

A woman in a red dress is shown floating in space, her body oriented upside down. The background is a dark, starry field. The title 'THE EDGE' is overlaid in large, bold, yellow letters.

# THE EDGE

JAMES SMYTHE

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Book Three of The Anomaly Quartet

James Smythe



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## 0

I walk the station, and I go to see Snipes; and he is in pain. He is in such pain, and that has been so clear from the start. A person who wasn't made for this; who wanted to be so much more. *An experimental pilot*, he said the night we met, the night he came up here; a joke we made about his job. I'm an engineer. Just an engineer. His hand on my arm. Maybe we could be something; in another life, maybe.

He paces his room, frantic. He says, 'I didn't want you to see me like this,' but I tell him that I don't mind, that I just want to help.

It's early in the morning, or late at night. The same state, really. Just different perceptions; we set the clock ourselves. And he says, a variant on the last: 'I didn't want to have to see you, not right now.'

'Please,' I say to him, but he doesn't listen. He doesn't, because he's made a choice.

He leaves his room, and he climbs down the ladder to the main section of the station, and he heads around it as if he's already late.

I chase him. I message the others, to tell them what's happening, that I might need help. He stops, shouts at me. 'Please, Ali,' he says, 'let me do this.'

Then he's into the changing rooms, and the airlock.

'Please help,' I ask the others, 'please help,' but nobody comes in this moment, and there's nobody coming at all; so I think, I'll pull the alarm, but Snipes is too fast, too driven.

He's got permissions; he can do what he likes to the systems.

We didn't have anything between us; we nearly did, that's all. But neither of us was in a place to begin anything—

He starts the airlock cycle. One door opening, and he steps inside.

Another door opening, and he's gone.

His hand lingers on the internal window, for just a moment. It holds, blocking my view, as if he's reaching for me—

Outside, I see Earth. That's where we are in this part of our rotation.  
Facing away from the Anomaly.

His trajectory: home.

I feel my heart leap, or sink, or crush or be pulled apart; I watch him go.  
It's so cold—

I feel myself pulled along in his wake. I would be—

The others get here, finally, and they rush and crowd, and desperately try  
to fix this.

Mon helps me away, ushers me to my room, where she quiets me. Shhh,  
she says. Hand on my head, brushing my hair back, comforting me;  
restraining me.

Go to sleep, she says. This'll help you, sleep now.

A sleep. A chance to reset myself, and to feel better, and to move on.

## PART ONE

*It seems, as one becomes older,  
That the past has another pattern, and ceases to be a mere sequence.*

**T. S. Eliot**, Four Quartets

# 1

Theo, my son, is five years old, or a little over; the exact number of days gets looser when you pass the easily definable. Until they're two, of course, you count them by months; or even weeks, when they're younger.

Then they cross a boundary, and suddenly: it's thereabouts. Two and a half; nearly four; five, until they're six.

My connection with Theo is purely digital. Screen to screen. The comms link with Earth is terrible, but usually it's enough for a picture, even if it's low res. To see his smile, hear his voice, that's everything to me. That tells me that there is a reason for my doing this.

After I have asked him about his day, about his life, and told him about mine, I tell him that I love him, and he says the same to me – he isn't yet old enough to really understand what it means, but he knows that there's a call and response to these things, and he says it the same way, every single time, as if it's rehearsed; even though I can tell he feels it, I can see it in his eyes – and then we say goodbye. Sometimes our conversation runs its course; sometimes it's halted because of the connection being tenuous up here; sometimes he's late for school, or his father has decided to take him out at the exact moment that he knows I'll be calling. But at least we speak, and have spoken nearly every day since I came up here; even if our conversations are only brief.

I think, on those days, that I work better. I am more efficient. I am focused, and I channel my feelings into my understanding that, more than anything else in the world, I want to get off this godforsaken station.

Last night one of my only real friends up here killed himself. His name was Snipes, and I hadn't known him for long. It feels stupid to get caught up in it, in missing him, or feeling the pain of his being gone; the burn of it. And already, his face is fading a little. As if it's not quite been impressed hard enough. The short time that I knew him, that wasn't enough to make it permanent.

But still, he ended it. He was sent up here to die, anyway. His death was inevitable.

He just wanted to control it, I suppose.

We buried him. Except, here it's not a burial. It's a send-off. So much less important-sounding, so much less gravitas.

This morning, more than any other day since I've been up here, I want to speak to my son. This morning, still hungover from the sadness of last night, I need Theo's voice, his gaze. I need that moment of connection; of clarity.

I get a connection straight away. Sometimes we don't get to speak, because the comms are out, or because our cycles don't overlap. Sometimes I call, but there's no answer. Those days, it's impossible to not fear the worst. In any situation where you truly feel for somebody, it's natural to worry when you cannot make contact with them; and when they're your child that feeling is amplified. But today, the connection works. There's static on the picture, and that's fine. Better than nothing. Xavier answers, and he smiles at me. He wears a very different smile than he wore when we were actually together. It looks the same, because that's his face, but God knows that whatever is happening in the space behind it is a very different thing.

'Allanah,' he says. He's the only person who still uses my full name. I've been Ali for as long as I can remember. Xavier uses my full name because he thinks it gives him the upper hand, or power. This unbearably petty aggression, this absolute smugness. Arrogance that was there before this, long before the upper hand he felt he held; that he is Down There and I am not.

Because, as he reminds me, to hurt me, I left, and Xavier remained.

As soon as he sees me he hoists Theo up into the air in front of him, holding him out to the camera, pushed forward. 'Can you see?' he asks. Theo has one of the knots on a necklace around his neck, like a cross, at first glance; a cross mixed with an ampersand, to make this tied-off symbol, looped and knotted together. 'He picked this one out himself,' Xavier says.

'No he didn't,' I say. 'He doesn't know what that even means. He's too young.'

'I don't think you can ever be too young to have faith, Allanah. He's got faith, just like I do. You wouldn't believe what it's like down here, now.'

Even in the short time you've been gone, it's so different. Belief in the knot is *intrinsic*. You'd understand if you were here, I'm sure you would.'

'I don't think so,' I say. He smiles dismissively. I wave at Theo and he waves back. My little boy; growing older every day, without me there to see it. 'Let me talk to him, on our own.' As I speak, my head swims. Being up here, it fucks with you. There's a strange pressure in the station, a sense of the air not being quite right. Headaches, bone aches, cramps in your gut: they're all part and parcel of your stay on the station. They told us that on day one. 'Take it off him, please. If you don't, I'll tear it off as soon as I see him.'

'Come on,' Xavier says, 'there's no need for that.' Xavier's got a necklace of his own, and I see it as he shifts Theo's weight in his arms: his is thicker, silver rope tied around itself; a tangled ball that has only a passing resemblance to a crucifix now. 'Anyway, it's not like I forced it on him. He wanted one.'

'Because you wear one, and he wanted to be like you.'

'Invoke the truth and make it a reality,' Xavier says. It's one of his church's platitudes: a phrase that means nothing, torn from some quasi-life-coach little blue book and turned into a commandment. Seize the day, and make it yours. But it's a creed that Xavier's lived by long before the knot came along. 'We both wanted to talk to you today, anyway.' His smile is so weak and ineffectual. I picture it plastered to his face while he sleeps, while he dreams whatever he has been told to dream. 'What's it like up there?' he asks. 'What can you see?'

'The same as always.'

'But the knot, right?'

'The Anomaly.'

'Sure. Whatever you want to call it.' So patronizing. 'What's it like, now?'

'It's the same as it always was.'

'How close is it?'

'A long way away.'

'How long?'

'Four years. Something like four years.'

'Four years, my word. That's ...' He sucks in air, like that's attractive to him, somehow, a lecherous move, and he smiles. 'That's not long, is it?' He leans towards his camera, and, by proxy, my screen. 'Describe it more?'

‘It’s dark. Jesus, it’s like you’re getting off on this.’

‘Don’t be disgusting. I’m impressed. What colours does it have in it?’

‘There are no colours. It’s dark, like I said.’

‘It can’t just be dark. You likely can’t see the colours, that’s probably it.’

‘I can’t see them because there aren’t any,’ I say. Xavier snorts.

‘Just because you can’t see them, doesn’t mean they aren’t there,’ he tells me. ‘You aren’t attuned to the full spectrum, that’s the nature of denying your faith.’ He looks away from the camera, and he rubs at his wrist and fumbles his words ever so slightly. ‘This is so like you. To shun what’s in front of your face.’ His voice dropped to a murmur. ‘You’re so selfish, Allanah. You should want to share the joy, but you’re trapped. You should be doing everything you can to get back here faster.’ He looks at Theo. Touches my son’s neck, the string around it. ‘Our boy misses you, but you’ve chosen to be apart from him. What does that say about the kind of person you are?’

