth a mushroom in another couple of weeks."

"But he's only nineteen."

"Do us a favor, would you? I mean, for the good of the ship and all." He poked his forefinger to her shoulder, as if she hadn't been paying attention. "Give FiveFord that ride he's been waiting for."

"What?"

"Go knee to knee with him. You're patched, aren't you? You can't get pregnant."

She couldn't believe he was saying this to her until she realized that he must have been sniffing. "Are you high?"

"Why?" When he winked at her, his eyelid fluttered. "Aren't you?"

"No."

"Then let's fix that." He fumbled at the breast pocket of his coverall, withdrew a sniffer and offered it to her.

She resisted the impulse to bat the thing out of his hand. "You're crazy." She wasn't about to *sir* him when he was twisted.

"What? It's just some harmless wizard. You get high. I've watched you."

"That's different." His lopsided grin infuriated her. She had accepted his bullying because she thought he was in control of things. "You're supposed to be responsible. You're wearing the override."

He peeled the card from his coverall and twirled it on its lanyard. "But I'm not on duty." He tucked it into the pocket where the sniffer had been.

"You're always on duty." She could hear her voice tremble. "What if something goes wrong?"

He waved the sniffer absently under his nose but did not squeeze off a dose. "You know why they call us monkeys?"

She closed her eyes, wishing this was just a nightmare she was having.

"It comes from first days," he said, "back in astronaut time. Everything was automatic then. The engineers didn't trust the old guys to do anything, not even think. Test animals don't make decisions and that's all the astronauts were. They used to say they were men sent to do monkeys' work."

She snapped the bungee against her wrist to keep from screaming. Beep was always saying things like that. She didn't know what he was talking about half the time.

"We're just along for the ride. Look here." He held up three fingers on his left hand. "Three wardrooms." He showed her all five fingers of his right. "Five of us. Crews used to need all that bunk space, but there was nothing for them to do. So they cut back. Everything is automatic now."

"But I'm shadowing you on the nav rack." Her voice was so small that she almost couldn't hear herself over Galley noise.

"Sure, so you can read it. But if we get a course wobble, can you calculate a new trajectory home?" He waited for her reply but there was nothing she could say. "You want Didit tweaking the magnetic containment field in the reactor?"

"I'd tell the computers to . . ."

"The computers are automatic. They don't need monkeys to override a busted routine."

"Then why are we here?"

"Crud duty? Fix lights? Fetch the ice?" He scratched under his arm and shrieked *hoo-hoo-hoo*.

When Mariska motioned for the sniffer, Beep grinned. She brought it to her face, cupped hands over it, and squeezed off a dose, which sparkled up her nose. The wizard sank to her lungs and streamed into her blood. Seconds later her brain was twinkling.

"Feel better?" said Beep.

For the moment, the wizard was more important than her fear and confusion. "We're not monkeys," she said. "We're remoras."

He cupped the sniffer to his nose. "Say again?" He pressed the trigger.

"Remoras. The fish that stick onto sharks and clean parasites off them."

When Beep burst out laughing, his sniffer shot across Galley and out into the spine. She chuckled too but it was only because she was seriously twisted.

"Yes, loosen your cheeks." He patted the packet where he'd put the override, as if to make sure he hadn't lost it too. "Why don't you think I like you?"

This also struck her as funny. "Because you don't." She giggled. "Sir."

"Look here." He pointed and the screen next to her woke up. She saw a grainy vid, obviously transcribed from a feed. On it was Mariska, except not. She was wearing a dress that was black and shiny and barely covered the crotch. The shoulders were bare except for the two skinny ribbons which kept the dress from falling off. She was wearing black strappy shoes with heels six centimeters long. The eyeshadow was purple.

She would never wear such ridiculous shoes. Or eyeshadow. "What is this?"

The Mariska on the screen tugged the dress up so that black lace panties peeked from beneath the hem. One of the ribbons slipped. The face's hungry expression stunned her.

"Stop it."

The scene shifted and another Mariska was perched in a golden cage. She was nearly naked this time. The arms fitted into outspread white wings like the ones they used in aviaries on the Moon. Feathers dangled from a golden chain around the waist but didn't conceal much. The chest horrified her. Although she was fifteen, she was still pathetically flat-chested—her mother's fault. But the figure on the screen would have needed at least a C-cup bra to cover the bare breasts. Someone—

*something* opened the door to the golden cage, but all she could see was a hand with long, pointed fingernails.

Beep froze the vid. "They go on from there," he said. "Much further on."

"They?" Mariska couldn't find her voice. "Where . . . *who*?"

"FiveFord has been making fake feeds where you do whatever he can imagine. It started on the outbound, but he wasn't obsessing until a couple of weeks ago. He makes one of you almost every day now. Sometimes he'll steal from his sleep time. I've seen this with shadows before." He gestured at the screen. "They make all kinds of deranged dream feeds, design inventions that could never work, study eight languages and learn none. I've got nothing against it in general, but sometimes they turn inward and swallow themselves. Then we have a problem."

Mariska was outraged. "You're as bad as he is." She reached past him and wiped the screen. "You're snooping this?"

"Fifteen-year-olds aren't exactly my favorite flavor, young Volochkova. I don't like this any more than you do." He fixed her with an accusing stare. "But tell me you've never created a fake feed before."

