

## Beyond the Wall by Justin Stanchfield

From two hundred kilometers out the Wall seemed an impossibility, the scale too large to comprehend. Jenine Toole checked her descent rate against the radar, her own senses unreliable as she guided the lander downward. Outcrops of pitted stone vied with undulating lines of drifted, tarry snow until the surface seemed zebra-striped in the wan light. As the craft dropped lower she saw its shadows racing beneath them. Twin shadows, one diffuse, cast by Saturn's milky glow, the other sharper but faint, the sun a mere point in the carbon haze. She had landed on Titan before, and each time the oddness of the landscape threatened to overwhelm her. Small wonder, she thought, that whoever had built the Wall had chosen this moon to build it on.

"Four-Eight November, do you still have the intruder on screen?"

The clipped, male voice over the com-circuits startled her. Normally, she made a drop like this in silence. No sense letting the pot-hunters know they were being followed. Frowning, she thumbed the transmit switch.

"That's affirm, Control."

"Four-Eight November," the voice repeated. "Do you still have the target on your tracking screen?"

"Roger that." Annoyed, she double-checked the screen nestled near the top of the padded console. The intruder's ship sat a kilometer from the base of the Wall, its thermal signature bright after the hot-stick landing. Whoever the pilot was, she decided, they had balls to pull off a drop like that. She hit the transmit switch again. "I'm showing the target ninety clicks downrange."

"Four-eight November? If you can read this, be advised, we can not see the target."

"Wonderful." Jenine cursed under her breath, then flipped the radio to intercom. "Paul? You guys better strap in. I'm about to hit the brakes. And, just so you know, we're out of comms with the orbiter. I can hear them, but they can't hear us."

"Got it." Paul Tsing sounded calm despite the bad news. Jenine's lips curled in a half-smile. She was never sure if he was as confident as he

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seemed, or if he simply didn't understand how dangerous it was dropping ten tons of lander onto a haze-covered snowball. Still, she would rather have him in charge of a mission like this than any of the other inspectors she had flown with over the last nine years. Saturn and its entourage of moons was a harsh place, harsher still since the Wall had been discovered. Nothing brought out the worst in people—and nations—than the promise of alien technology waiting to be salvaged a billion kilometers from Earth.

The lander shuddered as she gave the braking jets another shot. She forced herself to relax while they bled off airspeed, the craft bucking in the thick atmosphere. Falling more than gliding, Jenine split her attention between the instruments and the view outside the narrow window. Already, the Wall dominated the view, its stark angles framed by Saturn, the gas-giant a monstrous rubber ball cut neatly in half by shadow.

“Can you see the ship?” Tsing asked.

“Yeah.” Jenine could just make out a tiny, silver speck against the rust-brown terrain. “I’ve got ‘em on visual.”

She fired the thrusters again, slowed to a drifting hover and extended the landing gear. The radar showed them forty meters above the surface. Thirty meters. Gently, she eased back the throttle. Twenty meters.

Without warning, they struck. Jenine's head hit the low ceiling. “What the hell?”

The lander bounced, struck again and threatened to tip over. Moving on instinct, she chopped the thrust and let the craft settle ingloriously to the surface. A dozen alarms screamed inside the cockpit. She cut them off, made a fast inspection of the board to confirm they were still in one piece, then shut down the engines completely. Sweat trickled off her forehead as she thumbed the intercom.

“Sorry about the landing, fellas. The radar must have gone wonky on me.”

“Never mind that,” Tsing said. “Are you sure you set us down next to the right ship?”

“Of course I'm sure. It's the only one besides us on planet. Why?”

“Look out the side window.”

She did. Annoyance changed to incredibility, and then to a cold, gripping fear. The ship she had tracked from orbit, the same ship that had glowed with the full heat of landing only seconds before, lay tipped on its nose gear, a rusted hulk half buried in the methane snow. Jenine stared at it, unbelieving.

The pot hunter's ship looked as if it had been here for centuries.

Nine years.

Absently, Jenine fingered the hem of her jacket sleeve, the cuff as worn and tattered as herself. She smiled at the thought. When was the last time she had gone on vacation, provided you could call two weeks on the U.N. research station on Iapetus a vacation. Still, it beat the hell out of Titan Control, the cramped, overcrowded orbiter and its wartime mind set more than most people could stand for a single tour, let alone three of them.

"Stop it," she chided herself. Her voice echoed in her headset. Lately, Jenine had found her mind dwelling on the choices she had made, the opportunities lost. It was a bad sign, another indication that it was time to go home. She snorted. As if she could still call Earth home.

To distract herself, Jenine looked out the narrow window at the frigid, primordial atmosphere. Snow flurries danced, swirling in the floodlights that bathed the area. She watched as four figures, each in a different color E-suit, spread out around the crippled ship. Paul Tsing, wearing a dark blue suit with a white helmet, stopped at the base of the craft's extended landing ramp and looked up into the darkened airlock.

"Any sign of the pot-hunters?" she asked over the comm.

"Negative. Not a damn thing. Unless they have a safe room inside, this ship is cold. Deep cold. I doubt anyone has been here for years." Even Tsing's normal calm seemed stretched to the limit. "Are you certain we couldn't have missed their landing site?"

"Not a chance." Jenine had already played back the landing records. The ship was the only craft besides their own sitting on Titan's ice-choked surface. "Could it have been dead in orbit and came down on auto-pilot?"

