

FALLING OFF THE EDGE OF THE WORLD

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About this story, Suzanne says it's not hard for lifelong SF readers to imagine the isolation of deep space, where the emptiness so outweighs the people and places that life itself seems to be little more than a statistical error. None of us, though, I think were prepared for the isolation and separation right here on Earth wrought by the pandemic, and how it has kept us from loved ones while time has continued to march on in our mutual absences. There is comfort in knowing, no matter the distance, none of us are truly forgotten or alone.

FALLING OFF THE EDGE OF THE WORLD

Sunset is beginning, a sweep of red across the sky chasing the blue over the remains of the ship's stern, dragging darkness behind it like a thick sheet over the day's face and declaring it done. Stars, such as they are, will come on soon, one row at a time, perfectly spaced and aligned. Gabe mentioned once to Alis that he thought he remembered stars twinkling, and since then they have, blinking gently in symmetrical, rhythmic, soothing patterns until he falls asleep, and after that, what did it matter? And if some of the ones in the distance that blur together anyway, in Gabe's failing eyesight, have been turned off to conserve power—that too was nobody's to notice.

Early on, Gabe had tried to pay attention to the passage of time, believing someone should, and he had kept a journal numbering the days and then weeks. It was only when he lost track during an extended illness that he gave up, and never picked it up again as the months turned into years. "No going back to it," he'd told Alis. "No forward, either."

Most of the time it seems to him like it's been centuries, possibly forever, but he

still flails out of bed mid-nightmare, remembering the sirens and the terrible, ear-piercing shriek of the hull giving way, as raw as if it were all just yesterday. Memory is a cruel jokester, if left free to wander, but it is what he has.

Overhead, the first row of stars has now come on, right on time. He stands for a long while, staring at that artificial horizon. "What are you thinking about?" Alis asks, through the earbud that connects them.

"I wish I wasn't too tired to visit," Gabe says, by way of answer.

"It's a long walk," she says.

"I miss you."

"I miss you, too. But I can see you from here, and if you wave, I'll see."

He waves, until his arm gets weary and drops again to his side. "But I can't see if you wave back," he says after a while.

"I am, though," she says. "Close your eyes and imagine it. Maybe tomorrow you'll feel strong enough to make it to the edge, then we can wave at each other as long as you like. But you forgot your cup of tea again and it's grown cold, and it's getting late."

He laughs. "You have better eyes than me. Younger eyes, maybe."

"Only by a little. But I also have all our survey equipment over here, including telescopes, perimeter cameras, and magnifying scanners," she says. "They give me an unfair advantage. Now go warm up your tea, because it helps you sleep."

It takes Gabe a while to find where he left his mug, atop the autofeeder bin that's humming as it prepares the next day's output. He stares at the small bits of straw and dust that have fallen into and are floating in his cold tea. Making a face, he slowly dumps it out into the grass beneath his feet, where it will soak through the thin layer of substrate atop the old cargo floor and be reclaimed, reprocessed, and returned to him as clean water again, indistinguishable—and undistinguished—from new.

Alis is right that tea helps him sleep, and usually calms the nightmares, so Gabe walks back in under the edge of the torn hull, all jagged and tortured metal, and through the open emergency bulkhead toward the officers' mess, now all his own. He moved a cot in here for when the night rain is on, but mostly he prefers the hammock he's strung between two support struts out on the floor. Even though it's not logical, he feels safer on the grass and under the high dome of sky than in the closer confines of the wreckage of the ship, and rarely stays inside longer than necessary.

He puts his mug under the beverage dispenser, hits the button for tea, and closes his eyes to listen to the hum of the machine and the silence of everything else. When his mug has been refilled, he turns around and realizes he's been followed.

"I should just leave you out for the night, all alone," he tells the habitually wayward animal. "Maybe then you'd learn."

The truth is, if he did, he would worry all night, so he picks up the duck and carries him back to the makeshift barn out on the cargo floor, creaks open the door, and sets him inside before any others can rouse and rush the door. Not that they do; Boots is the troublemaker of the flock, Gabe's exhausting, exasperating, escape-artist favorite.

Done, he heads back into shelter for bed, and does not see all the stars—all except one, fuzzy and indistinct through the woven fabric of the sky, inexplicably moving—go out at once as soon as he is out of sight of them.

* * *

"We are go for drop, in ten," Roz says. "Everyone not buckled is gonna be bruised, no refunds."

Dr. Natalia Syra is already in the airlock vestibule, fully suited and strapped into one of the emergency jump seats. She closes her eyes, counts down the remaining seconds—three, two, one—and then there is that momentary sickening, inside-out feeling of dropping out of the jump conduit back into normal space. When she opens

her eyes, she can see the other three people in her team, buckled opposite her, looking unanimously amused at her discomfort.

“We’re out,” Roz announces. “Unidentified object just in range, bringing up sensors now.”

“Is it the *Hellebore*?” Benibeni asks, before anyone else can, though everyone has the same question; it has been a long, long search, and too many disappointments.

“It’s . . .” Roz tails off, and Nati braces herself for what already feels like bad news. “I don’t know. It’s the right size and mass, but . . .”

“Can’t be that many wrecks out here this deep in the Barrens, matching the *Hellebore*’s specs,” Osla, their engineer, chimes in from where she is stationed near the defense systems.

“Yeah, well, you all look at it and tell me what I’m seeing, because I’m not seeing a wreck,” Roz says. “Or anything familiar whatsoever. Data incoming to you all.”

Nati reads it, reads it again, then meets the eyes of her team. No one seems to have much to say, for once. “Anyone?” she asks, just to be sure.

“I’ve got no matches,” Osla says. “It does have an energy field, but it’s stable, no fluctuations whatsoever, and there’s no indication of movement. Or any indication how it would move, if it can. I don’t even have guesses what this is.”

“Can you get us closer, Roz?” Nati asks. “The mass equivalence seems an awful stretch to just be a coincidence, and this is right along the *Hellebore*’s last known trajectory.”

“It’s been lost for almost thirty years,” Roz reminds her.

“Long past time we found it, then,” Honne—Dr. Honnelin al Matti, physician, chemist, level-headed, nonbinary second cousin—says, from their seat beside Benibeni. “And if we haven’t, this is a mystery all on its own worthy of us. We are scientists and explorers, and we will not go home empty-handed. And besides, it doesn’t seem to present any obvious or immediate danger.”

“I agree, reluctantly,” Roz says, “so I’m nudging up near it. If it moves, I reserve the right to get my selfish ass out of here and ask all your forgiveness for continuing to live later.”

“I’m keeping an eye on it,” Osla says.

“Not as close as I am,” Roz replies, and Nati is sure that’s true. Paranoia on the bridge is not a bad thing, when you are this deep in uncharted territory, far from any welcoming star systems, refuge stations, or rescue.

Roz nudges their ship, the *Agastache*, closer, at what seems an unbearably slow speed, and when nothing happens, closer still. Nati reads over more scans as Roz and Osla send them to her, then decides. “I want to go in for a closer look,” she says.

Honne nods. “Me too,” they say.

Osla, who is still busy doing calculations on her handpad, looks up just long enough to wave one hand in what Nati takes as assent. And that means Benibeni the xenobiologist, who hates to go new places almost as much as he hates being left behind, is in as well.

There is muffled noise over their suit comms, likely Roz with her hand over the bridge mic while she swears up a storm at them, but in the end, she comes back on and says, “We’re now close enough and parked. You ready?”

“We’re ready,” Nati says. “I’m going first.” She unbuckles herself from her seat, reflexively runs one more check on all her exosuit systems and oxygen supplies, then cycles herself into the airlock. It’s big enough for all of them, but there is an old saying about eggs and baskets that applies surprisingly readily to sending out your entire exploration team in one go.

The outer door rises, the flashing red warning lights along its edge reflecting in the curve of her faceplate like an ominous ghost at the very edge of her peripheral vision,

while her heads-up display says *green, green, all is good*. Her magboots hold her tight to the floor, and she stands on the edge of the precipice, staring out into space.

Ahead of them, where they were hoping to find the *Hellebore*, some answers, and some peace, instead is a rounded, fibrous shape nearly a half-kilometer in diameter. It resembles, far too uncomfortably for coincidence, a giant cocoon. And through it, an impossibly long, impossibly thin needle of light.

She releases her boots and floats out, and behind her the airlock cycles closed again. As she orients herself, she unclips, one by one, a half-dozen of her survey drones from her equipment bandolier and releases them into space around her. They will measure, record, analyze, observe, with precision and without distraction, and already the periphery of her faceplate's display has the faint fluttering green aurora of their status lights.

Which is good, because she *is* distracted. The bright, shimmering gold line that pierces through the cocoon, like a toothpick through a cocktail cherry, still has no discernible, measurable physical structure. Her own scanners keep deciding there is some negligible mass there, then backtracking that into uncertainty. What it does have is energy, and lots of it.