Of course she had. Not a lot, but more than a couple. She and her friend Grieg used to fake Mr. Holmgren, their ag teacher. They had him diddling Librarian Jane, the star from *Crosswhen* and President Kwa and Godzilla. But that had been funny. Somehow she didn't think Richard FiveForce was doing fakes of her for laughs.

"Make him stop. Right now."

Beep showed her his hands, palms up. "Feeds are thought, young Volochkova. You can't stop thoughts. And it's not as if he's sharing with anyone. He can't know that I've snooped his kink. Or that I gave you a sneak preview." Beep released the bungee from his dining stand. "Anyway, I just thought you might be interested." He pushed toward the spine. "You can make him stop any time you want to. Reality trumps fantasy."

"I'm not sleeping with that pervert."

He waved without looking back. "Your decision." He flew through the hatch.

Her borscht was cold and she had lost her appetite. She shoved the cup into the disposal chute and flew back to Wardroom C. She hesitated at the hatch. Didit, Glint, and Richard were still linked into their common dream. Now she wondered exactly what they were sharing. After all, this was a feed that they had deliberately kept her from. What kinks might be happening under that imaginary striped tent? She shook her head. No, that was paranoid thinking. Glint had invited her to join them, after all. Still, she braced against the hatchway and then threw herself at her sleep closet before any of them noticed her.

She sealed herself in but didn't turn on the lights. Her mind was churning as she floated in the darkness. Why had Natalya Volochkova contacted Beep? Did her mother know how he had been tormenting her? Would whatever she told him make any difference? Mariska doubted it. She decided to resent her mother's interference, even if things did somehow get better. The whole point of signing on for an asteroid run was to escape the controlling bitch. Then Mariska got stuck thinking about what Beep had said. How could he ever have believed she'd let Richard touch her after she'd seen those fakes?

All the grown-ups in her life were out of control.

The longer she spent in the dark, the lonelier she felt. She had no friends on the *Shining Legend*. The only friends she did have were back on the Moon, forty million kilometers away.

And Jak had left her.

She woke up the screen and drilled down through the menus until she came to her feed editor. She linked it to the encrypted partition where she kept her secret shrine to Jak. She didn't give a damn if Beep was snooping. There was a specific feed she

had created of things she remembered about the Muoi pool. She and Jak used to swim laps there together; she found a sequence where they were sitting on the edge, their feet dangling in the water. In real life she had been wearing her aquablade swimsuit but now she changed it to the two piece that she never liked because it made her look like a little girl. In real life, they had talked about sharing a closet on a starship, maybe even the famous *Gorshkov*, assuming that her mother wouldn't be aboard. In her fake, there was no talk of the future. She scripted him to play with the waistband of her suit, which she had let him do sometimes. She brushed a kiss across his shoulder, licking the beads of water which clung to his bare skin. The shouts of kids playing in the shallow end bounced off the low ceiling of the pool's cave. Jak slipped his three middle fingers slowly down the bumps of her spine and then just inside her suit, which she had never let him do. The fake Mariska closed her eyes. The real Mariska sucked in a ragged breath. She could see her imaginary Jak getting hard under his swimsuit. But suddenly she was sad. Too sad. She knew there would be tears if she pushed the fake any further. And none of them, not Jak or Beep or Richard or the Jingchus or her mother, was worth crying over.

The *Shining Legend* was possibly the ugliest spaceship in SinoStar's fleet. At the back end of its long spine was a heavily shielded antimatter drive. Forward of the reactor was a skirt of battered cargo buckets. Outbound, these had carried agro and manufactured goods destined for *Rising Dragon* station. Inbound, they contained unprocessed nickel-iron ore and dirty chunks of ice from SinoStar's asteroid mines. Next to the buckets were storage mods. Further upspine, a hodgepodge of crew mods had accreted over the years: Command, Galley, Service, Health, Rec, and Wardrooms A, B, and C. Three crawlerbots, nicknamed Apple, Banana, and Cherry, wandered the various hulls of the ship checking for micrometeor damage. A watchbot named Eye flew alongside, held by a magnetic tether. Their asteroid bucket looked to Mariska like a pile of junk that had fallen out of a closet.

The ship ran on antimatter and water. Electrolytic cells dissociated hydrogen and oxygen from ice that had been treated back on *Sweetspot*. The hydrogen was used by the positron reactor for thrust, the oxygen refreshed the atmosphere in the crew's quarters. Unlike a starship like the *Gorshkov*, the *Shining Legend* was not a closed system. Scrubbers removed carbon dioxide from the atmosphere and vented it to space. The cells replaced the oxygen lost in this process and therefore required a constant supply of water. When reserves ran low, the crew fetched blocks of the treated ice, stored on loading porches outside the storage mods.

Qualifying in cargo was the last step before a shadow could advance to senior crew; it was the one job where the computers needed human help. Both Richard and Glint were shadowing cargo on this run. Glint had failed cargo once already but she'd been doing better this time. They used the crawlerbots to load, store, and off-load material at either end of the run and bring in the ice while the ship was in transit. In the old days, cargo monkeys used to suit up and actually drive the bots, but now everything was handled remotely from Command.

