

THE FUTURE FIRE

SOCIAL POLITICAL & SPECULATIVE CYBERFICTION

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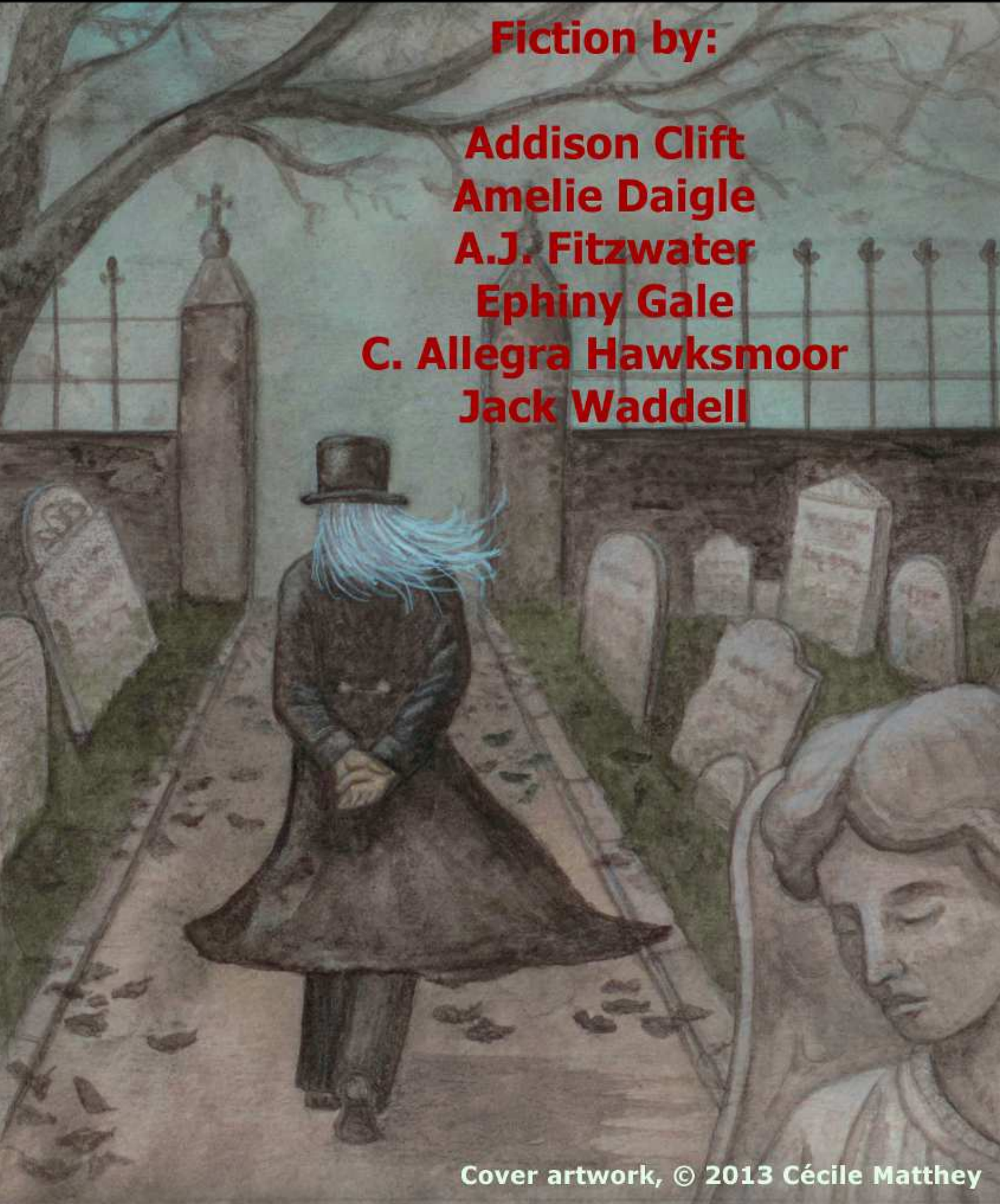
Amelie Daigle

A.J. Fitzwater

Ephiny Gale

C. Allegra Hawksmoor

Jack Waddell



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The Future Fire: Issue 20123.26

“There was a time when Patience ceased to be a virtue. It was long ago.”
—Charlotte Perkins Gilman

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The wait is over.

Since we last spoke, the *We See a Different Frontier* anthology of postcolonial speculative fiction has hit the shelves. Featuring stories by Ernest Hogan, Sandra McDonald, Sunny Moraine, Silvia Moreno-Garcia, Sofia Samatar, Lavie Tidhar, and many others, co-edited by the wonderful Fabio Fernandes, this anthology was crowd-funded (in other words we sold a couple of hundred copies before we started, which paid for maybe 80% of the up-front costs), and supported by many cool and generous people along the way. I'm biased, but I think it's brilliant. More to the point, I think it's an incredibly important anthology of stories from the colonial and colonized perspective, and it deserves to be read. (If you don't believe me, see some of the reviews listed on the press page for more objective reactions.)

Enough of the sales pitch.

This issue of *The Future Fire* features six short stories by some of the finest small press authors working today: from the deceptive and creepy colonial parable, the quietly haunting identity loss, the rollicking dark-fantasy eco-adventure, the quirky queer fairy tale, the semi-roboticized apocalyptic environmental tragedy, to the fevered and hallucinatory space-opera. There are no easy stories in here; there never are. The shit we have to deal with in this world is not addressed by patience, by being quietly civilized and hoping to earn respect. It's addressed by kicking it in the fucking teeth and shouting your demands into its bleeding mouth.

Reading for this issue reminded me why we started this magazine all those years ago: for the excitement, the unexpected, that sudden flush of recognition that *Yes! This story is going in!* These stories all felt so very beautiful and very damn useful, which is what we've always been looking for.

Djibril al-Ayad, September 2013

'Monsters'

Amelie Daigle

When the monsters come, the dinner table is set for eight instead of four. That's how I know, the minute I walk through our door, that tonight we are not dining alone. I close the door behind me and step to the side so I can lean against the wall without being in anyone's way. The thinking part of my brain sounds like radio static. I focus on my breath and the presence of the wall at my back.

When I move away from the wall, my muscles are shaky and my legs are weak, but I can think. I walk into the kitchen where my mother is coring apples. I ask my mother if she needs help setting the table. She says no, but would I please get my sister and bring her downstairs.

Upstairs, my sister is pretending to do her math homework. Really, she is signed onto her best friend's secure server. She is telling her friends about dinner tonight, and they are commiserating and sending her virtual hugs and wishing her luck as if she were about to be subjected to a particularly nasty calculus exam. There is only so much that can be said, even in relative secrecy.

I knock on her door. "Come in," she says. She is sprawled on the bedroom floor surrounded by a disorganized array of electronics, school supplies, and her own overgrown limbs. She used to be so small. During tornado drills, I used to be able to envelope her completely, arching my body over hers, protecting her. Now she's a towering 5'9", mostly legs. If the roof collapsed right now, my compact body would not be able to cover her. I am no longer an adequate shield.

I sit on the floor next to her. "Are you ready to come downstairs?" I ask.

"Let me say goodbye to everybody," she says. "Then I'll come down."

Her skirt is slightly too short to cover the scarred skin on her

thighs, and when she moves, I can see the red, raw streaks of irritated skin that hasn't yet managed to heal. I ache with the desire to protect her.

"I can come down with you," I offer.

She grins. "It's fine. Go help mom. I'll be down in a minute."

"Mom said she didn't need any help."

"She's alone down there," my younger sister tells me. "They sometimes come early."

It's difficult to argue with that. I nod and stand up. "Come down soon." Then I head downstairs.

My mother is sitting on the couch. I am relieved to see that she is not alone. My father is home, and they are talking together quietly. I sit in the chair across from my mother. "Is the table set?"

"Yes," she says. "Is Cole coming down?"

"In a minute," I say. "She wanted to say goodbye to some people." I realize that I've forgotten to greet my father. "Hey, dad," I say, a bit overenthusiastically.

"Hey, Luce." He smiles. "How was work today?"

"I got a freelance gig!" I tell him, letting my nerves show enough in my voice to convey excitement. "Editing some grad student's dissertation on teaching methods. Simple grammar and stuff. Shouldn't be hard, and she offered to pay the industry standard."

"That's fantastic, Luce!" He sounds genuinely pleased. "What about you, Louise? How'd your day—" He breaks off mid-sentence. There is a knock on the door.

My mother stands to receive our guests, and the expression on her face shows no trace of fear. Through my terror I feel a surge of pride in her absurd composure. My father bites at the nail on his little finger as the door opens.

Standing on the threshold of our home are our four monsters. I know them well, particularly mine. I am supposed to call her Melisande, which she chose because she thought it was elegant. Melisande and her family look like humans until they open their mouths—they smile with too many teeth. They are smiling that way at my mother now, waiting to be invited in.

"Welcome," my mother says, smiling graciously. "Please come in and sit down. I've made salmon and baked apples."

“Hello, Caesar!” My father walks to greet his monster with a friendly handshake. “It’s been a while since I’ve seen you and your family.”

“Too long,” Caesar agrees, smiling in a way that clearly conveys amusement.

“Feel free to take your seats at the table,” my mother says. “Luce, why don’t you get our guests something to drink?”

“What would everyone like?” I ask.

“Wine would be lovely,” says Cleo, Caesar’s wife.

“Wine for me as well,” Caesar says agreeably.

Melisande and Eliza confer in whispers for a moment before deciding. Melisande smiles at me toothily. “We’d both like cranberry juice,” she says, “if you have it.”

“I’m in the mood for cranberry myself,” I say. “I’ll pour some out for the three of us. Mom, dad, what wine should I get for Caesar and Cleo?”

“I’ll deal with the wine, Luce,” my dad says. “Caesar, Cleo, would you care to review our selection?”

Caesar and Cleo smile widely. “We’d love to,” they say.

I run and fetch the cranberry juice. I pour it into tall, fluted glasses that I know will appeal to Melisande’s sensibilities. Eliza I don’t know as well. I get the impression that she finds her sister’s taste for extravagant decorum a bit ridiculous, but all of the monsters value manners, fine china, and beautiful things. Melisande often presses me for my aesthetic preferences, and I tell her about the colors I like and the shapes I find most pleasing. For Christmas she gave a frosted blue bird of paradise figurine suspended in clear glass. I would love it if it only had come from someone, anyone else.

I walk into the dining room holding two glasses of dark red liquid. My mother has been entertaining Melisande and Eliza in my absence. “Do you think the underrepresentation of women in the senate is by *accident*?” she is saying skeptically. “There is nothing *natural* about it, unless you believe that women are somehow inherently unsuited for the public sphere.”

“I only meant that change takes time,” Eliza says pleasantly. “On our planet, the liberation of women was a struggle that lasted for several millennia. You seem convinced that these changes could happen

overnight, but the reorganization of an existing power structure is no small task.”

“We have the means to accomplish it, though, don’t we?” I hazard as I hand Melisande her glass. “We have a representative democracy. Half of its members are women. If we all agree that it’s a problem that needs to be fixed, we could conceivably—”

“Conceivably, yes. Practically, no.” Eliza speaks firmly. “You’re assuming that we all agree that the status quo ought to be altered at whatever cost, and it isn’t true. We’d have to be willing to accept worse political candidates simply because they were women, and even then that strategy might backfire.”

“I’m going to go pour myself some cranberry juice,” I say in response.

When I return, my sister is standing at the foot of the stairs, her eyes wide with inexpressible panic. Eliza smiles at her, amused; Melisande politely pretends not to notice and carries on conversation with my mother. I run to my sister and embrace her, purposefully displaying girlish excitement. “Cole, it’s great to see you, you’ve been in your room all day! Would you like something to drink?”

“Yes,” Cole says in a small voice.

“Come sit down,” I half-say, half-whisper. “Come sit next to mom. I’ll be with you in a moment.”

“Okay,” she says, and I squeeze her hand before I run to pour ice water for her. “Melisande, Eliza, you’re good? No refills?”

“No, thank you,” Melisande says, laughing softly. Of course, neither one of them has taken a sip. But it is polite to ask. The monsters value politeness above all things.

Handing Cole her ice water is a convenient reason to sit down next to her. I press her hands between my own as Eliza lectures my mother. “Can’t one expect there to be setbacks? After all, the Atlantic slave trade was far worse than any form of enslavement that had come before. These things take time to work themselves out.”

“I defer to your species’ vast knowledge,” my mother says, “though I can’t help but disagree. Excuse me, I’ll be back in a moment with the salmon.”

My father’s enthusiastic voice precedes him into the dining room. “An excellent vintage, wonderful choice! Caesar, Cleo, have a seat at

the table, my wife will be bringing the salmon shortly. Please, have a seat.” As is customary, Caesar sits opposite my father, at the foot of the table. Melisande is opposite from me. “Caesar, I must know,” my father says jovially, “what are your views on the recent events in Palestine? Are you a fan of the two-state solution?”

They’ll go on like this for some time. The monsters love politics, classical music, the Russian ballet, and National Public Radio. They love insightful discourse on popular culture and controversial topics. Caesar has a subscription to *The New Yorker*, I think; he cites it frequently when discussing human politics. Cleo seems partial to *Vanity Fair*. Melisande and Eliza, I don’t know where they get their information on human affairs, but I know that it’s important that they have it. Important for them to be able to fully participate in this elaborate form of torture.

“A lot of people don’t know,” Caesar is saying, “I read about it recently, in *The Economist* I think it was, that the first modern terrorist bombers were actually Jewish. During the what-was-it, the war in 1948? Did you know that, Harold?”

The salmon has nearly completed circumnavigating the table. My mother has cooked it in brown butter, which is delicious. After tonight, I will probably never be able to stand the taste of salmon or brown butter again. I place some on my plate reluctantly, and place some on Cole’s while I’m at it. Her hands have been shaking all night.

“There was a similar situation on our home planet once,” Caesar is saying, “only instead of giving the Favrias-krik the land of our enemies halfway across the globe, we gave them some of our own, little-used land. A very nice stretch of land that no one cared to industrialize, somewhat similar to parts of Montana. I wonder why you didn’t do the same with your Jews?”

“Many Jews chose to move here,” my mother points out. “I believe there are more Jews here now than there are in Israel, although those figures might have shifted from the last time I checked.”

Cole shifts in her seat and her skirt falls aside; I can see the gouges on her thighs. I shiver sympathetically. We all have them, but Cole’s gouges are always deepest.

Eliza is cruel. I would trade monsters with Cole if that were al-

lowed. But Melisande chose me, and Eliza chose Cole, and Caesar chose our family, and that's how it is.

"I keep wanting to see a candidate come out as anti-life, anti-choice," my father says. "Everyone's always telling me what they're for; my question is, what are you *against*?"

"Many politicians seem to enjoy asserting their opposition to illegal immigrants," Caesar says, chuckling.

"Such as yourself?" my father says with a wide smile. The monsters laugh uproariously. The monsters adore my father and his half-hearted attempts at humor where most would make no attempt at all. My mother says that even in casual conversation, my father is a dangerous man, always teetering on the edge of something and never quite falling in. Before the monsters, I did not understand what she meant.

"As always, it's a pleasure to dine with you, Harold," Caesar says. "Our other families always act so cowed around us."

