

Mars was dead, impacted a thousand times along its equator by high-velocity bullets fired from the void. They rent the crust, these missiles of ice and iron, awakening the god of war, awakening Olympus and Arseus and Pavonis. Deimos was a satellite then, would surely have been visited by the stones itself, but for Baxter and his team. They steered Deimos into an eccentric orbit opposite most everything else in the system, running from death, running from the stones.

Now Deimos was an orphan. Lost, listless, she wandered a retrograde around Sol, cloaked in silence, hypersensitive. Mars was dead, and Phobos as well, the former seething, molten, aflame; the latter simply dust.

"Godot, this is Beowulf." Coded spurt. The microwaves spoke, spoke too loudly, ringing through miles of rock, finding humanity in the depths of the onetime moon. "Return transmission relayed forty degrees solar north, coordinates to follow."

Foster mother calling.

"Should I acknowledge?" Missy was young and beautiful and marred. Her right arm shuddered under internal assault, and she fought back nausea and seizure as she spoke.

Baxter sneezed, focused, answered: "Affirm."

Her neural quivered as she subvocalized.

Baxter sat his vigil and fought against the memory of dead worlds. He studied his console, the flatscreen surveillance outputs. They showed him the skin of his world: rock and black, doused in shadows thrown from innumerable peaks and crater walls, edges made soft by regolith. Sol was near, her radiation fierce. Solar radiation baked Deimos now, providing ironic safety, unlikely respite from a war humanity had already lost.

As was the norm, Baxter withdrew. Thoughts assaulted him, vying with the machines in his blood for his attention. He ignored the cytes and their own little insidious war, concentrating instead on the past, his past, and how things had changed so drastically, so suddenly.

Earth followed Mars. There had been thousands of stones, cylindrical bullets of iron impacting, tracing their annihilation in a straight line as the homeworld spun through the storm. At impossible velocities they struck, most exploding in atmosphere, leaving a trail of titanic blasts as oxygen and nitrogen and argon were suddenly compressed, forced aside, thrown back together in wakes of vacuum. The entire sky was fire, a curtain of flame, and nobody heard the thunder in Warsaw, where the first chunks hit. Munich, Lyon, Madrid, a hundred other cities burned from Poland to West Africa and beyond. For weeks the Earth was scoured, plumes rising into atmosphere, poison floating from a ruptured, heaving crust. Man was gone by then, victim of the plague or escaped into space or entombed beneath layers of ash.

"They're not coming, at least not in time." Missy spat the words as another seizure jostled her, fine blonde hair flying in the null gravity. She bit down instinctively on her mouthplate, saving her tongue. Baxter waited, fighting nausea, watching her. So young. So brilliant. Like everyone she would suffer, had been suffering the small death, the alien nanocytes, precursors to the stones, to Mars, to the murder finally

visited upon her race. Humanity had stopped this plague of nanotech, and watched as another fate wasted the labor of generations.

Of course, truth be told, the nano hadn't been stopped so much as neutralized. There would always be pain, discomfort, and the invaders would never be discharged from their human hosts. But neither would they kill outright, immediately. The war inside would continue, but DNA could be duplicated, changed, induced to defend.

So we shiver and quake, and our functions fail. We are invalids, but we are alive. Baxter pounded the console, clearing his mind, scattering his wayward thoughts, "They won't come, you-you mean. Cowards! Scum! They're afraid!"

She turned away at his outburst, hovered for a moment, and pushed off to a corner, coughing all the way. Baxter returned to his surveillance, absently tracking their orbit, watching the surface for signs of nanoactivity. There would be none, not this close to Sol.

"If they join us before intercept, we could be detected." Her head was bathed in rads, framed by wishbone antennae. Her fingers piloted controls, giving herself small doses of fatality. She wouldn't live past thirty. Nobody did, anymore.

Baxter agreed with the strategy, despite his outburst. Of course Beowulf couldn't intercept. Torches were visible, dead giveaway targets. No, this mission was Deimos and her complement of two. There would be no support fleet. This project was clandestine, and accident, pure luck.

