

I Walk These Hills

written by

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Address

Phone

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INT. THE DIGITAL MAUSELEUM

The sound of the Ghost of Brand rebooting.

GHOST OF BRAND

I am the ghost of Joe Brand.

TESS

Tell me how you died.

GHOST OF BRAND

Executed, for just about the worst  
crime that can happen out in the  
black.

TESS

*The Protean Hind.*

GHOST OF BRAND

Yep.

TESS

Tell me about it.

GHOST OF BRAND

My official confession was  
published as part of the  
proceedings. Read that.

TESS

I've read it. I want to know the  
rest of the story.

GHOST OF BRAND

(digital glitching)

That is the whole story.

TESS

It isn't. I need you to tell me.

GHOST OF BRAND

Why?

TESS

Cause she won't. I need to know so  
that-

GHOST OF BRAND

(as if reading, glitching  
heavily)  
When the distress call was sent I  
was two hundred and forty thousand  
kilometers away. Initial reports  
were-

TESS  
That is literally just the  
official conf- Nevermind. Let's  
try this again.

A click is heard as the Ghost of Brand is turned off.

Tess takes a long breath, calming herself. After a moment's  
pause, the ghost is turned back on.

The sound of the Ghost of Brand rebooting.

GHOST OF BRAND  
I am the ghost of Joe Brand.

TESS  
What does that mean?

GHOST OF BRAND  
Josephine Brand is dead and I am  
her memorial. I'm a  
reconstruction. My face is sourced  
from photos and video. My voice is  
a mimic, using recordings from  
life as a blueprint. My words are  
approximations, guesses, based on  
things I said or wrote, public  
messages, private texts, even some  
journals and notes, plus facts and  
even the input of those who knew  
me in life. I am not complete. I  
am Joe Brand as seen through the  
lens of what we know. And though I  
may use the word "I" in her place,  
I make no pretense to be the real  
Joe Brand.

TESS  
OK. I'm Tess, by the way.

GHOST OF BRAND

Pleasure to make your  
acquaintance, Tess. What can a  
dead woman do for you today?

TESS

Someone told me you were a  
scrapper.

GHOST OF BRAND

Did someone tell you I was one of  
the best?

TESS

Yes. I was hoping you could help  
me; I'm thinking about taking it  
up.

GHOST OF BRAND

Oh yeah? A rookie. Got a ship?

TESS

There's an offer on the table.

GHOST OF BRAND

So you've come to old Joe looking  
for advice. I'm not sure I can be  
all that helpful. I never trained  
anybody.

TESS

I just want to know if it's for  
me. What it's like. If I'd be  
happy doing it.

GHOST OF BRAND

I was happy.

TESS

Oh yeah?

GHOST OF BRAND

Oh yeah. Now, we're a... an  
eclectic sort. Lots names for what  
we do. Salvagers. Junkers.  
Scrappers. Scroungers. Cutters.  
Breakers. Hendleys. Rag and Bone  
Folx. And even more for all the  
different sorts specialists who do  
what we do. Lots of different

reasons to go hunting out in the black for dark old ships and floating chunks of metal. But a common thread is that you have to very comfortable out there in the void. Cause you're gonna be out there a lot.

TESS

Sounds lonely.

GHOST OF BRAND

Nah. You get yourself a partner, somebody you don't mind being stuck in a tin can with for months on end. Keep each other safe. Keep each other company. Although I suppose if it was only ever salvage runs to dead wrecks, you'd start to miss civilization now and again. But, there are people out there. Every scrapper has a side gig or two. I'm a bonded mech, so I do break-fix and maintenance. Heading out to lonely stations and ships in transit, fixing what needs fixing. So just as often I was doing tow jobs, or meeting people on en route for in flight work. So not that lonely. And of course if you want people, there are the shipfalls.

TESS

Shipfalls?

GHOST OF BRAND

You must be an inner.

TESS

Maybe.

GHOST OF BRAND

Shipfalls are when somebody needs to dee-com a particularly large ship, a luxury liner or bulk freighter, a real whale. Quickest thing to do is to haul it to one

of the big shipyards down sunward, Delaney or Cixin. They can have a big ship taken to component parts inside a week. Trust me, I did that job for while. But they'll also take a huge chunk of the profit to do it. If you're not in a rush, you fly it out to some place like Pallas, Rogers, or El Alem. Put the call out to the independent scrappers like yours truly. Each one comes in and bids on what they want to extract, then pulls it themselves.

