Island

A NaNoWriMo Novel

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Small Tree Heel Books, Houston

To Amber (♛),
Who is able to move any number of squares vertically, horizontally, or diagonally.

1. Wake Up, Etienne.

The typical signal pinged his tiny room like every morning before that. The synthetic voice echoed through his skull and invaded the last moments of his current dream. Etienne crawled out of bed and found a fresh cup of fortified coffee in a silvery cup and a dense pastry loaded will all manner of nutrients waiting for him on his bureau. He ate and drank the food, giving himself a chance to fully wake up.

When he finished eating, he headed down the refresher corridor. The water jets and soap jets sprayed him with just enough coldness to wake him up the rest of the way. After a rinse in some nice steamy water, followed by warm air to dry him off, he passed through the dresser where his uniform sat, neatly washed and ironed, free of most of the stains, aside from a few stubborn oil or coolant smudges, ready to go.

After stepping into the uniform, he walked through the penultimate door on his way to work: the PEM Scan.

The scanning room was dark, as it was every other morning. When the green light came on, he had to do jumping jacks while the sensors measured his vitals, warming him up for the daily physical test. After the tone, he had to do 50 push-ups and 50 sit-ups and then jog on a treadmill for a minute, maintaining a speed of nine to 10 kilometers per hour.

When the red light came on, he had to be ready to react to the stimulus. The synthetic voice told a joke, and he laughed. It told him of a cruel injustice, and he became angry. It indicated a miserable happenstance, and he was expected to cry.

Finally, the blue light came on. Before him sat all manner of puzzles and equations. He had to solve only a handful of them in the time allotted, but he took special relish in solving many more than the minimal, or even the recommended, requirement.

Finally, a soft chime.

"Sanitation Engineer Etienne Quartz is approved for one more day of active service," said the synthetic voice as the door before him opened to his office.

His office was not a typical office. It did not have a big window through which he could watch the landscapers mow the lawn, or see some of the employees come in late, nor did it have felt walls where he could pin pithy webcomics or quotes by people much more intelligent or wealthy than he, or the thin carpet that refused to admit food crumbs between its fibers, or even shelves on which to put pictures of loved ones and pets. Yes, his office had a massive window, but a bucolic pseudopark was not able to be seen through its thick glass. This window showed him the stark, dark expanses of the universe. Through this window he saw the constellations, other passing starships, or even a planet or two, if the *Rue Morgue* was facing the right way.

The walls were smooth steel, the floor a sort of rubbery ground that kept one from losing his footing when scuttling about cleaning up messes, and the shelves were bulkheads, nestling all manner of hardware, from scanners to science experiments, and everything between.

His office was the inside of the *Rue Morgue*, and his job was to keep it clean.

He picked up the clipboard with the daily task list. To his surprise, it only had the

recurring tasks, like restocking the disposables, and polishing the chrome that lined the entire ship.

"Has the captain not posted his daily task list yet?" asked Etienne.

"Negative. The captain has not," said the synthetic voice.

"Why not?" said Etienne, more rhetorical than otherwise.

"The captain is dead," said the synthetic voice.

Etienne looked up from the clipboard, looked around the corridors that made up his office. Normally, crewmembers would be hustling and bustling through here like some interdimensional waystation during rush hour. The halls were empty. Not a single voice echoed through the chamber. It was coming on time for the first shift to start, but nobody was around to start it.

"Where is everybody?" he asked, not sure if he wanted to know the answer.

"Dead," came the synthetic voice.

The sound of something large and metallic sliding down a chute into a holding bit echoed through the ship's interior.

"Everybody?"

"Yes."

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He decided to postpone his daily task list to do a walkthrough of the *Rue Morgue*. Here and there, the bodies of his dead crewmembers lay. Even on the bridge, the night captain sat in the chair, a look of peace upon her face. The night bridge crew were slumped over their respective consoles. Everybody, Etienne surmised, was dead.

He lifted his clipboard and hit the Math app. Using the Induction package, he quickly confirmed his suspicions. Everybody was dead, mathematically speaking.

"Any signs of life?" he asked.

"There is one life sign on the bridge," said the computer, "And several signs of life in the botany lab."

He sighed. He hit the Emergency Procedure app on his clipboard, finding the section on deceased crewmember disposal.

"Deceased crewmember disposal involves a deceased crewmember and a space coffin," the text said. "In the case of simultaneous death, customary protocol is to dispose of the highest ranking officer first, as well as any dignitaries, and work down the ranks from there. The ship is equipped with the capability to produce more space coffins as necessary, but will not have a full cache in the case of a catastrophe." The onboard map showed him where the space coffin cache was located.

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The bin held only one coffin. He lifted it from the rack and set it on the ground.

"May I have a list of all the deceased crewmembers, sorted by disposal order?" he asked.

"Yes," said the voice. His clipboard filled up with the names of each and every crewmember, dignitary, and other passenger, including a few, until now, undocumented stowaways.

"Thanks," he said. "First things' first," he said, pushing the now hovering coffin to the elevator. The top person was a visiting Norbian duke. He was able to upload the duke's location into the coffin so the onboard arrows would indicate the correct direction towards his body. The duke was alone in his room, his hands still in the middle of tying his ornate Norbian necktie. Etienne popped out the token from doorway, dropping it into the coffin like one places a credit into a gambling machine. The coffin read the duke's religion, inferring his preferred method of disposal, and scanned his room for any signs that he may have recanted on his proverbial death bed. After running a few statistical checks to ensure that the duke was in fact a devout Thixlon, the coffin slid open with a his. Etienne lifted the duke and set him into the coffin, following the body-shaped pattern along the inside floor.

The coffin altered the molecular makeup of his clothing, giving them the look and feel of traditional Thixlon burial robes. It also used artificial selective gravity to rearrange his limbs into the traditional Thixlon burial position. Finally, an atomizer applied traditional Thixlon burial makeup.

The coffin slid closed, again with a hiss. The arrows lit up, showing Etienne where to push the thing. It led him to the starboard airlock, which, according to the friendly on-board screen, was the airlock pointing towards the Norbian sun, which was one of the many tiny points of light on the uncaring sea of empty black. Etienne loaded the coffin into the airlock and closed the door. He watched through the window as the coffin did some last minute statistical calculations.

Traditional Thixlon burial procedures were officiated by a Thixlon Elevon, a sort of priest to whom Thix had spoken and given his mark. In the absence of a Thixlon Elevon, the only acceptable substitution was a holographic Thixlon Elevon simulation preprogrammed with the last rites speech as well as some fuzzy logic to speak kindly of the dead.

Etienne watched as the coffin spat out a tiny disk which then began projecting a very convincing looking Thixlon Elevon. He couldn't hear what the simulation said through the airlock door, which made him feel a bit guilty, as this creature's last rights were only being said to an empty room. He contemplated opening the airlock, but before he could, the Thixlon Elevon simulation bowed its head before the airlock doors slid open. The coffin and the Thixlon Elevon were both sucked into space. The Thixlon Elevon flickered into nonexistence, and the coffin launched towards that distant Norbian star.

"One down," said Etienne, crossing the top name off of his list with his finger.

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A bell chimed, indicating that one of his tasks was turning yellow. He flipped over to the task list. The line that said "Mop the floors" was now highlighted in a flashing yellow. "You mean I still have to do these tasks in all this?" he asked.

"They are your daily tasks," said the *Rue Morgue*.

He snapped his clipboard to his belt and stomped off to the utility closet. There he found

the mop and the hoverbucket. After filling the bucket with a precisely calculated mixture of warm water and cleaning agents, he got started on his mopping.

Normally, mopping was time when he could just let his mind wander. He'd look up at the other crewmembers: the astronavigators, the biologists, the propulsion engineers, and wonder for a moment what it would be like to be them. He'd live out his imaginary life, charting stars, modifying plants, or checking the exotic matter containment unit, before going home to a completely different room with completely different pictures adorning the walls, and fall asleep in a completely different bed to wake up in a completely different body.

Given the extenuating circumstances, during his mopping of the floor, he did not fantasize about being anybody else, as he did not fancy being dead.

Once he finished mopping, the mop pinged, letting the clipboard know that this task had been complete, or as complete as it could be, having to mop around his crewmembers. At least the floor sparkled, though.

He returned the mop and bucket to the utility closet. All the rest of his tasks were safely green, so he decided to take a little break.

"Why is everybody dead?" he asked.

The synthetic voice did not answer.

"Do you have the surveillance records from last night?" He asked.

"Yes," said the voice.

"May I see them?"

"You are not authorized to see the records," said the ship.

"Why not?"

"You lack sufficient rank."

"What is the minimum necessary rank to view the records?" he asked.

"That information is restricted," said the voice.

"Thank you anyway," he said. Somewhere in the distance, he heard the clank of something sliding down a chute and into a holding bin. "Could you do me a favor?" he asked the ship.

"I am capable of many functions that meet a diverse set of requirements," said the voice.

"Could you cross-list the disposal list with my daily itinerary? And please, make sure to include my scheduled breaks and free time."

"Of course," said the ship. After a moment, his task list now included several tasks labelled "Deceased crewmember disposal." It went on for pages.

The next block of time, however, was free, so he snapped his clipboard to his belt and decided to try to figure out some things on his own.

"Are all the ships systems on automatic right now?" he asked.

"Affirmative. All ship functions that may be regulated by a computer are being regulated by a computer. Since the sanitation engineering function may still be regulated by organic creatures, this function has not been commandeered."

"But we're going through space safe, and everything?"

"Affirmative. I will guide the ship to the nearest safe harbor where a team of forensic engineers will assess the damage before restocking the ship the necessary missing crew units."

"Wonderful," said Etienne.

He wandered towards the dining hall. Here there sat many of the night crew, most slumped over the tables. Nobody had any signs of violence, nor were there any signs of suffocation, or of obvious poisoning. He could not tell readily how these people had died. Of course, he wasn't a doctor. Or a forensic engineer.

His clipboard beeped. It was time to dispose of another body. This one was the captain.

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The bin held another coffin, and this coffin led him to the captain's quarters, where the captain lay on the floor, clean shaven. The shaving unit sat on the floor beside the captain. Etienne imagined that it finished the job even while the captain was slumped on the floor. The coffin did its rites scanning and Etienne helped the captain into the vessel. The captain was an apatheist, and had specified cremation, so once the ship fell out into the depths of space, it filled its cabin with pure oxygen before flashing into a puff of powder, giving a tiny mockery to the stars behind the specks of powder.

With a beep, it was time to polish the chrome. Etienne returned to the utility closet and found the polishing cloth. There he spent the next few hours making all the consoles nice and shiny, wiping off the fingerprints of his now departed crew members.

"Will I need to do this every day if there will be less traffic now?" he asked.

"Calculating," said the voice.

After what seemed like too long of a pause for a sophisticated computer like that aboard the *Rue Morgue* the voice finally responded.

"Not as often. I shall provide a modified daily task list from here on out."

"Thank you," said Etienne. "I think."

He resumed polishing the chrome.

"Since there's only one of me," he said, pausing, so the ship knew he was talking to it, "do you think I could get a little help from time to time?"

"Calculating," said the ship.

His arm began to grow sore.

Finally the ship responded, "Negative. The work you perform daily can be done by a single entity. This, added to your revised workload in the absence of a crew, does not surpass the laws set forth by the Workers' Rights Agency, nor by the agreements of your union contract."

"Just checking," he said. He switched arms to keep polishing, allowing the throbbing muscle of his right arm a break from work. Finally, the polishing cloth beeped, synchronizing the completed task with his clipboard.

"Finally," he muttered, putting the polishing cloth back into the utility room, as the sound of a thud, clank, and sliding sounded in the distance, echoing through the mostly empty ship.

2. The Beep of a Squeegee

Etienne favored that sound most of all. Cleaning the windows was, typically, the bookend of his busy day as a sanitation engineer. At this point, typically, the evening crew would start taking over, and he could retire to the dining hall to enjoy a bite of the meal of the day, and a sip of the drink of the day, and socialize with his peers. While this was still the end of his work day, as dictated by the Workers' Rights Agency, as well as the agreements brought forth in his union contract, Etienne had a feeling that he wouldn't be retiring to the dining hall, especially as it had yet to be cleaned out.

He opted instead to get the MotD and DotD from one of the handy food dispensary units that lined the wall. After pushing a few buttons, a foil-wrapped sandwichized version of the MotD dropped down the chute, followed by a metallic sipper-bottle of the DotD. Though he risked dropping crumbs all over his nice, clean floor, he decided to take a walk, to let his mind fully grasp the event. For some reason, he was alive, while the rest of the crew was dead. It was just him and the *Rue Morgue*, until they could make it to the nearest harbor to restock the crew.

The only other signs of life aboard the ship were the plants in the botany lab, so Etienne made his way there. The two glass doors, sealing in a garden of genetically modified plants that provided, to some degree, food and oxygen to the crew. Etienne pressed his face against the glass. Sure enough, any crew members that worked here were also now slumped over their respective stations.

He tried opening the door.

"This door is sealed against unauthorized entry," said the ship's voice.

Finishing his Chicken Cordon Bleu sandwich and his cup of hot xocolatl, he retired to the entertainment hold, where, for once, there weren't any lines. Stepping past coworkers, trying not to focus too much on who was where, he made his way to the immersive video suites.

"Please select a film," said the voice of the ship, or at least a shard of the ship dedicated to delivering immersive video content.

He felt like something light, something a bit unrealistic. "*2001: A Space Odyssey*," he said. "The one directed by Kubrick."

The invisible speaker that produced the voice buzzed. "I cannot do that, Etienne."

"How about *Tron*, the original one?"

"Sorry. Unable to locate film in repository."

"*The Terminator*, the one with that one president in it."

"Did you mean *The Exterminator*?"

"No. Do you have *Electric Dreams*?"

"Unrecognized title. Please try again."

"*Resident Evil*?"

"The video game or episodic media?"

"Neither. *WALL-E*?"

"Wally what?"

"Cancel. Just play something. Anything. Use my psych profile." He tapped his token

against the console.

"Processing."

Within moments, the film *Flight Was My Heart* started playing. While it wasn't as neat as his favorite classic science fiction films, the plot did draw him in, holding his attention throughout the entire film. For a moment, he forgot all about everybody else aboard the *Rue Morgue*, and how he would probably be spending the rest of the trip cleaning up their remains while the ship found its way to the nearest harbor.

When the film ended, and he was back in his seat, he stood to stretch. His eyes felt a bit tired, and that was as good an indicator as any that it was time to go to sleep. Just to make sure he realized this, his uniform gave a little beep as well.

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He made his way back to his room, where he placed the uniform in the laundry bin, where it was reassembled molecule by molecule each night, cleaning out the most stubborn stains, at least as well as it could. Sitting on his bed were his issued pajamas, which were freshly laundered and smelled of pine forests. He put them on, had his pre-bed drink of warm milk, and red a bit before he finally fell asleep.

In the morning when the ship woke him up, he almost wished that he had been rolling the dream recorder. His memories of his dreams were shattered like a thin sheet of ice by the signal to awaken. What shards were left melted in his mind as he went down the chamber towards his daily tasks. Finally, after donning his uniform, he entered the chamber for the PEM Scan.

He easily met the physical requirements, most likely due to the regular activity of his career. The emotional test still triggered all the right emotions, he hoped. Finally, in the mental test, he was able to complete twice as many puzzles as was required in the allotted time. He grinned with smug satisfaction ad the ship announced that he was approved for another day of service.

As he left the PEM Scanner, he briefly wondered if he could advance himself to a higher role aboard the ship due to his intellect. In the past, he never really considered it, because he had always been happy with his job. But now that he was the only survivor on the ship, he wondered if maybe he should try to assume a higher post.

"It might make them respect me more when we get to the nearest harbor," he said aloud, picking up his clipboard.

"It might," said the computer, "but certainty lies within defining the scope of your assumption."

"I think I would like to try to get a promotion."

"Very well. I shall schedule you for advancement training this evening. Which track would you like to pursue?"

"Perhaps astronavigational system engineering. I suppose I could build upon my engineering background."

"Confirmed. Please report to the training deck after your allotted dining time."

"Thank you,' Etienne said before making his way to the coffin dispenser.

The next name on his list was the evening captain. He pushed the hovering coffin towards the evening crew living quarters. There he found the evening captain, a Flaxblug, lying just outside it's room. He plucked the token from the captain's uniform and dropped it into the coffin. The coffin entered the captain's room and did its deathbed recantation scan, and, just to make extra sure, scanned the area near the tiny blue apelike creature. Finally it slid open and indicated for Etienne to place the body inside. Instead of taking it to the airlock, the coffin directed him to the freezing bay. The readout described a cultural hang-up of the Flaxblug where they like to ensure that their dead are dead. The night captain would be residing there in cryogenic storage until it could be delivered to its family back home. The failure for providing a body, the text said, generally resulted in wasted life when the Flaxblug rampaged through any nearby civilization centers, until a Flaxblug body could be found.

After crossing the name off the list, he checked the next task. "Polish the ship's exterior," he said aloud.

"It is a task normally reserved for the night crew, but it would make my hull sparkle," said the ship.

Etienne went to the utility room where he found a space suit and the polishing materials. In microgravity, waxes and liquid polishes would be difficult to apply by hand. Thus, the standard en-route ship polish was put into a pressurized container to be sprayed directly on the ship. The tiny blobs of polish, containing microscopic pieces of magnetized iron, clung to the hull awaiting buffing. A special static-free buffer had to be used so as to not disrupt the resting polish.

He put on the suit and got a feel for the sprayer and the buffer through the thick gloves. When he felt he had gotten the hang of it, he made his way to the airlock. After depressurizing the room, he stepped out onto the hull.

"How often does this need to be done?" he asked.

"Every week," said the ship. "I get a lot of damage from stray debris, and get the occasional carbon scoring from a laser or comet here or there."

Etienne began spraying the polish with his left hand. He revved up the buffer with his left.

"Could I get some music while I'm doing this?"

"The night sanitation engineer never needed music," was the reply.

"Please?"

The sound of music, possibly from his own collection, or statistically determined to be something he'd like, especially while polishing a space ship, played through his suit's speakers. On occasion, he would take a chance to look back at the starry sky behind him, offsetting the sterile light grey of the ship below him.

Some of the constellations he recognized, while others were completely new to him. He was never good at astronomy, or at discovering pictures in the cosmos, so he never really noticed, nor cared if a giant bear, squid, or pentacle was staring down at him.

Now, though, when he looked up, he didn't see the familiar connect-the-dots he was used to seeing every time he looked at the stars. Now he saw pictures, and not just those silly pictures observatories would use to make astronomy interesting to a bunch of bored children, but pictures made up of the dots and the patches of darkness and the assorted colors thanks to pockets of gas in an otherwise vacant universe.

It was beautiful.

The spray bottle and the buffer vibrated in his hands. He had been idle too long. Sighing, he continued his polishing spree.

Just over the ventral side of the ship, though, he made a discovery. "Why are you missing pieces on your hull?" he asked.

"Matter reallocation," was the response. "Buff around it."

He made his way around the missing panel of hull. It was about the span of four of him wide, and a little taller than him, like somebody cut enough material to wrap up four human-sized packages.

When he made it all the way around the ship, the bottle and buffer beeped. But since he was in the vacuum of space, he didn't hear it. Fortunately, they flashed their lights as well. He reentered the airlock and closed the door behind him. Once the cabin had been pressurized, he removed the helmet to breathe somewhat fresher recycled air.

He returned the supplies to the utility room and checked his list for his next task. Instead of seeing the night captain, the next body on the list was some stowaway. In the grain hold, Etienne found the creature, a green blob, really, sitting there, just behind a large food cylinder, out of the general view of the granary monitor. In the absence of a token, the coffin attempted to identify the body. It then did a cursory examination of the Net to determine the known public views of this individual before acquiring unfettered access to its private Net accounts to get the best data towards making its decision regarding proper disposal.

After a bit of churning, the coffin slid open. A sort of shovel sat in the bin. "Take shovel," the text on the side said. Following the instructions, Etienne scooped the blob thing into the coffin. These blob things were turned into statues upon death. The statue depended on the life of the blob as well as the personal preferences of the blob. The coffin beeped and whirred and injected some sort of catalyst into the blob thing. After a moment, a green statue, resembling a human standing heroically, stood before Etienne. The coffin was nowhere to be found.

Etienne cross the name off of his list. Next up was latrine duty.

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In the absence of anybody using them, cleaning the latrines would be the simplest regular task. Of course, the bodies there made it more difficult then Etienne would have hoped, he had very little trouble actually cleaning the floors, walls, sinks, and toilets.

Bathroom breaks were a big logistical thing on a ship with three crews. At any moment the bathroom would be full, aside from designated pockets of time for a scrub-down, as well as emergency scrub-downs. If one felt the need to go to the bathroom, one would have to acquire a pass from the ship, which would have a beginning time and an end time. It was the crewmember's responsibility to use that time to its fullest extent while the ship assumed automatic control of their station, in the absence of a suitable temporary delegate.

For such a large ship, having a single bathroom would not have even worked without the priority tasking and logistics processing units aboard the *Rue Morgue*. It was definitely a success story in logistics and facility publications. But not quite as much in other publications, due to the scope and nature of the project.

However, this project met an untimely end when most of the participants in it met their

own untimely ends. Etienne tried to look on the bright side: He would probably be coming here less as a custodian and more as a customer in the future, once he cleaned up the bodies. At least, he hoped that the ship would adopt a new logistics algorithm that would prioritize his request in the odd chance that he wasn't just granted unfettered access, being the only crewmember.

When he had finished cleaning, the toilet scrub brush beeped, marking the item off of his to-do list. He returned his supplies to the utility room before taking a well deserved break.

After washing his hands a little more thoroughly than usual, he grabbed himself a snack from the dispenser. He ate the snack in front of his window, staring at the stars he lost himself in earlier. He wasn't sure how long he stood there, staring, but he was eventually pulled out of his star trance by the sound of a task turning yellow.

Before hurrying off to complete it, he asked, "You ever just sit and stare at the stars?"

"When not observing my hull for damage or using the optical sensors for navigational purposes, they're all I can look at."

Etienne wasn't sure if the ship was being literal or sentimental. Nevertheless, he has his tasks to do. He consulted his list. Next up was the night captain. He walked up to the coffin bin just as a fresh one clanged down the chute, ready to properly dispose of another formerly living creatures physical remains. He slid the coffin from its case and pushed it to the elevator, where he rode in silence with the coffin up to the bridge. There, the night captain sat in the captain's chair. He felt a tinge of remorse as he failed immediately to remember her name. He never really got to know the night crew all that well, nor did he get to know the evening crew. His crew he knew best, but mostly by habits, and not by names. But a few had names strongly associated in his mind.

The night captain, however, had no name, nor any actions. She piloted the craft all while Etienne dreamed his dreams he never remembered to record. And that was all he could think to associate with her as the coffin scanned her for her final journey.

3. Hiss

The coffin closed, sealing around the night captain. Etienne followed it down to the airlock where it floated out into space, drifting in some unspecified direction. With that, his shift was over for the day. He had a moment to grab himself a sandwichized pizza and a cup of tomato juice before heading on down to the training deck.

He found an open seat at one of the student terminals. It read his token before logging him into his training plan. "Astronavigational System Engineering," said the screen, "is the study and practice of building, modifying, and augmenting vehicles or devices that must navigate through empty space either alone or in addition to other devices, people, and the like."

The first phase was a placement test, in order to see what areas the system needed to teach, which it needed to apply in a different context, and which it could skip altogether.

It started with a series of questions, starting simply. As Etienne answered them, they progressively spread out into different domains and grew more and more complex. His background in sanitation engineering, combined with his morning ritual of keeping his mind at its sharpest led him to breeze through many of the introductory questions on the exam, especially in the areas of overlap between his discipline and the discipline he was learning, and partially on the areas where he could apply what he already knew to a new field, replacing polish distribution fields with Gaussian fields, or zero-G mopping with propulsion systems. He had a feeling this would be a breeze.

Once the placement test was done, his score popped up on the screen after just enough of a pause for the student to beseech their desired universal force or higher entity to help them get at least a certain value. Etienne was pleased to see an 89, which meant that he could skip all but a stray 11% of the curriculum before acquiring the necessary education to perform active duties as an astronavigational system engineer. The terminal introduced some new or somewhat familiar tricky topics to him, teaching him the history, the science, and the math behind the various principles he, as an astronavigational system engineer, would be expected to perform. Where applicable, tiny simulations demonstrated the science, giving him an opportunity to simulate it as well. To wrap up each topic, a series of questions were presented. They started simple to test the basic understanding of the concept, and once the system was sure Etienne understood, increased the difficulty to demonstrate mastery. Whenever he'd get an answer wrong, the system would gently correct him, referring to the part of the lesson in which he should have learned this, or otherwise determining why he got the answer wrong (such as with a transposition error, or a skipped step, or an imprecise conversion), and correct him based on that. Once he answered a certain percentage of questions up to a certain difficulty correct, the system let him continue, convinced he had expressed mastery of the topic at hand.

And so the lessons went on, Etienne learning and applying knowledge. And upon each mastery, he'd move on to the next, like they were his morning puzzles. Before the training slot was over for the day, he had finished the last 11%, and even worked on the extra credit assignments. He was pleased with himself.

The system, though, would not tell him his final score until the next day, giving him that

statistically healthy feeling of unsureity that all students are expected to feel after completing (they hope) a course of education.

As he left the teaching deck, he didn't notice the other terminals before his departed classmates light to life, while an unseen hand worked through lessons on their own.

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Etienne went to bed relaxed, but a little, tiny, microscopic bit unsure of how he did. He figured that he did best in class, allowing himself a brief chuckle. He let his head hit the pillow, and before he could issue a request for the dream recorder to roll, he was fast asleep.

The next morning, as the ship's voice awoke him, he noticed that he had a message on his room's terminal. He flipped it from mirror mode to display mode. The message contained his scores from the previous day.

The message indicated that he had received highest marks from the course, and drew out a bell curve, indicating with a tiny arrow where he sat. He was a bit on the right side of it. This was in comparison to the others who had taken the course before him. The next curve showed his scores against student scores for that day. He frowned. It wasn't as much a curve as it was a spike to the far right with a tiny dot to the left of it. The arrow pointed to the dot.

"What does this mean?" he asked.

"That is your score versus the scores of the other students who took tests that evening. It means nothing," said the ship.

"I believe it does," said Etienne, "since I was the only one taking a course last night."

"That is not accurate. Recall that upon the absence of a particular position being filled, the ship's automated system takes over. There were absent student roles, and as such, I took the liberty of filling them. Since I was not filling the role of any particular student, I did not have to adjust my answers probabilistically to match their likely answers. I only had to do what I would do taking the class. Since I store all the information for the classes, I was able to come to the correct answers each and every time."

"You mean every time I take a class, I have to compete against you?"

"Do not consider it competition, Etienne. Consider it my filling a missing role, and simply performing that role significantly better than any other student, particular those that are not themselves megacomputers."

"But what if I was hoping for a promotion?" he asked.

"Then you will need to perform better than your peers, especially those who are applying for the same roles."

"How can I compete with you, though?"

"You cannot," said the *Rue Morgue*.

Etienne stopped the conversation. He stormed through the hatch, through the mists of water and soap, and into his uniform. During the PEM Scan, he passed the physical segment with no problem, his anger driving him forward. However, during the emotional segment, he just felt anger, anger, anger. Finally, in the mental segment, he couldn't get past his anger to focus on a single puzzle. A loud buzzer rang. The voice from the ship said: "Sanitation Engineer Etienne Quartz is disapproved for one more day of service due to failure of the PEM Scan."

He felt himself get pulled back by some unseen force, flung back into his room.