Occasional bursts of electromagnetic energy told Baxter that the gun was still firing, out beyond Mercury. Firing outward. It was the same gun, the same signature. It was the killer of Earth, the killer of Mars. It was alien, a visitor, not of this wrecked system. It was the enemy, a target itself now. They would cross its orbit in three days. There would be collision. Flint and steel. The hammer and the anvil. Sticks and stones.

"Will break my bones."

"Huh?" Missy pushed back to her station, regarding Baxter quizzically. She sneezed, but her seizure had calmed.

"N-n-othing-g," he told her. "Th-thinking."

Would he scream? Panic? Would he shy away from his destiny at the last moment, take to the stars in this potato-shaped craft? Or would he welcome those final minutes, a respite from the torture he'd known for a decade? And what of Missy, eighteen yet ancient, terribly aware of the sentence visited upon her? First came the cytes, tiny machines streaking through space, finding atmosphere, finding organic life, dismantling it atom by atom. No UFOs, no bug-eyed monsters, golden robots. Nothing so dramatic. Just half a race dead before it realized the truth. As if that truth weren't enough, then came the stones.

Ginnie.

Baxter had watched Ginnie die, had watched the tsunami vanquish Hawaii. Her soul joined four billion that day, and Man was an orphan.

Baxter propelled himself to the rear of the command center for a rad bath, maybe a lymphocyte injection. He wanted stability for their coming encounter. He would be lucid in those final moments.

Never let them see you sweat. He laughed despite himself, a hollow, frightening, keening chuckle that

echoed from bare rock walls. He watched Missy as he took the rads, watched her as she looked ahead at a fixed starfield, polarized through video. The Enemy was still firing, oblivious. It was visible, that enormous comet, its tail stretching a hundred million clicks this close to perihelion, almost close enough to touch.

They ride the rocks, too, Baxter observed silently.

Europa went off-line.

#

He dreamt of Olympus Mons, awake after eons, spewing forth parts of itself, lobbing debris starward, the final, dying scream of an ochre world.

Something touched his forehead. He twitched. Smooth fingers, shaking slightly. His own digits gripped elastic netting and it came to him. He'd collapsed. "How long?" he asked.

After awhile Missy spoke. "You had a reaction." Her voice was quiet but strained, lyrical desolation. He tried to move, squinting against the station's dim lighting. She restrained him. "B-been dr-inking again, Baxter." Motherly. "Our little friends don't like that-t-t."

He ignored the accusation. "How long?"

"Twenty minutes. Not long."

Fatigue was a constant companion, his life a never-ending hangover. He pushed away, still trying to focus, and propelled himself toward the command area. Six screens showed static, the dead eyes of scorched cameras. He reached for the neural, inserted it, felt the familiar tingle where fiber optics met nerve tissue. He subvocalized, speaking to the nonliving, and somewhere below (behind? above?) the regolith stirred and another camera opened its iris upon naked rock.

The screen showed nothing, and the wavelengths were silent. Nobody was speaking, not anymore. Communication was the calling card of intelligence, intelligence but bait to the gun, its microscopic nuisances and hypervelocity planetkillers.

"Three days to impact. Mark." A BEEP issued from one of the station's wall speakers, as it did every twenty-four hours, marking time, a dirge. Missy said nothing more, wrapped herself in her navigation net, disappeared into her machines, her numbers.

Baxter caressed his neural, regarding the screens before him. Stars and stark relief. Where the cameras found the sun, polarization turned it green, an enormous tennis ball sprinkled with black sunspots. He shut those eyes down, saving their sight, and let his shaking fingers struggle over an oversized keyboard while dry lips formed words he'd never speak aloud. The computers heard, obeyed. Before him, a flatscreen flared, jumped, refocused: Interior, the tunnel, a small circle of space in the distance.

Their propulsion. Their weapon.

