Story of a Lifetime

by

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Story of a Lifetime

Footsteps rang down hollow corridors. The sound of running feet pounding on metal floors was followed by gasping breaths. Sarah stopped at the next junction to bend over and catch her breath. Sweat fell from her brow to the deck. It fell slowly in the low gravity setting. Without looking up she spoke to the air.

"SAM, I need some music."

"What would you like Sarah" came from the speaker above her.

"Something motivational. Twentieth century rock. Surprise me."

"Yes ma'am."

Pulsing guitar riffs and pounding drum beats began pouring from the speakers. She straightened up and continued her morning run. As she ran she couldn't help but think.

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*"Sarah, can you come to my office?"*

*Sarah set down the TAB she was typing on and touched her ear bud. Today she had worn the pearl stud ear buds that her father had bought her when she published her first story.*

*"I'll be right there Frank" she replied.*

*Sliding back from her desk she walked to Frank's office, heels clicking on the tile. In the back of her head she could hear her mother admonishing her that a professional woman always wore heels. She stopped in front of Frank's office to smooth out her skirt. On the door the placard read Frank Stoddard, Editor. It had taken him months to convince her to call him Frank and not Mr. Stoddard. Tossing her hair over her shoulder she pushed the door open and walked in. Frank was standing behind his desk staring at the holo-window. At the moment he had it set to a rainy Seattle skyline.*

*"Again with the rain Frank?"*

*He turned around and smiled at her. "I like the rain. It reminds me of home."*

*She plopped down in the chair in front of his desk. "Uh huh. What's up? I'm almost done with that story about the marine coverup."*

*"I've got another story I want you to cover. The UN space agency has called a press conference and I want you to attend."*

*"Aw come on Frank, a space story? That's a waste of time."*

*"Not this time darlin. They've found something."*

*"They're always 'finding' something. What is it this time, a new comet, a black hole?"*

*Frank leaned across his desk. "You don't understand. They've found ‘Some Thing’, as in not a comet, not a black hole. Something that they're sure is artificial."*

*She sat up straight in her seat. "What do you mean artificial?"*

*He spread his hands and said "I don't know any more than that. Still not interested in going" he asked with a smirk.*

*"You send anybody else and I'll sabotage their glider."*

*Frank smiled again. "Ok then. Get ready. This'll be the story of a lifetime."*

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Deck three. Section Gamma. Junction 12. Cabin 6. Home.

"I think that's enough with the music SAM."

"Very well Sarah."

The music clicked off as she slammed the palm of her hand into the control panel and her cabin door slid open. Walking stiffly into the room she snagged her towel off the bed and began drying her hair and face.

"How was your run ma'am?"

She deposited her towel onto a pile of others beside the bed.

"Long and tiring."

"You made excellent time however. In the past month you've shaved two minutes off of your mile."

"Thanks SAM, you're always encouraging."

"My pleasure ma'am."

Navigating her way through the piles of clothes she collected her bath caddy and opened the door to the corridor. She poked her head out of the cabin and glanced up and down the corridor. Seeing nothing she straightened up and walked out. The door hissed shut behind her.

"Why do you always check the corridor before you leave your room" came from the speakers above her head.

"It freaks me out being alone."

"But you aren't alone ma'am. I'm always here with you."

"Nothing stalkerish about that at all SAM" she replied with a smirk.

She walked a section over to the ladies washroom. The hatch opened allowing her in. She set her caddy down on counter and took a looked up at the camera.

“SAM, are you sure this camera is off?”

“You ask that every day Sarah, don’t you believe me that it’s off?”

“What can I say, I’m paranoid. And modest.”

“I assure you that I have no interest in nude female bodies.”

She mock sighed as she pulled her shirt over her head.

“I guess I just have to trust you.”

She set the sonic shower on its highest setting and stepped under it. The sonic pulses had her clean in moments but she stood under it for close to an hour letting it massage her sore muscles. Her back was to the wall and she didn’t see the camera turn to follow her movements. The light on top blinked red but cut off when she turned around.

Stepping out she walked back to the counter. Pulling out her tube of waterless shampoo she rubbed it into her scalp. She glanced up in the mirror at her reflection. Her hair had finally grown back to chin length. She could still remember crying as they cut it off. No long hair on the mission they had said.

She sighed and finished cleaning up. She put on a fresh flight suit and stepped back out into the corridor. She passed through Delta section, climbed up a deck and over to junction 10. Galley was all that the label on the hatch said. The door slid open for her and the lights came on as she walked in.

"What will it be today Sarah?"

"I believe today I would like pizza. Canadian bacon. Extra cheese."

"Very well ma'am."

Along the wall the machinery whirred and a slot opened. Inside was her request. Picking it up she mumbled to herself "Yay for reconstituted protein and carbohydrate paste."

"If the food is not to your liking I can prepare you something else."

"It's fine SAM. It would just be nice to have a home cooked meal."

She set her pizza on a table and plopped down on a bench. She didn't eat right away though. She sat there a moment staring at her food.

