

GOING DEEP

James Patrick Kelly

On the twenty-fifth anniversary of his remarkable feat, James Patrick Kelly tells us that he's still amazed at his good fortune in placing a June story every year for so many years with three different editors of *Asimov's*. "I am grateful to Shawna, Gardner, and Sheila for their guidance and to you the readers for your support." In his latest tale, Jim draws a masterful portrait of a preteen about to embark on that treacherous journey to adulthood. Inspiration for the ending to this story came to him while teaching at the Stonecoast Creative Writing MFA program. Jim's latest book, *The Secret History of Science Fiction*, an anthology he is co-edited with longtime co-conspirator John Kessel, will be published by Tachyon Publications in the fall.

Mariska shivered when she realized that her room had been tapping at the dreamfeed for several minutes. "The earth is up," it murmured in its gentle singing accent. "Daddy Al is up and I am always up. Now Mariska gets up."

Mariska groaned, determined not to allow her room in. Recently she had been dreaming her own dreams of Jak and his long fingers and the fuzz on his chin and the way her throat tightened when she brushed up against him. But this was one of her room's feeds, one of the best ones, one she had been having as long as she could remember. In it, she was in space, but she wasn't on the Moon and she wasn't wearing her hardsuit. There were stars every way she turned. Of course, she'd seen stars through the visor of her helmet but these were always different. Not a scatter of light but a swarm. And they were all were singing their names, calling to her to come to them. She could just make out the closest ones: *Alpha Centauri*. *Barnard's*. *Wolf*. *Lalande*. *Luyten*. *Sirius*.

"The earth is up, Daddy Al is up and I am always up." Her room insisted. "Now Mariska gets up." If she didn't wake soon, it would have to sound the gong.

"Slag it." She rolled over, awake and grumpy. Her room had been getting on her last nerve recently. When she had been a little girl, she had roused at its whisper, but in the last few weeks it had begun nagging her to wake up. She knew it loved her and was only worried about her going deep, but she was breathing regularly and her heartbeat was probably in the high sixties. It monitored her, so it had to know she was just sleeping.

She thought this was all about Al. He was getting nervous; so her room was nervous.

"*Dobroye utro*," said Feodor Bear. "Good morn-ing Mar-i-ska." The ancient toy robot stood up on its shelf, wobbled and then sat down abruptly. It was over a century old and, in Mariska's opinion, needed to be put out of its misery.

"Good morning, dear Mariska," said her room. "Today is Friday, June 15, 2159. You

are expected today in Hydroponics and at the Muoi swimming pool. This Sunday is Father's Day."

"I know, I *know*." She stuck her foot out from underneath the covers and wiggled her toes in the cool air. Her room began to bring the temperature up from sleeping to waking levels.

"I could help you find something for Daddy Al, if you'd like." Her room painted Buycenter icons on the wall. "We haven't shopped together in a while."

"Maybe later." Sometimes she felt guilty that she wasn't spending enough time with her room, but its persona kept treating her like a baby. Still calling him *Daddy Al*, for example; it was embarrassing. And she would get to all her expectations eventually. What choice did she have?

The door slid aside a hand's width and Al peered through the opening.

"Rise and shine, Mariska." His smile was a crack on a worried face. "Pancakes for breakfast," he said. "But only if you get up now." He blew a kiss that she ducked away from.

"I'm shining already," she grumbled. "Your own little star."

As she stepped through the cleanser, she wondered what to do about him. She knew exactly what was going on. The *Gorshkov* had just returned from exploring the *Delta Pavonis* system, which meant they'd probably be hearing soon from Natalya Volochkova. And Mariska had just turned thirteen; in another year she'd be able to vote, sign contracts, get married. This was the way the world worked: now that she was almost an adult, it was time for Al to go crazy. All her friends' parents had. The symptoms were hard to ignore: embarrassing questions like *where was she going* and *who was she going with* and *who else would be there*? He said he trusted her but she knew he'd slap a trace on her if he thought he could get away with it. But what was the point? This was the Moon. There were security cams over every safety hatch. How much trouble could she get into? Walk out an airlock without a suit? She wasn't suicidal—or dumb. Have sex and get pregnant? She was *patched*—when she finally jumped a boy, pregnancy wouldn't be an issue. Crash from some toxic feed? She was young—she'd get over it.

