

TAKING ICARUS HOME

Suzanne Palmer

Suzanne Palmer's first novel, *Finder*, will be out from DAW Books in April. The author, who recently won the Hugo Award for Best Novelette, presents us with a heartbreaking new novelette—her twelfth tale for *Asimov's*. In this powerful story, a starfarer uncovers some terrible truths while . . .

TAKING ICARUS HOME

There are, you think, two main problems with the Barrens. The first, and most obvious, is that it is vast and unnaturally sparse of star systems, which means it comes up stingy and begrudging with the specific, complex, and mostly not-understood gravitational circumstances necessary to spawn up active jump points. That leaves one to slog along in passive jump, or worse: actual sub-C speeds, which is especially tedious when you miscalculated your swing around one of the few actual bodies out here and got shit for a speed boost.

Not that you ever miscalculate, per se. That is problem number two: for being a place called the Barrens, there is way too much stuff out here floating around where it shouldn't be, like an old, holed-out rustfreighter that's abandoned itself right in your approach vector, meaning you had to swing wide to avoid a collision, and rather than make another day-long loop around to try again, you guessed, and you guessed really close, but not quite close enough. So here the fuck you are only going about a third as fast as you want, not quite in the optimum direction, and debating if you should just burn the fuel to take yourself up to passive jump and get the hell out. It feels like cheating, though. You've been playing the run around these stars for a long time, and damned if you're not going to at least think through if you can still use 'em.

"Axie," you say. "Vivaldi, please."

The ship chooses a violin concerto. You're not sure which one, but already you can tell it's a Martian Symphony Orchestra recording, as are most of the ones you've kept; even if you didn't really like the handful of Marsies you've met, the MSO is arguably one of the very best. The sound of strings swells throughout the small cargo ship that is the *Axolotl Daydream*, that is your shell, your home, an extension of you, no less vital a part than your own arms, your own eyes. The music is your collective heartbeat, and it warms you as you slide together through real space, among the dust and dead relics and ditched salvage in the vast emptiness.

The star you skirted awkwardly is named Birib, and it's a big, bright, fast-burning A-star with a few scorched rocks orbiting closer in, a gas giant past that, and then some distant chunks of ice that barely qualify as planets. Signal comes in from

somewhere between the giant and the first of the ice planets, and you know that's Hades Enclave warning anyone with bad intentions to stay out of their space. You've traded there, and it's not nearly as bad as they want people to think, but nowhere you'd want to stay.

You like being on the move, and you never did like other people much. It works out.

"Captain," your ship says. "I am detecting a substantial object along our projected path. I estimate we will overtake it in approximately four minutes."

"Animal, vegetable, or mineral?" you ask.

Axie knows by now how to interpret the question. "Artificial. It is consistent in approximate size and shape with a standard human-craft lifepod, but it is not broadcasting any signals, identity, distress, or otherwise."

"Propulsion?"

"Not that I can detect."

Dodging it is easy enough. The question is, should you? "Do you think it came from that freighter?" you ask, even though you'd bet it didn't.

"If I extrapolate backward from its current trajectory, it would appear to have also attempted a gravity assist loop around Birib, but in much closer to the star."

You blink at the console in front of you, knowing how you skirted the edge of tolerances, and you're in an actual starship designed for such things. "Closer? It would have been fried to a crisp."

"Scans indicate a high degree of crispiness," Axie answers. "That may explain the lack of signal and propulsion. It is possible it briefly grazed the heliosphere itself."

"So it's dead," you say, and that's a door closed that means you don't need to hassle with it, but also you can't fix it. You don't like not getting to decide that yourself.

"It is maintaining a temperature above ambient, so some systems are, at a minimum, partially functional."

"Slow us down so we overtake in fifteen," you say, "and give me scans."

Once you've got the visuals you're sure it's a lifepod, but it looks bad. Really bad. One whole side of the alloy hull plating—designed to tolerate temperature extremes—is blistered and some of the panels are warping out of place, which you've never seen happen, and you've cruised through fields of battle-shattered warships back when you ran with a salvage team. Axie is right, though, that it's not completely DOA. It's holding steady at about 8C, and there is electrical signature, even if it's nothing coherent.

"What do you think?" you ask.

"The chances of anyone inside it being alive are negligible but not zero," Axie said. "If someone is still alive, their chances of remaining that way until another ship accidentally crosses paths with it in the Barrens is effectively zero."

