

Tell, Tell
By Andrew King
730006958
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“Vroom vroom.” – Elizabeth Eden Harris (@CupcakKe_rapper)

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Stories Told Through Driving Snow

Heavy snow made the highway into a pretty Christmas card, but Emily didn't turn back then. Not when snow floated happily to asphalt and grass in lazy banana curves. Not when snow lost its movie-time cotton fluff and fell hard. Building snow. Angry, buzzing, piling white. More snow, less road.

She silenced her radio to concentrate. Kept her fingers hard tight at ten and two. Powder became layers of powder became just powder and no visible street. Bright haze. Her laboring Toyota pickup had all-wheel, but also 216,000 miles and twenty-nine hard-lived years.

Some guy in front of her gave up and turned his little Hyundai around, taking the left turn lane that became a bridge across the highway median, a bowl of grass now blanketed white. Mountain roads had them to save out of control motorists from oncoming traffic. Try your luck, lose traction, slip into the bowl. Wait for Emergency Services to come fish you out with a tow line or truck.

Come on, snow. Emily fed fresh gas to the engine with a heavy foot. *That's it? Gimme a little more.* With that little Hyundai gone, the quiet of so much snow padding made her feel small, but also huge. Isolated, but defiant. Snow jockey hell-bent on crossing the wastes. Her growling truck ruined the Christmas card spell.

Elevation made her ears pop. Good. That meant not far until Boone, probably. So much white, too much light. She had to squint hard for a line between road and sky and began to worry that she'd miss Boone when her exit came, or a slam into a stalled car.

Then her tires span without catching. The front veered left, back fishtailing up and right, and Emily cranked the wheel that way too. Cranked right. Hard right. Her front wheels bit

through snow into road and the car righted itself. Back on track, but her heart shuddered and thumped. She couldn't see if she'd left any swerve tracks behind her because the blizzard glared too bright through her whole back window.

Another bank of deep snow tried to throw her off course, but she fought back for every inch. Curve sharp left. Drift just a second right. Apply burst of gasoline and yank that steering wheel.

The storm had obliterated her whole world white and the Toyota had melded into herself. An extra limb or an exoskeleton. A bigger body. She drove on raw instinct and forced pressure back wherever the snow wanted to push her off road. Her truck broke through a built-up clump with a banging jump and then slipped on the landing. She saved it, but hadn't known if she could. Dicey.

Boone, Boone. How far to Boone? Ten minutes? Five? Five minutes on a sunny day and twenty-five now? Her phone sat in a cup holder, unused. She didn't need GPS help to tackle a little snow. *Blizzard ain't shit.*

Little snow. Lotta snow. Nothing but snow.

Snow that stole the street from under her tires and kept her from curving; she whipped the wheel but the tires kept sliding. And sliding. Sliding, sliding, skid-slip sliding—loss of control. Her pickup lurched sideways like an amateur skier coming to a quick turn-stop without stopping. And then down. No street. Just a big dip and her truck careened into the median bowl. Sliding, sliding, stopping.

She came to rest fighting the whole way, spinning her wheels uselessly against the compact snow and frozen precursor ice. Stomping the gas bucked the truck a little, but couldn't

get anywhere through more and more snow that kept coming down. “Shit,” said Emily, and then “Goddammit,” because that felt good.

Cutting the engine brought silence. A whole mountain gone quiet. Very pretty. She laid her head back, unbuckled her seat belt, and watched out the window while her beating heart calmed and calmed—embraced the silence that lifted this snow-space away from the larger world. Cut her off, like this was as big as the world got. A world the size of her pickup’s cabin.

I’ll get you next time, Emily promised the storm and then shifted her focus to what the hell needed to happen now. Ah yes, her hand found the phone in the cup holder. Time for help.

She thought about calling her mother, but dialed 9-1-1 instead, hoping the weather wouldn’t throttle her signal. A dispatcher picked up after two rings, and when the man asked, “What’s your emergency?” Emily gave her name, car information, and approximate location, as best she could estimate. “Somewhere between Exit 184 and Boone,” she told the dispatcher. “I’m close. I know that much.”

The dispatcher’s whistle became garbled somewhere between his phone and hers. “I’ll be. Exit 184 on 40 West? You *must* be.”

“How long until you can get someone out here?”

“Let’s see. Everybody getting out’s out already. A lot of folks stuck in your situation, but I can have someone there in probably two hours. You said you’re not in immediate danger?”

“No,” said Emily. “No, I’m fine.”

“Car juiced? You’ll be able to keep warm?”

“Yeah, we’re juiced fine. Don’t come for me while someone else needs real saving. I can hang for now.”

“I’ll have emergency services at your location as soon as I can.”

The end of the call brought the world back to silence. Emily crossed her arms over her chest and propped her boots on the dashboard. *I can still outwait you, snow. Just you wait and see.*

...

She killed an hour keeping an eye out the windows and sometimes firing up the engine for minute-long intervals to keep the heat alive. No emergency personnel come to rescue yet, but she had tons of idle time to square up her chances against the blizzard on foot. The odds she could hike to a building filled with light and warm air that didn't run on a battery. The odds she could do that without freezing to death, or getting absolutely destroyed by a car off-kilter in the snow. She hunkered down, yawned, and kept dreaming. The trusty nap method. Best way to avoid being killed.

Eventually the white fuzz up the highway slope took on a yellow glow. One that grew and divided into twin lights. Headlights. A vehicle, coming down the mountain.

Emily sat up quick. Emergency Services? She hadn't seen anyone else on the road in all the time she'd spent lounging in her truck. Warm fog had spread on the inside of her windshield where the heat of her cabin clashed with the dry cold on the other side of the glass, and she grabbed her coat from where it lay crumpled in the passenger seat to wipe the condensation away. Had her wait ended? No. With no more fog to blur the lights as they trundled closer and closer, slow and careful, she saw they belonged to not only a civilian car, but a real scrap junker. An old model Honda that she wouldn't have trusted on just road, forget snow.

She sat up and focused—watched the clunker Honda slowly crawl and try not to slip into the bowl. Slow, steady—maybe they'd make it. Maybe they'd get all the way down out of the storm. No. No they wouldn't. She watched the car falter and slide, and after the car had slipped

to a stop in the bowl maybe fifteen feet in front of her, she watched them try all the things she'd tried: rocking the vehicle back and forth, gunning the engine, stopping and starting and stopping and starting. No progress. The other car was stuck. *She* was stuck. They were both stuck.

So they'd wait together. Emily propped her socks back on the dash and tried to find the same near-sleep comfort she'd had before, but her eyes wouldn't close. They kept peeking open to check on the Honda. Didn't matter that too much fog coated the windows for her to really see. Didn't matter that, for all she knew, the other driver had suffered a massive heart attack, wading now through some gray land between life and death, meaning there'd be little for her to see anyway. But that hadn't happened, probably. No need to worry. Emergency Services would take care of them both.

A chill had snuck into the air while the other car had kept her distracted. Emily fixed it by twisting her keys in the ignition again, and the overhead light shimmered down the fog of her windows. Gave her an idea. A stupid idea, but what the hell else was she doing? Using the pad of her thumb, she wrote the digits of her phone number backwards on the inside of her windshield, so that the driver would see them reflected the right way. Then she flicked on her high-beams and waited.

And not for long.

Her phone rattled in its cup holder, and taking it in her hand, she saw an unknown number calling. "Hey," she answered. "This the other car? Are you okay?"

"Physically fine," came a voice tired and cranky like not-enough-sleep without coffee. "If you'd stop trying to fry me with your lights I'd be a whole lot better."

"Oh," said Emily. "Oh, yeah. Right. Sorry." She cut her brights and the engine. Warmth felt good, but so did having a working battery and air without carbon monoxide.

“Why’d you write me your number?” accused the voice.

She wasn’t going to tell this person that’d she’d been concerned for them. Clearly they were fine and had no use for concern. “No big reason,” she said. “I already called EMS. They’ll be here in another hour or so. Thanks. Bye.”

“Now, hold on,” the voice told her and Emily held. Silence for a minute and then, “I was rude and I apologize for that. Stress, you know.”

She’d been on the verge of hanging up, but then there were few things she enjoyed more than being right, so... She’d give the voice the benefit of the doubt. Again. For now. “It’s cool. I get it. Didn’t want to spend my day like this either.”

“How long you been out?”

“Little over an hour.”

“Bad storm, huh?”

“Yeah.”

“So.”

She said, “So.”

“What brings you out here? Crazy snow and all.”

Emily juggled her thoughts about how much to tell this stranger. She thought she’d locked her doors already, but she double-locked them all to be sure.

“You don’t have to say if you don’t want to,” said the voice, possibly sensing her concern in the silence. “Just making idle chat. Since we’re stuck. Nothing else for us to do.”

“No,” said Emily. “That’s all right.” Why did she feel so embarrassed? “I was on my way up the mountain. To Boone.”

“And you didn’t turn around? When the snow got bad?”

“No,” Emily said. “No. Then I’d have to drive all the way back another day.”

“How long’s the drive back?” the voice asked.

“An hour.” Emily told it.

“So you’ve been sitting here an hour so far, and help is... Help’s another hour away, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Huh,” said the voice.

“You didn’t have to say that.”

“I’m aware.”

“You’re kind of an ass,” said Emily, “huh?”

“Aware,” the voice said again. “And you’re a bad storyteller.”

“A bad storyteller?” Emily snorted. “Okay. On what basis?”

“No motivation,” said the voice. “I don’t buy it. You drove into the blizzard because, what? You couldn’t care to turn around? That’s weak.”

“Yeah, fine. Okay,” Emily growled into her phone. “You want a story? Buckle up.”

“I’m all buckled. You’re not buckled? Driving through this?”

“Zip it. My turn to talk. Buckle up.”

...

“There’s this girl, okay? There’s this girl who lives maybe a little bit of an hour down the mountain from where she’s planning to go, which is up that mountain to Appalachia State. Her boyfriend lives there in a really shitty house that’s falling apart with weeds in the gutter, empty bottles in a line on their shelf, and acute boy-smell. Normally, she’d be looking for a reason to

get out of going, but today's a little bit different because there's a high chance of real snow tonight. A real big storm."

"But why does the snow make anything different? That's the whole reason you shouldn't go."

"Exactly. Hush. I'm getting to that. So this real big storm is on the news and the weatherman is throwing a fit. He's reminding everyone to buy milk and bread because I guess we'll all just die if we go more than thirty hours without milk and bread. I've gone pretty much my whole life without milk, so it's like, trust me. You'll be fine. And—"

"Off-topic. Can you get to the part that matters, please?"

"Jesus. What's got you so wound up? You're not going anywhere soon. Sit back and I'll get there when I get there. Got it?"

Silence.

"Yeah. So like I was already saying, everyone's getting unreasonable panicky over this snowstorm, and the dumbest part is, the storm isn't going to hit until late in the afternoon."

"Like now?"

"Yeah, like now. So this girl keeps getting told to be careful, to take the truck, and mostly that maybe she shouldn't go. But the thing is, she can go whenever she wants. The storm won't be hard to avoid as long as she leaves early enough that it won't matter. Which she does, because she can't stand being in her parent's home anymore. Three days she's been back on winter break from her own school and already she's ready to pack a bag and escape to the rattiest house in the mountains. And it's not that she doesn't care about her family—honestly, she's really, really happy to see them, but she also kept track: After telling her mother she'd maybe be going up to Boone to spend one night with her boyfriend, her mother brought up the snowstorm three times

in half an hour. *'Just take care driving in that snow, honey. The roads get slippery,'* and *'I don't know if today's the best day for you to drive in the mountains. People drive crazy in snow, they don't know how,'* and *'Have you thought about going next week? Or after the snow? That way you won't have to worry about getting hit by a plow, or snowed in.'* Truth is, this girl had already thought about not visiting her boyfriend until next week and also not visiting her boyfriend at all. But now her mother is just on her about how dangerous everything is and this girl can't make her understand that the danger isn't that real at all, and now she's gotta go to Boone because she doesn't want to hear her mother worrying about her and if she just hangs up the whole thing and decides to stay, she'll just wind up listening to her mother worry about something else, and Boone wasn't somewhere she wanted to go in the first place. But she's just so tired of all that worrying. With a little bit of distance, she can appreciate that maybe she's been emotional, to an extent, and also really not the best daughter..."

"... Hello? Are you still there?"

"Yeah, sorry. Still here. Anyway, she's fed up eight different directions with all this fretting, so she hits the road in her dad's old truck, hours before the storm is supposed to hit. She'll be in Boone and trying to watch the falling snow through dirty windows that no one's *ever* bothered to wipe down, no trouble at all. She doesn't know what her mother was worrying about."

"But she was right, right? The mother? Snow got you good."

"The story isn't done yet and the more you interrupt the longer it's going to get. I'm not trying to be rude or anything, but that's just—I mean that's what it is. So *this girl* leaves with a whole bunch of time to beat the snow because by this point she can't wait to leave, even though she really doesn't want to. The drive has her excited, though. For the drive, she won't have to be

home or in Boone. The drive belongs to her, and for an hour and a half or so, things are going to be good. Her dad's truck is a stick, but by the end of her neighborhood she's melted into the driving groove, almost like she's never even touched an automatic like the car she drives at school, and she wonders how funny it is that little things can take you back to how you were at another time. To how you felt years ago when you were younger. Little things do it, she guesses. Like driving stick."

"Well that's sweet, I guess."

"So she starts getting really angry. Not really *at* anyone, more at everything and also the snow for setting this whole headache situation off, but she keeps picturing her mother's face as a surrogate for that everything, and it's not really all anger she feels either. There's anger but there's also some excitement, because she's got a new plan. She likes being right and she likes fighting, so fuck it, whatever. How long's she got until this snow? Three hours? She kills time at a Pita Grill by reading her Bioinformatics textbook and only leaves when she's sure she'll hit the worst of the storm. When the time's gone by, she drives out with blood rushing giddy through the fingers she uses to clench the wheel, collides with the blizzard, eventually gets swept into the bowl and then meets this high-strung stranger who won't stop interrupting her story."

"Come on. I didn't interrupt that much."

"Her story which is now over. The end. Finit. You can talk now."

...

"So you're here because of your mother?" asked the voice.

The snow fell lighter now. Not the same belligerent clumps as before. Dainty little flakes.

"No," Emily said first, and then added, "Aren't we all?"

"You really drove straight into a blizzard out of spite?"

“Is that all you got from that?” Emily flicked on her brights so they could drill back into the voice’s snow-caked sedan.

“Hey. Hey!” growled the voice. “Stop that.”

Emily gave the switch another flick with her pinky finger. She didn’t catch it hard enough on her first try and had to lazily give it another two before getting her headlights to dim.

An unhappy voice. “You get the irony here. I don’t have to explain it to you.”

“Oh no, I get it,” said Emily.

“So that’s why you’re here,” repeated the voice. “Spite.”

“No,” said Emily.

“Then what’s the real reason? Why are you really here?”

“I could ask you the same question,” Emily told the voice.

“You could.”

“Okay,” Emily laughed and pulled her legs up so she was sitting criss-cross in the driver’s seat. “Then I will.”

“I might tell you,” said the voice, “that I’m a very important person. That life has saddled me with strong purpose, and many would suffer if I didn’t at least try to perform my duties somewhere down the mountain.”

“What kind of life would give you purpose like that?” asked Emily, glancing at her Bioinformatics textbook.

“I could be a top-notch surgeon,” said the voice. “Hospitals across the nation and world might compete to match my salary. Universities might give me awards named after other people while distributing award’s named after me.”

“Wow,” said Emily, sensing opportunity. “Is that true?”

A middle-sound between *laugh* and *grunt* came through her phone. “No.”

“So,” said Emily, feeling disappointment. “Why *are* you here?”

“Because I’m dissatisfied.”

“Come on. After all the shit you’ve put me through you’ve got to give me something better than that. Tell a story.”

“Fine,” the voice sighed.

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“So once upon a time, I guess—”

“Are you serious right now.”

“Hey. Give me a second. When you were talking, I didn’t—”

“Yes you did.”

“No. Let me finish. I didn’t stop you before you’d even started. Right? Exactly. Get with me and listen: You aren’t old, you aren’t young. You aren’t really happy but you’re not overtly sad. You’re not successful in a way that means anything, but you don’t starve. Sometimes you even eat out, when you’re expected to. Never when you have the choice, because you don’t like most restaurants. Maybe people who dine with you think you’re a little odd, but that’s not really your fault. How do you make someone understand that you can’t stand neon? Neon in wall-décor, neon in signs. Buzzing, ugly light. Burning so much energy, no stopping, no rest, and for all that effort it’s still just neon. No one cares. And you feel the same about work and home and what’s left of your family as you do about neon.”

“Wow. What happened to you at a Red Robin?”

“I’m getting to that.”

“Something actually happened to you at a Red Robin?”

“From this story, do you think I’d ever willingly step foot into a Red Robin?”

“No.”

“Okay. So that’s established. Where was... The neon. Okay. Everything makes you feel like neon, and this just makes you want to scream, or climb a mountain and live there forever. And you know it’s not the neon’s fault you feel this way. Neon is just neon and the same as any other neon. So whose fault is it? Yours, for expecting some kind of fulfilment? The world’s, for failing to deliver any satisfaction at all? Well?”

“I still kind of feel like you’re avoiding the question about Red Robin, but go on. What happens next?”

“That’s it. The story is over. There’s nothing else.”

“Wait, that’s it? But nothing happened.”

“That’s the point. It’s over.”

...

Emily felt cheated and this stranger needed to know that she deserved a full story, and their offering, being dumb and partial, did not meet qualification standards. “Your story is lame,” said Emily. “Like seriously lame.”

“Yeah, that’s the point,” the voice said again.

“No,” Emily told her phone. She watched a Jeep Grand Cherokee navigate the snow past the spots where both she and the voice had failed to continue its path up the mountain. Eventually some emergency vehicle would come around to pull them out, and then she’d never speak to this stranger again. “That’s no story. There’s no change. No explanation. *‘How do you make someone understand that you can’t stand neon?’* That’s your job. And how does that get you stuck out here in the snow? Didn’t explain that either.”

“Like I told you,” came the sullen voice. “That’s the point. There is no change or explanation. Things just are what they are.”

“And they’re neon,” said Emily.

“They’re all neon,” confirmed the voice.

“I don’t buy it.”

“Who’s selling?”

“How about a real story about dissatisfaction?”

The voice *humphed*. “I don’t have anything else to say on the matter.”

“No, no,” said Emily. “*I’m* telling the story. Since apparently you can’t.”

“Have at,” crackled the voice. “Won’t unmake anything from neon.”

...

“All right. So here’s a story about a boy.”

“A boy?”

“A boy, and he’s kind of like your story, minus the extreme hate of neon, which doesn’t leave much, I know, but—”

“I—my story wasn’t about hating neon.”

“Then you should have made it about *something*. Come on.”

“You going to get back to your story or just keep attacking mine?”

“Honestly both. After that neon rant, you deserve it. But back to my thing, this boy is not satisfied. Not satisfied in ways that, I’ll confess, I’ll never truly understand. And he can’t explain himself either. He can’t stop someone on the street and tell them, “Hey. I’m not happy and I think I should be.” Like, get a job or something. Stop stopping people in the street. But he did have a job, I think. For a while, and he liked to draw. He was a good artist.”

“Cute.”

“Yeah. Adorable. *Focus*. So his life wasn’t hard, but it was hard on him. Nothing had any real meaning to him, but some days were better than others, so there had to be *something*. Just his own meaningless emotions might have been enough, but since some days were better, other days had to be worse. And *much* worse. And more frequent. Time passed with no improvement and everything he saw just *decayed*. The sun lost color. No more yellow and that white at its core no longer burned with strength to blind. Just a dim orb. Plants lost their green as they suffered through days and days of diet-sunlight. No more *fresh*. Nothing new or green.”

“Wait—hold on, hold on—just stop. This isn’t realistic. That can’t happen.”

“For real? It’s a story. Lay off.”

“But all the other—”

“*But all the other* whatever. My story, my rules. Dying sun.”

“Fine.”

“I don’t need your permission... So yeah. Okay? Yeah. So the blues went next. Washed right out of the sky, and the funniest thing happened too: *vamoose* to the various shades of black. Night wasn’t dark anymore because the black in the sky washed out with the daylight blue. Night, day. He spent hours just standing outside wondering how he hadn’t seen it before, that night was the same as day was the same as anything because—”

“Hey. This is just my neon thing again. You’re ripping my story.”

“No, I’m making it better.”

“But you can’t. That’s dishonest. There’s nothing better because there’s nothing that matters—”

“Well, I’m—”

“Just nothing. Adding more doesn’t work because the sum’s still nothing. Pretty words and images don’t change content. If my neon story is worse or whatever, that’s because it’s a better embodiment of the truth... Well? Aren’t you going to say anything?”

“Oh, yeah. I was just waiting for you to finish. Are you finished?”

“Yes, I am. But you see what I’m saying? What you’re doing?”

“Okay, I’ll wait.”

“For what? Hello? All right. Fine. I’m finished.”

“Cool. Thanks. Your story is over—you made that very clear. Mine is not, so you can’t really know what I’m trying to tell you until it ends. You can guess, and maybe you’re right. Maybe not. Keep trying to stop me from finishing and I won’t.”

“Then don’t. Nothing has any meaning, we agree about that.”

“Quit. Seriously. Ask my mother: I don’t agree to anything, basically on principle. But if everything is meaningless and sucks, why do you care so much about being right?”

“I don’t—you’re not understanding. You don’t understand what I’m... That’s not my fault.”

“Yeah, I’ll be real, that didn’t make any sense to me. What you just said. Are you going to let me get on with my story?”

“Yes.”

“Awesome. So yeah, night, day, whatever. This boy drained hours and hours thinking and thinking that night was the same as day was the same as anything because all was perception, and all perception came through the lens of an observer, a lens the observer was incapable of cleaning. So what was meaning? Just a spot on the lens the observer can’t rub off, and they wouldn’t try anyway because they believe the lens is clean. That they observe perfectly. They

haven't even questioned. So this boy is just standing there looking out at a bleach-bland night with a moon the same lifeless gray as space and the stars and everything down on Earth. Maybe he smokes a cigarette, but light equals non-light, so maybe not. Fire equals not-fire. The smoke in his lungs is air. *We all look at the same reality and get different pictures*, he thinks. *Everyone is wrong, no one is right, everything has no purpose*, he thinks, but it doesn't make him happy. And now he knows that nothing does and nothing ever will, so why even try. Or maybe he does believe in meaning. Maybe he sees it all around him for everyone else and that just makes him feel empty. I don't know this person and never will, but let me tell you about what he did next. He..."

"Yeah? I'm listening. What happens?"

"Sorry. Lost my mind there for a second. But oh! Here it is. What he does next is he... Well, he gets in a car. He's driving fast, very fast. Very, very fast because he's finding a strange kind of joy in the speed and joy isn't something he feels very much, or will again. He's driving toward this bridge he knows. This big bridge that runs across a mighty river, very high up. He knows that the guardrail is weak and that death is as meaningless as life. But he doesn't stop there. Yeah, speed gives him joy, but he's got anger too. So much anger. These stupid observers. This is going to be the last thing he ever does, so why not make a bigger, colorless splash? On the bridge, he hops the median and gets pulverized by oncoming traffic. He doesn't make it over the edge, but he pushes someone else off. People die. He dies in the wreck and the water takes a few who survived the drop into the river."

"Dark."

"Yeah, it is. But there's more. Because the guardrail is destroyed and the community is reeling, the bridge is temporarily shut down, pending reconstruction and reinforcement. The state

hires a crack squad of civil engineers who discover on their first day a massive design flaw endemic to the entire structure. The weight of countless vehicles over the years had caused the state of the bridge to deteriorate, and the lead engineer predicts that continued stress would have caused a collapse within the week. Probably at the busiest point of the day with pressure at the highest. So this boy would have saved lives.”

“How convenient. So we should all commit vehicular homicide on bridges for a greater human good, you’re saying?”

“Absolutely not. What I’m saying is, this boy couldn’t escape meaningful consequence. He was wrong. About the colorless sun and empty night—he wasn’t anywhere close to truth. Not in the general vicinity or neighborhood of truth. It’s just his smudge on the lens. To be clear, I am anti-vehicular homicide. Intentionally hitting someone with your car is bad, but that’s what he did. And so the bridge never collapsed, and maybe it never would have, but that doesn’t matter. His outlook was wrong and everyone who would have died in the collapse goes on to prove it every day, just by living their lives. The end.”

...

The voice did not say anything for a while. Then they did. “Now there’s a story,” said the voice, and Emily didn’t say anything yet, because the voice sounded calm like she’d never known it to sound. In the whole hour or so they’d been on the phone, she hadn’t heard it calm like this. “It’s a good story,” the voice continued, “but convenient. What if the bridge fell anyway, or he decided to wreck himself in an intersection or against a tree?”

“But he didn’t,” Emily said. “And it’s a story, anyway. It could’ve ended differently, but didn’t.”

“Well,” said the voice.

Emily kicked up her truck's heater. The cold had sunk deep enough to make her willing to risk a couple minutes of monoxide. She'd gone after the blizzard after all. Why not take on CO poisoning next.

The voice buzzed up through her phone, after a moment. "You know you could probably make it out of here."

"What?" said Emily.

"You're truck. Hold on to your phone, I'm coming over."

"What? What. No." Emily told the voice. "No, this is fine," but the line went dead. She checked her phone: 17% battery left. "*Shit*," she cursed to the cabin and then pushed the sleeve of her jacket around the inside of her windshield in frantic circles to defog a clearer picture of the outside.

There. The voice's car. Right where it had been. Good.

But then she saw the door move a little. A jolt. Tentative. Snow spilled from where it had built up on the roof of the car. The door pushed all the way open and then the voice closed it. Emily watched the voice cross the short distance between their cars, and the colors it wore were black. Head to toe. It carried a shovel. She watched it move past her windshield, and heard the rap of its knuckle against her clouded driver's side window. "*Get ready*," came the muffled voice. "*Give me a few minutes to dig out some of this around your car and behind.*"

She'd kept her door locked, but she pushed her thumb down over the peg to make double sure and then waited. No more quiet snow. A scraping underneath her car. The dark blur of the voice out the opaque film of her window, bending to scrape under her truck with that shovel. Bending, scraping, and tossing the clumped snow over its shoulder. She waited more than a few

minutes and felt better that she could feel the rumble of the engine course up through the steering wheel, even if flooding the engine with gas wouldn't get her anywhere.

The voice had worked around to the back of the car. Probably. She couldn't see it anymore. Snow did not stop falling. A shadowy blob grasping some sort of tool returned to its own blurred vehicle and then her phone rang.

"Yes?" asked Emily. "Hello?"

"Hey," the voice panted. "Hey. Try putting it in reverse slow. Rock forward and back first to get some traction."

"Why did you—" Emily started, but the voice cut over her.

"Hurry and try, before new snow covers the path."

Emily followed the directions and then slammed the pedal level with the ground. Her truck jumped backwards but didn't catch, sliding back to its original position.

"No," said the voice. "Too fast, too fast. Don't you know how to drive in snow? Go slow and steady so you don't lose your grip."

"I knew that," Emily lied and got a soft laugh in response.

"Keep trying," the voice counseled.

She kept trying. She did that. Emily moved with slowness that was agony but got her closer to the road than her reverse-gear cavalry charge. She thought she had it, but the angle of the bowl rose too steep, or maybe she'd still been too fast. The truck would climb no further.

"Damn," muttered the voice. "I thought I could... Your truck might have made it. I'm just stuck but I thought maybe you could make it out."

Shit, Emily thought, and then said, "Shit." and then it hung there until she realized she had to say something else, so she said, "Thank you. You didn't have to do that."

“No,” said the voice, “no, it’s no big deal.”

“No. You didn’t have to. You didn’t even have to try.”

“It’s really nothing.”

“Okay,” said Emily.

Silence again. Emily cut the engine to make it real.

“Hey,” the voice asked. “Want to hear one more story?”

...

“Once there was a bank robber who got caught. Crazy fluke. Not their fault. They’d cased the bank office, obtained schematics that detailed safe locations and the placement of cameras. An extra body had shown up that day—an accounts manager who normally took Fridays off came in to perform extra prep work to prepare for an upcoming vacation in the Bahamas and ruined the bank robber’s whole plan. The police grabbed the robber up and locked them away, but before they stepped behind bars forever, two investigators decided to further detain them for questioning. ‘Why’d you do it?’ they wanted to know, for this bank had not been the robber’s first. Or second. Or their third. A few of the robber’s former heists hadn’t even been discovered yet, but would soon. So, ‘Why’d you do it? Why rob so many? We have the figures. We know you’ve made more than you could ever spend.’ And that was true. The robber had acquired more money than they could ever use. When the investigators asked, the robber smiled, finding both sweetness and sadness in being stopped. ‘I don’t rob banks for money,’ was the answer they gave. That night, while lying in their cell-bunk, the bank robber contemplated their fate, knowing that they wouldn’t live for long without a bank to rob. They wondered if they could have explained themselves to the investigators, if they should have tried, knowing they couldn’t. Explain that they couldn’t *not* rob banks—how each successive robbery became a symbolic

rejection of a world so smitten with and structured around the perceived value of green paper. How banks became the best target. Money could be anything—a proxy for everything. The robber would happily steal everything from everyone in the world, if they could do so without causing harm. Maybe they reasoned that they should never get hung up on kindness; kindness being meaningless as all else. Maybe they tried often to convince themselves that there was nothing meaningful to harm, but only tried so often because they could never succeed. The speck on the lens, kindness, would not rub off, and so they could only rob banks, which had the profit and insurance to cover clients. After a month, the bank robber died in prison, not of any violence or particular self-effort, but organically and alone, as they knew they would. They left behind a legacy of stories that bank employees circulated among their families until their kids eventually forgot to pass them on to the grandchildren. Then, for all meaningful purpose, the bank robber wholly vanished from this life. They lived their life in complete control of their criminal protests and harmed no one and then vanished. The end.”

...

“So,” said the voice. “What do you think?”

A diagonal slant of orange sun had broken through the clouds. Snow still drifted down in spots, but the dusk-light now sparkled over what had already fallen in a warm and shining crescent. No emergency vehicles, but time never stopped moving, and soon dark would come down on a final dusting of snow. What did she think? She thought of a sad and romantic bank robber, softer than they pretended to be, and she thought of the blizzard and how she’d blundered straight through its stormy heart. She coughed and held her keys in tight in her fist.

“An improvement. It’s better than your last one.” she said, and waited for the voice to tell her she was wrong, that nothing could be improved. But she didn’t think they really believed that.

“Better?” a laugh from the voice. “Nothing negative to say? No holes to poke?”

Emily tried to say something, but had to swallow to clear her throat. Had the stress of the day finally sunk into her, or did only the prettiness of that sunset swoosh in the snow thicken her windpipe? “Well, if you wanted me to say something, I could tell you that the bank robber isn’t fully realized. That their notion of kindness is present but unexplored. Glossed over. I’d want to ask the bank robber how they defined kindness, and how they reconciled that with their hatred of everything neon.”

“You’re getting confused.”

“Sorry. Everything *and* neon.”

“No,” chuckled the voice. “Those were two different stories.”

“Right,” said Emily. “Yeah.”

A whistle, through the phone. Melodic. Tuneful in spite of a connection accented with electric garble. Like the voice belonged to some robot bird that could sing. Emily felt the need to call her mother. “I—I think I need to go soon,” she said.

“Soon?” echoed the voice, anxious.

“Yeah,” Emily said, rolling down a window to peer into the sky. The darkening orange. “Soon. But I think... I think I can see the next exit from here. It’s not far.”

Silence on the other end.

“I’m going to walk it.”

“It’s almost dark,” said the voice. “Emergency response is coming. You said that right? They’ll be here soon?”

“I don’t know,” said Emily. “That’s what they told me. But. Um.” But she couldn’t wait here anymore, not with the daylight window closing on her chance to fight the blizzard to the closest McDonald’s or wherever. Her mother would worry less when she phoned, and even less if she phoned from the all-night warmth and light of some fast food restaurant and not from her truck where she’d stranded it in the highway median. “Come with me,” said Emily, because she didn’t have the words or stories then to explain herself.

“With you?” asked the voice. “Leave my car? Out here? Abandoned?”

“Yes,” said Emily. “I’m going to go. Just need to tie my boots. Come with me and we can fight the snow together.”

“Together? No, I... I’m not leaving. You don’t understand, I can’t.”

“You can’t?” Emily at feet, which were already laced into a pair of beaten hiking boots. *Come on, snow*, she’d thought on the road, back before she’d lost. *Gimme a little more*. A little more of the danger her mother had told her and told her to watch out for, pleaded with her not to fight, because she knew Emily loved to fight.

“No, I can’t. Please don’t go. The cold...”

“All right, one boot done. One boot left.” Emily pulled one arm through a sleeve in her giant coat and then did the other. *Blizzard ain’t shit*, she had thought before, and her mindset hadn’t changed. “Is it about fate? About fighting it?” she asked. “Are you afraid?”

“What? No, I’m not, it’s—wait, fate? No, no. You’re really going to go?”

“I’m on my way out now.” Emily zipped her coat up to the neck and grabbed her Bioinformatics textbook. Something to read when she reached her destination. “Last chance to

join the protest of fate.” She waited with her hand on the door-handle for more than a minute of silence before she accepted that the voice’s owner was not coming. “Hey,” she said, by way of parting. “Been a pleasure swapping stories with you. I honestly wish you the best going forward. Rob lots of banks if that’s what gives you meaning.”

“Wait,” said the voice. “Wait, a second.”

Emily waited.

“I’m not that person,” said the voice. “The one from your story. The driver person.”

Staticky quiet. “I’m not that person.”

“I know,” said Emily, though she didn’t. “I know you’re not. Don’t worry. Good luck out here.”

But the voice kept going. “I’m also not the other person. Not the bank robber.”

“Okay,” she said. “I need to go now. While it’s still light.”

“Oh. Yeah.”

“Bye.”

“Bye.”

She hung up and pushed open her door to knife-cold air that rushed her, but she broke forward and pushed through, slamming her dad’s truck shut behind her. The orange whip of sun had dimmed to a color like carrot. She saw how it sliced for her a path that curved across the highway, and that’s where she hustled, high-stepping through deep snow that soaked her pants to the knees. The world remained eerie and silent as she crossed from the median, and she was hit by no cars. She traipsed through snow until her toes had numbed, until she came to the nearest exit. Turning her head, she saw the dark lump of her truck and the headlight orbs of the voice’s

car. The sign at the exit told her point-one miles to the nearest Wendy's, *that way*, and that's the way she went, praying for an open door and a menu with at least one vegetarian option.

The day and blizzard ended behind her as a blue so dark stole over the mountains on winds of greater cold, but Emily moved forward. Darkness grew and spread but moonlight did fall in ghostly silver through breathing holes in the clouds. She moved and when she saw the yellow light of Wendy's, glowing like heaven in a world gone cosmically dark, she moved faster.

Blizzard ain't shit.

Gimme a little more.

Long Ride

Journey start: Twenty-six hours and eighteen minutes left on the road. Twenty-six hours and seventeen minutes on the road. Twenty-six hours and sixteen minutes on the road.

The song on Stan's radio changed from something by Outkast to *E.I.* by Nelly, and he hadn't even hit his hometown border yet. Hadn't put the tall bodies of the Colorado Rockies behind him. 5:38 AM... Way too early for Nelly. If he heard Nelly before the Kansas-Missouri border, not enough time had passed to justify Nelly.

"*Uh wait a minute now,*" started Nelly over the beat and tunes, and Stan pinched the radio tuner without turning the dial. "*Can you hear me out there?*" Currently, Stan would answer yes, but had strong feelings that the road to the future would lead him in a different direction. "*Lunatics, is y'all ready?*" said Nelly, and then was lost to the universe static of FM radio when Stan twisted the channel. Weird song.

Twenty-six hours and fifteen minutes left to get away from his family and home in Colorado Springs to the coast of South Carolina—the cobblestone streets and beach, the finance internship that would propel him into the real world. *Hello Stan*, thought Stan. *Thy future's name is Charleston*. Money for the pocket and a sea-salt breeze. Twenty-six hours and fourteen minutes left to go.

...

Stan rolled through the streets of Wichita for the memory of the thing. Birthplace of the Probst. Jeff Probst. Destination for escapist Kansans as they flocked to one of few places where buildings grew from the level earth in defiance of their state geography. *No more flatness!* Last time Stan had driven through Wichita, he'd had Mike flying co-pilot and some kind of plan to avoid work, stability, and Charleston.

Jeff and the Survivor producers hadn't seen potential in his audition tape, evidently, but that didn't stop him from hosting weekly Wednesday watch-parties and running a gambling pool on what contestant would make it how far. By year's end, he'd been down twenty-five bucks, but generally feeling *up*.

Bright sun bathed windows and other city glass in fierce glitter that he drove aimless squares through, drove aimless squares under a sky blue like cotton candy. Seven hours on the road felt like one and a half. Good that he had so much time, that he could keep driving forever as long as road existed to feed his wheels.

Somewhere past the city outskirts, he could have found the hospital where a tow-truck had once hooked the same car he still drove now and tugged it away, but he remembered too much of that day: that the outskirts had a speed-limit of thirty-five—too slow for to take for just nostalgia. He completed one last building-block circuit and turned for the highway because the city, so pretty and shining, did not move him forward.

Nice memories, no open road. It's time to drive, baby. Time to go.

Nineteen hours and forty-one minutes left on the road.

...

After almost twelve hours driving, Stan had put up with enough noise-making from his stomach to consider scouting out a quick meal. His jumbo pack of Island-variety *Skittles* had carried him through most of the day, but now in his desperation, he'd actually let himself pay slightly above average for a porkchop and some vegetables.

But he couldn't get himself to split with the highway. Every second off the road was a second lost, and worse—a second he'd have to make up. Double loss. *Okay, next exit*, he'd think, but then he'd miss the next turnoff and think the same thing again. After thirty more miles

driving against the pain in his stomach, a sign advertising the town of Mexico, Missouri (*Southern Hospitality's Home in the North!*) made him laugh enough to slow down, and five minute's search delivered him the *Distance Driver's Diner*. Grass surrounded the roadside restaurant and swayed and swayed. Swayed on and on into distant downtown Mexico. Yellow light spilled from the diner's windows into a parking lot of trucks, vans, and two *Winnebago* RV's.

The late heat felt good on his skin and topped off his already bursting energy. Eat quick and hit the road quicker. Hustle to Charleston then hustle in Charleston—the path to success. Shadows flickered back and forth through window-light; one pane had been opened to a crack at the bottom. Clinking silverware-plate noise drifted out, and also happy voices.

“Welcome to the *DDD*,” greeted the hostess, a girl who wore her hair short and blond over a brown leather jacket that covered most of her pink-dress uniform with an embroidered daisy stitched beneath one pronounced collarbone. “Can I get you seated, doll?”

“Yeah,” said Stan. “Yes, please.”

The diner opened into an entrance alcove with the glass door in front and a podium for the hostess at the back. Neon signs glowed “Restrooms” in electric red, with more down a short hallway blaring out “Ladies” on the right and “Germs” on the left with a family changing room straight center. A scraggly tree grew from a wicker basket in one corner and in another gurgled a small fountain where a woman of rough stone carried two overflowing jars of water on her shoulders. To his right began the restaurant, a tan ivy-vinyl carpet under tables that alternated between booths and chairs. On the other side, a bar stretched from the entrance alcove to where a jukebox stood against the opposite wood-panel wall, flashing blue and green and purple.

“Waiting on anyone?” the hostess turned her head back to ask as she led him into the main restaurant. Now that she’d stepped out from the podium, Stan could see how her dress ended in clunky hiking boots with wool socks poking out just above.

“No,” Stan told her. “Just me tonight.”

“Just you?” said the hostess with a sympathetic pang. “Well that’s fine,” she said.

“Sometime’s just you’s all you need. You like the table or the bar?”

“Bar’s good.”

“Then here you are.” She pulled out his chair before disappearing back to the alcove in a few long strides.

An older gentlemen with delicate gold-frame glasses that caught the overhead light and a bristly moustache that belonged to a prior century’s mineral prospector set him out a glass filled with cubes of ice that butted each other and clicked as water poured in and pushed them to the top. A vest the shade of dark cherries hugged his thin waste, and Stan thought he looked like a toymaker, or the owner of a chocolate shop, or a pretty good bartender.

“Can I cool you down with anything else to drink, sir?” asked the man. “You got that *road* look on you, and the day’s been real hot.”

Which apparently, he was. “Just a Coke is fine.”

“Coming right up.”

A family with two small kids followed the hostess to a table behind Stan. She knelt down in her boots so she talk to the children on the level and gave the little boy’s ear an affectionate pinch while asking his older but still young sister, “Booth or chairs?”

“Booth!” the kids told her together.

She’d already stopped them in front of booth anyway. “Right here,” she said.

“Thanks, Sophie,” said their mother as she slid into the booth opposite her kids. “Love the nails.”

Stan turned back to the bar and listened as the bartender shot soda into a fresh glass of ice. The carbonate sizzle remained after he’d tucked the soda gun back behind the bar. “Here you are.”

