

# **Tales from the Mind of** **Arthur Gray**

*A Chapbook by Raven Montoya*

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## **Foreword**

In the following pages you will find several stories that I have made under the alias of Arthur Gray. These stories span several different genres, none of them are connected to each other in any way except for the alias I wrote them under, the fact I preferred them over the other stories that I wrote under the alias, and the fact they were written for the same class.

The first of these stories comes from Urban Fantasy about a man who is dealing with an addiction to the very thing that keeps him alive despite the suffering it causes others. However, he finds a solution, not an end to his addiction, but a way to possibly outweigh the horrors of satisfying his addiction with the pain that he saves others from. But the question is, is he a monster, a junkie, or a hero?

The second is of another Urban Fantasy, though more centered on the Fantasy than the Urban. A story about pair of friends at the beginning of an incredible journey. One of them is naturally gifted with immense strength that she nurtured over the course of her life while the other's strength comes from the teaching of his adoptive family rather than his biological one, though he doesn't believe in his own power. What problems will they face on their first day?

And the last of the three stories takes a sharp turn from fantasy into science fiction in a tale of a woman who finds herself minutes from death and possibly miles from sanctuary with only her oxygen pack to push her. She reflects on her life, she reflects on her parents, but will her past give her a future?

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# Warmth

Robert Finger tapped his foot against the hard pavement rapidly as he shifted on the cold metal bench. He twirled his pen in his left hand, as he waited for the supposed perpetrator of a recent string of strange murders. *Why did I even come here?* The young reporter thought to himself as he leaned back on the bench looking around at the fireflies that were starting to awaken. Andrew reached into his pocket, then pulled out a piece of paper *This letter is probably just a scam of some kind....* He looked up towards the horizon. *Looks like it's almost dusk.* Andrew looked at the letter that was left on his doorstep before he went to work, reading it once more.

*Robert Finger,*

*I'm the Vampire Vigilante. If you want to know more, come to Leatherwing Park at Dusk.*

*I'll see you soon,*

*V*

Robert sighed as he rubbed the bridge of his nose, *Ugh, this is stupid. It's probably a prank by some kid.* Robert dropped the letter on the ground as he put his pen in his pocket *Guess I shouldn't be surprised; I mean this whole thing stinks of some contrived comic plot. A mysterious letter for the reporter that's following the story leads him to the truth?* Robert scoffed, shaking his head as he stood up from the bench *Like the Vigilante was really gonna show up he-*

"Hey...," a raspy voice snapped Robert from his thoughts. Robert spun himself towards the voice to see a tall, slim man with a thick winter coat that hid most of his body. The stranger's hair was long and black with hints of gray here and there throughout it. The stranger's face had a hard chin, pointed cheekbones, and subtle wrinkles, but what drew Robert's attention more than anything else were the stranger's eyes.

Though he couldn't put his finger on it, something about the stranger's emerald-colored eyes was so alluring to Robert that he couldn't look away. Perhaps it was the way they seemed to glow with an inner light, or perhaps it was how they didn't seem to look AT Robert as much as THROUGH him, almost as if looking past the surface of his being and into his soul. A pale finger pointed towards Robert as the stranger continued, "you the reporter?"

Robert shook his head, clearing his thoughts so he could respond, "I—" Robert took a moment to steady his nerves, "Yes, if you are who I think you are then I'm the reporter you're looking for. Are you the one who sent the letter, V?"

The stranger nodded then sauntered over to the bench, his voice as dry in tone as his throat seemed to be when he replied, "Yep, honestly I was worried that you weren't going to show." He slumped down onto the metal bench before gently patting the spot next to him with one hand, rubbing his throat with the other, "That V is for Vincent by the way."

"Well, Vincent," Robert sat next to him, "I was thinking you weren't going to show either."

"Well, here I am." Vincent gestured to himself, "What do you want to know?"

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“Well, first,” Robert pulled his phone out of his pocket, “Mind if I record this? If you really are the person behind these murders, I think people will want to know what your reasoning was. If this is a prank, or you’re crazy, then it’ll still be something we could use to see how people are reacting.”

Vincent scoffed a bit, shaking his head as he muttered something under his breath. He waved his hand in a small circle, “Go ahead.”

Robert raised an eyebrow at the reaction, but nodded in affirmation as he started the recording, “So, Vincent, let’s start with a basic question, when were you born?”

“Really? That’s what you’re starting with?” Vincent raised his eyebrow, then shrugged, “Alright, I guess. I was born on March 30, 1939.”

“What?” Robert chortled, “No way, you’re no spring chicken, but you don’t look older than 40.”

“First of all, ow my feelings.” Vincent gently placed his hand on his chest, emphasizing the dry sarcasm of that remark, “Second of all, I’m serious, look.” Vincent reached into his jacket, then pulled out a comic book, *Detective Comics #27*, “My dad bought this for me the day I was born. He went into a comic shop, asked for a new issue cause he heard that kids like comic books, and this was the one he got. Here,” Vincent held the comic out to Robert, “you can take a look at it yourself.”

Robert gently took the comic book and flipped through the pages. If nothing else, he could tell from the frayed edges and yellowed pages that the comic was indeed an old copy that had been well worn by repeated readings, “Well, it’s a pretty old comic, kinda surprised it’s even holding together,” Robert looked back at Vincent, “But just because you’ve got a comic that’s 81 doesn’t mean you are. Plus, the way you talk doesn’t fit either.”

Vincent shrugged as he took back the comic, “Well, it’s the only thing I’ve got from back then. I almost sold it for drug money before I got my condition.” Vincent sighed, gently caressing the cover with the tips of his fingers, “It’s... The last thing I have from before....” Vincent trailed off, then cleared his throat before looking at Robert, “As for the way I talk, my –” Vincent inhaled through his teeth, creating a sharp sound of air passing through his teeth as he searched for the right word, “– condition makes it easier for me to adapt to the age I’m living in.” Vincent put the comic back in his coat.

Robert sighed, “Okay.” He rubbed his temple slightly, “moving on from that, you asked me to come here because you’re claiming to be the Vampire Vigilante, right?”

Vincent let out a long sigh as he rolled his eyes, “Ugh. That name is so... basic. Couldn’t you guys have given me a name that’s more interesting? Like, I dunno, the Bloodletter or something?”

