

IN THE STILLNESS BETWEEN THE STARS

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IN THE STILLNESS BETWEEN THE STARS

Emilio sat up inside the REMpod, discombobulated, and took deep breaths. He thought he heard Tomás shout “Dad!” from a distance before the cobwebs cleared and he regained his bearings.

The *Seed*. He was aboard the *Seed*.

Tomás had been dead for centuries.

His shortness of breath gave way to a sob. He covered his face with his hands.

Rows of REMpods, like pale-blue neon-lit coffins, surrounded him in the darkness. The steadiness of the blue glow signaled that all the sleepers on the cavernous deck remained in stasis. The cityship was still en route to Proxima b.

"Sorry to wake you prematurely, Dr. Garcia," LEE3 whispered into his earpiece.

"Pre—prematurely?" he said, teeth chattering. His throat felt dry.

"Afraid so."

"How long . . . ?"

"Two hundred fifty-one days. We need your help with a medical issue."

Only eight months? Tomás was still alive then, still a child. He clutched the locket around his neck and felt an enormous wave of relief as he strained to stop his shivering.

"Dr. Lo?" Emilio said. "Dr. Srinivasan?"

"Still in stasis. Only your services are required right now."

His services? Someone on the skeleton crew needed a psychotherapist? He was about to ask why an AI therapist hadn't been activated when LEE3 added, "My algo concluded you're the best suited for the problem at hand, Doc."

"Understood," he said. If the alien algorithm had selected him for the job, that settled the matter.

He stretched his arms over his head and took a few minutes to allow the light-headedness to pass before standing. Then he stepped out onto the ladder leading past the stacked rows of REMpods to the deck below.

* * *

As he exited the shower stalls, the dressing room remained veiled in darkness, lit only by the indigo glow of the phosphor strips lining the edges of the ceiling.

"LEE3. Can you do anything about the lighting?" The ship's AI presented now as an androgynous hologram, bald, with high cheekbones and pouty lips. It appeared to sit on one of the benches in the dressing area.

"We've gotta watch our energy consumption, Doc. In-transit travel protocols," LEE3 said, shrugging apologetically. Its mannerisms and colloquial speech patterns were designed to make listeners feel more comfortable, no doubt, but they struck Emilio as odd. "But you do have local power sources."

"Oh?" Emilio flicked on a mirror light and powered up the holomonitor. The shower had done him good. He felt fully awake, at least.

A few seconds later, a star-map projected overhead, revealing the *Seed's* location. They had cleared Neptune and were just a week away from a layover on Pluto where a thousand colonists would board the *Seed* and enter stasis.

The trip to New Earth would take three centuries. After a hundred years—the maximum amount of time the human body could tolerate stasis without permanent brain damage—the passengers would all awaken to life aboard the cityship. And upon arrival at their destination, the *Seed* would serve as a ready-made home base while their descendants studied and terraformed their new world.

"So, what's the nature of the medical issue?" he said, applying shaving gel to his face.

"Three days ago there was an incident. Angela Velasquez, an engineer." LEE3 pointed at the star-map hovering next to Emilio and the image faded, replaced by vid of a REMpod. A brown-skinned woman with long curly hair lay inside, her body twitching, eyelids fluttering. "As you can see," LEE3 said, "she was dreaming." The AI's voice dropped to a whisper, as if afraid the sleeping woman might be wakened.

"Dreaming?"

"Experiencing intense nightmares, actually. Her blood pressure spiked, and when the heart palpitations started, I woke her."

The vid faded, the star-map reappearing.

"How is that possible?" Emilio asked. REMpods suppressed all neurological activity while a traveler slept—including the rapid eye movement associated with dreaming, which was how the pods got their name. REMpods were alien tech. *Library Tech*. And Library Tech never malfunctioned.

"No clue. One of the members of the skeleton crew is examining Ms. Velasquez's

REMPod right now, looking for some defect—as improbable as that may be—but in the meantime, she’s still tormented by nightmares. She barely sleeps, and when my algo suggested she see a therapist—you, specifically—she finally agreed.”

“Where is she?” Emilio buttoned his shirt, staring at himself in the mirror. His hair had more gray in it than he remembered.

“Aft District 7. Want me to connect you?”

“No, it’s best I handle this in person. Can you give me directions? And let her know I’m coming.”

* * *

Emilio stood at the dimly lit station and pressed the Tram button. He strode to the front of the platform and with each step, the phosphor strip lining the floor lit the area ten feet ahead of him. With the citylights and holo-sun turned off, it felt as if he was navigating a dark dream. He’d seen the cityship from this vantage point when he first boarded the *Seed*, and had felt overwhelmed by its immensity. The towering hullscrapers and verdant parks, the wide streets jammed with transport vehicles, the central lake with ferries skimming the surface of still waters. The sprawling city—larger than Beijing—seemed infinite, the ship’s curves creating the illusion of an endless blue horizon. But now as he stood alone on the silent platform and stared into the distance, all he could see was darkness.

In two minutes the empty tram pulled into the station. The doors slid open and he took a seat in the vacant car, lit faintly in the violet phosphor glow.

“LEE3,” he said, as the tram accelerated into the abyss, “please show me a copy of Ms. Velasquez’s full biofile, including medical records.”

“Sure thing, Doc,” the AI spoke into his earpiece.

He expected the text to appear instantly in mid-air, but nothing happened. After a few seconds, he repeated his request.

“Heard you the first time,” LEE3 said. “Interesting. I can’t access it. There seems to be some corruption of the biofile.”

“Corruption?” he said. “How is that possible?” The AI, the datafiles—in fact, most of the tech that allowed for construction of the *Seed*—originated in the Library. And the alien Cataloguers weren’t known for defective tech. Sure, maintenance was required, but with a hundred thousand passengers all in stasis, the *Seed*’s tech had barely been used.