‘How dare you,’ I say, and there should be more there, but there isn’t; there are choked-back tears, instead, a lump in my throat. Xavier nods, as if understanding something, and he reaches for the screen. I try to make eye contact with Theo in that moment, as Xavier hoists him around, then severs the connection, keeping his face turned away from me; and I blurt out those three little words my son didn’t get a chance to say, hoping that the connection holds long enough to carry them down to Earth.

I love you.

I cry: about Theo, and the distance between us; and about Snipes, and the distance there, even further.

Last night. That’s all.

Some believe in life after this, but it’s hard to, when you’ve seen the evidence we have. So Snipes is nowhere.

I don’t know if it’s okay to cry about my lot, because it seems like there are bigger problems than mine. I have to keep reminding myself of that. People have come up here, and they have been brave, and they have tried to do something. Bravery is something that cannot be underestimated.

Snipes was brave.

I get back into bed. Another hour, or less, or more. Whatever I can have.

I imagine that I am out there, in the wild nothingness, before the Anomaly, and after here; and I’m spiralling, out of control. A veil, the cold, the dark,

clothing me; my eyes forced shut, the pain, the nothing, overwhelming.

Lost, and my guts churn, my head pulses, tightens, a vice; my pain—

The alarm sounds, waking me from my dream, whatever my dream was, trilling through the bones of the station, piercing my skull, thumping into my headache and making it ring even louder than before.

I dream out here. We all do. To be this close to death, every dream is either a memory or a dream of what might be; there's no ground in between.

I pull on underwear, my jumpsuit, slide my comm unit onto my wrist, and leave my room. I'm far from the viewing window, so I start to run towards it; but I know what the alarm means before I even reach it. I was on a committee that chose the sounds, that decided what we would hear in any given situation.

High-pitched, a trill rather than a thump.

That's panic stations.

Panic, station.

The security doors are shut. The lights gone dim. The exit pathways are marked for us.

I don't float, though, which means the centrifuge must still be churning. It can't be operations fatal. Not a fire, not an explosion, not a hole. This is something else.

The Anomaly. When all other options are removed, there it is. There it must be.

I run down the corridor and approach the viewing window, a massive track of glass, running around a sixth or so of the outer edge of the middle ring of the station, curved and secured and reinforced with polymers that make it basically unbreakable. And as I see it, before I see whatever's outside, I pray. I am not religious, so instead I cross my fingers and I try to picture Theo, but his face is somehow so intangible in this moment; distant, distance turning itself into the physical, even though I have just spoken with him, even though he was right there, in front of me.

I shut my eyes, briefly, running on instinct. I run these corridors, the loop – the donut, we call it – every morning. Sixty days of this station, of this repetition, and I know exactly where my feet will fall; the curve of the floor, the sound of each panel. The pleasing beat of my shoes on the metal, the exact tone of each step.

The others, bar Tomas Hyvönen, the scientist in charge of this station – so, that’s Desh, Cohen, Berry, Gibson, Sian – are standing at the window already when I get there. They’re watching something in the distance. Mon – Monica, my friend, the station’s primary medical officer – looks at me, and she looks so sad. Broken, almost. She takes my hand as I approach, as if she hasn’t seen me in the longest time, and this is a reconciliation.

She squeezes my hand. ‘Don’t freak out,’ she says.

I look out of the window in front of us, and I see it.

I lied to Xavier when I spoke to him, even though I didn’t realize it.

The Anomaly isn’t years away from us; not any more. Until this morning, it was and now it is not. Now, it’s on our doorstep. I don’t know how far; or how close.

As we rotate towards it, our orbit so fixed and yet bringing us closer, closer, it’s clear that it isn’t where it was last night. It’s not there, it’s here, it’s right here, really.

I want to scream.

I don’t. We are told to control ourselves.

‘We don’t know what happened,’ Desh says. He’s the tech guy on the station, maintaining the security systems, the appliances, the messaging, the connections. Clever and annoying in equal measure. ‘We’re on it.’

‘Ground control see?’

‘We’re asking. They’re being silent so far. Probably freaking out.’

‘Useful,’ I say. I look at it, and it makes me feel strange, unsteady. Disarmed. That will be the shock, most likely. I steady myself; and I feel Mon’s hand holding my arm, a brace, a restraint. I look to her, and she smiles at me. She doesn’t say anything. She is sad, or scared, or somewhere between.

I don’t know what to feel, and nobody is going to tell me what to feel.

‘Is there video of it?’ I ask.

Desh shakes his head. ‘Camera missed it. It just fucking ... leapt. Between frames, looks like. One minute it’s there and the next it’s ... well, there.’ He’s sweating a little. Jittery. He should have caught it, probably. Blame for missing such a pivotal thing will land on him, I’m sure. ‘We’re only running at twenty-four fucking frames, which I said wasn’t enough, I said that’s like a hundred fucking years out of date and I wanted one-eighty —’

‘It doesn’t matter. How close is it?’

‘We’re waiting for Hyvönen on that,’ Mon says. ‘It’s hard to tell.’

‘A few days, I reckon. Can’t be much more,’ Desh says.

‘Assuming it doesn’t leap again,’ Cohen says, his brow depressed. He and I don’t talk, not really; nor his compatriots, Berry and Gibson, who stand behind him as if they’re his chorus.

‘Has Hyvönen said anything at all?’ I ask Sian. She’s his assistant and carer both, there to support him on his good days and rescue him on his bad.

‘He’s thinking,’ she replies.

‘Is it a coincidence?’ I ask.

‘What?’ So dismissive in her tone, immediately.

‘A coincidence; that Snipes died yesterday, he went out there, and now this happens. It feels like it can’t be coincidental, is what I’m saying.’

Snipes died. I hear the words out loud.

I didn’t know him that well.

‘Everything’s a coincidence,’ she says. ‘Linear time’s a coincidence. Dominos. Don’t overthink it.’

And then we’re quiet. All of us, silent; just staring at this thing that’s changed our purpose up here drastically.

That’s changed *everything*.

When I arrived, there were forty people up here; forty *bodies*, the count used to read. A totally different place then, it was. Felt like it was bursting at the seams. Back then, you couldn’t breathe without hearing somebody else breathing first. Now, there’s the background hum of the rest of the station going about its work, the under-foot thrumming of the centrifuge from the level beneath us, but that noise all fades into the background. And when it’s faded, for the most part, it’s quiet up here.

Back then, we were forty bodies, then funding was pulled two weeks in, which took us down to twentyish; and then, more funding pulled, we were reduced again.

A skeleton crew, we were told, was all that would be needed to run the station. You’re a lighthouse, that’s all. We told ourselves that we would swell and grow once more, the number constantly fluctuating, depending on need. But until then, yes, sure, maybe it was easier to keep it lean.

Besides which: it was easier to rotate the crews if they were smaller.

Four months on, four months off.

I am sixty days through.

Time passes. We were meant to be here for so much longer.

Now, we have to leave. We have to go, because it's so close we can't risk it. Even I know that. All the projections, they had us cleared off with weeks to go.

If it swallows us, we do not know what will happen.

I sit with Mon in the mess hall, because we have to eat. Nothing better to do, while we wait for Hyvönen to tell us what's next. I pick at my breakfast, an English muffin, a patty of egg and spinach and hollandaise on top, all rehydrated and each component tasting, somehow, exactly the same as the others, no distinction between them. Mon drinks coffee. We used to have better food, but the freezers have all been switched off in the stores, the storeroom itself locked off. Another in a long list of attempts to save both money and power, but one which has left us with nothing but food that's been drained of all water and nutrients, and coffee that tastes stale the moment it hits your lips.

Over Mon's shoulder, I can see a sliver of the window. The darkness outside.

'They need to send us home,' I say. 'What happens if it moves again? I don't want to be caught in that thing.'

'I'm assuming they will,' she says. 'Not like we can do anything now. Still: you know what that means.' She smiles, softly, sadly. She's got a little boy not far off Theo's age; and an ex-husband she hates almost as much as I hate Xavier. We joke that Hyvönen has a type. Like some lothario, choosing those he sees fragility in, pasts that are tethers, anchors, that he can manipulate. Mon and I bonded through situational association and empathy. Those things are stronger than something like shared tastes, I would say. Actual understanding wins every time. 'You speak with Theo this morning?' she asks.

'A little.'

'Let me guess. Good but not great?'

'He looked well, but ... his father.' She knows what that means. 'And that fucking church, it's so insidious.'

'It's *not* even a church, don't fucking dignify them.'

'You and I know that,' I say. 'Try telling him.' Shake of my head. 'You. You go.'

‘Andre was good,’ she says. ‘I can’t complain.’

‘Just think,’ I say. She’s half-smiling. ‘Think. We’re going to get to go home.’

