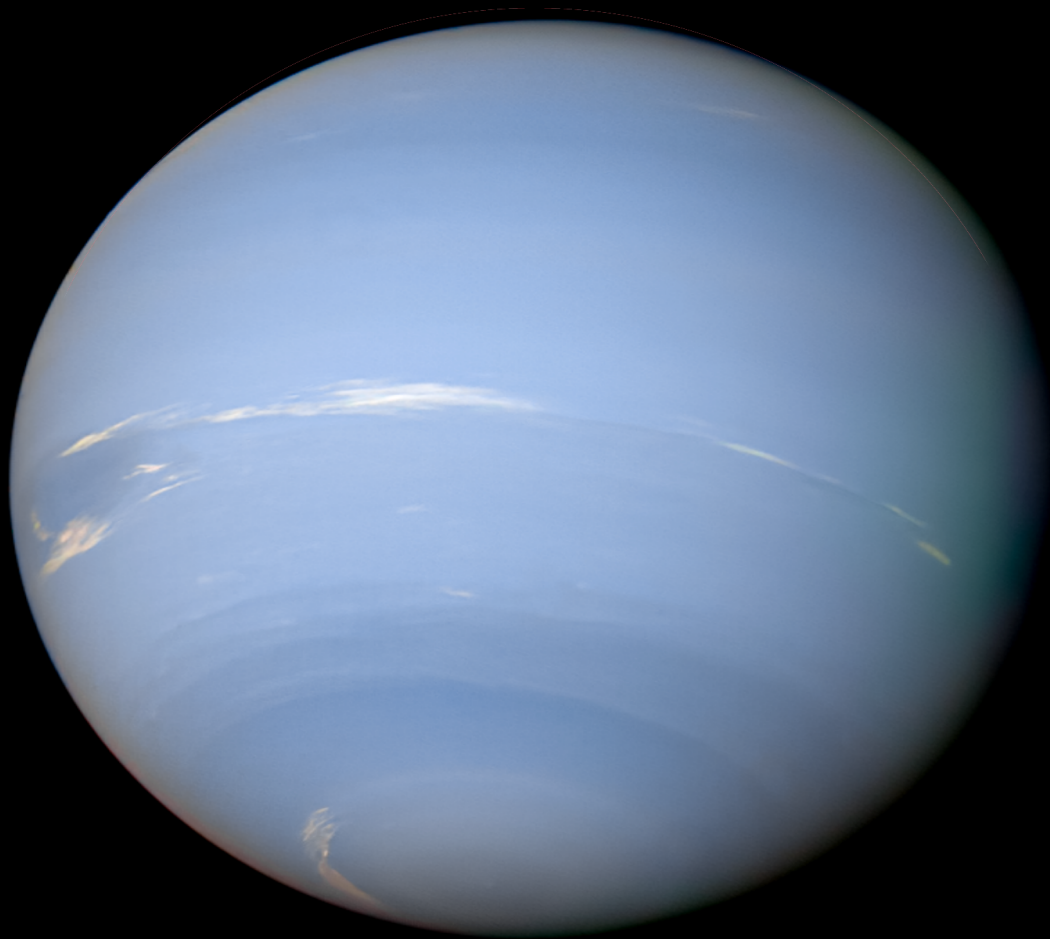


Vampires  
of  
Neptune



James Youngman

# Vampires of Neptune

by  
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“High time for space crimes!” Tulsi grinned as the space station came into view.

“Think we’ll find many customers with all those rumors going around?” Dallas asked, not looking up from their instrument displays.

“Even if we can’t, we can charge more. I got double out of our passengers.”

“Hazard pay. Nice.”

“Especially since there’s no hazard.”

Dallas said nothing, slowing the *Demeter* for docking.

“Oh come on, Dallas. You don’t actually believe that nonsense, do you?”

“People are going missing on the unregistered stations out here. Some of them still in cryo-sleep. And there are reports of strange, pale people showing up that no one brought on board.”

“These are criminal space stations at the edge of Neptune’s gravity well. Not counting the colony ships, this is the frontier of humanity.”

“Long way from the sun,” Dallas pointed out.

“Long way from everything! Weird stuff happens at the frontier, but it’s never supernatural. The the cloud monsters of Venus and the killer robots of Mars were made up, and so are the vampires of Neptune.”

Dallas gave a non-committal grunt, and started docking maneuvers. Tulsi took the radio and announced the imminent arrival to their passengers. For the most part, they’d seemed unconcerned with the rumors of space monsters, but then again, criminals living at the frontiers of human expansion in the solar system tended to be risk tolerant in the first place.

Some of them even found risk exciting. Tulsi smiled at the thought of her own illicit plans.

But first, she had work to do. Dallas smoothly docked the *Demeter* and Tulsi watched their passengers file out of the ship and into the station. Once she was sure they were gone, she radioed for Dallas, and the two of them began pulling goods out of their holds. It didn’t take long for customers to come aboard, looking to buy contraband from Dallas.

Nothing they sold was illegal per se. Neural implants that were stripped of the spyware and artificial constraints the companies that manufactured them imposed on their customers. Triton-grown produce and spices that avoided the tariffs the Neptunian Navy collected to fund themselves and, allegedly, infrastructure for the colony on Triton and the gas mines in Neptune’s vast storms.

Well, and the remora rockets. Those were *definitely* illegal. The idea had come out of three revelations that Tulsi had during her university days at Edison Technical Institute on Mars. The first of these was that her then-girlfriend, a local aristocrat named Edie, was only dating the young Venusian as a fetish, a fact brought to her attention by one of the Martians Edie was also sleeping with at the time. The second was that a major source of revenue for the corporations Edie was a majority shareholder of was selling auxiliary supplies to colony ship missions at horrific markups. The third was that a big magnet could stick to the hull of a colony ship like it was welded on.

And they could hold *a lot* of contraband to the hull, for a lot less money than the extortionists at the Martian-owned colony ship gantries charged, a fact which was making Tulsi and her partners a lot of money. She and Dallas were still unloading their gray market goods when they were approached by a representative of the Neo Jovian Collective. “How many moons is your next ship colonizing?” Tulsi called out as she headed to the *Demeter*’s ramp.

“Five! We’ve found a system with two gas giants in the Goldilocks Zone. There’s evidence of three habitable moons around the inner planet, and two orbiting the outer one.”

“That’s exciting! You got one picked out yet?”

“As long as I can live by an ocean, I’ll be happy. I’m from Europa.”

“Yeah? I’ve got a friend from there. She says it’s beautiful.” Tulsi smiled to herself. She’d met Joanna at Edison Tech. Like Tulsi, she had been on Mars thanks to a scholarship. Like Tulsi, living there left her with disdain for Martian society. She was more than happy to offer her skills as a mechanical engineer to the remora rocket project.

“Most popular tourist destination in the outer planets for a reason,” the European beamed.

“Let’s keep that ocean under the ice.”

The European nodded. “It brings me a lot of satisfaction to know that we’re screwing over the Martians by doing things this way. The less money we can give those parasites, the better.”

“Why do you think I’m in this business? Let’s see how much cargo we can get you from out here in the gas giants.” The answer, it turned out, was worth more money than the gray market merchandise and passenger seats put together. But not enough to fill all the remora rockets in the *Demeter*’s cargo hold.

“Cloud nine!” came a cry as the station’s cargo robots hauled away the Neo Jovian Collective’s remora rockets.

“This home of mine!” Tulsi replied, smiling involuntarily.

“I’d heard that there was a Venusian behind the cargo rockets,” the next customer said, stepping up to the *Demeter*’s ramp.

“Two of us, in fact.”

The customer looked passed Tulsi, then back to her, confused. “Your friend is pretty tall for a Venusian.”

“I’m from Io!” Dallas shouted over the din of gray market customers.

“The chemical engineer who makes our fuel is a friend of mine from back home,” Tulsi explained. She’d grown up with Kamiar in the floating cities of Venus, where he had remained for college. Afterward, he’d moved to Io to begin his career, and it was there he met Dallas, and brought the pilot into the conspiracy.

“Must be why they fly so well. Got any rockets for the Endless Horizons Project?”

“I think we can dig some up.” Tulsi kept a close eye on what organizations were sponsoring colony ship launches, and who ran those organizations. The consequences of getting caught by one of the Martian Free Colonies would be catastrophic, especially out here beyond the reach of any kind of law.

Luckily, their shareholders were easy to spot. For better and for worse, Mars had no taboos around genetic engineering. Any Martian who could afford the trip out to Triton, and the smuggling to and from the station, would be a child of the oligarchs who ran Mars’ corporations, engineered to have perfectly symmetrical features, bright irises, and pale, smooth skin that the Martian elite favored. Back at Edison Tech, Tulsi would joke that her brown skin, neither especially light or dark for a Venusian, gave her the darkest complexion on the Red Planet. It became less a joke each time she made it over her two local years at the Institute.

Tulsi kept her eyes open, and managed to keep the few Martians she spotted from being drawn to the *Demeter*. The wealthy, whatever body they came from, didn’t come to unregistered stations looking to purchase consumer goods. Tulsi herself had an ulterior motive for coming out as well. “Mind if I take some shore leave?”

“Do it,” Dallas said with a nod. “We’ll grab some food when you get back, then tag out.”

“Great; I’ll ping you when I’m done.” Tulsi was beaming as she left the *Demeter*.

Unregistered stations weren’t just places to go in search of gray and black market goods. They were places to go in search of experiences that one couldn’t have in the civilized parts of the solar system. Void-locking was how Tulsi got her rushes.

The first, of course, was the rush of adrenaline. The second, beginning only after being very certain that the harness straps were firmly secured both to the bulkhead and ones body, was of the atmosphere in the airlock rushing out into the void of space. These five-second jaunts into the vacuum were the highlight of Tulsi's trips to the unregistered stations.

She was in high spirits when she met Dallas in the food court. The two of them were halfway through their meal when the station's collision warning alert began to flash and roar. At once, the two were on their feet; they had to get back to their shuttle on their own.

The two of them rushed toward the dock, abandoning their half-eaten meals and fellow black market thrill-seekers in a panicked dash. Naturally, the rest of the station had had the same idea at the same time, and the hallways were a roiling mass of flailing bodies, each persons legs pushing them forward as the shoulders and arms of the other escapees pushed them back.

The yelling and banging was so cacophonous that Tulsi couldn't hear the klaxons anymore, although the blue flashes of light from the alarm periodically washed out her vision. Then all the human noise was silenced as a great, hollow groaning sound echoed through the station, as the great rotating ring of the guest deck shuddered and stopped spinning.

The loss of gravity came as a visceral shock. She tried to orient herself; how much had the station pitched around her in the collision? She felt a hand on her wrist; instinctively she twisted it free. The second time it grasped her she saw that it was Dallas. She took hold of their wrist and let them guide her; Dallas had been piloting shuttles since they were a teenager; they knew how to navigate in zero-g, and they always knew where their ship was docked. So she held fast and followed their lead.

The yelling stopped; the tone of the alarm had changed, as had the color of the warning light. Red pulses: the hull had been breached. Oxygen was now at a premium. Once Tulsi and Dallas reached the docks, the crowds began to thin, as escapees rushed onto the waiting shuttles. People weren't seeking the shuttles that had taken them to the station; any shuttle with an open passenger hold was at once filled by whomever was nearest to it. But Dallas was a pilot; they would get the two of them, and whomever scrambled into the *Demeter's* hold, safely back to Triton themselves.

They were in sight of the *Demeter* when a strange figure floated into view, and it was immediately obvious that something was very wrong with it. Limbs that were too thin, ears oddly pointed, eyes that may have held the light of the alarm, or may have actually been red. But it was chiefly the whiteness of the being which disturbed her. It wasn't albinism, or the paleness that naturally light skinned people tended to develop when they stayed too long beyond the sun's embrace in the inner planets. Nor was it the engineered light and unblemished complexion of the Martian elite.

Its skin was white like porcelain. White like marble. Like bone. Its thin lips parted in a cruel smile, revealing teeth that could only consume flesh.

"The fuck?" Tulsi gasped. There was no way. A fucking vampire?

The vampire floated toward her; the crowd of escapees spilling down the hall pushed her forward. The way the vampire moved was easy, graceful; even the asteroid miners Tulsi had seen at work more swam than floated. It blocked the way to the *Demeter*.

A sharp jolt from the crowd behind her knocked loose the grip Tulsi and Dallas had on each other.

"Tulsi!" Dallas cried.

"Get to the ship! Get out of here!" She felt a cold hand on the back of her neck. Nails like talons scraped her collar. She beat against the vampire while it pulled her closer; it didn't flinch. The crowd pushed forward, and Dallas with it. They reached for Tulsi. She could feel the fangs sink into her neck. She was surprised that the bite didn't hurt. It felt almost pleasant. Peaceful. No; she couldn't focus on that. She beat her fists against the vampire's head. "Save yourself! I'll keep it busy!"

Tulsi didn't understand the next minute of her life. There was a moment of pain as the vampire withdrew its fangs, a shrill hissing noise as it recoiled from her, and a firm, warm grip on her arm pulling her away. She was already in the hold of the *Demeter* before she realized that Dallas must have grabbed her when the vampire released her. But why did it let her go? And why did the two holes in her neck not hurt?

Thankfully, whatever damage the station sustained wasn't enough to take its docking systems offline, and the platform the *Demeter* rested on slid it smoothly into a ship-sized airlock before jettisoning it into space. Dallas instantly began rotating the ship away from the station; the moment they were far enough away to safely ignite the main thrusters they were accelerating away, vast Neptune filling the view screen.

Tulsi's attention was snapped from her view of the planet by a piece of hard plastic smacking into her chest. She looked down; someone, almost certainly Dallas, had tossed a first aid kit at her. She put her fingers to her neck and they came back bloody. The anti-microbial cream felt odd against her injuries, and the bandage was almost itchy. Weird. After cleaning her hand with a wet wipe, she left the first aid kit floating and headed to the cockpit.

"How's your neck?" Dallas asked, not looking up from the ship computer.

"Weird? But I can still stand and breath, so the bite wasn't too deep."

"Good."

Tulsi waited, but Dallas said nothing. She sighed. "So I guess vampires are real."

"I'm really sorry, Tulsi."

"Why? You were right."

Dallas looked at her, with pain in their eyes. "I don't *want* there to be vampires. And I absolutely don't want them to eat my friends."

Tulsi squeezed their shoulder. "Good thing it let me go. Wish I knew why though."

"The important thing is that it did. Let's get back to Triton before the navy figures out something happened out here."

Tulsi bit her lip. "Can you do a loop around the station before we head back home?"

"Seriously?"

"I got bit by a fucking vampire, Dallas. I want to know where it came from so we can melt its coffin into slag."

Dallas took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "You got bit by a fucking vampire."

"I got bit by a fucking vampire. Can we please go slag it?"

"Yeah. Let's do it." They punched in some navigation info, and soon they were accelerating back toward the station.