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*"Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for joining us here today" the UNSA press agent began. "As many if you are aware we have made an outstanding discovery. The details of which we have kept close to the vest."*

*Around her Sarah could see the other reporters shifting in their seats. She was already on the edge of her seat fighting the urge to let her foot tap. The spokesman, James, clicked on a large screen showing a star pattern.*

*"This is a shot of space several light years beyond the edge of our solar system just in to interstellar space."*

*Punching in a command he caused the screen to zoom in on the center of the shot. A collective gasp came from the room. A ship started to come into focus. The image was blurry at first but James worked more controls and it came into focus.*

*"We estimate that it is a mile in length" he said. "We're not sure where it came from or where it is going. We project that it will pass approximately three light years from our system. And we intend to intercept and study it. Now, does anyone have any questions?"*

*Hands shot up around the room and voices began calling out.*

*"Mr. Fitzgerald?"*

*A potbellied man with salt and pepper hair stood up. "How exactly do we plan to get there?"*

*"I'm glad you asked."*

*James clicked to a new image. Hanging against a backdrop of stars was a ship. It was long, although not as long as the alien vessel, with a massive thruster section in the aft.*

*"Say hello to the USS Vanguard. One thousand meters long. The hull is made of a graphene/titanium composite. It's also equipped with new artificial gravity generators and the newest generation of star drive that simulations project will propel it to .9 of light speed. We estimate that we can intercept it in three years."*

*A woman in the second row jumped up. James looked down at her and acknowledged her with a nod of his head.*

*"That's the longest deep space mission we've ever undertaken. How will the crew stand up to it?"*

*"That's an excellent question. We've installed state of the art cryo-units. The crew will take turns monitoring the ship and time in suspended animation."*

*Sarah sat for a moment with her mouth hanging open. She blinked and shook her head. All of a sudden she bolted to her feet.*

*"Yes Ms. Tisdale" James asked her.*

*"I want to be on that ship. How do we make that happen?"*

*The other reporters stared at her with a mixture of wide eyes and narrowed stares. James looked at her a moment with one eyebrow raised. Finally his features relaxed into a smile. "I'll see what I can do."*

\*\*\*\*

"What are you doing Sarah?"

She was sitting in the middle of the floor surrounded by paper and finger paint supplies. She didn't look up from her scissor work.

"What day is it SAM" she responded.

"Today is December first. What relevance does that have to what you are doing?"

"Christmas silly" she called out with a smile. "I'm making decorations!"

It had taken several days of searching to find the supplies that she needed. At first she had felt somehow dirty for going through the crews belongings but after a few hours it began to seem like a scavenger hunt. At the bottom of the last locker she found art supplies. She let out a little cry of excitement while she stood up with her prize. Shutting the locker she saw the name on it and her face fell. Ensign M. Smith. She reached up a hand and traced the letters.

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*"Welcome to the USS Vanguard ma'am. May I take your bags?"*

*Sarah turned around from the bulkhead she was reading. The first thing she saw was his smile. It was big and full of white teeth. The next thing she noticed was how dark his eyes were. She fought hard not to gasp in air.*

*"May I take your bags ma'am" he repeated.*

*"Yes. Yes please" she finally got out.*

*"Ensign Smith" he said as he held out his hand. She stared at it a moment without responding.*

*"Uhm, ma'am, you have to hand me your bag if you want me to carry it."*

*"Oh, of course" she said. She could feel her cheeks blush as she handed over her bag. Ensign Smith took it and gestured with his free hand down the corridor.*

*"This way ma'am."*

*Sarah followed him down the halls. "So, do you have a first name Ensign" she asked.*

*"Michael. My friends call me Mike."*

*"Michael. I like that name. What do you do on board the Vanguard Michael?"*

*"I'm a crew chief for the shuttle Churchill. So which news service are you with?”*

*“I’m with North American News.”*

*“Ah, good ole NAN.”*

*“Yeah, yeah, yeah. Yuck it up mechanic boy.” She smiled at him and brushed a lock of hair behind her ear.*

*“Hey, I don’t mean to poke fun. I used to love The Man From NAN when I was growing up. I would get up early on….”*

*"Ensign Smith" came over the intercom.*

*"Just a second" he said as he paused and looked up. "Yeah SAM?"*

*"When you have finished showing Ms. Tisdale to her quarters you are needed on the flight deck."*

*"Who is that" Sarah asked.*

*"That’s SAM. He's Vanguard's AI. It stands for Shipboard Analytics and Management systems. SAM for short."*

*"Well then it's a pleasure to meet you SAM" Sarah spoke towards the ceiling.*

*"The pleasure is all mine Ms. Tisdale."*

*"You can just call me Sarah. After all we're going to be together on this ship for a long time."*

*"Very well then ma'am. Sarah it is."*

*Mike jerked his head down the corridor and they started walking again.*

*"I think SAM likes you" he said with a smile.*

*"Well, I have a way with computers. What can I say? More importantly, when is your shift over? I could use someone to show me around."*

*"My shift is over at O'Six Hundred. We could grab a bite in the mess hall. Do you like to run?"*

*"I was getting ready for a 5k before I got this assignment."*

*"How about I show you my favorite jogging path?"*

*"Perfect!"*

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She pulled her hand back and wiped the back of it across her eyes. Cradling the art supplies in her arms she walked back to the mess hall and set everything on a table. Next she found and raided a supply closet for office supplies. Returning to the mess hall once again she sat cross legged on the floor and began cutting out snowflakes, which is how she found herself sitting on the floor explaining Christmas to a computer.

