

400-YEAR FROST

THE STORY OF PETE GARRISON

ZAK LETTERCAST

VERYGOOD COLLAB BOOKS

ABOUT THE STORY

Peter Garrison was lucky enough to get one of the last tickets aboard the final seed-ship to leave the dying Earth. He was unlucky enough to be the only survivor when that very same seed-ship dove face first into a star. Now, he must learn to survive on a strange, lonesome planet, and hope that someone, anyone, will come save him.

ONE
NIGHTFALL

It's dark outside. It's always dark outside these days. Shivers rattle up my spine, so I pull the animal skin tighter around my shoulders. The sky sparkles like sequins spilled across a black curtain. There are so many stars, so many constellations I've named. No one will know those constellations. No one will know the names of the alien stars who peer down on me with unkind eyes. I grab the plow and make my way to the field. It feels heavier this time, but maybe I'm just hungry. The food store is running low.

The night can only last so long. I should know what to expect by now. It doesn't stop the fear creeping up in my chest when I see the thunderheads making their way towards me from that horizon. Snow freckles the mountains in the distance. My little valley is safe, for now. Each day that the sun's crown falls closer to the horizon is a day closer to total darkness. There's maybe one more moon cycle before I'm plunged into deep night. I know I'll survive, I always do. I begin my day's work beneath the lingering, pinhole sunset and the growing light of the moons.

In another life, I was a farm boy. I try to remember those roots as I fervently till the land on this lonesome planet of mine. If only I could go back in time and tell ten-year-old me that we'd have an entire planet to ourselves one day. If only I could go back in time at all, I would have never ended up here. At least, I tell myself that. I tell myself that I would have chosen to die on Earth with my wife and son over my new, desperate existence. But that is probably a lie. I wipe my brow and push the plow just a few more yards, and again, just a few more yards, and again, just a few. More. Yards.

My new home is not a cozy one. Once accustomed to four solid walls, electricity, and forced air, I am now happy to have enough of a shelter to keep the fire alive and the rain off my face while I sleep. Life was not always kind to me, but this is by far the cruelest it has ever been. Still, I push forward. I have to. What if Hannah and Sam are still out there somewhere? What if they find me someday? Even if all they arrive to is a pile of scavenger-picked bones and an overgrown campsite, I want them to see I've had something of a decent life here.

Here. Where is *here* exactly? It's hard to tell. I never named the place. I always just refer to it as "Hell" in my mind, because that's what it is. It is my own little corner of Hell. It is total separation from anyone and anything I ever knew or loved. Separation from the sweet springtime air, from my family, from the sensual scratch of pen on paper, from pizza. When we left Earth, I knew there was no going back. But there was supposed to be an adjustment period, a remembrance of, or similarity to, the times before. I would give anything for just a ghost of the life I led on Earth, desperate and strugglesome as it felt.

I wasn't supposed to board that ship, that blasted vessel

NIGHTFALL

that puked me out onto this planet like God spits out lukewarm sinners. But Hannah's sister, Odette, managed to get us passage. It was the last ship leaving Earth, the last hope of finding a new planet to seed. The human race's final, flailing attempt at survival after we had burned the only home we'd ever known to the ground. I still dream of it sometimes, looking out the window and watching Earth fade off into the big black. It is a haunting visual. Surreal. I feel it in the pit of my stomach every time the images play through my mind. Then again, almost any memory makes my stomach hurt these days.

In truth, I have long been familiar with the darkness. I lived in it, often for weeks, digging out mines deep into the Earth's crust in search of any resources left over for humanity to exploit. After the farms all failed to yield crops, all us blue-collar men took to the dirt, deeper than any fruit would ever grow, to find our nest egg. I didn't love the job, but it paid the bills. The lucky men made it out without any damning marks on their skulls and lungs. In that, I have been blessed. Every day I wake up, too far from home to find it in the sky, lungs full of precious air without a cough or a wheeze. Every night I go to bed on a pile of something like hay, muscles tired from working the land, without a single creak or crack in my bones. And the times in between, my thoughts breathe sighs of soft poetry and the crisp scent of rain on sagebrush. My memory never fails me, which is perhaps my greatest curse.

But the pitch black of a mine is nothing like the vacuum of space. Space swallows up all the light and sound. There is no droning noise of pickaxes or machinery between gas giants. A thin sheet of metal and some wires and fiberglass are all that separate a starbound traveler from the hungry dark. And yes, the nothingness is always hungry. I watched

it gobble up the Earth, the solar system, the stars and planetoids and stale moons left in their wake. I got to see it all go in pieces, between hyper-sleep sessions, until one day I looked out and the pale blue dot was nothing but a glimmer behind a smudge on the glass. And the next time, I couldn't tell my own sun apart from all the other stars in the sky. And then we were in it, deep in the vast emptiness between solar systems.

Space travel is like floating in a dinghy in the middle of the ocean without a hint of land in sight, or clouds to change the sky, or wind to tell you which direction you are moving. How far down is it to the ocean floor? There is no way to know. What lurks in the depths around? Impossible to tell. I have never journeyed Earth's oceans, but I imagine it feels something like that. There was a lot of that same, pensive nothingness between our initial launch and the chaos that led to me ejecting onto this blasted planet's surface. Even the people traveling with me on the seed-ship seemed like blobs of nothing. Except Hannah. Hannah was everything.

TWO ASCENSION

The feel of her hand gripping mine... Her eager singing to soothe the passengers and herself as we launched from Earth... The way she always smelled of crisp apples despite not having seen one in ages... These things still make her more real to me than anyone or anything in my memories. Hannah's very existence was brighter and sharper and stronger than anyone else around her. It makes her a vivid haunt. I often fool myself into believing she is just around the corner, just behind that stalk of corn, just a few more layers below the surface of the soil.

"Well this is going to be fun!" I watched Hannah hurry up the gangway with her finest skirt and handbag in one hand, and our dog's leash in the other. The ship loomed over her like a giant, one thousand times the size of Goliath. I felt a twinge of panic as she galloped into its gaping mouth, Sunday-best skirt billowing behind her in a cloud of floral-print cotton. I glanced down at my suspenders and patched wool trousers. We stood out like a set of sore thumbs in our village's common attire. We were drab and dirty compared to the layered skirts, corsets, and fleur-de-lis

tophats and waistcoats worn by our fellow passengers. The only other time I'd been surrounded by such wealth was when the mining tycoons threw a lavish ball a few towns over, and hired the miners' families to serve drinks and appetizers. Such frivolity had always been lost on me. All it took was a glance at the failing state of the world to know that wastefulness had destroyed our home.

I bounced Sam on my hip. "We should be on our best behavior, alright little man?" I said it more for me than for him. He was a good kid. Three-year-old Sam, who was way too tired to really care much about anything, gave a sleepy nod. That's my boy. That will always be my boy. Sam, who would never know the true-blue of Earth's sky on a clear day. Sam, who would be raised on recycled air. Sam, who will always be my sweet, sweet child. I always tried to speak to him with gentleness, because I knew his life would be harder than mine ever was.

I reflected on my life as we moved forward in line. Farmer, husband, miner, father, traveler. I took a deep breath of dying Earth's hot, winter air and stepped into the giant metal death trap that was to be our salvation from a slow, painful death on Earth. Our home had died long ago, and the life support we had built for Her was on its last legs. Her heart stopped pumping in the year 2532, but we rode the final days of that long, deep exhale, just to excavate Her insides and rob Her rotting corpse of any purity that remained. We were fleeing the collapse of Her bones onto us, Her matricidal children.

I was surrounded by cannibals, boarding an ark built by cowards. The irony was not lost on me that I was one of them. I crossed the threshold into the seed-ship's gaping maw. The interior was horrendously sterile and sleek. It did not resemble, even in the smallest of details, the feel of

Earth. A coward would not want to be reminded of what they were fleeing. A cannibal would want something to cleanse their palate before moving on to the next big feast. Even Hannah was awestruck at the ingenuity and far-advanced technology that permeated the very air there, but as we made our way through corridors and doorways of the submarine-like structure, I was determined to be unimpressed.