The fact that she loved Al's strawberry pancakes did nothing to improve her mood at breakfast. He was unusually quiet, which meant he was working his courage up for some stupid fathering talk. Something in the news? She brought her gossip feed up on the tabletop to see what was going on. The scrape of his knife on the plate as she scanned headlines made her want to shriek. Why did he have to use her favorite food as a bribe so that he could pester her?

"You heard about that boy from Penrose High?" he said at last. "The one in that band you used to like . . . No Exit? Final Exit?"

"You're talking about Last Exit to Nowhere?" That gossip was so old it had curled around the edges and blown away. "Deltron Clean?"

"That's him." He stabbed one last pancake scrap and pushed it into a pool of syrup. "They say he was at a party a couple of weeks ago and opened his head to everyone there, I forget how many mindfeeds he accepted."

"So?" She couldn't believe he was pushing Deltron Clean at her.

"You knew him?"

"I've met him, sure."

"You weren't there, were you?" He actually squirmed, like he had ants crawling up his leg. "When it happened?"

"Oh sure. And when he keeled over, I was the one who gave him CPR." Mariska pinched her nose closed and puffed air at him. "Saved his life—the board of supers is giving me a medal next Thursday."

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"This is serious, Mariska. Taking feeds from people you don't know is dangerous."

"Unless they're schoolfeeds. Or newsfeeds. Or dreamfeeds."

"Those are datafeeds. And they're screened."

"God feeds, then."

He sank back against his chair. "You're not joining a church, are you?"

"No." She laughed and patted his hand. "I'm okay, Al. Trust me. I love you and everything is okay."

"I know that." He was so flustered he slipped his fork in his pants pocket. "I know," he repeated, as if trying to convince himself.

"Poor Del is pretty stupid, even for a singer in a shoutcast band," she said. "What I heard was he accepted maybe a dozen feeds, but I guess there wasn't room in his head for more than him and a couple of really shallow friends. But he just crashed is all; they'll reboot him. Might even be an improvement." She reached across the table, picked up Al's empty plate and slid it onto hers. "You never did anything like that, did you?" She carried them to the kitchen counter and pushed them through the processor door. "Accept mindfeeds from perfect strangers?"

"Not strangers, no."

"But you *were* young once, right? I mean, you weren't born a parent?"

"I'm a father, Mariska." He swiped his napkin across his lips and then folded it up absently. "You're a minor and still my responsibility. This is just me, trying to stay in touch."

"Extra credit to you, then." She check-marked the air. "But being a father is complicated. Maybe we should work on your technique?"

The door announced, "Jak is here."

"Got to go." Mariska grabbed her kit, kissed Al and spun toward the door in relief. She felt bad for him sometimes. It wasn't his fault he took all the slag in the *Talking To Your Teen* feed so seriously.

Of course, the other reason why Al was acting up was because Mariska's genetic mother was about to swoop down on them. The *Gorshkov* had finally returned after a fifteen-year mission and was now docked at Sweetspot Station. Rumor was that humankind had a terrestrial world to colonize that was only three years away from the new *Delta Pavonis* wormhole. Natalya Volochkova was on the starship's roster as chief medical officer.

Mariska didn't hate her mother exactly. How could she? They had never met. She knew very little about Volochkova and had no interest in finding out more. Ever, never. All she had from her were a couple of fossil toys: Feodor Bear and that stupid Little Mermaid aquarium. Collector's items from the twenty-first century, which was why Mariska had never been allowed to play with them.

What she did hate was the idea that decisions this stranger had made a decade and a half ago now ruled her life. She was Volochkova's clone and had been carried to term in a plastic womb, then placed in the care of one Alfred DeFord, a licensed father, under a term adoption contract. Her genetic mother had hired Al the way that some people hired secretaries; three-fifths of Volochkova's salary paid for their comfortable if unspectacular lifestyle. Mariska knew that Al had come to love her over the years, but growing up with an intelligent room and a hired father for parents wouldn't have been her choice, had she been given one.