Now that they were able to take a good look at the station, it was shocking how little damage it had suffered. The boarding had been rough, but other than the hole the vampires had cut in the hull, it didn't seem like there had been any other deliberate damage.

"Whoa. What's up with that shuttle?" Tulsi asked.

Dallas zoomed in on the ship the vampires boarded the station from. "It's an antique. Gotta be centuries old."

"No shit?"

"Here, let me get another angle on it."

"I've never seen one like that before."

"You ever visit any museums when you lived on Mars?"

Tulsi frowned. "Martian aerospace museums are mostly advertisements for whatever ships are coming out next."

"This is an early inner system shuttle. And I mean *early*; that's one of the ships they used to send the first waves of colonists from Earth to Mars. It must have taken centuries to get this far out."

"Vampires can wait centuries." Tulsi frowned. "But why do it at all? Mars didn't even have half a million people living on it when they built the Free Colonies, and they were the farthest people from the sun in the system."

"That's got to be it, right?"

"What do you mean?"

"The sun. This far out, we're getting more radiation from each other than from the sun. That must have been the plan; head out to the edge of the solar system where they wouldn't have to fear sunlight."

"Okay, but what were they supposed to eat for the centuries between colonizing Mars and colonizing Neptune?"

"How much blood do you think one of those old shuttles can hold?"

Tulsi frowned. "I'd rather *not* think about that."

"There you go," Dallas nodded, satisfied that they'd solved the puzzle. "So what's the plan? Wait for the vampires to leave the station, slag their shuttle, then back home?"

Tulsi thought for a moment. She didn't like the way her neck felt when she thought about slugging the vampire who bit her, but otherwise the idea seemed satisfying. An unhappy thought wormed its way into her mind and her face dropped. "You said that shuttle was built to go from Earth to Mars, right?"

"That's what it was designed for, yeah. But if you don't care how long it takes to get out here, you could basically run it like the interstellar probes and colony ships. Do your orbital math right, and you can just do one big burn at the start and coast the rest of the way."

"Could you do that, and still have the fuel to pounce on an illegal space station at the edge of Neptune's gravity well?"

Dallas was silent long enough that it made Tulsi uncomfortable. They didn't say anything as they began punching commands into the ship computer.

"What are—"

"I'm sending out lidar pings to see if there are any big objects within a light-minute of us."

Tulsi watched silently as data she didn't understand scrolled on a terminal on one of Dallas's screens.

"Well, shit," Dallas said, and after a few more commands, the *Demeter* had changed trajectory, flying out even further from Neptune.

"Dallas?"

"Large unknown mass" is how the ship computer describes it. If we're lucky, it's an asteroid that the astronomers haven't started tracking yet."

"And if we're unlucky?"

"We slag whatever it is and burn home as hard as our passengers can survive."

They were unlucky.

Two things were immediately obvious about the object: It was enormous, and it was artificial. Its architecture was utterly bizarre; giant towers growing out of each other at odd angles, the junctions sealed crudely.

"Oh," Dallas said. "Oh, no. No, no, no." They were already setting a new course, the *Demeter* already turning back toward Neptune before Tulsi could react.

“What is that?” The scale was overwhelming, an effect exacerbated by the seeming arbitrariness of the design.

The artificial voice of the *Demeter*, invariably cool and confident, announced that the ship would be accelerating rapidly. Tulsi didn't have time to raise an objection before she found herself pressed to the padded back wall of the cockpit.

She managed to climb her way into the copilot's seat before the *Demeter*'s acceleration made it much beyond one g. She strapped in and turned to face Dallas, who was staring intently at their instruments. “What the shit?”

They were closing in on two gs of acceleration. Dallas breathed deliberately, spoke deliberately. “Colony ships.”

Tulsi's blood chilled. That's why it was so huge; it was made out of a dozen of the largest objects humanity had ever produced. It wasn't towers rudely extruded from one another, it was dead colony ships welded together at whatever angle they could be reeled in at. Tulsi tried to remember how many of the towers she saw on the station, now that she knew what they were; she tried to remember how many people each of them had carried upon departure. When she realized she didn't know enough to do that math, it was a relief. She focused on steadying her breathing. Even at two gs, it was a long way back to Triton.

One of the benefits of growing up on Venus was that Tulsi spent her formative years at ninety percent of a g. Which meant that no one on the *Demeter* had a greater natural tolerance for acceleration than she did. Dallas sent her down to the hold to negotiate rates for a ride back to Triton with their passengers. There were a few passengers who had already paid for the round trip, but it was mostly people who had ridden some other shuttle to the station.

She'd collected enough bribes that Dallas didn't slow down as they passed the station. Good; she didn't want to waste the time or risk docking. The vampire shuttle was still present as they passed it again. She hoped the customers thought that she and Dallas were crazy enough to risk it. They were running a black market shuttle service to an illegal space station, after all. An hour after they passed the station, she returned to accept bribes to decelerate the ship. The passengers were able to bribe the *Demeter* down to a g. She knew that would leave the Martians on board uncomfortable, but it was what they were willing to endure to show they could still hold out over the people from the various outer moons, and since they had the most cash, that's what the rate was.

This left her and Dallas with plenty of time to decide on their next course of action. Tulsi put her hand to her neck. “Vampires are real.”

Dallas laughed without joy. “Good thing sirens aren't.”

“What are we gonna do about it?”

Dallas took a deep breath. “We've got to destroy the station.”

“How? It's a nest of colony ships. What are we going to do, use a shuttle to slag it?”

“Why do you think I sent you to extort our passengers?”

“Because we're criminals, with a hold full of criminals, escaping from a crime space station.”

Dallas paused. “Those are very good reasons, and all true. But also, the sort of weapons capable of taking down a colony ship aren't going to come cheap.”

Tulsi scratched the shaved side of her head. Unconsciously, she let her hand come to rest by the bite. “What if we call it in?”

“No.”

“You recorded all of the data, right? We hand it over to the navy, let it be their problem.”

“No.”

“Dallas-”

“Let’s play this out. We walk into the civilian affairs office, tell them we have a drive with data proving that vampires are real and they have a space station made out of dead colony ships at the edge of orbit. If we’re lucky, if we’re really fucking lucky, they laugh us out of the office before either of us says the word ‘vampire.’ But let’s say they humor us long enough to actually look at the footage.

“Well, now we’re really fucked, because they’re going to want to know what we were doing that far out in the first place. And on their way out, they’re going to find an unregistered space station stuffed with illegal contraband. Hopefully they arrest us, because when the station owners find out we lead the Neptunian Navy right to it, this is going to be a dangerous system for us to be walking around in.”

“If we leave an anonymous tip?”

Dallas shook their head. “How many civilian ships are there out here that can make that trip? None of them is leaving Triton until they figure out who gave them the tip, and when they figure out it was us, we’re back in that prison cell.”

“Shit.”

“Yeah, shit. The only reason the black market survives is that we don’t give the navy a reason to leave cis-Tritonian space, and they’re content to float around on safe, easy traffic duty. We give them a reason to start taking action further out, they’re going to start clamping down. They figure out that there are literally vampires out there, the whole system will go out of orbit. This is not something we can do through official channels.”

Tulsi hated to admit it, but Dallas was right. But how the hell were the two of them supposed to take down that station themselves? “So we take our ill-gotten gains, find someone willing to sell us fissile materials under the table, and nuke the vampires into ash?”

“Unless you’ve got a better plan.”

Tulsi thought for a moment. “Where in Neptune are we going to find that much plutonium?”

Dallas paused. “Fission drives were obsolete centuries before we made it to Neptune.”

“What kind of engines did the early Mars colony ships use?”

This time, Dallas’s laughter was sincere. “I’m glad we’re a team, Tulsi. Yeah, we can turn the vampire’s shuttle into a bomb, if we can take it.”

“Will that be a big enough explosion to take down their station?”

Dallas stopped laughing. “Not if we’re careless. But those colony ships carry a lot of fuel on them. If we can nail one in an engine or generator, that should set off a big enough blast to ignite the next ship, until they all go up.”

“So all we have to do is bait out an ancient inner-system shuttle crewed by vampires, take out the vampires, turn its engine into a bomb and launch it into the engine of a colony ship.”

“That’s the plan, yeah.”

“Four things. You can count it out on one hand. Easy.”

“Great. Once we get back to Triton, let’s take a day, then figure out how to make it happen.” Dallas slowly increased the acceleration by a tenth of a g.

The next morning, Dallas woke up to banging on their door. No sooner was it open than Tulsi pushed her way inside and shut it behind her. “We need to hijack a colony ship.”

Tulsi watched, confused, as Dallas poured boiling water into a pot filled with dried leaves. “Is that real tea?”

“It is. Manged to snag some on the station.”

“Nice! So, about the-”

Dallas silenced her with a raised finger as they set a timer on their tablet. When the alarm went off, Tulsi opened her mouth to start again; Dallas shushed her as they poured a cup of tea. Real tea was

a great luxury this far from the sun. Five minutes later, Dallas put down the empty mug, with an exaggerated satisfied sigh, before turning to Tulsi.

"I'm still excited about this idea," she smiled.

"Well, shit."

"Everyone onboard is going to be in cryo-sleep. We sneak on board, and ambush the vampires when they hijack it. Then we hijack *their* shuttle and use it to blow up their space station."

"And then get hailed as heroes on some alien world when everyone wakes up in five hundred years?"

"I figured we'd intercept the colony ship with the *Demeter*."

Dallas laughed. "There's no way for us to match the velocity of a colony ship. We wouldn't even make an interesting smear on the side of it."

"The remora rockets don't have any problem catching them."

"The remora rockets don't have passengers."

"Colony ships really go that fast? I thought they mostly coasted?"

"Have you ever watched a launch?"

Tulsi shook her head. The gantries were far out at Jupiter's L4 and L5 trojans. They were Martian owned and operated; the Free Colony that ran Edison Tech also ran one of them. "Just a couple promo videos."

"Do you remember the big panels along the sides of the ship? They're part of the gantry structure, and unfold before the launch."

"Vaguely."

"Those are mass drivers. You ever wonder why cryo-sleep happens in a gel?"

"I thought it was something about avoiding cell damage from ice crystal formation?"

"That's part of it, yeah, but the big thing is that it's an acceleration buffer. That's why they leave the pods full instead of draining them. When colony ships launch, they launch *hard*."

"So what you're saying is, we need to already be on the ship when it launches."

"That is *not* what I'm saying, and I think you know that."

"We can't get on to one after it launches, right?"

"Correct."

"So we have to get onto the ship at the gantry."

"Or come up with a different plan."

"I bet I can hack the timer on a cryo-pod."

Dallas made a sound like glaciers shearing. "We'd need more than just a hacker."

Tulsi smiled in a way that made Dallas think that she hadn't understood their intention. "Who else do we need?"

"We'd need someone who could smuggle us, with fully stocked cryo-pods, onto a colony ship that was preparing for launch. We'd need someone who could program those pods to wake us up on a signal from someone waiting on a ship near the station. We'd need people who can kill vampires, and we'd need people who could retrofit a centuries-obsolete engine and program a centuries-obsolete flight computer."

"So we get the gang back together."

"You think you're just going to call Joanna and Kamiar up, explain to them that you want to hijack a colony ship to bait out some vampires so we can hijack their shuttle and blow up their space station, and they'll just pack their bags?"

"I think that's exactly what they'll do."

Dallas frowned. "You know, I never met Joanna, but if she's anything like Kamiar, you're probably right."

“Great; then our first stop is Europa.”

“I’ll pack a swimsuit.”

“I’ll keep my toes, thanks.”

“You go void-locking every time we’re on station.”

“You know what conducts heat better than the empty vacuum of space? *Everything.*”

“Fine. Next stop is joveward to Io. It’s been a long time since I’ve paid my family a visit, and if we’re doing this, I want to pick up my friend Jules while we’re on the moon.”

“Engineer? Fighter?”

“No; they’re going to be my copilot for getting back out to Neptune and sending the signal.”

Tulsi frowned. “You’re not coming on the colony ship?”

“I’m no good in a fight. Flying shuttles is what I do best, so that’s what I’m going to do. I’ll wake you up when it’s time to fight, and I’ll pick you up once you’ve launched the shuttle. But I’m not sneaking onto a colony ship just to get eaten by a vampire.”

Tulsi sighed. She had expected Dallas to be with her throughout the entire trip. But they were right; Dallas was an incredible pilot, but their talents, their place, was on a ship. Still, knowing that Dallas would be responsible for picking her up did make her feel better. “Okay. So that’s everyone. You and Jules can handle piloting and comms, and me and the engineers can handle the rest.”

“You’re going to fight vampires? I don’t suppose you know a priest who can get you some holy water?”

“How sure are we that that even works?”

“Good question.” Dallas shrugged. “But I think you’re the system’s foremost expert on fighting vampires.”

Tulsi touched her neck. It hadn’t hurt or bled when she’d showered last night, and it didn’t do so now. The bites weren’t like wounds; it was as if her neck was just that shape. “It was strong. Unnaturally strong. Fighting it was like struggling against a robot; no one could overpower one.”

“But it let you go.”

“Yeah.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know. I thought I was dead. I told you to run, and it let me go.”

“Weird.”

“Yeah. Weird.”

“So okay, we know for sure that they’re strong, and that they drink blood. We’re pretty sure that they don’t like sunlight, but we don’t know what properties of sunlight hurt them. The rest? We don’t know.”

“That sounds right.” Tulsi thought for a moment. “Colony ships usually stock a few suits of power armor, right?”

“Kind of. They have heavy labor suits; they’re not the same as the military ones that the navies use.”

“But same basic properties? Thick armor, gestures amplified with robotic strength?”

“Yeah. Yeah! If you can get into the heavy labor suits before the vampires break in, that *should* give you a fighting chance. Are Kamiar and Joanna good for a fight?”

“Do you really think there’s a single engineer, chemical, mechanical, whatever, anywhere in the solar system, that wouldn’t put on some power armor to punch a vampire?”

“Okay, fair point.” For the first time that morning, they smiled. “So we head sunward, grab Joanna on Europa, Kamiar and my friend Jules on Io. Jules and I will drop you all off at one of the gantries, then we’ll head back to Neptune while you sneak onto a colony ship. I’ll give you the wake-

up signal when you're heading past Neptune, you'll knock the vampires into space, turn their shuttle into a bomb, and then I'll evac you."

"Easy!" Tulsı beamed. "Let's message our people and get on the next sunward flight!"

The convenient thing about living at the frontier of human settlement, probably the *only* convenient thing, at least among lawful matters, is that any interplanetary ship in the system will head back toward the sun as soon as it finishes its business. And since the Triton colony was too new to sustain itself, such ships were in orbit regularly, meaning Tulsı had no difficulty booking her and Dallas cryo-pods to the Jovian system.

Once they reached Jupiter, they were woken from cryo and moved to a smaller shuttle, in the same class, but newer, and with more luxurious accommodations, than the *Demeter*, to take the passengers inward to the moons, while the interplanetary ship offloaded Jupiter-bound cargo and picked up cargo and passengers destined for the inner planets.