"It's despicable," Cleo says, smiling meanly. I cringe; I hope it isn't noticeable. "As if *we* were unkind! And when we treat them with the greatest respect, always!"

"I certainly hope you'll be kind to us tonight," my father says, laughing.

"As kind as we ever are," Caesar replies. "Our species is old enough to know the value of tradition."

"I've been meaning to ask you that," my father says, and the tone of his voice is dangerous. Cole grabs my hand under the table; I squeeze back. "I have in my possession a wide variety of anesthetics. Of course you wouldn't need to administer them yourselves; I am quite capable as an anesthesiologist, and I only ask for the children, you understand? My wife and I are perfectly fine adhering to your... usual methods. I could inject it directly into the bloodstream. It wouldn't affect your children at all."

"It's so nice to converse with a human man to man," Caesar says appreciatively. "I would certainly love to acquiesce to your request, but I'm afraid it cannot be done. Nonetheless, I appreciate your concern for your children and I will take it up with the council. Who knows? Your children's children may benefit."

"Surely an alteration that will only last the duration of one night

need not be approved by the council?” my mother says, her face a mask of composed confusion. “That seems unnecessarily inflexible.”

“Here is the real issue, Louise, dear,” Cleo says calmly. “Here is the thing that none of you seem to understand. Wouldn’t it be easier for us if we were to round you up and place you in a slaughterhouse where you were treated *inhumanely*, forcefully bred, and then killed for your meat? Over thousands of years we have perfected a means of feeding that takes no souls and does not steal from weaker forms of life. We have reasons for doing things the way we do them. We don’t ask for your understanding. We ask for your trust.”

As Cleo speaks, Cole moves her chair closer and closer to me. We are pressed together now, our arms firmly linked. I stroke her hand with my thumb. *It’s okay*, I think as hard as I can, hoping that by some miracle she will hear me. *It’s okay. I’m here. Breathe, Cole, I’m here, you’re okay.*

“I defer to your species’ vast wisdom,” my mother says, “but my personal opinion has not been changed.”

“I’m sure that this salmon had very strong opinions too, dear,” Cleo says, smiling. “When it was alive.”

There is one bite of salmon on Cole’s plate. I stroke her hand once more. *It’s okay, Cole. I’m here.* Four salmon steaks and four baked apples lie untouched on the plates of our monsters. Three salmon steaks and four baked apples are missing. When the last bite of salmon has been taken, the real meal will begin. Cole’s eyes are moist as she lifts her fork to her mouth, chews, and swallows.

“Well, that was a delightful meal, as always, Louise,” Caesar says politely. “It pains me to say that my family will now proceed to cause your family pain. You may run, if you like.”

He smiles wide; six glittering rows of knife-sharp teeth will soon shave skin from my father’s thighs and abdomen. The taste of vomit rises to the back of my throat.

The feeding time begins.

‘Shadow Boy and the Little Match Girl’

C. Allegra Hawksmoor

for Wraith

21st September 1898

It has been almost a month, and every night the silence within me grows a little deeper. I will not be able to keep her job at the match factory for much longer. I am too clumsy. My mouth aches, and my hands are badly burned. I do not have her knack for the work, and do not know how we will survive this if she does not return. If anything happens to us, then it gives me a strange comfort to know that the truth of the matter will be written here. Words, at least, are more comfortable to my hands than phosphorus.

I do not know how to start. I have always been with her. The shadow that lies in the lee of her thoughts. I cannot tell you what it is like to grow up within a body that is not your own. I have never known another way.

Neither of us have ever fully understood what I am: a life that she has lived before, or one that has not yet come to pass. Whether something happened to her while she lay within her mother (or in years too distant into childhood to recall) to split her mind open like a gemstone with the Match Girl on one side, me on the other, and between nothing but a faceted surface full of stars. Perhaps she just dreamed me into being when she was very small, or found me one day in the park—nestled beneath the knotted brambles, in the coal-dust and very close to evening, shivering, and alone. Perhaps she made a home inside herself for me, because there was no other I could turn to.

However we came to pass, we are now as we are, and it cannot be undone.

It was always me that her father caught reading in a dark corner of the communal library on long and rainy afternoons. I looked at him with her eyes and he would tell me to go and play, which I quickly understood to mean that I should leave and give his daughter back to him.

It was easier with the other children: among the chimney-sweeps, piecers and hackers of the city’s howling factories and humming servers. They would laugh, and run away from me when I came into her body as though they were afraid, but then they glanced back and shouted:

“Hurry up, Shadow Boy!”

Their voices like struck metal as the evening glinted in waves of golden fire on the clouds. Against the hulls of the solar ships drifting vast and black above us. And I ran after them.

Some of them played at having little shadows of their own. For all I know,

those faces-behind-faces were as real as I am now. But they are not here any more. They belong amongst the dead.

To ensure I did not join them, I learned exactly when and how to hide.

23rd September 1898

My enduring memories of our adolescence are of the inside of her room. The clematis that wended its way beneath her window: the smell of its blossoming in summer, and the dull creak of its branches as her father's tabby tom cat climbed up through the tangled dark to curl beside me on her bed while I was at my reading.

Each night, she sat down at her worktable and breathed out deeply, banishing herself to the star-filled void between us and allowing me to come into her body. Each night, I opened that window to let the night air in over her skin. I sat down on her bed, opened my book, and waited for the cat to come calling somewhere after midnight.

From time to time, I dressed and crept out into the night instead. The gas lamps lit a path for me from the end of her street, all the way to the great shadow of the parkway. Skirting the liminal space between the carefully-mown lawns and the scuffling, wild darkness of the woods, I breathed in right down to the bottom of my belly. I began to forget about the strangeness of her body. I moved like a thing formed from the night itself, whilst the trees stood their silent vigils all around me: inverted creatures, wearing their lungs on the outside.

From the edge of the woodland you could see down rolling hillside all the way into the city, so long as the night was clear and the smog didn't hang too low. These were the years when they were still building the Algonquin Tower. From my vantage point, it looked like a great, broken tooth protruding from the city: its lower floors all lit up glass and neon green, floodlights pouring from its crown and catching against the underbellies of the clouds. Men and women labouring through day and night amongst the jagged cranes of their barren, concrete landscape. I would stare down at that glowing spire nestled amongst the smokestacks, with the cold wind on my cheeks and nothing to break the silence but the occasional clatter of a carriage heading down the main street and into town.

Both she and I came to the park as children (her skirts all dirty

around the hem, and me occupying a space beside her that only she could see), but now it had become my domain alone. I have never known where she goes when I am in her body, only that I never see her and hear her the way she does with me. Perhaps it's simply that she rests silent, but I have always suspected that when I am here, she is not. That she goes to somewhere that I cannot perceive or understand.

Perhaps there are other creatures out there as I am, but she never speaks of it when she returns.

28th September 1898

She was a little over seventeen when she began writing letters to Zachary, whose name means 'Our Lord remembers'. His parents went up to live in the first Lunar settlements years before he was even conceived, and all he had known of the our world was the earth-shine. A distant curve of blue-green on the horizon, marked with the great, white swirls of slowly-moving weather. They were both so young. Enchanted to find an existence so completely alien from their own.

She understood from the beginning that he was sick. That some combination of his own biology, the Lunar gravity, and the strange networks of copper wire and silicon that the moonfolk graft into their brains and into their bodies, was killing him. But my Little Match Girl was too young not to hope, and so she would keep writing him her letters, and some nights I would put down my book and walk down to the airstrip to see the ships that whisked those letters up into her moon boy's hands. The airfield was brighter than the day in the white and sulphurous light: the ships hanging motionless above the gravity engines, connected to the ground by long, thin thorns of twisted metal. They looked like black clouds, snagged straight out of the sky.

She grew sick with devotion. And, as she sickened, he grew well. It was as though she had drained the poison out of him, and he began to flourish beneath her grace. We spoke less, and simply continued to divide night and day between us as we had always done. But she spoke to him of me, and he even wrote me letters once or twice: physical things made of paper and ribbon and bearing my name on

the front that sent a strange thrill through my entire body, as though they had made me into flesh and bone in a way that nothing else had ever done. I wrote back in my own quiet, cursive hand. I tried to explain how the letters made me feel, but I do not think he understood.

3rd October 1898

It is in the nature of all living things to die. The sick and old are drawn to it as into the dark centre of a star. Passing through the heart of creation, into eternity. Amen.

And so it was with Zachary, whose name means ‘Our Lord Remembers’. She loved him to the very limit of her being, but it was not enough to sustain him forever. The more she cried, the more silent he became. His letters came, shaky and infrequent, and then one day not at all.

She called to me then as a flame calls out to still, cold water. As she had not called out since we were children, and afraid. I was with her when she lit the white candle on her worktable, and over every night that followed I would see that it did not go out: trimming the wick, and passing the flame between the pooling wax of the old candle and the fresh ones that she brought home with her from the market.

I lay beside her in the dead still of the night, when I breathed out so deeply and allowed her to pass back into our body to sleep. She cried often, but even more than that she lay there in the dark, and stared up into nothing at all.

Eventually, one evening as I prepared to take her over and see to my evening rituals, she told me that she wanted me to stay. I understood her reasons. The world had become too hard. Too cold. Filled with no light but the tiny pool of liquid gold around the pale candle on our desk. A week, perhaps. Or maybe two. A little time immersed in the shadows and the stars of whatever place she visited when she was not within me. Then things would get better.

That was the end of August, and I have not heard her voice since. It does not seem to matter how hard that I call out to her.

12th October 1898

I thought it best to try and construct some kind of life here. I cannot sustain hers well enough on my own. I can only hope that when she

comes back, the people and the things she cares about will come back to her, in turn.

Her clothes do not hang right, and I do not feel myself in them. I have no idea what will happen if I cease to be myself now she is not here, but I do not wish to find out. I bought some button-down shirts from a man in the market, and traded a few of the Match Girl's little wooden carvings for an old frock coat and a pair of pressed, black trousers.

I have been wearing her hair loose about her shoulders as I do, and a barber's boy from the city says that he can blacken it for me.

The streets are far busier in daylight, and I have tried to learn the subtle arts that people employ with one another as they go about their lives. I do not think that I have been very successful, although the situation is doubtless made harder by my unusual state of dress and strange way of speaking.

The working days are even worse, but I could only tell the master match maker that I was sick for so long. I need to survive here, so I must work.

The first day that I arrived dressed as I am, the match maker told me that she did not care who I was, or how I came to be. If I wanted to come into her workshop then I would wear a boned stay and an apron like the other girls. She gave me a bundle of clothes, and refused to let me work until I changed.

I must have struggled with the lacings for almost half an hour before Emily came back to see what was keeping me. She found me crying, angry, and humiliated. I should have found it simple. The other side of my mind had a hundred thousand tiny memories of how to do these things. But these memories belong to the Match Girl. They are not in my muscles or my fingers.

Emily helped me dress, and pinned my hair until I was not like myself at all. She did not understand why I would not stop crying, but she was kind with me. She calls on me each morning to help me dress, but I do not think that her kindness will matter for much longer. The memories of how to work with phosphorus and wood are as alien to my hands as the lacings of that dress.

The match maker shouts and corrects my work, and I burn my fingers often.

21st October 1898

I lost the job in the workshop, and have started an employment in one of the tiny noodle factories nestled beneath the eaves of one of the housing towers on the north side of the city that has its highest reaches forever in the smog. It rains every day, and the only other things I notice as I go about my work are the rats that scurry through the corners of the room, and the slow dripping of cold water.

In the evenings, I prowl the cemetery grounds around the mausoleum just outside the south gate. I'm not sure what I am looking for.

I tried to ask the match maker if she would give my Match Girl her job back when I am no longer here. She did not answer. I do not think that she knew how.

31st October 1898

You can see the spire of the Algonquin Tower from the edges of the cemetery. It projects itself up into the night sky like a single note, held unwavering and forever in steel and green light. Perhaps I should not be coming here, but the park has become too loud and too close to the light to do the work that must be done within myself.

I cut between the leaning gravestones and the weathered angels: their edges all smoothed away, the faintest memory of wings still folded at their backs and the echo of hands clasped tight against their chest. The empty, rain-smoothed spaces where their eyes should be watching me. It is quicker to come this way, and meet the central avenue about a third of the way into the cemetery. There are long columns of two hundred year old oaks planted on either side of it, and by the time I reach avenue I cannot see the city through them. Not even the high peak of the Algonquin. I hear only the wrenching of the wind amidst the branches, and the slap of wet and amber leaves upon baked earth. The autumn drifts in heaps along that pale path, as it leads off between the trees straight into nothing at all.

It grows dark hours before I near the mausoleum gates, and by the time I see them looming up ahead there is no one for almost a mile around me. No one but the dead.

The gates have not been open in all the times that I have been there, and the old padlock chaining them together does not look as though it has seen use in centuries. I think the metalwork was white

once, but time and rain and sootfall from the city has peeled paint from rusted metal and tarnished everything to lichen-green and chimney-black.

Beyond those gates, the great, granite pillars of the mausoleum seem to occupy eternity.

For years, people have come to this place to leave tokens for the dead. Maybe a few of them do it from some memory of whoever or whatever is buried in that awful place, but many more seem to come and remember those whose graves are far away, have been forgotten, or were never known to them. They tie ribbons bearing names, and weave bunches of dead flowers through the metal bars. They leave candles and offerings of perfume, bone and alcohol. Apples and pomegranates, poison mushrooms, and human hair. The foods and the things of the underworld.

Sometimes, I stay right up until the moment that the bells of St. Michael's chime the midnight hour, and I know I must go home and trim the wick of the white candle on her desk. See that the flame burns true.

I cannot allow it to burn out.

I read the names that are written on the ribbons, and listen to the gentle song of animal bones ringing against metal in the low wind. But most of all, I simply stare out into the void around the mausoleum. That close, it is a vast and pillared block against the sky: its thick, fluted columns wrapped in black and slapping ropes of ivy and echoes of graffiti decades old. The rabbits graze the grass around it low and soft, until it is like dew-covered velvet beneath the autumn moon. It looks as though you could sink into it for forever.

There are times when I think that I see her beyond those gates: running barefoot through that thick and moss-lined grass with her dress whipping at her heels. Laughing in a voice like the slow ringing of a bell. Skirting the shadows beneath the mausoleum as I once walked the narrow path between the parkland and the woods.

Every few steps, she turns around as though someone chases after her. But she never looks at me.

I do not know if she is coming back.

‘FINAL PASSAGE’

ADDISON CLIFT

As soon as I heard they were going over the Pole, I quit my construction job in Fairbanks and hitched a ride on a truck hauling casing joints up the Dalton. The driver kept calling me “girlie” and showing me the scars from the times he’d been stabbed, and all around us the autumn tundra was red and orange, purple and gold.

12 hours later I'm in Deadhorse, Alaska, standing on the edge of the world.

Last year, at about this time, the Arctic was totally free of pack ice. Apparently this happened way faster than anyone expected. It means merchant ships can skip the canal or the Northwest Passage and just go straight up over the Pole, saving *beaucoup* time and scratch.

But last year, no one was ready. This year? Different story. They’ve descended on Deadhorse like a colony of worker ants, trying to get a port up and running by the time the ships need to leave. It’s still unfinished, it looks like it’s made of pallets and duct tape, and it’s only got one working terminal. But on or around September 9, 2016, about two weeks from today, a tanker is going to leave the Port of Deadhorse and sail right over the North Pole to London, the first non-icebreaker ever to do so, and I’m going to be on it.