As if parking her with a hired father wasn't bad enough, Volochkova had cursed Mariska with spacer genes. Which was why she had to suffer though all those boring pre-space feeds from the Ed supers and why everyone was so worried that she might go deep into hibernation before her time and why she'd been matched with her one true love when she had been in diapers.

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=ten minutes= Mariska was still getting used to chatting in public. She and Jak had been more intimate, of course, had even opened wide for full mental convergence a couple of times, but that had been when they were by themselves, sitting next to each other in a dark room. Swapping thoughts was all the mindfeed she could handle without losing track of where she was. After all, she was still a kid.

=how's your fruit set?= Jak's feed always felt like a fizzing behind her eyes.

=fifty, maybe sixty= She noticed Random drifting toward her side of the lab. =this sucks=

=tomatoes?=-

=hydroponics=

=spacers got to eat=-

=spacers suck=-

Jak's pleasant fizz gave way to a bubble of annoyance. =you're a spacer=-

Mariska had begun to have her doubts about that, but this didn't seem like the right time to bring them up, because Random had shut his vacuum off and slouched beside her bench in silence. His presence was a kind of absence. He seemed to have parked his body in front of her and then forgotten where he had left it.

"What?" She poked his shoulder. "Say something."

Jak bumped her feed. =problem?=-

=just random=-

All kids of spacer stock were thin but, with his spindly limbs and teacup waist and translucent skin, Random seemed more a rumor than a boy. His eyelids fluttered and he touched his tongue to his bottom lip, as if he were trying to remember something. "Your mother," he said.

Mariska could feel a ribbon of dread weave into her feed with Jak. She wasn't sure her feet were still on the floor.

=s'ka what?=-

=nothing= Mariska clamped her head closed, then gave Jak a feeble wave to show everything was all right. He didn't look reassured.

"What about my mother?" She hissed at Random. "You don't even know her."

He opened his hand and showed her a small, brown disk. At first she thought it was a button but then she recognized the profile of Abraham Lincoln and realized that it was some old coin from Earth. What was it called? A penalty? No, a *penny*.

"I know this," said Random. "Check the date."

She shrank from him. "No."

Then Jak came to her rescue. He rested a hand on Random's shoulder. "Be smooth now." It didn't take much effort to turn the skinny kid away from her. "What's happening?"

Random tried to shrug from Jak's grip, but he was caught. "Isn't about you."

"Fair enough." Jak always acted polite when he was getting angry. "But here I am. You're not telling me to go away, are you?"

"He says it's about Natalya Volochkova," said Mariska.

Random placed the penny on Mariska's bench. "Check the date."

Jak picked the penny up and held it to the light. "2018," he read. "They used to use this stuff for money."

"I know that," Mariska snapped. She snatched the penny out of his hand and shoved it into the front pouch of her tugshirt.

Random seemed to have lost interest in her now that Jak had arrived. He switched on the vacpac, bent over, and touched the wand to a tomato leaf on the deck. It caught crossways for a moment, singing in the suction, and was gone. Then he sauntered off.

"What's this got to do with your mother?" said Jak.

Mariska had been mad at Random, but since he no longer presented a target, she

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decided to be mad at Jak instead. "Don't be stupid. She's not my mother." She saw that Grieg was hunched over his beans, pretending to check the leaves for white flies. From the way his shoulders were shaking, she was certain that he was laughing at her. "Let's get out of here."

Jak looked doubtfully at the chemical dispensers and gardening tools scattered across her bench. "You want to clean up first?"

"No." She peeled off her clingy and threw it at the bench.

Jak tried to cheer her up by doing a flip-scrape in the corridor immediately in front of the hydroponics safety hatch. He leapt upward in the Moon's one-sixth gravity, flipped in mid-air and scraped the rollers on the bottom of his shoes across the white ceiling, *skritch, skritch*, leaving skid marks. He didn't quite stick the landing and had to catch himself on the bulkhead. "Let Random clean that." His face flushed with the effort. "That slaghead."

"You're so busted," said Mariska, nodding at the security cam. "They're probably calling your parents even as we speak."

