

The Space Crawl Blues

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“Going to the Graveyard, then?” Ian stood by the quantum arch, ready to deliver a sales pitch.

But Blake Niva was not a customer, would never be. Even if Ian was his best friend and owner of the latest wizardry in space travel, even then he would never cave in and do it.

“Yeah, the Graveyard, Ian. But going the slow way.” *Space crawl*, and proud of it. Blake eyed the far end of the transport center where the space time, real time, old time shuttle concourse lay. He wished he could bypass the QT desk, bypass Ian and the inevitable excruciating conversation.

“I could get you there in a pico second,” Ian said, “like I’ve said before.” Ian exchanged conspiratorial glances with the quantum engineer who manned the arch. They were so proud of themselves, so smug. So rich.

“Right,” Blake said, not wanting to argue. The Graveyard hung in low Europa orbit at 1200 kilometers, so in fact Ian’s arch could save him about two hours round trip transit time, if time was all Blake cared about. “Catch you for a beer on the way back?”

Ian nodded. Beer was the glue between them, thin as horse piss, thick as habit. The two men had been thrown together for three years on this chunk of ice. Europa spectacularly orbited the great Jovian planet, or, more accurately, forever fell into it, due to the elegant relation between gravity and tangential velocity - concepts that, in space travel these days, were in danger of irrelevance.

The two men could not have been more different. Ian the self-confident partner in a company that had just broken the barrier to quantum travel; Blake the annoyingly shy pilot of real - and real slow - nuts and bolts space ships. Next to Ian, Blake felt comfortably inadequate, glad to take his friend’s leavings, including the women who took pity on Blake because he was bad at small talk in bars.

As Blake edged away, Ian kept him in the web of conversation. “You ought to try my way. Just once. Make a man of you,” he said, joking, but

meaning it. "You'd come out the other side with a mean knack for the ladies, yeah?" He stood by the arch and its quantum engineer like a barker at a carnival, drumming up business.

Blake grinned, but as so often around Ian, he seemed to miss the point. Since when did women find it sexy if you'd gone quantum? It proved you had the balls to travel digital? Maybe it was a macho thing. It did scare some people, those who didn't understand quantum teleportation. Which was basically everybody.

Ian kept proselytizing. "Let us give you the ride, man; you'll be better for it."

"You're crazy. It's quantum teleportation, not a new aftershave."

"You need a defrag, guy. We're here to help."

He waved at his friend, in a hurry to leave, uncomfortable with Ian's smug suggestions that he needed fixing. Or proving. Or more women. Or all the other things Ian was that Blake wasn't.

Sammy, at least, had never thought he needed to be different. With her lying in the Graveyard, life would never be the same.

The space shuttle was slow transport, yeah. But it would give him time to prepare. He'd say his goodbyes in the Yard, and he'd do so personally - no long-distance fare-thee-wells. It wouldn't be right. They'd been too close.

He looked back at the QT station where Ian and crew had snagged a customer. The quantum engineer directed her into the arch of the processor. Light crawled over her skin, haloing it. Then she disappeared. Blake wished her bon voyage, wherever her final destination might take her, as he used to say over the com back when he had a goddamn job.

The rush of resentment surprised him.

It wasn't Ian's fault that it had come to this: People as bits. Travel as transmission. Clean, cheap, elegant. The technology was bound to be viable sooner or later. Thing was, QT arrived a tad early for Blake Niva.

For one thing, it put him out of a job. Permanently.

No use for pilots. You remember pilots? People who could navigate

their way out of a comet cluster and change a lithium heat exchanger with their left hand while coaxing a balky optical computer to make nice to the hydroponics. No navigation needed these days. No 'ponies, either. Nope. What the worlds need now are hyped-up data slingers.

"Ticket?" The flight desk guy took Blake's boarding pass, sending him into the gullet of the loading tube. No lines, of course. Nobody was taking shuttles in these last weeks since QT got the OK from the UN. Thing was, quantum teleportation was brand new, so lots of people had postponed trips, waiting for the QT fares to come down, and then they'd just teleport. Folks who'd booked ram jet scoop flights to Procyon IV or ion drive passages to the Trapezius cluster all cancelled. Pretty soon business would be booming for Ian and company.

Folks had good reason to cancel space crawl plans. You didn't want to be scooped in your ram jet scoop. You'd be out in real spacetime, say, thirty light years, and QT clients would zip past you at quantum speeds. Course, it's not speed at all. It isn't even travel. It's just your bits entangling with the bits of the universe, until you come out the other end, reconstructed.

