

author
K.A. APPLGATE

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For Michael and Jake

Contents

PROLOGUE

CHAPTER ONE “IS ANYONE THERE?”

CHAPTER TWO “IF THIS IS A DREAM, IT’S THE MOTHER, FATHER, SISTER, AND BROTHER OF WEIRD.”

CHAPTER THREE “OKAY, THIS IS NOT CERTIFIED ORGANIC. THIS IS MESSED UP.”

CHAPTER FOUR “WE HAVE TO DO WHAT WE CAN.”

CHAPTER FIVE “YOU DON’T WANT TO SEE.”

CHAPTER SIX “ARE WE THERE YET?”

CHAPTER SEVEN “SUFFOCATE IN HERE OR SUFFOCATE OUT THERE. TAKE YOUR CHOICE.”

CHAPTER EIGHT “USUALLY THERE’S NO PAIN, BUT THIS MAY BE DIFFERENT.”

CHAPTER NINE “WE DIDN’T LAND. WE WERE CAPTURED.”

CHAPTER TEN “THE BABY . . . SOMETHING’S NOT RIGHT.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN “YOU MAY NEED A SOLDIER.”

CHAPTER TWELVE “THEY’RE HEADING FOR OUR PEOPLE!”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN “YOU DON’T GO DEER HUNTING WITH A TANK.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN “AND MAYBE WE’RE ANTS TRYING TO FIGURE OUT A PICNIC.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN “DON’T LET ME LIVE.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN “I’LL COUNT TO TEN SO YOU’LL KNOW WHEN IT’S HAPPENING.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN “TEN’S ONLY A MAGIC NUMBER IF YOU GOT TEN FINGERS.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN “WHO ARE YOU? WHAT DO YOU WANT WITH US?”

CHAPTER NINETEEN “YOU DON’T LIKE THE WAY THINGS ARE, YOU CAN GO, TOO.”

CHAPTER TWENTY “THIS IS AN AWFUL LOT OF TROUBLE FOR OUR ALIENS TO GO TO.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE “THAT WAS ENOUGH OF A RUSH.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO “WELL, SOMEWHERE THERE’S A BRIDGE.”

PROLOGUE

It took less than a year for Billy Weir to lose his mind.

He lay still, absolutely still, unable to move a muscle, unable to move his eyes, unable to control his breathing, paralyzed, utterly, absolutely paralyzed.

The technology of the hibernation berth had worked. It was ninety-nine-point-nine-percent successful. It had stopped his heart, his kidneys, his liver. It had stopped every system, down to the cellular level.

It had failed to still his mind.

The system supplied his minuscule needs for oxygen and water and nutrition. But it did nothing for the sleepless consciousness imprisoned in the all-but-dead body.

He raved silently. He hallucinated. He regained his sanity and lost it and regained it as the years passed, as the decades passed, as the very definition of madness became irrelevant.

He was in hell. He was in heaven. He floated, disembodied. He was chained to his own corpse. He rose and sank. He thought and imagined, and he almost flickered out, extinguished.

He begged for death.

And all of it over again, again, again. Time was nothing, leaping by in years and decades, crawling past so slowly that each millisecond might be a century.

In his madness he remembered every memory. He remembered when his name was Ruslan, not William. He remembered the cold and loneliness of the orphanage in Chechnya after his parents were killed.

He remembered his adoptive parents, their comfortable Texas home, school, church, McDonald's, the backyard pool, his room. He remembered every song he had ever heard, every TV show, every friend, acquaintance, enemy, every passing face in the mall. He remembered the wallpaper. The flyspecks on it. Everything.

He dredged everything up out of his memory, everything, every fragment of everything. Memory was all he had. Memory and the unchanging tableau of the hibernation berth's lid, the wire mesh catwalk above it, the shadow of the berths stacked above his.

At some point, after a very long time, he began to remember memories that were not his. The memories that belonged to the other sleepers became his as well. Real, imagined, or it made no difference?

He reached out with his mind, searching, desperate, like no human child had ever been desperate before; he strained to touch something new, anything that would feed the hunger. But the hunger was a bottomless pit, a gulf that could never be filled, a silence that could not be broken.

Real or unreal? he asked himself, wondered, then, after a while, stopped caring. Let any image come, he welcomed it. ~~Let any new idea appear, it was a banquet, and he didn't care if it was real or unreal.~~

The years reeled by. He felt the deaths all around him. He felt the dim lights go out one by one. He felt all the awesome emptiness of space as the shuttle rode feeble light waves far, far beyond the orbit of dead Earth.