"Not," said Jak. "Megawatt and I smeared the cams with agar last night." He smiled and swiped a lock of curly hair from his forehead. "From Holmgren's own petri dishes. All they've got is blur and closeups of bacteria."

He looked so proud of himself that she couldn't help but grin back at him. "Smooth." Her Jak was the master of the grand and useless gesture.

He reached for her hand. "So where are we going?"

"Away."

They skated in silence through the long corridors of Hai Zone; Jak let her lead. He was much better on rollers than she was—a two-time sugarfoot finalist—and matched her stroke for stroke without loosening or tightening his feathery grip.

"You were mad back there," said Jak.

"Yes."

"Have you heard from your mother yet?"

"I told you, she's not my mother."

"Sure. Your clone, then."

Technically, Mariska was Natalya Volochkova's clone, but she didn't bother to correct him. "Not yet. Probably soon." He gave her hand a squeeze. "Unless I get lucky and she lets me alone."

"I don't see why you care. If she comes to visit, just freeze her out. She'll leave eventually."

"I don't want to see them together. Her and Al." She could just picture Volochkova in their flat. The heroic explorer would sneer at the way her hired father had spent the money she had given them. Then she would order Al around and turn off her room's persona and tell Mariska to grow up as if she wasn't trying.

"Move out for a while. Stay with Geetha."

Mariska made a vinegar face. "Her little brother is a brat."

"Come stay with us then. You could sleep in Memaw's room." Jak's grandmother had been a fossil spacer, one of the first generation to go to the stars; she had died back in February.

"Sure, let's try that one on Al. It'll be fun watching the top of his head blow off."

"But my parents would be there."

Being Jak's girlfriend meant having to tolerate his parents. The mom wasn't so bad. A little boring, but then what grownup wasn't? But the dad was a mess. He had washed out of the spacer program when he was Jak's age and his mother—Memaw—had never let him forget it. The dad put his nose in a sniffer more than was good for anyone and, when he was high, he had a tongue on him that could cut steel.

“Weren’t your parents there when you and Megawatt set off that smoke bomb in your room?”

Jak blushed. “It was a science experiment.”

“That cleared all of Tam Zone.” She pulled him to a stop and gave him a brush kiss on the cheek. “Besides, your parents aren’t going to be patrolling the hall at all hours. What if I get an overpowering urge in the middle of the night? Who’ll protect you?”

“Urge?” He dashed ahead, launched a jump 180 and landed it, skating backward, wiggling his cute ass. “Overpowering?” His stare was at once playful and hungry.

“Show off.” Mariska looked away, embarrassed for both of them. Jak was so pathetically eager; it wasn’t right to tease him about sex. It had seemed like a grownup thing to say, but just now she wasn’t feeling much like an adult. She needed to get away from Jak. Everybody. Be by herself.

She decided to cue a fake call. When her fingernail flashed, she studied it briefly, then brought it to her ear. “It’s Al,” she said. “Sorry, Jak, I’ve got to go.”

The swimming pool in Muoi Zone was one of the biggest in the Moon’s reservoir system, but Mariska liked it because it didn’t have a sky projected on its ceiling. Somehow images of stars and clouds made the water seem colder, even though all the Moon’s pools were kept at a uniform twenty-seven degrees Celsius. And she felt less exposed looking up at raw rock. The diving platforms at the deep end were always crowded with acrobats; in the shallows little kids stood on their hands and wiggled their toes and heaved huge, quivering balls of water high into the air. Their shouts of glee echoed off the low ceiling and drowned in the blue expanse of the pool.

The twenty-five lanes were busy as usual with lap swimmers meeting their daily exercise expectation. Mariska owed the Med supers an hour in the pool four times a week. She sat at the edge in lane twelve and waited for an opening. She was wearing the aquablade bodysuit that Al had bought for her birthday. Jak had wanted her to get a tank suit or a two-piece, but she had chosen the neck-to-knee style because her chest was still flat as the lunar plains. That was why she didn’t like to swim with Jak—when they stood next to each other in swimsuits, she looked like his baby sister.

She eased into the cool water just behind an old guy in a blue speedo and cued up the datafeed she was supposed to review on ground squirrels.

