

EXIGENCY

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SAMPLE

1.0

The cursor bobbed in the air before her: `deep purple_ foliage`. She opened her bio eye and unblurred the background in her prosthetic *fone* eye. Paragraphs of text floated with Minnie’s gaze as she studied the view from her cabin’s patio. Blue salvia shrubs flanked the shaded cobblestone path from the bottom of the patio stairs, all the way down to the lake. Just above the distant hillside vineyards, the sun shone at late afternoon, its rays bouncing from the lake’s mellow ripples to the blossoming flowers.

Among all the pristine scenery, the salvia stood out to her. Blue flowers—*blaue Blume*—symbols of hope and beauty, of love and desire, of the infinite and unreachable. Yes, blue would work much better than purple. A smidge transcendental, but screw it. If Minnie’s readers caught it, great. If they interpreted the color as arbitrary, so be it. The rest of her essay should prove explicit enough for its intended audience.

Minnie rested her head against the lounge chair back and closed both eyes. The doc re-sharpened before her, cursor still bouncing: `deep purple_ foliage`. She selected purple and recursed for each instance.

Behind Minnie, beyond the wide-open threshold leading into her cabin’s living room, wee nails *tik-tik-tik’d* across the hardwood floor. She turned just as her pet ferret, Noodle, skittered onto the patio’s decking, and leapt up onto Minnie’s lap.

Noodle wriggled his pointy face into her neck and said, “Are you still working?”

Too ticklish, she pulled him back down to her legs and stroked his back. “Yeah, I have to get this essay done before group. At least the first draft.”

“What’s it about?”

“Context, perspective, and scale. I think it’s pretty solid so far, but who knows if anyone will actually read it.”

Uncharacteristic silence from Noodle. He rested his chin on his fist. Curious, Minnie glanced at the clock in her fone and waited while rubbing his ears. His anthropomorphized face conveyed deep contemplation.

He finally broke the silence. “So you’re feeling *down* about that?” He nodded encouragement, brow furrowed: *This is a safe place for sharing.*

Minnie smiled and went along with it. “Well, *Doctor* ... I wouldn’t say *down*. Just, I don’t know, more wondering than anything else, I guess. I’m supposed to produce these things bimonthly.”

“And you came *here* to work,” Noodle went on, a flit of his tiny paw toward the lake and mountains. “Not so *confined* as the station?”

Minnie’s amusement hiccupped. What the hell was Noodle going on about? Since when did he give two licks about the station? Confined? And then she realized exactly what was happening.

She rolled him onto his back and glowered. “*Et tu, ferret?*”

“I’m sorry!” He pleaded. “I couldn’t help it! It wasn’t me! Some trigger ... You must’ve said something flagged!”

“I’m going to go work in peace.” She pulled up the game’s main menu. “You know, what I came *here* for.”

Noodle attempted a final apology as he, and the rest of the game app, dissolved before Minnie.

She opened her eyes. The lights in her quarters undimmed.

Sliding out of bed, she growl-sighed. Was nothing sacred? With all the assessments and measures in place, did the station’s psych monitors really need to be invading her personal game? Hijack one of her pets? She was the *last* person on the station to consider at-risk.

Plopping down at her desk, she pulled on her headphones.

She wondered, had it been an *automated* psych probe talking through Noodle, or had John set it up? If it was automated, fine. At least it wouldn’t show up on some report. More likely the case. Though she could see John sitting in his command office with nothing better to do than setup new monitors: Minerva Sotiras - monitor for signs of depression, cleithrophobia, and full-blown eye-twitch spacewack.

Poor Nood, she thought. He thinks I’m pissed at him.

Later. Noodle would have to wait. The essay was almost done, and just north of fifteen minutes remained before her weekly group session.

She grabbed the stereo lens from her desk and popped it over her bio eye. The doc opened before her, floating in the recessed nook above her desk, flanked by her preferred editing tools. Movement caught her eye and she shifted focus past a patch of text in her second paragraph. Beyond her desk window’s frame, starry black space gave way to the browns, teals, and pinks of Epsilon C’s dominant landmass. Within seconds, the planet eclipsed Minnie’s view of open space.

“No thank you, Northern Hemisphere.” She said, and blurred out everything in the doc’s background.

Revision mode enabled, Minnie picked up where she’d left off back on her patio.

Where was I? Ah, right ... blue flowers.

“Edit all. Purple to blue.”

She reread the passage.

Pointing downward from low orbit, a scope provides a bird’s-eye view of a gently sloped hill, its surface blanketed with deep blue foliage half-lit by a setting sun. A tranquil scene.

The scope zooms out, revealing the blue hill is the last of its kind. The surrounding area is blackened by fire, dense smoke billows westward, and orange flames rapidly converge on the lone blue circle. A scene of destruction and potentially imminent extinction.

The scope zooms back in, beyond the bird’s-eye view, to a microscopic level, exposing a deadly toxin hidden in the lovely blue flowers’ pollen. Pulling out again, this time to a few miles overhead, a group of intelligent beings is revealed to the east, torches at their feet as they stand upwind, watching the last of the deadly blue flowers blow away as distant smoke. A scene of survival, of controlling one’s destiny, of tragedy aversion.

Focus shifts west, to another people, dead and dying from the poisonous smoke unleashed by their enemies. A war scene.

