

# PRESIDENT JOHN F. KENNEDY, ASTRONAUT

Sandra McDonald

**During Sandra McDonald's first visit to the Kennedy Space Center, the *Challenger* launch clock was still illuminated and frozen at the time of the disaster. During her last trip, she toured the mammoth Vehicle Assembly Building (VAB), one of the largest buildings in the world, where Apollo rockets were pieced together and space shuttles attached to their rocket boosters and fuel tanks. The VAB is also home to carefully preserved wreckage from the *Columbia* tragedy. This tongue-in-cheek secret history of the space program is one of the several dozen stories she has published in the last decade and is meant to celebrate the spirit of adventure and discovery that continues to propel so many brave men and women to the stars.**

"Gentlemen, I understand your objections," Jack Kennedy said. "Let me be crystal clear. I intend to be the first United States president to visit the Moon."

The rocket men from Houston fell silent, the armpits of their beige polyester suits damp with sweat despite the Oval Office's generous air conditioning. The military generals, resplendent in olive green uniforms, continued to voice their opposition. Sitting at a desk built from the oak timbers of an old sailing ship, Jack kept his expression flat and unyielding. He hadn't weathered a thousand political storms by listening to ominous forecasts.

Perched gracefully on a side chair, moodily smoking the cigarettes she never allowed the public to witness, Jackie Kennedy ignored the debate and watched through the windows as little Caroline and Johnny played on the lawn under the care of their nanny. Summers in Washington were insufferably humid. The First Lady would rather be sailing in Hyannis Port. If she had her way Jack would have retired from politics after his first term and be in private employment now. She was so very tired of the public eye.

The generals pointed out that the United States couldn't afford to lose a sitting president to the hostile environment of space or the vagaries of a Saturn V rocket. The country needed a strong leader to stand up to those bloodthirsty Communists. Jack didn't remind them that he was a navy veteran who'd survived being sunk in the Pacific by the Japs. The attempted assassination in Dallas had been quite a scare, but the doctor who had saved him from the bullets had also fixed his bad back and lifelong stomach problems. He felt as physically fit and mentally ready as any NASA pilot with dreams of far-flung stars.

Lyndon Johnson sipped from his glass of ice water and interrupted the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. "Gentlemen, the President of the United States, the very same man who approves the funding for your wars and your weapons, your medals and your marching bands, intends to be part of this nation's Apollo program. You can not deny him any more than you can deny the rise and set of the Moon itself."

The generals grumbled and the rocket men fretted, but eventually a compromise was reached. Jack would participate not in the first manned flight to the Moon, nor even the second, but after the 1968 election he would enter training for the Apollo program. One day, God willing, his booted feet would step down a ladder to the gray lunar crust.

Later that night, curled up in bed, Jackie poked him in the ribs and said, "Why the Moon, Jack?"

"I made a promise." He stared at the ceiling as if he could see through it to the stars above. "A solemn vow."

"You aren't good at keeping promises," she grumbled, thinking of how he blithely ignored his marriage vows of fidelity with that harlot Marilyn Manson.

Or maybe it was Marilyn Monroe. That detail's not important here.

History will confirm that Jack Kennedy was not a faithful husband, but despite adversity and obstacles he got himself to the Moon. In the valley known as Hadley Rille he found an alien black obelisk in the exact spot where he had been told to go looking. That's the absolute truth. Retrieving that obelisk from its current watery grave is the goal of our quest, and the reason that I need your help.

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"That old man is full of crap," Pera said as the *Land or Sea* continued its slow churn across the waves, but she didn't say it loudly. Loaded with four people, one mangy-looking dog, and a full complement of diving equipment, the old duck boat didn't afford much privacy. Ma would tear into Pera's backside if she jeopardized the money from this gig with some ill-chosen words that carried on the breeze.

Still, it was hard to keep her mouth shut. The old man went by the name *Rendezvous*, a fancy word that Ma said meant appointment. Older than dirt, with threadbare clothes and a tangled beard, he'd come aboard with his dog, a set of coordinates, cash in his pockets, and stories that couldn't possibly be true. For a week now they'd been searching for some old building buried under the waves with nothing to show for it but Pera's mounting irritation.

Throwing their morning waste over the side, her younger brother Kacey asked, "How do you know he's making it up?"

"No one's ever been to the Moon. It's too far away, and if you land on it you sink into a million layers of dust. That's an accepted fact, just like you don't go sailing too close to the horizon or you fall off."

"Radio Guy says the world's round," Kacey said tentatively.

Pera waved off the idea. "He's only a voice in the night. You know what's in the *Book of Even Keels*. Chapter and verse, the world is flat."

Kacey shrugged his skinny pale shoulders. He and Ma had fair skin and straight hair. Pera was much darker and curlier thanks to some father somewhere back in

Miami Watermills. Ma was close-mouthed on the subject and that suited Pera fine. The mills were full of snooty folk. Once in a while Ma rolled the *Land or Sea* ashore in the Carolina hills to make money towing or transporting cargo, but Pera didn't like mainlanders much, either.

"Baby girl, the radio's acting stupid again," Ma called from the bow.

Pera weaved past the bench where Rendezvous was snoring, skinny and ugly, his leathery skin sagging around his bare belly. The duck's radio was as worn out as the old man. Every time Ma meant to replace it, the money wound up going toward the pumps, blowers, brakes, rotors, shoes, or drums. Being both a boat and a truck at the same time was hard on the aging vehicle, the only home Pera had ever known.

She suspected Ma was tiring of salt, storms, and seas. That she secretly wanted to sell the duck and settle back on the mainland. Pera had no intentions of ever living on land. She saw no appeal to being tied to a place you couldn't move toward the horizon whenever the wind called to you.

What she needed was money to buy Ma out on the duck, but cash was a dream as far away as the Moon itself.

"I've been trying to raise that yacht over there and I'm not getting an answer," Ma said, tapping on the radio's rusty shell.

Pera squinted at the sleek white vessel off their starboard bow. "What do you want them for?"

"Girl," Ma said, irritated. "Do what I tell you."

"They're probably ignoring us. Rich and all."

Ma tugged her cap down further over her blond bangs. "Nothing wrong with money, baby girl. Where there's muck, there's brass."

They'd had this argument before. Scowling, Pera cycled through several stations and the volunteer coast guard channel. Reception was fine. Even Radio Guy was coming in clearly with his talk, old music, and fiery lectures. But when she tried to raise the yacht it didn't respond, and the coast guard didn't reply to a radio check.

Pera inspected all the connections as well as the voltage, then tried again with no improvement.

"It's probably the antenna," Pera said. "There's built-in gain for incoming signals but not the outgoing ones."

"That's what I was afraid of." Ma watched the yacht sail off with its coffers of money and heaved a sigh. "We're going to have to buy a new one when we take Mr. Rendezvous back to Miami."

"When's that?"

"When he's good and ready. Or when his cash gives out."

"Money for an antenna means less money for the operation," Pera said, watching Kacey set out his fishing lines. Since birth his right foot had been turned inward. There was a surgery for it, but each year he got older meant more pain and longer recovery.

Ma spat over the side of the boat. "I know how much things cost, girl. But unless we get a bonus out of the old man, a new antenna wins out."

Pera knew Ma's ways of earning a bonus when she wanted to, and the prospect was as distasteful as old fish rotting in the sun. In his rack, Rendezvous snorted and coughed and fell back to sleep. His dog, a small slobbering thing that liked to yap at seagulls, lifted its head from the crook of the old man's arm and gave them a long look with beady black eyes.

Ma said, "Humor him when he tells his stories, baby girl. Sometimes they're all an old man's got in this world, and a happy client is a generous one."

Listening didn't mean she had to believe a single thing dredged out of the history of the drowned United States.

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If the brave spacemen of the Apollo program resented Jack Kennedy's intrusion into their ranks they put on a good show of hiding it, for they were all professional military men. They wouldn't disrespect a former commander in chief no matter how ruinous he was to their plans and ambitions.

Jack attended the same technical classes they did, endured the same endless physical examinations, and trained as hard as any man who came out of Annapolis or its lesser Air Force equivalent. He drank their beer and went to their barbecues and regaled them with tales of his showdowns with those Russian bastards. Jackie hosted the astronaut wives at her new home in Houston, serving up cucumber sandwiches and sweet lemonade while they admired her collections of fine art and antique silver. Little Caroline and Johnny attended school with the children of the rocket men, and their drawings of space capsules and stick figures were displayed on refrigerator doors proudly.