Now, none of us could handle the whole ship on our own, but all working at the same time? It's like pack of wild hogs. It still takes longer than the big shipyards would, but everybody involved makes good money off of it, including the owner. A small shipfall can be maybe half a dozen crews coming in, but they can get much bigger, a hundred salvage ships or more working on them at once. That's a huge population boom for the locals, all those scrappers, plus people who come in to sell the scrounger food and booze and entertainment. Shipfall towns spring up over night.

That's the opposite of lonely. You're working almost shoulder to shoulder with the other crews. You all run out of spectrum and end up having to share blueline channels with each other. Then at the end of the day you all go to the same makeshift bars and restaurants. For weeks you're all a community. Fun, food, fights, and... the other stuff. For a while, you're all one big tribe. Working together. You work from the outside in. Each layer taken off the ship reveals more salvage to bid on then pull out. And then,

one day, there's nothing left. Not even the frame. And the shipfall town uproots itself and scatters to the void. I did a couple dozen shipfalls and I remember them all: the O Fortuna, the Atlas, the Silent Protagonist, the Wheel of Progress, the Americana, Soul of Sol, Luna Rosa, the Ernie Ford, the Ey Uhknem, the Pillars of Hercules... that was the biggest. Bulk Terraforming Hauler. She made countless runs between Earth and Mars for decades. Daunting ship, like a whole station. Even the Grinners showed up for that one, and they never come to shipfalls even though they salvage more than anybody. Took a hundred a fifty breaker crews nearly six months to pull her apart. The shipfall town took Raven from a 2vac station to third largest population center in the belt. We were at it so long the whole thing started to feel sort of permanent. They replaced some of the temp bubbles of the town with fully shielded modules. An honest to god circus came through and set up shop, making bank off the scrappers who were flush with cash from all that salvage. Two or three freighters a week coming in and buying scrap. And there were more than just bars and food, there were half a dozen brass houses, a casino, a freaking church, the Rangers even built a station special for the fall.

TESS

I bet they had their hands full.

GHOST OF BRAND

You betcha; we're scrappers in all meanings of the word. Hang around belter bars long enough and you'll see your fair share of rumbles,



rows, scuffles, tumbles, fracasés,  
donnybrooks, squabbles, and knock  
down drag out fights, and I bet  
you nine out of ten will have a  
scrounger on one side or the  
other. Probably both.

TESS

What a strange thing to be proud  
of.

GHOST OF BRAND

I'm a Callistan street brat at  
heart, my friend. I was born with  
scars on my knuckles. And look,  
it's tough out there. If you've  
found a score and some asshole  
comes in to swoop it out from  
under you, you either square up,  
or you lose your next meal.  
Although bar fights are different,  
they're really just for blowing  
off steam. Letting loose. If you  
do it right, you're all drinking  
and singing together.

TESS

So, that's the life of a scrapper?  
Shipfalls and bar fights?

GHOST OF BRAND

Not totally. Ah, Here's something  
I can teach you. If you find a  
ship out there, deep in the black,  
just floating for who knows how  
long? Better than even chance  
there're bodies inside. You can't  
just leave 'em. Toss a body out an  
airlock and they float. Forever.  
They get no rest. So we deal with  
them.

TESS

What do you do?

GHOST OF BRAND

Practically speaking, there're  
three options. Easiest is

fusion-cremation. You use a ship's engine to vaporize the body down to nothing. But that's risky. You can damage your ship, or launch the remains a high-v. If you're not squeamish, some bioreprocessors will take human remains. Put them back into the living biomass of the system. Cryomation is probably the best. The void does half the work. You freeze-dry the body in the vacuum, then break it down to dust, and compress that into a stone about yay big. Then you gotta drop them off at the next rock or station you come to. Someplace inhabited. I mean, by then it's just a hunk of carbon, not a person. But its... It feels better if there are people nearby. Most stations have a potter's field, spare storage somewhere for cremains stones. You probably won't know much about the person, so don't fret too much about a religious service. Lots of scrappers use this prayer:  
*To this dear stranger, laid to rest unknown. May you walk no more through these dark hills alone. Your road is run. Your journey done. May you at last be still and in our hearts find home.*

TESS

That's pretty.