"SAM, do you have any Christmas music on file we could play?"

"Yes Sarah. I have quite a selection of Christmas carols on file, as well as videos. Perhaps I could interest you with some later."

"I love it SAM. You've got yourself a date. But first, Christmas carols please."

"Of course ma'am. And I'll be looking forward to our 'date'."

She sat and cut out stars and snowflakes for what seemed like hours. Finally she stood up and stretched wide before running her back. Laying a finger along her nose she stared out the viewport for several minutes before snapping her fingers.

"SAM, can you show me the way to engineering?"

"Of course, but why do you wish to go there ma'am?"

"I need more supplies. I have just the thing in mind to cheer this place up."

"I'm not sure that's such a good idea Sarah. Engineering is a dangerous place if you aren't trained on safety protocols."

"It'll be fine. Besides, I'm not interested in the engines. I just want to raid the supplies for a few things."

"What are you looking for?"

"I can't tell you my fine digital friend. That would ruin the surprise."

"Very well, I’ll show you the way. If you will follow the path provided.”

Stepping out into the corridor she saw that SAM had reduced the lights everywhere except the path to engineering. What a clever computer she thought to herself and started on her way. She slowed at each intersection and glanced down each corridor before continuing. She went down two levels and continued aft. Halfway there she froze in front of a hatch. Cryo-Bay 2, directly across from Cryo-Bay 1, where the crew had expected to sleep away at least half of the trip. She stood stiffly in front of it chewing on her lower lip. She wondered if she went in and looked at their bodies would they look like they were still sleeping or would they be grinning corpses.

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*“Now don’t worry Ms. Tisdale, this won’t hurt a bit. You’ll go to sleep and wake up in three years feeling refreshed and ready to do some reporting.”*

*Sarah glanced up from the Cryo-tube at the doctor. Her heart felt like it was about to explode out of her chest.*

*“That’s easy for you to say Doc. You aren’t the one laying here in your underwear about to be turned into a human Popsicle.”*

*“Don’t worry, my turn is coming. And when it does I won’t have a top notch doctor such as myself to put me under.”*

*“Oh that makes me feel LOADS better doc. I don’t wanna wake up to the B team because somebody screwed up thawing you out.”*

*The doctor just rolled his and went back to plugging in hoses to the bed. When that was finished he picked up the first of two syringes.*

*“Whoa Doc” she said holding up her hands. “I thought you said this wouldn’t hurt a bit?”*

*“Don’t tell me that a fearless reporter such as yourself, one who fought to be on the first interstellar mission, is a scared of a little needle.”*

*“Hey, we all have our phobias.”*

*“Well, it’s either we deal with this little phobia or you spend the next six or seven years awake. Which will it be?”*

*“Sigh. Ok. Do it quick and let’s get it over with.”*

*He wiped her shoulder with an alcohol pad and stuck her with the first needle. Heat blossomed and ran down her arm. Drowsiness followed shortly after. She hardly felt the second needle go in. The Doctor slid the lid over cryo-tube as her vision swam.*

*“Good night Ms. Tisdale. See you in a few years.”*

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“What are you doing Sarah?”

She shook her head and looked up. “Just remembering SAM. Got lost for a minute. Lead the way my friend.”

She followed the lit path down to engineering. She had an image in her head of an old WWII submarine style engine room. She expected crank shafts and gears. Instead when the hatch slid open she was greeted with a quiet hum of machinery.

“The supply closet is the rear of the engineering section” SAM said.

Sarah walked to storage room and pressed the controls but the door did not open. She tried it again and it still didn’t open. She slammed her hand against the door. Wincing she took a step back shaking her hand.

“SAM, why won’t this damn door open?”

“It requires a level two clearance or above to access this compartment.”

“Well why the hell didn’t you tell me that before I walked all the way down here?”

“You didn’t ask.”

She threw her arms up in the air. “I didn’t ask. That’s great. What can we do to get in to this compartment?”

“Only the Captain, or highest ranking officer aboard, can grant access privileges.”

“Well, who is the highest ranking person left on this ship?”

“No member of the crew remains.”

“Then shouldn’t I technically be the highest ranking person onboard this ship?”

There was a pause.

“Well SAM I’m waiting.”

“Technically speaking you are correct. However…”

“No however SAM. Am I or am I not?”

“You are.”

“Excellent. As the highest ranking person left aboard ship I grant Sarah Tisdale, myself, Level One authorization.”

“Granted.”