‘Don’t count your chickens.’ Mon keeps the smile, but she’s hesitant. Less convinced than I am. I pierce my egg: a double-yolker, yellow dripping from my fork. ‘I just don’t think they’ll give this up that easily.’ She looks at me. Her head tilts in commiseration. ‘How you doing?’

‘I’m fine.’

‘Snipes, I mean. It’s hard ...’

‘I was there. I know.’

‘Look: I’m bad at this stuff,’ she says, ‘I’m so fucking clumsy. Look, I’m sorry, that’s what I’m saying. You want to talk, I’m here. I love you, that’s what I’m saying, and if you need me—’

‘I know,’ I say. A smile of thanks; of feelings reciprocated.

From the other side of the mess hall, I hear Berry and Cohen and Gibson eating, talking. Cohen quiet, quieter than usual certainly; Berry and Gibson being dicks, their usual asshole selves. Not giving a shit about the noise they’re making, or how anybody else is feeling. Snipes died last night, and they don’t care.

I feel less about it than I should. Shock, I suppose; or, maybe, I just didn’t know him that well. Maybe it’s just not the sort of thing that sinks in too hard when you’re only a week – less – into knowing somebody.

Mon clocks me looking over at them, my side-glance.

‘Cohen?’

‘He hasn’t said anything. But he will, he’s a prick.’

‘That he is.’ Her hand creeps to mine. ‘He tried anything?’

‘No. No.’ I side-glance again: Berry laughing at some shitty joke Gibson’s made. Cohen quietly to one side of them, as if he’s overseeing the whole thing.

I really hate them.

The egg is disgusting. I nudge it to one side, but can’t face the rest of the meal anyway. My stomach turns. Being up here, it’s hard on every part of your body. The actual physical being here, it’s not normal. We are not meant to be here, that’s the crux. This isn’t natural, so why should our bodies accept it? ‘What’s today like for you, assuming we’re not just packing our bags? Cross fingers, let’s pray.’ My face grins, and I feel the muscles stretch. Tighten.

‘Well.’ She stretches her Ls, a cartoon drumroll. ‘Hyvönen broke his arm.’ I laugh at that, a spit of sound from my mouth, and she covers her mouth as she laughs as well. ‘No, no,’ she says, ‘he fell down, right after he saw the Anomaly, apparently. It wasn’t funny.’

‘It’s a little funny,’ I say.

‘He’s old.’

‘Too old to be up here,’ I say. ‘And he’s been up here too long.’

‘So bloody long,’ Mon says. ‘His bones are fragile as anything I’ve ever seen. Breathe on them too hard and they’ll turn to dust. So today I’ll have a fight on my hands. He’ll need injecting to seal it. Maybe nanites. He’s resistant, you know that.’

‘At least if he gets handsy you can snap him like a twig.’

‘God, twigs. Remember trees?’

‘Remember soil?’

‘Remember air?’

We laugh, both of us. A joke we make a lot. We’ve been up here together a couple of months, that’s all. Amazing how bonded you can become, in that time.

‘Are you scared?’ I ask her.

She nods. ‘I’m fucking petrified.’

‘What happens if it leaps again?’

‘It hasn’t before. Chances are it won’t again.’ She shrugs. ‘That’s a doctor’s opinion. It’s not a pattern until it happens twice.’

‘Jesus,’ I say, ‘you’re so nonchalant. How can you be this laid back?’

‘I have a *relaxed disposition*,’ she replies, ‘that’s what my lecturers always used to say. Makes for a good surgeon. It’ll be fine. We have to believe it. They’ll get us off this thing, take us down there.’

‘But it’s still coming,’ I say.

‘Yes,’ she replies, ‘it is.’ She stands up, her plate empty. ‘I should make a start, prep the room for Hyvönen’s op. If you need to talk, about Snipes, or anything ...’ Her voice trails. I nod. I know, I know. ‘You okay if I leave you alone now?’ she asks, and I nod again, it’s fine.

But as she’s leaving, I ask her: ‘Do you think Snipes’ death had anything to do with this? With it ... moving?’

‘No,’ she says.

I watch her as she leaves, as she walks straight past the window, straight past the Anomaly. As it doesn’t seem to faze her; and I wish I was more like

her, sometimes. Able to leave things; to move on.

I eat the muffin with my fingers because it's impossible to cut with the ridiculous plastic knives we're forced to use. As if there's any need for anything sharper – anything that could be construed as a weapon – up here. If we wanted to mutiny, we'd mutiny. If we wanted to kill ourselves, we'd find a way.

I think of Snipes. I don't not think of Snipes.

I should be more broken by it, I know, but grief is strange; and time here is stranger. It hasn't hit me, I know. It won't until I'm not here, probably. Until I'm somewhere else, and this is the past, and Snipes is the past as well.

He is the present, still, somehow; there, but not.

A buzz comes through, on my comm. An instruction sent to everybody, from Hyvönen; but written by Sian, his assistant. Her tone, her timbre. Clipped to the point of abrupt.

We are not to go outside any more. No suits, no walks, no unnecessary outings. Only if it's mission critical will we be allowed. We have to seek permission.

Disappointing: because that suggests that there's still a mission to be critical for.

Only when Hyvönen has something that he needs us all to do does he issue specific instructions.

So I leave. I stand in the hallway, and I stare at the darkness.

To think that we are suddenly so close to darkness, so close to death, to the unknowable. To chaos, and to disorder. To this thing that was so ambiguous for so very long, a *something* that existed millions and millions of miles away from us; and maybe for millions of years, maybe.

But now, it's here.

We've seen it this close before, on fly-bys, through the drone footage that Desh and I worked out when we first got up here. I built the new drones from units meant to be flown on a tether, used for station maintenance. I had painted the fronts of them yellow, like little beaks; and so we christened them Huey, Dewey and Louie. From some old cartoon, or some old movie. Desh chose the names. He flashed their firmware with an update to their sound files, so that they quacked when they were given instructions. We got video as they approached the Anomaly, perfect clarity on its darkness.

Hyvönen was pleased, because he saw them as an opportunity. A way to send living subjects – mice, rats, a new generation's Laika if he could lay his hands on it – into the Anomaly. Nothing had gone in and come back alive, and he wanted us to test the limits of the thing.

The mice died, of course. Hyvönen didn't even seem disappointed. Instead, he told us to send more out there, so we did; watching them drift off into that deep, inky darkness, as matte and dull as anything you can imagine.

Before I came up here, I would lie in the garden with Theo, and we would watch the stars. He said, 'There's a hole in the sky,' and I told him that it was not that simple. There was more to it than that. He asked what it was, then, and I said that it was an Anomaly. That is the only word that we have for it. Something that we cannot explain; beyond that word itself.

This was how I explained to him what it was that I did. I would say, I am helping to create something that will go into that thing, that will try to stop it. I'm writing code, like a language, to allow the ship we're going to send in to work better.

He didn't understand the words – oh my God, he was too young for the words, or the meanings behind them – but he liked looking at the stars with me. He liked when I drew the shapes of the constellations for him, and when I told him what they were. What they meant, if you believed in superstitions. But then there was that dark mass in the sky with nothing inside it, and nothing past it; and when he asked about it, I didn't have answers for him.

I like explanations. I need them. I understand exactly how this place works. I understand the life support systems, the air filtration equipment, because it's the same as the ones that I used to fit on SC3s, back on Earth. I understand the centrifuge, which we basically co-opted from the Russians. I was on the adaptation team, ensuring maximum efficiency, keeping our gravity as constant and consistent as possible. I understand how all of the station works, even if only on a theoretical level – there are parts I am not allowed to touch, aspects of the station that Desh or Cohen or Sian have control over, but I have still tried to understand them. Eventually, I am who people turn to in order to fix problems. Even if those problems are on a software level – some of the software here is cheap and nasty, hacked

together, much to Desh's chagrin – it's easier to ask somebody to fix the hardware than the soft.

Eight of us up here; eight people who have so much resting on them.

And the pressure's multiplied so quickly. Yesterday, we were years from the necessity of understanding it, or stopping it, or *something*. And now, today? Today, we're days away, at best. The Anomaly is headed to Earth, it is coming, and we still understand so little about it.

I like to think, if the Anomaly manages to reach us, or them, however I think of it, that we will change the way that we live. We will adapt. When they can study it, maybe that's when we work out how to counteract it, and stop it happening. I don't know. We adapted to the heat, when it set in; to the seas, when they rose. We've adapted to the oxygen generators that blot the landscapes, to the ravaged ecosystems, to the cities we were forced to abandon in the wake of the microclimates we had no chance of controlling. We adapt every time some new virus gets unleashed, and we're terrified about attacks for a few hours; and then some scientist somewhere makes an antidote and it's released into the water supply and the air filters, the code for it copied the world over, protection immediate and widespread.

Until we know otherwise, we're safe.