Robert couldn’t help but chuckle slightly at the response, “Well I’m sorry. We try not to sensationalize killers like other stations. Besides, calling you a vampire is pretty sensational, isn’t it? Kinda sounds like Caped Crusader to me.” Robert gestured towards the pocket that Vincent placed the comic in.

Vincent scoffed, waving his hand as if fanning that comment into the wind, “Anyways, yeah, I’m the Vampire Vigilante, and before you ask, yes I am a vampire.”

Robert rolled his eyes then rose to his feet, adjusting his coat, “Okay if you aren’t going to take this seriously, I’m just going to leave.”

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However, just as Robert turned away from the bench to do just as he said, there was the briefest rush of wind that brushed past Robert's side. Before Robert even had a chance to register it, Vincent was already in front of him. The young reporter stumbled back from the stranger who kept growing stranger, his eyes darting between the aged stranger and the bench, "H... h-how did you-"

"I told you." Vincent interrupted as his emerald eyes stared down at Robert, piercing into the very core of his being yet again, "I . Am. A vampire."

Robert swallowed slightly then almost fell back onto the bench, however, once he was seated, Vincent was already sitting beside him again, as if he had never gotten up in the first place, Robert once again looked between where Vincent had been less than a second ago and where he was now. *How is he so fast? I didn't even hear him move that time... I... I must be dreaming or going crazy. No... it's... it's too vivid to be a dream. I'd have woken up by now. I felt the comic book in my hands. What is going on??*

"Now... I'm sure you have a lot of questions, what's your first one?" Vincent asked as he stared out to the horizon, the sun slowly sinking further and further beyond it.

Robert snapped back to reality, "O-oh, sorry..." He inhaled slowly, still trembling from anxiety if not outright fear, then he exhaled, feeling his muscles start to relax and lose their tenseness as his thoughts quieted, *Well, I may as well see where this goes, it's not like I could outrun him.*

"So... I guess I'll start with why would you -" Robert paused for a moment, feeling the words get caught in his throat, he couldn't tell if it was more from fear or disbelief, " - a vampire -" Robert took another pause to take a breath, steadying his nerves, " - live in Sunny Southern California? I mean, I know we get a lot of smog being so close to the city, but I'm pretty sure the sun still shines here."

Vincent sighed as he leaned back on the bench, "Sun doesn't kill me."

"Really? But I thought- "

"Have you ever read Bram Stoker's *Dracula*? The original book?" Vincent interrupted yet again, narrowing his eyes as he tilted his head to look at Robert.

"No, I've seen the black and white movie though."

"Well, if you read the original book, you'd know Dracula didn't die in sunlight, he just couldn't use his powers, or at least they were weakened."

"Is that why you asked to meet at dusk?" Robert asked, raising an eyebrow, "You wanted me to see how you were before and after sunset?"

"Well, that and I'm kind of a sucker for melodramatic comic book setups." Vincent bluntly responded.

Robert stared at Vincent for a brief moment before speaking, "I... Beg your pardon?"

"How's this sound," Vincent cleared his throat then brought his voice down to a lower pitch in an attempt to imitate a dramatic voice used for a movie's trailer, "A reporter, dedicated to bringing the darkness of the city to the light of day and our hero, constantly wrapped in the cold grip of the night, meet at the border between their vigils, the only even ground between night and day."

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Robert stared at Vincent for a moment before laughing at the ridiculous notion shaking his head dismissively, "Sounds pretty melodramatic to me."

"Exactly! Perfect setup." Vincent beamed.

"But uh, that still doesn't tell me why you live in a big city in Southern California."

Vincent's smile faded from his face as the sun slowly dipped down below the horizon, "Oh... right I..." he sighed softly, "I thought it would make me feel warm again. Maybe help my... Cravings."

"For blood, I'm guessing?" Robert interjected, "Why would being warm help?"

Vincent looked at Robert, baring his suddenly sharper teeth as he spoke, "Because that's one of the things I lost when I became this... THING." He wrapped his fingers around a flat rung on the back of the bench, the metal creaking from being crushed like paper in Vincent's grip as he loomed over Robert, "If I don't feed I start to feel all sense of texture fade away. Right now," Vincent's grip tightened, "I can only feel pressure, I can't feel how smooth or rough this bench is," Vincent's free hand gripped his shirt pulling slightly as he leaned closer to Robert, "I can't feel the material of my own clothes against my skin."

Robert shrank away, Vincent was already tall, but at this moment, Robert felt like David looking at Goliath. Robert tried to speak, but his words once again caught in his throat as Vincent continued.

"All heat is lost to frigid cold; I wear this fucking coat to try and hold on to the warmth for as long as possible, but it does NOTHING." Vincent released the rung of the bench before gripping at his jacket, "If I don't feed for too long, I even start losing my emotions until the only ones I can feel are the fear of my death and the desire to feel something, anything, outside myself again until they start to drown out what little shreds of humanity I have left!" Vincent held his head, "The fear and desire start to tear at my mind until I have no choice but to-!" Vincent cut himself off then sniffed the air briefly.

To any normal human, the only scents in the air would be the scent of the freshly cut grass on a summer breeze, but to Vincent, Robert stank of fear. Vincent could smell the familiar chemical concoction coursing through Robert's veins. The pounding of Robert's heart was like a drum pounding in Vincent's ear. The knowledge that at this moment Robert's mind was running rampant with terror, that at this moment the only reason Robert had not run was that he was petrified with horror caused Vincent to drool slightly in anticipation.

Vincent shook his head briefly before leaning his back down onto the bench, holding his face in his hands. Vincent took a shaky breath, his fangs shuddering slightly before returning to the façade of humanity just as he pulled his hands from his face.

"I... I'm sorry." He looked back at Robert, "I starved myself a bit before meeting up with you. I wanted you to know what I deal with." Vincent took another deep breath in through his nose, "... Wait here." Vincent stood up, then in the blink of an eye, he was nowhere to be seen.

Robert was still trembling, *Sh... Should I run? Would he be able to catch me? Would he kill me if I ran? Is he going to kill me anyway? He's only killed criminals so far... at least from the bodies that've been found... but if he did decide to kill me, what chance do I possibly have of surviving? He just disappeared between blinks, I can't tell if he's fast or if he can teleport.* Robert looked back at the bench,

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more specifically the now deformed rung that Vincent had crushed moments before, *He crushed steel with his bare hand! And... and he said he had been starving himself. He was starving himself and he still had that much strength?*

Vincent finally returned. An all-too-familiar red fluid was dripping from his lips as he strode back over to the bench. "Sorry, I needed to go on a feeding frenzy. Drain a few squirrels, a rat or two, it didn't take long." He pulled his hood down.