The behemoth seed-ship reminded me of the space exploration project, aptly named “Humanity’s Last Hope,” which had been abandoned twenty years prior when the world government imploded. The corporations were too focused on exploiting Earth to seek out new lands, so when it all went to hell in a handbasket, no one was prepared to use their own wealth and resources to fund the mission. Strange, that money was still power in such an otherwise lawless land. Wealth mattered, but survival apparently did not. So the *ISS Orion* sat up there, looking down on us and our dying world. I wondered if we would see it as we left Earth’s atmosphere. I wondered if the AI they had sent up there to help guide and perpetuate the mission, would wave at us through the windows. I wondered if they were free to leave. If they really were sentient beings, they had to be bored out of their minds and terribly lonely up there. Imagine waiting fifty years for a date with destiny that would never come to fruition.

“Look at all this, Peter!” Hannah cooed, galloping down the hallway to the back of the boarding line.

“It’s... very clean. Very white,” I responded, doing my best to find the bright side of the appalling bleached tones.

“Like *snow*!”

“Sure, like snow.” Or bone.

“What do you think, honey?”

“I think it might need some homey touches.”

“I made sure to pack your favorite quilt,” she said, placing a reassuring hand on my shoulder. I don’t like trying new things, and she knew that. I have always lived sparsely in rough, rural places. I only used technology that functioned on animal power, and man power, except when I worked in the mine. I was of the belief that if God meant for humans to fly, He would have given us wings. I think I still believe that. Maybe He damned me for defying His will. Or maybe my landing here was just a fluke. Some might venture to call it a miracle. Pretty sick miracle if you ask me.

According to Hannah and Odette, God is merciful. He does not give us more than we can bear, and He always provides for his children. By their logic, God had not meant for us to suffocate alongside our dying planet. God had not meant for us to watch our son die before he even had a chance to live. Like Noah’s family, we were given the chance to save ourselves from the flood. I don’t think the Ark of old looked quite like that space-bound behemoth, but who am I to say? I wasn’t there. I don’t know what gopherwood looks like. Maybe they painted the walls white, too.

I was trying to decipher the source of a deep humming noise that seemed to vibrate the walls and floor of the place. I had not yet figured it out when we reached the boarding center desk at the front of the boarding line. Hannah’s sister, Odette, greeted us there with hugs and kisses. She cleared our tickets, checked and stowed our bags, and gave us each a change of clothes.

“You need to get into these and check your street clothes at this counter before we launch. Changing rooms are just through that door to the right. Come back here

when you're done, and we'll have someone lead you to your seats." She would say this a hundred more times that night, probably more.

Until that day, I had been a modest man. Only in my worst nightmares was I ever reduced to my long johns in front of total strangers. Imagine my dismay when I opened the pack of clothes Odette had handed me and inside were a pair of gray, fitted long johns. All these people I would be flying with -- and there were thousands -- would see me in such a vulnerable state as I had been on my wedding night and the night Sam was conceived. Embarrassment rose in my cheeks as I changed into the outfit and got my son dressed, too. When I stepped out of the changing room, Hannah was waiting for me, cheeks equally pink as mine, and hair frizzled from changing into the snug gray one-piece. I couldn't stop the smile stretching my face, couldn't stifle the chuckle she beckoned from my core. Maybe this wouldn't be so bad after all.

Leaving Earth's atmosphere was terrifying and intense. The entire time we were going up, up, up to the stars it felt as though Mother Earth was striving to keep us tucked into her bosom. At the hardest pull of the struggle, I had breathed out all the air in my lungs and couldn't take a breath in. My lungs were flattened to my ribs. I was a fish in a vacuum. I was helpless against the forces of gravity. I was going to die there, breathless, fingers interlaced with Hannah's across Sam's lap.

Then came the sensation of free-falling. Dread, then safety, then panic, then peace. Earth had let us go, and I was floating in my seat, lungs full of recycled air. Even strapped down as tight as I was, there was a small pocket of space between myself and the surface of the chair. That inch and a half felt like a mile. The intercom system chirped out a

few tones and the cabin lights flickered on. Artificial gravity took hold with a deafening *clang!*

A collective groan rippled through us as the sudden, strange weight of our own bodies became relevant again. My lunch had been floating around in my stomach, all free-like. I felt woozy when it was pulled down, all jumbled up, to the pit of my gut. Seatbelts retracted and many stood and stretched. Others anxiously clutched the arms of their seats, certain we'd be plummeting back to Earth any minute now. I closed my eyes and steadied my pounding heart. This was an irreversible journey. Every instant we moved farther and farther away from that hellscape that had once been our home.

It wasn't long before attendants came out to direct us to our assigned rooms and explain the travel itinerary. All of us had to pull our weight between hyper-sleeps. Postings were based on our vocations on Earth, so I was assigned to horticulture. Hannah was assigned to childcare so she could spend time with Sam. The system was simple, so long as everyone followed the rotating schedule. Everyone would sleep in six-month shifts, then be awake for one. This way, every earth year that passed would leave us only two months older than before. By the time all candidate planets were tested and seeded, those who stayed aboard until the last planet on the seed-ship's journey would have only aged about nine years over the course of half a century.

I never got used to sleeping through entire half-years, or the complete emptiness of hyper-sleep. It was like a thoughtless blink. I rarely woke up feeling rested from it. Hannah's theory about it was that hyper-sleep really was just a very long blink. Everything about the process was designed to preserve our bodies and prevent any aging from taking place. Which, by her reckoning and mine, had to

ASCENSION

mean the mind stopped in place, too. I tried asking one of the doctors on board to explain it once, but it made less sense the more she talked about it.

Adjusting to space life was something of a challenge. I learned more about space tech in those first few months than I ever had throughout my entire life. In the first month alone, I learned how to operate every piece of horticulture equipment onboard, and I read an entire manual on how to use escape pods. Even getting meals from the mess involved pressing buttons and pulling levers. As it turns out, I have a knack for these things. Technology is just mechanics, and machinery comes easy to me. That knowledge is a big part of why I have survived so long on my one-man planet. It's the reason I even made it out of the hungry dark with my life.

THREE SUNBURST

You never expect the ground to fall out beneath you, even if the floor you're standing on is rickety and old. Once you've walked on it for a while you become accustomed to the creaks and groans of the boards as you traverse them. You learn to avoid the soft, rotting spots in the wood. You make plans to repair them after the end of the wet season, along with the roof leaks that caused them. You tell yourself it can wait a few more weeks. You might even know that a spot or two will break before the rain stops, so you tell yourself you're prepared for when that happens. But the instant your foot breaks through that weak wood and you fall, you are surprised. You panic. You shout. For a moment, you feel as though your heart stops.

There was a *hisssss* as my hyper-sleep pod opened. Stiff limbs came awake with a painful jolt as the adrenaline coursed through my veins. Pins and needles throbbed in my joints. There was the sound of klaxons blaring, and the sensation of boiling air. My lungs ballooned in my chest as I gasped a burnt, living breath, and I quickly lurched over the side to the biohazard receptacle as months-old dinner

emptied itself from my stomach. The puking was always inevitable. The first few wakeups trained us to just let it happen. But the needle sticking out of my chest? The emergency protocol lights? Feeling like I was being cooked alive? Hannah and Sam missing? All of that was new. It was wrong.

They gave us books to read, protocol to follow for situations like this. But those books never took into account the human tendency to panic. Our emotions control us. Emotions and logic, irrationality and pure fact simply don't get along. So, as I gave in to my primal urge to frantically unlatch the cabin door, I did not consider checking to see if there was a fire in the common area. I did not test to see if the door was hot. I pulled the latch, twisted the handle, and flung the door open without a care, and I was nearly blinded for that carelessness. The light pouring in from the windows in the atrium was searingly bright, and hot. I knew then that somehow our ship had become Icarus. We were too close, and our wings were on fire. It was time to ditch.