"It's like a bolt of lightning frozen in the act of striking," she says. "What if the *Hellebore* is inside there?"

"Then it died fast," Roz says.

"Any changes since our approach? Indications it's still an active weapon?" Nati asks.

"Nothing."

"Then I'm going across," she says.

"How about the rest of you?" Roz asks. "Last chance to change your minds. Anyone?"

No one does, and ten minutes later, her team is outside with her. Honne, Benibeni, and Osla, the best of the best: her team, her friends. Family, in any way that matters.

"Keep your tethers on so I can haul your asses back if that thing tries to bite," Roz adds from the helm of the *Agastache*.

"What if you're not fast enough? Or you're asleep at the helm, like usual?" Benibeni asks, only slightly less casually than he probably hoped it would sound.

"Then I'll use your body to go chummin' for space whales," Roz answers. "Waste not, want not. Now get a move on before whoever stuck that thing with a giant lightning bolt comes back and goes all homicidal Zeus on us, too."

"You heard the captain," Nati says. "Let's go do this."

And they leap into the dark.

* * *

"Hello? Anybody? Hello?" Gabe calls out. His voice is getting hoarse, the words themselves losing meaning with repetition. He had been down in the cryonursery when something hit the ship and threw him full across the room into a wall of incubators, leaving him unconscious for a time, then addled as he tried to work out where he was, what had happened, in the pitch dark.

The air is getting cold, and there is no light at all. Has the whole ship lost power? He imagines the engineering crew have a lot more urgent things to do right now than look for one hapless livestock manager who is not in immediate danger, as frightening as everything is. He wishes he knew just enough more about ships, and the ways they have problems, to be more reassured that this was just a semi-routine hiccup, for all the drama.

Still, he is antsy. The main safety doors out of the bio area are shut tight, and the instrument panel that would tell him if they were safe to open is dead. The ship has multiple backup power systems, but maybe they are needed for somewhere more vital right now, so he leans his head against the heavy door, his ear against the cold metal-ceramic alloy, to listen.

He hears nothing.

“Hello?” he calls again, and bangs on the door. “I don’t need rescuing yet, but I need to know what’s going on and that someone knows I’m in here. Please answer. Anyone?”

* * *

They circle, survey, and eventually crawl around the circumference of the cocoon, as they have all come to call it, staying carefully away from where the hair-thin line of energy bisects it. The surface texture appears woven, or wrapped like a ball of twine, overlapping thin bands of an unknown material. As touching it has elicited no discernible response, Osla nudges one of her hovering sampler drones closer. They all watch as it attaches itself to the exterior of the cocoon, and she floats beside it as it does its thing, the incoming data scrolling swiftly in green and yellow text across her faceplate.

“Base material signature of the fibers matches the alloys that *Hellebore* was originally constructed from,” Osla says, and heaves a deep sigh. “I guess we finally have the where and what, now it’s just the who, the how, and the why.”

“And the how is *deeply* interesting,” Honne says, already scrolling Osla’s reports. “The way this material has been repurposed on a molecular level—”

“I had an aunt on the *Hellebore*,” Benibeni interrupts.

“Osla lost a second father, and Nati and I three cousins,” Honne reminds him, gently. “I don’t know about you, but I can’t do my job unless I detach from that fact.”

“I know,” Benibeni says. “I’m sorry. This is getting to me.”

“Take what time you need,” Nati says. “We haven’t hit anything that needs your attention yet.”

“Whatever did this, there’s not much else out here,” Osla says. “The *Hellebore* might have just been too tempting a package of rare resources. Pirates—”

“... would have stripped it down of everything useful and then gotten the hell out of here,” Roz interrupts from the bridge, still comfortingly close enough if they have to beat a hasty retreat. “Why, if some mystery aliens needed the resources, did they take the time to build this and then just leave it?”

“Who says they left it?” Benibeni answers. “We don’t know what’s inside.”

“We don’t *yet*,” Nati says. “Osla?”

Osla takes the small fragment she’s cut off the exterior, pops it in a drone tube, caps it, and sends it back toward their ship for more extensive analysis later. “Sample one off,” she says, logging it. “A gift for you when we’re back aboard, Honne.”

Using the controls of her suit vambrace, Osla pulls a larger cutting drone in, looking for a good position. “Core sample time,” she says, and locks on.

* * *

It takes Gabe about six hours, in the dark, to find a handpad that hadn’t been smashed during the impact. It has its own powercell, so it shouldn’t have surprised him when it turns on, but the sudden glare of light against his face after so many hours of dark and fear is the most starkly beautiful thing he can remember.

Most of the handpad is operational instructions for caring for the colony’s cryo’d livestock and seedbanks, which were all things he knew anyway, that being his chief—and only—qualification for having been along on this trip, but there was also a cache of general ship data, including emergency instructions.

Using the light from the handpad, he finds the recessed panel near the door and gets it open. The cryo facility has its own power system that should have kicked on when the main ship power failed, but there are steps for manually starting it.

He follows the sequence, cold hands stiff and trembling as he pushes physically switched buttons, and then waits. He is sure it won’t work, that the system didn’t reboot on its own because it was too damaged, but as he sits hunched on the floor in front of the panel bereft of any further ideas or hope, the handpad goes to sleep, and

in the absence of that glowing rectangle, he realizes he can now, dimly, see.

Is it his imagination that it is also, just very slightly, warmer? He can't say, but just the faint bit of light around him is enough that he finally feels safe enough to cry.

* * *

"Gas leak!" Osla shouts, even as she withdraws the first drill head and fires an emergency sealant into the newly cut hole. Everyone backs off as she studies the readout from the drill sensors.

"What do we have?" Nati asks.

"Tell me it's not going to explode," Roz adds from the ship.

"No, it's . . ." Osla says, then checks the data again. Her expression is impossible for Nati to read. "It's breathable. Mix and pressure. It's viable atmosphere, at least according to the drill sensors. Honne, you're the chemist, you want to double-check me?"

"Happy to," Honne answers, and takes Osla's place near the drill hole. From their backpack they pull out a long needle-thin rod and slide it carefully through the sealant. Nati can see the reflection of Honne's heads-up display flash across their face as they scan and re-scan the data.

"Yep," they say at last. "Beenjai mix, even. 20C, about 35% humidity. Anyone else want to take a stab at the implications?"

Nati knows all too well the danger of getting hopes up. "It's been twenty-seven years," she says. "Let's not get too far ahead of ourselves. One step at a time, people. Osla?"

"Emergency boarding bore?" Osla asks. "It'll keep things airtight."

Nati nods. "Do it. We don't want to let any of that very fine air escape, after all this time."

* * *

"Gabe?"

Alis's voice, from the tiny earbud beside his bed, wakes him up. It's still dark out, and he is confused, brain still awash in whatever anxious dream he'd been in the middle of, and it takes him a few moments to come to his senses enough to find the handheld control on his makeshift night table and turn the lights on low.

"I'm here," he says, rubbing his face with his hands, his brain still feeling full of holes. She would not call at this time if there wasn't an emergency. He remembers when they both became desperately sick from bad water, during their first year here, and the terrible weeks of silence when he didn't know if she was still alive. The idea that something might have happened to her makes him feel queasy, terrified. "What is it? What's wrong?"

"I think . . ." There's a pause. "I think we have company."

Gabe tries to get out of bed too fast, his legs caught up in his blanket, and he falls. When he catches his breath, he holds onto the edge of the cot to pull himself up again, hating the way his left knee clicks and feels uncertain, the way his hips and ankles ache. He'll have some good bruises later, he's sure. Up now and awake, he gets water (thirty minutes ago it finished dripping into the cistern from the filtration unit; five hours before that, it was cold tea seeping through the cargo floor substrate) and puts his earbud on. "Say that again, Alis," he says. "I don't think I heard you right."

"Someone is here," she says. "Outside."

"Outside?" Gabe is no longer sure what that means. "Who?"

"I don't know," she says. "I'm sorry I woke you. I shouldn't have, without knowing more. Sometimes my thoughts are more fragmented than others."

"It's okay," he says, having long since stopped feeling entirely solid himself. He sits back on the edge of his bed and finishes his water. "What do we know so far?" What does *she* know, really, as all the ship's instruments and controls are on her side of the ship, on the bridge, in her much more capable hands.

“There are people outside, trying to get in, I think,” she says. “I’ll find out more. Just . . . until I give the all clear, stay inside, near the door, in case they puncture an air seal. Okay?”

“Sure, Alis,” he says.

He refills his water and, despite having just said he’ll stay inside, wanders back out onto the cargo floor, barefoot in the grass. Nothing feels different at all; there is only the near-silence he has come to think of as absolute after decades of tuning out the background hum of what was left of the *Hellebore*, and eventually the slow degradation of his hearing. He can’t quite bring himself to go back to bed, though.