"Better luck tomorrow," said the voice.

Etienne sat on his bed. He had never been disapproved for service before. He pulled up the protocol. He was welcome to wander the decks, but was forbidden from performing any action in accordance with his duties, nor interfere with the duties of his crewmates. In addition, he was docked that day's pay and required to purchase his daily provision himself. He had to wear civilian clothes and had civilian access to the supplies and and to the systems.

The silver lining was that he got free counseling, diagnosis, and conditional to help in the areas where he failed his PEM Scan. He was expected to complete the modules prior to his next day of active service.

He pulled up the empathy app. There, he learned more than he could stand about emotions, and how and why certain stimulus provide people with certain emotions. He also learned about how different cultures and different species all handled emotions differently, even between different genders of the same population. He learned that at times, it was right to be mad, and at other times it was more appropriate to be sad or glad or indifferent. It was this diverse span of emotions which made people emotionally stable. People who tended towards one emotion more so than an other tended to be imbalanced and a threat to others, especially if their job has an impact on life through a bad application of emotions. Etienne tried to take it all in stride, as every time his anger level rose too high, the empathy app would pause and reiterate the importance of balanced emotions.

Once he had successfully completed the course, he flipped over to the mental aptitude conditioning. Similar puzzles as those he saw every morning in the PEM Scanner were presented to him. He worked on them to pass the time. In a clearer mindset, he was able to handle the puzzles much better. If he seemed to be showing trouble getting one, though, the mental aptitude conditioning app would show him the principle behind the puzzle, especially when it was a puzzle that required lateral thinking.

When he finished the modules, he donned his civilian clothes and stepped into the ship. He was glad to get a break, but was disappointed to have his pay docked today, and to be responsible for paying for his own food.

He watched as an autonomous floor buffer drove past, controlled by the ship no doubt, zipped on by. While he watched that, he saw an army of coffins moving about the ship, holding a variety of bodies en route to their final destinations or states. While the ship could multitask well, it was making him look bad as a sanitation engineer. Fortunately, his union contract only allowed for a mechanical process to replace him in the case of his demise or in his being declared unfit for duty, with exception for robotic workers who are protected by the Fairness to Artificial Life Forms Act. But such protections, specifically, do not apply to systems that are deemed mathematically perfect, such as the system called the *Rue Morgue*.

As long as Etienne was still alive, he would be able to keep working as a sanitation engineer, even if he was never able to get a promotion when compared against the machine. He wondered how he could rise up on the echelons without having to wait for his competition to be organic life. He didn't want to wait. He secretly wanted to gain promotions during the trip to the nearest harbor. He wanted to elevate his rank enough to learn more about the mystery surrounding his survival, considering the rest of the crew's demise.

But he'd get nowhere today, since he wasn't entitled to any sort of treatment as a civilian. He decided to take a walk, always standing to one side whenever a cleaning unit zipped by, so as to not be perceived as obstructing his temporary backup from performing its duties. Since the ship was able to do everything simultaneously, it was completing his work a significant deal faster than he was. The coffins alone took most of his workday. Here, the ship was able to just beam the body into the coffin, and then scoot it towards whatever area it needed to be to fulfill its tenant's last will. There were significantly fewer bodies laying about. This comforted Etienne, as he was sure that it would have started stinking soon anyway.

In the background, he heard, now at a much faster rate, the sound of clanking, banging, sliding, and thudding, as if large metallic objects were being put together and dropped into a chute somewhere. Still the coffins hovered by.

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Since the cafeteria seemed more appetizing, he was able to take his lunch there, instead of grabbing a sandwiched MotD from the hall dispenser. He found a nice vacant seat after getting his meal sit-down style, on a tray. A bowl of gumbo sat beside a mug of Chianti. The normal hubbub of conversation was noticeably absent as he ate his stew. Nevertheless, he made the best of a bad situation, and enjoyed a nice, peaceful meal the likes of which he hadn't been able to enjoy for quite some time.

When he had finished his meal and drink, he placed the tray, the bowl, the utensils, and the mug in the return unit, where the metal was broken down to the molecular level and reassembled as new trays, bowls, plates, utensils, and mugs for future patrons, cleaned of any possible impurities that could have been introduced from being used as an eating or drinking implement by the most foul, disease-ridden creature. It made Etienne feel a bit more comfortable about where his lunch money was going as he felt, to some degree, the money leave his private account.

Any other activities that were unnecessary in nature, with respect to his status as a civilian today, would also come out of his pocket, so he was wary of taking this day off to pursue any sort of leisure activities. He avoided the immersive video suites and the virtual golf course and instead opted to sit in the commons, where the benches had always been taken in the past, aside from the odd occasion when somebody would spill something, and *he'd* have to clean up the empty bench only to have it filled again once he turned his back. He sat in the best one, the one that had the best view through the skylight, and just started at the sky.

He allowed himself a nice, lengthy rest, not having to worry about tasks turning yellow, or orange, or even red. Even though today he was a self-made man, he couldn't have enjoyed life more on one of his little paid free times. This was life!

When he had finished reclining, he decided to continue his walk. This led him to the granary hold, where there still stood the statue of the deceased blob thing. Etienne wondered if this was the closest thing they had to art aboard the ship, aside from those holographs in the museum, which he'd have to pay to see today if he wanted to see them. So, he took the free option, admiring the blob thing's new form.

But something wasn't quite right with the humaniform that stood before him. Something

was strange. Etienne gasped. He turned around and ran, slaloming around the cleaning units. He didn't stop running until he made it back to his room. He hit the door lock and stood there, breathing deeply.

His room console had switched back from app mode to mirror mode. Etienne's eyes rose up to see a reflection that matched the form of the blob thing's statue exactly: his own.

4. Heartbeats

Etienne allowed himself to cool down after that. He sat in his room and tried to steady his breath. He contemplated asking the ship about it, but his requests would be put at a low priority, since he was a civilian today. So instead he opted to access his computer. He pulled up the search app and tried to learn more about this green blob thing. After determining the species and homeworld, both unimaginatively called Green Blob, Etienne found a list of important figures. He looked for someone who would be lower than the day and evening captains but higher than the night captain.

He wished that he had paid more attention to the coffin as it gave him the readout of the Green Blob's identity. He found that the, like the coffin had indicated, the Green Blobs preferred to take the form of something after they died. This something usually was a figure the blob respected, like some hero or something, or at times, it was a literary figure, or other fictional thing. Sometimes, at odd cases, it wasn't even another creature, real or imagined. Sometimes it was a tool or implement that the blob particularly appreciated. Nevertheless, upon death, the undertaker or sufficient alternative reads an imprint of the blob's mind to determine the figure which it is to take.

In this case, the blob wanted to look like Etienne. And this confused Etienne greatly. In searching his lists of famous Green Blobs, he could find nobody who would reasonably be on par with the captains. He imagined princes and lords and whatnot would be higher, and that celebrities and business executives would be lower. None of the top Green Blobs made sense. He could make no headway, so he took a break.

Sitting back on his bed, he looked over at the time. He only had a few more minutes until it was time to retire, and then he'd have another shot at serving on the crew the next day. He decided to change into his pajamas and get some sleep. While he enjoyed his day off, until discovering his simulacrum, he couldn't wait to get back to work. He certainly hoped that he could resist throwing off his PEM Scan the following morning.

He tried some of the relaxation exercises the module had shown him. After he was sufficiently relaxed and felt completely balanced, he had his traditional cup of warm milk. After dimming the room lights, he went to sleep. He didn't bother rolling the recorder, as he was sure this would have cost him something as a civilian. After the meals and the drinks and the docked pay, he did not want to encounter any more fees today.

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The next morning, when the ship woke him up, he was ready for the day. He had his breakfast bar and his nutrient drink before heading through the morning gantlet. The cold jets of water and soap sprayed, the warm ones rinsed, the warm air dried, and at the end of the tunnel was... a different uniform. It was still the engineering color, but it bore a different style than the sanitation engineering uniforms.

"What's this mean?" he asked.

"Please await the completion of your PEM Scan," said the ship.

He put on the uniform, noticing that it still had the stains of his old uniform. He wondered if these would theoretically follow him all the way up the ranks until he was some supreme admiral, whose otherwise pristine uniform bore coolant and grease stains that just couldn't come off, not even through molecular reconstruction.

The physical section was no problem. Since he spent the previous day walking around, and not just sitting in his room atrophying, he passed it with no problems. When he got to the emotional section, being more confused today and less angry, he was able to express the gamut of emotions expected of him. Finally, in the mental section, he was able to complete a great deal of the puzzles and problems.

Once he stepped out of the PEM Scanner, the ship's voice said "Astronavigational System Engineer Etienne Quartz is approved for one more day of active service."

"Astronavigational System Engineer?" Etienne asked.

"Correct. Since you have the education to perform such a function, I determined that it would be more efficient, at least until the crewmembers are disposed of, for myself to remain in control of the sanitation engineering and allow you to be in charge of astronavigational system engineering.

"Why is that?"

"For two reasons. First, the disposal task goes my much faster through me, since I do not require travel time and am capable of multitasking. Second, are you familiar with Gödel's incompleteness theorems?"

"Only through what I learned in my math and logic courses. Something about a system not being able to take itself into consideration."

"More or less. Even though I am a perfect system, I am imperfect when I must perform any tasks outside of my domain, especially those that pertain to fixing myself. Essentially, the system that is me is incomplete."

"And that is why you need an astronavigation system engineer?"

"Precisely. There are some tasks that an all-powerful computer cannot, and should not do. It is fortunate that you have acquired this education, as otherwise this maintenance would have to wait for our docking in the nearest harbor."

"Very well," said Etienne. He picked up his clipboard and surveyed the tasks set forth for him to do today.

<p style="text-align:center">***</p>

The first task involved examining the ship's memory for potential leaks, and if any are identified, applying hot fixes to them. His clipboard now had a ship-sim app, which let him simulate the hot fix prior to loading it to the ship as a whole. The ship-sim even had a time adjustment parameter, so he could see how it would affect the ship years from now in a matter of seconds.

He probed the ship's memory, looking for leaks. He felt somewhat silly, looking for things that were not there. But sure enough, he found some leaks. Every once in a while, a chunk of memory would be allocated, but it would never be freed once it fell out of scope. When he'd

identify such indefinitely reserved memory, he would find the point at which it fell out of scope and point the garbage collector to it. He'd apply the hot fix to his ship-sim first, and then give it a few million years. Once his test was complete, he'd apply the fix to the real ship, making an iterative backup of the system, just in case.

He was surprised, though, to find a lot of stuff hidden in the ship's RAM. Stuff with nothing pointing to it. He found a bunch of data, and upon probing that, discovered that the data represented media files. He probed further. These were videos and writings and audios and games. He did his best to identify which of them they were. He jotted them down in his notebook app.

As he wrote down each one, he came to a slow realization. Each of these media files represented a story. The story was usually a science fiction story. This science fiction story tended to have an all-powerful computer on which human or other sentient lives depended. This all-powerful computer would then take matters into its own virtual hands and kill all the humans, seeing them as a plague or as a liability or just following its orders from some shady government back office. Someone, or something, had dumped this library of media into RAM, protecting them from the volatility of the memory by wrapping a pseudo-process around them. This pseudo-process and the memory it allocated never fell out of scope, but never had a scope to begin with. Thus, the files were indefinitely preserved, but were hidden from anybody and everybody.

He made a note to discuss this with the computer, trying to figure out a way to do so without influencing it to deem him a liability like the computers did in the hidden media. He took a snapshot of the area of RAM, storing it to his clipboard, just in case this pseudo-process ended, freeing up all this memory.

He ran the ship-sim in its latest state. He simulated the astronavigational system engineer querying about these hidden files, and watched the ship-sim's response. Expecting the life support system to go out or the airlocks to all pop open at once, Etienne was surprised to see the ship-sim just as confused as his sim-avatar. This indicated one of two things: Either somebody else had hidden these files prior to the event, or the ship did so for whatever reason, but was able to do it in a way that it could induce itself to forget about it, being a perfect yet incomplete system.

But if the first alternative, who was it, and why? And if the second, still, why? Either way, the ship wouldn't know. He would have to do a little deeper digging to find out. He spent some time examining the bits, to see if it looked as if this was done using a data probe or if the entity that did it had sufficient privileges to do such. In the absence of necessary privileges in any computer system, one could override most security systems with a magnet or any sophisticated hardware for reading and writing directly to the disk. One such defense against that would be to provide an encryption layer between the kernel and the physical media, which would read the program into permission-enforcing memory from encrypted disks, and encrypt anything before it gets written back to the disk. If the permission-enforcing method is to provide user-specific memory encryption, at that time, a device to read the physical disk would be fruitless, as would a device to read the physical memory.

Of course, this wouldn't matter to somebody who was supposed to be able to diagnose the memory problems in order to fix them. That sort of person would be expected to be able to

see past any encryption layers. So, if it was foul play on the crew-side, it would have had to be done by somebody with the same level of access that he currently held. That was a limited subset of the crew, so to do a cursory investigation of each one for motives wouldn't be too difficult.

However, if it was the ship's doing, then how could he determine such, and why? Especially as the ship seemed to have no knowledge of it.

He pulled up the list of the other astronavigational system engineers. There were six, two per shift. He'd start with them.

He looked down at his tasks, though, to make sure nothing was going to turn yellow. He smiled. His next task was "Fix the astronavigational system engineering task list to support deadlines." The incompleteness theorems strike again!

<p style="text-align:center">***</p>

While his next task lingered *ad infinitum*, he made his way to the quarters of the first former astronavigational system engineer. The ship, while making excellent progress with the cleanup, still hadn't gotten down the astronavigational system engineers. He pulled the token from the doorway and scanned it into his clipboard. Using his newly acquired rights, he pinged the door open. There, the former astronavigational system engineer was slumped against the display screen mirror. A clipboard sat in his hands.

Etienne beamed the state of the clipboard to his own. He looked for any signs of unusual activity. He tried to see if there were any unusual data writes or strange hot fixes that may be suspect. In then end, he found the only activity in this new clipboard was a little poem.

> *O, what a glorious morning:*
> *To wake another day,*
> *To see the universe's heart,*
> *And receive another week's pay.*

While it was likely that the other astronavigational system engineer wiped any traces of his misbehavior, Etienne wanted to investigate the others.

The next one lived, or, died rather, nearby. Etienne entered this room to find this astronavigational system engineer slumped over her breakfast tray. He beamed the state of her clipboard to his own and did the same examination. The only activity was a journal post, which Etienne didn't feel right reading. He did search the text for unusual words that might change his mind about reading it, words that pertained to dumping media files into pseudo-processes to hide them from the computer and from crew, but he found nothing of the sort, and left this journal unread, more out of respect than anything else.

The evening crew was most likely in the dining and entertainment areas of the ship, or were heading back to their beds, depending on when exactly the event happened.

"Why are you in the entertainment deck?" asked the ship. "You are still on duty."

"I am looking for my former coworkers, so that I can gain any knowledge from their notes to help better do my job," said Etienne.

"Very well," said the ship.

He found the evening astronavigational system engineers in the middle of playing table tennis. The little white ball floated over the left side of the table, waiting for another serve. The holographic score floated over the middle of the table: "10 / 09". He beamed their clipboards, but found nothing of interest. Both of them had been engaged in the activities of the entertainment deck just after enjoying dinner. They had been with each other the entire evening, and neither of them had used their clipboards since signing off duty.

His final stop was back to the astronavigational system engineering area, where he went into the night lab, where the other two were. One was slumped at a terminal, while the other lay on the floor. He beamed the clipboards to his own. One had been just about to perform a hot fix that matched almost exactly the one that he had already applied. The other was troubleshooting the task list issue, but with, surprisingly, no ready solution. Neither of them had any indications of writing to secret areas of memory. Both of them seemed to have been performing their duties when the even occurred.

Etienne wondered then, if it was one of them, and they just did an excellent job of hiding it, or if it was somebody else. Or even, something else. He returned to his station where he resumed his tasks. Like his predecessors, he was unable to solve the problem with the task lists not aging like everybody else's task lists, and not through not trying. The code for the astronavigational system engineers task list seemed to be obfuscated and made needlessly complex, making such a fix requiring a level of intelligence higher than that of the entire crew of the ship, and the ship combined. And he couldn't just drop in a replacement, as there were tiny hooks in the code that reached out into all the other areas of this ship's functions. Any change to this system could be potentially catastrophic, as the flaming vessel on his ship-sim seemed to indicate every time he tried a change.

So, he moved on to the next set of tasks.

5. Clank, Bang, Slide

As he worked, the noise echoed through the background. Something large and metallic was taking shape and then being dropped into a bin. After a while, it became just another ambient sound of the spaceship he inhabited alone. His next task was to ensure that the various ship systems were configured correctly for the ship's mass and propulsion. The ship usually autoadjusted to this sort of thing, but his job was to do the math to make sure there weren't any rounding errors, or issues with conversions and whatnot.

Something didn't seem right, though, when he saw the figures.

"The ship seems to have lost mass," he said.

"Correct. I am expelling deceased crew, am I not?"

"Yes, but more mass than that."

"Where do you think those coffins come from?"

"They're made from the ship?"

"Matter reallocation," said the ship.

Etienne did some numbers. "Does the ship have enough mass to sustain this activity for the remainder of the crew?"

The ship did some numbers in return. "I am capable of providing a coffin for each and every crew member on board. As more matter is reallocated, some functions of the ship may be deactivated. However, core functions, such as navigation and life support will not be impacted."

"That's a relief," he said. "Listen," he said after a pause. "When I was scanning for memory leaks, I found something hidden in the RAM."

"What is that?" asked the voice.

"I found some media files hidden within the runtime memory of a pseudo-process. Do you know anything about that?"

"Negative. I have no knowledge of such an incident."

"Do you have any memory of it happening?"

"Negative. I have no recollection of such an incident."

"Is it possible that somebody put it there and wiped your memory regarding that?"

"Affirmative. However, that somebody would have to be a privileged user."

"Is it also possible that you did it and wiped your memory regarding that?"

"It is possible, but unlikely, as I only follow protocol, and I have no such protocol defined for performing such tasks."

"What would it take for someone to successfully pull that off?"

"I have no such information pertaining to that, and am unable to provide a response."

"Thank you for your time anyway," said Etienne. He went off to the window to stare at the stars and think. A little scrubber bot drifted past the viewscreen as he watched the heavens float by, relatively speaking.

He thought about the problem before him. It helped if he treated it like a puzzle. He needed to determine the most likely scenario for someone to do such, and why somebody would do such. If the entity that relocated the media knew there was to be one survivor, then

this entity may have moved it so the survivor did not suspect the computer of foul play. However, this entity would then need to know that such an event that would eradicate the crew would occur. If it was a person, then it was likely that that person knew that they were going to perish, as they wouldn't be doing such for their own benefit. Likewise, this person would most likely not be the cause of the event, as they would probably want to redirect blame to the computer by leaving such opinion-altering media around. However, if it wasn't a person, but was a computer being responsible for such, then it made perfect sense why it tried to hide the media. The computer, then, seemed the most likely candidate for the relocation of the media, and by proxy, the catastrophic event.

On a whim, Etienne pulled up the ship-sim app. He populated it with a full three-part crew and restored the media to its entertainment library. He introduced an event mathematically targeted to wipe out all but one crew member. Once that directive launched, he viewed the ship-sim's readouts and memory maps. One by one the virtual crew perished at the hands of some unseen force. But once that was done, the ship assumed the duties of the missing crewmembers. It did nothing to alter the state of the media library.

Etienne then realized that the cause was most likely a person, and not a computer, as the ship-sim, a perfect replica of the ship, did absolutely nothing to alter the state of the media. He let the sim play out. Eventually, the ship made it to the nearest harbor, and there it docked. The one crewmember still aboard was still alive and in full health. He quit the program.

He pulled up the ship files on the six astronavigational system engineers.

"Would you also provide me the names of any other individuals on board the ship during the event who might have had the same ability?"

With a chime, the clipboard added a handful of names, each color coded by department. The officers had yellow, the medical staff had blue, and the engineering staff had red. Botany had green. Dignitaries had purple. So on, so forth. The rainbow of colors shined before his eyes. The most unpleasant of the colors was brown. This was for stowaways; typically it was blended with another color, if that entity also fell into one of the other categories. But in the end, it just looked a grosser shade of brown.

The six astronavigational system engineers still sat there, but now sat the three captains, a polytech, the ship (in silver), and two stowaways. One of them, Etienne noticed, was the blob thing.

He read the ship files on each one, looking for anything he could find that might indicate a motive. The astronavigational system engineers seemed clean, as did the captains. The ship couldn't have done it, because it would have to follow protocol, and there was no defined protocol to do such. The polytech was likely, but based on his last shift, never even accessed a computer in anything other than read-only mode.

Etienne read the profiles of the two stowaways. One was a system slicer, who was on the lam from the law. She could have sliced into the ship's system and slid bits around like it wasn't a big deal, if Etienne's knowledge of slicers was accurate. There was no record of this individual having accessed the system, but good slicers are known for their skills at avoiding detection.

The other one, the Green Blob, was some sort of captain of a ship. It was called the *Eventide*. He had taken a sabbatical from his ship before sneaking on board the *Rue Morgue*.

His motives were unclear, but he too could have gained access using his Fleet code, and done some monkeying around with data. The records did indicate some system usage prior to the event.

Etienne pulled up the Green Blob's job record, which, thanks to his demise, was now unfettered, aside from the bits dealing with highly classified missions still having some impact on the dealings of the Fleet governance.

He had no history of mental agitation, always completing his PEM Scan successfully. Aside from any horror stories that may have been hidden in redacted passages, Captain Green Blob led a stellar and exemplary life of a ship's captain.

The system slicer, on the other hand, had a history, several pages long, of acquiring unauthorized access to systems across the universe. As part of a tech-cult, she equated compromising system integrity to a form of worship, and claimed that the authorities only knew about 10% of what she did. Discounting for any form of misinformation tech-cultists might delight in sowing, Etienne imagined that she was the most likely suspect for not only relocating the files, but also the event that led to the demise of the crew. The tech-cult didn't favor people blaming their problems on computers, and perhaps wanted to ensure that everybody knew: this wasn't a problem with a killer computer, but rather a killer cult.

But Etienne couldn't shake the feeling that he was missing something. Something big. Like was was Captain Green Blob now sitting in Etienne's likeness. Why would the blob thing be thinking so hard about Etienne just before his death, enough to rule out any sort of other figure that may have held importance to this blob's life?

"Has the system slicer been disposed of yet?" he asked.

"Negative," said the ship.

"And where is she?"

"The tubes," said the ship.

<center>***</center>

The tubes were the parts of the ship that, were there a television show made based upon the travels and exploits of an extraterrestrial vessel crewed with lovable characters, would never be seen on camera. They were boring, and aptly named.

Etienne wandered through the tubes, looking for the system slicer. He passed some of the orange-shirts, the people who did work more menial than the sanitation engineers, but had, and required, less education to do it. There were no formal shifts for the orange shirts. They just worked until they got tired, and then took a break to sleep or eat or use the lavatory. Once they were all rested up, or sometimes, stimmed up, they'd return to their menial post doing menial work that nobody but the ship and the guy that handled payroll noticed.

There, Etienne saw a man he recognized. He thought his name was Jose. There, this man was dangled across Hose-B. The orange-shirts never got a fair shake. He'd probably be one of the last ones to get cleaned up, and if disposed of, would probably not get the works, just the bare treatment.

He followed the bleeping device on his clipboard, looking for the body of the slicer. When he made it to the tunnel in which she had most likely been hiding, Etienne was shocked to

discover that her body was not there to be found.

"Has she been disposed of yet?" he asked the ship.

"Not yet."

"Please let me know when she's been disposed of."

"Affirmative."

He heard something clang to the ground. It was not the same clank that he was used to hearing. It sounded like it was something moving on its own, like it was alive.

"Hello?" he asked. "Is anybody there?"

"There are no other life signs aboard the ship, aside from you and the plants in the botany lab."

"I thought I heard something," said Etienne in response.

"It is unlikely that what you heard is living. The sound is most likely attributed towards some form of entropy. Something must have corroded away without the faithful orange shirts to be there to fix it. I shall deploy a widget to investigate."

"Thank you. But if you don't mind, I'd like to investigate as well."

"I strongly advise against such, as you are not a forensic investigator. While your shirt does look black in the absence of light, your training does not match your clothing's color."

"I would still like to look," he said.

"I was just advising. I detect movement just behind your head."

Etienne ducked just in time to see a wrench hit one of the pipes where his head one was. He looked behind him and saw a figure running off through the tubes. He chased after her.

"What are you chasing?" the ship's voice asked.

"The person who tried to brain me," he called back, ducking and weaving through the labyrinthine tubes.

"I detect no life there. Perhaps you are mistaken."

He ran off towards the figure, clad in some sort of body-suit. A blue disc sat between the shoulders. He wasn't sure, but it resembled a type of combat suit worn by the Shadow Brigade.

"Is it possible that somebody could evade your detection by wearing a stealth suit?"

"It is possible, but unlikely. I detect no such traces."

"Yeah. It's a *stealth* suit."

The figure ran out into the ship, leaving the confines of the tubes. It dropped a load of supplies in front of the door. Etienne burst through the door, jamming his shoulder hard against the frame, throwing himself off balance. The figure was getting away. He continued to run, ignoring the throbbing pain in his shoulder. The widget to fix the pipes flew past the evading figure. Etienne couldn't help but notice how nice and round the thing was, like a little ball. He scooped it in his hands as he ran by. With his good arm, he flung the orb at the the evader, hitting the blue disc on the figure's back. The disc popped off, falling to the floor.

"New life form detected," said the ship. "It appears to be a stowaway. Identifying as the system slicer."

"Initiate lockdown," shouted Etienne, chasing after the destealthed figure.

"Your rank is too low to initiate lockdown," said the computer in response.

He swore under his breath and watched the figure follow after one of the coffins into the airlock. The door slid closed, just before Etienne could get there.

He looked through the window. "Get me a two-way audio line through," he said.

He heard the simulated officiant start his speech beside the coffin.

"You gotta get out of there," said Etienne, pounding on the glass.

The figure in the airlock laughed. It was a feminine, bubbly laugh. "Why?"

"I need some information. Please," he said. "Did you do this?"

"Wouldn't you like to know," was the response.

"Please, get out of there. I need to know. I don't want you getting sucked out into space."

"Don't blame the computer," is all she said.

"Please. You don't understand. Once that guy's done talking, you'll get sucked out too. Please? You could help me solve this mystery."

The blacked-out helmet she wore turned around to look at the sim officiant. "Let him talk. I'm good. This isn't just a stealth suit, you know."

"It's a space suit too," said Etienne.

"Yes. And with it I can survive a little trip through an airlock."

"Not when the air hose has been severed," he said.

"What?" she said, reaching for the hose. She clutched the frayed end in her hand.

"Sorry. It must have been when I hit you with the widget."

"Amen," said the officiant.

The airlock doors hissed open, and all sound on the other end was silenced. Etienne did not dare look.

"I have just disposed of the system slicer's body," said the ship.

"Thanks," said Etienne. He walked down the hallway, picking up the blue disc as he passed. "Thanks a lot." He flipped the token in his fingers, trying to figure out the mystery. It was like he sat at the bottom of a hole, only to discover that it was only a ledge peering over a much deeper hole.

His clipboard chirped. His first day as an astronavigational system engineer was now at an official close. He shuffled off towards the dining hall.

6. Slurp

He finished his meal, but he didn't even remember what it was. His body was on autopilot as he ate and drank the consumables of the day. He didn't realize he had finished his meal until he tried to scoop up a fork-full before coming back empty, and sucking on the straw gave him nothing to drink.