The place was in utter chaos. Between the shouting, the running, the wrestling and trampling, there was hardly room to think. I was swept up by the tide of frenetic passengers. My own wild jostling and shouting blended in with the others to make a roaring ocean of unfathomable terror. I glimpsed Hannah's frizzy red hair for a fleeting moment. But then I was slammed, face-first, into the burning hot wall of the corridor as another surge of newly-roused passengers forced their way into the sardine-can pod bay. Everyone had read the books. We all knew there was a limited time to eject ourselves into the big black before we were incinerated. The floor beneath our feet reminded us of this as it heated a few more degrees each minute.

And then, as if by magic, she appeared by my side,

carrying our wailing son. Somehow, through the mess and tangle of bodies, Hannah had managed to make it to me. Together for the last time, we slowly edged our way to the front of the throng of people. We both knew what had to happen next. The escape pods only fit one person each. We would have to separate and possibly never see each other again. But our chances for survival were good, especially if multiple pods landed in the same area as us. The pods are beefed up hyper-sleep chambers, capable of keeping the body alive for up to three centuries, or until they reach a planet on the list of set coordinates.

But with each pod only having room for one person, we would have to send Sam, our little boy, who by now was seven years old and way too small for his age, out into the hungry dark by himself. A glance over the heads of the crowd to the portholes on the side of the pod bay showed our bright, hot demise fast approaching. I hugged Hannah close to me, and tried to tell Sam how much I loved him.

“You have to do this. We all have to do this. I’m so sorry, Sam. I’m so sorry.” I urged him to have the bravery even I might not be capable of.

“Please take me with you. Papa, Momma, I want to be with you! Don’t make me go,” he begged us through tears. My heart broke. But this was the only option. We reached the wall of escape pods and quickly loaded him into one and sealed it shut. He turned to face us, tiny hands and little nose pressed against the round glass window. Hannah fogged the glass with sad, shaky breath, and traced a lopsided heart. The seal locked around the hatch and his pod ejected.

I turned to Hannah, who was shaking and sobbing and smiling and laughing all at once. Above the noise of the crowd, I could hear her sweet voice.

“I love you, Peter. I love you, and I will see you again, in this life or the next.” We embraced, and kissed, and then the bravest, kindest, most wonderful woman I ever met locked herself into an escape pod. We pressed our faces to the glass in a broken kiss, and when I stepped back, she was gone.

And then it was my turn. With her gone, the stench of fear and the angry sound of the place was unbearable. The heat was beginning to boil my skin. If I could eject myself quickly enough, my trajectory might follow hers and Sam’s. There was a chance we’d end up at the same place. Oh God, how I wish I had gotten in quick enough. But it simply didn’t happen like that. As I slid into the next open escape pod through the narrow hole that very much resembled a children’s park slide, a large hand grasped my shoulder and pulled me out.

I didn’t know bodies could make such a hollow sound as the one mine made when I landed on the metal floor among the feet of the mob. It reverberated through me, rattled my bones, shook my brain in my skull. People tripped over me, landed on top of me in a squirming, wriggling dogpile, the weight of which was growing by the second. I could feel my flesh cooking as they pressed me into the burning floor. I have no idea how I got out, but I did. And then, I was angry. I pushed brawling passengers aside, throwing them against the wall, against each other. I dodged wild blows and thrashing bodies as I searched for a new vacant pod, or any pod at all really, along the port wall.

The pod bay was quickly turning into a mosh pit. But with some effort, I saw my chance. While everyone else was fighting over the pods closer to the center, there was one all the way on the far end that no one had seemed to notice. I ran for it, but my way was blocked by three brawling men. I pushed one in the hopes that it might redirect the fight away

from the pod. It was one of the dumbest things I have ever done in my life. But by then, I was desperate. Unfortunately, so were they. I got sucked into the scrum.

A blow landed me *smack* between the eyes. The room spun. Delirious and desperate, I charged. I managed to knock the first man down in a wobbly tackle, and the other two pulled me up by my ankles and tossed me. But through the scrap, I'd gotten hold of the entrance to the escape pod, and when they let go of my feet to throw me into the chaos of the mosh pit behind us, I managed to keep my grip and scramble into the escape pod. I pulled the door shut and locked it. Faces and hands fought to pry the door open. They shouldn't be able to open it from the outside, but they were strong, and I was struggling to think clearly. I scrambled through the motions, no time to double check my actions.

I dropped into the coffin-like seat in the main chamber of the pod, latched myself in, and hit the eject button. There was a *hisssss* as the pod sealed, and then, with a horrible *whoosh*, I was rocketing through the nothingness. My heart pounded in my chest, and the adrenaline was nowhere near wearing off, but all I wanted in that moment was sleep. Sleep in the hungry dark. But I was a long way from the chance to take a hyper-nap. I had to get myself out of danger first, so before I turned on the autopilot, I took over the steering controls and directed the pod hard and fast away from the pull of that massive ball of hot gas.

The direction did not matter, as long as I moved away from that angry star. The heat from it nearly cooked me, but the shields on escape pods are brilliantly strong and I managed to get lucky. I'd left the ship just in time. From my window, I watched other escape pods hurtling toward the star, burning up in sharp blazes of hot light. I sped away

SUNBURST

from the thing, the hard drag of devastating gravitational pull wearing off with time.

After several hours of white-knuckle driving, a generous application of burn cream, and an IV of saline, I was on my way to recovery. I watched from an ever-increasing distance as the big ship that had been my home for years split apart under the crushing weight of that gravity. And that was the end of it. I was orphaned. Homeless. Farmer, husband, miner, father, traveler, and now galactic vagabond. There was nothing more for me to do except switch on the autopilot, whisper a prayer, weep, and surrender myself to the journey. It was time to sleep. I closed my eyes that night knowing only two things for certain. First, I was probably never going to wake up again. And second, if I ever did wake up, I was going to be painfully hungry.

FOUR LANDFALL

The first thing I noticed was the lump in my throat. Ages-old emotion, fermented and dark, rekindled in my chest as the hyper-pod roused me in preparation for landing. It turns out hyper-sleep preserves your emotions, your heart and soul, just as well as it does your corporeal form. Foggy flashes of red and green and, at last, blue, shimmered into view, like looking through a sleepy waterfall. I blinked. Sandpaper eyelids coaxed the blurred visage to clarity. A class M planet, much like Earth, waited below, presumably untouched by humankind. A cacophony of chirps and chimes told me I was ready to descend to the surface.

There was no biohazard bag to take my bile this time. According to the chronometer, I slept for nearly one hundred years before I reached a planet worth landing on. My limbs burned with electric fire as they came back to life. The interior of the pod spun, lights that had been tolerable before blinded me, background noises flooded my head to near-exploding. None of it compared to the sheer heartache

of my final moments awake, lingering for an entire century. I could feel myself breaking over and over again. This must be how mummies and ghouls feel as they wander graveyards and tombs. Except mummies and ghouls don't wake up in the orbit of a brand new, class M planet.

The pod warmed from the friction of entering the atmosphere of this new place and fear took precedence over despair. Would I be cooked alive? The landing sequence was automated, but I would still have to touch the pod down myself on the off-chance the auto-pilot failed. I braced myself, checked my straps, and reminded myself of the very basic steps needed to either land the bird or ditch it mid-air. Slowly, with a considerable amount of struggle, I reached both hands out to the sides of my coffin. Three buttons on my left were covered by clear caps to prevent accidental activation of the ejection protocol. I lightly fingered the hinges, ready to flick them open at a moment's notice. To my right was a series of levers, which would aid me in steering the craft if needed.