He checks on the ducks, and if it seems one is missing, he’s too tired to count, and anyway, eventually that duck needs to learn on his own not to wander off.

Nothing has changed, and there are no signs anything ever will.

There is still enough of the sleeping tea in his body that his thoughts are muddled, and he’s already not entirely sure what the conversation had been about, so he decides he probably dreamt it. And anyway, he doesn’t want to wake Alis just to confirm his own runaway imagination.

That settled, he goes back to bed, hoping for quieter dreams.

* * *

With light and warmth, Gabe begins to assess his situation. The extended power outage has wiped out all his mammal cryostock, though the seeds, insects, and some of his bird eggs seem potentially salvageable, if they are revived fairly soon. He can tell the ship is not moving, because the ever-present vibration of the engines throughout the floors and walls is gone. But he has air, and it seems to be refreshed, so there is time.

Time, fear, hunger, and boredom.

There’s an emergency locker, and in it a box of tools, a temporary airlock doorkit and a pair of exosuits. He’s worn suits—he had to prove basic competence at putting them on and sealing them up properly before coming aboard—but hasn’t in a while, and hasn’t often besides. But death from a suit malfunction would still beat starving to death, so he sets up the temp airlock kit just in front of the bulkhead door, forming a secondary layer, and zips himself into his borrowed, slightly too-large exosuit between them.

“Here goes,” he says to nobody, and pulls the manual release for the bulkhead.

He is not swept out into space, which he’s not a hundred percent relieved about, but he does find himself in the dark again. This time, he knows how to turn the lights on, and does.

When he can see, he sees the first of the bodies.

It’s Teinar, one of the other livestock techs who must have just been coming on shift. Although all the heavy furniture and fixtures on the ship are fastened down, the people are not, except when sleeping, during entrances and exits from jump conduits, or the occasional safety drill. Although Gabe is no medic, it’s pretty obvious that Teinar’s skull hit one of the bench corners, and that was the very messy and final end of that. Not far away another body lies sprawled, and he already knows it’s Rojo, one of the water system techs, but he has to go see anyway, and is surprised that Rojo is still breathing.

He doesn’t want to move him—Rojo’s neck is at an odd angle—so he sits on the floor next to him and holds his hand and tells him *help is coming help is coming help is coming you just have to hang on*.

Rojo doesn’t wake up, and some hours later, having exhausted himself into a near-doze with his own desperate mantra, Gabe realizes the tech’s hand is cold, and the breathing has stopped.

He sits a while longer and thinks about his own inevitable, probably very near,

death. There are some seeds in the bank that, if swallowed, will kill him, but it would be a long, agonizing death. He could also seal up his exosuit again and disconnect the oxygen tank, suffocating himself, but the idea is terrifying. He could do it if there was someone to hold his hand, maybe, but there is no one.

There's a surgical kit in the emergency locker that might offer something faster, some blade or overdose where the deed is done before you realize it. He lays Rojo's hand gently on his unmoving chest and gets up, stands a while unwilling to yet concede the obvious defeat. Then he draws a deep breath, lets it out slowly, and turns back toward the bio facility and locker.

There is a crackle of sound, somewhere on the floor, and he sees that Teinar's handpad is blinking from underneath the bench that ended his life. "Hello?" says a faint voice, one he doesn't recognize. "Is there anyone else out there? Anyone? Hello? Please tell me I'm not alone."

Gabe nearly hits his own head on the bench, scrambling under it to answer.

* * *

The emergency borer has done its job and cut a circular hole two meters in diameter through the strange surface of the cocoon, and as it withdraws it leaves behind a long plug with a two-sided lock into it. The outside perimeter fills with an adaptive sealant that seeps into the spaces between new and old, hardening in seconds. Sensors from both sides of the lock confirm the seal is good.

"You first," Osla says, and pushes back from the surface to give room.

"Me first," Nati agrees; she's the leader, surveyor, and archaeologist of the team. Together, they've explored countless human and alien wrecks and civilizational remnants, until they were drafted into the long search for the *Hellebore*. The colonists of Beenjai did not abandon their own.

So she unhooks her tether, opens the exterior lock, and pulls herself into the confines of the tube. Then she opens the interior lock and floats cautiously through, her suit's faceplate display giving her a cross-spectrum scan even as it sends a live feed back to her team.

Inside the cocoon, she is surrounded by strange structures, adhesions springing in an almost organic form in strands and clumps from the cocoon shell in toward the center.

"It looks like the fiber goo inside a pumpkin," Roz comments over the channel from the ship. "If you find seeds, don't even think I'm going to let you bring them aboard."

Nati thinks that's an apt analogy, but she is grateful there is nothing—seedlike or otherwise—hanging amongst the fibers. There is also no movement, no signs of anything or anyone in the interior space with her, no sense of danger, so she reaches out with one gloved hand and uses the nearest of the strands to pull herself farther in. For all its organic, grown look, the strand is unyielding and solid in her grip.

"Are those made of the same woven stuff as the exterior?" Osla asks.

"Looks like it," Nati answers, as she threads her way through the vague maze of it all further inward.

"I want to come in and take a sample," Honne says. "We clear?"

"Roz? Everything still quiet from out there?" Nati asks.

"I don't see any signs of trouble, but be careful. There seems to be some signal loss from inside. Team, you are go to teamify. Teaminate. Teamogrof—"

"We got it, Captain," Benibeni says. He sighs. "Biologist bringing up the rear, as usual. One of these excursions, it'd be nice if we actually encountered some *bio*."

"You say that, but when something leaps out of the dark and eats your face, then how will you feel?" Osla asks, already cycling herself and a subset of her drones through.

“Glad I’m in the rear. I’ll get it all on camera for later analysis and future publication,” Benibeni answers.

“I guess I better hope the alien doesn’t chew off my more photogenic side,” Honne comments. They are already through, and examining one of the support structures.

The banter means the team is on high alert, but still comfortable enough to take pot shots at each other. If they stop, then she’ll worry. Once Benibeni is in, Nati moves further in toward the interior of the structure; her scans tell her there is something more solid ahead.

She is not prepared for when she reaches it and finds the smooth exterior surface of a ship hull, with the Beenjai shipping guild logo still legible on it, between the fibrous struts.

“I’ve lost visual feed,” Roz says. “What are you seeing?”

“The *Hellebore*,” Nati replies. “It’s here.”

“Let me by,” Osla says, floating up right behind her. Nati moves over, and puts one hand out against the ship surface. There is no vibration, none of the mechanical pulse of a living ship, but even so, this feels extraordinary. She sends out her drone fleet on reconnaissance, lateral to her position, instructed to stay at least 15° of arc away from the energy intrusion. Quickly they report back a wall; the cocoon is chambered.

“Hull sounding suggests atmosphere inside as well,” Osla says. Everyone else is quiet now, and caught up to them, though Honne is still poking curiously at the struts with various instruments.

“So the hull is intact?” Benibeni asks.

“I didn’t say that,” Osla says. “If the ship was intact and holding air, why would there be air out here, in between the ship and the outer shell? And that shell was woven from material from the *Hellebore’s* hull, and I would estimate it would have taken approximately 22 percent of existing material to make it. If you had the tech to do this—which certainly we don’t—why not just repair the hull?”

“I can’t even guess,” Nati said. “If the intent was to use the ship for something after attacking it, why leave it like this? And why match the air? If it was space pirates, there’d be much closer overlap on atmo mix, but—” she gestures around her “—clearly not pirates. Not human ones, anyway.”

“I found the old airlock,” Honne says, from further astern. “It appears to still be operational.”

“That sounds like a trap,” Benibeni says.

“I’ll go,” Nati says. “Roz, I’m going in. I might lose signal entirely.”

“Be careful,” Roz answers.

Nati uses the struts to pull herself around to where Honne is, then gestures them away. “Everyone back off and be prepared to immediately evacuate if this goes wrong,” she orders.

She activates the lock, and after a long delay, the outer door creaks open. With one last look back at her team, she cycles in, and then out the far side into the *Hellebore’s* airlock vestibule. Dimly, lights come on, and the artificial gravity kicks in, and her magboots hit the floor and click on.

Something in the room moves, and she utters an involuntarily curse as she steps back toward the airlock, before she makes out what it is.

“Uh, Benibeni?” she calls over their comms.

“Here,” Benibeni answers, the connection faint and crackly. “You okay? I can’t make out any visuals.”

“I’m fine, but we’re not alone,” Nati says.

“An alien?” he asks.

“No,” Nati says. “There’s a *duck*.”

* * *

The voice is a systems technician named Alis, who he thinks he might have met once, during pre-trip orientation. She was in an airlock troubleshooting a glitchy door—and fully suited up, as a precaution—when the collision happened, and that saved her life.