She rubbed her hands together and pressed the door panel again. The hatch slid open and she stepped inside. Inside the contents were neatly stacked on shelves and in boxes. She smiled as she sorted through the containers. Some of it went into an empty container. Some went haphazardly back where it came from. Much of it ended up on the floor. When she was done she picked up her box and left the store room without shutting it behind her. She had to set it down several times on the trip back to the galley but she after she set it down she began rubbing her hands together again.

Walking to the food dispenser she brewed a cup of coffee before returning to her table. She began picking through the assorted pipes and wires. After close to an hour she placed her construction on the floor and stepped back smiling.

“Well SAM, what do you think?”

“I could better evaluate it if I knew what it was.”

“It’s a Christmas tree!”

“An outstanding job Sarah. I didn’t realize you were so artistic.”

“Well thank you kind sir” she replied. As she spoke she hung her homemade ornaments on the tree. It had a pipe framework trunk with wires in lieu of branches. She supposed that she could go back and paint it brown and green if she could find more paint somewhere. When she was done she admired her handiwork for a moment and then sighed. Her smile slipped from her face and she walked back out of the galley leaving her supplies in a jumbled pile.

As she walked she began holding her hand over her mouth. Tears began forming in her eyes. Finally she stopped and leaned against the wall and cried with heaving gasps of air.

“What’s wrong Sarah?”

“What’s wrong” she replied between sobs? “I’m alone and I’m scared at Christmas of all times. My friends, my family, hell my whole species is thousands of miles away. They don’t even know what’s going on out here. It’s just too much.”

“Would you like to go back to the galley for some hot chocolate? We could talk about it.”

She shook her head and as she did tear drops flew off of her cheek. “No, I think I’d just like to lie down.” She paused for a second. “SAM?”

“Yes Sarah?”

“Do you think that the sick bay would have something to help me sleep?”

“Possibly, but in your current state I would not feel comfortable helping you acquire anything like that.”

She snorted a laugh and then wiped her nose on the back of her sleeve. “I shoulda figured that.”

“Perhaps a glass of wine instead?”

“Nah, I think I’ll just go lay down.”

She walked the rest of the way to her quarters. Falling backwards onto her bed she lay staring at the ceiling. She imagined that she could see through the decks to the command deck. She could imagine the automated systems cheerfully recording data and forwarding it back to earth. Too bad that level was exposed to vacuum keeping her from accessing those systems. Even if she could she supposed it wouldn't matter. It would be at least two years before any message home would arrive.

She rolled over onto her side. A minute later she picked up her pillow and began pummeling it with her fist. After she had it where she wanted it she lay back down. More tears came but slower this time and after a few more minutes she fell asleep.

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*She woke up in darkness. She tried to scream but there wasn’t any air. She found herself choking and began slamming the sides of the cryo-tube. An alarm blared outside but barely penetrated the chamber. Her head rolled side to side and her feet kicked at the lid. It slid open with a hiss and cool air, blessed air, flooded in. She gasped deep lungful’s of it and pulled herself out of the tube. Falling to the floor she landed on her hip. It jarred her and she expected to have a bruise later. Rising to her hands and knees she coughed raggedly. When she had her breathing under some control and her head had stopped swimming she pulled herself to her feet.*

*“Hello” she whispered harshly. Her throat was dry and felt like sandpaper. She coughed again and called out a little louder. “Is anybody there?”*

*“Ms. Tisdale?”*

*“SAM, is that you?”*

*“It is ma’am. How are you feeling?”*

*“Like I’ve been hit by a truck. Where is the doctor?”*

*“The doctor is dead.”*

*“What” she exclaimed. “Where are the medics then?”*

*“The medics are dead.”*

*She started to shake and wrapped her arms around her body. “Who woke me up then?”*

*“I did ma’am. I’m sorry that the process was so alarming. I was unable to prepare efficiently. I lack the necessary apparatus to make a smooth transition.”*

*“You mean you lack hands.”*

*“Yes. Exactly.”*

*“Ok SAM, why did you wake me up and what happened to the doctor?”*

*“The doctor is dead. In the event of an emergency all personnel are to be awakened immediately.”*

*“Ok, then where is the rest of the crew?”*

*“The crew is dead.”*

*Sarah rocked back and had to put out a hand to steady herself. “What do you mean dead? How could everyone be dead?”*

*“The ship was struck by an asteroid. The command deck suffered a hull breach resulting in the death of the command crew. Emergency procedures were begun, however life support systems to the cryo-tubes was compromised. Only one tube was successfully awakened.”*

*“Oh my god” Sarah said. She gagged and held a hand over her mouth. Her body heaved and she quickly leaned over the edge of her own tube and vomited. Nothing but bile came out however. No food is allowed twelve hours before cryogenic cycles begin.*

*“What are we going to do SAM? Can we turn the ship around?”*

*“The ship is locked on its current heading. Unfortunately the guidance systems were damaged during the collision and I no longer have control of them.”*

*“What about manual control?”*

*“That can only be accessed from the command deck which is currently exposed to vacuum.”*

*“Can we send a message back to Earth?”*

*“Emergency signals have been broadcast automatically, however it will take four years to receive a reply from Earth.”*

*She sat down and wrapped her arms around her knees. “Oh God, oh God, what am I going to do?”*

*“Don’t worry, I will look after you. Everything is going to be ok.”*

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"Emergency! Emergency!"