Throughout the run, Richard, Glint, and Beep would gather at the cargo rack in Command to divert the bots from their normal rounds. But having people look over her shoulder made Glint nervous, especially after she had failed cargo. Back at *Rising Dragon* station she had put several new dents in the buckets while loading ore. Her problem was that when she got flustered, she lost track of where the edges of her bots were. She was fine as long as she didn't actually see anyone, so Richard and Beep had taken to monitoring her from a distance when she took her turn on the rack.

So Mariska was surprised when Richard flew into the Rec mod.

"Isn't Glint on ice duty today?" She was working out on the treadmill.

“She is.” Richard maneuvered himself into the weight machine and buckled in.

“Aren’t you supposed to be watching her?”

“I am.”

“But you’re not.”

“No.” He smiled at no one in particular as he adjusted the arms of the machine. “I’d rather be here with you.” He set the resistance to four kilograms for curls.

“Richard.”

He laughed. “Beep told me to take a break. He’s watching her but she hasn’t messed up since *Dragon*. Ninety-seven days and counting. She’s so good now that she’s boring.”

Mariska had logged just three kilometers and had seven more to go. At least a half hour before she finished her workout and could escape him. She pulled her towel from its clip and wiped her face. Sweat was another thing she hated about space. She missed swimming.

How was she supposed to act around Richard anyway? She couldn’t help but wonder what was going on behind those wide brown eyes when he looked at her. Probably imagining new kinks. But with more than a hundred days left in the run, she couldn’t afford to confront him. Feuds in space tended to take up a lot of room. On a ship the size of the *Shining Legend*, that would be trouble. But she wasn’t about to pretend that she was comfortable being alone with him.

After he finished the curls, he did shoulder squats. The weight machine clanked and wheezed and its gyros hummed. The more reps he did, the more the veins stood out at his temples. Richard was proud of his foolish muscles and worked hard to keep them. Now he was grunting from the effort. It was kind of disgusting. He told her once when they were high on wizard that he’d be like some kind of superhero if he ever visited the Moon. She’d tried not to laugh at his ignorance. There was hardly any crime at Haworth. The Moon had no need of another Lord Danger.

“You haven’t been very nice to me lately.” He was smiling, his cheeks flushed from his workout. “What did I do wrong?”

“Nothing.” She wasn’t going to think feathers and golden chains.

“Somehow you make nothing sound an awful lot like something.” He waited for her to answer; she let him wait. “Okay.” He reconfigured the weight machine for squat thrusts. “*One. Two.*” The count exploded out of him when he kicked his legs back. “*Three. Four. Five.*” He was so strong that he overpowered the gyro. When the apparatus banged against the wall, she could feel the entire mod shake. It was a point of pride with Richard that he could do this. “*Thirteen. Fourteen. Fifteen.*” No one else aboard could. Sometimes she could feel him working out as far away as Galley.

Richard stopped at twenty, sucking air in huge gulps. Mariska felt a familiar tingle; since he was out of breath and couldn’t speak, he was offering her his feed.

“No thanks,” she said. She woke up the screen in front of them, picked a 3D channel at random. It was old sci-fi from the previous century: a space captain in a ridiculously tight uniform was sitting on a shiny chair on the bridge of some fairy tale spaceship. The camera pulled back. Everyone on the screen was sitting on chairs.

There were no chairs on the *Shining Legend*.

“Artificial gravity.” Richard climbed on the stationary bike and started peddling. “I could use some of that just now.”

Mariska ignored him and pretended interest in the 3D.

Now the people on the bridge were staring at a viewscreen showing another silly spaceship. In an external shot, one ship veered sharply away from the other, narrowly avoiding a collision. Back on the bridge, the crew were all leaning to their left.

“Sorry,” said Richard, “but they’d all be puddles of jelly on the wall.” He shook his head. “People on Earth still watch this stuff.”

The counter on the treadmill clicked over to ten kilometers. "Really?" Mariska slowed her pace to a walk. Her legs felt pleasantly heavy.

"People on Earth are stupid. They don't know anything about living in space. That's why I left."

"There are stupid people everywhere." She unbungeed herself. "The trick is not to let them do anything stupid to you."

Richard shot her a quizzical look. "Meaning?"

"Meaning have a nice workout, Richard." She said, and kicked out of Rec.

Mariska had never had a feed from her mother before. At first she wasn't sure that she should accept it. Natalya Volochkova was a fossil like Beep. Her generation used feeds only for the most intimate sort of contact, which was the last thing Mariska wanted. But this feed had been the only message from her mother for several days now. Mariska was curious to know why she had stopped.

*=Moya radost, you know this isn't what I wanted for us.=* Natalya Volochkova was seated in a plastic chair in a spare room that was clearly not at their home in Hawthorth. The focus was tight, the light harsh. Mariska tried to zoom out but the feed refused her command. There was a stale papery smell to the room that made Mariska think that she might be looking at a museum or a library. Some kind of storage area. *"You think you are doing what is right. Maybe, but where you are now is not where you will be when you grow up."*

"I am grown up!" Of course, her mother couldn't hear her.

*=I know you have been suffering, but things will get better.=* There was a weight to her voice that Mariska had never heard before. *=I promise.=*

"Just stop your interfering, bitch."