The interior of the craft was still frigid to the touch, but it was quickly warming up. I watched as the space frost began to melt from my viewing portal and even more detail came into focus. It was like Earth's parallel dimension was hurtling up toward me at alarming speeds. Condensation streaked everything. Electricity popped and snapped in response to the moisture. The roar of atmosphere burning up the outside the pod eclipsed the erratic pounding of my heart. I fought the urge to clench my eyes shut as the horizon vanished and all I could see was a wide plane of soil, trees, mountains, and lakes. Where I had been freezing only moments before, I became soaked in salty sweat.

I crashed through a pocket of wispy pink clouds.

Turbulence. The craft made a sharp singing sound as it worked in overdrive to create a landing pattern that would keep itself, and its passenger, intact. It was about this point in the descent where I realized there was no guarantee that this planet was even habitable. The escape pod was operating on theoretical data that was over a century old. Anything could have happened to make this place inhospitable to humans. I could survive the death of my planet, outlast the destruction of my seed-ship, pull through a hundred years flying solo in space, even make it past the descent to the surface of a new planet lightyears away from home, only to take my first breath of non-recycled air in over one hundred years and keel over on the spot.

Or I could land and find Hannah, or Sam, or both of them, or a whole colony of others who managed to make it here the same way I did. Was that hope burgeoning in my chest? The craft's autopilot system corrected my position. I was parallel to the ground, which was rapidly approaching, but I couldn't see a thing. My stomach lurched. I could only see the sky now. There were no stars in the slightly pink daylight of this new world. My fingers felt weak on the switch-covers and landing controls. I had no way of knowing how close I was to landing. I could maybe feel the craft slowing, but tunnel vision crept in and I could feel the impending blackout.

With a jolt, a series of parachutes fluttered out of hatches at the top and side of the pod. The ground had to be close now. I took a deep breath, clenched my teeth, flexed my fingers and toes. After a moment, the rumbling descent faded to a rolling, whooshing, steady drop. Suddenly, I went from plummeting to my doom to riding the sky's currents like an airship. Thrusters ignited as the ground closed in, and I touched down with a more-or-less delicate *thump*.

The top hatch opened with a groan, a crack, a hiss, and a pop. Cautiously, I undid the seat buckles that had cradled me in the craft's bowels for longer than any man should have to live. I stretched, bent my knees, worked my way up to sitting. My head spun. I heaved. Empty. Stiffly, weakly, I pulled myself from the craft, birthing myself onto the first solid ground I'd seen in ages. The moment was bittersweet. As I lay there, weeping on the planet's surface, I could see streaks of fire descending from the sky. Eventually, parachuted pods emerged from the flames.

There were others.

I traced their descent and marked lines on the ground indicating which direction I should go to find them. With each breath of fresh air, I was filled with renewed life. With each exhausted step as I unpacked the escape pod and worked to set up my beacon, I became more and more determined to survive. This place was so much like Earth but somehow also terribly foreign. The air had not killed me yet, and it was sweet. The soil smelled fertile and hearty. The wind carried sounds and scents of somewhat familiar fauna and flora. The trees even looked like they could have come from Earth. But everything had to be tested before it could be used, regardless of if it was for farming, or fuel, or something else entirely. I didn't have time to run through those protocols. I had to get to where the other pods landed. So, after setting up my beacon, I gathered up some Mealpaks, some boxed water, and a first aid kit, and set off in the first direction I'd marked.

With some surprise, I found that I quite easily remembered how to work my way through the woods that stood between myself and my newly landed compatriot. Marking my path, remembering my way back, and keeping my bearings, it all came naturally to me from my decades as

a man of the land. It wasn't long before I reached the first downed escape pod. At least, it didn't seem like a long journey. The sun had barely moved in the time it took me to traverse the mild range of quasi-mountains and gentle woodland, but my body was tired and I was nearly drenched in sweat. Could it have taken hours instead of minutes? Or was I just atrophied from sleeping for a century?

The hatch hadn't opened yet. I waited for a moment, wondering just when my fellow traveler would emerge from their cocoon. I fought hard to swallow the hope that it was Sam, or Hannah, but the excitement burned in my chest and tingled in my hands and feet. Eventually, the dust and smoke settled. But there was still no movement. I approached, cautiously, wary of startling whoever was inside. Heat billowed from the pod. I leaned over it, gazing into the window. Steam wafted up like incense from the places where my sweat dripped onto the metal. I was reminded of the pod bay on our long-since-cremated ship. Panic struck me for a moment. What if this was one of the people I nearly killed for my escape pod?

I couldn't see through the window. There was something smeared all over the inside of the glass. Perhaps the passenger was too tossed around by the descent, maybe they passed out after the initial stomach upset that followed every hyper-sleep. I located the hatch on the side of the pod, pried it open with a thin rock, and typed in the master code, marked down diligently in every escape pod handbook, that would override the pod's seal. As the pod opened up, a curious smell wafted out. Humans do have funny smells, and recycled air can only be cleaned so well, so I thought nothing of it.

When I came back around to the other side of the pod, where the window-bearing hatch had slid open, my heart sank. Still strapped in, and wearing a stained and threadbare travel-suit, was a mummified human carcass and many empty MRE packs. The hair was long and matted, the nails were also long but chewed at the tip, the teeth permanently grimaced against thin, taut lips. When the tears pushed through my crumbling dam of resolve, I did not try to stop them. I unstrapped the traveler, pulled them loose from their coffin, and laid them on a flat boulder nearby. Skin flaked off as I lifted the surprisingly light corpse. They must have starved to death.

I knew I would bury them, but there were things I had to do first. I had to prioritize survival above all else. I had to find the other travelers before it got dark. I asked God for forgiveness for not burying them right away and for planning to steal their remaining provisions. When I searched the cabin for any remaining foodstuffs or water, there was none. I made several markers around the location so I could find it again. No true scavengers, if there were such things here, would pick the paper-skin and bare-bones of this poor soul any time soon. I left them there, and I pushed on toward the next drop site.

I was purely exhausted by the time I located the next escape pod. It had been on the ground for a while. There was no dust or smoke or steam. The shell of it was cool. In all the time that passed, it seemed the sun still hadn't moved. Was I really moving that quickly? Looking back now, it's foolish I ever thought a day on Earth was the standard length of a day on planets everywhere. I know now just how unhelpful the notion of time can be in a place like this. This other escape pod's hatch was also unopened, but

this time I could see inside. A glance through the clear glass indicated a vacant pod. There was no face looking back at me, not even a corpse. I dreaded typing in the code. What would I find inside? A child? Another corpse?

The door opened with a click and a hiss. There was no strange smell this time. It was almost pristine, untouched inside. The only travelers nestled in the hyper-sleep chamber were an incomplete set of bloodstained teeth, and a full set of meal provisions and water boxes. Almost too tired to continue, but too determined to stop, I marked the place in the same way as the others and traveled on to the next drop site. My body protested. I pushed anyway.

The next landing site provided me with a smashed up escape pod, which had cracked at the seams at some point and killed the passenger. The mechanisms on it did not work, but I could see some food and water behind the glass, nestled in the rotting chest of the corpse. I marked this spot, too, so I could return with the proper tools to dismantle the pod and take care of its contents. By now, I was dismayed. Fatigue wracked my muscles and mind, but there was only one pod left. I refused to give up.

The final escape pod was also unopened. My internal clock said that hours had passed, though unmarked by a static sun. Surely anyone would want to get out of their pod and onto solid land as soon as they touched down. But there was no sign of life there, either. There was nothing for me to do but weep as I went to the side of the pod. I chose not to look through the glass this time. I couldn't bear it. What horrors would await me there? Somehow, this time, I knew it. Sorrow burrowing deep into my soul, I typed the code into the keypad and the hatch opened. Inside was a child. It could have been Sam; I wouldn't know. Brittle bones were all that remained of them. I buried this one first, and then I

LANDFALL

made camp by the gravemarker and slept in a shady grove of large conifer-like trees. I went to bed with tears still wet on my cheeks, and awoke some unknown amount of time later, with the somber notion that I would never see another human again. The sun never did set that day.