And when at last the new thing happened, the unexpected thing, the impossible thing, he still did not know if it was real.

The unexpected brought hope, and hope shattered him all over again.

Billy Weir lay still.

Waiting.

CHAPTER ONE

“IS ANYONE THERE?”

Jobs opened his eyes.

He closed them again, and slept.

More than a day later he opened his eyes again. Blinked. The blink seemed to last long minutes. His eyelids slid slowly, slowly up, and slowly, slowly down. Like rusty garage doors.

What he saw meant nothing. The rods and cones in his eyes sent messages down a nerve wire that responded as slowly as his lids. Nerve fired nerve in ludicrously slow motion.

When at last the images reached his brain they did not electrify his visual centers. The images seeped like a stain, transmitted reluctantly by rusty neurons.

Blink.

See.

Process.

But no one was yet at home in Jobs's brain. This slow-motion action was carried on automatically, mechanically. A very old car engine being started. Starter grinding. Crankshaft turning resentfully. No spark to light the gas.

Then, all at once, he was there.

He was there. Aware. Aware of being aware. Able to form a question. Able to wonder. To experience confusion.

Where was he?

For that matter, who was he?

His eyes scanned slowly, left to right, practically screeching in their sockets, ball bearings that had not been lubricated in far too long.

Something close. Partly clear, frosted over. And something beyond the partly clear partition. A wire mesh, just a couple of feet above his face.

He was on his back. Arms at his side.

Sebastian Andreeson. That was his name. Yes.

No. Jobs. That was the name he'd taken.

Jobs. Okay.

Now where was he? And why did he feel so awful?

He hurt. Everywhere. From fingernails to toenails and everything in between. His head hurt. Hurt like he'd caught a fastball in the temple.

His mouth hurt. Sandpaper and twigs.

His skin itself hurt, as if someone had removed it, stretched it out, and reattached it badly. It didn't seem to fit.

Where am I? he wondered, but no sound came out. He knew sound should have come out, but sure that dry, wispy rattle couldn't be the right sound.

He tried to move a hand.

Exquisite pain. Pain that made his breath catch in his throat, and that in itself hurt.

Still, he had to move. Painful or not, he had to find out what was going on. He couldn't just lie here. Wherever "here" was.

He was a little afraid. This wasn't right. This wasn't normal. Was it?

He searched his memory. Not like opening computer files. More like prying open the door to a cobwebbed library full of ancient crumbling p-books.

He tried again to move his hand. It still hurt. Nevertheless, he moved it, raised it slowly to touch his face. He touched his chin. Not very useful, but reassuring.

The other hand. Move it, too. There you go, Jobs, both hands together. There you go. The release switch is right there.

"How do I know?" he wondered aloud.

Doesn't matter how I know, he told himself, silently now, I just know. The release for the hibernation berth . . .

What? Hibernation berth?

Brain waking up. Door to memory open. Okay. Rest a minute.

Hibernation berth, we know that. Right?

Yes, Jobs, we know that.

Suddenly memory came pouring forth, a waterfall of memory, a drowning surge of memory. Mom — *Mayflower* — shuttle — asteroid — Mo'Steel — solar sails — the Rock — the commander shooting himself — that crazy kid and his murdering brother and the Rock and oh, god, Cordelia, no, no, no, no, everyone smashed to pieces, Earth broken, broken, all those people dead —

“Ahh, ahhh!” he moaned.

His right hand found the release, pushed it, and the Plexiglas lid slid open halfway and stuck.

He pushed up, hard, both hands, agony!

Tried to sit up and failed. A vast weariness came over him. His head swam, and he slipped back and under, under, under.

Many hours later Jobs opened his eyes again.

He knew who he was and where he was. And even why he was there.

The Mayflower Project. Earth’s pitiful, last-second reaction to annihilation. The asteroid everyone just called the Rock. Jobs had seen it hit. There had been problems deploying the solar sails, he and the pilot were the only ones conscious. So Jobs revived Mo’Steel and the two of them had gone EVA to repair the problem. They had been out there, hanging in orbit, with a perfect, uncluttered view as the massive asteroid struck Earth and took seven billion lives.

He sat up. Carefully. Cautiously.

He stared at the hibernation berth next to his own. His dad’s berth.