Two of your three cargo holds are packed full of agro goods. You'd planned to fill the third when passing Beenjai, but one way or another the lifepod matter should be resolved before then. "Okay, Axie. Fetch it in," you order. You don't add *be careful*, because Axie is always precisely careful, and that's why you asked Axie to do it in the first place instead of doing it yourself. Not that you're not careful, but maybe not *precisely* so. You're human, after all, and your confidence is still stinging a bit from missing your course correction on the swing around Birib.

Axie takes full control of the helm, and you settle back in your seat, watching the front viewscreen, surprised by how tense you feel. You could go get coffee—Axie has as much use for you right now as a unicycle in zero gravity—but you want to *see*.

When the *Axolotl Daydream* closes on the pod, slowing, and you can get your best look yet at it, you find your breath all goes out in one sharp, shocked grunt.

It disappears beneath you, and you can feel the vibration of the cargo manipulators

unfolding themselves from the underside of the ship. Two minutes later, you see the bay three light flash from red to yellow to green, open to closed to repressurized.

Well. You might as well go see. Whatever concentration you need to figure out your best hop out of here is shot, anyway.

"Axie, stay at current speed and course for now," you say, and you unfasten your safety tether from your helm seat and push yourself up, doing a slow somersault in the air before grabbing a wallbar and pushing for the open door behind you.

From there it's down one drop tube, a quick airswim down the lower corridor, and then through the heavy doors into the bay. Axie has the pod suspended in the center of the space, mag-clamps holding it stable. You float over and put one hand on a clamp strut to stop yourself before you touch the pod itself.

The unit is about four meters long, shaped like a stretched-out egg, with two of its five stabilizer fins still intact. The exterior is scorched, and you pull yourself around it, looking for markings, anything to tell you what ship it might have come from, but what little you can make out through the charred exterior is illegible, slapdash graffiti that had been painted over whatever official insignias there might once have been.

"You're not helping me," you tell the pod.

At last, among the bubbled-up panels, you find the edges of the hatch, and carefully have Axie rotate the pod thirty-eight degrees to put it upright.

Then you hang back, and stare at it a few moments longer. "Do I want to open this?" you ask.

"I am not able to answer that for you," Axie answers from speakers in the bay, "but if not, what else would you do with it?"

It's a valid point, of course, so you take some deep breaths and try to push the anxiety down and out as you find the cover over the emergency overrides. Underneath, the controls are still alive, though they flicker weakly as its internal power systems falter. You're not sure it's a good idea, but you pull down a tethered power line and hook it into the system to stabilize it, and nothing explodes or tries to electrocute you, so that's something.

You hesitate, but what, really, does that buy you? Nothing. So you hit the sequence to open the hatch, curious and nervous and tense, as with a groan the tortured, deformed shell cracks and begins to open.

And then the smell hits.

You've puked in zero gee before—a lot, your first few months off-planet—and there's not much worse than trying to clean up those floating vomit-globules as they dance around the inside of your ship, coating and contaminating everything they hit, so you manage to hold it in long enough to back away from the pod and stick your face over the chute for the bay's flash recycler.

When you're sure you're definitely done, you grab a bob unit from where it's magged to the wall, flip it on, and let it go. It hovers, blinking. "Go have a look, Axie," you tell it, because the ship's mindsystems are tied into the tiny logics of the bob itself. "I'm going to go wash up."

The cold, precious water feels good on your face. You use the bathroom unit's gray-water suction hose to recapture all the droplets that have wandered off, then pop a teeth sanitizer tablet. They taste like crap—you call the flavor "Nuclear Mint"—but right now it's way better than the alternative, and it'll leave no trace of anything but itself when it's done fizzing and finally dissolves.

Before heading back in, you sling an oxy tank over your back and strap it on, then cover your nose and mouth with a portable facemask with the filtration set to maximum. Other than lingering mint, you won't smell anything. And now you can at least get advance warning about what you might see. "What've we got, Axie?" you ask.

"Human male, young. There is significant damage to both him and the pod itself."

“Deceased?”

“I cannot be certain,” Axie says.

So yes, you’re gonna have to go look. You expected as much, with your luck, and even if Axie had been sure you’d have had to verify yourself anyway, or the but-what-if nightmares would be merciless. “What is the pod saying?” you ask.

“The pod’s internal first aid and life monitoring systems have been stripped out,” Axie answers.

“What? Why?” you say. “Why the hell would anyone do that?”

“I don’t have an answer that meets an acceptable minimum of reason.”

All right. You can do this. You’ve seen bodies, more than a few, in the salvage days where not everything got cleaned out before being junked. You know what frozen brain-splatter looks like.

So you peer in. “He wasn’t even wearing an exosuit,” you say.