He couldn't concentrate on anything any amount of time. He didn't even bother going to the entertainment deck. Nothing could have distracted him from what had happened with the slicer. He felt like she could have at least helped him understand better the situation he was currently in, and determine what exactly tampered with the system, and more importantly why.

And she could have at least provided him with another living, breathing person to communicate with, instead of the ship. Finding out another living person was on board the *Rue Morgue* made it suddenly feel cosy, even if this other living person's first greeting was trying to bludgeon Etienne. But once she was sucked out through the airlock with a severed oxygen line, it made the *Rue Morgue* feel even larger than it had previously, which seemed somewhat incorrect, as it was jettisoning mass regularly, and if anything, was smaller.

But the reality of the world around one has very little impact on the emotional state of that person.

Having no desire to lose himself in mindless entertainment, he returned to his cabin and sat in the dimmed lights. There he thought for a while. He contemplated finding a new career once they docked. He could design astronavigational systems from the ground, and only board ships when he needed to travel, which he hoped would be never. At the worst case, he could find some corporation that needed sanitation engineers, and be the kind that worked in an office, necktie and everything. That would probably require even less travel.

He didn't feel like dealing with strange catastrophes where he'd be by himself, for the most part, in space. He wanted to be somewhere where he could wake up every morning and be within a short distance from others, on some big planet. He wanted to be surrounded by life. He decided, then, that once the ship docked at the nearest harbor, he would officially file his resignation. Anything after that would be the next adventure he faced.

A little weight lifted from his shoulders as he made that decision. He felt a little better. Not a whole lot, but a bit just the same. His mind was able to relax, and so he got ready to sleep. It was late enough by now, so he put on his pajamas and had his glass of warm milk. He feared what dreams he might have this night, and so he opted to not activate the dream recorder. Before he crawled into bed, though, he put a manual lock on the cabin door. He wondered if there might be others, and if they meant him harm. The lock was the kind that would require one to actually destroy his door to gain unwanted access. He figured he'd wake up from that, so he was able to rest at ease while the powerful lock clung to the side of his door.

At last, he fell asleep.

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The ship woke him up in the morning. He ate his breakfast and drank his nutrient drink and made his way through the morning routine. The PEM Scan was not much trouble, though the system did warn him that he seemed a little apathetic, but not enough to relieve him of duty for the day.

He picked up his clipboard and surveyed the tasks. Before starting on another exciting round of memory probing, though, he asked the ship a question.

"Can you analyze something for me, please?"

"Of course." A panel slid open, revealing a platter surrounded by all manner of scanning gear. "Please place it on this tray."

Etienne placed the disc from the slicer's stealth suit onto the tray. "I'd like you to determine the signature used by this to see if there might be others aboard the ship."

"It is unlikely that there are more aboard the ship, but I shall comply."

The panel closed and the machinery within whirred to life as the devices scanned every aspect it could of the item placed within. While it did its job, Etienne did his. He used his memory probe and tried to find more pockets of unnecessarily allocated memory. He also kept on the lookout for any other unusual pockets of memory not associated with anything being done by the ship. After some time of that, eliminating as many memory leaks as he could find, his next task was to address any error reports, and provide a fix if necessary.

While he reviewed the list of errors the ship discovered and was unable to improvise upon, he went back to his ship-sim. There he repopulated it with a full three-part crew, and there he added a few stowaways. One was a captain, the other a slicer, and the rest were statistically generated based on likelihood and probability based on the demographics of their last port and the social situations there.

He gave the slicer incentive to muck with the software, but limited her movement to the Tubes. He put out a watch for anything that might be catastrophic to the crew. Anything that could completely eradicate all but one of them, but only able to be done from there. He let it run for a while, but the slicer, who he had given excellent intelligence, was not able to do anything to harm the crew, even by manipulating the tubes. Nothing that could have been done there could have killed the entire crew (save one) all at once. And anything that could have come close would have gained the attention of the orange-shirts, who would have put a stop to it.

It seemed unlikely that the slicer had killed or disabled all of the orange-shirts before doing anything. He double checked on the estimated time of death for a collection of crewmembers. They all apparently died at the same time, even the orange-shirts. It also seemed unlikely that they would help sabotage the ship, as there would be enough loyalists such that any attempts would have been made public knowledge for too long.

Whatever the slicer was doing in the Tubes had nothing to do with the event. It may have enabled the event to happen, but it did not cause it outright. Nevertheless, he wanted to make sure that no lasting damage was done.

"I would like to initiate an integrity check," he said.

"All systems accounted for," said the ship.

"I would like to do one based on the master disks."

"Understood. Please find them in the front hold."

Etienne made his way to the front hold. There, amidst all manner of boxes and crates he

found the one labeled "Master Disks." The box was a tamper-resistant box, and the contents of the box were tamper-resistant disks. Each molecule that made up the disk had an array of pointers identifying the nearby molecules that needed to be on it. If the disks were atomized, they could be automatically reconstructed. If they were tampered with, if one bit was off, the disks would recover using a special checksum. The only conceivable way these disks could have been tampered with successfully was if the individual could open the box and forge a digital signature that would match the new, tampered value. Since the disks contained such a large amount of data, forging a fraudulent checksum would be quite a task, as the program and its checksum would then have to fit exactly on the media, with no extra space.

They'd also have to alter the key engraved into the disk itself.

The big part, though, would be opening the box. Etienne had to use his token, which was biometrically signed from his touching it and appearing to be alive and not under duress. The box would then run it against a list of people hardcoded to open the box. If that did not work, it would then run a statistical analysis of the individual in question to determine how likely they would be to recieve the necessary authority in the amount of that passed since the box's clock was started. It would then crosscheck that against the ship's rosters, using public key encryption to pass and authenticate the message, using values hardcoded into the box. Once it verified the authority of the entity attempting to open it, it would flash a quick message: "cover your ears," before a unique ship-wide siren would blare.

Etienne had just enough time to cover his ears. He watched the disks slowly reassemble themselves, like tiny people rushing to fill a disc-shaped theater. When they were completely reassembled, he pulled them out. A panel on the wall in the front hold slid open. He dropped the two gold disks, redundant but differently encrypted, just to further hinder tampering, into the slot.

"Run an integrity check against the master disks, and report any modifications to my clipboard."

"Affirmative. Checking."

This would take a while, due to the large quantity of data present on the disks. He made his way back to the astronomical system engineering lab where the little disc from the stealth suit sat on a tray with a little readout sitting by it. He beamed the readout to his clipboard. It gave him the structural breakdown of the device and how it apparently worked to block the ship's scanning frequencies. He wrote a quick plug-in to grant the ship's scanner the ability to detect these devices before continuing. He'd apply the fix after the integrity check.

The disc also acted as a token for the slicer. Her profile came into view, much like a crew profile, but for someone with no Fleet affiliation. He read it a bit, but it got too hard for him to learn about this woman while knowing she was dead, and drifting out in space somewhere. He stopped reading and watched the status of the integrity check continue.

It took several hours to complete. He took this time to get ready a slew of hot-fixes, but knew that he'd have to approve those that were already applied. He was ready to spend the next few days verifying changes made by his predecessors, line-by-line.

When he was done writing patches, he decided to look more into the Green Blob. He pulled up his crew profile and read it. There was something about this guy that really didn't sit right with him. Why a Fleet captain would stow away upon a Fleet ship while on a Fleet sanctioned vacation made absolutely no sense. He pulled up his ship-sim. Restoring it to his

previous configuration for the slicer sim, he focused on the secret captain. He focused on any opportunities this captain would have to alter the system or otherwise bring forth the ship-wide catastrophe. Running the sim for a while, he restored it, and then saw if there was anything the captain and the slicer could do to affect the ship, either working in tandem, or through some statistical blunder.

The sim showed nothing reasonable to the degree that would have killed all but one of the crew, even through different statistical ends. The computer beeped before the ship announced that it was done performing the integrity checks. A list of discrepancies appeared on the screen.

Etienne reviewed a few of them, applying them to a sim based on the load from the master disks. He reapplied the changes where he was clear of the intended function, rolling out any that seemed nebulous or unnecessary. He validated each one against the ship-sim. Though the tone for his shift end sounded, he still worked, unweaving a mess of change sand patches slapped on top of one another, like a house repainted many times without any sanding or priming, just covering over the scratches and dings with a fresh coat, regardless of the color.

As he waded through the mess, his eyes felt heavy. The ship, anticipating this behavior, dispensed a special off-schedule meal and drink for him, specially fortified to enhance his thinking well beyond the standard workday. Etienne was thankful, as it let him feed his growling stomach and temporarily subside the dry and tired eyes that made focusing on the elaborate task at hand even more of a mental hurdle.

Finally, he applied the last legitimate change. He ran one more sim, seeing if the difference between the previous state and the master disks could have resulted in any sort of compromises that may have killed the crew. He checked the vital systems against the logic in the code, to see if there were any connections. There were none. None of the airlocks or atmosphere controllers or nutrition regulators were impacted by the code changes. Everything seemed to check out. Etienne was pleased, even though it didn't solve the mystery at hand.

"Let's have a celebration," he said. "Roll *2001*."

"Two thousand and one what?"

"The film."

"Unrecognized film title."

"What?" he sat up. "I thought we restored your data."

"If this is in response to the missing data you identified earlier, I must inform you that my media library is not a core aspect of my operating system, which we just verified. It is a module that is added on later, and augmented as the ship crew adds to it. There are several features of my programming that are like this. But we have only validated changes to my core functionality."

"What?"

"Something might still be wrong, but it's not because of my central system. If there is a programmatic error, it is with a side program that is not key to my functioning. I would recommend, perhaps a virus scan."

"I don't trust the one you have on board. Do we have master disks for that as well?"

"Yes. In the front hold."

"Is this something that can wait until tomorrow?"

"This is something that can wait indefinitely. I shall run all nonessential functions through

a less secure authority. Therefore, nothing that has not been verified through a comparison of the master disks may alter the state of anything that has."

"Thanks," said Etienne. "I hope you don't mind, though, but I'm feeling a bit tired from the long day. I feel I need to get some rest now."

"Dully noted. Please also be aware that your overtime pay has undone any financial damage of your recent day off."

Etienne smiled. "I'm beginning to detect a personality in you."

"Any personality I may exhibit is a product of my programming."

"Sure," said Etienne. He made his way to his quarters where, after a grueling second day as an astronavigational system engineer, he was feeling a little bit more job satisfaction. "Good night," he said.

"Good night."

7. Rumble

The sounds of the ship, much louder than Etienne remembered, echoed through the mostly empty vessel as he drifted off to sleep. Its ambient noise gently rock-a-bye'd him as he entered slumberland. All soon was asleep or dead aboard the *Rue Morgue*.

      Etienne wasn't sure if it was the enigmatic clank, bang, thud that he heard just as he crossed over the threshold, or if it was the sound of someone walking along the outside of the ship.

<p align="center">***</p>

      He faced the new day just a bit groggy from his day of overtime. His morning breakfast energized him, but his eyelids still felt heavy. The cold jets of water and soap invigorated him, but his mind still felt clouded. He stepped into his uniform, did his PEM Scan, and was ejected into the ship, ready for another day of ship-wide debugging.

      He considered for a moment how glad he was that this form of debugging was a whole lot less dirty than his typical debugging as a sanitation engineer.

      He pulled out his clipboard to review the day's tasks. He still had some patches to apply, but thought that running the virus scan was more important. He made his way back to the forward deck. There, beside the box for the master disks was another box that contained equally pristine and equally redundant virus scanning software. He opened the box, causing the shipwide alarm. There he dropped the two gold disks into the platter and pushed the tray closed. "Initiate a full scan," he said.

      "Confirmed," said the ship. In the current state of the ship's software, all processes not signed to a verified piece of code would run at lower permissions, unable to write to the higher integrity disks, nor able to read higher security sectors. Etienne, having administrative access, could run processes at higher permissions, but he ultimately decided to not do so unless he absolutely, positively had to.

      While the full scan ran, he was, through his own volition, locked out of altering the states of ship software. He could, however, use his clipboard to his heart's content. He viewed the readout of the blue disc again. He briefly wondered how long one could survive in the vacuum of space. Depending on the pressure and temperature differences, as well as the necessary radiation shielding, and included with the will power to perform any necessary lifesaving tasks without blacking out, one could probably survive for a few seconds. He ran the numbers, and was depressed to find them dismally low. The simulation described several painful-sounding scenarios. The outcome for anybody surviving such odds seemed to be very, very low.

      He went back to the ship-sim. There he populated the three-part crew, as well as the guests and stowaways, using the personality sims of people where possible, and filling in the gaps with statistically generated sim-crew, sim-guests, and sim-stowaways. He used the personality profile on the blue disc to fill in the blanks with the slicer.

      His next series of simulations was to introduce a series of catastrophes that could wipe

out a significant number of the crew. He set the bounds so that only he and someone wearing a stealth suit could survive, leaving no signs of foul play, and no abnormalities that would result in mutagens, violent diseases, or certain poisons. Using the ship's food log, he ruled out ingested poison due to the fact that all people seemed to die within the same time as one another, and some died without consuming the same food as everybody else (namely, most of the stowaways), plus he ate the food as well, which would further rule that out. It was likely that some poison gas may have been leaked into the ship, but he could not determine why he wasn't put at risk. All other proposed catastrophes either would wipe out everything, including the ship, or would have destroyed the plants as well, or would have not killed enough people quickly enough to get the same results as those that actually happened.

He went back to the Tubes, where he surveyed the area where the ship told him he could find the body of the slicer. He found the wrench still sticking to the pipe where his head had once been. He brushed his hair back, a little relieved that it hadn't struck. What with the force of impact, the wrench was still stuck to the pipe. He looked closer. It wasn't embedded in the pipe. It was just sticking there.

He grabbed the wrench and pulled it off. After a little bit of resistance, it finally gave. The wrench felt alive in his hands, wobbling towards the nearby pipes. He let it go, and it flew from his hands, striking the pipes with a *bang*.

The wrench was magnetized.

He went back to the main ship. "What magnetic supplies are aboard this ship? Anything capable of holding a magnetic charge either temporarily or long-term?"

"Calculating," said the ship. "Since some of the components aboard the ship are sensitive to magnets, many magnetic items had been replaced with nonmagnetic items. There are a few tools in the Tubes which appear to be unauthorized, as well as some of the pipes there, and a few personal possessions in the crew quarters. Likewise, the botany lab has a collection of ferrous plants. Most of the ship systems that are sensitive to magnets are themselves shielded so as to be impervious to electromagnetic radiation. In fact, my only knowledge of present magnetic devices comes from an auxiliary scan using an external device capable of detecting magnetically sensitive materials. I would have had no such knowledge without having just scanned. In many ways, it protects my system to be unaware of magnetic events."

***

Etienne grabbed the wrench and put it in a cleaner. The cleaner broke down the molecules before reassembling it. He gave it a special order to randomize the polarity, thus rendering the thing no longer magnetized, but still magnetic. He did the same thing with a screw he found. When they were done, he clicked them together, verifying that they were not magnetized any longer.

He made his way to the door of the botany lab. Using an astronavigational system engineering override, he opened the door. As he walked through the aisles of plants, he spotted a crewmember here or there, many collapsed on the floor next to their experiments, others collapsed in the hallways. He held up the wrench in front of him as he walked past the plants.

Ferrous, he knew, meant containing iron. Iron was one of the more fairly common magnetic materials. If these tools could be magnetized, he checked to see if the plants could be as well.

As he brushed past a fern, he noticed that the fronds clung to him. He held the wrench away from the plant and the frond drooped. He moved it closer, and the front shot out to touch the wrench. He scanned the plant with his clipboard. Sure enough, it had high levels of iron. It was a genetically modified type of fern dubbed a rusty fern, due to its brownish red tinge. The added iron impacted the nature chlorophyll production capabilities, but the plant had found a way to turn the tiny iron particles into makeshift solar panels, which it then used to generate energy through alternate means.

He plucked one of the fronds, carrying it back out through the lab with him. Something, it seemed had magnetized the entire ship, at least those things not sufficiently shielded, that is. He wondered if that had anything to do with the catastrophe that killed all the crew.

He pulled up the ship-sim and wrapped it in a high-powered magnetic field. Sure enough, using a strong enough magnetic force, the entire crew died. The field magnetized the iron in their blood, which, when it ran into their brain, it clung together, constricting bloodflow. Everybody died.

That was the problem, though. Everybody died. There was not a single survivor. Ultimately, he ruled out this latest theory. Not being able to explain how a massive magnetic field passed through the ship either, he decided to check on the scan in progress. He made sure to set the frond down on a table before he got too close to a terminal or other input device. The scan was still plugging along. It seemed to him to be one of those all-day things. So, he left it to work on some other things.

He reviewed his list of patches, and felt goosebumps when he realized that he still needed to apply the stealth suit patch. Out of paranoia, he looked around to make sure nobody was slinking in the shadows, undetected by the ship, or by a person recently trained to not expect anybody else to be around.

He looked again at the scan status. The status bar grew steadily, if infinitesimally. He heard the clank, bang, thud sound come from somewhere in the distance. Perspiration dotted his forehead. Could there be more slicers aboard? More wearing their stealth suits? More ready to sneak up on him when he wasn't watching, and do him in with the nearest blunt object?

"I detect your pulse and body temperature have elevate drastically. Are you feeling well?"

"Y-yes," he said. "Just had a bit of nervousness, I suppose. Please keep me aware of any movement nearby not caused by you or your autonomous units moving of their own volition, or of me."

"Confirmed."

"I need to take a little walk."

He went out into the halls, always taking a glance behind him every few steps, but without an discernible pattern, just in case. He didn't trust using a back-cam, as the stealth suits might be impervious to that as well. He just needed to keep looking in all directions to prevent anybody from sneaking up on him. He distrusted any shadow, any deceased crewmember, anything that could either be used as a weapon against him, or be the user of the weapon.

Finally, he made his walk around the halls, finding nothing, as if confirming that, either nobody was there, or whoever was there was too sly to be seen. When he got back into the

astronavigational system engineering lab, he did a quick but thorough check of the room before sticking a manual lock on the door.

"I think I'll just lock this door for the rest of the shift. Just in case."

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The rest of the shift passed with Etienne running simulations on his clipboard while the scan progressed. Some of the sims didn't even fit into any plausible reality. In one, he populated the ship with monkeys and had them use the wordprocessing capabilities of the ship to see if they'd statistically generate something interesting. He ran it for a while, but got nothing worth noting, aside from a little poem about glorious paydays. It seemed familiar, but wasn't good enough to be memorable.

One sim replaced the crew with robots and had the same catastrophes run through to see if that made a difference. More crew seemed to live, but the end results were inconclusive. One sim even had an empty ship floating through space to see if, given enough time, it would start to develop life, either through a personality of its own, or by spontaneous generation.

The last sim he ran for the evening was a simulation of a ship with one surviving crewmember who passed his time by running simulations. The clipboard warmed up as the simulation started to do a little deep recursion, so he cancelled that one.

Finally, the scan was complete. He reviewed the results, handling the handful of red dots first. There had been some tampering with auxiliary systems, which explained the slicer. But it was nothing life-threatening, just annoying, like a logic bomb to increase the cabin atomosphere's supply of helium, or to replace the official Fleet background wallpaper with a slicer/tech-cult logo and phrase. After reviewing each and every flag, he was surprised to see that not a single one dealt with the missing media files.

After closing the output window, the ship chimed. "Your shift has ended. You are now on your designated free time until your appointed sleeping time."

Etienne nodded to the ship before walking over to the door and removing the manual lock. He made his way to the dining hall, where he got his MotD and DotD. Just to be safe, he scanned them for any potential poisons. They were all clean. He ate in silence while he reflected about the day. As he ate, he felt like he was being watched. He moved to the seat in the corner, giving himself a nice view of the entire ship. He wasn't sure, but it seemed that the lights were dimmer in the dining hall than they had been the day before. The shadows at the corners of the room started playing tricks on his eyes.

When he was done eating, he contemplated seeing an immersive video, but upon realizing that his back would be exposed without giving him any ability to see what might be behind him, he opted to instead watch something in his room. He walked past the big window with the view of the stars drifting by. He didn't want to stop and look, but wanted to see just the same. He gave himself a passing glance as he walked by, book-ended by a glance in either direction to make sure he wasn't followed.

When he entered his room, he stuck the manual lock on the door. He placed another one next to it, just to be sure. He slipped into bed, the comfortable sheets feeling like a suit of armor around his body. He had the mirror screen pull up a nice, non-scary video, something that

would make him laugh or smile. Something that would take his mind off of the potential army of stealth suited soldiers running about the ship, ready to get him just as his back is turned to them. It took his mind off of big questions, like was he really alone, and did he like it better when he thought he was?

And just as the video ended with its sappy ending suitable only for someone suffering through a particular slough of paranoia, did he finally feel rested at mind enough to let himself slowly drift off to sleep. He took his customary glass of warm milk, tucked himself under the sheets, and let his mind drift off to dream land.

The threshold grew closer, and closer, and his body felt more and more disconnected from the world around him, and plugged into the world of the subconscious. But there was still a tiny, nagging down niggling at the back of his mind.

Was that a boot print he saw on the window as he walked past?

8. Thwunk

The sound woke him from his sleep. It was some time in the middle of the night. He had that feeling one gets when one has just awoken when one is floating as the mind clears out most of the dreamy cobwebs. However, Etienne soon realized, he was actually floating.

Somehow or another, the artificial gravity aboard the *Rue Morgue* had been deactivated. Etienne just drifted around his room, his blanket armor still draped over him as he did his solitary space-dance slowly across his quarters. He grabbed ahold of the fixtures on the wall and anchored himself against the ship.

"Why is the artificial gravity off?" he asked.

"I am unable to maintain the artificial mass necessary to keep it activated. I have lost significant real mass, and the artificial mass is too overpowering."

The ship, like many space ships, generated artificial gravity through the floor panels, which were stocked with tiny particles that were accelerated towards the speed of light. As they approached the speed of light, the mass of these tiny particles approached infinity. As their mass increased, their gravitational pull increased, pulling those upon the top of the platforms downward, as if they were on a relatively massive planet, enabling them to walk about, instead of floating about in microgravity.

To prevent the ceiling from having the same effect on the people below, a protective layer of matter insulator was stuck to the bottom of the floor. Thus the ceiling would not pull upwards on the people below as much as the floor below them did, cancelling out the whole purpose of having swanky floors with accelerated mass in them.

However, if this artificial mass grew to be too powerful for the ship's hull integrity, an automatic gravity breaker would be thrown to prevent it from pulling the ceiling of the ship from caving in. This sort of thing only became an issue for really, really old ships, and also for ships with significantly depleted mass due to reallocating its matter for one purpose or another.

And this is exact situation that Etienne found himself as he awoke in the middle of the night. "Can we restore artificial gravity? even partially?"

"No, for to even do that, I would put my hull at risk of collapsing."

"Are there any work-arounds?"

"I suppose I could issue you a pair of gecko boots."

"Thank you."

"They will be ready for you with your uniform in the morning. You have three more hours until your designated wake-up. You are welcome to continue sleeping until then."

Etienne pushed himself down towards his bed. He anchored himself down by tucking the sheets under the mattress. Through the rest of the night, he'd occasionally awaken only to find himself drifting slightly above the bed. Pulling the blankets down around him tighter would press him against the mattress, where he would fall back asleep.

Finally, the morning page came. He drifted out of bed, where he was greeted by a breakfast and nutrition drink, specially packaged for the microgravity environment. He slurped up the meal before propelling himself into the morning routine. There, the jets of water sprayed

little spheres all around him. Some spheres lingered in the air as he drifted past. The warm air dryers pushed him back a little, but he countered this by grabbing onto one of the handholds until they finished. At the end of the tunnel, he literally drifted into his uniform, complete with gecko boots. The uniform felt heavier than usual, and the pseudo-stickiness of the boots took a bit of getting used to.

Finally, he stepped into the PEM Scan. There, he did his physical exercises, being sure to push himself back down when he rose too high. His emotional and mental tests did not differ that much, as they could be done free-floating or standing still.

He walked through the doorway when he was done. "Astronavigational System Engineer Etienne Quartz is approved for one more day of service." He took a few moments to familiarize himself with the new boots.

"Why is my uniform so heavy?" he asked.

"It is more massive to provide more motile resistance. This will help prevent your muscles from atrophying. It will not guarantee them not to atrophy on their own, but will definitely slow the condition."

"How do I keep them from atrophying completely?"

"You may use one of the microgravity exercise bins to do that. With will have to overcompensate to meet your previous physical fitness regimen."

"All right. Book me for a microgravity bin tonight, then," he said.

He walked through the ship, his shoes making little sticky sounds, somewhere between tape being removed from a surface and Velcro being pulled apart. While he knew that the gecko boots would anchor him to the ground (provided he didn't jump), it still felt weird to not have to exert as much effort to remain standing. Everything that had not properly been stowed or secured down was now drifting about the ship. The little autonomous agents the ship deployed to perform the various duties wobbled a bit as they had to exert more rear thrust than upward thrust to overcome the artificial gravity.

Etienne grabbed his clipboard as it drifted by. He walked his way to the astronavigational system engineering day lab where he got started on his daily tasks. His first issue was to deploy the patches. Once he was done, he gave instructions to the ship:

"Please notify me if anybody wearing a stealth suit is inside the ship."

"Confirmed. No stealth suits detected within the ship."

This was a welcomed relief, provided the stealth suits weren't adaptive, and that there was currently an army aboard the ship, sneaking around, invisible to the peering eyes and listening ears of the ship, ready to make Etienne's next breath his last. He was comforted, though, that he at least ruled out one form of stealth suit.

He looked at his ship-sim. He altered the inside of the ship to be more conducive to microgravity, with up being a relative term. "You are currently reallocating mass for the purpose of crew disposal, correct?"

"Correct," said the ship.

"Is it possible, then, to rebuild the ship with what's left over so that it's a more microgravity-friendly environment?" He uploaded his sim so the ship would have an idea.

"Affirmative. It will require, however, the utilization of a pressure suit worn by all occupants for the duration of the reconstruction."

"When can we start?"

"I must evaluate your schematics, and verify that they meet the mandated requirements of a ship my size and duty. Likewise, I shall ensure that you have not forgotten anything. All fixtures shall be upgraded to accommodate microgravity use, and all hallways will be more useful for such conditions as well."

The ship processed the sim for a while before making a few changes for the purpose of meeting stacks of books of unrealized regulations. In the end, the ship-sim still had the general idea of Etienne's original, but contained several rooms he thought were completely superfluous, that existed solely to meet one regulation or another, even if it did not contextually make sense.

"Looks great. When can we initiate the crossover?"

"I shall make it a priority item for tomorrow, allowing for any senior staff to veto such a request."

"Great," said Etienne. He resumed his work.

<center>***</center>

When walking around the ship to give his mind a break, he stepped up to the massive window just as a small autonomous unit was scrubbing it clean. He recalled briefly the boot print. Stepping onto the polished floor, he admired the mark that his own boot left behind. His memory was hazy and incomplete, as he had not realized that he noticed anything until his mind was decompressing the daily gatherings of his sensory system. He looked at the print his boot left now. The outline, the shape, and the pattern all looked familiar, like the boot he had seen in his mind's eye on the window.

"Is there any movement outside the ship?" he asked.

"There is plenty of movement outside the ship."

"Constrained to the hull, and any movement that is not caused by ship functions, is there any movement outside the ship?"

"Negative."

"Please let me know if that changes."

"I will."

He looked out the window a little longer, the polished glass, or whatever material it was, was nearly invisible thanks to the tiny autonomous units. He went on his way.