The railgun was recessed, supported in its burrow by high-tensile molecular titanium and surrounded by layers of insulation weave. The insulation was ten meters thick, impervious to the belches of electromagnetic energy the gun emitted in its efforts to accelerate particles the size of refrigerators to a tenth the velocity of light in under a second.

Baxter touched a joystick, and the camera rolled backward, revealing more of the kilometer-long railgun. Its tunnel pointed to solar south now, slave to the rotation of Deimos, one such rotation every seventeen hours. He steered the camera back along its track, through a thinning section of tunnel. A pivot, panning over uneven rock walls to their dormant reactor, potent but off-line. And to the left, ordered neatly before the barrel, cylindrical bullets of iron rock, unsmelted, unrefined raw stone cut to the shape of the railgun's track by the now-dead replicators. Beyond the bullets lay the cavern, an empty hole where rock had been, where they'd taken their ammunition, shaped pieces of Deimos into instruments of death.

The gun hadn't poked its dull nub of a nozzle through its hole in over four months, not since Mars and the ceaseless firing, creating reaction, steering Deimos from oblivion into the relative order of its retrograde. Thousands of bursts, it had sounded like flatulence over the neural. Cylinders of ore shot in every direction, slowing rotation, reversing it, establishing orbit, steering their fifteen-kilometer asteroid into a tight revolution around Sol.

Baxter had recessed it then, calling the rails inward, toward dormancy and refit. There it had remained, immobile, a broken hydraulic hose the culprit.

And not a hydraulic hose to be found anywhere, anymore.

The irony wasn't lost on Baxter, career military man. They could still fire the coils, awaken their thousand-meter gun. But the pulsing torture of just one burst could bake them, surely irradiate them beyond hope of recovery, for the railgun was designed to operate above ground, spewing its excess energy in all directions.

"Why do you torture yourself?" Missy's voice was everywhere. It coursed through his neural, finding his auditory nerve. She'd been listening. This quiet communication warmed him, for thoughts were not slave to physical limitations, and the stuttering speech and distracting tics that afflicted all humankind were invisible. He could almost believe Missy to be perfect, the way nature had intended, before minuscule alien robots began picking away at her.

"Regrets," he sent, and remembered Ginnie, relatively unaffected by the nano plague, one of so very few who could hide the effects, rise above them, remain dignified. she'd never so much as cringed, though the shakes were apparent. Her sneezes had been subtle, her tears rare, her strength an inspiration.

A particularly serious seizure assaulted him, then, and he felt his bladder release.

"GodDAMNthem!" He screamed this oath, obscenity bouncing from wall to wall and into the maintenance shaft. Missy remained quiet, pensive, and spoke via neural:

"The alcohol—"

"It's not the fucking alcohol," he snarled, ripping his neural free, feeling a second of numbness before his spine adjusted. He lifted himself from his couch, pushed backward, thumbed the rads hard even as his other arm directed a syringe toward a needle-scarred section of skin just above his right armpit. Missy watched him, framed by video, and Baxter felt the room close in, squeezing his head between the treatment diodes. His panic flowed, ebbed, another episode of claustrophobia. His mind buzzed with invisible radiation. Then the machine shut down, his adrenaline rush faded, and he was within Deimos again, surrounded by dormant equipment, awash in red-tinged emergency light punctuated through with the blue glow of multiple screens.

Missy smiled, reserved, understanding, and turned back to her machines.

#

Baxter was thirty-seven. Old. He'd die soon, and his body was broadcasting that fact to him. But Missy, Missy had years. At least ten, maybe more, for she weathered the storm quietly, took her lymph injections, never overcompensated. A noble woman, she'd kept her dignity, accepted the situation.

God, she could be Ginnie.

The screens displayed their target. The Enemy's twin tails shimmered in the solar wind, its core wrapped in a ghost of vapor; ionized hydrogen, oxygen, carbon. Somewhere in the head of that comet was vengeance.