“No,” Axie agrees.

You lean closer, less afraid now. His skin, where it’s bare, is covered with what you first take as ice, until you peer closer. Some sort of mineral deposits?

“Salt,” Axie answers, anticipating the question. “Extreme heat exposure can cause the body to sweat out salts and other mineral contents in a desperate attempt to cool itself.”

“Does that work?”

“No.”

The inside of the pod itself catches your eye, maybe because you want to look away from the blistered, red face. More graffiti like the exterior is here, what seems to be crude, thick drawings of the sun. You wonder if this was something religious, something deliberate. Something voluntary? The inside of the pod hatch lid is streaked with dried blood, and the man’s fingernails are bloodied and torn. *Probably not*, you decide. Poor kid.

“Axie, ping Hades Station and see if they know anything about this,” you say.

“Yes, Captain,” the ship answers.

You wonder how hot it got inside the pod, and you reach out with one gloved hand and tentatively place it on the body’s chest, not sure what to expect. And then you’re pushing away from the pod, your body reacting before your brain can even identify, much less articulate a reason for surprise, as the body arches, and its—his—arms flail, and a sound comes out of his mouth that is a terrible, senseless, despairing keening.

Shit, you think, and also: *Shit Fuck Shit Now What?*, and more shamefully, *Why did I have to go and bring this on board my ship?*

You’re still moving, though. You grab a wallbar, throw open your emergency supply cabinet, pull out the first aid kit that, other than going through several tubes of skin sealant, has been pretty much untouched since you bought your ship nearly nine years ago.

There’s a med scanner, and it wakes up after you whack it on the palm of your hand a few times. The screen pops up a reminder that it must be placed on bare skin. Whatever seizure the guy in the pod was having has already ended, and when you peer back over, he looks almost as corpse-like as before, except his eyes are open wide, staring and moving around, though you’re not sure there’s anyone home behind them. You pull your utility knife off your belt and, placing your hand more firmly on his chest now to keep him steady if he starts thrashing again, you cut his shirt with the other. You peel the backing off the sticky tape on the med scanner and press it firmly onto his chest, and then back away again, waiting for it to do its job.

What do you know about burns and hyperthermia? Not nearly as much as you do about radiation, and he probably got a good dose of that too, if the shielding on the pod had failed.

You’re not sure, but it seems like the wildly roving eyes settle on you slightly more

than anywhere else. "Hang on," you say, not sure if he speaks the same language, entirely sure it doesn't matter. "I'm trying to help you."

The scanner beeps. "Human male, approximately eighteen standard years old. Multiple internal organ failure," it says. "Acute neurological impairment and significant damage to the hypothalamus and other regions of the brain. Critically low potassium levels, and an unknown sedative that is interfering with optimal heart function. These take medical precedence. Recommend patient be immediately transferred into a full medical pod unit. Is one available? Please say [yes] or [no]."

"No," you say.

"The manufacturer of this scanning unit does not hold any liability for damages to persons that may result from the performance of actions which the unit advises. Say [agree now], [agree always], or [disengage unit]."

"Agree always," you say.

"Input code 74533C-5K into your emergency autoformulary. When dispensed immediately administer to patient, then say [more]."

You push back over to the cabinet where the first aid kit was and pop open the door next to it. The autoformulary is there, and just as dusty as the kit. It powers on. "What was that code, Axie?" you ask. Your memory is pretty shot by the amount of adrenaline you've got moving right now.

Axie repeats the code as you punch it in, and hit GO.

"The manufacturer of this autoformulary unit does not hold any liability for damage to persons that may result from the administration of formulations provided, except if such formulations are found erroneous for reasons of manufacturer negligence," the autoformulary says. "Say [agree now], [agree—"

"Agree always," you growl. Goddamned liability gates did nothing but slow you down when you could least afford it, out here where guns resolved arguments, not lawyers.

Three minutes later, a fat hypodermic needle full of some orange-yellow liquid drops into the dispensing tray, and you grab it out and kick off the wall back to the pod. The man is seizing again, his body twisting and rocking side to side as his arms flail along the pod bed edge. "Shit," you say. "Should I wait?"

"I think if you can safely get the needle in, you should not wait," Axie says.

So you haul yourself over the pod and kneel across him to hold him as steady as you can, and you stab him hard in the upper chest, below his collarbone, and push the plunger on the needle down until it's emptied. Then you pull it out and scramble back and off, afraid you've hurt him because he's still just a kid almost, afraid it's not enough and all for nothing.

Still, you say it: "More."