For an OS job, the interview process was intense—drug tests, background checks, criminal record checks, and investigations into whether I’d ever been tied to “terrorist or radical environmentalist groups.” (Who apparently have it in for this ship.) This old retired Navy crewcut grilled me for like an hour about my opinions on climate change. Sheesh. And here I thought climate change was the reason we were able to make this trip.

After checking into my motel room, I took a walk around town. It was cold and muddy and treeless. Nothing but a few company-owned stores, company-owned motels, and some trailers to house the workers—all of it built up on stilts or gravel pads. I watched through a chain-link fence as gas flares from the oil fields lit up the dark grey sky. It kind of reminded me of

hell.

After a few hours in Deadhorse, I was bored stiff. I was hanging out in the company-owned trading post when this chick came up and asked me if I was going to be on the ship to London. She stuck out like a third leg in that place. Most people in Deadhorse wear overalls and work gloves, but this girl was mad hot and dressed like a movie star. Her accent was weird. It might have been Russian, but I'm no good with accents.

"My name's Alisha," I said, trying to find something that wouldn't fall over when I leaned on it with my casual cool. "I'm Raven Clan, from Prince Rupert, BC, but really I'm a rolling stone. I can't stand to stay in one place too long. I've been all over—Yellowknife, Seattle, Hawai'i, Japan, you name it. So are you like an oil executive or something?"

She smiled. "A tanker ship isn't a very safe place for a pretty girl like you." (She was flirting with me! And her hand "accidentally" brushed against mine! Who said this town is boring?)

"I can take care of myself," I said, smiling coyly and inching a bit closer.

"I bet you can," she said, then turned and abruptly walked out of the place.

Oof. Shot down like a fat turkey. Did I say something wrong?

First day went all right. They had me putting non-skid on all the ladders and walkways, and I got a mean buzz off the fumes. They expect the September ice minimum to be in about a week, so we'll be leaving soon.

Despite what I'd thought, the MT Tomorrow actually *is* an icebreaker, since she's a double-acting ship. But everyone figures that as long as she never uses her icebreaking capabilities, it still counts as making history, right? It frigging better. I quit a good job for this.

There's this AB named Charlie who makes my gaydar do a blip or two. (Although that thing's been on the fritz lately.) If she's a dyke, she's very femme, which I like. Her story is the same as mine—she left her town in Oklahoma to see the world, and she never wants to go back.

Tomorrow's the Tomorrow's big day. All morning I was helping Charlie and some of the others load cargo, but mostly I was just trying to stay out of the way. Something on the chocks arms or the vapour hoses wasn't fitting right, or at least that's what I gathered through all the f-bombs.

But I do like a girl who's not afraid to cuss.

Later they called us all out on the dock for a group photo. It was my first time seeing most of the crew. The captain is a Yank named Pomerantz and the chief mate is a limey named Collier. No opinion on them yet.

But the navigation officer—oh, man. His name is Dubinkin, and all I can say is there must be a revolving door between the Russian Navy and the Russian mafia these days. Seriously, this guy has more tats than a biker.

You can barely see me in the picture, but still, it was pretty cool. Media came from as far away as Vancouver. Hell, maybe they'll even run it in Prince Rupert!

But then they had to spoil everything with one more photo. The Americans hung this big red ribbon across the dock, then they cut it with a pair of those oversized cardboard scissors, as if the Arctic were a brand new shopping centre.

Strange dreams haunt my sleep. Some kind of midnight black mass is taking place on the bow of a great big ship. The woman from the trading post is standing up there, naked, holding her hands in the air and letting out a hair-raising trill. About ten jet-black creatures with long, curved heads move in a circle around her, bowing and chanting.

I wake up and it's dark out. The snow is coming down sideways. I look around, and it all comes flooding back. Our departure was delayed by the blizzard. This is Charlie's motel room, and she's sleeping next to me. (Yep, she's a dyke.)

I reach for the remote to turn off the Cartoon Network. With the TV off, there's no sound but the creaking of the building and the howling of the wind.

Clear weather! Casting off at last! The satellite says the Pole is still

free of pack ice. Several days of good weather expected. London, here we come!

Some killer whales swim alongside the ship on our way out of port. We do 15 knots all day. Should make about 650 kilometres. They have me sounding tanks, then chipping rust. So far, so good.

This is my first time on a tanker, and I have to say it's weird. I don't just mean that it's nearly as long as three football fields. It's weird trying to imagine all that oil, sloshing around in the dark beneath my feet. Someone told me this thing carries 750,000 barrels. Think about that. That's enough to power almost three SUVs.

Earlier I beat down Charlie's ass at ping pong. It was brutal. Then we discovered the karaoke machine in the crew lounge. Charlie sang "Big Shot" and nailed it, even the part where he does the "Monster Mash" voice. I did "We Are the Champions." I was pretty proud of my performance, but then I got in a big fight with Jeff, the wiper, because he said it's the first time he ever heard that song sung by an actual man.

I called him a prick-ass dickholeface and told him to bite shit. It was all downhill from there.

I dream about the oil. In my dream, the oil is alive and conscious. It mounts assault after assault on the bulkheads, trying to break free. "Alisha," it whispers. "Alisha, I'm returning to the place that I came from. Will you come with me?"

I wake up with the overwhelming feeling there's something out in the passageway. But it soon dissipates, and I figure it's just the dream lingering, so I go back to sleep.

Still clear, no ice, still making great time at 15 knots. On the 8-12 I'm draining the pumproom bilge into the slop tanks. (Glamorous, I know.) I have to use this crappy little portable pump since the hydraulic in the pumproom is busted. I come back up and everyone's saying Pomerantz is about to skin Dubinkin alive. I ask the ETO what's going on, and he says, "Didn't you hear the shot?"

"I didn't hear shit, I was in the pumproom."

"Dubinkin took a shot at the stern. He claims he saw something."

Took a shot at the stern? Good thing I was right underneath it, ass-to-crotch with a pair of two-and-a-half million gallon oil tanks. What could have possibly gone wrong?

I call my folks from the sat phone in the crew lounge. They say Jeremy's in trouble in school again.

"Tell him next time I'm in Rupert, I'm going to kick his ass," I say.

"Alisha, if I believed there was a next time, I'd throw a party." As my mom says this, I glance out the porthole, and for the first time, I see some real ice out on the water.

Night. I'm down in the No. 1 starboard ballast tank, hand-scraping rust. There's supposed to be two of us, but Rocky's got the runs or something, so it's just me.

Except—it isn't. There's something down here with me. Some kind of presence. I've never considered myself psychic, but this is like being in an elevator with another person.

I call to the bosun, but he doesn't answer. That idiot's supposed to stay right outside the hatch. I climb the ladder and stick my head out, and finally I see him horsing around at about midships with some guys from the engine deck.

So I go back down. Only this time, as I'm scraping rust, I swear I can hear something breathing.

I finish *real* fast, then I make a beeline for the crew lounge, just to be around people. A bunch of them are playing GameCube and smoking herb.

Kit, the steward, comes in, looking like he's seen a ghost. He doesn't say anything, just sits down and stares off into space.

People try to be friendly: "Kit, *que pasa?*" "K-Man, want a hit?"

But he just sits there like something inside him has switched off.

On the way back to my cabin, I come across Dubinkin, sitting on the floor in the p-way. I sneer at him, but he's too drunk to notice.

Morning. We're in some serious ice now. It's everywhere. A lot of it looks like lily pads, but then there are these big mean-looking bergs floating around. I think we're down to ten knots, maybe less.

I got lucky today, getting to spend the 8-12 on lookout. (Although

it occurred to me I don't have a contingency plan if that drunk Russkie starts taking pot shots at me.) Over the course of the watch, the icebergs have gotten bigger and bigger, and the ship has gotten slower and slower.

Cold. As. Hell.

When watch is over I'm a frigging popsicle. All I can think about is getting under the covers. So I head to Charlie's cabin and we both conk out.

Next thing I know, someone's knocking on the door. I drag myself out of bed and answer it.

Well, well, if it isn't that fucknut wiper.

"Yeah, what do you want?" I ask.

"Russ got something on the VHF."

"What do you mean, 'got something?'"

"Come see for yourself."

So me and Charlie take the elevator up to the main bridge, still in our pyjamas, and stand in the back of the crowd, trying to see and hear.

The radio is crackling like hell, but it's unmistakably transmitting the sound of a female voice, speaking in a strange warble no one can identify. It sounds human, but the speaker never seems to pause for breath.

It hits me: this is the same thing I heard in my dream.

"How far away is it?" someone asks.

"This thing's range is sixty miles."

Charlie: "Have you tried answering?"

Russ just smiles and presses the PTT: "Station calling, hotel nine-er, zulu delta x-ray. Identify yourself. Over."

He releases the button and we all listen. The warbling continues unabated.

Russ tries again: "This is the MT Tomorrow, identify yourself, over."

The voice goes on as before. You can hear a pin drop in the bridge. Captain Pomerantz, who I've never actually spoken to, just stands there, nervously turning a coin over in his fingers.

"Weirdest damn thing I—" Russ starts to say.

But before he can finish, several other, much deeper voices join the female voice, and in unison they say some kind of chant. Or maybe it's a prayer.

For the first time, I wish I was back in Prince Rupert.

At mess, no one is talking about the VHF. They talk about everything else. The Astros are about to set a record for longest winning streak in league history.

I tell Charlie I want to see her after watch.

I spend the first part of the watch helping out in the galley, since the steward has locked himself in his cabin and won't come out. Then later they have me cleaning heads.

I find Dubinkin in one of them, sitting on the floor with a bottle of schnapps, drunk as an Irish mosquito.

He's ranting and raving in Russian, but at one point, as I mop around him, he switches to English long enough to say, "They hide in plain sight."

"Who?" Then the smell hits me, followed by the widening puddle. "Way to go, Boris Fuckov. You're leaning on the toilet, and you just pissed the floor."

"They'll never let us through," he says. Then he rambles on some more in Russian.

They'll never let us through. For some reason I think of those creatures in my dream, with the flat faces and the curved heads. I try to get Dubinkin to move, but he won't, so I just leave him there, marinating in his own juices.

After watch, I meet Charlie in my cabin. I tell her what Dubinkin said, and how when we heard that voice on the radio, I swore it was the same one from my dream.

She tells me about her dream: she's standing on the ice before a big black tower, trying to run away, but it keeps pulling her back.

"Like I'm tethered to it or something," she says.

As she's talking, three long blasts. We look at each other. Ship's whistle. Three long blasts.

Man overboard.

We run out on deck, as fast as we can. It's Kit, the steward.

Andres, one of the other ABs, was standing watch. He says he saw Kit over by the manifold, looking out to sea. His lips were moving, like he was talking to someone. Then he just walked over, climbed the handrail, and jumped off.

He was not wearing a lifejacket. Andres says he was cradling something in his arms, but he couldn't tell what it was.

They bring the ship around and shine the searchlight into the water. We're in that brief period of deep blue twilight that passes for nighttime this far north, and a heavy fog has rolled in.

We all call to him. Nothing.

Collier's afraid he might be clinging to some ice, too in shock to answer. He wants to drop a boat.

It's been almost thirty minutes since he jumped. Pomerantz surveys the icy water and says, "He's already dead."

They call it in to Deadhorse as a likely suicide. We keep going.

Morning. This place is like a tomb. No one got any sleep last night. Strange sounds reverberated through all the passageways. Everyone lay awake, hoping someone else would investigate. The AB standing the 4-8 watch said he heard voices on the wind.

Earlier someone tried to call their baby mama south of 49 and realized right away what the steward took with him when he went over the side—our sat phones. All three of them.

We still have the internet and the ship's radio, but I mean, what the fuck? Why would he have done that?

At mess Harlan says he thinks the people back in Deadhorse were right: someone is trying to sabotage this ship. Brenda says it's only about 800 miles to Svalbard, the first settled place we hit after the Pole. I don't know, that still seems awfully far away.

Night. I'm on B Deck, mopping a passageway. I have that feeling again: I'm not alone.

It isn't a breathing sound this time, but it might as well be. I know there's something here, but what's even weirder is, I think I know where it is. I think if I just reach out my hand—

There's a crackle. The smell of ozone. Every hair on my body

stands on end.

From around the corner, a little blue orb comes floating toward me at about eye level. It hisses and buzzes. It slows down and seems to take notice of me, then it passes right through the far wall.

Okay, I think I'm done mopping for the night.

“Alisha!” It's Charlie. “Just came over the NAVTEX. Monster storm. They're sending me up to the bridge to help out.”

And she's gone, before I even have time to wish her luck. I go out on deck, and a gust of wind nearly knocks me over.

I look for the bosun, but find Collier instead. He's rushing off somewhere. I ask him what I should do. He looks at me for a second like he wishes I didn't exist, then says, “Go to the engine store and lock everything down.”

The ship makes its first really good pitch while I'm heading down the stairs. I hold on, but my dinner almost doesn't.

The store itself is a disaster. There's crap all over the place. It's going to take hours just to get everything back in its proper drawer, much less lock it all up. I get to work, cursing the storm and the chief mate and Charlie for getting to go up on the bridge while I'm banished down here.

The ship is starting to heave something awful. It's hard to keep my balance. I have to dodge camshafts and inlet valves as they roll across the floor.

Something whacks against my right ankle. The pain is so bad I have to limp over and lean against the wall.

Through the air vent, just above my head, a loud crack.

I prick up my ears. I shut the door to the engine room to cut down on the noise.

Then it comes again. Pop. Pop, pop.

Oh, god. I think I know what that sound is.

I fight my way across the floor and pull myself up the steep metal steps.

In the crew's mess, my stomach plunges when I see a bloody handprint streaked across a table. I look around, but I don't see anyone else.

The “pop pop” comes again—upstairs. I stagger out and make my

way to the stairwell.

Once inside, I steady myself and listen. Someone is firing off a gun on the next deck. Where the hell is everybody?

I take a deep breath and start climbing. When I get to B Deck, there's blood everywhere. On the floor. On the walls. I see a body lying half in the p-way, half in a cabin. I think it might be Collier.

I've barely taken a step when Dubinkin comes around the corner. Or some crazed thing that used to be Dubinkin. His eyes are full of murder. He aims his rifle at me. I should run, but I just stand there like a goddamn deer. I close my eyes and wait to die.

But instead of death, I'm knocked off my feet. It feels like the ship hit something. I roll into the stairwell. I hear Dubinkin getting up behind me, cursing in Russian.

I take the first staircase several steps at a time, but then another collision throws me down the next one. My knee lands square on the metal floor. The pain is blinding. I see a flash of white light, then stars.

I don't know if Dubinkin is still coming, but I have to keep going. After two tries, I'm on my feet. I limp out the door into the passageway. I head for the deck because I don't know where else to go. The ship rocks again. I slide to the floor, trying to favour my knee, but I cry out in pain anyway.

Then there's a strange sound and I get a sickeningly familiar feeling.

As I watch, a shape moves across the surface of the wall, then the wall itself changes colours, and a jet-black creature steps out of it. It must have been camouflaging itself, like a flatfish. It's over two metres tall. Its head is curved on top, then hooked down on each side. Its mouth is an ugly, frowning slit, and its eyes are small and beady and dead.