The Moon was within Jack Kennedy's reach, but no civilization has ever climbed into the blue skies without paying a dear price. Three brave astronauts died in a launch pad inferno. God rest their souls. Another three nearly met their demise when an explosion caused their ship to lose power and oxygen. Only the quick actions of Commander Tom Hanks and copilot Kevin Bacon prevented further tragedy on that doomed mission.

As the dangers and risks mounted, poor Jackie begged Jack to think of their children and abandon his ambition.

"A man makes a promise like I did, he has to keep it," Jack said. "The rewards to mankind will be unimaginable."

Kacey interrupted the story to ask, "But who was the promise to?"

Silent in her rack, Pera pretended not to listen and kept her gaze on the stars. She knew their patterns but not their old names. Her favorites were the white ones that streaked across the skies and disappeared beyond the edge of the world.

Rendezvous replied, "A very astute question, young man. Let us practice the art of deductive thinking. Who in the story so far could Mr. President have made his promise to?"

Kacey was silent for a moment. The *Land or Sea* pushed through the endless waves, Ma humming to herself at the helm.

"To Mr. Johnson?" Kacey asked.

The mangy little dog barked in disapproval.

"Mr. LBJ was an important man to be sure, and they went so far as to name a whole space center in his honor," Rendezvous agreed. "But he is not our promisee."

Kacey's voice grew irritated. "I don't know who."

"The doctor," Pera said, despite herself.

Rendezvous sounded proud of her. "The doctor, yes!"

"What doctor?" Kacey asked suspiciously.

Pera rolled toward them and lifted up to one elbow. "There was a part about an assassination, and a doctor who saved his life. When someone saves your life you owe them everything."

The bowl of Rendezvous's pipe glowed as he inhaled foul smoke. "It's a debt that can never be repaid."

"But it makes no sense that a doctor in Dallas would know about an obelisk on the Moon," Pera said sternly. "If you tell a story it has to make sense."

"You presume that you know the nature of the physician," Rendezvous said. "You assume that they had never been to the Moon, or was of these very same oceans and landforms that gave birth to our ancestors."

"What?" Kacey asked.

“What?” Jackie Kennedy asked, sitting at the kitchen table of their home in Houston. “He was what?”

Jack sighed. “I knew you’d doubt me. If you’re going to ask a question, you’ve got to be open-minded about the answer. Dr. Bullock is an interstellar traveler who has come to Earth to help us achieve Utopia. The doctor was also fortunate enough to manipulate a tiny corner of space-time and affect the course of bullets fired from a school-book repository.”

“A tiny corner of space-time,” Jackie repeated.

“Yes.”

“He could have done a better job,” she grouched. Nightmares of Dallas still jolted her awake at night, coating her with cold sweat and even colder uncertainty. Sometimes she dreamed the assassin’s bullets had found their true mark. As if in a movie, she watched herself climb across the back of the moving convertible to retrieve parts of his skull and brain.

But that was foolishness, because the bullets had only grazed Jack’s skull. The amount of blood had been shocking, yes, and her pink wool suit ruined, but by the time they reached the emergency room at Parkland Memorial Hospital he’d been awake enough to flirt with a pretty nurse.

No one is saying that kind of behavior is admirable, but Jack’s many fine qualities had their counterweight in some unseemly ones as well.

Sitting there in Houston, Jack reached across the table and gripped Jackie’s hand. “I was alone in my room one night when the doctor slipped in and told me the most amazing story. She said—”

“She!” Jackie exclaimed. “A female doctor? Really, Jack?”

Jack raised a hand to signal for patience. “Gender is unknown beyond the stars. It just so happens that the traveler took the female form upon landing and must stay female until she returns home.”

“How very convenient,” Jackie said. “I suppose she had to take on blond hair and an hourglass waist as well?”

He cleared his throat and avoided that particular minefield.

“She said that a thousand years ago, as an ambassador from our neighboring civilizations in space, she sent to Earth an intergalactic Rosetta stone inscribed with the languages of a dozen far-flung worlds. This obelisk, no bigger than a modest tombstone, contains great secrets that will help mankind achieve a perfect future free of poverty, war, and disease. Unfortunately, it went astray under the gravitation distortion of Jupiter and landed in the gray dust of the Moon instead of the comforting oceans of Earth.”

Jackie said, “I think you must have been on very strong painkillers, Jack.”

The president-turned-astronaut was not deterred. “Imagine her surprise when she came to Earth expecting to see Utopia and instead found America and Russia on the brink of nuclear annihilation! Can you understand such a terrible shock?”

“I have some inkling,” Jackie replied, and lit a cigarette to calm her nerves.

“Because the exotic fuel of her spaceship is expended and no women are enrolled in our space program, we decided the best way to recover the obelisk was for me to join the astronaut corps and journey to the Moon. That is my goal, my dearest. One small step for me will result in great leaps for mankind.”

Jackie gazed at him for a long moment.

“I should call Deke right now and tell him that you’ve lost your mind,” she grumbled.

Mr. Deke Slayton was the honorable chief of all the astronauts, and Jackie’s threat was nothing to scoff at. The United States preferred to launch only men of sound thinking. But Jack had another piece of information to share.

“She said the obelisk will bring medical knowledge that would take hundreds of

years for our doctors to uncover on their own. Imagine the merciful end of disease, Jackie. The eradication of the common cold and the worst scourges of our planet. No mother will lose a child to disease or infirmity. No little child will ever go into a casket again. Think of it, Jackie. Families across the world will be kept whole and unbroken."

This was an argument most dear to Jackie's heart. Twice she had lost tiny babes before they could ever smile or laugh or bounce on her knee. If one alien artifact could prevent such sorrows for another mother, Jack should strive his hardest to retrieve it.

And so although she didn't fully believe Mr. President's story, Jackie didn't report him to the psychiatrists, either. In July of 1971, John F. Kennedy and the crew of *Apollo 15* launched into history.

"What happened when he brought it back?" Kacey asked. "That obelisk thing?"

Pera waited in the darkness for Rendezvous to answer. Ma had stopped humming, which meant she was listening, too.

"It was confiscated by a conspiracy of secretive government men," the old man said bitterly. "First they told Jack that it needed to be studied and deciphered. They warned him that to reveal its existence to the public would be in breach of a national security secret, punishable by death. They erased it from the mission logs and official photographs, then locked it into a wooden crate and stored it in an enormous warehouse of similarly suppressed wonders."

Pera spotted the loophole in his story. "So why didn't the interstellar doctor go get it?"

"They made her vanish!" Rendezvous said. "Murdered! Or locked away in a cold island prison. No one has ever discovered her fate. The existence of the obelisk became a secret of the House of Kennedy, passed along from one generation to the next through the fall and rise of civilizations until it passed to my old pappy, and then to me, his only son."

The *Land or Sea* rocked on the waves. Dissatisfied, Pera turned over in her bunk to watch the silver moon rise above the horizon.

Kacey asked, "You really think we can find it after all this time?"

"It's in the water below our feet," the old man said. "When we locate it, we will hold in our hands the secret to raising mankind to the full glory it deserves."

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The next day, Pera rose to find Ma drinking from her canteen while the sun came up. Radio Guy's voice crackled as he rambled on about some politics in the west.

"Why do you listen to him?" she asked.

Ma's right shoulder dipped up and down. "Ain't it nice to know there's civilization out there?"

"As long as they stay out there and don't bother us," Pera said.

At breakfast, as they ate butter biscuits and boiled oats, Ma showed Rendezvous the mapped areas they'd covered so far in this search. The coordinates he'd provided had been their starting point, but each day the search expanded. She didn't say anything about losing hope, but Pera thought Ma was preparing him for disappointment.

Rendezvous was having none of that, though. He said, "I promise you, dear Captain, that the VAB will make herself known to us in good time."

"VAB?" Kacey asked, squinting at the sunlit blue waves. "Is that the old warehouse where the obelisk thing is stored?"

"It's where NASA moved it to, long ago. The Vehicle Assembly Building. Once it was the tallest, widest structure in the land." Rendezvous spread his arms so wide his shoulders creaked. "High enough for an army of engineers and scientists to stack

together the ten thousand parts of a rocket. So big it had its own weather patterns and fire department. It was built of more concrete and steel than the Miami Watermills themselves.”