Deimos was hidden, coming at its target from sunward, backlit so intensely no camera or organic eye could detect it. They would hit with almost no warning, a mindless bullet, and in the process two more souls would be snuffed out, forgotten, and the Enemy wouldn't even know the instrument of its death.

He decided suddenly, returned to his station, tapped his neural, insinuated himself: "Let's do it, Missy. Let's shoot them down."

She remained still for a moment, an impossibly long moment, her body poised elegantly before a wall of metal and ore. No trace of her biological chaos existed for three glorious seconds.

"We'll bake in the rads, Baxter."

"We die if we spare them. We d-d-die if we shoot th-th-them. I want to watch. I want to s-s-SEE!"

She turned, eyes mere slits, lips twitching to render something of a smile.

#

Define pain, when there is no alternative. Ask the blind to describe their condition, the deaf to explain the absence of aural stimulation.

Missy, eighteen and slowly dying, glimpsed the realm of normalcy for seconds each hour, fleeting windows on a life she'd never known, never would. Her condition, common to all, was to her a simple handicap, a birth defect to be dealt with, lived through, managed. Years before gametes began the assembly of a young woman who now rode a mountain toward cataclysmic rendezvous, smaller, inorganic cytes showered the solar system, passing harmlessly through empty space until finally striking obstruction: planets, moons, asteroids.

Earth.

She'd never been there, and didn't miss it. But the scale of the loss wasn't lost on her. Missy felt anger, as all her race did, and helplessness, and she suffered from a shattered ego, a tortured sense of self. Missy, like thousands of survivors, like Baxter, was convinced of her own insignificance. Hers was a race without direction, without a mission, a people afflicted by a new, more deadly disease: self-pity. Missy couldn't, wouldn't abide pity, especially when focused upon her.

Now anger! There was a motive!

And love.

Baxter wanted to alter their course, curse their lucky trajectory, attempt a risky and foolish thing for the sake of emotion. Because it was within his power, a final act of defiance he could take to his grave. He'd have done something, gone down fighting.

But there was hope in his desperate vision, buried deep, deeper than the recessed gun ten kilometers beneath them. It was hope that she might live, that she might be spared. It was a one-in-a-thousand chance, but one just the same. He would do this, not for himself, but for Missy.

And for someone else.

Missy smiled wanly back at him, shaking her head. She'd be essential to such a maneuver. She'd be invaluable.

She nodded, caught his returning grin, his childlike face free of pain for the moment.

Then she turned to her consoles, hiding the tear which had begun tracing the white curve of her cheek.

#

Gun spoke to her, unintelligent, a beast communicating illness in binary, preprogrammed language. It couldn't move; it could only scream.

To the reactor, their fuel source: *Initiate*.

There was time now, as the reactor warmed its core. Hours. Missy disconnected, and slept while Deimos came slowly awake.

#

Distraction saved Baxter from chronic torture. Buried deep, his lower brain received overload from all areas of his wracked body. The pain grew, intensified, unabated. Baxter, thirty-seven, wouldn't see thirty-eight. Insanity was a companion now, pushing at doors in his mind, demanding entrance. He fought it, expending precious energy, struggling to remain useful.

He simmed, to pass time, to forget. Eyes closed because it was easier, he let his neural speak directly to his mind, bypassing pain centers, turning them not off, but down. Fiery signals coursed through his brain, blocked by programming and biofeedback. His senses were selective.

While his body cried, Baxter went skiing.

Cold, the northern Wisconsin winters. So bundled against the chill he could barely move, he guided two-hundred centimeter skis over moguls coated in a thin skin of ice. Wind whipped him, breaking tiny capillaries, turning his face a numb red.

He met Ginnie at the bottom, her red hair held back by a black headband. Sound carried well here, amplified by low temperature and clear air. All was sun and white and the cool WHIISHHH of fellow skiers as fiberglass cut swaths through brittle crystal.

"Tired," she said coyly, and as always, they left.

The hotel was modest, a chain of cabins strung along the highway. They made love, and fell asleep to the comforting drone of passing vehicles, Doppler song a soothing ballad composed on lonely, salt-stained asphalt.

