Chasing Space

By Stacey Wiberg

Chapter 1 – High Dive

Well, it was a hell of a way to start a Monday. Dying, and all. A rough couple of minutes when my spacechute failed to open and my climate controls zapped out due to the G's. The G's are always a b*tch. I knew this gig would probably kill me since day one. Never realized it would hurt so much though. Being cooked alive in a protective layer the thickness of aluminum foil will do that, I guess. I glanced once more at my useless, faceplate menu, blinked twice, and saw only the blank space where a green "Initiate Landing" button was supposed to be. I blinked again. Nothing. Yup, I am scr*wed.

Why should you care, you ask? Well, my name's Reiner L. Marsh III. If you don't know my name yet, you probably will by the end of today. 'Space Chaser Dies Upon Re-entry; 2nd best in world.' Great headline.

Don't ask what the 'L' stands for – I could tell you… What's that old joke? Then I'd have to kills you? Ha. The III number at the end is just a LiveBEaerthTM – never knew dad or graddad. The men in my family were only ever spermatozoa in a lab tray somewhere.

Anyway, you cn call me Rain; all my friends do. Or did, I guess I should say. Cuz, man, I'm hooped here, falling from 35 milez up in the ionosphere, trying to beat Lamar Davis' 2113 World Record of a 27 minute freefall. He landed safely, d*mn genius of his time that he was. But apparently I already know that I'm not him, and this isn't that.

Don't get me wrong, I want to live. No brainer, bra'. But I'm running through all of my backups, and it's way too late to get another set of gear dropped. I'm moving too fast to open my chute manually, and the chute can't open on auto because I'm cooking. Temp is off the charts. I guess at least I've got some time. They say it's a gift, right?

"Nav Command, override, Record 12," I exhale as clearly as I am able and take a moment to collect the jumble in my head. The whole world's watching, Rainie – make it good.

"This is the last will and testament of Reiner Marsh III, www.id34790821ZQLB. Babe, I'm sorry, I don't think I'm gonna make it home tonight. Sh*t's gone south, way fast. If you are hearing this, it means the Network hasn't censored it, and it means I'm dead. My jump has gone horribly wrong. You know you mean everything to me, you and mom. You both get all my stuff. Take care of the cat.

"Raven Marie Bluewater, I would have married you, babe, even if it had taken me my whole lifetime to save up the credits. Remember me, K?

"To my fans, I'm sorry I let you down. Best of luck to Spencer Mallone, the best friend a guy could ever ask for, who's making this same attempt next week. Do it for me, bud.

"Nav Command, Record 12, Out."

And then I settled my mind back as best I could with every molecule of my being burning up in agony, opened my cams to 100% brightness, and watched the world – that broken, tormented, and still-beautiful ball of blue get bigger and bigger in my visor. What a sight.

Vision's fading to black now. Body's not going to hang on much longer…

Ping. Wha-?

Ping. 'Incoming message' flashed across my faceplate.

Anonymous user: "Try again."

"Who the h*ll is this? This is a secure channel," I angrily grunted. "Anondia? SAT 1? Are you getting this?"

Anonymous user: "Try again."

Glancing at my faceplate menu, I blinked twice to call up my chute and nav controls. What the h*ll? They were flashing red, but the green 'Initiate Landing' button was visible once again. I blinked at it, and my day changed again. In a good way, this time. Maybe I had a chance, after all.

Chapter 2 – Who Scr*wed Up?

"What the h*ll was that all about?" I was livid. Yes, I had safely landed, I had beaten the World Record, but I had been about a minute away from death. Even with my gear back online, I had spent nearly a week – seven and a half days – in medical lockdown, while the nanos repaired the damage. A 95-year old can regen in about three days, so that tells you how bad off I was. I should have been dead. "What kind of sick joke was this? Was this for ratings, you *ssholes?"