And finally, zooming out once more, out beyond even the scope, a vast planet is seen teeming with life, two moons circling, along with a looming space station full of scientists from a distant solar system. A scene of learning—of discovery.

Scale. This is what Foster Dill Norte referred to when he coined the term scientific depth-of-field. What we now call simply dof. As a mental footnote, you may wish to commit one of my favorite FDN quotes to memory: “Context is everything, context can be nothing, scale is infinite.”

Minnie saved her work, set the stereo lens on the desk, and then navigated to the playback options in her fone. She selected the Sindy voice to read it back to her. Minnie had always wished she could pull off Sindy’s smooth, authoritative-yet-dispassionate tone. Instead, she thought her exhilaration always made her sound like a looner.

Minnie selected her desk speakers for playback.

Like all of the synthetic voices, Sindy’s Modern English was impeccable. “It can be challenging for observers to fully see the cosms, both micro- and macro-, and so one must always predefine the *scale* of a particular research set—the focal length of the scope, the depth of the optics, the time period with hard-start and hard-end, etset. And they must always account for *themselves*, the observers. It’s all too common for the researcher to exclude herself from a cosm, as if she’s but an intangible set of eyes absorbing information, identifying patterns, performing measurements, recording statistics. In example two-point-seven, a hypothetical researcher attempted to pluck individual factors from the chaos and arrange them into an order that she understands. This very act marries the observer to the recorded cosm.”

“Pause,” Minnie said and brought the text back up on her fone. “Edit. Marries to married. Commit.”

She set the cursor at the beginning of the last sentence and told Sindy to start again.

“This very act married the observer to the recorded cosm. This isn’t necessarily a problem, nor should one attempt to avoid it. We must simply be *aware* of ourselves during review and later stages of research. Unlike the heavily starched foundational research papers of the past, today’s scientists shouldn’t strive for invisibility, papers appearing as if nature herself spewed them out: ‘Here’s a bunch of data about ME: Nature!’ No, the observer should be represented nearly as much as the observation. Further, we mustn’t spend too much time at a single scale, prioritizing macro levels, as if this would allow one to fully grasp essential context. *All* levels are equally critical to capture.

“Case in point: Pointing downward from low orbit, a scope provides a bird’s-eye view of a gently sloped hill, its surface blanketed with deep blue foliage half-lit by a setting sun. A tranq—”

The Sindy voice paused dictation as a schedule reminder popped up in front of the essay text.

ALERTS: Group - 5 MIN

The alert faded to a countdown clock: 4:59, 4:58, before Minnie selected DISMISS. She saved her work, copied it to two of her lockers, and slid her feet into her slippers. Walking to the hatch, she opened a new message to Aether.

MINNIE: Yay group. Let the healing begin.

She received a near-instant reply:

AETHER: See you in a few.

Minnie exited her quarters into the hall, then scaled the ladder to the main tube. Gravity released her body, and she glided down to the hygiene sub-bay. Even after eight months, there was still something about her relationship with Aether that sent her backsliding into schoolgirl giddiness. And interacting with Aether around everyone else, in a supposedly professional setting, recalled the days when the pair harbored a thrilling secret.

Everyone knew now, of course—Aether had months ago moved out of her shared quarters with John Li and into Minnie’s unit—and more than one horribly uncomfortable group session had been dedicated to the relationship transition.

These conversations had been by far the most awkward of the entire mission, and not only for the three individuals directly involved, but for the rest of the crew, as well. As the current mission commander, John was in charge of the weekly group sessions. He could’ve recused himself, but the backup group moderator was the assistant commander: his *wife*, Aether.

Fortunately for the station’s nine inhabitants, John and Aether were the most mature, reasonable, and qualified—if such a thing were possible—to handle a divorce. They’d agreed some time before launch that if anything happened between them, the break-up’s initiator would move into the unused tenth personal quarters.

But to Minnie’s gratification, the tenth personal quarters had been repurposed as a storage unit, and John allowed Aether to move in with Minnie. There was no third person in line for such decisions. John and Aether’s divorce pretty much exemplified why the mission commander shouldn’t be in a relationship with a crewmember, let alone their second-in-command. Not that

they'd acquired their positions by choice. Both were elected by crew vote and each had voted for the other as mission commander during the past two elections.

"Minerva," John said as Minnie entered the common room.

"Yes?" Minnie snapped, not intending to come off rude, but he'd surprised her. When uttered by him, exasperating things tended to follow her name.

"*Welcome,*" he said, letting her know it's all he'd meant. Disappointment soured his face.

Minnie offered an apologetic smile and sat down at the round, bamboo table. She hated how she came off around him lately, and Aether knew it was an insecurity thing. She'd told Minnie numerous times how transparent Minnie was in John's presence.

"*Sometimes you act like he's going to snatch me back at any second,*" Aether had said one night. "*As if I'd have no say in it.*"

"*Maybe sometimes I'm afraid you'll want to,*" Minnie had replied. "*That one day you'll wake up and think 'What have I done?' and run screaming back to him.*"

"*Maybe I will,*" Aether had said. "*But no time soon.*" She'd grinned a clever grin.

"*Oh, it's safe for me to feel settled for at least a few days?*"

"*Maybe even a week.*"

Qin brushed by Minnie and plopped into the stool next to her.

Minnie elbowed him. "Sup, Chinstrap?"