She's able to tell him a bit about what happened, though it's clear she's still piecing things together. Something high-energy and high velocity struck them in jump space, which wasn't supposed to be possible. The *Hellebore's* catastrophically damaged safety systems dumped them back out into normal space—without jump stabilizers, staying in the conduit would have quickly torn them apart—but the emergency backup power systems that should have kept vital things like the relative inertial shift compensators online failed, so their exit to normal space was not very distinguishable from running head-first into a brick wall. Gabe doesn't fully understand the science—but he sure knows exactly what that had felt like.

Alis is up at the bow of the ship, has gotten access to the bridge and engineering, and although she hasn't been able to restore atmosphere on her end, she's got some minimal power up, and is working on rerouting around the damage to try to get out a distress call.

She has also been, one by one, sending bodies out the same airlock that saved her. She hasn't found anyone else alive either.

"Do we know what hit us?" he asks.

"You can't see it?" she asks in return, surprised.

He tells her he's only got access to a few internal spaces.

"It crashed *through* us," she says. "We dragged it out into normal space with us, and it damn near tore us in half. It's still there, forward of the main cargo floor."

"What is it?"

"I don't know," she says. "Once I have power back, I'm going to try to get some sensors online so I can scan it, but it's going to be a while. I'm doing everything by myself, and I dislocated a shoulder during the collision."

"You should come here," Gabe says. "I have heat and air, and I can try to pop it back in."

"Did it already myself," she says. "I don't recommend that, unless you have no other choice. But I don't think I can get to you, anyway. Most of the center of the ship is destroyed and open to space."

"But . . ." Gabe starts to say, but what is there to argue against? Or admit he is just afraid of being alone? "Okay. But we can do more as a team."

"I didn't think anyone was going to answer. I really thought everyone else was dead," Alis says. "Even if I can't see you, or you me, yet—and I'm not giving up, don't think that—just hearing your voice gives me hope."

"And me yours," Gabe says.

"I need to sleep," she says, after a long pause. "I've been at this too long, and I'm so tired I can hardly focus my eyes. You'll still be here when I wake up?"

"I'll do my best," he says, because that's the only promise he can make.

* * *

"Mother of moons!" Benibeni swears. "That *is* a duck."

* * *

Gabe wakes again, still not quite before dawn, and rubs sleepy glitter from his eyes as he swings his feet over the edge of the cot and sits up, back and neck sore, but mind feeling refreshed. "Alis?" he asks, slipping the earbud into place, his one, tenuous human connection. "Did you wake me up last night or did I dream it?"

"I did, I'm sorry," she said. "I know I shouldn't interrupt your rest; it just makes things confusing."

"You said something about our air seal possibly getting punctured?" he asks, as he

does his stretches, thinking about food, thinking about going to bed again for another half-hour just to make another slow, identical day go by a little bit faster.

“Yes, but it’s okay, they’re being careful, and I’m keeping an eye on them,” Alis answers.

“Them?” he exclaims. “What do you mean ‘them?’”

“The people,” she says. “I can hear them, and they’re from Beenjai. They’ve been looking for this ship for a long time.”

Suddenly the day is not identical at all, and there is so much to do, he doesn’t even know where to start. Oddly, he is afraid—will he even know how to talk to people, other than Alis, other than his ducks, after almost thirty years? What will it be like to see people, be near them? He has only been able to see Alis, across the gulf of the wreckage or via their few working screens, never near enough to touch.

“Why are you so quiet?” Alis asks. “Aren’t you happy?”

“What if . . .” he says, then pauses. He has walked out onto the grass, his comfort place, and feels it beneath his bare feet, this reality they built from near-certain death. “What if I don’t know how to live among people again?”

“You’ll be fine,” she says.

“We’ll be fine, I hope,” Gabe adds. “We’ll still be friends, right? I mean, it’s not just because you were stuck with me and no one else to talk to?”

She laughs, which she does so rarely. “I could’ve left anytime, you know, just gathered up my things and flew away into space, like magic. I guess I liked your company enough to stay. So stop worrying about it. They’re almost to you, coming up toward the aux seed storage unit. Go say *hello*.”

* * *

Gabe is getting more comfortable wearing the exosuit, and decides it’s time—three weeks now since the accident, according to the careful tickmarks he’s made on the wall, counted not by any of the smart consoles still down and dead, but by the predictable once-a-cycle deep hum that he can feel through his feet, through his bones, of the water systems discharging cleaned water back into the reservoir tanks and pulling in whatever accumulated gray water and sewage is next in line.

He doesn’t imagine the water system has much to do, but it does it anyway, faithfully and like clockwork, which is one less big problem than he could have had. Alis has gotten more of the bridge consoles working again and has activated some of the repair drones to work on the important things, like the torn holes in the hull, radiation shielding, and fixing their external communications array so they can call for help, so he doesn’t complain about his own boredom, even if he wouldn’t anyway.

He’s finished exploring all the areas at his end of the ship, and having sent seventeen of his fellow crew—mostly acquaintances, a few friends, one cousin—off to their eternal rest in the sterile garden of deep space, he wants to see a living person. Needs to, if he can.

The cargo bay floor is as bad as Alis had warned him, when he finds a working airlock and gets out at last. The *Hellebore* has other holds and storage spaces, but this is the big one, a vast floor nearly two-thirds the length of the ship and most of its height, where all the farm and terraforming equipment was tethered down beneath vast canopy doors big enough to accommodate all but the largest dronships for rapid loading and unloading.

Alis had not been exaggerating when she’d said the *Hellebore* had been nearly torn in half, and Gabe honestly can’t fathom how it hadn’t. One of the canopy doors has been ripped entirely away, and what remains of the other is bent and twisted backward from the impact point, allowing him to see, between the stacks of equipment that had stayed fast and the jumble of those that hadn’t, the blinding arrow of light protruding from the ship’s corpse off into space.

"What do you think?" Alis asks in his ear.

"It's not like anything I've ever seen, not that I've seen much," he says. "I don't know who could have had anything against us, much less such a grudge as to do this."

"I meant the cargo area, but you think this was a weapon, some sort of attack?"

"You don't?" he asks, surprised.

"I don't know. If it was intended to destroy us—"

"It came close enough to count," Gabe says.

"It hasn't finished us off, though," Alis points out.

"Maybe because whoever shot it at us knows they don't have to waste the effort. What chance do either of us have?" Gabe is angry at himself as soon as he says it, because even if he thinks it's hopeless, he has an obligation to act otherwise for her sake. "It's an alien thing. Who knows why aliens do what they do, or why? What did you mean about the cargo area?"

"Well," she says, "you're not wrong. We don't have much of a chance. I'm a systems tech, not a navigation expert, so I can't give you numbers, but dropping out of jump in the middle of the Barrens is bad. We're a needle in a light-years-wide haystack, and it's going to take people a while to find us. Maybe a long while. So we need to make ourselves comfortable. We'll need food."

"There's enough for a long time, in storage," Gabe says, because it was meant to feed a crew of sixty-two, not two. Then it occurs to him that the storage he means is on his half of the ship, this side of the divide. "You have food over there, too, don't you?"

"Some," she answers. "For a little while. If I can find a way to get the cargo area sealed again, do you think . . . do you think you could terraform it? Just the floor? Grow grass, maybe some crops? Can we revive any of the livestock?"

"The fowl, maybe," Gabe says. It's a wild idea, as impossible and inconceivable as it is an attractive challenge. "I need to think."

He has been winding his way between the crates and diggers and plows as they talk, climbing up on them when they've fallen in his path, and it takes him nearly an hour to reach the far side of the cargo floor. His legs and arms ache from pulling himself up, over, between. There is another airlock there, and when he catches his breath he opens it, but it opens on a gaping maw of torn metal. Through it that beam of light, no thicker than his leg, burns nearly as bright as a sun, and his suit's faceplate automatically dims it to a bearable glare. The thin shreds of the hull that hold the two halves of the *Hellebore* together seem fragile and few, though some must still carry intact conduits of power, water, some small lifeline of needs back and forth, or they would both have already been dead.

Across the gulf—not so far, though insurmountable—he can see another airlock, and above it an observation window, and there she is: Alis.

She looks tired. There's a bandage on her head, and her face seems swollen, red, wrong. But she is smiling, and she waves to him, and he waves back with every ounce of hope he can. There must be some way to survive, to build a bridge, to not each die alone.

"We can try it," he decides. What else is there? "Let me know what you want me to do."

* * *

Osla is at what they think is the last interior bulkhead between storage and the operational spaces of the *Hellebore*, waiting for the sensor unit she's clamped onto the door to return information on whether the door is safe to open. They are all still suited, so lack of air isn't a problem, but if there's a duck walking around loose, there might be other things that wouldn't appreciate seeing their air suddenly sucked away.

Nati can't help but hope: living people. She's sure her team is all thinking the same, knowing how impossible it should be, but there's Benibeni holding the duck,

who seems fully familiar with being held, and what else could that mean?