GHOST OF BRAND

You're gonna say it a lot.

TESS

How did you die?

GHOST OF BRAND

Executed, for a terrible crime.

TESS

Did you do it?

GHOST OF BRAND

I confessed.

TESS

Is this normal? For someone  
executed to be preserved like  
this?

GHOST OF BRAND

Hell no. Too expensive.

TESS

What did you do?

GHOST OF BRAND

Do you know what a vulture is?

TESS

Some kind of bird, right?

GHOST OF BRAND

Sure, back on Terra. Carrion  
eater. Circles around the sick and  
dying waiting for 'em to pop off  
so it can get a meal. Everyone  
knows that the black is a  
dangerous place. It's easy to get  
yourself into a heap of trouble.  
So a distress call is a... well  
you might call it sacred. You  
don't have to answer every one,  
but if you do, you're burning to  
help. It's a covenant.

TESS

What's the alternative?

GHOST OF BRAND

A vulture. They hear a distress  
call and think "well, here's an  
opportunity". They answer the call  
and they drag their feet or they  
get there and just wait. Wait for  
that ship in trouble to turn into  
some nice safe salvage.  
No one wants to imagine themselves  
being in danger and it's a vulture

who shows up. Staring out into the void at a ship, who could save you, but who's just patiently waiting for you die so they can pick over your bones. People don't take kindly to vultures.

TESS  
(flat, only a hint of question)  
And you did that?

GHOST OF BRAND  
There was a colony ship headed for the neptune system, the *Protean Hind*. She developed reactor trouble way out in the void. Leaking radiation into her crew compartments. I had my little salvage rig a couple hundred clicks away and we had most of what you need to for that kind of repair. So I answered the call.

TESS  
But you didn't save her.

GHOST OF BRAND  
There's a lot of valuable stuff on a colony ship. Specialized equipment, fabbers, computer systems. It was a game changing score. I couldn't just leave it there.

Pause

TESS  
You're being circumspect. I need to know what kind of woman you were. Good or bad. Did you try to save the crew and fail? Or did you let those people die for the salvage?

Pause

GHOST OF BRAND

(slightly glitchy)  
I'm guilty. I did it. I thought  
the score was worth it but, I  
guess I've got a conscience on me  
after all. After a few months  
alone, on the run, I... It ate me  
up. I came back, turned myself in.  
Let this whole thing be put to  
rest.

TESS  
(sighes)  
Enough of this, tell me about  
Maria.

GHOST OF BRAND  
There's no-  
(digital audio glitch)  
I don't know.  
(digital audio glitch)  
I...

TESS  
Josephine. Tell me about Maria.

Pause

GHOST OF BRAND  
(still glitching)  
Don't tell her, what I did. She'd  
try to stop me.

TESS  
Maria?

GHOST OF BRAND  
Yeah.

TESS  
What did you do?

GHOST OF BRAND  
(glitching again)  
I... I didn't...

The Ghost of Brand starts to break into digital noise.

TESS

Joe. Stay with me. OK. Back up a bit. How did you two meet?

GHOST OF BRAND

She was...

(noise stabilizing)

We were just kids. I looking for a way off Callisto and she was searching for something of her own. We both found our way to the saturnian drive, trying to be VACqueros. That's a young person's job. Hard. Demanding. If you ever meet an old VACquero, they're always tough as iron. And they're always a bit... broken too.

Walden station was a pretty good place for rookies to find work, and I spent a week or two bumming around, putting my name in with a couple of crews. I kept running into this other rookie looking for work. Taller'n me and always with this big grin on her face. We end up going for the same job. I was getting a bit desperate and flung some-let's say 'unkind'- words at her. Still smiling, she gave me this look, up and down. Next thing I knew, I was staring up at the ceiling. She'd laid me flat on my ass so fast I didn't even see her move. I popped up ready to rumble just in time for both of us to get kicked out of the interview. We ended up at the local bar, pooling our last couple of chits to buy a single bottle of Ganymede Gutrot. We drink it and she starts joking around that it'd be easier just to buy our own ship and make a go of it. I tell her, if she ever does, to call me and I'll burn like heck to join her crew. We shook on it. And then I realized, we had sort of teamed up and I didn't even know her name yet. That was Maria. She's my partner.