Robert widened his eyes as he noticed how Vincent's appearance had changed. Vincent's once salt-and-peppered hair was now as black as the night sky, his skin had gone from pale to a light tan, the wrinkles that once adorned Vincent's face were nowhere to be seen. "I'm much better now."

Robert stared at him, "You're... Y-you're younger."

"Physically yeah." Vincent tossed the squirrel aside then sat next to Robert, "It's another thing *Dracula* got right." Vincent started to take off his coat, "If I drink enough blood-" he festured towards his previously worn skin and thin body, now filled out and vibrant, "-I get younger, and-" he flexed his now athletically toned arms slightly, "-and stronger too." Vincent placed his hands on the rung he had crushed before, slowly flattening it back into its original shape, "It also brings my sensations back, that's why I can take the coat off."

Once the rung was repaired, or at least not visibly deformed, Vincent leaned back against the bench. "The oldest I've been physically is probably... 80? At least that's what it felt like the night I first started going after criminals." He looked at Robert. "You okay?"

"Huh?" Robert had been staring at Vincent, but only now did he actually start hearing his words, "Oh I... sorry I-"

"You thought I was gonna kill you." Vincent interrupted.

"What? N-no I-", Robert almost pleaded.

Vincent held up a hand, "You don't need to lie to me, I can literally smell your fear, dude."

"You can?"

"Well, adrenaline and cortisol. That particular mix of chemicals produced by the brain causes a fear response. That, and I can also hear your heartbeat, it's not beating as fast as it was, but it's faster than when we started talking."

"I... I'm sorry. I mean, y-you gotta admit this is a lot to take in. And you did get rather... Intense not long ago." Robert said as he scratched the back of his head.

"Yeah, that's fair, but I've fed enough now. Oh, and in case you were wondering, I'm also why rodent populations have gone down."

Robert looked at the blood dripping from Vincent's lips, "I can see that." Robert furrowed his brow, "Wait," he looked once more at Vincent. "if you can feed on animals, then... what made you start draining criminals?"

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Vincent inhaled for a few seconds then let out a loud sigh, “The difference between animal blood and human blood is... like crack vs coke.”

“How so?” Robert asked, his curiosity now outweighing his fear

“... Do you remember the first incident, where I killed two gang members that jumped a night jogger?”

“Yeah, that was two years ago. I was assigned to report on it. Plenty of people were throwing out the word vampire even back then because of what happened to the victims.”

“Do you... want to know what that night was like for me? What it meant to me?”

Robert nodded for Vincent to continue, making sure the recorder was well-placed to hear the full story.

“Well, I was walking down the street, I had been trying to stick to a single feeding a week to try and keep a low profile...” Vincent sat back as he began to tell his story.

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I was on the corner of 4th and Byron. I knew that I would need a bigger feeding soon because my last one was already starting to wear off. Either I'd need to feed more often and risk getting caught, or my hunger would overcome my morality and I'd finally kill someone. I was hoping that a walk at night would clear my head... but all it did was remind me of the fact that no matter what I'd always feel cold, numb, scared, and in pain unless I fed.

While I was walking, there was a man, blonde, mid-20s, he was wearing some cheap cologne but that didn't hide his scent from me. I already told you that I can smell blood and hear it pumping... but it's more than that. I can smell everything that's pumped through the body, and I can instinctively tell what the chemicals are, probably because different chemicals in the blood are like different additives to me, I get high either way, though not in the same way.

Because he was jogging his scent was more... pungent. Dopamine, endorphins, he was enjoying himself, probably getting off on a runner's high, maybe that pop music he was listening to helped. But then I noticed that little mix I told you about, that smell of fear, he was scared, not actively maybe, but something was nagging at him enough for me to notice.

That scent... oh that scent, the scent of prey fleeing to home... it was intoxicating. It brought me back to my junkie days, except even worse because I knew his entire body was flooded with the drug I craved. I got a contact high just smelling him and hearing his blood flow: I could feel joy again as my fears just faded into dust in the winds, I could feel the lining of my coat against my arms, the cloth of my shirt against my chest and back, my denim pants against my legs, the wind on my face, hell I even thought I felt my heart start beating again for a moment. Every little thing that people take for granted, that I used to take for granted, just rushed back to me all at once, it was better than any high I'd ever had.

At that moment I knew I had to follow him, I needed more of him, I couldn't let go of being able to feel again. *Just for a little longer...* I lied to myself in my own mind, *I just want to feel warm for a little longer... then I'll leave him alone....* But part of me didn't want to leave him alone. Part of me wanted to

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drain every drop of blood from his body. I saw my chance when he went down an alleyway. When I turned into the alley, yhat's when something snapped me to my senses.

He was being mugged.

There were a pair of gang members, I could tell from the scent of their guns and the faint whiff of narcotics on their clothes, they were holding him at gunpoint. They were preying on this innocent man because they had power. They were doing what I had been avoiding because I didn't want to lose what little pieces of me I had... something they abandoned for the sake of quick cash, my humanity.

That's when I got an idea, *I don't want to feed on humans... I thought to myself, but if they reject their humanity... then they are no longer human. They are animals, prey playing at being predators. I'll show them what a real predator looks like.*

After that thought entered my mind, however briefly, I didn't hesitate, I couldn't. I immediately rushed in, pushing the jogger out of the alleyway I don't know if I told him to run or if he just ran, but the main point was there weren't going to be any witnesses for what was about to happen. One of gangsters shoved his little peashooter in my face, I could smell their blood, smell that sweet, sweet adrenaline... but the bitter cortisol was missing. In it's place was a sour smell, noradrenaline; they were angry.

That wasn't what I wanted, what I **needed**. I **needed** fear, I **needed** that rush that their would-be victim gave me.

I hadn't gotten a real chance to test out my powers before then, I was always too scared someone would see me and I would be killed or worse for being a monster. But at that moment I wasn't scared anymore. I don't know what I was. But I think that part of me that overcame my fear I was just a junkie looking for a fix. Let me tell you, it's not a good idea to get between a desperate druggie and their high when you're not prepared.