Ian and his ilk almost worshipped the process. They joked that it defragged you, but it was more than just braying. They thought the process was akin to entangling with God. Take a mega collider, blast the gluons away, create pairs of quarks, put half of 'em in a box, and take it by space crawl to all the destinations a body could possibly want. Then, with "spooky action at a distance" - even Einstein didn't comprehend it - you could send information between the first quark and the second. Simple. Maybe too simple. Nobody understood it at a fundamental level. Einstein also said that physics should be as simple as possible, but no simpler. They should have listened to him.

Blake'd rather entangle with a grizzly or a European glide eel than with quantum states. He'd managed to live twenty-eight years without ever knowing he *had* a quantum state, and it had always been good enough, before. He'd had the best job a man could want. And he'd had Sammy.

He stopped at the cockpit, jawing for a few moments with Keegan, the lucky son of a bitch who still had a pilot's job, then he buckled in. Six weeks left, Keegan said. Then they'd decommission the shuttle. *Put it down*, Blake thought, *like an old horse*.

Settling in as the shuttle lifted off, he took pleasure in the physicality of the G-force, the sheer waste of carbon molecules in the barely

controlled explosions under his butt. *I'm on my way, Sammy. Don't think I'd let you go without saying goodbye, do you?*

On board there were a few other passengers heading for the Yard - a handful of decommissioning engineers, haz-mat experts, and recycling aides, mostly. They could have chosen to QT it, but maybe they were sentimental. Or afraid.

Who could say whether, when they put your data stream back together, you'd be the true you? More to the point, who could *prove* it? Once a person had QT'd, Blake thought they seemed different. Maybe it was the sense of betrayal he felt, just looking at them. Not that you could really blame folks for choosing clean, cheap, and elegant.

But there were eight people on this flight who'd likely never been in a teleporter.

Not yet, anyway. Fares would come down, though. Pretty soon, it would be a QT universe.

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"The Samantha Gray," Keegan announced over the com.

Blake released himself from the seat and floated to the egress hatch, pulling himself along by handholds. Once into the connector he made his way to the docking mast and into the lock, and then, with a rush of gravity, into the *Samantha Gray*.

"Sammy." His voice bounced around the empty corridor.

"Blake," came her voice, a velvety gust.

He got his bearings, adjusting to the gravity of spin, a little light of one G. Struggling, he got his space stomach under control, and his emotions. Turning toward the bridge he trailed his fingertips along the wall, not for stability, but to feel her skin, that solid, embracing reality of ship. Times he could remember when he'd felt her around him, like a cocoon in his bunk; times when she'd lit his way to the gymnasium, or the mess hall, like she knew where he'd decided to go; times when she'd pearly her hull to repair a rip, her calm voice saying, *Patch program underway, Patch program complete*. And then, for his ears only, *Blake, I think we'll be fine*.

Now decommissioned, she waited for the engineers to board, yank her optical computers, offload her savant programming. After those indignities would come the recycling bots, like grave beetles. They'd reduce her to the raw material for - no, he couldn't think about Sammy being the stuff of kids' toys or macaroni packaging, or QT processors. As he walked to the bridge, they said no more to each other. In fact, Blake couldn't speak.

On the bridge, the view was a panoramic glory. Europa turned below, its glossy ice punctuated by the hab domes. Beyond, Jupiter bestrode the sky, a yellow and orange colossus, its tidal forces keeping Europa's subsurface oceans liquid. The view had its grandeur, yes, but something else held Blake transfixed.

The ships.

They were arrayed before him, just ahead, and to starboard, and to port, locked together in orbit in the prettiest sight a normal human being could hope to see. Here was a good cross-section of the near-Earth fleet: a couple of ramjets, three nuclear pulses, even a nonrelativistic rocket there just below. And a beamed light sail - for eight brief months the go-to technology before QT passed muster. Enclosing him, the *Samantha Gray*, his stalwart ion scoop. These would have been your choices for stellar transport back in the day. All the way six months ago before the QT breakthrough. The last of the test subjects had come through fine. People dying of cancer, Lupus, incurable viruses, volunteered to become trial data streams to forward the future of instantaneous travel. The announcement of UN approval hit the stock market like a cometary impact. After the dust had settled, people had made their trip adjustments, and overnight Blake Niva and Sammy had become obsolete.

"I still have some ice water."