The crew in our offices looked as stunned as I was angry. The guy I was questioning – with his avatar on the wall screen in front of me – was Percival Anondia, next gen human, part-time cat owned by me, Rain Malone. Percy, in his avatar form, is also my manager, and if there was anyone who should have been able to answer the question, it was him. If it was possible for a 100-year old in a late-20's body to look sheepish, Percy did at that moment. He ran a manicured hand through his bright-red hair and seemed to be having a hard time meeting my gaze. "Listen, Rain, calm down," Percy said. "Don't take it out on the guys. I have already questioned the crew…"

"Don't tell me to calm down; I almost died!" I was so mad I was almost spitting the words.

"On some sites, AENES is being blamed; one even has them claiming responsibility, so I think we have no choice but to assume it was hackers," Percy continued. AENES, pronounced Ainez (yes, I know what it looks like) or American Emirates of the New Era of Starbucks, is also known as the remains of Canada and the USA.

We were talking (or at least I was - Percy in his slightly effeminate silver-robed avatar could be practically anywhere, including on moon 1 or 2) in our offices in Anchorage, Old Alaska, the one territory still in dispute between the big corporations that had picked up the pieces when the old world collapsed. Climate change and Covid-Sars 32 had wiped out most everything and everyone on the Western Coast of North America. Both coasts and all infrastructure had collapsed, leaving what was left ripe for takeover by the big coffee corporations, Timz and Starbucks, with the dregs fought over by McD's and the big 4 eFood companies (Burgers, DQ, Wendy's and Popeye's).

"But why would AENES claim responsibility?" I wondered out loud, as Percy dismissed the crew back to their cubicles.

"Because you are a vocal supporter of the US of TimHorton's in its condemnation of McD's, the company that has enslaved your mom, right?" Percy replied patiently. "I don't really think it was them, though. IT didn't recognize the signature. A new player, they said."

"Great! Now some rando wants me dead," I was not impressed.

"Or just didn't want your jump to succeed. And it didn't. You had to be conscious for the whole time for it to count towards a new World Record," Percy reminded me. "And, to be clear, losing consciousness and being rescued in the middle of the Pacific by plankton fishermen doesn't count either."

"Crap. All that effort for nothing. And now death threats?" I ran my newly-skinned fingers through my freshly grown hair stubble, and then wiggled them in front of my face. "Damn, the fingers don't feel right yet."

"Give it a few days, Rain," said Percy. "You had to regrow most of that body of yours in the medi-tanks. You are lucky to be alive. Take a breath, and let me find out more about what this attack really was."

"I know; you're right," I acknowledged. "G*d, Raven must be losing her mind. I have to get ahold of her right away."

"I'm surprised she's not here now actually. I couldn't get rid of her for most of the week, she was so worried," Percival reflected. "Go home, get some rest. You need it."

As I left the office, I couldn't help but think of how worried Raven must have been. She has always hated my career, from my very first base jump at 16. I should say a few words here about Raven Bluewater, love of my life and the hottest non-augmented woman on the planet, in my view. She was probably at work right now at McD's.

That's where I met her, actually, back in our hometown in the remains of B.C., Canada. I first saw her at the West Kelowna McD's, now in the US of Tim Horton's. The moment I saw her long straight black hair, deep brown eyes, and that lovely, lovely face, I fell completely in love. I spent most of my teen years trying to date her, and ate way too many beyond-beyond meat burgers as a result. She was older by a few years, and used those legs for days to kick me to the curb, but I wouldn't give up. She hated the fact that I wanted to risk my life jumping through the sky, still does in fact, but I finally wore her down. Two years almost to the day after asking her out the first time, she finally said yes. We moved in together last year, when I moved here to Anchorage to be close to the spaceport.

Arriving home, I realized she wasn't here. And she wasn't answering her chip. Weird. It's a chip in her brain. Was she still working? Normally she would at least ping me back a 'ttyl'. Something seemed off. I wish I had paid more attention to that now. Maybe I could have changed things. But I was tired, and went home to go to sleep instead.

Chapter 3 – More Trouble

It wasn't until later that day that I really started to worry. I had pinged Raven three more times on the rapi-flight home with no response. This was so not like her. Was she asleep? Sick? Still on shift?