The little man was shouting and aiming his Glock at me still. I couldn't hear what he was saying over the sound of their heartbeats pounding in my ears, or if I did, I didn't care enough to remember. I just wanted to shut him up, and to make him **fear** me. So, I crushed his hand in my own. Unsurprisingly he screamed, but he wasn't scared, not yet. I ripped the gun out of his now broken hand and squeezed it till it was scrap.

There was a loud bang, a flash of light then I felt a sharp pain in my side. The other gangster shot me.

You don't know how good pain can feel until you've known what it's like to feel nothing at all. I laughed, for the first time in ages I laughed. In fact, I couldn't stop laughing; I was having the time of my life even though I know I would be ending theirs.

That's when I smelled it, bitter, and sweet. The smell just so happened to be coming from the asshole that had the balls to shoot me after I broke his friend's hand, and his gun, with my bare hands.

I jumped on the opportunity and that little coward. He managed to get out a few more shots out before I sank my teeth into the bastard's throat.

You ever had blood in your mouth? Do you know that coppery, metallic taste that it has? Even after all these years I still remember. It spoils the taste of animal blood for me, but his blood didn't have

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that. It tasted like... Ambrosia, the nectar of the gods, it was almost like I wasn't tasting his blood, but instead had the power of having someone fear me as if I were death itself, come to harvest, dancing across my tongue.

The delectable flavor wasn't the only thing that I got from drinking his blood. No, I could feel my strength grow as my youth returned to me, a rat can usually give me a year back at most if I feed on a big one, but when I fed on a human for the first time I could just feel the sand going backwards through the hourglass as I went from 60 to 40 in less than a minute. The bullets lodged in my body even got pushed out before my flesh healed as good as new.

The other gangster tried to rip me off his friend, but a quick punch in the face dazed him long enough for me to finish my first course. When I was done the gangster was practically mummified. That's when the other one started to beg for his life. Unfortunately for him though... I was still cold.

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"My God..." Robert muttered under his breath, "I... I always wondered how they could be drained of all their blood with only one puncture wound and so little being in the alleyway but... my God..."

Vincent sighed softly, "Sorry, I got carried away." Vincent looked down, "It was only after I had finished the second gangster that the regret kicked in. I had avoided drinking human blood for decades and in a single night, I gave it all up."

"... And... yet you kept going. You've killed tons of murderers, drug dealers, and other criminals over the past 2 years."

"That's because I realized something. I couldn't die, not on my own, my fear and desire would overwhelm me at some point." Vincent leaned back on the bench, looking up at the sky, "That meant if I didn't feed enough, I would start hurting innocent people. But-" Vincent turned to Robert again, "-if I fed on criminals, I could avoid hurting people who don't deserve it. And if I'm careful I can make sure I know who those people are that do. So, as long as I have these powers, and this... Addiction, I wanna put them to good use."

"I see" Robert rubbed his chin briefly, then remembered what Vincent had said before the story, "Oh, also, you said that the difference between animal blood and human blood is like the difference between crack and coke, what did you mean by that? Is it just the intensity or-?"

"No, it's a quality thing. Human blood lasts a lot longer, it actually took me about two weeks to start aging. Took me a lot of rats and squirrels to get back to this condition and even then, I'll start aging again soon."

"I... this has been a lot to take in."

Vincent slowly stood, "In that case, I think that's enough."

"Wait!" Robert grabbed Vincent's hand.

"Huh?" Vincent looked back at him.

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“What... what are you? Are you just a junkie with superpowers or are you a superhero with an addiction? What do you see yourself as? People are gonna wanna know what you think as much as me.”

Vincent stared at Robert, “I called you out here because I wanted to let people hear my story and decide for themselves what I am, whether they believe or not.” Vincent pulled out that copy of *Detective Comics #27*, then smiled to himself, “But to be honest... I always wanted to be a superhero.” And with that, Vincent, the Vampire Vigilante, disappeared into the night.

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# **First Week at Adventurer's Academy**

Being an adventurer is not an easy profession, especially when it comes to traversing a dungeon. That's why the Adventurer's Academy, the first and most prominent college for all professions involved with the dangerous and profitable profession of Dungeoneering, was established. People of all races – Humans, Orcs, Elves, Dwarves – all of them and more came to Adventurer's Academy to prepare themselves to even take part in one of the many facets of this profession. Rudi Manygold is one of the newest students who has come to join.

Rudi knew from several sources that Adventurer's Academy is like many other prestigious colleges in some ways. For example, according to upperclassmen, the first few months are focused on weeding out the weaker students until only the best of the best graduate and enter the field of Dungeoneering.

However, as he neared the end of the first week, nothing seemed to be too drastic: He moved into the dorms the week before, met most of his teachers, gotten acquainted with many of his classmates; all of the normal things one would expect from the first week at any college. There was only one class that Rudi had not experienced yet.

Basic Monsters, a class about all the different low-level common monsters that are seen in dungeons, was the last class that Rudi had not been to yet. The class would be taught by Professor Hugo Crow, whom he had no other classes with. The stories that upperclassmen told Rudi about Professor Crow were not encouraging.

*Professor Crow... Even just his name sounds terrifying. I really hope that he doesn't actually do practical exams on the first day. What if I haven't studied enough? What if I –*

In the middle of his constant worrying, however, suddenly his thought process was interrupted when one of his classmates suddenly patted him firmly on the back, causing him to stumble slightly before he looked back at her.

Rudi's body was by no means small given that his biological parents were an orc, which caused most of the food he ate to become the muscle of his large frame, and an elf, which caused him to grow to an impressive height of eight feet. That being said, the girl who had just pat him on the back was so large she made him feel positively minuscule.

Bergdis Jotunnsen grinned at her old friend as she bellowed, "HEY MARIGOLD!" Bergdis grinned as she wrapped an arm around Rudi's shoulders, gently noogying him, "Looks like we got another class together!"

Rudi wrestled himself out of her grip then sighed. "Bergdis... it's MANYgold, not Marigold," he believed this was officially the thousandth time he explained this, "My moms are Dwarves, not Elves. You've known me since Kindergarten. How do you keep getting my name wrong?"

"Heh, I know I know. It's just fun messing with you." Bergdis teased as she ruffled Rudi's long, black hair.

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A flustered blush appeared on Rudi's pale green face before he waved her hand off, he looked up at his old friend. Being of giant descent, Bergdis couldn't help but swell with a sense of pride when she dwarfed other people. With a staggering height of 12 feet and eight inches tall, and a substantial build to match, she had no trouble towering over most anyone, including Rudi.