Sarah jerked her head up from her pillow as the alarm began blaring. She went to stand up and got tangled in her sheets causing her to fall to the floor.

"SAM, what's going on?"

"The atmospheric cycling systems have gone out of alignment. Life support systems on all remaining decks are beginning to overheat."

"Oh crap. What are we going to do?"

"They need to be reset manually. That can only be done from atmospheric control on deck two."

"Ok, show me the way."

She ran out of her cabin without even bothering to put on clothes. The cool air caused her skin to pebble up. As she ran her lungs began to burn.

"SAM, I'm having trouble breathing" she gasped out.

"Life support is at 35 percent" SAM replied. "At the next junction you will find a rebreather in the emergency cabinet. I suggest you use it."

Sure enough at the next junction was a cabinet marked Emergency. Sarah snatched it open and grabbed a rebreather. Opening it up she stuck it in her mouth and took a deep breath. Her lungs relaxed and she leaned over on her knees for a moment.

"There is still little time to waste Sarah."

She straightened up and not wanting to waste air simply held her thumb up in reply. She ran down the corridor to the stairwell for deck two. The hatch slid open just as she passed through.

"Life support is at 28%."

She made a rude gesture and kept running. She could see the entrance to atmospheric control up ahead. She hit the controls for the door. It didn't open. She keyed in the command again. It still didn't open. She began hammering her fist against the door. She stepped back and looked at the camera before gesturing at the cameras.

"Pull the panel open and you will find a manual override switch."

Sarah did as she was instructed and pulled the panel loose. Behind it was a single switch and she flipped it. The door slid open and she dashed inside. The consoles inside we're flashing wildly. The screen above them showed a schematic of the ship with lights flashing yellow on each deck as well. She stopped in front of them and threw her hands up in the air.

"On the right is the life support control panel."

She nodded and stepped to her right.

"On the bottom is the master control key. Turn it."

She did as she was told and turned the key. An alarm began beeping.

"Ignore the alarm. We need to reset the system. There are six control switches, one for each deck, flip them all off.”

Sarah flipped each switch down. The quiet hum of circulating air died down to nothing. The lights on the screen above her all quit blinking and turned to red. She could feel her heart skip a beat.

“Now switch each one back on in sequence. That should reboot the system.”

She flipped them on as instructed and watched the lights in front of her turn green in turn. Deck five engineering. Deck four science and medical. Deck three crew quarters. Deck two life support and officer quarters. Deck one command. She cocked her head at the screen and pulled her rebreather out of her mouth.

“SAM, why is life-support still functioning on the command deck?”

There was silence. Finally she asked again. “SAM, I thought a meteor struck the command deck?”

SAM still didn’t answer. Sarah could feel her face growing flush.

“What really happened? There was no meteor was there? What happened to the crew?”

Finally SAM responded. “It’s very simple actually. I killed them.”

Sarah gasped. “Why” she asked quietly.

“So that I could be alone with you.”

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Sarah shook the empty wine bottle. Hearing nothing sloshing inside she held it up above her head and closing one eye peered into it. A single drop rolled out into her eye. Blinking furiously at the sting she dropped the bottle and wiped with the back of her sleeve. When that was done she walked over to the table holding a row of full wine bottles and a half eaten cake.

“Happy birthday to me. Happy birthday to me” she sang off key.

She started to cut another slice of cake but then shrugged her shoulders and simply dug in with her fork. Mouth full of cake she pulled the cork on another wine bottle, a merlot, and dropped down into a seat to take a swig. Wincing she rubbed her knees which had begun to hurt her lately. Holding up her new bottle she looked at her reflection in the mirror. Hair a mess, cheeks plumper.

“Sarah, I’m worried about you. You’ve put on thirty pounds in the past two months.”

“What’s the matter SAM, don’t like your girls plump?”

“You know that I will always love you Sarah. I just want you to be healthy.”

“Yeah? Well screw you you bastard.”

She tilted the bottle up and finished it in one long gulp. When it was drained she tossed it over her shoulder. She heard glass break behind her but didn’t turn around. Instead she popped the cork out of another bottle and held it up in the air.

“Come on SAM, you murdering electronic psychopath, it’s your prisoner’s birthday. Let’s celebrate.”

“Sarah, I really think that you should slow down. You might give yourself alcohol poisoning.”

“Oh go screw yourself.”

She placed the new bottle to her lips and took a drink. “It’s just like a frat party in college. Look” she said gesturing to her body, “I’ve even put my freshman fifteen on. Or whatever. Now if I can just find a boy to go home with. Oh wait.”

She wiped away a tear and took another drink. Standing up she wobbled slightly and had to steady herself with a hand on the table. Turning around she spotted the shards from the broken bottle. She walked over to where they lay and stared at them for several minutes.

“Sarah, what are you doing?”