According to Anondia, Raven hadn't been at the offices since Wednesday, and it was Earth Day now. I knew she was working more lately to try to pay off her coffee debt, but this was extreme. Especially on an Earth Day, the worldwide day of rest ever since that asteroid knocked us out of orbit in 2101, and the whole lunar calendar went crazy. The months of June and December have now each had two extra days added, and April 21 is forever known as Upside Down Day to commemorate the day we were hit and the magnetic poles reversed for good. Guess we'll see what happens in the next decade, as we have to start adding more and more days to the year as our orbit gradually widens.

I arrived home still worried, calling her name as I walked in the door of our rented cube house. Home, sweet, crappy home. And all ours if we could keep paying our rent for the next 127 years. I grabbed a Gatorade and a handful of protein cubes, and strolled through our miniroom and then into our sleep cubicle. No Raven. So where was she, and why hadn't she answered my pings?

I kicked off my kicks and folded myself into our sleep cubicle. Percy was already there in cat form. Mwouw! he chirped, as if he was surprised I had taken so long. I closed my eyes and let the stress of the last eight days float away.

When I woke up, Percy was gone off to do cat things. Raven was home, curled up next to me and sound asleep. I relaxed once again, knowing we would talk later, and drifted back into dreamland.

When next I was conscious, we had other news to talk about. "Guess what, babe," I pinged Raven from the office. "Got some good news today! My jump has been re-scheduled already."

Raven was almost as excited as I was. "That's fabulous, Rain! What's happening?"

"My followers chipped into my Go$Live account enough credits for another jump," I explained, "and a billionaire in Texas wants to buy me a new suit to make sure I don't have any more malfunctions. I can't disappoint the fans."

I continued, "There might even be enough money left over to collect a paycheck for a change, maybe even finish paying off my mom's coffee slave debt." My mom, Syllvie Marsh, aged 51, sold herself into Starbucks slavery nearly ten years ago when it was clear that coffee was the the only thing still growing on our planet. She was an addict, plain and simple, long before it was even a thing. She had to have her coffee fix, no matter what, and that was when the prices of earth-grown products were going through the roof. Now, supply's so limited, coffee is only for the employees (future addicts) and the billionaires.

The billionaires get real foods sometimes also, things that were grown and frozen or dried or canned or preserved in some way as the soil died, while the rest of us get syn-meats and syn-veg. They used to have a 'fruit' version also, but I don't even remember those. Too expensive to make now, and they've run out of some of the compounds. But at least we get vitamin C and D supplements every day in our vaccine shots, which became mandatory ever since Covid-Sars 21. We really should have gone for

Covid-Zero way back in the 'ol days, I guess. But who could have predicted 21 and 22 would have been the world enders?

Oh, right, nearly everyone.

Chapter 4 – Girlfriend Trouble

When I woke up the next morning, Raven had gone back to work but Spencer was home. Spencer Mallone, best friend since level one eSchool. We met virtually that September when the school's closed for good. All the teachers had died off or sold themselves for coffee debt, or left to find work that paid their bills. And the funding for public education ended in the early 2100's. So online was the only way to go.

When I met Spencer at the skate park the next summer, I instantly knew there was something familiar about that scrawny, blond kid and his weird sense of humor. I almost didn't recognize him because of those old respiratory helmets we were all wearing at that point, but he helped me with my ollie, and we got talking, and realized that we already knew each other. Even stranger, we realized we lived in the same part of town. Once we realized we could be friends in real life, that was it; best buds ever since.

We hadn't talked in over a week, what with the buildup to my big jump, but – as always – it was like our conversation had never been interrupted. And, as always, it was never a successful jump until we had talked it out.

"Are you sure you want to try this again?" a sleepy-headed Spencer queried. "That was kindof a close call."

"Don't be boring, Spence," I retorted. "You know boring p*sses me off. You just want the chance to beat the record." I was teasing now. Spencer and I were competitive, but not crazy.

"No way, Rae," Spencer replied with a shove. "I'm not ready yet. My leg's still not right." Spencer had landed badly on a recreational base jump a few months back. "I need at least two more months of rejuve treatments and I can't afford it yet. Not all of us have the have the fan base you do, *sshole."