“First Ms. Velasquez’s REMpod, now her datafile,” LEE3 said. “Weird. I’m currently discussing this with a member of the skeleton crew at Stern District 33.”

Although capable of maintaining simultaneous conversations, LEE3 showed him the courtesy of fading out.

Thirty minutes later, the tram pulled into the Aft 3 stop. Emilio exited onto the desolate station platform and stared ahead into the darkness. High above, a faint light shone in a window. He headed toward it, the pathway lighting up in front of him with each step. His footsteps echoed in the stillness, creating the impression of someone following him.

Eventually he reached the sliding glass doors of the medical facility. He crossed the cavernous lobby and rode the elevator to the seventy-sixth floor, then walked to the suite number LEE3 had given him.

* * *

“Dr. Garcia?” the young woman said, extending her hand. “Angie Velasquez. I’m sorry to wake you.” She wore an engineer’s bomber jacket, her hair swept back into a ponytail. Dark creases underlined her deep-brown eyes.

“Eight months sleep is plenty. I feel refreshed,” he said.

As he shook her hand, she directed him to the cushioned sofa. “Sorry about the lighting in here.”

“I’m getting used to it.”

She made small talk about the cityship and the upcoming layover in orbit around Charon before he gently redirected the conversation. She raised an eyebrow when he explained the difficulties accessing her biofile.

"It's hard to describe my problem in a way that doesn't make me sound . . ." She smiled as the words trailed off, pain etched on her face. Her eyes filled with tears.

"You recognize you need help," he said. "That's a good sign, Angie. It suggests things aren't as bad as you might think."

"I do need help," she said, wiping her nose with her sleeve. She had a constant, nervous sniffle. "I'm just not sure what kind."

"Tell me what's troubling you."

She hesitated. "During prep for boarding the *Seed* . . ." She shook her head, took a breath, and started over. "I worked for EncelaCorp out of Mexico City for the past five years. My husband Marc and I studied Library Tech, specifically engineering, and worked on a number of high-profile projects: the NAM-European Air Rail, Polar Solar, the Antarctic MegaWell, a few others. But when we learned about the *Seed*, about the project to terraform New Earth, we knew we'd found our mission. Our mission in life, I mean."

"I understand," he said, thinking about his own passion for the *Seed* project, his own sacrifices.

"Ever since our postgrad days, Marc and I had studied the plans in development to travel to Proxima b—this was back before it had been christened New Earth. We even dipped our toes into the ion sail research, developed some expertise so we could add value beyond ordinary Library engineering."

He smiled at the phrase "ordinary Library engineering." Humanity had left "ordinary" far behind after discovery of the alien Library hidden in the ripples of a gravity wave, an entire database transmitted through microscopic rips in the fabric of space-time.

"We applied to join the crew," she said. "You can imagine our excitement when we both made the cut. A dream come true. But there was a complication." She lowered her eyes. "Our four-year-old, Sofia. We weren't just making a choice about our own lives, but about her future as well. An irrevocable one."

"No doubt," he said. He thought of the life *he'd* left behind. His son Tomás. His family. His friends. But the thrill, the wonder, of the mission to New Earth had overridden his guilt.

"Initially, Marc and I were on the same page. Then he started to have doubts. We were sentencing Sofia to a lifetime aboard this ship, he said, and punching a one-way ticket for her children to a dangerous—potentially deadly—environment. I understood that, believe me. But the way I saw it, isn't the entire expedition premised on the notion that we have the right to determine the future of our descendants? That we have the right to decide that our children, and their children, will serve as the pioneers of New Earth? That they'll have a chance to begin all over again, and get it right this time?" She stared at him pleadingly, and her expression softened when he nodded.

"It's a difficult decision for everyone on the mission," he said.

She stood and paced across the room.

"Are you sure you don't want to sit?" he said.

"There's something else. Something I need to get off my chest." She sat down in a chair facing him, then averted her eyes.

"Go ahead," he said.

A long pause followed.

"I was cheating on Marc."

"Go on."

"Marc and I had our share of arguments, but I loved my husband, Doctor. Really, I

did. The fling . . . I can't explain it." Now the words poured out of her. "I met Stefan at a local coffee shop. He was a college kid, a German expat. I can't say we had much in common—he was ten years younger than me. It started out as a harmless flirtation and then became a one-time mistake. Everyone's entitled to one mistake, right? And after the first mistake, what's one more? And then one more after that?" She smiled ruefully. "We began seeing each other." She stopped suddenly, clearly expecting him to make some judgment about her extramarital activities, but when he stayed quiet she continued.

"I eventually won the argument with Marc. About our future. About our daughter's future. He agreed we'd join the *Seed's* crew, just as we'd always planned, and that Sofia's life would be dedicated to 'a greater purpose.' Good for me, right?" she said bitterly. "We made our arrangements, said our final goodbyes to family and friends, and tied up all the loose ends of our lives in anticipation of leaving Earth for good. One happy family, sailing off into the cosmos." She stood up and began pacing again. "Marc never found out about Stefan."

"Is this something you feel you need to confess to him?" Emilio imagined the poor fool asleep in his REMpod, oblivious to his wife's deception, being shaken awake, told the bad news, then placed back into stasis.

She sniffled and shook her head almost imperceptibly. "N-no."

"You've been having nightmares," he prompted.

"There's this song. Marc used to sing it to Sofia at bedtime." She cleared her throat. "'When the wolf's in town, it gobbles you down, down . . .'" She bared her teeth, made a snapping sound. ". . . down!"

He flinched. This was a kid's song?

"Since I woke up I've started hearing it, coming out of the *Seed's* ventilators. A high note, a lower one, then another. The other day I swore I heard it in the elevator—except the elevators on the *Seed* don't play music. Crazy, huh?" She caught herself, clearly unhappy with the word she'd chosen.