His eyes bulged, staring at, yet not through, the dark, panoramic window across the room. "Hang on ... this guy's almost dead..."

Minnie waved a hand in front of him. "Does this mess you up? Am I messing you up? Watch out!"

Flustered, Qin swatted her arm away, shut his eyes, and scooted to the edge of his seat. "Aw, what? Come on! I ... Oh, how you suck, Minnie."

She grinned, wide-eyed. "No way, did you die? Did I really gank it? *Tell* me I got you killed."

He glared at her. "No, I got him. But *zero* bonus."

"Good enough," she said, cozing back into her seat. "I'll take it. Send me a screencap?"

Qin deadpanned his decline.

All two meters of Tom's lanky stature ambled around the table.

"Sup, Blondie?" Minnie said.

Tom had evidently witnessed the successful ganking of Qin's game, and gave Minnie a congratulatory nod as he sat. She dipped her head in return.

"Good afternoon, my pretties," Aether said from the doorway.

Minnie descended the ladder from Wheel A to the lab pods. One of her probes had M'd her a proximity alert. She had more than three hundred of them distributed across Threck Country, but she recognized this probe's unique identifier the moment it appeared in her fone:

ALERTS: MIN1311 – 1m PROXIMITY – IL

Under different circumstances—those occurring more than two weeks ago—Minnie would have been concerned that an intelligent lifeform had come within one meter of an observation unit. But this particular OU, originally intended for a much less precarious position outside the densely populated Threck City, happened to lose a sail during its early-morning descent, landing just off a stone walkway outside the main wall. Panicked, Minnie had prepared to send an incident report to John and Aether (protocol required the mission commander and assistant commander be notified of much lessor predicaments. But she'd paused mid-compose.

Minnie had waited for the station's next flyover and proceeded to reposition one of the optical arrays, zooming in to estimate the probe's visibility to passers-by. She'd seen in the display that the remaining sails had dissolved upon landing, and the porous, camouflaged outer shell blended well with the surrounding mulch and soil. What if she gave it a day to see what it could gather? The team had never had eyes and ears in so busy an area.

Two weeks and no less than 1,000 IL proximity alerts later, MIN1311 had provided a windfall of data—data that would've taken months, possibly years, to gather with more discreetly placed probes. Minnie had been able to fill in thousands of gaps in the City dialect, capturing slang, idioms, and much more casual conversation than the very formal language she'd been able to record during public assemblies.

Ever watchful, John had inquired about MIN1311 the day after it landed.

Minnie had lied. "It's nowhere of concern right now, but I'm going to have its internals destruct after nightfall." She hadn't said *that* nightfall.

Two days later, she received an M:

JOHN: Is MIN1311 taken care of?

She'd replied, taking advantage of the ambiguous wording: Yes, it is.

She didn't know how long she planned to keep it there observing. Indefinitely? She'd be caught for sure. But she'd performed multiple risk assessments! If a Threck noticed the probe and picked it up, the internals would instantly self-destruct, leaving only a hollow, charred core within the shell. The Threck might keep it as an interesting find, show it to acquaintances. Worst case, the object would be given to a Threck with geological knowledge. Recognizing the shell's foreign material, they'd tool it open, revealing the burnt core and minute fragments of internals. Their most likely final analysis: some sort of meteorite.

So what was the big deal? After all, the probes were designed with the assumption that an IL would eventually discover one and crack it open.

Minnie stepped from the ladder's last rung to the lab floor, and noticed Ish sitting in her own lab area across from Minnie's, her hands in a combox, manipulating some object on the planet

surface. A workaholic even more obsessive than Minnie, Ish had apparently rushed straight here after group.

Ishtab Soleymani was the mission's lead specialist on the primitive Hynka race that dominated the northern hemisphere of Epsilon C, or *Epsy*, as it had come to be known. Though the Hynka were brutal predators, Ish was extremely protective of them. She even refused to call them *Hynka*.

The Threck, for whom Minnie was lead specialist, had recently begun dabbling in transoceanic exploration, and at some point encountered these terrifying behemoths. They branded the creatures "savages": *Hynka*. At the time, as Ish had yet to determine a single name by which the team could refer to her ILs, the Threck word became the default. Once Ish finally ascertained what her darling predators called themselves, *Hynka* had already become ingrained in the team's heads. And besides, the hissing, guttural *Oss-Khoss* just didn't roll well off the human tongue. Minnie didn't think the bloodthirsty beasts would be all that offended.

She'd once told Ish, "Go down and stand in front of one of those things and see if *Oss-Khoss* gets you devoured any slower, or with more compassion, than *Hynka*."

Petite, doe-eyed Ish had merely stared at Minnie with a thoughtful air, seemingly perplexed by the notion that standing before a towering, chest-heaving, wheezing, drooling Hynka would be anything other than a dream come true. In that species, Minnie surmised, Ish saw only a brilliant hunting machine—the highly successful top of the food chain in a land the size of Eurasia.

Minnie (and everyone else) observed a hulking, too-fast, energy-squandering, gorillagator beast that owed its survival to the rapid breeding and bounteous litters of a few of its surviving prey species. And that balance wouldn't last. The Hynka population continued to maintain steady growth and dispersion. Within 200 years they'd eat their way to their own extinction, leaving behind a vast, fertile land for Threck expansion. It was inevitable. There simply weren't enough huntable calories to sustain the population once its size doubled, and the beasts didn't appear to be within a thousand years of agriculture.