*=I'm on Mars just now, but I won't be staying. I don't know if you've heard, but we're commissioning a new starship, the Natividad.=*

Mariska felt her throat tightening.

*=It's been more than a year since I've heard anything from you. I write, you are silent. At least I know that you are safe. I'm sorry if you're unhappy.=* She was shocked to see her mother's eyes shine with tears. *=I wish I knew what you're thinking just now. But if you really want me out of your life, then I must accept that. I've been offered a place on the Natividad. I had hoped to bring you with me, but . . . =*

"Go then." Mariska closed her mind. The bare room and her sad mother disappeared. "Leave." She deleted the feed.

Mariska tried to relax into the delicate embrace of her closet's sleep net but her thoughts kept tumbling over one another. Mariska wondered at how little she understood herself. This was exactly what she wanted. Natalya Volochkova was finally leaving her alone.

So why did she feel betrayed?

Glint's scream shook the walls of Galley fifteen meters away. Mariska choked on a mouthful of butterscotch pudding. When she poked her head out of the hatch Beep almost tore it off as he shot upspine toward Command. She followed at a distance. Ahead she saw Richard desperately trying to pull Glint downspine. Glint flailed at him like a drowning swimmer.

"What?" Beep shouted over her shrieking.

"Seda . . . tive," said Richard. Glint spun in his grasp and they crashed against the deck of the spine. "Ooof. Glint, no."

"What?" said Beep.

"Something about the ice."

It was a measure of Glint's panic that she gave musclebound Richard all he could

handle. But when he finally yanked her arms behind her back, she slumped forward. Her screams melted into sobs.

“You.” Beep pushed Mariska at them. “Help.” He flew into Command.

They wrangled her downspine to Health and strapped her to an examining table. Richard tried to comfort her while Mariska tapped at the med rack and charged a face mask with somapal. When Richard pressed it to her nose and mouth, Glint groaned and went limp.

They stared at each other across the table. Richard was breathing hard enough for three people.

“What about the ice?” said Mariska.

“Don’t know.” He shook his head. “There wasn’t time.”

“Let’s find out.” He followed her out.

“Where?” Beep muttered to himself as his fingers danced over screens on the cargo rack. “Where, where, where?” He was barefoot and held himself still by curling his toes into the deck burrs. His hair was mussed. He looked like he had just woken up; she thought he might be twisted. “Damn it, where?” Mariska had never noticed how long Beep’s toes were. There was fine black hair on the joints.

He stabbed at the rack. The screens that had been showing Banana’s view switched to Eye flying next to the *Shining Legend*. He panned up and down the ship. Mariska gasped when Eye looked past the porch on Storage D, where their reserves of treated ice were supposed to be.

It was empty. Behind her, Richard made a strangled noise.

“Come on. Where?” Now Beep turned Eye away from the ship to scan the nearby space.

Mariska tore herself away from cargo to access the nav rack. “Time cluster,” she said.

It was 04:33:04 on 15 July 2163. The mission was in its three hundred and nineteenth standard day. The ship had completed its mid-course switchover from acceleration and was now seven days, two hours, and eleven minutes into deceleration toward home. Acquisition of the approach signal for *Sweetspot* station would occur in one hundred and five days, eighteen hours, and twenty-one minutes.

“There.”

The ship’s reaction mass reserves of hydrogen would permit braking for just sixty-eight more days. The inventory of ice finished updating. It would be sufficient for forty-seven days of oxygen renewal. The screen began to flash red.

Eyes wide with terror, Mariska glanced across Command at Eye’s view. Two blue-white blocks the size of lunar rovers were tumbling sedately away from them toward the blaze of stars.

“The problem isn’t fuel,” said Mariska. “If they start a ship soon enough, it can match trajectories with us. Then we offload some replacement ice and finish our deceleration.”

“Except there won’t be any *we*.” Glint looked hollow. “We’ll suffocate by then.”

“Not necessarily.” Richard was trying to convince himself. “Not at all.”

“We’ve got tons of ice back in the buckets,” said Didit. “Asteroid ice. Tons.”

The four of them had gathered in Wardroom C while Beep was in Command talking to experts at *Sweetspot* station. No one wanted to be alone, but being together and seeing how scared they all were made waiting for Beep an agony. There were long silences, punctuated either by hopeful declarations or sniffles. They all cried some, Glint the most. Mariska was surprised at how little she cried. She was sure she was going to die.

“Such an idiot,” Glint rubbed the heels of her hands against her temples. “The stupidest damn stupidhead in all of space.”

Didit poked her listlessly. "Shut up, Glint."

"It's my fault too," said Richard, not for the first time. "Should've been watching you. That's what backup is for. More eyes, no surprise."

Twenty hours before, while retrieving a block of treated ice, Glint had bumped the Cherry crawler against the side of the open airlock. The ship's computers had interpreted this as a potential failure and had triggered lockdown protocol. Glint hadn't wanted yet another screwup on her record, so she had gunned Cherry into the airlock just before the doors slid shut. Once it was safely inside, she had canceled the lockdown. It was, after all, a false alarm. The shipbrain would still record the incident, but an anomaly without consequences wouldn't get Glint in any trouble.