"So, you excited to take a class on monsters? I hope we get to take some on!" Bergdis slammed her fist into her open hand to emphasize her point as she practically bounced with each step.

"I honestly hope we don't." Rudi replied, straightening out his hair, "I haven't gotten any real practice using magic for combat. I'd probably want to wait a couple of years before we got any practical testing. So, I'm hoping that Basic Monsters will just be analysis focused. I don't think I'm ready to fight monsters yet."

"Pfft, whatever man, just enchant something to burst into flames or some shit."

"Enchanting takes time! I'd need an hour to give something a flame enchantment. I'd need 3 hours after that to make it safe for use, not to mention that I would either need a material that has a high melting point, is non-flammable, or is enchanted to already be either of those just to make sure that it wouldn't be useless. That's not even mentioning the enchantments needed to make sure it doesn't harm the user, then there's--"

Bergdis grabbed his shoulders before turning him towards her. She looked into Rudi's eyes, "Rudi." She took a deep breath in through her nose, then exhaled through her mouth demonstratively, "Breeeeathe."

Rudi immediately stopped talking then inhaled slowly through his nose, before he sighed through his mouth, "Sorry."

"You're really nervous, huh?" Bergdis let go of Rudi's shoulders as she started walking again.

"Yeah." Rudi rubbed his arm, "have you heard anything about Professor Crow?"

"Nah, I didn't think it'd be anything I couldn't handle," Bergdis shrugged.

"Well, apparently he can be pretty rough on students, and he doesn't hold back just because it's the first week. He also likes giving live demonstrations--"

"Great! So that means we'll be getting to kick some ass!" Bergdis's grin widened, a determined flame burning in her greenish eyes.

"I truly... truly hope that's not the case... I am not ready to take on monsters yet." Rudi's own hazel eyes turned downward as he nervously fidgeted with his hand, rolling his thumb over his pointer finger then under, pinching it slightly before rolling it over again.

"Ah come on." Bergdis patted Rudi's back, causing him to stumble once more, "What do we got to worry about? I can bench a school bus and you can do that cool thing your mom does."

"Which one? Cause if you mean the one that taught me enchanting, I already said--"

"No, no, no, I meant the cool mom that does that thing where she controls rocks and metal and stuff, not the nerdy one that helped me pass Alchemy class."

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“Oh.” Rudi nodded in understanding, his eyes falling to the floor, “I haven’t quite mastered that yet. Magical crafting is as difficult as any other magical skill.” Rudi started rubbing his thumb over and between his fingers yet again, “I haven’t trained enough to fully use it for crafting, let alone enough for it to be useful in combat.”

“I dunno about that,” Bergdis snickered. “I still have this from that one time.” Bergdis brushed aside her short blonde hair before pointing at a relatively small scar between her left eye and left ear.

“That was an accident!” Rudi half-apologized, half-retorted as his lips furled into an indignant pout.

Bergdis laughed at Rudi’s reaction as she opened the door to the lecture hall their class would be in. It was a rather average classroom with an assortment of desks and a whiteboard at the far end away from the door. The room lacked any windows, but the mystically powered lights that hung overhead were enough to make the entirety of the room visible.

“I’m sure it won’t be anything too –” Bergdis abruptly stopped halfway through her sentence when the two of them saw a random assortment of items on every desk in the room.

The young pair walked further into the classroom, examining the objects on the desks as they made their way around. There didn’t seem to be anything too odd: a can of monster-repellent, weapons, wands, staves, random things that someone would find in an adventurer’s tool kit.

Each of the desks also had a name on the seat, though this was not unusual at this point. Many classes that had assigned seating usually had magical writing on the seats to guide students to their desks. The magical writing also caused desks to change size between classes for larger or smaller students.

“That’s odd...”, Rudi observed as he placed his hand on one of the desks; it was made of a strange-looking wood that Rudi hadn’t seen before in his mothers’ workshop. Not only that, but the desks were entirely different from the ones that Rudi had seen earlier in the week.

Students started walking into the room around the time that class was set to start, so Rudi and Bergdis took their seats. The chairs connected to the strange desks groaned and squeaked under their weight. All the chairs made such sounds as the students prepared for class, many of them noting how uncomfortable the chairs were and how odd the assortments of objects were.

Rudi leaned towards Bergdis, whispering, “These desks are all pretty weird.”

Bergdis stared at Rudi for a moment with her eyebrow raised before she spoke, “And... All the random shit on the desks isn’t?”

“Well,” Rudi started, bobbing his head slightly from side to side as he collected his thoughts before continuing, “I mean it is, yeah, but putting a bunch of random stuff on desks isn’t as hard as moving new desks into a room.”

“Maybe something happened to the other ones?”

“In less than a day?”

“Could have been some magic spell gone wrong or something,” Bergdis shrugged.

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“That’s impossible. Look,” Rudi pointed at lightly glowing rectangular devices at the four corners of the classroom, “Those are AMFGs, Anti-Magic Field Generators. Pretty much every room in the school has em except the ones where students are supposed to learn how to use their magic. I was actually reading about them the other day-”

“Nerrrrrd,” Bergdis teased, “What’s your point?”

Rudi rolled his eyes, “What I’m saying is it’d be almost impossible for a student to move a pebble with magic when those AMFGs are on, let alone destroy a whole classroom’s worth of desks.” Rudi rubbed his chin in thought, “Even if the other desks were destroyed... You’d think that they’d either have higher quality desks on standby just in case something went wrong or that the desks would be enchanted to be more durable.”

“You sound like your mom when she saw one of the light fixtures in the old gym was an inch out of place. You sure it’s not just your inner crafter talking?”

“No! Well, okay maybe a little but just look at these!” Rudi let out a sigh through clenched teeth as he started fiddling with one of the lumps of malformed wood on his desk, “Look at all these weird knots in the wood. Wouldn’t those have been filed down by now? And yours is legitimately dangerous,” He pressed down on one of the nails, causing the desk to groan slightly from the pressure, “it has weird white nails sticking out of it!”

“Eh, I dunno, maybe these are just the only backups they had.” Bergdis leaned back in her chair, “I just hope that nails in a desk aren’t the most dangerous thing we’ll see in this class.”

Before long, everyone was seated. However, the professor had still not yet arrived. Eventually, everyone started looking around, checking their schedules to see if they had gotten the right time and classroom since the professor hadn’t arrived when class was supposed to start.