"The patient has now been put in a chemical coma," the scanner says, "and will require another formulation in approximately forty-five minutes. At that time, a code will be provided. Given the limitations of this scanner and the severity of the patient's condition, it is recommended that he be brought with haste toward the nearest public trauma facility."

"Nearest public trauma facility" is a joke out here in the Barrens. "Did we hear from Hades?" you ask.

"Yes. I thought it best not to interrupt you. They say he's not one of theirs and suggested we speak to 'the Sunrunners.'"

"The Sunrunners?" An ominously promising name, given the circumstances.

"They sent coordinates. It appears to be a small station in an outer orbit, not part of any normal trade routes. It is not logged on any of my maps."

"Contact them?"

"I tried; no answer. Hades had expressed that as a likelihood, and said if we go

there in person, to be careful.”

Great, you think. You have things to do, things other than chase down people who don't want to talk to you on behalf of some nameless stray you stumbled over and picked up.

You look again at the man. His eyes are closed again, and it feels final.

You have a ship to fly, you tell yourself, and with that you turn your back on everything in your bay. “Axie, I'm heading back to the bridge,” you say. “Tell me when forty minutes is up, or if something changes.”

“Yes, Captain,” Axie says.

“Add this ‘Sunrunners’ station to the nav maps,” you say, as if you haven't decided what to do—and you haven't—but you know what you *will*.

Unknown sedative. The bloodied and torn fingernails. Answers are owed, and someone damned well needs to collect.

* * *

You don't ping them to let them know you're coming, which is probably stupid given how many of the free-floating Enclaves out here in the Barrens are heavily armed, but what's one more stupidity on top of the larger one, chasing down what happened to one nearly dead stray in a Universe full of abandoned people.

Your justification is this is the only one the Universe threw at your feet. *And it better not make a habit of it*, you add. It's bad enough you have to go actually talk to these people.

The Sunrunners' station is a small-sized wheel-axis combo, nothing atypical except in the vast quantity of external graffiti that covers it, and the amount of junk surrounding it. When you're in range you transmit a standard docking clearance request, and a few minutes later a voice pipes up on your open channel.

“Uh. Who's this?”

“Cargo shuttle *Axolotl Daydream*, coming in to dock,” you say. Forget requesting.

There's a pause. “Do we know you?”

“Not yet,” you say.

Another pause, then, “Whatever, sure. You got tradeables?”

“I do,” you say, though you aren't planning on trading them here. That's not what they asked, though.

“I think bay four is clear. I'll turn the spotlight on, um, *Ask A Lot* or whatever the hell you said your ship is. Someone'll meet you there.”

“Thank you, docking control,” you say, and you're proud how much you kept the sarcasm out of your voice.

You let Axie take over docking and go check again on the man. In the last four hours, you've given him three more shots from the autoformulary, and hooked up a big bag of translucent liquid with a smart vampire tap that you didn't watch sink itself into his arm. You've come to think of him as your passenger, though he's probably more accurately cargo. The scanner won't give you a prognosis, which is probably telling you all you need to know about that.

You remember being about the same age, and all the dumb things you did, and the trouble you (mostly) narrowly avoided, and it seems to you if he's going to die in your ship, you should know his name.

Axie docks the ship without difficulty, and you suit up at the airlock, just in case, and you make sure you've got some weapons both out of sight and where you can reach them. You don't want trouble—well, not much trouble—but you don't know what you're walking into, only that you damned well plan on walking back out of it when you've got what you wanted.

When you're cleared, you go through your airlock, seal and lock it, then through the station's airlock, making the shift to spin-grav with practiced ease. There are

three people there waiting for you, none of them in exosuits. One man, two women. One of the women is holding a bundle of fabrics that you belatedly recognize as containing an infant, which surprises you. What if you were a pirate and came in shooting?

The other woman glares at you. "Who the fuck are you, coming in out of nowhere and ruining a perfectly setup launch run?"

"I tried calling," you say.

The man snorts. "So what?"

"So that's why I came in out of nowhere and ruined some launch run you could have told me about, but didn't," you say.

"You're not from Hades," the woman with the infant says.

"No."

"Who are you?" the lead woman says. "You didn't answer that."

So you do, not that your name means a damned thing to them, not that it bears all that much resemblance to what your parents put down on your settlement birth records when you popped into existence.

"And you're a trader?" the man asks.

"Yeah. Agro mostly," you answer.

"Fruit?" the woman with the baby asks hopefully.

"Grains, mostly." You also have a dozen crates full of riddleberries destined for Beenjai, but they aren't for sale.