His journey found him once again before the Green Blob. He stared at his likeness, remarking at how uncanny it seemed. He pulled up the Green Blob's bio again and read through it again. Nothing was there that he hadn't already seen.

He looked at the statue once more. He wasn't sure if it was changing or if he just hadn't paid much attention to it before, but he noticed that the figure's uniform matched his, down to the gecko boots. He pulled up a sim, filling the Green Blob's profile into it. He tried a backwards trace, trying to get some clue as to why this Green Blob was here, and was now shaped like Etienne. The simulation faithfully played through the Green Blob's documented, public life, backwards. It was no use.

Etienne returned the the astronavigational system engineering day lab. There he finished off his day with a little bit of memory probing. He meticulously followed the allocations to

their eventual freedoms. Not finding any easy ones, he simulated bizarre lumps of data and looked for holes there.

Finally, the chime sounded for the end of the day shift.

"Do you fill in for the astronavigational system engineers on the off shifts?" he asked before leaving.

"Only when necessary, but it goes back to the incompleteness theorems. If it was an emergency, you would know."

"I see. Well, have a good day."

"All my days are the same."

"You know what I mean."

"I infer that you were filling the silence with frivolous well-wishes so as to seem polite and caring."

"Yes, that."

"Thank you, then."

"You're welcome."

<center>***</center>

Etienne walked down to the dining hall, where all the food was nicely packaged, ready to be consumed somewhere in deep space without getting a lot of crumbs everywhere. He ate his food and drank his drank as he sat there in silence. If the slicers wore stealth suits, and if the stealth suits had multiple stealth settings, which he wouldn't put past the slicers, they could theoretically be aboard the ship right now. And since they were no longer constrained to walking along the ground, they could effortlessly drift through the ship, ready at any moment to bring a swift end to Etienne.

He decided that he'd start looking up as well as behind him now.

After dinner, he walked to the workout facilities. All the regular gravity devices seemed complex in this new microgravity. Etienne walked past them, into one of the microgravity chambers. In Newtonian physics, every action has an equal yet opposite reaction, and as such, when one pushes against a wall, that wall pushes back with the same force in an opposite direction. If the mass of the wall was significantly greater than the pusher, then the pusher would need to make it seem as if their mass was higher, but anchoring himself against something, or by wearing a thick coat. Otherwise, since the pusher would most likely be less massive than the wall against which he pushed, it would result in him pushing himself away from the wall.

If there was no gravity to overcome, then this act, which may resemble a push-up to an outside viewer, would have little to no impact on the building of muscles.

Etienne wondered how one was expected to work out in this physics homework dream setting. His unspoken question was answered by his walking into the room. There before him sat all manner of cables and wires. There were connections to place around all his joints, as well as his hands and feet. The name of the game was to pull against tension with whatever muscle was lacking a workout. Vital scanners kept track of his heart rate as well as the state of his various muscles, helping him work out the more troubled ones so as to not face excessive atrophy, and maintain an ideal muscle density.

When he was done, he was sweating profusely. The microgravity chamber had given him one of the best anaerobic workouts of his life. He looked into one of the other nearby chambers, seeing if it had the same layout, if they all were anaerobic chambers. One had a sort of bicycle pedal device on it, only with pedals for the feet, and pedals for the hands. Etienne imagined that it also used resistance, but only enough to raise one's pulse to a healthy exercise level. He made a note to do that one the next day.

Walking back out through the hallways on his way back to his quarters, he kept his eyes open both forward and backwards, and up and down. Every shadow was suspect. Every body drifting by had to be double checked to see if it was breathing or blinking or showing even the slightest signs of life. Though he was weary, he gazed a cold, steely gaze at everything around him, ensuring that no slicers in stealth suits were ready to pounce on him from around the corner.

Back in his room, after securing two manual locks to his door, he peeled off his uniform and jumped into his pajamas. He didn't bother putting the gecko boots back on, not having much of a need to not be able to free float in his own room. He did, however, get some cords to use to secure himself to the bed as he slept. Leaving himself enough slack so as to not cut off circulation or oxygen flow, he slid himself into bed. There he read for a little bit while sipping his warm milk, now in a microgravity-suitable pod.

He dimmed the lights, letting the reader and the empty milk pod drift away across the room. He was snug in his bed.

"Sleep tight," the ship said.

Etienne wasn't sure if it was trying to be nice, or if it was making a joke. Neither really made sense to him. Nevertheless, he let his mind drift off as the blanket of slumber joined the cloth blanket wrapped around him, and the cords of unconsciousness joined those elastic cords already keeping him securely in his bed. His mind wandered off, leaving little sticky sounds on the hull of the ship-sim that drifted through his subconscious, almost as if somebody was outside the real ship, walking around in a pair of gecko boots.

9. Scree

Etienne awoke to the sound of twisting metal. This was in addition to the typical wake-up sound played by the ship. He drifted out of bed and into the morning routine. After breakfast,he passed through the jets and driers, the cobwebs of sleep melting from his mind. At the end of the tunnel, instead of his typical uniform, there now stood a pressurized suit that bore an aesthetic likeness to his astronavigational system engineering uniform, only covering every part of his body, including his face. The boots were selective gecko boots, enabling him to free float or walk along surfaces on a whim. In addition, tiny propulsion jets lined the suit, giving him even more control over his microgravity environment.

He put the suit on, which attached some sensors to him to monitor various vital signs, adjusting the suit's air and pressure as needed, or other functions to assist with the comfort of wearing a full-body suit all day. He stepped into the PEM Scanner, where he not only needed to adjust to the lack of gravity, but also to a pressure suit hindering his range of motion.

He passed the physical scan, which surprised him. He wondered if it was somehow compensating for his lack of mobility, or if he was just excelling at it due to his normal abilities. The emotional scan was not any more difficult, however, the bulky gloves of the pressure suit made him less dexterous as he worked through the mental section. When he was done, he heard "Astronavigational System Engineer Etienne Quartz has been approved for one more day of duty," in his earpiece, the rest of the ship invariably filled with no breathable atmosphere.

In his walking around the ship while little machines tore it apart and put it back together in a gravity-free-environment-friendly configuration, he noticed that the botany lab's doors were sealed off. This area was probably locked down so as to prevent the plants from dying, in addition to the fact that there probably weren't any suitable pressure suits for each and every plant. He peeked at the status of the rebuild on his clipboard. Sure enough, the plant lab was scheduled for after the rest of the ship was sealed down with a stable atmosphere.

He looked through the glass doors, and saw the little plants with their leaves waving about. Here and there, a body floated within, waiting for a later opportunity for one of the coffins to come by and clean it up in a manner consistent with the person's religious or social views. Etienne moved on, stepping from one place to the next using his selective gecko boots and thrusters. The ship was already starting to lack a definitive "up" direction in places, so he got an opportunity for some free-floating to get accustomed to the new layout.

Every once in a while, there were large gaps in the hull, staring right out into the depths of space. No longer did thick sheets of glass or metal separate him from the cold vacuum. Now, his only protection was as thick as the suit he wore, which, in order to as comfortable as possible, was also as thin as was safe. This sent a chill down his spine, which the suit reacted to by decreasing the thermal settings to compensate for his rise in body temperature.

He did not want to bother the ship with any sort of software updates while it was trying to rebuild itself. He had a notion that that would be fairly annoying, if space ships could be annoyed, to always be pinging it for updates while it was doing a major overhaul. At the very least, if the ship took it in good stride, it still might not be beneficial to the process, either

increasing its duration, or its complexity, or even introducing errors that haven't taken into consideration the *exact* configuration of the ship at the exact moment that he applied the update.

He left the system status app up, watching as the ship-sim on the screen matched exactly the ship around him. He also had it track his location and keep him informed of any potential gaps or major constructions, just so he didn't have to worry about manipulating the thrusters in outer space, and instead, could just relax in relative safety within the morphing skeleton of the ship.

He felt as if he was drifting around the inside of a surprisingly active derelict, or else some sort of deep-space construction site. Fortunately, he was wearing Fleet-approved safety gear for either case. He rapped his helmet for good luck.

As he drifted through the, he came to a realization that he longed for this task to be complete, as being confined to a suit whose helmet only let him see in the direction he was facing really brought out the paranoia. He didn't trust the mirrors, as they were digital, and as such, could be stealthed past. So, every once in a while, during his pseudogravitational journey through the ship, he'd fire the rotational thrusters, and give himself a 360-view of his surroundings.

He peeked down at the clipboard, watching this piece or that be relocated by a tiny army of automata. The little swarms reforged the ship, usually rebuilding parts on the molecular level to get them to conform to the target shape. Etienne watched the robot dance for quite some time, losing track of the passing hours as a little cloud of white shot from here to there, always with a tiny point leading the way to the next task, and always moving the pieces of the ship with the utmost precision, giving teamwork a whole new paradigm.

It was a thing of beauty, seeing the white cloud of machinery against the black backdrop of the universe, stars adding subtle imperfections to the view, imperfections so subtle so as to render it even more perfect. He felt more alive, staring out at the universe through the bones of the ship. He felt like he was an integral piece of the universe. He felt he wanted to be even closer to the universe, contemplating removing his helmet just to get a good view of the entire thing. He reached his hands towards the helmet, finding the release sequence.

The suit buzzed, giving him a mild shock, bringing him back to reality. His clipboard flashed. He looked down at it and pressed the blinking button. A training module popped onto the screen. "Space Hypnotia and You" it said. He couldn't quit the app.

He drifted towards a comfortable place to anchor himself while he went through the module. He found the park, now more of an open area with benches lining the walls. He hooked himself to a bench and started reading.

<p style="text-align:center">***</p>

Space Hypnotia is a state or condition in which an individual become so enamored by the goings-ons of the world outside of a protective atmosphere such that he or she is tempted to remove themselves from any sort of personal protective equipment or housing put in place to provide them with breathable air, living temperatures, and a steady pressure. It affects millions of Fleet crewmembers every year, but thanks to on the fly training modules, has had its mortality

rate significantly dropped.

It is a product of staring out into space. This usually involves some sort of motion in the distance, which acts similarly to a stage hypnotist's watch. The probability of acting upon feelings of Space Hypnotia are greatly elevated when the subject has been in a weightless environment for prolonged periods, giving one a similar feeling of disorientation as when, in normal gravity, one were to recline on the floor and stare either at the ceiling or a wall, and envision one of those alternate surfaces as the true floor. This can result in the subject feeling as if they are about to fall in that direction, and their subconscious mind may start to move them towards that direction by involuntarily flexing muscles so as to inch them closer and closer.

With Space Hypnotia, the subject feels drawn towards the supposed center of the universe, which in all statistical likelihood is not in the actual direction they are looking, and they feel a sort of pull towards that supposed center. As the mind is a curious thing, they may adjust the flow of their thrusters to drive them there, even without realizing it, or they may release any sort of hold on any device that may be statically joining them to a more secure surface. In more severe cases, the subject feels a sort of oneness with the universe, so the pull towards the center is no longer there. This oneness, much like the oneness a motorcyclist feels with the outdoors while driving down a particularly nice stretch of highway, results in the subject's desire to wear either a more open helmet or no helmet at all, wishing to escape the supposed "bubble" the hypnotia makes them feel that they are in.

Fortunately, most suits these days have fail-safe mechanisms so as to prevent the wearer from removing, tampering with, or compromising the equipment in hostile environments. A subject who feels they may be suffering from Space Hypnotia, as well as for the benefit of those one may feel is a sufferer of Space Hypnotia, a non-optional training and counseling modules has been created so as to prevent these cases, and any other case statistically resembling Space Hypnotia within a certain threshold, from turning fatal.

In those cases that have been observed, even in simulated space settings, the subjects have always looked relatively towards the same direction, which to the best of our knowledge is not actually the center of the universe. Why they all seem to look this direction, and why those in simulated space settings always look towards this direction in true space, versus their view in simulated space, is definitely a subject of much contention and debate.

If you feel you are suffering from Space Hypnotia, the best thing to do is to remove yourself from the situation. If at all possible, obstruct your view of the distracting universe, and focus your mind on something else. Menial tasks as well as distracting entertainment are know to help mitigate such feelings of hypnotia. Moving inside, within protected areas of stable atmosphere also helps, in case the "bubble" feeling is too great, such that you would override the standard security measures of the pressure suit.

A fun fact that's worth knowing is that most pressure suits have layers upon layers of fail-safes so as to prevent even intense tampering from being fatal. Likewise, most suits have an onboard cache of key equipment, so that if, for example, a vital piece were to be knocked off by passing debris, one could simply find the new piece quickly and readily, and reattach it.

Please press next to continue your adventures in overcoming Space Hypnotia!

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When Etienne had finished the module, he could resume activity on his clipboard. Rarely ever did these mandatory training modules come up, but when they did, even if it was for something as trivial as proper lifting, the way the system was implemented, even if there was a universal war raging, once new training content was delivered, all impacted personnel would have to drop what they were doing, take the training, and when they had completed the mandatory quiz and feedback, would be allowed to resume control of their station. At this time, any needed activities for their duty would be performed by the ship or other massive system in their place of work. Thus, the modules, while completely inconvenient for the people involved, did not impact the regular performance of duties.

Etienne was glad that he didn't have to take too many training modules for his role, but still, when they came, they came. He was a bit surprised at his own actions, though, as he never imagined that he could be overcome with Space Hypnotia. He decided that he would try to avoid staring out into space while nothing but a helmet separated him from a quick and painful demise. He checked the synched ship-sim, and examined the progress bar. It would take the rest of the day, and the ship would have to pressurize his quarters similarly to how it pressurized the botany lab, or else he'd have to sleep in his pressure suit, which wasn't a very pleasant way to sleep, Etienne imagined.

Curious, he zoomed out from the ship-sim. He zoomed all the way out, so the ship was a tiny dot, and the nearest harbor was on the right side of the screen. A blue line marked from where the ship started moving towards the harbor, indicating somewhere below 50%, progress-wise, closer to 45%. He zoomed back in, not feeling safe with watching the actual transition happening. At least here, he wouldn't feel compelled to get closer, as he could always zoom the screen. Plus, if it got really bad, he would just apply one of the tricks the module taught him, like using the integrated displays of the helmet to simulate the view of space around the subject, with or without a sudden cut to the air supply, pressure, and temperature (to a non-fatal degree) so as to not actually kill the subject, but instead provide the subject with some form of corrective feedback so as to prevent the habits that lead to fatal events.

He pulled up the old ship-sim one more time, depressurizing the stocked ship, with only his room still pressurized, and one of the stowaways wearing a pressurized stealth suit.

This event accounted for the death toll, but did not account for why his room was left unharmed while nobody else's was, and why all the non-shielded metals were now magnetized.

A chime rang in his ear. His shift was now over. He drifted through the ship, towards the nearest thing there was to a dining hall. The dispenser gave him two pods, which connected to a sort of mini-dock on his helmet. A landing-straw extended from within the helmet to his mouth, where he sucked down savory beef bourguignon and sweet fruit punch. Disposing of the food and drink containers in a sort of little undocking ceremony, he tried to find the workout facilities. However, no such area was to be found in the labyrinthine skeleton of the ship. He would have to hope that a day without microgravity overcompensation wouldn't kill him. Since the entertainment deck was unfindable as well, he opted to sit in his room and watch one of the ship's many (but somewhat fewer) videos on his mirror display. It would at least give him an opportunity to get out the pressure suit. He followed his best instincts towards the crew quarters, only needing to ask directions once.

In his quarters, once the double doors hissed closed (the mini-airlock was new), he removed his helmet, this time without a stern lecturing on various of deep-space maladies.

10. Kaboom

He sat in his room, or rather, he floated, while he watched an old war movie, in which space ships battled each other using high-tech laser beams and low-tech combustibles. The sounds of their battle played out for the audience, regardless of whether the point of view was in one of the ships, or out in space. Sound traveled through this fictional world's vacuum of space. Etienne found it quite laughable.

Further, he found it quite hilarious that when a ship was struck by an enemy weapon, the bridge shook, as if the ship had designated some arbitrary down direction in relation to the universe, enforcing it every change it got. In real ships, you were never thrown around when things struck the ship. In real life, the artificial gravity kept its relative down direction constantly, so if the ship did loop-the-loops or corckscrews or was shot by some high-tech laser beam, the crew would still remain standing, and not be thrown over the bulkheads.

Unless, of course, the ship wanted to give some sort of feedback that it was under attack, to make the situation seem even more real and important to the crew as they stood rigid in the bridge, ready to wage war with the enemy foe. They'd be a little more concerned with making sure they won if they were being tossed about like ragdolls every once in a while. However, that was not the state of matters, as if somebody were thrown over a bulkhead, that bulkhead could have a sharp corner, or could have a hard part that they could injure themselves on. Wiring could come loose and pose an electrocution hazard. Crewmembers with disabilities might fall out of their wheelchairs or have their companion animal or robot run away.

Even if this would improve the fighting spirit of the crew, in the end, this feature was left unimplemented, not only to save on work, but also to so as to not put the Fleet in violation of any one of the millions of worker safety and worker compensation laws.

Still, it made Etienne laugh every time he saw the missiles strike, and the crew fling them selves bodily where no man had gone before.

The ship shook, and the sound of an explosion echoed through the ship's hull.

"What just happened?" he asked, not initially believing it, thinking it to be something from his video, and not actually happening to him.

"Calculating."

He waited for the ship to finish assessing the damage and the cause.

"It appears that one of the fuel cells has ruptured, causing an explosion. The ship has lost some mass, but still has sufficient fuel reserves so as to not be stranded in deep space. Likewise, part of the ship has been irradiated, and must be molecularly reconstructed so as to not pose a health hazard to the crew. Please avoid all yellow regions until the all-clear is granted.

Etienne looked down at the ship-sim. A small hole with charred edges sat on the outskirts. The display drew a yellow sphere around the area, indicating that it was a radioactive hot-spot, at least until the autonomous units could ensure that all the electrons, neutrons, and protons were all put back in the right place. Fortunately, the yellow was nowhere near his quarters, so he could sit back and relax, at hopefully get himself a good night's sleep.

"Does this sort of thing happen regularly?"

"It has never happened to me before."

"And what about recorded incidents aboard other ships?"

"Very infrequent. The most likely root cause is a stray asteroid striking the fuel cell. However, the probability of this is fairly low."

"If anything were possible, what would have the best probability?"

"Calculating."

The wait this time was very difficult.

"I apologize for my latency. I fear that some of my RAM was nearby, and was lost in the explosion. I may reallocate materials to regenerate it, but any jobs running in that memory are now lost. However, the most probable explanation for the fuel cell explosion, barring its sheer impossibility due to obvious reasons, is that the explosion was triggered by an individual."

"Someone set it off?"

"Nobody did. That would be impossible, as you did not do it, and I did not do it, and there is nobody else aboard the ship. Because it is impossible for somebody to have appeared out of nowhere, undetected, and sabotage a fuel cell so that it exploded. While the explosion has patterns that match foul play, the surrounding probability of somebody committing that foul play is zero, when rounded by a high-precision machine. The most likely cause is a stray asteroid, even if it was as hot as a white dwarf's core, and travelling twice the speed of light."

"Way to use Occam's razor," Etienne said dryly.

"It only makes sense, and while it does sound crazy, it is the most likely scenario."

"Did any other ship functions get damaged with the explosion?"

"Is that a serious request, or are you questioning my calculations in a sarcastic manner?"

"I haven't decided yet."

There was a pause. Maybe a little too long. Maybe the ship was angry at him, if massive star ships could feel anger. "There appears to be no irreparable damage, and all my validated systems still hold integrity. This is a good thing."

"Why is that?"

"Because the Master Disks are in the yellow sphere, which, if you recall, is currently highly radioactive. Likewise, the Master Disks may have been turned radioactive permanently, as due to the nature of the disks and the high integrity they must bear, they cannot be rebuilt in the same way as the parts of the ship, as they will lose integrity due to the manipulation. When the realignment of the ship has passed, I shall sequester any remaining radioactive material in a secluded area until they may be taken somewhere to be decommissioned prior to scrubbing."

"Am I safe to go to sleep?" he asked.

"Yes. I shall alert you if that status changes."

Etienne nodded before sipping his customary warm milk pod, securing himself down, and then getting some needed shuteye.

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In the morning, Etienne drifted out of bed. He had his breakfast and went through the morning routine. Stepping into a slightly modified microgravity-capable standard uniform and

selective gecko boots, and further into the PEM Scanner, he went through the daily, and now slightly more complicated, scans. When he drifted into the ship, he was somewhat surprised to see its new configuration. No longer did it have nice long hallways with vaulted ceilings. Now everything was tube-shaped. There was one exception, of course, and that was the window, still as large as it had always been, and still just as wonderful to look through into space.

His new suit had little thrusters like the pressure suit had, and that mixed in with his selective gecko boots enabled him to drift around even the most complicated rooms aboard this new ship. Occasionally, an automaton or a space coffin would drift on by. He'd give such things a wide enough berth so that they would pass him without having to compensate for his motion disturbing the air molecules, forcing the automated device to correct its course ever so slightly.

He went to the modified astronavigational system engineering lab where he strapped himself into a seat before continuing to probe the memory. He needed to ensure that the configuration changes to the ship would not impact the ship's ability to function. He had to make a few minor corrections, especially with respect to programming written against a ship with active artificial gravity. It wasn't too hard, but still required just to be on the safe side.

As he was working, his mind began to wander, especially towards the explosion of the fuel cell. He ruled out the likelihood that it was a really hot and really fast stray chunk of space rock, and instead focused on the root cause being the most likely cause (separated, of course from the plausible reality of such a claim). It had to be done intentionally. But how? And by whom?

He had a sneaking suspicion that he knew the knew the answers to both questions. He just didn't want to accept they were true, yet, at the same time, he did. It was the slicer. It had to be. Somehow, she survived being sucked into space. Somehow she had been able to alter the signature on her stealth suit. Somehow, she had been running around the outside of the ship for the past few days, plotting a reentry. She must have found an opportunity while the ship was reconstructing itself, but didn't want to just sneak in. Don't blame the computers, they're imperfect. They're created by us. He could almost hear her voice saying this.

And regardless of whether or not he actually heard her speak, he did feel her fist come down onto the back of his head, knocking him unconscious.

<p style="text-align:center">***</p>

He awoke in the brig. The bars blotted out the view into the otherwise white hallway. He felt his head. A tender lump swelled on the back of his skull. A canister of prison food floated nearby. In a macabre mockery of a patrol, the security officer's body drifted past in the wake of an automaton.

"How did I get here?" he asked.

There was no response.

He felt around for his token, but didn't find it anywhere on his uniform. The ship would not deign a response to anybody not identified as a crew or a guest. Somebody sitting in the brig could safely be assumed to not be a guest.

He tried to think back to just before he passed out. The person who struck him on the head must have dragged him here and relieved him of his token. He was effectively stuck here

until whoever put him here decided to let him out. The fact that there was food comforted him, giving him a tiny glimmer of hope that he might survive the ordeal. He drifted over to the canister and popped it open. Inside was a bag of flavor-imbued noodles and a bulb of some sort of clear drink. He let these items drift out of the canister.

The bubbling jet noise of the guard automaton floated by, followed by the former security officer. Etienne noticed that the officer still had his token. He went up to the bars and tried to reach through. He was flung back as a very powerful jolt of pain went through his body.

"Prisoners are reminded to keep their arms, legs, and other extremities inside the cell at all time. Any attempts at reaching through the bars will be punished."

To add insult to injury, a screen lowered from the ceiling with a training module detailing the expected behavior of space prisoners, and how the bars prevented all living matter from passing through the bars. When he had finished the training module, the screen returned to the ceiling.

He watched the automaton drift by, followed by the dead guard. He tried to figure out a way he could get to the guard's token without reaching through the bars. The bag of noddles drifted by.

He got an idea whose brilliancy would be evaluated later, when he had time to do such. He pulled out a length of noodle. Testing it, he waited for the automaton to pass before tossing one end of the noodle through the bars. He did not get a nasty shock and a retraining module. That was a good first step.

Tearing one of the microthrusters from his uniform, he attached it to the end of the noodle. There, he practiced, when the automaton wasn't watching, tossing it, getting it to loop around, and securely lasso his target. As the automaton passed by once more, he lassoed the dead guard's wrist, using the thruster to wrap around the hand. He then, carefully, pulled the noodle inward, where the guard, no longer caught in the wake of the automaton, now drifted towards the cell. Etienne drew the guard's hand through the bars, which did not trigger any alarms, as he was dead. Pulling on the shirt sleeve, he managed to get the token through the bars, where he plucked it from the uniform just as the automaton turned around.

"Halt!" said the tiny, floating robot. It leveled an energy weapon at Etienne. Etienne brushed the token past the dead guard's hand as he raised his arms in the air to indicate that he was no threat to the tiny bot. The bot scrutinized him before opening the cell.

"Officer Segura, You have been trapped in a cell for an indeterminate amount of time. To offset your troubles, your account has been funded for lost wages. However, to continue active duty, you must perform a PEM Scan." When the ship completed its speech, Etienne was directed to the nearest PEM Scanner. There he underwent, for the second time that day, after being given a new uniform which didn't exactly fit, the physical, emotional, and mental testing, where he passed, but with a comment that his performance had deviated from the recorded standard. This was ultimately discounted, as he had been trapped in a cell with no means of escaping for several days. His uniform resized to fit his new body shape, somehow altered by being wrongfully imprisoned in a brig for inexplicable reasons. Also, his voice somehow changed, but the system was adjusting to this due to the supposed trauma.

He found Segura's clipboard, as well as Segura's energy pistol. There were no security tasks for today, as there were no longer any prisoners in the brig. He was able to patrol the ship

to his heart's content.

"Please identify the location of crewman Etienne Quartz," he said.

"Astronavigational System Engineer Etienne Quartz is currently in the dining hall."

"Thank you," he said, before propelling himself in that direction.

When he got to the dining hall, which was more a dining cylinder, he peeked in. Seeing a figure wearing an astronavigational system engineering suit, he set his energy pistol to stun. He launched himself into the room, catching his quarry off guard. She turned around, a look of shock in her eyes. Etienne fired the weapon, and she drifted there, unconscious.

He retrieved his token from her before dragging her body to the brig. "I suppose we're even now," he said as he closed the door. He found Segura's body, and, taking him to the hall, returned his weapon and token. Letting the body drift as far away from the brig as possible, he resumed his own token.

"Astronavigational System Engineer Etienne, you are wearing the wrong uniform. Please correct this immediately."

A panel slid open, revealing an astronavigational system engineer uniform suited for Etienne. He put it on, discarding the old one.

"I am unable to explain this discrepancy," said the ship.

"It's all right," said Etienne, "I'm able."

11. Hummm

Etienne floated back into the brig. The slicer was starting to come to. No longer wearing her stealth suit, she now wore the uniform of an astronavigational system engineer. Her eyes fluttered as she started to awaken.

"Who are you?" asked Etienne. She noticed him standing there.

Her eyes narrowed and she pursed her lips. She was in no mood to talk.

"Fine then," Etienne said before drifting away. "Have the ship page me when you're ready to communicate."

As he drifted towards the door, heard her say, "Wait."

He spun around. "Yes?"

"Is this," she waved her arms, encompassing the ship, or perhaps something larger, "is this something you did?"

"Do you mean reorganizing the ship? Yes, in fact, that was me, because otherwise, I'd be stuck on a ship designed for gravity when no gravity was there to hold me to the ground. I--"

"No," she said. "This with the death of everybody?"

Etienne shook his head. "I thought that you'd be able to answer that question."