Only now the consequences were dire. Normally, Glint would have instructed Cherry just to drop the ice and leave the airlock. Then, after checking that the primary ice restraints on the storage porch had re-engaged, it would have resumed its automated search for micrometeorite damage. But the crawler was on the wrong side of the doors and its restraint routine had been interrupted by the lockdown. This wouldn't have been a problem had not the secondary restraint, a sheet of nanofabric that covered the ice reserves, failed. The two remaining blocks had somehow nudged out from underneath and taken off. Simulations showed that some kind of vibration could have set the ice in motion. On a ship as old as the *Shining Legend*, shakes and rattles were to be expected.

Mariska guessed that the ice had come loose when Richard banged the weight machine against the wall of Rec. From the way he avoided her gaze, she guessed he thought so too. Was that why he kept apologizing for leaving Glint to fetch the ice?

What everyone was wondering, although no one dared say it aloud yet, was how Beep could have let Glint trash the safety protocols so totally. He'd told Richard that he'd watch her. Had he had his nose in a sniffer?

"Here it is," said Mariska. "That data feed I was looking for."

*=Untreated water is a poor conductor of electricity, impeding the reaction in electrolytic cells so that the dissociation of hydrogen and oxygen occurs very slowly. Typically the addition of salt electrolytes will increase the conductivity of water as much as a millionfold. Using water treated for enhanced conductivity enables SinoStar's advanced electrolytic cells to achieve efficiencies of between 50 percent and 70 percent=*

"So salt." Didit brightened. "We get ice from the buckets and just add salt."

"We don't have that kind of salt," Glint said wearily. "And we sure as hell don't have enough of it."

"Hey, all the feed said was that the cells would be slow." Didit wasn't giving up. "Slow is better than nothing." She looked to Mariska for confirmation.

"Plus raw asteroid ice is full of dust and crap. It'll just clog the cells." Glint's chin quivered but she held the tears back. "Face it, we're slagged."

"Shut up, Glint."

"There's a way," said Richard. "There has got to be a way."

Nobody bothered to agree or disagree. The silence stretched.

"Buck up, monkeys." Beep appeared at the hatchway. "We haven't fallen out of our tree yet. Everyone up to Command and I'll tell you the plan."

The word *plan* seemed to lift the four teenagers. Didit reached over and gave Glint's hair a sisterly pull. "Told you." As they followed him upspine, Mariska caught herself grinning with relief. The brains at *Sweetspot* must have seen something she hadn't.

Beep waited until they had settled themselves around the cargo rack. One of the screens showed Banana crawler parked in front of Storage D. "So we use the crawlers to fetch raw ice from the buckets. We chip off chunks and boil all the impurities out."

Mariska knew that couldn't be right. "How do we do that?" she said. "We have no way to capture—"

"Volochkova, did I ask you to speak?"

"No."

"No, *what?*" His voice was cutting.

"No, sir." She noticed that the skin of his face seemed stretched too tight.

"Leave your ignorance in your pockets. All of you." He let rebuke hang in the air for a long moment. "Next we start collecting leftover salts from the electrolytic cells and stop dumping the stuff into space. We add it to the purified water we're going to make. They're telling me that using fresh water slows down the electrolytic cells. It's like watching toenails grow."

"We know that," said Didit. "Mariska found a feed."

"We've got enough treated ice . . ." he glanced over at the nav rack. ". . . for forty-seven days. Let's see how much salt we can save by then. Okay, monkeys? Trouble is knocking but we're not letting it in. I'll suit up and ride Banana back to the buckets.

"While the reactor is at cruising power?" Too late, Mariska realized that she had spoken without permission. This time Beep was more forgiving.

"I've damped it down." He nodded at the energy rack. "Besides, how else am I going to sort ice from ore?" His grin was bleak. "But thanks for your concern, young Volochkova. I do realize that radiation isn't my friend." Didit laughed nervously. The others glared at Mariska as if she were trying to kill them: They were fine with letting Beep risk the exposure. After all, he was senior monkey.

"So, FiveFord and Glint, get Apple and Cherry started for the porch. Didit, lower the air pressure in the airlock to four tenths of a bar." He pushed off and floated over them. "Young Volochkova, you come with me to Service and help prep the suit. That way you can wash all those worries about my safety."

On their way downspine, Beep caught himself at the hatch to Wardroom A. "I need my coolwear." He waved her on. "Power my suit up and start the checklist. I'll be down in two kicks."

There were a dozen spacesuits bungeed to the walls of Service. Most of them hadn't been touched in years. As part of their cargo chores, however, Glint and Richard had powered five of them up regularly during the run to make sure they still worked. They were all low pressure, which meant Beep needed to prebreathe oxygen before the spacewalk to keep from getting the bends. Since Beep had been aboard the *Shining Legend* for more than a decade, he had a custom-fitted suit. Mariska opened it, plugged its battery cord into the fastcharge outlet, and started its power-on self test. She was moving through the rest of the checklist when Beep flew in.

He had the hood of his coolwear pulled back, but otherwise it covered his entire body. The white of the fabric made the deep flush on Beep's face stand out. When Richard exerted himself, he just turned red. Beep was practically purple and was sucking in huge gulps of air.