Kacey looked impressed. Pera stayed skeptical. The watermills were the largest places she'd ever seen, a long stretch of rotating habitats, power plants and agro fields. Thousands of people lived in their cabins, and ships from all over the world sailed to their piers for trade. Everywhere else was seaside towns and ports, flat and uninteresting, though Radio Guy bragged about big cities in the western mountains. She never figured on seeing them. Too far away, too expensive to go see, and too strange for anyone born to the sea.

“What if the VAB got washed away?” Kacey asked.

“It was anchored into hundreds of feet of limestone bedrock,” Rendezvous said. “You couldn't wash it away with a tsunami.”

That was silly. Everyone knew the force of water could flatten many things. Entire cities, ruined and forgotten, ebbed and flowed in the currents and tides below the Atlantic coast. Like old Miami itself, now a watery grave of steel, plastic, glass, and toxins. Most old places were off-limits to all but the hardiest or most foolish. Ma was a bit of both, but even she wouldn't go near old nuclear power plants, or places known to be seeping chemicals that turned fish and humans cancerous.

“There never was no such building that he's talking about,” Pera said to Ma later as they rinsed their breakfast plates over the side.

“We'll find out,” Ma replied.

“And even if it's down there, how are we supposed to find one little thing in a building so big?”

“We do the best we can.” Ma's voice went lower. “Keep in mind, little girl, that if there is some special thing down there, it might be worth money to other people, too. All our money problems could be solved.”

Ma was being optimistic. Sooner or later Rendezvous was going to have to give up on his crazy idea and deal with disappointment. She hoped he didn't try to weasel out of paying all he owed by claiming Ma's navigation was off. Pera would back Ma up if they had to go to a judge. She'd say, “You can't navigate to crazy, Your Honor, and don't let him start talking about some old president named John F. Kennedy.”

The sonar began to ping loudly.

Ma and Rendezvous both moved to the front bench. Pera reluctantly followed.

The unit was old and sometimes cranky, but when operating correctly it scanned a thousand feet ahead of the duck and along a ninety-degree point of view. A wide, high elevation appeared, resolving into an underground mountainscape of debris.

Rendezvous began to clap. A wide grin split his craggy face. “Well done, Captain! Success!”

Ma flipped on the undermount camera. Acre after acre of an old structure flickered into life in the crystal-clear water. The roof was long gone and the eastern wall had entirely caved in, but the enormous building was still roughly intact. Rendezvous had sketched out for them its six towers, four high bays, and the long transfer aisle where the enormous components of rockets had been trucked in horizontally. Two of the towers had toppled, but the others reached upward toward the surface from a tangled mess of walkways, support beams, and flooded elevator shafts. One well-preserved stairwell climbed out of the muck and then broke off mid-step. Sand and silt had settled over everything, fostering a home for algae, sponges, and anemones. A large group of bluefin tuna swam along one long wall, followed by an adult shark.

“I'm a brave and nimble woman,” Ma said, “but no human can squeeze into those depths.”

"No human needs to," the old man replied. "Kacey, get me that silver suitcase under my bunk. Weighs almost as little as air itself."

Kacey brought the case forward. Rendezvous balanced it on his knobby knees and opened the latches. Peering over his shoulder, Pera saw six silver spheres resting in cushions of white packaging. The smallest was the size of her thumb, the largest as big as her closed fist. Each had a tail of wavy metal tentacles for propulsion and navigation.

Ma shifted under Pera's hand. They both knew how much the spheres would bring at market. More than some imaginary obelisk. Enough for Kacey's operation, the new antenna, a year's worth of fuel and food, maybe even more.

Rendezvous lifted the smallest drone. "These lovely ladies will be able to explore the VAB much more quickly and safely than any mortal man or woman. They're all named after goddesses of yore: Lana, Lauren, Lucille, Heddy, Betty, and Marilyn. They can self-navigate, are equipped with three-hundred-sixty-degree cameras, and have laser knives to cut through any difficult situations. Their grappling hooks can handle weight of up to twenty pounds only, so your assistance in lifting the obelisk will be necessary once they locate it."

"How can they find a thing in a mess like that?" Kacey asked.

"According to my research, the obelisk was stored in a special crate in Tower A, and that crate was marked by a radio frequency ID chip."

Ma said, "Batteries in some old chip would long be dead."

"Passive identification, Madam Captain," Rendezvous said. "The drones will emit radio waves. If the obelisk and its crate are within a hundred meters, the chip will start singing like a canary."

Ma and Pera slipped into their gills, helmets, seaskins, and flippers. The highest reach of the VAB was only thirty feet below their keel. A nice shallow dive. The gills would pull oxygen out of the water for them, the helmets cycle out their carbon dioxide. The seaskins, old but well patched, would keep them insulated against the cold currents this time of year. Their principal heads-up unit, Old Bertha, had twin propellers for tugging divers through water, a hard drive for recording video and audio input, and a towed antenna that connected their radio back to the duck. Little Agnes, the single-prop unit that Ma kept for her own use, had similar equipment but a smaller hard drive. Rendezvous showed them how to turn on the drones and pair them with Old Bertha, then how to communicate with or recall them as needed.

The drones seemed real fancy, but the only equipment Pera truly trusted was her rubber flippers. They had no moving parts or electronics. Everything else except the drones was old, like Ma, like the duck, and old things tended to break down when you most needed them to stay alive.

Pera went into the water with Old Bertha and began to sink. The undersea world undulated around her. Moving through the expanse of blue and green always felt like coming home to a place she'd forgotten. She liked the way light filtered through the waves and shaded downward to darkness, and the deep, muffled sounds that carried far in languages she didn't understand. If she could, she'd follow the currents beyond ruined cities to the places where whales still roamed and tropical reefs covered with dazzling life. She was too old to believe in mermaids and mermen but in younger days she'd wanted to join them in their underwater homes, away from people with their messes and problems.

Ma tapped into Old Bertha's private comm network. "You daydreaming, baby girl? Don't fall behind."

"I'm right here," Pera replied.

The VAB rose up beneath them, and Pera shivered despite her skins. She and Ma were nothing but little spots against the immense crushed presence of the place.



Tiny specks against all that concrete, steel, sand, seaweed, and sea life. As she angled up Old Bertha to record video, she tried to imagine what it must have been when this stretch of the world had been green coastline instead of ocean bottom. How the building would have towered over salt marshes and sand dunes, a beacon of science for miles around.

Not that she believed any rocket had delivered people to the Moon, but the VAB's existence meant that some important work had been done here once, some great endeavor now forgotten. Or some mistake brushed aside. Maybe it had made weapons. Maybe it had melted the icecaps and drowned the world.

"Let's get those drones working," Ma said, maneuvering to Pera with Little Agnes's help.

Pera pulled them from a pouch at her belt and let them slide past her fingers. The control app on Old Bertha sent them spiraling down to collapsed steel and concrete. Two of them zipped by Ma's flippers.

From up on deck, Rendezvous said, "Beautiful, just beautiful."

"How come those engineer people needed such a big building?" Kacey asked, his voice clear in Pera's helmet.

"Because going to the Moon requires extremely large rockets," Rendezvous said. "It's no small thing to carry a heavy spacecraft and the men inside beyond the pull of gravity. Later ships called shuttles also lifted aloft from these lands, outfitted right below our feet by armies of technicians. Imagine the sight: fancy white planes hanging off the sides of giant orange fuel tanks flanked by twin rockets."

Kacey asked, "The shuttles were planes?"

"Space planes."

"Where did they go?"

"Space," Rendezvous emphasized. "Hundreds of miles above your head. The governments of the world built an orbiting station up there so the scientists could watch the ice caps melt."

"They could have watched that from a mountain."

"You have no romance in you, young man," Rendezvous said. "No grand imagination."

Kacey must not have realized the radio was live, because he said, "Pera says that imagination can't buy food."

She didn't like that he was talking about her, but she kept silent and hung in the water. Two nurse sharks cut through the water a dozen feet below her. They were no problem. They didn't bother people unless you bothered them first.