He'd heard of psychological priming—a past stimulus coloring a person's future response to similar experiences, making them see numbers or patterns that didn't really exist—but not manifested in this way, with music.

"That's not all," she said. "I'd been dreaming of something . . . twisted, dirty. A shadow. A shadow that follows me wherever I go, just out of sight. And the past two days I—I've sensed it even when I'm awake. I'm afraid it's been . . . freed. From my mind. Set loose on the *Seed*. It's after me. It wants to punish me."

"I see," he said. "And what exactly is this 'thing' that's after you?"

She bit her lip. "A monster. That's all I know. It hides in the dark, but if I pay attention, I can see movement, black within black, out of the corner of my eye. I saw it clearly—just once—for a second. If I stare directly at it, it disappears."

He removed his scribbler from his pocket and handed it to her. "Can you draw what you saw?"

She stared at the hexagonal device. "Is this Library Tech?"

He nodded.

"Good, 'cause I'm a lousy artist." She dragged her index finger along the surface for a few seconds until the device read her intentions and made adjustments to the image on its own. She handed it back to him.

"At first, I caught a glimpse of it crouching behind the REMpod stacks," she said. "Then I spotted the shadow at the far end of a corridor. Distant enough that I wasn't sure it was real. About eight feet tall, shrouded in a black mist. It has this . . . stench of rotting flesh. But what scared me—what truly scared me—was when it spoke. It whispered profanities. Promised to skin me alive.

"I know how this sounds, doctor. I'm not an idiot. I know what you're thinking—

the same thing I'm thinking. That I'm hallucinating, that it's not real, that it's just my guilt getting the better of me. I woke you, in fact, to *convince* me of this. To *prove* I'm imagining it, that it's all in my head. Because the alternative . . ." Her lower lip twitched. "I'm afraid that the hallucination—if that's what it is—is taking over." She leaned forward, her face inches away from his. "The monster's creeping closer and closer every time I see it. And in the end, if I believe it's real—if I believe strongly enough—it doesn't much matter whether it's *actually* real, right? That's why I need you to make me stop believing."

He stared at the sketch on the scribbler. The image resembled a diseased black bird, a huge shroud with a tattered outline. Only it bore a human head. And a face that looked just like Angie's.

* * *

Emilio prescribed an anxiolytic to help her with her nerves and insomnia, and LEE3 directed them to the dispensary on the third floor to retrieve the meds. They walked the long darkened corridors together, and though he didn't admit it, he couldn't shake the feeling they were being watched. Her story, fantastic as it was, had unnerved him.

"Let's talk again tomorrow," he said upon their return from the dispensary, leaving her at the door to the entrance to the patients' suite. "The meds will help."

He took residence in the corner suite a few doors down from hers. The space had floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the Aft 3 District, which normally would have provided a spectacular vista. Now the view consisted of a thick, daunting darkness. After staring at the image on his scribbler for some time, he asked LEE3 to forward it to the Library Liaison on Pluto for further study. He'd have to provide an opinion on Angie Velasquez's mental state when they entered orbit around Charon next week. While this might require him to violate doctor-patient confidentiality, the privileged nature of their communications had to take a backseat to mission safety prerogatives. And having a mentally troubled passenger aboard the *Seed* was inconsistent with those prerogatives. After hearing her story, however, he wanted to see if he could find a way to avoid forcing her off the ship, especially since her husband and daughter were still in stasis.

He opened the locket around his neck and stared at the picture of Tomás. It was seven P.M. in Puerto Rico. From the moment he'd woken up, he knew he had to do this. He'd never said goodbye, but now he had one last chance to make things right.

"LEE3, connect me to Earth." He gave the AI the number of his ex and waited for the q-comm link to be established. Before Library Tech, the four-hour lag time in transmissions from the outer Solar System to Earth and back made holding a live conversation impossible, but instantaneous quantum communications had changed all that.

A dining room blinked into view. His ex-wife frowned into the camera.

"*Jesucristo*. You," Nina said.

"Nice to see you, too. Is Tomás there?"

"What is wrong with you?" She clenched her fists, as if to punch him from across the Solar System. "No. Just, no. I'm not going to have you do this to him again. You made your choice."

As she spoke, Tomás popped onto the screen beside his mother.

"Dad?" He wore a baseball jersey, a smear of guava jelly across his face. In just nine months, he must have grown three or four inches.

"Tomás!" Emilio said. "How are you, *m'ijito*? Are you still in Little League?"

"Where have you been? I needed your help learning to hit a curveball. Are you coming to my birthday party next week? I really want you to come."

A pang of guilt stabbed his gut. Nina was right; he shouldn't have called.

"I'm sorry, I can't be there," he said, his throat closing up.

“Dad?” Tomás said. “I can’t hear you. Are you coming?”

“Hello?” Emilio shouted. “Hello?”

“Dad?”

The image faded.

“LEE3? I’ve been disconnected.” He felt partly relieved, partly sick to his stomach.

“Hmm. That’s odd,” LEE3 said. “We’ve lost all communications with Earth. I’ll alert the skeleton crew.”

The REMpod, the biofile, and now communications.

“LEE3?” he said. “Is Angie Velasquez’s biofile still inaccessible?”

“Yeah, Doc.”

“What about her husband’s?”

Before LEE3 could answer he heard footsteps scampering outside the entrance to his suite. “Angie?” He pulled open the door and peered out into the corridor. At the far end, he thought he saw a shadow move, black within black. He blinked, and it was gone. “Angie?”

* * *

LEE3 walked beside him, matching his gait. “You okay? You seem a little preoccupied.”