"Doubt it." Tsing's breath cut in and out of the circuit. The man was nervous. "We're going inside. Let Control know, will you?"

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“Okay. Be careful.”

“We will.”

Jenine watched a moment longer, then flipped over to the surface-to-orbit frequency. “Titan Control, Four-Eight November, come in.” She waited, but heard only static in her earphones. She tried again. “Titan Control, this is landing craft Four-Eight November, come in.”

The frequency remained empty, silent but for the irregular hiss and pop of lightning. A cold shudder ran down her back. In a system as active as Saturn’s, communication problems were hardly uncommon, the background radiation at times so intense it could distort the strongest signal. But, in the dozens of drops she had made, she had never spent this long out of contact with the orbiting facility. Then again, she never set down this close to the Wall before.

The Wall. Her gaze drifted to the dark rampart half a kilometer off their nose. The massive structure was so tall she had to crane around until her nose nearly touched the window to see the top of it. Hundreds of tiny, rectangular portals dotted its face, spaced at seemingly random intervals along its length, the far ends so distant they stretched to either horizon until they were lost in the mist. Small wonder dozens of automated probes had passed it off as a geologic feature. Not until a manned mission arrived did anyone realize the thing was an artifact. Within hours, the powers that be had set the greatest discovery in archeological history off-limits until jurisdiction was established.

Jenine snorted in disgust. That had been a decade ago, and still the U.N argued over who had the right to set foot inside first. It had seemed a good place to escape a failed marriage and stalled career, to volunteer for a tour guarding the structure which had, by all evidence done perfectly well on its own for more than half a million years. Now, in retrospect, she could hardly imagine she had ever been that naïve. Her eyes began to sting, and she realized she hadn’t blinked once as she stared at the Wall. She shook herself out of the dark reverie and reached for the transmit switch.

“Paul? What do you have inside?”

“Just what we thought.” Tsing’s voice crackled, the ship’s hull hampering his signal. “This puppy has been down a long time. Not a drop of power in the system. No sign of crew. Oh, crap . . .”

“What’s wrong?” Jenine tensed, instantly alert. Booby traps were the greatest threat any patrol faced. Few of the high-tech pirates that periodically attempted to break the prohibition would risk a physical fight, but nearly all of them were willing to leave a surprise or two aboard their ships for anyone who came poking around. “Talk to me, Paul. What’s wrong?”

“We’re okay.” He sounded out of breath, clearly shaken. “I was wrong about that crew, that’s all. The pilot is still aboard.”

“Alive?”

“Neg on that. She’s inside her suit, but frozen solid. Looks like the body’s been here for ages. And you’re not going to like this part. The suit is a GenDyn Six.”

“You’re kidding?” Jenine’s eyebrows furrowed together. The General Dynamics Mark Six was standard issue for U.N. troops assigned to deep space missions and not available to the public. She glanced over her shoulder at the locker where her own suit hung ready should she need it, then turned once more to the window. “Must be stolen. Can you see the ID patch?”

“Stand by. We’re checking now.”

Jenine waited, her heartbeat practically the only sound other than computer fans and the soft moan of wind around the hull. She zipped her jacket tighter against the chill in the cabin. Impatient for news, her hand moved toward the transmit switch when Tsing’s voice returned.

“We’ve got an ident.” Another long pause.

“And?”

“Jenine . . .” Tsing’s voice sounded small, as if he was fighting the urge to vomit. “According to the patch, the corpse sitting in this chair is you.”

They faced each other across the fold-down table in the passenger compartment. Out of his suit, Paul Tsing was a short man, with a thick shock of black hair and boyish eyes that belied the deep wrinkles carved around them. Normally, he was a rock. But not today. His face was pale, almost waxen, and like his three teammates, the scent of cold sweat hung around him.

“There’s a rational explanation,” Jenine said. She looked around the

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cramped chamber. None of the others would meet her gaze. Two of them, Morrisy and Kvas, were new replacements. The fourth inspector was a dour, pinched-faced man named Bruner who had been transferred up from Jupiter two years earlier, no doubt a reprimand for something. Only two ways, she thought glumly, to wind up at Titan. Volunteer or screw up. She took a sip from her coffee bulb then continued, uncomfortable with the silence.

“The suit was stolen, that’s all. There must be dozens of Mark Sixes unaccounted for.”

“Fine,” Tsing said quietly. “What about the ID patch?”

“Someone hacked my records. It happens.”

“Maybe.” Tsing took a drink, scowled, then pushed his own coffee aside. “We’ll know more once we get the DNA back from the tissue we cored.”

“Christ, you don’t think it’s me in that suit, do you?” Jenine’s eyes widened in mock horror. Nervous laughter spread around the table. Even Bruner managed a weak grin. “Come on, guys. There’s a logical explanation. We just have to find it.”

Tsing’s eyes locked on hers. “You weren’t over there.”

A low rumble coursed through the hull, strong enough to feel through the padded benches. The sound built into an undulating wail, then faded. One of the newbies, Kvas, practically jumped out of his skin.

“What was that?”

“The thing that goes bump in the night.” Jenine motioned him to sit back down. “It’s just our fuel—still bleeding off the methane into the main tank. You’ll get used to it after a while.”

“How long until the tanks are full enough to break ground?” Bruner asked, practically the first thing he had said since returning from the pot-hunter’s ship.