"Thanks, Sammy." He went to the dispenser and brought a cup back to the pilot's station. He thought about putting his feet up on the console, but training and pride took precedence over comfort. He sat and gazed out the view port.

"It's pretty," he said.

Her voice was a mere whisper. "Yes. More of them every day."

"You know... I've come... I've come to..." A fan whirred overhead; a bot clanked somewhere in the hold. "I've come..." The words were lined up

but not moving through his throat.

At last, her voice came, sweet and calm. "You don't have to say it."

Goodbye.

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The sight of those ships hanging limp before him, awaiting execution, plunged Blake into a deep silence. The padded arms of the nav chair held him like a lover. And despite all he'd meant to say, he fell asleep right there. He dreamed of voyages taken and voyages still to come. He conversed with Sammy, her disembodied voice more real to him than any physical friend, and he grieved in the underworld of sleep in ways he could not allow himself in the land of quantum entanglement and beers with Ian.

When he woke and stood at the console, he put his hands on the nav display, touching the screens. They were all dark, but heavy with familiarity.

Turning, he left the bridge. Were those her eyes, those view screens at the prow? Where did the essence of the ship reside? Where did you go to say the last words she would ever hear?

Damn, he was stupid to have come here. She was a machine. *Don't you get it, she's an optical computer programmed to seem human. And you, Blake Niva. are hopelessly deluded, pathologically maladjusted and just a touch delusional.* Ian had said as much. Joking. But not.

He stood in front of the airlock, about to punch in a call for a shuttle, when Sammy spoke. "There's a message, Blake." He stared at the wall screen. "Who?"

"Not giving her name. Shall I delete?"

"Accept. Thank you, Sammy." It was strange to have a message here. Even stranger coming from a woman.

"So, Blake?" The voice-only message sounded sort of like Luce Pamuk, Ian's old girlfriend, but not quite.

"That you, Luce?" he said, speaking into the mike. "I thought you were in Tau Ceti."

“Not much of a hi-how-are-you.”

He sighed. “So how are you, Luce?”

“Too late to ask, but not so great, frankly. Listen, give a message to Ian for me? He’s not picking up.”

Picking up? As though there wasn’t a lag? She was on some moon of Tau Ceti b, for God sakes - but then he remembered she could communicate instantly. People weren’t the only data sent by entanglement.

She went on, “I had this gig with a band.”

“I heard. Not going well?”

“No, not the fuck going well. It’s the voice. I want the one I had, and I figure he got a copy of before I left. It’s my signature, Blake. They don’t like how I sound. / don’t frigging like it. So, if he kept it, I want it back.”

“Want what back?”

He could almost see her roll her eyes. “My old self. My data self, or whatever the hell you call it.” In the ensuing pause he couldn’t think of what to say. “Aren’t you listening, Blake? I’m really counting on you.”

“I’m listening.”

“Okaaay. Tell Ian my voice was better before. He defragged me on the way, yeah? And so great, I got cleansed and cleared, or whatever they call it, but along with it I lost the polyps on my vocal folds, the ones that gave me the goddamn voice they’re goddamn paying me for, my torch-singer, rip your guts out warble. I liked it better than this white voice, this generic squawk he’s left me with. Because, you know, that other was *me*. More me than this. *Capisce?*”

He thought he capisced. But he had to get a few things straight.

“Are you saying defragging means you get improved? Physically?”

“What planet are you on, Blake? Yes, that’s what it means. It’s not being talked about, Ian says, but it makes you clean and clear of lots of glitches. Normally I would have wanted it. But this part I don’t like. So just tell him to save the original, and just switch me over on the trip home. Which can be sooner than later, so if he’s still offering a free ticket, which I think he

owes me, then I'm coming home now. Understand?"

"Right. Luce, are you feeling okay otherwise?"

"Yeah, okay. What are you, my mother?"

"Just wondering if there are other side effects."

"Blake, they're not *side effects*," she said with that sarcasm he'd come to expect from women who were quicker than he was. "They're improvements, yeah? You want to have defective genes? Aging? It's all cleansed and cleared. So no, they're not side-effects. Don't go ragging on Ian, or I'll never get these quantum gigs. Just tell him to work out that bug, so you can keep some flaws you want." There was a pause long enough to drive a ram jet cruiser through. "Are you listening, Blake?"

He was. He very much was. After reassuring her he'd talk to Ian, he killed the connection.

Ship's corridors were always too warm, but the sweat slicking his skin made him cold. "Were you listening, Sammy?"