That's what I tell myself, at least.

The donut is quiet. I don't know what I want, really – do any of us? In a crisis, can any of us truly know what we want, need, even require? And if the Anomaly leaping towards us doesn't constitute a crisis, what truly does? – but I don't want silence. I want the buzz of people working. Mon is preparing for Hyvönen's arm surgery. Desh is doing whatever coders do to pass their own concept of time. The clique are being assholes somewhere, I'm sure, passing time instead of actually doing work, even if we don't quite know what work should look like right now.

I want a message. A joke: Hyvönen thinks of himself as a god, and I suspect that even he would admit it. Mon and I use that. Instructions like pennies from Hyvönen, a bad pun that we love, because it's *something*.

But it's so quiet. I stand alone at the window and I watch the darkness. This massive object that isn't an object at all; a presence with no presence. The Anomaly: alien, impossible to comprehend. Something that we don't understand, and that we never will. We never thought it could happen, that's

the insane thing. That's the truth of every change in our lives: terror attacks and pandemics and personal tragedies, we try to keep them from ourselves until they're relevant. If we stopped and contemplated our own ends too much, we would go insane.

Why don't I like being out here? Part of me feels selfish, to think of the people who would murder for this opportunity. But they aren't here, and they can't see this. The Anomaly, looming, coming into focus; or we are, we are moving towards it. It has no orbit: it simply sits, taking up space.

Soon we'll be past it, and it won't be there to see any more, until we swing back around.

I put my hand to the glass, as if this is some romantic movie; a loved one on the other side of the glass, about to spiral out of control.

Snipes' hand on the airlock window.

He wasn't my loved one; he was barely mine at all.

The Anomaly: that is all I can see. Whatever is behind its wall, its border, that's the loved one. The nothingness, I suppose.

The lights flicker. Cycle. Off, click, click, off one by one. The donut plunged into darkness. The thrumming of the centrifuge beneath my feet; the vibration of the station through the glass. We say that it's still, it's never still.

The station creaks.

Metal on metal; bolted together segments of every piece of this place, still settling.

A new house settles, they say. The floorboards settle, the roof settles, the windows settle. When Xavier and I moved, so I could be close to my training, the house was doing nothing but settling for so long.

'Did you hear that?' I would ask, and he would shake his head.

'You would hear creaks in the twigs of newly built nests,' he said.

But I heard settling: like footsteps, softly treading, feet that didn't exist on floorboards that had been there for years; years that, for some reason, were not quite enough.

The creaking under me now, and from the windows. In the darkness, it feels as if it's the walls closing in. Tighter, tighter; and the space is already small enough, even though I am not claustrophobic, and I am not afraid of the dark. Still: creaking, and then thumping—

And out of the window, a glance, and I see something staring at me, something—

My face. The lights flickering, and the reflection of my own face, against that dark mass. I stare at the reflection – back at the reflection – as it catches me off-guard. A moment, caught in it—

Something thumps into the glass. A hand, I think, fingers splayed, pressed to the window; not a reflection, but another me, out there, a device in a horror movie, to scare, to intimidate, to signal an ending—

But it's not a hand, it's detritus. Orbital debris. It's a piece of clothing: a glove, floating out here. Accidentally flushed, or ...

Or it's Snipes'. His glove, drifting loose, free.

It sticks to the window briefly, then the sensors puff it away, as they're designed to do. To keep the windows clean, and clear, and perfectly transparent.

I am afraid of being here, because everything now is about being afraid. The lights come on, one by one, around the donut; and I follow them, because it's better there.

Even though it's just as quiet, there's somehow less silence.

## 2

Here is the story of humanity's relationship with space, with the stars, with the Anomaly.

We began by staring up at the nothingness, at the twinkles in it, the light we could see, and we assumed that it was gods; that it was incomprehensible. Before we knew what the sun was, before we understood the concepts of stars and red dwarfs, we assumed deities and demons. We assumed that our mortality meant that this thing – a life giver, which aided crops, which gave us light before we could even do that for ourselves – was something more incredible than we could comprehend.

We worshipped it, and we were probably right to.

Eventually, of course, we told ourselves that we did not want to be complacent about our knowledge of what was above us. We began to fathom what it was, and how it worked. Maybe we lay there, counting stars, watching the brighter ones move around us. Trying to understand. That was before we started to destroy the sky, as well. Maybe it's natural to wonder how clear the sky might have been, maybe; and if, with that crystal clarity, we could actually see everything. We came from millennia of not understanding this space above us, and then we charted it and plotted it and built telescopes, and suddenly we knew it all. We argued about our place in it, whether we rotated or were rotated around, depending on our arrogance; and we argued about what it would be like out in it, if we could breathe, if we could hear. We didn't understand, and yet we told ourselves that we did.

We sent up satellites, probes, ships. We landed – first on the moon, then more recently on Mars – and we told ourselves that to do it once was a demonstration of humanity's greatest skills: of exploring, yes; but underneath that, of course, was conquering, was might and majesty.

This is what we do. We move to where we are not.

Enter, then: the Anomaly. For so long lower case, until we didn't have a better name for it. Something is anomalous until it isn't; we have never

defined it better. The Hyvönen Anomaly, technically, that's how we designated it, after it started life as a number that meant nothing, a code, in research files and secret emails. But the Hyvönen Anomaly is likely how history will remember it. He tries to speak of it now with his name removed from the noun, to keep himself apart from it; as if it might sully his good name. It's a piece of space that we cannot understand, that exists but only barely, dense and unreadable. It's a semi-permeable membrane that, when crossed into, cannot be left.

Inside it, we know – and *all* we know – is death.

And it's coming for us.

I feel a constant need to check the fixtures and fittings of the station, the smallest aspects that somehow hold it together. I spend much of the day on the windows, checking the sealant, to make sure that the creaking wasn't important. Pressing my thumb to the edges of the glass, to feel for the cold. The way it works, the multiple layers of glass, it would get cold if there was a leak.

Colder, rather; it's always cold.

From behind, I hear the low growl of Hyvönen's resting voice: a constant hum, almost, from his throat, as if he is in a state of perpetual disagreement. He's not built for being up here any more. He shuffles past me, accompanied by Sian. He doesn't look at me; doesn't look at the window, at the Anomaly. Arm tight in a sling. Doesn't wait, just barges – as much as he can do such a thing – into the medical bay, one of the rooms off the donut, and the door shuts behind him.

The glass around the medical bay usually dims when there's something going on inside it, but it hasn't, not now, for some reason – probably Mon leaving it clear, knowing that I will want to see this. It's evidence of his fallibility. I watch as Mon tweaks his arm, as she works with her machines to examine the fracture, to try and reset the bone. The pincers run up and around his limb, whirling, spinning, heating and cooling, fixing the bone with their gels and clays.

This version of him isn't what they sold to us before we came up here. It's not even close to how he's presented to the world. The agency uses promotional photographs from thirty or so years ago, back when he still had his birthmark across his face; when that was what distinguished him from his brother. That was when the whole space programme was his, and he was

a marvel. The man who brought back wonder to the masses. They kick-started a new space age, in theory: one that was less about discovery of our solar system, less about exploration, more about understanding. Exploration was how the Anomaly was found; investigation was how, in theory, we would understand it. The mission failed, the ship lost – just like every ship – but there was nobody else willing to step up. He kept his position, presenting himself as a costume-party fantasy of a bygone age's space-race: thin-tie suit and slicked-back hair, horn-rimmed glasses and tumbler of whisky. He spoke to the world, a self-proclaimed genius, and he apologized.

This isn't over, he said. I won't stop until we understand what we are dealing with.

He didn't stop, in fairness to him. Except, now, he's his own greyed-out shadow. His hair thinned to the point of near non-existence, somehow both swept and pasted across his scalp. His bones deteriorating from age, from trip after trip up here during the construction phase, from the traumas he's put them through; bones so damaged that his entire self is a patch-job, nanites in place of Band-Aids, tying him together. But his decay is more than just hips and ankles: dementia has set in. We all know it, even though it's not public yet. He needs daily treatments. When we first came up here, Desh told me that there's a MemoRain in Hyvönen's office, that he's on a regular regeneration cycle: his memories put back into his brain, slides inserted back into an antique projector after an accident, fingers crossed that the images are still tenable.

I have asked Mon, and she says that she can't talk about his medical files. From the way she says it, I know that it's true. But I get it: people are more inclined to question their leaders if they are known to be failing.

Once, Hyvönen had the keys to the kingdom, that's the thing, and he sent up a ship, with his brother on it, and it went into the Anomaly. Of course, it never came back. That's how these stories always end: you send something into the unknown, and it becomes the unknown itself. It was a loss that Hyvönen took ownership of; because he stayed, and his brother went.