“I wouldn’t have asked you to activate your psychotherapy program otherwise,” Emilio said. Like most shrinks, he’d been consulting a therapist off and on for years. The consults became more regular after his divorce a year and a half prior to launch of the *Seed*. Now he was forced to commiserate with LEE3’s psychotherapy subroutine.

They made their way through the skyweb, dark crisscrossing corridors—some stretching kilometers—connecting one hullscraper to another. He needed exercise to help clear his head. When they reached the top floor of an accompanying ’scraper, a door opened to a gymnasium steeped in darkness. Above them, a massive skylight framed the dusty constellations, his own private *Starry Night*, the Universe itself as art.

“I would say we’re dealing with straightforward projection on her part, guilt manifesting as an imaginary monster that now stalks her,” Emilio said. “It’s interesting she’s self-aware enough to have considered that possibility herself. And she doesn’t seem the type to react in that manner. If the human psyche worked this way, half the population would be haunted by monsters.”

“Aren’t they?” LEE3 smirked. “Are you decommissioning her when we arrive at Pluto?”

“I don’t know yet. I want to find a way to help her.” He stepped onto the treadmill. “POWER OFF” displayed on the monitor and he slapped at the handlebars in frustration. “She hasn’t been entirely forthcoming with me. Still, I’m impressed she sought help.”

“After some arm-twisting by me.”

“She did listen to you, though.”

“My, you’re giving her every benefit of the doubt, aren’t you?”

“Am I? What are you driving at?” He wondered if LEE3’s psych subroutine *required* it to duel him with cryptic platitudes.

“Ever consider that you’re acting this way because of her child?”

“I don’t see that her daughter has anything to do with—”

LEE3 sighed loudly. “From one therapist to another: give me a break.”

Emilio gave up on the treadmill and made his way to the track, starting a light jog. The circular pathway was bathed in the faint indigo, making it easy to stay on course. His mind wrangled with LEE3’s question.

“Okay. As a parent, I empathize with her.”

“And why is that?”

“She chose to keep her family together,” he said. “Either they all went or they all stayed. There was no other option for her.”

In his case, the family court judge had cut through all the accusations and recriminations in the custody dispute by sitting down with Tomás and asking him to choose. The boy had picked his mother. The court order had limited Emilio's visits to alternate weekends, and after a few months even those visits had tapered off as he became immersed in preparations for the *Seed* mission. Once he'd committed to joining the crew, the question of appealing the custody decision—or of any contact whatsoever with Tomás, for that matter—became a moot point.

He circled the track, LEE3 jogging beside him.

"Emilio?"

"Yes?"

"There's an incoming q-call. From Pluto."

He slowed down and made his way to a wall monitor. LEE3 stood next to him, mimicking the movements of an exhausted runner, a towel around the neck, hands on knees. The AI must have decided Emilio needed the company of a workout buddy.

He tapped the screen and a wide face beamed at him. "Dr. Garcia. I'm Aulani Kahanahuni, Pluto's Head Librarian. I'm responding to your query. I wanted to let you know there's a Library match."

"There is?" While he'd forwarded Angie's sketch to Pluto on a hunch after she'd mentioned studying Library engineering with her husband, a match was a long shot, at best. Pluto's orbital grav-wave detectors and deciphering team provided the finest Library access in the Solar System.

"The Ancient Cataloguers' wisdom knows no bounds!" Aulani said, looking skyward. Plutonians had a reputation for their devotion to Library knowledge, a devotion that veered toward mysticism. Given the miracles of Library Tech, he couldn't say he blamed them. The problem was the difficulty in distinguishing between Library entries on science versus belief systems, history versus mythology.

"You've drawn an illustration of an anomaly known to manifest on Cataloguer ships, often right before an accident."

"You mean like a gremlin?" he asked. "Or a poltergeist?" He sounded more condescending than he intended.

She stopped smiling. "The Cataloguers did have some scientific theories on the cause of these anomalies, but my staff is still conducting its research. And I wanted to answer your emergency query as quickly as possible. There's also an entire mythology developed around these apparitions. Most notably, that they target and torment those persons guilty of terrible sins."

Typical, he thought. *A mishmash of fact, fiction, and superstition.* "Would someone studying Library engineering come across information on this anomaly?" he asked.

"Oh, absolutely. It's cross-referenced quite often in entries on spaceship engineering."

So, Angie would have seen this image before. Adding her face to it, however, spoke to . . . deeper issues.

"You haven't actually encountered this phenomenon," Aulani said.

He hesitated. "No."

"I should be able to present you with additional information when you arrive at Charon." She waited as if expecting him to say more, but when he volunteered nothing else, she lifted an arm and looked skyward again. "Well, let's thank the Ancient Cataloguers for their wisdom."

A girl appeared on the viewscreen and yanked at Aulani's blouse. She leaned down. "Not now. Mommy's busy."

"*When the wolf's in town, it gobbles you down, down . . . down!*" the child sang, staring directly into the screen at Emilio.

His heart skipped a beat. "What was that?" he said.

"I'm sorry, Doctor. Just a silly nursery rhyme. Very popular these days. Is there

anything else I can assist you with?"

He shook his head.

"We're all looking forward to the *Seed's* arrival."

After the communication link clicked off, he turned to find that LEE3 had vanished. The gymnasium seemed darker than before.

* * *

LEE3 had pinpointed Angie's location at the recreation center several blocks from the medical facility. Emilio decided to meet up with her outside the entranceway to the closed casino, where slot machines and roulette wheels hibernated in the shadows. For someone who feared she was being stalked, she didn't seem to mind navigating the vast ship on her own. He found her on a bench by the casino.

"Doctor," she said, nodding hello.

"Angie." He sat next to her.

"Isn't it interesting that the designers of the *Seed*, a ship created to transport the best and brightest of humanity, included a casino?"