Minnie approached Ishtab's combox and peered over her shoulder at the screen. "Whatcha got there?"

Ish was surprised, but thrilled to answer. "It's actually a discarded tool. I've got vids of a female using it to pry roots away from a burrow, and then as an extension to spear the hiding rodent inside."

"Aww. Poor bunny."

Ish glared. "Is it more humane how your people consume living worms or suffocate their fish?"

Minnie shrugged. "Just saying poor bunny. Got a soft spot for fur. Find me a fuzzy Hynka and I'll 'awww' right there with you as it devours its own brother's guts." She turned to go, ignoring Ish's stammered protest.

"Siblings would never ... Conspecific cannibalism isn't..."

At her main console, Minnie accessed her alerting system and cleared the queued probe events. She pulled up the language database and looked at the breakdowns. 114 new words or usages. Reviewing them in their recorded context, she felt that same elated ear buzz she'd enjoyed over the past two weeks. As usual, a few of the definition suggestions were a little off, but she listened to the audio, watched the Threcks' body language in the vids, and input her corrections. The computer always had difficulty pairing gestures with audibles to form single words. Not only were the Threck dependent upon head and arm movements to convey meaning

and inflection, the identical word could have two entirely different meanings if spoken during inhale or exhale.

After six playbacks, Minnie discovered a new modifier: a sort of doubletake head gesture with a subtle shrug. “I miss those days” became “I mourn [that person].”

As she had yesterday and the day before, Minnie decided she’d kill the probe *tomorrow*.

* * *

Minnie gnawed a chewstick while watching from their bed as Aether sponged her face in the mirror. Her eyes perused Aether’s long body in the dim light.

“You have a bruise on your butt,” Minnie said.

Aether twisted and observed it in the mirror. “Ooh, that’s an ugly one. That stupid workbench in Engineering. On the left when you enter.”

“It’s crazy how high your butt is. That corner always gets me on the waist. Hurry up.”

Aether leaned into the refresher nook, the soft hiss of microjets as it dried her face.

Minnie rolled onto her back and stared at the perforated ceiling. “How about that drama in group today? Pablo and Zisa.”

“They worked it out well.” Getting Aether to engage in petty gossip always proved challenging. She tossed back a swig of mouthwash and swished it around in her mouth.

“Yeah, eventually, but *sexual harassment*? Really? He complimented her. I was there when it happened.” Minnie deepened her voice. ““Oh, hey Zees. Been putting in extra time on the legger?””

Aether spat the mouthwash in the sink. “Well, it does imply he’s just looked over her body, and she’s always been sensitive to that sort of thing. *We* all know he was only talking about her legs, but he should know better with her. It’s over though. What matters is they’re still friends, and he’ll be more conscious in the future.”

Minnie’s gaze had lost its focus at some point, the ceiling holes blending and merging with the glazed metal’s faux wood coating. What time was it in Threck City?

Aether crawled into bed.

Minnie rolled on her side to face Aether and engage, but additional language advancements could be happening right that second. Her mislaid observation unit was down there, hard at work, like some tireless assistant working for her day and night. Joy mingled, in equal portion, with her fear of being caught. She wanted so badly to tell Aether about the OU, but it’d put Aether in a bad spot having to either betray Minnie or lie to John. Better she didn’t know.

“Pensive face,” Aether said, and tried to mirror Minnie’s expression. “You’re worried about what to do for my birthday, aren’t you?”

Uh-oh, is it this week?

Minnie pulled up the calendar app. “Yeah ... exactly. You psychs just see right through a person, don’t you?” Two days away. She’d have to make her something. Something physical.

Aether squinted at her. “You just opened your calendar.”

“Yeah, busted. But wow! You’re fifty-five!”

Aether’s speechless face rapidly morphed to a quivering stink-eye. “*Chron-age*? How ... *dare* ... you!” She pushed Minnie’s shoulder back and climbed atop her, pinning Minnie’s wrists into the mattress. “You just violated rule number one, m’lady.”

“Well hello there, Ms. Sensitivity,” Minnie beamed, relishing the moment. “Shall we hack into the system and edit this inconsiderate birth year entry?”

“Not a bad idea, actually. Nineteen years in a metabed equates to around two years of physical aging, so ... just subtract seventeen years from both of us.” Aether sat back, releasing Minnie’s wrists.

“Nah, I’m okay being forty-five. So much *wisdom* tied to that number. But man, oh, man, *fifty-five!* Talk about wisdom.” Minnie sighed with mock reverence. “Verily, thine eyes hath beheld such wonders.”

Their gazes locked—a battle of penetrating stares that gradually devolved into juvenile face-making.

Aether finally gave in and flopped back down beside her. “So, what were you *really* stewing on?”

Can’t tell her about the probe...

“Oh, just wondering how many other teams were actually reading my research guides. I know I won’t receive feedback from the first installment for another couple years.”

“Well, *we* all think it’s brilliant. Everything you’ve published so far. And you know I’m not just saying that. Tom and Pablo, even as backups, absolutely incorporate your methods. I’m sure Ish, too.”

Minnie popped her eyebrows. “Ish? Seriously? You think she’d read a word of something *I* wrote?”

A note of disappointment in Aether’s face. “She looks up to you; it’s just hard for you to see past the wall she’s built up. But you can change that. I’ve always said you can change that.”