Next day, we both signed onto a crew run by an old crone called Mama Van. She had a face like a old sour apple. And she was a slave driver. 36 hour exo shifts. Breaking our backs tethering BROLOS into strings thirty or forty long. I have never, before or since, been as tired as I was working for Mama Van. I can remember standing in her ship's airlock, feeling the exhaustion to my very bones. There were two things that got me through that job: Maria, who turned out to be just about the funniest person I'd ever met, and Mama Van's cooking. I never understood it. Mama Van was constitutionally incapable of spending a penny more on ingredients than she absolutely had to. Bottom of the barrel stuff. She was a mean, bitter old hag. But fuck me. Somehow, the food that came out of her galley was to die for. Criscuits and sambal gravy. Bean sprout pancakes. Oh, her fungal steaks. I once ate actual damn prime bovine ribeye and it wasn't half as good as a two credit chunk of mushroom cooked by Mama Van.

We'd come off a nearly two day shift, and at first everyone would want nothing more than to head straight for their bunks. But you gotta to eat first or you'll wake up in a bad way. So we'd be huddled around that little galley table and Mama Van would load us up with food and we'd just dig in. And at some point Maria would always say something, bringing up something that had happened on the shift. Put a spin on it, and have us rolling. I swear, she would wait for just as I was about to swallow to say something

particularly funny, and I'd damn near choke to death. We made a good team. One day, hours into a shift, I realized that since we'd gone exo, we hadn't said a single word to one another. No sign, no signals. And it hadn't hampered us in the least. I could just glance over at her and know what she needed or expected. Or I'd turn to ask her for something and realize she was already handing it to me. Just a perfect sync.

TESS

I know the feeling.

GHOST OF BRAND

That's special. Keep hold on to it when you find it. I didn't, first time out. After two seasons with Mama Van's crew, I couldn't take it anymore. Quit. Signed on to a twenty four month contract at the Delany Shipyards.

TESS

That's mars, right?

GHOST OF BRAND

Yep. Furthest sunward I'd ever been to that point. Not a bad job on paper. Short shifts and lots of opportunity to learn. Room and board included. But yardwork is a mix of mind numbingly boring and incredibly dangerous. You find yourself doing the same tasks over and over, enough to put your brain to sleep. But one slip of a finger and, boom, you've cut a live fuel line. Splatter yourself across your work bay. It can kind of tear you up, all that stress mixed with boredom.

Lots of the workers there handle it by really letting loose off



shift. I heard that Delany shipyards consumes more recreational mind alterants than anyplace else in the system. Of course, if you drink, smoke, swallow, inject, and snort up your whole paycheck every month, when your contract is up, you got no choice but to re-up. I saw that trap coming a mile out. So I stayed clean, saved every credit. Wasn't much fun, had a couple of close calls. But two years later I had all my shipyard pay and all my savings from the saturnian drive. To boot, I had six shipbreaker classifications and five levels of bonded mech accreditation. I was ready.

TESS

For what?

GHOST OF BRAND

A ship of my own. Well, almost. I needed someone to go in with on it. So naturally I think back...

TESS

To Maria.

GHOST OF BRAND

You got it. I shot her a call and what do you know? Fools rarely differ. She was two months out from completing an apprenticeship with the Jovian Astromerchant Fleet. She'd been saving her pay too and was proud owner of a brand new astrogation license. Just like working exo on the drive. We hadn't spoken about it at all, but when we turned around, we'd found the other had done the missing half of one complete plan.

TESS

So you two got a ship?

GHOST OF BRAND

Well, just a hull at first. Once upon a time she was a General Atomics CR-90. I think she was scrapped and recommissioned two, maybe three times before we found her in a salvage yard on Ceres. Bought her, grafted in a Hobb-Malloy Kovar 10 reactor, christened her the *Wandrin Star*, and spend a year and half doing a complete refit with our bare hands. Once we got her flying, barely, we got to work making short salvage runs. At first, everything we found went straight into the Star just to keep her flying. But over time we had her kitted into a lovely little scrapper. Full suite of waldos, tow-rated RCS, DG rig, bootstrapper, work horse fabber, even an on board micro foundry. She could handle it all; salvage, deecom, maintenance, diagnostics, break-fix, rescue, tug work. We could even scratch build hulls under twenty five meters keel length. She was such a good little ship, our *Wandrin Star*.