Not memories, really, but recorded dreams pieced together, assembled, lucid dreams brought to life, put to software, lived and relived - constructs of a time that was, a place that existed, a love he'd know forever. It was a melange of what could have been, and bits of what had. It was Baxter's life, Ginnie's. What should have been.

The image froze, the simulation interrupted by thoughts, wandering thoughts fired randomly:

Titan. Maybe I'll ski on Titan.

But he knew better, and returned to the sim. There he was alive, invulnerable, in love.

#

Missy lived in a world of speed, flashing signals traveling solid state components, program cards no larger than a human cell. When there was nothing to do, Missy found her own diversions.

She eavesdropped. Baxter, lost in his past, never noticed as she perched herself within his own dreams, a casual observer. On the mountain she was a dozen people, their eyes as they glided over a landscape of snow and ice. Following the car she was a crow, that most ugly of birds, and she felt the cold and turned it off and soared behind the red vehicle to a line of cabins.

Inside she was a cat, sleeping soundly save for one open, green eye. The cat was an indulgence, for it didn't exist in Baxter's program. But he didn't notice, wrapped in Ginnie, lost in grief personified, given substance.

"This isn't real, Baxter," she heard herself say, and in the dream the tabby vanished, leaving not even a smile, and Baxter stirred, his sim losing substance.

He stiffened, vomited violently into a nearby bag, and turned to Missy. "You were s-s-spying again," he said, reserved, his voice thick.

"Meow," she said simply, and returned to the diagnostics.

#

Baxter gripped his sanity as if in a vise.

Thirty-five hours from impact, Deimos aligned, he tapped four keys. Imperceptible nudge, tooth-rattling vibrato, the railgun spat forth tiny barrels of rock while shaking in its housing, changing their trajectory in the process. Missy's attitude jets fired, stabilizing, and Deimos began falling below the plane of the ecliptic.

The gun continued firing, overheating dangerously, and Baxter thought once again of flatulence, though

the sound reverberating through the asteroid was more like shuffling cards.

Ten more minutes, and then ten hours, and then...

In its shaft, buffeted by its own forces, the railgun glowed a dull red, increasing toward orange, firing hundreds of projectiles northward, toward the stars, with enough velocity to reach the nearest in decades. Would any strike worlds, ruin lives?

We're careless, he thought, and found he didn't care.

Baxter glanced at Missy, and was immediately reassured that this was indeed the right choice.

#

If there were such a direction, Deimos angled slowly downward, falling beneath the ecliptic to pass eventually, rotating quickly, under its target: the Enemy. Ten thousand things to watch, Missy paid attention. The comet filled all her cameras now, ivory cloud covering a core of ice fifty kilometers wide. That alien presence fired from time to time, picking off those men and women carelessly talking out there beyond Venus. Missy heard those conversations cut short by impact.

Radio silence descended on the Solar System for the first time in two centuries. Then Beowulf called, breaking that quiet, risking discovery.

"Godot, you're changing course. Explain."

She keyed her response: "Using the rail."

"Not the plan, Godot. You've adjusted your orbit."

"Don't want to be a b-b-bullet. Using the rail." She closed the com and reflected on Beowulf, that small mining craft hopping from planetoid to planet, always staying hidden, out of range. Who picked these names? It seemed to her that the handles should be reversed. For a noble warrior, Beowulf was conspicuously avoiding combat.

Don't blame them.

Her machines cried out to her through the rapid vibrations from below. Electromagnetic wave alert. Radiation alert. Overheat alert. Orbital instability, proximity, structural stress...

Baxter was still, and at first she thought him dead, but a gloved hand hovered over his large keyboard, his huge eyes tracking figures on the flatscreen before him. Ammunition, targeting. A soldier at full attention, concentrating, body stiffening and relaxing randomly against the nanocytes.

Deimos shook visibly now. Monitors flashed, died, came alive, battling EM interference. The gun's voice was a low buzz, amplified through rock, knocking any unanchored object into the air where it would float into a wall, rebound, hover away again.