Then another one comes out of the wall, and another one. I watch in horror as the wall comes alive with them, and before I can even piss myself, at least ten have stepped out into the passageway.

And they're coming right at me, reaching out with weird, mouth-like hands.

Feet, hatch, deck—where I immediately wipe out. It's a total skating rink.

I half-crawl, half-slide from one piece of machinery to the next. I've got no lifejacket, and my ice cleats are back in my cabin. The wind must be fifty knots. I'm going to try for the deck store, but it's about fifty metres out, so I'm going to have a hell of a time getting there.

I grab onto a P/V valve and look back at the deckhouse. I don't see anyone (or anything) coming after me. I try to signal the bridge, but I don't think I'm in their line of sight yet.

There's a totally naked woman climbing up on the davit arms.

Wait, I must be hallucinating. Right? I pull closer, but the figure doesn't vanish. I hold onto a COW line and shout. I wave my free hand. I shout some more.

Then she looks at me, and I see who it is. It's the woman from Deadhorse, who touched my hand and told me I was pretty. The one in my dream, who conducted a black mass on the bow with those same creatures I'm trying to get away from.

She grins like a demon, one of the chains breaks, and the lifeboat slips and goes dangling off the side of the ship. Then the other one goes, the lifeboat drops into the water, and immediately gets thrown against the hull.

That's when I see it. The wave that's going to sink the Tomorrow. It must be ten stories high, and it's bearing right down on us, tossing off icebergs like dandruff.

Too slippery to walk? Think again. I speed-skate across the deck, reaching out toward the hatch, creatures or no creatures, now almost there, now flat on my face, now up again, now I'm inside, now I slam the hatch closed and lock it behind me.

Then the wave hits, and everything goes black.

“Hey. Hey, wake up.”

I open my eyes.

“Alisha, right?” It's Bruno, the pumpman. I don't really know him, but I recognize him from his big moustache.

I look around. I'm lying in the p-way, just inside the hatch. “What happened?”

Bruno kind of laughs. “What didn't happen? I'm going around looking for survivors.”

I sit up and try to get to my feet, but they give out underneath me.

“Careful, you hit your head.”

But that isn't it. The ship is still. Not still like the storm is over. Still like...still.

“We're stuck,” he says, then clarifies when he sees the way I look at him. “We're stuck in the ice.”

“But we're an icebreaker.”

He laughs. “Do you know how to fix this thing?”

I pull myself to my feet, take a minute to get my land legs, then open the hatch and look out.

It's like the surface of the moon.

I step outside, mindful of how slick it is. There are giant ice boulders all over the deck. The sky is low and grey. The ice stretches to the horizon, in haphazard stacks and ridges. You couldn't walk across that landscape if you wanted to.

“The storm must have blown us right into some pack ice,” Bruno says. He lifts his vest, showing me his pistol. “You'd better come with me. Those creatures are everywhere.”

We take the stairs up to the bridge. Charlie is there, tinkering with the control console.

“Alisha,” she says. “I'm glad you made it.”

“You too.” I look around. All the glass is busted, letting in the frigid air. The instruments are smashed. Ice is everywhere, in big chunks.

“That rogue did it,” Charlie says. “I was in the room when it happened. Took Pomerantz with it.”

“The captain?”

“Washed him right out to sea.”

“Can you get anything working?” Bruno asks.

“It's all shorted out. And I'm an AB.”

I notice for the first time the backup lights are on; the main power must have been lost. “What about the radio?” I ask.

“The whole radar mast is gone. Washed away. We got nothin'.”

“We must have some other means of communication.”

“Not really. No radio beacon, no SART transponder. Or at least, they're not where they should be.”

“What about the main transponder?”

“Smithereens.”

“By the storm?”

Bruno sucks air through his teeth. “It was in a cabinet down in the equipment room. Now it’s in pieces all over the floor. The GPS tracker, too. Could have been the storm, but...a million to one. If you ask me, someone took a sledgehammer to every piece of vital communications equipment on this ship.”

Dubinkin.

“So we’re cut off?”

“Well, there’s one thing that might save our asses. I think some of our not-so-loyal shipmates may have escaped without us. The lifeboats are gone, and I’m not finding nearly enough bodies.”

I don’t say anything about the naked woman cutting the lifeboats down. I don’t know if it’s because it sounds too crazy, or because I don’t want to take away their last hope.

Bruno sighs. “Of course, they’d have to send an icebreaker, which could take weeks. Meanwhile, we have those things to deal with.”

“Let’s go back to the galley,” Charlie says nervously. “I couldn’t pilot this thing if all this crap was working.”

Kyle, the QMED, is waiting for us in the pantry, along with Sami, the second engineer. But Sami is unconscious most of the time; Dubinkin put a few extra holes in him.

“Where is that psycho bastard?” I ask.

Bruno shrugs. “I’m going to look for more survivors. Haven’t been below deck yet. I was headed that way when I found you.”

“Please,” Kyle says, “Leave us the gun.”

“Negative.”

“What are we supposed to do if those things come back?”

Bruno takes something off the shelf and tosses it to him. “Throw a can of peaches at them.”

Then he leaves.

Four hours and Bruno still isn’t back. I’m pacing back and forth, trying to reassure everyone. “You know they’re gonna come for us. They have to. Even if we’re just lower class trash no one cares about, think how much oil is on this ship.”

No one seems very reassured.

The creatures come. We hear them in the mess, so we all hold our breath. Charlie keeps her hand pressed over Sami's mouth, since he's been moaning from his wounds.

I think there are three of them. They speak in these weird clicks and whistles. At one point, they're right outside the pantry door.

After they're gone, no one speaks for like an hour. Then Kyle says it's the third time they came.

They must know we're here. What are they waiting for?

It's been all day now and Bruno is still gone. Me and Charlie want to go look for him. Kyle doesn't want us to. (It's becoming clear that Kyle is a total pussy.) But in a way he has a point. It isn't really Bruno we're going after. It's the gun.

We go anyway.

We search the whole deckhouse. At one point we have to hide in a closet from two of those things. Bruno is nowhere, but we do find Dubinkin—in the basketball court. He's slouched against the wall with a knife in his hand. It looks like he tried to disembowel himself, but was too drunk to pull it off right. He bled to death anyway. His rifle's nearby, but it's out of bullets.

We go out on deck to have a look around. The fog is back. I can barely see ten metres off the side of the ship.

As I'm scooting along the icy deck, my feet give out under me and I land flat on my ass. Charlie, too.

We look at each other. The ship has come unmoored. We...are... moving.

All around us, the ice is breaking up, and we're skating past it with surprising ease. I look, but I can't even see the bridge in this fog. If anyone's up there, they can't see either.

We hurry back to the galley, where we find Kyle and Sami—or what's left of them—strewn about the pantry in big red splotches. We sit in the mess for a while without speaking before we go up to the bridge.

It's more or less like I expected. Not a soul around. All the instru-

ments are dead and the wind is knifing through the room. Whatever's driving this ship isn't using the usual controls.

So now we're sitting up here at the bow, as the Tomorrow barrels through the icy water. Charlie has her head in my lap. She's barely spoken.

"Maybe it's London," I say.

She looks up at me, not knowing what I meant.

"I mean, maybe the transponder is working fine, or maybe we've got another one, and they're pulling us along somehow. Hell, maybe everyone's glued to the BBC, and they're showing us as this little moving dot, and..."

I shut up when I see the look on her face. It's bullshit, I know. In reality, the oil company suits are probably running around in damage control mode, trying to blame this all on an incompetent crew, lest their dreams of turning the North Pole into their own private HOV lane get dashed all over the ice.

Strange lights fill the sky. There is a pale green glow all around us, and little silver balls are streaking like shooting stars, right off the side of the ship. And sounds—like wailing and moaning on the wind.

There's been no sign of those creatures. Are they gone?

A few minutes ago the fog began to lift, and that's when I saw it. Charlie must have felt my body tense up, because she lifted her head to look.

It's a black tower. Shaped like a mushroom. It's dead ahead of us, although I can't say how tall it is or how far away. It's still partially shrouded in the fog. But when I look at it, I can feel it looking back at me, as if it were the periscope of something that hasn't surfaced since the earth was a primordial swamp.

We're closer now. I can see this thing a little better. It's perfectly rounded, with no distinguishing features. It's jet black and it looks coarse, like it's made of pumice. Every few seconds it emits this low-grade pulse that makes my teeth rattle.

A few minutes ago, my stiffening body once again alerted Charlie. I wish it hadn't, because while we both watched, two doors separated

and a portal opened up at sea level. I can't see inside it. Pitch black. But whatever's in there, I have a feeling we're about to find out.

I don't know what time it is, or what day. Could be midnight or noon, for all I know.

Silent lightning streaks above us. That little blue orb I saw in the passageway—now it's in front of the ship, leading us closer and closer, right into the mouth of this thing.

Charlie is sitting at the railing, looking out portside. But then a scream rips through the air all around us, and she scrambles back and presses against me.

The fit is gonna hit the shan here, people.

Mom, Dad—I love you. I wish I could call you and tell you I'm sorry. Sorry for being ungrateful, sorry for running away from my problems instead of facing them. I thought I was a grown-up, striking out on my own, but really I was just being a big coward.

And Jeremy—I promise to watch over you, from wherever I end up. Like Foam Woman, the ancestress of our clan, I'm going to rise from the sea, just to keep you out of trouble. You're a great kid. It was an honour to be your big sis. I won't let anything happen to you, J.

Charlie says she wants to make one last attempt to take control of the ship. I ask her not to, but she goes anyway. She comes back a few minutes later and puts her head in my lap without saying anything.

The ship is empty. Those things are gone. We're the only ones on board. I can't describe how I feel. Strange. That's all I can say. Strange. Like this is happening to someone else...

This is it. Just a few more minutes and it will pull us in.

It is *huge*—much bigger than I first thought. It must be a hundred metres high. Or more. It's covered with weird hieroglyphics, and from somewhere within its dark opening, I hear a familiar chanting.

Or is it a prayer?

Charlie clutches my hand. I clutch back. Then she sits up and kisses me on the mouth. "Well, Alisha, it was nice to know you," she

says.

She goes over to the rail and, as I watch, puts one leg over, then the other, and drops off the side. I run over to look, but her body has sunk like a rock in the frigid sea.

So now I stand at the bow, alone, with this great, primeval Unknown reaching out to draw me into it, and I have a decision to make. I can follow after Charlie and jump to my death in the icy water. Or I can stand my ground, and stay with the Tomorrow as she makes her final passage.

'The Light Princess'

Ephiny Gale

The queen died shortly after childbirth, of internal burns. The baby princess lay crying in the corner. They knew this because of the wails; the baby was so bright that they could barely see her limbs, let alone her features. By some curious genetic match, or perhaps mutation, instead of the slight glow of her countrymen, the princess radiated light. The king could not hold her for more than three seconds without burning, and besides, looking at her hurt like staring into the sun.

As the princess grew up, the king scoured the land for potential suitors. On her sixteenth birthday he brought her the Ice Prince. His icy body reflected her light and, although she was better adjusted to her own radiance than others, this almost blinded her. She clamped her eyes closed over the starbursts in her eyelids and held his hand through his thick glove. Seven seconds later he had to pull away; his palm was melting into the glove's fingers.

On her seventeenth birthday the king brought her the Water Prince. He left slightly wet footprints on the tiles of her room. He was naked aside from a pair of damp shorts, and tiny water droplets constantly beaded on top of his skin. He took her in his arms and neither melted nor burnt. She was light as air as she savoured the feeling of his skin, his muscles under her palms, his lips on her neck.

Twelve seconds later he pushed her away.

He said she was boiling him on the inside.

The king declared that there were no other suitable men in the world. Even he, himself could not marry her. She would never bear children. He locked her in a tower at the edge of the ocean, believing the only thing she was useful for was becoming a lighthouse.

During the night, she slept, a ball of light illuminating the rocks below. During the day she cooked with the heat of her hands and the supplies in the basement, and she examined the faded world map on the wall. A corner in the south-east had been torn off. It seemed deliberate, like a jilted lover tearing a face from a painting.

Sometimes she stood at the gigantic tower window and wished she could

jump. She thought she could probably reach the waves, but she'd never learnt to swim; the glare in the water had always been too bright.

During the day, she dug a hole in the bottom of the tower, shovelling dirt with a silver spoon.

At dawn on her eighteenth birthday, the Light Princess escaped and rushed south-east. She took only the spoon, a knife, and as much food as she could carry. At sunset, she hid in caves or buried herself in the ground, with just enough space for her eyes, nose and mouth. And before too long, blissfully, she crossed the border into the next kingdom.

Many things in the Metal Kingdom hurt her eyes, including the Metal Prince. She could only sit on the prince's lap for twelve seconds before heating him so much that he burnt her flesh, and ended up falling backwards and almost cracked her head open. The burns took three weeks to heal. She wondered why everything she didn't burn on first contact turned painful.

After that she came to either the Earth Kingdom or the Steam Kingdom. If it was the Earth Kingdom, its ochre-coloured prince glared from under his dusty eyelashes and forbade her from coming any closer. He believed his arteries were stems, his veins were shoots and his capillaries were roots. One touch and his entire circulation system would ignite.

If it was the Steam Kingdom, she laid her hands on its prince's shoulders while his scalp steamed gently. In seven seconds wisps of steam began to seep from the rest of him. They rose to scald her on the face and arms and hands. She cried and her tears went up in steam, too.

If it was the Earth kingdom, she cut through the curtain of vines across its border with her knife. If it was the Steam Kingdom, she reflected her own light with her silver spoon, and thus shone a pathway through the thick, suffocating clouds of steam to the other side.

Regardless, she reached the south-east corner of the map.

The palace was made of smooth, black stone that didn't shine. Inside, in the opposite way to which those in the Light Kingdom projected it, the king and queen seemed to suck the colour and light out of the air. It was a peaceful kind of darkness, and the king and queen

apologised that they had never had a son, and there was no Dark Prince for her to procreate with.

She slept in a deep, deep basement in the palace and slept for a long, long time.

When she woke there was a void in the room. It was a person-shaped void, and the Light Princess believed the king and queen must have lied. She leapt towards it and flesh materialised out of the darkness in her hands.

That flesh was cold and strong and pitch, pitch black. In the presence of the void, her heat and her light had retreated to a soft glow, and the Light Princess no longer had to squint to see around her. For the first time, she could just make out the shape of her nose where it sat on her face. She could see her hands for the first time, where they clutched at the void's back. She could see the void's long black hair and short black dress.

"You're so warm," said the Dark Princess, and even the whites of her eyes were black.

The Light Princess counted to three. Seven. Twelve.

Neither let go.

‘THE WATER THIEF’

JACK WADDELL

Sabal leaned back, digging the metal heel-claws of the Hulk’s feet into the rock as he scraped to a halt just as its toes met the edge of the gorge that sprawled below. His stomach dropped as though he hadn’t stopped in time.

A gale shoved at his Hulk’s back, threatening to topple him forward into eternity. It was strange to hear the wind howl but not to feel it. The carapace of the Hulk exoskeleton cut its wrath.

Beyond the gorge was the next rise of the mountain. There was no path down and no path across.

He remembered a prayer to Ganesha, and though he couldn’t bear to bring the words to his lips, he heard his father’s voice:

Oh, moon-hued and four-shouldered One, upon You we meditate for removing all obstacles.