"Oh," the woman says, and she is disappointed. "We don't really need grains, though."

"I have something else I've newly come into, which might be more your thing," you say. The man raises an eyebrow, as if he doubts this. "A burnt-out pod, with a burnt-up man inside. I hear he might be one of yours."

The two women exchange looks. "Ah man, that's rotten luck for a first-timer," one says. "That was a pretty good pod. So it was salvageable? You're here to claim a finder's fee?"

"Something like that," you say.

"Great. Since you're on rotation that's your responsibility, Deeka, not mine. While you work it out, I'm going to take my run," the woman with the baby says. She hands the bundle to the other woman, and grins. "Wish me sunluck."

"Sunluck, Rif," the woman Deeka says as she shuffles the sleeping baby in her arms to a better position.

"Sunluck!" the man adds. "Don't shoot it low; it's my run next."

"You shoot so high, Hol, you might as well stay on the station," Rif says, and leaves the bay with a spring in her step.

You look at the man Hol, and the woman Deeka, and you just can't add up what the hell is going on here. "So he's yours?" you ask.

Deeka shrugs. "Not really, no."

She hands the baby to Hol. "Go put this somewhere," she tells him, then turns back to you. "Come on in, Captain, and tell me about what you've got to trade and maybe we can make a deal. I'm Vested Deeka."

"You're the leader here?"

"We take turns, and it's my turn, so yeah," she says. "Welcome to Lux Enclave."

* * *

You follow her into the station, curious and wary. The station interior is well lit, reasonably warm, and the air fresh, but there is clutter on the floor, and you walk past a status panel that has orange warning lights flashing on it. Deeka pays it no attention. Likewise, there are other people here who pass you in the corridors, and none seem to care that there's a stranger here. An older woman is drinking from a small box, and as you pass her she finishes and just lets it fall to the floor.

Deeka notices you noticing. “We get cleaners in from Hades periodically,” she says. “They’re due soon.”

“You have warning lights—” you start to say.

“They send a maintenance person too,” she interrupts. You wonder if she’s even looked at the panel to see what’s failing, whether it’s something unimportant or something that could kill everyone here. You find your exosuit especially comforting in the moment—it won’t protect you against everything that can go catastrophically wrong, but at least it’ll save you from some.

You expected Deeka to take you to an office, but instead she drags you into a large common room that’s crowded with people. There’s a bar with an auto-bartender—you cynically notice there’s no warning lights on that—and some foodmakers. A few people are eating, and some seem to be asleep in chairs or leaning over tables, but most people seem to be paying attention to a bank of screens along a side wall. One seems to be a live feed, with Rif’s face in close up. She’s grinning at the camera. Another must be on the outside of her pod and heavily filtered because front and center is the system’s star, growing larger. The others are all readouts and diagrams of the pod’s status and progress. At the bottom of the screen two numbers increment; one is a timestamp, and the other you realize is a *score*. It takes you another thirty seconds or so to put together how close she’s going to cut it in her swing around the sun, and you suppress a shudder. You still have very fresh in your mind—and in your ship—the consequences of even a small misjudgment.

“The kid in the pod,” you say. “He launched from here.”

“Yeah,” Deeka says as she waves you toward a table farthest from the noise. “Is the pod in condition to be refitted? If so, we’ll buy it back from you.”

“It could be, with a lot of work,” you say. “Someone gutted out a bunch of the internal safety systems.”

“Yeah, they’re cheating and drive your score down, even if you don’t use ’em,” she says.

“The kid’s name . . .”

She shrugs. “I don’t even remember. Honestly, he’d only been here for a few days. Doesn’t really matter, now.”

How can it not, you think, but how do you say that? You are trying to figure out what to say next when another man, maybe still a teenager, approaches and sets down a coffee in front of Deeka. “As you like it,” he says, and Deeka nods.

“Two points,” she says, and he goes away again, looking pleased.

“Points?” you ask, even though it’s not what you care about.

Deeka gestures around. “Some of us are vested,” she says, “which means we have an official stake in the station, and can take a rotation as leader. Vesteds name heirs for their stake, which can be kids or lovers or friends or just anyone. Points are a status thing among the unvested to show you’re worthy of being an heir, or staying one. Competition is healthy, and weeds out the unfit really damned quick.”

“And these runs? That’s for points?”

She takes a sip of her drink, steam rising around her face. “And for fun. Not much else to do around here.”

“And the kid in the pod . . . ?”

“Probably had less fun than he expected.”

“And that’s why he was drugged?”