Her keyboard danced, held down by her fingers. She felt sick. Ahead, the target was reacting, its rotation changing, its own orbit in flux. Somehow, through Sol's corona and unprecedented sunspot activity, through a storm of light, they'd been spotted...

Then the comet fired, too early, a ten second burst outward. Missy tracked the bullets, interpolated.

Titan. They had an hour.

Ignoring the risk, she sent wideband, on all frequencies, showering the outer system with her tiny voice.

A warning.

#

The darkest place is shadow, and Deimos was there. Sun at their back, Baxter and Missy plunged through that darkness, too tiny to eclipse the Sun until the last moment, when they would fire and end the terror.

Missy's railgun ceased its ripping overdrive and quiet descended.

Baxter noticed nothing of his surroundings. His world was a snowball. His seizures were gone, replaced by numbness from neck to toe, indicator of the irreversible: nerve damage. His finger hovered, useless above the trigger, paralyzed in the null gravity.

"Missy, I need my neural."

She glided across the room, lifted the fiber optic, inserted it beneath his right ear. His mind filled with white brilliance for an instant, then Baxter was Inside.

Ten hours.

#

Missy wondered at her sudden tranquillity, but Baxter called and ended the thought, and she forced aching, fatigued muscles to his aid. He was a mind encased in tissue, physically stagnant. Alien cytes were finishing their work.

Deimos ran his lungs, moved his heart, kept the brain alive for a final encounter. The neural was his nursemaid, and Missy didn't bother to speak, though she wanted to. Instead she returned to her station, absently appeasing the alarms and cries of tortured systems. The gun had engaged the fail-safe. It would cool while internal robotics made repairs on the housing and cleaned residual radiation.

Radiation. The rock sang with it. Electromagnetic energy and gamma rays struck through iron, ringing Deimos like a bell. She knew the asteroid was uninhabitable, that they were both goners. But the nanocytes were gone as well, showered in deadly wavelengths. The seizures, the nausea, it had all eased since the firing. She glanced again at Baxter, crouched pathetically over a console of blinking light. Too late. It was too late for him. The damage done him could never be repaired, and Missy figured it made no difference anyway. His neural twitched occasionally, in time with electrical fluxes needed to support him. He was mind now, a sedentary thinking machine.

Missy entered his world.

"Baxter, I'm here."

Nonsound.

"You're dying."

Gray limbo flashed white, an affirmation.

"Let me be your senses."

Darker gray. An image of Ginnie.

"I love you as much, Baxter."

They simmed, and Ginnie was Missy, and outside a false memory trucks massaged an extinct highway.

A cat lay near the door, its eyes closed, sleeping.

#

They entered the coma, and white blindness enveloped them. In his couch, she felt Baxter tense and relax.

Fifteen minutes.

The Enemy had detected them, finally, after they'd dropped far enough. Its gun turned laboriously, too slow. Ten kilometers back, through solid rock still glowing invisibly with radiation and vibrating with residual electromagnetic energy, the railgun awoke again. It had to be coaxed, that stubborn weapon, and even now Missy was more it than human. Fail-safes were difficult to override.

But their course was true. They'd pass twenty clicks below the target. If it had been so designed, the rail could shoot once, for one tiny projectile would be enough. Instead, a hundred bullets would strike the comet. Overkill.

Ten minutes.

She intercepted high-end transmissions from the Enemy. It had never spoken before, except in violence, and she duly ignored it, storing the information for later study, if later mattered anymore.

Deimos turned, a bit too quickly, and Missy fired the attitude jets a final time, tiny course correction. It was a matter of waiting now, the inevitable closing quickly.

She studied their current orbit. Still a tight ellipse, they'd aphelion in two weeks, begin a stately fall back, flashing past the sun at thirty million kilometers. It was a stable orbit, their traverse barely wider than Mercury's. Deimos, hottest of the system's satellites, would orbit invisibly for eons.