Not that he shows his pain, of course. Nobody talks about the tragedy of the eternally lost Mirakel Hyvönen any more. It's just not the done thing.

In the medical bay, Hyvönen – our Hyvönen, Tomas – barks at Mon as she slides the apparatus from his arm. Some part of it scratches his skin, and

he snaps, in pain and rage, his ire aimed squarely at Mon. A scratch, little more, and it bleeds, yes, thick bright blood, but still; it's only a scratch.

I watch as Sian tries to calm him. She puts her hand on his shoulder, and she apologizes on his behalf. I'm assuming it's an apology, but it's not like her face actually shows anything resembling emotion when she says it. She's cold, emotionally, which I think probably makes her good at her job.

He's a lot to deal with.

Mon unseals a large box in the corner, pulls out a canister. Nanites. I've seen them before, down on Earth, when one of the people in training was crushed under an old SC3 craft. It fell from its anchor at the back end, fin slamming into the guy's leg, nearly taking it off. They put nanites onto the damage, and they sealed it, rebuilt it. Not permanent, but good enough to hold him until they could get him to a proper surgeon, until he could get a perfect reprint fitted.

Mon opens the canister, takes out a tranche of the nanites. They're in small liquid pouches, sealed off and protected, kept in cold storage to prevent them activating. She draws some into a syringe and injects them into Hyvönen's forearm. It's blackened and bruised, the angle of the bone wrong; and he winces at the needle, at the pressure of the nanites entering his flesh. As soon as they hit the warmth of the body, they start to work. This would be miraculous, if miracles weren't something we just invented ourselves, something we dreamed of and then made happen. Under his skin, the nanites slither, shimmering through like a light held beneath a bedsheet; and they find their target, and they mend it. They can fix almost anything, that's the most astonishing thing about them. There's a half-life, sure, before they stop being efficient, but if you need to patch a metaphorical tyre, they're the ideal.

Hyvönen stands up. He adjusts himself, moves his arm; stiffly at first, and then with greater range of movement. The whole thing looks immediately better: the colour returning to normal, and the skin less loose, as if it's been plucked and pulled back, stretched around his old bones. A nip and a tuck and he's good as new; as old, rather.

He does this strange little bow, to Mon, and to the equipment, and then turns and leaves the room. He tries to stride his way out of his shuffling, leading to a juddering as if there are frames missing from my vision. Sian lets him through the door first. He carries himself as somebody twenty years older than he is. Held forward, stooped and crooked, and he glances

from the corners of his wet eyes at everything and everybody. He sees me, standing by the window.

‘You,’ he says. Raises his hand; points. Confusion, as if he’s partway between recognizing me and not. This is par for the course with him. He is not all here, not all the time. Wait for the parsing. ‘What are you doing here?’

‘Sorry,’ I say, ‘I shouldn’t have been staring. I heard about your arm, sir.’ We treat him like military, even though he’s definitely not. His space station, his rules. ‘I hope it’s feeling better.’

‘You shouldn’t be here; what are you doing here?’ he asks, again.

‘We should go,’ Sian says, to both him and me. She leads him down the corridor, around the donut, away from the labs; and I am, again, alone.

Saying goodbye to Theo when I came up here was the hardest thing that I have ever done. Of course it was. Xavier didn’t even want to let me bring him to the launch, but I told him that it was important to me: that Theo see me leave, and understand absolutely that I was coming back. I spoke to Xavier’s mother, because we still had a perfectly reasonable relationship – I suspect, if pushed, she even agreed that her son was a poor example of a human being – and I told her what he was doing. I said, ‘I’m trying to do something to help us all, and Xavier is being a fucking child.’

‘Yes, well: children are wont to do as they will,’ she said, wiping her hands of it; but then Xavier called me the very next day and told me that he had changed his mind. He was going to fly Theo to Florida, so that I could see him and say my goodbyes. I didn’t like that conversation, because he said it all with such an air of finality, as if he assumed that I wouldn’t be returning home at the other end. He stood there when I held Theo, not giving me any time alone with him. He waited there for the whole conversation, standing in the corner by a window, like a fucking wraith. We were in one of the beige holding rooms in the launch facility, and we ate the sandwiches that were prepared for us – tuna fish and salad, and I can still taste them, that’s how strong that memory is – and I remember thinking that it was so strange: that this would be the last real food I would eat for the next few months, probably.

I didn’t think that it would be the last time I held Theo for that time, because I could only smell those sandwiches, even as I tried to breathe in his hair. It was only afterwards that I realized that Theo had changed his

shampoo; or, Xavier had changed it for him. My son's scent, suddenly different. The memory of his smell fading almost completely in that sensory overwhelm.

I asked Xavier to let Theo stay with me that final night and he denied me. He said that I was too busy, his tone snide. Too stressed, and he said it in that pointed way he tended to say everything when he wanted to refer to my health issues. And it's a Tuesday, he said. That's what the custody battle was about: my job, my role in all of this, and how much attention I could – or couldn't – give to my own son. Xavier made me out to be a bad person, somebody who would ignore their family because of their work at best, or neglect at worst; somebody with issues in their past that would intrude, even after I had them redacted from the conversation, stricken from the record. The past was the past, and I didn't even believe it in the way that Xavier did.

Lies, between us; bitterness and lies.

But the court agreed with him. I told them that I could handle both aspects of my life, but they only looked at me with pity. Of course I couldn't.

Poor, poor Allannah: with her history, and her mind, and her ways.

The judge said that maybe it was best, until the Anomaly was sorted out, as if it was a minor discrepancy, and until I was willing to devote time to him – telling me that I was a bad mother, if not in so many words – that my boy lived with Xavier. That's what he told me.

When I handed Theo back in the waiting room – we hoisted him between us, as if he was still a toddler, unwilling to admit to the passing of time, the growing of his body – I told Xavier to take care of him.

'I won't need to,' he said. 'The knot will do that, in the end.'

That was the first time he used the phrase to me directly. I knew he was obsessed, I knew he was going to the meetings, to what they called the sermons, but he hadn't told me himself. And then he tried to give me something: one of his necklaces. Homemade. A crucifix, wrapped in its own chain. Strangled, the metal twisted and gnarled, then fastened in on itself. He pushed it into my palm. 'You have to go,' he said, 'but maybe you'll see this better on the other side. Maybe, when this is all done, you'll see that we were being provided for all along.'

Then we boarded the SC3 that brought me up here. Back then, they were coming up to the station every couple of weeks with people and supplies.

And I remember lying back in my chair, strapped in like this was any other test flight or simulator, and thinking that this didn't need to be the way that it was.

Before the door shut, I saw Theo there, or I'm sure that I saw him. I think I saw him. His little head of jet-black hair, a target to concentrate on, a dark spot in my vision. I'm sure that it was him, so I waved to him, and he waved back.

Everybody was waving.

That was a memory that we both needed to have.

Time is strange here. It can be lost. You are working on something, sitting in the quiet, the cold, and you shut your eyes, and suddenly ... Bang. Time has passed, and you've slept, or it feels as if you have, and you're still cold and yet nothing at all has changed. I was sitting, and then my eyes were shut, tired, my head doing the ache it does, all the way down my spine. Imagining something that won't happen: drifting out there, lost. Spiralling away from the station, nothing to cling to, towards the Anomaly as it waits to swallow me whole. Gasping in air, and feeling my chest tighten—

Then, *thump, thump*, the pumping of an artificial heart that powers this entire station, suddenly intruding into the peace. And I'm back, I'm here, right where I was. My head hurts, and my mouth hurts. Xavier always used to tell me that I ground my teeth, at the back. That he could hear it while I slept. He used to say that I had an underbite when I slept, because my mouth was forcing the teeth together so much.

I must have fallen asleep. I meant to sit, for a moment, but again, that sort of thing happens. The boredom; the stasis.

The air.

Xavier would say, 'You're like a pug when you sleep; like one of those ugly little dogs, their faces squashed up, their breathing fucked, as if they're on the verge of stopping at any moment.' And my chest: the ache is real, even if the reason isn't. The air up here is thin. Balanced, supposedly, but I've seen the oxygen processors – I helped install them, I help maintain them – and it's in favour of energy preservation over health.

I rinse my mouth out. I read through the jobs I was meant to be doing this week, and I try to think about their mundanity; as I'm sure they'll all get

abandoned. Nothing like the urgency of a massive fuckknowswhatitis in space to really screw with your schedule.

I smile at that, and my wrist buzzes; and for a moment, I'm taken aback, as though somebody overheard my thoughts. Don't laugh at the Anomaly. It's all-powerful, all-terrible.

But I'm wrong. The buzz is a summons: Dr Hyvönen wants to see me.