“Thank you,” said Stan, and he sipped, and even though a Coke is a Coke is a Coke, all things being equal, this was the bubbliest, best Coke he’d ever had. “Did I hear you say you could tell I’d been on the road?” he asked. “Earlier.”

“Oh, yessir,” the prospector-barman wiped his side of the counter with a checkered cloth. “People got a look about them from being in the car too long. Cooped up,” he said, scrunching his shoulders for effect. “Take’s them a moment and a meal to get proper relaxed.”

“You can really tell?” Stan was surprised. Impressed.

“I’m wrong?” he asked.

“No, you’re on the money,” said Stan. “Started the day in Colorado Springs.”

The bartender whistled. “Come a long way.”

“Long way I still gotta go,” Stan countered.

“Overnight?”

“Waste no time that way.”

“Well,” said the bartender. “Be careful pushing yourself so hard, now. Can I at least send you off with a meal into that good night?”

Stan, who’d been scanning the menu, ordered the porkchop, some mashed potatoes, and a bowl of autumn soup.

“Be right up,” the bartender told him, but a wait wouldn’t have left Stan upset. Which didn’t make sense. Shouldn’t he yearn for the road and miles and progress toward his goal?

Two more families and the one Sophie had just led over filled the booth tables behind him and a pregnant couple sat on the booths in the far corner. At the bar, two men grinned and shared a basket of peanuts and sipped soda that might have been spiked, but Stan didn’t think so. Conversational hum drifted in from all around him, but he couldn’t make out any of the individual talk, only that it all seemed content. Good smell hung in the air of the place and the golden light stood out stronger as the world outside the windows fell bright to dark blue. Stan wondered if the good smell ever dissipated, or if you got used to it. The last good smell place he’d sniffed had probably been... When his parents bought a new minivan back when he’d still been in elementary school? But he felt like that now. Like a kid in a new car breathing through his nose uncontrollably.

The bartender appeared with his food and then spoke a while with the other two men at the bar. “Nina getting on you to start gearing the store for holiday season, Doc?” Stan heard him ask.

The night got darker but nothing else did. Stan ate his full meal and tipped thirty-five percent. Before he left, he asked the bartender for his name.

“Ernie,” said the man, and they shook hands.

“Stan.”

“Good luck with your drive, fellah. Enjoy the country, if you can find time. Live some life.”

“Thank you. I will.”

In the entrance alcove, by the fountain and woman of overflowing jars, Sophie told him, “Come back now, y’hear?”

“Just passing through,” said Stan, wishing he wasn’t. “Badass jacket. Boots too.”

“*Thankee*,” Sophie rolled her eyes but smiled. “Seriously, come back sometime.”

Stan said he would, almost left, and then asked, “Got a phone number?”

She said she did and then gave it to him.

He wasted a few minutes just sitting in his car with the engine off, listening to the muffled noise of the restaurant. How long late did they keep open, he wondered? He passed someone arriving just as he left. Four someone’s, all piled into a minivan. Another family.

Instead of turning back for the highway, he found a Motel 6 outside Mexico and spent the night there. Fourteen hours and forty-four minutes left to go, but Ernie was right. Too much to see not to ease up a little and enjoy seeing. Fourteen could be sixteen, or eighteen, whatever it needed to be, really.

...

His journey had begun with hills. Mountains—the rugged Rockies. Then had come the far spaces, flatland stretches that bore him through breadbasket Kansas into Missouri, where the land returned to hilly. Embraced a new wetness. Murky trees clustered tight around both ends of a big bridge that took him over the thundering Mississippi. Big brown water that wound and curled and frothed foam-struck white.

He moved up hills and down hills. Drifted through trees and out of them. Past bent trees and towns filled with ivy, decay, and more cars than buildings. McDonald’s where workers outnumbering customers ten to one. He munched an Egg McMuffin for breakfast and sipped

special promotion one dollar tea. Took his time. Used the free Wi-Fi to give the *Distance Driver's Diner* a five star Google review.

The first gas station he rolled into that morning had no vehicles. No vehicles and no people. Placing his head against their window and cupping his hands around his eyes, he saw dust covering shelves already broken and shelves falling apart. One of the gas pumps had been ripped from the ground, leaving metal, frayed wire, and cut hose-line to curl outwards from the broken space. For some reason, he dug a penny from his pocket and dropped it down the mouth of the hose and heard a small splash from the reservoir below. Gas, he thought, or seasons and seasons of built up rain water?

Thirteen hours to go?

...

Rain began to fall in a light mist that brought out the color in everything except the sky. Grass became slick and glistening in the strength of its green. The road turned dark with the wet while the air above blanched pale gray. Gray like feather-down. Gray like the clouds had rained all their color away.

Stan kept one window down so the cool air and scent of a world newly-wet could run through his car and drove beneath the speed limit. The highway had gone empty except one, sometimes two cars in his whole field of vision, forwards and backwards. Three deer watched him cruise by under dripping trees.

Up and down on the road like some kind of wave. All the dampness of the ocean but so many states and miles before Charleston. Funny how a place could be so like something it so wasn't.

Still morning, but a gray sky set all daylight hours equal. Might've been any time. Stan kept up the drive. Ten hours or so to go, maybe.

...

Sophie: So traveler, where are you now? – 12:24 PM

Stan: Minnesota. Catching my breath at a truckstop – 1:15 PM

Sophie: Still not in SC? You were texting big game last night – 1:21 PM

Stan: Yeah – 1:23 PM

Stan: It's not like a huge rush I guess – 1:23 PM

Stan: I don't actually start my job for two weeks, want some time to get settled in the city first – 1:25 PM

Sophie: Wow eager – 1:25 PM

Stan: :) – 1:26 PM

Sophie: Bet it'll be cool tho I've never seen the ocean – 1:26 PM

Stan: Wait really you haven't? – 1:26 PM

Sophie: I want to at some point – 1:26 PM

Sophie: Just hasn't happened yet – 1:27 PM

...

A brown sign on the side of the road spoke of Freeman's Mill, a nationally recognized historic space. Stan decided to pull off and walk himself back to life. Put some pizazz in his legs. Shake as much of that cramped road-look Ernie had described as half an hour on his feet would let him.

The rain had gone still by the time he pulled into the gravel surrounding the old Freeman Mill. Still, but still there, and Stan felt like he was moving through paused time as his shoes

crunched on the little rocks. A strong mist like freeze-frame rain that got up in his clothes and hair with each step.

Heavy forest surrounded the mill on the not-lot side past an embankment where Stan thought a creek must run, but could hear none of the bubble and froth that belonged to rapid water. The Freeman mill stood tall and square, built of damp-dark wood with a shingled roof. A plaque on the outside wall identified the mill as dedicated to the public—that any wanderer could enter with respect to explore and take pictures. The door swung backwards with its own weight to slam behind him as Stan stepped into a world of shade.

The entrance floor of the Freeman Mill had no natural light. One empty oil lamp sat lightless on a desk and another hung on a hook from one of the rafters. A grindstone took up a quarter of the room and other and tools lay scattered across the place. Black and twisted from metal, they sat in clumps of three or four on a few structures, on the floor, in the belly of an aged wheelbarrow. Cracks of gray sky peeked through the spots where boards of the wall met imperfectly, slivers of weak brightness that illuminated nothing.

Two sets of stairs ran against the far wall, one climbing up and the other heading down. Figuring he was in no rush, Stan took the downward steps first. He had all the time he'd ever need and could climb later.

No movement in the mill's basement. No sound. Wooden stairs turned to cobbled rock at the bottom step—a stone basement that led in one direction. Stan walked down the short tunnel to where the wall opened up into a drop-off and dry creek bed. He could have jumped about five feet to the muddy bottom, and from there climbed into the old waterwheel that hung from the body of the mill. No movement in the wheel either, the creek having diverted and died long ago.

The contraption looked like a kaleidoscope train trestle with moss accents. Like the track had folded in on itself into a circle.

Stan did not like the motionless waterwheel, or the basement. He shifted his feet and they made almost no sound on the stone, but he could hear the thudding strength of his heart. The strength that loudly tried to pull him back to the road because Charleston lay on the other end, the next step to success and the rest of his life. Here, the creek had vanished and the wheel had stilled. The building was inert and the world no longer had use for mills so it would never wake up. A very large spider on the wall startled him, but it did not move so he let it be.

On the first floor, the lamps remained unlit. No hand had touched these pre-computer machines, these tools, had put them to use, in over a century. His shirt clung tight to his skin in the moisture and sapped his energy. Wouldn't it feel good to sit and stop? To stop and rest? To not have to wade another step for this hanging water? No. The temptation was there, but the temptation felt like panic. Panic to move. He moved upstairs.

A hole in the roof let a beam of daylight gray fall into mill-space and land on the floor. Lying still where the toothless light pooled was the long-collapsed skeleton of some large creature—a deer? Bleached white bones casted all kinds of sliver shadows on each other where the leftover animal-pieces shared space with the gray circle. Stan watched the head, beads of water from the air leaking down its hollow bone eyes.

Stan left the dead animal and the Freeman Mill. Did not look into the woods beyond or burn another second studying the halted waterwheel. He hopped in his car, drove, and hoped he'd never see this place again.

Nine and a half hours to go, but less than an hour to get to anywhere that's not here. Somewhere away from the Freeman Mill and out of the rain.

...

He took the rest drove for the rest of that evening at an odd and changing pace. Fast here. Cruising slow there. He didn't know if he was missing everything or skipping over things he'd rather not see. Sometimes he felt like speeding up, like feeding the engine more gas because he was chasing something. Other times he second-guessed. Felt like he was just running away.

He thought of the *Distance Driver's Diner* and might have made good on his promise to Sophie if he hadn't crossed a whole state and many hours by then. The ocean had drawn him to Charleston first. The difference, the distance. The East Coast a big change from Colorado. He would have liked to have known, now, if he was really going somewhere better than what he'd left behind.

Nine hours and counting.

...

A late night storm broke as he crossed into Kentucky. He didn't have many hours scheduled for this leg of the trip and would shift quick and south into Tennessee. Was it possible that this storm would hold over him for an entire state, that he'd only ever know Kentucky under a dark and lightning-splintered sky?

Heavy rain. Heavy, heavy rain. Lightning and danger.

He grabbed a room at a motel just across the Tennessee line and waited for morning, lying on his back and listening to the rain and crash long before he could fall asleep.

Eight hours.

...

Stan: Crossed two states yesterday. There – 8:46 AM

Stan: Back on my flow – 8:46 AM

*Sophie: Ha. Well I've been at work for two hours already and have 32 in tips so there –
8:51 AM*

*Stan: Good money. How many early mornings you have to work to stop working early
mornings – 8:53 AM*

Sophie: Keep talking two weeks early to Charleston guy keep talking – 8:53 AM

Stan: I'll keep driving you watch 0_0 – 8:54 AM

Sophie: When you going to drive back to DDD? – 8:59 AM

Stan: Way back maybe? Kind of far from the coast – 9:03 AM

Sophie: Totally tell me about the beach. Wish I could see it at some point. – 9:12 AM

*Sophie: There's a bowling arcade up here in Mexico. When you blow back thru town bet
I can double your score – 9:13 AM*

Stan: Yeah really? 9:15 AM

Sophie: Triple – 10:01 AM

...

Somewhere before Knoxville in the eastern part of Tennessee, he left the highway in search of an early lunch, possibly at some bustling roadside diner that would give him good food, company, and an understanding of what he should be looking for in Charleston. What if finance left him drained? He'd be making more money than he ever had before but was that the trap? How fast or slow would pace for him his best life?

He crossed paths with a Wendy's, a Burger King, and an abandoned Quizno's but nothing like that diner in Mexico, Missouri. Did he ask too much from chance, to find two such places? He would return to the DDD someday. Sometime.

Warm sun poured into his car, and he drove with the windows down, left arm resting where the glass had disappeared, choosing turns on whims and hoping they'd lead him to either the highway or something worth seeing. Then he heard music. Another curve brought him even with a long row of wooden shacks connected at the walls. Most had a porch swing or made up for the lack of one with two or three conciliatory rockers. The music floated over their roofs from somewhere behind the line.

Stan slowed his car and nosed it into a gravel lot on the other side of the road, where a rainbow collection of vehicles in many colors, all faded, had parked anywhere they could find space. He fit his car between a big yellow pickup truck and a beaten Honda that looked older than some of the shacks. Quick notes from a far-off piano grew louder as he moseyed across the street and up a dirt trail that took him past the shack-line into a huge green space with an outdoor chapel at the center. Maybe two hundred filled rows of wooden pews that led up to a big wooden cross hewn from felled trees. More had brought lawn chairs, families, and blankets to gather in the field around the chapel. Three more rows of shacks enclosed a complete circle, and from the inside, Stan could see nothing of the road that ran in one direction to Charleston and in the other back to Mexico and Colorado, to Wichita and the places he'd been from. A sign read *Unity Camp Meeting, Est. 1823*.

The piano slowed, and Stan thought that the tune must have ended, but then the music picked up again and the people stood together and sang, "*Sowing in the morning, sowing seeds of kindness. Sowing in the noontide and the dewy eve. Waiting for the harvest, and the time of reaping. We shall come rejoicing, bringing in the sheaves.*"

Stan sat backward onto the grass and felt good being still. A different still—not the freezing silence of the Freeman place, because he knew that when the song ended, he would move again. That he’d arrive at Charleston and stay or go as he felt he needed to.

“Bringing in the sheaves. Bringing in the sheaves. We shall come rejoicing, bringing in the sheaves.”

The tenants had decorated this side of their shacks with awnings and colored blankets tacked to the walls behind their porch swings. Stan saw colorful toucans, a striped lighthouse, the cracked liberty bell, and more and more designs all around the circle. Did they live here full year, he wondered? Church, he’d gone to church once with a friend after a sleepover, but that had happened way back years ago. Right now, the people kept singing.

“Going forth with weeping, sowing for the Master. Though the loss sustained our spirit often grieves. When our weeping’s over, He will bid us welcome. We will come rejoicing, bringing in the sheaves.”

They sang the refrain a final time and then went quiet. So much noise gone so fast. Anticipation. “Thank you for that,” came the mic’d voice of a preacher. “Now let us bow our heads in prayer.”

Did that mean him too? He had enjoyed the music.

“We come to you, Lord, to thank you. For this beautiful Sunday and also for the Camp Meeting—that we may gather here in your space, and lift up to you our songs and hearts. And upon our hearts, Lord, we ask you impart that feeling of Camp Meeting, that when we leave here, we leave with that light within us to share. Lord, we know it is easy to be a Christian in our homes and churches. We know that it is in the world outside that we fail to be the witnesses you call us to be. So we thank you, Lord. We thank you for the sunny mornings, sweet hymnals, and

fried ham of our Camp Meeting. We thank you and understand that Camp Meeting is as much for our neighbor as it is for us. That it is our responsibility to take the spirit we find here and share it with that world outside where it can be so hard to stay true to you. We thank you for teaching us to pray as your Son did, all those ages ago, when he said, *'Our Father, who art in heaven. Hallowed be thy name.'*”

Stan opened his eyes when the Lord's Prayer started and looked at the lazy clouds. The lazy, lazy clouds. *We shall come rejoicing.* The tune made a nest in his head.

“For thine is the Kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen. Go now and may peace and God be with you and y'all have a wonderful day!”

And the people began to stand and disperse. Pick up and pack up their lawn chairs. Stan watched them linger and exit. The clouds, the peaceful chapel—wooden pews in grass bursting healthy and green. Then the people were gone to their shacks and Stan was still there. He realized the time had come for him to be gone to.

A family had gathered for lunch on a collapsible table behind one of the shacks across from where Stan had parked. A tablecloth peppered with yellow flowers covered the surface with steaming ham, casserole, macaroni, green beans, and a bucket of Bojangle's fried chicken heaped on top. God, did it smell goddamn good. That good smell. Maybe he'd have joined in the Lord's Prayer if he could count on that good a meal waiting for him in Charleston.

“Hey, stranger!” called a big man looking out of place in a collared shirt. “You want a bite for the road?”

Six hours and fourteen minutes to go and a delicious casserole inside of him, but the flowers on the tablecloth wouldn't let go of his head. The embroidery. The chisel of the bone of Sophie's collar.

...

Stan: Getting close. Excited. Ready for the beach – 1:13 PM

Stan: Still at work? – 1:14 PM

...

Near the end of his time in Tennessee, his radio found *E.I.* by Nelly again, and Stan let it play. If the moment called for *E.I.* by Nelly, he wouldn't fight the moment. Better he live with no focus on starting or stopping. He guessed that meant listening to *E.I.* sometimes, if the radio threw that at you.

“Andele andale moma E.I. E.I. uh oh—what’s poppin tonight? Andele andale moma E.I. E.I. uh oh—if the head right Nelly there erry night.”

Four hours and forty-five minutes left, and if the radio bade him listen to *E.I.* by Nelly for all of it, he would.

A little less than an hour later, the radio found *E.I.* again, and this time Stan really felt ready to listen. He pulled off the nearest exit and found a place to stop. The song played out.

...

Stan: Hey, what if I made it back to DDD tonight? Think you’d have time to triple my score? – 2:41 PM

Sophie: Hell yeah ur toast – 2:43 PM

Sophie: Aren’t you going to be in Charleston tho – 2:46 PM

Stan: I could be – 2:50 PM

Stan: But I’ve got time – 2:51 PM

Stan: I could also be bowling – 2:52 PM

Sophie: Hell – 3:00 PM

Sophie: Yeah. – 3:00 PM

...

He'd stopped in a small town near the South Carolina border to refuel for the next leg of his journey, which would take him back where he'd been. Sunlight came down in visible strips through holes in his lazy clouds, this gorgeous sun would follow him to Charleston, or back to Mexico and wherever else he went. This good heat would wait for him and succeed any storm always.

A mechanical click. His car needed no more gasoline. Stan returned the nozzle to its pump and loved the traces of fuel-scent and how that sun fell on his reaching arm. He tossed his keys in the air, caught them, and whistled *we will come rejoicing, bringing in the sheaves* as he moved again.

Don't Tell Me Your Name

Emily went to Hazel Lake Mall because she had a sudden need to bake a quiche with sweet potato crust. Off and on for weeks she'd been telling Jordan she'd cook him something at some point, but work had kept her from making good. Jordan, who worked at a deli, coached Little League, and had more free time than she did, had offered twice to pick up anything she might need, but she'd told him no, she'd go herself.

So Hazel Lake Mall, with its two stories that yawned around her. Two stories of empty mall-hallway. *Mallway*. Half the shops had "Space for Rent" stickers pasted over shuttered windows. A small boy hooted and giggled as he ran up the down escalator of a twin set. Bedazzled cases for outdated smartphones sat on the rack of a deserted kiosk and reminded her to call Jordan, but she had a lot of *mallway* to cross before Le Food Shoppe. She could dial in the car.

Le Food Shoppe had devoted an aisle and a half to vegan cheese. The cheapest substitute cost more than even the fancy normal kind, but she'd won 8.5 million for her department at the last budget allocation meeting to help twenty-somethings in tech startups go public, so yeah, what the heck. \$24.99 for cheese-less feta, whatever. Put it in the quiche.

A ding from her phone.

Jord. Halvorson: Hey.. You on your way? Game abt 2 start – 3:30 PM

She dropped it back in her purse. Later. In the car. Now was quiche time, and she'd be there in person soon. Her phone dinged again in the Le Food Shoppe checkout.

Jord. Halvorson: Mom & dad here, Nate 3rd up 2 bat – 3:37 PM

Nate was Jordan's nephew, newly nine years old and spending his first year in Little League on Jordan's team, and her man loved it. While Nate practiced catching pop-flies on first,

Jordan could practice being a dad. He talked about it every night, so adorably excited and *so much*. The parent prep he could do, the learning how. The back of Emily's hand tingled where his fuzzy lip had kissed it that morning before she left for work. Jordan coaching Nate at practice. Dad practice. *Dactice*.

She stopped and took a breath. Pulled out her phone and typed out a text.

Exciting! Hope he hits good. On way, will be there soon

She read the message over and then deleted *soon*. Sent.

Jordan wanted a family. She knew he *had* a family—the whole point of today's game, actually. His parents had come to watch the son of one son play baseball with guidance from their other son, and if Emily's busy schedule allowed, meet a possible daughter.

Ding. A reply before she could even pass the escalators, where the same small boy had started hopping the conveyer rail to dangle and laugh the whole way down. She looked around. No attendant at the phone-case kiosk. Shuttered stores, no parents. The kid spider-monkeyed his way up the other escalator to start again.

Jord. Halvorson: Hit a double!!! Mom asking abt u, almost here? – 3:47 PM

She kicked up another message, telling him that time was tight and—a surprised sound like a hiccup followed by a *thud*. The child—he'd lost his grip on the escalator rail and dropped halfway down onto his ankles and then knees. She saw him sit up fast but sway all dizzy, face a baptism of confusion, and she rushed to where he'd landed, let fall her unmade quiche, disappeared her phone into her purse.

“Hey,” she told him, trying to crouch next to him and then giving up when her heels wouldn't let her. Sitting on her knees, she asked, “Hey, hey. Are you okay?”

He nodded but so clearly wasn't, the shock that comes before actual hurt draining from his face to leave a shake in his shoulders. Emily saw his quivering chin, the tight-shut mouth. "Hey," she cooed softly because she could see how much the child did not want to cry. "Hey."

The kid exhaled hard with his whole small body and she touched a hand to his arm. She craned her neck around for his parents? Where was this kid's mom? Dad? Not even the kiosk had a person for her.

She moved her hand to his back—moved it in slow circles, saying "Hey," and "It's all right," until his shaking had steadied into deep breaths and uneven jolts. When he unwound his clamped jaw enough for her to see the deep scores his too large adult teeth had cut in the spongy lip, she asked, "Does it hurt?"

He blew out hard, rocking his head forward and back while a single strand of blood-saliva dripped onto his jeans.

"Do you think you can stand up?" she asked him, and he rocked his head again but didn't try to move. "Is your mom here?" she changed tact. "Where is your mom?"

"I," he started with a scratchy whisper that he lost when he had to clench his teeth and wrench his eyes through another shaking spasm. When they opened, Emily saw water glisten at the corners. "I... *Eye doctors*," he finished.

The eye doctor... Upstairs, then. She'd gone before, and could get the child there, if she could get him standing first. "Do you think you can stand?" she asked again, and then added, "Can you be strong for me, even if you have to use my arm?"

The boy nodded, his face now screwed tight against pain she could hear in the quick breaths he'd started taking through his nose. He wrapped his fingers around the hem of her blazer as they rose and teetered—the double escalator drone humming in from around and above.

“Okay,” she found her balance. “Let’s go.”

They rode to the second floor and then she let him lead in a sort of hunchbacked hobble that took them back in the direction of Le Food Shoppe. Jordan was probably cheering for his *Coyotes* as they took the outfield, but he’d understand this. She stooped and stepped and hoped her heels wouldn’t betray her again, not with so much child leaning on her.

“Here. She was here.” The boy had brought her to a white-lit and sterile alcove with lots of mirrors and posters of toothy smiles under big glasses. “She was here,” said the boy, and Emily tried to think of what to do. The eye doctors... Lake Optometry. “She was,” the boy was saying again, but then—

“Walter!” A woman moved fast down the *mallway*. “Walter! Where did you go, I told you to—”

Now that he’d found his mother, Walter broke out everything he’d been bottling up. He pulled Emily in her direction, and then just let go, hopping with a terrible limp to the woman’s hip, which he flung his arms around and used to bury his face. “Oh,” she brought a hand around to the back of his head and held him there. “Oh, are you...” She saw Emily and fired off, “What happened? Did you see?”

“He fell,” said Emily. “He fell from the escalators. I...”

“Oh Walter,” sighed the woman, and she pulled her son’s face gently from her blouse. “Walter. Is this true? What did I tell you to do?”

He mumbled something and tried re-burying his face. She said his name sharper, and this time he moaned, “*Stay-he-he.*”

“O-kay,” the woman softened. “Where does it hurt, big guy? What’d we do to ourselves?”

Emily watched her roll up the cuff of one pant leg while Walter whimpered and stood heavily on that side. “Goodness child,” Walter’s mom tutted, and Emily recognized colorless bulges on his shin that would inflate into big blue bruises. “Goodness,” said his mom again, and then, “*Ouch*. We can put some ice on that when we get home. Do you want to go wait at the ice cream shop until daddy comes to pick us up?”

Walter sucked in one shaky inhale but didn’t say no, and Emily remembered the quiche she’d forgotten. Quiche, forgotten. And her phone. Forgotten quiche. She hadn’t called Jordan. *Forguiche*. Last week at exactly this time, she’d brought orange slices for the kids to snack on, and Jordan had told her through the chain-link fence that his parents were coming to Nate’s next game, and would she be comfortable meeting them, *perfectly all right if not. Here, I’ll even give you their first names. Just think of them as Curt and Anna*.

“*Absolutely*,” she’d told him then. “*Sure*.”

Fierce Emily, Emily *shark*, Emily indirect manager of over 300 mixed analysts and consultants through her direct team of a dozen project leaders had nothing to fear from two kindly retirees. Curt drove an ambulance but not for over a decade and Anna still organized the same church pre-school Jordan had graduated thirty-one years ago. So Emily hadn’t met anyone’s parents in a meaningful way in... well, a kind of a long time, but she was still *Emily*. That did not change. But where at work, that meant fierce and *shark*, the nighttime definition had somehow changed in the last week to mean lying awake and listening to Jordan snore, thoughts echoing with his Nate-talk and *dactice*. Emily’s morning definition changed around the same time. Became informing Jordan of her spontaneous desire to cook fancy quiche.

Quiche she’d now forgotten. *Forguiche*.

“Come on, Walter. Let’s go,” said the mother.

Walter put out one foot, transferred a little weight, and then dropped like a soccer player taking a knee, face scrunched with tear-wet cheeks and tightened eyes. He held his mother's hand all the way down. "Walter?" she stumbled. "Walter are you—Walter, oh my god."

And now Emily saw the red of the boy's other ankle. Big red swelling like a circus balloon between the tongue of his shoe and cuff of his jeans. How had she missed it before?

Walter, so composed and probably in a little shock for so long, saw his mother's face and cried, "What is it, is something wrong? It *hurts!*"

Emily wanted to calmly announce to all interested parties that the ankle looked incredibly not right and also wrong and also how had she not noticed the broken state of this child before, *what was wrong with her?*

"Okay, okay," Walter's mother was on the floor now too, hands on her kid. She had his back propped against one arm while she used the other to probe the big red ankle. He flinched when she brushed his skin trying to peel back the jeans. "It's gonna be okay," she was saying. "We'll wait for da... No. We'll—" Walter cut through her speech with a long moan that had her free hand thumbing tears off his splotchy cheek and whispering, "Oh, baby. Oh, baby."

Emily saw this and was no longer quiche Emily. She whipped out her phone, ignoring a message that had just arrived from Jordan. "I can call nine-one-one. Or do you have a car?"

"What?" asked the woman, "I," and she chewed on her lip. "I don't have a... How much does an ambulance—"

"Nevermind." Emily stashed the phone in her purse. Her hand brushed plastic. "I can take you. Try and get him to drink from this." She pulled the half-empty bottle of Fiji Water from her purse and passed it to Walter's mother. Yes, she knew the company serviced a despotic regime that quashed the Fijian people—that was the point. She imagined venture capital shared a lot of

headspace with cutting throats and this helped her get there. “Sipping is fine,” she instructed.

“Just try and give him something other than pain to focus on.”

Walter’s mother accepted the bottle, lifting it uncapped to Walter’s mouth. “Hey, baby. Shhh, shh... Can you drink for me? Just a little sip. Okay? Okay, good. Now another.”

“I’ll be right back. Get ready to move him,” said Emily, and then moved with fury down the escalator and out to her car and got there so fast. Twisted the ignition and gunned a tight curve into parking parallel by Hazel Lake’s sliding glass doors. Her hearth thudded sharp but she didn’t stop. Didn’t slow. “Hey,” she panted. “Car’s pulled around. You can ride in the back. I’ll get you to the ER.”

“Thank you. But you don’t have to... I can...”

“It’s no trouble,” said Emily. “No trouble. But let’s go. Let’s go.”

Emily was going to try and help Walter up, but Walter’s mother stood first, grunting as she lifted the kid. Walter hung to her neck like a chimpanzee with his ballooning ankle dangling under him. “My shoe,” he’d begun moaning. “My shoe hurts!”

They were already walking, each step, each sway punctuated by sharp intakes in Walter’s breathing. “Shhhhh,” Walter’s mother said first, rubbing his back, but when Walter kept crying and saying, “My shoe, my shoe,” she looked to Emily and pleaded, “Could you...?”

But Emily shook her head. “Keep the shoe on. Contains the swelling.” So Walter’s mother kept shushing and said, “Did you hear that Walter, did you?” Walter had not. He’d started reaching with his fingers to scrabble at his shoe.

“We’ll get there. We’ll get there soon. We keep moving forward,” said Emily. When in Hell, cherish momentum. Stop once and you’ll stop again. At her car, she held the door open for

Walter and his mother while they ducked in backwards. In the driver's seat she looked back and told them, "Hold on. We're on our way. Be there soon."

She merged onto the highway as smooth as she could manage at eighty miles-per-hour. Walter hadn't stopped wailing and the empty bottle of Fiji Water clattered somewhere under her backseat. Emily shifted into the far left lane and cut off some guy in a truck who wanted to go 110, presenting her fist and middle finger when he started laying into his horn.

Where Hazel Lake had provided hundreds of vacant parking spaces, the Emergency Room offered spots numbered in the tens mostly filled. Emily pulled to the front. "Go ahead and hop out. I'll meet you inside," she said and then wondered why as she patrolled for an empty space. Wasn't her part done here? But she'd told the woman she'd go inside. She'd go inside.

That was where she found Walter and his mother, standing in line. She stood behind them in silent support, with a short break to stand in silent support by the vending machines, where she purchased a Milky Way for mother and Snickers for son. Walter's mother accepted the candy and asked, "Why are you being so nice to me?"

Emily didn't know how to say that she couldn't not help, that she hated seeing people, especially children in pain. Those words wouldn't come.

"Walter?" an ER tech called.

The attention of Walter's mother snapped off her, and Emily unfroze. Good. Jordan was waiting for her; she needed to be there—she'd told him she'd be there. Emily stood. Time to go, *time to go to Jordan's field—see that dactice in action. Dactaction.* She thought all this with perfect knowledge that she'd just sit idle in the car, waiting for enough dozen minutes to pass that she could just head back to the apartment. And now she even had an out. The injured child, an unimpeachable excuse.

Jordan would understand. So would Curt and Anna. She'd call and explain everything about Walter and yeah, he'd be let down, but that wouldn't stop him from calling her *shark* with affection, from telling his parents, "*Sorry mom. Shark can't make it today. She's out taking on the whole world again,*" because he really talked ridiculous and adorable like that sometimes.

Emily could see her own reflection out the packed ER's huge window-walls and who she saw made her so choked-up angry, she thought she might let out a big Walter-sob and disappoint herself even more.

But before she could do any of that: Call Jordan, idle in the lot, glare at her semi-transparent self for more than a hot second, she heard Walter's mother ask, "Come with me?"

Emily forgot everything about herself and followed. Past triage and through the doors. Down a hallway and around a corner. Through medical beeps and the sound of people talking and moving fast. A man with an electronic reader clamped to his finger and tubes running from his nostrils gave their procession grumpy eyeballs from his wheeler-bed in the center of the hallway.

When they'd reached what the ER tech called their curtained cubicle, Emily waited for Walter's mother to place him on the sickbed and select a chair before seating herself on a roller-stool. Walter's crying subsided into pained grunting and his mother crinkled the wrapper of her Milky Way without opening it.

They waited and kept waiting. Emily thought about pulling out her phone to peck out a quick message to Jordan, but didn't. A nurse came and took Walter's vitals, gave the quick answer of "Soon," when Walter's mother asked about a doctor, and then disappeared out the plastic curtain. More waiting. When the doctor did come, he spent all kinds of time asking Walter questions like what was his name, what happened, and *does it hurt when I poke here?*

Yes.

“Well,” the doctor told Walter’s mother. “It’s swollen badly.” Emily glanced over to Walter where he laid on the bed, jeans cuffed and without shoe or sock to cover his red sore of an ankle. “And that can mean a lot of things,” continued the doctor. “Bones are a possibility. Broken bones. Ligament damage, but we can’t check that until the swelling’s gone. I’m going to recommend an X-ray for now to take a look at what’s going on in there.”

“Is that really...” The Milky Way sat inert on the lap of Walter’s mother. Now the fingers of one hand crinkled the fingers of the other. “Would there be another way to—or does insurance...?”

“Well,” said the doctor. “You could go home and wait for the swelling to die down on its own, and if everything is *swell*, then, you know.” No one laughed. The doctor sucked in a breath and said, “But swelling is indicative of trauma, and there’s a lot going on here. I wouldn’t recommend an X-ray unless I thought it was necessary.”

“Okay,” Walter’s mother contorted her mouth close to how people normally grin. Maybe the doctor couldn’t tell the difference because he smiled back. “Okay,” repeated Walter’s mother. “Let’s do it then. X-ray.”

So with the doctor pushing Walter in a new wheelchair, they went with him as far as he allowed them to follow, stopping with him by a door marked *Radiation Hazard*. “If you two could wait here,” he gestured to a series of chairs next to a very large fish tank with only two small fish the color of spent lemons. “All right, Walt. Let’s go!” The hazard door closed automatically behind them: Doc and Walt onto their next adventure! The big scary X-rays that reveal things even scarier and radiate wildly.

Walter's mother waved and gave smile-support to Walter until he was gone, then she had her face pressed into hands she used to rub her skin up and down and wipe her nose after a violent snuffle. "Oh God," she said and rubbed her face more. When she brought her hands down, her eyes were shiny and red like Walter's ankle. "Oh God, how could I mess up this bad?"

"What?" asked Emily, and Walter's mother grabbed the arms of her seat and started rocking.

"I let him get away and now he's hurt. I can't believe I—I let him get away and now his foot! What if he can't walk anymore, or if he can't... Oh God..."

Emily put her hand over the woman's where it clenched the armrest. "No," she said looked into her eyes and said. "No. This isn't your fault. It's no one's fault. You didn't mean for this to happen and couldn't have stopped it. Things will be all right, and even if they're not right now, they'll get to be."

Walter's mother slowly drew her face up to lock eyes with Emily, and Emily saw those eyes were speckled and green. "You can't know that," she said. "But thank you. Thank you."

"No trouble. Really. I'm happy to," Emily said, thinking now would be an excellent time for another practiced lapse into silence, but then Walter's mother said, "Thank you," again.

"Thank you," said Walter's mother, looking a little bit like Walter because now she'd started shaking. Drainage leaked in a trickle from both sides of her nose. "Thank," she shook and repeated, "Thank, thank..."

"Hey," Emily's heart shuddered. "Hey, it's all right."

"No," Walter's mother took a hefty sniff. "No, it's really, really not. My husband—he's at work—I was... That is, we've been," she swallowed. "Money's tight. Really tight. We talk so

much about,” *sniff*, “money and also Walter but now while I was watching... Walter’s hurt and I was supposed to be watching, and...” she stopped and shook her head.

“No.” Emily fixed the strap of her purse straight and serious on her shoulder like she’d do before tackling an interdepartmental lunch with marketing and finance. “No. If your husband cares about Walter, he’ll be concerned for Walter. This isn’t your fault.”

Walter’s mother had her forehead scrunched into a deep V that sat between her brows and above her nose. “No, no, he’s... Thank you,” she said, “and I’m sorry but just. I’m glad you’re here but who are you? How do I make this up to you?”

“You don’t have to,” said Emily, stiff.

“But I do,” Walter’s mother insisted. “I mean, you—you drove me here, and I see that suit,” she said, running the hem of her own blouse between a finger and thumb. “You’re not *not* busy, and you’ve done so much more than... Just what kind of person does this?”

Emily looked on in horror and wanted more than anything for Walter to walk out of the X-ray room on two functional ankles and distract his mother by being miraculously cured. She said, “You don’t have to do anything to make up something anyone would do.”

“But you’ve been so nice to me and I don’t know why or anything about you! What do you do, what’s your name? I haven’t even told you who I am. I’m—”

Emily cut her off. “Don’t tell me your name.”

For a moment, nothing. Then, “*What?*”

“I don’t want to know,” Emily said. “You don’t know who I am and you really don’t want to either.” She stood up and tried to keep her voice soft, saying, “Walter will be out soon and everything will be fine. If not right now, things’ll get that way. Goodbye.” And she left.

Outside those sliding Emergency Room doors, she remembered that Jordan had texted her. Way back in Hazel Lake. Which was good. One more thing for her to do before finding her car.

Jord. Halvorson: Getting L8 into game. Close? – 4:58 PM

Jord. Halvorson: Mom&dad heading home to beat dark – 5:35 PM

Jord. Halvorson: Youre not coming – 6:13 PM

Emily read these and typed out her own message: *Sorry. Crazy day. Will tell you about it back home. So sorry I missed.* She looked at the response but didn't send. She deleted the words and tapped Jordan's name. Tapped *Call*. Midway through the second ring, he picked up.

"Hey *shark*," came his voice with only a dab of primal telephone crackle. "Was wondering when you'd drop a line. What's up? Are you okay?"

Got caught up at work, she could say, and then he would leave it at that. "I'm sorry."

"What? No biggie. More games coming up."

"No. No. I'm sorry. I got off work hours ago, and I've just been killing time. I meant to go to the game, but I didn't."

"Wait," said Jordan, and Emily waited. "Wait," Jordan said again. "So you've been... where, exactly? What... I, uh, what's up? What's going on?"

"It's Curt and Anna," said Emily, and then, "No. It's not. It's me. I'm—I got nervous. About meeting Anna and... I'm sorry. About meeting your parents."

"Oh," said Jordan, simple and flat.

"I should have told you," said Emily.

"I mean, yeah..."

A family exited the Emergency Room and had to divide into two groups to move around her. Emily moved to the side and used the pointed toe of her heel to displace some mulch in the hospital's landscaping. "It's just hard," she said. "For me." She swallowed. God, how she'd like it if her boyfriend were some suited asshole on the budget appropriations committee. Then she'd really summon her strongest voice and rip into him, but he wasn't a suit. Didn't even own one, and now she could hear people cheering from a Little League match far away in her phone. "It's hard for me to know people, sometimes. Or let people know... Like a compliment, right? Sometimes it feels like a gut-punch, because—or, or..."

"Emily."

"Or a hug is, is made of spikes, or—"

"Emily—"

"Or have I ever told you about Ted? One of my closest friends? He's great."

"Wait. Who's Ted?"

"The best account development agent on my team," said Emily.

"That's a... relief, I guess," said Jordan.

"But it's like that," Emily had found her voice now. "Your parents. You're—they're so nice! Your mom preaches preschool and—" she took a breath. "I'm sorry, Jordan. I'm so sorry."

"Emily. I get all that. And I get all that about you."

Emily listened.

"I mean, I don't *get it* get it, but I do kind of get it, got it?"

Families and couples and some individuals streamed in and out of the Emergency Room, and Emily watched them, smiling with something like funny frustration. If he were some

corporately powerful executive, she'd never let him speak to her this way, but he hadn't stopped being Jordan. "Got it," she said.

"Righto. Remember when I was back working the deli at *Gourmet Corner Bistro*?"

"You still work there."

"Yeah, but now I'm also a coach. And I'm also dating you, and both are better gigs, so."

God, why did the frustration have to also be funny.

"But the first time I called your insanely complexly healthy order *The Superleaf Raspberry* you didn't tip for a week."

"I've apologized for that before; please don't make me do it again. I don't know if I can. That name is godawful."

"You ordered the same combination of grape leaves, spinach, quinoa, sweet peppers, and raspberry spread on rye every lunch for three straight months. It deserved a name."

"Okay, okay. Keep going."

"Well," said Jordan. "Yeah, so then you also pushed back our first date for like a week. Every afternoon you'd come in and say you actually couldn't that night and reschedule for the next day until we finally just had lunch literally right there on my break."

"All right, yeah. But the date was good. Like surprisingly good."

"Hey. Why the surprise?" he laughed, but something sounded sad still. The actual laugh? The short pause after? "And I get you got spiky hugs. The first time we hugged, I thought maybe you were allergic to my clothes or I smelled or something."

"Wow. Uh. Sorry about that?"

"No, that's—I'm exaggerating. Point is, we worked at it. Got better. No more spiky hugs," he said. "Spike-hugs. *Spugs*."

Emily grimaced and wished she had some Fiji Water. “Oh god. That word thing is the most ridiculous—”

“But, just to be clear, you’ve never asked me to stop.”

She had to turn away from the phone so he wouldn’t hear her sigh. “No,” she said, when it was safe. “That’s true. It’s cute. I think about it sometimes. When I’m feeling overwhelmed.”

“Glad it’s working for you,” he said. “You know I think you’re cute too, right?”

Emily didn’t say anything back because her throat had closed. She coughed it back open but couldn’t get the words on her tongue past her lips.

“Hello? Emily?” Jordan’s voice. Panic traces.