“Three hours, maybe four.” Jenine shrugged. “It doesn’t really matter. We won’t have a launch window for seventeen hours. And that’s only if I can reestablish comms. I don’t like the idea of launching blind.”

“Any idea what’s wrong with the radio?” Tsing asked.

Again, Jenine shrugged. “I think it’s background noise. I’m running a full diagnostic now, but it takes a while.”

“Well then . . .” Tsing spread his hands. “We’ve got a few hours to

kill. Might as well get some rack time.”

“What about the intruders, sir?” Morrissy asked. He sounded so young Jenine had to stifle a grin. “Shouldn’t we do something about them?”

“We are.” Tsing sank back onto his narrow couch. “In case you haven’t noticed, there are only two ships in walking range. One of them is dead, and we’re sitting in the other one. They’re stranded without us. When they knock on our airlock, we’ll arrest them. Until then, I’m going to get some sleep.”

Frost built on the inner surface of the window. Despite the heaters, it was cold inside the cockpit. Jenine wrapped her arms around herself. The muted snores from the passenger cabin were somehow reassuring, a human touch on an indifferent world.

No, she reminded herself. Titan was not indifferent. It was dead. A void, smog-shrouded chunk of ice and rock whirling about a gas giant so far from the sun it might as well have been in interstellar space. Almost against her will, she turned to the narrow window and stared at the enormous structure outside.

“It’s still hard to believe, isn’t it?”

Startled, Jenine spun around in her chair. Tsing stood in the narrow doorway, a blanket wrapped around his shoulders. He glanced at the empty co-pilot’s chair.

“Mind if I sit down?” He eased into the high-backed seat. “Why here? Of all the places in the solar system, why would any race build something like that here?”

“A message, maybe?” She shrugged. “They wanted to see if we became a space-faring race and left it as a marker.”

“You know, I’ve never bought that explanation.” His eyes traveled down the length of the enigmatic artifact. Titan was still on the sunward side of Saturn, but the feeble light that penetrated the haze revealed few details. “If they really were interested in our technological advances there are better ways to do it than this.”

“All right, then, maybe the aliens landed here for the same reason we do. Titan’s a perfect re-fuel point.”

Tsing nodded thoughtfully. “That makes sense. But, it still doesn’t

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explain our friends out there.”

He tipped his head toward the other ship. Floodlights from the lander bathed it in a bright pool of light, accentuating the sharp angles. Unlike most pot-hunters who relied on stealth technology, this ship had simply blazed in-system along a standard approach path, almost as if they didn't care if they were spotted. Methane snow flitted back and forth in the wind before finally falling to ground. Skeptical as she was, Jenine couldn't help but notice how deep the accumulations around the machine were. If she hadn't seen it land, she would have sworn it had been sitting in the same spot for decades.

“How long has it been?” Tsing asked.

“Nearly five hours.” She knew what the question meant. Whoever the pot-hunters were, they couldn't have been this long from their ship without carrying spare oxygen and batteries, and if they were using thrust packs, which seemed likely given the lack of footprints, their range would be limited. Six hours, seven at the most, she estimated, before the crew had to return or die of asphyxia. Unless, of course, they were already as dead as the frozen corpse they had discovered. A cold thought hammered against her, and she swung around to face Tsing.

“What if this is a decoy? What if there never was a crew, and that ship was just sent down to distract us while the real potters land somewhere else?”

“I thought of that,” he admitted. “Seems like an awful lot of trouble to go to.”

“Given what a single artifact from inside the Wall would be worth . . .” She let her voice trail off.

The creases around his eyes deepened. After a moment, he changed the subject. “Any luck with the comms?”

“No. I've run the diagnostics twice and can't find a damn thing. Has to be outside interference. I'm running a new scan on the tracking dish now, but . . .” Something out the corner of her eye struck her wrong, and she leaned closer to the window. “What the hell?”

“What's wrong?”

“The ship's gone.” Shaken, Jenine looked again. To her amazement, the derelict was back, snow swirling around its hull. She shivered. “Wonderful. Now my eyes are playing tricks on me.”

“Never mind that,” Tsing said, an urgent tone in his voice. He pointed toward the Wall. “Look up near the top tier of portals. Our friends are back.”

High above the red-hued snowdrifts, barely visible through the haze, a light glowed in one of the rectangular openings. Even as they watched, it brightened, then faded, as if someone holding a lamp had turned to face them then quickly swung away. Eyes locked on the wall, Jenine asked, “What now?”

“Now?” Tsing stood up. “I wake up the guys and suit up. Looks like we finally get to see what’s inside that son of a bitch.”

Time slipped to a crawl. Jenine sat alone inside the lander and watched the team march across the barren expanse toward the Wall. By regulation, she had donned her excursion suit, the stiff, bright green fabric uncomfortably snug around her chest and waist. She hated this part, the waiting, the feeling of utter uselessness while the rest of the team took on the real risk. Protocols had been in place for years, contingencies by which a team might actually enter the Wall should the structure be at risk. Under perfect circumstances they would have been in constant contact with the orbiter before such a decision was made, but with the comms down and clear evidence that someone had already penetrated the Wall, Tsing had made the only real choice he could.