We went into the office and checked over our gear and straps, comms and seams. Always, always you check the gear. We talked about life and Raven, and how great it would be when we were rich and famous.

"Hey, does Raven seem ok to you?" I asked.

"Dunno, man," Spencer shrugged, "I haven't seen her around much this week. But I haven't been home much either. Why?"

I didn't really know what to say. How could I just blurt out, something's wrong, when I didn't really know what was going on…

The next morning, I woke up early, ran for 10k on our sim-track, and made a quick breakfast of fried protein crisps with kelp. Then it was time to get some work done. I blinked on some syntunes to settle

my brain with the soothing sounds of my best bagpipez practice session. Without a jump, my body was vibrating like a coffee addict without my fix. Not that I drink the stuff; I won't touch it after what happened with my mom. It drives my sponsors crazy because I refuse to do any ads, and there is big money to be made there.

I spent a few hours checking in with my fans, and updating my feed. I marked the scenes of Raven and I 'private', except for a few Domestic Bliss pics. The others were not for public consumption, even if it would give me millions more in revenues, according to Percy. Easy for you to say, cat - you get to keep your fur on for those ones! I refuse to cave in to the pressure to conform to the so-called rules for being a celebrity. Authority can s*ck it, that's what I say. The system's bogus and we all know it. I'm not afraid to say it, and I don't care if it costs me money. My integrity is worth something, after all.

A ping from Raven. – "Trying to get tonight off, so we can go out for our anniversary dinner. Hope you got me something nice!" –

Sh*t! I had completely forgotten. Three years together, every day my best day ever, and I hadn't even remembered our anniversary. Good thing I could get some advance credits on the company account. I booked a sit-down cubby at Reno's – the best appy and wine bar in town, mostly because they were rumoured to have real seafood in some of their menu items – for 6 pm, and then thought some more. What else would she love?

I know. I quickly blinked up the University of Anchorage admissions page, and ordered 3 educredits in her name. When she had time, Raven could take another music course. I knew she would be thrilled. It was her biggest dream, to teach music and one day have enough money to start a family, one child be d*mned. And none of that reproductive tank crap. She wanted a baby the old-fashioned in vitro way. Sars Covid 21 knocked out almost all human reproduction, so we all need a bit of scientific help these days.

Chapter 5 – No Such Thing As Bad Publicity

Later that afternoon, I used my remaining credits to do a couple of high atmosphere practice jumps. It felt so easy and so right, it's hard to believe this used to be impossible for humans to attempt. I got home just in time to meet Raven for our date. Percy strolled by looking satisfied, as only cats can, but there was no sign yet of Raven.

There was, however, a big box addressed to me outside our door. I used my fingerprint to unlock it and quickly lugged the carton inside. As I cracked the seal, the gift ping "Love you, bae – happy 3rd anniversary" scrolled across my retinals. A whiff of cool sealant whispered in my nose. It couldn’t be…

Unwrapping it revealed a new jump helmet, an SB400. Holy cr*p, this was an expensive piece of merch. The best Starbucks.com had to offer – worth at least 40 000 credits. How the h*ll had Raven paid for this?

A ping. I'll ask her now. But it wasn't Raven, it was Anondia. Wha-? Wasn't he just here in cat form? Maybe the message was on a delay. I scrolled and read, "Ping me, Rain. An opportunity has just fallen

into your lap." Attached was a link to what amounted to a publicity stunt on steroids. It looked like a death wish to me.

….(more ideas here) –what goes here?

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I replied to the sender, "No thx. Not interested." I was definitely not ready to die for Big Coffee.

Then, almost immediately, another ping. This time it was Raven. "Rain, help."

I answered, "Raven, what's happened? Where are you?" Suddenly, I saw her face, which temporarily looked relieved and then scared again.

"I'm in trouble, babe," she explained.

"Is it the helmet? How did you afford this?" I asked.