He shrugged. "Even the best and brightest enjoy a game of chance now and then."

"I suppose."

"Angie," he said gently. "Is there anything you'd like to tell me?"

LEE3 had finally accessed her husband's biofile.

Her smile faded, and she lowered her eyes.

"I know it's not easy," he said.

"If you already know . . ."

"To be able to help, I need to hear it from you."

She took a deep breath. "Marc and Sofia took a morning shuttle to Luna-1 for the boarding of the *Seed*. I told him I'd join them the next day, that I needed to see my sister—we hadn't spoken in over three years—to find some closure." She shook her head, smiled sadly. "Total lie, of course. That wasn't the closure I was looking for. I met up with Stefan and we spent the entire day making love, saying our final goodbyes. I went off-grid, so I didn't hear the news. I didn't know . . . about Shuttle Flight 10."

Flight 10. The shuttle had disintegrated on lift-off. The fifty-five fatalities had delayed the *Seed's* departure for two weeks.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"The thing is, they wouldn't have been aboard that flight if I hadn't won that argument with Marc, if I hadn't convinced him to go forward with the mission," she said, her voice hoarse. She put her hands over her face. "And I—I should've been with them."

"It's not your fault," he said. "It's just . . . terrible luck."

"Now . . . now that thing wants to even the score. Because I wasn't where I was supposed to be."

"Look, your illustration of the 'monster' is an image you would have come across during your studies of Library engineering."

"You consulted the Library?" Panic swept across her face. "Why did you *do* that?"

"Calm down."

"No, you don't understand," she said. "The monster. It came to me last night. It spoke to me, told me that you'd contacted Pluto to access the Library. And it warned me there'd be horrible consequences. I'd hoped it was just a dream."

"I understand." He'd have been more impressed with her revelation if he hadn't just told her about his communications with Pluto.

"No, you don't! Now it has its sights set on you. You've put yourself in grave danger." She put her hands on her head. "It told me it's moved inside some of the other sleepers now. We need to deactivate those REMpods."

"Wake more passengers?"

"No," she said, avoiding eye contact. "Not wake them."

"I see. Angie, didn't you ask me to prove that whatever you're seeing isn't real?"

"Yes, and instead you're telling me the monster is catalogued in the Library. That it is real."

"The Cataloguers have been known to maintain myths alongside history, fiction alongside science. This is no different," he said. "I want you to use this." He removed a streamlight from his pocket and handed it to her.

"Ocular therapy?"

"Flash the light in your eyes every two hours. It'll calm you down, make you think more clearly."

"Doctor . . ."

"Angie? Listen to me. The monster isn't real. Your dreams aren't real. Continue with the sleep meds I prescribed, and supplement them with the streamlight. In the meantime, let's keep meeting, and talking. Okay?"

She stared at him and then at the streamlight in her hand before nodding. "I'm sorry I got you involved in this. Be careful, okay?" She turned, her shoulders slumped as if defeated, and headed down the corridor in the direction of the medical facility. He was tempted to accompany her, but he had an urgent question for LEE3 that couldn't wait.

"LEE3," he said, when she was no longer in sight.

"Yeah, Doc?"

"Has Angie Velasquez been near this District's REMpods since waking up?"

"Yes. She asked me to deactivate several, but doesn't have the authority to give me that command."

"She did?" Why the hell hadn't LEE3 informed him of this? "I have no choice then."

"You'll be decommissioning her at Pluto?"

"It's not safe to wait that long. Can you wake up two security guards? She needs to be confined to quarters immediately and kept away from the sleepers."

"Understood."

Movement. A blur shot across his peripheral vision.

He turned back in the direction Angie had headed and thought he saw a figure dart out of the corridor and into the casino entrance. "Angie?" *Wonderful.* The last thing he needed was for an anxious, troubled crewmember to overhear the order decommissioning her. He walked to the casino's arched entranceway, which was festooned with gargoyles and cherubs. "Hello?"

The silhouettes of gaming tables and slot machines stood out in the dim blue lighting like the skyline of a miniature city.

"LEE3?"

"Yes, Doctor?" The AI had abandoned its physical projection and whispered into his earpiece.

"Is Angie in the casino?"

"Negative. She's walking the *Seed's* skyweb at the moment."

With only one passenger awake in each of the twelve districts—all maintenance engineers—and with each district extending more than a square mile, it'd be unlikely to bump into a member of the skeleton crew.

He sensed it before seeing it. Pressed against the wall like a human-sized cockroach, oozing along so slowly that the movement was barely discernible. He pretended not to see it, pretended he didn't feel the invisible claw of terror clamping down on his heart.

He needed light. He bent and grabbed one of the power cords extending from a slot machine and plugged it into an outlet. The machine lit up with a loud clang, and music played. The reels had a picture of a wolf's head, fangs bared, and the familiar ditty

played: “When the wolf’s in town, it gobbles you down, down . . . down.” He considered kicking out the cord, shutting it down, but he didn’t want to lose the light.

Out of the corner of his eye something—an obsidian ribbon—sped by so quickly he barely saw it.

“LEE3?”

“What now, Doc?”

“Someone just exited the casino. Who was it?”

“I’m not detecting anyone but you.” A pause. “I was just about to buzz you. I wanted to let you know there’s been another REMpod glitch. I’ve been unable to wake up the security guards you requested.”

“Try another doctor, then.”

“That’s the thing. None of the REMpods are responding. I can’t seem to wake up anyone.”