The Plexiglas was dark. The dull yellow lights showed something fibrous, as if the berth had been filled with . . .

Jobs reeled. His stomach heaved with nothing to expel. A weird moan came from his dry throat.

The berth was filled with what could only be fungus of some sort, generations of it, filling the berth. Like bread mold. That’s how it looked. Green and black. No shape visible within, nothing human, just a six-foot box filled with decay.

Jobs’s hands shook. He reached to open the lid.

No. No. No, he couldn’t. No, there was nothing in there, nothing for him to see. Let it be an undifferentiated horror, don’t let some faint outline of the familiar appear. He didn’t want to see his father’s skull, his teeth grinning up through the rot, no.

He turned away.

“Is anyone there?” he croaked.

No answer.

It took forever to roll out of the berth. He moved like the oldest man on Earth. He moved like some arthritic hundred-year-old. He panted, exhausted, on his knees, wedged between his own berth and his father’s.

He crawled, gasping with exertion. His mother’s berth. Oh, please, not that rotting filth. Anything but

that.

He pulled himself to where he could look in, weeping without tears. His mother was still there. Her skin was crumpled parchment. Her eye sockets were sunken, eyes gone. Some of her teeth lay in a heap in the back of her throat. They had fallen from absent gums. A gold crown still gleamed.

Dead. No possible doubt. Dead. Dead for a long time, dead.

His brother? Edward?

He crawled to his brother's berth, and there, breathing peacefully, his brother rested, as though napping.

Jobs lay half-across his brother's berth and fell asleep.

CHAPTER TWO

~~“IF THIS IS A DREAM, IT’S THE MOTHER, FATHER, SISTER, AND BROTHER OF WEIRD.”~~

“You’re alive,” a voice said.

A hand shook Jobs’s shoulder, but gently, seemingly knowing the pain he was in.

Slowly he revived. He saw a half-ruined face. A pretty girl, Asian, with half her face melted like wax.

“You probably don’t remember me,” she said. “I’m 2Face. We met back on Earth. Do you remember Earth? Do you remember what happened?”

He nodded dully. He looked, helpless to stop himself, at the filthy decay of his father’s berth.

“A lot are like that,” 2Face said. “I don’t think very many of us are still alive. On my way up here I saw a few who looked alive. Sleeping, still. And there are some that . . . some, I don’t know.”

Jobs searched her face. She looked as if she had been crying. But maybe that was because of the drooping eye on her burned side.

“Do you think you can walk?” 2Face asked.

“I don’t know,” Jobs said.

“I think maybe we should get out of here,” 2Face said.

Jobs shook his head. “We have to help these . . .”

“We’re too weak. I keep falling asleep. I just heard you, so I climbed up here. But we have to get out. Outside. This place is . . . there are dead people everywhere.” Her voice that had been so calm was edging toward hysteria. “There’s just things, people, stuff you don’t, I mean, I was climbing up here because I heard you moving and I passed by . . . and my mom . . . it’s just . . . and they don’t even smell, you know, not like dead people, like nothing, or like, like yeast, like bread . . .”

“Take it easy, take it easy, don’t think about it,” Jobs said.

“Don’t think about it?!” 2Face screamed. “Don’t think about it?!”

Jobs grabbed her face in his hands. The melted flesh felt strange. She stared at him, wild.

“We start screaming, we’re never going to stop,” Jobs said. “My brain is ready to explode, my mom and dad and everything. But we have to think. We have to think.”

She nodded vigorously, searching his eyes as if looking for reflections of her own panic. “Okay, we stick together, okay?”

“Yeah,” Jobs agreed readily. “We stick together. Help each other. Neither one of us thinks too much, okay? We just try and figure out . . .” He couldn’t imagine what he had to figure out. The images of

his parents, the fear that his little brother might awaken and see them for himself, all of it was too much, like he was trying to take a drink from a fire hose, too much data, too much horror.

2Face said, "Okay, come on, we stick together." Her calm had returned, almost as if it was her turn to be rational while he fought the torrent of fear and grief. "Okay, we need to find out what happened. Are we . . . I mean, where are we, the ship, I mean? Did we land somewhere? Are we still in space?"

"Yeah. Yeah." Jobs nodded, anxious to come to grips with simple problems. "Yeah. We're not weightless. Okay. We're not weightless. So we can't be in space. Unless we're accelerating. Then we'd have weight."

"That's good, think about that," 2Face said.

"Let's go up. To the bridge. We can see where we are."