“You say the same thing about John.”

“And I mean it!” Aether said, sitting up. “You were thinking about him again, weren’t you?”

Oh jeez. Come on.

“I was so not ... Can we not—”

Aether stroked Minnie’s arm. “I really think you need to get it out more. Talk to *me* more. Tell me what you dislike about him. Tell me what frustrates you. I’d rather do it here, with you, then have it rear up in the middle of group or assembly.”

Minnie sat up and faced her. “Listen. Really hear me right now. You see me thinking, or I’m frowning or something—chances are, I’m down there.” Minnie nodded out the window to the violet planet as it rolled by. “I’m not like I was eight months ago. I don’t think about him anymore. Honestly. Do you believe me?”

“Of course I believe you.”

“Thank you.”

They sat quietly, sharing a smile. Aether tilted her head a little. She was waiting. She was doing that psych thing where you just wait for the patient to say more. But it wasn’t going to work on Minnie. She was immune to such transparent tactics. Minnie would simply stare at all that exposed olive skin and wait it out, thinking other thoughts.

Minnie broke the silence. “You *know* he has thoughts, though—that he misses you.” Aether raised her eyebrows. “And I *guarantee* he has vids of you in his fone. Gross stuff. He could be watching them *any* time, you standing there right in front of him, and you’d have no idea he was overlaying the real you with some ... some—”

Aether blinked, stunned. “He’s not like that.”

“Of course not.”

The soft monotone of an impending announcement sounded in Minnie’s ear. She could see Aether got it too.

Qin’s voice spoke in their ears. “Supply pod on final approach.”

Minnie frowned. “Has it been six months? What day is it?”

Aether smirked and crawled out of bed, grabbing clothes from the closet. “It’s the fourth. Two days from my birthday, *ahem, ahem*. Time flies, right?” She dressed and pulled on her runners. “I’m just going to check on them; make sure everything’s good, okay? He’s showing Ish how to run final approach. We’ll resume this vid business when I get back.”

“No, please, I’m done talking. Disregard everything I just said. Seriously. Just hurry back, you.”

Aether stroked Minnie’s sandy hair, the way Minnie liked, the way her father used to, and then left the room.

Lying back, Minnie scolded herself once more for letting the crap in her head come out of her mouth. Even if asked directly, she needed to lie. And why couldn’t Aether ask about something else? Ask her about the Threck and Minnie would blab her ear off for hours! Ask her more about Ish! That was actually kind of eye-opening for a second. Maybe Ish’s standoffishness was a direct result of Minnie’s reactions to Ish’s standoffishness. Maybe if Minnie was nicer, Ish would relax and act somewhat normal. Hell, violate policy and ask her about *food*.

Minnie felt a sudden wave of ghost hunger and clutched her belly skin. She felt around the sheets and under her pillow, finding the chewstick beneath. Back in her mouth it went. She considered opening her game to sneak a virtual snack. It was strictly forbidden, of course, but Qin had showed her how to trick the system into presenting food. It even activated scent receptors.

But no good would come of it. She had to think like a recovering alcoholic. The just-a-little-sip mentality was highly destructive.

Like the eight other individuals on the station and the dozens of others sent to distant planets on similar missions, she hadn’t consumed a solid for almost 27 years. Meds in the water shut down the majority of the digestive process, nutrients and calories supplied by supplements also infused in the water. It was the most extreme part of training and transition on Earth, and it wasn’t optional. Quite simply, there existed no practical way to feed a team of 8-12 people on an orbiter, light years from home, for the rest of their lives.

Even though the meds blocked the processes and signals that led to hunger sensations, it was difficult to comprehend the psychological impacts of food, the social importance of eating. The teams still gathered twice daily for this very reason. “Assembly” remained one of the few mandatory entries in everyone’s calendars, despite the fact that they drank from their canteens throughout the day. You sat around a table, drank your water, socialized. Many of them munched on chewsticks. There was nothing to swallow, but they kept the teeth and gums healthy, and satisfied latent oral fixations. Some avoided chewsticks as they only reminded them of what they couldn’t have, preferring to utilize them as any other hygiene tool before bed.

In training, everyone had been put on the meds right away, meals tapered and cut off two weeks in. Many brilliant, high-potential candidates dropped out at that stage, dreams shattered over food. Others washed out for the sudden stark reality of a one-way trip. They’d thought they could handle leaving home forever: sever ties, say good-bye. But when it came down to it, a truly unique psyche was required to accept that daunting future and consistently remain on task.

Even though she was close with her father, Minnie had always been fine with leaving him, and likewise, he with her. He’d said he wished they could both go off to different ends of the Orion Spur, each knowing the other was fulfilling their greatest dreams. But he was too old for the program, and so they’d spoken their tearless, ecstatic goodbyes when he dropped her off at the training center. She was 16. As the weeks passed, she found herself only vaguely troubled by

the realization of what she missed most about her father: the way he'd stroke her hair until she fell asleep.

How fortunate was she, Minnie thought, having found *love* on a journey she expected to live out alone? And how sad was it for John Li, who came with his wife—the person he believed he'd share the rest of his life with—to end up alone, and with no way home? Perhaps Minnie could forgive him a yank or two as he watched those vids of him and Aether.

"He's not like that!"

BS. He's got vids.