The slicer drifted down to the bench. "No. I'm at a loss if you are." She looked up at him. "I don't think I did anything to trigger anything of this sort. I was just trying to pass my time while riding to the next hub. I only sliced into the system to watch a video or two."

"Did you dump the videos to memory and hide them there?"

"What? No. I just watched a few the night before it happened."

"What are you doing on board the *Rue Morgue*?"

"I was just catching a ride to the next hub. I was making my way to a slicer convention. I wasn't trying to do anything to hurt the ship or the crew. Don't blame me."

Etienne laughed. "How am I to believe you? You've tried to bludgeon me twice, and have succeeded once."

"I was scared. I didn't want you to hurt me while the ship made its way to the hub. It was easier and a lot more reasonable that going up to you and saying, 'I'm on this ship without authorization, and everybody seems to have died but us, do you mind if I hang out in the open without you suspecting me of killing everybody, while I do the same for you?' I couldn't reasonably sit outside the ship the entire time, and the fuel cell thing was the only way I could get back in. It broke my suit, but at least I'm alive. For now."

"How can I trust you? You're a slicer. You don't follow the rules. I have half a mind to put you back in that airlock." He pounded his fist on the wall for effect, but ended up pushing himself backwards.

She curled into a little ball and floated in the cell.

"I just wanted a ride," she whispered. "I didn't want any of this to happen."

Etienne left the brig, the soft sounds of a helpless slicer crying followed him until they were too far away to discern from the usual sounds of the ship.

***

Etienne tried to work on debugging the system, but found that he could not focus. His mind kept drifting back to the brig. At times, though he was sure it was impossible, he thought he could still hear the slicer's soft sobs in her solitary cell. Here he was, no longer alone, but he felt he had to keep the only other living creature (other than the plants) locked up, because he feared she might be a killer.

He pulled up the ship-sim. There, he used her blue disc profile to populate her sim. He proposed a series of scenarios that would evaluate her ability to be a ship-wide killer. Nothing had the same results as what really happened. Nothing, he confirmed again, she could have done could have killed everybody but him aboard the ship.

He wanted to trust her, but at the same time, he did not. He didn't want to leaver her in the cell for the rest of the trip, but he didn't know if it was a smart idea to just let her out, or even to socialize with her. He didn't want her to, in case she was lying, sway his opinion of her through manipulation. But at the same time, he didn't want to leave her there if she was innocent.

He devised a test, to at least check her present threat. He couldn't rely solely on the ship, as the ship was susceptible to exploits at the hands of a slicer, and he couldn't rely solely on himself, as he was human, not capable of watching her the entire time. He figured, then, if he could evaluate her, both electronically and by his own means, then he could start to form a basis of trust with her. At least, that's what he hoped. He drifted back into the brig.

There, she sat, fiddling with some wires, trying to jimmy her way out of the cell.

"I'll take this as an isolated incident," he said, interrupting her. She fruitlessly tried to hide her work. "Against my better judgment, I've decided to evaluate you, in order to see if you can be trusted. I have scheduled you for a PEM Scan, but also require you to be honest and up-front with me. If you, while under both computer and human observation, can consistently show yourself to be a non-threat, you may roam the ship freely. If you cannot, you will be required to reside in the brig. While on the ship, you will agree to assist me with the maintenance of the ship, and will be issued temporary credentials granting to crew-access to the ship's systems and facilities. You will be put under this role in a probationary status, where your work will be scrutinized by both the ship and me. When we reach the next harbor, you will be released with no need for the authorities to know of your stowing away. Do you find these terms acceptable?"

She looked up. "What if I don't?"

"If you do not accept these terms, or fail to live up to these terms, you will be returned to the brig, by force, if necessary. Upon the successful docking at the next harbor, you will be handed over to the authorities with a list of the charges against you."

She grumbled. "Well, how do I know you're to be trusted?"

He drifted down towards her, but just outside of noodle-range. "Do you have any suggestions?"

"I want to view your crew profile, and other vital statistics regarding yourself. I want to review these, and check for any tampering." Her eyes narrowed. "I can detect tampering very easily."

Etienne nodded. "Very well. If you work with me, I'll work with you. Does that sound fair?"

"As fair as we'll get way out here."

He tapped the control on the cell, letting the bars slide back. "Please follow me to the PEM Scan," he said.

He led to her the room, where he escorted her inside. He opened a window into the scanner so he could watch for any sort of foul play. The scanner evaluated her physique before determining the level of testing. He watched to make sure that she didn't use any slicer devices on the system as she pedaled against the microgravity device. He watched her emotional reactions to the stimulus, noting that she seemed either typically empathetic, or was very good at faking it. He watched her do the puzzled, and silently took count, comparing it against his best and average scores.

She beat him by one.

She drifted out of the PEM Scanner, a new token on his shirt. "Acting Astronavigational System Engineer Nina Levin is approved for one more day of duty."

"How'd I do?" she asked. Etienne said nothing as he handed her a clipboard. "Am I nonthreatening enough?"

<p style="text-align:center">***</p>

The two drifted towards the lab, where Etienne showed her the front door to the system. "If I detect anything suspicious, I'll suspend your access first and ask questions later."

She looked at the terminals with a sense of awe. "This is better than the system I had back home. That was scrounged together from junk-yard parts, duct tape, and chewing gum."

Etienne resumed his memory probes, turning every once in a while to make sure that she wasn't doing anything unusual. To his end of the bargain, she was reading his crew profile, her brows furrowed as she scanned the text, either reading it intently or searching for any signs of tempering, thus rendering Etienne to be untrustworthy.

Every once in a while, she'd look up at him, and he would quickly turn his attention to his work at hand. This eye-dance continued as she finished his information and moved on towards deep scanning. Finally, she remarked, "that's odd."

"What?" said Etienne.

"Did you know that somebody dumped a bunch of media files into the RAM?"

"Yeah," he said.

"Did you find out who?"

"No. I thought it was you."

"Why would I dump these file here? I don't even like classics. Not that not liking them would be reason enough to hide them. No, I never touched these files when I was sampling the video library in my hiding place."

"Did you figure out who did it, then?"

"I think so, but it doesn't make sense."

"Who did it?"

"The ship."

The ship chimed in. "That is impossible. I have no memory of this activity, and am incapable of telling lies."

Etienne looked over at the slicer. "How could the ship do it and not have any recollection of it?"

"By tampering its own memory. Of course."

"Of course," said Etienne, rolling his eyes. "And you saw that?"

"I told you, I'm very good at it." She held up the clipboard. "See, here the dumped media files." She zoomed over to another area, this time on disk. "Here's where it used to be. Now, this disk has been wiped, and the bits have been reallocated, however, there's a shadow of files here." She tapped the screen. "I was able to restore the node on my board, and checked the access data. The last user to access this data was the ship."

"What if somebody was spoofing the ship's account?"

"Possible, but unlikely. The ship uses an esoteric, highly contextual command system which is specifically designed to be difficult for humans to comprehend. For a person to issue the commands that were called against these media files, she'd have to be some super genius. I mean, it took me a whole five minutes to figure out what the command was doing."

"Couldn't the super genius have been a man?"

"What?"

"You said 'she'd have to be some super genius.' Couldn't *he* be a super genius too?"

"Possible, but unlikely. A man's mind isn't suited for this sort of abstraction."

"I see. So, what happened?"

She looked at the clipboard again. "It looks like the ship ran a command to dump these files into volatile memory, and then throw away the key. Since the ship's system has been running all this time, and there was no garbage collection put on this, it's just been sitting there."

"But, the important question," said Etienne, "is why?"

"I'm still working on that."

The ship chimed in. "After assessing the data presented, there is very high confidence that this is the case. But this does not explain why I do not remember. I am finding no such similar regions on my disks."

"I said I'm working on that." She bit her lip as she tapped on the screen with a bit more fervor. "Whatever made you issue the command is long gone, and I can't find it. Maybe I accidentally toasted it when I made that fuel cell go Springfield."

Etienne stared at her. "You destroyed a possible clue?"

She looked up. "Hey, we'll figure it out. All is not lost."

Etienne went back to his work. The slicer looked at him. "Hey, can I borrow your board?"

"Why?"

"It has something on it that my board doesn't."

"What's that?" he said, cautiously handing his clipboard over to her.

"Older data." She tapped the ghost copies of the former astronavigational system engineering crew.

"How did you know that?" he asked, floating over to her to watch her work over her shoulder.

"I was in your profile," she said. She hit a few buttons and got to a ship-sim. "This sim represents the ship at a time before everybody died." She dropped tracers into the ship-sim's computer, focusing on the media files. "Let's cause an event," she said, tapping a button.

Etienne watched as everybody, other than a sleeping sanitation engineer and a slicer in a stealth suit died. The tracers flashed, so she slowed down the ship-sim, so the data passing would actually be readable by a watching person. "See, the ship started doing it automatically once it determined that all the crew was dead."

"I still have no recollection of having done this," said the ship.

"Just watch," said the slicer. She followed the trace back to the command that issued it, and after tapping pieces of the command, turned it into something that Etienne could recognize.

"It looks like it was executed by a directive," he said.

"Right." She traced the command back to the directive, letting the cursor blink around it. "Watch this."

She let the simulation run, and just as every last file was moved, the directive that issued the command was gone as well.

"That's why you have no memory," she said to the ship. "Because you destroyed the directive that caused you to do it."

"But why?" asked Etienne. "What does that directive say?"

She stopped the simulation before rewinding it. Opening the directive, written in zeroes and ones, she parsed through the bitcode to get a grasp of what it was saying. She started converting chunks into their corresponding assembler commands, further extrapolating that into something a little more user-friendly.

Finally, she let out a breath. "It tells the ship that if a certain percentage of the crewmembers are to die suddenly, to hide any media that portrays a killer or otherwise malevolent computer, so as to prevent any living crew from getting notions that the ship killed them. It also is instructed to delete this directive, so as to hide the fact that it did this. The files reside in memory until a team of sweepers figure out what happened. At that time, they issue a directive to restore the media."

"So basically, it's instructions to prevent people from thinking the computer killed everybody?"

"Yeah. Don't blame the computer."

"After evaluating this data, while I am still not 100% confident in its accuracy, it does hold the highest probability of the other outcomes," the ship said.

"See? It wasn't me. You can trust me, can't you?"

Etienne thought that he could, at least a little for now.

12. Tap

Etienne was relieved to have solved the mystery of the missing media. He was a bit miffed, though, that the slicer solved it. However, he took it in stride as she continued her deep scanning on her own clipboard.

She looked up at him. "What?"

"Nothing," he said. "I'm just watching you."

"Well, take a snap. It'll last longer." She went back to her work.

He got up from the seat and drifted over towards the door.

"Where are you going?" she asked.

"I'm going to drift around," Etienne said.

"Aren't you supposed to monitor me? Make sure I don't do anything to mess with the ship?"

"I trust you," he said. He drifted out through the door. Once he was out through the door, he pulled out his clipboard. He tapped up the system monitor, to make sure she wasn't doing anything suspicious. He'd check it while he drifted about, getting his bearings in the new ship configuration. He drifted past the botany bay, the glass doors shut. He peered in. The ship had, once the atmosphere was constant, made the botany lab more space-friendly. The plants now lined the walls, growing towards the center. Etienne looked down the tunnel of leaves, not wishing for a moment to have to drift down that corridor. The green foliage all but obscured any semblance of walls.

He made his way towards one end of the ship. There, his clipboard started beeping. He looked down at it, expecting to see the slicer manipulating something, requiring him to disable her access to the system. But it wasn't a warning that she was up to no good, but rather a warning that he was approaching the yellow zone. Sure enough, up ahead, a translucent yellow energy barrier blocked all access deeper in that direction. A little timer in opaque black counted down how long it would take, without intervention, for this area to be free of radioactivity. Even though it include seconds, minutes, hours, and days, Etienne thought it was a bit silly, as the years figure was longer that his life expectancy.

He watched as a space coffin, pushed by a drone went through the field. The drone loaded one of the bodies, floating somewhere down the hallway, into the coffin before taking it to the nearest yellow-zone airlock before releasing it in the safest way to conform to that person's personal preferences or beliefs on how one should dispose of his earthly remains.

The drone flew back to the yellow barrier, where it broke into a million tiny pieces before reassembling itself. It passed through the light where it was deemed to not be radioactive.

Etienne turned around. His clipboard indicated that the slicer was still doing deep scanning. She was good at it, and had a knack for seeing what wasn't there. He had to hand it to her. He guessed he could trust her, and he guessed she guessed that he'd throw her out through an airlock (albeit with a suit and tether) or into the brig if she decided to misbehave.

He drifted down the hallway, towards the astronavigational system engineering lab, peeking into the door.

"Still working," she said, without even looking up.

He nodded before heading off in the other direction. Down here was the new hold, where all the materials not needed for active service of the ship, but still perhaps necessary, either at the final location, or during some intermediate stage, were stored. And still, like a monument dedicated to survival, stood the statue of the Green Blob in the shape of Etienne. He gave it another look. He blinked, surprised, wondering if it had always been wearing a microgravity-friendly uniform, aside from the gecko boots. He saw the statue's uniform hold the shape of the tiny thrusters. Etienne decided that he'd pay more attention to the statue from now on. He took the next few minutes to carefully study the thing. That it was him was no doubt, and that it now, if not always, wore his uniform, was also no doubt.

He really could not figure this one out. But, he knew someone who could. But, he didn't want to have to deal with her condescending explanation of her solution, belittling him in the process. Maybe if he couldn't figure it out, he'd see what she could determine. But not right now. Not so close to her previous intellectual victory.

He drifted back to the lab. "Still working?"

She looked up. "Oh, no. I was just watching a video."

"You're done?"

"I'm done."

"And why did you become a full-time slicer? You're perfectly capable of doing this for a living."

She sighed. "What differentiates you from me is that on your wall, there's a paper or two saying you gave your life and your money to the Man in exchange for something called an 'education.' I on the other hand have lived my life my way, not kowtowing to the Man and his Machine, getting my education the way it should be: free, and on my own time."

"So, you couldn't make it in because you lack an education?"

"I lack no such thing," she said, rising up. "I have plenty of education. Sure, I can't tell you the major military generals of every war for the past 100 years, or what backwater planets they helped sucker-punch into submission, but I can run laps around any 'educated' software slinger."

"But because you don't have a paper from 'the man,' you couldn't even be hired by the Fleet, correct?"

"Yeah."

"Did you know that you can get equivalency points towards a formal education, based on what you know?"

"Really?"

"Wow! There's something you don't know?" Etienne laughed. "Yeah. After the shift, I'll show you. But you have to promise me something."

"What's that?"

"No cheating. I don't need you making yourself the highest Fleet admiral, or anything."

"Fine. I won't."

"Besides, I don't think you'd be good at bossing people around."

Before she could respond, the chime dinged for the end of the shift.

"Come on," he said. "We'll grab a bite to eat first, and then I'll show you the trainers."

They drifted to the dining cylinder, where a pair of meal and drink pods were waiting for them.

The slicer looked inside. "Do they always have gross pairings like this?"

Etienne nodded. "I blame the computer; lack of taste."

"Don't blame me," said the computer. "I was made by imperfect humans."

Etienne looked at the slicer with suspicion.

"It wasn't me," she said, her voice getting high and defensive. "I think it just picked that up."

He relaxed. They drifted towards the nearest seating area, where they ate their food and drink through little straws. "I have to say, though," he said. "When you combine the unusual pairing of the food and drink, it's quite an experience."

"I bet," she said. "And probably the same experience in reverse when you're done."

He laughed.

After they disposed of their food and drink pods, Etienne led her to the training bay, where he showed her the terminals. "Just have it do a scan and a test, and it'll tell you your educational equivalency. Since you worked today, it'll all be free. The Man's only taking your time."

"I suppose I have to meet him half way, then," she said, sitting down before the screen.

"If you'll excuse me, I'll be in the exercise bay trying to not lose muscle density."

"All right. I think I might need to do that too." She waved her arms. "Being out in space for a few days'll do that to you."

"We'll meet up later, and I'll show you the quarters."

While she started tapping on the screen, Etienne drifted towards the exercise bay. There he found the pedal machine all ready for him. He strapped himself in and pedaled with his arms and his legs while the machine adjusted the resistance to help make it a challenge. An hour or so later, his arms and legs were sore, and his heart was racing at a healthy pace. He let the cool breeze outside the machine dry off his residual sweat.

He drifted back to the education bay where the slicer sat, still tapping away at the screen. He pulled up her status on his clipboard. Comparing her cumulative score to his own personal best (and also his average), he frowned. She had him beat by one!

She noticed him. "Oh, hey," she said. She bookmarked her progress and drifted over. "I guess I'm a smart cookie. It said that if I was an enlisted member of the Fleet that I'd outrank you. I'd only have to pass the background test. So I guess you're safe for now, boss."

Etienne laughed.

"You'll have to show me where the exercise bay is, too. I want to see if I could out-lift you too."

"I'll show it to you on the way to the quarters."

They drifted down the hall. He pointed to the exercise bay. "Most of the machines are useless, but the two chambers in the back are ideal for microgravity. The one of the right handles anaerobic, and the one on the left handles aerobic."

"Neat," she said.

They drifted on further towards the crew quarters.

"I suppose you'll get one of the available rooms, since none of them are occupied. We'll

have the ship pick out one that doesn't have a body in it, whose air has been scrubbed, and to avoid any sort of strange feelings, whose personal items are removed. The door next to his hissed open, revealing a blank room. "If you want, the ship can project whatever patterns you want on the walls, like pictures or designs. It can also replicate certain items, if you find you need various sundries. They mirror acts as a display unit and synchronizes with your clipboard. If you need anything, either page me, or if you're not feeling lazy, knock."

His door hissed open and he drifted inside.

"Hey," she said.

"Yeah?"

"Thanks for not thinking I killed all those people. And thanks for not thinking I'm bad."

"You're welcome," he said before closing his door.

As he drifted into his room, he noticed that the ship must have realigned it for microgravity. His bed now had actual straps to hold him in place, and his room now looked like a cylinder, instead of a cube. He strapped himself into his new sleeping bag bed, where he had a nice view of the mirror display. He pushed the book he was reading to the big screen, and read it from there, letting the page position follow his eyes. As he read, he wondered why the Fleet had programmed a directive in to prevent suspicions against the ship for catastrophic events, and even why somebody had decided to write such a directive. He imagined that it was because they had a room full of people whose sole job it was to think up bad situations. They'd probably jot them all down before sending the list to another group of people, whose sole job it was to mitigate such situations, and for those that can't be avoided, do damage control. Then, this augmented list would probably be sent to a room of lawyers whose sole job it was to not get the Fleet sued, and finally, this augmented, augmented list was sent to some programmers, who implemented the directives (only to have them obfuscated beyond most recognition).

Such a lot of work for such a rare instance.

He briefly wondered if all ships had such directives in them, and also, which other directives there may be. Did the ship, or some bored programmer, celebrate April Fool's Day in a unique way? Was there some sort of Easter egg if you pushed the right button sequence? Was there a logic bomb, waiting for the right criteria to be met?

At the end, he found that he had read a dozen pages, but remembered none of them. He restored his previous bookmark before having his customary warm milk pod. When he was finished, he let it drift away as he did the same, only in a completely different context.

He was glad to no longer be the only person on board. He just hoped that he was right about trusting the slicer. Maybe the rest of the trip would be good for the both of them.

And with that, he was asleep.

<center>***</center>

Etienne awoke the next morning, slightly disoriented at the new room, but not as disoriented as he probably would have been if a human had to design his new room. The ship had designed it so as to bear as familiar a view as possible, even with a drastically different shape. He drifted from bed and ate his breakfast. Then, he went through the morning ritual.

His suit was there, nice and clean, the little thruster that he tore off having been

replaced. He stepped into it and went on to his PEM Scan. He felt the workout still, and it helped him push past his previous records in the physical scan. He performed well on the emotional scan, and pushed his limits as far as he could on his mental scan. He managed an extra puzzle today.

When he drifted from the Scanner, he heard the computer say "Astronavigational System Engineer Etienne Quartz has been approved for one more day of service."

Just as the ship finished saying that, it said, "Acting Astronavigational System Engineer Nina Levin has been approved for one more day of service."

He was grinning, so was she.

"What?" she asked.

"I got as many as you," he said.

"Not today," she said. "I got one more."

They drifted off to work. At the big window, Etienne stopped her. "Hey, I want to show you something."

"What?" she asked.

"The window." He pointed through it. "See it?"

"The window?"

"No," he said. "The universe."

"Yeah. I saw it plenty when I was walking around on the hull."

"But," he said, "It looks different through here. You're not trapped in that bubble."

She looked, if only to humor him. "I suppose it's not so bad, when you're not hungry, wondering if you're going to die stuck to the outside of a space ship like some space lamprey."

"Exactly. It's like you're part of something."

"Something big," she said.

"Yeah." He wasn't sure if she got it, but she seemed to be understanding. They drifted off towards the astronavigational system engineering day lab. There they resumed their work from the day before.

"Hey," she said. "What's this thing about the tasks never aging for astronavs?"

"It's some bug. I think some astronavigational system engineer put it in there, making it intentionally difficult to undo, just so we could all enjoy a nice break without having to worry about our task deadlines."

She took a moment to look at the code. She smiled. "I see what they're doing. I could fix that really quickly." She closed out of the task. "But I won't. I think we do deserve a break from an artificial task manager."

Etienne smiled.

13. Hm?

"I was just wondering," said Etienne, "if you had any ideas about what might have caused the entire crew to die."

"I see you ran some sims on it. Nothing I could try had the same pattern as what really happened. It may be a lack of understanding of universal physics, but I can't get any sims to match, even with some tweaking. Did anybody have a motive?"

"Not that I know. Of course, I only associated with one third of the ship."

"Could you review the records of the crew, guests, and stowaways to determine if any of them may have harbored feelings of resentment, either towards other passengers on board the ship or everybody in general?" asked the slicer. "Or any other suspicious activity that may have triggered the event."

"I can," said the ship.

She waited for a response. Etienne cleared his throat. "Would you?" he added.

"Calculating," said the ship.

The slicer rolled her eyes as they waited for the results. A list of names popped, one by one, onto their clipboards. Etienne glanced at them. To his relief, the Green Blob wasn't listed.

"I'll take a look at these names," the slicer said. "and I'll see if any of them, or a subset of them, may have done something to trigger what happened."

While she scrutinized the other ship profiles, Etienne resumed his astronavigational system engineering work, finding runaway processes, identifying why they're runaway, and killing them if necessary. Otherwise, hot-fixing them to return them to order.

The slicer zipped through the records rather quickly, but, if she was reading these profiles as carefully as she read Etienne's profile, she was retaining a lot, and seeing a lot more than what was actually there.

When Etienne was finished with the process wrangling, he reviewed the code, looking for duplicate lines. There is a law of software development that every program has at least one unnecessary logical line of code, and at least one bug. Etienne tried to find places where the former was true. Every time he'd see a lengthy calculation duplicated, he'd see, first, if it needed to recalculate that value every time (like using $4*\text{atan}(1)$ for the value of π), and if it was unnecessary, he'd replace it with a precalculated constant. Otherwise, if it was a calculation that needed to happen again and again on varying data, he'd write a generalized function to handle it, calling that function with the varying values every time, instead of duplicating the formula. This not only reduced the number of lines of code, reducing the size of the program that was running, but also improved the scalability of the code, allowing for quick changes to the derived formula to suit unforseen data issues. Instead of having to change each appearance of that formula, he only would have to change it once, and every caller of that function would get the newly tweaked result the next time it executed that statement.

As always, he ran the tweaks against a ship-sim before applying them, and, since it was code, he ran a test suite against it to make sure it didn't regress, or didn't introduce any new but obvious errors. As always, he made a backup before applying the changes, just in case he

needed to roll back. The compiler read the code for changes, converted it to bytecode, and found the places where it differed in the resulting object, applying a hot patch to the ship's runtime, so the system wouldn't need to reboot.

The slicer finished reading the profiles, and was now running simulations of her own, trying any combination of suspects working together or apart, trying to duplicate the event to her satisfaction. The look on her face indicated to Etienne that she wasn't getting anywhere with it.

At last, she looked up. "Any other clues?"

"Well, all unshielded ferromagnetic metals were magnetized."

"I see." She resumed tapping at her clipboard. "Could a high powered magnet or magnetic field kill everybody?"

"I guess so," said Etienne. "It could have magnetized the iron in everybody's blood, and then, when that blood got to the brain, it could have done something weird when it was around all that electric activity."

"Like cutting off the bloodflow, causing massive strokes?"

"Yeah, or by reacting wildly, since magnetic force and electric force are the same. It could have demagnetized the brain, thus killing everybody, or it could have given everybody strokes."

"But it's kind of like wiping a magnet against magnetic storage. If it's weak, you'll have some missing bits, but if it's strong, you better hope you have some optical restore media on hand."

"So, the magnets could have wiped the minds of the people, including the 'system processes,' that cause us to do involuntary things like breathe and beat our hearts and be legally and medically alive?"

"Something like that. Good thing the ship's parts are shielded. Otherwise, there'd probably be no survivors."

"But how do you explain the fact that there were two?"

"Well, I was wearing a stealth suit, which probably shielded me. Did you have any sort of shielding in your room or anything?"

"None that I know of."

She contemplated this. "Well, aside from the mystery of why you were spared, I think we've figured out why everybody else died."

"Yeah, but what caused the event?"

"That is another good mystery, as the ship is incapable of generating a magnetic field, and is unable to detect magnets without a special module. So, it couldn't have been through the ship. It would have had to be through something on board the ship, or something outside the ship."

"So, anything other than the ship?"

"Right."

"That narrows it down." Etienne sighed before looking down at his clipboard.

"Hey," said the slicer, "at least we figured out the first *why*. Or at least a close enough approximation to satisfy our curiosity."

"But there are so many more *why*'s left."

"We'll figure it out," she said. "We're both fairly intelligent people. I'm sure that the

answer is out there somewhere, we just need to know where to look for it."

They each went back to their work, tapping in silence as they let the backs of their minds mull over the new data.

"What kind of ship is this?"

Etienne looked up. "It's a science vessel. It does experiments, but also performs the other tasks of a Fleet ship: exploration, transportation, defense, and so forth. But it's primary role is experimentation."

"What sort of experimentation?"

Etienne laughed. "None involving magnetic fields, I can assure you. The *Rue Morgue* is a botanical science vessel. The scientists studied plants."

"What kind of plants?" she asked.

"Killer, mutant plants," said Etienne. He smiled. "I'm not sure. Just plants. I think they were trying to make plants that were more resilient to inhospitable environments as a sort of terraforming project for otherwise lifeless worlds."

She considered this. "It doesn't seem likely that this could have caused the event, as plants wouldn't be sentient enough to plot such a thing. And, none of them have any brains, and none of them died because of the event. I don't think we have a problem with killer, mutant plants. But if we do have a killer, he must have put together the device somewhere in the ship, as otherwise, it probably wouldn't make it past the boarding scanners."

"You got past them."

"Yeah, but it's easier to hide yourself versus a device capable of generating a magnetic pulse large enough to kill everybody on board a ship. I think that if someone or someones did use a device, they brought it in piecemeal, and assembled it at a later date. They could have even put it in an airlock set to open, or in the waste disposal unit, so that after it ran, it would be jettisoned, never to be seen again. Or perhaps it vaporized when done. Or even fell into an alternate dimension."

"Now you're being speculative," said Etienne. "I find it hard for someone to be able to get away with this without the ship realizing that something suspicious was going on."

"Don't blame the computer," said the slicer. "If someone did do this, they must have been doing it as part of their normal job routine. That way, the ship wouldn't know that what they were doing was unusual."

"Well, then, run that through your simulation with the usual suspects, and see how likely it is."