"To the bridge. Maybe the captain is up there, he can tell us, if he made it, I mean."

"He didn't," Jobs said, remembering a dull thump, the sound of a gun being fired. The sound of a man's choice not to live on when his wife and children and home and very species were gone. "Long story. There were some problems. Come on. Let's go to the bridge."

Each step up the ladder was painful. But each step was less painful than the step before.

They climbed past the place where D-Caf and his brother, Mark Melman, had stowed away. Where Mark had shot the Marine sergeant. What was her name? Jobs couldn't remember. Had she survived? How could she, she'd been shot, badly wounded when they bundled her into a hibernation berth. How could her own perfectly healthy parents had not survived, how could a wounded woman?

And Mo'Steel. What about Mo? He should check on Mo.

No. No more hideous Plexiglas coffins. He didn't want to see any more horrors.

They reached the crawlway that connected the cargo area to the flight deck. The hatch was open. Jobs went in first.

He had to climb up. The tunnel was meant to be used either in a weightless environment or crawled through when the shuttle was at rest horizontally.

The tunnel opened onto a space below the flight deck. It was mostly crammed with lockers. What they contained he didn't know, but water would have been his first choice. He was desperately thirsty.

There was a ladder that in this position was more an impediment than a help. He crawled onto the flight deck. It was designed for horizontal flight, with the seats set in such a way that during the landing phase, the pilots would be positioned like the pilots of any commercial jet. So when Jobs entered the flight deck the seats were above him, over his back.

He stood up and stretched.

Looking straight up, Jobs could see a sliver of light through the small cockpit windshield. Like

looking up through a skylight. Strange. The sky was blue, and for a moment he felt a leap of irrational hope. They were home! On Earth. All of it a dream.

But the blue of the sky was not the depthless, indeterminate blue of Earth's sky. The sky seemed to be made up of blue scales. Dabs of blue and dabs of violet. Even streaks of green. And the cloud he saw was no cloud that had ever floated through Earth's sky. It was white in parts, but also brown, with streaks of brown dragged across the white.

The whole mass of the sky moved, vibrated. As if the wind blew, but blew nowhere in particular, just reshuffled the scales and smears of color.

"What is it?" 2Face asked. She was staring up past him.

"I don't know."

He helped her to her feet. They stood on what would normally be a vertical bulkhead.

The shuttle had landed. Somewhere. Gravity was downward, which meant that, impossible as it clearly was, it had landed nose up. It had landed in takeoff position. Utterly impossible.

The shuttle had no way to achieve this. The thought had been that the ship's computers would, sensing the right circumstances, trim the solar sails to achieve deceleration and enter orbit around some theoretical, hoped-for, prayed-for planet.

After that, the thinking was that any orbit would inevitably deteriorate, and the shuttle would then be able to land in its normal configuration under the guidance of a revived pilot.

Of course, the shuttle normally landed on a smooth, paved runway. Not on prairie. Not on water. Not on mountainsides. Not in craters.

Jobs knew (just as everyone aboard knew) what a mishmash of faint hopes and ludicrous delusion this mission represented. There never had been anything more than a disappearingly small chance of success.

Fly through space toward no particular goal, have the solar sails work both to accelerate and decelerate and then have the absurd good luck to land on a planet with reasonable gravity and a very convenient landing strip positioned wherever they happened to touch down?

Absurd.

But to do all that and somehow end up *vertical*?

"Maybe we're still asleep," Jobs muttered.

"I don't think so, Duck. I don't have dreams like this."

The voice was instantly familiar.

"Mo?"

Mo'Steel leaned out into view overhead. He was perched in the captain's seat. He was smiling, but nothing like his usual Labrador-retriever grin.

"I'm alive," Mo'Steel reported. "If this is a dream, it's the mother, father, sister, and brother of weird. We got all of weird's cousins in on this. Come on up. You gotta see this. You have *got* to see this."

CHAPTER THREE

~~“OKAY, THIS IS NOT CERTIFIED ORGANIC. THIS IS MESSED UP.”~~

It took some effort but 2Face managed to climb up to where Mo’Steel sat. He took her hands and hauled her up by main force. He was amazingly strong, especially given the weak-kitten state she and Jobs were in. He must have been awake longer. He seemed more fully recovered from hibernation.

Once up, 2Face helped Mo’Steel pull Jobs up to their now-cramped spot. They squeezed together on the back-support of the copilot’s chair, with their heads pushed into gray panels of switches and knobs and LEDs.