"All the great explorers of sea had the ability to dream big and plan small," Rendezvous said. "Captains like Chris Columbus and pirates like Jack Sparrow. There's room in the human soul for many admirable qualities. Every complex problem requires an imaginative solution. Your sister needs a wider exposure to the possible and not only the pragmatic."

Pera doubted that Kacey knew what "pragmatic" meant. She herself was not too sure. But she definitely didn't need exposure to anything beyond the duck, the sea, and Ma and Kacey.

"After all, without my creative thinking and careful research we wouldn't be floating over the greatest building of the twentieth century," Rendezvous said. "We wouldn't be on the verge of a discovery that will change the course of mankind."

"I guess," Kacey said, but he sounded doubtful. "So what happened to that space station in orbit when the waters rose?"

"Inevitability." Rendezvous no longer sounded happy. "Just like the skyscrapers, it fell down."

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By the end of the day, the drones hadn't found a trace of Jack Kennedy's alien obelisk, which probably didn't exist in the first place. Pera and Ma left the machines in the ruins to work overnight and returned to the surface. Kacey had fresh tuna and warm hash ready for dinner.

To Pera's dismay, however, Ma sounded like she was falling for the old man's crazy stories.

"There really was a space station floating in the sky?" Ma asked.

Rendezvous cast his gaze upward as if he could see it across space and time. "As I sit here before you, I swear it."

Ma scraped her fork on her plate. "And women went there as astronauts?"

"Absolutely. Miss Sally Ride, she was the first. Captain Janeway was there too. And of course there was Mrs. Jackie Kennedy herself—"

Pera put down her dinner plate with a solid thump. "The president's wife? You think we'll believe that?"

"Pera," Ma said, a warning.

"He's making it up, Ma!"

Rendezvous shook his finger at her. "Space stations needed to be christened like any other ships of the fleet. When it came time to bestow the honors, NASA could think of no one more popular among the astronauts and their wives. All those cucumber sandwiches had charmed the naysayers. Jackie went up as a passenger and broke a bottle of champagne on an airlock hatch. It was a great adventure for her. If Jack had been alive he surely would have been proud."

"He was dead?" Kacey asked.

"On a yacht in the Mediterranean," Rendezvous said. "Reported to have drowned in the middle of the night."

Ma abruptly stood up and moved to the helm.

"You shouldn't have said that part," Pera said.

The mangy dog barked at her shrilly. Rendezvous put down his plate. "Which part?"

"My grandfather drowned," Kacey told him. "When I was a baby. He helped Ma run this boat."

Pera didn't remember much about Old Pop, except for his sugar-white beard and the way he'd read to her each night from the Book of Even Keels. She thought Kacey probably remembered him even less. The dead had a tendency to disappear, unless you had a crazy great-great-grandson or whatever like Rendezvous who kept your family stories alive.

"My condolences on your loss," Rendezvous said formally. "The death of a patriarch is never easy to bear."

Pera didn't know what a *patriarch* was, but that night she dreamed she was adrift in a rowboat looking for Old Pop. She searched endlessly over the waves, but no obelisk from outer space could carry back the dead over the black waters.

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The morning brought strong winds and choppy waves. The weather forecast said a storm was brewing to the southwest. Pera and Ma went into water that was cloudier and colder than yesterday and sank toward the VAB. On Old Bertha's screen, five blinking dots lit up in the ruins. They'd scattered into tiny corners. The sixth drone, Marilyn, didn't answer. She was the smallest of all the machines.

"Dead batteries?" Ma suggested.

Rendezvous replied, "They're charged enough to last a year."

"Maybe she got stuck somewhere," Pera said.

He replied, "She'd still respond, unless she got switched off somehow."

"Maybe she got swallowed by a whale," Kacey said.

Marilyn continued not to respond. Pera and Ma started a manual search but given the size of the VAB, the cloudiness of the water, and the drone's extremely small size, they didn't have any luck at all. They took more pictures and videos of the site and explored some exposed cavities, careful not to touch anything that might collapse or shift unexpectedly. Pera saw nothing that might be valuable. Wrecks like old cruise ships were much more interesting and profitable, if you could find one that hadn't been picked over by a hundred other crews.

When they returned to the surface hours later, Rendezvous fretted about missing Marilyn.

"Drones don't simply disappear," he said.

Ma pulled herself up into the duck and peeled off her gloves. "They do if they're programmed wrong or crap gear to begin with, Mr. Rendezvous."

Pera clung to the side of the duck but didn't come out of the water.

"That one machine costs more than this boat," Rendezvous sputtered out. "Built with top notch excellence!"

"You think we took it?" Ma said.

Pera spoke up. "We wouldn't steal one. No use for it."

Rendezvous's fists clenched at his sides. "Each one would fetch a pretty penny at market."

"Maybe we scooped it out of the water while you were sleeping and stuffed it into a hidey-hole?" Ma said. "Go ahead and look. Search away."

Kacey's head lifted at the buzz of engines. "Boat!"

Pera scrambled up over the side. Ma opened the chest where she kept the pistols. The vessel coming toward them was flying a neutral flag, but that didn't mean anything. It could be full of pirates or marauders, tourists or salvage divers. Hard to tell the size from her dead-on approach, but as the bow grew closer Pera saw a few crew on deck. Civilian clothes, two black men, one Asian woman. Good sign that they had a woman onboard, but women could be pirates too, and some women didn't volunteer.

Rendezvous scowled at the new arrivals. "Damned meddlers. This is my expedition, and I'll be damned if they muck it up."

Ma asked, "You know them?"

The boat slowed and turned, presented her starboard side. It was an old military vessel, steel-gray and powerful, more than a hundred feet long. No weapons that Pera could see, but threats weren't always visible. A white-haired woman wearing a captain's uniform exited the wheelhouse and glared at them across the choppy waves.

"I used to change her diapers when she was still a boy," Rendezvous said venomously. "Now she's my worst daughter ever."

"You stole my drones, you old coot!" the worst daughter yelled. "You're under arrest!"

\* \* \*

Ma allowed an officer of the ship to cross over by dinghy. Sunburned, ginger-haired, and not much older than Pera, he stepped aboard, straightened his blue cap, and tugged down the long sleeves of his wrinkled khaki shirt. He introduced himself as Ensign Benjamin Dante.

"I represent Captain Leela and *Standing Wave*, the flagship vessel of the National Aquatic and Subaquatic Association," he said.

Ma put together the acronym first. "NASA?"

Rendezvous snorted. "A pale imitation! The first NASA went to the stars. Yours collects rusty old relics and ignores the greatest potential boon to mankind that this planet has ever known."

Pera liked the look of Dante's face, and the way he spoke clearly and firmly. She decided to speak up for him. "You've told your stories, now let him tell his."

Dante gave her a brief glance and a nod of appreciation.

"Our NASA is dedicated to recovering artifacts of great historical value from the depths," he said. "In the last year alone we rescued the head of Abraham Lincoln, the torch from the Statue of Liberty, and the top of the Bunker Hill monument."

The names meant little to Pera. She didn't know why anyone would value a head, a torch, or a monument to a hill.

"They put junk in a museum and charge people to see it," Rendezvous sniffed disdainfully. "Profit-mongering scavengers."

"The museum is for everyone—" Ensign Dante started, but his face flickered as if remembering past arguments with Rendezvous. He turned back to Ma. "Captain Leela invites you to join us for dinner."

"All of us?" Kacey asked.

"I'm not stepping foot on that boat just so your tyrannical despot can slap me in chains," Rendezvous said.

"She's not going to arrest you," Ensign Dante answered, with thinning patience.

Rendezvous sat himself down on a bench. "I'm staying right here. You'll have to drag me away."

"I'm not leaving my boat alone with him," Ma said. "Especially with this weather coming in. Pera, you go talk to the captain."

"Why me?" Pera asked.

"Because I said so."

"I'll go," Kacey said.

"Not a chance," Ma replied.

Pera balked, but Ma insisted. Pera wanted to change her clothes or at least clean up, but the shortage of privacy on the duck was even more acute with a stranger watching. She grabbed her cap, jammed her frizzy curls underneath it, and pulled a long-sleeve shirt over the streaks of dirt on her arms.

As Ensign Dante motored them back to the *Standing Wave*, he said, "That's a funny little boat you have."

"It's a duck," Pera said tersely.

"A what?"

"They used them back in the wars. Land and sea both."

"Oh," he said. "Where are you from, anyway?"