His quarters are enormous. They take up what was to have been the New Europe wing of the station, before they were forced to pull out over funding issues; and before the United Nations Space Agency became a thing, took this whole operation over. This was shiniest part of the station, still waiting to be unwrapped when the UN collapsed and sold it to private investors as the Anomaly got closer. So it fell to Hyvönen to finish it himself. He made it happen.

He bought the house, he chooses which bedroom he gets.

I have never been in his quarters before, though. Pretty much none of us has, because there's never been a reason to. Only person aside from him who spends any time here is Sian. Best I can tell, working as his assistant means standing around and staring when anybody tries to move the good doctor off-track, but if that's how she makes her living, who am I to argue? I don't imagine many people have security access, anyway. Desh will, most likely; and, actually, probably Mon. In case Hyvönen needs her in an emergency.

But I merely build; I assemble. Compared to them, I am *persona non grata*.

As I walk towards it, I cycle through the reasons he could want me. His air supply. His hyperbarics. His coffee machine. So many things could need repairing.

His Earl Grey is too hot, maybe; his bath is running too cold.

These are the things I went to six years of university for, I think. To help build a spacecraft, a space station; to ultimately fix a toaster with a dodgy element.

The doors are already open, Sian waiting in the doorway for me. 'You took your time,' she says. She's twenty-something, and tiny. Terrifyingly thin, but not like she's sick – a different kind of thin to the old man – and her hair is clipped army-tight. Everything about her feels as if it's rejecting trappings or bullshit, and I respect that. 'He's been waiting.'

She doesn't bother listening for an excuse. Instead, she turns and walks off with an almost supernatural calm. Her body barely moves. An invisible book on her head that never falls, a control I can't quite understand; until I am in the room itself, that is. The gravity is slightly different here. It's looser, somehow. Only a little, but enough to cause a lift in your belly. Like mild indigestion. Immediately you have to adjust, to reconfigure yourself to deal with it. Must be for his benefit; to help him with his body.

Up here, we've become used to feeling enclosed and capsuled. We've accepted everything being built into the walls, the plastic of the floor being the same as the plastic of the beds, the rooms themselves moulded and joined and fastened down. Hyvönen's room is different, though. How long has it been since I have seen somewhere that didn't look as if it were torn from some bullshit-futuristic science fiction movie? There is actual furniture in here, and there are real books on the shelves. I recognize some of this, some of the items; they must all be classic pieces, things that are so well known they're almost ingrained into our cultural consciousness of furniture and knick-knacks. There is a chair and matching footstool, in this rich leather that I know is real without even having to touch it, making it either a genuine antique or illegal. There is a globe here that, I know without examining it, is a drinks cabinet. And, more than that, I know that it will hold real bottles, not the paper cartons that our scant supply of alcohol comes in. Even that makes me jealous. And I wonder: why have a globe, when the real thing is there, out of a window, on a rotation for us; visible exactly like this, but with more majesty. And sure, more yellow, less green than the representation; but still. His clothes, his belongings, all affectation. The old books, leather-bound, missing protective dust jackets; audio on old wax vinyl, lined up in shelves that fit them perfectly; and video cassettes, a format that nobody has used in nearly a century now. Tapes that degrade, that need maintenance. Flawed, but original, which I suppose is the point.

Through, past this detritus, is another room. Here sits Hyvönen, his shirt off, his skin sagging and pale. There is a device on his head, a slim crown of plastic and wires, the cable from it leading to something in the corner. A big black box that takes up much of the wall. There's a thick whirring that comes through the air; a grinding, almost. That's how loud it is. This, I know, is a MemoRain, even though it's the first I've seen outside a museum. They were withdrawn, their use made illegal, in favour of chemical treatments – so much neater, if not quite as efficient; and there

were nightmare stories before they were withdrawn, about people being left vacant by the treatments, bodies with no functioning minds. And yet, he's got one of the very same machines: memories recorded to hard drives, backed up, restorable.

I suppose that, when you've got Hyvönen's money, the legality of any possession, any medical procedure, ceases to be a problem.

It makes me wonder how bad his memory actually is; if he's being repaired to keep himself presentable – or, even, just functioning – how often does it happen?

And the fact that I am allowed to see this, that's a fundamental shift in everything I've known. Why? Why me, why now? Is it out in the open?

How often does he actually collapse?

He sees me, and he smiles. A stark contrast to his earlier confusion.

He pulls the crown from his head and he picks up his shirt from behind him. His arms into the sleeves – his broken arm back to full strength already, apparently. I wonder if his restoration makes him forget he even hurt it in the first place; if whatever backup of his mind he's running on was made before he even broke it.

He buttons the shirt while I wait, then puts a tie on. Sian stands by, to help him if he needs it; and then she reaches for him as he starts to walk towards me, but he flicks her arm away, not looking at her.

'Miss Becker,' he says, and he holds out his hand, as if we haven't met before. But we have. He interviewed me over a screen; he okayed my being here. And while we have not been close workmates, I have been here, as has he. It's likely his treatments, I think. Maybe they leave him more vague than he would otherwise have been. I wonder how much is lost to him before it's restored. 'Thank you for responding so swiftly to my request.'

'I wasn't aware I could turn it down.'

He smiles. 'You're quick. I like quick, Miss Becker.' The door closes behind him, the sound of the memory machine dying away. I notice that it's been replaced by music in here: something from the pale end of the last century, some guitar music that I vaguely know from before, back when I was a kid.

'Everybody calls me Ali,' I say. 'Allanah.'

'Sometimes I prefer the formal. Easier to remember who I am dealing with. My name is Tomas, but I think you already know that. Would you like a drink?' He doesn't give me a chance to answer. 'I don't like to drink

alone. They say that's when you know you have a problem: when you can't persuade somebody else to join you, and yet you drink anyway.' He smiles, walks to the globe and opens it – I was right, the cliché, and I spy the heads of a few bottles, metal caps and off-orange corks – and pulls a bottle out. 'Just a little one.'

'I prefer a clear head,' I say. We talk in English. Everybody talks in English, even though we probably don't need to right now. I know Hyvönen lived in Germany for a while, I know he knows the language. But still, English. It's easier, a mid-point.

'And you think that this won't help with clarity? Trust me, I am experienced.' As with his summons, I wonder if I actually have a choice here. 'The looseness afforded by alcohol, it's like lubricant. You understand engines, pistons, so forth?' I don't want to be the one to tell him that the piston is long extinct, so I nod. 'They need oil. This is oil, nothing more.'

'Okay,' I say. 'Just a small one.' A placation.

'An excellent choice,' he says. 'Small means that you can always have more, should you choose to.' He carries himself so strangely. He's been in this business for decades now, twenty years spent working towards the launch of the *Lära*, the first ship he sent up to space, to the Anomaly; then another thirty-five or so building up to this moment here. He pours the liquid into the two glasses – it seems slow, and it doesn't pour properly, as if it's threatening to lose its way as it leaves the bottle, towards the small baubles of ice that are somehow already prepared in the glasses – and then passes one to me, before chinking his glass against mine. 'To the future,' he says.

'If there is one,' I say. He smiles, tickled by that.

'Ahh, there is always a future. That's the nature of time, of course. Always moving forward. I suspect it's the singular immutable thing in existence. Whether, of course, it moves towards the place we wanted, or even behaves the way that we have decreed it behave, well. Those are up for debate.' He drinks, and I drink; warm, peppery, the hint of a burn softened by the ice. I look around at the room, absently. 'It's a good room, isn't it?' he asks.

'It's very nice,' I say. 'I like the furniture.'

'You wouldn't believe what it cost to bring it up here. But I argued. I said that if I was going to be here such a long time, I would need creature

comforts. We aren't animals, and how dare they try to treat us as such?' He picks a box up from the tray beneath the globe. 'Do you smoke?'

'No,' I say. Nobody does, not any more, but he has cigarettes. He opens a delicate metal case, and there they are, trapped beneath a pair of thin elastic bands. They're quite beautiful, and so delicate. Small white tubes, crisp paper, a sweet smell that reminds me desperately of being a kid, of my uncles on my mother's side.

He pulls one out. 'Have you ever tried one?' he asks.

'No,' I reply.

'You should.' He puts it between his lips and holds the box out. I shake my head, and he smiles again. 'Not for everybody, I understand. But my lungs aren't my own any more. They aren't even flesh. When the replacements cannot catch cancer, it's significantly easier to fall to baser desires.' He lights the cigarette, and the smoke plumes around him. 'Today is confusing, is it not?'

'It's not normal, certainly.'