* * *

Emilio searched for Angie for over an hour along the cityship’s skyweb of interlocking catwalks. LEE3 reported she could no longer be detected—either another glitch in the systems or she’d done something to mask her lifesigns. He didn’t think she’d exhibited any suicidal tendencies, but now began to doubt himself. He leaned over the edge of the handrails staring down into Central Lake, its dark waters swooshing against the ship’s artificial shore. Normally, the *Seed* would have simulated the moon in the sky, but while the REMpods remained on, the moon stayed off. Even the dim phosphor lighting had now stopped functioning, so he used a pocket streamlight to brighten the catwalk a few steps ahead of him.

He remembered the day Tomás fell off the pier at Lake Redondo while baiting his fishing line. Emilio had dived in and pulled him out. While Tomás coughed up water, Nina had lit into him for failing to watch the boy more closely.

“LEE3?” he said.

No response.

“LEE3?”

The holo materialized beside him on the catwalk. “You okay, Doc?”

“No, not really.” The words came slowly at first then burst forth in a torrent. He told LEE3 about the shadow in the casino, the music he’d heard. With all the technical problems—communications down, REMpods malfunctioning—maybe Angie was right. Maybe something was sabotaging the ship. Maybe the Library wasn’t describing myth, but something real and perilous. “The *Seed* is in danger,” he said. “I feel it.”

“You ‘feel it’? Really?” LEE3 said, head shaking. “Listen to yourself. You’re all alone on a massive cityship, living in darkness. Surely you must realize your perspective is being skewed by Angie’s delusions.”

Had LEE3 been corporeal he would’ve grabbed the AI by the collar and shaken it. “I repeat: Datafiles have been corrupted. Communications are down. And now we can’t wake anyone up! You didn’t see the monster—I *did*.”

“While we’ve been speaking I again reviewed vid of your movement through the casino. This time in infrared and with x-rays—even on a molecular level. Nothing was detectable in there but you.”

“It was . . . in the stillness, in the shadows . . .”

“Have you considered anxiolytic meds? Ocular therapy?”

He glared at the AI.

“Listen, the ship problems you’re describing are rooted in the physical. These are simple engineering glitches.”

“Engineering glitches,” Emilio repeated. He snapped his fingers. “You’re right; I need to follow up with an engineer, one of the skeleton crew. Connect me.”

“I can’t do that.” A faint smile appeared on LEE3’s face, as if Emilio had taken the

bait by making the request.

"Communications problems?"

The holo shook its head.

"Then what?"

"They're all quite dead, I'm afraid."

Emilio stepped backward, his heart in his throat.

The AI cleared its throat, licked its lips and sang: "*When the wolf's in town, it gobbles you down, down, DOWN!*" It stood there smiling at him, then took a bow.

"Why did you do that?" he said.

"Do what?"

"N-nothing." Emilio edged backward before turning and running down the catwalk toward the interior of the nearest hullscraper. He peeked over his shoulder to see LEE3 staring at him, hands on hips.

* * *

The alarm sounded after several hours of fitful sleep. Emilio didn't remember setting it. Instead of the familiar soothing tones, it made a different sound; a high note followed by a lower one, then another. "*Down, down, down.*"

He slammed his fist against the wall monitor to shut off the braying music.

Sitting up in bed, he took deep breaths and wiped the sweat from his face. Since returning from the skyweb, he'd tried connecting with members of the skeleton crew throughout the ship with no success. He'd also attempted to contact the Charon moonbase, but couldn't establish a link even though the *Seed* now had to be in closer proximity to Pluto. He'd also expected Angie to contact him, but there'd been only silence.

Then the smell hit him. The stench of decay made him cover his face with his hands.

It lurked in the far corner of his room, hidden in the shadows, hunched over. A human head perched obscenely atop a slimy shroud.

What are you? he wanted to say, but fear choked him into silence.

"Emilio?" The thing cawed like a vulture as it spoke.

It edged closer to him. He was paralyzed. Closer. It stood at the foot of his bed. Now it bent at the waist—although he couldn't make out any sort of torso behind the shadow that enveloped it. Closer still.

It began to hum. *When the wolf's in town, it gobbles you down, down, down. . . .*

As it lurched forward, its face came into view.

The monster's eyes were black, pupil-less, its mouth black, toothless, but its face . . .

Dear God, the face was *his*.

He shut his eyes tight and tried to scream, but couldn't. He covered his ears to avoid hearing the song. Tomás. The monster knew about Tomás. Knew he'd left his boy behind without saying goodbye. Knew he'd blamed a ten-year-old child for choosing his mother over his father. He was so ashamed. He'd abandoned his son, and the creature knew his shame. *It knew.*

When he opened his eyes, the monster was gone.

Dreaming. Had he been dreaming? With every fiber of his being he hoped so.

But the stench lingered.

* * *

A few hours later, as he studied the protocols for initiating a manual wake-up of the sleepers, hoping to find a way to do so without inflicting any permanent damage, the door to his quarters chimed. The sound started with a note, followed by two higher ones, then a lower one. *When the wolf's . . .* He shook his head. *Stop it.*

The door slid open and Angie stood there. "Hello, Dr. Garcia," she said. "I'm sorry to bother you in your quarters."

Her eyes seemed clear; she smiled confidently.

He stared behind her into the emptiness of the corridor.

“Thank you for everything you’ve done for me,” she said. “The meds and ocular treatment have done the trick. I’m better. Much better.”

“Y-you are?”

“I have—had—a lot of guilt. But the meds and speaking to someone about it has made me realize I can’t keep reliving the past. I need to look forward. In any event, the hallucinations and nightmares are gone. I don’t hear that song anymore.”

“That’s good.” He swallowed. “But the communication grid is down. We can’t transmit any messages to Earth, or to Pluto for that matter. The *Seed* is having all sorts of systems problems.”

“I know. I consulted with one of the engineers from Aft 8.”

“You did?” He said this too loudly.