“Safe,” Osla declares, as everyone crowds in closer, then hits the lock and opens the door herself.

Nati goes through with Osla, the others behind, and a few steps in they stop. There is a man there, long gray hair in an untidy ponytail half come undone, his clothing a mishmash of patches and repair seams and various types of tape. He is anxious, his hands fidgeting together, his eyes wide and scared. The man tries to speak, clears his throat, then finally manages a tremulous single word. “Boots.”

“Um?” Nati says. The man’s feet are bare.

“I got it,” Osla says, and starts to unseal her exosuit to take a boot off. “I’m about his size, I think.”

The man turns red, waves his hands in front of him. “Sorry, no, sorry. Boots is my duck. He wanders off a lot. I’m sorry, I knew I’d get this all wrong. *Just say hello*, she said, and I haven’t even got that right!”

Nati takes one cautious step forward. “I’m Dr. Syra, expedition lead on the *Agastache*. You can call me Nati. I’m from Silver Groves, back on Beenjai.”

“Hello,” the man says. “I’m Gabe . . . Gabrel Tirce, of Vinehaven.” He laughs, awkwardly. “Or of the *Hellebore*, for nearly half my life, such as it’s been. This is overwhelming. I’m sorry. Why don’t you come up to cargo? It’s much nicer there.”

“Are there others?” Osla asks.

“Two of us, me and Alis, that’s it,” Gabe says. “I’m sorry there aren’t more.”

“You don’t have to apologize,” Nati tells him, as he leads them, with many wondering, disbelieving glances back, toward cargo. “We never dreamt we’d find *anyone* alive.”

They follow him through another airlock and up a ramp, and there the bulkheads are open wide onto a field of vibrant, living green. Where there should be enormous canopy doors overhead, instead there is the weave of the cocoon, and bright light streaming down from it on grass, a handful of fruit trees, a thick, tangled patch of riddleberry vines, fields of grain, and, of course, more ducks. An entire forest seems to occupy the back half of the floor.

Benibeni sets Boots down, and the duck runs off to rejoin its milling, squawking fellows.

Honne touches Gabe’s arm, very gently, and he jumps back, startled. “I’m sorry,” he apologizes, yet again. “I haven’t been touched by anyone since the collision.”

Honne nods. “I’m a medic, Gabe. When you’re ready, you should let me check you out. Okay?”

“Okay,” he says. “Let me just get another cup of tea, then I’ll be able to think more clearly.” He walks back through the doors to a foodmaker, and draws himself a cup with shaking hands before returning to where Nati, Honne, and Osla are still standing. Benibeni is off examining the plants, like a kid who unexpectedly found himself in a candy shop.

“You said there’s another survivor?” Nati asks.

“Yes. Alis. Alis Noma, she’s an engineer, she’s the only reason we survived. She made the sky, see?” Gabe points up.

“And where is she?” Nati asks.

His face falls. “On the other side,” he says. “Stuck in the front of the ship, while I’m stuck here at the back. We talk over comms all the time, and I used to hike over so we could at least see and wave at each other, but it’s gotten too hard lately.”

He sips his tea, and for just the briefest flash, his eyes are filled with gold, bright and sparkling. It fades so fast Nati thinks maybe she’s imagined it, but she meets Honne’s startled gaze and knows they saw it too.

Gabe finishes his cup and sets it down. “Better already,” he says. His voice is stronger, and he is no longer shaking, no longer afraid and confused. “So! Welcome

aboard the *Hellebore*. Want a tour?"

* * *

Alis is slow to answer, when he calls her on the comms, and when she does her voice is hoarse, almost unrecognizably weak. "You're sick, too?" he asks. He thinks he's lost at least three or four days, maybe more, to fever, hacking cough, stomach cramps, and unbearable exhaustion. Even just the effort of finding his earbud where it had fallen off in his restless sleep had left him breathless.

"It's the water," she says. "One of the purifiers went offline in the collision, and I only just found it. I sent a repair drone to reboot it manually, but it'll take a few days to flush the contaminants out. Don't drink water straight from the feed until I give the clear; tea and coffee are fine because the food prep systems have their own internal filtration. If that doesn't work, I'll have to send you instructions for brewing beer."

"No hops in inventory," Gabe says. "I've got riddleberries, though, so maybe wine? In a season or two, if we can close up cargo."

She laughs, starts coughing, and takes a while to catch her breath again. "Sure, a season or two. I can't even think beyond ten minutes from now, and I'm going to go back to sleep as soon as we're done talking."

"Maybe I should come over there," he says. He's been thinking this through for a while, and he's used to his exosuit enough that the idea of being in space doesn't completely terrify him, though it's still nothing he'd be eager to try without good cause. "I can go around the outside, away from the arrow. Or you can come here."

"We're surrounded by debris, tiny sharp bits of metal. It'll take a while to clear up, when I can spare a bot for it. I've got nine online now. Was working on number ten when the contaminated water caught up to me. And anyway, all the systems I need to get us through this are here, in engineering, or on the bridge. But, listen, just in case something happens to me—"

"No," he interrupts. "No 'just in case.' I can't do this without you. If you're this sick, you should get yourself into a med pod."

"You told me the infirmary is open to vacuum," she says. "And anyway, that's your end of the ship, not mine."

"There's a spare pod in the equipment room next to the bridge. I saw it on the tour, before we left Beenjai."

"I didn't take the tour," she says.

"Well, go look! Please? Everything else can wait a few days until you're better. Promise me you won't wait?"

"I promise," she says. "When my repair bot is done with the water system, I've set it to come to you, and you can send it back with some dried fruit, if you have any in storage that's still good. I'm really sick of nutripaste and crackers. That would help me a lot, and give me something to look forward to. Okay?"

"Okay," he says.

"I don't feel good. I have to go before I pass out," she says and disconnects abruptly.

He doesn't have many fresh fruits or vegetables left—it was supposed to be a six-week trip to the fledgling colony on Jozzoma—but he's happy to send everything he has to her, and if she can figure out how to seal off cargo, he will grow her more fresh food than she can eat in a lifetime. That, he *can* do.

* * *

Gabe's thoughts are a mix of the expected euphoria at rescue, and no small amount of terror; he's had Alis to talk to for three decades, but he hasn't been this close to people, had people *touch* him, since the day of the attack, and it disconcerts him, as if he is rediscovering food after starving for as long as he can remember. It doesn't help that he forgot his tea, earlier, and it takes a little time to calm him, help

him get his thoughts in order.

The Beenjaiers who've come are scientists, engineers, explorers. People he is sure Alis will understand more than he will, know how to answer their questions. He cannot quite shake a vague, irrational fear of abandonment, eventual rejection.

"Alis?" he asks, over his earbud. "They're here."

There are four of them, and they've introduced themselves already, but he has trouble holding onto their names in his wash of conflicted emotions. He remembers the leader, Nati, at least, but probably because she's already told him twice.

"I'm trying to tie into their communications to talk to them directly, but our system is out of date and a mess of hasty repair work," Alis replies. "Are you okay giving your bud to their leader so we can talk?"

"Okay," he says. He pulls the bud away from where it's stuck onto the side of his face, along the jawbone just under his ear, and hands it to Nati. "Alis wants to talk to you. Technical stuff over my head, I imagine."

She takes it from him, pops it on. "Hi, this is Dr. Nati Syra, of the Beenjai explorer *Agastache*," she says. She is grinning in excitement, and he tries to let her mood catch and lift him up, too. Gabe can't hear the reply, but Nati is nodding, and glances over at Gabe more than once, so he knows he's being discussed. "I got it," she says. "I'm going to have our medic look him over, and I'm going to hand you off now to Osla, our engineering expert."

She passes the bud along to the one of the other women, who takes it and immediately switches over into tech talk and acronyms, and turns back to Gabe. "Please let Honne check you out?" she asks him. "Then Benibeni over there in your garden—he's our team xenobiologist—will help us figure out how much of your work here can be saved and taken back with us. We'll evacuate as much as we can."

"I can't abandon my ducks," Gabe says. "Or my bees, and stillbugs, and worms. . . ."

"We're not going to leave anything behind we don't have to. But the trees, those will be a lot harder," she says. "Osla will also consult on that, when she's done talking to your Alis."

Gabe thinks, *My Alis*, and relief floods through him. They understand; everything is going to be all right.

Benibeni comes over, smiling and holding an egg as if it was the most precious thing ever. "This—this is extraordinary! I'd never have believed it possible, but you've done it, survived and thrived and grown a whole microecology around you," he tells Gabe. "Don't worry, now it's our turn to do the work. We're going to get you—and all of this!—home safe and sound."

* * *

Gabe is sitting atop a crate, back aching, neck stiff, and barely aware of either as he peers intently through the incubator window. He is starting to think he'd imagined it when, unmistakably, one of the eggs inside wobbles, just slightly, again.

"Alis!" he calls out. "We did it! We're going to have ducklings!"