Jenine shifted in the padded chair and tried to get comfortable. The waiting tore at her, the sensation that she was little more than a glorified chauffeur. Too much time on her hands, too much time to think. Think about why she stayed out here, and why she was reluctant to go back to Earth. So many missed opportunities, all the bright promise of her life dwindled to this odd little corner of the solar system. She had been running from herself so long she sometimes wondered if she could ever catch up.

The speaker crackled. “Are you reading us all right?” Tsing sounded slightly out of breath.

“Roger that.” She glanced at the center screen, now split into four separate views, one for each of the team members. “A-V and telemetry all five by five. You got any tracks yet?”

“Nothing.”

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Jenine leaned closer to the screen. She couldn't imagine how the pot-hunters had entered the Wall without disturbing the snow around it. Even with thrust-packs there should have been marks. Nothing about this mission made sense, and not for the first time since they landed she felt the fear twisting within her stomach. She tried again unsuccessfully to contact the orbiter, then let her eyes drift back to the center screen. Already, details from the Wall were visible, the surface a mottled, pitted gray, cracked and worn by the harsh environment. If she had expected something high-tech she was disappointed. The material looked like any of hundreds of terrestrial ruins.

A dark rectangle came into view, the nearest of the portals on screen as Tsing's helmet lamp played across the opening, revealing a narrow hallway within. "Here we go." No mistaking the tension in his voice.

"Roger that," Jenine replied, her own voice barely a whisper. Like most of humanity, she had seen the old footage relayed back by the robot probes the initial teams had sent inside. Rough, skittering images of twisting, intertwined passages and stairwells, most so steep the probes had been unable to ascend. No artifacts had been found, no inscriptions or murals, nothing to indicate who or what had left the enormous monument. She tensed as Tsing's camera view darkened, then stabilized once he ducked under the lintel.

"Do you see anything?" she asked.

"Not much. It's pretty tight in here. Barely enough room to squeeze by. Lots of snow piled up . . . damn it!"

"What's wrong?" Jenine's fingers tightened around the armrests.

"Nothing. I tripped in the dark, that's all. Missed seeing a step down."

The view from Tsing's camera flickered, returned, then darkened once more, the signal weakened by the heavy stone. One by one, the others in the team followed him inside. Jenine looked out the cockpit window and tried to spot the door they had used, but the details were lost in the snow squall. High above the surface, nearly at the top of the Wall, she saw another flash of light.

"Paul? I just caught sight of the intruders again. They're above you and to the west." She waited, but Tsing didn't reply. "Paul? Are you

reading me?”

“Yes. Stand by . . .” Tsing’s transmission was almost unreadable. The video feed flickered then cut out. The other cameras did as well. Within seconds, the center screen was blank. Jenine stared at it while a wave of dizziness passed through her, as if the cabin had suddenly tilted then just as quickly righted itself. She glanced once more at the ship a hundred meters to her left.

It was gone.

“This isn’t happening,” she whispered, barely able to breathe. Her fingers flew across the control panel as she scanned the area around the lander. To her dismay, the instruments found nothing, no heat signature, no radar return, certainly nothing on the video feed. She stabbed the transmit button.

“Paul? Get out of there, now.” She knew she was letting panic sway her, but couldn’t stop. “If you can hear me, we have a situation out here. Return to the lander. Repeat, return to the lander.”

She boosted the gain and listened. No voices replied, no pings from any of their trackers. Quickly, she switched to the orbiter’s frequency and tried once more to reestablish contact. “Titan Control, this is landing craft Four-Eight November. Please come in.” She waited without reply. Frustrated, she let the dish scan the southern horizon, hoping the computer might locate another radio source. “Any station, this is United Nations landing craft Four-Eight November. Please come in.”

She frowned. Somewhere, buried in the blanketing white hiss of Saturn, she heard a faint trill. The sound built, then faded only to return a few seconds later. Jenine narrowed the scanning range, but the electronic warble remained damningly obscure. Less than thirty seconds after it began, the transmission vanished.

“What the hell?” Her voice echoed softly in her earphones, the words clipped by the intercom while she waited for the ship’s navigation library to identify the source. Seconds dragged into minutes as the computer searched through thousands of samples before it finally found a match. Jenine’s jaw fell open. The only object that could have created the brief, passing signal was an early space probe that had gone non-functional over two hundred and sixty years earlier.

“This is impossible.” She flicked back to the ground-to-ship

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channel. “Paul, this is the lander. If you can hear me, please return to the ship. Do you read me?”

Without warning, as if to answer her call, a loud bang ran through the hull. Jenine jumped and struck her helmet against the cockpit ceiling, then steadied herself against the back of her chair and listened. Another thud followed the first, and then another, all centered near the small airlock at the rear of the passenger compartment. Someone was knocking at the door.

“Paul?”

Hopeful, Jenine switched on the fish-eye camera mounted inside the lock. Blood roared in her ears as the camera focused on a lone figure in a bright green excursion suit framed in the outer hatchway. She squeezed her eyes shut and looked again, but the figure was gone, nothing visible but swirls of dull red snow. Certain that she was losing her mind, she replayed the video. The dizziness and nausea she had felt earlier returned, so strong she nearly vomited inside her helmet, all doubt removed.

The person who had been banging against the airlock was herself.

Seventeen minutes. Jenine watched the clock on her visor, clinging to the passage of time as a drowning dog might grasp a log between its front legs as it was swept downstream. “Come on, think . . .” The sound of her own voice helped her regain her calm. “Got to be a rational explanation for all this.”