'No.' He smiles. Smoke trickles out from between his teeth. Perfect teeth, regrown in a mouth far too old for such pearly whites. 'The algorithm failed us. Mathematics, of course, is so rarely wrong, as you know yourself. And yet sometimes ... Nature has a plan.' He stands – easier for him in here than watching him doing it in the medical bay, certainly – and he walks. Not shuffles, lifts his feet. His limp is gone. 'The Anomaly is too close, now. My hope is that we have time for one last chance, a window that we can't afford to miss, or to waste.' He makes an expression that I'm sure he thinks is comforting, but it's anything but. It reads as sarcastic. There's a minuscule part of his face that doesn't move; the top corner of what was once his facial birthmark, before he had it removed. His twin brother, Mira, was identical to him apart from that birthmark. That must be something, I think: to have it removed, and to see a different man looking back at you all of a sudden, how strange that must be. But not a stranger, rather a man that existed; a brother that was lost.

'So, Miss Becker, I have a question for you. What would you have us do, to try and save ourselves?' he asks.

He means the people on Earth. We're implied, but there's always been this question over us, up here; this knowledge that we might be lost. We pray, and we hope, and we watch – and there's still a lone SC3 stored here, known as the *Raft*, primed and ready to take us home should we need it, at a

moment's notice – but this is about Earth. It's about future generations. Because what happens when the Anomaly reaches those we love? What happens then?

'We've tried everything,' I say, which isn't an answer. I'm not sure he really wants one from me. This is so he can tell me about his, that's all.

'That is not true,' he tells me. 'We have shot at it, and fired missiles at it. But maybe that is not enough?' He says it knowing that he believes he's got an ace up his sleeve. He swipes in the air to bring up a console and types something on the keyboard. An image appears, a holo between us. A spaceship. A modified SC4, that's obvious. It's been tweaked and changed. Not painted, which is odd to begin with. Strange, to see the raw metal. It's been plated many times, built up again and again. Bits and protrusions. This is the ship that Snipes was going to pilot, kept down below the station, in storage, with the *Raft*. I don't remember it being so banged up when it arrived, so altered. Things always look shinier than they are. 'I have christened this one *Ukonvasara*,' Hyvönen says. 'I don't suppose it means anything to you.' I look again at the ship, closely. It's another variant on the standard. I've helped to build, to tweak, more of these than I care to count.

'I don't know the name,' I say.

'It's from mythology,' he says. 'Norse. *Ukon*, stronger than thunder, God himself, carved his axe to strike lightning into the hearts of his foes. It was said that his weapon could stop even death.' He smiles, as if there's poetry in that idea; except it reads as smugness. 'My *Ukonvasara* is humanity's axe,' he says.

'We've tried a nuke already,' I say.

'We have. You think that means we shouldn't try again?'

'Probably, but we won't. We're human, that's what we do, isn't it? We keep trying the same thing and hope it somehow starts to stick.'

He grins, this smug glow to him. 'I think you're probably right,' he says, 'but how fast you were to assume that a weapon needed be violent. Humans are not adaptable, I would say. There's only one thing we can do, once we have exhausted all other options: sacrifice.'

'Still with the gods?' I say, half-joking; but I'm thinking about the pilots who have done that very thing. 'That's what Snipes felt,' I say; and there's a moment where his name parses in Hyvönen's brain, where his eyes dull, and I realize he has forgotten.

It was only yesterday, and he's forgotten it. Because with his restored memory, it's not there. The glassiness of his eyes betraying the stillness of his face.

'It was his ship,' I say. 'This was his ship. He died,' I say, the bluntest refresher. A kick-start; and Hyvönen nods, but he's lying. He sits down on one of the couches, easing himself onto the cushion. Even that act seems to physically hurt him. He moves on; ignores the revelation. Any more would give him away, I suspect. 'I have come to the conclusion that we will never damage the Anomaly.' He's the man who should know. That's scary, to think of it; that the person who is meant to have the most faith has none at all. 'For the longest time I have thought about this, because we have tried everything. But, what if there are answers that we cannot understand? What if there are things other than we know?' Another smile. I imagine, at one point, he was probably quite attractive. I can imagine him as a younger man: persuasive and charming, and so driven to save the world.

'What do you mean?' I ask. A video begins, floating in the space between us. He shows me: *Ukonvasara*, leaving the New International Space Station, and entering the Anomaly. Not exploding, but carrying on, deep into the Anomaly.

It goes on and on and on. 'What do you know?' I ask.

'I know many things,' he says. 'My brother, Mirakel, was lost inside there.' Hyvönen's lips dry; and he wets them in the most curiously delicate way, a finger to his tongue that he then brushes along them.

'And so he's dead,' I say. It's callous, but true; and this is a conversation that I can scarcely believe I am having. He's been out there for decades, and he will have died. No life support, no fuel. It's finality.

'Of course. However, I've died as well. And I think we all know that death is not necessarily the end.' He lifts his shirt, and I see what I did not when he was in the other room: a patchwork of scars that cover his torso on one side, across his heart and lungs. 'For three minutes I had no life signs at all. And yet, here I am, and I am speaking to you.' He brings up another window. An audio file, waiting to be played. An image next to it, spinning, of a fragment of something metal. Chunky, blocky. Not quite golden age tech, but old.

'What is that?'

'Listen, first,' he says.

He presses play. A crackle of noise fills the room; the sound of the recording's background, the ambient noise. A voice, so similar to Hyvönen's. 'I wish that you were here, brother!' Exasperation. Desperation.

'Mirakel?' I ask, but I know the answer. The voice the same, but with its own lilts, its own trills. The recording continues:

'You would have loved to have seen this, Tomas. You would have been amazed. All through here, it's as black and dark as anything you can imagine, and then ...' Crackles, hisses of static; and then, 'Slivers, brother. Of light, or something like light. There is something here more powerful than we imagined. Inside here, it's beating, brother. A beating heart. It's pulsing, with light. With life. I think it's ... It is, it's alive.' The static, and then the file ends.

'When – how – did you get it?' I ask.

'It found me,' he says. 'Debris leaves the Anomaly. I have had ships in the past trawling the edge, recovering what they can.'

'Gathering trash.'

'Very much so. Almost everything that emerges is of no worth. And then, one day, this. A piece of the *Lära*. The black box, if you like: designed to be found, recovered, examined. This was what we managed to recover from it. We used old tech for it. We both loved the tangible, the physical.'

'Convenient.'

'It is.' He grins. 'But you mean it sarcastically.'

'Slightly. Convenient that you sound the same. Convenient that you found it, the chances of this piece finding its way to you—'

'A million to one. More. A trillion. But still: there's always a chance.' He motions towards the sofa. Shuffles, then sits, lowering himself onto the cushion. Sighing, as he does so. 'It's strange: you would think that the pain would abate as the broken pieces inside my body are replaced with the artificial. But, alas.' He shakes his arm. 'And this, of course. This one will not heal well. The skin is too thin.'

I drag him back to topic. 'So, you believe him? You think the Anomaly is, what? Alive?'

'It's a possibility. Consider our egos: that we assume an alien life form might somehow be similar to ourselves. We assume a bipedal physicality, the construction of devices, of spaceships, of civilizations. We assume that any other life form might have evolved on our plane of existence, alongside us somehow. And yet, our own evolution came from something we call

LUCA – the last universal common ancestor. Nothing more than a single-celled organism, really, from which all life on our planet evolved. But that's only one path. The paths we didn't take, that birds didn't take, or lizards: they are infinitesimal. And that's before you get to creatures that didn't evolve from the same amoebae as we did. Who is to say that the Anomaly isn't something evolved? Who's to say it isn't the first stage of an evolution? Who, indeed, is even to say it isn't our own evolution's ending.' He nods, as if this makes sense. A theory he's long had. 'My brother was many things, but he was not stupid. If he believed that it was alive ... Maybe there is stock to be placed in that.'

A life form.

Which would make entering it *first contact*. Or, something close.

He smiles. 'There are few enough of us here that we only need the one ship to return to Earth. So *Ukonvasara*, eminently viable for my desired purposes, is available.'

'They won't miss it?'

'Sometimes things slip through the net.'

'Like spaceships, sure.'

Nothing shakes the smile. 'I enjoy sarcastic women, you know. Very much enjoy them. I will share something with you now,' he says. 'I have been planning this for a while.' He says the words slowly, splitting each syllable into its own mouthful. 'I want to reroute some of our power, our batteries to it. Give it more oomph, shall we say?'

'More oomph. Another missile. We've tried that so many times,' I say, but he shakes his head.

'Not a missile, I told you. No, no. We come in peace,' he says. 'I want the craft to journey further. Some tweaks, yes, sending signals. But I want to see if we can find what Mirakel found: evidence. And, in doing so, perhaps we can map it a little more, get some idea of how large it is.'

'We know how large it is.'