She raises an eyebrow. “Yeah, was he? Weird. Hol helped him set up his run. Maybe he’d know. Why would you care?”

You shake your head. “Someone’s got to,” you say.

“If you say so,” she says, and clearly doesn’t. “Forget him. If the pod’s salvageable we’ll give you three thousand for it back.”

“What backing?” you ask, because you sure as shit don’t think any of theirs has

value.

"Haudie South," she says. "That's all we trade in."

Haudernelle is outside the Barrens, one of the more solid currencies. It makes her offer suddenly tempting, never mind that there's a mostly dead kid still using the pod. And it's suspicious, because you see no signs of any kind of economic activity here, or even capability, unless stupidity is selling hot right now.

Deeka must see the skepticism on your face, because she leans back in her chair and throws one booted foot up on an empty seat. "Founders made claim on all the ice in the system and in three others," she says, scowling now. "Thirty percent of water mining in this quadrant of the Barrens puts money in our hands. You want cred, we want our pod. Is that a problem for you? Why did you even come here, then? Oh!"

The last exclamation takes you by surprise, but Deeka is suddenly no longer looking at you, but at the displays. "Rif beat her high score!" she says. "Sunluck!"

Someone is walking up behind you, and you turn. It's Hol, baby no longer in his possession, a drink in his hand that looks less hot, and more potent, than whatever Deeka has. "She's one of the best," he says, and without asking drops into the other empty chair.

"Way better than you, Hol," Deeka says. "You're gonna have to do something really daring if you want her to name you for her stake."

Hol grins. "But I'm handsome and charming! And who else is there?"

"Not as handsome and charming as the runaway," Deeka says. "You know anything about how his run went bad?"

"Nope," Hol says. He looks at you instead of Deeka as he says it, and he says it quickly. "Captain here play air billiards?"

You do, as it happens, and you say so. You're thinking about how it's a time waste you don't need right now, but Hol reads in your expression some sort of lack of confidence, and straightens up. "I'll wager fifty points I can beat you," he says.

"I don't have any points," you say. And you don't plan on earning any.

"I'll cover the captain's side of the bet," Deeka says. "But you lose, and you take a thousand off the salvage price on our pod. Fair?"

"Fair. If I win, you tell me about the kid in the pod," you say.

"Sure, whatever," Hol says. He stands up, and you realize he means to play you right now.

Your ship is listening, and in your earpiece tells you the scanner gives a few more hours—barring an unexpected, but not unlikely downturn—before the passenger will need anything else. So you stand up, too. Hol is easily eight centimeters taller than you, and he edges slightly closer just to make sure you notice that.

Anyone who thinks height means anything, when people grow up in and out of all sorts of different gravity wells, is an idiot. Space is, in your experience, full of idiots.

"Okay," you say. "Lead on."

Deeka follows, along with a few others who've taken their attention off Rif's mostly finished run to look for new entertainment. There's an entrance to a spoke tube off the common room, and you start by climbing and end by floating into the station's spindle itself. Hol makes the transition with confidence, but his movements betray a lingering awkwardness. You wonder how long he's been here, and what planet he's from, but you don't wonder much.

The air billiards chamber might be the only genuinely clean room on the station, by necessity of the game. The walls are a thick xglass, with pockets—tubes, really—at all eight corners, and on the center of each vertical side. Hol grabs a cue, then passes you one. You examine it, notice the slight warp in it, and swap it for another on the rack without a word.

"I'll go first," Hol says.

“Manners, Hol. Guests should go first,” Deeka says as she floats over to a grippy chair and throws herself in.

Before Hol can either argue or accede, you wave him on. “I don’t mind,” you say.

Hol pulls a cue ball out of the holder beside the box, opens one glass wall, enters, and closes it behind him. “Rack,” he says, and a section of the box ceiling lowers and two halves of its spherical mechanism open and retract, leaving a cluster of billiard balls wobbling in the center of the box.

Hol puts his cue ball in the air in front of him, moves around it a few times to sight it, then braces his cue in the crook of one elbow as he uses the other to swiftly tap the white ball. It hits the cluster and breaks it, balls going many directions, and Hol does the dancing dodge to avoid being hit by a ball, which is an automatic out.

One ball sinks on the break in one of the side pockets. Two others bounce off the xglass not far from corners. Close, but not quite close enough.

Hol leaves the box, seems pleased with himself. “Your turn, Captain,” he says.

You chalk your cue and enter the box, having to duck under and around still-moving balls. No inertia on your side to settle things down, here. You have to watch the trajectories of all the balls around you, while looking at the spin on the ones you think might be worth going for. Outside the box, Hol is drinking again, and you wonder how easy he’d be to beat drunk.