Tulsı and Dallas waited on the shuttle as it made its stops on Callisto and Ganymede. At last, they touched down at the spaceport outside of Siren City, the largest settlement on Europa.

"You ever been to Europa before?" Dallas asked Tulsı as they disembarked.

"No; I haven't really spent time in the Jovian system. My folks took us to Earth a few times to visit family when I was growing up, then I went to college on Mars. I think I had only been on Io about a week or so before you and I met, and then we were off to Triton."

Dallas grinned. "I'd never admit it back on Io, but this is my favorite view on any rock in the system." They lead the way toward the train to Siren City.

Tulsı wasn't particularly impressed. The station looked more or less like the stations on Earth. The local style was interesting, but even that didn't stick out in her mind. The train, like the station, reminded her of a lower budget version of what she'd seen on Earth, just with bigger windows and more ads looking to entice tourists. Once it got moving, it wasn't even as smooth as the trains on Earth. Was Dallas pranking her?

Then the train dove into the ice. "Whoa!" The walls of the tunnel itself were the glaciers of the European crust. Tulsı had never seen a glacier in person; now she was inside of one. "This is beautiful."

"Just wait."

Tulsı turned toward them. Wait for what? Through the window behind Dallas, she watched as the train sank lower, the tunnel exiting the glacier and entering the ocean.

The vast majority of human infrastructure on Europa was beneath the surface; sunken structures tethered to the glaciers above. The vast domes, with the network of rail tunnels between them, reminded her of the floating cities on Venus, but upside down. And the clear waters of Europa provided a longer view than the clouds back on Venus; the network of illuminated settlements stretching out before the train's vast windows.

And that was the human settlement. Life in the Venusian clouds was microbial; Tulsı knew it was there, but didn't think about it much. But Europa? In addition to the indigenous microbes, heroic efforts by conservationists had engineered and transported all kinds of aquatic life from Earth to Europa early in the history of the moon's settlement. Corals, anemones, and mollusks grew on the sides of the domes, vast kelp forests surrounded them, and great schools of fish swam among them, searching for food while hiding from their own predators.

She noticed Dallas again; they were grinning even more widely now. "I told you so."

"Now I get why this is the resort moon."

"Right? And you can fly on Titan." They shook their head. "Can you believe the Martians wanted to drain all this water for terraforming?"

"Having lived on Mars, yes."

“Good thing they lost that war.”

“Good thing.” Tulsi was barely listening; Venus and Triton didn’t have oceans, and she never went diving when she was on Earth. She’d never seen anything like this before. Tulsi spent the rest of the trip to Siren City with her face pressed to the window, enthralled by the splendor of Europa’s boundless ocean.

Joanna was waiting for Tulsi and Dallas at the station in Siren City, and lead them back to her apartment. Siren City was made up of a vast acrylic glass sphere, with several smaller spheres attached by transit tubes. A vertical column connected the poles, with a series of torus shaped plates surrounding it. These plates were the platforms on which the homes, parks, businesses, and other structures of human life were built. Joanna lived on one of the lower plates, closer to the column than the surface.

The apartment was modest by Jovian standards, making it spartan by the standards of the inner planets, and luxurious by the standards of Triton. Joanna offered them fish and salad made from the moon’s engineered biome; Tulsi and Dallas greedily consumed the freshest food either had eaten since moving to Triton.

At last, Joanna asked Tulsi what brought her to Jupiter. Tulsi took a breath, pressed her hand to the bandage on her neck, and told her former roommate the story of her encounter with the vampire, conveniently leaving out any mention of her void-locking or extortion.

It was Joanna’s time to take a deep breath. “So you’re running away from the vampire that bit you?”

“Oh, no. Sorry,” Tulsi waved her hands apologetically. “We’re going to nuke their space station. That’s actually what I wanted to talk to you about.”

“The vampires used an old fission powered shuttle for their attack,” Dallas said as they pulled up a picture of the derelict ship on their tablet. “Our plan is to hijack the shuttle, turn its engine into a bomb, and launch it at the at the engine of one of their colony ships.”

“We want you to set the engine to blow up, and launch the shuttle at the target. If all goes well, we get one hell of a light show, and then we don’t have to worry about vampires ever again.”

“I wasn’t worried about vampires before,” Joanna frowned.

Tulsi got up, sat down next to her friend. Tulsi tilted her head toward her shoulder; conveniently, the vampire had bitten her on the same side that she shaved her head, so her hair was already out of the way when she pulled back the bandage.

Joanna gasped. It wasn’t just the perfect symmetry of the two punctures. It was their perfect cleanliness. There was no seeping blood, no sign of infection, just two cones of missing tissue. Two *smooth* cones, none of the natural variance in the surfaces biological processes produce.

“This is real, Joanna. Vampires are real, and I need your help to stop them.”

Joanna said nothing for a moment, then hugged Tulsi tightly. “A fucking vampire bit you, Tulsi.” After a few breaths, Joanna pushed back, her hands on Tulsi’s shoulders. She looked her friend in the eyes. “I’m in. What’s the plan?”

Dallas and Tulsi walked Joanna through the plan, to the level of detail they had it at that point. Joanna listened patiently, nodding along, saying nothing, although she frowned at a number of points. When the explanation was done she smiled without showing her teeth. “Okay. I have some questions.”

“Can you make the bomb?” Tulsi asked in a rush.

“Oh, yeah. That’s trivial. I mean, if you can get me onto the shuttle safely.”

“So we’re good?” Tulsi grinned.

“If you can get me onto the shuttle safely. The shuttle filled with aggressive, hungry vampires. Why are you smiling harder now?”

“The standard loadout for colony ships includes heavy labor suits.”

Joanna's eyebrows came together for the moment it took her to understand the relevance of that statement. "You mean we get to beat up vampires in power armor?"

"That is *exactly* what I mean!"

"I'll go pack!" Joanna was already on her feet by the time she finished the sentence.

"Told you so," Tulsi grinned.

"It is a strong argument," Dallas laughed.

Tulsi was sad to leave Europa, with nearly twice the gravity as Triton, and vastly better food, but excited for the ride back to the spaceport. She munched on fried fish and stared out the windows as Joanna caught Dallas up on local affairs. This, to a degree Tulsi would have found surprising, had she been paying attention, involved sports. A team from Ganymede, the Illus Illuminators, had won the latest Pan-Jovian Cup, a source of camaraderie-building outrage between the Ioan pilot and European engineer.

The two of them found themselves needing to work together sooner than expected. Tulsi was heavier than either of them, but with an arm under each of her shoulders, and the leverage gained by being each about a foot taller than her, the Jovians succeeded in keeping her from getting on a train back to Siren City, and onto the shuttle to Io. They consoled her with the promise of the even greater gravity to be found on the innermost of the Galilean moons.

Pele City wasn't nearly as visually impressive as Siren City. Like the settlements on Triton, those on Io were largely underground tunnels, the ports the most obvious signs of humanity's presence on the surface of both moons. And like on Triton, the ride from the port to the city was simply an elevator, although at least the screens in Io's elevators were more dedicated to news than advertising.

Once they were off the elevator, Dallas parted ways with Tulsi and Joanna, leaving them with a brief explanation of the transit system before disappearing into it to visit their family and retrieve Jules.

Kamiar had told Tulsi to meet him at the cryonics lab where he worked; deep at the edges of Pele City's cave system, far from the population centers. The lab was near the geothermal power plants that generated the city's electricity; it was at the edge of a volcano.

The air in the train Tulsi and Joanna rode got hotter and hotter as the train rushed ever deeper toward the moon's churning furnace. And then, as it entered the station, the heat was gone. Tulsi shivered; she hadn't expected the sudden temperature change. It was practically chilly as she walked to the lab.

Tulsi and Joanna didn't have to wait long for Kamiar to make his way into the lobby. Nearly at once, he hugged Tulsi off her feet. "Oh, Tulsi! It is good to see you again."

"Miss me that much?" Tulsi laughed.

"I'm tired of being the shortest person on the moon," he teased.

"Okay, Kamiar. Down. This is Joanna. She did the mechanical engineering for the remora rockets."

Kamiar put Tulsi down and smiled up at Joanna. "So good to finally meet you!"

"Likewise!"

"So what have you been doing since working on our little conspiracy?"

"I work in power generation on Europa."

"Very cool! Well, not as *cool* as what I do."

"Is he always like this?"

Tulsi nodded.

"You work next to a volcano. I live under an ice sheet," Joanna noted.

"She's good," Kamiar noted to Tulsi before turning back to Joanna. "Cryonics fluid, and for that matter, a bunch of other stuff we make here, takes a lot of heat to produce, especially at scale. Not to

mention, when you want to test the quality of your insulators, it's convenient to have easy access to magma."

"So it's easy to get your hands on cryo-gel?" Tulsi asked.

Kamiar's eyes briefly narrowed. "Why don't we go get a bite to eat? All this easy heat makes for some good stir-fry."

The stir-fry was good, as was the coconut ice cream Kamiar insisted that they follow it with. He had spent dinner keeping the conversation lively and moving; enthusing about the food, telling stories about his life on Io, about his childhood back on Venus, and encouraging Joanna to talk about life on Europa. Nothing, however, about why Tulsi had shown up on Io, with an engineer friend from college in tow.

He led the two of them back to his apartment. It was in the same district as the lab; they didn't need to take the train back to the city. It was surprisingly large and well appointed; a perk, he explained, of living next to an active volcano. He poured three glasses of a local tequila before sitting down. "Alright, Tulsi. You didn't fly all the way out from Neptune for some stir-fry."

"Finally!" Tulsi practically growled. "I got bit by a vampire, and I need your help to go blow it up."

Kamiar took a sip of his tequila. Half of it was gone with the tumbler left his lips. "See, this is why I didn't let you talk about anything recent while we were eating. That's not the type of conversation you have in public."

"But we're in private now, right?" Tulsi asked. Kamiar nodded, and she explained the events at the space station.

At the end of the story, Kamiar seemed confused. "What do you need cryo-gel for? It's not like it contains garlic oil or holy water."

"Oh, the cryo-gel's not for the vampires. It's for us."

"Tulsi. Do *not* drink cryo-gel."

"That was a dare; I know it's not food."

"So what are you going to do with it?"

"We. We're going to hitch a ride on a colony ship, hijack the vampire's shuttle, then Joanna here is going to rewire it into a bomb that we're going to launch into their station."

"So that 'we'-'"

"Inclusive."

"I don't think I can take a vampire in a fight."

"What if you were piloting a heavy labor suit?" Both women were grinning.

Kamiar joined them. "Okay, so getting the cryo-gel shouldn't be an issue. My company is pretty generous about personal use. The issue is going to be getting the pods. We don't make them, so I can't just grab a few out of the supply closet. We'd have to buy them, and those pods don't come cheap."

"My pilot and I recently raised some capital."

Kamiar stared at her. "If I ask you to explain how, will I be at risk of subpoena?"

"Yes." Tulsi smiled and sipped her tequila. "Oh, good tequila."

"The cacti love it down here." He took another sip of his own drink. "How are you going to get the pods wired into the colony ship?"

"Hardware engineer," Joanna said, raising her glass.

"How are you planning on getting your pods onto the ship?"

"I was thinking we'd be technicians assisting a cryonics engineer who was double checking the installation," Tulsi said.

"Potentially gets us on board. What happens when we don't get back off?"

"If we can get on just before a shift change, we'll probably get lost in the shuffle."

“It’ll take some tight timing, but it *could* work. I’ll start making cryo-gel. It’ll take me a few days; you two can crash here until we’ve got everything.”

And there was plenty of room for them. While apartments were larger in the Jovian system than on Triton in general, for Kamiar to live alone in a place so big was shocking. Tulsi and Joanna tried not to dwell on why apartments in this district were so affordable as they headed to separate rooms to sleep in.

The next day, Tulsi and Joanna researched upcoming colony ship launches while Kamiar was at work cooking up the extra cryo-gel. Both the L4 and L5 gantries had impending launches. The massive ships would be taking on their travelers soon, which was perfect for Tulsi’s purposes.

“Who are the sponsors?” Joanna asked once Tulsi had finished the list.

“At L4, we have the Million Earths Foundation, the Order of Saint Neto, and, ugh, the Free Galaxy Corporation.”

“Isn’t your ex their CEO or something?”

“Something like that. Martian corporate boards are all inbred.”

“Sure. We can go with one of the other ships. Who’s launching from L5?”

“The Neo Jovian Collective and the Human Galaxy Foundation.”

They looked at each other. “L4? L4.”

“It seems like the Order of Saint Neto should be our target, right?” Joanna started. “They’ve got to have a bunch of crosses and holy water on board.”

“Right. But how sure are we that that stuff actually works?”

“I mean, not one hundred percent, obviously. But what we have is folklore and your encounter. What else can we go off of? Hell, as much as I want to fling a vampire into space with heavy labor armor, we don’t actually know if the suits are stronger than they are.”

Tulsi hadn’t realized that her fingers were at her neck. “Yeah, you’re right. With what we know, it’s probably our best shot. At least as good as the other two anyway. Let’s try to get onto that ship.”

“Okay. Wait. Is it hypocritical of us to hijack a ship full of priests in case we want to use holy artifacts?”

“I don’t really believe in gods, but I figure if we use church stuff to fight vampires, that’s got to at least break even.”

Joanna nodded, satisfied. “Alright. Let’s try to find out as much as we can about the construction and outfitting of the Saint Neto ship.”

The ship, *Trinity Seven*, was, like most colony ships, built by a Martian engineering firm, with a mostly standard design. And while many of the details were proprietary, a mix of marketing material, leaks, and Joanna’s general knowledge of the state of ship engineering left her confident that she could find the crew chamber and get the extra pods wired into the ship’s grid.

If they could get on board. The timing was going to be tight. Tulsi figured that the passenger loading was probably the easiest window for her team to sneak onboard, but it was also the last opportunity. Once the colonists were in the cryo, it would only be a matter of hours before the mass drivers launched the ship, either to a new solar system, or into the vampire’s trap.

Kamiar had only produced half the cryo-gel they needed by the end of the day. After getting that news, Tulsi called Dallas, who assured her that they and Jules, and the cryo-pods, would be ready by the end of the next day.

With Kamiar and Dallas taking care of the materiel, Tulsi and Joanna found themselves with the day free. The district near the volcano had museums dedicated to the construction of Pele City and the broader colonization of Io, and impressively lush public parks, filled with the engineered descendants of plants from the deserts and jungles of Earth. It was the latter that especially drew Tulsi’s attention;

Triton had little plant life outside of industrial vertical farms. The greater variety of plants meant a greater variety of foods available, and much cheaper than what Triton had to offer. After she and Joanna had lunch, she insisted on picking up a dozen jars of spices to send back home with Dallas.