She raised an eyebrow. “We sailed through a gravitational wave—unlike anything we’ve ever encountered before—after we passed Neptune. Normally, it’d be undetectable, but Library Tech is especially sensitive to it, which explains the malfunctions. The *Seed* rode it out. Everything’s back to normal. And I’ve been mulling over what you said about the anomaly. I think it’s the Cataloguers’ way to describe—in metaphorical terms—an actual physical phenomenon, in this case a grav-wave.” She smiled. “I feel like an idiot.”

Her interpretation made sense except . . . he’d seen the monster with his own eyes. He had smelled it. He had felt it drawing ever nearer. He exhaled. “I’m glad I could be of assistance.”

“I’m grateful. I’d been running away from my issues, denying they even existed. But I realize now that’s no way to live your life.”

Is she putting on a show for me? he thought. With the *Seed* approaching Pluto she had every incentive to convince him she was fine, to avoid being decommissioned.

She turned to leave, but stopped at the doorway. “Are you sure everything is okay, Doctor?”

He nodded. “Prepare to go back into spacesleep when we enter orbit around Charon. I’ll check you into your REMpod.”

As her form faded down the corridor, LEE3 materialized outside the door to Emilio’s quarters, leaning against the wall.

“Why’d you lock me out, Doc? You’ve been holed up in that room way too long. Did I do something to offend? Is it my breath?” The holo breathed into its cupped hands.

“What you said to me about the skeleton crew . . .”

LEE3 stared blankly. “I’m not following.”

He paused. “Can you access the conversation we had on the skyweb?”

“Hmm,” LEE3 said. “There’s a gap in my memory.”

“Angie says the ship’s engineering issues are due to a gravitational wave the *Seed* sailed through.”

“Interesting theory.” LEE3 didn’t appear at all interested. “And Angie?”

“Fully recovered apparently.”

“‘Apparently.’” LEE3 smiled. “But you can sense a faker a mile away.”

“Where is she heading now?”

“A level below us. Moving toward the energy flux station that powers the REMpods.”

Emilio raced to the end of the corridor. Leaning over the handrails, he stared intensely into the gray until he spotted Angie on the skyweb a few levels below, the pathway lighting up ahead of her. She took a few steps, stopped, and looked back over her shoulder.

“Angie!” he shouted, waving.

She froze and stared up. Her posture changed immediately when she saw him, standing straighter, as if feigning confidence.

A smudge in the shadows moved behind her, then a black wave rose.

"No! Look out!" he screamed.

She turned, her face twisting into a grimace as the creature swallowed her upper torso. It lifted her high in the air and her body disappeared, legs kicking, down its gullet, bit by bit.

Down, down, down.

The monster turned toward him, its black-smudge form elongating. Its oil-slick head blurred and morphed into familiar features.

A boy's face, grinning at him, something smeared across his lips.

Emilio turned and ran full-tilt into an adjoining tower, where he jumped into an elevator. When the door opened on the deck level, he expected the creature to be waiting for him, but instead there was darkness, only darkness. But in that blackness he sensed movement.

He needed to reach the nearest skeleton crewmember, the one Angie had spoken to in Aft District 8, on the other side of the bay. Without going up into the skyweb, a ferry was the only way across.

He sprang out the front entrance and ran down empty streets, his heart banging against his sternum as he pushed his endurance to its limits, slowing down only when he arrived at the pier. With his sides aching, he jogged down faux-wooden planks and hopped aboard the ferry. "Depart!" he commanded.

As the ship skimmed into the thick darkness, he leaned over the deck and stared back at the pier, straining to see any signs of the creature. The waters were still and silent, the ferry's movement creating a cool, sterile breeze. His thoughts turned to Tomás pleading with him to come to his birthday party. Then he imagined the creature standing an inch away from him in the pitch darkness, its exhalation the breeze against his face.

No! Clear your mind.

He had to contact Pluto, learn if the additional Library research had turned up more information on the creature.

After some time, he made out the massive silhouette of the Aft District 8 hull-scrapers looming larger and larger, black against gray.

When the ferry reached the pier, he jumped out, glancing over his shoulder. Behind him, the floorboards on the ferry creaked.

"LEE3," he whispered.

Nothing.

"Goddammit, LEE3!"

He leapt into the maze of dark streets until he found himself at the end of an alleyway with no exit. And before he even turned around, he knew what awaited him.

The towering shadow blocked his path, humming a familiar tune.

He reached into his pocket and pulled out the streamlight, activating it. The narrow beam of light sliced through the creature, splitting it in half.

He lunged past it and out of the alleyway.

When he turned around, the shadow had reconstituted itself.

He held up the streamlight again, and an ebon tendril shot out of the monster's midsection, swatting the device out of his hand.

It hovered toward him. It would never stop stalking him, he realized.

His instincts screamed for him to run, but his professional training, his life experience, told him how foolish he'd been to try to escape from it. He clutched the locket around his neck. He'd spent so much time running, trying to flee from feelings that threatened to consume him. He had made his choices, as had everyone else aboard the cityship. Now he needed to find a way to live with those choices.

He took a few steps toward the obscene bird-shaped shadow. The child's visage glared at him, and its mouth opened, stretching impossibly wide to reveal a bottomless

abyss.

Emilio drew nearer.

“I’m not running from you anymore.”

His breath—perhaps the words themselves—rippled the creature’s outline. Up close, it seemed as insubstantial as the mist of memory.

“No more running,” he repeated, moving closer still.

The creature froze in place, then drifted backward, away from him.

A siren blasted, and the shiplights suddenly flared on.

“ARRIVAL. CHARON,” the ship’s speakers blared. “ARRIVAL. CHARON.”

As the shiplights intensified, through squinting eyes, he saw the creature slither to the end of the alleyway, where it cowered, shrinking until it faded into the disappearing shadows.