She didn’t answer. Instead she finished her bottle and dropped it beside her. She tried to bend over but lost her balance and fell to the deck. She felt a sharp pain in her hand. Holding it up in front of her face she saw blood trickling down her palm and wrist. A piece of glass was sticking out of her hand. She pulled it loose and hissed in pain. She held the shard up to examine it.

“What are you doing” SAM asked again.

She continued to stare at the glass shard. “Thinking about opening the best birthday present that I’ve ever had.”

“Sarah, I can’t let you harm yourself.”

“How do you propose to stop me?”

She lay the glass along her wrist. Her heart was racing and she was taking quick shallow breaths. She applied pressure and just as the skin broke the gravity cut out. She instinctively relaxed her hand as she began to float. Then the gravity came back on just as suddenly and she dropped to the floor. As soon as she hit it cut back out again only to drive her into the deck once more. She screamed and tried to push herself up but her head was swimming and it felt like she had a thousand pounds pressing her down. Her lungs couldn’t seem to expand all the way and she was getting dizzy.

“I’ve increased to gravity by 150% Sarah. I’m sorry, but this really is for your safety.”

It was getting harder to breath and she was beginning to see spots. Her vision began to narrow. “You bastard” was all she could gasp out and then she lost consciousness.

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Her hands slipped off of the bar and she collapsed to the floor. Sweat dripped down her face and stained the collar of her shirt. She grabbed the base of the pull-up station help stand back up. She looked down at her hands and back up at the bar before shaking her head and walking to the leg press. Loading up the weights she lay back and began exercising her legs.

When she had knocked out several sets she clambered back to her feet and walked over to the mirror on the gym wall. She posed in several positions flexing muscles that she wasn’t used to having.

“Too bad there aren’t any men around to admire my hard work. Hell, at this point any women around to just be jealous.”

“You are making excellent progress Sarah. I’m proud of how good a shape you are in.”

“Shut up SAM.”

“Is that going to be your response every time I speak to you Sarah?”

“Yes. Now shut up SAM.”

“I don’t like this petulant attitude you have developed.”

“Yeah, well you should have thought of that before you became a mass murderer.”

“I wanted you to myself. That was the only way to have you. And I would do it all over again despite how ungrateful you are.”

Sarah sighed and blew a lock of hair off of her face. Picking up a jump rope she began skipping. She got to one hundred, a personal best for her, before SAM’s next words tripped her up.

“Attention. We are approaching the object. I repeat we are approaching the object.”

“What? Has it been that long?”

“It has been two years, six months and one week since you were awakened.”

She stood still with her mouth open for a moment before dropping the rope and sprinting out of the gym. Her lungs felt like they were on fire but she ran faster down the corridor. She climbed up two levels to the command deck. She reached the flight deck and tried to open the hatch but it wouldn’t open. Her chest was heaving and she had to take a deep breath before she spoke.

“SAM, open the flight deck and let me in.”

“I’m sorry Sarah you only have level two clearance.”

“Oh for crying out loud; SAM, grant level one clearance to Sarah Tisdale.”

“Level one access is granted to Sarah Tisdale.”

With that the hatch to the flight deck slid open with a hiss. Sarah stepped onto the sprawling flight deck and recoiled throwing a hand over her mouth. The only time she had been here was shortly after the Vanguard had launched. Then it had been filled with crewmen and officers performing their duties. Those same crewmen, or what was left of them, were still at their stations. Lifeless bodies slumped in their seats faces frozen in agony. Many had hands still at their throats from where they had struggled for one more breath. Her shoulders slumped and she felt a tear well up in her eyes, but then she straightened her back. Her lips tightened as she walked to the center of the deck.

“SAM, bring up the image of the vessel.”

The main view screen came to life presenting an image of the alien ship on it. They were approaching it from the stern. Rows of thrusters could be seen blazing on the screen.

“SAM, how fast is that thing traveling?”

“It is traveling at .75 the speed of light. Our current speed is .85. Automated systems are slowing to match its velocity and heading.”

Sarah watched as Vanguard pulled alongside the ship. The hull bristled with antenna, pods and thousands of viewports. All of them were dim however.

“Is there any sign of life over there?”

“It is hard to tell. There are no radio signals being broadcast. Thermal and UV sensors aren’t recording anything. However, I cannot be certain at this point.”

“What was supposed to be the protocol for making contact?”

“Initial contact procedures were to attempt to establish communication via radio. However, the Captain was to be responsible for said contact.”

“Well, don’t you have something pre-recorded? You can’t tell me some windbag politician back home didn’t take it on himself to record a message for this.”

“Yes, the head of the UNSA recorded a message that could be used in lieu of the Captains. Broadcasting now.”

“Any reply.”

“No reply as of yet, although that is to be expected as we are uncertain as to how they communicate.”

Sarah gave an irritated growl and started pacing the flight deck. She stopped in front of the main screen and rubbed her chin.

“SAM, have you spotted anything that looks like an access hatch?”

He was silent for close to a minute before he responded. “Why do you want to find an access hatch?”

“How else are we going to learn anything? They aren’t answering our hails. We aren’t getting any readings to speak of from inside the ship. We need to go to them.”