Which gave her an excuse to ping Dallas and get the dock info for the ship they'd rented for the trip to the L4 gantries. They had initially been planning on leaving the next morning, but Tulsi insisted that they all leave that night if possible; it was a long way to L4, and they only had so many days before the *Trinity Seven* was set to launch.

Tulsi then turned around and sent the dock information to Kamiar, so he could get the cryo-gel sent to the port, and then had him send her a list of everything he needed from his apartment.

Tulsi and Joanna were waiting for Kamiar at the train station when he got off work; the three of them ate dinner on the train as it carried them away from the volcano, toward where their race to the *Trinity Seven* would begin.

The ship Dallas had rented was a fast cruiser, smaller than the *Demeter* but with a similar class of engine. It was a bit weird seeing them walk down the ramp from another ship, but Tulsi was still glad to see them. While Kamiar and Dallas went to the hold to double check that the cargo was secured for the trip, Tulsi and Joanna changed into their cryo-suits.

"This is a really fancy suit," Tulsi commented. "I don't think I've ever worn a cryo-suit that had individual toe sleeves."

"These are really well made," Joanna agreed. "The internal plumbing is really efficient in its layout. Discrete insulation types on both sides of the pipes. Should make for easy transitions in and out of cryo-sleep."

"This what people are wearing closer to the sun these days?"

"Rich people, sure. This is top of the line. The only way you could get something better than this is getting it made bespoke."

"Came with the ship," Dallas said, flanked by Kamiar and Jules as they entered the crew chambers. "Fastest ship I could find. Mainly ferries management types between Jupiter and the gantries, so it comes with all the creature comforts you need to enjoy a restful state of suspended animation." They grabbed a suit off the rack and tossed it over their shoulder. "Jules, these are Tulsi and Joanna. Tulsi and Joanna, Jules. Old friend of mine. I need to be awake and at the helm until we complete the slingshot; you should all get in your pods. I'm going to get us moving as quickly as I can." With that, they disappeared toward in the cockpit.

"Hey," Jules said with a nod. Their height and build gave away that they were from one of the inner planets, probably Venus. "Heard you're planning on defenestrating a vampire."

Tulsi grinned. "And then we're going to blow up the rest of them."

"Fuck yeah! I'm going to go get changed. Start the count down to the count going down."

"I like them," Kamiar noted, pulling off his shirt to reveal the cryo-suit beneath it.

"You've been wearing a cryo-suit as underwear all day?" Joanna asked.

"Wasn't the first time, won't be the last."

"Isn't that bad for them?"

"Most of them, yeah. This is one of my work suits; it's built for working next to a volcano."

"Two minutes to liftoff," came Dallas's voice from the intercom.

At once, Kamiar, now just in his cryo-suit, was at a terminal tapping away commands. The lids of four of the deck's cryo-pods slid open, their mechanisms silent, or at least, quiet enough to be completely obscured by a synthetic voice welcoming their occupants. Jules rejoined them, and the four were secure in their pods by the time the ship left the ground. They were asleep before they left atmosphere.

Tulsi inhaled deeply, exhaled slowly, and was awake again. Joanna was right; that was the smoothest she'd ever woken up from cryo. She pressed a button to open the lid; a bright beeping sound played, and a moment later the lid was open. Her ears didn't pop; the pod must have equalized the pressure. That was new. She rubbed her eyelids, expecting to find some cryo-gel still clinging to her face, but her skin was clean. The pod must have rinsed and dried her before it woke her. She could get used to traveling like this.

Her sense of peace didn't last long; Dallas pinged her over the intercom to join them in the cockpit. "Which ship is the one you wanted to get on again?"

"*Trinity Seven.*"

The L4 colony ship port was visible on the main screen. The center of the operation was the torus of a rotating space station; the largest by far that Tulsi had ever seen. On the near side of the station, half a dozen partially built colony ships were being assembled. Opposite the station, a mammoth colony ship floated between the launch rails; two other complete ships were floating not far off.

Dallas tapped at their console; the image on the screen zoomed in on the launch cannon. The camera panned across the body of the ship. At this level of magnification, the markings were legible. An icon of St. Neto above the text "*Trinity Seven*".

"Shit. How much time do we have before launch?"

Dallas started tapping at their console again; the camera pulled back to the wide view as Dallas pulled up schedule information.

The *Trinity Seven* began moving forward, a brief creeping motion, then in less than a second, it was shrinking away from the sun. The awesome and terrible sight of its launch having passed, Dallas turned to Tulsi. "Shit, Tulsi. I'm sorry."

Tulsi shook her head. "You got us here as fast as you could. There are still two more colony ships getting prepped for launch."

Dallas tapped at the console. "There's the *Gaia's Gift*, and before that, the *Watson & Crick*."

"Which one do you think it'll be easier to bluff our way onto?"

"The Million Earths people are too sincere, the Free Galaxy people are too cynical. Either one works."

"Speaking of cynical."

"We take criminals to and from a crime space station where both we and they do space crime. It pays to be an honest judge of character."

"You're an inspiration, Dallas. Get us onto the station for now. I'll go update the crew."

Tulsi didn't let them have a chance to be worried or disappointed. No dwelling on the launch of the *Trinity Seven*, just laying out the new plan of finding their way onto one of the two other launch-ready colony ships. By the time they docked, she was feeling good about their chances. Dubious hopes of divine intervention or not, they were going to slag those vampires.

She walked down the hatch, took three steps onto the station, and froze dead in her tracks.

"Hello Tulsi. Been a while."

Jules was the first to react. Their hand flew from their pocket, a half-dozen garlic bulbs flew from their hands. They slammed into the figure's chest, before bouncing off harmlessly. Slowly, all eyes turned to them. "Skin pale and smooth like bone, eerie grace, sharp teeth, unnaturally symmetrical features."

The figure smiled, sincerely. "Thank you."

Tulsi rolled her eyes, old frustrations displacing present fears. “They weren’t calling you pretty Edie; they think you’re a vampire. Which she isn’t, she’s just a rich Martian.”

Jules narrowed their eyes. “Are you sure those are different things?”

“Technically, yes.”

Jules stooped to retrieve the garlic, keeping an eye on Edie as they did so.

“I’m surprised to see you out here,” Edie said, turning her attention to Tulsi. “Last I heard you were out on Triton.”

“How did you know we were on this ship?” Joanna asked, putting herself between Tulsi and Edie. Edie was taller than Tulsi; Joanna, a head taller still, looked down at the Martian.

“Joanna, so nice to see you again! What a nice little reunion this is! I know, because when someone rents one of the Free Galaxy Corporation’s luxury shuttles on two day’s notice, that gets my attention. So I took a quick glance at the manifest. Imagine my excitement when I saw your names on it!”

Kamiar snapped his finger. “Right. Edie. I know who you are.”

“Familiar with my work?”

“No, Tulsi mentioned you back when we were in college.” He joined Joanna between her and Tulsi.

“Good things I hope.”

“Hope’s a funny thing.”

Tulsi stepped forward, pushing herself past her friends. “Great, you saw we were coming. Now we’re here. So what do you want?”

“I just wanted to see you again! We were really close in college, and I’m sad about how things ended. I was hoping we could catch up, get dinner.” Her eyes flicked briefly to Tulsi’s crew. “There’s some great restaurants on the station. Anything you want, it’ll be my treat. For all of you.”

Tulsi opened her mouth to decline, but Dallas started speaking first. “Then the most expensive restaurant on the station it is!”

Edie grinned at Tulsi. “Follow me.”

When they arrived at the restaurant, lights along the floor lead the party to their table. The food was waiting for them; Edie took her seat and gestured for Tulsi to sit next to her. Joanna sat next to Tulsi on her other side, Dallas took Edie’s other side, with Jules sitting next to them, and finally Kamiar between them and Joanna.

“The finest in Martian food engineering,” Edie said, gesturing at the bowls of stew. “A perfect blend of micro and macro nutrients, high bio-availability, and modest calorie density, appropriate for the executive lifestyle.” She turned to Dallas. “I ordered the most expensive spice blend.”

“How?” Kamiar asked.

Edie pulled her hair back, revealing a flat triangle embedded behind her ear. “Neural implant. My time is too valuable to waste using speech where thought will do.” Tulsi scoffed audibly. “Your bowl is special. I got you your favorite spice blend from back in college. You still like it, right?”

Tulsi looked at her bowl, then at Edie and Joanna’s meals. They were all the protein cube curry that was popular on the Red Planet, but in three different colors, owing to the different spice blends. Tulsi took a deep whiff of her curry. It reminded her of being back in college, being back on Mars. Back with Edie, who was lying about the restaurant.

Martian curry, even at its most expensive, was cheap enough that even the desperate Martian underclasses could afford it. Rare and difficult to produce spices could certainly raise the cost into the realm of the luxurious, but it was a meal eaten because of its nutritional properties and ease of local production: the Martian elites valued independence from Earth above anything but money.

No; Edie hadn't taken them to the most expensive restaurant on the station. She'd taken them to the restaurant where she could treat Tulsi to a nostalgic meal, a meal they frequently ordered in on lazy weekend days spent more horizontal than vertical.

"Hard to say. Spice is hard to come by on Triton." She could practically taste the spices from Io. Instead, she tasted her curry. Damn Edie, but it really was delicious. While most of the food on Triton was conceptually similar, it was much more utilitarian in its production; most of her calories came from near-flavorless compressed protein bars, and a decent chunk of her vitamins came from pills. Just about anything else was imported, at great expense, from somewhere closer to the sun.

Edie nodded, watching Tulsi from the corner of her eye while taking a spoonful of her own curry. No doubt it had been produced to her individual nutritional needs. She grinned when Tulsi involuntarily smiled at the taste of her dinner. "You mentioned something about vampires when you first arrived?"

Tulsi sighed. She didn't think Edie would believe her, but she explained about the attack all the same. Edie look at her neck with a curiosity she was failing to mask as concern. Tulsi peeled off the bandage, allowing the Martian to get a closer look. She flinched when Edie prodded near the bites, but it was out of surprise, not pain. She frowned; that was the opposite of what her reaction should have been. Annoyed, she replaced the bandage.

"Unreal," Edie said.

"And yet."

"Does it hurt?"

"No. It doesn't hurt, it doesn't bleed, it doesn't heal. It's just there."

"I can get you the best doctors in the system."

"And surely some lucrative biotech patents for yourself."

"You would be generously compensated."

"There it is."

"Martians," Dallas muttered.

"Hey!" Edie cried.

"You're being unfair," Kamiar interjected. "Most of them are serfs."

"The employees aren't-" Edie stopped herself, took a deep breath, and turned back to Tulsi. "So why are you and your...friends here at Jove L4? This is the only inhabited part of the system more remote than Neptune."

Tulsi looked to Dallas. They were frowning. "Your call."

She turned to Edie. "We're going to fight them."

"Is that why your friend threw garlic at me?"

"You got it," Jules chimed in without looking up. They crushed a clove between their spoon and the table before stirring it into their curry.

"That still doesn't explain why you're *here*. The only thing you can get here that you can't get better, cheaper, and easier somewhere else is a colony ship." Her face went slack. "Tulsi. You can't really be planning on hijacking a colony ship."

"No, that would be impossible."

"I'm glad you under-"

"We're going to stow away on a colony ship so we can get the drop on the vampires when they hijack it."

"Come on, Tulsi. I get that you're not happy with how things ended between us, but you didn't come out all this way just to make fun of me."

"Every word of that was true, and yet you were still wrong." She pulled out her tablet and showed Edie the footage of the colony ship graveyard.

Edie gasped, and covered her mouth with her hands. Tulsi turned to Joanna, confused, but Joanna just shrugged. Neither of them were used to seeing Edie moved by anything.

“Such a waste. We’re supposed to colonize the stars.” An aperture at the center of the table opened, letting a mechanical arm deliver a cup filled with water to Edie. She took a couple sips before handing it back. She wiped her lips as the arm withdrew and the table closed itself. “What’s your plan? How can I help?”

“You’re serious?”

“I’m serious. As crazy as it sounds, there are vampires in orbit around Neptune, stealing our ships and killing our people. That can’t continue.”

“We need to get onto one of the colony ships. Joanna, Kamiar, and I. We’ve got cryo-pods rigged with receivers, so Dallas and Jules can wake us up when the vampires show up to hijack the ship.”

“Done. I’ll have your pods installed on the *Gaia’s Gift* within twelve hours.”

“Don’t you own the *Watson & Crick*?”

“I’m an executive of the free colony that manufactured both ships. The other execs will care a lot less about me imposing changes on a customer ship than one of ours.” She turned to Dallas. “I’ll have the work order transmitted to your ship. You can just fly straight up to the *Gaia’s Gift* and the drones will handle the rest. I’m also extending your lease; you’ve rented a fast and reliable ship. That’s good; you’re racing a colony ship.”

Dallas looked confused. “You really are helping us. No bullshit?”

“No bullshit. This is bigger than interplanetary rivalries, or even college drama. I’ll get you to the vampires, with anything you need in the hold of the ship.” She paused for a moment. The robotic arm returned, taking away all of the curry. “Come on, enough of this egalitarian slop. I can’t let you go into cryo without eating at the fanciest restaurant on the station.”

“I knew it,” Dallas muttered, tossing their spoon into the open aperture.

After dinner, Edie followed Tulsi and her team back to the docks. “Mind if I come aboard for a few minutes?”

Tulsi opened her mouth, but it was Dallas who responded. “We’ve got to get moving if I’m going to beat the *Gaia’s Gift* to Neptune.”

“I was hoping to spend some time with you before you left,” Edie said to Tulsi. Joanna stepped forward but Tulsi waved her back.

“I appreciate you helping us, and the food, but like Dallas said, we’ve got to get moving.”

“I can meet you on Neptune. I’ve never been out past Jupiter.”

“You can’t buy forgiveness, Edie.”

“I can’t believe you’re still upset about things that happened in college.”

“I’m not. I’m using the education I got there.”

“Worlds are still turning,” Dallas barked, to no one in particular.

“Look on the bright side, Edie. When all this is over, you can say you financed the defeat of the vampires!” Tulsi backed into the hold as the ramp closed. She felt much better when it sealed, with her inside and Edie outside.

“You dated that blood sucker?” Jules was incredulous.

“I was young and living alone for the first time; she was hot and attentive. Anyone want to claim the moral high ground here?”

Joanna smirked as she raised her hand.

“You’re ace; that’s cheating.”

Joanna lowered her hand, but not her lips.

Dallas cleared their throat loudly. They were holding up their tablet; the screen was filled with three giant words: SHIP PROBABLY BUGGED. When everyone had nodded in acknowledgment, they updated the message. CAN SHE BE TRUSTED?

Joanna pulled out her tablet: BUGS MAY HAVE CAMERAS, then FIND LIGHTS.

A few minutes later, the crew had set up a makeshift dome of light using some of the portable flood lamps the ship was equipped with. They huddled within this dome, the bright lights blinding any camera that might be looking in, using their tablets to hide their communication from any hidden microphones.