Mariska could see beads of sweat at his hairline. "Beep," she said, "tell me you're not high."

"Borrowing some courage is all." He landed in front of the oxygen bar. "And don't be warming my ears about it." He clapped the mask over his face, and glared at her.

Back in Command, she had suspected that something was wrong with him. Now she was certain of it. But there was nothing she could do, so she went back to the checklist. After fifteen minutes, he pulled the mask away and thrust the override card at her. "Hold this while I suit up."

She took it and he raised his arms. Mariska grasped his waist. She could feel the

pulse of the coolant in his coolwear, which was designed to keep the spacesuit from overheating. She raised him over her head and jiggled him through the suit's opening.

He fitted his arms into the sleeves but then paused. "How many oxygen bottles do I have?"

"Two," she said. "Checklist calls for two, primary and backup." She didn't understand why he was asking. Two four-thousand cubic centimeter bottles had been the standard design spec since before she was born.

"How many are left?"

She shrugged.

"Go look."

Mystified, she opened the locker, counted thirty-seven filled and fourteen empty bottles. She reported this.

"Worth knowing." He finished sealing himself into the suit. "Worth remembering. So, let's dance."

She handed him his helmet to carry, unbungeed him from the wall, and tugged on the suit's tether. He bobbed behind her like a man-sized balloon as she pulled him downspine to Storage D.

The air was already thinning in the airlock and it felt colder than it actually was. Beep turned on his boot magnets, enabling him to stand upright in front of her. She was expecting him to fit the helmet onto the suit's collar so she could lock it down. He surprised her.

"Not yet, young Volochkova. Time for a quick chat. You have the override?"

She offered it to him. He shook his head.

"I'm leaving it with you for now. That means you're in charge in case anything spills. I am thinking that you can make the hard decisions. At least, Natalya could."

Mariska wasn't her mother; for some reason Beep still wouldn't accept that. "But Richard is senior to me. And Glint . . ."

He snorted. "FiveFord could drown in a glass of water. He should go back to Earth and dig holes with all those muscles. Only he'd probably fall in. And Glint . . . poor Glint is broken." He pointed at the override. "You show them the override and tell them I said."

"What is this, Beep?" She tucked it into the pocket of her coverall.

"This?" He smirked. "Just a little walk. *La-la-la*. But before I go . . . Remember the fakes I showed you? Ah, I thought you might. So that was just a little joke. The fakes never existed, or at least, you saw all there was of them. All that I made."

"You?"

"I like to stir the soup, Natalya." His laugh had a chemical edge. "The runs are so damn long, too damn boring. Hard to stay interested. So we play tricks. It's tradition, how bucket monkeys keep from going crazy."

Mariska felt suddenly dizzy in the thin air, afraid to say what she was thinking. "Why tell me this now?"

"I'd say it was conscience, if I had one." His mouth tightened. He raised the helmet over his head and stared into it. "Time to go."

"Wait." She caught at the front of his suit. "That was a lie about the raw ice, wasn't it? And the leftover salt—that can't possibly work. And you—you're going to get a crazy dose of radiation. . . ."

"One less mouth to breathe." Beep stuck his chin out at her. "You'll know what to do when the time comes." He lowered the helmet onto his head. She wanted to hammer on it, get him to stop, make all of this go away. Instead she locked it to his suit.

By the time she got back to Command, Beep had already turned Banana downspine and was accelerating toward the buckets. The others watched the screen that showed the crawler's camera, but Mariska was fixed on the overview that the Eye saw.

“He’s going kind of fast.” Richard was beginning to suspect what Mariska already knew.

“Then tell him to slow down,” said Didit.

Beep must have turned his boot magnets off. On the Eye, she saw that they had come off the racing crawler and his only contact was the joystick which he grasped with both hands. His legs swung upward relative to the surface of the ship until he was upside down. He looked like a gymnast doing a handstand as the crawler hurtled toward the buckets.

“Call him,” said Richard. “Glint?”

“Doesn’t work.”

“It’s dead. He must have disabled it.”

Glint’s hand trembled as she pointed at the Eye’s screen. Didit was sobbing.

“Override it.”

“With what?”

“*Stop him.*”

At the exact moment the crawler crashed into the bucket, Beep released his hold. His momentum flung him clear of the *Shining Legend*, tumbling helmet over boot.

They watched as he applied gas thrusters to correct his wild rotation.

They watched him spread his arms to embrace the darkness as he shot away from the ship.

They watched in shock as he faded to a speck of space debris and was gone.

“Still, you could have stopped him,” said Richard.

“How?” Mariska was tired of their accusations. The weight of what she had done—and not done—was crushing her.

“You could have.”

Glint was no help. She had kicked her slippers free of the deck burrs and was floating aimlessly around Command. She seemed not to notice when she bumped into things.

“But we still have ice,” said Didit. “Who’s going to fetch the ice?”

“Nobody.” Glint’s head lolled backward. “It’s just like Mariska said. A fairy tale.”

“What does she know?” Didit’s hands curled into fists; she was ready to punch someone. “Maybe she made Beep do it.”

“He gave her the override.”

The four of them considered this fact in silence. Richard ran a finger down the edge of the cargo rack. It came away with a smudge of ugly blue. “The crud is back,” he said to no one in particular

“It’s her first run,” said Didit. “Why her?”