FIVE STAGNATION

Over the next weeks, I toiled harder than ever before under the watchful eye of that ever-wakeful sun. I gathered what supplies I could from each of the pods. I set up the beacons beside the downed pods and built rudimentary signs pointing to my base camp. After I buried what remained of the bodies, I went about building a homestead, just like we were taught to do on the seed-ship. I took samples, tested for consumability, ran water through the purifier. So much time passed, and still the sun barely moved, and I hardly saw any meat-yielding creatures. The things I knew about farming counted on seasons, moon phases, day and night. But everything stood so still here. Even the air felt stagnant. It was like living in a photograph. But given time, that would change, and drastically.

Clearly, it was impossible to tell the time using conventional methods. Luckily, the chronometer from my escape pod still worked. I was able to work out a sleep schedule, where I would retreat for several hours to sleep in the shelter I built along the banks of a river deep in the

STAGNATION

woods. Then, after sufficient rest, I would return to whatever project I was working on. I would farm in the “morning,” check traps in the “afternoon,” and cook in the “evening.” At the end of the day, I would mark a line on a large slab of rock. Somewhere around the forty day mark, I was able to yield my first harvest from the speedy-seeds that came with my escape pod. I had a whole store of radishes, carrots, and potatoes.

Months passed. I built a sundial at one point, and discovered that the sun did actually move in a very small circle in the sky. It was easy to deduce that the planet’s axis was heavily tilted, and I was at one of its poles. At some point, I noticed the air getting hotter each day. Any plants I grew above the surface started to fry in the heat. The sun became larger, closer, and even more centered in the sky. It was when I had been there for an entire Earth year that the weather officially became unbearable. I made the terrifying decision to break camp and head whichever direction had the sun at my back. I needed to get to a place where the sun would travel along the horizon instead of bearing down on me all day. I had to leave a lot of supplies, but that actually ended up saving me down the road.

It was an arduous journey. The terrain was new, and it was somehow less predictable than it had been when I was looking for the pods. For a while, it felt like I would forever live beneath the angry gaze of this planet’s sun. Everywhere I went, that glaring beast of a star followed, beating down on me with intense fury. It was another several months of serious trekking before I reached a tolerable climate. I had been on the planet twenty one Earth months when I planted my stakes a second time. It was a makeshift home, a basic shelter to keep me cool and dry. Fortification would

come after I re-established a planting cycle and built up the food stores with meats and preserved goods.

At first, I did not notice the sun beginning to recede. I was focused on the ground, not the horizon. The sun was a nuisance I had worked hard to distance myself from. But in the new camp, I barely saw it, and I was grateful. I constructed new ways to enhance the sun's light for my plants, using the reflective parts of the escape pods. There was a nip in the air from time to time, so I had to insulate the plants before bed, but at least this way I was not being cooked alive.

I continued planting and harvesting, sowing and reaping, and the sun made its way along the horizon. If I had the supplies, I would have painted it. I'd never seen a sun like that, looking so tired and fat and pink. I slept shrouded in large leaves, and the rains came less here, so I found myself running water to the field as often as I checked the traps. The two-year anniversary of my arrival here passed without incident, and the cycle continued on like it always had. I picked and pickled, hunted and salted, skinned and tanned, reminisced and wept.

And then, one day, only the crown of the sun peaked up above the horizon. All that time, I had not noticed it slowly creeping behind the distant line of mountains. There had been a persistent chill in the air for some time, sweeping up across the plain below me. But this time that same breeze carried the scent of snow. I could feel frost beginning to hum on the tips of my ears, fingers, nose. For the first time in a very, very long time, I had goosebumps. This must be winter, and I was certainly not ready.

At first, I scrambled to trap something big, something with lots of fur and a thick hide. It didn't work. The animals knew the cycles on this volatile hellscape. It was no

STAGNATION

coincidence that my traps had been empty for the past fortnight. Had the fauna all chased the sun over the distant ridge? Had they burrowed into the ground to hibernate? I shuddered to think I might pay the ultimate price for my carelessness. Still, I stayed. Maybe this chilly time of year in Hell would be a short one. Maybe the sun would return in full force before I had a chance to freeze to death.

It was only weeks before the storms came. Clouds buried the sun's light like seeds in soil. Darkness descended on my land, along with nighttime sleet. The weight of the weather broke down my tent, but the relentless wet and slick of the ground made it hard to build any new structure in its place. My fire was rarely lit, and I was rarely dry. Floods washed over my fields, followed by genuine ice and snow storms. And finally, one day when the storms hung low on the horizon, I could see the clear sky above me. Unfamiliar stars hung in the crisp cold air. There was no light, not even a glow, from the sun. Distant thunderheads threatened more snow. Reluctantly, I accepted that I had to return to the land of perpetual light.

I packed everything I could, piled on the clothing and the furs, and started my trek back to my original landing spot. As I went, blizzards came, but by some miracle I survived. I could not have picked a worse time to try that route. I know now that the frost of winter was in full effect, the days were at their shortest, and the sun was so far it would only be a pinprick in the sky when I did finally reach my former camp.

After what I presume to be a few days of wading through darkness and snow, I stumbled upon a cave I had located on my initial journey away from the sun. Inside was warmer than I'd been in weeks. It was dry enough to light a fire. The pile of animal bones in the corner was old and

ZAK LETTERCAST

covered with dirt. The cave had not likely seen a soul in weeks. It was with such luck that my fate was decided for me. There was no chance of me making it to basecamp in those conditions. I was either going to live, or die, in that cave. That winter was the longest night of my life.

SIX
CLOUDBURST

I have spent five years in Hell. Probably longer, by Earth years. I lost count way too long ago to know for sure. This place is brutal, but humans are resilient. We have to make our homes in the most inhospitable places, because the hospitable ones resent us, push us out like a splinter. I now migrate between camps depending on the season. If it's summer, I head away from the sun. If it's winter, I head to the landing site. The trails I follow are often overgrown each time I traverse them. There's something about the way nature redeems our trespasses, reclaims the slander of our footsteps, takes our leavings to make something much more beautiful than any art we could ever contrive.

I am Hell's steward. This place has tried to kill me more times than I care to admit, and I've sometimes even asked it to claim my soul. But in the end, all I can do is care for the place in the same way Earth deserved from the start. I treat the soil with reverence, take what I need, give to the other creatures what I have no use for. Sometimes I still sow Earth food, but over time I've become acquainted with the

native flora. Each year I tear down, migrate, rebuild, till, sow, reap, store, and start again. As I make my trek back to whichever camp I'm headed to, I learn something new about the plant life here. This place is abundant, so I often find something new that is edible, or deadly, or medicinal within a few days from my old camp. A plant worth propagating is often all three.

I am settled into my winter camp as of three fortnights ago. The winter land holds a unique beauty as the trees and grasses and ground fall deep into dormancy. There's a haunting fury on the cold wind, and even though I know I might not survive to see the sun in its full beauty again, I choose to fight back the biting cold with a warm fire and furs and the memories of my wife and son. The day will certainly come when I am too old and frail to survive alone. Sometimes, I look out to the horizon, and the fading sun throws a mirage of silhouettes, like people walking along the ridgeline, and I think, just for a moment, that I might not be alone.

Even now, as I tell my story to the rising moons and burrowing roots, I can see figures moving against the pink-gold of the sun as it sinks below the thunderheads. Except... this time, something seems different. These don't look like mirages. They seem much more solid than that. Should I approach them? They look human. Or, humanoid at least. They're bipedal. They both have reflective suits on. The sun glints off them in a sharp, persistent glare.

Cautiously, I grab a spear and snake my way up toward them. They see me coming and duck low behind a tall stone. I hear something above the noise of the coming night. The buzz of tree beetles and chirping spiders douses the voices, which have dropped to a near-whisper. Hunkered to the ground, I slink into the shadows. It's just like hunting

big game. Quiet, downwind, steady, calm. Fingers wrap tight around the sand-smoothed spear. Toes grip the stones and soil, rough pads traverse pebbles and thorns like nothing.