It is a victory after many defeats; as he'd expected, the mammalian livestock is a loss, but he'd hoped for at least some of the chicken and ptarmigan eggs to make it. He is pretty sure the bees are viable, but there's no point trying until there's something flowering for them to live off of, and his seedling beds—emptied crates with layers of artificial soil mats under full-spectrum lights looted from the infirmary—are a sparse mishmash of anemic-looking shoots, still skeptical of life.

The egg wobbles again, and then another one.

"That's great," Alis says. She sounds much stronger now, enough that he almost forgets how scared he'd been during the nearly three weeks of silence after he'd urged her to put herself in the med pod. He'd even hiked to the edge of the intrusion, twice, but could not figure out a safe way across, and worried that if he died doing

something foolish, he wouldn't be there for her at all. And anyway, objectively he knew the med pods were more reliable than his own anxieties.

"How soon do you think until we've sealed the cargo floor?" he asks. He's cleared it, in preparation; he'd been hesitant to send the tractors and other large ag vehicles out through the gap where the canopy door was gone, but then, it was easier to watch them drift away than the bodies had been. He kept what he thought he couldn't do without, but otherwise, clear space was the priority.

"Another four to five months. I've rebuilt and reprogrammed several of the drones, and I'm working on more," Alis says. Since emerging from the pod, she's been trying to make up for lost time. "They are going to collect debris from around the ship, and take material from sections that are too compromised to repair, and re-extrude it as a thin fiber."

"Like spider silk?" he asks.

"What?" she says, then a short while later, "yes, like that. I had forgotten about spiders, sorry."

Gabe chuckles. "My brother was terrified of them," he says. "Guess it's good I became the farmer in the family."

He hasn't thought about his family since the early days after the *Hellebore* was struck. They must believe he's dead—and maybe he will be soon—but he's not ready for someone to push him out into cold space, not yet.

He keeps watch on his wobbly eggs, certain there is no point thinking any further ahead than the first pip, and little else as important.

* * *

Gabe walks the team through the fields and small grove of fruit trees, leading them toward the front end of the cargo bay, and to where the intrusion—the *arrow*, he calls it—pierces the ship. He shows them the bulkhead that once upon a time led forward into the bow of the *Hellebore*, and eventually the bridge, but shakes his head. "That whole part of the ship was ripped open," he tells them. "Alis says that part doesn't hold air, and now that the cargo hold is sealed, we can't open it. There's no other way across."

"I got a kit," Osla says, and Nati waves everyone else back so her engineer has room to work. She pulls a flat packet out of her pack and unfolds it into a large, translucent tent. Then, with Nati and Honne's help—Benibeni is still carrying the egg cupped in his hands, and asking Gabe questions—they press it up and around the bulkhead frame.

Osla double- and triple-checks her readouts, inspects the entire setup physically for the fourth time, then declares the seal good.

"Osla and I will go through first and assess the situation on the other side," Nati says. "Gabe, is it okay if I borrow your earbud again?"

"Sure," he says, though he's slow to take it off and hand it over.

Alis has been his lifeline for decades, Nati knows, and she understands how difficult and how sudden all this must seem. "I'll give it right back, I promise," she says, as she puts it on.

In her ear, Alis asks her for a favor.

Nati glances at Gabe, not yet understanding, not wanting surprise to show on her face. "Gabe," she asks, "it just occurred to me, but do you have an exosuit of your own? We might need it to get you out of here."

"Back in my room, in the officers' mess," he says. "I haven't worn it in a long time, though."

"Benibeni, maybe you can go back with him and check it out?" Nati asks. "There's probably a poor mama duck wondering where one of her eggs went, after all."

Benibeni grins, and Nati thinks she has never seen him this happy; given how

grim they'd expected this expedition to be, that's almost as astounding as finding survivors.

Gabe raises one hand up high and waves, and Nati sees the small lens mounted above the bulkhead.

"Please tell Gabe I'm waving back," Alis asks over the bud, and she does.

Gabe is pleased by that. "Tell her I'll see her soon," he says, and then he and Benibeni head back through the garden.

"Okay, let's do this," Nati says. She and Osla close up their hoods and faceplates, then Osla unseals the seam running down the center of the airlock tent so they can step through. There's just enough room in there for the two of them, and Honne is already settling down in the comfort of the grass to wait.

"You know I have an extra suit in my pack that would fit him just fine," Osla says.

"I know," Nati replies.

"Okay, then," Osla says, and knows enough to leave it at that. They've been a team for a long time.

Satisfied that the airlock tent has sealed up behind them again, Osla cranks open the bulkhead, and there is the pulling sensation of their small pocket of air suddenly escaping to run free in a much larger space. Vacuum, indeed.

And there ahead of them is the thin, brilliant line of light, passing through the absolute devastation of the midship, an explosion caught and petrified and held in the act of flying apart. Nati glances up and around, then peers over the torn edge of the decking in front of their boots; she can just see the weave of the cocoon, far below.

"Now what?" Osla asks.

"It's safe for you to cross, as long as you don't come closer than two meters to the energy line," Alis says.

"Gabe's suit wasn't good enough to make it?" Osla asks.

"It was best that he stayed over there," Alis answers, and Osla glances at Nati, eyebrows raised. "I'll explain when you reach the bridge. The artificial gravity is off from this point forward until the bridge itself, so please anticipate the shift. The next bulkhead has an airlock door beside it, so you can pass safely through. I have just finished restoring pressure and air to everything within that chamber. A security drone will lead you through."

Nati eyes the chasm one more time, then jumps; somewhere mid-gap, the gravity goes away and it becomes only motion and momentum. She needs only a short burst from her exosuit jets to get her trajectory into alignment, and when she reaches the far wall she puts out her hands to stop herself and curls up, swinging her feet around until her magboots hit the floor and click, stick.

The intrusion hasn't changed as far she can tell, though Osla scans it again thoroughly before she crosses next.

The airlock is functional, and big enough for them both with room to spare. As Alis has said, there is a drone waiting on the far side. Nati and Osla follow it, alternately floating or stomping as the conditions of the floor around them vary, and Nati takes in the amount of damage. So much of the space around Gabe has been patched, or at least cleaned and cleared of debris, but here the stresses that pulled the ship nearly in half are still written into the structure around them. A few places are held together with strands of the same weave that the exterior cocoon is made of, and Osla scans that too.

"This feels . . . abandoned," Osla says. "More like wreckage than not."

Nati nods in agreement. *How fair is that, though*, she wonders. *Would the cargo floor look any better if the garden wasn't covering most of it?*

There is a working comm screen outside the bridge, near the observation window, and there's the image of woman on it, younger than Nati expected, with brown hair

and tired eyes, but a smile. "Please come in," she says, and the bridge door opens.

Nati steps through, feeling the shift back to gravity and turning off her boots. Her peripheral display says the air is good, if a little cool.

The bridge is empty. "Hello?" Nati calls out. "Where are you?"

"Over here," Alis says, from another screen beside the dust-covered captain's chair. Everything here is covered in dust, layers of it, settled in drifts as if it had all just settled like ash. "I'm in the emergency equipment room. It's the door immediately to your left."

Nati steps through, Osla a few steps behind her. There's a med pod here, similarly covered in dust, but humming, working. Nati swipes her gloves over the glass plate, clearing it. Inside there is Alis, exactly as on the screen—brown hair, eyes closed—the med pod wires and tubes protruding from all over her head and torso, and layers of the cocoon weave, through which Nati can see occasional flashes of gold glitter.

"Alis died twenty-six years ago," Alis's voice comes from the screen behind them. "We're sorry."

* * *

Gabe has been standing in the garden a long time, regarding his rows of riddleberry vines, which have now reached the top of their makeshift trellis and are putting out tiny, periwinkle flowers. "I should start some bees," he says, speaking mostly to himself, though at his voice he hears the quartet of the latest batch of ducklings behind him, always almost dangerously underfoot, mill around and rearrange themselves in the grass.

"More bees?" Alis asks.

"More?" he asks back, confused.

"You started the incubator up a week ago. They should be almost ready," she says.

"I did?" Gabe remembers intending to, but no more than that. He sets down the watering can in his hand, realizes he forgot to water the vines, and picks it back up again quickly. Alis doesn't say anything, which is a relief; lately his anxiety has returned, and he seems to be forgetting small things, little details. Nothing important or that matters much, except that it bothers and embarrasses him.

He waters the berry vines, puts the empty can back under the drip feed for later, then goes inside to reconstitute some soup for lunch. It's only as he's watching it heat and anticipating it being done that he remembers again about the bees. By the time he returns from down in livestock cryo—the bees are only a day or so from hatching out, and he had to scramble to get the fab unit online to start printing hive cells—his soup has gone cold.