She could still tell him nothing. Soothe his worries, talk all about Walter and make things between them right again. But she couldn’t. She couldn’t, she couldn’t. Cherish momentum. Don’t stop once you start. Not once. Her voice cracked but didn’t break. “I think we need to talk about direction. What we want from our lives and each other and where we’re going. I don’t think we’re going the same places.”

“What?” said Jordan, flat. A half-step low, voice out of tune. “Is this... Are you—oh my god.” Silence filled with cheering families. “I’ve, um, I’ve got to... The kids. Game. One inning left.” She heard him breathe deep through the phone. “So I’ll see you later?” he asked. “At the apartment?”

“Yeah,” said Emily. “At the apartment.”

“All right,” Jordan answered. “Great. Nate’s doing great, by the way. Great. Great. See you later, bye,” and he hung up. Left Emily alone in front of the bustling Emergency Room with nowhere in particular to go. She hoped good things for his last inning of *dactice*.

She just stood there for a minute, once taking four steps toward her car before heading back to the curb, and then doing it one more time but only making it half as far. Finally, she groaned and said out loud, “*Goddammit.*”

No one questioned her as she clicked through the waiting room and bending hallways. Might’ve been her all-business attire. Might’ve been the killer *shark* stride. Emily knew it was both, and more. You could put off an air with the right mindset and stature. Your body could become an alien metal, strong and unshakeable. Entire planets might crumble against your flawless body. You could kick a puppy down a sinkhole of infinite stairs, or tell a startup you no longer believe in their vision and are stripping their assets. You could be scared as shit and still avoid questions from a single member of the Emergency Room staff.

She found Walter and his mother back in their curtained cubicle. Walter slept on the bed while his mother pushed her fingers through his hair. “Is he all right?” Emily asked first. She did have to know.

“Fracture in the ankle,” Walter’s mother informed her. “Won’t know about ligaments until the swelling dies.”

“I’m sorry,” Emily told her. “About Walter and also for how I treated you.”

“That’s fine,” said Walter’s mother.

Emily didn’t leave yet. She sat on the roller-stool and crossed her legs. “My name is Emily Jackson,” she began. “I’m Senior Vice President of Development for a high-ranking venture capital firm specializing in startups that offer technology solutions.” Machine sounds and footsteps from behind the curtain rushed to fill the silence at the end of her statement. “I graduated with my MBA from Haas at Berkeley, but spent my undergrad studying biomedical engineering at MIT.” She took a quick break to calm the thudding in her chest. Measured

breathing helped. “I used to think I wanted to work in a place like this. I spent a lot of time in places like this as a kid. A lot. Wasn’t sure if I’d get the chance to leave.” Walter’s mother watched her. Said nothing. Listened. Emily kept going. “I thought I wanted to work in a place like this, but...” she shrugged. “Plans change. I like making money and being tough.” Emily paused here. “I won’t have kids, and I’m okay with that. I’ve known a long time.” Walter’s mother wore an unreadable expression. “And I have trouble saying that. Not *just* that, but all kinds of stuff like that, even to people who need to hear it. But I’m not weak,” she insisted. “I fought for my success and I won. I make money. I’ve made so much.”

Walter squirmed in his bed, distracting them both, for a moment. Things settled. Emily took another measured breath.

“And I don’t think that’s—well... I can’t tell you how hard it is to tell you, like I’m cutting out pieces of myself.” She sat with her hands clasped over her thigh for a second before tapping a little tune on her knee and standing up. “Anyway,” she said. “You wanted to know who I was; that’s who I am. I can leave you my number if there’s anything else you need for Walter.”

But before she could go, Walter’s mother reached out with the hand that wasn’t buried in her son’s hair. Her fingers came up to cup Emily’s. “Hey,” she said. “Emily. My name is Cassandra. I’m glad I met you.”

In Pursuit of Gratification

5:36 AM on a Saturday meant Mike should not have been awake to see how the time was exactly 5:36 AM on a Saturday. Far as he could tell, 5:36 in the morning had pissed off God, or Benjamin Franklin, or someone else with power and had been cursed below 9 o'clock, the earliest anyone should ever get up.

"It's early morning, the sun comes out. Last night was shaking, and pretty loud."

For almost two years now, for nearly two whole years, for three and a half academic semesters, Mike's roommate had woken up to *Rock You Like a Hurricane* by the Scorpions.

"My cat is purring, it scratches my skin. So what's wrong with, another sin?"

... Weird song.

His roommate, James, had tangled blond hair that hung in wild loops and knots to his shoulders where muscles covered places Mike thought other mortals surely grew only bone. James worked out and played football. He'd also once set off their dorm's fire alarm while grilling a 20 oz. steak on a George Foreman he kept hidden beneath his bed. After milling outside in a crowd of about a hundred for twenty minutes, they'd climbed back to their room on the fourth floor where James resumed grilling. Mike had taped one of his shirts over the smoke detector in exchange for James cooking him up an extra slab of meat.

"Sorry if I'm waking you up, Mikey," said James, bouncing around their room to collect the protein bars and half-empty purple Gatorades he'd stashed in various places but needed for Intramural tournament day.

"No prob," said Mike without getting up.

James had these loose red boxers hanging from his hipbones that were part of a Target set, two pairs for each playing card suit. Spades decorated him today and yesterday had been

hearts. “Oh *hell* yeah,” James emerged from where he’d buried himself in his closet, the waistband of some crinkled compression shorts stretched between his hands. Mike flopped to the other side of his bed, but damn his reaction time—he was slow. Had caught a brief flash of James dropping Spades around his ankles and tripping one foot out, spine curved, back built. “Thought I’d lost them,” came the voice of James. “Anyway, you probably got the room to yourself tonight, man. Bama’s doing another one of those tournament tradition things where The Boys drink from eleven to eleven, so I’ll catch you later.”

Possibly, Bama was a nickname short for *Alabama*, but Mike had never met the guy and didn’t know for sure. James had never clarified.

“The night is calling, I have to go. The wolf is hungry, he runs the show.”

James’ intramural team called themselves The Boys. The day was Saturday. James would be gone. This was convenient, no—this was *fate*. Mike had been waiting for the chance to get himself a fucking dildo.

“He’s licking his lips, he’s ready to win. On the hunt tonight, for love at first sting.”

But not at 5:36 AM.

...

“Oh my god, seriously thanks so much. Seriously, I woke up this morning, and was like: *If I have to pay for one more Uber to get me to this job, I’m teaching Spencer how to say, ‘Drive me off the side of this bridge,’ in Chinese.*”

Mike’s phone left a rectangular film of sweat from his ear to his cheek. The sun made sure his other cheek kept sweaty too, just not film-level yet. The bus stop, being a ramshackle bench of splintery wood, offered no protection. Sonia worked part-time with three different area children, teaching them Chinese that she figured they’d probably forget in a few years, but their

dads were big tippers. When he told her he was waiting for the bus that would drive him twenty minutes to the public lot where he stored his car through the semester, she'd latched onto the idea of him carting her away to some pocket-suburb outside the University. A little pushy, but that was part of what made her a good friend. A real ride-or-die, or if she'd been forced to Uber today, possibly both. So good thing Mike would have his car.

If the bus would come.

"Buses running late today," Mike reported into his phone. "Like fifteen minutes late."

"Don't go chasing cars," Sonia sang to him.

"I'll do what I—wait there's the bus. Catch you in a few." Before she could say anything else, Mike separated phone-screen and cheek-skin through sticky peeling. The face-sweat on his phone had a coloration like dissolved baking soda from the acne lotion Mike had applied that morning. Took him two jabs with his finger to end the call because the screen was so wet, and the sun continued to beat into him and stab at his eyes from the glinting windows of the bus as it finally arrived.

Mike entered and took the only empty seat he could find at the back between a fratstar with a backwards cap and croakied sunglasses and a minor league fratstar with sunglasses but no backwards cap. Fifteen minutes late. Air conditioning broken. Body heat.

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He got to his car fine and kicked up the air conditioning as the second step after ignition. Hot air shot out before cold. He should have asked Sonia to grab him a bottle of water. He still could, but no. Now, he just wanted to get on the way so he could get his six-plus inches of silicon and get home.

Where would he even put the thing? He hadn't decided on a stashing spot yet, but if James could hide a Foreman grill from two Residential Advisors in two years, he could hide an imitation penis from James, no problem.

He pulled up outside Sonia's dorm across the gender-dividing street from his and James' place and pulled out his phone, waited, and took stock of his situation. 12:34 PM and he'd been awake and sweating profusely for about two hours. Usually at this time on a Saturday, he'd be on the PS4 playing *Shadow of the Colossus* and forgetting the cold realities of homework and impending exams. Today, though, he waited for Sonia to exit her big brick dorm wearing a neon orange t-shirt from some fundraising function over negligée workout shorts. Waited for her to skip over to his waiting car.

"Oh, thanks so much," sighed Sonia as she buckled into the passenger seat.

"Risqué," Mike commented as he threw the gear into reverse.

Sonia's glasses magnified her scandalous wink, "Gotta get that dad tip, am I right?"

Mike snorted but also blushed.

"Hey." said Sonia, stone serious. "Don't shaft me. Only one of us is getting tip tonight and it's definitely not me."

"You could come with me?" Mike offered. "They probably carry a whole Dad Tip product line, since that's your type, I guess."

Sonia grinned. "Dear God, I wish I could. That sounds amazing. And veiny."

Mike winced.

"And shrunken."

Mike took a shaky breath and tightened his hands on the wheel.

"Do you guys get like dandruff down there when you hit middle age or something?"

“Great,” said Mike. “Now you’ve got me all paranoid and I’ll have to start buying *Head&Shoulders* for neither my head nor my shoulders. Thank you muchly.”

“So what’s James doing tonight?” Sonia asked, looking at her phone.

Mike risked glancing away from the road to confirm she was just staring at the lock screen. Ha. “Drinking with Bama and The Boys until eleven in the morning.”

Sonia made the kind of face most people do when they taste something really sour, but Mike knew Sonia self-identified as a sour-fiend with a secret bag of *Warhead’s* in the same drawer where she kept her underwear because her roommate kept eating all her unhidden leftovers. This love of sour meant she only got to break out her strong-lemon expression when she heard something like, “*Drinking with Bama and The Boys*,” or Mike describing his fantasy of flying down for the Western Hemisphere’s biggest furry convention in Rio de Janeiro. “Yick,” she said. “Wait, what were his boxers this morning?”

“Spades,” said Mike, “and then compression shorts.”

“Mmm,” said Sonia.

They left University grounds for the main road and hit immediate traffic. No trees or their shade. Just cars and acute sunlight. “How far down is it?” Mike asked.

Sonia, who’d collapsed into her seat, shielding her eyes from the sun by burrowing her face into her elbow, answered, “I don’t know. Not far. Like four or five lights down, left on Carrington Street and then like ten minutes and left again into the neighborhood.” She sat up and started pressing down on her door’s window control.

“Hey, uh,” said Mike. “The window’s already down.”

At this news, Sonia re-collapsed and re-hoisted her elbow. “Ugh. I know. *Jesus* it’s hot.” Which was both unfortunate and true. Fortunately, Mike wouldn’t have to drive much further

than Sonia's tutoring house to reach SkEevy X Adult Super Store, according to his GPS app, so maybe he'd still get home before four in the afternoon.

They baked all the way to Carrington Street and hung the left as Sonia had requested. Traffic got better but the sun didn't. When they rolled up to the home of Sonia's tutee, the heat saved Mike from having to roll down the window to get a better look, since this way he could just dive right into gawking. "What the shit," he said. "That's like twice the size of our library."

"Yeah," said Sonia. "I know. Their fridge has got, like two different ice dispensers plus one for water. Like you don't even have to select between crushed and cubed. You can get both."

"You're so weird."

"Mm hmm, yeah." Sonia climbed out of the car and then leaned her head in through the window-space. "Have fun buying your dildo. *Awoo*."

Mike began to drive very slowly, causing Sonia to squeak and hop back to the curb. "Thanks for driving me!" she called as he rolled away.

The time on his dashboard read 1:41 PM. Not bad, but he only had so much day, and his stomach had started tugging on the lines of his throat asking for food. Funnily enough, when his phone started vibrating to ABBA's *Dancing Queen*, it's time read 1:43 PM, so his car must've been a little slow. Mike brought the phone up to his ear and answered the call. "Hey. What's up?"

"Oh, man," James sounded relieved. "I was worried you'd be busy and wouldn't pick up, but only two rings. Nice."

"Uh," said Mike.

Shouts and random snatches of *Sandstorm* by Darude sounded off in the background behind James' voice. "Dude, I'm suffering here. Can I—can I ask you to do something for me?"

“Yeah,” said Mike. “Yeah sure. What’s going on?”

“Thanks,” said James. “Yeah, so like...” and his voice got all quiet. Mike pulled to the side of the road and tried to strain his ear past *Sandstorm*. “I’ve got like this itch, you know?”

“What?”

“Well right now it’s more of a burning. Like, *down there*.”

“Well,” said Mike. “Um.”

After a couple more measures of dubstep-lite, James voice picked up again. “You ever been in a locker room, and you see people putting *Gold Bond* on their junk, and you’re like fuck’s up with that? Like, I’ve never needed it.”

Mike tried to avoid locker room settings for practical reasons, but saw them a lot in some of his favorite videos. Which probably wouldn’t be helpful to James in his current situation. At least he was starting to understand James’s current situation.

“Anyway,” said James. “You know how I haven’t washed my compression shorts in like two months?” Mike had not known that and having access to that information didn’t make him particularly happier. “I think they might have soaked up a bunch of sweat and got *super* tight, and now like... I need some *Gold Bond*, man. I’m dying here. Are you home right now?”

“Yeah,” said Mike, and then realized what he’d said and wanted to punch himself. The sun continued to bear down. “I mean, uh... Yeah. I can—do you have any?”

“Okay, so here’s the thing,” said James. “No. I’ve like never had, you know, dick issues like this so I really don’t. But I know Todd’s got some in his room so you could probably get it there? 223, two floors down from us. His roommate’s kind of a shut-in so he should be home. Just tell him you’re getting something for Todd and grab some and bring it to me. Cool?”

His car without the movement had become a sun-trap. Light and heat eked in and eked water out of his skin, saturated his back where it rested against the seat's dark leather. "Yeah," he said. "Okay. Cool. Might take me a minute. I've got this practice test to finish."

"Sweet. Thanks man. You're the best. But hurry man, please hurry."

"Yeah," said Mike.

...

It took him forty-five minutes to be standing outside room 223. He'd left his car in the lot of their dorm—technically against University parking regulation, but he could procure Todd's jock irritation-mediation agent faster than a tow truck could tow, hopefully. Orchestral tones drifted out from the crack under the door, a melancholy soundtrack Mike thought he recognized. Todd's roommate must've had a PS4 too. He knocked.

Mike knocked a few times before he got an answer.

Todd's roommate cracked the door and peered around, and Mike saw curly red hair, bottle cap glasses, and skin so pale the kind of sun Mike had already dealt with today would probably kill the guy. He didn't say anything for a minute—kind of weird. Mike felt the need to explain, "Hey, uh. So my roommate, uh. I'm friends with Todd and need to bring him something for tournament day."

Todd's roommate blinked.

"So I'm here to do that. That's what I'm here to do."

"Yeah, whatever," said Todd's roommate.

Mike did his best stepping into Todd's room, but with all the junk lying around, his best really suffered. His left foot squished into a discarded banana peel, and if this were a movie, he would have comically fallen, but this was life and the banana peel wasn't totally empty. Hence

the *squish*. “Careful with that,” admonished Todd’s roommate. His shirt had a picture of the Incredible Hulk on it, but when he lowered himself onto the dust and hair-coated futon that took up most of the room’s floor space, the cloth bent above his stomach so that the Hulk’s chest and arms were lost in the fold. Sunlight filtered through the shuttered blinds, but only emphasized the blanket shade of the rest of the room.

Mike got the impression that Todd’s roommate would be no help in finding the antidote for agitated groin, and as he searched through Todd’s disaster of a closet (easy to find. The one with collared University apparel and no Avengers), he noticed that he’d been right. The music from the PS4 belonged to *Shadow of the Colossus*. Mike shivered but couldn’t articulate why. He shouldn’t have told James he could do this.

He found the *Gold Bond* in a drawer at the back of the closet buried in Todd’s underwear, which he hoped were cleaner than James’ but from the state of the room, didn’t hope very much. Also in the undie drawer were: half a fifth of Fireball, three standard condoms from the Student Union and one ribbed Trojan, a beaten cap from some club in Daytona called *Dock Master*. Mike took the *Gold Bond* and tried to forget everything else. Todd’s roommate didn’t even see him leave, or maybe he was seen but not comprehended. Mike watched the apocalyptic reflections of *Shadow of the Colossus* play over Todd’s roommate’s twitching eyeballs as the door swung shut.

Great. So he had James’ stupid dicksauce. Much less satisfying than the fantasy. He made a note to inform Sonia and hustled down the stairs to where his car was hopefully unnoticed, unticketed, and still there. 2:51 PM. Plenty of time, but good God, this sun.

He called James.

“Mike! Finally! You here? Oh man, gimme some good news.”

“I got the *Bond*,” said Mike. “Be there in ten. Meet me by the road?”

“You mind just coming into the locker room?” asked James. “I’m kind of in a hurry to get back on the field. We’re killing it out here today.”

Mike had seen several dozen porns start like this, but didn’t think that was what this was. *Good thing, honestly*, he told himself. The dildo hadn’t had time to work its expanding magic yet. “Yeah that’s cool.”

“Thanks man. I *owe* you one,” said James, and then hung up.

Mike tried not to read into the fact that reality still hadn’t deviated from the apparent porn intro. He stood in the heat by his car for a second with his terminated call and borrowed *Gold Bond*. When he did climb in, his car interior was airless and intensely hot.

...

He only had to drive about five minutes to the tournament day field (normally a walk of fifteen), but parking regulations remained in effect. Mike cruised by twice before calling it and just pulling to the side of the road. If he did get towed delivering *Gold Bond* to James, then he probably... Well, he probably wouldn’t do anything, but he’d be very upset.

Two games were running at once horizontally on the field, and Mike watched the students cheer, clap, and square off against each other. He felt kind of sad that without this *Gold Bond* errand, he probably wouldn’t have even seen the field. Probably would have just played *Shadow of the Colossus* like Todd’s roommate. Or not. Without this, he’d definitely have a sex toy by now, so yeah. Also that.

The intramural locker room looked paused in mid-collapse, a freestanding building a short distance from the actual field. The roof sagged in places, and Mike could see large cracks where wall met wall at corners. He pushed through the door—a door that hung improperly at a tilt within its rectangular frame—and went inside.

“Oh shit, Mike,” James came around a row of decrepit lockers, some hanging open with torn off handles. Sweat soaked him all over, but smelled athletics and only made his clothes wet and muscles shiny. “Oh shit, oh shit. Did you get the *Bond*?”

“Yeah, it’s here.” Mike passed him the appropriated lotion and a dreamy look fell over James face.

“You have no idea. Seriously. Like, it’s all just rubbed raw, but I gotta keep playing, you know?”

Mike thought that maybe he did have some idea, because that sounded a lot like his first and only time bottoming. At least James had found *his* solution. Then James squirted a bunch of lotion on his palm and shoved his hand down his gym shorts, and Mike figured maybe he should leave, but James seemed content to chat.

“We’re killing it out there, man. Four-one overall right now.”

“Nice,” said Mike, and watched James hook his arm around. Hit every angle and underside.

“We’ve never won before, but this could be the day of The Boys.”

“Awesome.” Mike checked his phone. 3:13 PM. “Hey, uh,” said Mike. “I’ve got to go.”

“Yeah totally,” said James, hand still contentedly massaging inside his shorts. “Thanks, man. Saved my life, hardcore.”

...

He hadn’t quite navigated out of the University before Sonia called. He sighed and picked up. The day had already stretched this far. He could fit another ride for Sonia. “Hey, how’s it going?”

“Literally great,” chattered Sonia. “Spencer’s still working on his tonal *ma*’s, but I made like one hundred and fifteen dollars because daddy’s wifey wasn’t home.”

“Good haul,” said Mike.

“Yeah. He told me to take it and ‘enjoy my college days because they go by quick’.”

“Amazing.” Mike hooked right onto the main road. The traffic remained but also remained in motion. He streamed with the other cars through one light before hitting red at the next one. “Thank you for your sagely wisdom and advice, father.”

“*Mā, má, mǎ, mà,*” said Sonia. “I won’t badmouth him if all he’s done so far is give me money. If he starts trying to horn in on Spencer’s lessons, then we’ll talk shit all day, but oh my God, Mike, that kid is goddamn adorable.”

Mike adopted the voice of an offended English lord. “Rein yourself in, woman! You must be stronger than your ovaries!”

“Ugh,” said Sonia. “Don’t I know it. But speaking of reining yourself in, did you pick up your package?”

“No, not yet,” Mike confessed. “I had to—something came up and I had to go back to the dorm and I’m on the way now.”

“Wait, you haven’t got there yet? I thought you said it was close to Spencer’s house?”

“Well it kind of is, it’s just I had to go get something for James and—”

“Oh my God. Mike, tell me to shut up so you can do what you need to do.”

“Don’t you need a ride?”

“Lmao,” Sonia laughed. “I’m carrying *dollars* right now, remember? I’ll just Uber.”

“You sure?” asked Mike. “I can really—”

“Yeah,” said Sonia. “No. You do you. You do you *real* good tonight, alright?”

“Okay, yeah,” said Mike, wiping beaded perspiration from his forehead and smiling.

“Yeah I will.”

“And then we can do us tomorrow. Pizza is on Mr. Spencer’s dad.”

“Oh, deal,” said Mike.

“Alright. Go get your sex toy, tiger.”

“*Wolf*,” Mike corrected.

Sonia hung up.

...

There were no cars in the SkEevy X parking lot but a lot of weeds. The paint on the walls had faded to a yellow like watery sunshine but less pleasant and plywood covered the windows. Did all sex shops look like run-down opium dens, or had this particular shop just committed hard to the aesthetic?

He locked his car twice on the walk from the lot to SkEevy X. Tall trees cut close circles around the shop like nature itself was ashamed and wanted to block as much of the building as they could from road-view. Between that and SkEevy X itself, this created the feeling of an unsettling bubble of extreme tree and extreme human. Mike locked his car a third time.

The door to the store didn’t open even when Mike propped one foot against the wall to push with his leg. The ‘SPACE FOR RENT’ stamp on the nearest sheet of plywood might have saved him the trouble, but he was exhausted and a little bit mad now and kind of hoped he’d just tear the handle off. He didn’t.

“Fuck!” he yelled, because he had no reason not to. No one here to hear him.

“Hey man, haha,” came a voice from the somewhere off to his side and on the ground.

“Whatchu goin’ around with that kind of language for?”

Mike watched a bundle of trashed newspapers and old blankets lying against an inlaid corner of SkEevy X squirm and shift until the face and hands of a man, pale and thin as a skeleton, poked through. Dirt ran in stripes down his face and his fingernails were curled and yellow. A long purple cut across the back of one hand had partly healed.

“What? You tryna get inside?” asked the man, and Mike clutched his fingers tight around his car keys in one pocket because that reminded him he had a way out. “We got a way in if you need some shelter from old SkEevy.” The man had a voice like a croak and had started running one hand up and down the wall of the building with affection. “Hold up,” he told Mike. “If you’re coming inside, you’ve gotta meet Theresa. *Theresa! Get out here!*”

Mike did not want to meet Theresa and no longer wanted to remain on the premises of SkEevy X, but it was too late to stop that first thing from happening.

A wraith-thin woman with brown skin and a patchwork coat of many faded colors tottered from around the back of the boarded-up shop. Her mouth sat too large for her jaw and didn’t close properly while her nose was too small. She seemed a woman sewn together from ill-fitting parts. “Shut the hell up,” she told the blanket man and then turned to Mike. “*Hey, sugar.*”

Mike swallowed and said, “Hey,” and wondered why he hadn’t left yet.

“So this youngster here,” said the blanket man, pointing to Mike with a dismissive wave of his skin-covered arm-bone. “He was trying to get into SkEevy. What’d’ya think?”

“Well, look at him, Ralphie,” crooned Theresa. “And his clothes are so nice. Hey, boy. Do you mind if I have a square of your shirt for my coat?”

“Stuff it, you old hag,” grumbled the blanket man, Ralphie. “I saw him first, he’s my buddy. He don’t want to give his shirt into your rags.

Theresa snorted a real room-clearer. Her nose had *volume*. “You don’t know what he wants because there’s nothing,” she twirled into a crouch next to Ralphie and pushed his head back with her middle finger, “going on in that stupid noggin. You don’t know nothing.”

Ralphie shook her hand away. “Yes I do too. He was coming here for SkEevy, he wants himself a toy. Hey,” the blanket man stared at Mike with his big sunken eyes and said, “you came here for a toy, right? Don’t use Theresa; she’s no good.” Theresa, standing now, gave Ralphie a vicious kick to the body, but the blow must have been absorbed somewhere in the pile of blankets because he didn’t stop talking. “Listen: when they closed this place they left some stuff behind. Good stuff. Come in with me and I’ll find you one of them real nice pocket pussies. You can go to goddamn town, I promise.”

Mike was lucky that his next action came involuntarily, because otherwise he wouldn’t have known what to do. He might have even followed Ralphie inside. God, he was a pathetic creature. Pathetic, and laughing out of control. Probably had something to do with heatstroke, but in that moment, Mike was so uncomfortable he could only laugh. Laugh and laugh. Bend double with laughing. Theresa joined in immediately while Ralphie looked confused, and then offended, and then joined in too. After about a minute and a half, Mike saw his chance to leave. “Alright,” he said, wiping one eye. “It’s been fun, you guys, but I’ve got to get out of here.”

“No you don’t,” Ralphie countered, but Mike told him, “Yeah I do.”

“*He says he’s got to go*,” Theresa hissed. “Can’t you see he’s some important type?”

“Fine,” said Ralphie. “Fine. But just come back here sometime, alright?”

“Probably no,” Mike said, and walked back to his car. Ralphie and Theresa tracked him with their eyes as he pulled out of the lot, and Mike didn’t stop driving or check his direction until he’d taken two lefts and a right and pulled over on the shoulder of a faraway street.

His dashboard clock read 4:55 which meant 4:57 PM was the real time. He could just drive home. He'd tried hard enough to justify giving up. Instead, he picked used his phone to search for other nearby stores and found a place called Blessed Secrets Emporium, twenty-five miles away. At first Mike thought the name had more *church* implications than *sex shop*, but the ribbon at the top of the website featured two naked silhouettes, mid-dance and leaving no room for Jesus. After confirming the shop was still in business, Mike hit the road.

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Mike arrived at Blessed Secrets Emporium at 5:36 PM through intense traffic and evening sun that had oranged without losing heat. Where SkEevy X had looked aggressively closed, the Emporium kept lights on in its windows and had a large frieze of the same nude dancers from the website above their door. Mike's stomach gurgled as he staggered out of his car—not entirely bad news. Empty intestines meant no chance of mess later.

When he opened the door and stepped into the shop, the Emporium attacked him with colors and light. Everything was red, black, or accented in weird shades of neon, and everything was everywhere. Feet from the door stood a curvy mannequin showing off a ballerina's tutu-thong in front of a stack-mountain of boxes containing handcuffs of all different material: metal, leather, metal with pink frills, metal covered with velvet...

"Hi! Welcome to Blessed Secrets Emporium!" called a woman who had to be six-foot-five from her place at the epicenter of the Emporium's sexy chaos inside a circular sales counter. She wore a dark blazer over a gray turtleneck with suit pants and Mike couldn't tell if the outfit was supposed to convey power in a sensual way or if it was just drab, and he didn't want to conduct further analysis because the woman had her eyes drilling into him. He'd rather wear that tutu than see it on some chick, what was wrong with him? Out of curiosity, he checked the price

tag. One hundred and forty-five dollars. So he'd have to start tutoring... well, tutoring English for some lecherously gay foreign dads to get that kind of cash. Great. Alternatively, he could just cut out the tutoring. With all kinds of repressed middle-agers willing to pay cash for you to let them buy you dinner or clothing just a tap of the phone away, why invest in anything! "That's a nice piece!" chirruped the clerk. "Requires handwashing but totally worth it."

Mike decided he had to find his section and get out of here fast.

Behind a wall featuring male and female police costumes for Unlawful Roleplay™ stretched a wall of insertion devices. Judging by the models on the wall with their mouths contorted into perfect circles, most of them were intended for female use, but Mike figured they'd work the same for him, for the most part. Not the ones with two prongs. Some featured electric components, with vibration being by far the most common. But then the Emporium had one brand that let you load the toy with special lubricant, set a timer, and then get sloppily filled by your severed genitalia. One or two featured a special warming function reportedly designed to mimic *Real-Life Feel*, also trademarked, but since there were only two of those and a bunch of everything else, Mike questioned its success.

"You finding what you're looking for?" chimed the clerk from her sales-counter cage.

"Yes." Mike lied.

Everything was so expensive. He didn't want to pay upwards of ninety dollars for something he was going to shove up his rectum. Repeatedly. Or maybe that was the problem. Where the high prices came in. The repetition. He moved forward through an aisle of lace lingerie and banana hammocks into an aisle of butt plugs, quickly finding that the prices were no lower and the shapes were even weirder. He crouched down and began having a little fun sifting

through the models. Why were so many of them metallic? He'd never been strongly attracted to metal but maybe he just hadn't thought about it enough?

"Hey!" came the cheery voice of the clerk, now right behind him. "You sure there isn't anything I can help you with?"

Mike froze and a shudder passed through his whole body. He hated being seen like this and hated even more that he really could use some help. Whatever. He hadn't starved himself for so long to get embarrassed out of this by someone he'd have to face anyway at the register.

"Yeah, actually. Is there anything on the cheaper side?"

"Hm," said the clerk, like this had her stumped too. Crouching, Mike's head didn't even break above her waist, so he stood and measured somewhere close to her shoulders. "Yes, we do have... Here, come with me." She led him to a wall near the back. "This whole wall *is* in the fifteen to forty range. But—"

"But they have tails," said Mike.

"Yeah, they all have tails," she sounded solemn, but then perked up when she cupped her hand under a piece with black and white striations from plug to tail-tip. "This one's just adorable though! It's got like some kind of lemur thing going on."

Mike wanted to die but knew that if he passed on from this life without giving Sonia the chance to make fun of him for this experience, she'd find a way to call his spirit back and do it harder. He'd escape nothing. "Yeah," Mike agreed halfheartedly and to some degree truthfully. He tried very hard not to look at the gray tail with red accents on the far right. "I think I'm looking for something a little more..."

"Yeah," she nodded. "I kinda figured. But we wouldn't stock them if they didn't sell, so..." She shrugged. "Let's try over this way."

This way turned out to be exactly what Mike was looking for. Fifty-four was a little more than he'd planned on spending, but the weight he felt when he lifted the dildo from its rack and how fucking real the thing looked totally justified the cost. The clerk hadn't left his side during the entire weighing process where he compared the look and feel of a few different fake penises, but that didn't matter to Mike so much anymore. At some point, possibly around the tails, he'd slipped into a kind of *whatever* state that felt really good. Like who cares? This purchase wasn't for anyone else. He forked over the cash and took ownership of his item—even bought a specialized cleaning foam and lube value pack with two bottles of each for forty additional bucks because why not?

"Thank you," he told the clerk, and she beamed, her smile lifting all the many freckles across her cheeks. "I did really appreciate the help."

"Have a nice day!" she called, waving as Mike left the store.

Outside, the day had gone dark. He checked his phone. A Snapchat from Sonia and a clock that read 6:25 PM. Plenty of time for a trip to McDonald's on the way back.

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He got a few looks on the bus taking him from the lot where he'd left his car to campus. After realizing he'd forgotten his backpack and had nowhere to hide his Blessed Secrets Emporium bag, he'd decided that he didn't care. One guy with a frocket-shirt that read *Beach Blowback '17* did wind up switching seats across the aisle of the near-empty bus after a jolt in the road let him see the bag's contents, but how did that affect Mike? Yeah. Whatever, man.

The clock read 10:12 PM by the time he was sitting on his bed, stripped to almost nothing and cradling the dildo in his lap. He'd spent about two hours in the McDonald's drinking a lot, eating a little, and dozing in the blessedly frigid air conditioning before hitting the road back

home. Lying back, he closed his eyes and rested for about ten minutes. Then, he shifted onto his side and began rubbing the toy's length slow over the seat of his boxers. He kept clenching and didn't know how to stop. This had hurt last time, and that guy had been smaller than what he'd bought. He'd taken shits bigger than this tool so why did he have to keep puckering now? Curling the fingers of his free hand around a bottle of lube, he wondered how much was too much, in an economic sense. He was about to experiment with that when his phone rang.

He cut off *Dancing Queen* before the first *Ooo*'s with a slide of his thumb. "What's up?" he said to James, heart hammering. "You're not on your way home, right?"

"No," said James, "no, no. It's, uh... I'm in trouble here, Mike."

"Again?" Mike removed the dildo from between his cheeks.

"Yeah. So you remember the *Gold Bond*, yeah? The stuff you got for me."

"Yes," said Mike. "Yeah, I remember."

"So I'm like, well this is a real tough spot, man. Turns out, I'm not the only one who's like needing some *application*. Bama just hit Todd up for some *Bond* and Ricardo's said he'd drive Todd and him down to pick it up, but I can't let him know that I had you steal it because that's just weird. Do you still have your car?"

"Uh, no. Dropped that off."

"Oh. That's alright. No big deal. Can I get you to run down to Bama's house, get this *Gold Bond*, and stash it back where you found it in Todd's room?"

"I don't know man." Mike's half-erection drooped and died. "That's a long way to run and like... You could just give it to Todd right now."

"Well it's not Todd that needs it. It's Bama that's got the dick itch."

And that kind of bothered Mike, because he had dick itch too, goddammit. “Why can’t you just run it back? That’ll save time. And you’re way faster than me.”

“Okay true,” James conceded. “But what if I told you I’m drunk as fuck,” and Mike could hear him belly-laughing through the phone.

“Seriously? It’s not even eleven yet!”

“Well we usually start around like, eight-thirty or just whenever.”

“Sorry, man. I don’t think I can help tonight.”

“Wait!” said James. “Wait, no. Hold on, Mike—you’re like my only hope here.” He paused, laughed, and added, “Obi-Wan.”

Mike was about to hang up.

“Eleven to eleven,” James insisted. “It’s eleven-eleven drink night, Mike. Make a wish. You’re my wish. Come help me with this *Gold Bond* situation.”

“It’s not eleven,” Mike reminded.

“Well,” said James. “I’m sorry too. It’s just, I can really trust you, you know? You’re like, one of the only people I know that’s not an asshole. I mean, I do love these assholes but I don’t want Todd knowing I used his groin lotion, you know? That’s pretty gay.”

“James,” said Mike.

“I guess what I’m trying to say is,” James started, and Mike could hear people shouting in the background. The trashing of Bama’s house, probably. “You’re not like, judgy about this kind of stuff, and that’s cool.”

Mike used his non-phone hand to lift his dildo high above his head and look at it: oblong, fleshy, blackened from how it put their room’s light into eclipse. “Thanks,” he said. “I mean that. But sorry. You’re on your own on this one. Hope it’s a wild night.”

“A-ight,” said James. “No biggie. Catch you later, dude!”

And that was the end of the call.

Mike sat up. He looked at his sex toy. He didn’t really feel like using it. Not just now. After a few minutes, he meandered over to his PS4 and picked up a controller. On the system’s main menu, he considered continuing his *Shadow of the Colossus* run, but remembered how the images had flickered in reflection across Todd’s roommate’s eyes and decided he didn’t want to do that either.

He turned back to his phone. He’d had it off and on and off and on all day, so what was one more call? The dial tone repeated a few times after punching the numbers, but then Sonia picked up and said, “Hey Mike, how’s it hanging?”

“Honestly, I’m totally bored right now. Would you possibly be free? And wanting to bump that pizza night from tomorrow to now?”

“Spencer’s dad would be happy to accommodate such proceedings, financially,” answered Sonia, all seriousness. “James still gone?”

“Got the place to ourselves.”

“Hey, have you seen the movie *Memento*? I started it like yesterday but didn’t get to finish and bruh, I’m fucking weak. It’s weird and confusing and good as shit.”

Mike had seen *Memento* before, but wouldn’t mind a second viewing if Sonia wanted to see it too. “Well then I’ll get it set up.”

“Awesome. Be over in a jiff.”

“Sweet.”

Call Ended. Boop, boop, boop.

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10:30 PM and Sonia came over with pizza that Mike and her enjoyed over the cinematography of Christopher Nolan.

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Sonia said, “Hey, look, it’s 11:11,” and they made fun of James’s playing card boxers.

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Mike walked with Sonia to her dorm at 2:55 AM and then headed back for his own. *Memento* had been watched and the pizza had been eaten. A rousing success of a night.

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Mike shook and made a noise as his body convulsed the dildo out of him onto the towel he’d laid over his bed, and then he was done. Breathing hard, he reached and curled his fingers around its sticky warmth. *Hot as shit*, he thought, and grinned. His phone had read 3:21 over three unread snaps from James when he’d started, but it’d probably show something like 3:55 now since he’d tried with partial success to take his time. Whatever. Time didn’t matter. This night was his.

Captain Mel

Tech Wunderkind ‘Six Star’ Announces *Indecision Cure*™ Prototype Release for Mid-Q4

by KeShawn Douglas

For twenty-two years I’ve reviewed new tech products for gadgetwise.com and for twenty-two years I’ve tech products have failed to engender in me that mix of wonder and excitement that I get when I think about Six Star’s upcoming Indecision Cure™. What if an app could use person-specific biometric data to determine what you need before you know you need it? Ambitious like nothing the tech world has ever seen, and this writer can’t wait to get hands on the prototype and...

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Half past six on a Thursday meant Mediterranean takeout for dinner at the office. Rasmussen, worked late every day except Friday, and as his administrative assistant, Mel had decided certain quality of life improvements fell under her domain. When she’d started a year and a half ago, Six Star CEO and founder Gabriel Rasmussen had clocked in at age 58 with a little less than six feet in height and a belly showing early signs of late age paunch. Now, he’d grown out a trim snow-colored beard and undergone a seesaw reversal of chest and stomach. That was all her.

“Greek salad today,” Mel called as she laid out the veggie platter on the conference table. “With tapenade and pita.” The staff at Garden of Crete had added a chocolate yogurt mousse to her order because Rasmussen could afford to tip well and Mel was the one with her hands on the money, so she made sure he did. She’d once told Diondre, the man working Thursdays at the register, how much she liked mousse, and after that, dish hadn’t stopped showing up in her takeout box.

The aggressive pecks of Rasmussen hammering his fingers against the keyboard of his laptop tapered off and stopped. Mel heard him sigh and stand. Crack his neck. “Excellent,” he said as he moved out of his personal quarters for the empty office at large. Downtown Philadelphia at dusk shimmered in orange, breathed, and moved out the windows and forty-three floors beneath them. Most of the regular office bodies had gone home by now, but Mel knew Theresa, who’d taken on managing commercial retail for the *Indecision Cure*™, would be staying late to put final tweaks to the prototype’s Walmart proposal. She’d never heard Theresa talk about her dietary convictions, but she’d also never seen anything with meat labeled ‘Theresa’ in the office fridge, so Greek salad. Vegetarian cuisine.

Rasmussen left for a minute to grab one of his Diet Coke’s, and when he came back gave Mel some pointed side-eye. “I’m pretty sure your employment contract doesn’t rope you in for extra hours every day, Melanie,” he said. Mock reproach. The usual routine.

“You would know,” she replied. “You wrote it.”

“Right,” Rasmussen said, patting a fist against his chest after a large swig of synthetic sugar and carbonated bubbles. “So you’ll be heading out soon, then?”

“Depends,” she countered, piling a plate with steaming veggies. “Are you?”

“Heh.”

“I’m going to take this back to Theresa,” said Mel. “I’ve also put together your calendar up through next Tuesday. You’ll want to take a look at your Monday four o’clock. Thirty-five minutes scheduled for the CleanTek rep. Name’s Reg.”

Rasmussen nodded. “What’s your take?”

“Probably wants to tie the company name to our channel, *for our benefit*, of course. Depending on how you like him, I can loop Theresa in or help her stay out.”

“Jesus.” Rasmussen placed his Diet Coke on the conference table so he could pick up his plate for a quick bite. Eating while standing was inefficient, but Mel knew Rasmussen spent all day sitting and preferred a more active relaxation on dinner-at-the-office day. She hadn’t bothered to pull him up a chair. “Green vultures. No chance at pushing back until it doesn’t happen?”

Mel shook her head. “No, he came with a reference from Douglas. Grad school friend of his little brother or something like that.”

“Damn. Ah well.”

Conversation melted into eating but Mel was thinking too hard to taste the food. How to speak so that she’d seem competent? Thorough. She was thorough. According to Rasmussen and other higher-ups at Six Star, Melanie—the administrative assistant, and maybe something more, eventually—was thorough. “Well,” she said, “Looked into his background and we might like this guy. Did his junior consultancy with CleanTek during their heavy growth stretch mid-2009 to 2014, opted out of a senior consultant position to get sponsored for an MBA from Stanford and reroute into sales.”