I'm close now. Why am I afraid? Thoughts of moonmen and martians plague my mind, dispersed between flickers of Hannah and Sam, fresh apples and clean linen. The forest grows louder, celebrating the impending dark of long night. Only the very tip of the sun shimmers like the hint of a star above the horizon. I have minutes, at most. Their phantom conversation rises above the forest noise.

"Do you see where it went?" the furthest one says.

"Shhh, I'm trying to hear," the other responds. I hold my breath.

"I think it's behind that tree."

They're right. They know where I am. I duck down anyway, watching as they take cautious steps toward me.

The sun dips below the ridgeline, and all at once the spirits of the sleepy forest fall utterly silent. The reverence for the impending crux of winter throughout the little valley is palpable. We all know that many of us will die before the sun graces our land again. The travelers don't know this. They speak without regard for the sanctuous moment, footsteps tarnishing the perfect soil as they tramp thoughtlessly forward. How human.

In the soft gray of dusk, the shadow people come into dim clarity. Long necks crane to peer past tree trunks. Anxious fingers sit on weapon triggers. I can't see their faces. Do they have faces? Glossy blue suits reflect the purple sky. Sudden, anxious radio static shocks all our nerves. I shrink into myself, holding my spear close, ready to attack. I can feel their eyes on me. One of the creatures replies to the signal with some discordant, mechanical

melody. I hear them coming closer and decide to try my luck at diplomacy.

“Hello there, welcome to my home!” It comes out raspier than I thought it would. How long has it been since I’ve spoken out loud?

There is no response.

“Are... are you real?” It’s a reasonable question, I think.

“Leba, I think it’s talking to us.” The voice is robotic, but it’s genuine and full of concern.

“Are you from Earth?”

“I don’t think we’re supposed to interact with the wildlife, Shel.” This voice is also mechanical sounding, with an edge of disdain.

A third, gentle voice chimes in. “It’s asking about Earth. It might be worth taking back for examination.”

There is a slight beeping sound.

“Diagnostics say it can survive our atmosphere,” the concerned voice says.

“I’ll handle it,” the third voice says. There is the sound of heavy metal boots crunching over ground as that one approaches me. “What do you know of Earth?”

“Earth?” It’s been ages since my lips have forged that word.

“How long have you been here?”

“I don’t know.”

“Who are you?”

“P-Peter Garrison...” My voice breaks as I say it. Are these tears on my cheeks? “What are you? Are you going to kill me?”

“Peter-Garrison, we believe you may be able to help us. But you have to come with us.”

“Where?”

“We have what I believe your kind would call a space-ship.”

“You mean to go with you... up there?” My heart sinks. This place is not Hell. This place is home. The hungry dark is mindless, suffocating, murderous Hell.

“Peter-Garrison, you must come now.” It’s a command.

“My wife, my son...”

“Are they here?”

“I-I don’t know. Have you seen them?”

There was a pause, followed by the discordant chime of static communication devices. “We have not.”

“Who are you?”

“We are running out of time. You must come with us.”

The one called Shel speaks up. “Nex, I don’t think it wants to join us. We have two minutes before we’re stranded here.”

I glance around the tree trunk and get a better view of them. Even in the fading light of the sun, I have learned to see by the light of the moons during half the year. The blue suits cover their whole bodies, skin tight, with notches for the joints of their fingers, knees, hips, and so on. And their faces are not simply covered by rebreathers. Their faces are electronic. These are not humans. They know how to speak to me, they know how to communicate, but they are absolutely not like me. By now I am standing in the small clearing between them and my former hiding spot. The spear is up and aimed, sharp and ready to kill.

“Who the hell are you?” I ask for the final time. They’re about ten yards away from me. I can make that dash in an instant if I need to. Sure, I can throw the spear, but that makes me a still target. Moving is better. Surprise is good. My toes grip the ground beneath me. I breathe deep and steady myself.

The closest one, Nex, puts his hands up in surrender. “Peter-Garrison, please lower your weapon. We mean no harm.”

“Lord protect me,” I whisper and my feet kick off into a full run.

“Shoot him,” Nex says.

Leba fires.

Pain sears in my gut, surging in a blossom of lightning through my body, from my center out to my fingertips. I feel a string of nonsense words dribbling from my mouth as my knees hit the ground. I look up at them, struggling against the pain, spear still gripped tight. “You... were supposed to... save me.”

Shel approaches, takes the spear from my hand, and kneels in front of me so we’re at eye level. I can feel myself fading. “We are, Peter-Garrison. We are here to help.”

SEVEN
REBIRTH

Darkness.

The smell of sweet soil on my face.

“Just let it take you.”

Visions of blue robots with long, craning necks and angled raptor-faces flash like a confused picture reel. Nothing is linear. Mysterious tools held like paintbrushes, wiry fingers with ominous attachments. Bright lights. Is this Heaven? Have I suffered long enough? Voices. Hannah’s song as we leave the surface. A blanket of pure white light. The shimmery blue of cryo. A mechanical song of rhythmless tones and beeps. The hand of God on my chest, pumping life. Recycled air. A porthole to the hungry dark. Nothingness.

Apples.

Her voice.

No, their voice.

The one called “Shel” reads to me. I’m not sure what it is, but the familiar sound of papers turned by pensive fingers welcomes me back. Eyes flutter open. It’s waking up from a hundred year sleep all over again. My body hurts. Or

is it numb? Pins and needles. Fire. A balloon of cushion around my nerves. My eyes are made of sand. Shapes and blobs and bleary dancing light flicker across my vision. Still, Shel reads.

Poetry. Some obscure piece, maybe their own work. I've never heard it before. It's nice. Words begin to make sense. I catch the final stanza: "To coalesce with comrades clear, And muddy up the arroyos here, To bend branches and slide earth and race the canyon wide, To remind you of your days on the sea, when you were once the tide." I watch as Shel closes the book and looks up. "Finally, Peter-Garrison, you're awake!"

You don't have to call me by my full name. I try to speak, but nothing comes out.

"I bet you want to say something, don't you? Well, don't get too focused on it. You don't have that capability yet. Wait here. I'll find the others. Leba! Nex! Peter-Garrison is awake!"

Why can't I speak? Solid borders settle in around the shapes. Things that were blurry are now crystal clear. I can see better, more, than ever before. Everything has such a preciseness to it.

Before Shel has a chance to leave the room, the other two enter, accompanied by one more in a lab coat. Leba speaks. "We'll have to change that name, it's garishly unpronounceable."

"Let him choose his own. If he likes what he's got, we should call him that." Shel's protective tone draws something up in my chest. Lust? Annoyance? Affection? Defiance?

My brain is fried, like I've been doing math calculations for days on end. I always hated math. *Where am I?* I think

the words, try to form them. Nothing comes out. My lips are numb. Everything is numb.

“He seems distressed,” the one in the lab coat says.

“Have you told him yet?” Nex asks.

“No, I called you in as soon as he opened his eyes.”

The one in the lab coat approaches my bedside, checks some monitors, then turns to me and speaks. “Peter-Garrison, you died.” There is a pause to let it sink in. It doesn’t. “You died, and we resurrected you. Your body gave up, and we shot it out into space. But, in your final moments we were able to determine that your mind has a lot of useful information. So we copied your brain. We made sure to get all those intricate parts that hold memories and make you yourself, and then we moved you into a new host body. You are in the process of booting up, but we’ve disabled your mobility functions until you prove trustworthy and cooperative. My name is Letu. These are Shel, Nex, and my partner, Leba.”

Shel stands beside me, looking down over me in that bird-ish way. They seemed joyful amidst the others’ obvious placidity. I felt sick. “Isn’t it wonderful, Peter-Garrison? You’re alive and serving a higher purpose!”

I try to speak. Still nothing.

“I think he wants to talk, Letu,” Nex says.