"Yes, Blake. I think we have a problem."

He thought for a long minute. "I'm not so sure we do."

He called the shuttle. Just before he entered the air lock, he said, "Sammy, no one comes on board except me. Tell the recycle guys you've, um... detected a hyper-resistant strain of staph and you're getting" - he smiled wickedly - "clear and clean."

"Aye, Captain," she said coquettishly.

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In the Land's End Lounge, Ian sat at the bar, hand on the thigh of a striking brunette.

Blake walked up to the pair. "Beat it," he said to the woman.

Ian exchanged glances with her. "Jesus H. Hawking, Blake. Lost your manners along with your job?"

The woman stalked away, and Blake took her place on the barstool.

He signaled the bar keep, who plopped two fresh ones down.

Ian smirked. Then he smiled. “She likes it, I think.” He nodded in the direction of the brunette, now sitting with a gaggle of friends. “Put a little sneer into your voice, they like that.”

“You an expert, Ian, on what people like?”

Ian’s eyes grew wary. He took a sip of beer. “Not so much.”

“I think you are.”

Looking over the head on his beer, Ian sipped.

“I think you could give me what I want.”

“What’s that, then?”

“Self-confidence. Extroversion.” Blake nodded at the woman he’d chased off. “They like that.”

Ian affected nonchalance. “We could help, you. If you’ve finally come round to it.”

“I said goodbye to Sammy. What have I got left?”

Ian had the decency to lower his eyes. “That’s tough.” He brightened. “We could get you clear, though.”

“Blow out the pipes a bit, right? Can you get down to the genetic level? Fix little non-standard errors? Make me more like you?” Blake put on an eager look. “Cause you’re the template for normal, right?”

Silence, as Ian played with the condensation on his glass.

“You used your own body scan as a basis, right? And who did you choose for the women, Ian? Your pal Lindsey? No, she’s near-sighted, isn’t she? Maybe Iyna?”

“Hardly matters who,” Ian murmured.

“No, I guess it doesn’t. We’re all code, in the end.”

Ian warmed to the subject. “Exactly. If you look at it that way, it takes

the fear out of it. We defrag you, clean up your code. We've been doing it with computers for a hundred fifty years. We're just moving to the next level, yeah?"

"Yeah. So did the volunteers for the beta test know they were being cleared?"

"Sure. That was the payoff. We lost a few. Didn't tell about those, the ones that frizzled into, well, noise. But the rest all came back cured."

"Defragged." Blake laughed, shaking his head.

Ian laughed too, but his smile faded as the UN officers strode through the doorway, heading for him. He pinned Blake with an accusatory glance.

Blake nodded. "Thanks for speaking into the mike. Guess they read you loud and clear."

Ian examined his glass of beer as though he still had deniability.

As the officers took him into custody, Ian said, "When the word gets out that our process cleans you up, there'll be no stopping it, Blake. You gotta know that."

Blake wished he had a killer comeback, but he'd about exhausted his snazzy repartee. "I don't think you guys can fine-tune this, Ian. You can't pick and choose. You aren't doctors. Or real scientists. You're tech guys. I don't think most people are going to trust you to *defrag* them."

Ian shook his head in pity. "Everybody wants perfection, Blake. That's where you're wrong."

"I don't think so. Some of us like what we were. Warts and all."

As the officers pulled him toward the door, Ian muttered, "What you gonna do for women *now*, Blake?"

He watched as the men in powder blue loaded Ian into a van and drove him away. Ian was right, of course - you couldn't stop this instant travel thing. Eventually, the technology would be reliable, fares would come down - and for those who wanted something extra, well, eventually there'd be a menu for selecting upgrades. Blake knew that. But meanwhile he had what, five, maybe ten years? People would still want to travel on the QT, as long as Ian's company wasn't involved. But there'd be some, maybe a lot,

for whom the whole deal of rematerializing into quantum bits would be highly suspect.

They'd want to travel the old way. *And thank you for choosing the Samantha Gray.*

Finishing off his beer, Blake headed for the door. The brunette put a hand on his elbow from behind. He turned.

"Buy you a drink?" she asked.

"Um," Blake said as words predictably left him. "Um, actually... actually, I have a date."

"OK, cool." She smiled at his awkwardness. She turned and sauntered back to her friends, the words trailing. "Hope she's waiting for you."

He thought she would be. He headed toward the transport center, first at a brisk walk and then at a run.

It was time to get his date out of the Graveyard.