The wind paused. Immediately, Sabal leaped out across the chasm, thrusting the Hulk’s arms out ahead to catch the rock on the far side. Just after his Hulk’s feet left the ground, the wind burst free again with a roar, thrusting him aside to where the gorge widened. Below him there was nothing but air and, far down, the dove-gray stones of the Talung.

Sabal’s heart dropped as he and the Hulk twisted and fell.

But the wind relented, and on his downward arc he smashed the Hulk’s left hand into the ledge. Metal claws ground through stone with a sound like a plow through gravel. He kicked his toes into the mountain side, and after a terribly long moment, he came to a halt.

He rested his head against the plastiglass carapace of the Hulk, lungs drawing deep, though even with his breather whirring, the air was puny up here. His vision swam, and he was afraid to close his eyes in case they never reopened.

He looked up at the ledge of the gorge. He had dropped six meters in his jump.

There was that much more climbing to do before he died.

“Sabal!

The front door slammed shut, rattling the distiller perched on Sabal’s stovetop kettle. He snatched the glass tubing before it tumbled to the floor.

“Sabal!” shouted Little Bina again as she rounded the corner into the kitchen and skid to a stop. “There you are!” she said between gasps.

“A shock, I know, to find me standing in my own home,” he said, balancing the distiller’s collector over the kettle again. Water beaded into gems and slid away from the kettle into a reservoir in the cabinet.

He glanced at Bina. She had not smiled at his teasing.

“The Mayor sent for you.”

“Mister Rakesh must do one of two things, Little Bina.” He brushed the kettle with the back of his hand. It was cold. After turning off the stovetop’s chilling plate, he pulled the distiller from the kettle and tipped butterleaf tea into two small cups. “He must learn patience, or he must repair the mobile tower.”

Sabal cut two large slices of lemon cake onto plates, and Bina shifted from one dirty foot to the other as he placed the tea and cakes on the table. Cupped between his fingers, the tea was rosy red, and it smelled like summer.

“Sabal, he said you must come at once.”

“That I will,” he said. The icy tea slipped smoothly over his tongue like its name promised. Another fine genesplice from Sanjay. “Just as soon as I’ve finished my cup. You should try yours.”

“It’s the water, Sabal” Bina said. “It has stopped.”

Sabal barely heard the tinkling of his porcelain cup and the splash of tea squandered on the floor.

“It is the government,” said Nabhas Rana with his voice like a bear in challenge. His face and vest were still covered with dust from a demolition site. He took care not to shake any on the mahogany table that filled the boardroom. “They are punishing us for refusing to evacuate to the coast.”

Nirav Rakesh, the Mayor's son, crossed his arms and leaned back in his chair. "I think it is the Americans. They are stealing all the water left in the world to sell it back to us."

"We don't know if it's the government, the Americans, or someone else," the Mayor said. Sabal noticed that he didn't even suspect natural causes, though neither did Sabal. Did he know who this someone else could be?

"What do we know right now?" said Mrs. Das. She was chairperson of the village board, and Little Bina's mother. "Sabal, please tell us."

The village board was a quarter of the size it had once been, which reflected how the population of the town had changed in the past ten years. Even still, Sabal's face and neck warmed as though each eye on him was a heat lamp. With any more of an audience, he might have melted away.

"Go on," said Mister Rakesh.

"The flow meters—" his voice cracked. Mister Rana snorted. "The flow meters reported a sequential halt in the Rangeet's circulation through the aqueducts this morning."

He pressed a button on his mobile phone. Though the mobile network no longer worked, the wireless intranet still did. A holo glowed behind him, showing the course of the buried stream as it flowed down the mountain to Dubdi. Then the blue curve of the stream cut off, draining down its route and disappearing.

"It began suddenly at six, from full flow to zero within the sixty second report window."

"Is the Rathong gone?" asked Mrs. Das.

Sabal shook his head and flicked a button. A low orbit image of the Talung mountaintop replaced the stream image. It was from last month, the most recent they could acquire without the Indian government's help.

"The Rathong glacier is small," Sabal said, pointing, "much smaller than a generation ago, but it survives. With care, it should provide water for ten years or more. Either the melting has stopped or the water was blocked."

"How long will our reserves last?" asked Nirav.

"A week," Sabal said. Murmurs arose around the table. "That can

be stretched with common sense and rationing.”

Mister Rana scoffed. “A week? Is that the best you can do? How could you let this happen?” He looked around the table. “Tell me again why this pup is in charge of our water? Because of his mother and father?”

Sabal stared at Rana as though through a narrow red tunnel. The heat in his face flared, though its flavor changed.

“Nabhas!” shouted Mrs. Das. “Sabal has studied hydrology and water conservation at university, like his mother. He is better qualified than any of us.”

Mister Rana crossed his arms. “At least she finished her degree.”

Mister Rakesh slapped the table and stood. “Enough! Sabal has our every confidence. We will follow his direction. Furthermore, he will lead an expedition up the Talung to review the situation.”

The world seemed to drop from under Sabal. The Talung, which stood shoulders above the world among the Himalayas. The Talung, which had destroyed his family.

What would he do with Giri?

Rakesh went on. “Nabhas, you’ll go, too. And we’ll need the construction Hulks.”

“I just bought those!”

Rakesh leaned, hands on the table. “Then they should be in fine shape.”

Rana sniffed. “I can spare two. But I can’t go, my asthma has been acting up.”

“Fine, then send Gagan.”

This was just getting worse. The only person who hated Sabal more than Mister Rana was his son.

“But we need all three Hulks.” Rakesh raised his hand when Rana tried to speak. “If we can’t free the Rangeet, then you’ll have no customers left, Nabhas.”

“And Nirav, clean your rifle. You’ll be going for security.”

Nirav grimaced, but nodded. Sabal wondered what Rakesh expected them to find on top of the mountain.

Rakesh looked around the nearly-empty table before turning back to Sabal. “Bring us back our river, Sabal, before—”

He didn’t finish. He just waved them away.

Sabal slid open the door to the ‘ponics beneath his house and climbed down. The light was already on, so Sabal was not surprised to find his younger brother downstairs plucking tomatoes off the vines. Sabal shuddered at the water that splashed to the floor, but for once he did not admonish the boy.

“Giri,” Sabal started, but Giri turned to him with red eyes rimmed with tears. Sabal frowned. “You must not cry,” he said before he could stop himself. Giri pouted at him while wiping tears from his eyes with a tissue, which he threw into the extractor.

Giri sniffled. “I don’t want you to go up the mountain.”

Sabal swallowed a lump building in his throat. “It’s not like when Mother and Father went, Giri. We’re going for a week or two, not a year.”

Giri nodded, but frowned still.

“Hush, now. Little Bina and Mrs. Das will take you. You will have such fun that you’ll forget about stuffy Sabal and all his rules.”

A slight smile cracked on Giri’s face, but tears still beaded in his eyes. Sabal wrapped his arms around his brother’s head, holding it to his chest.

“May I go to the base camp with you?” Giri asked, muffled a bit from Sabal’s arms. “And light incense?”

“I hoped that you would.”

He had made good time, crossing the razor sharp rises of Talung’s peaks. The Sherpas, mostly on foot, were far behind.

Sabal reached out again, easing the Hulk’s fingers into the crevice. Feeling was gone—either the feedback triggers weren’t working or frostbite was setting in. Sabal gave the hand another shove and then gently shifted his weight. It held.

Meter by meter he shimmied along the face. A ledge sat only a few more meters above him, but it was plainly visible from where Sherpas might be climbing by now. Down here he was hidden.

He clenched the fingers of the Hulk’s right hand around a spur. They bit in tightly without crushing the rock to powder.

He let the Hulk hang as he pulled a block from the bag hung around his own body. Wind whistled in the carapace as he opened it

to the world.

He hoped the wind would not push the Hulk from the face of the mountain as he carefully smashed the block of explosives into the rock and tapped at the detonator screen until it was ready.

The electric motor squealed as the truck's driver eased it over the hump in the road. These were the last of the foothills of the Talung. Even the sun struggled to surmount its sister mountains to the East. The morning was cold and dimly, redly lit.

Nirav hopped from the passenger's side as the truck rolled to a stop. Sabal stretched out his shoulders for the first time during the two-hour drive from Dubdi. He nodded his thanks to the driver, who only stared at him in response, but smiled warmly at Nirav when the man waved his thanks outside.

A line of monks, looking like saffron ants, toted baskets of offerings down from the Buddhist temple nestled into the mountain. More had already gathered at the stone altar built at the base of the mountain's rise. It was covered with cloths and candles and statues of gods and bodhisattvas. Blue, red, and yellow flags hung from slanted ropes and flapped in the morning wind.

"Would you like to make an offering, young man?" A monk, nearing the end of his middle years, approached him. Deep lines marked eyes and a mouth used to smiling. Sabal remembered him.

"No, Brother Harsula." Sabal swallowed his disgust, trying to keep his face placid.

"It is said that if you don't give to the mountain gods here, you will give up there." He pointed to the peak of the Talung.

The peak *would* mean death. It sat in the Death Zone, where the air was so thin that all life withered. Even climbers with oxygen tanks lasted only hours. Fortunately he would not have to climb quite so high to get to mountain's shoulder where the Rathong glacier sat.

"I've made enough offerings, brother."

The monk tilted his head to the side, a gesture Sabal had long since tired of, so he turned away. Giri and Little Bina were at the altar, affixing sticks of incense into the cracks of the stone blocks. An old monk smiled at them and lit the sticks for them. Little eddies of smoke twisted in the air until a frigid gust caught them.

“You are like a father to him as much as a brother.”

“He had a father, and a mother,” he said. “The mountain took them.”

“It pains me to see you turn from your mother’s faith, Sabal. I think it would do you good to make an offering in her memory.”

Sabal walked away and let the wind answer for him.

Giri was stacking food onto the altar when Sabal came up to him. Sabal knelt so that Giri could hug him.

“You’ll be good at Little Bina’s?” he asked. Giri nodded, lip quivering. Sabal began to stand.

“Wait!” Giri said. He pulled out a sprig of incense on a wire. “I didn’t burn this for you yet. I only burnt Nirav’s and Gagan’s.”

Sabal had set many such sprigs alight. Giri had been too young to remember now. Giri hadn’t slept with the radio by his bedside for nightly updates. He hadn’t taken his exams a month early to rush home. He hadn’t ridden his bike up the foothills to lay flowers at the altar, or to borrow a telescope from the monks to scour the mountain-side for signs when the updates had stopped. He hadn’t begged the mayor to put him on the recovery team when it was clear they weren’t returning.

But perhaps he would this time.

Giri lit his sprig from another that was burning on the altar. The thick scent of dhoop wood reached Sabal. It seemed to fill his lungs; it threatened to drown him.

“Tubby!” came an amplified shout behind him. The whir of servos came just after. Gagan was enclosed in his Hulk. “It’s time to go.”

Sabal climbed into the carapace of his Hulk. The control rods were cold even through his gloves, and the stirrups were too low, letting too much of his weight hanging from the belts around his torso. But Gagan and Nirav were already walking their Hulks up the slope.

Sabal waved the Hulk’s massive arm to Giri, who stood and watched, waving, as Sabal trekked after his comrades.

Sabal’s pack crashed into the ground, followed an instant later by his own body. His Hulk slumped into a crouch.

Gagan laughed. “Nap time, Tubby! Better put on your breather before you fall asleep, if you care to wake again.”

Sabal was gasping and dizzy by the time he dragged out the mask-and-tube breather and slipped it over his head. The little pumps whirred as he breathed in, doubling the oxygen he could draw. He imagined he could feel it fill his blood. He lay there for a few minutes to catch his breath.

His legs burned. His arms felt like ropes stapled to his shoulders.

“The Hulk isn’t enough for him, Nirav. Maybe we should carry him up the mountain like a babe in arms.”

Nirav only grunted.

Sabal struggled to his feet and tromped over the mountain shelf to the enclosed Rangeet. There should be a sound of rushing water, but there was only the wind.

With a scrape of metal on concrete, Sabal slid open the cover and shined a light inside the aqueduct. It was musty, and Sabal resisted the urge to slam the cover shut before water vapor escaped. Instead he scrambled inside and shined his light up through the tunnels, but he saw only smooth concrete walls and a dry, rocky river bed.

For three days they had climbed and searched. It was clear that the blockage couldn’t be inside the aqueduct, because then the Rangeet would overflow it and spill outside the tunnel, reclaiming its former course. Still, Sabal examined nearly every access hatch as they went.

Sabal stopped to report back with Rakesh over the radio. The town was conserving water, but they were still running short quickly. These discussions always depressed him, since he never had any good news to give. Fortunately, in another day they would pass a ridge that would block any further radio signals, and he wouldn’t have to report.

By the time he returned to the camp by the row of slumping Hulks, the other two men had set up a hotplate. Nirav warmed rice and sauce in a pan next to a kettle. He handed Sabal a strip of flatbread.

Sabal stared at it, not at all hungry.

“Eat, Sabal. Already your digestion is slowing. Much higher and it will stop entirely. Eat while you can.”

Sabal had to pull down his mask enough to bite into it.

Gagan lifted a kettle from the hotplate and poured the steaming tea into a cup. A cloud of steam burst into the air, and Sabal dropped his bread to reach out to grab the kettle. He scalded his hands through his

gloves as he tore it away from Gagan and slammed the seal shut.

“Fool!” he shouted. “You can’t let warm water touch the air!”

Gagan glared. “The tea covers the taste of your piss.”

Sabal placed the kettle on the ground near the hotplate. “There is no taste from the recycler. You are pouring our water into the sky!”

“What does it matter, Fatty? It is a fraction of a fraction, and the hot water warms my bones.”

“It matters,” Sabal said. “Every ounce we let slip is an ounce we will never see again. It passes into the air, which is too dry to give it back. Even when the clouds do form, those in the lowlands steal it from the sky with their salts. It will never return to us.”

Gagan was silent.

“If each of us saves only two percent of our water, that means ten more of us can drink for a year, Gagan.”

“And how many of us are up here on the Talung now, Sabal? We are here to save the Rangeet, not droplets from kettles.”

Sabal crossed his arms. “The recycler is nearly perfect, Gagan. The water tastes great.”

Nirav raise an eyebrow at this.

“Fine, then drink without it,” Sabal said, snatching it up to carry it away.

The exhaustion hadn’t left his arms, the cold hadn’t left his fingers, and the recycler was heavy. It pitched in his hands and tumbled toward the rocks.

Nirav dove. He yelled as the corner of the recycler tore through the fabric of his coat and into his arm. With a thud the recycler landed upright, reasonably sound but stained with Nirav’s blood.

“Clumsy fool!” Nirav shouted as he clamped a hand around his wound. Gagan dug through a pack and came up with a bandage.

“I’m sorry,” Sabal mumbled. Neither man replied.

Outside the concrete walls of the Rangeet monitoring station, the wind shrieked. The screen showed the forecast captured from a pirate satellite signal set at the station—100 kilometer per hour winds for the next two days. Winds strong enough to peel the Hulks from the mountain.

“We’re grounded,” Sabal told Nirav, lifting his breather.

Nirav stared through the plastiglass window. Sabal could see dust rise, whipping at the Hulks that they had chained in the lee of the building.