The obvious answer was the one she liked least. She was hallucinating.

“All right, then, why am I seeing things? Anoxia? My suit air is fouled.” To test her theory, she carefully unlocked her visor and swung it up into her helmet. The smell of her own sour breath washed away, replaced by the colder, musty cabin air. She filled her lungs, exhaled and filled them again. A breath cloud hung around her face as she let the air out. She glanced at her bio-monitor, but the readout showed no change.

“Okay,” she said out loud. “Go to plan B. What the hell is Plan B?”

Her eyes drifted around the cockpit and fell at last on the Emergency Medkit. She remembered it contained sedatives, but quickly rejected the idea. While a tranq patch might steady her nerves, it would

also dull her senses. Until Tsing and the others returned, she had to remain sharp, even if she mistrusted what her mind reported. Still, the kit might contain something useful. Slowly, hampered by her suit, she reached for it but stopped as the radio unexpectedly burst to life.

“Four-Eight November? This is Tsing. Come in. Please come in.”

“Paul? Go ahead.”

“Thank God.” Tsing’s voice was raw. “We’ve been trying to contact you for hours.”

“Hours?” The statement confused her. The team had been inside the ancient structure less than seventy minutes, but she passed it off as nerves. “It’s the Wall. It’s blocking your signal. What’s your location?”

“I’m sitting in one of the portals. I think it’s on the upper tier, but I can’t really tell.”

Through the murk she could just make out a faint glow near the rim of the massive artifact. “Okay, I’ve got you. I think you’re in the same doorway the pot-hunters used. What’s your situation?”

“Not good. Bruner is down. He panicked when his air got low and jumped through one of the doors to the ground. Kvass and Morrissy went to find him, but I can’t raise them on the radio. Listen, Jenine, we’re all short on power and air. My reserve is down to thirty minutes.”

“Thirty minutes?” She leaned forward, certain Tsing was mistaken, and found his bio-read. Now that he was back on-line, the telemetry functioned again. She stiffened. Instead of the seven hours he should have had available, his air supply registered thirty-four minutes of usable oxygen. “What happened out there?”

“Got lost . . . wandered around inside the . . .” The signal, diamond bright only seconds ago, now began to break up. “Found the bodies . . . can’t . . .”

“Say again? What bodies?”

“The pot-hunters. They’re dead.” He spoke more slowly, but the signal continued to weaken. “No chance to retrieve them. Not now.”

“You found them?” Jenine blinked. “Paul, their ship is gone. Some of them must have made it out.”

“What are you talking about? That ship is still on the ground.” For a moment, Tsing’s voice came in clear again. “I can see it from here.”

Another wave of vertigo struck her. What should have been a

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routine mission had suddenly become impossibly complicated. One team member missing and most likely dead, three others on the verge of suffocation, her own mental health questionable. She took a deep breath, then spoke slowly, “Paul, what are the weather conditions where you are?”

“Huh?” He sounded perplexed. “What do you mean? They’re the same as what you have. Overcast sky, visibility fair out to five klicks. Wind conditions calm.”

She glanced out the window at the heavy snow driving past, the wind a howl. The Wall was nothing but a dark, blocky shadow through the haze, T’sing’s lamp the only discernable feature. Even as she watched, that light faded, then was gone.

“Paul?”

Static answered. She slumped back into her seat and began to shiver, chilled to the core. She tried again to raise T’sing without success, then, moving stiffly, rose and wandered toward the back of the craft. A small locker was built into the wall behind the couches. From it, she withdrew three oxygen canisters and put them inside a carry sack, then added as many charged batteries as she could find. She picked up the bundle. In Titan’s weak gravity the weight wouldn’t be a factor, but the sack was bulky and would hamper her movements. She sighed, unable to think of any other way to carry the emergency supplies. Bundle in hand, she shuffled to the airlock, pulled on her gauntlets then resealed her visor. A row of tiny green lights popped into view along the rim. She reached for the airlock controls, but paused.

“This is insane,” Jenine told herself. While she had been busy gathering supplies, the weirdness of the situation had been pushed to the back of her mind. Now, it returned with a vengeance. Regulations insisted she remain with the lander. So did common sense.

Unfortunately, that meant leaving a friend to die.

More frightened than she had ever been, she slapped the broad red button beside the door and waited for the airlock to slide open. Before she could change her mind, stepped through.

Jenine leaned forward, fighting the quartering headwind, the bulky pack of spare oxygen cylinders slapping her leg with every step. The

surface felt spongy underfoot, the methane slush sticking to her insulated boots. She paused a moment to rest, and turned to look behind. The lander remained an oasis of light, its rotating beacon painting the swirling snow a garish orange. A fast glance at her clock showed that fifteen minutes had elapsed since she had spoken with Tsing. With time running out, she hefted the sack and pressed on.

The Wall stretched from horizon to horizon, its top lost in the blizzard. She could just make out the individual portals, coffin-sized openings spaced irregularly across the structure's stone face. She picked up her pace toward the nearest of them and hoped it was the one Tsing and the others had used. If she didn't pick up their trail soon, all of this was for nothing.