A few minutes passed before the door to the classroom opened. A tall, thin, dark-haired man with pale skin, dry, reflectionless eyes, carrying a stack of papers shambled into the room. He was wearing a clean black suit, a bit more formal than some of the professors but not too odd.

What was odd was everything else about the man’s appearance: his skin was dry and sagging despite having the posture and hair of a young man. His staggering, uneven pace seemed as if each step required more effort for him than it should have. In short, he resembled a walking corpse as he got to the desk and straightened out the stack.

The man gently placed his papers on the desk before pulling an attendance sheet from it then looking over the silent class. However, as soon as he opened his mouth to speak his lower jaw fell off, falling a short distance before rattling against the desk as it settled. Unsurprisingly, several of the students started screaming and/or panicking before the man held up his hand to silence them.

The man let out a low sigh before he calmly grabbed the part of his jaw that fell off. He gently set it back into place on his face before working his jaw around a bit before finally speaking, “I apologize for the... Unusual introduction.” his monotone voice resembled the creaking of a coffin lid as it carried throughout the classroom. “I haven’t had the chance to revitalize myself in the last few days, so my body is weakening. Do any of you have questions?”

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Most of the class raised their hands immediately.

The professor rubbed the bridge of his nose before sighing once more. "Let's run through some of the usual questions... Yes, I'm a human zombie. Zombies eat flesh, not just brains. I eat meat because I can't digest plants anymore, but I won't eat any of you."

Most of the hands went from being stuck in the air to resting on the knotted desks.

"No, I am not a normal zombie, I was brought back through an incorrectly performed resurrection ritual. Unfortunately, no way to fully bring me back to life has been found." Professor Crow tapped the side of his head, "However my mind works as well as it did when I was alive."

A few hands shot back into the air, "My body needs frequent revitalization rituals to stay in one piece," Professor Crow explained as he rubbed his jaw, "that's why my jaw fell off."

The hands remained in the air this time, throughout this whole portion of the class Professor Crow's voice never broke its creaking monotone. "No, it didn't hurt when my jaw fell off, losing parts just cuts off the sensation completely until I have reattached them."

And with that, all students finally rested their hands either on their desks, on their laps, or at their sides, "Now that that's out of the way, I'm Professor Hugo Crow, I'll be your teacher for any classes relating to monsters both in terms of fighting them and using their parts for alchemy. Now, let's start role."

Rudi raised his hand, interrupting roll call. Professor Hugo looked at Rudi with his lifeless eyes and croaked out, "Yes Mister –" Professor Crow narrowed his eyes at the names on the attendance sheet, "Marigold?"

"Um, it's MANYgold sir. S-sorry, um, I-I was adopted by dwarves, so my last name is Dwarven, not Elvish." Rudi was rubbing his thumb between his pointer and middle fingers yet again, "I-I understand the confusion since I am half-elf. A-anyways, I was wondering why there were all of these weird objects and these new desks?"

Professor Crow raised an eyebrow briefly when Rudi mentioned the desks in particular, "That would be because of our class today." Professor Crow cleared his throat, then looked back at the attendance sheet, "I'll explain when we get there."

Rudi nodded then lowered his hand to the desk, looking over the assorted items, as many of the students were while Professor Crow finished reading through the list.

"Now, there are many monsters that are drawn to dungeons, this class will talk about the basic monsters. The most likely types that you are going to come across." Professor Crow muttered out as he turns away from the class.

Professor Crow began drawing shapes on the board, "The first few weeks of this class will mainly be focused on monsters that do not have sapience, all of the monsters we will be covering today are dangerous carnivores."

The professor placed the stack of papers in his desk before standing. "There are some sapient monsters that live in dungeons and sometimes even people start inhabiting dungeons either of their free

will or because they are under one of several thousand varieties of mind control. But that isn't what we'll be focusing on today."

Professor Crow pulled away from the board to show a drawing of a small semi-iridescent ball, a rat, and a spider. "These are the four most common enemies that you will find in the first few levels of most dungeons: Slimes," he pointed at the drawing of the ball, "giant rodents," he pointed at the rat, "giant arachnids or insects," he then pointed at his own face "and lastly there are undead." A few students chuckled at the example, but Professor Crow's face remained largely emotionless. "Many of you have probably read up on these creatures and more in preparation for this course, that will serve you well."

Professor Crow went on to start explaining the differences between these four types of creatures. He started with slimes, massive balls of sentient goo that can eat through most materials but gain the most sustenance from living material.

He then moved on to giant rodents, arachnids, and insects which tend to at least be strong enough to easily break human bones if not stronger.

He then finally explained how the most common types of undead are animated skeletons and zombies, neither of which has intelligence on their own but are usually controlled by a higher intelligence deeper within the dungeon.

All the while during Professor Crow's speech, the students were looking over the strange assortments of items or shifting uncomfortably in their seats. The desks squeaked and groaned and growled from the change in weight.

Rudi was silently pondering the purpose these items could be, though most of his focus was on the desks themselves. No one desk had the exact same assortment of items, though each of them had something that could be used as some form of weaponry: physical weapons like swords and axes, magical weapons like wands and staves, or less conventional weaponry like nets or cans of repellant. Rudi thought back to his studies.

It was then he realized something that each desk had in common, Weapons, magical focuses, monster repellant... all the items on the desks were used when dealing with monsters.

It was then that a revelation came to Rudi's mind, *No... No, he wouldn't do something that dangerous, would he? I mean... I know the Upper Classmen said that he would use more real-life practice. But he wouldn't make students fight monsters on their first day in his class... would he?*

While Rudi was lost in thought, Professor Crow placed his hands on the desk at the front of the class, "Now while these are the most common monsters you'll find in dungeons, there is one common monster that I haven't put on the board." Professor Crow croaked matter-of-factly in his ever-present monotone, "It is likely going to be one of the deadliest creatures for inexperienced adventurers, like all of you, to deal with."

Rudi's body tensed, his fingers gripping the desk firmly.

Bergdis raised an eyebrow, finally looking directly at the teacher for the first time since he had begun his lecture, "Before I go into that particular monster." Professor Crow looked over the class slowly,

"I understand that some of you know my reputation for testing students on their knowledge and skills through what some might call dangerous means." His eyes fell on Rudi, "For example, if you had talked to upperclassmen who took my class, they'd probably mention having fought a monster on the first day."

Professor Crow put down the marker he had been using for his drawings, "You may be wondering how much truth there was to their words." Professor Crow sat down at his desk chair before flipping a switch, all the AMFGs in the room suddenly stopped glowing.