He reheats it and sits down at the table, thinking he ought to run a check of his nutrition levels, and maybe run a scan to see if he's getting enough deep sleep at night, but he doesn't want to alarm Alis. She's been the rock of the two of them, and he owes it to her to not be more of a bother than he surely already is.

If he starts some grains next and can figure out how to mill it with what he has on hand, some day he could make toast and riddleberry jam. Surely soon Alis would finish with all the things that needed doing from the bridge so she could cross over here, and if he made her a picnic lunch of fresh food every day, it would still not be enough to repay her for saving his life, for not leaving him alone to die forgotten in the darkness.

Just to be sure, he takes the logbook pen and writes himself a note for tomorrow not to forget about the bees again.

* * *

"What the ever-loving, piss-in-the-updraft, kink-in-the-airhose fuckity fucking fuckery is happening here?" Osla asks.

If the woman—the image of a woman, anyway, Nati reminds herself—takes any offense, she doesn't show it. "We are the E," Alis's voice says. "The collision with your

ship was unintentional. We normally do not travel the same frequencies in jump-space as your peoples, but we were experiencing problems and drifted into your synchronous dimensional conduit while investigating. Many of us were also terminated by that event, but we have done what we can to take responsibility for your one remaining survivor.”

“He doesn’t know you—Alis—died,” Nati says.

“No.”

“And . . . you’re a simulation?” Osla asks.

“An integration,” E-Alis corrects. “When the human Alis put herself into the pod, she was already too ill for its systems to repair, only prolong. She survived in the pod for ten of your months in a suspended state, during which time we found the pod, decoded and connected with its systems, and then eventually with her. It was Alis’s thoughts and memories that told us how to encapsulate the remains of your ship to provide a sustaining environment, and the medical pod that taught us enough about your physiology to maintain Gabe’s physical health. That has been almost enough.”

“Almost?” Nati asks.

“It took much longer for your people to come than we expected,” not-Alis says. “Gabe’s mind and memory are degrading. We have been trying to compensate, from within—”

“The glitter. The tea,” Nati says.

“Yes. We have tried to replace what he is losing, and all that he has lost, but we are not far from the point where there is no Gabe left, only us. It is time for us to let him go.”

Nati taps her comm. “Honne, you there?”

“Having a nice nap, thank you,” Honne replies, sleepily. “What do you need?”

“I need you to go find Gabe, and run every medical test on him you can plausibly do as fast as you can, including a full neurological workup,” Nati says. “Try not to alarm him. Then send Benibeni outside the cocoon to contact Roz, and tell her to prepare for a medical evacuation. She’s probably already having fits, not hearing from us.”

“Got it,” Honne says. They sound fully awake now. “Are we going to need med pods for both of the survivors?”

“One pod,” Nati says. “There is only one survivor. Now go.”

* * *

Gabe wakes up. It’s dark, and he doesn’t know where he is, or what is happening. He remembers something bad happening with the ship and flails off his blankets in panic.

“Alis!” he calls out. “Something happened! Rojo and Teinar are dead, and the ship is breaking apart.”

“Gabe, it’s okay,” Alis’s calm voice comes from somewhere in the room; he’s not sure where.

He searches frantically and finds the earbud on the floor. “But Alis, we’re in danger! We were going . . . somewhere, I don’t remember. Something bad happened, an accident or an attack—”

“Gabe, that was a long time ago,” Alis says. “We’re both safe now. Listen to my voice: we’re safe. You need to go get some tea and calm down, and then everything will make sense again.”

“But . . . Rojo. I held his hand,” Gabe says. “I told him I wouldn’t leave him. I don’t know where he is now. I can’t remember where he went. He was hurt. Where are you, Alis?”

“I’m waiting for you in the officers’ mess, to have tea with me,” she says. “We have tea together every morning.”

He stumbles to the mess, but everything looks different, empty, old. Alis isn’t there, and he thinks he no longer knows what she looks like, or if she’s ever been here, but

there's a hot cup of tea waiting for him and he knows it will make him feel better, so he drinks it, hot and comforting and sparkling.

When he's done he sets the cup back in the autowash, feels the last lingering bits of fear and confusion ebb away, like the remnants of a dream where nothing made sense disappearing in the light of day.

The autofeeder bin will be full, and the ducks waiting for him to let them out. One of the newest ducklings is already proving a troublemaker, and he thinks he'll name him Boots, after his favorite childhood goat. At least the duck was unlikely to earn the name by stealing and eating several pairs of his footwear.

"You interested in some fresh berries, Alis?" Gabe asks. "I should get another good batch today, if you want to send over a drone."

"I'm still waiting on the jam and toast you promised," she says. "You remember?"

"Of course," he says. "Soon as I finally have enough grain that I don't need it to replenish my seed stock, we can try out your mill idea. I won't forget."

* * *

Gabe sits still, trying not to fidget, as the rescue team's medic checks him out, making small talk that is just a tad too quick and constant to feel casual. He doesn't understand why they didn't come back with Alis, but the medic has told him that Nati and the engineer are still over there talking to her, and that Alis has raised some minor concerns about environmental exposures that they want to check out.

Of course he feels fine, and she's not complained since the very early days when they were both so desperately ill, so he figures that this is some precautionary paranoia. *We can have a good laugh about it later*, he thinks, and then: *together*.

Still, the medic is being fussier than he feels entirely patient with. He wants to get on with the work of securing and transferring as much of his gardens as he can. "Are we nearly done yet?" he asks, trying not to sound at all ungrateful for the unaccustomed attention.

"Soon, sorry," the medic says. "It's just protocols, you know? You can trust me."

"I do," Gabe says, wondering, *why would that be in question?* "I just want to get to work so we can all get out of here. Sometimes it's like I can't remember home at all."

The medic's comm bleeps. "Benibeni is bring in a medical pod," Nati's voice comes over the channel, audible with the medic's suit open and hood down. "Alis is providing an opening through the cocoon."

Gabe smiles. "Alis is the smartest person I've ever known," he says. "And the hardest working. So many times I've tried to get her to come back here, relax, take a break, but no. It's weird, knowing someone so well that they feel beside you, but you've never actually been in the same place, or at least not when you knew them. Is that weird?"

"Not at all," the medic says. "I have a partner who's a trader opping out of Beserai, and we almost never get to see one another, but we talk so often we never feel very far apart. Think how weird it must have been in the days when you only ever knew the people who lived in your same village, and if you didn't get along, well, too bad."

Gabe nods. "I don't know if, by that analogy, the *Hellebore* is a village of two, or two neighboring villages of one each. I don't know anyone else any more."

"When we get home, everyone will know you. You'll be a hero."

The medic's handheld beeps, and they squint at it, puzzlement on their face, until they hold it up to Gabe and run through their scans again. "Is everything okay?" Gabe asks.

The medic shrugs. "Twenty-seven years, bound to be a little wear and tear, right? Nothing serious." They tap their comm. "Benibeni, we need that med pod."

"Almost there," the response comes. "I'm now in a section with gravity, so it just got a lot more cumbersome. Five minutes. You can come help, if you're in such a hurry."

"No, no hurry," the medic says and glances at Gabe as they say it.

Whatever conviction Gabe had that the awkwardness of the conversation was on his part, having been isolated as long as he had, evaporates. “I want to talk to Alis,” he says. “I want my earbud back, and I want to know what’s going on.” He pushes the medic’s handpad away and stands up, doesn’t care that the medic chases after him as he goes inside, finds his exosuit, and heads back out and across the cargo bay.

“Wait!” the medic calls. “Let’s talk about this!”

Gabe is done with talking; whatever toll age has taken on him, three decades of farming has not left him weak, so he ignores them until they catch up and put a hand on his shoulder, and then Gabe shoves them—not violently, but with clear insistence—back.

“Nati, Gabe is heading your way,” he hears the medic call ahead. “He has his suit.”

Whatever the reply, Gabe doesn’t hear it. *This isn’t how our rescue was supposed to go*, he thinks, fury roaring in his ears. Not that he believed, after the first year or so, that rescue would ever come, but this seems worse than none. Whatever deception is underway, he will not tolerate it, but he needs to know Alis is safe. Together, they can force these people to tell the truth.

It has been a long time since he’s hiked to the far end of the cargo bay floor, and his knees protest even as his breath wheezes in and out like his lungs are a bellows full of dust. His trees here are doing well, growing fine and tall, though as he runs he can’t help but notice—this one needs pruning, that one a nitrogen booster, those brambles should be pulled or at least thinned—until he spots *it*. The thing he needs.

His clothing has long since become indelibly saturated with the synthetic pheromone for *friend*, so when he stops beside the tree and pulls down the hoopball-sized hive, he gets immediate attention from the bees, but no stings. Stepping back onto the path, he hoists the hive above his head, prepared to throw it at the medic, who stops dead in their tracks with more than a little surprise on their face.

“Gabe . . .” the medic says, putting their hands up in front of them and waving them gently as if to say, *put it down put it down please*.