Something lay at the foot of the monument. Jenine jogged toward it, her gait hampered by the odd gravity. From the color of his suit, she knew it was Bruner. Her headlamp threw his body into an almost surrealistic accuracy. His visor was rimed in frost, a thin, diagonal crack across it. She didn't need to touch him to know he was dead. She swept the area with her lamp. Heavy footprints, half-filled with drifted snow, led away.

"Thank you," she said, blessing her luck at finding the tracks. She followed them to the portal, then stopped. The vertigo she had felt earlier returned, as if the moon's orbit had suddenly gone mad. She fought down the sensation, then ducked inside.

A narrow passage lay in front of her, the stone rough-hewn. Her mind flashed back to a school field trip when she was ten or eleven, a sim-tour of Egypt's Great Pyramid. The corridor could have been left by the same builders. Dragging the pack behind her, she continued down the passage. Twenty paces inside, the corridor turned left into a narrow flight of steps. Two more bodies sat upon them, unmoving.

"Morrissy?" Jenine knelt beside the nearer of the pair. "Can you hear me?"

The man stirred. Jenine bent closer, desperate to find an angle where her suit lamp didn't blind him. His eyes fluttered open.

"How . . . how'd you find us?" His words were thick, barely coherent.

"Just hang on, okay?" She pulled out one of the cylinders and exchanged it with one of the empties on his power unit. After she made

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certain the seal was tight, she did the same with his spent battery. “Take a deep breath, okay?”

Morrissy nodded weakly. She stepped over him and repeated the operation with Kvass’s pack. Even with the fresh cylinder and battery, she couldn’t tell if he was breathing.

“Thanks for coming back,” Morrissy said, his voice stronger.

A cold finger skipped down Jenine’s spine. “What do you mean, ‘come back?’”

“The lander,” Morrissy said. “When we got down, it was gone. We thought you’d abandoned us.”

She thought about explaining, but decided against it. She still had to find Tsing. Dreading the thought of penetrating deeper into the structure by herself, she let her light play over the rough-cut stairs.

“Where’s Paul?” she asked.

“We hoped he was with you.”

“No. I talked to him from the lander, but he was on one of the upper tiers. Did you leave marker tabs?” Jenine helped Kvass sit up. The man groaned incoherently, the sound a muted roar in her headphones. She waited until the channel cleared, then asked again, “Did you tab a trail back to where you and Paul split up?”

“We . . .” Morrissy sounded on the edge of hysteria. “We ran out tabs hours ago. Doesn’t matter anyway. They don’t work in here.”

“What do you mean they don’t work?” The hair on the back of her neck stiffened. Standard practice was to drop a trail of the reflective tabs behind to leave a path for following teams, or to track your way back out. Unless the laws of physics were somehow violated, the system was practically foolproof. “Morrissy, how do I reach Paul?”

“Go up,” was all he said.

Annoyed and more than a little frightened, she squeezed past Kvass and started up the constricting stairwell, then paused. “Can you two reach the lander?”

“I think so,” Morrissy replied.

“Good. I’ll meet you back there as soon as I can.” She wondered if she was making a mistake. Given how frightened Morrissy sounded, she hoped he didn’t try to launch without her. She pushed the thought out of her mind and started climbing.

A small landing lay at the top of the stairs, another corridor branching past it. To her left, the passage emptied into blackness, obviously one of the doors she had seen from the lander. At the other end of the passage she saw a small circle glowing pale yellow. She smiled to herself. Despite what Morrissy had said, the marker tabs were obviously working as promised. She hurried toward it.

The corridor turned sharply to the left. A second marker tab glowed at the far end, twenty meters away. Leaning forward to avoid brushing the ceiling, Jenine shuffled to the tab, then stopped, confused. Instead of another corner, she found a blank stone wall.

“Wonderful.” Angry at the wasted time, she retraced her steps to the stairwell, then went past it toward the doorway. She steadied herself with a hand against the wall and carefully looked out. Far below she saw the lander, still bathed in the glow of its flood lights, the pot-hunter’s ship beside it. She forced herself to look down, but quickly pulled back inside, the view dizzying. Odd, she thought? She hadn’t noticed she had climbed so high. Again, she moved back toward the stairwell and dropped the carry sack beside it, then stared into the passage, utterly confused.

The descending corridor she had climbed only moments before was gone. Another stairwell lay in its place, the rough-cut steps beckoning upward.

“No. No, no, no . . .” she whispered. Over the frequency, she said, “Morrissy, can you hear me?” She listened, but her radio remained silent, nothing in her headphones but her own rapid breath.

“Slow down,” she scolded herself, fully aware how much time she was wasting. By now, if Tsing’s estimate had been correct, his tanks were dry. If he was alive, he was living on whatever his scrubber salvaged from inside his suit. She needed to find him and find him fast.

“Just calm down,” she said out loud. “Don’t lose your head.”

Back and forth she moved along the corridor, each trip a dead end, every return bringing her not to her starting point, but to a new junction. Sweat poured down her back, her heart pounding furiously as the minutes trickled off. Unable to find her way back to the ground floor, she continued to take the ascending stairs.

She paused at the top of the next flight, blinded by the sheen of

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breathe condensed inside her visor. She waited for it to clear, then looked around. Her lamp lit the far end of the corridor with a pale, blueish glow. Unsure what she might find, Jenine shuffled toward it. As she neared the end of the passage, she saw that the glow came from reflected snow. Cautiously, she edged toward the opening and looked out, but nothing was visible, the blizzard impenetrable. Had the lander been directly beneath her she couldn't have seen it. Dismayed, she slowly turned around.