Minnie's dulling thoughts shifted to the surface, to Threck City, the stirring architecture, the grand harbor, their Thinkers and artists, their theories about the stars and mathematics, the Fishers out at sea riding on behemoth *afvriks* trained as fishing boats. She imagined life in the city, and, despite Aether's absence, eventually fell asleep.

John Li reclined in his office chair, perusing the incoming pod's inventory. Scrolling past the usuals—supplements, meds, power cells—to the extras section, he quickly scanned for the object of his interest: fone upgrades.

John's fone had been giving him persistent pain for months. Pablo had pulled it out and run diagnostics but found nothing wrong. John remembered the look on Angela's face when she entered sick bay and saw John's hollow right eye socket. He'd watched with his left eye, the real one, as she blinked and rubbed her own fone eye. It seemed that despite their complete dependence on the technology, not many liked to be reminded of their implants, or the amputated bio eye they'd replaced.

"I think it's in your housing," Pablo had said. "Not the fone itself. Don't see any physio problems. Maybe a firmware upgrade will alleviate though ... whenever they come ..."

John had nodded and thanked him. Pablo didn't think it a critical issue because John didn't convey it as such. "Some occasional pulsing behind the cavity," John had described.

"How bad? Would you consider it debilitating? When it's at its worst?"

John had forced a convincing laugh. "Not remotely. Just something I thought I'd put on your radar." Would it have helped to describe the pain as that of a thumb pressing in on the fone, harder and deeper? The sensation of building pressure, ever threatening to burst?

John had had to live with the consequences of downplaying his pain, not the least of which was a lack of meds. Without a reportable override, Pablo was the only one who could program adjustments to crewmembers' water.

The throbbing behind John's fone continued as he used the source of his pain to drill down into the pod's tech manifest. He held his breath as it popped into view before him, virtually hovering in the air a dozen centimeters away.

Brand: LEN Model: LEFONE 8.5 SW: 5.366 FW: 5.30

Image: NS23-9 QTY: 12

Their current software and firmware were in the 3s, so he looked forward to whatever improvements two generations had to offer.

He switched back to the medical supplies in search of ocular housings, but found none. The chances had been slim, anyway. Adult housings were considered permanent, and new fones were expected to be backwards compatible all the way to the original 21st Century housings. Not many people were willing to take the risk, or invest in the surgery required. Once your housing was installed, replacing a fone could technically be done by yourself in a mirror, albeit unsanitary.

On Earth, while the vast majority preferred a perfect color match (rendering an implanted fone indistinguishable from a bio eye), others opted for bold-colored irises, wearing matched contact lenses over their bio eye. Kids used them as fashion accessories, choosing fones not for quality or functionality, but for the special gimmicks the off-brands used to entice them, such as animated color-shifting irises, or shocking, full coloration such as all black or all red. Before

entering training, John remembered seeing a teenager at the airport with a repeating message scrolling across his fone eye: JAX, MEDZ, SONDZ—a possibly ironic update to “sex, drugs, and rock n’ roll.”

27 years later, he couldn’t imagine what gimmicks the manufacturers and modders had come up with since. He was excited, however, to learn what functional enhancements had been achieved 20 years ago, back when the incoming pod launched from Earth.

Upgrades brought not only augmented software, but also typically included higher resolution pic and vid capability, greater magnification in binoc mode, occasionally new visual spectrums beyond the standard thermo, infra, kinetic, and mag. New versions of ear modules were rarely released, as they too required a surgical installation.

John flicked through his contacts to Qin and selected VOICE. The receiver in his ear activated.

“Hey, what’s your best guess on when the pod will be ready for unloading?”

Qin replied, “We don’t even have visual yet, but Ish has established control. Ish? ... She says it’s still decelerating ... maybe a few hours before docking.”

“Great, thanks. How’s she doing with those controls? Comfortable?”

“Totally.”

John flipped to his calendar and sent an open appointment request to Pablo, flagging “asap” for the time.

Less than a minute later, John received an acceptance M for tomorrow, 0900. Pablo had included a note:

PABLO: That housing still bothering you?

JOHN: Often enough to make me cut in line like a jerk. But anytime in the next week is fine, really.

Why? John rebuked himself. *Why is it fine? Why can’t you just say “I need this.”?*

Aether had put up with it as long as she could, among other issues. How many times had he told her “whatever you want” after she specifically asked him to never utter those words again? When it came to the mission, or to a task at hand, he led without hesitation. But if it had to do with him—something personal—there was a sort of block there.

PABLO: We’ll do it tomorrow. My first open slot. You will be the guinea pig. I just read the upgrades are 2 generations newer!

Thank you, thank you, thank you! John shouted in his head, but replied with a nonchalant:

JOHN: Whatever works...Thanks!

John shut off his fone and Optical Pass-Through engaged. Everyone was required to shut down into OPT for at least 4 hours a day, but John knew that many slept with their fones still on. It wasn’t healthy. He wished he could force a settings change in everybody’s devices, but that would only further outrage those with whom his relationship was often precarious. With the amount of complaints Aether received from disgruntled crewmembers, it was a wonder how John managed reelection to a second term as mission commander. He supposed that, when it came to elections, he was the known quantity, or the most desirable of the undesirables.

The least undesirable?

With his fone off, the pain had subsided a small amount. These reprieves were his primary source of optimism when it came to the upgrade. Likewise, when Pablo had removed the fone, John's discomfort vanished entirely.