=The hibernating *Spermophilus tridecemlineatus* can spend six months without food. During this period its temperature drops to as low as zero Celsius. With a heart rate at 1 percent of its active state and oxygen consumption at 2 percent, the squirrel can survive solely on the combustion of its lipid reserves, especially unsaturated and polyunsaturated fatty acids.=

As Mariska’s heart rate climbed to its target of one hundred and seventy-nine beats per minute, her deep and regular breathing and the quiet slap of water against her body brought on her usual swimming trance. For a brief, blue moment doing the right thing was easy: just bounce off the two walls connected by the black lane line.

Then her thoughts began to tumble over one another. Everything was stuck together, just like in the Love Gravy song. Al and Jak and Volochkova and her life on the Moon and her future in space and sex and going deep and the way her room wouldn’t let her grow up and Feodor Bear and pancakes and tomatoes and what did Random want with her anyway?

=The gene regulating the enzyme PDK4 (pyruvate dehydrogenase kinase isoenzyme 4) switches the squirrel’s metabolism from the active to the hibernating state by inhibiting carbohydrate oxidation.=

She tried to remember exactly when she had decided not to block out everything about Natalya Volochkova, but she couldn’t. She had a vague memory that it had been her room’s idea. She had asked it why her mother had abandoned her and her

room had said that maybe grownups didn't always have choices but that had only made her upset. So her room had told Mariska that she was a special girl who didn't need a mother and that she should never ask about her again. *Ever. Never.* Or had that been in a dreamfeed?

= . . . mitochondrial functions are drastically reduced . . . =

Mariska felt as if she were swimming through the data in the feed. She was certain that she would never remember any of it. And Mr. Holmgren was going to have a meltdown when he saw how she had left her bench in the lab and she'd probably flunk tomatoes just like Jak had.

=In 2014 the first recombinant ground squirrel and human genes resulted in activity of PTL —pancreatic triacylglycerol lipase—in both heart and white adipose tissue under supercooling conditions.=

What had happened in 2018? She had never much cared for history. The Oil Crash must have started around that time. And Google 1.0. The founding of Moonbase Zhong? A bunch of extinctions. Datafeeds, sure, but mindfeeds didn't come until the eighties. When did the fossil spacers launch the first starship?

As she touched the wall a foot tapped her on the shoulder. She twisted out of her flip turn and broke the surface of the water, sputtering. Random was standing at the edge of the pool, staring at her. His bathing suit had slid down his bony hips. "My penny," he said. "Can I have it back now?" His pale skin had a just tinge of blue and he was shivering.

Random spilled his bundle of clothes onto the floor in front of her locker; he had the handle of a lunch box clamped between his teeth. Mariska slithered into her tube top as he set the lunch box on the bench between them. It had a picture of an apple on it; the apple was wearing a space helmet.

"This isn't funny, Random." Mariska slipped an arm into the sleeve of her tugshirt. "Are you stalking me?"

"No." He punched the print button on the processor and an oversized pool towel rolled from the output slot above the lockers. "Not funny at all."

She sealed the front placket of the tug and plunged both hands into its pouch. There it was. She must have taken the penny without realizing it. She extended the coin to him on her palm.

"First we talk, then you get the penny." She closed her fist around it. "What's this about?"

"I said already." Random stripped off his wet bathing suit. "Your mother." He crammed it into the input slot and began to dry himself with the towel.

Mariska set her jaw but didn't correct him. "What about her?"

"She's a fossil. The penny could have been hers."

"Okay." She wasn't sure she believed this, but she didn't want him to think that she didn't know it if it were true. The heroic fossils had been the first humans to go to the stars. They had volunteered to be genetically altered so that they could hibernate through the three-year voyage to the wormhole at the far edge of the Oort Cloud and then hibernate again as their ships cruised at sublight speeds through distant solar systems. Most of the fossils were dead, many from side effects of the crude genetic surgery of the twenty-first century. "So?"

"She probably has stuff. Or maybe you have her stuff?"

"Stuff?"

"To trade." He wrapped the towel around his waist and opened his lunch box. It was crammed with what looked to Mariska like junk wrapped in clear guardgoo. "Like my goods." Random pulled each item out as if it were a treasure.