TESS

That's a good name. How'd you come to that one?

GHOST OF BRAND

Cause that's what we wanted to do, me and Maria. Wander. No home port, go where we pleased, do what we wanted, see the system. That's the beauty of salvage and repair, you can go just about anywhere. There's junk all over the place, and ships always need fixing. From Terminus to Mercury, there's work everywhere. What better life could you ask for, than to see the

system in your own ship with your best friend?

TESS

She meant a lot to you?

GHOST OF BRAND

Yeah. Everything. I don't have family, outside of her. She was like a part of me. The better part of me. That's the thing about having a partner, you gotta commit. The void is a dangerous place, and civilization is worse. You get a partner to watch your back and you watch theirs. And you don't judge them and you don't lie to them, or ever try to cheat them. The point of a partner is to have one person. One person, at least. That you can absolutely trust. That means you have to be worthy of that trust back. You can be a scoundrel to the rest of the world. Thieving. Conning. Lying. Fighting. Vulturing even. But to your partner, you are your best you. Cause you need them and they need you right back.

TESS

Your best you. Hm.

GHOST OF BRAND

I wouldn't have lasted a year without Mar looking over my shoulder. Cause she saw who I was, who I really was, right down at my core. A hoodlum. An angry asshole. Impulsive and dumb. See looked at all this and said "yeah, her, she'll do". And I got no illusions about her. Cause I saw her right back. Smarter than everyone else in the room. Strong inside and out. And afraid. Desperate for people to like her. Desperate to not be

alone. But big old iron walls all around her.

TESS  
And you looked at her and...

GHOST OF BRAND  
said "yeah, her, she'll do."

TESS  
Did you love her?

GHOST OF BRAND  
Yeah.

TESS  
Were you in love with her?

GHOST OF BRAND  
Ah.

(sigh)  
Lots of meanings of the word love. A lot of different names for the most important person in your life: best friend, girlfriend, wife, better half, soul mate. Partner. We weren't bunkmates. I mean, don't get me wrong. Early on, we tried each other on for size. Just to see if it worked. It didn't. Mar's more of a bedfellow-in-every-port kind of person, and I'm... I'm a don't-really-see-what-the-fuss-is-about kind of person. But we were partners. That's what mattered. I just hope she's found somebody new. Somebody to look after her now that I'm not around anymore.

TESS  
Because of what happened with the Protean Hind?

GHOST OF BRAND  
(glitch)  
Yeah.

TESS

What happened? What really  
happened?

Pause

GHOST OF BRAND

(slight glitch)

When we got the distress signal,  
there was no way we weren't going.  
A big ship like that? All those  
people. Needing help.

And, incidentally, they'd be very  
grateful. Good for business in the  
future. Lot of good will bought.

Maria put the Star on auto and we  
strapped into the acceleration  
cradles. I built that ship with my  
own two hands and we'd been  
working out in the black for over  
a decade together. I know exactly  
how many gees for how long we  
could go before something will  
give. We pushed right up against  
that limit to get to the Hind.

And we were too late. It was too  
late before we even got moving.  
The radiation leak had been worse  
than the crew had thought. The  
colony company, when they'd  
installed the sensors had, of  
course, gone for the lowest  
bidder. The leak had started weeks  
before anyone noticed. The crew,  
the passengers, everyone, had been  
walking around all that time, but  
they were already dead. There  
wasn't anything we could have  
done.

When we arrived, nobody answered  
on the comm. The reactor was  
running, but the ship was just  
floating along. Walking the hills  
above the valley in the shadow of  
death. We couldn't even go aboard  
until we shut the reactor off. Had  
to do that manually from outside  
the hull. Closed the manifolds and

doot starved her. Then we pried open an airlock and went inside, keeping our suits on for the shielding from what radiation remained.

The Ghost of Brand takes a long slow breath.

GHOST OF BRAND

I found a lot of bodies in my time. In all kinds of states. All kinds of deaths. Decompression, explosion, asphyxiation, starvation, dehydration, fire, murder. Fresh ones, old ones. Mummified corpses, dry as a bone. Rotten bodies, wet and wriggling with life. I've seen it all. What I saw on the Hind was the worst. Nothing had prepared me for it.