LIED ABOUT RESTAURANT Jules pointed out.

WON'T JEOPARDIZE PROFITS Tulsi asserted, and Joanna nodded in assent.

SO? Dallas asked.

WON'T TRY TO KILL US, then, INVESTIGATION = DELAY = COST

ARREST? Kamiar inquired.

WHY?

LEVERAGE ON TULSI

Tulsi frowned. WANTS ABSOLUTION, NOT GIRLFRIEND

SAFE TO BOARD? Dallas asked.

Tulsi and Joanna looked at each other. Edie was typical Martian aristocracy; she'd look out for her own interests above anything else, and she mostly understood her interests in monetary terms. But she also had a personal mythology to maintain, and Tulsi holding a grudge was a stain on her ego. CAN ONLY FORGIVE IN SOLAR SYSTEM She looked at her crew. They were weighing the choice, and while she was anxious to take the fight to the vampires, she knew that they were right to take the risks seriously.

Joanna held up her tablet. IN

Kamiar nodded. IN

Jules shrugged. FUCK IT, IN

Dallas took a deep breath, then got distracted by a notification on their tablet. "We're clear for departure. Everyone in your pods." They held up their tablet. SEE YOU AT NEPTUNE

Tulsi stood frozen as Dallas disappeared toward the cabin and the rest of the crew started disassembling the light shield. This was it. When she next woke from cryo, it would be on board the *Gaia's Gift*, just beyond the orbit of Neptune, with a transport ship full of hungry vampires coming for her.

She touched the unhealing, unhealing wounds in her neck. She was going to enjoy tossing vampires into space.

Waking up from cryo would have been disorienting even if Tulsi's previous experience hadn't been the smoothest of her life. She'd gone into her pod in the hold of the rental shuttle, and woke up in the crew deck of the colony ship *Gaia's Gift*. She'd never been in a colony ship before; she didn't realize how thin and low on oxygen the hall's atmosphere would be. If the oxygen had been higher, she'd have understood the logic, but as it stood, she just had a mild headache.

It didn't help that it was completely dark. She groped blindly for the personal effects locker at the base of her pod. She was able to find her tablet; its screen was almost painfully bright as it powered on. Once she got its flashlight on, she sealed the cryo-pod and placed the tablet so that its light would reflect against the gel in the chamber. That illuminated the immediate area at least. Once her eyes had adjusted, she returned to the locker.

"Tulsi?"

"Kamiar? How long have you been awake?"

“A few minutes. Can’t find the latch on my locker.”

Tulsi grabbed her tablet, and helped Kamiar to find his. Now they had two islands of light. She returned to hers, wiped off the excess cryo-gel and changed from her cryo-suit into the more practical clothing she’d packed for the battle while Kamiar did the same. Something felt weird; there was something in one of the pockets that she hadn’t put there. Had she been sabotaged? Who would do that? Who even knew what she was doing?

The pocket contained a vacuum sealed packet of garlic cloves. Jules. Tulsi laughed, and held the packet up for Kamiar to see. He checked his own pockets, and held up the garlic Jules had packed for him. “Looks like Joanna is awake.”

Tulsi turned around as Joanna emerged from her pod. She helped her out and to her locker. Once Joanna had her tablet up and running, she found her way to a terminal in the hall. A few minutes later, the oxygen started to thicken; Joanna had routed air from the algae vats the ship maintained for seeding exoplanets. Once she’d begun that process, she brought the lights up. Still dim, but bright enough to see around the room.

Bright enough to see Edie, seated calmly atop an empty cryo-pod.

“Edie!” Tulsi hadn’t intended to yell, but wasn’t upset that she had.

“Tulsi!” Edie seemed happy to see her, as though this were a delightful coincidence.

“Why are you here?”

“You said there were vampires out here. If that’s true-”

“You saw the bite marks.”

“I did. But it’s going to take more than my word to convince the rest of the board.”

“What?”

“Think about the implications, Tulsi. Vampires violate our understanding of biology, of life and death. What could be a more important discovery in the realm of biology than a colony of actual vampires?”

“You want to monetize vampires,” Joanna said flatly.

“I want to create an entirely new branch of medical science. Has Tulsi shown you her bites?”

Joanna nodded.

“Centimeter deep puncture wounds *in her neck* that subjective days later haven’t begun to seal, haven’t resulted in infection, haven’t continued to bleed. Do they even hurt?”

“No. Not even a little.” She touched her fingers to the bandage. The bites felt empty, like they were missing the fangs.

Edie hopped off of her cryo-pod. “What if we could figure out how that was possible? What if we could figure out how to replicate those effects in a way that was safe and reliable? Of course we’re going to make a fortune; everyone in the system is going to want these treatments.”

“We?” Kamiar asked skeptically.

“I get that people off Mars think of us as a bunch of greedy backstabbers for some reason, but we’re fundamentally honest. I wouldn’t be here to collect a sample, to record some footage, if it weren’t for you all, so you’ll all be getting a share of the profits.”

“Samples?”

Edie pulled back her sleeve, revealing a thick ring around her forearm. “Tethered syringes. I’ll grab a sample of vampire blood, or whatever they’ve got in them.”

There was a great mechanical groaning sound that echoed through the vast ship. When the fearsome roar subsided, Tulsi turned to Joanna and Kamiar. “They’re here.”

Joanna rushed to the terminal. “Routes to the heavy labor suits are on your tablets.”

The four of them raced out of the crew deck down the corridors of the massive ship. Tulsi turned a corner, and slammed into a person who must have weighed half again as much as she did, even without their body armor.

“Captain! I’ve found the pirates!”

The security guard waited patiently. Why wouldn’t they be patient, Tulsi thought to herself. The security guard was armed, and had backup coming. Two people entered the corridor, one another security guard, the other a ship’s officer. “These are the pirates, Captain Ibeh,” the guard who had apprehended Tulsi said nodding toward her and her crew.

“I’m going to be honest, I didn’t think pirates were a problem I was going to encounter,” Captain Ibeh said, chuckling with his guards.

“Just wait until you meet the actual pirates on board,” Tulsi spat.

“You must be the leader. I was-”

Eddie bristled “Actually, I represent-”

“She’s the leader,” Joanna cut her off, nodding her head toward Tulsi. Kamiar nodded in agreement.

“As I was saying,” Captain Ibeh continued, evidently entertained by the exchange, “I don’t know why you’ve broken onto our ship, but I trust the Neptunian Navy will find that out in less time than it takes them to scrap that relic of a shuttle you used to latch onto us.”

“We’ll all be dead before the Navy gets here.”

“Dead?” Captain Ibeh seemed genuinely offended. “You listen here, pirate or no, you are still a child of the Earth. Our mission is to spread the spark of Earthly life throughout the galaxy, not snuff it out in our home system.”

“Hey, great,” Tulsi said. “But the monsters drilling through your hull don’t have your principles. Just hunger. So let us go so we can deal with them before they eat everyone on this ship.”

“That is how you defend yourselves? That you aren’t pirates, and the real pirates are cannibals, *space* cannibals, that you smuggled yourselves onboard to defend us from?”

“Yes!” Eddie practically yelled.

“Kind of!” Tulsi said. “We *are* stowaways. And the reason we snuck on board was because we expected the pirates to attack this ship, and we intend to stop them.”

“The space cannibal pirates?” Captain Ibeh asked with, frankly, deserved skepticism.

“They’re vampires.” Tulsi tore the bandage off of her neck.

“Vampires? *Vampires!*” Ibeh’s laughter was a roar that continued until the *Gaia’s Gift’s* engines suddenly shut down. Ibeh turned to his guards. One of them rushed to a nearby terminal.

“The pirates shut down the engines. And...they shut down our external comms system.”

“Did it go down with the engines?”

“No; it was the first thing they shut down. Comms were down before the emergency alert system pulled us out of cryo.”

“I told you the Navy couldn’t save us,” Tulsi noted.

Captain Ibeh took a deep breath as he turned back to Tulsi. “You clearly know more than I do about these pirates. How do I know you’re really not part of their crew?”

“I was trying to show you before you started laughing,” she responded, turning her neck toward the captain. “One of the bloodsuckers bit me. Why would I want to help them? I want to hop in a heavy labor suit and chuck them into the vacuum.”

Captain Ibeh looked at Tulsi’s wounds and frowned. “That is very bizarre.”

“Yeah, it’s not my favorite. So can we get the heavy labor suits already, or do you want to wait until the vampires start snacking on your sleeping colonists?”

Ibeh took a few deep breaths. He directed one of his guards to observe and report on the colonists, and the other to wake up a few more emergency personnel from terminal.

“Have you got cameras watching the crew hold?” Kamiar asked.

“Yes,” Captain Ibeh replied.

“Internal network is down. We’ve only got the ad-hoc network,” reported the guard at the terminal.

“Have your scout check the back of the crew hold. There are going to be four empty cryo-pods, one for each of us stowaways.”

“Even if there are, how do I know that’s not a trick?”

“We installed additional cryo-pods and used them to stow ourselves away before you launched. If we wanted to gut the ship, we could have disabled the emergency alert system while we were sneaking on board,” Edie said, her tone cheerful and smile toothy.

All that was clear about what Ibeh said next was that it was deeply profane, but afterward, more loudly, he radioed to the security guard he’d sent to check on the cryo-pods and ordered him to check for the empty pods Tulsi and her crew had used.

The reply was the scream of an energy weapon followed by the scream of a human being.

Tulsi opened her mouth to speak but Ibeh was already delivering orders to both the security guard that was with them and to the personal radios of just awakened guards. He frowned at Tulsi. “Follow me. We’re going to the heavy equipment hold.”

There were a half dozen security guards waiting in the heavy equipment hold when Tulsi arrived.

“Yes!” Joanna cheered at the heavy labor suits. “Tulsi, help me get in.”

“Wait!” Captain Ibeh barked. “I want my people in suits before you four get in.”

Joanna and Kamiar visibly deflated, but Tulsi soothed them while members of the *Gaia’s Gift* security team got into the industrial suits. They moved away from the bulkheads they had been held to, awkwardly shifting into the hold. It wasn’t until four of his guards were in suits and ambulatory before Captain Ibeh consented to Tulsi and her crew getting in heavy labor suits. He introduced the four security officers: Ruoho, Park, Tetuanui, and their lead, Uribe.

Kamiar and Joanna practically flew to their suits; Tulsi was more deliberate in getting into her cockpit. She’d never operated equipment like this before, and she was a few minutes away from using it for a fight to the death on the edge of space. The straps reminded her of the straps she used for void-locking. Only this time, if the outer door of an airlock opened up on her, the suit was going out with her.

Taking the first step in the suit felt incredible. The sense of power, the sense of capability. She wasn’t going out of an airlock, but every vampire on the *Gaia’s Gift* was. She flexed her hands, and the robotic hands of the suit flexed with them.

The eighth suit knelt down, seemingly of its own accord. Edie entered as though she’d done so a hundred times before. Once she was secured, the suit stepped forward with an eerily human motion.

“Good luck,” Captain Ibeh said grimly as the eight heavy labor suits began their march to the crew hold.

The suits raced through the hollow halls of the ship, the pounding of their feet like an avalanche. Even from within the cockpit the gallops propelled Tulsi forward, eight hearts beating in her ears.

Uribe lead the charge into the crew hold, the other guards pouring in after her; Tulsi was next behind them. As excited as Joanna and Kamiar were for the fight, and Edie was for the hunt, she had gotten them into this situation; even if it didn't mean much, she felt that she should be the first one to face its dangers.

The hall was largely the same as it had been when she'd departed it, except near the port side bulkhead. A large section of the wall had been cut out and was resting where it fell. Several of the cryopods were missing, all near the hole in the bulkhead. Against what remained of it lay what remain of the security guard. From what it looked like, that was most of them, minus their blood.

Tulsi didn't realize she'd been staring until the sound of her radio snapped her out of it. "What off Earth?" It was Park. Looking around, she guessed Park was piloting the suit that was leaned over the desiccated corpse.

"Everyone flank the entry hole. That has to be their entry point." It was Uribe. Tulsi was glad that she sounded so calm and confident. "Tulsi and I nearest the opening. When the pirates come back into the hold, the nearest two suits on either side will block off the hole, and the other four units will encircle the enemy. Then we crush them to dust."

"Got it," Tulsi replied. She didn't have a better idea, and these were security professionals. She pressed the heavy labor suit against the bulkhead and turned its sensor array toward the opening while the other suits took their positions. As much as she enjoyed the idea of tossing the vampires into space, the suits couldn't fit through the hole in bulkhead.

Tulsi's heartbeat was louder than the echoing drumbeat of the suits charge had been. Information appeared on her HUD, but most of it was meaningless, so she just focused on watching the gap for the return of the vampire. Vampires? She had no idea. The bandage itched against her neck; it was a relief to remove it. She was beginning to think of how peaceful it had felt to get bitten when a cloud of mist flowed through the doors, undulating like the jellyfish she'd seen under Europa's ice sheet.

She watched as if in a trance as the cloud swam out and around one of the cryopods. The cloud formed a ring, which rotated around the pod before condensing into two darker shapes. The tails of the cloud collected into these masses, which came together into two humanoid forms.

But not human.

The marble-white skin and thin lips, the unnatural grace of their movement, and the cruelty of their gazes would have settled the issue even if she'd not just watched them condense out of living cloud. Vampires were in the hold.

"Move!" Uribe shouted over the radio. Her suit was already in motion; Tulsi rushed to her own position. The other suits fanned out, rushing to encircle the vampires. The two vampires turned toward the nearest suit to them. They moved so quickly, yet seemingly so casually. Then one of them reached into the leg of the heavy labor suit and tore a piston out of it with feral strength.

Tulsi panicked. Who was in that suit? Joanna? Kamiar? She didn't know; the suits all looked the same. She rushed toward the fight. The vampires danced around the suit's attacks as they tore the moving parts out of it. She caught the arm of one of the vampires mid-swing and tossed it aside.

The vampire landed gracefully, like a dancer, but it hadn't been able to overcome the suit's strength. This was a fight the humans could win. The thought was shaken from her head as the other vampire tore the joint out of her suit's knee. By the time she was able to focus, the vampire had badly damaged one of the machine's hands. A visceral noise escaped her as she swatted at it, but the vampire stepped out of the way as though turning at a street corner. She lunged forward, grasping for it with both mechanical hands.

The awful crash of metal against metal echoed in the hall. The suits hands clapped against each other, empty, and the suit slammed into floor of the hall. Tulsi rushed to push the suit up. She got it up onto its hands and good knee; a second later she fell helplessly onto her back.

The vampire stood on the chest of the heavy labor suit; it stood over the pilot hatch. Tulsi reached for it, but the suits shoulders weren't as flexible as her own. The vampire smiled as it grabbed the latch to open the hatch.