Rasmussen chewed thoughtfully and stroked his beard. He’d been doing that a lot, Mel had noticed, since she’d encouraged him to grow it. “So you’re thinking he’s good?”

“Probably,” said Mel.

“But you spoke with him?”

“He’s good, or seems good. Probably good, but you’ll need to watch him. He’s good at seeming good. But definitely give him the full thirty-five.”

“I’ll certainly do that. Thank you, Melanie.”

“Right,” said Mel. “I’ll let you know if anything else comes up.” She dropped dinner off in Theresa’s office. The woman looked up from two ankle-high stacks of paper to thank her; big glasses magnifying the tired creases around her eyes. “Don’t worry about it,” said Mel. “Give the kids a ‘what’s up’ from me.”

When she rejoined Rasmussen in the conference room, he was playing with the blinds on the window, where dusk had gone deep purple. “Melanie, what’s your November plans?”

“At the office,” she said.

“What do you think about a Florida trip? The NüLife Technology Showcase is on a boat this year, you know. They sent that VIP invitation last week.”

Mel knew. She’d passed off the invitation and compiled a brief historical report of major players that had attended and emerged from NüLife since its inaugural event three years ago. Nothing huge, but they’d grown. Starting to hit that critical point of relevance where your competition would show up regardless of whether you did. She’d recommended he send someone. “Are you thinking about going in person?” she asked. “I can check the long-term weather forecast for you.”

“That’d be swell,” said Rasmussen. He waited a minute. “Are you interested in the showcase? If I go, would you be interested in accompanying?”

An opportunity to be the face of the company? To shake hands with the adversary behind a grin like armor and take them in with her eyes? “Hell yeah I am.” The chance to demonstrate her worth over quality champagne on a ritzy boat. That was payoff. “Pardon my language,” she added.

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Rasmussen approved the expenditure to fly in first class from the Philadelphia airport to Miami. Mel had chosen their chauffeur company and met the man she'd spoken to on the phone outside. A black Mercedes and a clean-cut suit. Extravagant but only a little. She heard Rasmussen give one of his approval grunts. "Duncan," she shook the man's hand.

"Ms. Callahan," said Duncan. And they were off.

The twin patches she'd worn for the last month insisted that she notice them now, with the conference so close at hand. At first they'd itched, the one on her left wrist more than the one pasted to her left ribcage, and then she hadn't noticed them at all, for a time. Now they were back and the bones protecting her heart chafed horribly. She checked the paired app on her phone and read: *Satisfaction 61%; Turbulence 63%*. A prompt offered to display suggestions to increase both long and short run satisfaction, but she declined.

"So what's on the menu tonight?" Rasmussen asked her. Duncan, driving silently, hadn't gotten them off airport campus before Rasmussen had pulled out a tablet, gotten into his emails, and asked about dinner.

"Seafood," Mel answered. "Restaurant on a dock pavilion. Touristy, but nice enough. Nationally ranked sommelier."

"Good." said Rasmussen. "I'm in the mood for a nice white."

"We'll be arriving in twenty-five minutes, sir," added Duncan from the front.

Mel enjoyed the meal. They sat outside on the pier, a dipping parabola of yellow lightbulbs with glowing filaments hanging in a string above them and the sound of the ocean rising from beneath the pier. The sea salt air tasted better to her than any fish, any wine—though she did enjoy those too.

She'd asked Rasmussen if sitting along the rope guardrail that separated the boardwalk from a fifteen foot drop into the sea would bother him. "As you like," he'd told her. Now he said, "You like the beach?"

"Yeah." Mel listened for and felt the waves. The dark kept her from seeing, but she could sense all that empty space beneath her. Empty space and then water under the thin boards where she rested her feet. "I don't get out here enough."

"I didn't know you'd been to Florida before."

"I haven't."

"Then I'm glad you're getting the chance. *Mmm*, this fish is delicious... Your mother's still doing fine?"

"She is," said Mel. There had been a scare about a year ago. She'd missed work. "Full remission. Still kicking."

"That's good to hear."

"Thank you."

They ate in silence for a while, and part of Mel thought she should speak up. She didn't want to leave Rasmussen without a conversation partner on this trip, but the closeness of the ocean did something to her. Reminded her of other times and places, and the now, with her sitting as someone she never thought she'd be somewhere she'd never thought she'd get the chance to go, felt unreal, almost. Unreal and exciting. And pensive. Made her hold a sip of wine over her tongue and breathe in salt through her nose before swallowing. She checked the patch-paired app: *Satisfaction 79%; Turbulence 62%*. See suggestions to improve satisfaction? *No*. "Thank you," she said, eventually.

"Hm?" Rasmussen had lost himself in his own thoughts.

“Thanks for choosing me to come here. To the showcase. I appreciate it.”

“Oh,” said Rasmussen, looking a little uncomfortable. “No trouble, really. I’m glad you were willing to go. Don’t know how I’d have gotten everything planned and in motion without you.”

Mel had to look away so she brought her eyes down to her pan-seared fish. She cut into it and pulled a slice of the tender meat away with her fork, watching how the lightbulb glow caught in her dinner. Turned the fish a soft kind of yellow like gold.

“Bags are all packed for tomorrow?” Rasmussen asked.

“Yeah,” Mel laughed. Broken spell. “Three whole days of them.”

“Three whole *days* of this conference,” he said, and Mel recognized his *would you look at this mess* tone. A tone she liked to hear because hearing meant she was with Rasmussen in the know. He saw distance between *her* and *them* and liked her side better. “Putting us out on this boat for three days. Just think of the expense for something they could have held so much more easily on the beach. Still got ocean, I mean *Je-sus*.”

“I plan on having a good time,” said Mel.

“Good,” said Rasmussen. “Me too.”

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Third Annual NüLife Conference says ‘Bon Voyage!’

by Danica Brown

Who has a stronger sense of our current and future times than NüLife Technology Showcase host, Diego Cantobre? Probably no one, writes this reviewer. His penchant for prediction and simulation brought him fame and money, but that’s not what he’s known for now. With his technology showcase entering its third year, Cantobre has eschewed that landlocked silicon

society to take his event out to sea. All aboard, lucky invitees! “We live in a world of constant connection,” Cantobre recently told Tech Monthly. “And that’s amazing. That’s great. I’m thankful. But. But, but, but—this year’s conference is something unique. Extraordinary. We want to give our guests the first look of the future, and that means no connection. No leaks. To the Atlantic!” Cantobre continued to explain his position, citing...

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Boarding the *Financial Fortune* meant shaking hands and learning the names of the faces they belonged to—mostly names and faces Mel unofficially knew from the report she’d compiled for Rasmussen. Gulls and other beach birds called for breakfast, flying in circles above the marina where she and Rasmussen stood at the entrance. Lines and lines of yachts in gleaming white and only sometimes other shades. Lots of gold trim, and theirs was the closest, biggest, and whitest of them all. The goldest trim. “*Financial Fortune*,” scrawled in looping rare-metal cursive.

While Duncan unloaded their bags behind them, a man wearing a captain’s hat over a sharp beard, a blazer, and big sunglasses with lens color in gourmet chocolate approached from the pier. *Diego Cantobre*. Mel remembered his name and biography. Ex-techie kid gone rock star investor out of Silicon Valley. Big money. Made lots of bold claims about the future that came almost 70% true. Needed the conference to explode in the next few years to cement his brand or else lose it.

“Diego Cantobre,” the man greeted with deep-voiced confidence Mel didn’t think could ever naturally belong to someone who made their initial livelihood leaning on sugar and energy drinks to pull all-nighters pecking into their laptop. “You must be Mr. Gabriel Rasmussen? From

Six Star? Absolute joy to have you here, sir. An honor. I had a poster of you in my dorm at MIT back in school. Your work in advertising was incredible.”

Smooth, thought Mel, and waited for him to greet her. Wondered if it would even happen. Diego wasn't that tall, but had a head and a half on her, easy.

“Nice of you to say,” said Gabriel, matching Diego's magazine-cover grin. “We're excited to be here, Mr. Cantobre. Big thanks for the invitation and the opportunity to demonstrate our tech.” Here, Duncan passed off a wrapped present to Rasmussen, like Mel had discussed with him over the phone before she and Rasmussen had even booked their flights to Miami. Rasmussen gave it to Gabriel.

Diego accepted the gift with customary restraint, but Mel couldn't see his eyes under those chocolate shades and wondered what she'd see if she could. Greed? Satisfaction? Perhaps an appropriate amount she just over-read? Calm down, she told herself. Calm down. Listen to the ocean and calm down. “Is this...?” Diego's voice trailed. “Is it really...?”

“Yes it is,” Rasmussen told him. “You'll see the different ways it works during the showcase.”

“If the suspense doesn't kill me first,” Diego said with a loud laugh. Too loud. Mel saw him realize and edify his conduct down. “But come on then. Let me help you with your bags and show you around our ship. Entirely electric,” Diego bragged. “State of the art, state of the future. She's beautiful.”

Was it wrong to feel jealous of a boat? Not that she particularly cared about catching Diego's aesthetic eye or men in general, but she wished they were the same height at least. Rasmussen and Diego turned away while she thanked Duncan for his service and left enough tip-dollars in his hand to be generous without making him feel inconsequential. “Have a good day,

ma'am," said Duncan with a nod of acknowledgement. Mel had to work her short legs a little bit fast to reach where her boss and host were striding down the pier.

Diego dragged Rasmussen's roller-suitcase behind him, and Mel was glad Rasmussen didn't ask if he could take hers. "Right, say, Diego," said Rasmussen when he saw Mel had rejoined them. *Diego?* They'd moved to first names quickly. She'd stick with Mr. Cantobre until getting the express okay. "Have you spoken with my assistant, Melanie? I'll swear up and down, best addition to our Philadelphia office in the last decade."

"Melanie?" asked Diego. He craned his neck and then saw her. Looked a little surprised. "Oh, hi. Hello, Melanie. Pleasure to meet you. I'm Diego." He recovered fast with a jovial handshake that Mel accepted. "We're so excited to be here," she said. "Thanks so much for the invitation. Diego."

When they had reached the boarding ramp that lead up to the deck of the *Financial Fortune*, a large excitement swept over their host. Diego all the way up the ramp to spread his arms in presentation of his grand vessel. After the man had motioned for them to come up and join him with a wave of his wrist and disappeared onto the boat, Mel felt a nudge at her arm. "*Financial Fortune*," Rasmussen whispered. "Really? Odds he gets sea sick day one?"

Mel felt a little bit ashamed of how glad she was to be included on this joke at Diego's expense, but wouldn't deny that she did feel better. "It's the captain hat," she whispered back. "It's the captain hat or it's the blazer. It's both."

"Yeah," said Rasmussen, "Jesus. Let's get on board before he loses my bag somewhere."

Mel and Rasmussen climbed the ramp that led to the top deck of the *Financial Fortune*, where they joined over a hundred and fifty investors, competitor representatives, and

personalities like Diego Cantobre, with another odd hundred set to join them before their time to leave port, only several hours away.

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“Ready for this?” Rasmussen asked. They were standing in the hallway outside their separate rooms. His dress-suit conveyed more prestige than a low-caliber tuxedo while maintaining a certain casual flare. She’d gone the little black dress route. Safe but not boring.

She stepped out and closed the door behind her. High heels made her about as tall as Rasmussen’s nose. “Free champagne and fancy appetizers? If Diego comes through I’ll stop making fun of the name of his boat.”

“You look great,” said Rasmussen.

“Yeah? You too.”

“You picked out my clothes.”

“I know,” said Mel.

Down the hallway and up a set of stairs. Up to the deck of the *Financial Fortune*, where light and laughter drifted from the conference hall through a set of glass doors at the stern of the ship. Mel could see lights from the windows above the conference hall too, where she imagined the captain made the boat move while vibrations from the movers and shakers and the rich as they had time of their high-status lives shook the floor from below.

A showcase for tomorrow; a soiree for tonight. No land in sight. The moon reached down with silver light to push and pull the mysterious currents of the ocean that touched hands with the boat’s real captain. Not Diego Cantobre. Someone else through those lighted windows above the champagne halls of party. Mel shivered. She could feel too much of the sea breeze against her uncovered skin and not enough of her high-heeled feet made contact with the deck.

“Cold?” asked Rasmussen. He’d noticed.

“No,” said Mel. And she wasn’t. A Florida warmth hung in the air that suffered no chill in the wind, no trace of the frost that plagued Philadelphia in November. She didn’t feel like laughing but did anyway. “I’ve never been on a boat before, you know.” she said.

“Hell of a first time,” Rasmussen encouraged. “Let’s go down enough shrimp, olives, and champagne to make Diego regret inviting us.”

“Yeah,” said Mel. *Us*. “Hell yeah. Let’s do it.”

They moved out of night into big sound and big light. Overhead spotlights alternated gold, silver, and orange and caught in a huge chandelier that glinted prismatic in all its crystals. Wait staff with big buttons up and down their coats glinting to match accents with that chandelier. Rasmussen accepted a flute of the bubbly from a tall man with an expressionless face. “Excuse me,” said Mel, and he handed her one too. The curved glass caught light and distorted too. Stretched it out curved like neon. She sipped and prayed for the bubbles and alcohol to remake her into that person she was back in Philadelphia where her name and competence were known.

“Look,” Rasmussen pointed to a circular table decked out in classy food. Mel counted three large lipped glasses filled with red dipping sauce and enormous shrimp with big tails that curled over the rim.

“Oh, I see them,” said Mel. “Nice shrimp.”

Rasmussen let out a singular laugh. “No, our host. *Next* to the shrimp.”

He was right. Mel saw Diego, still wearing his goofy captain’s hat and laughing to a crowd of three. Shadow striped their faces and kept her from seeing the others beyond their outlines. Diego soaked up light like the chandelier.

Rasmussen poured his entire flute down his throat in a single gulp. “Come on. Good move to thank our host for his drink.”

So Mel followed him to Diego and the three, stopping to pluck a shrimp from the glass. A whole critter. Stalk eyes and antenna. Feet cutely curled out front and that big rudder tail curling behind. Wholly dead. She twisted and removed the head, squeezed the tail to pop out the edible prawn. Deposited the shell onto a plate half full of discarded shells. She dipped and sniffed her sauced shrimp—marinara and spices. Biting and chewing, a flooding in her mouth like the bountiful sea with notes of Italian success.

“How’s it taste?” came the voice of Diego.

“Mm?” Mel took a minute to get shrimp and sauce down. “Good,” she said. “Delicious,” but he didn’t respond right away. Just looked at her with eyes that glinted like the buttons on the coats of the wait staff. “I honestly love seafood,” she added. “There are some good places in Philly, to be fair. We’ve got the Schuylkill River so that’s something, but this is so good.”

“Glad you’re enjoying it,” Diego laughed and nodded. “It’s Melanie, right?”

“Yeah,” said Mel. “Melanie. And you’re Diego.”

“Yeah, Diego.”

He was still looking at her, and she could see Rasmussen glancing every couple seconds in her direction as he spoke and laughed with Diego’s three shadows. One deep breath and she’d built herself back up. She belonged here. She had every right to be here. She eyed Diego up and down and smiled kindly. All right, nerd. Square up.

She reached for another shrimp and twisted its little head until snapped off. Pinched the tail and pulled the prawn. “You want one?” she offered. “For real, they’re so good.”

“Ah, no thanks,” Diego shook his head and patted his stomach. “So full already.”

Mel wondered how much stomach space he'd devoted to champagne. His current flute had more space than drink left in it. "Really?" She dipped the shrimp and ate it in one bite.

"More for me, then. Guess I'm about to have a better time at your party than you are."

He laughed with an open mouth. Teeth so white they too caught in the light. "Then I'll have done my job as a host. Gabriel, where'd you find this one?"

"You mean Melanie?" Rasmussen answered in a measured voice that made her sip more champagne to hide a laugh. Yeah, she knew that tone. Liked it, in this situation. Have fun, Diego. "Two years or so ago, I think? Yeah, two years. My old assistant went back for a Masters in Accounting and shifted into finance. Held interviews for the open position and never seriously considered anyone else after meeting Melanie."

"Wow," said Diego, and polished off his glass. "That's nice."

"She's got dedication past the point of requirement and has made all our lives so much easier."

Mel made eye contact with Diego, smiled, and popped open another prawn.

"That's nice," Diego said. "That's really nice." He tried to drink more champagne but didn't have any left in his glass. "Excuse me," he told them, "I seem to be running on empty. If you'll give me a minute." And he was gone somewhere into the amorphous mix of light, shadow, and people.

"Heh," said Rasmussen. The three shadows had faded away. "Think he'll be back?"

"God, I hope not," she said. "*Je-sus*."

For the next two or so hours they roved around the conference hall. Tables of appetizers, conversation, and ambient classical music. Mel spoke and initiated and made fun of Rasmussen a little bit for how clearly attached he'd become to his beard. "Oh no, don't get me wrong," she

told a representative from some startup growth investment firm. “It’s a good look, but come on just look at him,” and to Rasmussen, “you can’t go fifteen minutes without running your hand down your chin.”

“What?” Rasmussen blinked, grinned, and did it again.

General amusement; Rasmussen laughed too. Mel met stares with another woman in a similar black dress, rolled her eyes, and winked. The woman laughed and shook her head. Rolled her shoulders and walked away. Mel watched the space where she’d gone. Took another sip of champagne.

After, as she and Rasmussen retired to rest in preparation for the showcase tomorrow, she laughed under the full moonlight and said, “That was actually a good time.”

“Yeah?” asked Rasmussen. “I thought so too. Don’t think I’ve eaten like that in ages.”

“Almost two years,” Mel informed.

“Well. Guess that’s right.”

Off the deck and into the stairwell. Into the hallway that led to their rooms.

“What’d you think of Diego? Asshole, right?”

“Right,” she said.

Rasmussen frowned. “Yeah, I thought so too.” He grimaced and spat onto the carpet. Mel thought that might have been the champagne in him. “Fuck his kind,” Rasmussen said. “He comes around you again, just grab his stupid cap and toss it overboard.”

Mel laughed and felt lucky to be where she was. “I might,” she said. “Don’t think I won’t. And now if I do, you can’t fire me for causing a scene because this qualifies as executive permission.”

“Fire?” Rasmussen cracked his knuckles and then yawned. “Be more inclined to give you a promotion.”

Mel stopped. There was the word she thought about all the time but never said out loud. Was this the time to ask? Or maybe that was the champagne in her. Maybe she should *lean* on that champagne in her. “You said your last assistant went into accounting, right?”

Rasmussen stopped and looked around for a second before realizing Mel had fallen behind him. “Oh. Right, yeah. Went back for his degree and now he’s a CPA. Works on a consulting basis but we keep in touch.”

“But he went back to school,” said Mel.

“He did,” Rasmussen confirmed.

“Well,” Mel started, but Rasmussen yawned again.

“Hey, Melanie, I’m sorry but I’m just exhausted after all that. We can continue this conversation sometime after the showcase? Need some rest.”

“Yeah,” said Mel. “Yeah, yeah, totally. Time to rest.” She opened her door and put one foot in before calling back. “Remember, we go on tomorrow at four. Official start is ten, so I figure we show up then and duck out around two for some prep time.”

“Sounds good,” Rasmussen told her, “like always.”

“Goodnight.”

“Night.”

...

Gone were the fancy suit and dress. On were the jacket and tie—the business professional. The investor types dressed in wild colors and extravagance, but Mel had decided on all business for her and Rasmussen at the showcase kickoff. Six Star would have some class—

extravagance in negative. The appetizer tables of last night's party had been cleared of food and someone, probably the wait staff, had conjured chairs for everyone to sit in. Diego Cantobre stood on stage still wearing his captain's hat and now with a white suit-jacket to match.

"Welcome, welcome, welcome all." The mic carried his voice clear through an impressive rigging of large speakers that the full lighting allowed Mel to now see. "Welcome to the third annual NüLife Technology Showcase. We're so glad to have you here." Scattered clapping. "Today you'll be seeing the finest, newest technological gadgets and products. The techniques and items we'll be using every day of our lives once the world catches up to what we have on our little boat. Of course she's not so little," Diego's head tucked forward a nod and his eyes looked up. A conspirator's wink. "Is she?" Scattered laughter. Mel gave a polite smile and exhale even though she wasn't sure what that joke was supposed to mean. "The *Financial Fortune*," Diego considered, using his free hand to remove his hat in presentation of humility. "Ladies, gentlemen, and nonconformists, let's have a hand for our boat!" Stronger applause. "But she's not just our boat," he said. "Not just our home for these three glorious days. No, she's in fact the unofficial first item on our showcase!"

Mel noticed lots of people looking around after this announcement, which she didn't get. First surprise item or not, the boat was the same one they'd socialized in last night and dragged themselves out of bed in this morning.

"The first of her kind," Diego said once most eyes had returned to him. "The first all-electric gigayacht. She moves so quickly, so quietly—no combustion necessary. Her entire shell converts light into charge for her battery, her entire hull is connected to a robust program that operates a hundred-million cells to jet propel her through the water. My lovely *showcasers* and *showcase-ees*," he said, and Mel wondered who was who. "This hat," here he held up the

captain's cap, "is not a joke. NüLife and its partners have designed this boat from scratch, and it is on this basis that I tell you—you *can trust us*. You can trust us to bring you the finest in technology because we are the cuttingest of edges and like attracts like. So enjoy your stay. Enjoy the show. Investors, the unicorns for which you look are here. Pay them well and ride for the moon. All you company representatives. I just want to take a minute to thank you all. Without you, there is no showcase. No reason to build my wonderful boat. Make these investors line up to give you their money."

And that was the end of Diego's speech and the start of the showcase. Mel wouldn't have said it, didn't like it, but if Diego had spoken truthfully in his description of the *Financial Fortune*, she'd have to call her parents and friends to brag to them about how she'd been present on the maiden voyage of the first boat of the future.

...

After sitting through four hours of product demonstrations with only a thirty minute lunch break where she could only look at the cute little charcutier sandwiches on croissant rolls, Mel didn't want to learn another way helpful new applications could use innovative software and design to save her hours and hours of accumulated time per year by shaving off a handful of seconds every day. She didn't need an *Indecision Cure*™ to know she'd forget these presentations as soon as they ended. After hearing another interchangeable five-foot-nine, 130 pound guy with glasses and suspenders tout "block-chain conceptualization" for the fortieth aggregate time with no explanation, she began to hate this unknown concept with a potent venom. Where did people learn this shmancy magic? Their prestigious universities?

Rasmussen snagged a small plate with one dainty croissant sandwich away from the lunch table and kept it with him back to the gallery, untouched and in his hand even as they left

the showroom to assemble their materials in the prep room behind the stage. After going through the presentation motions three times, an alarm sounded on Mel's phone. Four o'clock, and Diego Cantobre sauntering in, right on time.

"Awesome," he assessed. "Excellent. Everything ready to go? You guys need anything, a cup of water? Champagne? Ready to go?"

Serious panic energy blew off Diego like a physical scent, and Mel wondered if this was how carnivores smelled prey. That almost visible fear people got when they were about to lose it.

"Don't worry," said Rasmussen, calming, placating. *Yeah, get patronized*, thought Mel. "We have this," her boss assured. Mel tossed Diego a sweet smile. *We'll save your stupid showcase boat boy.*

"Sweet," Diego rubbed his hands together. "Then let's get this show on the road. Or out to sea. Whatever. Knock them dead guys. I know you can. You'll crush it, I know."

"Hey, Diego?" said Rasmussen before the man could stalk away.

"Yes? Can I do something for you? Anything?"

"Absolutely." Rasmussen thrust the extra lunch plate at him. "Please hand this off to someone in the crowd and tell them not to eat it. Just to hang on until it's time."

"Sure." Diego agreed without question. A desperate slip? "Sure. Anything else?"

"Nope that's all," Rasmussen dismissed.

For someone with such a minimal drive for grooming and general self-preservation, Rasmussen's skill at presenting did not suffer. Mel had learned early into her employment at Six Star that aesthetic sent a message, which was why she'd told Rasmussen to lose the tie and unbutton his collar. "Walk onstage with your jacket, but take it off after introductions," she'd told him. "Drape it over the back of the chair."

Aesthetic had gotten her this job. Aesthetic and self-presentation. Before Six Star, she'd sat behind the counter of her hometown Starbucks for almost five years. Decide what you want to communicate, and then make everything part build that goal message. Melanie is thorough. She is dependable. Conservative dress with a touch of style. Highlight her commitment to her last occupation, all five years. Talk about observing and fixing. Redesigning the shop based off customer feedback diligently recorded. Don't expect a callback because Starbucks is the only thing on your resume. Get one, and then the job.

"Good evening NüLife sailors, fellow tech-heads and investors. My name is Gabriel Rasmussen." Applause that demanded acknowledgement cut him off until he had nodded, winked, and stroked his trim beard. "Yes, yes. Thank you so much, truly. My name is Gabriel Rasmussen from Six Star and this," he took a step toward Mel, who held in her hands the box that would hold the *Indecision Cure*TM, "is my fellow Six Star representative, Melanie Callahan!" Amused applause with a smatter of laughter. Mel held the *Indecision Cure*TM box up to give the audience a better view while Rasmussen removed his coat. "Thank you for that, thank you. Now, we only have a handful of your minutes up here, but I promise we're going to make the most of them, and I honestly believe what we're about to show you will rock your world. Investors," Rasmussen tipped an imaginary cap.

This speech, delivered by someone else, would not have worked, but Rasmussen had that clout. Mel had studied how office-callers acted when they showed up for an appointment. She'd read pieces on Rasmussen's work online. So make the showcase-goers wait, just a second, Rasmussen. Signal that you know your own value.

"Our goal at Six Star is to reduce stress in people's lives, and the *Indecision Cure*TM is how we will accomplish it. You are all familiar with my earlier work on determining the efficacy

of advertisement through biofeedback, and we apply these same concepts here to a more important end: your satisfaction. It can be hard sometimes, to know what we want. To know what is good for us. To admit that we feel a certain way. The *Indecision Cure*™ will help you with that. Now, if you'll direct your attention to Melanie.”

Mel rolled back her sleeve to show patch on her left wrist, actually more than a patch—actually a complex piece of computery that detected and mined digital mountains of data points from her vital signs, ran them against its sister patch for accuracy, and then transmitted the aggregate data to her paired *Indecision Cure*™ application for analysis. Constant user input was required for the first few weeks, typing in activities as the user performed them into the app. To help the app identify match cause to effect. Rasmussen explained all of this while Mel smiled and tried to really feel the height advantage that the stage gave her over the watching crowd. The overhead lights made them hard to see, but she knew they were out there. People with money and futures and storied pasts to prop up their exemplary CV's or remove the need for one altogether. They probably ordered mobile at Starbucks and judged people who held up the line because they wanted fancy drinks. Wait. Enough spiraling. This was her cue.

“So that's the nitty-gritty how-this-works, but they can read all about that online,” she broke in, chastening Rasmussen for his stream of geek over *Indecision Cure*™ functionality. “Here,” she addressed the crowd. “Let's take a look at what *use* looks like.” She sat in the chair and pulled out her phone, which she'd paired to the screen that covered the wall behind her. Mel's *Indecision Cure*™ profile played widescreen, and Mel saw her Satisfaction at 33%.

Rasmussen clapped his hands and spoke again to the crowd. “All right everyone. Take a look at this. What does *Indecision Cure*™ have to say about Melanie?” He turned with the

audience. Stroked his beard and meditated on the screen of Mel's Satisfaction and Turbulence.

At last he sighed, "33%, oh my... That's not so good Melanie. What's wrong?"

Mel frowned. "Well, uh. I don't know."

"Well take a look then!"

Mel clicked the link suggesting steps to take toward her lasting satisfaction and a list of actions sorted by how strongly the *Indecision Cure*TM predicted they would improve her satisfaction appeared. At the top of the list was *Eat*.

"Good God, Melanie. Have you eaten today?"

Mel shook her head, a picture of total dejection that brought some polite laughter out of their onlookers. "No! Nothing. Nothing since those big shrimp last night."

"It's," Rasmussen checked his watch. "Dear Lord, it's a quarter past four! You didn't even have any of those fancy ham sandwiches at lunch?"

"No," said Mel again, all sadness and regret. "Not even one."

Here, Rasmussen turned to the audience and implored them, "Please! Who can help my poor assistant? Does anyone still have a plate from lunch?"

Scattered laughter while an owlish looking guy with coke bottle glasses and wispy blond hair crept from the fourth row and climbed onto the stage. He moved with the confidence of a toddler with an embarrassed shine of red on his cheeks and he had his thin fingers folded over the lunch plate Rasmussen had passed off to Diego. The audience answered his discomfort with delight, and Mel gave a grudging mental nod to Cantobre for selecting the perfect ineffectual intellectual for this role. "Here, here," Rasmussen assured the man, "it's fine. This way. That looks delicious." As the red replaced pale even more across the man's face, Rasmussen's performance mask seemed to crack and show actual humor. "Don't worry about it, come on.

You're—oh boy... You're doing," he lost composure but found it after a surgical few seconds.

"You're doing great, yes."

Mel thought the performance was cute. A bite of the croissant sandwich would have been better. She tilted her head to the side and thanked their audience participant and then dug into that croissant-ham combo until she held nothing but its plastic serving plate. She patted her stomach and pretended to choke a burp by holding her fist to her mouth while the audience laughed and on screen, her Satisfaction rose from 33% up to 54%.

"Better?" Rasmussen asked her, and she told him "Oh my God, yes. Unbelievable."

Rasmussen ran a thumb down his jaw and turned to grin at the audience. "Thank you so much for hanging with us through that little demonstration. That was a simple application of how the *Indecision Cure*TM can improve your happiness in the short term. Generally, we know when we need to eat—when we get hungry. But this is the *Indecision Cure*TM at its most basic. As time passes and data collects, your profile will become a more accurate picture of you. Base sketch to three-dimensional sculpture in full relief, if you will. What are you hungry for? Are you broadly lonely or pining for the company of a particular individual? Still, however, these are only short term suggestions to improve happiness. For longer term options, we turn to our second metric, *turbulence*. This is a meta-measure of volatility in Satisfaction after adjusting for cyclicalities, to remove our predictable patterns of hunger, thirst, and fatigue."

The audience tittered. Snippets of whisper flitted through the shadowy crowd like elusive fish Mel didn't have the tools to catch, but even without defined words, she could hear the sound of interest.

“We will not be exploring Melanie’s turbulence today, out of respect. For her, and for you, audience, because I’m afraid we’ve taken up much too long of your good time already. But you’ll get your hands on an *Indecision Cure*™ soon enough. Six Star guarantee.”

Applause.

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“Killer!” Diego found Mel and Rasmussen in the prep room. “Absolutely fantastic. You guys. Just, you guys.” He looked like he was about to cry and then pulled both of them into hard hug that had Mel’s face full of the shoulder of his white suit-jacket. “Sorry to say I don’t think I’ll need an indecision cure. Happy to tell you it’s because I’m positive you guys *rock*.”

“Thank you,” said Rasmussen when Cantobre finally separated, and when Cantobre finally disappeared back to introduce the next presenters, he told Mel, “And thank God that’s over.”

“You looked like you were having fun,” said Mel.

“All right, I was having a blast,” Rasmussen confirmed.

Mel collapsed into a chair someone had set against the wall and closed her eyes. End of the road tomorrow. Returning to port a little after four. Less than twenty-four hours and then all the fanciness would end. No more boat, no more ocean. No more Diego—a plus, but she was ready to admit that his stupid cap and jacket were kind of funny, in a ridiculous cartoon way.

“What are you thinking?” Rasmussen asked. “About the presentation? Thought it went okay.”

“No,” Mel shook her head. Maybe now was the time. She’d put in good work at Six Star. With Rasmussen. Learned a lot. “Everyone here’s really done something with themselves,” she started. “Even Diego’s got this boat and all the cool techie stuff.”

“Yeah,” said Rasmussen. Nothing else.

“I want to be successful like that too.” She had her eyes back open. “Do you think there’s a path up for me at Six Star? Eventually?” she added.

“Eventually?” Rasmussen echoed. “Well. Right now we really value your work in administration, with all the hectic mess going on.” Quiet. She could hear him pushing the bristle of his beard. “But eventually. Eventually? Yes,” he said at last. “Yes, eventually we can work something out for you.”

He was uncomfortable and Mel could hear it, but she’d also heard him say yes—she had a career path at Six Star and someday that path might loop her back to another boat like this one, but this time the invite would come addressed to her. Didn’t matter if it didn’t happen tomorrow or the day after. The path was there and she could wait for *eventually*.

“Thank you,” she said.

“No, it’s nothing,” said Rasmussen. “By that I mean, keep doing good work.”

“Count on it,” Mel told him. “You know I will.”

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That night’s dinner of Atlantic seafood medley took place in a fancy dining hall a quick stride away from the gallery and past the deck’s heated pool. Mel thought that a sunset would have been nice for the convention’s last night in open waters, but at some point during the eight hours of presentations, clouds had conspired to turn the sky into a dark mirror of the ocean. Water mixed with air in the open space between sky and sea in the form of rain that fell a little bit hard. Mel could feel the roll of the deck under her flats and Rasmussen said he could feel it as a twinge in his stomach. “If you’re going to be sick,” Mel had lectured, “don’t do it on me. Go find Diego with his super white jacket.”

“Ha ha,” Rasmussen said, and then grimaced.

They’d taken a quarter hour to go back to their rooms and become elegant again. Mel had opted for an androgynous blue suit over turquoise button-down that she hoped would prevent Diego or anyone else from trying to flirt with her and also make her feel a little bit closer to the ocean, thematically. She would miss the steady roll of waves that did queasy things to Rasmussen’s stomach.

They scurried across the deck, jackets held above their heads to block the rain that fell like needles, and fell harder by the time they’d pushed their way into the dining hall.

“Blech,” Rasmussen groaned. “Why’s it got to be so wet?”

“What?” asked Mel.

Rasmussen waved his hand in no particular direction. “The water.”

When a member of the staff brought them to their assigned table, Mel wasn’t surprised to find Diego Cantobre already there, chatting up four others, including the mousy man who’d delivered her croissant during the *Indecision Cure*™ presentation.

“Oh awesome!” he called as they approached. “Rasmussen, Melanie. Come meet everyone—this is Benjamin, Roxanne...”

Introductions carried on and Mel learned that the man with the wispy hair and bottle glasses went by Ted, a representative for a venture capital tech firm. “So happy to meet you,” he said when his turn came. “We always like to tell the startup crowd we’re looking for the next Six Star.”

“Six Star *is* the next Six Star,” Rasmussen grumbled.

“Of course,” Ted nodded seriously. “But the kids are out here doing great things. We live in an amazing time. So much good work being done!”

Rasmussen's laugh was sharp, one Mel had heard before but not often. "Tell them they can come work for Six Star."

"It's attracting all the top talent," Mel nodded her head to display modesty and make sure the whole table knew she was talking about herself.

"Ha," Rasmussen laughed with everyone else.

"So this is it?" she asked Diego when no one would step into the conversational spotlight. "Times up for NüLife?"

"Well the party's not over yet," he said. "We've got this meal. And then we'll execute the homebound protocol and the ship will bring us in."

"And then?" she pressed.

"And then the party really will be over."

Rasmussen grunted, and Mel wondered what had got him in such a mood. Maybe his stomach. She'd pick up a case of Tums on shore; he'd sit there and hurt forever before giving into the pain if there wasn't someone to cave and buy Alka-Seltzer tablets for him.

The meal came to their table in parts: a fancy pre-cut salad where the dressing and good stuff was just drizzled onto half a head of cabbage that just seemed lazy. A very small serving of some tangy stew that might have contained an endangered animal. Dessert more art than food. Mel decided that back on land, she'd get herself to a big, greasy, unhealthy cheeseburger and she wouldn't pay more than six dollars for it. But she'd get it back in Atlanta and on her own time. She wasn't about to ruin all the hard work she'd put in to fix Rasmussen's diet.

After the meal, Diego treated stood on a small stage at the center of the room and treated them all to showman's tears—laughing wails of despair that the showcase must indeed come to a

close. He thanked them all and advised them to collect their things, that the journey back to port would only take them a few hours.

Mel would miss the ocean.

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In the privacy of her room she consulted her *Indecision Cure*TM and saw a Satisfaction of 80% and a reduced Turbulence of 61%. That had her interest. As an aggregate measure of Satisfaction, sum Turbulence was designed to change slow, and even this slight reduction meant her satisfaction had been relatively stable since she'd last checked. She resized the window of data collection to include only the days since she'd left for the conference. Her turbulence plummeted to an unheard of 31%. Using her paired app, she cross-checked turbulence against satisfaction on a double line-graph. There. A general downward trend in turbulence as satisfaction steadily rose, with slight blips in the turbulence drop to coincide with two major satisfaction spikes.

What were those?

12:42 AM on the night before yesterday. That would have been... Her first talk with Rasmussen about his last administrative assistant. The one who had gone back to school and gotten his degree. And the second—4:54 PM yesterday. Right after they'd finished their presentation. When Rasmussen had confirmed her path forward at the company.

She sighed and laid on the bed of her cabin, the weight of her roller-case pressing against her side. When she closed her eyes and forced herself to be still, when she listened to the room with no noise was when she could feel the waves, or imagine she could. Water beneath them undulating. There were deep spaces underneath here and currents that kept the world constantly in flux. No stillness. No one was stuck.

When she opened her eyes, she found the *Indecision Cure*TM app still open on her phone, satisfaction at 84%.

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Two hours later, she and Rasmussen had taken seats under a table with an umbrella on the top deck, had taken a bottle of champagne from the convention hall and two flutes. They would sit and sip and watch the land roll in. She'd cast out a line of conversation but Rasmussen hadn't bit, so she decided that this was the time to be silent and introspective. Meditate on the comings and goings of things or something. She really thought about the roving ocean and all the cool fish swimming beneath them. Silver flashes of fin and scale. Squishy invertebrates with no solid shape. The difference between that world and their own obsessively clean white yacht and Diego's starched coat and stiff smile made her laugh a little.

"What?" Rasmussen asked.

"Nothing," she composed herself. "Nothing. All's well."

"Well," he grunted.

The champagne bottle slowly reached empty though Mel had only worked her way to halfway down her second glass. *Flute*. God, she'd almost had it with these fancy things. She went back to thinking about that greasy cheeseburger and then more about fish.

"Boat hasn't moved yet," said Rasmussen, and then checked his watch. "An hour and fifteen to our disembark time, we need to get moving." He ran his thumb down his beard, which had begun to inch out a little bit. Salt and pepper across his cheeks. "We'll miss our flight."

"I can get it rescheduled soon as we get connection."

"That's good," said Rasmussen.

Definitely his stomach. She could save time by rescheduling the flight while swinging by a Rite-Aid or somewhere for those Tums.

She didn't particularly mind the wait. A little extra time on the water—that was fine with her. When she moved up with Six Star, would she have access to the kind of compensation that would let her return regularly to the water? She could hope. Or if she went back to school like the old assistant maybe she could find somewhere on the coast. Somewhere warm and on the water.

A few other showcase attendees had wandered from their rooms to the top deck. They hovered in groups, talked in furtive circles. Rasmussen polished off the bottle and then his flute. “We better get moving soon is all I’m saying. Had about enough of this place.”

But they did not get moving soon. They did not get moving for the next two hours. Mel knew a whole two hours had passed because Rasmussen muttered, “Jesus H. Godforsaken Christ, it’s been two hours. Fucking hell.”

She nodded, kept silent. Inspected her long empty flute just to do something.

“The fuck is Cantobre,” Rasmussen kept on. “Dumbfuck whiz-kid.” He glanced over to her. “Sorry. Pardon the language.”

“No,” Mel shook her head. Tried to show some outward relaxation. “No, it’s cool. When are we going to get moving, seriously.”

Not for another two hours. That was when Diego started making the rounds. Speaking for a second with one furtive circle and then another. Mel and Rasmussen watched the groups trickle away toward the convention hall until Diego finally made his way to them. Early evening put a bright yellow behind him while he stumbled over his words and wrung his hands, curly black hair instead of his captain’s hat, mussed and unkempt.

“Hello, that is—um, good evening. Sorry. We are experiencing... unexpected delays. Would you be willing to go to the, um—”

“Dear God,” said Rasmussen, “just speak.”

“Right,” said Diego. “Yes. The convention hall.” He stopped to take in a deep breath. An exhale. “Please make your way to the convention hall and I’ll address everyone there.”

Mel watched Rasmussen for their cue to stand and go, but it didn’t come. Her boss just sat and drilled into Diego with icy eyes until their host left. Then he pushed himself up. “Fucking hell,” he swore again.

“Goddamn,” said Mel, but didn’t think her attempt at venom came off right.

...

Yesterday, the convention hall had felt bright and vibrant. Now all the fancy clothes, fancy people in them, and general extravagance made her tired. She checked her *Indecision Cure*™ and saw her satisfaction coming in at a hot 32%. Her turbulence hadn’t spiked though, even when she narrowed the collection window to the last few hours. So she was probably just hungry. She shook her head, shut off her phone, and tried to focus on her stomach. How was it feeling? Was she hungry?

That made sense. Lunch had been... what? A glass and a half of champagne?