Pera watched Kacey's unhappy face grow smaller in the distance. "Out here."

"You don't have a home port?"

"Do you?"

"North Carolina's where I was born. I've been in the navy since I was apprenticed ten years ago."

She focused on him. He must have joined up at about the age Kacey was now. She couldn't imagine being far away from family when still so little.

"You like it with them?" she asked.

"I like being useful," he said. "Digging up stuff that's important, and making sure that other people get to see it some day."

"But history's all done with," Pera said. "Who cares about old things?"

Dante slowed the motor as they approached his ship. "Everything's got a story. If you know the story, you can maybe find a way to tell it again. Or find a better way to do things. Don't you want to improve the world?"

Pera didn't reply.

The *Standing Wave* was larger than any other ship she'd been on. Out of loyalty to Ma, Pera didn't openly admire the well-scrubbed decks and bulkheads and the

brisk, efficient crew, but her nose perked up at the smell of hot coffee wafting from an open hatch. Dante escorted her to the captain's cabin and introduced her to Captain Leela. Captain Leela's square face had more wrinkles than Pera could count, and she was chewing on an unlit tobacco pipe.

"You've fallen in with a disreputable character," the captain said.

Pera didn't disagree, but she was busy remembering the words *when he was a boy* and couldn't help but study Captain Leela's long hands and flat chest.

"You got a problem, girl?" Captain Leela asked sharply.

"No, ma'am." Pera made herself look at the bulkhead instead. "He says he's your father."

"Father or not, he's a menace to common sense and a good night's sleep." Captain Leela sat down on a stool beside a table covered with charts. "He never met an hour of the day he didn't want to fill with crazy stories about aliens, astronauts, magic circles, time travelers, ancient civilizations under the ice. Don't let him get started on the Aztec pyramids."

"What's an Aztec pyramid?"

"That's not important right now," Captain Leela said. "Luckily, decades of unfortunate experience have taught me to take precautions in all of our dealings."

She opened a small box on the table and pulled out the thumb-sized drone Marilyn.

"How did you get that?" Pera asked.

"My father is a man of unpredictable tides," Captain Leela said. "You think you know what's on his mind, and then he'll rise up and run off to search for something unrealistic or unobtainable. A daughter's got to take precautions. This drone here has long been programmed to find her way home if put to unauthorized use."

"He says he's looking for an obelisk from the Moon," Pera said.

"And tomorrow he'll be looking for an ancient tablet of secrets from Mesopotamia," Captain Leela said. "Hitch your star to him and you'll be dragged worldwide in quests of futility."

A sailor knocked on the hatch and brought in a piece of paper. "The millibars are dropping and the seas are rising, ma'am."

Captain Leela scanned the tiny print. "How well does that little boat of yours hold up in foul weather?"

"Well enough," Pera said.

"Time to batten down the hatches," Captain Leela said. "This storm is heading straight toward us."

\* \* \*

Ma wouldn't leave the *Land or Sea*, which was not just her home but the only thing she truly owned in the world.

"I have every confidence in her," Ma said.

Pera said, "There's confidence and foolishness."

Dante doffed his cap. "You are more than welcome as our guest on the *Standing Wave*, ma'am."

"I'll be fine." Ma put her hands on Kacey's shoulders. "You take this one back with you, though. He deserves to see a nice big ship like that."

"I want to stay here," Kacey said stubbornly.

Ma shook him firmly. "You'll do what I tell you, little man."

Pera wanted to stomp her foot against the deck, but she didn't think that would impress anyone. "You'll need our help. You can't handle it alone in a storm."

"I've been sailing these oceans since before you were a kick in your mother's belly," Rendezvous said. "And this amphibious truck was built to deliver soldiers through the heaviest of surf to the killing fields of war. I will stay with your mother. Besides,

I'd rather sink to the bottom and shake the hand of Davy Jones than cross NASA's treasonous decks."

"There won't be any sinking or hand-shaking today," Ma said.

Rendezvous put the mangy dog in Pera's arms, and she tried not to drop the squirming bundle. "Rest assured, madam, that no confluence of weather patterns can scare me."

Pera glared helplessly at Ma.

"Go on, now," Ma said.

Back on the *Standing Wave*, Pera and Kacey were assigned to ride out the storm in the cabin that belonged to Rendezvous. It was a small, smelly compartment with a single bunk stripped bare, a bolted-down table with a crack across the top, and a red padded bench worn with age. Yellowed papers, maps, lists, and charts had been cellophanned to every bulkhead, and rows of dog-eared and musty books were crammed into railed bookshelves around the bed. From the overhead hung a curious contraption of colored balls held together by wires, all of them circling a yellow sphere.

The mangy dog perched at the single porthole and barked at the gray waves sloshing ever higher against the hull. Pera tried to convince Kacey to read some books. The collection included obsolete history texts, a Spanish copy of *The Book of Even Keels*, some well-worn comics about a beautiful superhero mermaid, and crossword puzzles that had been filled in by many different pencils over the years.

"I don't want to read," Kacey said. "I want Ma."

Pera thrust the mermaid comics into his hands. "Shut up. You've only got me right now."

She herself wasn't very good at reading, but there were plenty of pictures. Old skyscrapers, majestic bridges, museums of glass and light. It didn't matter where they'd been because they were all gone now. As the ship's rocking increased, the books slid back and forth on the metal tabletop and the overhead spheres swung to and fro. Outside the porthole, the waves slammed against each other under the dark sky. The caged lightbulb over Pera's head flickered, and the mangy dog barked louder.

When Dante came to check on them, his uniform damp and disarrayed, he said the storm from the south was nasty but not hurricane strength. The crew and Captain Leela were confident they could avoid disaster. Meanwhile the *Land or Sea* was a steady blip on the radar, and Ma had the portable shortwave radio that Dante had loaned her if she needed emergency help.

The mangy dog came to sniff Dante's hand. Dante asked, "What's his name?"

"Rendezvous said he didn't have one," Kacey said. "Came to him in Miami as a stray."

One of the ceiling spheres jolted loose and landed with solid click on the deck. It rolled under the table.

Pera asked, "What is that thing?"

"Our solar system," Dante said. "The Sun and all the planets. We're number three, the blue and green one that just fell down."

Kacey said, "Pera thinks the world is flat."

"You do?" Dante asked, surprised.

"I don't want to talk about it," Pera said. "Is he a good sailor? Rendezvous?"

Dante scratched the dog's ear. "Captain says she learned everything she knows from him. Once, when I was first onboard, we weathered a hurricane with fifty-foot waves pummeling down on us like fists. I was sure we were going to get smashed into pieces. But he saw us through."

The boat rose and dropped, metal groaning and rattling as wave and trough

clashed for superiority. Kacey burrowed into Pera's side. She kept one hand on the table and the other gripped tight on Dante. The ocean bore no mercy, no goodwill, only frantic energy it hurled at them through wind and water. The boat was riding up and down on waves that didn't care if they sank and drowned. Even if Captain Leela and her crew knew what they were doing, bad fortune or fate could easily overwhelm the ship. Pera's stomach twisted and turned with each drop, making her swallow hard against bile.

"This is a good ship," Dante said. "Very seaworthy! I trust her completely."

The *Standing Wave* began rolling to starboard. Pera clutched both Dante and the table tighter. Any vessel could capsize given enough of a shove. Water rose over the porthole, turning it black. Kacey made frightened noises into her shoulder. Gravity tried to tug them down the bench and she pushed herself backward into the cushions, feet braced against the table legs, Dante crushing against one side, Kacey starting to slide out from the other. The dog yelped in Dante's arms and they continued to tip sideways, the whole ship groaning.

For one awful moment she was sure they'd lose the battle, but the tilt slowed and hung, the whole world poised, and then the ship rolled back past centerline and went toward port. As she pressed into Dante she heard him start to pray. She knew, with awful certainty, that the duck could never survive a storm like this. Ma was likely dead, and she and Kacey truly orphaned.

\* \* \*

After midnight the storm eased off, though not so much that Pera could sleep. Her skin felt tight, her head ached, and her stomach continued to twist and turn on its own. She tried nibbling on some crackers that Dante rounded up but put them aside for Kacey, who was exhausted and dozing on her lap. Rain continued to lash against the porthole. She must have fallen asleep after all, because she closed her eyes for a moment and woke to see daylight. Kacey was gone, but a bottle of water had been left for her.