Mo’Steel nodded toward the other seat. A space suit was strapped in place minus helmet. A skull lolled against the collar.

“The commander,” Jobs said. To 2Face he explained, “He decided he didn’t want to come.”

“Yeah,” Mo’Steel said.

2Face stared. It was almost comical. A grinning Halloween skeleton dressed up as an astronaut. Sure, it had been there a long time. She tore her eyes away, unwilling to think about it. Her mother was dead. She had no grief to spare for this poor man.

Mo’Steel said, “If you stand up you can look out and around through the side window here. Careful though, it takes a while before the old body gets hooked up right. And watch this panel here, sharp edges.”

Jobs stood. 2Face stood, held on to what should have been an overhead array of switches. She looked

She gasped.

The ship stood tall, the only man-made thing. Filling the narrow view was a landscape that seemed to literally vibrate with color and movement. Green and yellow and blue. There were trees with royal blue trunks and branches, brown trunks, even purple. Leaves that were more like rough smears of color, light and dark greens, honey-golds. The branches seemed to poke in and out of the leaves with only the most rudimentary logic.

Tall grass, or at least something that at first glance looked like grass, extended down a hill to a blue and-violet river bordered in umber.

Beyond the river the grass took over again, offset by a smear of reddish-brown.

In the distance was the suggestion of a village, whitewashed walls tinged green and red tile roofs set at improbable angles.

Above it all, the pulsating blue sky, so alive, but at the same time flat, without depth.

“Excellent, huh?” Mo’Steel asked.

“What is it?” 2Face wondered aloud. “None of it seems real. I mean, I think it’s real, but it’s like . . .”

don't know. I don't know how to explain it. I mean, the sky, it's as if the blue isn't air but a million small blue birds flying around all packed in close together."

"It's beautiful," Jobs said. "The colors are so intense. How can it be real, though? Look at the way the river moves. Shouldn't water move like water, no matter where you are? It's more like . . . like it kind of smears past, like, like big sections of it kind of move together."

"Maybe it's ice. Maybe it's not water at all," 2Face suggested.

"Or maybe our heads are all messed up," Mo'Steel suggested. "You know? How long were we asleep? You know your eyes don't totally focus when you first wake up and stuff sounds too loud and all?"

2Face tore her gaze from the agitated, too-bright landscape. "Maybe you're right. Maybe it's all in our heads."

"This ship is standing upright," Jobs said cautiously. "That's impossible. Unless it's real, I mean. But theoretically it's impossible. So maybe this is just a dream."

"Deep," Mo'Steel mocked.

"Maybe my mom isn't dead," 2Face whispered. "Maybe none of them are dead. If it's a dream. We don't know, right?"

The three of them sat down, wedged uncomfortably together, hugging to keep from falling, sharing one seat until Mo'Steel leaped the gap to reach the chair occupied by the skeleton. "We're going to need to bury him, I guess."

"No hurry," Jobs said darkly.

Mo'Steel pulled at the seat belt but it came apart in his fingers. The corpse shifted, slid, fell off the side of the chair, fell to the bulkhead with a sound like a dropped bundle of sticks.

"Sorry, Commander," Mo'Steel said without seeming very disturbed. "What are we going to do?" Mo'Steel asked Jobs, sounding to 2Face as if it couldn't possibly be his responsibility to figure it out himself.

2Face wasn't sure she liked him. She was drawn to Jobs's quiet, thoughtful way. But Mo'Steel had a way of being jumpy in his own skin, like there were too many calories being burned. He reminded her of the landscape she'd just observed.

"I guess sooner or later we need to go back downstairs," Jobs said. His reluctance was evident in his look and tone. He didn't try to hide the fact that what was down there in the *Mayflower* capsule horrified him.

2Face definitely shared that sense of horror. Pain was down there. Loss. Unimaginable loss.

Mo'Steel rocked back and forth on his heels and looked like he'd rather talk about something else. He stood up and looked out of the port-side window and yelped.

“Yah-ah-ah!” He pulled back, blinked, looked again. He pointed accusingly. “Okay, this is not certified organic. This is messed up.”

“We’ve seen it,” 2Face said, feeling a little annoyed.

“Uh-uh.” Mo’Steel shook his head vigorously. He pointed at the starboard-side window. “You’ve seen *that*. You have *not* seen *this*.”