“Hello, Jenine.”

“Paul?” Her jaw dropped open. Five paces behind her, his visor open to the frigid, toxic atmosphere, Paul Tsing stood, one arm propped casually against the stone wall. He smiled at her.

“I think you should follow me.” His voice was calm and edged with regret. “You need to see what I've found.”

Her head spun. Nothing made sense, not the man in front of her, nor the side passage Paul Tsing led her down. How had she missed seeing it before?

“Where are you taking me?”

“Home.” Tsing turned and smiled at her, his face still exposed to Titan's atmosphere. “I know it doesn't make any sense, but believe me, everything is going to be fine.”

“Paul, don't you understand, this is impossible?”

“Yes. I understand it. But I don't think that really matters anymore.”

A faint glow lit the corridor, not the reflected gleam of helmet lamps against methane slush, but a softer, more subtle illumination. Confused, she followed Tsing into a small, vaulted chamber. Though it was constructed from the same rough gray stone as the rest of the Wall, the surface was smooth, almost polished, the floor patterned like marble. Tsing edged aside and let her step past toward a broad portico, slender columns supporting a trio of arched doorways. She shuddered as she crept beneath the middle arch onto a narrow ledge, an elegant stone handrail barring her from the precipice. Hands shaking, she leaned against it.

A city spread out below, high towers lit bright as candle flame.

Helicopters and mag-rails flitted between the angular structures, little more than flashing red lights from her high vantage, while further beneath an endless swath of roofed streets covered the ground like a network of capillaries, their translucent surfaces adding a pleasant yellow wash to the base of the skyscrapers. Lazy clouds drifted along the steel canyons, as if a gentle rain might recently have fallen.

“That’s Chicago,” she whispered, unable to pull her eyes away. Tsing stepped beside her and nodded.

“That’s where you grew up, isn’t it?” His smile broadened. “I told you I was taking you home.” Before she could stop him, Tsing put his hands against his helmet, gave it a sharp twist, then lifted the bulky headgear off and tucked it under his arm. His dark hair was damp with sweat.

“Have you lost your mind?”

“Maybe.” He grinned. “Probably. Does it really matter? Open your visor, Jenine. Stop denying yourself. Admit it. This is what you’ve been searching for. Everything can be different this time. Anything you want, yours for the taking.”

She felt the dream sweep through her, the sweetness of the moment palpable. Tsing was right, wasn’t he? What good did it do to deny what she saw, whether it made sense or not? How long had she been running from herself? Slowly, her hands rose to her helmet. She placed her fingers firmly against the hard plastic, took a long swallow of the rubber-tinged air, then closed her eyes. Her forearms tensed as she started to twist.

“No.” She let her hands drop to her sides. “This isn’t right.”

Her eyes fluttered open. Gone was city and the elegantly carved chamber, the narrow corridor replacing it, the only light the harsh white burn from her helmet lamp. At her feet a body in a heavy excursion suit lay sprawled on the rough stone floor.

“Paul?” She crouched beside the body and rolled it over. Tsing’s visor was closed, but she had no way of knowing if he was alive or dead. Frantically, she groped for the carry-sack, but found nothing. She rose stiffly to her feet and looked back the way she had come. The sack lay crumpled at the top of the stairs leading downward. She rushed to it, gathered it in her cold fingers, then hurried back to Tsing. Shaking, she changed his oxygen cannister and battery, then shook him. “Can you

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hear me?”

A muffled groan answered in her speakers. She forced herself not to cry in sheer relief. Still hampered by the tight space, Jenine pulled the woozy Tsing to his feet, and holding him under the shoulders, guided him toward the stairs.

Snow met her head lamp, Titan’s cold surface just outside the rectangular doorway. Too narrow to walk abreast, Jenine kept one hand on Tsing’s arm as she led him toward the exit.

“Almost there,” she said, coaxing him along.

“No . . .” His breath was labored. “Need to go back.”

“We are going back. Just a little farther to the ship.” Her boot brushed against something, and she glanced down, relieved to see the oxygen tanks she had exchanged from Kvass and Morrissy lying where she had left them. Somehow they vindicated her memory. “Come on, Paul. We can do this.”

“Can’t leave.” He tried to pull away. “Not yet.”

“Listen to me. We’re both low on air. We need to get back to the ship.” The wind forced a swirling tongue of snow into the passage. Tiny pellets struck her helmet as she ducked under the lintel back into the world outside the Wall. Night was falling as Titan slid into Saturn’s shadow, the gas giant a hazy crescent stretching from ground to zenith. In the deepening shadows, the lights from the lander played hypnotically against the ice. She paused a moment to stretch the kinks from her back, grateful to finally be free of the enigmatic structure. A flash of light at the lander brought her up cold.

“What the hell are they doing?” Horrified, she watched the attitude jets flash in sequence. Suddenly, she understood. Morrissy was pre-flighting the craft for launch. She twisted around so fast she nearly lost her balance, and grabbed Tsing’s wrist. “Come on! They’re going to leave without us.”

She broke into a slow jog, hampered by the odd gravity and the still woozy Tsing. He pulled against her, dragging her back toward the doorway.

“We can’t leave. Not now. Not after I’ve found the way home.” With a twist, he broke free. Jenine tried to grab him, but he was already

out of reach.