"Vanilla Girl." He showed her the head of a doll with a patch over one eye. "Pencil,"

he said. “Never sharpened.” He arranged an empty Coke bubble, a paper book with the cover ripped off, a key, a purple eyelight, a pepper shaker in the shape of a robot, and a thumb teaser on the bench. At the bottom of the lunch box was a tiny red plastic purse. He snapped it open and shook it so that she could hear coins clinking. “Please?”

Mariska dropped the penny into the purse. “How did you find out she’s a fossil?”

“It’s complicated.” He tapped his forehead and she felt a tingle as he offered her a feed. “Want to open up?”

“No.” Mariska folded her arms over her chest. “I don’t think I do.” She was chilled at the thought of losing herself in the chaos of feeds everyone claimed was churning inside Random’s head. “You’ll just have to say it.”

Random dropped the towel on the floor and pulled on his janitor’s greens. She was disgusted to see that he didn’t bother with underwear. “When the *Gorshkov* came back,” he said, “everyone was happy.” He furrowed his brow, trying to remember how to string consecutive sentences together. “Happy people talk and make feeds and party all over. That’s how I know.” He nodded as if that explained everything.

Mariska tried not to sound impatient. “Know what?”

“It’s a beautiful planet.” Random made a circle with his hands, as if to present the new world to her. “Check the feeds, you’ll see. It’s the best ever. Even better than Earth, at least the way it is now, all crispy and crowded.”

“Okay, so it’s the Garden of slagging Eden. So what does that have to do with all this crap?”

“Crap?” He drew himself up, and then waved the pepper shaker at her. “My goods aren’t crap.” He set it carefully back in the lunch box and began to gather up the rest of his odd collection.

“Sorry, sorry, sorry.” Mariska didn’t want to chase him away—at least not yet. “So it’s a beautiful planet. And your goods are great. Tell me what’s going on?”

He stacked the Coke bubble and the eyelight on top of the book but then paused, considering her apology. “Most of the crew of the *Gorshkov* are going back.” He packed the pile away. “It’s their reward, to live on a planet with all that water and all that sky and friendly weather. Going back . . .” he tapped the bench next to her leg “. . . with their families.”

Mariska’s throat was so tight that she could barely croak. “I’m not her family.”

“Okay.” He shrugged. “But anything you want to trade before you go—either of you . . .”

Mariska flung herself at the security door.

“Just asking,” Random called after her.

When she burst into the kitchen, Al was arranging a layer of lasagna noodles in a casserole. Yet another of her favorite dishes; Mariska should have known something was wrong. She gasped when he looked over his shoulder at her. His eyes were shiny and his cheeks were wet.

“You *knew*.” She could actually hear herself panicking. “She wants to drag me off to some stinking rock twenty light years away and you knew.”

“I didn’t. But I guessed.” The weight of his sadness knocked her back onto one of the dining room chairs. “She stopped by right after you left. She’s looking for you.”

“I’m not here.”

“Okay.” He picked up a cup of shredded mozzarella and sprinkled it listlessly over the noodles.

“You can’t let her do this, Al. You’re my daddy. You’re supposed to protect me.”

“It’s a term contract, Mariska. I’m already in the option year.”

“Slag the contract. And slag you for signing it. I don’t want to go.”

“Then don’t. I don’t think she’ll make you. But you need to think about it.” He kept his head down and spooned sauce onto the lasagna. “It’s space, Mariska. You’re a

spacer.”

“Not yet. I haven't even passed tomatoes. I could wash out. I *will* wash out.”

He sniffed and wiped his eyes with his sleeve.

“I don't understand,” she said. “Why are you taking her side?”

“Because you're a child and she's your legal parent. Because you can't live here forever.” His voice climbed unsteadily to a shout. Al had never shouted at her before. “Because all of this is over.” He shook the spoon at their kitchen.

“What do you mean, over?” She thought that it wasn't very professional of him to be showing his feelings like this. “Answer me! And what about Jak?”

“I don't know, Mariska.” He jiggled another lasagna noodle out of the colander. “I don't know what I'm going to do.”

She stared at his back. The kitchen seemed to warp and twist; all the ties that bound her to Al were coming undone. She scraped her chair from the table and spun down the hall to her room, bouncing off the walls.