Jobs frowned and with help from his friend made his way across to the far seat. He took a long look several breaths, and took 2Face’s hand to guide her across.

She pushed between the two guys and looked.

No, she had not seen this.

It was in black-and-white. Entirely. Not a splash of color, not a glimmer. The sky was gray with puffy white clouds. The ground was broken up into a series of deep channels or canyons cut deep around precarious mesas. Looming in the distance, rising up from the fractured plain was a massive mountain range, snowcapped at the jagged peaks.

No color. None. Light gray and medium gray and darkest gray shadows edging to black in the deep places.

They raced back at dangerous speeds to check the first view. It was still there, still a wild profusion of greens and blues and golds.

Two landscapes. Completely incompatible. Completely impossible.

“The dream thing is seeming more and more likely,” 2Face said.

“There should be a chronometer of some kind,” Jobs said suddenly. He began searching the ranks of dials, readouts, and switches. Most of the readouts were blank. But when he toggled certain switches some of the readouts came to life.

“There should be some kind of mission clock,” he muttered. “Time from launch or whatever. There it is.”

A small digital readout displayed a long string of numbers.

“It’s still running. Look. Not seconds, minutes. It’s only showing minutes,” 2Face said, looking over his shoulder.

“Two-hundred-sixty-two million, eight-hundred-seventeen thousand, nine-hundred-and-twelve minutes,” Jobs said. “Mo?”

To 2Face’s amazement Mo’Steel calculated instantaneously.

“Five-hundred years, twelve days, and some spare change, Duck,” Mo’Steel said.

CHAPTER FOUR

“WE HAVE TO DO WHAT WE CAN.”

As they descended into the capsule again, Jobs was grateful for the mysterious landscape of the planet. Grateful for the mystery of how the shuttle carrying the *Mayflower* capsule had come to land in such an impossible position. Anything that took his mind off the work at hand was welcome.

His father and mother were dead. If his brother, Edward, was still alive at all, he was unconscious.

Five centuries. They had drifted through space for five-hundred years. Not strange that the untested hibernation equipment had failed his parents, more surprising that it had preserved him. Nothing made worked for five hundred years.

Another mystery. More unknowns. So much better than the knowns.

“I don’t think we’d better open any of these units,” Jobs said. “Even if we see someone we think is alive, we better let them be. I don’t understand how this system works. But it must have a programmed revival sequence.”

“I hear something,” 2Face said. “Listen.”

Jobs heard it, too. A human voice. Groaning.

Mo’Steel scrambled into the “basement,” through the hatch and then down the circular steps as fast as a monkey, sliding more than stepping.

“Someone’s alive down here,” he called up.

Jobs and 2Face followed at a more normal pace.

“How did he do that?” 2Face whispered. “The thing with the minutes, I mean.”

In a low voice Jobs said, “Mo’s crazy, he’s a wild man, doesn’t care about much except the next adrenaline rush. Doesn’t mean he’s stupid, especially with numbers.”

“Idiot savant,” 2Face muttered.

“Mo’s my best friend,” Jobs said. He would have said more, but Mo’Steel didn’t need defending. 2Face was as smart as she seemed, she’d come to appreciate Mo’Steel. If not, well, that would be his loss.

“Sorry,” 2Face said.

They reached the level where Mo’Steel squatted beside a young woman. Jobs recognized the Marine sergeant. Her uniform, like his own clothing, was brittle and in tatters, but the dark camouflage pattern was still recognizable.

She was not alone in her berth. A child lay there, a boy, seemingly asleep on her belly. It wasn’t a newborn. It might have been a two- or three-year-old. And there was a weird, cylindrical, almost

translucent piece of skin that seemed to hold them together. It began near the sergeant's shoulder and snaked its way into the baby's side.

Tamara was awake. Confused, as Jobs had been on waking, sleepy.

"Take it easy, take it easy," Mo'Steel comforted her in a gentle voice. "No rush. You're not going anywhere yet."

The woman blinked and tried to focus. She tried to speak but only a groan was heard.

2Face leaned over. "You're on the shuttle still. We've landed. Somewhere. We don't know where."

Jobs pointed to a small round hole in the woman's uniform near where the long, cordlike piece of skin started, and gave 2Face a significant look.

2Face tugged gently at the cloth. It tore easily. The bullet hole in her shoulder could be clearly seen as a neat round scar, lighter than the surrounding flesh.

Tamara seemed to be trying to form a question.