“We can authorize that function, for now.” She presses a few buttons, and suddenly, the floodgates open.

I’m not stopped up anymore, the words flow out of me in a stream of confused robotic tones. It’s a jumble, tangled words wrapped around each other in a mismatched mess, until finally they string together in a way that makes sense. “How dare you?”

“I do not understand,” Letu says, head cocked. “We saved you.”

Shel seems deflated.

“You took heaven away from me. You stole the only dignity I had left! You took my death! I was so close to them. So close to my wife, my son. I could taste the end... and you ripped it all away from me!” There are no tears, but I feel myself weeping. Sobs come out, mechanical and awkward. My chest doesn’t move with my crying gasps. No lungs. No heart. No nothing.

“We saved you,” Nex offers, “from ceasing to exist.”

“You damned me. You cursed me with eternity away from love.” I thought that planet was hell. It was a blessing compared to this.

There is a pause. Then Letu lifts a wiry finger. “If I may, what you claim is not exactly true. You still died. Your body, your brain, your original mind and self all went away to wherever it is you go when you die. You, Peter-Garrison, are simply a copy of the original Peter-Garrison. He made it into the peace of eternal rest, and now you’re here instead of him.”

I want to respond to that, but there’s nothing to say. Is this better or worse than I originally thought? After a quiet moment, my sobbing subsides. Silent rage burns in my phantom stomach. “So you’re saying that... I’m not even really myself?”

“You are yourself. He was a different version of you. It’s not as complicated as you want to make it, Peter-Garrison. Regardless, you’re helping us now. Be grateful to have a purpose. The other Peter-Garrison did not have a purpose. He struggled to survive, he tried to kill the wrong people, and he died pointlessly.”

“I never agreed to help you.”

“You already have helped us, and you will continue to.

Even now you are teaching us about Earth, helping us understand about humans.”

Letu is right. I can feel them sifting through my mind, combing for information about my old home, about my culture, about the seed-ship, about Hannah. Not even my memories are safe. “But... why?”

“That’s classified,” Nex interjects before Letu has a chance to respond.

“Classified? Do classifications matter if Earth is gone?”

“We are of Earth. So long as we are alive, our home -- your home -- is not dead.” Nex is solemn, if a machine can be solemn.

I’m a machine now, so I suppose it is possible.

Shel reaches their hand to mine. Metal on metal. A strange feeling, like my nerve endings are brand new. “Humans made us. They gave us our mission. But they died, or left, before we woke up. We’re on this sacred mission, have been for ages now, given to us by *you*. You are our gods. You are our makers. But in all this time, in all this searching, we never found any of your kind alive.”

I don’t want to ask it. But now I have to know. The words come out distant and muffled. “How long have you been searching?” My head is swimming.

“Three hundred years,” Nex says, still solemn. He must know how hard that is to hear.

“So... How old am I? Or, how old was I when you transferred my mind to this... this thing?”

“If you left Earth when we think you did,” Letu says, swiping through information on a tablet, “you are close to four-hundred years old.”

A ton of bricks on my chest. Physical form gone, no lungs to gasp with, no stomach to drop. I feel it all the same.

“And my wife? My son? Did you ever find them?”

The room is full of pregnant pause so thick a machete could cut it.

“We have no way of knowing for sure,” Nex says, avoidantly.

Not good enough.

“Take. Me. To. Them.” I demand it. A phantom heart pounds in my tinman chest, erratic and rebellious.

Nexus shakes his head. It’s such a human gesture. “We don’t even know if it was them for sure. It was just the only settlement we found with any semblance of... civilization.”

“There’s a chance!” Shel interjects. “Their pods came from the seed-ship. It could have been them.”

“Take me there. Now. That is all I ask, and then I will help you all you want. I’m sure you can only glean so much from memories.”

The four look around at each other, and no words are exchanged but it seems they’re all in reluctant agreement, like mind-reading is standard issue for robots. I can tell Shel is rooting for me. Even Letu, as callous as she’s been, pities me.

Leba speaks up for the first time since my eyes opened. “I’ll tell Pyxis to change course and take us back to the gray planet.”

EIGHT
DESOLATION

The drop pods are elaborate. I stare at the complicated dashboard of buttons, levers, indicators, meters, slides, and touch screens as we wait to detach from the *ISS Orion*. To think, I have been aboard the *Orion*, the savior of mankind itself! I, of all people, am here, of all places, lightyears away from my own solar system, searching for the love of my life and our kid! I don't want to be in awe of it, but I am. I don't want to feel heroic, or hopeful, or like maybe, just maybe, there's a chance for humankind somewhere. But I do.

There's a gentle *click* and the drop pod releases its hold on the space station. We zip toward the dim world below, headed for one of the only clear spots in an atmosphere otherwise darkened by thunderheads. The Gray Planet. It's aptly named. Apparently they found suggestions of human activity at the center of a tall mountain here. According to Nex, the rest of this world is pretty much void of life, but it seems like it had once been vibrant. It may have even had large bodies of water. When they last visited, nearly fifty years ago, there was the faintest of heartbeats at the center

of that mountain. Debris from escape pods from my seed-ship littered the ground around it, rusting and rotting away, but traceable.

Hannah and Sam could have been in those escape pods. They could have brought some inside and used them as hyper-sleep chambers. They could be resting peacefully, as young as the day I lost them, right there inside that mountain.

I shudder at what they will probably think when they see me. Well, I don't shudder, I'm a robot now, but the concept is still there. Letu calls it an involuntary cerebral reflex when my brain assumes there is an organic body attached to it, with shoulders to shudder, lungs to breathe, a heart to ache. Most of the time, I know I'm empty, but sometimes I forget. Will Sam and Hannah forget, too? How will I break the news to them? That Hannah's husband, Sam's dad, is just some bloated, boiled, frozen corpse lost to the vacuum of space? That he's me, trapped in this souped up sardine can?

The craft shakes as we break atmo. I flash back to my own horrifying descent to Hell and hope this landing brings more promise than that one. Nex and Shel are accompanying me to the ground. They will lead me to the entrance of the only bunker they found here that might still house living beings of the human variety. The other crew members, and there are several others, await our return so the mission can continue. Some are on standby for emergencies, others wait hopefully for their first human passengers since the end of the world.

Shel places their hand on mine. In the few months of travel back to this planet, we've grown fond of each other. We often read together in the atrium, mostly poetry and manuals. We share a sense of humor. In another life, maybe

DESOLATION

I would cultivate that little undeniable spark between us. I have absorbed so much information since I arrived here, picked up new languages and hobbies. We don't have to sleep. We can -- we can even dream if we want to! But even with all the new wonders that come from living inside this metal shell, none of it is worth the effort without someone to share it with. Without Hannah to share it with.

I indicate gratitude to Shel with a nod of my head and a simple "thanks," and I hear the sound of landing gear as Nex engages surface protocol.

He swivels his chair to look at us. "Pete." The crew stopped using my full name after the first week. "There are no signs of life, and there are high levels of radiation coming from the planet."

"That doesn't mean there are no people here." Nex and Shel share a glance. I ignore it and stride to the back hatch. "Come on then, let's go."

The route to the entrance is long and winding. Before I died, I would have struggled to follow the overgrown path. Today, I traverse it with ease. What would have taken me days to cover took us mere hours. We pass through ruins, overgrown gardens, tiny scraps of what had probably been escape pods when they first touched this ground. We pass over melting glaciers, the cracks and creaks echoing across the barren wasteland like some kind of giant stomping in the distance. I realize it's more than just desolate here; it's cold. I'm almost impervious to extreme climates now, but I make note of the temperature gauge on my visual display. It's well below zero Celsius. Frost forms on us as the world's faint sun begins to descend below the horizon. Unfazed, we continue on.