The stage sat empty for almost half an hour before Diego Cantobre showed up with his white jacket bedraggled and face aglow with sweat. He clapped his hands together. “Hello,” he said, and then stopped. Cleared his throat. “Hello, honored attendees of the NüLife Showcase.”

A little insect buzz in the crowd. Chittering. Unhappy. “Jesus Christ,” Rasmussen muttered to her. “Here we go again.”

“Still going to bump me a job if I find that hat and toss it overboard?” Mel shot back.

“Considering.”

Rasmussen snorted.

“Thank you, oh so much, for your patience,” Diego began his speech with hand-wringing. “I did want to announce that at this time, we are still experiencing... delays. We will be returning to port as soon as technical adjustments have been made and such a course of action returns to feasibility. While we work on that, my recommendation to you all is that you continue to enjoy everything we continue to offer, like the wonderful weather, the beauty of the Atlantic, and the coziness of your rooms.” Somewhere between the start of his speech and the end, he’d rediscovered that comfort with words he’d been flaunting this whole conference. “We are confident that the technical issues we are currently experiencing will be resolved in short order and appreciate your understanding. Thank you.”

The chittering. Louder. “Well now hold on just a minute,” called a man with a southern accent the size of east Texas. “Is there anyone available from the crew who could tell us a little bit about what’s actually going on?”

Which made Mel remember their first night on the yacht, scurrying through the wind and rain to reach the convention hall. That snapshot memory of the towering upper level of the ship. The cabin where the captain would stand. Why was Diego still addressing them? Why not *that* person?

“From the crew?” Diego asked.

“I said it, didn’t I?” called the man from the crowd, and the crowd with its insect chittering followed him—rose with his voice, sank back down. Mel caught Rasmussen muttering

something but didn't catch what. Then it came again. "The crew, whiz kid. You've got a crew running this boat. They can tell us what's the problem?"

"So." The NüLife host said from on his stage. The hands. The hands were wringing again and his shoulders had crept forward into a hunch that came more disappointingly natural than the strut that was all Mel had seen since stepping foot on this ship. "So." said Diego, "So the, uh, crew."

Oh come on, Mel thought. Diego you slimy bastard, this is your boat, right? This guy spent the last two days eating your food? Buck up and stare him down. *Come on.*

"So there, uh," Diego stumbled on and then stopped, sucked in a breath, and spat out his next words so fast Mel had to catch and separate the words out after hearing them. "*So-there-is-no-crew-the-boat-is-entirely-self-sufficient-and-operating-based-on-code-I-authored.*"

What?

Mel looked around at everyone else who was also looking around too.

What?

"The," Diego started and then coughed. "The plan was to... haha. The plan was to give my presentation during commencement while we headed back to port. Like, '*Ah! If you're here, who's driving the boat?!*'—you know. That kind of thing," he gave a weak laugh indistinguishable from his cough except for that he didn't move his hand to cover his mouth for this. "No one's driving the boat! It's the code! The way of the future!" And he almost fell, but caught himself at the last second. He stood, and this time remembered to cock his shoulders back. Paint that smarmy tooth-grin across his lower face. Tried to be the person he'd presented himself as. "You know, it's the code!"

Dead silence. The kind of total silence that makes other things louder—breathing, a heart that beats inside you. Creaking and groaning as the ship drifted imperfectly across the water, but maybe that was just the imagination. It had to be, because the boat was too big. Mel booted the *Indecision Cure*TM because she didn't know what to do and that was what she did now when she didn't... No. No, no, no, no. She cut off her phone.

What.

“The code,” Diego kept saying. “The *Financial Fortune* runs on a self-updating code I wrote for it, one that observes and reacts to everything. You all follow my GitHub? You can find it there. I published it for everyone to look at. Like, the coolest part of this showcase was the ship the whole time, and you can see it online, you know?” Diego, visibly sweating. “Proof pudding? I mean, proof's in the pudding. It's the code. Right?”

One of the caterers, a thin man with a thin face all flushed red, took a step toward the stage from his place on the outskirts of the room and called out, “Wait, what does that mean?” and a stocky guy in the front row—Mel recognized Benjamin from breakfast—hollered, “Are you telling us we're stranded?”

“No,” wheedled Diego, and Mel might have felt sorry for him if her pounding adrenaline wasn't pushing her to tackle him off the stage... Or jump overboard and swim for the coast. “No, we're *fine*,” Diego persisted. “We're just fine. Everything is under control, it'll just take a minute. Uh. An hour, maybe. All I have to do is run through the code and find the hiccup that's keeping preventing the proper execution of the homebound protocol. Easy,” was what he said, but he looked like he'd aged both a thousand years and also reverted back to a child. An overwhelmed twelve year old with a beard-stubble shadow, skin bent hardline into intense worry wrinkles, and overworked sweat glands. “I wrote it. From the ground up. Ran it through over a

billion simulations—no lie. It’s just got to be one little thing and I’ll find it and we’ll be fine. We *are* fine.”

“Holy hell, Melanie,” whispered Rasmussen, and he covered his face with his hands.

“This is hell, Melanie.”

“Just... Just, just,” Diego had his hands out in front, full stop. A double sign for stop, but the buzzing of the crowd defied his open palms. Angry buzzing crowd. Mel ran a spot check of the room, cataloging each exit in case she had to get herself and Rasmussen out of there fast. An angry crowd, buzzing. “Just,” Diego kept pleading, “Just. *All right*.” Hands went down by his side. Back under control. A new sweaty scowl for his pissed-off guests. “*Just shut the fuck up*, will you? We’re fine. I’m going to fix it. So hang tight in your rooms and we’ll be in Miami real fucking soon. All right? Good.”

Mel actually locked eyes with Diego, then. Just for a second. Probably double-checking the exits too—there was one right behind her on the right that she’d already glanced over.

“Christ,” said Rasmussen.

...

They’d convened in Rasmussen’s room to discuss their situation and options. It reminded Mel of planning out their presentation, but with none of the fun. She’d drawn up a list of their collected belongings and Rasmussen had sworn to and at God that he’d never attend another yuppie tech conference, not on this green earth and definitely not the blue sea.

Then the power went out.

Funny, how things could get suddenly worse like that. One second, things are bad and one second later, things are bad in the dark.

“Curly-haired, white jacket-wearing little,” Rasmussen had grumbled. “Lab coat Ahab wannabe wunderkind...”

“He had a poster of you up in his dorm room, remember?” Mel nudged. She didn’t find this anger particularly productive, and yeah, Diego had totally messed things up, but he’d pay his price for that. Who would willingly tie their name to NüLife now? No one with a name that mattered. NüLife —literally dead in the water.

Rasmussen kept going. “Should be institutionalized—”

And that was when the overhead lights died. Yellow dusk-light poured in a beam through a circular window and divided the room. After a minute, Mel asked, “Did...?”

“Oh yeah,” said Rasmussen. “Come on. Let’s find Diego.”

...

A set of stairs that began in the prep room behind the gallery brought them to the yacht’s higher places. To where the people in control could observe all and cultivate that control. The bridge of the *Financial Fortune* enjoyed a wide window that spanned the whole front of the room and offered an excellent view of the few lost convention attendees wandering dazed across the deck. Everything was supposed to be white—Mel could see that, but the dusk sun drenched the whole room in a yellow like imitation gold. They found Diego sitting crisscross on the floor and hunched over a laptop, as colored by the outside light as everything else in the room. One hand dragged and dragged a wireless mouse across the floor-tile while the other pecked at keys in quick bursts. He didn’t notice when Rasmussen and Mel entered and didn’t notice when they stood back and watched and watched until finally Rasmussen said, “Diego. What’s going on?”

The man froze. No mouse movement. No action on the keyboard. He turned his head and Mel saw unkempt hair, stubble-shadow and panic all bathed in evening yellow. “Uh,” he said and wobbled a little at the waste, eyes unfocused.

“Diego?” Mel asked. “Are you okay?”

“Sam hill,” Rasmussen pulled at his fringe of beard. “What did you break?”

“Uh,” Diego repeated, and Mel realized that this was the first she’d seen him without his ‘convention host’ shell. The white suit jacket sat in a bundle on the floor looking like a discarded towel or some old sheets.

“Look,” sighed Rasmussen. “Maybe I can help. Maybe we can figure this out together, right? What’s the...” He swallowed and Mel could only imagine the expletives he was fighting in his head to keep his speech so neutral. It was moments like this, she reflected, that made her glad to work for Rasmussen and Six Star. Well, she’d been lucky to find the position anyway, but still—moments like this. “Come on,” said Rasmussen. “What’s going on?”

Diego blinked and steadied just a little. Enough that he didn’t seem at risk of collapse. “Well. The code. That runs the ship. It has self-updating protocols. The base code has guidelines to change itself in response to stimuli.”

“Yeah, yeah,” said Rasmussen. “So the case that’s been running since we left Miami got warped?”

Mel tried to follow Diego’s response. Something about some self-modification to the master code that ran everything with spillover effects that amplified and had more spillover effects and then, and then, and then... Great. These kinds of moments always seemed to come. When she became a nonparticipant. A prop at the edge of the room. She could buoy herself on all Rasmussen’s barbed jokes about youngster fool Diego Cantobre but she’d never learn that

language that only the two of them spoke. She tried not to hate them both by rolling back her memories to her early days at Six Star when Gabriel Rasmussen was a chunky middle-ager subsisting off either four McDonald's trips per day or nothing at all and clearly looking for early admission into assisted living.

"You didn't try reinstating the source code and hard-editing in the homebound protocol?" Rasmussen was asking. He'd used the yacht's useless control terminal to lower himself to his knees so he could get a look at Diego's laptop. A single cable stretched from the yacht's traditional controls to the computer.

"No," said Diego. "Not first. I—just, okay. I ran billions—that is *hundreds of billions* of simulations for this trip and they all came out fine, I..." He rubbed his eyes but instead of looking better, he looked worse. Less alert. "I thought it just had to be an easy fix and then we'd be back, and—"

"Okay," Rasmussen clapped once. "Diego. Diego? Let's reset to source code and get to shore. Can we do that?"

"Well," said Diego.

"Well what?" Rasmussen pressed. "Well okay? Well let's get to it? Work with me, here, whiz-kid. It's your code."

"It's," Diego tried again. "It's—well."

Mel saw her place to cut in and pounced. "Well? Been through this, come on. Well what?"

"Something broke." Diego said this plain. Said it even. "When I compiled. Something broke the code."

"What do you mean, 'something?' Just reset it and we'll build from there."

“No.” Diego chuckled. “No, something in the ship is broken. Something that changed in the ship is still breaking the code.”

Mel kind of understood that, or kind of thought she did. A physical something, code-independent was broken on the ship, and what was broken could be fixed. “So we find what’s out of place and set it right,” she said. “We can do that. We *can* do that, can’t we?”

But Diego just looked up and said, “It could be anything. It could be something as small as the angle of the ship. Maybe something in the engine has come just a little loose. The temperature is a degree off. Some input the code isn’t prepared to handle. Anything.”

“Anything?” asked Mel.

“The code is broken so everything is,” said Diego.

“Oh fucking hell,” Rasmussen groaned. “We’re hosed.”

...

Rasmussen left before Mel did. He needed space, or something. Probably good, Mel thought, since blowing off steam with a brisk walk seemed more productive than throttling Diego, who looked only halfway aware of where he was.

She hadn’t decided the best course for herself yet. A little space might be a kindness for Diego. Or not. Sunset of no clouds, a clear burning heaven at the viewport. She’d never been good at leaving. The *Indecision Cure*TM pulled at her pocket and the biofeedback patches itched against her skin. *Check. You have to check.* Satisfaction clocking in at 40%. Turbulence, 65%. Obviously things had gone not well. An angry Rasmussen and ship-wide disaster. Not hungry, not thirsty—so what then? How to improve satisfaction? White, yellow, red out the window. Little black. Dark blue. Focus on the colors. Look at what you’re seeing and enjoy the view. Satisfaction rose to 42%. The sound of Diego taking long breaths through a stuffy nose. Diego.

“Red sky at night, sailor’s delight,” Mel offered.

Diego didn’t have a response. Hadn’t resumed his attack on keyboard or mouse either.

“Old sailors used to say that,” she soldiered on. “They had a rhyme.”

Still nothing.

“If you want me to go,” Mel told him. “I will. Just in a few seconds. Want to watch the sunset, if that doesn’t bother you.”

A sniff. A long inhale. More nothing, and then, “Yeah. That’s fine.”

A dying red circle sank closer and closer to a line on the horizon that divided water from air. Both sides glowed with its red and suffered an invasion of shadows that poked that poked in from all angles.

“What do you think you’ll do next?” Mel asked.

“I.. I don’t know.” Not a hint of the showman. No up or down to these lines—just flat words with as much buck as their powerless ship. “I broke everything. I’m an idiot.”

“Huh.” Mel kept her eyes on the ocean and sun and window. Finally she said, “Well that’s rude.”

“What?” Surprise. “Sorry, uh.”

“That you’re an idiot? You’re probably smarter than me, do you think I’m an idiot?”

“Uh.”

“Be careful how you answer,” Mel advised.

“No.” said Diego. “No, you’re not an idiot. I don’t think you’re an idiot.”

“Well that’s good,” said Mel. “Me neither.” *Sometimes*. “So next steps. Next on the roadmap. What needs to happen now?”

Diego laughed once. A quick sharp sound. “Guess I need to get my finances in order and tell Hear-See Group to stop lining up buyers for our IPO.”

“Probably,” Mel said. “But who knows. Re-segment your budget into PR. Live-tweet this whole thing and post in a blitz when we have connection.” More shadows than red on the sky. A circle into an eight, our half-submerged sun. “But you can’t do that now. So. What’s next?”

“Next?” Diego parroted.

“Yeah, next. You’re a smart guy. Figure it out.”

“We don’t have power.”

“None at all?”

“Absolutely nothing.”

“So what does that mean for us?”

A more natural laugh. No barbs, no bite. Diego said, “Guess we kind of have to party on a yacht like rock stars.”

...

In her life, Mel had been a lot of... Well, at least a few, things. Barista. Student... Yeah. Never been stranded at sea before, but if there was a way to do it... Things could have been worse, and they’d probably get worse later, but now? What the hell. Hell. Rasmussen was mad as hell. Fuming into his champagne. Muttering between sips, and Mel couldn’t really blame him for that, but the shrimp tasted spectacular and maybe he should remember that.

What do you do when everything is broken? When the evening has wilted yellow to black and you’ve got no light but an ample moon and dots of stars. You’ve got no anything; the boat is broken, shore’s out of reach, the freezers are without cold or power and most of your food

has a warm shelf life of a day and a half? Wouldn't make sense to let it go bad and it looks like you're going to need the energy for the trials to come.

"Attention NüLife Technology Showcase attendees!" Diego had announced, standing on a chair he'd dragged out to top deck of the *Financial Fortune*. "We are stuck and have no connection or way of getting to shore. This is my fault and I apologize. I'm not sure how long the code has been malfunctioning and have no idea where we are. The best thing we can do right now is to remain optimistic and wait to be rescued. The good news is that we're important. Yeah, we're very important and people will notice we're gone. They'll find us. But while they do that, please help yourself to as much shrimp, caviar, prosciutto, and whatever else as you can handle. This will also be the last night we at NüLife can guarantee cold champagne, so my recommendation is to have fun with that too."

Diego and his skeleton crew of caterers had dragged most of the remaining food out from the stockrooms onto the main deck using portable flashlights. They'd carried one man out of the boat's interior on their shoulders after he'd tripped in the dark and twisted an ankle. He'd looked upset then but now he had another chair from the gallery, food, two bottles of champagne, and kind of a smile.

"Shuffleboard tournament! Twenty minutes." Diego had closed his speech with, "Five thousand dollars out of my wallet into the winner's."

Q&A had gone on for a few more minutes. Investor types wanting to know all the specifics about what they were getting into—how droll. Mel had gone straight for the wide-rimmed shrimp glasses and taken one all for herself. Five thousand for winning shuffleboard? Hell, she could win it. She was young, she was limber. She needed the money. Rasmussen had emerged from his quarters and had one bottle of champagne uncorked and on its way down his

throat, another tucked under his arm, and a third in the fingers of that hand. “Can you believe this? This is a nightmare.”

Mel pinched a bigass piece of shrimp by the tail, swirled it around the marinara in her glass, and spilled a dab of red sauce on her shirt. Six years ago she’d been dying in a West Virginian field with a bunch of high schoolers on Miller High Life, the champagne of beers. Improvements.

She caught the end of Rasmussen mumbling something, killed another shrimp, and asked, “What was that?”

“I said I’m going to stamp this guy’s career. Conference. Everything. Where’s your due diligence? This level of negligence should be criminal.”

Mel shrugged. “It might be. If someone gets hurt.”

“Jesus. If you’re hurting my time, you’re hurting me money. I’ll sue you.”

“Think Jesus really said that?”

“Yeah. When he was whipping those snakey moneylenders. That’s what ought to happen with Diego. Come on, he rubbed you the wrong way too, right?”

“Right,” said Mel. “Yeah, he did.”

“Yeah.”

They were quiet. Mel chewed another shrimp while Rasmussen took pulls from the bottle. “Well,” said Mel after her second shrimp consumed in this way. “Mama needs \$5,000. I’ll get him back by getting his money.”

“I can’t believe he’s trying to wave some chump cash around to make us forget what an ass he’s been. Just like the little twerp.”

Mel translated her groan into a laugh on its way from her head to her mouth. “Chump cash. Yeah. Anyway, yeah. Reporting back later.”

She didn’t win but came so damn close. Second place. A middle-aged woman named Jodi took first. A wispy wraith-woman in a black gown. Mostly quiet but a different entity when grasping a shuffle-stick. That moonlit concentration when she took her stance and used both arms to slide a big circular puck down a stretch of the deck. “Snap,” Mel said after Jodi removed the only puck she’d managed to land in the point zone with a tactical shot of her own. “Thought I had another forty years before I started looking bad playing shuffleboard. You’re incredible.” Of the players, the librarian-presenting guy who’d brought her that snack during the presentation laughed the loudest, but possibly because Mel had fucking trounced him in game one. Ted was his name.

Most of the conference’s 85 attendees had wandered away to sleep or sulk in the privacy of their rooms, Rasmussen among them, but the rest kept up. Near what might have been one or even two in the morning, they’d dragged chairs out of the gallery to form a circle under the stars. Living in Atlanta, Mel hadn’t seen real stars in a long time. Hadn’t seen stars like these ever. Her satisfaction had surpassed her battery, now at 72%. Ted was talking about back when he’d started at the Hear-See Group. He said they’d hired him for his analytical mind but hadn’t listened when he told them his body hadn’t kept up, that the junior consultant’s traditional hike would break him.

“Did it?” asked Diego. “You’re here. You’re fine?”

Ted looked at him, all serious, pupils clashing with the reflection of the moon in his big glasses like the satellite’s shadow. “Yeah. That trip. What you see,” he gestured to his paper-thin frame. “Is the product of many years of therapy. Physical and otherwise, as a result of that

retreat.” Then he brightened. “You know how some people are allergic to grass and it’s super inconvenient?”

Diego shook his head, grinning. “*Oh no.* Yeah.”

“Well,” said Ted. “That’s pretty much the only thing I’m not allergic to, thank God. Who schedules a team-building wilderness retreat for spring?”

“Everyone,” Mel told him.

Another hour of stories and stars and eventually Ted posed the question, “What happens tomorrow?”

Diego sighed. He’d leaned back so that his chair sat balanced on only the back legs. Now he rocked back forward. “Tomorrow we start conserving the food and drink we have.”

Moments of silence. No one else asked it, so Mel did. “What food and water do we have? That won’t go bad?”

Diego didn’t seem to want to answer. But he did. After staring at the deck for a bit. “We do have some water. Not a lot. We’ll definitely have more champagne.” The uneven whoop of some wind. Ocean, far off. “As for food. Let’s call it, non-liquid nutritional content.”

Sad laughter. Mel didn’t.

“We have the shrimp sauce.”

No laughter. Except Mel’s. “Tomorrow’s gonna suck,” she said, wiping at her eye.

...

The prophecy came true with a throbbing combo of hangover and exhaustion. Mel had found her way to her quarters using the light of her phone (Satisfaction: 64%) and passed out until morning’s piercing light came poking through her cabin’s window. Day four of the cruise.

Off schedule. No schedule. She hunkered in bed for as long as she could ever let herself do nothing—maybe ten and a half minutes.

Gloom hung in the air of the hall outside her room and pooled on the floor like shadow water. No light in the overhead bulbs. She knocked on Rasmussen's door and got nothing. He'd taken three bottles with him last night, hopefully to tide him over for the next few days and not down in a single sitting.

Brightness in the air as cheery as ever. Mel sucked the salt breeze through her nose. Exhale out the mouth. Soothe your aching head. She did feel a little better.

The top deck didn't have much to hold over the rest of the ship other than light. Tables and chairs from the gallery and dining hall had made their way to the outside. Here she could head to the rail and look over the ocean.

Guests meandered between the deck and the shade of the gallery. The pomp and high fashion of NüLife had fallen apart in places. That old money investor still had his coat, but over a stained undershirt and pajama bottoms. That one had paired their monogrammed bathrobe with sleek Ferragamo's. Mel recognized Jodi from shuffleboard and spent the morning chatting about technique and life on shore. They split a warm bottle of champagne that tasted like tasted like the inside of her mouth times two. The wind came in strong gusts for bits of time—an hour here, another quarter hour two and a half later. Dead lull in between.

She passed the time with Jodi talking about their professional lives, meaning Mel spoke for a couple minutes and then listened a lot. "Starbuck's," she finished. "Worked there for about two years, but they were going to promote me. People were quitting all the time. Kind of awful. Anyway, I realized when they gave me the offer that I... Well, I didn't want to be the girl who

never left, you know? My parents are still there, and they're fine, but everyone else had moved. I wanted to do that."

"And you found your place at Six Star?" Jodi asked.

"And I found my place at Six Star." Mel confirmed and then got buzzed listening to how Jodi worked in human resources at an independent satellite launching facility in Kazakhstan before transitioning out and putting her accumulated wealth to use as an investor. "The cosmodrome raised me," Jodi said, grimacing as she dry-swallowed champagne that tasted like hot glue. "And it's funny because I'm old. I remember bomb drills in Kindergarten. The Soviets were going to destroy the world, themselves, and us."

When Rasmussen appeared in the late afternoon, Mel knew how he'd be, and she'd prepared for it. He stumbled, blinking into the light, dressed in the same clothes he'd worn before but rumpled. Creased and hanging wrong. He joined Mel and a few other guests in the shade of the gallery. Jodi had lain down to sleep off a two PM headache that might have been a hangover or sun poisoning.

"No news?" Rasmussen asked, palm pressed to his forehead.

"None yet," Mel answered. "Far as I know we're still drifting, but I've been doing some thinking. I kept your schedule pretty clear for a few days after NüLife, starting today. Recovery time."

"Yeah?"

"Yes, I figured. You know, yeah. Recovery. But now, I think we've got an opportunity. Or you do," she amended. "Six Star. We."

"And what's that?"

“This is obviously a disaster,” said Mel. “We’re talking BuzzFeed, major networks, maybe a Disney-Hulu documentary if we’re lucky. This whole thing sucks right now and sucks for Diego, but if we spin this the right way,” she said, “if we act right in the moment and spin the experience after, we’ll make a big splash.”

Rasmussen muttered something, or maybe nothing. Mel couldn’t tell, but she steamed onward. “So let’s start now. Let’s make the best.” *And stop being such an unhelpful grump.* “We can help with rationing,” she suggested, “or just be a positive force to lift people’s spirits.”

Rasmussen snapped to focus when she mentioned rationing. “Food? What kind of food do we have?”

Damn. She’d overplayed her hand. Onto the bad news, then. “I think the sauce is all we’ve got left.”

“The sauce?”

“The shrimp sauce.”

“No. No way. No one could be that big a numbskull. Not even him.”

“Well,” said Mel.

“No way.”

Way.

Another hour brought Diego and his small crew of caterers onto the open deck. The wind had stolen the sun’s bite. No strong heat, but Diego had to yell to be heard.

“Attention!” he yelled to the dagger stares of his former guests and admirers. “At present we drift somewhere between the coast of the southeast United States and the western coast of Africa. Who’s hungry?”

Silence. Stares. Rasmussen's clenched fists and face gone chalk white. Mel wanted to take Diego by the shoulders and shake and shake and shake him for trying to be funny because she hoped to all-fuck he wasn't serious. "I'm hungry!" she called because everyone else's vocal chords apparently relied on the same power the boat did. "Let's eat!"

So Diego, out of all the work he'd put into building his brand, all the time he'd poured into refining his code, had forgotten one other thing. Two. Serving spoons and bowls. The caterers dragged a large metal drum of cocktail sauce from the kitchens and set it up next to a table where they stacked appetizer plates and the tiny shiny spoons from yesterday morning's caviar. "Please form an orderly line," he suggested. "This is all we've got that'll keep, so we'll be having a lot of it."

Grumbling under the bright sun. Some clouds overhead, but other than that, just wind and sea. Idyllic. Pristine. Flat champagne made up about half of Mel's stomach content and the rest was bile and that hurt. Maybe some sauce would bring balance to her frothing innards. "Want me to grab you a plate?" she offered Rasmussen. "Like Thursdays at the office?"

"The ocean is God's cruelest desert and Diego is his dumbest creation," Rasmussen answered.

"Okay, I'll get you a plate," said Mel. "You need some sauce."

She remembered the marinara shrimp dip in a red almost crimson, but the stuff in the vat looked like melted brick soup. "Morning Melanie," said Diego as she stabbed at the sauce with a caviar spoon. One gloop to plate one, maybe six or seven more to make a meal. Yee haw and hallelujah—behold! The wages of utmost decadence and *Financial Fortune*.

"Mel's fine," said Mel. A reflex. "Friends call me Mel."

"Oh. Not Melanie? I thought I heard Gabriel—"

“Professional relationship,” Mel cut him off. Gloop. Another congealed marinara dollop to the plate. Au de ripe tomato. “I mean, we are friends, it’s just.”

“Professional?”

“Yes.” She glooped faster because talking to Diego had upset the champagne still sizzling in her gut. Two plates loaded with partially aged tomato paste and spice. “Good luck with the inevitable mutiny,” she said.

Joining Rasmussen, they took their sauce plates into the windowed dining hall with a few other showcase castaways. No city view. No streets at dusk. Just the sun. The water. No extra desserts from Diondre at the cashier’s station. Just sauce. Mel recognized stocky Benjamin one table over by sight and the southern man who’d heckled Diego yesterday by voice. “I promised myself when I was in college I’d never eat like this again. Not after I got out and made my fortune. Crazy fucking world, huh,” the man was saying.

She heard Benjamin’s spoon click against his teeth as the man gagged down a warm hunk of pure sauce. “Ralph, we went to school together. Remember that time you got really sick and told the doctor you’d never had a drink before in your life and then he said you had the liver of a fifty-six year old alcoholic and put you on the O’Doul’s diet? You were twenty.”

“Yeah,” Ralph answered. “And now I’m all caught up.”

Mel turned to Rasmussen, who’d been nibbling at his sauce in silence. “You have that kind of time in school?”

“Hmm? Oh. No, I stayed in a lot. Those were Apple’s early days. I liked to practice coding with dinky text games.”

Mel waited for more but more did not come. Did bringing up school remind him of his promise? A path forward? She'd met the old Six Star administrative assistant, Andre. He worked in Six Star finance now as a CPA with two degrees now.

Sauce and silence. Silence and sauce. Another lavish dinner on the *Financial Fortune*.

"God, pour me another glass of champagne," she heard Ralph request as Benjamin popped the cap off a fresh bottle. "If I'm going to eat like it's college I'll drink like it too."

...

A second gathering occurred on the top deck. Diego at the height of his smarm, serving his toothiest grin and rations of water to the NüLife guests. "I have great confidence that we will be rescued soon," he promised, and then patted the large plastic jug the caterers had brought out. "Today's portions will be two cups of the goodest, the cleanest, the freshest water we have."

While Mel preferred bluster Diego to the depressive sack she'd witnessed in the control room, the reversion did mean she had to hate him again. That stupid had had found its way back on his head. Maybe it gave him confidence. It gave her the desire to glop up its expensive whiteness with marinara.

The edge of dusk on a pruple dark sky that fuzzed everything at the edges. Rasmussen's trimmed scruff in the fuzzy night looking unkempt. Unkept. Chilly air.

No complaints now. The catering crew managed the line and whispered with guests as the procession moved toward water. It looked to Mel like something religious, and the thought crossed her that no one on the whole Earth could know what was happening here. Could feel it. No one except those on the water. The lost souls of the *Financial Fortune* with Diego at the head in his whites like some kind of priest as he dispensed that most basic sustainer of life. Nothing in the world but them, the boat, a moon behind clouds, and hidden stars.

“What happens when we run out of water?” Rasmussen muttered into his cupped hand.

Mel didn’t have an answer. Didn’t like the ones she came up with except, “We’ll drink the champagne.”

Rasmussen told her, “We’re in a closed system. If we don’t start designing our future, it will happen *to* us.”

Mel said nothing because a caterer was passing. Their white uniforms that meant nothing save ‘one designated to distribute food’ glowed in the fuzz dark. Like acolytes in a dim sanctuary or silent angels. Controlling food, portioning water. How much more important now than shoveling illustrated paper into overly complex technology doomed to fail.

“What are you thinking?” Mel asked her boss when the white coat had passed.

“I’m thinking we should be missed by now,” said Rasmussen. “And I hope that means we get rescued tomorrow.”

Diego met them with a half-grin shrug at the mostly empty jug. “Nice night,” he offered.

“A little cold,” said Mel.

“How many of these things do we have?” Rasmussen jerked his thumb at the jug.

“Enough for a little while,” said Diego. A deflection. “Twice as long if we split rations.”

Two champagne flutes of delicious water tinged with plastic, Mel and Rasmussen sat in the gallery entrance as night set in and the wind picked up. The water had, more than anything, reminded them their mouths were dry, and two more flutes of Blanc de Noirs had quenched nothing but their curiosity that such a thing might help.

“You should go to sleep soon,” said Rasmussen. “We’re not helping ourselves by keeping up.”

“I’ll go when you do,” Mel countered.

“Okay,” he said. “I’m going,” but didn’t move.

She waited.

“Do you feel taken care of at Six Star?” Rasmussen asked. “Has it been a rewarding occupation?”

“Absolutely,” Mel answered with no hesitation. Her heart didn’t hesitate either. Picked right up with the wind. “Lucky to be here,” she said. “Even, like, right here,” meaning the *Financial Fortune*.

“Good,” said Rasmussen. “I’m glad to hear that. I really am.” A pause. A long one. “And you’ll always have a place at Six Star. In some capacity. We’ll always be willing to carve out a place for you.”

“I’ve been thinking about Andre,” Mel said. “From finance? You know, how he—”

“Excellent,” closed Rasmussen—grunting, standing, ignoring her last words. “Good talk, Melanie. Glad you feel that way. Remember to get some sleep,” he called back as he lumbered off.

Mel kept up and stared off the side of the ship. Everything in the distance had merged black, no telling sky or sea. She pulled out her phone, useless in this nowhere place except to monitor how satisfied she was with her life. 33%. She’d been so high this morning. What had happened?

Last night they’d played shuffleboard. Tonight everyone who wasn’t her had ducked into their burrows within the ship.

Oh well. She could keep waiting. She could bide time and boost her satisfaction in other ways the application suggested. Cooking new recipes was a valid substitute for career advancement in terms of satisfaction, right? Jogging. She could try yoga. Or maybe they’d run

out of water or food or champagne and all be dead in a week. Maybe she'd do as instructed and get some sleep.

...

Red sky the next morning. Angry red sky like blistering skin. Angry red all over like the crushing arm of a sunburnt giant. Mel choked down her bottle of morning champagne and listened as Jodi talked about all the same satellite stuff to Ted. Listened to more about how sure they used to be positive the world would end. The sour thought rolled into her on a wave of carbonated wine that tasted like melty pop rocks: dying in a nuclear blast beat an eternity in reception all the way.

This day's sauce ration came earlier than yesterday's. Diego must've been hungry like the rest of them.

"How much of this shit do we have?" she asked when she met him at the vat.

Diego shrugged. "Saving on cost. This was going to be our first event but the plan was to spend most of this month on the water."

She plunged one arm into the metal drum to harvest a teaspoon of sauce the same shade of pissed-off red as the sky. "So things haven't really deviated, then." She said, "Cost saving. *Cost saving*. You, cost saving. On the *Financial Fortune*. You."

Diego turned a beseeching look to the furious clouds. Coupled that with a short huff out the nose that made her burn to scream at him, to tell him to remove his awful hat and fucking just disappear, all right? That Diego Cantobre could be so dumb and successful reflected poorly on her. She should just accept that she'd already peeked with sixty or so years left to live if she didn't die before next weekend.

“Yes, you save money where you can,” Diego explained, arms crossed and sleeves pulled back to expose his bony wrists. “When you spend almost all you’ve got on a big boat and you need to convince more liquid rich people to give you their money, you buy cocktail sauce in bulk. Sure you can relate.”

“Ha,” said Mel and hated the champagne dizziness that made her sway to the right and then left as she took her sauce platter to the gallery. No dining hall. No windows, please. Just shadows, sad sauce, and the constant knowledge that life had stalled and probably wouldn’t start.

Rasmussen appeared from the *Financial Fortune* dungeons and Mel played up as much as her mood let her. “Morning boss. Want some sauce?”

“No, but I’m thirsty. How’s the saltwater?”

“Better than the champagne,” she said, “but only because it’ll kill you faster.”

One bitter laugh. “I’ll have three. Unless we’re rationing that too.”

“Could jump overboard. Have all we like.”

“Anything to improve our circumstances,” said Rasmussen.

“Yeah,” Mel agreed. She fell into mean humor so easily. Why bother resisting what comes naturally for no gain? “Red sky in the morning,” she said around an acid swallow of marinara. *Sailors take warning*. “Think the weather will kill us before Diego does?”

“Hopefully,” Rasmussen cracked his knuckles. “Wouldn’t give him the satisfaction,” and parts of her laughed while other parts still wanted to scream.

What do aging technology addicts do all day without their gadgets? Mostly nothing. Ted had locked himself in conversation with one of the caterers, speaking again of his life-threatening allergies. “Tree nuts,” he was saying. “So glad this shrimp stuff. *Mmm*. Has no tree nuts. And that it never touched the shrimp. Analeptic shock, I’d probably die.”

Mel hardly believed he'd made it this far. Such a fragile person, but successful and excelling while she couldn't get an undergraduate degree. God, she needed drink that wasn't champagne. She liked Ted. She needed to stop. She needed to get off this stupid smart-boat and sink her teeth in a double cheeseburger. Suck down an extra-large Dr. Pepper.

...

So long on open water. So long on calm seas and under calm skies. Now the wind came and stirred waves. Stole voice and howled the NüLife survivors into the gallery and below deck. Mel, Rasmussen, and the rest scurried like rats around the lightless passages that hid them from the gale. Shelter in the dark. Huddled like cavemen before the invention of fire. They whispered and breathed—impotent air sounds that confirmed their puniness in the face of nature's unbending wrath.

That piercing wind and the deeper static of rain that crashed and pounded. Rain. Rain. *Rain*. Thunder, the loudest sound in the world.

A light approached—Diego, bursting inside and sinking to his knees with heavy breaths. Not enough light poured from a small flashlight dangled on a loop around his wrist while he heaved his breaths on the ground. Had he fallen? Was someone hurt? What—

“Water!” came his cry. “The rainwater. Quick! We—we can... We can collect it.”

Water to drink, water to drink. Water that slid down your throat without bubbling, that didn't poison your mind sip by sip into hating everyone around you.

“Guys?” Diego croaked. He must have rushed down from the helm. “Guys? Water...”

Mel pushed between people she felt more than saw. Split close shoulders in the dark. “Hey,” she exhaled, reaching Diego's cone of light. “I'll help,” she said. “What do we need to do?”

“Thank you,” Diego breathed. “Thank you. This way.”

Out of the dark interior and into a world of rage and wind. A deluge from heaven, violent and cold. Mel opened her mouth to catch rain that exploded over her face. Catch them like snowflakes, soothing on your tongue—sweet bliss, that water... Forget the blast around you.

Diego had three caterers with him. One tottered in the wind and fell, rolling on the rain slick deck. The two white coated companions lifted their fallen comrade and raced stumbling back to the gallery entrance.

“Well?” Mel cupped hands to her mouth and yelled, but Diego—his half-there shadow in the dim light—Diego, who looked into the storm and lost his nerve, did not respond. “Come on,” she pleaded. “It’s your boat. Your hat. We need water.” But Cantobre couldn’t see her, she didn’t think. Only gazed into a tempest so large it had wiped out erased their moon and every star. “Diego!” Mel roared, and in the lightning flash snapshot that followed, saw and memorized every contour of his face. How gaunt he looked. Like a statue, like a formaldehyde-stiff corpse that saw the end coming as he died. A flash that was there and then gone into darkness and thunder that crashed like hell’s own drum of war. Seeing this—hearing—Mel almost collapsed. Thoughts: We are lost, we are dead. Thoughts needling into her like arrows, falling with the rain that poured wild into the gallery entrance on a slant. But other thoughts rose inside her, rising to meet what the storm sent flying. The *no, no, no*, and *we are not dead*. The, *we are alive*. We are ALIVE.

“Benjamin, Jodi, Ted,” she called. “Diego Cantobre!”

Their attention, like the people themselves—unseen but unmistakable. Felt. Here. “Containers,” she instructed. “Containers. We need them. Diego!” but the storm still had him. “You!” she reached out and grabbed one of the caterers by the arm. “Containers?”

“Behind the, uh. They’re... The dining hall! Behind the dining hall.” The white coat, drenched with rain. “In the kitchens.”

“Go!” Mel told the three of them. “Go together and don’t fall. Bring them to the edge of the dining hall. As many as we have. Anything that holds water.” They didn’t move at first, but they needed to. *They needed to*. Instead they looked at the storm like Diego Cantobre looked at the storm, freezing under this thing that was larger than their whole world. “Go, go, go!” Mel shouted, and they did. It shocked her that they did—that her voice was enough. The three were gone into black.

“Mel! Mel!” A voice from the shadowy mass. Thin, piping. “I want to help.” Ted, materializing behind those glasses streaked with rain. “I want to—” he started but stopped. A pale face. Mask of fright. “What can I—” A swallow and cough. “What can I do?”

She could see him tumbling on a gust over the rail too clearly, too easily. “Not outside,” she said. What could he do? He could, he could, *he could*... He could. “Clear the gallery when we go out,” she ordered. “People are either safe inside or with me, except grab four for yourself. Take the containers we bring in and store them where they won’t spill or fall.”

“Aye, aye.” Ted saluted as he melted into the gallery.

And now her turn had come. “Everyone!” she bellowed. “Everyone who can do it, come with me outside! Follow me to the dining hall and grab a container. Grab two and let them fill! Shield them from the wind and move them here when they’re full!” No one moved. What was she missing? What did they need? “This storm,” she pointed with her whole arm out the archway that opened to the raw elements, “is our storm. Our storm! And this water,” she cried. “It’s our water. Our water, come on! Our water! Our water!”

“Our water,” a few voices called back.

“That’s right, yeah!” Mel screamed at them. Didn’t know where this had come from, hadn’t done anything like this since never. “Our storm! Our water!” She pushed her voice to its loudest, grappled with the storm to the edge of vocal collapse. “Our storm!”

“Our water!” More voices. Loud voices. Together voices louder than the storm. *Their storm.*

“Our storm!”

“Our water!”

“Our storm!”

“Our water!”

“No more champagne!”

“No more champagne!”

And they stampeded onto the deck. Charged into and through mad wind and broke sheets of rain in a dash to the dining hall. How many? Mel tried to count but couldn’t. Not in the chaos and rain. Not all of NüLife, for sure not all, but enough. A sizable crew. *Hers.*

“Jodi!” she called. A glimpse of her shuffleboard hero in a lightning photograph, passing. A hand gripped her arm in the full dark that followed. A familiar squeeze, and then she was gone. The three caterers rushed into and out of the dining hall, small flashlights on loops like Diego’s to find their path. A fleet of plastic bins, steel drums, buckets, and other containers of sizes and shapes rested in the alcove that led to the room of windows, tables, and chairs. “We’re cleaning out the kitchen and storage now, but we think there’s more down another level,” reported one of the caterers. “We’ll—” A bright flash. “—Keep going in to find them. Here, take—” *Crash.* Mel saw the small flashlight in the caterer’s hand and took it. Wind slicing across

her shoulders and a chill like fever swimming through the rainwater all over her. “Excellent,” she said. “Thank you,” and she turned back to the deck.

Shadows moved, tripped, and flitted between shelters. The slight overhang of the helm. The entrance to the gallery. Mel saw a few metal drums guarded by watchful silhouettes and saw others of the showcase she recognized by face if not name as they filled smaller containers. Plastic bins, metal cans that once held perishable food. Anything watertight hit the deck.