* * *

Emilio managed to fit the most important of his personal belongings into a single carry-case, which he rolled onto the docking bay. The arriving passengers greeted him as they disembarked from the shuttle in single file. The *Seed’s* skeleton crew—twelve engineers from each district, all alive and healthy—welcomed the Pluto colonists and directed them to their respective REMpod stations. The Plutonians were already dressed in white sleeping suits made of Library-inspired fabrics specially designed for decades-long stasis.

He was surprised to find Aulani Kahanahuni, the Library Liaison, among the arriving passengers. He hadn’t realized she was scheduled to join the *Seed’s* crew.

“Dr. Garcia,” she said, smiling broadly when she spotted him. “I’m glad to see you.” She introduced him to a stocky man with a warm smile she identified as her husband.

“I’m glad to see you, too. Where’s your daughter?” Emilio said, looking among the throng of arriving Plutonians for the girl he’d seen on the q-call.

The smile on the Librarian’s face vanished. “We decided to leave her behind on Charon. With my sister’s family.”

After an awkward pause, he said, “I . . . I understand.”

“Do you have a moment?” she said. She pulled Emilio to one side while her husband rejoined the other white-clad passengers who were being guided now by LEE3.

“The additional research you requested on the anomaly has been completed and is being forwarded to you.”

“Oh?” He was about to tell her it was moot at this point, but she continued speaking.

“The prevailing theory among the Cataloguers is that the anomaly is the product of gravitational waves on a scale heretofore unknown to us. Grav-waves of this sort aren’t generated by the collision of two black holes or other high-density objects, as is typically the case. No, these are unleashed when the branes of two universes brush up against each other.”

“Multiple universe theory?”

“Indeed, Dr. Garcia. Indeed! The Cataloguers theorized grav-waves on such a scale produced micro-tears in the fabric of spacetime—much like the ones that allowed transmission of the Library itself—only these allowed pieces of another universe to leak over into ours, drawn to spaceships powered by q-tech. In fact, as I mentioned, there’s an entire Library mythology built around this phenomenon, the concept of actual living creatures drawn into this universe by a person’s guilt.”

“Are these ‘micro-tears’ transitory?”

“Oh yes, though Library lore tells of rare instances where something crosses over and stays, finding continued sustenance in the guilt of its prey,” she said. “The Cataloguers have blessed us with their great knowledge—and their great storytelling.”

she said, smiling and raising her arms skyward. "Tell me, Doctor. Why are you so curious about this subject?"

He hesitated. "I had a patient with some interest in the matter."

She noticed his carry-case. "You're leaving?"

"Yes, this is my last stop, I'm afraid."

"Is this related to the . . . unfortunate incident with that poor woman?"

He hadn't realized word had already spread to Pluto of Angie's death. LEE3 must have logged it. The official cause was suicide. They'd assumed she'd been heading to the energy flux station to damage the REMpods, but LEE3 said she'd leapt into an energy beam, incinerating herself. He'd asked LEE3 to show him the vid-feed of the incident, but the recording was unavailable due to the ship disruptions at the time. Emilio considered confessing to LEE3 what he'd seen—what he thought he'd seen—but realized this would only focus attention on his own mental state, his own failure to properly treat Angie Velasquez's condition. Best to leave the *Seed* quietly. He had opted instead to set forth a full record of his experiences in the medical logs should the *Seed's* crew encounter a similar problem with another sleeper in the future.

"I'm leaving for personal reasons," he said.

"We all must follow our own paths," Aulani said.

He accompanied her to the REMpod next to her husband's and allowed them to speak privately for a minute before setting down his case to help them step inside their respective pods.

The plexi lowered, and calmness fell over Aulani's face as she drifted into spacesleep. Emilio thought of Angie. Whatever her psychological issues, were they much different than the guilt faced by every single person aboard the *Seed*? Guilt borne of leaving loved ones behind? Or guilt borne of bringing them along, sentencing them to a lifetime aboard a spaceship and their descendants to a dangerous and an uncertain future?

"Dr. Garcia!" LEE3 waved at him. "The shuttle's departing to Charon. If you're leaving the *Seed* . . ."

He jogged twenty steps before he realized he'd left his case next to the REMpod. When he returned and bent to retrieve it, he noticed a slight twitch on Aulani's lips, rapid movement behind her eyelids. He looked at the sleepers around her.

The twitching seemed to glide like a wave across the sea of REMpods.

"Dr. Garcia! The shuttle's going to leave without you."

He hesitated, looked back and forth between the shuttle and the REMpods. A stillness had fallen across the sleepers. He touched the locket around his neck, then turned and raced across the docking bay.

He entered the shuttle and another person, an engineer, followed behind him and took the seat across from him. They were the only two passengers aboard the AI-piloted shuttle returning to Charon. He sat down, buckled up, and put on headphones to drown out the sound of the engines. Outside his window, Charon's bustling moon-base drew closer, and behind it, ghostly Pluto with its heart-shaped ice-plains beckoned. It could take months, but eventually he'd find transportation back home. He'd call Nina as soon as he reached Earth and arrange a visit with Tomás.

He thought about the mission he was leaving behind, the adventure of settling New Earth, and felt a twinge of regret. And then he thought about the twitching faces of the sleepers. A pulsing wave of something—something alive, yet foul—seemed to be moving through them, infecting them all. Was it real? Should he have done something? He shook his head and pushed away the thought. And as music began to pipe over the headphones, he thought he heard a note followed by two higher notes, then a lower one. *Down, down, down.*

He ripped off the headphones and threw them to the floor.

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“Is everything all right?” said the engineer sitting across from him.

Emilio nodded, took a deep breath.

He had made his choice. Now he needed to find a way to live with it.

He shifted his thoughts to Tomás, and trained his eyes on Pluto, the ice-white sphere growing larger and larger until the darkness of space had disappeared.