We climb up, up, up the steep slope of the mountain, until we reach a plateau somewhere near the middle. It isn't

a natural formation. There are scrape marks where shovels dug and people labored. This flat patch of land, about six meters by six meters, looks out over a dark gray valley filled with snarled, barren branches. Large, bleached bones punctuate the scene like megalodon teeth half-buried in the arid soil of a dry ocean. As though on cue, a thin curtain of snow begins to trail its way to the ground. It's almost romantic, in a devastating way. I turn to face our tall gray foe, this threshold into the unknown, and then I see it. Where the plateau meets the mountain, shrouded by thorny climbing ivy, is an entryway.

When the thick, grasping branches are finally cleared away, a weary and cracked stone door reveals itself. In red lettering at human eye level, which is at my chest, read the carefully painted words: DO NOT OPEN.

"This is why we let it be," Nex says in his matter-of-fact way. "There were a few alive in there that I could tell, but it was so long ago."

"We worried that if we opened it, the deadly air out here would kill them. But we might have doomed them in leaving them, all the same," Shel continued.

Nex hesitated. "There's no way to know for sure. I mean, they might have migrated or..."

"Or Shel's right and they died off," I finish for him. "If they stayed in there five decades, they probably starved. And if they left? You said the radiation was thick when we landed. Humans don't do well in conditions like these. Can you see anything in there now?" My hopes should be dashed. I should be angry. I should be sad. Instead, all I can think is that we have to get in there, regardless of what Nex sees inside. I have to know for certain. I have to see it with my own eyes. Of all the places they've been, and there are

many, this is the only one that suggests anyone else from my seed-ship survived.

He finishes his scan and replies, “Same as before, no signs of life. The radiation here is off the chart. It’s like the land itself is decaying. Humans wouldn’t be able to survive in this, not well, anyway--”

“But can it hurt our kind?” I ask, surprising myself. *Our kind*. Like I’m one of them. Like my mind isn’t being backed up on the ship every second I’m here. I shake my head, reminding myself that, yes, I am one of them. But I am also the last human in the universe and I am fighting to survive. The others don’t seem to notice my embarrassing internal argument. I remind myself that corporeal concerns are not as easily relinquished as my human suit was shed. It seems we can’t be transformed with the press of a button, not really.

“We should be fine,” Shel replies.

Nex and I push the door, and it crumbles to reveal a dark corridor. “After you,” he chimes.

I hunch down, realizing now just how tall I am compared to how tall I was, and shuffle into the narrow passageway. The scent of something familiar, something ancient, tickles my senses. They let me keep my sense of smell. I can turn it on and off as needed now, and today I’m using it to find Hannah and Sam. I pull the scent of apples to the front of my mind, and like a robotic bloodhound, I set to work seeking it out.

“I’m here, my love. Lead me to you.”

NINE
PURSUIT

“I think I see something,” Nex says, peering through the walls and doubtless myriad corridors that weave through the mountain with his unique sense of sight that I still can’t quite comprehend. “If we follow this hallway left and hook right, we’ll end up in what look like housing units about two stories up.”

It’s been hours. Nothing familiar has come up, no scent of apples, no children’s voices, not even the scurry of rodent toes on rock. There is only the relentless, heavy silence of the mountain bearing down on us from all sides, endless hallways leading to more hallways. At last, we reach an opening. I stretch my shoulders out, standing back up to my full height. My head is an inch or less from the ceiling here, but at least there’s breathing room. The three of us convene in what seems like a rounded meeting hall, with small round doors leading to other, smaller rooms.

At last, evidence of life.

First I notice the rows of bench seats and tables that fill the main part of the meeting hall. The tables have what appear to be stone plates, cups, and utensils scattered across

them. The food that filled them, if there was any, is long gone. Cups lie on their sides, dark stains spilling over table edges onto seats, drip marks leading to the floor. The bench seats are not empty. Scraps of fabric dangle from them, tattered and faded. Beneath them, the paleness of rotting bone; the brown of stretched skin; long, matted strands of hair. Some still sit where they died, and others lie in pieces lining the floor beneath the tables. Their earthy tones stand out against the cool dark of the carved-stone ground.

I expect despair to hit me like a ton of bricks. It doesn't. Instead, the scent of apples wafts by, so faint I might conflate it for a memory. A trail of papers leads into one of the rooms, like a draft swept them up and carried them. They're illegible, any words written on them lost to the mountain's damp guts. Shel and Nex watch as I check each corpse, each piece of paper, rifle through the rooms. There are beds here, rotted away, with the dead still in them. She's somewhere, I know it.

"Still no signs of life, Pete. I'm sorry... this looks like the last of the stronghold," Nex says in an effort to bring me to heel as I make another determined sweep through the rooms.

"There *are* signs of life, Nex! Look around. Do you see all this?" I gesture to the place. "They made a life here. They lived here, worked here, tried to survive here. It's grim. It's full of death. But it's also full of life..." The suggestion of sadness scratches at my chest, but I don't give in. I search harder.

Before my death, I'd be choking back tears. Before my death, this would have ended me. But I am not Peter Garrison the Dead Man. I am alive, inside and out. "There has to be something here. There has to be a picture, or a note, or a clue as to where she went. Something. She would

tell me she was here! She would leave something for me, whether she stayed here or died here, she would have told me about it.”

Nex squats beside me and flips through what appears to be a journal. “How can you be sure?”

“I just know, Nex. It’s a human thing.”

“It’s a thing for us, too, Pete,” Shel says, then kneels to join me in digging through the final pile of personal items.

Yes, our kind. I’m one of them now. We’re together in this, putting back the pieces of a scattered life one scrap of data at a time. And finally, we find the scrap of paper that gives me permission to help them find their lost history. Wrapped in a threadbare cloth, sealed in a small wood chest, concealed by many layers of wool, beneath the final pile of random belongings which definitely smell of crisp apples in fall time, is a stack of letters in a familiar hand.

They’re preserved just well enough that I can make out most of the words. I pick each crumbling, sacred piece up with mechanical delicacy and hold them up to read. The first page is blank, but the second page has handwriting. I can almost feel the slanting, curling letters imprint themselves onto my soul.

My dearest Pete...

Outside, the icy wind howls a tune of revival against the mountain’s surface. Shel and Nex watch soundlessly as I make my way through Hannah’s letters. I know I can read as fast as the hardware allows, but I want to savor the strokes of her pen, the loops and whirls and jagged edges of her words. So I take my time. The letters detail her last few weeks here, on this planet they named Frostden. She never found Sam. She thinks he’s still out there. She says she feels it in her heart, like she feels it in her heart that I’m alive, too.

There’s more, and I take it all in. I reread every

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sentence, every paragraph, every page. The last words she writes to me are simple, and I believe with all my heart that they are true. She signs the end of every letter like this, and I yell it from the top of the mountain before we make our way back to our pod. The blizzard nearly drowns me out, but I don't care. We descend from the sepulcher, towering, metallic ice giants that we are, and my purpose is renewed. We load into the drop pod, and the heat from our engines melts the snow and ice that piled like thick frosting on our craft. As the deep gray of radioactive clouds break and give way to the vacuum of space, I repeat her words over and over in my head. Suddenly, the hungry dark doesn't seem so daunting anymore.

As long as there is one person left to hope, then there is hope that there are others out there to share it with.

END.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Zak Lettercast is a queer multi-genre author with a passion for dark and gritty speculative fiction. Xe finds joy in eloquent turns of phrase and expansive universes, but xe is also aware of the importance of art to the efforts of social change. Lettercast takes pride in xyr ability to build unique, inspiring worlds and create thought-provoking plots, and xe strives to craft relatable, diverse characters who grip the reader's heart and mind. Xe got their start as a non-fiction children's author for Teacher Created Materials, under the pen name JB Caverty. Xe has since self-published several fiction works, spearheaded two anthology projects, co-written several short stories, and submitted countless academic reports and intelligence analysis products at university. Lettercast's passion for speculative fiction, particularly science fiction, is not limited to xyr passion for writing. Xe dreams to someday use cutting-edge technology, geospatial intelligence, and astrogeology to help bring science fiction into the realm of reality.