She had her flashlight and hopped from place to place bringing that light with her. “How we doing?” she asked a dazed-looking guy with a haircut that still looked like \$150 soaking wet over his five o’clock shadow. He blinked and mumbled something the storm ripped away, so she touched his arm and yelled over the wind, “Let’s get inside! Is your container full?” He might have nodded. Could’ve been a dizzy slip of the neck. A bin by his feet, three quarters full. She stooped to pick it up, flashlight dangling on its strap, and he followed her motion. Together, they baby-stepped their burden to the gallery, where Ted met them at the door. “Can you handle this?” and when Ted said he could, added, “It’s heavy.”

“I got this,” said Ted, and Mel’s light showed his face go deep red with strain when his arms accepted the bin, but he didn’t drop. “Take him with you,” Mel nudged the other NüLifer into the gallery. “Think the noise and shit got him.” Judging by the haircut, this guy probably spent his days ranting about how VR technology would revolutionize film and almost running over pedestrians. Landlocked Mel would have been happy to judge him hard by his haircut, but on the *Financial Fortune*, she just wanted him inside and safe.

Back on deck. Back to moving between groups. Moving from face to faces visible in her light for only as long as it took to confirm all was well. New containers coming out. Old ones carried, shuffled, and pushed into the gallery. She helped others shift their water and found

herself working on one of the metal vats with the southern man, Ralph. He'd broken out his blazer on this night and Mel's first thought was that the rain would completely run it, but then she figured he could probably afford a new one, so. The big drum had overfilled and continually overflowed. With Mel on one side and Ralph on the other, they scooped it inch by inch toward the gallery, each dragging scrape sloshing loads of water down one of their waists.

"Don't think we've really met," she shouted, a wave of overflowed from the vat crashing down her stomach. "I'm Mel!"

"I remember," he twanged back. "*Indecision Cure*TM. Ralph."

Water flying in every direction. From the sky, out of the vat. Flying up when they kicked with their shoes. "It'll be an occasion for champagne," she huffed. "When we're done."

Ralph swore and swore again, "Ah, fuck it. I'll cut a bottle with you. And there's no one else on this miserable planet I'd say that to, right now."

Several rotations of new NüLifers and containers later, she stood in the open, flashlight in hand, and stared at the open sky. *Our water. Our storm.* Then a shout. She turned and saw the fall—a shadow that tipped over its vat as it fell to the deck. Lost water surged across the deck as the steel barrel bounced. Rolled. Faster. Her feet lost the floor in the flood, and the banging vat—banging loud and hard as it grew speed, rolling and soaring toward her—smashed into her legs and she started banging onto the deck. Banging and rolling. The deck banged hard against her back and her teeth clacked and she could feel the rain on her, getting into her nose. Which way was which way and had she fallen over the side? Rain, or the cold embrace of the ocean?

Coughing, spluttering. The back of her aching skull coming down to rest on a hard surface. Slow understanding and burning in her shins where she and the vat had collided. Dancing light where the caterer's gift struggled on the leash of her wrist as she coughed again

weakly. The water in her throat, she needed air. Moaning as she turned onto her side and curled in her knees.

One palm to the deck. Two. Pushing up under the rain that smacked and smacked the top of her back. One foot flat to the deck. Couldn't get two.

"Mel? Mel! Are you okay?"

Hands under one shoulder. Deigo's voice, closer. "Mel. Stand with me. Come on."

"Yeah," she breathed. "Yeah." She planted her second sole, but the pain in her leg—the cascading water and dark dots swarming in front of her eyes.

"Woah." Diego again. "Here. With me." Lifting behind that shoulder, and she rode the lift to her feet. Stumbled, breathed—water in the air but more air than water. "Thanks," she gasped. "Thanks."

"What now?"

What now? *What now, why her, what now?*

"What about... Uh." Her legs were burning and the rest was cold. The cold that had gone had sensed her weakness and rallied back. Strong.

"Yeah?" Diego asked and waited.

"We," Mel winced. Bit her lip. "Kitchen," she said. "Get to the kitchen. How many more containers. See."

"Right," The rain had saturated Diego's wild hair flat to his scalp and she hoped maybe whisked away his cap to some lightless and lost corner of ocean.

"Wait!" she shouted when he began to move. "Give me a second," she said, testing weight against her legs. She pressed one into the deck and then the other. "I think I'll be fine. I'll be fine. Okay. Go!"

She said the word and Diego disappeared into the ship and darkness. Where was the other fallen shadow? Who? How much longer would they last out here and how long would they last without water? Mel found the fallen on their side by the far rail—the guy who’d gone around pairing his initialed bathrobe with the Italian loafers he hadn’t bothered to change out of. That might have been the problem. Mel went to bend and almost fell. She limped a few steps back and looked around. Where was anything? She needed... Was there—

“Need a hand?”

The pale popsicle-stick figure of Ted, standing like a goddamn librarian hero in the rain. Nearby lightning put a frozen frame on an image Mel knew she wouldn’t forget. “Hell yes.”

Ted did the lifting and almost capsized only twice, but managed to keep himself together long enough for Mel to duck under one of Bathrobe Guy’s arms. They had him almost to the gallery when he found his voice and consciousness, moaning, “I’m sorry. I spilled the water. I’m sorry.”

“We’re fine!” Mel lied. Ted couldn’t speak for exertion, but sputtered extra hard and threw a chipper thumbs-up that might have been a random flailing of his arm.

“I just wanted to help,” the man kept on. “I’m sorry.”

“Hey,” said Mel, and her legs fucking burned. “Our water. Our storm.”

Jodi came up beside with a large can of water tucked under each arm. “Hey,” she said. “Is he all right? What happened?”

“Find Diego,” Mel told her. “He should be with the caterers. We need to start wrapping up.” In the gallery, where conditions were dark but not life-threatening, Ted commandeered Jodi’s containers and Mel passed off her flashlight. “Good luck. Take care of them,” she said, and watched its shrinking white beam as Jodi dove into the storm. They’d sat Bathrobe Guy on

the floor, and with her back against a wall, Mel lowered herself down to join him. Laid out her stiff legs and prodded the places where she hurt.

“You all good?” asked Bathrobe.

“Fine,” said Mel. “Really. I’m okay.”

Really, she was better than okay. Adrenaline dulled those aches in her legs and back, and so did the good news that Diego and Jodi brought back to the gallery: that the last of their fill-worthy stock stood collecting as they spoke. “Awesome,” she said. “Keep checking on people and as they come back here I’ll pull them in. And thank the caterers. What are their names?”

“Joe,” Diego answered. “Hassam, and...”

Mel waved him off. “That’s fine. Doesn’t matter. Just go.”

The half-drowned and exhausted guests of the NüLife showcase began to trickle into the gallery. Ted and a few others moved the final intake of water, and Mel’s thoughts turned to Rasmussen. Where was he? Inside? Safe? Or in his room with a bottle? Had he seen her with the flashlight, when she had it? She tapped Ted’s leg as he passed by. “Hey, have you seen my Six Star fellow anywhere?” Even in the near-dark, Mel could read his confusion. “Gabriel Rasmussen,” she clarified. “The boss-man.”

“Oh.” Ted wiped his wet glasses on his wet shirt and changed nothing. “He was up here a little bit ago.”

Mel laid her head back and grinned. So Rasmussen was helping. Good. She liked him in a good mood and he worked better in one anyway, she knew. “Thanks,” she said.

“Yeah,” ted droned on, unaware that Mel had already heard what she wanted. “He ran outside near the beginning. Helped Benjamin get the first big vat.”

When Jodi returned, she brought the flashlight with her. “This is yours?”

“No,” Mel told her. “One of the caterer’s. Joe, Hassam, or the other guy.”

Jodi shrugged and put the light in Mel’s hand. “Well it’s definitely not mine.”

The catering trio were the last back. Mel pushed hard to rise against the wall so she could greet and thank them on her feet. “Joes?” she asked the first one.

The man had a curly mustache that had curled down after taking on water. “Roger,” he said.

She turned to the remaining two, “Hassam? And I’m sorry. What’s your name?”

“I’m Joe,” said the third man, who had a body the same rough shape as one of the vats but larger.

“Ah,” said Mel. “Well—”

“Roger,” explained the man with the droopy mustache.

“Right. Thank you all. You were great out there.”

“You know I used to worry,” said Hassam, who had ripped the collar off his caterer’s uniform to expose stray curls of black chest-hair, “that I’d die next to these knuckleheads.”

“Man,” said Joe.

“So I made peace with it, today,” Hassam continued. “And now I think maybe we won’t die at all.”

“We aren’t going to die,” Mel told him.

“Please. Keep the flashlight,” was all he said back.

On her way to her room and a long intense sleep, Mel drank from one of the plastic water bins. She drank and drank until she wasn’t thirsty and had forgotten about the hunger. The storm thrashed, spat, and raged outside, but this water belonged to her. Our water. Our storm.

...

Remarkable, Mel thought, how fast things could change both ways. Change once and then change back. Sun replaced storm, and only the standing water that filled the containers in the spare room behind the gallery served as evidence of the wild winds and bone-cold rain that had roared and pounded. Only the bruises in deep purple and blue that opened up all down her legs to show their tumorous faces like night flowers. Those, and the flashlight around her wrist.

Her phone's battery had almost drained away now, hanging on at 20%. No connection still. No point in searching or hoping all the way out here, but satisfaction dialed in at 54%. She set her phone back to Airplane Mode and stashed it in a pocket. The third time she'd checked before lunch and she'd only lost a single percent.

The saucebells rang, or whatever mystic timepiece signaled to Diego that the hour had come to serve sauce told him that the hour had come to serve sauce. Mel sat with her legs splayed, back to the ship's gallery in the shade of the shade of the helm that rose out of it. She watched NüLife gather for sauce; Hassam and a caterer she didn't know serving.

Rasmussen had sat with her for most of the morning but they hadn't spoken. Fine with Mel, who wanted more than anything, more than rescue, to rest. When he did break out some words, he asked if she'd like for him to get her some sauce? Mel told him, "Sure."

By the time he'd gone through the line and got back with a plate for him and one for her, she wasn't alone. Shuffleboard legend and cosmodrome graduate Jodi had joined them in the shade. Also Ted, and the mustachioed Roger.

"You've got a crackerjack coworker there," the caterer complimented Rasmussen.

"Where she work, sales?"

"Executive administration," Mel answered before Rasmussen could.

“A good jumping off point,” Jodi added and made Mell want to stand up and cheer, bruises and all. “Get to know a lot of people that way.”

Rasmussen patted his throat with his fist, swallowing sauce. “Oh absolutely. We at Six Star are very thankful for Melanie’s presence.”

A calm lull of a day. No reason they shouldn’t be fine. Plenty of sauce and now water. A bright sunshiney sort of day to follow the trials of the night.

...

On the fourth day after the NüLife conference ended and the NüLife war of attrition against the indifferent Atlantic began, dolphins appeared off the port bow. A good sighting that lifted the people’s spirits.

Stand at the rail and watch them chitter and splash. Watch them puff jets of water that glitter in the air. Listen to Benjamin say, “Must be 400 pounds of fish. Think of the eating.”

Mel had to agree that a steaming dolphin steak would taste like heaven paired with aged marinara. Everyone *aww’d* and cooed as a dolphin sidled up to the ship’s hull. Blessed the *Financial Fortune* with a tap of its bottleneck nose.

What a magnificent creature that she’d tear into with hands, feet, and teeth if given the chance of a chance. Pretty fish.

Funny, how you could appreciate beauty you’d love to destroy.

...

On day five, Mel chucked her dead phone off the stern of the ship. It had died early the previous day, but she hadn’t stopped whipping it from her pocket, pressing her thumb to its inert screen and waiting for light. She had to know her satisfaction. Where did she stand, how—

No. Into the drink.

Her phone twirled in the air and caught sun. Pierced the water on its thin side and vanished without a splash, which disappointed sorely.

Even with so little to do except laze in the sun and laze out of the sun between daily allotments of sauce, it had eaten too much of her time. Jodi had caught her checking the dead device during that morning's shuffleboard session. Mel's legs still ached, but inactivity hurt worse. 'Do nothing' meant do nothing but sit and hurt and think about how exactly a week ago you shared gourmet fish dinner with Rasmussen on the Miami pier. Rasmussen had taken to doing a lot of nothing these days. He'd lay in the shade. Lay in his room, in the spare room behind the gallery with the water. "Conserve energy," was his creed. "Play the long game, Melanie," he'd advise.

But the long game looked gloomier and gloomier by the eve, by the hours and minutes they couldn't track because all the clocks were digital and dead. Shuffleboard was a kinder sport, even if Jodi always won.

"What's that?" she'd asked, rising from her next flawless shot to find Mel on her phone. "Are you getting signal?"

"No," Mel said, leaning on her shuffleboard stick to ease pressure off her legs. "It's nothing. Literally nothing. It's dead."

"Why do you keep checking it?"

"Force of habit." Her stomach gurgled. "Maybe."

"Want to break back into the champagne tonight?"

They'd done it last night with Ted and had a good time. Surprisingly good. Refreshing. "Only if I win," said Mel.

"Shoot. It's your turn."

So she'd thrown the phone to the waves and lost her cure for indecision. She stood there and waited and waited until the boat had maybe moved somewhere else that looked the same as any other patch of ocean and then thought, so what now? What else? Her hand twitched in the direction of her pocket—what it always did now when she had such thoughts.

But the patches! She remembered the biofeedback patches that monitored heartrate, sweat, and other complicated body shit to compare against history and determine satisfaction at present. They'd been on her so long she'd forgotten.

The patch on her forearm came off easy. Easy as pulling back her sleeve and peeling it away. Dropping it off the side. Turn, turn—it flipped and flopped on a wandering breeze until it moved on from falling to sinking. Bye, bye.

But the second patch clung to her chest. She looked around. Nothing here. No one. The helm of the ship rose from the deck behind her and cut her off from the main promenade where everyone sat around and waited for sauce, rescue, or the end of days. Fuck it. What was the point of losing yourself in the open ocean if you couldn't throw tits to the wind just once?

She took off her shirt, lost the bra. Pinched the patch by its corner and began to peel. The adhesive pulled at her skin and smelled like the rank boob-sweat it had absorbed and trapped since the showers had thrown in the towel almost a workweek ago. Disgusting, but entirely her own, so Mel reveled in the smell and tossed that patch to the Atlantic. Poked at the pale island it left in her bronzing skin. Warm. Sticky with a film from the adhesive. She'd ignored official *Indecision Cure*[™] guidelines that recommended changing patches no less than nightly.

A week without changing her patch meant she'd gone just as long without seeing the cuttlefish tattoo that rose to almost her left clavicle. A contortionist shape in midnight blue with accents of brown and burnt orange. A shape she hadn't realized she'd missed. Its colors.

The shirt went back on but to hell with the bra. To the depths, to Davy Jones' Locker. She didn't jettison it like the patches—just wadded it into her pocket. Whatever. Might as well let her body breathe a little bit since clearly no one was coming and they'd drift and drift until they hit somewhere and finally stopped drifting.

...

"For real," Ted laughed and sipped. Alternated between a little sauce he'd copped from the day's shares and the champagne, the *Financial Fortune*'s supply of which bordered on infinite and would probably outlast the lives of its castaway crew. "We really might be in the Bermuda Triangle. It's definitely possible."

"Get out." Mel swilled warm champagne that smacked of the inside of someone else's mouth inside her own. "You're not serious."

During some rabbit hole of boredom on day four, Ted had discovered that one could scale the side of the dining hall at an outside corner where it merged with the kitchen. Backing into that corner let you climb if you walked your feet up one to each wall. This had changed everything, of course. A new place! They never thought they'd live to see it. Cause for celebration. Cause for champagne.

"Listen Melanie," Ted lectured. "Part of my job is putting numbers to risk. Are these kids and their startup real shit? If we take them public and lobby to the bigger boys at Facebook-Amazon-Google to get them investing in ownership, are they going to belly-up, drain our capital, and fuck us? I don't know. 13%. Odds that aliens are coming down tomorrow to tell us, 'Howdy stragglers. Welcome to Bermuda Land Triangle Town, home to every earthly delicacy? I'll give it 43%."

Which had been Mel's final satisfaction measure before the demise of her phone. Funny.

“Time to go easy on the champagne there, big guy,” said Jodi, though Ted probably weighed less than Mel even with his height advantage of at least a head and a half.

“Risk of that?” said Ted. “Zero. Zero percent.”

They’d taken to drinking at night, the three of them. The storm of three days ago had given way to only calm weather and easy seas. The stars above open water made Mel never want to go inside. At night, the world inverted. Too dark to see anything beneath them or more than thirty feet away. All the action happened in the air—this sky of stars and many lights like Atlanta upside down.

“Haven’t seen much of Rasmussen lately,” said Jodi.

“You’ve seen him come in for sauce.”

“That’s true.” She swigged the last of her flute and laid down to lock eyes with the sky.

They were closer here, on top of the dining hall. Only the black tower of the ship’s helm behind them stood any higher. Mel wondered if Diego watched them now from his viewport at the top. If he could even see this far in the thick of night. “It’s kind of funny,” she said. “I thought signing on with Six Star would take my life in new and exciting directions—”

“—one could say it did,” Ted inserted.

“—but here I am and it looks like it’s going to kill me.”

A snuffling sound that Mel recognized as a barely contained laugh from Ted. “We’re not going to die,” he said. “Honest, have you ever heard of something like this happening? This will be one of those,” and Ted, whose natural voice already brushed against shrill, broke into falsetto, “*My God they floated for 21 days! I can’t believe it took us that long to find them* kind of moments.”

“I thought the aliens were going to get us,” said Mel. “Take us to Triangle Land.”

“What’ll you do when we get back on the continent?” Jodi asked both of them, dissatisfied with the conversation.

“First?” Ted poured himself another flute but then set his glass down without a sip. “I’ll kiss the ground until I’ve got dirt all grinding in my teeth and then die of an allergic reaction because someone used the soil to grow a peanut at some point.”

Mel snorted. “You think we’ll make landfall on a peanut farm?”

“No,” Ted frowned. “I already told you. The aliens arrive tomorrow. What about you, Jodi?”

“My husband will be waiting for me,” she said, the first Mel had ever heard her voice something less than solid. A shake on the ‘husband.’ Jodi sucked in a breath and blew it out. Chose to keep looking at the stars and not them. “He doesn’t know it, but he’s moving to the desert.”

“You have a husband?” Mel asked. “You’re moving to the desert?”

“Yes. Well, I live in the desert.” A little silence. “We’ve talked about it and I’m the one who’s going to ask... So yes. He’s waiting for me.”

Mel decided that there should be more champagne for Mel because Mel didn’t have anyone waiting for her. And that was fine, really. What she wanted. A drop more than a mouthful of amber bubbles swished at the bottom of the one bottle they’d brought with them. “Y’all mind if I...?”

Shaking heads all around so she downed it in one.

“There’s someone who’s looking for you.” She cradled the empty bottle for two heartbeats and then let it fall so she could run her hands down the soreness of her legs. “They know we’re missing. They know to look for us and they haven’t found us which means they

can't. They can't find us." She massaged her legs harder—hard until the hurt bit back like a bothered viper. The cool air had curdled to poison, and the worst was she had nowhere to go. No way to achieve distance, clarity. She'd walked all the places she'd ever walk. This was it and this was torture.

"No," Ted had taken the short drop from falsetto back to his natural voice. "No, no, no. World's big but not that big. If they look for us and they don't find us they'll just look more. We're in a tough spot but we won't die today. We won't die tomorrow."

"You don't know that," Mel told him, because he didn't. *Small world*—the world was not a small world. People congregated in dense pockets like Atlanta, but on ocean—on the wide open ocean—you could slip through the cracks, fall away from the people, and no one would ever see you again. That's where they'd drifted: this nowhere place. Bermuda Triangle. "You don't know," said Mel. "You don't, you don't..." She didn't know what had hit her. The dehydration. The thorny ball of hunger constantly rebounding around the inside of her stomach for days. Her hand had a twitch that kept taking it to the pocket with her wadded up bra. Was she getting everything she wanted from life? No. They were going to perish on the high seas. Ted was being an idiot and wouldn't stop talking, talking, talking.

"You know, I lied before," said Ted. "Kiss the ground? What? That's so excessive. If aliens did come and take us to space I'd never do that. What I would do—hey, Mel? Hey, you good?"

Mel sniffed but nodded.

"What I would—what I *will* do is take a clean hundred bill and get the longest, finest haircut, shampoo, massage, and shave I can find in whatever city we land in. Then we're all getting dinner. A big dinner. What are we eating? Come on, help me out."

“Look,” said Mel. “I don’t have a hundred to get a haircut, or dinner, or—”

“Doesn’t matter right now,” said Ted. “We’re all getting dinner and I’m paying. I’m burning this money right here on food or outside with a match on the sidewalk. Help me out—what are we eating?”

“Burger,” Mel relented.

“Just one?” Ted tipped back a small sip from his glass. “I said I’m paying.”

“Burgers,” said Mel. “Three.”

“So. Okay, so that’s—”

“Three just for me,” Mel clarified.

“Now we’re talking. What’s on them?”

“Bacon.”

“Bacon... Good. Are we eating cheeseburgers?”

Jodi watched them back and forth. She had eyes dark like the suits she still wore after everyone else had let their wardrobes fall apart. She had dark eyes with bits of reflected star.

“They’re cheeseburgers,” Mel confirmed. “American cheese and provolone. Melty but you can still see the corners of each slice. Onions, too. Lettuce.”

“No tomato?” Ted asked.

“Fuck tomato. No ketchup. Nothing marinara. Nothing red.”

“I like my burgers with a little red in the center.”

Mel sighed and sniffed and realized she’d stopped pressing into her bruises. “The burgers... have a little red in the center.”

Ted grinned. “Delicious.”

Stars were getting in everything, Mel noticed. Jodi's eyes, but in their empty flutes too. Stars that curved with the bevel of the cup. Stars that peppered Ted's glasses. Little sliver of moon.

Jodi had her own input. "Fries on the side. The ones with the curvy sides. Golden crisp, hot in the middle, and drizzled with salt."

"Peppers," said Mel. "Banana. Jalapeno."

"Of course," said Ted.

"Sesameeeee—" Mel swallowed a yawn. "Sorry. Sesame bun."

"Deathly allergic. But we can probably—"

"No sesame," she amended. "Big kosher pickle."

"Good God Almighty, which way do I steer?"

"Thanks," said Mel. Stars were in the dark glass of the champagne bottle. They must have seized the chance to fall in when they saw all the liquid had gone out. "Sorry, I don't know why..."

"Nah," said Ted. "Just doing what you did the other night. In the storm."

"What?" Mel asked.

"You talked us up," said Jodi. "It was dark and loud and we were scared. You got us moving."

"I didn't do that." Mel looked at both of them, but then they looked back and she had to turn away. "All right, I guess I did, but only because you guys were there. And Diego. And Rasmussen." She pointed her hand at Ted. "You helped. You volunteered to help."

"Think I'd have made it that far if you didn't go all 'Our water, our storm,' on everyone?" He'd done the falsetto again.

“My voice isn’t that high,” said Mel.

“I’m worried,” Ted ignored her. “I really am worried. But I don’t panic. When things got bad, we had people like you. We worked together. So yeah, I can get all excited about haircuts and burgers because I really believe it’s going to happen.”

“He’s right,” Jodi said, and Mel had to believe her because she sounded so serious and had launched satellites out of Kazakhstan. “He’s an optimist, and we might still die,” she qualified. “But we’re better off than we were, and that’s big.”

Ted shrugged. “Kind of have to learn to hunt for positivity when a chance encounter with an almond could kill you. Never been a glass half empty guy, you know? It’s just not empty.”

“Yeah, no offense,” said Mel. “But you’re too down to earth. How the fuck did you ever catch an invite to NüLife?”

Ted held out his half-full champagne flute. “Hey, I don’t really feel like finishing this. One of you want it?” Jodi did. “Anyway,” said Ted. “I do one thing but do it really well. I look at smaller tech enterprises and get to know them. Know their numbers, they’re feel. They’re potential. Then I put together a report to my bosses to help them decide whether taking them public would be mutually beneficial.”

“NüLife?”

“Why do you think Diego hooked me into your presentation?”

“Hope this shows up in your report,” said Jodi.

“I’m compiling a *very* long report,” Ted answered.

Mel yawned a second time into her fist. The night had gotten to her, or maybe the stars, now blurry from the champagne, exhaustion, or both. “Hope it doesn’t go on too long,” she said.

“Don’t worry,” said Ted. “It ends with a haircut and hot dinner.”

...

Two events of note occurred on the seventh day of drifting. The first was immediately concerning to all parties. Diego announced that water rationing would begin again. That they had enough, but wanted to keep having enough, so Joe, Roger, Hassam, and the other caterers had moved the water supplies into the kitchen. Overtaking was discouraged by two NüLife guests set to guard the door to the kitchen at all times. The guards were all of them, performing their duty in accordance with a schedule Diego had drawn up. The first guard also guarded against the hypothetical treachery of the second guard. Same for the second to the first. Other chores were also assigned and scheduled including serving duty. Clearing the plastic bin by the stern they had dubbed the ‘Bathroom Bin’ and made into a chamber pot when the toilets in their rooms stopped flushing. Diego created scavenging parties tasked to trawl the ship for useful items because “You never know what you might find,” was how he put it.

The new restricted water diet didn’t bother Rasmussen like Mel thought it would have. While she wouldn’t have said the news lifted his spirits by any material measure, he seemed no worse. “We’re not any less dead than we were yesterday,” he grumbled.

But later he came to Mel and offered her two of his three daily flutes of water rations. “I’ll make up the difference in champagne later,” he played it down. “Besides. I never thanked you. Your water, your storm.”

Mel’s hand didn’t itch so much for the *Indecision Cure*TM anymore, but she knew that right there, her satisfaction reading would have triggered a positive feedback loop.

The second important event didn’t look like much. Mel would have missed it entirely if she hadn’t woken up at some midnight hour to pee and maybe defecate. No one had eaten a bite of solid food in over a week and they were all beginning to feel the pain of that. It came out like

paste and smelled like marinara and Mel had already made plans to slash the curtain of her room's shower into usable squares if the *Financial Fortune* toilet paper supply ever ran dry.

She stepped out of her room and into the hallway, flashlight on but pressed into her cupped hand to keep things dim and easy for her eyes. No knowing the exact lateness of the hour, but voices still drifted from down the hallway. At the far end—shadows where stairs led deeper into the ship. They saw her light, made noises to hush and disappeared down the steps, leaving Mel alone with her light and halfway desire to visit the Bathroom Bin. Mostly because anything was more interesting than squatting over a filthy plastic box for fifteen to twenty minutes, she followed the voices.

She'd never seen the engine of a big boat before. Even as she followed who turned out to be Roger and some other guy she half-recognized without placing a name into a room marked ENGINE, she didn't know if she could really say she'd seen the proper engine of a big boat. Here were slick boxes with acronyms and labels. Aisles cut the boxes into a grid and Mel wondered what they would have done, how the components they housed might have hummed if Diego's code hadn't smashed itself to pieces. At the back of the room sat the biggest box of all. Huge, it took up the entire back wall. Here, Mel found two others in addition to Roger and the other man.

"Sup," Roger told her. "You like our new digs?"

"Digs?" asked Mel.

"I don't know, man," he answered. "This is where she's broken right. Maybe she just needs to be fixed."

"She?"

"The boat. Uh, *Financial Fortune*."

“Oh,” said Mel. “I don’t know if this is the kind of thing you can fix.”

Roger didn’t like hearing that and his face showed it in the pursing of his droopy stache.

“Have you tried?”

Mel saw that the four had stripped sheets off their beds and laid them down in the back aisle. They were going to sleep here. A plate full of red stuff sat on the ground before the big box. Blood? Her heart picked up and she squeezed the flashlight in tight in her hand. No, not blood. Marinara. Just sauce. “Um, no,” she said. “We did not attempt to fix the engine.”

When the other three saw Roger shaking his head in disappointment, they joined in.

“Then how can you expect us to not give it a shot? You of all people should understand that.”

Mel didn’t want to say out loud that a molasses-consistency bowel movement had become preferable to staying here, so she made her last comment, “Oh. Cool. What’s the sauce for? Just a snack?”

“For the ship,” said Roger, real slow like this was something she should just know. That he shouldn’t have to explain. “It’s for her.”

Mel left them in near dark that would have been total if not for Roger’s flashlight, the same model as her own. She heard her own footsteps too loud as she left. Loud, echo-y footsteps in a room she couldn’t see but should have hummed and buzzed with noise from the engine.

On night seven, four NüLifers slept in the engine room. On night ten, twelve attendees went below deck to offer a portion of their sauce ration to the engine.

...

Rasmussen continued to float Mel shares of his water rations. By his third day doing this, which was their tenth day drifting, Mel had stopped liking it. Now she was concerned.

“No,” she said. “No. You drink it. I won’t take it.”

“I’m fine,” Rasmussen insisted. “Really. It’s yours.”

Ten days had done no kindness to his figure. Weight lost, but not in the varied and eclectic diet of healthy foods brought into the office kind of way. Still a large man but plain that he suffered from hunger. The pudge he’d retained hung tight against his bones like muscles in the wrong places. He’d kept the hand tic, the finger and thumb running down the scruff of his beard, only now the stylized scruff had grown unchecked into something barbaric. A good mist would have painted him as a Viking ghost.

“Take the water, Mel. I’ll give you a raise.”

“Dock my salary,” she said. “Whatever. Just don’t pay me in water. You need it.”

In the end, she gave in. She drank the water and it was good. Remember this when we’re back in Atlanta, Rasmussen, she tried to say with her eyes as she went bottoms up on the glass.

Diego, as far as she could tell, spent most of his time sequestered in the helm of the ship. She’d visited on day six and then again on day eight after her first shift guarding their stores of sauce and water. Her fellow guard had looked at her too much, a squirrely woman with eyes that leapt out of her eyes. Wetter, shiner than eyes had a right to be. Mel couldn’t recall their color telling Jodi about it, and then Diego. Not their color. Just the shiny wetness. The woman had looked at her too much and said, “Do we do it? We could break in. Help ourselves. No one would ever know.”

Mel had been startled and then confused. Too focused on those eyes. She said, “But we’d know,” and the woman looked at her like she was a dumb thing that lacked even the power of brain and will to define itself. “It’s for everyone,” Mel had tacked on because she felt judged.

“It’d be for the ship anyway,” the woman had muttered.

Mel had only connected what the woman had said with the bizarre gathering she'd witnessed in the engine room when she recounted it to Jodi. By then, the two of them had retired to the storeroom behind the gallery after a rousing game of shuffleboard Mel had almost not *completely* lost. "Oh hell," her friend's eyes rolled so far back that a half-second heart attack gripped Mel when she thought Jodi had passed out from dehydration. Thankfully no. the eye roll was just that extreme. "She's from my investor's club," Jodi explained. "Hate that bitch on land too. Better tell Diego not to schedule her again."

So Mel had ascended the helm for the second time in two days to call on Diego Cantobre, architect of all their woes and his own too. On day six, he'd called her up for advice. Requested her presence during the evening's sauce distribution.

"Oh God, Mel. What do I do?" He'd asked.

"Uhhh..." The chaos of the helm had her distracted. Papers taped and laying all over. Papers covered in wild scribbles. One wall had eight different crude pen sketches of a world map, drawn from an evidently poor memory. The shape of Asia had different just and accents with every iteration and Diego hadn't even tried to figure out Europe. Just a randomly horizontal blob with an island off to the upper left that was probably Great Britain or Ireland. He'd phoned in Africa hard on one sketch—just a smooth oval—and he'd forgotten Australia on all but two. Mel had never considered a career in cartography, but this... This was—wow, okay.

"They're maps," Diego explained, like she'd never heard of one. "Just... I was trying to figure out where we might be."

Mel noticed that every map had a big dot in the rough location of Florida and a dotted line leading out to different spots in the Atlantic.

“You think we’re closer to Antarctica than the Bahamas?” she asked, pointing to a map that had the *Financial Fortune*, signified by an ‘FF’ impossibly far south.

“I don’t know,” said Diego. “It was a little cold today.”

“We did have some wind,” Mel acknowledged. “Diego, I don’t know if this is... the best use for your talents.”

“So help me,” he had said. “What am I supposed to do? I caused all of this and my laptop is dead, everything is dead. I can’t code. What do I do? How do I make amends?”

Mel felt guilt poke at her a little then, knowing what she did about Ted’s forthcoming report, but Diego had to already understand that, at least. On some basic level. In all this time, he hadn’t seen to drag a chair up to the helm, so Mel cleared away some stray papers so she could sit on the floor with him. “All right,” she’d started, head turning in circles for some sort of idea. “So we’re feeling a little lost, yeah?”

“Hopelessly,” groaned Diego Cantobre.

“No,” said Mel, an image of Ted with stars in his glasses flashing through her head. “No, not hopelessly. Never hopelessly. Come on. What do we do when we’re feeling lost?” She kept asking because she hoped he’d just have a breakthrough already and give her the answer because the best thing she’d come up with was how her hand hadn’t stopped twitching toward her empty pocket where the *Indecision Cure*TM used to rest.

Then she had it.

A memory older than any impulse to speculate on her happiness based off a reading from her phone. Years ago in East Kentucky. The old apartment. Her old roommate, Rebekah, in the process of moving to New Mexico. Mel had slowly imploded for weeks wondering what she’d do. Where she’d go when Rebekah had already gone. She’d never put any of it into words

because Rebekah had her own problems. Moving problems. Moving thousands of miles away problems, but she'd known. Rebekah could always tell. Mel hadn't wanted to cry in front of her friend, not then, but the time for her to care about embarrassing herself in front of this person rested more than a decade in the past.

Rebekah had sat with her, all body art and piercings in her cutoff tank—comet blazing down her arm next to barbed wire in a spiral. Waited as she dried herself, and then asked, “What do you want, Mel?” and Mel didn't want to say, “For you to stay here,” but Rebekah always knew anyway, so why not. She went ahead and said it.

“But why?” Rebekah had asked her. “What would change if I stayed? What do you really want?”

In the end, Mel had come up with a list of two items:

- 1) Be my own reason to be somewhere
- 2) Have confidence (get a tattoo???)

Rebekah had taken her out to work on item two that night, the birth of her cuttlefish.

Mel thought of this on powerless day six aboard the *Financial Fortune* when she asked Diego, “What do we do when we're lost?” and then finally, “What do you want?”

“What do I want?” he parroted.

“What do you want?” Mel shot back. “Yes. Grab a sheet of paper. We'll make a list.”

So they did.

“I want my laptop,” said Diego. “I want the power back on. I want my code to work.”

Mel shook her head. “It won't and it didn't. Why do you want these things?”

“Why do I...?”

“Why.”

“I don’t want to feel like I’ve fucked up,” said Diego, choking on the first part and spitting out the rest like it burned.

“Awesome,” said Mel. “This is good. Now why?”

“Why ‘why?’ That’s it. I don’t want to be a goddamn fuck-up, only it’s too late.”

“Not too late,” said Mel. “But this is still something you don’t want. *Don’t* want to fuck up. What *do* you want?”

“I want to do a good job.”

“*Why?*”

“I want to do a good job so people look up to me and I can be proud of myself. And I can like myself.”

Mel clapped twice, slow. Rolled her shoulders back and fixed her posture. Sat upright next to Diego in the brain room of the *Financial Fortune*, caught in a frozen hurricane of loose papers and scribbles. “There we go,” she said. “Now we do the easy part.”

‘How can I like myself?’ was the next question and they already had the answer: ‘Do a good job.’

How do we do a good job? They came up with several ideas. Create a new rationing schedule for the remaining water and sauce. Draw up a list of tasks that NüLife guests could perform to give them purpose and take care of necessary functions.

That had been day six, and one of the two noteworthy events of day seven had been the institution of rations and chores for them to perform as a group.

Mel thought of the second noteworthy event of day seven when she went to visit Diego for the second time, on day eight. “The woman on guard duty with me,” said Mel. “Jodi said her name is Tanya. She can’t be trusted around the water.” And then she remembered that the shiny-

eyed woman, Tanya, had muttered about the water belonging to the ship. “Also there’s something weird happening in the engine room you might want to know about,” she said, and told him.

...

The nice thing about sauce on day nine was the illusion of solidity. How you could trick yourself into tasting some crunch on your teeth. Globbs of the stuff had congealed in places.

Rasmussen had joined her for lunch in the dining hall. A few days back, some of the other guests might have rolled up beside him, but somewhere around day seven, NüLife had lost the phenomenon of social eating.

“Makes you miss Atlanta, doesn’t it?” he asked.

Mel had never thought about how much ritual went into dining. Eating together, breaking bread. Give us this day... An expression of familiarity. Degree of intimacy.

“A lot of things make me miss Atlanta,” she lied. What in Atlanta could call to her that wasn’t here on this ship? She missed food, sure. She missed caffeine. But Six Star and building her life had been her everything in Atlanta, and she could find both right here. *What do you want, Mel?*

Clinking of Rasmussen’s spoon through sauce to bowl. Mel winced at each collision. Did wielding the utensil with such force remind Rasmussen of other food? Solid food? Real food? “Think that rescue will come today?” A clump of his sauce abandoned the spoon and got caught in his beard.

Mel really didn’t think so, and couldn’t tell if he was poking fun. “Are you going to give me your water again, today?”

“Yes. If I can get you to take it.”

Mel set down plate and spoon with more clink than Rasmussen's whole meal. "But why? Why are you doing this?"

"Because we need to take care of each other." The sauce in Rasmussen's beard bobbed with his jaw when he spoke. "Just trust me. This is the best thing for us both."

"No." Mel looked straight into the sunken sockets of his eyes. "I'm worried about you. You need to drink your water and stay hydrated."

"You need to trust me," said Rasmussen. "This is fine."

"Is it?" Mel asked. "Really. Is it?"

They were all feeling the thirst squeeze by then. Diego had upped portions to five flutes a day under the hateful glare of a burning sun. People kept inside. People kept in the shade. Mel knew people who kept up a tall hours in the engine room.

"Yes," he insisted. "Yes it is. You have really good instincts, Melanie, but you don't have perfect information."

"So tell me," said Mel. "Educate me. Mentor me. Loop me in. You know I'm capable. What can I do to demonstrate my value?"

Rasmussen let his sauce-plate fall, unfinished, spoon buried in chunky red. "Right now? Accept that we have your best interests at heart and do as you're expected without expecting more."

We? Who was *we*? "Are we still talking about water?" she asked.

"Yes. We are still talking about water. You should drink the extra shares and keep strong in body and spirit."

"Fine," said Mel. "You know what? I'll take it. I'll take the water you seriously need to survive."

Rasmussen said, “Good.”

“But.” Mel glared at him. “But if you don’t want me to expect more. To put more in so I can get more out—”

“Okay—”

“—then don’t make me feel like I should expect it. The extra water. Always asking what I think. Acting like we’re always on the same page. Why did you even bring me here?”

“The conference?” Rasmussen’s bushy eyebrows had twisted and conjoined. “Here? Please don’t get confused, Melanie—”

“Oh, I’ll try not to, boss.”

“Melanie. I asked you to come with me here because I value the work you do and because I thought you’d want to come. And you did. You’re competent, reliable, and care about the quality of your work. That’s rare. Rare. That level of dedication is what made you stand out in application and why we try to provide extra benefits for you where we can.”

“I work in reception,” said Mel.

“You do more than that. We both know it.”

“More than I should be, apparently.”

“Yes.” said Rasmussen. “And you know I’ve always reminded you that normal business hours end at five.”

Mel’s cheeks burned with more than the hours and hours of harsh sun she’d absorbed over the past week. This was true. But she’d wanted to do a good job! That was the whole reason for signing on with Six Star. For uprooting and replanting in Atlanta, a godforsaken city with ‘opportunity.’ She’d only ever given zero shits about what she did before at Starbuck’s—Six Star was supposed to be different. Her legs, the ones that still hadn’t stopped throbbing from her

tumble in the storm—those legs wanted more than anything in the whole world (the size of one of Atlanta’s dumb downtown windowed rocks by this point) to stand and run from the dining hall. Climb to the hall’s roof. Climb to the helm. Climb to the roof of the helm and get as high up and far away as the ship-world would allow. But she forced herself to keep her seat and keep looking at Rasmussen through her burning cheeks. Two years ago, this would not have worked. “Well,” she said. “In that case, I’m sorry for overcommitting.”

Rasmussen sighed. His beard had not released the sauce clump. Just stuck there and stained the areas around it. “It’s my fault too,” he was saying, “and I recognize that. I let you stay late and let you meet Andre, though you’d probably have met him anyway. I let you takeover office dinners, didn’t make you go home, and a hundred other things. For those, I am sorry.”

“Okay,” said Mel. “Okay. Okay.” She was trying. Burning in her cheeks, but she was trying, she was fine. “So I need to just sit back and drink your water and just relax with what I have?”

Rasmussen coughed. Two weeks at sea hung from the bags of his eyes, or maybe this conversation burned him too, which only bumped up the buzzing heat Mel felt all over now because she didn’t want to feel bad for him. Not now. He didn’t need that, not with his god-level computational knowledge and wealth.

“Yes,” he said. “I do want you to have the extra water and hope you find satisfaction with your position at Six Star.”