"You were shot. You may not remember it right away," Jobs said. "A stowaway shot you. But it looks like it healed during hibernation. Maybe the machine . . . maybe just time . . ."

"No," Tamara said, forcing the word out. "Baby . . . my baby . . ."

"She must have been pregnant when she went into hibernation," 2Face said in a low voice. Then, loud enough for Tamara to hear, "The baby was born. God knows how. It's right here. It's on you. In fact, it's attached to you."

Tamara nodded slowly. Her hands felt blindly and Mo'Steel gently guided her fingers to her baby's face.

The baby opened its eyes. Jobs recoiled, banged his head on the low deck above. 2Face cried out, an expression of pure horror.

The baby's eyes had run, liquid, out onto its mother's belly. It stared at them now with empty eye sockets.

"Wha . . .?" Tamara moaned.

Mo'Steel was the first to recover. "Nothing. Nothing, lady. Don't worry, it's okay."

Tamara slipped back into sleep. The baby, at any rate, blinked its empty eyes and seemed to be watching them with great interest.

Jobs, 2Face, and Mo'Steel pulled back.

"Radiation," Jobs whispered. "Five centuries in space. This capsule is lead-lined, but five-hundred years of hard radiation while the kid is slowly, slowly somehow growing and, I mean, during ce

division and all . . .” He stopped, unable to speak. He felt like a mountain was falling on him. Like a man standing on the beach as a tidal wave hits. He was being buried alive, smothered, crushed.

Way too much.

Jobs felt Mo’Steel’s hand on his shoulder.

“It’s woolly, Duck, but you gotta strap it up and keep moving. We can’t go all slasher chick and start screaming. There’s weirder stuff than this coming.”

Jobs nodded, but he wanted very badly to punch his friend in the face. He didn’t want to be comforted, let alone be told he had to be a good soldier and get on with his life. He wanted to cry. He wanted to scream. He wanted to wake up and not be here. It was too much, too much. Impossible to process a tenth of it, a billionth of it.

His hands were shaking. A result of the hibernation? No. A result of waking up and seeing.

“We need to get some kind of grip on things here,” 2Face said. “Let’s check every berth. Let’s see what’s what. How about that? One by one, bottom to top, okay?”

“What she said,” Mo’Steel agreed. He was looking very earnestly at his friend.

Jobs covered his face with his hands. “As far as I know we have no food. No water. We’ve probably already taken a hundred lifetimes’ worth of radiation. I don’t know what that is outside there on the planet, but it can’t be natural. Maybe no air outside. My folks are dead. Yours, too, mostly. The whole human race is dead. Maybe just the three of us and . . . and that woman and some kind of mutant alien baby.”

“Yeah. Like I said, very woolly.”

2Face said, “Jobs, you said yourself: It can’t be. The planet out there, the ship standing this way. It can’t be. Not unless there’s something else.”

“Yeah?”

“So, what’s the something else, Jobs? Don’t you want to find out?”

He laughed bitterly. “You’re trying to appeal to my curiosity?”

“We have to do what we can,” 2Face said. “You’re right, the human race is all over. Except for us. Me. I’m not going to roll over and die. You want to give up, Jobs, I can’t stop you, I guess, but I have to try. We’re *it*, however many of us are alive on this stupid ship. That’s not why we should give up. That’s why we can’t give up.”

“Well, good luck, Eve, go forth and multiply,” Jobs snapped.

2Face started to answer back, but Jobs saw Mo’Steel take her arm and shake his head. “He’s coming around.”

Jobs glared at his friend. “You think you know me, don’t you, Mo?”

“Yeah, 'migo, I know you. There's some deep stuff to figure out here. You can't leave it alone. I know you pretty good, Duck. You can't leave it alone.”

Jobs nodded dully. He looked up at 2Face. The smooth half of her face was set, determined. The burned side, with its drooping eye, seemed to weep. *There was a poem in there somewhere*, Jobs thought.

He should formulate a plan. He should step up and try to figure it all out. But right now the strength wasn't in him.

“Lead on,” he said to 2Face.

CHAPTER FIVE

“YOU DON’T WANT TO SEE.”

It had taken . . . how long so far? 2Face had no way of knowing. No watch, no clock, maybe no need for them.

It was taking a long time as time is experienced — subjectively. Time dragged when it was measured out in hideous deaths and uncertain lives.

And then there was the thirst. She wanted water. Needed it, and soon. And they had no idea where even to begin looking.

So they kept up the grim task of accounting.