You don’t want to stay here long enough to find out, so you pick your shot and take it, watch two balls collide and sink into corner pockets, then when the cue ball’s trajectory takes it back where you want it, you shoot again, and pretty soon the only balls left in the room are Hol’s.

When you leave the box, Hol pulls himself out of his chair and gets right in your face, but you can’t help but wonder if he still feels quite so tall.

“Minus fifty for Hol,” Deeka says, and there is a mix of ooohs and laughter from those who’d gathered to watch. Hol glares around him, then throws his cue. It clatters across the room, hits the wall and a table, then floats free until someone else grabs it and stuffs it back in a rack.

“So, tell me about the kid in the pod,” you say.

“What do you care?” Hol says, waving his hands angrily. “He was just some drifter, showed up here a few days ago, wanted in but couldn’t take the heat. I tried to help him out, but sunluck wasn’t with him.”

“So you drugged him and stuffed him in a pod he didn’t know how to fly? How’s that helping him?”

“I did not drug anyone!” Hol yells.

“I did,” someone else says, and everyone turns to see Rif float into the room. She’s still in her suit, but her hood is thrown back, and her face is red like a bad sunburn. *Is a bad sunburn*, you think, but not the worst you’ve seen today.

“He didn’t want to go, but after I slipped him a hit of skunk, he hardly noticed,” Rif says. “I thought once he had a good run behind him he’d settle in better, and maybe Hol would leave him alone. I set his pod myself. The run was good.”

“I changed the settings for his run,” Hol said. “I figured if he was going to compete with me, he was going to have to do his own damned run, not a preprogrammed cheat.”

Deeka looks back and forth between the two of them, then heaves a big sigh. “Hol, you know there’s no way Rif is going to name you her heir, right? She doesn’t even particularly like you.”

“She will,” Hol says, crossing his arms in front of his chest.

Rif rolls her eyes. “Anyone know where my boy is?” she asks.

Deeka turns to you, shaking her head. “So, that’s all figured out then. If your curiosity is satisfied, can we buy our pod back now? And did you say you had fruit to trade?”

"No fruit," you answer, because what else can you say? Alive or dead, the kid's going to have to come out of the pod anyhow, either for further treatment or for proper disposal. And you don't want to stay here, with these people, any longer than you have to. "Give me an hour or so to unload it."

Deeka gets out of her chair and leads you back toward the docks, while several people have gathered around Rif to buy her a drink for her good run, Hol first among them.

At the airlock door, you turn back to Deeka, one last time. "And no one even knew his name?"

"Something long," Deeka says. "Might've begun with a 'B,' or a 'D.' Rif and Hol just called him Noob."

"Thanks," you say, the sarcasm making no impression on her, and you cycle yourself through the lock back into the safety and sanity of *Axolotl's Daydream*.

* * *

A little over an hour later, you open your bay doors and use your cargo arm to extend the pod out and over toward the station. You didn't bother to clean it, after you moved your passenger—still alive, still barely—out. Let that be on them, to see the mess they left behind.

As you deposit the pod in their loading bay, you get confirmation of the cred transfer, and someone in an exosuit loads a small box back onto your arm.

Deeka's voice comes over your ship comms. "His things," she says. "We were gonna space it, but maybe there's information in there you want, or whatever. I didn't talk to him too much myself, but he was sad, I think, and had come from a bad place. A runaway. I didn't really ask. He just wanted a place where he was safe."

"I wish he'd found one," you say, but she has already disconnected.

You retract your arm, have Axie scan the box to make sure it's nothing surprising or dangerous, and then you close your doors, push carefully back from the station, and turn away from it and go.

* * *

Hades Station isn't interested in, nor a good place for, anyone who can't take care of themselves or doesn't have a large group of loyal friends to do it when they can't. But they do sell you a mid-grade, not too old medical pod for five hundred cred.

Moving the passenger from the cot you'd set up for him and into it was awkward enough that you were glad he was in a coma and didn't notice the several times you nearly dropped him and the one time you did before you got him up into the unit and dumped like a sack of tubers. Nor is hooking him up to the pod's waste systems an experience you'll treasure, but you get it done and get the unit sealed, and after you accept that the med pod's manufacturer has no liability for the man inside, it turns on and begins a more thorough scan and diagnosis. It has its own autoformulary, its own internal manipulators, and can take better care of him than you could anyway.

You desperately want to take a shower and scour the memories of tubes and needles, of Hol and Rif and Lux Station, clean, but you don't want to have to buy more water that lines the Sunrunners' pockets. So you make do with a towel and sanitizing gel, and get back to the bridge.