TESS

So, everyone was...?

GHOST OF BRAND

We did not see a living soul on that ship.

TESS

What did you and Mar do?

GHOST OF BRAND

What we had was a dilemma. See, the rule is: if everyone aboard is dead, that's salvage. Fair game. But there's a sort of subclause, not official. If you responded to the distress signal and you get there too late, then you call in the ship to the authorities and don't touch it. By the letter of the law, you should be clear, but it's not exactly on the up and up to salvage a ship you failed to save.

TESS

But you did.

GHOST OF BRAND

So much value in that wreck. We couldn't leave it. Seemed like a waste. If we called it in, the colony company would just take possession. Nobody gets anything, cept some corporate bottom line is less in the red. It didn't seem like it'd hurt anything. We didn't discuss it, Mar and I. Just looked at each other through our faceplates and knew what we were going to do. I stripped the fabbers and the construction gear. Maria went to the bridge and dumped the computer core into the Star's storage. All in all, we didn't take much. Valuable, sure. But not that much compared to what was left. We called the rangers as we flew away.

TESS

How'd you end up here?

GHOST OF BRAND

When the rangers investigated, they made a timeline. Saw when the reactor shut down. Figured out when we opened the airlock and did our dirty work. Knew exactly when we left. And they looked at the medical telemetry from the passenger systems. The system that keeps track of everyone's status for insurance purposes. And it turns out, when Mar and I were there, stripping the valuables from the *Protean Hind*, there were still some heartbeats going. Poor strangers, dying of radiation in corridors and bunks of the ship that was supposed to take them to their new homes. Indistinguishable from the corpses laying next to 'em, who had been their friends and family. Laying there and following slowly after.

And me and Maria, picking the ship over. Like vultures.

TESS

It sounds like you couldn't have-

GHOST OF BRAND

Ain't no excuse. And when the report came out, people were furious. Looking for somebody to blame. Rangers put out a bounty on us. We were on the run. We ended up hiding on Tethys, with the whole of the system looking for the Wandrin Star. And rightly so. Maybe it would have all died down eventually. But it turns out, I do got a conscience. I couldn't stand it.

TESS

So you took the blame.

GHOST OF BRAND

Damn right. Face the consequences and in the process, save my partner from the same fate. I snuck off, took a ship to Ganymede. Turned myself in. Struck a deal that if they didn't go after Maria and the Star, they could hang me and I wouldn't fight it. And they did, else I wouldn't be here.

TESS

Despite everything. I think you might have been a good woman, Joe Brand.

GHOST OF BRAND

(snorts)

Don't let a rumor like that get around.

TESS

I need to go.



GHOST OF BRAND

Did you find out what you wanted  
to know?

TESS

Yeah, I think so.

Pause

TESS

Give me your hand.

GHOST OF BRAND

I'm a ghost. I can't really-

TESS

Best you can. There. That'll do.

GHOST OF BRAND

What are you...?

TESS

*To this dear stranger, laid to  
rest unknown.*

GHOST OF BRAND

Oh.

TESS

*May you walk no more through these  
dark hills alone. Your road is  
run. Your Journey done. May you at  
last be still and in our hearts  
find home.*

GHOST OF BRAND

Thank you.

Pause. Then echoey footsteps as Tess leaves the mausoleum.  
She walks through a silent hallway and into a waiting area  
or plaza. She approaches another woman and sits on the bench  
next to her.

MARIA

Well? How is she?

TESS

If she was anything like her ghost  
is, I see why you two got along.

Pause.

TESS  
You should go talk with her.

MARIA  
No. I... No.

TESS  
Why not?

Pause

MARIA  
It should have been me. She was my partner. I should have been the one to... She just thought of it first.

TESS  
OK.

MARIA  
Gimme some time. Maybe someday I'll... be able to face her. Did talking with her... Did you decide?

TESS  
I think so, yeah. I think I'll have some big shoes to fill.

MARIA  
No, you don't. You just gotta be-

TESS  
My best me. She told me that bit. I can handle that.

MARIA  
All right. OK. Good. Let's get back to the Star then. Partner?

TESS  
All right, partner.