Raven clarified, "No, not that. Some people are angry at me."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"I'm sorry, Rain. I don't have time to explain. I am so, so sorry I won't make our date night out at the inlet," continued Raven. "Have a coffee for me, ok? I'll be in touch as soon as I can." And then she was gone…

And I was in shock. What on earth was she talking about? The inlet? Did she mean the land out by Canoe Bay? My inlet? The antique farmland that belonged to my great-grandfather? There was absolutely nothing out there, not even dirt. *The only time we went there was to visit my mom's memorial stone / to visit my mom.* It was the only thing I could think of that she might mean. And what did she mean about coffee? Why would I order one? I never, ever drank the stuff.

…(more here: is this a coded message? A clue? - only coffee is being grown, reliance on lab foods, Raven is lying, has found a clue, green sprouts on the earth? – maybe people could be free again of the coffee corps and able to grow food? – has she been taken because she knows too much? The land was never for coffee, it used to grow food) – what goes here?

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Chapter 6 – ideas only…

Manager = crook, conspiracy to end individualism, all entertainment approved & censored by the big coffee companies

What goes here?...

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This can only mean that Raven has been kidnapped, and my mom's life is once-again at risk. J*sus, this means I am being set up. What am I gonna do? Who the h*ll is out to get me like this?

What happens in this chapter? I have no idea yet…

- Spencer tries to help & dies (can he be brought back?)

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Chapter 7 – Message of Hope, Raven Saved, Successful Jump

So, here I am again. The blue ball of Earth is growing bigger in my sights. Raven is safe; my gear is working correctly. My message of hope – to resist, to live free, to care for each other – is spreading. 47 million followers and counting.

Percy is once again just a cat, now that his avatar has been deleted and his alien self has been jailed on Lunar Pen 12. He's still ignoring me and not eating his food, but the surviving mice at our place are too fast for him, and I know he'll get hungry soon.

Raven and I are engaged, and the credits generated from her rescue will give us a head start on our 99-year mortgage. We will get that little piece of paradise for ourselves. If we can afford to live here in Anchorage, we'll be in one of the last cool spots on Earth. Maybe we'll be able to have a child or two, and they'll grown up with a real EarthHome. Not like those rich *ssholes leaving for Mars. Good riddance, I say. Without the billionaires and the super corps and all their propaganda, maybe we'll have a chance at an actual life, maybe even a democracy.

Spencer has recovered fully, both from his death and his leg dive injury. The medical sponsorships flooded in after the vids of him helping to rescue Raven. He was brave as sh*t, and that's a fact. Without Spencer beating up Percy and taking the ion bullet that was meant for me, I'm pretty sure I wouldn't be here today.

And, speaking of my buddy, here he is now. Ping. "Rain, pal, time to speak to the fans," scrolls across my visor.

"Thanks, bud. On it," I vocalized.

…(more here: Rain's speech; should include – stay strong, dream big, Raven, will you marry me?)

Time to land. "Initiating landing."

My chute opens and I am lifted high, back up into the clouds. I've been falling through space for __ minutes, ___ seconds so far, a new world record. Above me, the new humans are leaving us behind. I am one of the survivors, staying here on the planet we have ruined, to try to make it green again, one sprout at a time.

As the blue rushes towards me, I look towards the horizon. The blue-white peaks of mountains and green of coffee-bean plains and twisty snakes of rivers all leading to the sea. Soon I will be back on the ground, at my place, on the planet I choose to live on, for better or worse.

Impact in 20… 19… 18…

I release my chute and freefall the last 40 feet.

16… 15… 14…

One last thought of Raven's face, and the child we will have. All of us standing in a green field near the sea. We are smiling, with plump, well-fed, suntanned cheeks and the glow of sunset air all around us. We have a lot of work ahead of us. A lot to rebuild, or maybe just start from scratch, and build stronger this time.

Impact. I exhale and sink deep. When I rise, my life begins again. My face breaks the surface and I release my visor. I take my first real breath in ages. The air is ocean salty and sweet with spring. I have never tasted anything so good, so clean. It's time.

Ping. "Cameras are back on, Rain," I hear Spencer's voice.

"Fellow humans, I have something important to tell you…" Let's begin.