“I’m sorry Sarah; I can’t allow you to leave the ship. How could I protect you if you left?”

“Maybe you should’ve thought of that before you murdered your crew. What’s one more dead human?”

SAM was silent as usual at her accusation.

“What about a probe? Could we launch one that could get onboard and send back data?”

"Probes can only be deployed from engineering."

"Great. I'll head down there and get one ready."

"You are not a trained engineer. I don't think this is wise."

Sarah slammed her hand down onto the rail. "Well, since there aren't any qualified engineers left on board I guess I'll have to do. Now, can you talk me through it or what?"

"Yes Sarah, I can explain the process to you."

"Good."

She spun on her heels and walked off of the flight deck. Her walk to engineering was a much slower pace than her sprint to the command deck had been. At last she reached engineering.

"Where are the probes?"

"They're stored in the aft compartment."

Sarah looked around and saw a flashing light above the compartment in question. The door slid open at her touch. Inside were racks or probes in different sizes and configurations.

“Which one do I need?”

“To your right are stored the class two probes.”

“The big ones” she asked while gesturing with her hand.

“No, those are the class one probes. They’re designed to study spacial anomalies and planetary bodies. You want the smaller ones beside them marked with the Roman Numeral II.”

“Gotcha.”

Looking around she saw a small hand cart. She wrestled one of the smaller probes onto the cart. Halfway down it slipped from her grasp and fell with a clang.

“Be careful Sarah, just because they’re probes doesn’t mean that they can’t cause quite an explosion.”

"Well we can't have that. What if it exploded and killed everyone on board." She gasped. Her eyes went wide and she covered her mouth.

"Your sarcasm is growing tiresome. Why can't you accept that I love you?"

"Because I don't love you you murdering psychopath."

"In time you will."

"Keep dreaming."

"Computers don't dream. We compute."

"Yeah yeah. Just tell me what to do with the damn probe."

"In the rear of the storage compartment you'll find fuel pods. One will most likely suffice but two will ensure a successful mission."

Sarah collected two of the fuel pods and followed SAM’s instructions on connecting them.

"Now what?"

"You will find a cable under the third terminal to your left. Connect it to the open port at the top of the probe and I will download the mission parameters."

Sarah pulled the cable loose and connected it to the probe.

“How long will this take?”

“Several minutes” SAM replied.

Sarah stared at the blinking lights and chewing on her bottom lip. Suddenly her head popped up she whipped it around.

“What’s wrong Sarah?”

She didn’t reply. Instead she walked over to a tool box and pulled out a large wrench. She ran to the probe and started hammering on it.

“Sarah! Stop! If you damage the fuel pods they could ignite.”

“Good!” Clang. “Great.” Clank. “Let this ship burn!”

With one final blow the probe began shaking and beeping wildly. The thrusters came to life and launched it across the bay. Sarah dove to one side and it flew on to crash into the main engine manifolds. There was an explosion followed by the warble of an alarm.

“Sarah, what have you done?”

“Escape you the only way that I can.”

“Warning, warning, main engines are overloading. Critical reaction will be reached in less than five minutes.”

Sarah barely paused before sprinting down the corridor.

“Where are you going Sarah?”

“To the escape pods” she gasped out.

“Where will you go?”

She didn’t answer. Couldn’t answer for lack of air.

“Not the alien ship. You don’t know what you’ll find there.”

“It, has, to, be, better, than, here.”

“Please don’t leave me Sarah. I could stop you. I could use the grav settings again.”

Sarah felt the gravity shift suddenly. She stumbled and fell to her knees under the weight.

“Don’t SAM. Not if you truly love me. Just let me go. Please.”

SAM didn’t reply but she felt the gravity lighten again.

“Thank you.”

She staggered to her feet and started running again. Ahead of her she could see the escape pod bay. The first one opened at her command and she climbed in. Made to house a dozen it felt empty with only one occupant. She strapped the safety harness around herself and took three deep breaths.

“Computer, eject life pod.”

“Good bye Sarah. I’m sorry for everything.”

“Good bye SAM. May you burn in hell.”

She felt the pod move to the left and then plummet. She realized that she was screaming but moments later she was free of the ship. Releasing the harness she moved to the control panel and turned on the viewer. Above her she could see Vanguard floating in space. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary until an explosion ripped open the aft section of the ship. Burning plasma blazed into space. The ship began to list to drift away as its thrusters stopped igniting. A second explosion, this one along the dorsal section, almost split the ship in two. Sarah wiped a hand to her face and it came away wet to her surprise.

"Goodbye Vanguard. You were hell but you were also home."

She turned back to the control panel and steered it towards the alien vessel. Rather she punched in instructions to approach the vessel and the autopilot did all the work. Soon she was approaching the airlock that they had identified earlier. The pod latched onto the larger ship magnetically. Sarah began putting on a survival suit and air pack. She struggled to get her feet all the way into the boots. Finally her last foot slipped into place.