The monitoring station straddled the Rangeet two-thirds of the way between Dubdi and the Rathong glacier. They had turned on the heat, but the building wasn't airtight enough for pressurized oxygen. Nirav looked strange in a sleeveless t-shirt with a breather on his face.

Nirav didn't reply as he left, but he went into the barracks, where Gagan napped. Nirav would surely do the same.

Sabal was relieved. The office of the monitoring station was sparsely appointed. Two chairs at a long L-shaped desk along with two computers. A picture of his parents hung on the wall, surrounded by a wreath of fake flowers.

His parents. This office was the last place they had been seen alive, before they went out to repair a breach in the aqueduct. Before the mountain had taken them.

Sabal had been at school, studying hydrology like his mother, preparing to come back and take her place, and perhaps to marry. He only had a year left of school. He was near the top of his class.

The mountain had taken more than his parents. They had taken his future. When they disappeared, he had returned to help with the search, and then he had stayed to care for Giri, who was only five. Mayor Rakesh had hired him to his mother's position, but at half the salary since he hadn't finished his degree. Most of the village had left by then.

Sabal leaned back in the chair and stared at the screens until he fell asleep.

Gagan stood over the stove in the kitchenette, stirring a pot. Six empty boxes from the pantry were scattered across the countertop. "There's enough food in the stores to last a month."

If they ate at all. Nirav still had to cajole Sabal into eating.

Steam from the pot streamed into the air. The stove didn't even have a fan and hood over it.

"If we had the water for it. It's all dehydrated."

Water would be hard to extract from solid waste. Here, they lost water with every meal, first by cooking it, and later by digesting it,

but Gagan's only reply was to slurp a spoonful of stew from the pot.

The tamed Rangeet should have been surging through its enclosed course just under their feet. They should never have wanted for water here.

"What is the forecast?" Gagan asked without turning.

Sabal turned and looked out the windows of the main entry. The Hulks thrashed on their chains like they were possessed by angry wind spirits.

"Two more days," Sabal said with a sinking heart, turning back.

Gagan sat down his spoon and faced Sabal. "We must risk it."

"We can't. The Hulks will be cast from the mountain side."

"We cannot stay here," he said. "It took five days to climb this far. Rakesh will evacuate the city in a few more."

"We can wait a while. We have enough water in the basement cistern."

Gagan crossed the room like he'd been shot from a cannon. His fist flung out and caught Sabal clumsily on the side of his neck. Still, it felt like being struck with a thrown brick.

"I'm not worried about our water, Tubby! I'm worried about theirs!" He thrust his finger East, and downward. "Think of Giri, coward!"

Sabal did. He wondered if Little Bina's family had already bundled up their belongings and struck out for the coast. Would Giri stay behind? Perhaps Rakesh would find a place for him. If not—Sabal refused the thought.

"It would be suicide."

Gagan knelt and grabbed Sabal by the front of his shirt with both fists. His knuckles dug between Sabal's ribs.

"I left my wife and child down there, Tubby. I will not send them to the coast. Do you know what happens there?"

"They live in government housing, and are given food and water."

Gagan punched him in the stomach, doubling him over, and kicked his feet out from under him. He landed hard on his side, knocking his breather away. It was as though all the air in the room had vanished.

"They live in tents, Sabal. Millions of people. They have riots over water. They kill each other in the open for a cup of water or a bag of rice. Disease rages—cholera, dysentery. Tens of thousands have died

already.”

Sabal had heard rumors, of course, but Rakesh denied them. Without regular contact with the rest of the nation to verify, Sabal had taken his word.

“How-?” was all he could get out between gasps.

“My father found a report on Rakesh’s desk. We have to get the water, Sabal. If Dubdi dies, so will all its people.”

The air in the tunnels should be thick with moisture. Even with it doubled by his breather, he could barely sense it.

Sabal shined a flashlight around the tunnels. It was a short space, he could just stand in the spots where the rock floor was low, but it was many meters wide.

The Rageet’s course was dry, with only tiny rivulets streaming along it. It should have been a steady flow of hundreds of liters per second. Once it had gushed, and adventurers from around the world would come to raft it.

The ground was jagged, the Rangeet’s historical course. Sabal’s parents had only built an enclosure over it to prevent excessive evaporation and theft, all to save Dubdi from extinction. Five years later, it was doomed anyway.

His light glinted off of something across the tunnel. Sabal stepped carefully over the slick and jagged rocks.

A golden tube hung down from a black cylinder, a water condenser, and entered another segment that resembled a Pythagorean cup, before finally winding down to a clock face. Another golden tube bent off to the side, where a drip of water fell.

A clepsydra—a water thief. It was an ancient sort of clock, but this one was very sophisticated. He had heard his father joke about it before—it was the gift he made for Sabal’s mother for their wedding day. It was a union of their skills—mechanical engineering and fluid dynamics. Sabal had never seen it, because his mother was irritated at the waste of water. It seemed they found a spot for it, after all, in the heart of all their marriage had built.

In the sculpted bronze on top, Ganesha sat beside a Buddharupa, their hands nearly touching. It represented his parents’ faiths, and their union. There were words once engraved beneath the seated fig-

ures, but they were obscured by oxidation.

Sabal checked his watch. Without enough moisture for the condenser to collect, it was hours off, but the hands shifted fitfully nonetheless. Sabal watched as the minutes vanished.

Sabal had spoken with Rakesh on the hardwired station radio after his fight with Gagan. The mayor was organizing half the village for evacuation, but Gagan's family, Giri, and Little Bina's family would stay for another few days, along with a dozen other families. Still, each family that left weakened the village and hurt its chances for survival.

The door opened. Sabal shined his light at a stooping Nirav, who held his hand out to shield his eyes.

"Are you alright?" he asked.

Sabal rubbed his ribs. There was a bruise, but no damage. "Yes, thank you."

"It wasn't right that he hit you. I should teach him some manners." Nirav sat on a bulging rock.

Nirav could. He could beat Gagan as easily as Gagan had Sabal. A vicious part of Sabal yearned for that, but he stamped it out, disgusted. He could picture his mother's frown at such a thought, and the image nearly broke his heart.

Sabal sighed. "Gagan was right. We have to go."

Nirav shook his head and pointed up. Even through the thick concrete above them, the wind howled. "That would be suicide."

The Hulks were strong, but they were large, making an target for the wind's rages. But neither could their bodies survive the wind without them.

But they were almost there now, weren't they. Only two more days of climbing, at least with Hulks. How long without?

They needed shelter from the wind, and they needed the Hulks. They couldn't have both, but perhaps they could have one.

He pulled out his mobile and tapped at the topographical map he had stored. The tunnels of course ran through the Rangeet's channel, and as far as he could make out, they were traversable all the way to the top.

"The tunnels." Sabal said, pointing up. "Get Gagan to pack. We leave in an hour."

Sabal couldn't feel the axe in his hand. With an effort, he focused his eyes on the rock in front of him and swung it down. The axe spun from his grip and slipped dropped four meters to the Rangeet's channel floor.

If the Rangeet still flowed, it would have gushed over this fall, making it impassible. Even dry it was more than Sabal could handle. He clutched at the blue line that Nirav had laid, the only thing keeping him from following his axe.

Air rasped through his mask. It wasn't enough. His eyes swam free from his control and his arms swung like he was a puppet instead of a man.

By the time he realized that Nirav had grabbed his coat, he had already been dragged up to a flat stone. Gagan stood behind him, stacking their equipment.

"Sabal, listen to my voice." It was like he whispered in a wind tunnel.

"You must focus, Sabal. If you quit now your body will quit, too. You will die in these tunnels. You must sit up."

Sabal dragged one arm up along his body and thrust the elbow down. Next he hauled the other. Grunting, he flexed his back. It was like lifting the mountain itself. His whole body constricted, choking out what meager air there was. He began to sag back to the rock.

"Listen to me, Sabal. The mountain wants you. Can you hear it?"

He could. It screamed in the gusts of wind that tore at the tunnel walls. It echoed in the thrum in his ears. The mountain reached up for his heart, to squeeze it dead.

Sabal's arms shook and the muscles in his back spasmed painfully.

"Yes! Raise up!"

It was harder than the first climb. It was tougher than reaching the monitoring station. Sabal dug into his heart for strength and rose up on his elbows.

Nirav swam into view, lighted by an LED lantern. Sabal swung his legs underneath himself.

"Slow down, Sabal!"

He found a well of strength he hadn't known. With a surge Sabal

rose up.

“No!” shouted Nirav.

Sabal’s knee gave way and he lurched forward. He flung out his hands. Gagan was there, lifting the recycler. He saw Sabal and tried to turn away as Sabal bowled into him.

They both crashed into the ground. The recycler bounced off the stone and slipped from Gagan’s hands. Sabal heard it tumble down falls with a crash.

Air rasped through his mask. Thoughts slipped from his mind like butter from a hot dish.

Forward and up. There were no thoughts left. Those had evaporated with the water from his mouth. All that was left was a dehydrated body and the urge to move. He could barely remember why. He had totally forgotten where, except to take another crawled pace along the blue rope on the gray rock.

A boot lay across the rope. Sabal traced it to a leg, then to Gagan, who sprawled along the tunnel floor, poking a collection of rocks with his gloved hand.

Shining his light, Sabal didn’t see an opening. The tunnel ended. The face diffused into his mind like milk spreading through tea.

“Dead end,” he said, voice croaking. Gagan looked back at him, frowning. Somewhere behind there was a shuffling sound as Nirav crawled along. He was a big man, and was having the hardest time without water.

Sabal looked up. Between him and Gagan, a metal panel in the ceiling of the tunnel flashed in the beam. Sabal pointed at it.

Gagan closed his eyes for a moment, then nodded. He had to crawl backward to reach it, then he slid it open.

Blinding light poured in. They slipped on thick shaded goggles before Gagan scrambled up the rocky slope of the tunnel and out.

“Water!” Sabal heard. From deep inside the urge to move redoubled, and Sabal climbed out. Gagan dragged the rope ahead and sank it into the concrete top of the aqueduct. Sabal followed the rope to the top, where it met a shoulder at a sharp angle.

He slumped over the top of the ridge. Gagan squatted three meters in front of him, slurping water from a puddle with his bare hands. Sa-

bal kicked his legs, trying to haul them over the crest to crawl the last of the distance.

With a shout, he made it at last. He rose up on his hands and knees and crept like dog until a tug around his waist pulled him short. He fiddled with the carabineer that tied him to the blue safety line and then, finally free, half tumbled to the water's edge.

It was ice cold, he found after he clawed off his breather and he pressed his lips to the water. Heedless of the cold he slurped it up like soup until he gagged and sputtered. Gagan slapped him on the back. Sabal noticed that the man's hands must be freezing, truly at risk of frostbite, though he didn't show it.

Nirav finally crested the rise. He sprawled at the edge of the ridge.

"Finally," he heard in an unfamiliar voice.

Sabal spun around on his knees and slipped in the mud by the water's edge.

A man sat on the edge of a natural rock step with a rifle across his knees. He gave a shout and three others rose up from behind and around other rocks. They were armed and well equipped, and wore tinted goggles across their eyes to prevent the UV light from burning their retinas, but they wore their breathers around their necks as though acclimated to the extreme altitude. From their faces and clothing, they were Nepalese, probably Sherpas from the quality of their equipment, salvaged from the days when rich men still came to climb these mountains.

Behind them a gray Hulk clambered over the edge, nearly silently. The servos didn't whine like his Hulk's had. Only the slight scratching of its fingers on the rock gave it away. It was thinner than his Hulk, too. A smug-looking man piloted it.

"Please, all of you over there," said the man with the rifle, clearly the leader. He pointed to the ridge.

"Our friend, can we give him water?" Sabal asked. Nirav hadn't moved since climbing over the ridge.

"Dorji!" the leader called.

The man from the Hulk stepped forward. His breather hung around his neck, leaving his sneer plainly visible. But he walked toward Nirav and tossed a canteen near his hand. Then he kneeled on Nirav's back to unhook the strap of his rifle. He took the rifle and checked it

before stringing it over his own shoulder.

The leader stood. "Stay put. We don't want to hurt you."

More men came around glacier. The Rathong was much smaller than it should be. The tarpaulin his mother had designed lay crumpled along its side. The tarp was brilliant white, except for a segment along one edge that had shifted to black using a chemical timer. It allowed a more controlled melting of the glacier, and minimized sublimation. Only now it was wadded and trampled along the side of the Talung's shoulder.

Three men hauled an iron tube the size of a man's leg around the wall of ice. It was mounted on wheels and dragged behind it a cart with a big black box.

As the three men labored, other stuck plugs into their ears.

Dorji knelt in front of Sabal and the others as the men positioned the device in front of the wall that was the glacier. He smiled.

"Phurba does not want to hurt you. He is a good man. A good Buddhist. He has never killed. But me?" He stroked the neck of the rifle over his shoulder. "You wouldn't be the first body that I've left on the mountain."

Dorji stuck plugs into his own ears. Sabal and Gagan did the best they could to cover their ears with their hands.

A big man pressed a button on the iron cannon and began to turn a dial. The other men gathered behind him.

It was less a sound than a pain in Sabal's ears and a pressure in his head. White clouds burst from the edge of the ice wall of the glacier, billowing up until the wind caught them and drove them west, into Nepal. In moments the corner of the glacier was gone, shredded into slivers.

The men began to adjust the cannon for another shot. At this rate, the remainder of the glacier would be gone in a few more hours. Sabal pictured the western slope covered in mounds that would look like snow. The whole process moved the ice only dozens of meters, but it was enough to shift it from the Rangeet's basin. Enough to steal it from Dubdi.

Gagan began edging toward Nirav's prone form. Dorji glared at him.

"My friend needs help," he said. Dorji nodded.

Gagan grabbed the flask and held it up to Nirav, who gulped the water, barely stopping even when he choked on it. Gagan helped Nirav sit up.

It must have been the altitude that slowed him. Gagan seemed to move through water as he stood, drawing Nirav's pistol from under his down coat. Dorji smiled as Gagan's arm wheeled around. His rifle slid from his shoulder and into his hand before Gagan could come around. He fired it one-handed into Gagan's stomach.

Gagan screamed. Sabal screamed. Dorji laughed as he kicked Nirav's pistol off the mountain's edge.

Reach. Shift. Hold. Reach.

Sabal fought through the fog that enveloped his mind. Every thought took the whole of Sabal's concentration. Each foot of space conquered was a monumental effort.

He reached for a spur as his mobile beeped in his pocket. He jerked in surprise, pulling the toe-spikes of the Hulk's right foot from their perch. The left hand grasped at the spur, splintering it. He teetered in the air as a massive gust of wind tried to tear him from the cliff. He kicked his toes into the rock face. They bit and held while he grasped at a spike of stone from the face.

He gasped, but it was like breathing through a blanket. Without the breather he would already be dead. Even with it his brain was a shadow. He fought to remember why his phone would be beeping.

He slipped his hand from the Hulk's control claw and slapped for the mobile in his jacket. He hit something bigger than he expected.

Explosives. This was the eighth location. He pulled his other hand from the control claw, praying that the Hulk will cling on its own. Despite numb and gloved fingers he placed the explosive.

One more to go.

By that night the glacier was gone, powdered and swept to the far side of the ridge. The men had already packed. Phurba approached Dorji, who guarded them still. "Six hours. That will be enough time. Then let them go."

Dorji nodded, but Phurba held his gaze for a moment. Then the Sherpas started toward the summit.