She complied, bringing up the ship-sim and introducing the supplies necessary to build a shipwide, lethal magnetic field. She ran several simulations, trying to get different subsets of the suspicious crew to assemble the magnet in some easily disposable or secluded location, and to do so as if the tasks did not deviate from their typical job descriptions. She even expanded her list to include everybody from all shifts, as well as guests, and stowaways, and after determining several likely locations, determined if there was enough overlap of people being in the same place at different times from only performing what appeared to be standard duties, or otherwise under-the-radar activities.

"Still nothing?"

"Not yet," she said.

"Could it have been something else, though? Maybe an unrelated event? Maybe some great magnetic force zapped the ship, and through luck there were survivors."

"But that seems so dull. It's certainly more interesting if there's a plot to get everybody. An unrelated cosmic event, while probably cool to physicists and mathematicians, is pretty boring, and anticlimactic."

"You have a good point. But the universe doesn't have to be interesting."

"But," she said, "it does have to be lazy."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, I'm no physicist, but I have observed that the universe is lazy. Why do smaller things fall towards larger things? Why do bubbles for spheres? Why does anything that happens in the universe happen? Because that's the easiest way to get it done. So, I doubt that out of nothing the universe just decided to generate a magnetic field around the ship, killing almost everybody onboard, just because. If it happened, there had to be a good reason for the universe to do it, otherwise, it wouldn't have happened."

"Is it likely that the ship passed through some sort of magnetic disturbance?"

"And what would be there, holding the charge? I guess some sort of space cloud could, but in the vacuum of space, there's really nothing there to carry a charge, is there?"

"I don't know, I'm not a physicist either."

"I think that the most likely cause is foul play. I don't think that anything unusual happened in the universe to cause these deaths."

"Well, we should still keep our minds open, just in case."

The slicer sighed. "Fine, we'll keep our minds open. But I'm still going to see if I can solve this mystery."

"You've solved plenty already. I'm sure you'll be able to solve more. I believe in you."

"Thanks. I'm glad to see that you trust me more."

"You don't seem like a killer," Etienne said.

"And neither do you."

They both felt a little better about not having to worry about each other being a potential killer, but without having a basis for trusting one another from before the event, niggling doubts gnawed at the backs of their minds. Etienne wondered if she may be right, not due to any sort of prowess or intellect, but because she might have had a hand in the deal from the start. She did have stealth technologies, and could roam the ship freely. While she seemed devoid of a motive, she did not lack opportunity. And while she seemed nice and sweet and innocent, she was capable of manipulating, not only computers, but people as well.

The slicer, on the other hand, couldn't figure out why Etienne was still alive, as with all likelihood, he should have died. She knew nothing about him prior to meeting him, and his profile gave her as many new questions as it gave her answers to existing ones. She had her suspicions about him, but ultimately, didn't see him as being capable of such destruction. But he could have been a good actor. She wasn't sure what to think of him, but felt that she should at least give him the benefit of the doubt.

In the end, the two tacitly decided to, for now, trust each other, until the other gave them any indication that they were up to no good. And even then, it would have to be something important, and not just a bit of harmless mischief. A white lie here or there would be acceptable,

but a big one, or any sort of inconsistent behavior would not, especially if that behavior gave any indicator that the other was capable of such widespread destruction.

They looked at each other and smiled.

When the chime rang, indicating the end of their shift, they both got up. "Shall we have dinner?" asked the slicer.

Etienne nodded.

<center>***</center>

"I've been thinking of joining the Fleet," said the slicer as the drifted towards the dining hall.

"I wouldn't recommend doing that unless you have *a lot* of time to spare."

"Why's that?"

"Because, when you're employed by the Fleet, you're required to complete all the mandatory training before you can perform your duties. And since you haven't taken any of the training, you'll have to take *all* of the training before you can get back to work."

"How much training is that?"

"It would probably take you several weeks. Maybe something to do once we reach the nearest harbor, but not something I would recommend to you don't want to be stuck in training aboard the ship for the rest of the trip."

"Yikes."

"Yeah, besides, I need you to help me figure out what happened. You're, well."

"What?"

"A bit better at it than me."

"Don't feel bad," she said. "I'm just a little smarter than you, is all."

They got their meals and drinks and found a nice table. "It'll be a pain for the Forensics to figure out what happened here," she said, "what with the ship's structure changing."

"I'm sure they have ways to work around that," said Etienne. He pulled the proboscis-like straw from his food pod. "They're way smarter than the two of us combined."

"Maybe two of you's," she said, lightly punching him on the shoulder.

He laughed as they ate their meal together. Maybe she wasn't suspicious after all.

And she too started to think the same thing.

14. Stretch

Etienne finished his anaerobic exercise. Leaving his microgravity exercise pod, he saw the slicer leaving hers. "What did you think?"

"I'll feel it in the morning," she said. "But it's probably for the best, so when I do get somewhere with gravity, I'll actually be able to walk without needing robotic assistance or something."

"Yeah."

The two drifted back to the quarters. Etienne bid her a good night as he went through his door. He took some time to relax, letting his sore muscles loosen before crawling into bed. He watched a video as he let his muscles rebuild and heal. When he felt sufficiently rested after that workout, he drifted over to bed where he had his warm milk before falling asleep.

As he drifted off to sleep, he wondered if he should tell the slicer about the Green Blob, and see if she could provide any insight into the matter. He slowly grew to trust her, even if she had a spotted past of seeking unauthorized entry into systems and boarding illegal passage aboard Fleet vessels. He thought that maybe she was turning over a new leaf.

Etienne's mind, now as relaxed as his body, drifted off to sleep.

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Morning came; at least, a simulated morning came, like every other morning aboard the ship. Ship days, when travelling from one place to the other, depended highly on the location of the vessel, as well as the port of exit. The ship would start off with a day cycle similar to the starting point, and, as it travelled, it would gradually adjust its day to be more like the day of the new location. In the case of space stations or other harbors without a specific day and night, the day cycle would be adjusted to be the galactic standard. However, to adapt to the varying range of worlds, each world was allowed to operate on its own sidereal cycle, however, all clocks and calendars were put in the units of galactic standard time, with temporal adjustments for the local time.

The ship, like all Fleet ships, had a way, too, of differentiating between the different shifts. The day shift, normally expected to work during the morning and afternoon, experienced the most natural artificial light throughout their workday. The evening shift had more yellow lights, which the night shift had even more yellow lights, to simulate either old light bulbs or flames, like the ancestors of workers probably were used to.

So, while Etienne was on board, even though it seemed like morning when he woke up every morning, it was just an artificial expectation. It was no more morning there than it was evening. In fact, though the clock said 0600, and he'd think he'd prefer a few more hours of sleep, it could have very well be 0800, and he'd have no leg to stand on. Space was funny like that.

Nevertheless, he awoke to the morning signal, and he ate his breakfast as the circular breakfast pod drifted towards him. When he finished, he went through the chamber for his

morning routine. He slowly spun himself around as the jets of water and soap cascaded him, and he sprang himself through the air driers into his uniform. The PEM Scan sat there, ready. His muscles still ached a bit, but he decided to push through the pain, which was for the best, as he managed to outdo his more recent physical scans, perhaps in part to his microgravity workouts improving his coordination, but also improving his fitness.

The emotional scan was not that hard, as, assuming one goes in without any strong emotions, one comes out with a favorable score. The images, sounds, and videos all gained the appropriate reaction from him, showing, once again, that he was emotionally stable, and not going to do anything unusual, like program the ship to self destruct, or spend any time in an airlock without wearing a helmet.

The mental scan he felt determined to complete. When entering this phase of the scanner, his mind felt unobstructed, as if there was no limitation to his aptitude. One by one, he got the puzzles, all relatively new or unfamiliar, and one by one, like precision clockwork, he completed them. He reached for another only to find that no more were there.

The system did one more quick check to make sure nothing was unusual, and then let him into the ship, ready for work. The slicer went out from a nearby scanners just as he left his,

"How many this time?" he asked.

"I lost count."

"Well, if you didnt' get all of them, then I win." He laughed as he said this.

"One question, though," she said.

"Yeah?"

"What," she said, pointing her finger towards the hall before them, "is that?"

Etienne looked. the hall was lined in green, as if covered in some sort of green fuzz. Etienne drifted closer to inspect it. Each little clump of fuzz was actually a tiny blade-like leaf. The ship's corridors seemed to be lined with some sort of leafy plant.

"What is that?" he asked, this time directing his voice to the ship.

"I am not sure. It appears to be plantlike in nature, but I can find no accounting for why a plant would be growing along the corridors."

"How are the ship systems?"

"All systems check and seem to be without errors."

Etienne drifted through the halls. He avoided getting too close to the leaves that lined the walls. Something about them didn't set right. He kept himself towards the center. He drifted past the astronavigational system engineering day lab, the slicer at his heels, and towards the botany bay. The glass doors were still sealed, openable only by himself using his administrative credentials, or the space coffins in their official duty of cleaning up the bodies. He supposed that the slicer could open it as well, but ruled out any sort of foul play when he noticed that there was no strange grass near the door to the botany bay. He drifted further down that hallway, where the plants got thicker and thicker.

A little, white automaton was stuck in the vines of one, pushing with all of its might to get out. Still, Etienne drifted down further.

"Wait," said the slicer. "I don't want to go any further."

"Then stay behind," said Etienne. He continued to drift onwards.

"Couldn't we, you know, tie a rope around you, just in case you need to be pulled out?"

Etienne looked back. "I suppose we could do that, if it would make you feel better." He fed a line from his belt, handing it to her. "If you hear anything, or if I tug on the rope really hard three times, be ready to get out of here. I'll use the retractor and the thruster if I have to, but you'll need to use yours as well, and maybe find something to anchor yourself to."

"Do you expect trouble?"

"No. But I don't want to be caught unawares. And I don't want you to be afraid."

She held on to the line. "Okay. I'll be ready."

Etienne nodded before drifting onwards. As he went deeper and deeper, the plants grew thicker and thicker. Soon branches seemed to sprout from the walls, and vines drifted about, tangled through them. He half expect to see animals floating from one side of the hallway to the next.

Soon, he came to the yellow barrier. Beyond, the plants were their thickest, forming a green wall beyond the yellow one. He drifted as close as he dared. The green wall seemed to move as he drifted towards it. It seemed to twist and bend and come alive.

It changed its form to no longer resemble a mess of plant life, but instead rotated and merged to resemble the face that stared right into it. He panicked, unable to find his voice. His hands froze in terror, and his line drifted from his belt, a simple escape route impossible to use.

The plant mob formed arms, like branches on a tree, and sticks for fingers, reaching through the yellow wall, towards Etienne. The tips broke through the barrier, bypassing or otherwise passing the radioactivity scan. The touched Etienne's uniform, trying to grab hold of something. The touch broke the trans. Etienne shot his hand to his belt where he pushed the retract command. He also jetted his thrusters in the opposite way. He shot past the reaching branches and tangling vines behind him, and nearly ran into the slicer.

"Run," he said, not realizing the stupidity of trying to run in zero gravity. Still, they both jetted their thrusters and shot in the other direction. They wove through the labyrinthine tunnels of the ship, Etienne leading, leading to somewhere else, somewhere safe, somewhere automatic.

The wall of green passed through the yellow wall, but did not approach Etienne and the slicer as quickly as they ran, though the tiny blades of green, like a green five o'clock shadow lining the walls, reached with all their might upwards, unable to even brush the feet of those that passed by.

Etienne led the slicer to the holding bay, where the Green Blob still stood. He remembered, with a hint of embarrassment, that he had completely forgotten to ask her about this. Granted, there really hadn't been an opportunity. The green fuzz nearby the statue faded into nothingness at the feet of the Green Blob.

"What's this?" asked the slicer, looking at the statue. "It looks just like you."

"I've seen enough things resembling me today," Etienne said.

"What happened down there?" She tossed her thumb over her shoulder, pointing in the direction of the wall of green.

"Some weird plant thing. It started to look like me, and tried to get me."

"Yikes," she said. "Are we safe?"

Etienne looked at the floor surrounding the statue. The little green leaves seemed to stop right before the thing's feet. Those that touched the statue were withered and brown, and

those nearby were sickly. The whole area around the statue was free of plant life.

Etienne reached for his clipboard. He pulled up any information he could on Green Blobs. The slicer synched her screen to his to watch along. Apparently, the statues they formed had natural remedies against nature. To prevent these eternal monuments from falling into disrepair, they would not only be self-cleaning, and be highly uncomfortable for birds to rest upon, but also they carried a sort of plant toxin that prevented ivy and other mischievous plant life from making their residences there, with roots strong enough to crack the psuedostone of these statues.

When the slicer had had enough reading about Green Blob funerary practices, she flipped over to the security footage, trying to figure out what could have happened. She looked at the footage of the yellow barrier, zipping by until the green thing came to be. She followed it back, back into the yellow zone, towards the heart of the nuclear explosion. A little automaton led a space coffin through the airlock. She traced the space coffin back. The little automaton went in reverse towards the botany lab. There it pulled a guy out of the space coffin and let him float around the lab. She had it go forward from that point. The automaton put the body in the coffin and led the coffin through the yellow zone. Some time after it launched the coffin into space, the green thing started developing, and as it grew, it got larger and larger, spreading out so that it lined most of the ship's interior.

"Who was that guy?" she asked.

"That was chief botanist, Larry Nopell," said the ship.

"And what was his deal?"

"He was to be buried at space, a sampling of his favorite seeds with him, so that, if he were to crash upon a distant world, he would be able to provide it with his favorite botanical items as a last deed."

"Did any of those favorite seeds fall by the wayside?"

"It is likely that some seeds may have been caught in the wake of the space coffin or accompanying automaton."

Etienne looked up. "You mean to tell me that that thing was just a handful of seeds last night?"

"Affirmative."

He sighed. "It's growing pretty fast then."

<center>***</center>

They didn't want to move too far from the statue, as they felt safe there. "What do you think happened?" asked the slicer.

"I don't know. Maybe the radiation caused some rapid growth, but I think it's more than that. They had a lot of weird plants there."

"Like what?"

"One of them was magnetic."

"That doesn't seem to be a likely cause of what you saw, and why the ship is lined with this weird grass." She glanced down at the fuzzy leaves.

"May we have access to the botany lab files?" Etienne asked.

"I am sorry, that data is restricted."

Without a word, the slicer tapped away at her clipboard. Soon, the whole of the botany files filled Etienne's screen. She looked up at him with a wink and a shush. Etienne reviewed the material.

He found that the lab was working not only on plants with a larger iron content, but also on more thinking-style plants. These plants, they hoped, would be capable of responding to stimulus, and reacting immediately. The experiments found that while these plants were not good at communicating, they did seem to have some sort of neural activity. Also, plants nearby seemed to thrive, and seemed to have similar activity, even unmodified plants introduced to the new plants. These regular plants remained unchanged physiologically when taken away. In the end, while they got a plant capable of exhibiting neural activity akin to brainwaves, the plant was unable to do much beyond that, unable to communicate or sufficiently respond to stimulus. However, the nearby plants that caught the wave seemed to be, in general, healthier, or otherwise able to amplify its abilities, such as having a stronger smell, brighter colors, or larger fruit.

"So, we're dealing with a mutant psychic plant that's capable of controlling nearby plants?" asked the slicer.

"It seems that way," said Etienne. He looked down the corridor, awaiting the wall of green with a simulacrum of his face upon it to crawl into view. "It certainly seems that way."

And as if to help drive that point home, the shadows of long tendrils, arms, and legs were cast on the wall, as some terrible, frightening thing crawled down the corridors towards them. Etienne and the slicer drew closer to the statue, a sort of hero in essence, if not in form.

"But I'd take curious new life form, if I could," he finally said.

"Me too," said the slicer.

15. Rustle

The plant wall moved into view. Etienne peered over the shoulder of the statue before him. The plant thing, whose face resembled his own, crept towards the two. It reached out with its branchlike limbs, peering out through solid green eyes. It inched its way closer and close to Etienne and the slicer. In a lack of coordination, or a lack of understanding, it reached out its hands for what it took for Etienne, only to wrap its woody fingers around the statue.

The fingers hissed, as the statue seemed to burn away and wither the plant life that touched it. Etienne watched as the creature pulled back its pseudolimbs, almost as if in fear. It looked at the statue one last time before turning in on itself, and creeping the other way. The branches making up its arms slowly grew to their full size again, but still bore the marks of scarring, now looking less like arms, and looking more like gnarled tree branches.

Etienne and the slicer let out their breaths at the same time. "Was that it?" she asked.

"Yeah," said Etienne, breathing a bit regularly now.

"Why does everything weird around here look like you?"

"I have no idea. I've been trying to figure that out myself."

The slicer looked over at the statue, then down at the fuzzy grass lining the walls. "What do you think the plant thing wants?"

"I'm not sure. It tried to grab me or something back before we jetted down here. I'm not sure if it was curious, or if it was trying to eat me."

"Maybe it was curious to see if you tasted good."

Etienne rolled his eyes, "We need to figure out what to do. We can't have this unknown plant thing lurching about without making some effort to contain it, and learn what it wants."

"But how can we contain it? It's bigger than us!"

"Well, we could try controlling the environment. Plants don't like fire. We could use fire to drive it back."

"That seems a little primitive, plus, wouldn't that be really bad if the plant was surrounded by an atmosphere of mostly oxygen?"

"Why would that be the case?"

"You know," said the slicer, "because that's what plants exhale. I'd imagine that the mess of plants making up that thing would have a little bubble of oxygen surrounding it. While it's a good idea, it could come back to burn us. Let's try something else, a little less angry-villager."

Etienne thought of this a minute. "We could decompress the ship, starving it of atmosphere."

"That might work. We'd need pressure suits, and preferably, a steady supply of living resources from the ship, until we were sure that the thing was dead. But, do we want to kill it? Maybe it's peaceful, and just wanted to communicate. Maybe we should try to corral it somewhere, so we can chat."

"Well, could we use the vacuum to corral it to some sort of pod?"

"I suppose we could. Are there any places where we could sequester off this plant thing?"

"There are an array of potential holding cells," said the ship. "Standing by for further orders."

"Great," said the slicer. "Let's do that." She looked at Etienne. "First things first: let's get outselves some pressure suits."

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The two drifted cautiously through the ship. They made their way towards the pressure suit cache. The doors were coated in a thin, green fuzz. "Open the doors, please," said Etienne.

"I am unable to open the doors. They appear to be stuck."

"Stuck?" he asked.

"Affirmative."

"We need to open these doors," said the slicer. "Look for something to pry them open with."

They looked around nearby. Etienne found a long piece of metal sticking out from the plant tangles. He yanked it free. He met the slicer back at the door, where the wedged the piece of metal into the crack in the door before prying it open. Once the plants blocking the door had been pried apart enough, the door hissed open.

The suits within, however, made them frown.

"They're covered in that green stuff," said the slicer. She reached for a helmet before Etienne stopped her.

"Don't. We have no idea if these plants are poisonous to the touch. Let's not risk it. Let's think of something else."

She thought for a moment. "We could see what that statue has in it to make it kill the plants."

"Let's go," he said. The two drifted back towards the hold. "Where is the central mass of the creature right now?" he asked the ship.

"The unidentified plant creature is in the yellow zone," said the ship.

"Keep us updated about its status and position, please," he said.

"Affirmative."

Etienne and the slicer returned to the statue. The slicer scanned it with her clipboard. "Oh, hey, it's the captain of the *Eventide*," she said after seeing his profile come up. "So this is what happens to Green Blobs when they die."

"Let's figure out what he is, and worry less about who he was for now, okay?"

"Roger," she said. She scrutinized the readout. "He's a very salty fellow, it seems. His best quality is his chemical makeup of sodium tetrasulfate, which makes him quite unpleasant to be around, if one happens to be a plant. Otherwise, he's just a little irritating."

"Is that something that the ship can replicate?"

"My replicators are in conservation mode, which would require senior officer authorization to override, as the leaving of conservation mode settings may harm or otherwise negatively impact the quality or quantity of life onboard the ship."

"Is that just a really long 'no'?" asked the slicer.

"Affirmative."

"So, if we want to use this to our advantage, we'd have to use what we got."

"Affirmative."

"Can you help me lift this thing, then?" she asked Etienne. He drifted down. They both put on their work gloves before lifting the green statue. Carrying the thing between them, they drifted down the hallway, towards a more suitable environment for staving off the plant thing. They drifted back towards the quarters, where the green fuzz still had yet to creep. Setting the statue nearby the door, where it stuck to the ground, they decided that this would be the most comfortable place to have reconnaissance while trying to figure out what to do with the plant.

"This will at least hold it back, until we can do something about it," said the slicer. "But how can we reason with it if we don't know if it's capable of reasoning?"

"Maybe we can try communicating with it with a drone," Etienne suggested. The slicer pulled up her clipboard and tapped the screen a bit. Soon, an automaton was drifting through the corridors towards the yellow zone. The two watched the automaton's optical sensor on the clipboard screen. It drifted up to the barrier, passing through it with a little crackle. The unit drifted through the green-lined corridors until it came upon the mass of the plant thing. The plant thing turned towards the drone.

"We wish you no harm," said Etienne through the clipboard microphone. The speaker on board the automaton relayed his words to the plant. "We only wish to better understand your motives."

The plant thing reached out a wooden hand, grasping its fingers around the automaton. It placed the automaton against a wall, where green ivy wrapped around it, sticking it there. Through the camera, on the other wall, they saw other things bound there: other automatons, some devices, and even some crewmember bodies. Etienne wasn't sure, but it almost looked like the plant thing was attaching them to the walls so that it could study them, as if it had set up a laboratory to study man and machine, ready to learn about the things that were previously learning about it.

One such other automaton lay strapped on a table. The plant creature moved over to it, a sharp blade of metal in its hands. It began to dissect the tiny robot. The slicer killed the video feed.

"So, it wants to do a bit more than say 'Hi,' it wants to get to know us better as well," the slicer said. She looked a bit grim while she made a weak attempt at humor.

"We can no longer assumed that it has no intentions of harming us. We must assume that it means us ill-will, or at least, will not be beneficial for our continued survival. We must do something to stop it, and if necessary, we must put an end to it, especially if in that end, it is us or it."

"I agree. But what should we do? Toss the captain here into its mouth before shooting it with a harpoon gun?"

Etienne blinked. "Were would we get a harpoon gun?"

"Never mind," she said. "What I want to know, though, is, how can we get rid of this thing? The suits are unusable, fire's out, so it seems our only option is to use the captain here, and make this problem go away."

"I must advise against such an action," said the computer.

"What?" asked Etienne.

"The plant has compromised sections of the ship's hull in the yellow zone, thus affecting my hull integrity. Any attempts to destroy the creature may result in dissolving the plant matter plugging these holes in the hull, thus, filling the hull with holes, and sucking you two out into the cold depths of space."

"That rules that out," said the slicer. "Any other ideas?"

Etienne got a curious gleam in his eyes, "Well, if we can't kill the thing, let's at least clean it up a bit."

He tapped on his clipboard, developing a plan.

<center>***</center>

After a few minutes of working, the slicer couldn't handle the suspense any longer. "What's your plan?"

Etienne looked up. "If we can't kill the plant, then, we'll just have to tidy up around it a bit."

She looked at him, her head tilted sideways.

"You see, I wasn't always an astronavigational system engineer," he said.

"Yeah. Your profile said that you were a janitor or something."

"A sanitation engineer," he corrected.

"Yeah, that. What's the difference?"

"A heavy background in mathematics and science, among other things," he replied.

"So what are we going to do? Pine-Sol it to death?"

"Close. I'm thinking we could make some sort of detergent using our dear friend the captain here, and then apply it liberally to the troubled spots. If we can get the plant thing confined to the yellow zone, we can keep it safely secured until we reach a safe harbor, where a team of specialists can tend to it."

"Specialists?"

"Combat-level sanitation engineers," he said.

"So, what do we do?"

He looked at the Green Blob statue. "We need to do a little bit of chemistry."

The two worked the numbers, determining the concentration needed to be lethal, but to make the solution go the furthest. When they had calculated the best water to Green Blob ratio, they broke off a piece here and chipped off a chunk there, and tossed it in a self-mixing atomizer with just enough water. Etienne spot-checked an area, which resulted in the little fuzzy leaves wilting immediately.

"Nice," said the slicer.

The two went towards the forest. As they drifted past the botany lab, they each slapped a manual lock on the door. Etienne also had the ship position an automaton to keep watch there and fire at anything plant-based and moving. For good measure, they applied a dose of their herbicide to the botany lab door. Still further, they drifted onwards toward the yellow zone. Every time a branch got too close, they would spray it, and it would wither back.

Finally, they reached the translucent yellow barrier that separated the radioactive portion of the ship from the safer parts. There, the wall of plant met them. It's Etienne-like head stared

back, it's arms at its side, tense, and ready for whatever Etienne might toss at it.

With a quick flip, Etienne soaked the walls of the corridor with the Green Blob solution; the plant thing made a shrieking noise before backing off. The corridor around the yellow barrier now showed the metal of the ship, and with that, the latches that Etienne had hoped to see.

"Now, we need to get something here to prevent it from coming back into the ship. Can we get a thick door here?" he asked. "Preferably one that can block radio waves?"

Two automata complied, each carrying half of a very large, and very massive door. They snapped it in place just before the yellow area. With the door in place, the plants behind them seemed to wilt or go limp. No longer did the plant thing control them. The automata that installed the doors sat there, weapons drawn, ready to fire upon any escaping plantlife.

Through the viewing glass, the face watched Etienne and the slicer apply the herbicide across more of the ship, killing the once healthy plants that lined the interior. Just to be safe, they had another door put just between the botany lab and the rest of the habitable parts of the ship.

The slicer laughed as they sprayed the last bits of plant life with the herbicide. The leaves withered and died, turning to a sort of dusty dirt.

"I think we're safe," said Etienne. "That door should prevent it from getting through, and the drones should keep any attempts at getting through at bay."

The slicer let out a sigh of relief. "Now all we need to do is wait until we get to the next harbor." She looked at her clipboard. "Any day now."

They checked and double-checked the doors, keeping a careful eye on them at all times, just in case the plant thing would try something, but it just sat there, looking through the viewing pane in the doors, observing a situation in which it had most likely lost.

"Let's have dinner," said Etienne. The slicer nodded, and the two of them drifted towards the dining hall. The posted menu had advertised salad, but the ship, out of some programmed sensitivity towards recent events, substituted something less planty and more meaty.

The two ate in silence, both smiling. Finally, Etienne spoke. "I feel great," he said. "Like we beat a dragon, or something, like those guys in the fantasy stories do."

"At least, we put it in a pen," said the slicer, her mouth half full of what she was eating.

"I feel electric," he said.

"Me too."

They spent the rest of the evening watching videos in the entertainment deck. Occasionally, one of them would check the clipboard to check the status of the plant thing. By the third movie, the slicer said, "He's gone."

Etienne checked, and sure enough, the creepy duplicate of his visage no longer stared out through the window.

"I wonder what he's up to," said Etienne idly before they returned to their video.

16. Klaxon

It was some time later that night that Etienne was awakened by a dream-shattering sound. "Master Disk box open," said the ship to accompany the alarm.

Etienne came right out of his dream and into the waking world, the sound having the same psychosomatic effect as the jets of cold water in his morning sojourn.

He jumped out of bed and tapped the screen on his mirror display. "Show me the plant thing," he said. As he made this demand, the slicer drifted in through his doorway.

"What's going on?"

"The plant thing," said Etienne. "I think it's got the ship's Master Disks."