While she drank the water she picked up some books that had toppled to the deck in the middle of the night. One was a biography of John F. Kennedy. She flipped through the musty pages of pictures and text. A young man in uniform, not as handsome as Dante. His wedding to a pretty woman. Two young children at play on what she guessed was the White House lawn. The pages after that had been razored away from the binding. Cut and lost to the world. But then there was a funeral, Jackie wearing black and a veil while her teenage children stood behind her.

Pera's fingers drifted across the rest of the library. A fold-out map of the Moon, with all of its craters and ridges neatly labeled. A world atlas showing countries that no longer existed. A book of names and seven digit numbers, one thin page after another, hundreds of them, maybe some kind of code. One book held a picture of planets and the Sun, and she matched it to the ceiling collection. It took a minute to find the one that had fallen, and when she did she put it in her pocket.

Pera went topside and saw the crew busily repairing storm damage. Up on the bridge, Captain Leela was steering them southward. The mangy dog was chewing on a bone someone had given him.

"Any word from my ma?" Pera asked.

Captain Leela's voice and face both betrayed her exhaustion. "We lost our radar and all comms during the night. Can't reach anyone."

Pera turned to look at the relentless and cruel ocean.

Captain Leela said, "The winds blew us off course, but we're headed back to the site of the VAB. It'll take a while. Get yourself some coffee if you drink it, or rest if you need it."

But she couldn't rest, not with everything still so unsteady in her gut.

"Your father tells a lot of stories," Pera said, eyes on the horizon.

"Once you get him started, he's hard to wind down," Captain Leela agreed. "Like a cuckoo clock."

"Do you think there's such a thing as a space obelisk? This thing he's looking for?"

Captain Leela engaged the autopilot, slipped from her chair, and poured herself some tea. "Don't fall for his stories, girl. He talks to earn himself attention. Talks to show the world he's here. Talks about things he doesn't know and knows too well, in equal measures. Talks to fill up the quiet places he can't stand anymore, because the people who used to be there are all gone now."

And his daughter talks just like him, Pera thought.

"But it's a mistake to think his wild imaginings contain even the tiniest grain of salt," Captain Leela said. "Lots of people in this world have rued the day they thought they saw gold instead and followed him off on fool's quests."

"I wouldn't follow him anywhere," Pera said.

"Good. Stick to that conviction and your life will be full of far fewer headaches."

Below decks, Pera pitched in where she could be useful, mopping out seawater from where it had broken through hatches or portholes. Kacey helped too, though his twisted foot brought him some sideways glances from the crew. He didn't ask about Ma. Every time she opened her mouth to reassure him, the words dried up. When Dante came down to tell them that they were getting close to the VAB, Kacey raced topside. Pera followed more slowly.

The sun was so bright she had to shade her view, the breeze so salty she had to wipe away tears that sprang in her eyes. The duck was nowhere. As they chugged through the waves, she remembered just days ago, searching these waters for the VAB, when her biggest problem was Rendezvous and his ridiculous tales.

"If we can't go back to the duck I want to stay here," Kacey said.

"You can't. It's not our place."

"We can talk to the captain. She'll sign us on as crew."

Pera said, "What would you do? Muck out their heads, scrub their decks? What life does that lead to? We need to get your foot fixed, and then you've got to go to school or something. Learn a trade."

"You're the one who needs schooling," he said. "I want the sea."

She had so many arguments to make against that, especially since he was a child who didn't know what he was talking about, but a flash of light on the horizon distracted her. Once, twice, three flashes—a message from someone using something reflective, like a mirror.

"Ship ahoy!" Pera shouted.

When they pulled abreast of the *Land or Sea* several miles south of the VAB, Ma was sitting on a bench with her right leg broken in two places and immobilized in a makeshift splint. With the sun splitting through the clouds behind her, she looked bedraggled and exhausted and strangely cheerful.

"I told you she'd weather it fine," Ma said after Pera, Kacey, and Dante crossed over by dinghy.

Crawling up beside her on the bench, Kacey said, "We were worried about you."

"No need to worry," Ma said, and slung her arm around him in assurance.

"Where's Rendezvous?" asked Dante.

"One of those drones pinged Old Bertha," Ma said. "It found that obelisk he's been looking for. He went down to go dig it up. Said this is the culmination of his life's work."

Over a handheld radio Captain Leela snapped out, "Culmination of his hallucinations!"

Pera calculated the damage she could see. Half of the duck's cargo had been lost overboard, most of the solar panels were torn or missing, and seawater was splashing



around their ankles. When they got back to Miami watermills, they'd have to put in for repairs. Ma didn't have any kind of insurance. With her being disabled and Kacey too young to work, Pera would have to support them all. She wasn't legally old enough for a real job, but there were other ways to make money. Unhappy ways.

Ma said, "I see where your mind is going, baby girl, and you can stop that right now. Everything's going to work out fine. Mr. Rendezvous and I made ourselves a deal. He's buying the duck so the three of us can retire to land. Ain't that grand?"

Pera gaped at her. "He's what?"

"I said he'll have to pay cash, of course, and he claims to have it in Miami."

"He's lying!" Pera's limbs felt ice cold, her face curiously hot. "It's all he does!"

"We'll see."

Pera threw up her hands. "You can't sell. This is our home."

Ma gave her an impatient look. "We'll get another. And money to fix Kacey's foot. That's what matters."

"You can't," Pera repeated. She didn't like the way Ma, Kacey, and Dante were all staring at her, as if she were the crazy one when clearly Ma had lost her senses. "It's ours."

"It's his if he's got the money," Ma said.

"Maybe we can discuss it when he comes back aboard," Dante said diplomatically.

Over the radio Captain Leela asked, "Enough of that, folks. How's your engines over there?"

"Dead in the water," Ma replied.

Captain Leela said, "Secure the tow ropes and let's go get the old fool."

Dante brought Ma back to the *Standing Wave* for medical treatment. Kacey went back with them, clinging to Ma like a little octopus, but Pera stayed on the duck. She couldn't bear to look at Ma's betraying face. Selling their home without even asking her or Kacey was wrong in all sorts of ways. Maybe Ma had panicked at the height of the storm. Rendezvous was likewise an idiot for buying a boat in such poor condition, and maybe he'd realize that in the clear light of day. Or maybe he was a liar who didn't have the money, and he'd only said he'd buy it to make Ma feel better about all the damage.

Pera bailed out water and tried to fix up a broken panel, but it was going to take a lot more than that to repair the duck. She glared at the horizon until they reached the VAB and Dante's voice crackled over the handheld.

"The medic set your Ma's leg, said it's a clean break," he said. "Don't you want to come over and have lunch?"

Pera reached under her bunk. Luckily her gear hadn't gone overboard in the storm. "I'm not hungry."

He must have been watching through binoculars, because he asked, "Why are you putting on your skins?"

"Why do you think?" Pera asked. "Someone's got to get him. Then we can all go back to Miami, and she can give him what he wants."

Dante hesitated. "You don't have to. I've got gear, and we've got divers—"

"He doesn't trust any of you. And he doesn't like me, but he likes to fill my ears with rubbish."

"Our comms are still broken," Dante said. "We won't be able to communicate with you once you're down there."

"Don't go anywhere," Pera replied. "I'll be back with him as soon as I can."

She threw herself in the water in a mood ready to tear off someone's head. Once she got below the surface, the roiling silt kicked up by the storm kept Pera from seeing past her own outstretched arms. Descending into the gray-blue was like sinking into a muddy puddle. Little Agnes was slow and awkward, her antenna

trailing upward in the murk back to the surface. Pera should have disconnected it, given the *Standing Wave's* lack of radio, but that would have taken too much time. She used Little Agnes's comms to contact Old Bertha.

"I won't go without my obelisk!" Rendezvous said.

"That's not a nice greeting," she said. "Don't you care to ask how everyone held up in the storm?"

His blip appeared on her display twenty meters to the southwest and forty meters below her feet inside the rubble pile. The landscape of debris that was treacherous enough in clear water was now positively menacing in the gloom and murk. Pera turned Little Agnes but kept her speed nice and slow. Impaling herself on rebar or getting caught in tangles of wiring would be no fun at all.

"I'm sure they weathered it in fine NASA fashion," he said.