Of the Eighty who had originally been chosen to fly on the *Mayflower* Project, one had died in the riot on the ground. His berth had been taken by Tamara Hoyle, who had been shot—but not killed—by the stowaway Mark Melman who had, in turn, been killed.

The mission copilot had been killed by D-Caf Melman. D-Caf had been given the hibernation berth belonging to the man he had killed. The mission commander had taken his life into his own hands.

So seventy-nine people had entered hibernation.

Of those, they had already confirmed twenty-one who were very definitely dead. Thus far 2Face had counted nineteen, plus Tamara’s “child,” who were either alive and active or in various states of revival.

Among the confirmed dead were both of Jobs’s parents, Mo’Steel’s father, and 2Face’s mother. Older people had fared worse. Some adults had made it, like Mo’Steel’s mother and 2Face’s father and even Tamara Hoyle.

They climbed up a level.

“Cheese,” Mo’Steel reported, checking the first berth. It was the shorthand term for the death that Jobs’s father had died. A death that filled the berth with green–black mold.

“Cheese” for the moldy ones. “Crater” for the ones, like one young girl, who had been killed by micrometeorites. And “facelift” for the ones who had been dried out, stretched, were nothing but parchment skin over skeletons.

It was brutal jargon for a brutal job. They were protecting themselves, 2Face knew. They couldn’t weep for each death. There were seven billion dead.

“Oh, god.” Jobs recoiled from the next berth.

“What?” 2Face asked. She was still worried about him. She didn’t know if he was a strong person who had suffered a moment of weakness, or a weak person. They needed strength.

“You don’t want to see,” Jobs said.

~~2Face hesitated. But no, she couldn't start giving in to the fear now. She pressed past Jobs and looked at~~
A man. His body looked like a target, like he'd been shot full of holes, bloodless holes. Something had
burrowed tunnels, some as small as a quarter inch in diameter, some three times as big, in every
exposed inch of flesh. He was dried out like so many of the others, mummified. But none of the others
had been eaten alive like this.

Jobs wiped his face with his hands. He looked sick. But then, 2Face supposed she did, too. This was
vile work.

Beside the worm-eaten man was a girl in the early stages of revival. 2Face had met her in passing, just
yesterday. Just yesterday five-hundred years ago. A "Jane." Not 2Face's kind of girl at all. But what
could silly school cliques possibly matter now? She spoke some calming words to the girl, who fell
back asleep.

"This one's alive, too," Mo'Steel reported from across the aisle.

The occupant of the berth was a kid, maybe twelve years old. Maybe younger. Or maybe he was just
small for his age. He had dark, deep, almost sunken eyes. His skin was pale as death, so fragile you
could see individual veins in his arms and face. His hair was black.

His eyes were open, staring, as blank as a doll's eyes.

"I know that kid," Jobs said. "His name's Billy. Billy something. Weir. Billy Weir?"

"Weird? Billy Weird? Needs to think about picking a new name," Mo'Steel said.

Jobs leaned in and said, "Billy. Billy. You were right: I'm here."

2Face exchanged a surprised look with Mo'Steel.

"Before we left, back at the barracks. He was walking in his sleep," Jobs said. "Talking. I think he was
asleep, anyway. He said, 'You'll be there.' He said that to me."

"Billy, wake up, man," Mo'Steel said.

No response.

"Are we sure he's alive?" 2Face wondered.

"He's alive," Jobs said. "He's alive. It takes a while."

"His eyes are wide open. But he's not focusing at all."

"He's breathing."

2Face covered Billy's eyes with her hand, then removed it. She watched the pupils closely. They had
widened in the dark and were now contracting in the light. "Okay, he's alive."

“Hey,” a voice called. “Hey. Hey!”

“A live one,” Mo’Steel remarked. “Up there. Come on. Old Billy here is not a morning person. Give the boy some time. Let’s go see who’s yelling.”

2Face agreed. But Jobs would not stop staring at the impassive face of Billy Weir.

“Come on, Jobs,” she said. “We’ll come back.”

“He said I’d be here,” Jobs said.

“Yeah. Come on.”

“That’s a total of . . .” 2Face hesitated.

“Start with eighty including the baby,” Mo’Steel said. “Looks like thirty-four alive or at least looking alive. Forty-six . . . otherwise. You want the percent? Forty-two-point-five percent made it. Fifty-seven-point-five percent passed on.”

“So far,” 2Face said.

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