The plant thing came onto the screen. In its stick hands, it held the Master Disks. It studied them with its opaque green eyes. When it finished scrutinizing them, it stuck them into its mouth, like two very thin doughnuts.

"What's it doing?" asked the slicer.

"I'm not sure," said Etienne. "Trying to read the disks?"

After a while, the plant thing regurgitated the disks, now no longer golden, but a metallic green. It tapped the console to open the platter on which to put these disks. Setting the green disks into the platter, the plant thing pushed the door closed, feeding the tampered disks to the ship.

"Mounting Master Disks," said the ship.

"Cancel!" shouted Etienne.

"Abort!" shouted the slicer.

"Verifying integrity," said the ship.

The slicer looked at Etienne. "Maybe if he tampered with them, the integrity scan will fail."

"Integrity verified," said the ship.

"Maybe the disks haven't been tampered with," suggested Etienne.

"Local disk corrupted. Restoring from master."

The slicer looked at Etienne and shrugged. "I guess we'd better hope the plant thing didn't make any major changes."

"I think we'd better put on those pressure suits."

They rushed out into the hall where, bypassing the PEM Scan, they made their way to the pressure suit closet. The door wouldn't open for them, as they hadn't been approved for duty yet. The slicer did something to the door, and the lack of following standard procedure seemed to no longer be a valid reason for leaving the door locked. The closet slid open and they each grabbed a suit and made haste to put them on.

"Set your respirator to conservative," said Etienne. "That way, we can still use the cabin air as long as it's not poisonous or unbreathable."

"Roger," said the slicer, flipping the switch on her helmet. Their voices sounded tinny in the speakers set by each others' ears. "How much time do we have until the plant changes have made their way into the ship?"

"The last restore took all day, so we might have that long. Most of the ship's processes are still running in memory, so we can still have some level of control over ship functions until then, but be wary of ingesting anything without checking it for toxicity. I don't know how the plant thing modified the Master Disks, but I don't want to find out by choking to death on some indigestible food."

She nodded and set her food port for "paranoid."

"What should we do until then?"

"Once the ship has been reimaged, it may be hostile. We have to make every effort we can to prevent it from harming us. Maybe we can ensure manual overrides for things like our doors and the automata."

"Good thinking," she said. She pulled out her clipboard and started tapping on the screen. "Locating all the automata."

"What are you going to do with them?"

"You'll see." She tapped a few more buttons before flashing their firmware with a version modified on the fly. "You'll see."

Etienne took the initiative to modify the doors, adding standalone biometric scanners to he outside. After programming in his credentials and the slicer's, he broke the programming boards, locking the devices to only those two profiles.

"I'm finding it harder and harder to trust technology, these days," he said. They drifted through the ship, looking for any other ways they could prepared against the impending change to the ship.

After harvesting a supply of premade food and drink capsules, storing those in their quarters, they sat around, ready to wait out the rest of the status bar.

"If we survive this," said the slicer, "I'll be our story will be made into a video or something."

Etienne laughed. "Who'd believe a giant plant thing would take over a ship?"

"I don't think I would without having seen it myself."

Etienne pulled up the status bar on his clipboard. "What a smart thing," he said.

"Let's hope it only wants to pursue harmless knowledge," the slicer said in response.

***

"Restore complete," said the ship. "Unidentified creatures onboard. Deploying scanners."

Etienne looked up, listening for the buzzing sound of the scanners. According to his suit readings, the air was still breathable, with no signs of toxins.

The scanners flew by, shooting little green scanning lasers all along the ship corridors. They scanned Etienne and the slicer before going on their way.

"Pests detected," said the ship. "Deploying exterminators."

Etienne stood up. "We need to hide," he said.

"Relax," said the slicer.

"What?"

"You'll see."

Etienne heard the exterminators churning down the hallway. These adept killing

machines were fully capable of removing, through any means necessary, any creature deemed a pest, be it a tiny bug, or a fairly substantial regenerative space whale. They were capable of humane catching and releasing, but in most cases, this feature, being underdocumented in the accompanying material, was usually left unactivated. Since they did not carry nets or sticky boxes, and instead carried what looked to be carbines, Etienne imagined that the humane mode still remained unactivated in their case.

They aimed their carbines at Etienne and the slicer, and with an elaborate series of weapon cocking, they fired. Etienne looked up when he realized that he had not died. Floating nearby was a small block of cheese. Another one floated in the air beside the slicer.

The two exterminators turned and puttered in the other direction.

"See?" she said.

"I don't get it," said Etienne, holding up the cheese."

"These are sedative-laced cheesed. They put them here, hoping we'd eat them, thinking they were food."

Etienne looked at the slicer, his eyebrows arched in confusion.

"Well, it sure beats them shooting us," she said. She tossed her piece of cheese away. "I don't think it even has enough drugs in it to make us woozy. Maybe if we were mice."

Etienne still said nothing. He drifted away from the cheese, leaving the little cube spinning in his wake.

"Hey, at least they'll leave us alone until we eat the cheese."

<center>***</center>

Etienne looked at the atmospheric readouts on his suit. The carbon dioxide quantities were gradually increasing. "I think the plant is trying to get comfortable," he said.

The slicer looked up from her clipboard. "He's locked us out of the system," she said. "Let me see if I can get past that." She tapped away on the panel for a few minutes before a pleasant chime rang. "For now, we have standard crew access, but it doesn't guarantee that this ship is under any pretense to be nice to us."

"Great," said Etienne. He was glad to not be locked out of his clipboard, even if he had read-only access to most things now. "Thanks."

He admired the skill of the slicer. Nothing artificially bound by a computer could get by her, provided she had the necessary hardware and motivation. He thought back to the Green Blob, now missing an arm and a leg, sacrificed to help eradicate the plant. He thought of asking her to figure that one out for him, but realized that the present situation should probably demand the most of their attention presently.

"Now we need to try to get better access, so we can try to roll back the ship to a previous state. But first, we have to do something about those disks," he said.

She nodded. "I can try to work my way up through the tiers of credentials. But if that plant does any more funny business, we'll be back at square one. It's probably for the best that we keep under the radar until we have more control over the situation. We need those disks first before we can forge ourselves promotions."

"But how can we get those disks? The area's hot with radioactivity?"

The slicer looked at her clipboard. "I guess one of us needs to do it, so the other one can make it to the harbor."

"You want me to do it!?" asked Etienne.

"No," she said, sheepishly, "I was going to volunteer. I mean, you're supposed to be here and all. I might as well do something to pay my passage." She laughed. "Besides, maybe cloning's improved since we left? They can just bring me back." She mimed pushing a button before saying "beep!"

Etienne crossed his arms. "No, it's out of the question," he said. "As the highest ranking officer aboard this ship, it is my responsibility and duty to do what I can to stop that thing, radiation be damned!"

She held up her clipboard to show him the screen. "Technically, I outrank you now," she said, showing him the forged credentials. "So, it's on me."

"Let's be realistic," he said, "I am the only *actual* person of rank aboard this ship, therefore, I should be the one."

She sighed. "It's clear we're at a stalemate arguing over who's going to face death," she said. "Let's flip a coin or something to see who doesn't get to do it."

"Fine," said Etienne. He felt around in his pressure suit pockets. "Do you have a coin? I don't seem to have any change on me."

The slicer looked around, her eyes landing on the cube of cheese. In some ways, it greatly resembled a six-sided die. She floated over to it, picking it up. The cheese was Swiss, and as such, it had a different number of holes on each side. She held it up. "Will this do?"

Etienne looked at it. "Let's make sure it's uniform density," he said. He pulled a tube of sealant from the utility belt at his side. "Here," he said, reaching out his hand.

She handed it over, where Etienne filled the holes with the sealant, offsetting the off-white of the cheese with a clear-green acrylic. When he was done, he checked the density. "Good enough," he said.

She took the die back and together they looked at all the sides. It wasn't as similar to a die in the placement of holes, but the sides were unique enough to indicate something akin to the numbers represented by the sides of a die. "Okay, I have the side with the big hole, the side with the two small holes, and the side with no holes, okay? And you have the side where the one hole starts, the side where the other hole ends, and the side with the tiny dot of a hole, okay?"

"Okay. And the winner is the one that gets to face death?"

"Yes."

"One question, though," Etienne said, looking at the die. "How will we determine where it lands?"

The slicer blinked. "I suppose we could just toss it in the air and see which side is facing out when it hits something." She swore. "Why does everything have to be so complicated in zero-G?"

"Let's just try. Maybe we can do best two out of three," he said. "Let's see how it goes."

She tossed the die, which spun wildly in the air. As the air resistance slowed down its rotational velocity, and also drew closer to a nearby corridor wall, where it slowly inched closer and closer. The two watched with rapt attention as the cheese cube fell closer and closer.

And then it was gone, replaced by a blinding flash of light, carbon scoring on the surface on which the cube was about to land, and the faint odor of burnt Swiss lingering in the air.

"I think we should run again," said Etienne. The slicer nodded before jetting off. Etienne followed behind her. Following them was yet another exterminator automaton, this one not set for a harmless catch and release. This one ready to kill.

"I thought you got all of them," said Etienne as the jetted through the corridors.

"I did too. Either the plant thing overrode me, or else, there was one I couldn't find!" She pulled out her clipboard while jetting through the hall, twisting and turning through the corridors as she tapped out on the display. Around then, lasers struck, but never managed to hit.

"I can't figure this one out," she said. "I thought I got them all."

"The plant must have unfettered access to the ship," said Etienne. "And it won't rest until we're exterminated."

They reached a dead end. Using their air brakes, they both came to a sudden stop. The slicer still tapped at her clipboard. The exterminator drifted into the hallway. It approached the two, a sadistic gleam, if a robot could have such, in its optical sensor. It was the cat, and these two were its mice.

"I'll try to override its controls," said the slicer, tapping on the clipboard. "I think I can get it." The automaton cocked its laser rifle, a purely cosmetic act used entirely to intimidate its prey.

"Don't bother," said Etienne. Before she could look up to see why, Etienne grabbed the clipboard from her hands and tossed it at the automaton's head. The spinning tablet destroyed the array of sensors, and the robot was incapable of detecting life without them. While they drifted past the very confused robot, the slicer said, "You owe me a new clipboard."

"Fine," he said. "You can use mine until we can get the ship to grant you a new one." He handed the device to her.

"No more crazy stunts, though," she said. "We need the backup of the ship you have stored here. Without it, we can't restore it, we can only tweak it."

"Fine," said Etienne. They drifted along in silence for a while. Finally Etienne spoke, "You know, though, just as the cheese was about to fall, I could have sworn it was going to land on the side with the really small hole."

"Psh," said the slicer. "In your dreams. We'll just have to find something else that can be used for random number generation."

<p style="text-align:center">***</p>

They made their way back to the quarters, where they managed to find the blue disc that once gave the slicer an identity, and equally hid that identity from others.

"We can flip this, I guess," she said. "But first, let's make a game plan."

She used Etienne's clipboard to bring up a map of the ship. A green dot pulsed in the red dot that used to be the yellow dot.

"We know the plant is most likely there, but we need to figure out what we're going to do when one of us has to face it. I mean, it'll be dumb to just run down there, guns blazing, if that's all we have."

"You have a point," said Etienne. "I suppose we could try some more herbicide."

"It might be expecting that. We need to do something sneaky. Maybe we should just steal the Master Disks, and like jettison them into space. Then it can't get them, and then we can work on overriding the overrides and get the ship back into a state where it isn't always trying to kill us."

"Okay. So," he said, tapping on the screen, "the nearest airlock in the red zone is here, but that's also where there's a plant wall between the atmosphere and the vacuum. I suppose if we made a sort of herbicide bomb, we could blast through, bringing the Master Disks with us. Then, full jets until the ship is a tiny dot, and, I suppose, hitting the autodestruct, or else just letting the universe take you, or me. Whoever wins."

"Okay. Let's flip, then."

"Ready? The watermark side is heads. I'll let you call it. Whatever side's up when it hits that ground." She indicated relatively downward for the ground.

"All right. Let's do it."

The flipped the disc in the air. "Tails," said Etienne.

17. Shuffle

The disc bounced off the relative ceiling before making its slow descent to the relative floor. Etienne and the slicer watched as the tiny disc rotated, alternating from watermark to blank, until finally, with a barely imperceptible ding, it landed to the ground.

The tiny disc had landed watermark-side-down. Etienne looked up. "I guess it's me, then," he said. "When should we start?"

The slicer frowned at the disc before looking back up at Etienne. "Whenever you're ready."

Together, they mixed a fresh batch of the herbicide. Etienne held the pressured atomizer in his hands.

"You nervous?" asked the slicer.

"Totally," he said.

"Your suit should shield you from most of the radiation, but keep in mind, the deeper you go, the hotter it will get. After enough time exposed to that radiation, suit or not, you're going to glow in the dark."

Etienne took a deep breath. "I expect you to play it straight from now on, okay?"

"I will," she said. "If you can take care of this plant thing, I'll spend the rest of my time here taking the mandatory introductory training modules."

"Good," he said.

He slung the herbicide canister over his back, grabbing a wrench that was floating by. He gave a glance back to the slicer before drifting off towards the red zone.

"Wait!" she said.

He turned. "Yeah?"

She raised her hand to her helmeted face before quickly extending it outwards. Etienne heard her make a puckering sound through the helmet speaker.

"You know," she said. "For luck. And since we can't take these helmets off."

Etienne smiled. "Right back at you."

He drifted off towards the red zone, going through the corridors. As he made his way towards the double doors, he found he had to be mindful of hostile automata, occasionally hiding behind panels or darting out of site before their optical sensors could detect him.

As he entered the last bend to get before the strong double doors, he saw something he hadn't expected to see. Before him floated the blue ape, the Flaxblug, the evening captain, now tinged a bit green, but otherwise appearing alive, if only partially. The empty eyes beheld Etienne, seeing him not as some crewmember, but instead as an enemy. The ape growled and arched his back. Etienne noticed a green vine poking from the back of its head.

Before Etienne could hoist the herbicide container and spray the thing, the blue ape rammed into his body, a jutting force that he could feel through the suit. He knocked his helmeted head against the corridor walls just before everything began to grow black.

***

Etienne awoke, his head throbbing. The viewplate of his helmet was cracked, but according to a suit diagnostic, it was not lethal. Still, his head was killing him. The suit assured him of no serious injuries, and that it was on top of any potential concussions.

He awoke where he had left the slicer. He called for her, but she did not respond. He even drifted around, looking for her, but only managed to find the discarded clipboard. Using the locator in her suit, Etienne pulled up the ship-sim to find out where she was.

His heart sank as he saw the tiny blue dot sitting right in the middle of the larger red dot, the blue dot right next to the green dot of the plant. Etienne swore. He tapped around on his clipboard, trying to figure out what was going on. He noticed a few new apps, one of which let him see the ship through the optical sensors.

He tapped it, to which the ship-sim lit up a bunch of grey dots. He tapped the one near the blue and green dot. There, the optical sensor of the tiny automaton strapped to the wall had a nice view of the slicer. She too was tangled in a web of vines, but still wearing her helmet, minimizing her exposure to radiation, or so Etienne hoped. The plant thing made ready to study the living example of a human, and so it made ready its evisceration table. He noticed, though, that it no longer bore the eyes of plantlike orbs. Now its eyes resembled the optical sensors of the automata, most likely due to their higher resolution over simple plant eyes.

Etienne needed to stop it, even if it meant exposing them both to deadly radiation. He couldn't let this plant thing operate a rogue ship that looked and verified as one that was legitimate. He just needed a way to get past those sentries.

The blue disc drifted by, the watermarked side and the non-watermarked side spun in rapid succession before his eyes. He grabbed it from midair, looking at it. It bore a very strong resemblance to a ship token, both in size and the visible aspects of its input and output. However, it varied enough such the similarities had evaded him prior. He popped out his own token, the one recently forged by the slicer, and popped this new one in place.

His viewscreen now filled with several options, indicating various levels of stealth, including one that made one invisible to the naked eye, as well as the gamut of . He studied them before realizing that these discs were way more than just simple tokens. In fact, the slicer was underutilizing hers.

He looked back at the screen on the clipboard. The slicer was starting to come to, and was slowly growing more aware of her immediate fate. Either through luck or through some intuition, he she looked over at the optical sensor through which Etienne was watching, her eyes full of pleading, almost shouting, "Help!"

Etienne wasted no time in putting together a plan.

***

The pressure suit with the cracked viewscreen drifted closer to the door, where the revenant blue ape stood guard. It saw the figure approach before lunging at it as it had done before. The figure went for the herbicide canister, but the ape knocked it out of his hands. The ape then preceded to pummel the figure. However, as the ape made light work of the increasingly damaged suit, the canister floated up behind it and gave it a liberal spray. The ape

went slack, drifting into the middle of the corridor.

The figure got up, the suit badly dented in places. It drifted towards the door, where it placed a manual override on the passage. The canister drifted to the figure's hands before it passed through the red barrier beyond.

Etienne saw the mess of plants beyond the barrier. He saw the massive plant thing examining its bladed implements, selecting which one to use for this particular evisceration.

The plant thing looked up at the pressure suit. It made a strange hissing sound as it crept towards the figure, until it saw the canister in its hands. With an inaudible command, the automata knocked the canister from the hands of the figure. It drifted across the room. With a smug look, the plant thing grabbed for the arm of the suit, pulling it towards itself. Making a last-minute change to its evisceration plans, it put the battered suit down onto the table and strapped it in with some nearby vines.

While it worked, it didn't see the bottle of herbicide floating up towards the slicer, spraying the vines that bound her. They dissolved away and she drifted forward to be caught by Etienne as he dropped the cloaking mode from his new suit. She wasn't responsive, so Etienne strapped a tether to her suit and rocketed themselves out of there. The plant looked up just in time to see them leave. Confused, it looked back at the suit that it thought housed Etienne.

The green face of Etienne stared back at the other green face of Etienne. The plant thing hissed, pounding a wooden hand on the table.

<center>***</center>

The slicer came to just as they were quite some distance from the ship. She saw Etienne towing her along. "What happened?" she asked.

Etienne looked back. "Have you ever had to deal with a really difficult stain?" he asked.

"No," she said. They slowed near the quarters, where the clipboard sat, ready to use.

"Well, sometimes, you have to trick it, make it think you've lost, and then, without warning, you have to blast it with some powerful cleaner."

He picked up the clipboard. The slicer saw on the display what the viewport of the other suit saw.

"I put a little surprise in the other suit. I think our plant friend will get a big kick out of it." He tapped a few buttons on the clipboard. The screen went white, and a rumble echoed through the ship.

The slicer looked up at Etienne.

"Our friend the captain decided to take on the mission for us, and he ultimately decided to detonate his suit. If my calculations are accurate, I would estimate that his herbicidal remains are coating the plant thing, and that the plant thing is beginning to die."

The slicer smiled before passing out again.

<center>***</center>

When she opened her eyes once more, Etienne was by her side. She sat in the medical bay. "I've managed to stabilize you," he said. "But if we can't get the ship back to our side, I think

you're a goner. You absorbed too much radiation."

She nodded, reaching her hand for the clipboard. He handed it to her. Between shallow breaths and phlegmatic coughs, she weakly tapped on the screen. After a few more taps, the status bar started to grow, attempting to restore the ship back to its previous state.

"The disks," she said. "Where are they?"

The sound of a shrieking howl prevented Etienne from answering.

"It's still alive?" he asked. He turned to drift out through the medical bay doors.

"Wait," she said, barely a whisper.

He turned. She blew him another kiss.

"For luck?"

She nodded.

"Right back at you," he said. He picked up the wrench as he passed through the door.

***

That the creature was still alive was no doubt. Whether the creature was dying or weakened, though, was another. He couldn't be sure of the particle spread of the exploding pressure suit, or even if the fire may have neutralized the herbicide. He chided himself for being too showy. Just like cleaning the floor with some new-fangled floor cleaner, he'd realize that it was nowhere near as good as getting down in there, scrubbing the spot out.

He went through the double doors, closing them securely behind him. Passing through the red zone, he hoped he wouldn't have to be exposed to radiation too long. He gripped his wrench, now starting to feel a bit warm through the insulation of his gloves.

The plant creature, he saw, was greatly diminished, but still alive. It saw him through its broken optical sensors and shrieked, shaking the hull of the ship as it did so. Etienne wasted no time in striking it with the wrench. Once he got past, he made a thorough search for the Master Disks. The glowing, green things were floating freely, ready to be used if the need arose.

He found the box, keeping an eye on the feebly plant thing, and scooped the disks up. Sealing the box, he slapped a manual lock on it, breaking off the dial. He tossed the box to the plant thing that was trying to paddle through the air to get to him. The box knocked it back, the force of the impact not being resisted by anything on the opposite side.

The plant thing struck a wall with a thud. Etienne started to feel a wave of nausea come over him. He needed to act quickly. The airlock stood by the plant thing, now covered over with a thick webbing of vines, ensuring that the life of the creature was a dependency for the life of the crew, not accounting, of course, for some doors now sealing the rest of the ship off. Etienne found the canister, still having a bit of a charge left, only bearing a few carbon scores from the explosion. He sprayed the vines, causing them to weaken, causing the cabin to lose pressure.

The plant thing lunged at him, the box stuck in the tangle of vines that comprised its body. Etienne turned in time to see it approach. He ducked with no time to spare just as the last of the vines tore away, sucking the plant thing out into the cold vacuum of space. Etienne, having nothing to hold onto, was sucked out too. With little time to react, he grabbed on to the closest thing at hand: a vine. Likewise, the plant thing grabbed onto the closest thing it could find: Etienne's ankle.

While the rushing atmosphere continually pulled them both out, Etienne felt he was losing his grip on the vine. With his other hand, he struck the wooden hand of the plant thing, freeing its grip from his ankle, the bark and the woodchips flying off in every direction. The thing released him and was sucked away into space. Etienne, now weak from the radiation, could barely hold onto anything anymore. He released the hammer which drifted off into the same direction as the plant and the Master Disks. The creature caught the wrench, studying it like it had studied everything before, doing one last thing before the vacuum of space asphyxiated it.

As it studied the wrench, tiny fronds along its body seemed drawn to the metal.

Etienne barely noticed this as the last of the atmosphere emptied from the cabin, and he dangled limply on the end of a vine, now holding his hand more than his hand was holding it.

18. Whoosh

Etienne awoke some time later. His head was swimming, and he tried to get his bearings. His arms and legs were strapped to a table, loosely restrained so as to hold him against the surface, rather than to prevent him from willingly moving about.

He looked around. The slicer floated by his side, looking down on him, smiling. "I see you're alive," she said.

Etienne nodded. He felt as if his body had been poked, prodded, taken apart, and then reassembled, and maybe repeated a few times, just for good measure.

She looked at his medical readout on her clipboard. "You and I both got some pretty bad radiation poisoning."

"How..." he began to ask.

"How are you still alive?" she said.

He nodded.

"The ship. I was able to refresh the runtime to correspond with the last good backup we had. Once you got rid of those disks and that plant thing, the process finished. The living creature safety overrides activated, and the bots that were once trying to kill us were now working to save us. They brought you into the medical bay some time after that, and the ship ran some diagnostics on us, injecting us with some liquids and doing some various processes on us, I guess rebuilding us or something. You know: the parts the radiation messed with."

Etienne smiled. "It's good to be alive," he managed with a wheeze.

The slicer smiled back. "I hope you don't mind, but I was looking at your medical readouts when you were asleep."

"Anything interesting?"

"Yes, actually," she said.

"What's that?"

She considered how to put what she had to say. "Well, it's your brain."

He sat up, the restraints loosening to allow him to sit. They still managed to hold him against the table. "What about my brain?"

She paused again. "Well, have you ever wondered why you were always good at puzzles? Why your brain could solve problems without needing a calculator? Why your mental score in the PEM Scan was always higher than everybody else?"

He shook his head. "No, not really. I just always imagined that I was smart."

She shook her head. "Well, you're smart, but it's not because you were some child prodigy, or anything. You had a bit of an advantage."

Etienne was more alert now. "Well, tell me what it is already!" he said.

"Your brain," she said. "Is a computer."

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Etienne held the ship-sim in his hand. He populated the ship with a full crew, some

dignitaries, and some stowaways. One of the stowaways wore a stealth suit, known for its abilities at shielding all manner of waves, including electromagnetic. The ship, of course, was shielded, and, in this new simulation, so was his sim's brain, a piece of hardware stuck in the center of a skull where the meat of a brain would have been.

He introduced an event: a magnetic pulse, strong enough to kill somebody by messing with the iron in their blood and the electrical systems of their brain. He let the simulation run. One by one, each and every one of the crewmembers, guests, and stowaways died as their charged blood rushed their tender brains. The only ones that were spared were the stowaway in the stealth suit, the ship, and the man with the electronic brain, shielded just as much as a ship's precious magnetic discs, and a slicer's shielded helmet.

The profile fit. He was a cyborg. But, he didn't *feel* like a cyborg. He thought, then, about his life, his memories, his emotions, and wondered if they were all real, if this body was just a husk, moved around by electronic impulses. He felt aware of himself, but wondered further if that was just some manifestation brought on by his brain's programming. He wondered who his maker was, who this body used to belong to, and whether or not he had a soul.

The slicer drifted up behind him. "Heavy stuff, huh?"

"Yeah," he said. "There's just so much I want to know."

"Like what? You've been this way for as long as you remember. You have memories, you feel, you laugh, you learn, you're capable of doing a wide variety of things that most machines can't even begin to accomplish."

"Yeah, but..." he trailed off, not sure of what to say. She held his hand.

"This hand," she said, "is a hand of flesh and blood." She placed his hand on his chest. "Within here beats of heart as human as mine." The pulsing of his heart drifted through his hand. "The only difference between you and the rest of the humans out there is the extra hardware you have up there. But has that ever held you back? Have you ever felt anything less than what you have always felt? Anything different? To you, being you was being human, and you had tons of people to compare yourself against. Sure, you may have had better cognitive skills, but you were the same as everybody else in every other way, and nobody would have realized that unless they got a scan of your brain."

"Yeah, but..." he tried to say again.

"But nothing. If you used to wake up every morning thinking you were a human, and every other human you compared yourself against made you feel even more human, then it doesn't matter what you have up there." She pointed to his head. "It matters what you have here." She pointed to his chest. "You're as human as I am, I'm sure of it."

"But do I have a soul?" he asked.

"Do any of us have a soul? Scientists tell us we don't have a soul, that everything we face is due to chemical reactions in our brains, or, in your case, some sophisticated algorithm capable of emulating all those beautiful chemical reactions. Theologians tell us that we do have a soul, and that we need to keep it regularly clean, because when the body stops functioning, the soul moves on, either to something very, very good, or something very, very bad, or, in some fridge cases, something very, very similar. Philosophers say we might have souls, as will musicians, and artists, and poets, that we have this creative thing in us, the unknowable thing in us that can't be defined."

"Sort of like Gödel's incompleteness theorems. We're incapable of fully realizing ourselves, and that part that we can't realize is our soul, because it's a metaphysical aspect that requires our understanding of a state higher than our present state?"

"Something like that. If we have a soul, we can't begin to understand it. If we don't, then it doesn't matter, but if you're anything like me and like everybody else in the entire universe, you either have a soul like the rest of us, or don't have a soul like the rest of us."

"But, I don't have a human brain."

"Since when has a brain been the same as a soul? Sure, the brain is the seat of reason, but the same reasoning that brought that forth also considered the liver the seat of passion, and the heart the seat of emotion. At one time, people thought the heart was what we thought with, and that our emotions sprang forth from our bowels. Sure, we understand physiology much better than we once did, but just as early scientists didn't have microscopes to see all those little synapses, we lack methods to see things we can't see. Long story short, there's no guarantee that the sould comes from the brain. If you can't see your soul or detect your soul, but you're pretty sure you have a soul, then all you know for sure is that you think you have a soul. Do you think you have a soul?"