Tulsi patted her clothing, searching desperately for her last hope. She tried to ignore how nice her bite wounds felt, the memory of how peaceful getting bitten had felt, as she retrieved the pouch of garlic and tore it open. Her thoughts were suddenly dominated by the taste of raw garlic as the cloves cracked between her teeth. She really hoped that the folktales were right.

A mechanical arm grabbed the vampire and slammed it into the floor. The suit shifted, pinning the vampire beneath its weight. Tulsi tried to right herself, but the damage to her suit made it hard to maneuver. She watched through the suits cameras as the hatch of the suit pinning the vampire opened, and Edie exited.

"Edie!" Her voice couldn't escape the pilot hatch, and Edie couldn't hear her radio from outside of her own hatch. She could only watch Edie launch the syringes from her wrist into the neck of the pinned vampire.

The syringes withdrew a moment before the other vampire appeared behind Edie and pulled her off of its partner by the back of her neck. It casually tossed her aside and grabbed the robot arm pinning down the other vampire. The two of them had gotten the hand off of the pinned vampires chest when another suit drove the free vampire back with a swipe. The attack missed, but the vampire now found itself encountering two more suits.

The suit that drove the free vampire back grabbed the arm of Edie's suit and dropped to its knees. Tulsi was thankful for the noise, awful that it was, of the heavy labor suit's knees slamming into the floor, because she was certain, as she watched the vampires head roll away from the suits, that she would have hated the sound that accompanied it detaching. The suit palmed the head, mouth facing hand, and gripped it tightly before standing upright again.

Tulsi's radio pinged. "I'm going to chuck this thing all the way back to Europa." Joanna's glee was unconcealed.

"Joanna! They broke my knee; I can't get up."

"Hold tight," It was Kamiar. Together, he and Joanna pulled Tulsi up into a kneeling position.

Tulsi couldn't fight, but she took the head from Joanna to allow her to pursue the remaining vampire. She watched as Joanna and Kamiar turned their heavy labor suits toward the melee and stomped off to join it.

She was torn between her desire to get back into the fight and her desire to stay in the relative safety of the heavy labor suit. And part of her wanted to leave it, to face the vampire as a human. To seek that peace. She shook her head. No. She didn't know why that was happening, just that it started when the vampires arrived. Tulsi knew what she had to do. She crawled toward the hole the vampires had made in the bulkhead. The heavy labor suit was now short enough to fit through the hole, and onward she crawled, closer and closer to the hull of the ship, and, just beyond it, the void of space.

"What are you doing?" It was Ruoho.

"I need to destroy this vampire head."

"What?"

"I'm going to throw it into space."

"Just crush it," Kamiar insisted.

"I can't."

"Tulsi?"

“I can’t explain. It’s just got to be this way.”

The crawl felt agonizingly slow; the crew hold was near the center of the ship, and she had to crawl through bulkhead after bulkhead, tormented in turns by the shriek of the broken mechanical knee scraping against the floor and the intrusive thoughts telling her to seek the vampires, rather than destroy them.

She did not seek the vampires, but she found them.

The hole in the hull of the ship was the same size and shape as those that the vampires had carved through the bulkheads, but terminated in the cargo airlock of the derelict shuttle, connected by a soft, sealed, rubber sheath. Standing inside the shuttle airlock stood two more vampires.

They were already in the colony ship by the time Tulsi had radioed back for help. Even if the other vampire in the crew hold had already been destroyed, there was no way the other suits could make it to her in time to save her. They were fast, but not that fast. An idea came to her; a desperate, foolish idea. But the only idea she could think of that had an even slightly greater than zero chance of working.

Tulsi didn’t know if vampire bones were stronger than human bones, but she was pretty confident they weren’t weaker. And she was damn sure the mechanical arms of the heavy labor suit were far stronger than human muscles. She propped the body of the suit up with her empty hand, and using all the power the suit had, hurled the vampire head at the soft boarding sheath between the ships.

The vampires were already at the suit by the time she released projectile; it had a head start as they turned into smoke and rushed after it, faster than she’d seen vampires move in their human form. Then faster still as the head pierced the rubber, and the vacuum sucked the vaporous vampires into the void of space.

Tulsi rotated the body of the heavy labor suit, following through on the throw. The suit’s chest was facing the hole on the sheath when it started to drag toward it. She leaned away from the hole and stretched out the working leg of the suit. She scrambled, just able to position the suit so that it bridged the length of the boarding sheath. The vacuum pulled on the suit, but the suit was holding; its leg against the shuttle, its arms against the colony ship.

Tulsi struggled to steady her breathing. The suit was flashing environmental condition warnings, and panicked voices poured out of her radio. She couldn’t worry about any of that right now. Right now, she had to patch the hole.

She didn’t know exactly what kit the suits carried, but she knew they were built to be used on planets and moons. Places that, as dangerous as they may be, didn’t have the risk of the atmosphere suddenly getting sucked away from a hole into space a meter away. Which meant she’d have to do something that the suits weren’t meant to do. She double checked the straps of her harness, making sure none of them were twisted, and then tightened them as much as she could. She took a deep breath, then released it.

Then she peeled open her suit.

Tulsi could see from the lights flashing on her HUD that the suits warning systems were screaming, but she couldn’t hear it over the roar of air rushing out of the ship. She bent the sheet metal that had wrapped around the suits chest as flat as she could against the hull of the colony ship. Air raced around her face, too fast and too far for her to breath. She could feel the void pulling her. Just as fiercely as it had at the space station.

Struggling against the vacuum, she managed to position the sheet over the gap between the ships, pinning it to the two hulls with the limbs of the suit. The center of the sheet popped outward toward the vacuum of space, groaning against the strain.

But it held.

Tulsi went limp against the harness. The atmosphere thickened around her, her ragged breaths desperately dragged air into her lungs. She didn't know how much time had passed before she became aware of the yelling. She slapped at her radio, shutting it off, but the yelling continued. She vaguely recognized that her name was being called.

"Joanna?"

"Don't talk. Just catch your breath." Joanna wrapped her arms around Tulsi; Kamiar released the harness straps, and Tulsi fell against Joanna. The two of them helped Tulsi gently to the floor.

"You okay?" Kamiar asked.

Tulsi nodded. Her strength was returning. "You get that other vampire?"

Joanna smiled broadly. "Turns out, if you drive the finger of a heavy labor suit through a vampire's heart, the vampire explodes into dust!"

"I'll have to remember that for next time."

Joanna laughed. "I'm going to go rewire the shuttle's reactor. Radio for me when you have a trajectory for me from Dallas and Jules." With that, she headed off into the vampire's shuttle.

"What if there are more of them?" Kamiar shouted after her.

Joanna briefly spun around to face him. She pulled a clove of garlic out of her pocket and held it out. "Gift from Jules!" She popped it into her mouth, grinning. Her face fell as the clove cracked between her teeth. Still, she dutifully ate the raw clove, gave a thumb's up, and resumed her journey into the shuttle.

Kamiar looked past her, and opened his mouth to speak, but was cut off by one of the security guards. "We'll keep her safe."

Tulsi hadn't realized that any of the ship's security detail had reached her, but was glad to see Ruoho and Tetuanui, armed and armored, hurrying after Joanna. She was less glad to see Edie appear. "Get your sample?"

Edie smiled and held up her arm. The vials were full of a dark, viscous fluid. "We're going to start a revolution."

Tulsi nodded. "First, we need to blow up that station and make it back home." She held an arm out, and Kamiar helped her to her feet. "Are external communications back up?"

"No. They only had one engineer in the officer's deck."

"How do you know that?"

Edie tapped her implant. "All of our products use the same protocols. And I have administrator access to all of them."

"Can you use that to help fix the comms system?"

Edie frowned. "I don't think so. The shuttle is doing something to the *Gaia's Gift*, and it's too old for me to interface with directly. Even if it wasn't, I wouldn't trust the vampires not to have booby-trapped it." She thought for a moment, and her face brightened. "I can probably help diagnose the problem, though!" She leaned against the bulkhead and closed her eyes, her focus sinking into the ship's network.

Kamiar found a terminal. "Looks like the internal comms system is back up."

Almost immediately, a voice could be heard over the speaker. "Captain Ibeh, we've got a contact from near the pirate ship."

"Who is it? Our people? The pirates?"

"It's the stowaways," Kamiar offered.

"What's happening down there?"

"We've destroyed four vampires. That might be all of them? Your security team is escorting our engineer into their ship, and our, uh, cyborg is trying to figure out what the vampires did to your external comms system."

Out of the corner of her eye, Tulsi could have sworn she saw Edie briefly frown. Then her eyes opened. “External comms should be working.”

“Great!” Tulsi was eager to speak with Dallas. “What did you do?”

“Nothing. Whatever was blocking it just stopped.”

Joanna’s voice echoed from the terminal and Tulsi and Kamiar’s tablets, just slightly out of sync. “I found their jammer, and I cut the power cable.”

Tulsi laughed as she joined Kamiar at the terminal. “Efficient! I’m going to get the targeting info from Dallas.”

“Great; I’m heading for the reactor. No sign of any more vampires so far. Let me know when you have that trajectory for me.”

Tulsi sent a ping signal out. She didn’t know how far out the *Demeter* was parked, so each second she waited for a return made her more and more anxious. When the ping finally came, she immediately established a private channel. She didn’t think there were any Neptunian Navy ships within the radius to the *Demeter*, but there was no sense in risking it.

“Dallas!” she yelled when the channel opened.

It took a few seconds for the reply to arrive. “Uh, this is Jules. Dallas had to use the head. Tulsi?”

“Yeah, this is Tulsi. Thanks for the garlic.”

“No problem. Did it help?”

Tulsi licked her teeth. “Yeah.”

“Cool.”

Tulsi paused for a few seconds. When no more message came, she asked if Dallas had calculated a trajectory for launching the shuttle back at the station. When the reply came, it was the data on the relative position and movement of the vampire’s maze of derelicts. Tulsi validated the hash before trying to figure out how to transmit it to the obsolete shuttle.

Her thoughts were interrupted by Joanna’s voice blaring from her tablet. “Data looks good; thanks!”

“I took the liberty of forwarding the data package to Joanna’s tablet,” Edie said coolly.

“Oh. Oh, thanks.” Tulsi briefly wondered what other data Edie’s implant gave her access to.

“So should we come pick you up or something?” Jules asked.

“I think so, yeah! I’ll let the captain know to expect you.”

“Okay, cool. See you.”

Tulsi switched channels and told Captain Ibeh that the *Demeter* would be approaching to retrieve her team, and to send down some mechanics to patch the hole in the hull.

Tulsi had been tempted, several times, over the following hours, to slip back into her cryo-pod. She, along with Kamiar and Edie, had helped the security team retrieve and reconnect the cryo-pods that the vampires had taken to their shuttle. Thankfully, there hadn’t been any other vampires beyond the four that had already been dealt with, and they hadn’t opened up any of the cryo-pods they’d stolen.

Once that was done, Tulsi had nothing to do. She couldn’t help Joanna with the reactor, and the shuttle had already received its new flight program. She offered to help the mechanics with the patch job, but they didn’t want her help. The security team members didn’t want to talk with her, and she didn’t want to talk with them, either. So she paced nervously as Kamiar played games on his tablet and Edie did who knows what with her implant. Edie had her arms folded in a way that obscured the vials on her wrists. Tulsi didn’t know why, but it made her even more uncomfortable. So back and forth she paced while she waited for something, anything, to happen.

Joanna had the shuttle ready to launch with Dallas and Jules still an hour or more out. She setup the ship so that she could launch it remotely, and exited to allow the mechanics to finish patching the hull. Once they were satisfied, she launched the shuttle. All those awake on *Gaia's Gift* gathered to watch the ancient shuttle's final flight. The colony ship's external cameras were trained on the shuttle, and routed to a large screen meant for screening to groups while in orbit around the destination planet.

Eventually, the great mass of captured colony ships appeared on screen. A tear rolled down Captain Ibeh's face. "All of those innocent people...the vampires would have done the same to us..." He and some members of his crew turned to comfort each other.

Tulsi turned to her own crew. Joanna and Kamiar were watching the screen. Edie might have been as well, but it looked like she was only glancing at it between focusing on...well, Tulsi couldn't say what, except that she was probably doing something with her implant. She was gently rubbing her wrist, whatever she'd taken from the vampires hidden beneath her sleeve. Tulsi shuddered as she turned back to the screen.

A gentle tone played in the hall. One of the *Gaia's Gift* crew members broke away from the others and pulled out a terminal. "The *Demeter* is requesting permission to dock."

"Yes!" Tulsi shouted.

Captain Ibeh smiled at her, then turned to the crew member. "Granted."

Tulsi went down to meet Dallas and Jules at the dock. "Welcome aboard," she grinned.

"Here we are, on the first colony ship to ever leave the solar system," Dallas laughed.

"Want to watch all the other ones get blown up?"

"Wouldn't miss it for the sun!"

They joined the others in the theater. The ancient shuttle rushed toward the vampire's nest.

"Why aren't you using my shuttle?" Edie asked, trying to sound neutrally curious.

"Because that one's yours, and the *Demeter* is mine," Dallas responded with the coolness Edie had nearly affected.

"Wait, shut up," Joanna frowned. She turned to the *Gaia's Gift's* crew members. "Can you zoom in? Bottom right third of the screen."

"Joanna?" Tulsi was concerned by her friend's tone.

The view snapped to a different camera. The shuttle was no longer near the center of the frame, but now, the part of it that was still in frame was in the top left corner. An asteroid occupied by the center of the screen.

"No, no, shit!" Joanna cried. "Can you calculate the trajectory of that rock?"

"Already on it," an engineer responded. The screen changed again; a simulation display replaced the camera view. At the center was a cylinder, with a dotted line running through its major axis. A sphere was drawn in a different color on the screen. As it moved, it left a trail of dots tracing its movement history.

As the simulation ran, a thick line projected out from the sphere, thinning out and matching the curve that the trail was forming with greater confidence. The forward line of the sphere turned into a thin dotted line, like the forward line of the cylinder. The two lines crossed.

"Is the asteroid going to hit the shuttle?"

"Maybe?" The engineer frowned as the sphere and the cylinder moved toward each other on the screen. The simulation paused when they collided. "It's going to be close. The asteroid isn't a sphere, and the shuttle isn't a cylinder, so depending on their actua-"

"Shit," Joanna interrupted. "Can you shoot it? Knock it away?"

"The anti-asteroid projectiles wouldn't have enough energy to do anything that far away, even if they could get there in time. Which they can't."

"It might miss," Kamiar offered.

“And it might not!” Joanna snapped back.

“So what happens if it hits?” Tulsi asked, forcing herself to sound calm. “Will it trigger the bomb?”

“No, the detonator is on a timer. But the navigation system is primitive; it’s not going to be able to right itself if the ship gets hit. So there’s no way of knowing where it will be when the bomb goes off, just that it won’t be where we want.”

“So what do we do if the asteroid hits the shuttle?” Dallas asked.

“How many heavy labor suits can fit in the *Demeter*?” Jules asked.