“Hello Mariska,” said her room as the door slid shut. “You seem upset. Is there anything I can . . . ?”

“Shut up, shut up, *shut up*.”

She didn't care if she hurt her room's feelings; it was just a stupid persona anyway. She needed quiet to think, sort through all the lies that had been her life. It must have been some other girl who had drawn funny aliens on the walls or listened to the room tell stories—lies!—about a space captain named Mariska or who had built planets inhabited by unicorns and fairies and princesses in her room's simspace. She didn't belong here. Not in this goddamn room, not on the Moon, not anywhere.

Then it came to her. She knew what she had to do. Only she wasn't sure exactly how to do it. But how hard could going deep be? It was in her genes—her mother's genes. Slag her. Everyone so worried that she would go deep without really meaning to. So that must mean that she could. That's how the fossils had done it, before there were hibernation pods and proper euthermic arousal protocols.

She didn't know what good going deep would do her. It was probably stupid. Something a kid would do. But that was the point, wasn't it? She was just a kid. What other choice did she have?

She lay back on her bed and thought about space, about stepping out of the airlock without anything on. Naked and alone, just like she had always been. The air would freeze in her lungs and they would burst. Her eyes would freeze and it would be dark. She would be as cold as she had ever been. As cold as Natalya Volochkova, that bitch.

“The earth is up,” the room murmured. “And I am always up. Is Mariska ready to get up yet?”

Mariska shivered from the cold. That wasn't right. Her room was supposed to monitor both its temperature and hers.

“The earth is up, and I am always up,” cooed her room. It wasn't usually so patient.

Mariska stretched. She felt stiff, as if she had overdone a swim. She opened her eyes and then shut them immediately. Her room had already brought the lights up to full intensity. It was acting strangely this morning. Usually it would interrupt one of her dreams, but all that she had in her head was a vast and frigid darkness. Space without the stars.

Mariska yawned and slitted her eyes against the light. She was facing the shelf where Feodor Bear sat. “*Dobroye utro,*” it said. The antique robot bumped against the shelf twice in a vain attempt to stand. “Good morn-ing Mar-i-ska.” There was something wrong with its speech chip; it sounded as if it were talking through a bowl of soup.

“Good morning, dear Mariska,” said her room. “Today is Wednesday, November 23, 2163. You have no bookings scheduled for today.

June 2009

That couldn't be right. The date was way off. Then she remembered.

The door slid open. She blinked several times before she could focus on the woman standing there.

"Mariska?"

Mariska knew that voice. Even though it had a crack to it that her room had never had, she recognized its singing accent.

"Where's Al?" When she sat up the room seemed to spin.

"He doesn't live here anymore." The woman sat beside her on the bed. She had silver hair and a spacer's sallow complexion. Her skin was wrinkled around the eyes and the mouth. "I can send for him, if you like. He's just in Muoi Zone." She seemed to be trying on a smile, to see if it would fit. "It's been three years, Mariska. We couldn't rouse you. It was too dangerous."

She considered this. "Jak?"

"Three years is a long time."

She turned her face to the wall. "The room's voice—that's you. And the persona?"

"I didn't want to go to *Delta Pavonis*, but I didn't have a choice. I'm a spacer, dear, dear Mariska. Just like you. When they need us, we go." She sighed. "I knew you would hate me—I would have hated me. So I found another way to be with you; I spent the two months before we left uploading feeds. I put as much of myself into this room as I could." She gestured at Mariska's room.

"You treated me like a kid. Or the room did."

"I'm sorry. I didn't think I'd be gone this long."

"I'm not going to that place with you."

"All right," she said. "But I'd like to go with you, if you'll let me."

"I'm not going anywhere." Mariska shook her head; she still felt groggy. "Where would I go?"

"To the stars." said Natalya Volochkova. "They've been calling you. *Alpha Centauri*. *Barnard's Wolf*. *Lalande*. *Luyten*. *Sirius*."

Mariska propped herself on an elbow and stared at her. "How do you know that?"

She reached out and brushed a strand of hair from Mariska's forehead. "Because," she said, "I'm your mother." ○

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