Glint cackled. “Because he hated her?”

“We should contact *Sweetspot*. Tell them what’s happening here.” Richard nodded at the override hanging around Mariska’s neck. “Maybe we should enable comm now?”

Mariska brought up the comm cluster and flashed the override at the nav rack. Then she paused, considering. “Close communication,” she said. “Time?”

“Sure,” said Glint. “Let’s check the doomsday clock.”

Didit turned on her and shouted. “Shut the fuck up, Glint.”

The screen still flashed red. It was 08:14:56 on 17 July 2163. The mission was in its three hundred and eleventh standard day. They were eight days, twenty-two hours, and six minutes into deceleration. Acquisition of the approach signal for *Sweetspot* station would occur in one hundred days, twenty-three hours, and fifty-one minutes.

“There,” said Mariska. “See?”

The ship’s reaction mass reserves of hydrogen would permit braking for eighty-nine more days. The ice inventory would supply be sufficient for seventy-three days of oxygen renewal.

"See what?" said Richard.

"We gained twenty-six days." Mariska felt as if she were rising out of herself and looking down at them from the Eye. "Beep gave us twenty-six more days."

"So what?" Now Glint shouted. "Seventy-three from one hundred. A month of no air."

"Right," said Mariska. "But if we decrease demand again, we buy even more time."

"Decrease demand?" Fear filled Richard's voice.

"And the rescue ship—they don't have to wait until we get all the way to *Sweetspot*. They can come out to meet us. . . ."

"Someone else sacrifices?" said Didit. "That's your plan?"

"Nobody has to sacrifice." She pushed herself over to the environment rack. "Somebody just has to stop breathing."

"Oh, great," said Glint.

"Who?" said Richard.

Mariska's mind was racing as she brought up the crew's med files. It could work. It had to work.

It was just above freezing in the mod; Mariska was pleased. The inner shell of the *Shining Legend* was fitted with heating strips to keep the bitter cold of space from penetrating crew areas. But Mariska had disabled the shell heaters in Service as part of her plan. She faced Richard as he gripped her waist in his strong hands and lifted her. The Jingchu sisters stood together to one side, wisps of their breath curling into the chill. They were holding hands, which was a good sign. Mariska was worried about Glint's mood swings. Sometimes it seemed as if she resented getting this chance to survive. She just wanted to have the dying over with. But Didit kept pulling her back from despair.

Richard was concentrating so hard on lowering her into the suit that she couldn't help herself. She touched his neck. He glanced up, about to apologize, but she winked at him. "Permission to nap?" She tugged the lanyard of the override around his neck. "Sir?"

He grinned. "Permission granted."

She shivered as he sealed her into the suit. Was this the last time anyone would ever touch her? Bad thought. No bad thoughts. "Ninety-six days," she said. "We can do this, right?"

Richard and Didit answered, "Right." Glint just glared; she still thought that Mariska was abandoning them.

"No chores, understand? Let the crud run wild. And sleep as much as you can."

"We will," said Didit.

"Just remember to wake up when it's time to swap my bottles."

Richard handed her the helmet. "Don't worry."

She tried to think of what else she could say to keep from saying goodbye. "This is it, then." Mariska could feel her throat closing; she didn't want them to see how scared she was. "Okay monkeys, out of here before you freeze to death." She lowered the helmet to the collar and Richard locked it to the spacesuit. She felt a tear pool at the corner of her eye, but the helmet's tinted faceplate hid it nicely.

So, how was she going to do this? She didn't really know how to trigger the hibernation response. The one time she had done it had been five years ago. That had been the first time she had tried to escape from her mother, by running away three years into the future. She had been furious at Natalya Volochkova then. Had that had anything to do with it? She was still mad at her, but not as much as she had been. She tried working up some hate for Beep but all she could think about were his two bottles of oxygen. Six hours, and then? Maybe she should get mad at herself for signing on to crew the *Shining Legend*. Bucket monkey—the worst job in space.

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And now she might die a bucket monkey. Bad thought. No bad thoughts. She did the math again while she waited for something to happen. She had thirty-seven bottles. Each could provide three hours of oxygen, plus or minus ninety seconds. Altogether, a hundred and eleven hours. *Sweetspot* claimed the soonest the rescue ship could rendezvous was ninety-five days, plus or minus maybe half a day. Altogether, two thousand, two hundred, and eighty hours. Plus or minus. But if she hibernated she might reduce her oxygen intake to as low as 4 percent of normal. Four percent of two thousand, two hundred and eighty hours was ninety-one hours. That meant she only needed ninety-one hours of oxygen and had a hundred and eleven hours bottled. Plus or minus. Was 4 percent possible? She didn't know. The first and only time she had hibernated it hadn't been in a hibernation pod with the proper euthermic arousal protocols. She had induced it by sheer willpower in her bed on Haworth. And at room temperature. They said afterward that she was crazy to try it, lucky to survive. But this time she had the cold on her side. Four percent. Ninety-one hours.

And if 5 percent was the best she could do? Bad thought. No bad thoughts.