“Bring the rest of the gear when you come,” Phurba shouted over his shoulder as he marshaled his men along. They left, hauling the cannon by a cable. A pile of boxes remained stacked by the man’s Hulk.

Soon they were alone with Dorji. Nirav lay still much of the time. Gagan clutched a bandage to his side.

“He needs water,” Sabal said.

“There is plenty over there,” Dorji said, pointing to a shallow pool left by the glacier. “But he must reach it on his own.”

“Go, Nirav,” Sabal said. “You must crawl to the water.”

To call it a crawl as Nirav approached the stream’s edge would have been generous. By fits and starts he squirmed along the ground a few centimeters at a time. Sabal could hear the fabric of his suit tearing as he went.

Sabal tried to stand as Nirav slumped to the ground a meter short of the water. Dorji slammed the butt of his rifle into his gut and he toppled to the ground, breath ripped from his lungs.

Without his breather his lungs struggled to pull oxygen from the thin air. His lungs felt at once empty and clogged. With a gasp Sabal finally pulled in a lungful of anemic air that soothed the burning in his chest but not the buzzing in his brain.

When he finally climbed to his knees he saw that Nirav was on the move again, crawling on his belly. Dorji shouted encouragement.

Finally Nirav brought his head to the water’s edge. He pursed his lips and slurped a mouthful at a time. Dorji clapped slowly.

Nirav launched a burbling cough, offset by splashes as his head flopped in the water. Dorji laughed. In moments the flopping slowed, though Nirav’s face still laid in the water. His arms strained to move, but failed. He lacked the strength to pull himself from the puddle.

Sabal tried to stand again but was brought down by a dismissive backhand by Dorji, who laughed even harder.

Sabal got to his knees and peeked around Dorji’s leg. Nirav lay face down in the puddle. Bubbles rose in the water.

“Very good!” the guard shouted, clapping. “Less work for me!”

Sabal scrambled to his feet as rapidly as he could, but Dorji was already waiting for him. He whipped the butt of his rifle hard across Sabal’s face. It felt like being punched by the mountain itself. He

went to the ground.

“It is hard for a man to kill at first,” Dorji said. “I wonder if your friends understand this. A man’s heart must learn murder. Mine had a good teacher.”

Sabal built an image in his mind, of his mother and father sitting on a slope like this one, beneath the rifle of a man like Dorji. “Did you ever kill a man and woman together?”

Dorji pursed his lips. “You must mean the builders. Were they your family? Your parents? Yes, I see it in your eyes. That was not me, but I wish it had been. The people of my village still praise him daily, the man who killed the builders.”

Sabal’s closed his eyes.

“Your people taught murder to my heart. My son was sick with dysentery. Every day I struggled to put more water into him than came out. I gave him my entire ration, and my wife gave hers. But he died anyway, for lack of water.”

He pointed at the concrete buttresses that had guided the Rangeet’s flows. Sabal noticed a cut into it that had allowed the Rathong’s melt waters to drain on the Eastern side, towards Dubdi. “Because your people took it.”

Sabal’s arms abandoned him, ignoring all commands to move as the rifle barrel drew his gaze up. He was fixated by the eyes he couldn’t even see behind the goggles, eyes he imagined beading down into pinpoints of hatred. Sabal wanted to shut his own eyes, but couldn’t bear to.

“Your family died, but did not pay for their crime. It is fitting that they pay with their son, as I did with mine.”

Dorji’s finger squeezed down onto the trigger. Sabal closed his eyes at last and waited for the shot.

It came at last, a deafening blast that sent his head spinning. Fire branded the left side of his face, but to his surprise his head was intact. Sabal pried open his eyes.

Dorji lay on his back in the puddle, rifle still across his chest. A fist size stone clattered across the face of the mountain. Gagan grunted behind him.

Dorji, arms shaking, struggled to raise the rifle.

Sabal grabbed a rock and sprung to his feet. Dorji found strength,

then, and started to swing the barrel toward him, but Sabal crossed the meters between them too fast. He swung his arm out to knock the rifle aside and then brought the rock down hard on Dorji's face.

The goggles shattered. Sabal could see the man's eyes now. They were clear blue. The pupils shrank to dots under the glare of the sun. They focused on Sabal's face. Sabal heard the rifle clatter to the side. In the corner of his eye he saw Dorji's hands moving, searching for some weapon.

Sabal swung again, pulling back just as the stone struck the thoughts from Dorji's head. The rifle dropped.

Sabal's heart rose in his throat, but a wispy cloud escaped Dorji's mouth, and then another. He hadn't killed him.

Sabal vomited beside the pool.

Gagan had crawled up to sit against a spur of rock. He was still gasping from the exertion of throwing the stone that had knocked down Dorji.

Sabal pulled Nirav out of the water and turned him over. His eyes were dim. There was no pulse.

Sabal took the breather off Dorji's neck and grabbed the rifle. He stumbled to Gagan, who nodded in gratitude when Sabal strapped the breather to him and pressed the rifle into his hands. It took another five minutes to re-bandage Gagan's wound, which had bled black into the snow-like slivers of ice dusting the mountaintop. Sabal thought he would die soon unless they could get him down the mountain.

But it would take weeks to descend in their state, and there would be nothing at the bottom when they got there. The water was gone. Little Bina's family would be packing up. Would they take Giri to safety? They wouldn't leave him alone, no parents and no brother.

On the rise above them the men appeared like ants crawling on a hill. Soon they would unload their cannon and steal another glacier, the Talung, named for the mountain it capped. At least that one no longer fed a village. Sabal had petitioned for an expedition to divert water into Dubdi's own aqueduct, though it was smaller than the Rathong. Why hadn't the Sherpas stolen just that one? They had been greedy. Their greed would kill Dubdi.

“We should stop them,” Gagan said. It took Sabal a moment to understand him. His speech was slowing. “Steal it first.” He spiked his fingers together and then flared them out. “Boom.”

He pointed at the boxes, which he must have recognized from working with his father. Sabal opened them, and saw a thick waxy substance with wires emerging.

Sabal dug out his phone, not quite useless despite the lack of towers. His thick gloves kept him from pressing its buttons. The frigid wind howled through over the ridge, wind that would burn flesh with its cold. He pulled off his left glove. Pain shocked through his arm clear to his elbow. He tapped at the phone to bring up the topo map.

Below the crest of the Talung glacier, a long ridge cut down toward the Rangeet’s former channel. It wouldn’t make it into the aqueduct, but it would flow toward Dubdi along the Rangeet’s path.

“Gagan,” Sabal said, speaking firmly. “I need to divert the path.” He traced the channel he saw in the rock that need only be freed. It glowed pink, and he showed the work to Gagan. “Point to where I should place the charges.”

A black-gloved finger pointed at the screen in nine places. Sabal tapped those places with a thumb too numb to be sure of the touch.

As Gagan slumped, Sabal shoved his glove back over his fingers. Sabal collected his gear on the back of the Hulk that Dorji had left behind. It was smaller than the others and more mobile—the plasti-glass carapace was minimal, only for protection from falling rocks. It wasn’t heated or airtight. Gagan needed the better breather, so Sabal took Nirav’s from the stream and shook it dry.

He had to beat the Sherpas to the top. He tucked the explosives, small and powerful, into storage pockets in the Hulk and, when those were full, his own coat pockets. Then he strapped himself in.

Through blackness and the warmth of sleep, Sabal’s mind followed a trail back to himself. It was a scent that didn’t belong among the hollow odors of the mountain, of dust and ozone, or among the thick smells of his body.

Dhoop wood, here above the world where anything could grow. It didn’t belong on the mountain, and he didn’t belong in the pit of unconsciousness.

The green LEDs of the explosives blinked before him. He stared at them like landing lights bringing his mind back home.

The numbness of his hands, the sleepiness, the sudden warmth all came into focus. Kilometers into the sky, hypothermia was setting in, and perhaps dehydration, too.

Sabal wouldn't make it back to Giri. If he had water left for it, he might have cried for his brother. Talung was a black hole for the family, swallowing any that tipped into its horizon.

Sabal's head swam. His arms and legs suddenly felt flush with heat. He was baking inside his Hulk, and he fought the urge to peel off his down suit. The end was coming.

He pulled the detonator from his pocket and laid his thumb on the button.

A splash of water interrupted him, followed by a thin stream. High above him, white light blossomed and illuminated the profile of a man standing at the precipice, urinating. It was far too cold to smell anything, and Sabal's nose wrinkled in disgust not at the stream splattering on the rocks just above, but on the waste. With greater care, perhaps the Sherpas wouldn't need to steal the water.

The button weighed in his hand. They were up there, now. His stolen march was squandered; he was too late. To go on now would be to murder a dozen men.

He had no tears. Fatigued overwhelmed even his frustration. He let the button slip from his fingers.

Back at the Rathong, Gagan was probably lying dead. He had probably shot Dorji first, as soon as he felt the drowsiness set in, if not the first moment Sabal was away.

Dorji, the man who learned murder. Sabal thought about the man's dead son. He thought about what he would do if Giri's life water was spewing out of him. He would give up his water, he would gather all he could. Giri would live or die depending how much he could collect.

Through all his foggy thoughts, one cut through. Giri still would. His water wasn't spewing out of him, but it was leaking out at drop at a time. The sky stole it. The ground stole it. The bricks and mortar of their houses drank it in if left untreated.

These Sherpas were stealing it just now.

He could see Giri on the coast. Where would they put a lone child? Would he end up in a ditch, stabbed for a child's water supply? Would he end up with dysentery, like Dorji's son?

Sabal's heart broke as murder entered it.

He kicked away from the face of Talung as he pressed the button. Along the ridge, at the nine locations, the detonators went off simultaneously.

With the air rushing in his ears and the explosion shaking the ridge, he couldn't hear the screams.

He whispered his father's prayer. "Oh, moon-hued and four-shouldered One, upon You we meditate for removing all obstacles."

Sabal's Hulk skidded down the pitched face of the Talung, and he stared at the tip of glacier as it toppled toward him in the air, and at the rush of the Talung melt-water lake as it poured free, glistening in the first beam of dawn's light.

It crashed over him and seeped into his Hulk, tasting of earth and life, and it carried him down its rocky path to his village, to his brother.

‘A Fear of Falling Under’

A.J. Fitzwater

Silentia SaganDrop Station has two-thirty-two capacity.
ELE is silent.
I am awake.
I am the only one here.

Three Things

I’m in the holding cell, not sure how I got here or why. Maybe it was just the closest bed.

I can’t remember my name all too well, it has an L and a Z in it, so I’ll work with that. There is a flashpoint vacuum welder on the floor beside me.

Day One

The cell door has reset. The main computer isn’t recognizing any input, but we’ll work on that.

I panic for a moment when I realize I can’t remember how or why or what or whom, realize I’m alone with ELE, down there, waiting, until I tell myself it’s not that bad. No one to answer to.

Maybe the computer will help me, maybe not.

Bigger problems as yet. Let’s get this metal flesh stink out of the air and some fresh Oh-Two flowing. There we go my girl, I know I’m not someone you’re used to dealing with, but we’ll figure this all out.

Whatever this is.

I’m tired. I lie down on the cell slab again. It’s as good a place as anywhere.

Day Two

Sometime in the night I’ve had an accident and soiled myself. A little weep never hurt anyone, no one here to tell me to buck it up. Not sure what I’m crying for; the silence or the mess. Never been good with either.

Hug myself tight after a bad dream. It’s gonna be okay. We’ll fig-

ure it out.

It doesn't take me too long to figure out I can shower. Yes, a real shower! In some random flunky's cubicle. Not that I could find my own. My head hurts too much to think about where it is right now.

Wow, real water. None of that three minutes of recycled chemical slop. I haven't had a proper shower in months... I think. At least, I smell like it.

The hot water stings. There's a cut on my head. Why didn't I feel it earlier? How did it get there? Memory of something about shock. Is that what I'm in? Shock and awe? Awe at the silence. Shock that ELE has stopped talking?

ELE. Oh. Is that why the station is empty? What did ELE find that was so bad?

I'm frightened. I'm curious. Maybe not curious enough. I've got no choice but to be all over the place about it.

I get out of the shower and stare at the stranger in the mirror. Oh hey, it's just you.

Run a hand across the scalp fuzz. Burr, scrape, scab. Don't have enough hair to pull at the scab. Hey wait. No one, no regs. I can have my hair back!

Ah, there's my headache. Forehead is split from temple to temple. Shallow, but messy. Another deeper slice on the right shoulder that's scabbing up. Handsome colour too, quite the elegant Hieronymus Bosch. Never seen its like on myself before. Always been so careful. Have to be out here. Long way from anything.

Not much I know how to do other than keep the wounds clean and medicated. I slather on what looks good from Medical. What a mess. Gravity hasn't been kind.

Scars; always been for the brave. What did I do that was so brave? I can remember I've never been brave before, and now that I have been I want it back.

Can't force it. Tired again, so very quickly. What does the computer say about concussion? Ha, no it can't say anything yet. Botheration.

I find myself a sunward portal before I lay me down to rest, but the view is off. The constellations are on a drunken lean, and I can't see the dead edge of K64128.

I should be concerned, but the stars are still there in their infinite prettiness. I'm not dead. Although. Twinkle twinkle little star, I can see you're not that far.

That can't be right.

No, that's not right at all.

Day Three

Whoever's bunk that was, it was exceedingly comfortable. However. The station is spinning around me when I perform some semblance of verticality. Little hard with the floor tilted. Something else to speak to the computer about.

This is a vicious headache, but my brains and guts remain where they should be. I count that as a plus.

Speaking of guts, despite the protestations there's nothing to offer to the porcelain gods. The stomach, the woozy head. What is it now? Of course, I'm hungry. I've only had water the last few hours. Wait, no, days? Really?

Tank steak and powdered eggs in the mess. Hey, I'm that damn good, I still remember how to get it juicy and bloody in the middle. Carrion and charcoal, down it goes.

And up it comes, a gush of blood, like someone's punched me in the mouth. Oh that's right, I'm a vegetarian.

Dammit, this is gonna come slow and messy, isn't it.

Wash your mouth out. More fresh water, damn does it taste good. And now I have a hankering for cherry tomatoes, the ones that pop sweet and nice in the mouth.

Huh. Here I am. All alone. Something very very wrong going on, and all I want is tomatoes. Brain, you're freaking me out.

The hydroponics atrium smells like home, wherever that is, and has a good crop just coming in. I eat tomtatoes right off the vine, still slightly warm from the sunlamps. A little salt wouldn't hurt.

All this, all mine. I don't have to share. I hug the dwarf corn in glee. Pick out a few weeds, encourage the new shoots of climbing beans like I know what I'm doing. Perhaps I do. Wow, they really left this place in a mess.

Pop peas like hard little bullets into my mouth, bam bam bam.

I lay beneath the apple cucumber and banana passionfruit for a

while. I've done good here. No one to tell me I'm interfering in god's work.

I have food and I have Oh-Two. Maximum output for minimum input, recycle recycle recycle. It's the Silentia way. Can't get takeaways this far out. Pizza delivery fees are killer this close to Jupiter.

Gotta laugh, or you'll cry.

The atrium doesn't have a portal, it's shielded too well, but I know now those twinkling stars are sitting just off the shell of the station.

Gotta cry, or you'll laugh.