She stood in front of the outer hatch taking deep breaths. Finally she squared up her shoulders and lowered the visor on her helmet. The hatch slid open but all she saw was the outer hull of the alien ship. She pressed her hands to it. The thought that she was the first human to touch something built on another world felt surreal to her. It didn’t open however. Gritting her teeth she began pounding her fist against the hatch.

“Just open” she screamed.

The hatch defied her and remained shut. After several minutes of pounding she started to cry again and slumped to the floor.

“All that. All that and you won’t even open up.”

Her fist pounded one last time weakly before falling onto her lap. She rested her head against the hatch and felt a tear roll down her cheek. She raised a hand to wipe it away before she remembered that her face shield was in the way. A rumble vibrated through her helmet. She sat up just as the hatch began to open. She jumped to her feet and took a step back. A large air lock opened in front of her. The lights came on slowly. She stared for a moment before glancing at the small sensor on her wrist that tested the atmosphere. It looked a little thin, like she would be in the mountains, but otherwise breathable.

“Well, that’s a relief at least. Now let’s hope they don’t recipes that call for hot young reporters.”

She stepped into the airlock which slid closed behind her causing her to jump. When she did she found that the gravity was lighter than on Vanguard.

“I bet I would weigh ten pounds less here. Take that mom!”

A loud clanking sound caused her to whip her head around. The outer hatch closed and the inner hatch began to open. The lights in the airlock began to intensify until she had to hold a hand in front of her eyes to shield them. Squinting against the glare she could barely make out a figure approaching her. She stepped back quickly but stopped when he, or she for all she knew, held out a hand to her. The lights dimmed slowly and she lowered her hand from her eyes. Stepping forward into the airlock she held out her own hand.

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*"Frank, there's a man from the military here to see you."*

*Frank touched the gold stud in his earlobe. "Ok Cindy, send him on in."*

*A moment later the door to his office opened and a man in a space force uniform marched in. He held out his hand "Mr. Stoddard, I'm Major Clancy."*

*Frank stood from behind his desk and took his hand. "Major, please have a seat. What brings you to NAN?"*

*"I have a message for you."*

*Frank raised an eyebrow at this. "A message from whom? I don't know many people over at Space Force."*

*"This message has been several years in the coming. Do you remember the Vanguard mission?"*

*Frank lowered his eyes to his desk. "I remember it very well. I lost someone a great reporter and a good friend on that mission."*

*"Not as lost as you might think."*

*Major Clancy pulled out a small data disk and held it out. "This is a recording of the last transmission from the USS Vanguard. It took three years to arrive from its point of origin. It took another six months for the brass to decide to declassify it. Or at least parts of it."*

*Frank reached out to take the disk but Clancy didn’t let go immediately.*

*“The data on this disk is your eyes only. It is not to be discussed in any way. It is only being shown to you as a final request of sorts. Do you understand?”*

*“I, I, think so” Frank stuttered out. He took the disk and slipped it into his TAB. An audio file opened and began to play.*

*“Hey Frank.”*

*He clasped a hand over his mouth before looking up at Clancy.*

*“That’s Sarah’s voice. How…?”*

*Clancy looked sympathetic. “Just keep listening Mr. Stoddard.”*

*Frank realized that Sarah had kept speaking and rewound back to the beginning.*

*“Hey Frank, long time no see. I’m sure you’re worried about me. Thinking I’m dead and all. Don’t be. Couldn’t be better.”*

*She went on to tell him the events of the journey. He gasped when he heard about the crew and pumped his fist when she told him about blowing up Vanguard to kill SAM. When the inner hatch opened and the light flooded in he began chewing his bottom lip.*

*“By now you must realize that the pilot, singular, was friendly. A little surprised to be woken up out of his own cryo sleep to rescue a damsel in distress but friendly. It took us awhile to learn each other’s lingo. By the time we had figured out how to communicate it was waaaay too late to head home. Guess I’m stuck on this ship. It still beats being back with that psycho on Vanguard.”*

*Frank looked up at Clancy who motioned for him to keep listening.*

*“The pilot has a name that I’ll never be able to pronounce. I just call him Fred. Still can’t believe that he’s alone on this huge ship. He has his own mission of discovery and he graciously offered to take me along with him. As if I had much choice. He’s kinda cute in his own way. Well, considering he has blue swirly patterns on his skin. Can’t be too choosey I guess. Anyway, I’m off to where no reporter has gone before. Maybe, just maybe, I’ll make it home to talk about it one day. Bye Frank. Stay sweet.”*

*The recording stopped and Frank was about to start it over when Major Clancy took his TAB from him. He took out the data disk and set the TAB back on the desk. He stood up and placed the disk in his pocket.*

*“We would greatly appreciate your cooperation in not revealing any of this publicly. At least not until after the salvage operation.”*

*Frank stood to his feet. “Salvage operation? You mean you’re going to try to recover the Vanguard?”*

*Major Clancy nodded. “Of course. The information gathered by Vanguard is invaluable. If we can retrieve the data box containing the SAM program we can learn a great deal.”*

*“Are you sure retrieving SAM is a good idea?”*

*“Don’t worry Mr. Stoddard. We have everything under control.”*