“I won’t let you hurt Alis,” Gabe says. “I don’t know what you’re up to, or what has happened on Beenjai in the last thirty years to change us so much, but this is not our way. We help. We are *kind*. And you—You!” He wants to hurl the hive at them, but his bees are milling around him, trusting him, just as he should have been able to trust these people, and the symmetry is not lost on him.

“We are trying to help,” the medic says, and they look sincere and more than a little hurt. “It’s just . . . it’s complicated.”

“So explain,” Gabe says. He may not be willing to throw the hive after all, but the medic doesn’t know that.

“I’ll explain,” a voice says from behind him, and he whirls around, stepping off the path so he can see both the medic and their leader, Nati, who have returned from the other half of the ship.

She holds out the earbud.

He needs both hands to keep from dropping the hive. Do they know that? Is this a trick? He isn’t sure what to do, wishes Alis could tell him, knows that’s a circular trap.

“Alis has been sick for a long time,” Nati says, her voice gentle and strangely sad. “She didn’t want you to know, which is why she never crossed over here. We were trying to get a fuller assessment of your health without distressing you, which obviously we failed at. It was my call, and I apologize.”

Gabe carefully puts the hive up in a tree, safely supported by the branches. The bees will likely abandon it to build another, but they’ll have to be coaxed back into frames for transport, anyway, so it won’t matter.

Nati and the medic are watching him, but make no moves against him, so he steps quickly forward and snatches the earbud out of the palm of Nati’s glove and sticks it

on.

"Alis, is this true?" he asks.

"I'm sorry," Alis says. His Alis, sounding just as healthy and strong as ever. "It's true. These people will take good care of you—"

"Of us," he protests.

"Of *you*, and all your beautiful garden," she says. "We never could have imagined this life, this friendship, this love. We will always have Alis, but it's time for us to go."

"We? Us? I don't understand," Gabe says.

"I'm sorry," Alis says again.

His head, his body, feel suddenly tingly, and he opens his mouth to say more, but tiny sparks of gold float out of his mouth, from his eyes and nose, and his mind begins to scream as so much goes away, memories and knowledge like ghosts flitting out of a room he did not know was haunted, leaving it and him empty.

He doesn't know who he is, where he is, who these people are who are grabbing him to keep his body from falling as his mind plummets away unhindered, accelerating, only that he has lost everything that ever mattered. He screams in anguish until one of them touches his neck, and there is a small, sharp prick, and what is left of his mind fills with fog and darkness.

* * *

Benibeni and Osla finish packing up the garden as best they can, though most of the trees will have to be left behind. Gabe's notes on beekeeping, once they scrounge them up after a very unpleasant first day, prove invaluable at getting the colonies collected and cooled safely to stasis conditions for the long trip home.

A *new home*, Nati thinks, as she perches atop one of the diggers Roz found drifting a few thousand kilometers away and brought back to help with the heavy lifting. She and Honne went through the rest of the ship, found what personal belongings or journals from the original crew might bring comfort and closure to their families, and Roz has assembled both her scans and footage from all their helmets to recreate a virtual 3D of the *Hellebore* before they'd begun the task of disassembling thirty years of Gabe's and Alis's work.

Gabe is in a medical pod in cryo, safely tucked in the *Agastache's* med bay. Alis provided them with a data dump of Gabe's mind—physical, chemical, electrical—the memories a mix of original and replicated, in hopes that the Beenjaiers would find the technology to restore it all to him.

Honne is skeptical, but enthusiastic; they'd long since figured out how to halt the neurological degradations of dementia, but not how to restore function or memory. The comprehensive mapping provided by the E is something they'd never had before, the detail and structure extraordinary, an entire mindstate captured in a snapshot. Not a fix itself, but perhaps pointing the way to one, or many. Nati suspects their medic will be hard to drag out of their lab for much of the return trip.

The E also gave them a similar map of Alis, though what one did with someone's mindstate when there was no living body to return it to, Nati doesn't know.

There are a lot of things that they will need to figure out before they arrive back at Beenjai.

Nati is sitting in the grass, watching Benibeni trying to herd the last of the ducks, two at a time, into carrying cases. He sees her watching and rolls his eyes, throwing up his hands. "Still missing one," he says, and snaps closed the cases he's got and adds them to the growing stack of things ready for loading. The old cargo floor now shows through in places where they've scraped up the substrate, either for sampling or just accidentally while moving things. Those trees they think they can save have been uprooted and bagged, and lie fallen in piles, also awaiting the heavy lifting equipment to come in.

The lights in the weave above are shifting toward sunset, and she will stay and watch the stars—such as they are—come out one more time before they breach the weave and open the remains of the ship to the cold of space.

Her emotions are almost unbearably conflicted: joy and grief, and wonder at this oasis, all built and sustained to save one man until his people could come take him home.

“How far away is your home?” Nati asks; she has the earbud again.

“Home is here,” Alis replies. “We live in the line, travel in the line, are the line. We have been here for many of our generations, and we wonder too what it will be like to fly again, when none of us remember it directly, only via old data in our collective repository. Memory, for us, is very much a shared continuum, past and present together.”

“And Alis—the human Alis—is in there?”

“Yes. We are changed, for it.”

“I wish I knew what you looked like,” Nati says.

“You have seen us. Hundreds of thousands of us,” E-Alis replies, and a tiny fleck of gold passes by her face, does a loop in the air, then travels on. “We will miss living in the land of giants. But we are ready to go.”

“Almost there,” Nati says. She stands up, startling the missing duck that had been apparently hiding right behind her, and manages to grab it and hold on through a flurry of flapping wings and indignant squawking. One of Benibeni’s empty cases is nearby, and she pops it open with one hand while holding the still-squirming duck against her chest, and shoves him in. She is about to seal it when several little gold motes float out of the duck, and zip up and away.

“We enjoyed playing with Boots,” Alis says.

The duck seems as nonplussed as Nati feels, but what isn’t strange anymore? She seals the case and then her own faceplate. “I got the last duck,” she calls to her team. “Is that everything?”

“That’s it,” Osla replies. “Ready for operation can-opener?”

Nati isn’t, but that doesn’t matter. “Do it,” she says, and watches as the weave is peeled away, and the air around her rushes up past her body, thinning and spreading until it is gone, and crystals of frost creep across the surfaces of everything around her. Real stars shine in, for that brief moment before the hauler drones descend and pick up all the wrapped and crated things with silent, cold, inexorable precision. Night has fallen, for now and forever.

Later, she watches from the *Agastache*’s airlock as the last of their drones returns, and everything is done that needs or wants doing.

The E need energy to get moving again, and she has given them permission to use the *Hellebore*; they have salvaged better memories of it than its ruined hulk could still bring. Roz gives the all-clear, everyone is in, and they are backing away.

“We’re done,” Nati says to Alis, and adds, “Thank you.”

“And thank you,” Alis replies. The *Hellebore* begins to shimmer, collapsing inward into dust that grows brighter, glowing, seeping into the intrusion until it swells with new energy, new light. Everything is gone—the ship, and Alis’s body, which they all felt belonged with it—and is now part of the E.

With only a faint scattering of dust around it, the line blinks, once, and then brightens and moves, so fast it seems in moments like a shooting star, passing away to some other part of the Galaxy, or beyond.

“Let’s go home,” Roz says, over the ship comms.

Somewhere, two decks below her and farther astern, Gabe sleeps, too deep even to dream, but alive. Who knew, after that? “Home,” Nati agrees. “It’s long since time.”

* * *

“Gabe?” Alis asks.

Gabe is kneeling in the newly constituted dirt, checking how it sits atop the substrate, thinking about roots and beneficial bacteria and nutrients—things he knows, things he can do—and thinks, this is who I am, just not where I thought I would be. “Yes, Alis?” he replies.

“How do you know if you are doing the right thing?”

He laughs. “Well, first I check the pH, and then—”

“No, I mean, not that,” Alis says. “I feel like I’m dying, but also that I will live forever, and I don’t know what that means. Means for you, for us.”

“You plant the seed, you give it light and water, and if you are lucky, it grows. It doesn’t need to know anything about you, or even that you are there and helped it,” he says. “In some ways I feel like I’m that seed, except I know you gave me the sun, gave me air and life. I’m the luckiest person alive, right now, for however long that lasts. And I love you for it.”

There is a long pause, and he wonders if he said something wrong, made everything awkward, but then Alis replies.

“Love!” she says, and laughs. “I think I understand.”

“I should hope so,” Gabe says. He thinks this section of dirt is deep enough to grow simple grasses, but he’ll need it deeper for planting vegetables or anything woody. How ridiculous was it, him trying to farm in deep space? How could he not try?

“After everything,” he adds, “love is what matters.”

“I won’t forget,” Alis tells him, and he smiles, digs his hands into the soil, which is starting to warm under the new roof, new lights that she gave him, and thinks about the wonderful possibilities of worms.