“I like where you’re head’s at,” Dallas nodded, “But we’re going to take one of the shuttles from the *Gaia’s Gift*.”

“Excuse me,” Captain Ibeh interjected.

“The *Demeter* is an outer system shuttle. It’s decently fast, but it isn’t built for sustaining multi-g acceleration. Colony ship shuttles are built to take off from planets with even higher gravity than Earth.”

“He’s right,” Edie added. “Although they’re still not as fast as my shuttle.”

“I don’t think we can make it to Triton and back in the time it takes the vampires to make it here.”

“They’re coming here?” Captain Ibeh asked, clearly even more frustrated.

“They aren’t stupid,” Dallas said, turning to face him. “They sent out a crewed shuttle, disabled your engines and comms, and were going to hijack the *Gaia’s Gift* to add it to their colony ship collection. So what do you think they’re going to do when they see that the shuttle they sent comes back late, gets hit by an asteroid it could have easily avoided, and then blows up, all while we just drift here?”

An angry noise came from Captain Ibeh’s throat.

“They have the same class of shuttle you do,” Edie said.

“What would you even do if you flew over there? What’s the plan? I’m not going to let you spend my shuttles and heavy labor suits to go improvise a military strike.”

“Can we get a visual on the nest?” Joanna asked. The engineer returned to the camera view and zoomed in on the hive. Joanna studied the view for a moment, then pointed at one of the colony ships. “That one.”

Dallas looked at the screen, then at Joanna. “You’re not thinking of-”

“Using the far ship to slag the rest, and then launching it out of the solar system, yes,” Joanna finished.

“Would that work?” Tulsi asked.

“The exhaust stream is hot enough,” Dallas granted, “But if you’re generating exhaust you’re generating thrust. So, assuming you can take control of one of the ships, you can slag a couple of the other ones, but you’d still have a dozen left to deal with.”

“The exhaust stream won’t totally destroy the adjacent ships,” Joanna grinned. “The fore and aft sections of the ships should be mostly intact, and they’ll be drifting toward the cluster. The cascading crashes will take out the rest.”

Dallas frowned. “Yeah. I guess that’d do it. How do we get past their anti-asteroid guns?”

“I’ve copied their ping codes,” Edie said. “The system won’t target any shuttle broadcasting them.”

“How can you be sure?” Captain Ibeh asked.

“Because my company developed those systems.”

“Could you get them all to shoot at each other?” Tulsi asked.

“The anti-asteroid guns can’t destroy objects that large, so the targeting systems won’t let them waste the ammo.”

“So boarding action it is,” Tulsi nodded.

“You want me to gamble one of my shuttles so a half-dozen of you can hijack a colony ship with who knows how many vampires on it?” Captain Ibeh scoffed.

“Half a dozen of our people, half a dozen of yours,” Tulsi corrected. “I want to take members of your security and engineering teams.”

Captain Ibeh laughed. “My engines still won’t turn on! I’m not sending my engineers off to die in a hostile space station.”

Tulsi took a deep breath. “Then half a dozen of us it is. Come on, everyone, let’s head to the *Demeter*. Captain Ibeh, you’re welcome for saving you and everyone on your ship from being eaten by vampires.”

The *Demeter* was well on its way when the asteroid struck the derelict shuttle. Joanna and Dallas were tracking it; at least it was still headed generally toward the vampire nest. They were explaining their plan to use the explosion to hide their approach when Edie entered the deck, insisting that Tulsi needed to come with her to the cargo hold.

On the way down, they found Kamiar, again at Edie’s insistence, before finally reaching the hold. She let Tulsi and Kamiar enter first. “We don’t just make the ships,” she said, grinning. Four of the *Gaia’s Gift’s* compliment of heavy labor suits kneeled with their backs to the bulkheads, two on a side. Between them, half a dozen cryo-pods.

“Edie-” Tulsi began.

“Remote operation is a standard safety feature of heavy labor suits and colony ship cryo-pods report basic information about their crew member. I pulled two engineers and four security officers.”

“What are we going to tell them?” Tulsi asked.

“The truth. Kamiar, can you wake them up safely?”

“Not a problem.”

Half an hour later, the first two crew members slowly woke up. By Edie’s design, the first to woken up were the engineers, Paewai and Juma.

Paewai pulled himself up, slowly opened his eyes, and immediately frowned. “What have you done with me?” He wasn’t looking at anyone in particular when he asked the question, but when he saw Edie, his focus stayed on her.

“Paewai?” Juma asked groggily from the adjacent cryo-pod.

“I’m here. I’m right here,” he said confidently, then, more quietly, “Wherever here is.”

“You’re on an outer system shuttle called the *Demeter*, near the edge of Neptune’s gravity well,” Tulsi said, trying to sound calm and friendly.

Juma shot up in her pod. “The *Demeter*? What happened to the *Gaia’s Gift*?”

“It’s floating not far from here, as the emergency engineers work to repair its engines.”

“What happened to the engines? What happened to the crew?” Paewai demanded.

Tulsi reflexively reached for her bandage, but it was gone. Fine; it was only getting in the way. She explained what had happened, then told them about her own attack, letting them inspect her wounds and showing them all the supporting video footage she had. Then she told them the current plan.

“That’s a lot to take in,” Juma said.

“Do we have a choice in this?” Paewai asked.

“You could stay in the *Demeter* if you don’t want to help Joanna with the colony ship. It’ll be dangerous in there, but it’ll be dangerous in here, too.” Tulsi checked her tablet. “I need to know in ten

minutes. Radio's on the bulkhead, in between those two heavy labor suits." She left them alone to their deliberation.

Five minutes later, Joanna was chatting logistics with Juma and Paewai as Kamiar carefully woke the security team members. By mutual agreement, Joanna and Kamiar left the hold while the security officers were still groggy, leaving it to their fellow *Gaia's Gift* crew-members to bring them up to speed.

Once the engineers had gotten the security officers to understand, and agree to, the general plan, they summoned Tulsi to come down and go over it in greater detail. During this discussion, the derelict shuttle, built to survive a trip from Earth to Mars, having endured the far longer trip from Mars to Neptune, burned away as its reactor exploded. The *Demeter* lurched with sudden acceleration, not as a result of the blast, but from Dallas maneuvering to use the explosion as cover to hide their approach.

The security officers got into the heavy labor suits as Dallas flew them into the open shuttle bay of the target colony ship. Edie accessed the ship's network. She got the airlock closed behind them, and the crew disembarked.

Their goal was the engine bay. After studying Edie's blueprints, Joanna, Juma and Paewai had figured out a way to increase the size and temperature of the exhaust plume, but it required physical modifications to the thrusters. They plotted a loop that would get them to the engine bay and back to the shuttle bay as quickly as possible without doubling back, so as to hopefully dodge the vampires. While the engineers worked out their plans, Edie and Tulsi wrote a program for Tulsi's tablet to monitor her walking speed, pulse, and breathing rate, and ping the rest of the team when they slowed down unexpectedly. Tulsi didn't like that her bite wounds were being used to make a crude vampire radar, but any extra warning could be the difference between life and death.

The party advanced, those on foot within a diamond shape formed by the heavy labor suits, crewed by the security officers. They progressed slowly; the ship's computer was treating the ship as though it was still on the long journey between stars. No lights, low temperature, low atmosphere. The powerful work lights of the heavy labor suits were all that illuminated the way forward.

But that revealed a new problem: The layout of the ship didn't match the blueprint. The vampires had torn out bulkheads, floors, and ceilings, welded the metal sheets into new positions, radically altering the interior of the ship. Altering the layout, and obscuring the path to the engine bay. If there was a logic to the changes the vampires made, none of the humans could perceive it. Gone were the clean perpendicular bulkheads and long sight lines of human design. Metal met metal at odd angles, with odd connections and odder gaps.

They were still just sheet metal, and the heavy labor suits were able to cut a path through them, a process as awkward and slow as the irregular architecture itself. Tulsi wasn't sure if the casual glances Edie periodically shot her way were meant to be reassuring, but they weren't. It didn't feel like vampires were near, but vampires were folklore, not science, so she was only guessing at what worked, and worse than that, Edie was only measuring a proxy of a proxy of proximity.

The team continued to carve their path toward the engine bay. The engineers were confident that the vampires couldn't have moved the engines; they were too big, too well integrated, to be removed from the engine bay without cutting out that section of the hull entirely. When they were what was originally two bulkheads away from the engine bay, Tulsi smiled. Her bites were starting to feel nice.

She gently rubbed her neck as she was passing through the pathway that the security team had carved from the intervening web of metal. Edie, who was ahead of her, continued walking at the same pace as the engineers who had proceeded her. Tulsi was glad Edie wasn't worried.

"You doing alright?" Jules asked from behind her.

She consciously lowered her hand. “Yeah.” She unconsciously lowered the tone of her voice. “Yeah. Hey, everyone. I’m starting to feel something.”

Joanna, Kamiar, and Edie stopped in their tracks.

“Feel something?” Juma asked. “What do you mean?”

“You can sense vampires?” Paewai asked, failing to hide his skepticism.

“Kind of, yeah.”

“So be on your guard,” Dallas said, before anyone else could respond.

“Who needs garlic?” Jules asked, pulling fistfuls of cloves from their pockets.

Paewai and Juma exchanged a look, but after watching the crew of the *Demeter* accept garlic from Jules, they took some as well. One of the security officers kneeled down in their heavy labor suit. Jules put a bulb of garlic in the suit’s outstretched palm; when they pulled back, the security officer clapped the suits palms together and smeared the garlic oil between them. One by one, the other officers took cloves for their own suits.

The tympanic footfalls of the heavy labors suits, which had been white noise before, were now a fearful reminder of the danger they faced. Tulsi tried to track if she felt more or less peaceful as they approached the engine bay, but it was hard to focus, especially while having to navigate the labyrinth the vampires had built. She wondered if her vampire had laid out these walls. She wondered more grimly why she thought of the vampire that attacked her as “her vampire.” When Joanna announced, from beyond the next bulkhead that they were at the reactor, Tulsi let out a sigh of relief. Everything was going to be fine; she didn’t need to worry.

Oh. “They’re here!” She swiftly popped a few cloves of garlic into her mouth, cracking them between her teeth before spitting them into her palms and rubbing the oil on her hands. It tingled. Did garlic oil usually tingle? She couldn’t remember.

“Get in the engine bay!” She couldn’t tell which of the security officers was speaking, but the booming amplified voice snapped her to attention and she rushed into the engine bay.

“What do we do?” Paewai asked.

“Do we fight?” Juma was fidgeting with her garlic.

“No,” Edie said. “Get the torch burning. We’ll deal with the vampires.”

Metal groaned and banged as the heavy labor suit still outside of the engine bay tried to seal up the hole the other suits had torn open to allow the engineers in. Tulsi felt relaxed.

The quiet of the derelict ship was gone. Joanna, Paewai, and Juma were working swiftly on the great machines that could drive the ship between the stars. The three security officers inside the engine bay were rapidly patrolling in a circle around the engineers, searching for any sign of the nearby vampires. Outside, the last security officer was welding the entryway shut. Dallas, Jules, and Kamiar had positioned themselves around the engineers, but it wasn’t clear to Tulsi what security they could offer. She looked around, but couldn’t see Edie. She knew that should worry her, but it was hard to feel concerned about anything.

Then the sounds from outside became louder and arrhythmic. “Contact!” the outside security officer roared through the heavy labor suit’s speakers. Metal slammed against metal; one of the interior heavy labor suits rushed to guard the bulkhead from the inside. Tulsi frowned as she felt hands grab her; Dallas and Kamiar were pulling her behind the heavy labor suit.

A horrible shriek echoed from beyond the bay. “Garlic works!” the security officer cried. All eyes turned to Jules, who was rubbing a cracked clove on their neck. Tulsi touched her neck reflexively and cursed; what was just a tingle on her hands was a painful burning on the bites. She’d have to protect herself some other way. “Hostile down, but more are approaching. Two, three? Unclear.”

“How much longer do you need?” Dallas yelled to the engineers.

“We’re almost done!” Joanna shouted back. “Do we have a way back out?”

"I don't know," Dallas choked, realizing it as they said it. "I don't know."

"There's another way." It was Edie. Where had she been? She appeared from behind the reactor, wearing a space suit and carrying another over her shoulder. "The vampires didn't bother moving the emergency suits. We can escape along the exterior of the ship."

"Seriously?" Jules demanded.

"They're all reporting full air tanks, full batteries, and working magnetic boots." She tossed the second suit to Tulsi. "Someone help me carry the rest of them." Kamiar frowned, but ran to meet Edie as she transmitted directions on which bulkheads to punch through to the security officers. The two who weren't guarding the bulkhead stomped off to open the pathway to the hull.

There was a horrible crash as something dented the entry bulkhead. By the size of it, it had to be the heavy labor suit. Then more screeching, metallic and vampiric, as the bulkhead struggled against more brutal impacts. It cracked. Vapor poured into the engineering bay from the fissure in the bulkhead; was the coolant system on the heavy labor suit damaged?

Tulsi rushed to get into her space suit, but struggled with the way it constrained her range of motion. She'd put them on before, but only for emergency drills. Dallas was meticulous about maintaining the *Demeter* while in port, and keeping it away from debris while in flight. Once the suit was on and booted up she checked the systems; Edie had been true to her word.

She'd barely finished securing the suit when she heard someone scream her name. A moment later, she felt herself being lifted off the ground by her tank. This wasn't like when Dallas and Kamiar pulled her back to relative safety earlier; this was stronger than the two of them together. The space suit itched against her neck.

She laughed as the vampire came into view. It was her vampire; the vampire that bit her on the black market station. It felt right to her, almost poetic. The vampire must have felt the same way; she could tell even before its predatory smile came into view. Suddenly, its face contorted, made ugly by its pain, before it dropped her. Tulsi reflexively put her hand to her chest as her vampire clutched its own, smoke trailing up from between its fingers. It recoiled back, its terrible scream making her bites burn and her head ache, as Jules pelted it with more garlic.

The vampire withdrew; it was as if a powerful gust of wind blew it into a cloud of fog, and simultaneously blew the cloud back several meters. The cloud reformed into the approximation of humanity the vampire normally wore and roared in anger and pain, its long fangs fully on display. Smoke continued to pour from the holes the garlic burned in its chest as it spread out its arms and hands, talon-like nails gleaming in the low light of the chamber.

With monstrous strength the vampire launched itself at Jules. A moment later, it exploded into a cloud of black smoke that burned itself to nothingness, revealing the garlic oil coated hand of a heavy labor suit, its palm pressed flat to the floor where the vampire had been crushed against it. Jules grinned and gave the suit's pilot a thumbs up.

"More coming!" the security officer announced, straightening up and turning around in the suit. More mist poured in through the bulkhead wall. Jules launched a clove of garlic into the mist, which recoiled away from it as it flew through the air. Dallas and Tulsi threw their garlic at the cloud as it fell toward the floor.