A sonar ping jolted through Pera's helmet. She glanced up, although of course she couldn't see to the surface. "Ma's leg is broken."

"I set it myself. She's a sturdy woman with a fine seaworthy vessel."

"She ain't yours," Pera said. "You can't have her."

She meant the boat, or maybe Ma. It was hard to say. Maneuvering through all the cloudiness made her less sure of herself. A school of tuna dashed to and fro in the muck, startling with their swift appearance and disappearance.

"As scintillating as this conversation is, I'm too busy recovering the most important object in the history of mankind to debate with you."

"I didn't come to debate," Pera replied, though maybe she had. "But if that obelisk of yours really has all the secrets of the Universe on it, you won't be needing a boat. You'll have to go on land, show all the people what it says."

"Luckily your boat is a land conveyance as well," he said.

She wanted to kick him. Or herself. The undersea world of diminishing light pushed in on her as Little Agnes helped guide her toward the unknown. The *Standing Wave's* sonar pinged twice, and she wished the ship would shut up.

"They'll take it from you," she said, and now she didn't mean the boat at all. "If a president of the United States can't keep it safe, you can't either."

"I'll protect it will all my might," Rendezvous insisted.

"I bet Jack Kennedy said the same thing."

He clicked his teeth. "You are a seriously annoying child."

And then, a moment later, before she could answer, he said, "Oh! So that's what this is."

A few moments later she saw pinpricks of light in the gloom below. Descending took careful navigating past broken slabs of concrete and jagged metal that wanted to reach out and slice through her seaskins. When she caught up to Rendezvous he was pushing aside a large metal panel. Three of his drones had formed a circle of illumination over his head, and the other two were using their lasers to cut through another long panel.

"I don't see an obelisk," she said.

"Your powers of observation are unastounding," Rendezvous said. "The RFID chip is pinging a few meters below us. We're so close my teeth itch. But this—this I did not expect."

"Expect what?"

He paused from his labor. "This is the VAB repository of debris for one of the space shuttles. It was destroyed in a terrible accident on its way back from the stars."

Pera picked up a black square of foam no bigger than her hand. Lightweight, thick with silt, it didn't look like a piece of anything special. "It blew up?"

"Inelegantly phrased, and not quite. It broke into a thousand pieces in the sky under the heat and force of reentry. NASA gathered all the tiny bits that fell to earth

and put them here. She was called *Columbia*.”

“Never heard of it.”

“We’ve already established your lack of education,” Rendezvous said archly.

Pera put the square down. “If it’s a cemetery, you shouldn’t go digging around in it.”

“It’s not a cemetery. The astronauts died far from here, rest their souls.”

“I suppose there was a Kennedy onboard,” Pera said. “One of those kids all grown up? A grandchild? Don’t you have a story about that?”

“Humph,” he said.

He began shifting debris again. Pera didn’t volunteer to help. Visibility was still awful, but in the cold illumination she saw part of what might be a window frame, and then what might have been a hatch. Over the radio she heard the magnified sound of her own breathing. The lonely sound fed into her anxiety. The ocean was a frightening landscape and the VAB a hulking, haunted grave.

“What’s it like?” she asked suddenly. “Being up there, in outer space?”

“I wouldn’t know. I’ve never been.”

The *Standing Wave*’s sonar pinged three times in quick succession and then fell silent.

“Why are they making such a ruckus?” Pera asked.

“I’m sure they have their reasons,” Rendezvous said, which sounded very generous for him. He fell silent and shifted more debris. Pera figured he wouldn’t be ready to leave for hours more to come.

“Is outer space cold?” Pera asked. “Are there space whales out there? Or space dolphins? I’d like to meet a space merman—”

“What will it take to make you stop talking, girl? I’m busy!”

Pera sighed. “I guess Ensign Dante was wrong. He said you were full of imagination, but you must have run out.”

He sounded affronted. “That day has yet to come, little girl. Let me work in peace and I’ll tell you what outer space is like.”

\* \* \*

Steering the lunar vehicle across the landscape, Jack Kennedy considered how the Moon was very much like the bottom of the sea. A student of both astronomy and oceanography, he recognized in the gray landscape of mountains, ridges, and valleys the same geographic features of the Atlantic near his hometown and the Pacific where he’d once nearly drowned. But there were no whale carcasses here, no shimmering schools of fish or oak skeletons of sunken galleons. Only an eternity of silence piled against itself under the starlight.

“I didn’t ask about the Moon,” Pera said over the radio. “What’s it like beyond that, where there’s nothing to rest your butt on?”

“It’s silent so people can concentrate!” Rendezvous snapped. “Let me tell the story or go swim back to your mother.”

Jack rolled the vehicle to a stop in the ancient volcanic channel known as Hadley Rille. In a few moments he would dismount and begin to search for the obelisk the intergalactic traveler had told him would be waiting for him. But sitting there at the wheel, his fragile body protected by an even more fragile spacesuit, his pale face upturned to the Universe, he took time to consider not only his own journey from boyhood to astronaut but the immense voyage the traveler had made as well.

The Galaxy was built to keep people at home, she had told him. The stars hurled themselves away from each other at astounding speeds to discourage travel and communication. To attempt connections between species and civilizations took courage and not a little foolhardiness, for such efforts required enormous money and scientific expertise and then often spectacularly failed. Dr. Bullock had been

so determined for the Earth mission to succeed that she volunteered to follow the obelisk across the great expanse in a tiny ship. She had already witnessed the tragedy of world civilizations imploding and destroying the precious ecosystems they lived on. She knew that as with hen eggs, groups of sentient life needed nurturing and protection. She would make sure the message was received and then return home.

The traveler left her planet on a solitary journey, but she didn't travel alone. The beloved voices of her families and friends went with her. She luxuriated in the solid knowledge of their love and support, and carried in her alien heart the memories they'd made together. As she crossed the expanse the voices began to fade, the way a colorful fabric fades with exposure to sun and wind, but they were supplanted by new voices that sang out from the rogue worlds that live in the dark space between stars.

Planets are travelers, too, young Pera. They speak to each other through waves of gravity and electromagnetic radiation. They told Dr. Bullock stories that carried her along through the long night and loneliness. Adventures and comedies, fables and tragedies. In turn she learned to create stories for them, too, which they passed along to their moons and satellites. With their help she learned the language of dark comets as they zoomed to and from gravity wells, and decoded the secret messages of brilliant pulsars and neutron stars.

When the traveler finally reached our solar system she was greeted warmly by the hearty voices of Pluto, Neptune, and Uranus. Saturn told her many epic tales. Jupiter tried to persuade her to stay in his large embrace. But Mars guided her onward to Earth, and she landed in a fireball over the desert called New Mexico. When she stepped out of her craft and discovered that the obelisk had never arrived, her heart nearly broke in disappointment. Everything she'd sacrificed by leaving home was for nothing.

"It wasn't for nothing," Pera blurted out in depths of the ocean. "It couldn't be."

"Time will tell," Rendezvous said. "Lookie here."

He rose up beside her, the drones shimmering around his shoulders. In his hands he held a large rectangular case made of aluminum. His eyes were wet behind his helmet, and he was smiling a toothless grin.

"Behold the obelisk," he whispered.

\* \* \*

Pera pulled off her helmet, glad to see the blue sky and breathe in fresh air. She was much less glad at the sight of a long, intimidating military gunship alongside the *Standing Wave*. Captain Leela, Ensign Dante, and some other members of the crew were standing on deck, their hands behind their heads as they glared at a ring of armed marines in gray uniforms. There was no sign of Ma or Kacey. Pera's gut went cold at the thought they were dead below decks.

"Do what I say, whenever I say it," Rendezvous said, bobbing on the waves beside her. His grip on the obelisk case was unrelenting. "Keep your calm. I know these scoundrels, and I know exactly what to tell them."

Reluctantly Pera left Little Agnes alone in the water, and Rendezvous left Old Bertha, too. They swam to the *Standing Wave*, where the enemy marines threw down a ladder and helped them aboard. Rendezvous tried to keep the obelisk case for himself, of course, but they wrenched it from his hands and set it on the deck. High above, the NASA flag flapped in the breeze and the sun went behind a bank of clouds.

"Sit and don't cause trouble," said one of the marines.

The mangy dog barked an objection from the window of the wheelhouse. The marines ignored it.