Mariska wasn't as big as Beep, and subtracting her consumption from the load on the electrolytic cells only gained the crew another twenty-four days. But twenty-four and seventy-two would stretch the oxygen resupply reserve to ninety-six days. Which was exactly when they would rendezvous with the rescue ship from Mars.

Plus or minus.

Mariska felt good. Cold, but good. The numbers added up. They could do this. All she had to do was close her eyes and stop breathing so much.

Mariska's blood was pounding. Her fingers throbbed and it felt as if someone kept clapping hands over her ears. She thought her heart might explode. Time to open her eyes.

Storage. She knew this was Storage. But where was Storage? Someplace full of floating bottles. And Richard. His name was FiveFord and he could drown in a glass of water. She could see that he wasn't very smart, sleeping in Storage when he was supposed to be doing something. Something. She was gasping and her throat was sandpaper. She thought she should go back to sleep. Or die. But then there were other people in Storage. People in spacesuits. One of them pushed Richard aside and he crashed into a wall. Mariska wished he would wake up. She blinked because her eyes were filling with smoke. Then Spacesuit Person was in front of her. Shaking her. This must be the rescue. *Yay!* She couldn't tell who it was at first because the helmet had a mirror face. Then she saw the name. Black letters below the collar. *Volochkova*. That was her name. Mariska giggled. Was she rescuing herself? Why didn't Richard FiveFord get up? This was what they had been waiting for.

Xu Jingchu didn't look much like Didit or Glint to Mariska. She was old and her life had tugged at her. She was Earthborn, a head taller than Mariska, and her loose muscles and spindly posture made her look as if she were suffering from some wasting sickness.

And she was grieving.

"When Glint said that she wanted to make one more run, I swear I fought her," said Xu Jingchu. "I wanted her to learn the business, not qualify as senior crew." The old woman had Mariska's hand in hers. "I'd already arranged for her to work at *Sweetspot*, move on to the materials processing division. But she insisted on one more chance at cargo. Why?" She kept rubbing her finger across Mariska's palm. "I don't even shop for myself anymore, so why should she be fetching ice and loading ore into buckets?"

Mariska was exhausted and just wanted Xu Jingchu to go away. The old woman was no longer talking to her—she had been arguing with her dead daughter for the

last few minutes. Mariska let her head fall back on the pillow of the hospital bed, hoping that her mother would pick up on the signal.

"She was proud," said Natalya Volochkova. "She wanted to do her best."

"Proud." Jingchu's expression was bitter. "Of dying for nothing?"

"Glint and Didit were very brave." Natalya Volochkova stood up. "They fought right to the end. They just ran out of time."

"Yes." Xu Jingchu squeezed Mariska's hand and let go. "Yes, they were good girls." She stood too. "I appreciate everything you did, Dr. Volochkova. I know you took extraordinary measures to save them."

"I couldn't have done anything without you."

She bowed in acknowledgement. "As you say, time ran out. Thank you, Mariska, for seeing me. I hope we can meet again under more pleasant circumstances." She gathered herself to leave.

"Excuse me," said Mariska. "But did Glint ever visit Earth?"

Xu Jingchu looked puzzled. "No, not really. Of course, the clinic was in Chicago so they were born there. But they were tweaked for space. Staying in Earth gravity would've been agony." Her expression darkened. "Why?"

"I just wondered if she had ever seen the sky."

"The sky?"

"Mariska is still not herself." Her mother rested a hand on Xu Jingchu's arm. "We came close to losing her too."

She nodded and a wisp of white hair fell across her forehead. "Of course." She let herself be led away.

Natalya Volochkova had been right. It had been a mistake to see Xu Jingchu so soon. And now her mother had rescued her from the sad old woman. Mariska was still getting used to the idea that Natalya Volochkova might not be the enemy. Had she come back into the room then, Mariska would have tried to thank her. But her mother was still trying not to push herself on Mariska.

Mariska had learned meditation as part of her spacer training, and her doctors kept urging her to try it now, find a silence in herself that would give her peace. But what had happened still roared through her mind. The *Shining Legend's* shipbrain had captured the crew's last moments. Glint and Didit had died in each other's arms in the wardroom, but Richard, the strongest of them, had muscled his way to her even as the oxygen levels in his blood crashed. He had died changing her last bottle. She couldn't imagine being that brave. She knew she hadn't earned that kind of devotion.

To escape these dark thoughts, she called up a feed she had been working on.

*A dusty dirt road cut across a grassy field. The sky above was the deep blue of the oceans as seen from space. It had a delicious weight, as if it had been filled with more air than any sky had ever been. Mariska stood on the side of the road as a parade of animals passed. Cows and polar bears and elephants and two zebras wearing top hats and a whale with squat legs. Didit, Glint, and Richard drove up in a bathtub filled with water. Didit waved.*

*=We set up a tent.=*

*Mariska looked up. =Nice sky.=*

*Glint smiled. =Not too blue?=  
=Perfect.=*

*Richard leaned out of the bathtub, reaching for Mariska. She stepped back.*

*=Coming?=  
She shook her head. =Not yet.=*

*=Want us to wait?=  
She shook her head again. Richard pulled his arm back into the bathtub and*

*tapped Didit on the shoulder.*

*Mariska watched them go. In the distance she could hear the tootle of a pipe organ. ○*

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