“Great,” said Mel. “Okay. Thank you so much for bringing me out here. For bringing me into this. I feel very valued.”

“Hold on, Melanie. I know you’re tired and hungry and dehydrated—we all are—so I’m not going to—”

“Not going to what?” asked Mel. “Move me out from behind the Six Star front desk? You know I did get that from this conversation, thanks.”

“No, I was going to say, ‘Hold this conversation against you.’”

“Golly.” Mel shoveled a load of sauce between her teeth and swallowed. “I’ve just got all kinds of things to thank you for, huh? Thanks again, boss. Sorry I ever took the time to workshop your health, run late-night background research on your many engagements, listen for hours and hours while you complain about people you don’t like, which, by the way, is most people.”

Rasmussen’s expression didn’t change, but Mel knew better than to believe the mask. She’d been his frustration sponge for how long? Two years? She knew how he’d get all stony and only let things show later, alone or in trusted company, which had included her.

“Then I’m sorry too.” Quiet in the hall. No sauce-in-mouth sounds. No clinks against plates. “That I didn’t force you to leave at five and for thinking your enthusiasm and friendship were more than clout-chasing.”

Mel tried to focus on her sauce. Think about the sauce. Eat the sauce. You can’t make this better right now—*only worse*. But she’d never been good at letting things go. “Maybe you should get out of the office sometime and make some friends so you can know the difference.”

She knew it was sharp because the words cut her too on their way out. Rasmussen started breathing through his mouth.

Sauce, sauce. Focus on the sauce. She tried. She tried and got two spoons down, but the heat in her cheeks kept rising and rising. Not a fight she could win.

“God, I—” Mel started, but then shook her head and crushed her own words with another bite of sauce.

“Yes?” from Rasmussen, quietly. His hands were by his sides, or in his lap. Under the table where Mel couldn’t see them. His sauce sat again and uneaten like the whole slowly dwindling supply of the ship. Same for the clump in his beard.

Mel stood. “Okay,” she said. “Okay.” She grabbed her plate and left Rasmussen alone with his sauce in a hall full of windows showing new stretches of identically sunlit ocean. The cheek-heat had seared a wetness into her eyes and won. She’d rather take care of this in her room.

...

She didn’t see him the rest of that day. Didn’t leave her quarters. Just laid on her bed swimming in the inner-ship shadows and despising the tomato-taste of her mouth.

At one point he heard a knock, and though hours had passed by then—hours to cool down—the dread kept her pressed to her bed. She whipped herself into standing after a few minutes. *Come on, Mel. Be mature you fucking adult.* But when she opened her door, she found not Rasmussen, but eight flutes of water.

...

On day ten, duty called. Scavenging duty. Mel had helped Diego redraw a new chore schedule that prioritized giving tasks to NüLifers not actively offering food to the engine. Jodi, Ted, Benjamin... Rasmussen. The caterers who weren’t Roger. On day ten, she set out with the first *Financial Fortune* Committee of Scavenging, a group that consisted of herself and five others and included Jodi by design.

“Hey,” said Mel when they met with the others on the top deck. “Sorry I’ve been kind of absent.”

Jodi blinked. Mel saw in the bright sun that her eyes were speckled and pale. Base green. “It’s fine,” she said. “Is everything okay?”

Mel’s first instinct was to blurt something barbed about Rasmussen and Six Star, or herself, but her problems weren’t Jodi’s problems. She clamped down on her tongue to kill the thought and then answered, “Stress got to me. Feels good to be moving.”

They milled around and made introductions. Milled and milled until Mel realized they were all waiting for someone to step forward and direct. Specifically, her. Ridiculous after the day she had yesterday. God, she wasn’t in the mood, but to hell with it. Whatever.

“All right,” she announced. “The goal here is scavenging. Anything that might be useful we’re going to move to the storeroom behind the gallery. Literally anything, since right now we have nothing. We’ll split into groups of two and divide the ship, ending with the engine room. We go in there together because who knows what weird mess is going on there now. Any questions?”

“Uh, yeah. Like what *kind* of stuff are we looking for?” asked one of them, a techie-type man Mel would have described as interchangeable on shore but had to concede him individuality on the *Financial Fortune* for two reasons: One—he’d tried to cut his eight day beard with scissors a few days ago and succeeded in poor fashion with a long diagonal cut on his chin and a smattering of hair left over like blocky brush grass. Two—he wasn’t huddled in the engine room like some on this voyage were so inclined.

“Really anything,” she repeated, wrangling the impulse the sarcastic urge. The meanness had her tired. “If you can imagine a situation where it has use, I want it in the storeroom.”

The man took her answer seriously, nodding. Mel wondered if he’d worn the same solemn face while nicking his chin with a pair of scissors.

For trust reasons, Mel had designated the kitchens and food storage to herself and Jodi. The guards, one of them the caterer, Hassam, let the two of them pass without a word, which was an issue. “Aren’t you going to ask why we need to go in?” Mel asked him.

“Because you’re you,” explained the other guard, another techie-type who after ten days without power and twelve at sea had yet to achieve any physical distinction.

“Why do you need to go in?” was all Hassam said.

“Scavenging duty,” said Mel. “Our purpose is to look for any sort of item that might be useful.”

“Very good,” Hassam nodded. “I will come with you inside while you complete your task.”

“Of course,” Mel deferred. Better.

The other guard had his lower lip shoved out like a sad puppy. “I don’t get to come in?”

“Keep your post,” Mel told him.

The kitchen interior was a palace of standing water and low shadow. Light through its sparse and circular windows striped the room with yellow and floating dust. Silence pooled in the room with the motionless water, and Mel and the rest were careful in how they walked between the metal drums and plastic bins that held their storm—how they whispered to preserve that muted sanctuary of the place. Water, wholly still and waiting in the half-light. Good, clean water. Tinged with the metal or plastic of its container but pure all the same. The harried searchers of the engine room had it all wrong—the engine was not the most precious cradle of the ship. No, the engine was broken. Babel. An unworking contraption of incommunicable purpose. Here was the innermost, the beating heart. Oh water, stuff of life.

Mel cleared her throat with a cough. “Excellent.” She lifted a serrated carving knife from one of the sinks. “See, this is the kind of tools we should know we have.”

“What would use that for?” Jodi asked, eyes on the blade.

“Nothing right now,” said Mel. “But depending on the situation...”

Jodi kept watching, eyes icy. “What if we didn’t bring that to the storeroom? What if we didn’t want others to know we had it?” and Mel understood that she meant the people who slept around the engine.

“They’ve got to know that the ship has sharp things,” she said. “Roger is a caterer.”

Hassam spoke up. “Because they haven’t come for it now doesn’t mean they won’t in the future.”

“Okay.” She pressed the back of her wrist to her forehead and felt the weight of the knife in that hand, the closeness of the metal. Her head throbbed because she wished she’d never found it, that they didn’t have it. Wanted to not know about it because other people didn’t need to know about it, and that meant not telling anyone. It meant secrets. “You’re right. We’ll hide it. It and anything else like it. Anything more dangerous than a spoon gets hidden in storage.”

“Not overboard?” Jodi asked.

“We still might need it,” said Mel, eyes running up the length of the knife.

They scavenged through the kitchen and collected other sharp metals. Serving prongs that could stab. Knives that could cut. Two meat cleavers.

“I think there is a bone-saw downstairs,” said Hassam.

Mel sighed. “We’ll get that too.”

Combing through storage took time. Down the dark steps from the kitchen to a room closer to a warehouse than the higher end of *Financial Fortune* was to a Silicon Valley castle of

decadence. Many bins and crates filled with things—useful things. A huge coil of rope, extra catering uniforms, actual bowls that could be used for sauce.

The bowls delighted Mel. A good find because since the power had dried up, so had their ability to wash dishes. No one ever left a pinch of sauce uneaten, but pretending the plates weren't absolutely disgusting had stopped being an option by day seven.

"What about there?" Mel gestured to a big metal door.

"The freezer," Hassam answered. "Very warm now and smells very bad. If you're going to check inventory there too, I'd like to leave before you open the door."

"It smells bad?" Mel asked.

"Horrible," Hassam confirmed.

"Perfect. That's where we'll hide the knives."

Jodi said she'd stay, but when Mel cracked the door's seal, the first wave of stench sent her up the stairs to Hassam and a world without the scent of decay. Mel had to tug with both hands to open the freezer, wondering what merciless giant had decided a door must be twice her height and composed of dense metal. As she propped it with a spare bin to keep it open, Mel reflected on the way she divided her memories into segments of her life. Before the end of high school; after graduation. Before Atlanta; after Six Star. Before boarding a boat out of Miami. Before exposure to the *Financial Fortune's* freezer.

Deep down at the core of the ship, things had gone rotten. Things had begun to bloat and putrefy, to lose the pleasant boundaries that made them commodities, luxuries, palatable. Things soured, or sweetened to an extreme that pinched the nose and choked the throat. Mel stood in that cavernous freezer hugging a bin full of edged metal that might have glinted in the fluorescence had the overhead lights not died with the ship's power.

Darkness in a freezer that sweltered like the desert. Far back darkness like the gullet of some great east with death on its breath and people for dinner. She balanced the bin on her knee so she could position her flashlight. That small cone of white put face to the stench around her. A long dead pig hung from the ceiling on a big black hook, the beginning of a line of such foul creatures. A pig midway down the blackness had sunken through its hook and fallen, leaving a chunk of its ribs and skin behind while it splayed on the floor. A smell like shrimp gone to Hell let her guess that the contents of the shelf to her left contained her favorite food.

Mel carried her bin through the pigs, shrimp, and dead things into the recesses of the freezer. At distance, the dark reclaimed her way out and she could no longer see over her shoulder. Her heart thudded hard behind the bones of her collar and her stomach churned and churned but had nothing to throw up. This thawing dungeon, this pit had taken over everything. The prop would shift from the door, and the freezer would slam shut and devour her. The door would vanish and she'd spend her remaining hours wandering the halls of stench until that stench became a part of her and she it, and then all her pleasant boundaries would dissolve too. She would join with the pigs and shrimp and that would be the end until decomposition came in full to make them fully gone at last.

But none of that happened. Not yet. She found the back of the freezer and a good spot behind twin buckets of caviar that had wilted like flowers and blacked like the interior of the ship. She stashed the bin of tools used to cut and stab there to be forgotten or possibly remembered by the right people, at the right time.

Back in the kitchen, Jodi asked. "Did you hide them?"

Mel answered, "Yes." but couldn't say anything else for risk of losing the stalemate with her gag reflex.

“Good,” said Hassam, but then he muttered. “Hopefully a crazy looking for a knife won’t realize that a chair leg does just as well.”

She wished he hadn’t said that.

...

The first *Financial Fortune* Committee of Scavenging reconvened on top deck in preparation for the final stage of their implementation plan: Weird Denizens of the Engine Room. What are they doing? What do they have?

“Thank you, everyone,” said Mel. “Things might seem hopeless, but we’re working to make the best.” They were all watching her. “And that’s all we can do, really.” She hoped her lameness came off as profound and not, *well...* “We’ve got one more place to check out and then I’ll want a full report from each of you on what we’ve found. After that your time is your own and we can all go back to our beautiful tropical vacation, may we never have to go home. Any questions?”

Of course Scissor-chin raised his hand. What was his name? All Mel could remember was the scissors. “What smells *terrible*?” he asked, and then Mel’s guilt wasn’t so bad.

“Me,” she answered. “Thanks. Some parts of this ship are disgusting.”

“Oh,” said Spencer.

A breeze blew by and Mel hoped it would carry some of her smell away. Knew it didn’t. Jodi chuckled but got quiet when Mel looked at her. “So the engine,” she said. “Let’s go.”

Did she feel safer approaching the engine room with numbers or silly? Scissor-chin bounded forward to hold the stairwell open for their little procession and Mel decided that she liked him. Why not? They were stuck together anyway. Entertainment had some value. He didn’t

make her feel the way Tanya did with her watery eyes. Or Rasmussen with his appreciation handouts.

They reached the bottom of the stairs where they found the door marked 'Engine Room' and a little window that let in a helpful beam of light so they could read the letters on the door. Mel didn't want to think *hostile territory* but by trying to avoid thinking it, she'd already thought...

"Are we waiting for something?" Jodi asked.

"What?" Mel coughed into her hand. "No. We're just. You know."

"Deliberating," Scissor-chin offered, and Mel agreed. "Yes. That. And now we're done. C'mon."

The stairwell had a circular window near the bottom that let in some light. It had one at the top and one around the middle. The engine room had shadows. Twelve noon the same as twelve at night. Mel dug her flashlight out of the pocket she used to use for the *Indecision Cure*TM and made it so they could see, if only in the direction she pointed her arm. Whisper and murmur met them. Indecipherable. Babbling at the edges and end of the room, behind rows and rows of metal plating and unknown device. Mel lifted her light up, tossed it around the room to get her bearings and make sure no one clung to the ceiling above or other kind of horror movie shit, no thank you. When her light bounced around, the shushing started and the voices stopped. Echoes of shush. Complete quiet and some cold. No light in here. No breeze, no warmth. Mel spiked her beam into the ground, not wanting to be seen but dead set against giving up seeing. Her Scavenging Committee crowded around her. Safety with size. Feel bigger in the dark.

How big was this room? The exit—*that* they were near. The others? Where were they? Her own people breathed all around her. Breathed too loud. But were they her people? Were they friendly breaths? *Hostile territory...*

Then, a guitar. Slow strumming, rows of boxes away, and then words with it, a ghostly rendition. “Almost heaven, coast of Florida...” Mel recognized Roger’s voice above the rest but the ghost was in the back up. His chorus in unified half-whisper. “Beach of Miami. Boardwalk over the river.”

Jodi brought her head close to Mel’s ear and muttered. “What the fuck?”

“I don’t know,” breathed Mel while the denizens of the engine room sang, “We’ll grow old there, far away from the sea. No *Financial Fortune*, live life how we please.”

“Come on,” Mel ordered her group. “Come forward. They camp at the back. Sooner we get on with this, sooner we get out.”

They moved, but didn’t break the huddle. The engine-dweller’s song reverberated around the layers of boxes that filled the room and the guitar’s driving strums had blended with the choir and low lighting to produce something hypnotic.

Mel called a stop when they came to the big box, where they found Roger and seven others sitting in a semi-circle around a plate piled high with sauce and three candles burned nearly to stubs. Roger, who held the guitar turned an eye at their approach. All was black and shadow but the space of each candle and the cone of flashlight. Now the strumming picked up and the people entered a new verse. Loud.

“Seasick road! Take us home. To the place, we belong!”

Roger had this dumb grin under his dark space eyes and didn’t stop playing. Said nothing but the words he sung and smirked at her. Damn show-off. She hated musicians.

“Hey!” Mel barked. “I need to talk to you.”

Roger jammed harder, perhaps mistaking Mel’s energy for an invested audience. She clapped her hands three times, loud. Her hands were small as she was, but she’d discovered years ago how you split ears by just cupping your palms.

A pause on the guitar. A stumbling halt as the people stopped singing. “Mel!” Roger shouted, and “Mel...” the gathered people whispered. Did they plan this? They had to have planned this. “What brings you to join us?” he asked. “Has Diego fixed the ship? Are we rescued?” As he said Diego’s name, the song circle all spat on the floor. Mel had to wonder if they’d practiced this maneuver as well and understood that the question had no good answer.

“No,” she said. “Very much still lost at sea.”

Roger smirked. “Diego.” he said, causing another group spit. “Want to join us for a song? We can teach you the words?”

“To your bastardized *Country Roads*?” asked Mel. “Why?”

He shrugged. “Makes us feel better.” He scooted to the side and made room for exactly one person. “We monkeyed with the lyrics to make them more, like, applicable to our current situation? But if that’s not your thing we’re working on one from MGMT and I know a lot of Tame Impala.”

“What? No thanks,” and then, “Why?” she asked again.

“It’s the only song we all knew. And it makes sense, right? We just want to go home. That’s all we went,” said Roger. “I miss my band, Mel. We used to play Saturday nights on the boardwalk. They probably think I’m dead or something.”

“Okay.” said Mel. “And the food. What’s that about?”

One of the engine room adherents, a twenty-something, looking zealous all dappled in candlelight, spoke up. “If we’re kind to the engine, then she’ll give kindness back.”

Roger glared at his eager follower and said, “Man, hold on,” and the adherent’s candlelit face fell chastened. “It’s a Karma thing,” Roger explained. “Like good things will come around if we put that energy out.”

“No, I get it,” said Mel. “Karma. Whatever floats your boat. We’re here to take inventory of supplies and see what, if anything, is useful. We’ve searched the rest of the ship. Time for you to put some good things out.”

Roger grinned. “What could we possibly have here, in the dark?”

Maybe her life had come to ultimately nothing, but Mel could fully tell when someone was out to waste her time. “There’s a guitar,” she pointed out. “You found that. Find anything else?”

Mel’s people stood and Roger’s sat. Together they formed a ring around the man with the guitar and Mel with her flashlight. “We don’t have anything else,” said Roger. This time without smiling. “We didn’t ask for this. Diego took everything away from us.” Another group spit. “And *you* took the water away from us.”

Eyes—dark and white and tempered with candlelight looked into her from all around. She’d have been more scared if she had something to lose. Which she didn’t. She really didn’t. So... who did these little shits think they were? “I *got* you the water you have. And I give you more every day. This is how we make it back to shore. We collect and conserve.”

“So why do you keep talking with Diego, huh? Why do you keep supporting him? It’s his waste that brought us here. You should join *us*. At least we have more fun.”

“He’s trying,” said Mel. “We all came here for different reasons. Don’t put that on him. Now are you seriously going to tell me you could find candles and not a single box of tools lying around the engine room?”

She looked at Roger. Roger looked at her. All those eyes looked at her. The room reeked of sweat, sauce, and a little bit oil. “Sure.” Roger conceded, finally. “Sure. We did find a toolbox. Wrenches, whatever. Just get us back to shore, Mel. Okay? We don’t like it here. Diego shows up sometimes but other than that, no one says anything. No one does anything. We’re hungry.” He looked like tears. Wetness over the white and dark and candle of his eyes. “We’re hungry. We don’t know what we’re supposed to do. Take us home, please.”

Now Mel’s own people were looking at her too. She didn’t have *people* anymore. No Roger’s people. No hers. A ring of worried souls asked for help. Asked Mel and the candles and that plate with the sauce. But she didn’t ask for this—she didn’t want it. All she wanted was Rasmussen and Six Star to invest in her the same way she’d sunk so many hours and care into them. She could not lift the hopes of these ghost ship souls. That was too much. They were too heavy.

“Just give us the tools,” said Mel, and felt like *Financial Fortune*: without power. “Just keep living each day and one day we’ll get off this boat and never get back on. Hold tight and we’ll make it.”

That was all she could give them.

...

Dispersal at sunset. The first *Financial Fortune* Committee for Scavenging disbanded on the top deck. Mel gave a quick speech that amounted to, “Good job guys. Thanks. Now enjoy the rest of the day, if you can.”

It had been a long one.

Jodi stood by the rail, eyes behind big sunglasses and trained on that bleeding circle, the traveling sky-light that constituted the only change in their lives beyond the constant dwindling of their rations. An errant breeze fluttered the ends of her blouse and though they stood at the same level, Mel felt like she'd have to walk uphill to meet her position. Jodi had made it. Jodi had gone out and made it with her life. Kazakhstan launching satellites to angel investing. She'd secured her own invitation to Diego's conference. If anyone had advice on how to move forward with Six Star or move forward without Six Star, it was the woman she'd been sharing champagne and shooting shuffleboard with since stranded-on-the-ocean day one.

"Hey, uh, Mel? Sorry. Hey." The techie-type with the scissor-chin, red in the face and troubling one hand with the other. "Sorry."

She glanced back to Jodi who didn't seem to be going anywhere and then refocused on scissor-chin. "Yeah, what's up?"

"Well," he said. "First of all, that was really crazy, wasn't it? In the engine room? I mean. You didn't, like—you were so even with that guitar guy."

"Oh," said Mel. She fidgeted. Another glance—Jodi hadn't moved. "It's really no big deal. His name's Roger and I met him earlier, so."

Scissor-chin blinked. Looked a little confused and then talked very fast. "Right. Uh. Anyway, there's something else. We found this door near the lower deck, but it was locked, but you could see a little bit under the door and it looked like something, but my partner was kind of tired and said it was probably nothing, but I got down and laid on the floor and I swear I could see something, so I wanted to let you know about this door."

Mel's turn to blink. "This door?"

“This *locked* door.”

“Okay,” she said. “Locked door. You need a key. I know where Diego keeps the keys,” she realized as she spoke it. At the helm, hanging on a peg by their captain’s wall of maps. “Could you say all that again, slowly, while we grab them?” A locked door could hide anything. Behind a locked door might be a battery radio, a chart of the stars, anything. “Jodi!” she called out, waving.

Mel led their group to grab the set of keys with a shout of, “Just borrowing these!” to Diego where he stood in the middle of the task of taping more papers to his walls. Scissor-chin led their group down to the lower deck where Mel had only strolled once or twice in all her days at sea. So far down so many stairs and through dark corridors. A small space near the stern of the ship opened to a railing. The water was as close here as dusk was to night, dim and orange around them. If the engines had power they might have caught spray from the ship’s wake in this place. “Here’s the door,” the techie pointed out.

Took her a minute to find the key. Real keys—nothing electronic about it. No glamor in locking your closet with a digital thumbprint. Eventually she found the inch and a half of iron that made the door click and they moved into a room around half the size of her own. Smaller, but packed with stuff. Glorious, glorious stuff. “Amazing,” breathed Mel, and damn did she mean it. “This exactly *specifically* the kind of crap we were looking for,” she told scissor-chin. “Thank you.”

Food. Here in this room. Honest, mass-produced and packaged food. It was real.

“*Wow...*” moaned scissor-chin. “That’s... That’s peanut butter.”

And not just peanut butter. Peter Pan extra crunch with the seal intact. Two large containers. And more. Two boxes of Nature Valley bars. A box of PopTarts (brown sugar

cinnamon). Three books in a stack. A mattress bed and tangled sheets. A chest by the bed that held clothes—a coat with many pockets, a bucket hat, swimming trunks, long johns with Family Guy characters printed all over them—and most life-changing of all, a sleek fishing rod and tackle box too.

“What was the name, again?” Mel asked scissor-chin. “I put it on the schedule but that was a few days ago.” What a find. What a fabulous, fabulous find. She could even forgive the horrendous long johns—hallelujah, actual food!

“Spencer!” he chirped.

“Can you go get Diego?” she asked, adding, “Here. You can take my flashlight for the journey,” and, “Thank you, Spencer.” as he jogged away.

“Oh my God,” said Jodi, once they were alone. “Do you think...” she swallowed.

“Think what?”

“A stowaway,” she said. “Do you think someone snuck on board?”

“And is here now?” Mel inspected the fishing rod, but didn’t know what to look for. She could tell it had been shiny once, or shinier. Perhaps either lightly, or lovingly, used. “And we haven’t seen them? For this long? I don’t know.”

“It’s possible,” Jodi insisted. She’d lifted the coat of many pockets, a heavy workman’s thing. “Unlikely. But without another explanation... We might know them without knowing, you know?”

Mel wanted to ask about Six Star and what she was supposed to do now, but couldn’t think of a way to bring it up. Her heart started beating all fast when she started putting the words together in her head, and whenever her eyes crossed the food—those granola bars—and now she had thoughts of Roger and the cult in the engine room asking her to take them home because

they were hungry. Her heart hurt and that hurt climbed into her head and stung her eyes. God, the hunger was going to kill her. Back in whatever home she'd had in Atlanta that wasn't the Six Star office she had this chair. This purple armchair she'd picked up from some rescue mission thrift shop. She could feel how old it was when it creaked against her collapsing into it after a long day at the office that didn't see her home until well after dark, when she'd curl up with granola like the bars in those two boxes and pull up an afghan and fall asleep. She could smell its long history in the dust that rose from its cushions and why was she thinking of this now? Now when she needed to not be in her own head. But what if she never saw that chair again? Never found herself in that dust-bubble of age? She hadn't thought about that chair since Atlanta—why did it tighten in her throat now? Would she ever sit in it again?

“What do you think?” Jodi asked again. “Do you think it's a stowaway?”

Mel clubbed her thoughts into focus. *Focus, focus, focus*. A stowaway? No. The odds were much better that some self-serving NüLife jackass had stumbled across a key to this cubby days ago and squirreled away all the food they could find. Already a dirtbag thing to do, but throw in the fishing rod? Unbelievable. But she had to talk to Diego. Maybe he was that NüLife dirtbag—she'd know when she talked to him.

But Diego's first reaction after Spencer corralled him to the stash was to bury his nose in his elbow and grunt, “Good God, what died?”

“A bunch of pigs,” Mel told him. “Thanks.”

“The freezers,” Jodi explained. “She scavenged the freezers.”

Ever helpful, Spencer offered, “I'm physically incapable of smell.”

“Woah!” Diego had comprehended the peanut butter. “Is that Peter Pan?”

“Yeah,” said Mel. “Peter Pan and PopTarts. And a fishing rod.”

“Sick. Where the hell’d you find these?”

And like that, Mel could tell. Diego wasn’t that dirtbag. A dirtbag, maybe—if you asked any of the engine room-ites, but not *that* dirtbag. “Any idea what all this is?” Mel asked. “Why it’s here and who it belongs to?”

“Huh?” Diego had sunk his attention in the nutritious goop of the Peter Pan.

Jodi held up the bucket hat and jostled it over the mess of sheets pretending to be a full bed.

“Um...” Diego scratched at his curls, longer and shaggier every time Mel saw him. Might have been the untapped commercialism of this whole boat, but he looked a dead ringer of the Capital One caveman. *What’s in your wallet?* A Powerball winner, judging by the way his face lit up. “Ah!” he snapped his fingers. “This must be Fred Albany’s place!”

“Fred Albany?” Mel asked.

“No one,” Diego laughed. “Just no one. He’s the guy I pay to live on the boat when we’re not on it. Make sure everything looks good and no one breaks in. Stuff like that.”

“Fred Albany.” said Mel.

“Yeah!” Diego had a grin on like Fred Albany was some captain of the Coast Guard and not enjoying his shore leave funded by NüLife dime. “Look at all this stuff!”

The fishing rod was big news. In the early days, no one had done anything because rescue was hours, moments, seconds away. Later days had only come after they’d established a pattern of lethargy, and then factor in the growing thirst, the hunger... There had been talk of harvesting meals from the ocean but no action.

Diego hadn’t stopped removing the peanut butter lid with his eyes. “So...” he said. “This is... This is all going to the storeroom behind the gallery?”

Mel didn't like the quiver in his voice. The tension she could see in his rope thin body. The hunger. She understood that, but he looked like a vampire, all sallow and starving. Skin with the consistency of paste. "Well no," she said, resisting the impulse to snap her fingers in the space between Diego's eyes and the Peter Pan and break that wolf stare. "Obviously the food will go with our sauce in storage where we won't have to worry about someone stealing it."

"And we'll divvy it up equal?" asked Jodi, and Mel could hear the difference between the answer she wanted and the answer she expected by the miles-deep pang in her voice. Miles of hunger. "We have a lot of people here." So many days on the water.

Diego nodded. "Eighty-two. Eighty-two mouths."

Jodi picked up from there. "How do we split a box of PopTarts eighty-two ways?"

"What's twelve divided by eighty-two?" Mel posed, eyeing the bubble letters that spelled out the box's pastry count.

"Hardly a bite," muttered Diego.

And Mel understood. If they locked themselves in this room right now and devoured the whole stash, no one would be harmed. No one's conditions would change. No one would know what they'd miss out on and so they wouldn't miss out. Mel tried to analyze costs and benefits and thought of Rasmussen, like she always did when she got analytical—a habit she'd have to break. He'd take the food. He'd take it all. He'd probably give her some. Mixed bag greed and kindness—no need to sympathize with the schmucks who aren't on your team. She'd seen their other food in the freezer, seen what that looked like. This? This looked like land. Like Walmart, Harris Teeter, and home, and didn't smell like death.

Neither Diego nor Jodi seemed willing to move one way or the other. Scissor-faced Spencer kept swinging his head between him. Maybe he got what was being decided. Mel did.

We can only do this if we all agree. Rasmussen would tell her to take it and Rasmussen was successful. What had she ever gotten acting like herself?

“All right,” said Mel. “All right. Let’s eat.”

“Wait.” Jodi blinked. “Really?”

Mel grinned like her lips were pumped with helium. “God, yes. Close the door, lock it, and get me a Nature Valley, good God.”

What happened next came fast and heavy. Eating fast like you might never get the chance again. Shoveling food, eating messy because seconds wasted chewing or wiping your mouth meant more for someone else and less for you. Mel had never spoken with Spencer before that morning but now had seen him plunge an entire fist of peanut butter into his mouth, seen him choke himself to swallow through the goo. The Nature Valley bars cracked between her teeth like lightning or breaking glass. A throbbing in her gums because they’d forgotten the resistance of solid food. Jodi and Diego had gone for the peanut butter as well, and its smell had taken the room. The butter hung from cupped hands and the spaces between fingers like stalactites. Diego had two PopTarts gripped in his non-butter hand, alternating butter and chomp, butter and chomp.

The butter. They’d nearly emptied the first jar of Peter Pan and she’d crunched nothing but Nature Valley. Unacceptable. She wasn’t allowed to face a slow death at sea if she couldn’t taste peanut butter one more time. “*Ooomph.*” Her elbow connected with Diego’s chest as she cut in to get her share but she didn’t cave. Her stomach felt full to bursting, so full and stretching and hurting but a sweet ache. She sunk her hand into the butter and brushed fingertips with the jar’s plastic bottom and her fist rose up heavy with nutrients, protein, calories. How much sauce equaled one peanut fist of butter? Not all the sauce she’d had in the last two weeks.

She kissed her palm. Closed her lips around the butter there, pushed in and pulled back. Rubbed her tongue around the inside of her mouth and swallowed. Went back for more and sucked the last pinches of peanut from under her fingernails. Overfull, still on the run from knife-sharp hunger. More peanut butter? More peanut butter.

By the time they finished, Mel had claimed a spot on the floor, belly up to give the food in her gut the space it demanded. One arm lay flat against her side while the other had collapsed before she could rescue her hand from the empty Peter Pan extra crunch. The jar laid where it had fallen, just like her. Spencer seemed asleep, butter coating the patches of his beard the scissors had missed, but groaned every few minutes. Mel wanted to tell him to shut that down—that they were dead if someone stumbled into them—but her own aches wouldn't let her get any words out. She kept mouth and throat screwed tight shut and chin tucked to collar, because unlike Diego, she was *not* going to lose the last real food she'd ever have to an upset stomach. Diego, for his part, had inched his head a little to the left of the vomit he'd burped and then spewed all over Fred Albany's bed. Jodi, who alone of the four of them had retained the ability to walk, had exited the room at that point. Whether she'd braved the darkened hallways without a light or taken a rest on the lower deck, Mel didn't know.

If the military-caliber odor of Diego's bile had any positives, it was that no one would find them because they happened to catch a whiff of something that made them hungry. Maybe they'd think someone was dying and maybe someone was. At least she wasn't the worst smelling person in the room now.

Spencer stirred. A noise like a yawn or whimper. Definitely awake. "I wish..." he began, but had to plug his mouth with his hand while the food moved around inside of him.

“What?” she asked, because she wanted to know. The food they’d eaten had left her feeling dirty and focusing on others would make her feel right.

“Oo—uhh?” Spencer groaned.

“Wish what?”

“Wish I’d never,” he hiccupped. “Never told y’all. Could have eaten... This by myself slowly.”

And Mel couldn’t argue with that. Partly because the strangle-grip of her stomach on her throat had tightened and partly because that answer made her feel worse.

...

Two more days of ease and unease after twelve more of the same. Sauce and water and water and sauce. A terse exchange with Rasmussen, but neither of their hearts were in it. She’d gone up to the roof of the kitchens with Jodi and Ted to bathe in the sun. “Who cares?” Jodi had said. “If cancer kills me before *Financial Fortune* I’m a lucky woman.”

“My report gets longer every day,” Ted had sighed.

Did Jodi feel weird around Ted? Mel did. He tried to cajole her into their old game of conjuring the foods they’d eat when they rejoined the shore world. Painting them like pictures to hang in the beautiful blue air. They’d done this a few times since that night with the champagne and it had always been a relief. A non-torturous hour. But she couldn’t keep with it today. Couldn’t get started.

“A big steaming pot.” Ted had his arms folded behind his head and shirt off. A run-of-the-mill vacationer and a touch more bronze than probably he’d ever been. He had a beard of bristles and hair around his nipples but nowhere else. “A big steaming pot roast. Vegetables. Potatoes. Bubbling.” He waited for her to jump in, but Mel couldn’t focus because here was a

grown man with the stick-thin body of a sixteen year old. Here was a child-man like Peter Pan which was the peanut butter and the food was all pictures of Nature Valley and PopTart in her mind, no pot roast. They'd dug in without a thought. Without a care. Dug right in like unthinking animals. Pigs in the freezer.

"Simmering," Ted soldiered on. "Uh. Spices..."

"Tastes really good?" Mel tried to add. "I don't know. Sorry."

Ted left before Mel or Jodi did. Sentry duty by the kitchens. "God," Mel said to the sky, after he had gone.

"Mm hmm," Jodi agreed.

"It doesn't bother you? That we forgot to... you know."

"Forgot?"

"Yeah. We'd have told him, right? About the food? If we remembered."

"Of course," said Jodi. "Totally."

"Really? You think we would have?"

She lifted her sunglasses. "Probably. Maybe. Well," and she let them drop.

"You don't feel bad?" Mel asked. Palpable lack of interest emanated from Jodi but she had to ask. Needed to hear it in words.

Even breathing. The brush of the breeze. Maybe Jodi had fallen asleep, but then she rolled onto her stomach. Time to tan the back. "About what? Not giving Ted three spoons of peanut butter? He'll have some fish when we catch some."

"But—"

"Why feel bad now, Mel? Who's got the time to feel bad?" Jodi stretched in the sun and yawned.

Mel's hand twitched for the *Indecision Cure*TM, something that still happened a few times each day. "I don't know," she said. "I don't know."

...

Since the day that *Financial Fortune* had gone dead in the water, NüLife had consumed untold volumes of cocktail sauce. Untold, because without electronic inventory updates, they couldn't get an exact amount, but the proportions had to be mythic. "Seriously. How much sauce did you take on?" Mel asked Diego during the day's serving.

"A lot. Maybe more than I thought. The savings were good buying in bulk."

Mel had the distinct impression that she wouldn't have given the okay to that decision. Maybe NüLife needed a new purchasing manager. Probably a new name too.

Rasmussen tried to eat with her. She'd claimed a spot in the shade of the helm and started on her sauce when he drifted over. Didn't ask to join, didn't sit. Just lingered like a ghost. The white fringes on his beard made her think that.

After a few deliberate bites, she cleared her throat of sauce with three hard swallows. "What's up," she said.

"Hmm." he said back, which wasn't enough.

She turned back to her sauce. "Okay then."

He kept lingering until at some point, he disappeared while she kept her focus on the sauce and waited for him to say anything else.

...

Mist on day fifteen. A cruel reminder of the water they'd all but lost. Reminded, Mel met with Diego to assess their supplies. "How long?" she asked, surveying the two remaining metal drums that stood at the empty center of the kitchens.

“At current rate?” Diego scratched through the tangled hair curling off his cheek. “Three days to go through a barrel. So. That’ll depend.”

She considered this. “And then it’s back to champagne?”

Diego didn’t say anything at first, but Mel understood. By day fifteen, they were all fluent in the language of anguished silence.

“Then we’ll split it,” said Mel. “Water and champagne at half what we’ve been giving. Drag this next barrel out a week and a half.” She said this, but the anguish persisted underneath, and Diego understood too.

“I know. I’m tired too,” he said. “Exhausted.” And then, “You think we’ve got another week in us?”

“Yes,” she said. “If we split rations water and champagne.”

The mist persisted to the next day. NüLifers swarmed the top deck and walked with their mouths open. Good moisture. Any moisture. That mist eradicated everything. Together, they floated on fog through fog and Mel felt blessedly bloated. Between water in the air, her own portions, and the water that still unknowably showed up outside her door from Rasmussen, the beats of her own thirst had settled. Slumbered.

She sat with one of the temporarily noncompliant engine dweller by the gallery entrance and watched NüLifers scurry. Ted had to rest every few seconds, hands pressed to kneecaps, back bent double. The engine refugee jerked a thumb. “How long you think he’s got?”

“At least a week and a half,” Mel answered.

“Ha.”

...

And then the winds turned bad. Water, champagne, and sauce were served indoors. Everyone stayed in their rooms or down with the engine. People shivered. Of all the things, now cold? How far had they drifted? How big was the world?

Mel went down to the engine room with a small offering of sauce. Sang a song and felt better and worse.

“Glad you could join us,” said Roger.

“Yeah,” Mel told him and the rest. “Whatever. Just here to kill some time until time kills me.”

Roger had a grin that was all teeth. “God, I miss cigarettes. Welcome to our little club.”

...

But she didn’t really join. Just drained the hours. After four more days of whipping wind and intermittent sun, Rasmussen approached her in the dining hall. Apparently he’d taken note of her visits to the catacombs of the ship.

“What are you doing with those loonies?” he growled. “You’re smarter than that.”

“We’ve got days of water left and this is what you’re going to waste your energy on? Telling me how smart I am?”

The dining hall. Why did they always do this in the dining hall? Was it the wide windows, all ceiling to floor along every wall that reminded them of their office in Atlanta? But they never sparred like this in Atlanta.

“No.” Rasmussen countered. “They’re crazy down there. You’re not. Yet. What happens when they start getting to you and that changes?”

“I don’t know, boss.” Mel had spent a lot of time respecting Rasmussen that she no longer understood. Where was his far sight? That wisdom of experience that made him

somebody and her worthy of making only his Google calendar but not her own? “What happens when we’re out of water and back on champagne?” she asked him. “When people get angry?”

He snorted. “You won’t survive longer by joining *them*. Like they won’t turn on you for being Diego’s little helper.”

“Oh, I’m fine.” Mel snapped, thoughts on the freezer and the sharp things stashed there. “I’m okay. But what about you? Where’s all this water coming from?”

“My rations,” Rasmussen answered. “I told you.”

“If I catch you stealing...” Mel shook her head to dislodge the image of the freezer cache. An example would have to be made.

“You won’t.” he said. “I’m not,” and that was that.

...

Sunrise with Ted. Nothing she’d planned—God, who wanted to see anyone when things were this bad? She’d already claimed her spot on the rail when he came moseying over. “Good morning. How you doing?” he’d said, paired with a half-sad smile that made her thoughts burn. She hated the way that seeing him put the taste of peanut butter back in her head. Jodi was right. She shouldn’t have to feel bad. Why did he have to go about so friendly when—maybe he hadn’t noticed—everything had gone to absolute shit.

“At least we get this.” He flopped his limp wrist over the side of the ship in presentation of the ever-obvious sun. “Lots of people probably go their whole lives and never see this kind of beginning to the day.”

Which was a pretty dumb way of looking at the fact that way, way more people weren’t destined to perish at the third annual NüLife conference. Thanks Diego.

“Everything is bad,” said Mel. “Why are we trying so hard to pretend that’s not true?”

Ted shrugged. They watched the dawn. It wasn't remarkably beautiful or even passively great. Today, the colors just looked like jumbled colors. Too much visual noise to appear organized or even pretty. Too much effort to read 'pretty' from this mess of colors and light.

"We just have to hang tight," said Ted. "That's what we do when we can't do anything else. Keep striving."

But she'd already been told that so many times in so many ways. She'd said the same thing to the song circle in the engine room. The *Indecision Cure*TM kept her striving and striving for months for what? *What do you want, Mel?*

"Why?" she asked. "There's no rescue coming and we can't save ourselves." Ted didn't have anything to say back, so she kept going. "We're feeding ourselves all these lies about how if we keep calm and wait and wait and wait we'll get what we want, but it's not real. You know it. I know it." They waited by the rail for dawn to pass so they could start waiting on sunset.

"Do you really think that?" asked Ted, and what was with everyone side-eyeing her everything lately? How well did these people think they knew her? "Have you really done everything you could possible do and now you're ready to give up?"

The peanut butter ghost in her mouth really ruined this whole thing. Talking with Ted. Sunrise. "Shut up," she said. "Just shut up. I don't owe you anything."

Her heart jabbed quick at her ribs, but she played it cool. Look like you're not bothered, her thoughts ran. Don't look at him. Look at the sky.

But Ted didn't press for more conversation than that. They were all tired.

...

Diego made the announcement that they'd be permanently moving off water in the morning. Mel wouldn't have done it like that, not that he'd thought to consult her. Night would have been kinder. Extra shadow to hide from the scared and angry people out for your head.

The engine-ites showed up in a big group and stood together with their crossed arms and glowers. Mel waved to them. Two of the friendly ones waved back.

"What is this?" Roger called. "Where's the rest of the water? After all this rationing, you're going to tell us everything is gone?"

"Gone!" Diego flailed his arms. From his perch on top of one of the tables they'd dragged from the gallery, he looked like a work-for-food street performer in the wrong line of work: Skeletal. "We're back to champagne until we get another storm. Or until we run out."