"Where's my ma?" Pera asked Captain Leela.

“Safe down below.” The captain’s voice was steady. “Do as they say and all will be well.”

Pera had her doubts, but she sat on the deck beside Rendezvous. His bony shoulder pressed against hers. She could feel him thrumming with unhappiness. From the wheelhouse came a young woman with twin silver stars on her epaulets. She wasn’t very old, but she had a long scar down the side of her face and a mouth set in a frown.

“So you finally succeeded,” she said to Rendezvous.

“No thanks to you,” he spat out. “Worst daughter ever.”

Startled, Captain Leela said, “I thought I had that honor.”

“This is your half-sister, Lieutenant Rose Massachusetts Fitzgerald,” Rendezvous said. “A traitor to our bloodline.”

“There’s nothing traitorous about protecting the world from alien corruption,” Lieutenant Fitzgerald said without even a glance at her newly revealed sibling. She bent over the case and swept a handheld scanner over every corner. A brief whine came out of it when she passed the location of the RFID chip.

Satisfied, Fitzgerald said, “Ever since the world drowned, my organization has guarded this site from outside interference. But now that the artifact is recovered—”

“By me!” Rendezvous interrupted.

Fitzgerald stepped back and continued, “—we owe it to our superiors to see if it can be used against the ambition of the western cities. Open the case, Ensign Dante.”

“Belay that order,” Captain Leela said fiercely. “If you want to open it, open it yourself.”

Dante’s gaze went from Leela to Fitzgerald and back again. Pera couldn’t read what was in his face. Regret, maybe.

“He works for me, not for you,” Fitzgerald said. “Always has.”

“Sorry, ma’am,” Dante said, and stepped forward.

Pera’s heart gave a funny little twinge, but she clenched her teeth and ignored it.

“Never trust a boy with ambition,” Rendezvous grumbled. Then he lifted his voice. “Yes, go ahead and open the case. Let loose the interstellar energy that’s been building inside for centuries. I can’t wait to be obliterated in the blinding light of unleashed radiation and take my back-stabbing progeny with me.”

Ensign Dante hesitated.

Captain Leela said, “I hope you don’t mean me.”

“He’s bluffing,” Lieutenant Fitzgerald said warily. “Open it.”

Dante’s hands shook as he undid the latches. Rendezvous moved backward a few inches, as if that might help anything. Pera tried to look nervous. Muddy seawater spilled across the deck as Dante gingerly raised the lid.

No blinding light burst out, but Pera already knew it wouldn’t.

Dante reached into the case and lifted up a thin black square of material.

“What is that?” Captain Leela asked.

“Some kind of foam.” Dante lifted more pieces. “Tile? I don’t know. And this is concrete. What the hell is all this?”

Rendezvous snorted. Then he full-out laughed, but it was laughter mixed with tears. He put his hand to his stomach and leaned against Pera.

“Guarding a secret for centuries,” he croaked out. “Guarding a bunch of rubble. That’s what you’ve been doing. Worthless rubble.”

Lieutenant Fitzgerald scowled at him. “That makes your whole life a failure, Father.”

“Oh, I’ll get by.” Rendezvous wiped his eyes and smirked. “In a few years you’ll be throwing my ashes to the waves, but you have your whole life to live with yourself.”

Lieutenant Fitzgerald turned to Captain Leela. “I don’t know how you stand him.”

"It takes a good daughter to carry that load," Captain Leela said. "Now why don't you get the hell off my ship?"

"And never darken our doors again!" Rendezvous called out as she departed.

Ensign Dante went with them. Pera was too busy below decks hugging Kacey and regaling Ma with what had happened to even think about saying goodbye and good riddance.

\* \* \*

Captain Leela invited them to supper that night in her cabin. Pera, Kacey, Ma, and Rendezvous all crowded around the table as sunset hues streamed through the port-hole. The mangy little dog gnawed on an old shoe under the table. The captain poured fragrant red wine into small glasses and Ma let Pera have some, but not Kacey. Pera was too busy eating to console him. She'd slept most of the afternoon away and was absolutely ravenous.

"To success," Rendezvous proposed.

"I'll drink to that," Captain Leela said.

Ma looked from father to daughter. "Bunch of foam tiles and concrete is a funny way to gauge success."

Rendezvous clinked his glass against Leela's. "One, two, three. A fine succession of pings. I'm glad you remembered at least one of the codes I taught you as a child."

"One, two, three," Captain Leela echoed. "Menace on the horizon. But really, Papa? Another daughter? How many half-siblings do I have in this world?"

He chuckled. "As many ports as I've visited in this world."

Captain Leela groaned. "Thousands."

"There's not thousands of ports, are there?" Kacey asked.

"I stand corrected," Captain Leela said, but there was a funny little moment where she looked at Rendezvous, and he pointedly did not meet her gaze. Pera saw it and decided to think on it later.

"Wait," Ma said. "You knew? Down below, listening to those pings, you knew we were in trouble? And you brought my daughter up into danger anyway?"

Pera spoke up. "We couldn't stay below. Sooner or later they'd send down divers of their own. Even with poor visibility they would have tracked us down."

Rendezvous patted Ma's hands graciously. "Your daughter performed well under pressure. No pun intended."

Kacey joined Ma in confusion. "So what was the success?"

Captain Leela drank her wine. Rendezvous stuck his knife into the tuna that had been served for dinner and cut off a large chunk. Pera had already finished her portion and was hoping the steward brought second helpings soon.

"You found it," Ma said suddenly. "The obelisk. And then you hid it, filling the case with decoy material instead."

Rendezvous gave a satisfied belch. "I touched it with my own hands, madam. I held between my gloved fingers the very object that had sailed between stars and which my great-great-great-forebearer brought back from the Moon."

"I touched it, too," Pera confided. "Smooth as ice, and covered with tiny little carvings neither of us could read."

Kacey looked crestfallen. "I want to touch it. Can we go back?"

"I suspect Lieutenant Traitorous Wench will be keeping an eye on the site for a while to come," Rendezvous said. "She's like a cat on the scent of the canary. But we hid it well, and when the time is opportune we can return."

"Ain't you impatient?" Ma asked. "All your life's work stuck back there? How are you supposed to build Utopia without it?"

"Technology to the rescue, madam," Rendezvous said. "Your robots and my drones served us well."

“My drones,” Captain Leela reminded him.  
Pera said, “We took pictures.”

\* \* \*

After bedtime, suffering a little indigestion, Pera went topside and leaned against the port railing under a black sky full of beautiful white stars.

She didn't know, exactly, what would happen next. Ma needed to rest up while her leg healed. Kacey's foot still needed fixing. The duck boat was broken. Rendezvous repeated that he wanted to buy it, but Captain Leela pointed out that it would offer scant protection if Lieutenant Fitzgerald and her crew came calling again.

The future was as murky as the sea around the VAB, and Pera should have feared it. But something in her felt loose and eager, ready for decades yet to be written.

Rendezvous had said he didn't know which star belonged to Dr. Bullock, so Pera picked one out that looked especially bright. From her pocket she withdrew the blue and green sphere that had come from the old man's ceiling. She made her wish and tossed it to the waves, where it bobbed off along the silver path of moonlight and past the towed silhouette of the *Land or Sea*.

Carried north by currents, wind, and tides, the tiny earth meandered across the ocean on a lonely journey. But it did not travel alone. The voices of whales, dolphins, and sharks kept it company as they traded stories of undersea drama and survival. The great sea mounts of the mid-Atlantic ridge recounted tales they'd heard from the continents. The continents rumbled occasional corrections but let the sea mounts have their say.

When the currents turned northward again over sunken islands the tiny traveler went with them, and at long last came to rest on a rocky brown beach where a woman in a broad-rimmed hat was picking up shells. Behind her on a hill was the fortress that had been first her prison and then her home, and written in the sand were the runes she practiced daily to keep the language of her home planet alive.

The plastic earth had lost much of its paint, but the touch of her fingertip restored it to its former luster. In a flash of warm golden memory she saw every moment of its journey, and saw the girl who had last held it, and saw through that girl's eyes a black obelisk shimmering underwater in the hands of a man whose life she had once saved in Dallas.

Dr. Bullock lifted the earth to the sky and smiled. Mankind's new journey was beginning, and with it a brand new story.