He leaned the recliner farther back and closed his eyelids. Somehow the pain felt more bearable knowing this could be the last time he'd have to sleep with it.

* * *

The piercing blare of the emergency alarm plucked Minnie from her dream.

A drill at this hour? What a hole!

The room lurched beneath her, followed by a violent vibration. Yellow and green lights strobed above her bed. She clung to a handhold and tried to open the hatch, but the actuator didn't respond. Rotation shift. The personal quarters cylinder was slowing down. They'd lose gravity soon.

A synth voice announced through the PA: "This is not a drill. This is not a drill. Exigency procedures. Exigency procedures. This is not a drill ..."

Minnie hurriedly dressed as she activated her fone to call Aether.

ALERTS: Wireless unavailable.

Crap! Crap! Crap! It's real!

She leapt to the window shade and pulled it open. Bits of debris, small and large, streamed by. Planet Epsy streaked by the window at an arcing diagonal. Something had exploded or impacted the sta—

The supply pod!

Minnie accessed her fone's settings and requested a direct connection to Aether. She accepted a few seconds later and an undelivered M from one minute earlier popped up.

AETHER: Minnie, we are in full exigency. Go to Wheel A and your assigned EV. I'll see you on the surface. I love you.

MINNIE: What happened?!

AETHER: Supply pod impact, hull breach, fire's out but envr + cooling are inop. We have 8 mins.

MINNIE: Backups? BH?

AETHER: Minerva, go to your EV NOW.

Minnie's mind raced. What if it was something she could fix? What about the backup habitat? Why were they jumping straight to surface evac? It was last on the list of exigency measures. Aether didn't want to hear any of it, but she was as susceptible as anyone to groupthink. Someone said "We have no other options!" and everyone listened. It was probably John, and no one would think to challenge him in an emergency. People listened for anyone with an authoritative tone, and complied without question.

Minnie slid open one of the emergency panels and grabbed a breather, pulling it over her head, and pressing it to seal.

Back to the hatch.

The mechanism override clicked into place and Minnie forced the door into the bulkhead. The tube was still pressurized. She climbed the ladder, her weight shifting right and then left as

the station's irregular rotation toyed with gravity. At the top of the tube, she peered out the window in the hatch to the long duct that led to the backup habitat. One entire side of its solar array had been disintegrated, and the escape duct had clearly been breached.

That doesn't mean we can't use it! Minnie yelled in her head. *We only need suits!*

She opened a new M to Aether.

MINNIE: BH intact. Escape duct breached but passable.

AETHER: 3 mins Minerva.

MINNIE: Why EVs?! This is not protocol!

AETHER: Listen in 10 seconds. Sound of EV containing Qin and ME.

Aether severed their fone link.

“No!”

Aether knew exactly how to force her compliance. Epsy's surface was a permanent refuge. Once Aether's EV launched, the only way Minnie would see her again would be to do the same: abandon ship in one of the pre-programmed EVs, all the way down to the rally point in Threck Country. And Minnie was the one responsible for first contact—the only one with a real handle on the language. Even Tom, her backup, had hardly bothered to learn the spoken language. If the duty fell to him, he'd have to fumble his way around the Livetrans app.

The ladder began to vibrate with a new frequency, followed by the loud *clang* of retracting anchors as inverted electromagnets blasted an EV from its bay. Aether was off. And despite the screaming in her head, Minnie knew she had no choice but to follow. She descended the ladder, fighting intense gravity shifts, until she dropped into the hygiene pod. Loose articles filled the zero-grav air, drifting around like a slomo insect swarm.

Minnie bounced from floor to ceiling to bulkhead, swatting away water droplets, razors and combs, washcloths, until she reached the tube to Wheel A. As she grabbed the first rung, another telling vibration began. She pulled herself into the tube and looked out the window.

Clang!

To her horror, she watched an escape vehicle launch not toward Epsy's atmosphere, but straight out into the black of space.

She screamed “NO!” and her breather fogged.

Aether! No no no ... Are they all ejecting wrong?

Clamoring through the tube to Wheel A, Minnie emerged just as EV4 began its launch.

Who's assigned to 4? Ish and Tom?

Minnie floated across the common area. Chess pieces, a well-gnawed chewstick, and a paintbrush bounced off her visor as she approached the open hatch of EV6, and the person she very much wished to strangle. She was surprised he'd waited for her.

Clang! EV4 launched.

Minnie glanced back to the panoramic window at the far side of the common area. Another doomed launch. The EV's silhouette in front of the Epsilon star shrank to a tiny, heartrending dot. The occupants would already realize the mistake. They'd know they were as good as dead.

Minnie felt something impact her chest. An instant later, her head flew backward as she was yanked forward into the EV. She slammed into the seat just as John came into view through her breather mask. He was already in his orange survival suit, fuming, shouts muffled behind his visor. Sensing her presence, Minnie's suit activated, detaching from the seat around her and

wrapping over her head, legs, and arms. Automated clutches stretched out and joined to each other at the seams.

John popped his visor open and shouted again. “Hands, feet, head!”