"That's a lie!" someone shouted Mel recognized Benjamin's voice a solid second before recognizing his person. The voice was hoarse to breaking. The person was... rough. Skin that looked burnt and sapped of color at the same time. The days had not been kind to him and neither had hunger. "I was on guard duty yesterday and we had a whole barrel. No way that's gone!"

Murmuring voices. Buzzing voices. Angry. Diego entreated the crowd with open hands. Presented his palms, but the buzzing did not stop. "Yes!" he called out. "Yes, I was just getting to that! We do have a little water left that we'll be saving for emergencies only to make it last!"

"Save it for what? Who? You?" The accusation came from an irate engine dweller and his contemporaries chimed in with a few yells of "Yeah!" and by clapping him on the back. Mel remembered the peanut butter and approved. Someone had to keep him in line and she couldn't trust herself to do it.

"The emergency water," Diego explained, "is for emergency situations."

“I’ve been lost at sea for two weeks!” hollered one of the other caterers, Joe. “That count as an emergency?”

“For big emergencies!” Diego yelled back, which Mel would have told him not to do. Again, not that he’d thought to ask her before doing this. Now he’d engaged.

Roger took a big step forward and bellowed, “But it’s a big emergency when it’s you getting thirsty, right?”

“No!” Diego’s voice cracked into a squeak that made Mel want him kicked. Her stomach growled so hard it folded over on itself and made her bend. Things had been like that since she’d reminded it what real food felt like on the day they’d raided Fred Albany’s stuff and now her gut was that much angrier about starving. Everyone seemed intent on her suffering, including herself.

“Emergencies only,” Diego pleaded, hopelessly trying to placate the crowd. “Death’s door. Life and death kind of emergencies.”

The concept, Mel could get with. Not a bad idea, but the execution was going to get him executed, and maybe he’d realized that, because the squeak in his voice had grown louder and grown worse. Panic. The crowd was standing. NüLife, rising. Closing in. Angry. Violence simmered under the pleasant sun of the morning. Mel saw Rasmussen with the crowd but almost didn’t recognize the face. Their time on the *Financial Fortune* had transformed them into not humans. Echoes reduced by hunger, thirst, and exhaustion. As much as Rasmussen disdained all of NüLife, here he was, rising with them and shuffling like zombies toward Diego.

“Wait!” Diego was calling. “Wait, wait, wait! Hold on! This is for everyone. This is good for everyone, trust me, this is... This is fine—fine! Drink it!” he had pearls of precious moisture curling out of his eyes now. A shameful waste at this level of conservation, but depending on the

sentence of the crowd, he might have been smart to use it while he could. “We can drink it all now! Water for everyone!” he sobbed, seeing he had nowhere to go and falling to his knees. It was too late. Surely he could see they’d all gone too long doing nothing and they couldn’t do nothing anymore. The crowd didn’t want water; they wanted blood. A few souls lingered on the outskirts. Paper-thin souls, the ones who shied from action. The ones who saw the rage of having no other option and shook, shivered, and froze. *Ye weakhearts*. She counted Ted. No surprise there. Distract yourself with another invisible meal and pretend your life isn’t over. She saw scissor-chin Spencer with his new growth beard. Not a shock, but puppy-dog energy will only get you so far. Grow up and join the angry mob. And then she found Jodi. That surprised her. Didn’t they teach which was up at the Cosmodrone? Guess not.

The crowd moved like a mad dog unsure of the electric fence. Would it work? Or would it hurt? Mel wondered what they’d lose once NüLife realized the fence was only in their own heads. What dangers would inevitably come. What dangers would—

“Mel! Mel!”

Mel looked up and met Diego’s shiny brown eyes. Shiny because the end of his life closed around him. Emergency water. “Mel!” he cried. Now he consulted her. Sure then.

She yanked the knot of venom from her stomach into her arms and hit the deck moving. “Out of the way,” she ordered some NüLife extras at the back of the pack and pulled them apart as she pushed through. The people who saw her moved for her and the ones who didn’t were moved by her. She scaled the table and stood, eyes hard on the whole conference. Diego in his groveling still came as high as her chest, but she felt miles tall, if dispassionate. She picked Rasmussen out of the buzzing people. Height over him too. “Hey!” she yelled, and the buzzing flinched quiet like she’d punched their voices with her own. “Everybody quiet. Back up!”

And then she had them. Quiet again. Ocean and breeze. Better not lost them like Diego had done.

“That’s what I thought.” She pushed the words out through her teeth without sacrificing volume. Her frustration was bigger than the crowd’s and she was going to ride it. “This is not how we move forward.” The people waited for her. What could they do instead? Mel had to choke down a poison laugh because she definitely had nothing better to give them, but... There was Ted still at the edge, lingering. That was something. “We’ve got to strive,” she said. “That’s what we do when we can’t do anything else.” She stared them down from end to end. Welcomed any challengers. “We strive, okay? And that’s all we do. Not this.”

“The water!” Rasmussen. A voice she’d heard too much of. I’m doing something, she ached to scream at him. *Leave me alone!* Instead, she waited for him to finish, patient as the whole ocean. “What about the water?” he goaded. “He’s trying to steal it.”

And maybe he was right. Diego clearly wasn’t above that. Neither was she. The peanut butter.

“He’s not stealing anything. The small amount we have left is for emergencies so we can switch back to champagne and draw the water we have out as long as possible. Listen, box. If you don’t think this is a good idea, you’re not thinking.” Snickers from the crowd. Good. It felt good to talk down to him from up here on the table. To win. Take that.

“But the water—”

“Will be in the same place it always was.” She let a dash of boredom eke into her words. Give them more for the snickering. Entertainment. *Something*, because who wanted to play shuffleboard half dead? “Same place,” said Mel. “Same guards. Dispensed in cases of dire, dire need. If you’re dying. Like dying, dying, and we have water, you’ll get it.”

Rasmussen spat on the deck in a gesture so similar to how the engine dwellers treated references to Diego that Mel was shaken for a second. “He shouldn’t be in charge.”

Mel wondered if Diego understood how much so many people hated him and felt a pang of pity, which was nice. Reassuring that she could still muster some sympathy.

“His leadership has brought us to ruin,” Rasmussen continued, and Mel couldn’t disagree with that. Diego, with streaks of snot streaming down from his nostrils and knees pressed to tabletop at her side did not a strong figure make. “He’s only led us from bad to worse. Every day he makes us worse and we’re worse and worse off. He was unfit to run this conference with power and he’s unfit to run this boat without it. Why are we still listening to him?”

And then Mel got it and wanted to laugh and laugh. Diego wasn’t the ocean. He wasn’t the wide world that remained so impossibly wide in defiance of all their technology and global communication. He was just Diego—some things were his fault and others were not. Not everything. Not the rift that had grown between Six Star’s two representatives. *Rasmussen. You’re jealous.* Wow. Living at the top of the world really made you develop some kind of sensitivity. Mel thought the time had definitely come to twist the knife.

“And who should be?” she asked. “Who should we listen to? You? What, in your whole career of coasting off your ability to talk to computers makes you qualified to talk to people, forget leading them?”

And then the layers were peeling away. Maybe seeing one thing led to the next like domino realizations, or maybe she could just see him better from this high angle. No more looking up. Those days were over. She wasn’t the only object of the jealousy Rasmussen nursed for Diego. “At least he’s trying,” she pressed her old employer. “Can’t fault him for that, except

you do.” She crossed her arms. “You stopped trying a long time ago. Now you can stop trying to drag everyone else down with you.”

Quiet from the crowd. Distraction over buzzing.

“Obviously you’re fired,” Rasmussen said.

“Yeah go figure,” Mel called back, and then under her breath, she muttered to the *Financial Fortune*’s kneeling captain. “*Get up and defend yourself. Brawl.*”

Diego obeyed. He stood and tried to look strong, but couldn’t stop the shaking in his legs from carrying to his voice. “This is the best way,” he said. “This is the way we stretch our supplies the longest.” He choked on himself but pulled together. Took a second to breathe, and then, “This is how we strive.”

Benjamin spoke up again. The original inciter, but now he just sounded sad. “What are we supposed to do?”

Mel shrugged. “Entertain yourself,” she suggested. Actually, shuffleboard wasn’t the worst idea. A game you could still play half-dead. “Pray for a storm.”

And the storm of their anger had passed. The crowd still grumbled, but the hornet buzzing had fallen back into slumber, if only for that day and that hour. Mel looked for Rasmussen but couldn’t find him. Go on then, she thought. Sulk. It’s not that fun.

She yawned and hopped off the table, throwing back a casual, “Whatever,” when she heard Diego call out, “Thanks.” She wondered how the champagne was flowing and if she couldn’t snag a bottle to split the day’s rations with Jodi.

...

Drinking champagne at previously unconceived levels of sustained dehydration yielded wonderfully bad results. Instant hangover! Like chugging a migraine. Another gorgeous day on

the wild ride that was *Financial Fortune*. Doom hung heavy in the air and that was something you could feel like a tangible weight. Stroll on deck. Dip into sunlight and feel that heat lay into you. Push you down and crack your skin.

No one formed a mob. No one had the energy. No more contact with Rasmussen, but that was fine. Fine. Didn't matter to her.

Dusk or dawn? She tried to puzzle it out as she emerged blinking onto the deck from the ship's interior. All orange. Blanket orange. All heat.

Two other souls on deck and one of them Ted. A guy whose name she couldn't recall leaned against one rail, eyes on the orange. Sky, reflection in sea. She could have sworn she'd seen him somewhere. Had some memory somewhere but not the energy to reach with her mind and grab it. Ted stumbled across the deck like a man with his mind somewhere else. Thorough unconcern for the placement of his feet. How long had he been out here? Mel hadn't seen him or much of anyone in the last few days. A lethargy had seized the ship and people were harder to find.

Mel lounged at the edge of the gallery alcove, watching Ted stumble and feeling like some cretin sort of creature that burned when it touched the light. Should she help him? If he was only a little not okay, she'd rather not. Ted staggered into another step and then turned his face up, giving her a full view of the pale flush that had bloomed all across his face and neck. Mel lost her own blariness in a snap. How much sun could a person absorb before it penetrated the skin and sunk into the mind? "Ted?" she called. "Hey, Ted!"

And he heard her, or she thought so. Dilated eyes like big dark circles behind his glasses rolled unfocused as he turned his neck in her vague direction. Ted—looking and blinking and lost. He put down another and then tripped to the side, stumbling, stumbling—stumbling so close

to the rail. Slow motion now as Mel watched and processed. She saw him try to stand and collapse again, but this time with no deck to catch him. No feet to carry the stumble—he crashed into the rail, hard against his ribs and he kept going. Slow motion, slow motion—speeding up. She saw the whole thing happen so slow but he was gone so fast. Gone like he’d never even been there at all because the deck hadn’t changed. The deck looked the same as before. The other guy whose name she didn’t know kept just leaning against the other rail where no one had yet fallen.

“Oh God,” Mel breathed, shaking. “Oh God, oh God.” There was no one else. Just her. Oh God, she couldn’t do anything.

But she did run. “Ted!” she screamed. “Ted! Can you hear me?” She craned her neck over the spot where he’d tumbled off the side and saw the same unbroken ocean she saw everywhere. Swells that moved the boat up and down. “Ted!”

Then, erupting out of the water—a starving, spluttering, drowning man! “Hold on!” Mel shouted. Could he even hear? No, there was no way. But what to do other than watch? Watch and wait until he got tired, and then... And then and then and then. *And then*. The thought wouldn’t finish.

“What’s going on? What happened?” Her screams had startled the nameless man. She had been screaming? She had. *And then*. “Did someone go over the side?”

She didn’t know this man’s name and that didn’t matter but did make her think of scavenging and meeting Spencer. And peanut butter—Ted hadn’t gotten any. *No*. She did not need to think about this right now. And then. Scavenging, scavenging. Below, Ted struggled against the water and the water was all around him. Splashing, spitting, choking. *Scavenging*. The peanut butter, the knives, the... *the rope*.

The rope.

“Stay here,” Mel ordered. “Do *not* leave him.”

“Yes ma’am.”

She found the rope where they’d stored it in the spare room behind the gallery. Fastest she’d run, fastest thing she’d done in a week. The whole coil couldn’t fit in her hands so she wore it like a huge necklace and tried not to trip over the strand that slithered behind her like a snake. “Outside!” she called to the few drifters that all the noise had brought up to the gallery. “Outside, now!”

They followed. They listened.

Mel met the nameless man where she’d left him at the rail, where two stories below, Ted grappled with the ocean. She let her mess of rope fall to the deck and began wrapping one end around her waist. Strong material, these thick woven cords. If she could pull off a knot that held, she might not drown and maybe Ted wouldn’t either. After two attempts at a shoelace tie, she glared at the NüLifers who had now split between watching her and watching Ted slowly run out of sight below. *And then*. “Help?” Mel asked. “Knot? Anyone?”

“Help?” the nameless man echoed, raising a timid hand. “I... I might be able to do a, uh. I used to go—no. Used to be a—”

“Can you tie a good knot?” Mel held the rope around her waist in a deconstructed lasso that would have felt ridiculous if she had even a second to give over to something other than worrying about what she was about to do. “That’s all I need to know,” she said.

“Yes,” said the nameless man. “Yes. Sailing in the summers, I used to—”

“Perfect.” Mel shoved the end of the rope into his stomach. “I want it. Tie me up good.” While the nameless man repositioned her, and then the rope, and then worked, she addressed the rest of the watchers. “You’ll have the other end,” she said. “Don’t lose it. Don’t you dare lose it.

When I've got him, you pull us back up." She saw Spencer, somewhere near the middle of the group with a raised hand and question on his lips, but that was when the nameless man finished. "No comments," she told him, pleased with the tightness of the rope around her hips. Maybe she'd live. *And then?*

And then Mel planted a foot halfway up the railing and vaulted over the side.

Did she have enough rope? If not, this drop was going to end very fast and hurt. Orange giving over to gray in the sky. Fringe of black. Dusk not dawn. Ted still visible down there, still fighting—she picked up the snapshot memory in the heartbeat that she fell. Still fighting. He'd been fighting one health threat or another all his life. Guess that built stamina.

Mel collided with the water in a splash that ripped her senses away. In all her time at sea, she'd never touched ocean, but now the cold, wet, and dark rushed all around her. Cold and fast and tasting of salt. She couldn't tell where was up or down, where she must go to find air and sky because salt had pushed into her eyes. Darkness of murky water became all and carried that cold which eradicated all feeling. She'd jumped into this empty world where there was nothing left. No Ted. No boat. No NüLife. But she still had the rope, and the rope belonged to the other world. The rope would take her back. Her clothes clung heavy to her and the water clung heavy to her clothes. Pulled her down. Burning in her lungs, bubbles out her mouth. Rank saltwater scraping all inside her nose. She kicked and kicked and followed her tether into air. Warm air. She coughed and she spat. Kicked with her feet to keep her head above water and in that warm, warm air.

Ted. Where was Ted? She looked but couldn't see. Looked, but the waves... *There!* In the waves. As one swell came down, Mel saw Ted splashing so close, treading and kicking and flailing his arms.

“Hey!” she tried to shout. “Hey!” but then she sank in the water and had salt on her tongue.

Coughing back to the surface where shouts rained from the deck above, but she couldn’t hear what they were saying. So loud. She was so close.

Her shoulder exploded and waves rose to claim her. Freezing cold over all of her, but not in the shoulder where pain burned in a white hot core. She reached out with the hand of her unburnt shoulder, reached for the surface. The surface, where was it, she needed to breathe! Her hand scrabbled against something hard and metal that pushed down on top of her, shoved her deeper into the cold where the pain in her shoulder radiated stingingly brighter with pressure. Water in her throat, trickle to the lungs. So long pining for water and now it had buried her. Tugged her down and tugged her down with only the rope tugging against the pull of the depths in hideous tug-of-war that left her choking and drowning and suspended in salt, but nothing lasts forever. All states that are not final must change. The rope had a stronger grip on her than the ocean, and this is a side that won, pulling her out from under *Financial Fortune* and across the dusk horizon between sky and sea.

Given this gift and reprieve from darkness, Mel swam harder, pushed harder than she ever had before, even with one arm. Everything was movement and movement was against the bullying swells that pushed past her into and under the ship’s mighty hull. All was movement except Ted. The thought, Ted. Find Ted. She fought the waves, the water, and the rope. Fought through the star burning in her shoulder but gained distance in inches that were immediately lost as the waves carried her back. *Financial Fortune* groaned at the constant insistence of the waves. *Financial Fortune* slapped down against the water behind her, but she hadn’t gone back under. But she hadn’t gone back under. But she hadn’t gone back—”

Ted! The waves smashed them into each other. His arm crashed into her shoulder and wrapped itself there. Her howling as he squeezed, and there was the other hand, slapping against her cheek on its way to the rope. Droplets and pain flecked her eyes, but she glimpsed enough fragments to assemble this image: Ted, bursting from the water, eyes screwed shut and fists closed tight. And then the pulling started. The rope, lifting her into the air and threatening to pull her apart at the stomach. “The rope,” she hissed to Ted, praying he had the consciousness to hear. “Grab the rope. Hold tight.”

Relief breathed into her like a numbing breeze. Ted had taken the rope and released her exploding shoulder. The rope pulled at her in a struggle to rise and she tried to pull herself up with her good arms, but her wounded arm wouldn’t grip and the rope laid into her aching waist. The pain took over and tore away the remaining fingers. She wanted to shout to Ted that something had clicked wrong in her shoulder; that she couldn’t hold on, but the yank of the rope cut into her stomach and her words lodged in her windpipe and choked her. Tears burned out the corners of her eyes to join the wider body of salt and water. Darkness deeper than dusk jostled with her surroundings for control of her eyes and mind. She was going under, she was going under, she couldn’t speak, she was going under.

Under, under, under. Maybe this was a kind of peaceful. Maybe this was dying, and she didn’t mind going at sea, actually *in* the sea. Far out in the open, miles and miles and dimensions safe from the freezer where pigs rotted to liquid and mush.

Dying flipped you upside down. A little like flying. Under, under, under became up, up, up. Like you were a kid again with your parents so tall. They picked you up out of the water and it hurt you so much in the middle. You had a body dangling next to you with arms tucked

underneath your shoulders and one of your shoulders was like touching the stovetop and you weren't able to yank back your hand.

Up, up, "Mel! Mel, keep with me!" Up. Up. Up. "Mel!"

Half of everything was black and far away, but she saw enough to see Ted. Enough to remember, to learn that pain hurt so much worse when you were alive. Ted's moving mouth didn't fully match what she heard as his words. "Mel? Hang in there. We're almost up. We're almost—"

Then she had hands on her back. NüLifers from the right side of the rail, lifting her over. Ted, with both arms slung around that rail to keep himself from falling back, was telling them, "She's passed out again. Someone get Diego. Get the emergency water."

She tried to say, "I'm fine," but coughed herself inches from another blackout. And then she was on deck next to Ted, alive and back on the ship. Both of them were. Diego had come with a champagne flute that he held to her chin. She tried to shake her head, but heard him say, "It's water," so she bent forward and greedily drank the glass to empty. Diego and Ted and Roger, she after she'd drank to nothing left.

"Mel?" asked Diego. "Can you hear me? Can you speak for me?"

She wanted to say, *'Haven't I done that enough?'* and laugh off whatever was going on, but found she couldn't and settle for a partial lie of a nod and then gave words another shot. "Shoul...der. Shoulder."

"She's hurt," Ted told the captain. "Roll back her sleeve."

Mel bit into her lip and tasted sweet metal blood.

"Out of socket," Ted concluded. "We need to reset. Who—"

“All me.” A new voice. The last time she’d heard him, Roger had been leading a chorus in a mutilated rendition of the *Gilligan’s Island* main theme. *Just sit right back and you’ll hear a tale, a tale of a high-tech ship...* “Played rugby in high school. Happens all the time. Hurts.”

And Mel lost whatever memories occurred between hearing that and the impact of pain that came with the setting of her shoulder that left her panting and aching on the deck. Panting and aching and able to speak. “Wow,” she puffed, because she hadn’t the lung capacity to get anything with more syllables. “Wow.”

“Jesus, Mel,” said Ted. “You’re okay. Thank God you’re okay.”

“You’re okay,” Mel told him. “Are you okay?”

“Fine,” said Ted, “with about a mile of footnotes. Fine now.”

With the hurt in her shoulder receding back into her body, the throbbing in her stomach took over. “The rope,” she moaned. “Off. Get it off, please.”

He and Diego tried and tried, but the knot defied all attempts by fingers to pull it apart. Mel tried to make herself small and wriggle out, but sucking in her stomach made her bend double and almost throw up.

“Who tied this?” Ted asked.

Mel shook her head because she didn’t know. “Get. Jodi.”

Ted was up immediately, cutting through the onlookers who had yet to disperse asking had anyone seen Jodi. When he came back, Mel thought he must have explained the situation to their friend on the way because Jodi wasted no time asking questions, only saw her, saw the rope, nodded, and set off toward the kitchens. She returned holding a gleaming silver knife and enveloped in an odor of noticeable decay.

“Where’d that come from?” Diego asked, eyes trained on the blade as Jodi worked it slowly against the rope. Ted said nothing but did the same. “What reeks?” was Diego’s next question, and Jodi answered both of them at the same time with a curt, “This whole ship,” and as soon as Mel was free, she was gone.

Still aching too much to stand, Mel lifted the bottom of her shirt, groaning when she saw the harsh purple bruise that extended horizontal across her whole stomach. If she had water in her system to spare, she’d have cried.

“Youch,” said Ted. “That’s... I’m sorry.”

Mel sighed and laid her head back. She deserved a rest and didn’t care where she took it. The steady rock of the boat soothed her when *she* was the one on top.

Ted didn’t take the hint and kept talking. “Thank you. That was incredible and I’m sorry I ever—God. I don’t know what happened to me, just one second I was—and then...” *And then.* “Thanks. Thank you.”

Diego snorted. “Yeah, incredible. Completely crazy. You’re both crazy. Mel, what the hell. That took some balls.”

“I don’t have balls.”

He ignored that and doubled down. “Big, big balls.”

“Yeah,” she said, “Well,” and she wanted to be angry and say everything didn’t matter, but the praise felt good. Off-putting as the compliment was, recognition felt *good*. Sure, nothing mattered, but she’d just jumped off the side of *Financial Fortune* to rescue someone from the grasp of the ocean. Absolutely wild and she’d actually done it. “Ugh,” she said. “I’ll sleep for a million years.”

Ted wouldn't stop apologizing. "I'm a weak asshole. I can't believe I fell in. Shit. Mel, I'm so fucking sorry."

"It's really all good," said Mel, who just wanted him to drop it. Did they have to apologize to each other like this after so long? Had he chosen to get smote with heat stroke? "I'm the crazy asshole who jumped in."

"Be that as it may," said Diego. "Glad we have a crazy asshole like you, then."

Rasmussen would hate this, was a thought that made Mel smile. "Thanks. Feels good to be appreciated."

The two of them sat with her as night fell like a curtain of stars. No clouds tonight—bad for rain but good for light. What prettiness in the curve of the crescent moon.

...

The next two days passed in the same sort of lethargy but Mel enjoyed it more, even with her litany of fresh bruises and aches layered on top of the hunger and the thirst. Funny how a little adrenaline at the right moment could shift your whole mood. She told herself it had nothing to do with the obvious math of saving someone's life more than offsetting not telling them about some peanut butter and snack food.

She visited the engine dwellers once or twice a day and they seemed glad to have her. Jodi was less excited than she was about helping the group convert *Simple Gifts* into a country bop about a hopeless boat. Mel suggested that they do *My Heart Will Go On* for the thematic ties. Make things easy.

"Clearly, we don't like doing things the easy way," Roger had shot her down. "We're still letting Cantobre play captain, so it's hard way all the way." But then he'd figured out the song for them anyway.

A constant protest of Diego's position developed when Roger began setting up shifts where two engine people would stand menacingly outside the ship's helm at all hours. He told them to not do anything physically harmful and just "Look really mean as a reminder," he'd explained it, "of what happens if we don't get our water." Mel had asked him twice if this was absolutely necessary and both times, he had begun plucking the opening strings to *My Heart Will Go On* and pretended not to hear her, which seemed like a low blow somehow, though she couldn't successfully vocalize that feeling. She'd tried to communicate it to Jodi, who'd only told her, "I don't know. They're creepy. They're crazy. Why fixate on this?"

On the second day, Roger and Diego got into a shouting match, calling each other all sorts of ugly names. Roger had spouted by far the most inventive slur with, "Water-hoarding silicon valley implant-humped miser camel."

It was possible that because Diego was brown, Roger assumed him to be from the Middle East, despite the blatantly Latin name. Later, Mel asked Hassam if Roger pulled that kind of racist stuff often and the other caterer had answered, "Frequently. Stupidly. The moustache is also a crime."

Diego had parried this geographically suspicious slight by confirming that when they arrived at port, should such an event ever happen, Roger would receive no pay for catering services rendered while the others of his company would be compensated for each additional day drifting at overtime rates. Joe was happy to hear it. Mel wondered if NüLife still had the assets to make good on this promise, but then remembered the yacht beneath her feet. Who would want to keep a thing like that after a time like this?

Witnessing the fight reminded her of Rasmussen and made her grow somber. They might not last the week without rain and yes, she was still mad at him, but where was the sense in dying on a burnt bridge? She set out to find him.

“Hey boss,” she said, after a loop around the ship that ended when she recognized the hunch of his back over one of the supply piles in the storeroom. “What you looking for?”

He stopped searching and just looked at her for a second, like a spooked deer. “Hey.” His fingers were curled around the brim of Fred Albany’s bucket hat. “Found this. Was looking for something to keep the sun off my head so I don’t get like that skinny guy. Your friend. Whatever his name was.”

“Ted.”

“Ted. Him.” He didn’t say anything else about that episode. Didn’t give any indication that he’d seen Ted fall or that he was even aware of her own role in the action.

“Look,” she said. “I feel bad about the way we left off. I’m sorry. The truth is, our friendship means a lot to me and I started feeling like I didn’t have the same value to you.”

She should have been nervous just opening up like that. Just putting it all into words and shoving it out. She marveled at the insecurity she didn’t feel now. Her standing with this man had been her whole career, and if she wasn’t sure about whether she had his respect, if she had to ask... Well. But nervous had gone the way of *Financial Fortune*’s power, of the *Indecision Cure*[™], their water—just gone. Let the wind take your caution and blow it away. You could die any day.

He waited. Took his time forming a response and rotated Fred Albany’s hat in his fingers. “I’m sorry too,” he said. “I’ve been rude and mean.” He paused to formulate more. “I placed an extreme amount of value on our professional relationship because you improved my life, and I

considered you unprofessionally, a friend and confidante, which wasn't strictly appropriate. That's something I can see now and can see how that was unfair to you."

His use of the past tense would have had Mel in a nervous sweat only a few days ago, but Atlanta was so far away now. Her time at NüLife had partitioned itself from the rest of her life.

Rasmussen continued, "I knew you were looking for a career, or for more than just a job. We weren't in a position to fill that. I thought if I could be a mentor, that'd enough. Maybe. In the past we've sent people back to school for secondary degrees, like my old admin, Andre, but a bachelor's is too much of an investment. It was never going to happen and I should have told you."

Mel's cheeks burned like they had that day in the dining hall. Even in her present aloof state, that hurt to hear. If she was honest, she'd already known it. She wasn't going to run away this time, didn't matter how hot her cheeks got. "I understand."

Rasmussen cleared his throat. Formed. "That isn't to say that, in my personal opinion, you don't have all the talent and baseline skills for success. I—"

"It's fine," Mel interrupted. "It really is. I do good work. I know."

And they got quiet again.

"In case you were wondering," Rasmussen broke in after a beat, "you're very unfired."

"You don't have to do that," Mel told him. "Really." She coughed. "I'm glad we had this conversation, okay?"

"Yeah," said Rasmussen. "Yeah. Okay. Me too."

And surprisingly, refreshingly, the farther she walked from him, the further the burning in her cheeks subsided, so she kept walking and walking farther and climbing until she'd come to rest at the spot she, Jodi, and Ted had found on the roof of the kitchens. High places had always

helped her think, breathe, and calm down. Organize. Crafting a new concept for the rest of her life felt silly with the length of that possibly numbering as low as a seven or eight days, but she couldn't deny that the feeling was good and the silliness light. She'd fallen into the same trap again. Of living for someone else. She slipped her hand under the collar of her shirt to cup it over her cuttlefish tattoo and remembered the goal she'd set so long ago before relocating to Atlanta: Be my own reason to be somewhere.

Didn't matter that their supplies of water, champagne, and sauce dwindled lower with each passing day. Every tomorrow was a chance to start fresh until there were no more tomorrows.

...

The sense of peace did not last, or maybe Mel was the only who'd felt it. She'd gone to the rail to check out the stars and keep thinking about who she wanted to be, but could have sworn that she'd felt someone else's presence in the darkened halls leading away from her room. Flipping on her flashlight had revealed no one. Just her alone. Disturbed, she'd hurried to the open deck.

The cry echoed from the far end of the deck, diminished weakly by the distance. "He got the water! Knife—he had a knife!"

The sense of peace did not last.

Mel tore across the deck and met a jittery Spencer and huffing Benjamin at the same time Diego emerged from the helm, tailed by his two engine-dwelling protestors.

A hacking cough from Benjamin, but Spencer could talk. "Man. With a knife. He came for the water. Said he'd cut us."

"Who?" Mel asked. "Who was it?"

“We’re fine by the way,” Benjamin had recovered enough to growl. “And who knows? The coward had a hood up and cloth wrapped around his face like an assassin.” Now he’d recovered enough to stand. To fix Diego’s twin watchers with a mean glare. “One of yours. One of your engine buddies. Maybe one of you.”

“Fuck you trying to say?” One of the engine dweller’s, a big man who’d tried and spectacularly failed to hit the high notes of *My Heart Will Go On* clenched his fists and stepped forward.

Diego thrust out his arm to split the space between Benjamin and the man. “These two, at least, are accounted for.”

“He made us go down into storage,” said Benjamin. “Told us if we came back up while he was still there, he’d gut us with that knife.”

“And it was a freaky knife,” Spencer added. “Electric and had teeth like a saw.”

Saw? Ah shit, thought Mel. Not the bonesaw. “How long did you wait? When did this happen?”

“I don’t know,” Spencer blabbered. “Not that long. Five minutes.” But of course, they had no clocks.

“That’s not all.” Benjamin hadn’t broken searing eye contact with the big man and the big man hadn’t backed away either. “He didn’t even drink it. First he spilled a bunch of it everywhere while we watched. Told us, ‘To the ship. Water for the ship.’”

“That’s not what we do,” said the other engine room delegate. “It’s just a joke mostly and this is actual crazy.”

In that moment, Mel was glad that a violent stranger had the bonesaw and not Benjamin. “Just a joke?” the man spat. “Just a joke? Our survival is a joke? What kind of defense is that?”

Which seemed fair to Mel, if the delivery came across barely too murderous. The memory Tanya on guard duty—they'd phased out known associate's from guard duty for a reason. "Are you sure about that?" she asked the people she'd been singing with earlier that day. "Are you sure there's no one maybe taking things a little bit too seriously down there?"

Given a moment to reflect, the big man looked less angry and more anxious. Now she turned back to Benjamin and Spencer. "So that's it? He came in with a weapon, spilled some water, and disappeared?"

"He took some with him," said Spencer.

"How much do we have left?"

"A little. He didn't take it all."

Benjamin rested his face in his palm. "Still days off our lives."

Diego sighed and Mel wondered where his hat had gone. She hadn't seen it in over a week. Someone else might have beaten her to throwing it overboard. That someone could have been Diego. "We should gather everyone, right? Tell them."

Mel didn't answer right away because she hadn't realized he'd asked the question. "What? Oh. Gather everyone?" She turned the situation around in her mind. Diego promises emergency water and emergency water goes missing. Someone from the engine room might be responsible, but he let it happen. The telling would be ugly, but the people had a right to know, didn't they? This wasn't peanut butter. This affected them.

The bonesaw. The stranger had held the bonesaw she'd hidden in the freezers with everything else. No one should have been able to get in there. No one should have known.

"What if..." she started. The eyes of their circle drilled into her. Diego's caught the moon hanging behind her like a fleck of silver on each iris. He was scared. He was so scared. Would he

really call a meeting to break the news to everyone after how the last one had gone? She thought so, and surprised herself with some admiration. That meeting would go better with a culprit. Someone other than him to blame. “What if we do this,” she said. “We tell them, but not until tomorrow night. Give me a day to find them. This person with the knife. If I can’t, then we come clean together tomorrow night. I’ll stand with you,” she promised Diego.

“No,” said Diego. “No. You can’t do that again. It’s not on you.”

Mel shook her head. “A lunatic with a knife isn’t on you either.”

“Well,” said the big man from the engine.

“Work on your high notes. And the rest of you,” Mel turned to the other three. “You’re on guard duty until tomorrow. I don’t want anyone to know about this while I’m asking questions. You’re the only ones we can trust now, so get along.”

“What if he comes back?” asked Spencer.

Mel tried to sound confident. “Yeah. Let’s see one guy get past four of you with just a knife. It won’t happen.”

“What do you want me to do?” Diego asked.

“Trust me,” Mel said. “If you can.”

“I do,” said Diego in a voice so toned down from his brassy NüLife presenter’s tone she could hardly think of the two Cantobre’s as the same person. “Do you have an idea?”

“Some,” Mel said. “Maybe.”

...

In the morning, she went to Jodi. Sat with her friend in the dining hall and asked the questions she need to ask. The first was, “Have you told anyone about the crate of knives?”

“No. No one. Haven’t told a soul.”

“No one?” Mel repeated with eye contact. “Not a soul?”

“No one.”

“Who was on guard when you went to get the knife to cut that rope after Ted went over the side?”

“No one,” Jodi said again. Perfect solemnity.

It made disappointing sense. Everyone loved a spectacle and the guards had deserted their post to see what happened. “And when you returned it?”

“I got lucky,” said Jodi, seeing what Mel really wanted to know. “Didn’t show them what I had. Kept it hidden under my shirt. Hassam was on duty with someone else and he knew what I had and where I needed to go.”

Mel nodded. “Okay. And he was with someone?”

“Yes.” Jodi’s stare didn’t waver. Didn’t blink. “I don’t know who.” Then she posed a question. “What happened?” and Mel filled her in.

“Oh my God,” she whispered. “Mel, I didn’t—you can’t think that I did...”

“I don’t,” Mel assured her. “I don’t. But you said you were hiding the knife when you returned it. What about when you first went to grab it?”

“No, I—” Jodi chewed on her tongue and looked up. Deep creases across her forehead as she tried to remember. “I don’t know. I was thinking about you. Focused on getting that rope off. You were hurt.”

“I understand,” said Mel, “and I appreciate it.” Then she asked her last question: “Will you come with me to question the rest? Someone has a bonesaw.”

“Of course,” Jodi told her. “Lead on.”

...

Hassam proved difficult to find, but they did find him. First they stumbled across the other caterer, Joe, who provided the location of Hassam's room and suggested they try there. Finding that room unoccupied, they returned to Joe, who told them, "I don't know. He's a quiet guy. Try the lower deck; I've seen him reading there before," and that was where they found Hassam, reading. The caterer had lugged a chair down from the gallery to the open space outside Fred Albany's onboard home and had his thumb in a beaten paperback of Hawking's *A Brief History of Time*.

Jodi made the approach. "Nice book," she said. "Learning anything useful?"

Hassam turned a page and dipped his chin in a slow nod. "On the third read? Sure." Then he sighed. "If we will not live to see land, a little understanding of the universe might be a good thing to have." Which seemed to Mel like a sad thing to say, and inconsistent with the level of rage necessary to wield a bonesaw. "But I wish I had brought other books," he confessed. "I have decided that I like science fiction more than science fact. I brought this because I thought it would be good for me and not because I thought I would actually read it."

"Hmm," was Jodi's whole response. As a professional with experience launching satellites, this assessment might have miffed her.

The noon sun glared over the ocean, but not into their alcove. The body of the boat prevented a direct path and cast Hassam's reading nook in cool shadow. A good spot for reading. "What can I do for you?" he asked. "You must want something. Keep in mind, you are only distracting me from the known secrets of the universe."

"Have you told anyone else about the knives?" Mel opened up. "Does anyone else know?"

“Other than you and you?” Hassam countered with pointed glances at Mel and Jodi. “I have told no one.”

“Can you think of any way someone on this ship might have found out if no one told them?”

“Yes,” said Hassam. “The other night. When you saved that man. I saw her,” he nodded to Jodi, “with a knife and thought to check on the guards. There were none, so I grabbed the first person I saw and picked up the shift.”

“Right,” said Jodi. “No one was there when I went to get it. They’d gone—I guess to watch Mel and Ted.”

Hassam rubbed his eyes. “The kitchens were open. I presume that these questions mean a knife is missing? Or something bad has happened to someone?”

“To all of us,” Mel said. “Someone used the bonesaw to threaten the on-duty guards and stole water.”

He turned another page and blew out a slow breath. “All the more reason to hurry through this book a third time and hope I finally understand something so I can know the universe before we join it.”

And they all got quiet. The kitchens were open. Anyone could have gone in. A lot of people had attended NüLife for one reason or another. To invest, to present, to work. They’d run out of water before they ran out of people to interrogate. Anybody.

But then...

Mel frowned. No. Not just anybody. It wasn’t possible.

“No,” she said. “No, it doesn’t work.”

Jodi piqued her head. “No?”

“No,” Mel mused. “It’s strange. They wouldn’t have known where to find the knives, or even that they existed in the first place. They wouldn’t have had time to look.”

Waves lapped placid against the *Financial Fortune*. Blue skies and a pristine sea. The same straight line horizon they might never stop seeing.

“The sun has gotten into all of our brains.” Hassam closed his book and did the same with his eyes. The picture of a perfect vacation nap. “Good luck.”

...

Jodi had asked her where they’d go next and groaned at the answer. The engine room. “And what do you think we’ll find?”

“I don’t know,” said Mel. “Our bonesaw madman if we’re lucky.”

Jodi shot her a glare before they passed into the near-absolute darkness of the engine room. “Why would you say that now? Why would you?” She brushed quick past Mel to immerse herself in the flashlight’s beam.

The whisperings of the engine dwellers filtered overhead and around the room, but Mel knew the voices had no substance. Just something they did when they heard the door open for a stranger so the rest of the ship would leave them alive. Thinking that one of those whispering voices might belong to a bonesaw monster ready to leap out of the darkness gave them new edge, however. Edge sharp enough to saw through whole hogs. But they did not find their culprit. Instead, they encountered a jubilant Roger.

“Hey! What’s up guys,” he welcomed them into the dim glow of the engine’s candlelit sanctum. “Welcome back!”

“You’re in a good mood,” Mel commented.

Roger beamed. “Of course we are! Thanks to you, or to the engine, karma, whoever. Check this out.”

Mel looked at an empty plastic bin, much like the kind they kept in the kitchen and had used to harvest water from the storm. “Cool,” she said. “Did it have water in it?”

“Did when we found it this morning.” Roger looked over the empty bin with something like pride, or some other breed of satisfaction. The darkness of the room and weirdness of Roger made Mel unwilling to sink effort into understanding what specific smugness she was seeing. She tapped the bin with her toe. Yes, surely as plastic as it looked. Remarkable. “So you just found it? Where?”

“One row back from where we lay out our blankets. Isn’t that crazy?”

A lot of things were. “Truly,” said Mel. “Any chance you know who brought it?”

“Me?” asked Roger. “No clue. Kind of thought it was you bumping our rations or something.” He finally noticed what must have been one mean look on her face for him to acknowledge it, toning down his good mood and asking, “Is something wrong?”

“If someone attacks you with a bonesaw,” Jodi advised. “Let us know. We’d be interested in speaking with them.”

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To Be Completed

- Rasmussen stole water during the storm and has run out. He has stolen more to recoup his losses, but saw Jodi retrieving the knife while everyone else was distracted with Mel and Ted. Sensing opportunity, he stole the bonesaw and has framed Roger’s group for the water he’s stolen.

- Mel confronts Rasmussen, who convinces her that they must look out for each other, even at the expense for the others aboard the ship. Initially, she agrees.
- A conversation with Diego causes Mel to reflect, in what she believes might be there final days, on what kind of person she wants to be, even at what might be the end of her life. She decides to turn Rasmussen in and assist with reclaiming the water he's stolen.
- Enraged, Rasmussen attacks Diego, and the two are wrapped up in a brutal altercation which Mel interrupts, leading the crew to throw Rasmussen into a makeshift brig (Fred Albany's room).
- Diego is too injured to lead, and Mel assumes command of the vessel. Eventually their ship runs aground of a small island off the coast of the Bahamas where they are recovered by the Coast Guard.
- Back on land, Mel considers her options. She can return to Six Star, as Rasmussen will have her, and it seems she might have a real shot at advancing there. After talks with Jodi, Diego, and Ted in their own homes across the US, she decides against all these options and returns to Florida, where, inspired by their rescue crew, she enlists in the Coast Guard.