"With that being said-" Professor Crow looked across the faces of his class, "-can any of you-" he gestured his hands outwards to the class, "-tell me-" he brought his hands to his chest, "what a Mimic is?"

The class was dead silent as Professor Crow's words hung in the air. *Deadliest creatures, dangerous means... Mimic.* Suddenly the class burst into chaos as most of the students, including Rudi, started tossing away any of the items on their desks, most keeping at least one weapon or some other form of defense that they used to destroy the rest of the items.

The commotion from the constant movement caused the desks to groan even louder than they ever had before as some were tossed aside in attempts to destroy more of the items.

Bergdis was one of the students who didn't react to the question but instead only reacted to the chaos. She looked around, confused at all the panic, though she did follow suit with the class in a small way when she crushed the weapons on her desk into a metal ball. Rudi, on the other hand, grabbed a short sword off his desk, tested it on the ground, then started destroying the items on his desk, making sure to cut off some knots from his desk as he did so.

Some of the students that already had some magic training took advantage of the deactivated AMFGs: freezing, burning, or teleporting some of their items away. Meanwhile, some of the stronger students crushed or ripped apart their items. Anyone whom neither had immense strength nor magical training used one of the weapons to destroy as many of the items they could.

Some of the desks were totally demolished in the chaos, but what was more remarkable was that some remained completely untouched.

Professor Crow raised his hand before waving it to draw everyone's attention, "Alright, alright, that's enough." The zombified professor slowly rose to his feet, "You can all relax now." All of the students turned to the teacher, "None of the items on your desks were mimics, and as you can guess none of the desks that were destroyed were mimics."

Many of the students slowly started to relax, breathing sighs of relief, though several refused to loosen their grips on their weapons. Any students that had not yet caught on to the reasoning for the panic that swept through the classroom looked towards the professor for an explanation.

"Now," Professor Crow began as he stood up from his chair, picking up a marker for the board. "For any of you who don't know, mimics are creatures that have the unique ability to transform into imperfect copies of non-living objects." Professor Crow started drawing on the board.

Rudi furrowed his brow slightly as Bergdis relaxed in her seat, fiddling with the metal ball a bit as she listened to the professor speak. Rudi's eyes darting about the room as if searching for an answer

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written on the walls. *Was... Was that it? No, it couldn't be, there had to be more than that. A professor wouldn't just make their class start randomly destroying things without a good reason, would they?*

Rudi's eyes fell on one of the AMFGs, it still had not started glowing again. Looking around none of them had been turned on, *Why hasn't he turned the Anti-Magic Field Generators back on?*

"However," Professor Crow's voice snapped Rudi from his thoughts, "when they transform, they usually make mistakes. Mimics have to leave their eyes on the outside of the object survey their surroundings. Their mouths also tend to remain the surface so they can quickly attack their prey when they are at their most distracted." Professor Crow tapped on the board to a drawing he had made of a chest with eyes, teeth and a long, apparently prehensile tongue.

Rudi widened his eyes then looked back at his desk, then at all the others. *Weird knots, monster repellent was on one of the desks, every desk had some sort of weapon, the desks constantly squeaked and groaned throughout the whole class.*

*But... he said that they-* Rudi looked up at the professor, *No... No, he specifically said 'None of the desks that were destroyed were mimics, why would he need to specify that the desks that were destroyed weren't mimics, wouldn't that already be implied? We already know they aren't mimics because they were destroyed and they didn't squeal in pain or anything.'*

He noticed that none of them seemed to be moving, many of the students did test their weapons on their desks so obviously if any of them were mimics they had to react... then he remembered something.

*Bergdis! She had no idea what was going on! Her desk was the only one with those weird white nails sticking out! No, not white nails, TEETH!* Rudi looked at Bergdis's desk, it was spotless, it somehow hadn't been nicked nor jostled during the entire panic, and Bergdis's eyes were fixated on the board.

Then, the "knots" slowly started to unfurl, revealing yellowed eyes with red, slit-like pupils as the rest of the desk opened, revealing a drooling maw with the "nails" revealed to be sharp fangs that hid a long, drooling, tendril-like tongue. In a moment of fear, Rudi swung his sword at the creature. Suddenly the mimic shrieked then leapt away, launching the metal ball off into the ceiling.

"What the hell??" Bergdis shouted as she shot to her feet, staring up at the ball before looking back at what only seconds ago she believed to be her desk.

The feral creature hissed and shrieked as it scrambled around the classroom, the students who had fought with their fists or their weapons to fight earlier focused their efforts on protecting the magic casters who had been left defenseless due to them expending their magical energies in the panic that preceded the Mimic's reveal.

Rudi had not been casting any spells throughout the fight. He had only used the sword from his desk as he believed his magical skill, or lack thereof would have been more of a detriment than an aid.

Suddenly the mimic let out another ear-splitting screech as it leaped toward Bergdis, who had still been looking for a weapon. The creature's mouth widened so far that it seemed almost as if it would be able to bite Bergdis in half.

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Rudi looked at Bergdis, and at this moment, knowing his childhood friend's life was in peril, he called upon the crafting magics his mother had taught him. His hands raised above his head as they glowed a bright yellow, a similar form of energy forming around the metal ball that Bergdis had made earlier as it slowly changed from a misshapen orb to a solid spike.

Rudi then thrust his hands downwards as the creature was mere inches away from her face, the metal spike hurtled down towards the Mimic.

The spike impaled the feral beast before pinning it to the ground. The Mimic squealed in pain as it desperately writhed and clawed at its surroundings. Bergdis's jaw dropped as she turned her gaze from the dying creature to Rudi. Rudi was panting slightly as he stared at the struggling mimic, he hadn't noticed the fact that the other students' eyes had fallen upon him as well.

Professor Crow's eyebrows raised as he pursed his lips slightly, showing the first sign of any emotion other than apathy or annoyance. "Well," Professor Crow began with a somewhat lighter tone in his voice as the mimic slowly stopped moving, "It seems Rudi is our best listener."

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# Floating over Odysseus

*I'm going to die out here.*

This was the first thought that went through her mind as she drifted through the vast emptiness of space like the scraps of debris from the satellite she had been working on before it was hit by an asteroid. She could see that her ship, struck by the same asteroid, was slowly falling toward the planet, not that it could have helped her if it were intact.