She remembered and leaned forward, spotting her boots still clamped in their charging docks. She kicked off her slippers, pointed her toes, and shoved in both feet. Eager ankle clutches joined to the boots as she stuffed her hands into the awaiting gloves on her armrests. Overhead, she found her helmet, tugged it from its dock, and pulled it on, sealing it to the receiver at her neck, then synced her fone to the suit. System checks confirmed all seals as John turned to the hatch, slapped the ejection button, waited for the three-second safety count, then struck it again. He disappeared out of sight beside her. Restraints sprang out from the seat, binding her shoulders, waist, legs, and head.

He didn't time it! We're screwed!

Minnie regained her senses and struggled to turn toward John. The EV seats were positioned in a V, two passengers facing slightly away from each other. She could only see the edge of his arm.

The EV began to quake. Minnie pressed her head to the front of her helmet, grasped the grips beneath her hands, clenched her eyelids shut.

Clang!

Her body thrust forward from the launch, her restraints a little loose. g-force fighting against her, she pulled a hand to her chest, found the adjuster knob, and twisted it until her body pressed snug into the seat.

He didn't override and launch manual. We could be drifting into open space!

Minnie opened her eyes, peered out the little porthole above her. Among the black of open space, she imagined a tiny white dot, a mislaunched EV, drifting away.

Aether...

She tried to calm herself, unmuddle her brain. The EV's intercomms hadn't automatically connected their suits.

Direct Connect!

She sent a DC request to John. He accepted a few seconds later. She had the M primed the second they linked.

MINNIE: Our trajectory is screwed. Other EVs launched into space.

JOHN: I know.

MINNIE: If you knew then why didn't you launch manual?

JOHN: I know now. Not when I activated.

MINNIE: Well, we're heading for entry, but no way we're on course.

JOHN: The station just went up. It's gone.

The EV rattled briefly from the destroyed station's shockwave, then returned to unnerving stillness. Minnie closed her eyes, inhaled a breath, and held it. She needed to ask the question.

A series of thruster bursts slowly rotated the EV to entry orientation, followed by a new wave of tremors.

JOHN: We are definitely entering the atmosphere.

Brilliant effing observation. Ask him the question.

MINNIE: Do you know if Aether's EV launched on mark?

No response. Violent shaking. An orange glow brightened outside Minnie's porthole. Entry friction.

MINNIE: John? Please answer.

JOHN: I don't know.

JOHN: I don't think so.

Minnie shut her eyes, felt her chest compress from the inside, like hooks over her ribs, winching inward. Her gut twisted. He didn't know. What *did* he know? He didn't know anything. He knew more than her. At least *saw* more than her. What did he see? He must've seen. He knew. He saw. It's why he said he didn't think so. He wouldn't have said that otherwise.

Aether was gone.

Vibrations subsided, but she could feel them decelerating.

She hoped the chute would fail—a 20 km/s impact on land, instant vaporization—done.

She opened her stinging eyes, tried to squeeze away the blurring tears to see out the porthole. They were in the shadow of the planet—nighttime wherever they were headed. And where might that be? She hoped not an ocean. What time was it when she awoke? Her fone indicated it was 0840 station time. She tried to recall her last visuals from the window, the last landmass in view. She remembered thinking EVs on the flagging side would launch roughly correct, could head close enough to Threck Country to make it, but now she wasn't so sure. Had she seen land out there? Could it have been clouds?

She could simply play it back. Her fone was set to queue up 30 minutes.

The chute popped from the EV, expanded, and she felt her spine and legs depress against the seat bottom.

As the EV descended toward an unknown surface below, Minnie retrieved her earlier view outside the common room window and closed her bio eye to see it clearly. Beneath scattered altostratus clouds, she recognized at once the jagged eastern coast of Threck Country, the typical cloud pattern above the inert volcano. Which meant that her EV, launched out the opposite side of the station, was either headed to an ocean, one of the major islands, or Hynka Country.

MINNIE: We're def not on course.

JOHN: I know. I just finished calculations. It's not good.

MINNIE: You have an LZ?

JOHN: Yes. And we're touching down in 10 ... 9 ... 8 ...

The EV landed with a surprisingly soft thud, nothing like the overzealous simulators on Earth. John seemed intent, however, on matching the training drills, right down to the scripted verbals.

Minnie's ear module ticked to life with John's voice breaking up, and annoying crackles accompanying every consonant.

“—aps off ... Full spec—weep ... —ival kit.”

Audio was still trying to go through the EV's inop wireless.

Minnie found herself running on autopilot, her restraints flying off, fone shifting through optical spectrums, as she extracted the surface survival kit from the console beside her.

Thermal optics were useless—the EV outer shell was still blazing from entry, displaying only a wall of white in all directions. Kinetic and infra only worked for line of sight. She paused at the mag setting, picking up a muddle of hazy electromagnetic waves, then enabled the bio filter. The world beyond the EV cabin materialized before her in dreamlike color—a black and white vid after colorization, but with transparency and overlapping objects, like a 3D comic book. She closed her real eye and surveyed the area. Focusing past the dim ghosts of foliage revealed a disturbing sight.

“Switch to mag,” she said.

“I am,” he replied.

“Bio filter?”

A brief silence. “Uhh ...”

“See them now?”

“Yes. We must ... clo— ... a village.” It could be one of their helmets screwing up. Both of them needed to disconnect and DC their suits. “... got at le—wenty within two— ... —s’ side. You?”

Was that “twenty” he sees?

Minnie slowly panned across her swath of visibility. “I’d say more than a hundred on my side. And they’re *all* coming.”

END OF SAMPLE

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