Axie has already plotted a course, which you are just too tired to complain about not having done yourself. The numbers are good, but they're not where you'd planned on going next.

"This is a course for home," you say.

"Yes," Axie answers. "Given that you rarely sell above cost and operating expenses at either Innich or Traprock, both of which require some detour from optimum travel lanes, I assumed that you would decide the logical choice is to return to Joszoma."

"Traprock and Innich are borderline starving," you say.

“The grain will keep, and neither station is so dire that an extra two weeks will have measurable consequences. Jozzoma has the nearest medical facilities that can both handle a patient as critical as ours, and that will not refuse a charity case. Also, your mothers and father will certainly appreciate seeing you.”

That is true; since one of your fathers in your parents’ quad passed two standards ago, the remaining seem less happy with your wandering hermit-trader lifestyle. You are who you are, but then, so is everyone else. You try to find a balance.

Home it is, then. “Okay,” you say. “Do it, Axie. Take us to passive jump. I’m going to go get some sleep. Wake me if anything happens.”

* * *

You grew up at the edge of this vast lake, and as a kid you used to stand, or sit, or lie on the shore and dream of sailing far across it, swimming with wild creatures, finding invisible islands and building yourself a fort and living off the land, self-sufficient and happy. You were surprised, even though you knew it wouldn’t—couldn’t—be so, that space doesn’t have storms, or waves, or ripples of its own. And some of its islands are more terrible than others.

The water is still today.

Your passenger is in a chair supplied by the local medical center. It has him encased up to his chin in an opaque, flexible, sterile sheathing while his damaged skin is prompted to regrow. He looks like he is wearing headphones, but it’s a neural stimulator trying to nudge awake the parts of his brain that the heat shut down. No one knows if it’ll work, but for now your passenger—former passenger—stares out at the water, just as lost in whatever daydreams as you used to be, except you always woke up from them. He’s out of his coma, but beyond that . . .

Your parents insisted on you bringing him here as soon as they heard the story, and his box of things sits unopened in a spare room on the main floor of their sprawling complex of geodesic domes like shiny bubbles on the green hillside.

You tried to talk them out of it, tried to distract them with the crates of riddleberries you brought them—and already your mothers are planning what to bake from them, and what to sell—but your father reminded you of the abandoned lilikit litter you brought home when you were seven, and the one-legged tukket you found half-starved in the grass when you were nine, and the titan hound you stole from a zero gee dogfighting ring that is fast asleep right now on the front porch as if all things are assuredly, perfectly right with the Universe. It is, they say, what they love most about you, that you can’t leave anyone or anything else behind if you can help it.

Maybe so. The docs don’t know if the kid will ever regain more than minimal brain function, and he will need several organs regrown if he is ever to leave the chair under his own power. You aren’t sure if you’ve done him any favors, if saving him wasn’t just prolonging needless pain.

You’ve decided not to look in the box, until either you can give it back to him, or he dies. His name might be in there, but so is his past, and he doesn’t need either of those things at all right now.

One of your mothers walks down from the house and puts her arm around your shoulders. She has a glass of tea, and you can see the half-dozen riddleberries she’s dropped into it to sweeten it. She doesn’t speak, doesn’t need to; you lean on her just slightly, eyes still drifting over the featureless expanse of water gleaming with sunlight. Home is the best place, even if it’s not the place for you, not yet, maybe not ever.

She knows that, too. “Axie told the house system that you’re off again at nightfall,” she says. Already you can see the faint pale face of one of Jozzoma’s moons rising over the lake.

“Yeah, I’ve got a hold full of grain to haul to the mining stations,” you say. “And now a lot of paskie wool, too, thanks to Father. That’ll get a good price when I make it to

Beenjai.”

“Be careful out there,” she says. She always says.

“I always am,” you answer with equal predictability, and you look back at your passenger in his chair, gazing out at the lake. “Hey, you, kid,” you call out to him softly. “You’re safe here. It’s okay now.”

One corner of his mouth twitches, just a little bit, probably some autonomous reflex, as he’s been making small, random movements ever since they brought him back from the medical center. But maybe, just maybe, it’s a smile.

You finish your tea, gently disentangle yourself from your mother, and give her a kiss on the cheek. The titan hound raises his head to watch you go as you walk up the hill, past the house, to where you’ve parked your small shuttle.

You belong out among the stars, never so near as to burn, never so far as to lose your way in the dark, and always home tucked away in your heart, waiting for you.