The mist tumbled into a pair of vampires who failed to land gracefully, but sprang to their feet with alarming speed. As Tulsi's head cleared she realized she didn't have any more garlic, and the oil on her hands wouldn't make it through the gloves of her space suit. "Jules, garlic!" she yelled. At once, one of the vampires was moving toward her; the other toward Jules.

"I'm out!" They held their hands out with palms flat, trying to menace the approaching vampire. The security officer turned toward them; the vampire advancing on Tulsi turned toward the heavy labor suit. The suit lunged toward the vampire before it and fell to the ground as the vampire behind it tore

the hydraulics from its leg. The suit had barely settled before the vampire that disabled it was atop its core.

Jules slapped at the vampire, and it pulled back from their palms, fearful of the garlic oil coating them. But its arms were longer than Jules' and it managed to grab their elbow. Dallas rushed the vampire; it knocked them away with casual disdain before returning its attention to Jules. They struggled briefly as Jules swatted with their free hand, but the vampire was able to catch their wrist.

Suddenly, the vampire dropped Jules with a hiss. Smoke poured from a dozen smoldering holes in its shoulder. Jules straightened themselves and slammed their palm into the vampire's abdomen. When it doubled over, they grabbed its face with both hands. It shrieked terribly and swiped at Jules's chest, talons out. Its entire body exploded into burning smoke before it could make contact.

Jules looked over their shoulder; Joanna, clad in a space suit, was toying with a clove of garlic. "Engine's ready! Let's get out of here!"

"I need a suit," Jules said, rushing toward Joanna.

"So does Dallas," Tulsi said, helping them to their feet.

"Kamiar has your suits in the airlock; come on. Oh, shit!" The other vampire stood atop the wreckage of the heavy labor suit, blood dripping from its lips. It dropped the desiccated husk of the security officer and smiled maliciously. It looked younger than it had before, more alive.

Jules, Tulsi, and Dallas ran after Joanna. They raced around the ladders and scaffolding past the reactor, through the tunnel that the other heavy labor suits had torn to the hull. The vampire kept pace, toying with them as it effortlessly pursued them.

"Vampire on our tail!" Joanna yelled as an airlock came into view.

The inner door of the airlock was open. Kamiar and Edie were waiting inside, dressed in space suits next to a small pile of empty suits. The heavy labor suits stood empty and still on either side of the door.

"Get in!" Edie yelled back. "I'll hold it off with the suits!" She stepped out from the airlock; the heavy labor suits reanimated and flanked her.

Joanna, Tulsi, Dallas, and Jules stumbled into the airlock, slamming against the outer wall in their rush to enter. The heavy labor suits closed ranks behind them as Edie slammed the inner door shut.

Dallas and Jules were securely dressed by the time Tulsi realized Edie was still outside the airlock. "Edie! What are you doing?"

"Don't worry; just run!"

Before Tulsi could reply, the klaxon inside the airlock screamed to life, drowning out all other noise. Three seconds later, there was a loud whoosh, then no sound in the airlock at all. Tulsi didn't remember turning on the magnets in her boots. Was that automatic, or had Edie done it? No time to think about that now; she exited the airlock and began walking along the outer hull of the derelict, where Paewai, Juma, and the surviving security officers were waiting.

Between the constrictive suits, and the powerful magnets on the boots, progress across the hull was slow. Tulsi wanted to look behind her, to see if Edie had made it, to see if the vampires were pursuing them. Could vampires survive in outer space? Did they need oxygen? Did they need pressure? Tulsi didn't know, so she just worried about moving as fast as she could.

How far was it to the dock? No one was saying anything, but the security officer who had stayed in front of the group was continuing their march, and no one was saying anything on the radio. Tulsi checked her oxygen level. She was using air faster than the suit expected, but it also expected her to be in the vacuum for longer than she was intending to be.

Still, she didn't like watching the rate at which she was depleting her air supply, and the periodic pings from her suit only added to her anxiety. She tried to not let that add to her heart and breathing rate, but it was a struggle. She was relieved when the leading security officer pivoted to face the other survivors and radioed that they were at the shuttle bay's emergency airlock.

Tulsi sped up as best as she could; Dallas, who had been behind her the entire march, easily beat her to the airlock. The security officers called for them to wait, but Dallas could not be stopped once their ship was at hand. A minute later, the survivors were on board the *Demeter*.

"What happened to the Martian?" Juma asked, strapping herself into a seat in the passenger hold.

"She stayed back to hold off the vampires," Tulsi answered.

"Oh. Shit, I'm sorry."

"Thanks." It was what Tulsi felt Juma would expect her to say. She didn't understand what had driven Edie to stay behind. It was the first selfless act she'd ever seen from her. Why now? She radioed to the security officer on the hull. No sign of Edie. It was time to leave.

The security officers were the last to enter the *Demeter*. As soon as the airlocks sealed behind them, Dallas tore through the outer door of the shuttle bay with the *Demeter's* anti-asteroid guns. Tulsi was plastered to the bulkhead as the ship launched forward. She steadied her breath and began making her way toward the cabin, fighting the acceleration of the ship with all her strength, pushing herself forward with every piece of support she could find. When she got to the passenger hold, her eyes snapped to Joanna.

The European grimaced, pinned to her seat by acceleration far stronger than what she'd experienced even on Mars. Tulsi asked her if she needed Dallas to slow down, but Joanna shook her head. "The plume is worse."

Tulsi didn't realize how right Joanna was until she made it up to the cockpit and got strapped into the copilot's seat. The *Demeter* was far enough out that she could see the cone of the colony ship on the main screen. The plasma escaping the cone was not the elegant fire she associated with rockets, not the disciplined candle she was used to seeing. The engineers had turned the colony ship's engine into a cruel volcano. Plasma erupted through the ships behind it, the solid remains of the hulks listing toward the other ships in the cluster.

As she watched the titanic hull pieces and molten ejecta crash into the rest of the vampire's nest, she was thankful for the vacuum of space. She was sure that the sound on board the crashing ships was terrible. The ships splintered from the collisions, before the feed went white as the melted center segment of the first ship ignited the fuel supply of another colony ship.

A second later, alarms started blaring. "Shit!" Dallas spat. "Ejecta coming our way! Too big for our anti-asteroid cannons!"

"What do we do?"

"Strap in." Dallas activated the acceleration alarm; Tulsi screwed her eyes shut as they pushed the *Demeter's* engine even harder.

Tulsi held the straps tightly as Dallas's evasive maneuvers bounced her in her seat, struggling to steady her breathing. Her eyes shot open in a panic. "The *Gaia's Gift* will think we're an asteroid!" She reached for the radio controls, but couldn't overcome the *Demeter's* desperate acceleration. "Slow down!"

Dallas said nothing; the *Demeter* turned hard, narrowly dodging an enormous blob of molten colony ship.

Tulsi cursed under her breath. Slow wasn't an option, the radio wasn't an option. What could she reach? She gripped the arms of her seat, and her hand bumped a cluster of buttons. If she wasn't

pinned to her seat with overwhelming g force, she'd have felt relief. "I'm activating the emergency beacon. It'll keep the cannons from firing at us."

"That'll pull the navy," Dallas said through gritted teeth.

"They're coming anyway!" Tulsi activated the beacons.

Dallas grunted, their focus on dodging shards of colony ship larger and faster than the *Demeter* itself as they flew past it. They dove low, trying to get beneath the *Gaia's Gift*. The ship lurched violently and began to roll as alarms screamed to life. "We got hit!"

Tulsi's stomach dropped. She focused on the radar screen, the only screen she could see not showing a feed from the violently spinning hull cameras. But reading the screen only added to her fear. "We're gonna hit the *Gaia's Gift*!" she cried.

"Working on it!" Dallas yelled back.

Tulsi watched as the massive shape of the colony ship slid ever closer to the center of the radar screen; as the *Demeter* spun ever closer to crashing against its hull. She closed her eyes and held her breath as the radar icon came within its own length of the center of the screen. A primal, visceral sound tore out of Dallas and filled the cockpit. Tulsi screwed her eyes tighter.

As the screaming stopped, Tulsi felt weightless. Was she dead? The alarms were still blaring, so no, she was still alive. That was good. The ship wasn't moving or rolling as fast, either. That was probably also good? She opened her eyes.

Dallas was breathing heavily, but not actively working the controls.

"You saved us." She wasn't sure if she had spoken loudly enough for Dallas to hear her or not. She cleared her throat, but Dallas grunted their assent before she could speak.

"From the collisions. But our engines are out and we don't have enough fuel to make it back to Triton anyway."

Fear gripped Tulsi, but hope wrested her free. "We don't need to get back to Triton; just the *Gaia's Gift*. I'm going to see if the engineers can come up with anything." She unlocked her harness and made her way down to the passenger hold. Everyone looked sick, Joanna looked dire.

"Joanna! Are you alright?"

"I threw up, but I think I'm fine?" She very clearly was not. Tulsi rushed to get her a bottle of liquid nutrients. While Joanna drank, Tulsi explained their situation to the crew. Joanna drank faster as Tulsi spoke. She tossed the bottle aside and gestured for another, then nodded at Paewai and Juma, who nodded back and unbuckled their harnesses. At once, Kamiar was retrieving more liquid nutrients for Joanna, and Paewai and Juma were putting their space suits back on.

Tulsi returned to the cockpit and updated Dallas. They radioed the engineering team to give them the best information that they had on the specifications and present state of the ship.

"We're in pretty rough shape," Juma radioed back. "We'll do what we can, but you're not going to be hitting a full g without getting to a gantry."

"I'm fine with that," Joanna chimed in.

"Do what you can," Dallas said, making sure the radio was off before sighing audibly. They startled as the radio came to life.

"*Demeter*, do you read us? This is *Gaia's Gift* lander zero one. Do you read us, *Demeter*?"

"Yeah. Yes! We read you *Lander Zero One*." They pulled the radar view onto one of their screens. There was an object on an intercept course between the *Demeter* and the *Gaia's Gift*.

"What is your status?"

"Not great," Dallas answered, then explained the state of the ship.

"Can you match our velocity?"

"No. I'll let the engineers know to target that functionality. I can probably maintain present velocity."

“Roger. Do you have space suits for crew transfer?”

“Crew transfer?” Dallas laughed. “Why risk that when we have harpoons?”

There were several seconds of silence before the lander’s crew responded. “We will pull along side you and attempt to match your velocity.”

Dallas turned to Tulsi. “That went well. I’ll check status on the tow harpoons, you update the engineers?”

Tulsi nodded and took the radio.

The engineers were able to make the repairs needed for Dallas to stop the *Demeter*’s rolling, but were unable to match velocity when the lander was making its approach. The lander was able to slow enough to match the *Demeter*, at which point their crew radioed over.

“We’ve matched your velocity, *Demeter*. Do you have enough space suits to-”

“Deploying tow harpoons.”

Tulsi and Dallas had made sure that the magnetic harpoons were loaded; the lander’s crew might be annoyed, but the vehicle wouldn’t be damaged. Resigned, they towed the *Demeter* back to the *Gaia’s Gift* to return the surviving crew members, and to await the Neptunian Navy.

Captain Ibeh was waiting for them in the hangar. He had a stoic expression, but it was clear that he had been crying not long ago. When the *Demeter*’s crew disembarked, he approached Tulsi.

“You did a difficult thing today, my fellow child of Earth. And while I mourn those whose sacrifice made that success possible, I take comfort in the knowledge that those sacrifices will allow us to fulfill our promise to the galaxy.”

Tulsi didn’t know what to say, so she affected stoicism herself and thanked him for his kind words. This seemed to satisfy Captain Ibeh, and she was glad for that. As well as for him choosing to move on to speak with his own crew members.

“Ow, fuck!” She slapped her palm to her neck. Her bites hurt; she could feel blood dripping against her palm. “I need first aid!”

“This way!” Kamiar called. He was helping Joanna follow one of the *Gaia’s Gift*’s crew members; the g forces of their escape had been hard on her moon-grown body. Thankfully, colony ships were well equipped with both medicines and mechanical surgeons, and soon Joanna’s bruises were soothed and Tulsi’s bites had been closed, disinfected, and bandaged. They sat together, quietly holding hands while they waited for the Neptunian Navy to come for them.

Tulsi was thankful that Captain Ibeh was there to meet the officer from the Neptunian Navy. She knew her story sounded absurd, and the best evidence she had for it was gone. Not to mention the criminal activities she and Dallas would likely be liable for, and she didn’t want to deal with that after everything else that she’d just gone through.

So when a crew member appeared to bring her out to speak with the navy officer, her stomach twisted with dread. Captain Ibeh and the navy officer had unreadable faces, which didn’t make Tulsi feel any better.

The officer, perhaps a native of Triton, judging by her height, turned to face Tulsi. “Are you the captain of the *Demeter*?”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“Captain Ibeh informs me that there was a group of colony ship pirates operating just beyond our gravity well, and that you lead the mission to destroy their operating base.”

Tulsi tried to maintain her composure as her mood rapidly brightened. “That is correct.”

The officer nodded. “Then the people of the solar system owe you a great debt.”

“Well, we all do what we can.”

“And you have done commendable work. We will transport your crew and your ship back to Triton, and see to it that your ship is repaired.”

“Thank you, officer. I’ll advise my crew.”

The officer nodded, and turned her attention back to Captain Ibeh, but Tulsu still held back her grin until she’d put a few meters between herself and the officer.

Edie had burned most of the shuttle’s fuel escaping the detritus launched by the destruction of the vampire’s colony. Thankfully, it had been a newer model than the one the vampires had used to hijack the *Gaia’s Gift*, or she likely wouldn’t have made it out alive.

Well, something like being alive. The heavy labor suits had let her subdue and compel the vampire to turn her easily enough. She wasn’t sure whether she was still technically alive or not. She was still cognizant, still in control of her body, her mind, and her implant, and for now, that was more important than philosophical musings.

She broadcast orders to her staff back on Mars. She’d designed an upgrade to her implant that would allow her to take fuller advantage of her new cognitive abilities. A drone ship would be sent to bring it out to her shuttle, along with enough fuel for her to accelerate back to Mars. Still, it would take her a long time to reach the Red Planet. Time for her to explore the ways her vampirism had enhanced her mind.

And her body. She traced her tongue along the tips of her fangs as she traced one of her long, sharp fingernails along the glass top of one of the cryo-pods she’d loaded onto the shuttle.

## **Acknowledgments**

Learning from those who know more than you is a great way to get better at anything; I have been fortunate throughout my life to be friends with better writers than myself, writers who have been generous with their knowledge of writing. I am a better writer, and this story is a better story, because of the friendship and support of Neil Lee Thompsett and Matt Vancil.

Thank you to my friends Alexi and Addie for reading over the joke around Joanna's asexuality from within that perspective.

Finally, this story would not have come together without the reading club I was in throughout 2020. It was in conversations therein that I realized that two half-ideas I had, one for a story premise, one for a setting, could make a complete whole when brought together.

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