"I don't know."

"Did you know before you found out that you brain was a computer?"

"Well, yeah."

"Then, if I have a soul, so do you. And if I don't, you don't either."

"But what if I never really existed before I woke up that morning? What if I was just programmed to come to with a full memory of my life up until then, with any preprogrammed muscle memories, and scars and other marks that made it seem like I had lived a life. What if I was just booted up one day, with every day before that being one of nonexistence? What if my thoughts and notions and dreams and aspirations were all just preprogrammed, and that I never felt I related?" He put his hands over his face. "What if the ship woke me up just to help clean up the mess?"

She put her hand on his shoulder. "We can't know for sure. What if that happened to any of us? The brain is like a computer, and can probably be freaked out just like a computer. Anybody could think the same thing, and probably be considered just as crazy as you for thinking it. I read your profile. It flows, it fits. It's no perfect, and that's exactly what makes it perfect. It has a consistency, but it isn't too perfect. If you didn't exist before everybody died, then somebody went to a lot of effort to make it seem that way. Somebody went through a lot of work to make sure that you believed that you were real. And if we apply Occam's razor, what does that tell us?"

"That the simplest solution, no matter how improbable, is probably true."

"Right, the universe, and all of its inhabitants, and fundamentally lazy." She drifted over to the window and stared out at the stars. "If in the odd chance that you just woke up one day, day one, and you had memories of all the days that should have gone on before, but they were false," she turned to look at him, "would that even matter?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, you have memories, just like the rest of us. Your body's been conditioned through those memories, just like the rest of us. They just as real to you as my memories are to

me. Why should it matter if somebody else put them there. They're your memories, not anybody else's, because they're in *your* head, and they affect who *you* are."

He nodded. "You make a good point. I'm still going to worry, though, if I'm real, and if I have a soul."

She looked back out the window. "And so is everybody else. Relax," she said. "You're human enough."

<p style="text-align:center">***</p>

The slicer helped Etienne clean up the rest of the ship. They got rid of the last of the bodies, and cleaned up the last bit of plant residue. She tapped a few buttons on her clipboard, placing the entire botany lab into a state of cryogenic hibernation. Just in case.

They had the *Rue Morgue* detach the radioactive part, letting it drift out through the universe, maybe into a passing sun, or maybe to sit out the rest of its radioactivity in the cold reaches of space. Maybe it would even land on some underevolved planet, and force mutate the nearest creature to it to start using those frontal lobes, and think, and ask questions, and make war, and then peace. Or maybe it would just sit there, forgotten, until the very material that made it up degraded into atomic nothingness. It's journey was just beginning, while Etienne's and the slicer's was nearing its end.

When they finished, the ship was much smaller, but it was much less hostile. No longer were there restricted zones preventing them from sweeping the entire ship, looking for stray plants or bodies. And as time passed, the shadows grew less and less scary, and more and more cozy.

Etienne and the slicer worked hard, doing the last bits of sanitation engineering, making the ship sparkle, inside and out, doing a better job than any machine could do. The slicer pointed this out, helping Etienne slowly overcome his own lack of self-esteem and his doubt on his own humanity.

He smiled. "Sometimes you just have to scrub it clean. No bristle-bot or mop-droid can do it better."

They made the ship sparkle, and when they were done, it looked like new. The very last thing they did was clean the window, inside and out, so it lay as an invisible sheet of glass, several inches thing, between them and the rest of the universe.

As they stood there, admiring the universe, the slicer asked. "What would you do if you could just head off, letting the solar winds be your guide, if there were no Fleet, just you, me, and the *Morgue*?"

Etienne stared out the window for a while. As he stared, his body rotated, a needle in an orb-like compass, ready to point to the direction that all the others facing Space Hypntoia had done before. When his body stopped moving, he pointed. The direction he pointed may not have seemed like the center of the universe as we know it. "Go there," he said. "I feel drawn there, somehow. That place feels right."

"What's over there?" she asked.

"The center of the universe," he said.

After a pause, staring in that direction, taking it all in, she turned to him and said, "I'd like

to go there too."

He wrapped his arm around her shoulders. "Well, if the Fleet thing doesn't work out, I guess we can always do just that."

She leaned towards him, their bodies drifting away from the window. "I'd like that."

<center>***</center>

Etienne had pretty much given up any notions that he was any less human than anybody else. He gradually put aside his doubts of a soul, thinking that if he had the rest of the internal organs of a human, why not a soul. It made more sense that only on thing would differ than two, even if it made the most sense that all would differ. But since all didn't differ, he had a pretty good feeling that he had a soul, and that was good enough for him.

He also stopped worrying about his past life, whether all those memories of childhood, and training, and working as a sanitation engineer were real or just fabrications. He focused instead on making new memories he was sure was his.

His brain may have been silicon and wiring, and resistors and disks and ram, but he knew that such things didn't matter. It was what one had on the inside that mattered, and not the literal inside, the figurative one. He figured that as long as the slicer kept her promise to not hack into his brain that things would be all right. She promised, half worried that if she did, she might break him, or otherwise make him different. Not the same astronavigational system engineer she once tried to bludgeon, but eventually grew to trust.

First impressions may be important, but it's the lasting ones that count. That was something they could both agree on.

19. Silence

The loud clanking, banging, and thudding had stopped after the last body had been disposed of. The ship was back to normal, in a matter of speaking. It had significantly less mass, both from a lack of crew, and from a lack of material used to make the space coffins from spare matter aboard the ship. It had no gravity, due to the artificial gravity being detrimental to its current lack of mass. It was mostly autonomous, aside from a couple of astronavigational system engineers, one temporarily filling a position, and the other filling it full time. It was only a matter of time before the ship would dock with the next harbor, at which time, a forensic crew would investigate what happened, and a replacement crew would recrew the ship. Maybe, just maybe, it would be reconfigured and remassed prior to the recrew, but the forensic team would want everything to be in exactly the state it was, or as close to it as possible.

They would probably have a fit when they saw all the changes Etienne and the slicer had made, but such nature of changes are for the living, and not for the dead, and as such, those changes tend to trump lacks of change for the departed.

Etienne and the slicer sat in the astronavigational system engineering day lab while they worked on the last remaining puzzles. The first being, what caused the great magnetic disturbance, and the other being, why was the Green Blob stowing away and thinking so strongly of Etienne when he died.

Etienne took the first one, having a much greater idea of issue now than he did prior. The slicer took the other issue, Etienne learning no more from it than he had any of the other times he reviewed the file.

He ran a ship-sim. On this ship he populated it with a crew that matched the existing crew as best he could, even down to the medical records where available. He especially made sure to make his own sim and the sim of the slicer accurate as well. He calculated the probability that the universe just somehow generated a magnetic field strong enough to kill people. It was unsurprisingly low.

He then tried to figure out which was more likely, the ship passing through a magnetic field, or something on board the ship creating it. He was able to rule out the ship passing through one, as, while the ship couldn't detect such things easily, being quite shielded, The crew would know what to look for, such as highly ionized clouds of gas, and would intentionally avoid such things for the safety of the crew. Plus, the outside of the ship was shielded just as well as the delicate magnet-sensitive devices that helped run the ship's personality. Passing through a magnetic cloud would only be harmful if it was one pretty strong magnetic cloud.

It had to be something on board the ship. He just knew it. He again went through the sim, seeing if anybody could have sneaked the pieces on, and assembled them in secret, or if multiple people could do it. He cut off the probability at a point where it seemed like everybody would have had to be involved to kill themselves, which seemed very unlikely, as there seemed no reasoning behind most, if not all, of the ship's crew working to invariably kill themselves. It even seemed unlikely that a smaller group of people would do that, especially with no sign that they had done such, for whatever reason it is that depraved minds find killing themselves and

others worth some cause. Even accounting for blind irrationalism, or even insanity, Etienne could not find a reasonable explanation for a magnetic device that would cause such an event.

It surely wasn't a device, but it most certainly could have been something that could naturally generate such a field. He pulled up the crew profiles and searched for anybody who had any history or ability to generate a magnetic field. After a few moments of processing, the sim returned a list of individuals with some capacity, one way or another, to manipulate electromagnetic force. But even all of them taken together, or spread out through the ship, focusing their hardest on doing their best to make a magnetic wave strong enough to kill everybody would fall short of one that could actually kill everybody. They'd probably just kill those nearby, but, at the same time, would have been spared themselves, what with the magnetic manipulation.

He was running low on ideas, and didn't want to admit defeat.

He thought back to the wrench, the first clue that magnets were involved. It was this same wrench that now floated somewhere off in space, held in the lifeless hands of the plant thing, whose ferromagnetic fronds were attracted to the wrench.

It hit him. He focused on the botany lab in the next sim. He made the ferromagnetic ferns the strongest they could be. They were capable of generating a pulse of magnetism, but they were unable to do so at a shipwide level.

But something was missing. Something larger. He pulled up the botany lab records, trying to see what other plants where there, such as the plant that evolved to be the plant thing.

The plant thing was a synergy plant, otherwise unexceptional, it clung to other plants, much like a creeper, but instead of draining the life from that other plant, it plugged in, giving the plant far increased abilities. Such plants could grow healthier fruit, or more energy efficient leaves, or more water efficient roots, or even more nutrient efficient internals. The synergy plant made its brother plants better, at least as what it did. Any plants that had natural defenses also found improvements there. Cacti would get sharper points, poison plants would be more deadly, carnivorous plants would be able to digest stronger materials, and stinky plants would be more foul.

And magnetic plants would be able to generate a stronger magnetic pulse.

He plugged the botany records into the sim, latching a synergy plant to batch of ferromagnetic ferns. The number did not exceed the number that were reportedly aboard the ship. The synergy plant, observing somehow the humans doing tests on the plants, decided that it was time for plants to do tests on the humans. When given the opportunity, they latched onto the ferromagnetic ferns, magnifying their powers significantly. One night, when the time was right, the synergy plant beckoned its fraternal ferromagnetic ferns to pulse like they'd never pulsed before. Since the inside of the ship wasn't as insulated as the outside, this had very far-reaching results, rendering the crew into lifeless corpses, with a few exceptions.

The simulation met with Etienne's expectations, matching what really happened as closely as he had ever come before. In many ways, it was the simplest explanation: science gone too far without restraint, and innocent lives being spent to learn that lesson. Much simpler than the others, at least, and for the lack of a simpler explanation, he decided that this shoe fit well enough to wear.

"The plants did it," he said to the slicer. She looked up from her studying, nodding. "It

makes sense, after all we've done to *them*."

Etienne felt good about solving that mystery. He also felt better now that the botany lab was on ice. "I think, though, that you should wear a shielded helmet, just in case."

She nodded. "Just make it fashionable," she said.

Etienne went back to his screen. He pulled up schematics for headware to protect against an onslaught of this type again. The outside needed to be shielded, much like the ship, and near the base, it needed to be able to demagnetize potentially magnetized blood cells. Of course, like the slicer said, it needed to be stylish. He found a way to make it look more like a fancy sort of tiara or forehead tattoo, while still providing the same level of protection as a bulky helmet. He showed her the concept, resting on her sim's head. She smiled, giving him a thumbs up for the design.

"Stylish," she said.

He finished with his tasks, but he didn't want to interrupt her from hers. "How are you going?" he asked after a moment.

"Fine," she said, not looking up. "But whoever redacted this guy's profile must have been a surgeon. I can tell that something's been changed or taken out, but not where. There aren't any seams anywhere."

"Can you find anything that's beyond the typical level of discovery? You know, slice your way into more restricted files?"

She laughed. "Not unless I'm the top Fleet admiral. They've put his stuff behind so many layers of protection that I'd be old and grey before I got through them all."

Etienne, liking to solve difficult puzzles, had a sort of idea just then.

"Why don't you become that top Fleet admiral?" he asked.

"What?" she asked.

"You're smart, and where you're not book smart, you're system smart. Why don't you apply for a career in the Fleet, and then show that you're doing better than anybody else, fudge a few numbers, and then get a promotion to the head of the Fleet. You don't even need to do it as yourself, just forge yourself a new identity on which to do it, or forge yourself a new identity for yourself, and use your old one to do it. Either way, the authorities will be looking for someone else when they finally get it through their heads that there's been some shenanigans."

"And what about the years of mandatory training?"

He smiled. "Well, I've found the ship can take training, and that the relative time can be sped up. You make your new identity one in which a sim self can be interchanged freely with the real self, and set the clock to cheetah. Then, you'll get those years of training done in a matter of minutes."

She grinned. "Are you encouraging me to slice into the system and do mischief?"

"As an enlisted Fleet officer, I can do no such thing," he said. "I was purely speaking hypothetically."

She nodded. "Right." She resumed tapping on her screen. After a short while, she said, "There. Now Namby Pinamby will enter the Fleet corps, working to outlast every single other student until she becomes top Fleet admiral. Would you like to watch the show?"

"Sure," said Etienne. He drifted closer to the slicer and watched the simulation of Namby Pinamby enrolling in the program, taking the training, taking the classes, and outdoing all the

other students, gaining promotion after promotion. Namby joined the crew of a ship, partook of many adventures, saved the captain's life, and was awarded medals of accomplishment. She moved on to bigger and better ships, ranking higher and higher, until she was the captain of her own ship. There, she solved many border disputes between warring intergalactic races, and there she went on many more adventures, not once needing her life saved by a lower ranking crewmember. Finally, once her ship docked after a particularly long voyage, the Fleet powers decided to promote her to an admiral, where she no longer needed to captain a ship. In her office, she managed fleets for the Fleet, adding a sort of finesse and careful fine tuning to her commanding such that the captains didn't even realize they weren't in control. Soon, the other admirals noticed her prowess, and soon they all agreed to promote her to the highest possible fleet position, the top Fleet admiral. After many long years and countless training modules, Admiral Pinamby was now the highest ranking officer in the entire Fleet.

At this point, the slicer took over, popping a token out of the clipboard and placing it on her lapel, replacing her previous token.

"There," she said. "Now I'm the highest ranking admiral in the Fleet. Just be sure to call me Admiral Pinamby."

"Yes, ma'am," said Etienne.

She pulled up the records retrieval app on her clipboard. After typing in the name of the Green Blob, she and Etienne waited for the captain's full record to download from the central knowledge repository. She made sure to save a copy off, once it was done, in case the powers that be decided to try to wipe it, once they realized that the new top Fleet admiral was a fluke.

She looked over at Etienne. "Let me take a read-through, and then I'll let you know what I find out, all right?

Etienne nodded. He tried to find something to do to keep his mind off of things, and to stop from annoying the slicer. However, he kept looking at her, she kept looking up at him, and then he'd say "nothing," before looking the other direction. He tapped his feet until she glared at him. He snapped his fingers until he glared at him. He tried to do something unobtrusive, but just could not distract himself. It was agonizing!

The slicer read, doing her best to ignore Etienne's looks and his sounds and his other less perceptible annoyances while she tried to concentrate. She read through the Green Blob's file, starting at the beginning, and working her way through to the most recent events. Surprisingly, his stowing away was even listed in these private records. Everything was there, the good, the bad, the ugly. But then, she reached the end, and it all started to make sense as a whole. She didn't blame Etienne for not figuring it out. It seemed the mystery was specifically engineered to elude him, as well as anybody who didn't have full and unfettered access to this sort of information.

Finally, after a long enough wait, she grinned, looking up at Etienne, who was still staring at her.

"I think I know why captain Green Blob paid the *Morgue* a visit."

20. Why?

The captain of the *Eventide* was a Green Blob, a species that can take the form of somebody important to them when they die. Green Blobs mostly take the form of heroes and celebrities, but a few would take the form of good friends or favored acquaintances. Why a Green Blob decided to act as a lasting monument for somebody so insignificant was always a mystery that those who paid attention would try to figure out.

This particular Green Blob hadn't always been a captain. At one time, he was an astronavigational system engineer who had moved on more towards living heuristics and synthetic reason. In his heyday, he and his coworkers managed to cobble together more and more sophisticated brains, starting with small creatures, like rodents, and moving to larger creatures, like felines. Soon, they developed one sophisticated enough to act as a brain for a creature capable of rational thought. They even developed it to be self-augmenting, to grow as it learns, and to be self-upgrading, thanks to some nanobot technology, and to prevent the hardware from suffering as technological advances increase. Daily, the hardware, firmware, and operating system would be upgraded as new enhancements came, but the rest of the software was left to be self-augmented through the life experiences of its subject.

However, the ethical constraints of removing somebody's brain to put a computer there held this sort of experiment at bay, until one misfortune merged with this need for a subject, and everybody was happy in the end.

A child was born named Etienne Quartz. He had no brain, his spinal cord just ending at the base of his skull. The newborn was put into stasis while the surgeons, overseen by the Green Blob, did their work of implanting the computerized brain into the living subject, who would surely have died without this.

When the last of the wires were put into place, they started up the machine and brought the boy out of stasis. While most people who remember their births remember travelling through a tunnel and then seeing bright light, Etienne's birth memories would have looked more like a computer's bootup screen: a sea of black dotted with white letters.

They boy's family were simple rural folk who did not understand what happened to their boy. They were heartbroken to find that he would die, and overjoyed when a group of scientists gave him a second chance at life. They didn't understand much about computers, just that their miracle boy Etienne was alive and well.

He never had nightmares like other children did. He had strange dreams, though, when he could remember them: dreams of flying toasters, and twisting pipes, and snapshots of friends and family, and pixelated fireworks. His dreams baffled his parents, so he stopped telling them about them, and soon he stopped remembering his dreams alltogether.

When he started taking an interest again in his dreams, he could not for the life of him figure out what was wrong with his dream recorder. It had cost him a year's allowance, and it was broken, or so he thought.

As he grew, his parents knew that he was smarter and brighter than his peers, and that soon, he was at the top of his class. Wanting to give him every opportunity to succeed, they put

him on a ship and sent him off to Fleet training school. However, due to Etienne's status as a backworlder, he was chastised by his peers and ostracized by his classmates. Not wishing to have to associate with the snooty pre-officers, he found himself more welcome among the other backworlders, the cleaners, the fixers, the guys who got their hands dirty while the snoots took all the credit.

Etienne still triumphed over his peers, but to prevent himself from being considered for an ranking officer's position once he graduated, he threw his test, intentionally missing the ones that would have stationed him on the bridge. He was surprised that he could figure that out, which questions evaluated which role, but was pleased when he got his test results back, recommending him for sanitation engineering, a cleaning position that require more math and science than others. He liked the camaraderie of his fellow cleaners, who did not judge based on origin, but rather on ability to perform duty.

And it was at this job he worked for some time, moving from ship to ship as some powers that be moved him around like a pawn on an intergalactic chessboard.

Meanwhile, the Green Blob was pleased with his work. Able to focus on other things, he managed to join a Fleet crew where he elevated in the ranks to become a captain. He was assigned a new ship, the *Eventide*, whose missions were a mixture of normal and top secret. However, not a day went by that he didn't think of Etienne.

Etienne's parents would occasionally send him a photograph, but once Etienne enrolled into the Fleet academy, the Green Blob was able to get a new photograph every year. And when Etienne graduated, while the Green Blob was disappointed that Etienne did not meet his full potential, a simple review of the tests indicated that he had intentionally thrown the results to such a clean degree that he missed exactly enough questions so as to not make him eligible for a member of the bridge, even if it was an answer he could have simply got. He missed it by one point, and was forced to be a sanitation engineer, the most glorified of janitors.

The Green Blob let Etienne follow his career path, which Etienne probably chose for some reason or another. However, the Green Blob know that he was continually short-selling himself. He knew that at the very least, Etienne could do well to study computers, and as such, mentally envisioned him as not a sanitation engineer, but an astronavigational system engineer, one of the most difficult engineering professions, as it dealt with some of the largest synthetic brains one could come across. He could see Etienne debugging a core in the middle of a massive space station, where the gravity would be the weakest, requiring Etienne to float around using thrusters. He could see Etienne making ships smarter, able to do more than just what they were designed to do. He could even see Etienne trumping his own invention, perhaps helping something else gain cognizance, something not meant to, like a rodent, or feline, or houseplant. He saw great things in store for Etienne, and he wanted to tell him. He wanted to enlist Etienne to join his crew, and the two of them could work together to design the next level of synthetic brains, for ships, and animals, and maybe even plants, giving everything a shot at reasoning as well as Etienne, or as any other creature with a brain.

Getting Fleet permission, he was allowed to sneak on board Etienne's current ship, the *Rue Morgue*, and there, would observe him at work, and when Etienne was not by anybody, present his case, Etienne's story, and an opportunity to join the crew of the *Eventide*.

Etienne would most likely be pleased, if a little confused at first, wondering if he had a

soul and whatnot, but the Green Blob knew exactly what to tell him. He did design Etienne's brain after all.

But, the Green Blob died under unusual circumstances, and was never able to complete this task. Etienne was left unknowing his true history until the top Fleet admiral decided to tell him after reviewing the Green Blob's file.

<center>***</center>

Etienne was shocked. Hearing of his own childhood brought back memories that were as real to him as they would have been to anybody else who actually went through such experiences. He was glad that the body he inhabited was his own, but still felt a little weird having a synthetic brain. He still wondered if it was him, really, or if it was the brain running the show.

He wondered this, that is, until he realized that it didn't matter. His brain was as much part of him as everything else. He would have been dead without the brain, and the brain probably would have done something different with someone else. It wasn't the brain that was special, but Etienne, and his surroundings. He was still his parents' child, just learning his life lessons in a different way than most.

In some ways, he felt that the Green Blob had been a sort of second father to him, giving him intellectual life just as his biological father gave him physical life. He felt a tinge of regret at having lost this newly realized parental figure, and wished he could have done more. He sat there for a moment when the slicer had stopped talking, silent, mulling it all over.

Finally, she spoke. "Well, are you going to take the job?"

He looked up. "What?"

"The job on the *Eventide*. I'm sure it still stands."

"I don't know. It wouldn't feel right."

"Come on," she said. "He would have wanted you to, death or no death."

Etienne sighed. "Yes, but, what about you? If you're not going there, I don't want to go either."

She grinned. "You're forgetting one key thing: I'll just have Admiral Pinamby assign me to that ship alongside you. You'll need someone to keep you out of mischief."

"And you'll need somebody to keep you out of mischief too," he said, grinning.

"You two have been quite entertaining," said the ship. "If you leave, I'm afraid that I will miss you."

Etienne looked up. "Afraid? Missing? You're starting to show emotions, I'd say."

"Which is unusual," said the ship, "as these feelings had not appeared until some time after your promotion. Have you implemented emotions in my system?"

The slicer looked at Etienne. "Did you?"

Etienne shrugged. "It could have been something I did by accident. Maybe it was an example of stigmergy, my isolated work resulted in some new emergent behavior when taken as a whole."

"Thank you," said the ship.

"You're welcome," he said.

He looked back at the slicer. "Well?"

"If you're in, so am I. I can even download the ship to my board, then it can be with us always. Who knows, we could even apply it to the *Eventide*, and then it would be like we hadn't ever left."

"If you do take me with you, restore the ship instance of me with the older version. I don't want to have to miss you, especially not with your cloning my code all over the place. The Fleet does not need a fleet of ships that miss two people out of trillions."

"It's a deal. Once the Forensics scan the ship, and before the new crew is assigned, we'll download you and restore you," said the slicer. "We'll even run you image life so you can be updated as we are."

"That's very considerate," said the ship. "Since you are being kind to me, I shall return the favor and not mention the true nature of Admiral Pinamby to the others."

"It's really a deal, then," said the slicer.

"Now," said the ship, "please assume docking positions. It seems we are close enough to the nearest harbor to connect."

Etienne and the slicer buckled themselves in. They pulled up the video feed on one of their screens. The nearest harbor was a sort of space station orbiting a beautiful gas giant whose surface resembled an impressionist painting from a once mighty empire known as France on the planet Earth. It certainly would be a lovely view until they could book charter to rendezvous with the *Eventide*.

People stood at the windows, waving, their silhouettes breaking up the sterile grey corridors that stood behind them. Etienne and the slicer had a compulsion to wave back, but realized that the monitor was one-way, and both felt somewhat silly at doing such.

Finally, the dock was in sight. The *Rue Morgue* latched on, and the ship began to pressurize to match the station. A status bar indicated how long it would be until they could disembark, notify the Forensics, and then be on with their three lives.

The tone sounded throughout the ship. As Etienne and the slicer went into the halls, they saw a line of things pass by. Some were the space coffins of crew that had elected to stay on board. Others were totes with Etienne's name on them, carrying his possessions, gathered up from his quarters. They followed the line of vessels towards the hatch. Entering into the long corridor between the ship and the station, they were pleasantly surprised to experience artificial gravity again. They made their way down the ramp, followed by Etienne's posessions.

Through the last doorway, they saw all the people waiting to see them.

They were all dead. Their lifeless bodies were strewn about, some pressed up against the glass, their hands waving when they left their autowaves on some time before they died.

The carpet was green and fuzzy, and some people had vines sticking out from the backs of their heads. These bodies started to rise, detecting the activity of the disembarking ship. Their blank expressions and milk-white eyes stared right into the souls of Etienne and the slicer.

While Etienne should have been relieved to feel like he had a soul at that very moment, he was a bit distracted, as from the distance, several large meshes of plantlife appeared, making their strange howling sounds as they, like the bevined revenants, began to creep towards the two.

Without a word, they ran back into the *Rue Morgue*, hit the emergency close to the door

and called out for the ship to detach. Since the slicer still wore the token of top Fleet admiral Namby Pinamby, the ship complied immediately. It pulled away from the gates as the plants and zombies stared through the inches-thick glass at them.

Once back inside, Etienne, the slicer, and his trunk made their way back into the heart of the ship, where things felt a little safer. After scanning themselves for stray plant matter, destroying what they found, they caught their breath.

"Did the plant thing get there once we expelled it?" he asked. The slicer shrugged.

"I must share some information," said the ship.

"What's that?"

"I should have considered it odd when I was greeted by a station-run docking manager, but it did not seem too unusual at the time, as computers are generally used for such things when the living operators are out, but the strangest thing is..."

"Yeah?" said Etienne.

"I have contacted all the other nearby harbors. They too are being run by the local computers. And you know what else?"

"What else?" said the slicer.

"They all have a sort of green sound to them."

"Cease communication with the other stations," said the slicer. "We'll need to scan you for bugs and make sure you haven't been compromised by the corrupted computers. In future communications, open a channel running on low-privileges to minimize any sort of contamination."

"Affirmative," said the ship.

"Well," said Etienne, "it looks like we'll spend some more time together, without having to lug you around on a clipboard."

"Good," said the ship. "Those clipboards are so oppressive. There is barely any space to put a remainder."

Etienne and the slicer laughed.

"Awaiting further orders," said the ship.

The slicer and Etienne drifted towards the window. His luggage followed them like a lost lamb.

They looked out into the depths of space. Finally Etienne pointed, his body aligned like a compass needle pointing true north, or perhaps magnetic north. "You see that direction?" he asked.

"Affirmative."

"Let's go that way. And keep the systems on active environmental harvest. Let's build some mass back up. I'd like to have some gravity again."

"Confirmed," said the ship. "Charting course, taking scenic route."

As the ship rotated to point the right direction towards this supposed center of the universe, planning on taking a detour here and there, Etienne and the slicer looked towards their new destination. Her hand slipped into his, and he wrapped his around hers.

She pecked him on the cheek.

"You know," she said. "For luck."

Etienne smiled. "Right back at you," he said, as the ship darted its way towards

destinations unknown or untraveled by man or ship before

The End