The tofu vats are still bubbling away, one just coming to maturity. Not going to need fifteen of these smelly bastards. I shut off all but two, one for a new crop, one for fermenting. The rest gurgles and chokes away into the recycling system to be turned into fertilizer. Nothing going to waste here, not even the protein.

The system chews over the unexpected effluent for a while but then it hums with satisfaction. Job well done. The less smell, the better.

All this fresh Oh-Two is doing my head in. I make sure the extractor fans are doing their thing to distribute that lovely oxygen across the station, and tank the rest. Never know when I'm going to need it.

I sleep beneath the brassica, dreaming of borscht and rag dolls.

Day Four

Leave me alone, ELE. I'm tired. I know you're there, just waiting on the other side of the drop. I'm not ready to talk to you yet.

When you wish upon a star, how I wonder why you are...

Shut up.

Day Six

Why *did* they leave me?

Why did they leave *me*?

Are they going to come get me?

Do they even know I'm here?

Uplink's broken, so says the computer, which has nothing to say about ELE at all. It wasn't made to give an opinion.

No uplink. So. Back home might see those twinkly little bits out there and think it's all over rover. Silentia is silenced once and for all.

And if they don't come, how do I feel about that?

All these questions, they hurt my head.
I'm no ambassador. What am I supposed to say to ELE?

Day Ten

I've fallen out of bed, but it doesn't hurt. I bounce. That's wrong. Better check the spin's not out of kilter.

Something woke me? Ah yes, I heard a drop cradle engage. One wouldn't normally hear the clamps lock in with a full compliment on station; one only feels it.

But with this waiting silence like an indrawn breath, I can hear everything.

Dammit. Not going to get back to sleep now. Off the floor soldier. Now, which way to the cradles again?

I can't remember the last time a cradle dumped their load. But then again, I don't remember much before... something about a choice that wasn't a choice...

Shut up.

There you are ELE.

I must have been dreaming. The drop cradles are silent and full, the Einstein-Rosen Link Engine spheres in repose, the symbols splashed triumphantly on each hull. Eh El Eh. Ready to shake hands with what or whomever is out there. Say it like Ellie, like belly, like warmth in the womb my god there's something talking back...

But still that whisper? None of the consoles are showing any communication. Stop it ELE. Don't make me think it, don't make me say it. I'm not. We were right to look, but wrong in our expectations. It's going to be okay, ELE, I promise.

Where was I? Oh yes. I must have imagined it, though they always said I never had much imagination. The launch consoles behind layers of quarantine glass blink on off, on off, twinkle twinkle. One cradle is black, console circular blinking through a stuck diagnostic loop. None of the clamps show the characteristic ice scarring of a Drop just returned.

Go back to sleep, ELE. Please. Just for a little while longer.

Better go do something about this wonky gravity, though it'll be the long hard way since the computer is still having difficulties. It's making walking hard, and I've never been sufficiently co-ordinated

in low-g to look as balletic and arrogant as those ELE riders. Plus I get motion sick. Makes you wonder how I got out here in the first place.

Day Twenty

I've let ELE go, sent the spheres on their way, and wished her best in her future endeavours. She was annoying me with the on off, zero one, there not there, strobe strobe. God, it was like Christmas on steroids, making it hard to sleep. I told her to go find someone else's ear to whisper in.

It was all gibberish anyway. I told her to speak any one of the five languages I have a passing tongue in and the two I'm fluent in, but she ignored me, even in ISL.

So I've set random co-ordinates without a return axis. Go hang out in the middle of a star for all I care. Maybe you'll find someone and this alien friend will think you're intelligent life yourself, ELE. Hello hello, is there anyone in there?

Clunk, hover, drop, flash. Gone. Rinse and repeat on each sphere. Even the one on diagnostic, though that wasn't a pretty sight, smeared beneath the station after it missed its injection point. More twinkly bits to add to my collection of stars.

They can be quite pretty if I let my eyes go out of focus, squint, turn my head, and stare at them long enough. Until I remember what's in that star dust.

Day Twenty-Five

Letting ELE go? Hasn't made a damn bit of difference. The whispers haven't gone away.

Shit.

Day Thirty

So here we are, talking to myself. Better conversation than before, that's for sure. Do this, do that, get on the ship, don't be a fool, there's no ti-...

Hey, I can't help it if the computer has got the hump. Having to re-program it from scratch, though it's still capable of the basics. It's like a really intelligent and capable baby. I don't have the energy to

nurse it through another adolescence let alone the terrible twos.

It does the minimum. Let's me eat, sleep, shit and amuse myself. That's enough. Best parent a woman could have. Never answers back.

Just wish it had some sort of answers. Cause ELE doesn't. She's not even blaming me for sending off the her spheres.

I need to lie down. The cradle room is quiet. That's a good enough place for now.

I'm not waiting for anything to come back. That's ridiculous, and impossible.

Don't answer that, ELE. Please. I know you don't want to frighten me, but you do. You don't even need the spheres now. I know you'll come through in your own good time.

Day Forty-One

Naked day on the bridge. Like casual Friday, except no prurient judgment.

Well, only because the environmentalists are on the fritz.

I'm tracking through the relays slowly, but every time I replace a circuit or reformat a control, something else that she blows further downstream. I'd like to say I'm good at this, but really, I'm faking it. But who's here to judge?

No joy on finding an uplink, so I've set the computer to cataloguing and tracking all the sparkly bits.

The atrium is coming along well. A little overgrown, and I'll have to repurpose some of the crops, but I won't be running out of Oh-Two anytime soon. Might have to deploy the hydrogen scoop eventually, but fuel is doing fine so far.

My forehead is healing nicely. Itchy. But at least I'm not going to die.

Or maybe I'm just delaying the inevitable because I'm a coward.

Day Forty-Eight

Someone is singing. I wish they'd shut up. I hate opera, especially sung as badly as that. I know the acoustics down in the loading bays is good, but Jesus Christ on a bicycle, stick a sock in it.

Tofu casserole is good. Basil smells divine. Won't you try some?

Day Seventy-Five

There's something I'm supposed to remember. Simple as dust, lost as the stars. Something ELE told me I have to do, must remember.

No, it's gone.

Day Eighty

I've been a little distracted, chasing down stars out the corner of my eyes. And just when I think I have them, my mind wanders. Headaches too. Not good for solving problems, terribly bad for conversation.

Try the tofu steak. It's really good. The bread is coming along too. It's rising more often than not now.

Day Eighty-One

Shh. Sleeping.

The diamonds are dancing against the black velvet, spinning around my head, a constellation, a pattern I should remember, should honour.

I'll pluck them one by one, name each two hundred and thirty one of them, and put them safely away in my pocket. Maybe that will be enough.

Day Ninety-Nine

I've put up the Holiday decorations.

My holidays were never this cold though. I don't remember a white Christmas.

Nope, it's gone. Just remember that it was definitely warmer than this.

I've kept clippings from the atrium, slashes of red and green. The greenery has gone brown at the edges very quickly outside the atrium though.

Christ's Mass. There's no massing of Christ out here. No ghosts between the stars. No angels dancing on the head of those diamonds pinned against the sky.

Computer reports still no uplink. ELE is telling me otherwise, about other things, but we're not on good speaking terms, her and I, so I don't know whether to believe her. I tell her she's nothing but

glorified Christmas lights again. She hasn't been everywhere, the universe is too big for that. I guess I could go look for myself.

Maybe.

No. I prefer it here. Nice and quiet.

I'm tired. The baby potatoes grown especially for this meal were good. There's a pretty dusting of snow on the inner hull.

I need an extra blanket.

Day One Hundred-Four

I'm starting to see my breath all the time. The Christmas decorations are dead, and now the temperature in the Atrium has dropped. I can't afford to lose a crop. There are no emergency rations with all the shuttles popped, and it would take me too long to get the other vats fermenting.

I'm seeing sparkles on the inside of the hull now. Not good.

Day One Hundred-Eight

Even ELE is quiet. I want to sleep, it's so cold.

Day One Hundred-Nine

I've been sleeping closer and closer to the central core in an effort to keep warm. I ended up sleeping on the bridge last night. Well, tried to sleep.

So many bloody lights. I definitely put up too many strands of fairy lights for Christmas, and I haven't found them all yet. Star light, star bright.

Alright, I'm up, I'm up.

Oh.

Computer is not very good at sign language since I've shut down all unnecessary functions. And I don't come in here much.

Well, that puts a dent in things. Literally.

Day One Hundred-Ten

I've been reading up as much as I can on micro-meteor strike and Oh-Two loss, but it's tough. My own personal asteroid belt of diamonds is so pretty. Tracing their orbits with my fingers, how they catch the scant light from the station, and how they genuflect to their

celestial sisters.

The sun is so quiet.

I haven't put on an environment suit yet. I have a bit more time before that's necessary. I'll have to seriously consider soon, as all these extra layers are restricting movement.

I don't know what to do. ELE's no help. How am I supposed to remember what to do?

Day One Hundred-Twelve

Of course I know what I need to do.

But it's so BIG out there.

And they'll be watching. My diamonds, my ghosts. Judging every movement.

I could fry. I could suffer a puncture myself if one of my diamonds got too close. A piece of dust so microscopic I wouldn't even see it coming could blast right through me and I wouldn't even know it was until I was too late.

I could lose my tether and my rubies would join the diamond dance.

At least I would die quietly, only my breath and my screams to keep me company.

But why scream? What a waste of breath.

Oh ELE, what should I do?

Day One Hundred-Thirteen

I don't want to die. I've grown to like it out here.

Day One Hundred-Fifteen

I've chosen one of the long-term EVA suits. None of them fit me properly. I never needed one made to order. But I have all the tubes in the right place even if I have to tape them in place. Gonna hurt like a bitch taking them off, but what's a little baldness compared to death by suffocation and exposure?

All the cargo bays are empty—why didn't I notice that before?—so I have my pick to practise in. Dropped the spin enough so I can do run-throughs in near freefall.

I forgot to tie things down in the Atrium and the mess room. That's

going to be a, err, mess to clean up when I'm done here.
If I'm done.

Day One Hundred-Seventeen

No stars. No ELE. Not even a ghost.

I'm magged to the hull, spread eagle. I don't remember how I got here. I see the cargo bay door open, but I don't remember doing that either.

I'm going to black out and unnecessarily waste my air tanks if I keep breathing like this. I know I have hours upon hours but that knowledge doesn't stop the downward spiral.

I'm black against black. So black this close, this far away.

The computer is running symbols and numbers in the lower left of my visor. I should know this stuff, but I never bothered with it. The computer won't be bothered if I don't come back. It'll carry on, looking for uplink. It'll tell them about ELE if it finds one.

There's a leftover flavour of bile against the metallic air. Whatever I did has already been tubed away. I tongue between tubes and sip at oily water, rinsing out my mouth. The only way is down, and I can't help but gag a little.

It stays down.

My breath is coming faster again as I focus beyond the data stream to the intricate tumble of diamonds. I can usually only see them at sunrise and sunset, six times a day on faster spin, or if I turn on the docking lights. Which is now.

They are eyes. Winking at me. They know.

Stop looking at me like that! It wasn't my fault. You were the ones who panicked.

With a flicker of eyelids and pupils, I unlock the mags and flip over. Graceful is an inadequate descriptor. Floundering, elephantine maybe. But what the hell, no one is here to give me a gymnastics score.

My face is mere millimetres from the metal desert of the hull. This close, it takes me minutes to crawl across symbols I can't process. I can see pits and close calls. I could have been a peeping tom.

I could stand up. If I wanted to. Everyone must pass an EVA test to get out here. But what the hell would *I* do with a skill like that, two

hundred and thirty-first in line to the president?

Well, there you go then. The improbable made possible.

I can only hear the hiss of my air. Just the sort of silence I've always enjoyed. Now that I have it, you can take it back thanks.

ELE watches from the other side of the station, her tiny mass a millstone pulling on my feet, my mind. A big empty eye to the universe. I'm waiting, she whispers.

I say nothing. I'm not going to be the one to break this spell.

I finally reach the plate in the hull the computer shows me as the offender with intersecting green lines. I can't see anything so I switch between spectrums... and oh, there we go. A thin stream, barely a hair's breadth, from a pore blacker against the black. So tiny you'd almost think it couldn't do that much damage, it couldn't kill.

I rest again, nano-glass the only thing separating my kiss from the metal, spreading my body across the hole. Perhaps I could stay here; this would be a sufficient repair.

No, says ELE. It would not.

I'm not used to these gloves, no matter how much I've practised. It wasn't enough. I fumble the flashpoint welder and things go black again as it spins away after a soundless bounce off the metal.

That's it. I'm done.

Until a thump on my leg.

Of course. The welder is attached to my tool belt by a retractable nano-fibre cord.

I'm going to design better gloves. Add it to the growing list of things To Do. I have the time. Now. They'll thank me for it, I'm sure.

When I'm done, I stop to watch the stars waltz.

I can hear them singing my praises.

I bow.

Day One Hundred-Eighteen

I don't know how I'm back inside, but I am. I sleep in my suit because it's still too cold and I'm too tired to take the damn thing off.

Day One Hundred-Nineteen

My fingers keep cramping.

The suit stinks

But at least I can take the helmet off.
My ears sting with the cold.
I've found the corresponding puncture on the inner hull, with the help of the computer.
The welder keeps moving, I can't make it stop.
Stupid thing.
There we go. Place, point, aim, shoot.
Way to go. You're a damn hero.
To whom? For what?
Cry. Laugh. Same thing.

Day One Hundred Twenty-two

I've lost about two-thirds of the Atrium. I won't go hungry, but it'll be a bit lean and a lot of tofu until I can restart the soil and get another crop going.

I'll have to shut off most sections of Silentia until the oxygen mix resets.

Boring. But at least I make sure I can visit ELE.

We sit in quiet contemplation.

After a while, ELE asks me why I did this.

Thinking has never been my strong suit.

Maybe I like the quiet. Maybe I'm not ready to become a constellation yet.

No. It's what I *had* to do.

You deserve a second chance ELE.

At least you have taught me patience.

Day One Hundred Twenty-Five

Yep, it's gonna take a while to clean up the mess and the bridge and the captain's quarters, but dammit Silentia, you deserve it.

Day Two Hundred-One

Reading for pleasure? What a bizarre concept.

Alright, I'll try to put the words in the right order.

What do you think ELE? What should I read?

Science Fiction? That's funny.

Day Two Hundred Thirty-Three

What's my name again?

Doesn't matter. No one to use it. ELE's not into that sort of thing.

Day Three Hundred Sixty-Four

A star has moved out of near orbit. The computer is telling me it's getting bigger.

It takes me a while, but I eventually realize that the reason it's taking so long to move is because it's so far away. It's a long way off, but it's coming. Maths was never my strong suit.

And there's a whisper from an uplink.

Something about an apology.

They're useless, because stars shouldn't talk back.

Something about regret.

I've never had time for that. It would have killed me.

Something about not knowing.

Yeah, they should have been better prepared.

Do they know about you ELE? Practise your nice words.

Day Three Hundred Sixty-Five

I can't.

I won't go down there.

But I must.

ELE heard they were coming. She's ready. Her voice is no more a whisper. She's almost here, almost pulled her way through. She won't let me go now. She's trying to be kind.

Voices on both sides. I am the medium. My mouth is full of salt.

There's something in a drop cradle.