Alice Stone's ancestors on her father's side were on the first ship to the Mars Colonies, her great-grandparents on her mother's side worked on the first starship that would go between solar systems, her parents were in the first group of miners to work for The Odyssey Mining Company and now their legacy would end with her, an aerospace engineer, no great pioneer, not even the greatest in her craft, a small whimper compared to the generations that had preceded her.

True she had not made plans to continue her family's legacy through cloning or the traditional means, but it was one of the millions of choices she'd never get the chance to make, millions of experiences she'd never have. In these, what she believed in her heart would be her last moments with her body drifting through space, her mind drifted to this morning...

Alice had just gotten a call that there was a satellite had been knocked out of orbit and was in need of repairs. She was the closest engineer and most other crews wouldn't be going near it any time soon.

*Gives me a chance to test out the new upgrade.* She started looking over her well-worn space suit, though she focused mainly on the new rectangular device fitted to the back. It was a massive hunk of metal, with small, closed vents at the bottom. She fiddled with the switch for the vents to make sure that it was working probably. *The new storage tank has enough oxygen in it to get me most of the way around the planet if I wanted to.* She gently patted the tank, *At least it should if it actually works like the lab boys said it does.*

"Incoming call from Maria Stone." Alice's ship alerted her

Alice sighed, "Geez mom... Ship, let it go to voicemail. Maybe I'll call her after the job, shouldn't take that long."

Alice could remember the Homer in her mind, a grand tower of steel and titanium with a dozen rings full of people... including her parents. *I should have answered the call, I've been so busy with work I haven't really scheduled the time to call her...*

Alice had grown up on The Homer, went to school there, found a job there. Her parents lived on that station and now she realized she may never see it again.

She realized that her parents may never see her parents again.

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*If I just knew Where the Homer was, she thought, If I knew which direction it was in then maybe I could reach it.*

Her eyes fell upon a small patch on her suit. It was something decorative her mother made for her when she got her first ship. The patch had the three moons of Odysseus revolving around a blue pair of letters A, for Alice, and S, for Stone. Alice's mother told her that the moons of Odysseus rose and fell for her, so she thought that making this patch would let Alice know her mother was always with her in some small way.

*I wonder what mom and dad are up to now.* Her eyes trailed down her arm to the broken radio on her wrist. *I bet mom's getting ready to call me... I wish I could talk to her one more time.* She closed her eyes and let her mind drift once more, this time to her mother, who she knew was waiting for her to return to the Homer.

Alice's parents were always supportive, but her mother was her greatest inspiration. Maria Stone was a planetary researcher, so unsurprisingly she knew more about Odysseus than most. She was able to predict when certain islands would be safe or unsafe for mining, she knew the best mines like the best of her hand.

*Heh... I still remember when she taught me how to tell where the station was going to be based on-* Her eyes suddenly widened as the realization hit her, *-the position of the moons!* Alice's mind snapped back to reality as she looked out over Odysseus.

A small spark of hope entered her heart and mind. Her eyes darted to the small screen at the corner of her helmet that showed her remaining oxygen levels. *Alright, I have half an hour's worth of oxygen, hopefully that'll be enough to reach the station.*

She started moving her left arm in a swimming motion, slowly turning herself. If she had any chance of surviving this ordeal, she had to find the three moons of Odysseus, Charybdis, which would orbit from the Southwest to Northeast, Scylla, which would go from the Northwest to the Southeast and Polyphemus, which orbited the equator.

She eventually managed to just barely turn herself in the direction of two of the moons. *Okay, Charybdis is near the Northeastern section of the planet. I can't see Scylla and Polyphemus is just below Charybdis....* Alice looked down at the planet, spotting a few of the landmarks her mother had taught her in her youth, *So, if I start moving now, I could get over the North Pole when Homer stops for the daily analysis of the ice caps!* Alice started using small but focused bursts of air to push her towards the North Pole of Odysseus, praying she would be in view and that she could get someone's, anyone's attention. All the while keeping an eye on her oxygen gauge.

*That's five minutes gone, 25 left....*

*Thump, thump... her heart beat heavily in her chest.*

*20 minutes....*

*Thump, thump... Thump, thump...*

She had to keep pushing but the gargantuan station was nowhere in sight, had she gotten the positioning wrong?

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*15 minutes....*

*Thump, thump, thump...* her heart pounded against the inside of her ears

Fear once again gripped at her heart with claws as cold as the endless void she was stuck in.

*10 minutes....*

Just as hope was once again going to be lost, she saw it, The Homer! It was slowly starting to lose momentum as it slowed for the daily analysis. *If I keep going I can make it before they start moving again! I've still got ten minutes of oxygen left. 12 if I hold my breath. I have to get back. Alright, 12 minutes starting now, let's go!*

She boosted herself towards the station.

*Five minutes....*

The station slowly came to a halt. *Eight minutes.* She was close enough to see an airlock with an external entry button.

"Oxygen reaching critical levels", her suit warned.

She took a deep breath as the oxygen tanks ran out of air, *Okay, that's a minute and a half of air, wish I had more but I've trained for this exact type of situation!* She tried to reassure herself even though she had no more oxygen to work with. The airlock was so tantalizingly close, thankfully she was already drifting towards it.

*90 seconds...* she mentally counted, straining to hold onto this last bit of oxygen.

*60 seconds....*

She managed to get to the airlock, but it wasn't opening. Alice had no idea if someone would be able to get to her in time if she didn't open it herself. She cried out in her mind as she struggled with the door, *Come on, stupid piece of junk, open already!* She pounded her fist on the airlock door as she tried to open it.

*20 seconds....*

*Ten seconds...*

*Five....*

*Four....*

*Three....*

*Two....*

*One....*

The airlock door began to open. Alice quickly burst through the crack in the airlock door, slamming her fist on the internal button to close the door before it even had a chance to fully open, she

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gasped for air as the room started filling with oxygen. As she felt her previously burning lungs fill with precious air, she couldn't help but laugh as tears streamed down her cheeks between exasperated gasps.

She barely managed to make her way out of the airlock, before finally collapsing from the stress she had just been through. Some of the operators in the area were shocked to have a sudden airlock opening without prior confirmation. Alice heard one of them call for a medical team to be dispatched just as her vision blacked out.

Several hours passed before Alice opened her eyes to see a familiar face at her bedside. "Hey Mom." Tears welled up in both Alice's eyes and her mother's, "I've got a real story to tell you."

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