“Damn it, Paul!” She stood, torn by indecision, and watched his stumbling, retreating form. Two hundred meters still lay between herself and the lander. Even if she could stop Tsing, she couldn’t physically drag him to the ship. Her only hope now lay in stopping Morrissy from launching. A pounding, throbbing pain built inside her skull. A quick glance at her suit monitor confirmed her suspicion. Her own oxygen supply was nearly gone. Decision made, she turned toward the lander, calling frantically over the radio as she skip-walked across the frozen ground.

“Four-Eight November, come in.” The effort of speaking cost her, stealing precious gulps of air. “Morrissy, please, respond.”

A red glow built beneath the craft, a shimmering blush as the engines came on line. Daring the blast that would certainly scorch her to cinders should Morrissy launch while she stood outside, she threw herself against the airlock’s outer door and pounded her fists on the heavy plate, desperate to get the panicked deputy’s attention.

“Morrissy! Listen to me!”

Her chest ached, the fear and lack of air overwhelming. Jenine felt as if she was drowning inside her helmet. A rhythmic shudder pulsed through the hull. An image of herself engulfed in flames as the craft broke ground flashed through her mind. Desperate, she looked for shelter, but saw only the pot-hunter’s derelict ship fifty meters away. Out of options, she dashed toward the gaping hatchway.

The craft was dark within, the walls rimed with ice. Jenine fell on the ramp, bruised her knee, but staggered to her feet and blundered down short corridor toward the cockpit. Like the rest of the ship, the control panel was frosted, the systems long dead. She fell more than sat into the pilot’s chair. Out the corner of her eye she saw blue-white flame spread beneath her own ship, the lander quivering as Morrissy powered up.

“You bastard,” she shouted over the radio. “Damn you, you stupid, stupid bastard.”

The chair felt rock hard beneath her, the padding frozen solid. Her headache had worsened, her air supply nearly gone. Silently, she laughed at the irony. At least she understood how the frozen corpse wearing her excursion suit wound up inside the abandoned ship. She clenched her

fists in frustration and shut her eyes.

“No. I refuse to believe this is happening.”

Jenine took a long, slow breath, the air sour as it wheezed in and out of the helmet’s overworked regulator, then opened her eyes once more. A grim smile crept across her face. She was still inside the Wall, less than a meter from the exit. Paul Tsing stood behind her, weaving drunkenly on his feet. Outside, past the narrow opening, the lander sat alone, the pot-hunter’s ship vanished. She took Tsing by the wrist.

“Let’s get back to the lander.”

“But . . .”

“No,” she said firmly and led him outside. Wind tore at her, driving her sideways as she struggled toward the craft. Snow swirled, at times so heavy it blinded her, but she held to the flashing orange strobe and trudged on. A vague shape took form, the lander a slumbering dragon in the gloom. Tsing said nothing as they reached the airlock, but stood complacently beside her as she raised her arm and pounded three sharp knocks against the hatch.

“Captain Tsing?” A nervous voice blared inside her helmet. Jenine breathed a sigh of relief.

“It’s me, Morrissy. I’ve got Paul. Cycle us through, okay?”

The airlock slid open. Jenine helped Tsing inside, then followed him into the cramped chamber. The effort was nearly beyond her. The outer door resealed. Air whistled around her as the lock emptied then refilled with fresh oxygen. Finally, the inner door slid aside. Morrissy and Kvass stood just inside, waiting for them. Jenine pushed Tsing through the hatchway, then popped her helmet off. The musty, recycled air tasted sweeter than springtime. Feeling stronger, she nodded at Tsing.

“Help him. He’s suffering from hypoxia.”

Together, they removed Tsing’s helmet, then led him to the nearest couch and eased him down. His hair was matted, his skin pale, but his eyes looked clearer.

“Thank God you came back when you did,” Kvass said. Jenine thought she heard a note of guilt in his reedy voice. “Control’s been calling for over an hour. They want to know if we need another ship to come down?”

“No.” Jenine shook her head firmly. “Tell them we’re okay. No,

wait. I'll tell them myself in a minute." Somehow, she wasn't surprised that communication had returned.

"Ma'am?" Morrissy shuffled his boots nervously. "What about Bruner? Shouldn't we go back outside and retrieve . . ." He hesitated. "Retrieve his body?"

Jenine glanced across the narrow aisle at Tsing. He caught her eye and gave his head an almost imperceptible shake. He understood. So did she. Somewhere inside that labyrinth, somehow, Bruner was still alive, still contemplating whether to jump from the high doorway or die from asphyxiation. All she had to do was find him. The thought sent a chill through her. The memory of that city-scape glimpsed from the hidden balcony was still too fresh, too seductive. Anything that could be contemplated could be found there, but only at a price. Madness lay in that direction. She turned back to face Morrissy.

"We can bring the body back later, before the next launch window. But not tonight."

"Ma'am . . ." Again, Morrissy paused. He chewed on his lip, as if he couldn't bring himself to frame the question. "What is that place?"

"You mean the Wall?" She thought about the question. She could have told him that it was Hell. She almost said it was Heaven. Instead, she shrugged her shoulders. "I don't know. I wish I did, but I don't."

"What do we tell them when they ask what happened down here?" Kvass inched closer. Jenine looked up at him and held his gaze, then smiled.

"The truth," she said. "We just tell them the truth."