Five minutes.

The Enemy fired, adjusting its own trajectory, but as before, it was too late. Mass moved slowly.

Who hid beneath the target's ice? What force exterminated entire species? There would be no answers, not from here, unless that desperate transmission could be decoded, translated. Perhaps they cried out for mercy even now, red-handed and guilty. Perhaps they knew nothing of honor, these builders of destruction. Perhaps their only motivation was fear.

Quite a motivator indeed, Missy thought.

The targeting software barked out its proximity alert, and Missy mentally nudged Baxter.

#

A hundred bullets tore the Enemy to vapor. Baxter watched from every angle, relishing his revenge. For a full second he pounded through the coma, sending death in a wave of stones until the gun finally quit, its cooling systems ravaged. Again Deimos rang with waste energy, and over at her console Missy dealt with the consequences of Baxter's excess.

#

The Enemy was a gas cloud now, twin tails dispersing but evident.

Baxter's brain was alive, and Deimos, his new mother, wife, nursemaid, would see to it that he'd live indefinitely now, with the neural and his crewmate for company. A lonely existence, this close to Sol, orbiting every sixty-five days, entrapped in iron, inside the tiny corridors of their rock habitat. But the alternative was death, slow and steady, and Baxter decided, his mind suddenly awake with possibilities, that he would much rather live.

He and Ginnie and Missy, together.

#

Baxter died with the Enemy. Missy let him go, for the damage to his body had spread into the cortex after all, creating hallucination, mental illness more terrifying than their now-purged alien infestation. She ejected the body, another human shell in orbit about the primary. Baxter disappeared into the diminishing coma, a tiny white dot amid a cloud of light gray.

She returned to her station and opened the com. Beowulf had stopped screaming long enough to congratulate. She didn't acknowledge, but raised the volume, letting the Captain's human voice fill the control room, echoing slightly from irradiated walls.

"We're leaving the system, Godot," he said. "A few thousand of us."

She coughed.

"We're sending rendezvous coordinates."

Missy ran a hand through blonde hair, came out with a clump stuck to her fingers. She coughed again.

"Are you okay, Godot?"

She keyed in. The delay was a mere five seconds; Beowulf was nearby. "I'm not coming," she said.

Beowulf paused, or maybe he was already leaving, increasing the distance between himself and this spaceborne battleground. "Meet us in the Oort," Beowulf said at last, the Captain's voice clouded by

ominous fear. "We lost Triton an hour ago. Incoming projectiles came from out-system. Six directions."

Missy reclined, feeling suddenly, violently ill. After a few minutes she said, "Godspeed, Beowulf. I'll be going nowhere." She switched off the com, turned her ebbing attention to the largest of the flatscreens, to the outsystem view.

The spreading remnants of the Enemy reflected intense starlight, bringing harsh brightness to Deimos's night side. The stars moved slowly past her field of view, familiar constellations. Earth was a brilliant orange star, Mars just as red as ever, but ruined. If the scopes had been strong enough, she could have seen Titan as it formed a new ring about Saturn, a thick belt far out from the rest. And Triton, gone an hour. And Europa. All gone now, desolation that had once housed a spreading empire.

The Oort. She might have guessed, had there been time. The Enemy, a comet. There were trillions like it out there in the depths, the borderland between stars. Infinite resources for a diligent enemy, countless platforms from which to rain death into the gravity well.

Escape was the only option now, their paltry vengeance a mere respite in an ongoing extermination. Their target was gone, and with it a race.

Missy...

The shock of that voice stung her, and she reached for her neural, ready to rip it free before awareness dawned.

She turned to her screens, watched Baxter's body merge with the gas and dust that had been the Enemy.

Missy rode Deimos around the sun, body free of one illness, beset by another. She listened to the Departure, but mostly she slept, and occasionally she dreamt of a tiny cabin and a highway and an orange cat dozing, content, near the door.

"Meow," he said, coaxing, voice firm, masculine, strong.

And finally, it was a dream no more.

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