'No! Not at all. We know how large we have guessed, based on curves and algorithms and equations. But maths isn't everything, you know? Maths is barely anything. Perception is closer to fact, sometimes. It involves less guesswork. You helped to create these wondrous inventions.' He says it with no small amount of pride, I think; even though we barely know each other, it's as if he's taking ownership of this, of me. Responsibility. 'I am going to need your help for this. We will map it; and we will try to talk with

it.' He sees my face. I don't know what look I am pulling, but he sees it. 'Don't be so alarmed.' He leans close. Conspiratorial. 'Maybe we commune with it. Send a message. Something like the golden records on the Voyager probes. Something to afford it knowledge of us, of what we are; and maybe, even, us of it.'

'It most likely isn't alive,' I say. 'It's most likely a spatial anomaly, some sort of black hole, or something ... I don't know.'

'And so: we will discover,' he says. 'My brother believed what he saw was alive. Mirakel, rest his soul, believed. He was foolish and childish on occasion, to his detriment, perhaps; but he wasn't prone to frippery.' A shrug, that sees Hyvönen's whole body commit to make it happen. 'Who am I to deny him his discovery; his moment in the sun.' Then, quieter: 'He was as much a scientist as I.' Tick, tick: his eyes flitting, left to right, right to left, before settling forward; as if he wandered from the path, and has found his way back. 'But there are factors at play here. For a start, ground control—' He says the words as if they're evil, the final boss in a video game. 'They locked the craft to a single purpose. Barely a journey at all.' Once, I know, he was in charge. But investors and boards and chains of command mean he's a figurehead now, really. Little more. 'There are restraints on the craft. Manual restraints, yes?'

'Most likely,' I say. 'And software, working together.'

'So, you will help Desh remove them. I want ground control to have – ha! – no control; and yet they cannot know that, not until the last moment, not until the craft is inside the Anomaly, the station quiet, the crew returning home. And then: you will make further alterations, which I will explain as and when.' He turns. A grandfather clock behind him: the pendulum swinging, the hypnotic brass of a cheap magic trick. 'My parts have a clock. My body has a clock, a timer. I am dying. The effort required to keep me alive ...' He trails off, waves his hand, a circular motion. I think of Theo doing *The Wheels on the Bus*, round and round, round and round, and on. 'Such is life. I am dying again, and so.' But he doesn't look that sad about it. Just exhausted. He lights another cigarette; I didn't even notice him finish the first. 'There are a few long days ahead of us. I am already tired, and I would imagine that you are as well.' He stops looking at me. Still stares towards me, but his gaze is loose and unfocused.

My cue to leave. I stand, walk to the door, stop. A question, bugging me already. Gnawing at my brain.

The door opens, and I step out; and as I go, he speaks, one last time.

‘You know,’ he says quietly, almost so quiet that I can barely hear him over the ticking of the clock, the whirring of the old technology in his room, the ambient hum of the station itself, ‘I think that maybe we are very much alike indeed.’

The door closes, and his voice is gone.

The Anomaly’s *inexorable creep* – that’s the phrase that Hyvönen used to describe the movement of it to us in his initial speech – was once so completely predictable. The first time humanity saw it, it was terribly far away. Further than we’d ever gone, and we didn’t understand it, because it was an absence.

We are good – or adequate, maybe, in the scale of things – at defining that which exists. But absences, removals, losses? We have always struggled with those. Like, say, grief. How do you define it? It’s missing something that’s no longer there.

At first, we didn’t know what to think of the Anomaly. Suddenly, this area of absence appeared, and didn’t abate. Nobody knew what caused it. We discussed a big bang, the thought that maybe this might be something that the universe has seen before. Or, maybe it’s something that we – humanity – brought on ourselves, somehow. We have discussed every option, every possible avenue; but it all comes back to that inexorable creep, and the knowledge that it is coming, and that, so far, we have discovered no way of stopping it. There is no end to it; it is a piece of space that isn’t there, and never has been, and never will be.

Then, all of a sudden, it was impossible to miss, and amateur enthusiasts started talking about this thing that they could see through their telescopes and on their hacked satellite feeds; and then, one day, you could simply look up towards the night sky and see a patch where the stars were missing, as if they had been blotted out, where the constellations, as you tried to plot them, had holes bitten out of them. I remember seeing the headlines; and I remember that, on seeing them, eating breakfast in some diner with my friends, we shrugged it off. It was an anomaly, I thought. Lower-case A.

When I first began specializing during my degree course, the Anomaly was hanging over us all. Probably – likely – it was a goal, of sorts. To see it then, it was unthinkably different from only a few years before. Before, space was frippery. Or, that’s how it seemed. I moved for university, to

another country, to Florida. My parents followed me; they said, We're retiring soon, and we want to be near you. Because I think that they could see my life changing, that I wasn't necessarily heading back to a country without a space programme of any kind. And then, straight out of college I went to work for the United Nations Space Agency. They hired the best, that's what they told us. We're only interested if you're the best of the best. They headhunted me, to code their ships and stations and investigative devices, and I said yes. How could I refuse? It's a different business than it used to be, that's what my father said. He was a ship technician, working on the mechanisms that made them fly; as if it was a family trade, passed down from generation to generation.

These things, they always seem to repeat themselves.

We met, we fell in love, we got married. That's how it's meant to happen. You meet people at work, you socialize with them, make friendships, get drunk, do the dance. The most traditional of relationships. You begin a thing; you come to understand that you prefer the exclusive company of this person to other people's company; you begin forging a life together. That life was manifest as Theo, and then Xavier changed, and I got sick – or, he said that I got sick – and that was that. I moved back in with my parents, because I needed the help with Theo. They had always wanted to be there for me, they said. And they got to spend time with Theo. My father bought shorts and a cap and took Theo to Disneyworld, and he said, I'm becoming one of those men, right? And he was, he absolutely was; except, also, he was collapsing. He was sick, dementia of some type that doesn't have the name of the type you recognize, so you hope it's not as bad; but, in reality, it was worse. A series of micro-strokes ripping through his brain.

Xavier used that, in court. My mother couldn't be carer for him and Theo. And I wasn't there. We put my father in a home to get custody, and still Xavier insisted. He waved medical files around, my medical files. Spoke about them in court.

We, my counsel and I, argued it should be inadmissible. But Xavier spoke to the judge himself. His hand on his chest, Please, you understand. Man to man. And the judge nodded, because of course, of course, I couldn't be allowed to make that judgement for myself; maybe it should be considered.

Considered; condemned.

The court decided that Theo was mine every other weekend, and the rest of the time I trained. Nothing but training. The Anomaly – Hyvönen’s Anomaly – was coming closer to us. It was a threat, we were told, so they needed us. All hands on deck. All of a sudden they wanted us up there, to fix it. We asked them how we would do that, and they said that they didn’t know. They said, We have to get up there and look at it. We have so many tests we can do now; things that we can affect, readings we can take. I remember being in rooms with scientists who explained nothing, and Hyvönen standing at the back. He was always totally silent, but did that matter? It was him. It was all about him.

That was when we all started capitalizing it. There have been other anomalies in space, and there will be others after this, I am sure, whether we are aware of them or not; but none like this one. This one swallows life, and it is death.

I don’t know how long they managed to keep the truth about the Anomaly a secret from the public for. Years and years. The files are sealed, that period of time has never been made public. Whatever happened to the *Ishiguro*, whatever really happened, that was a secret. But the Anomaly was constant, moving in a way that meant we had an algorithm. We understood exactly at what point it would reach us. We had five years, nearly six. We had time.

Theo would be nearly in his teens. I understood the rules of engagement. I was up here until my time was served, then I would return home; and I would have time to apply for joint custody, to build my home, to turn everything around.

But now that has changed. The Anomaly has leapt. Days until it reaches here. Weeks until Earth, assuming it doesn’t leap again.

I don’t think it’s hit me yet, because it feels like I should be broken by the revelation. I know, I should be crippled, because it’s unnatural. I can see that, as if I’m on a vantage point. I know it’s wrong, and yet it’s passing me by.

Shock, I have to assume. Maybe that’s the only way to deal with it.

When I get back to my room, Hyvönen’s files on *Ukonvasara* – blueprints and mission breakdowns and mauve-protected papers full of jargon and hypotheses – are waiting for me. A physical file, left inside my room: the lock evidently nothing to him, or Sian, whoever left the files here. I flick

through the papers. They all lie somewhere between insanely over-detailed and utterly insufficient. Dates and timestamps have been deleted. Not even redacted, just simply missing from the documents. As if everything's been thrown together, approved without anybody caring. The redactions, of which there are a great many, are details: minutiae, that I try to figure out – the puzzle of missing words in otherwise nearly logical sentences, somewhere between crossword and jigsaw puzzle and shape-sorter – but I fail. Handwriting, and not just his. The axis of the letters turned to the unhinged, the frantic and manic.

*Do not upload to the systems!* written in bold on top of the pages. To keep it private, away from ground control, no doubt. Even though he built it, staffed it, he evidently doesn't trust them with this. Their smart shirts, their rows of bespectacled pocket-protected scientists, staring at a 2D screen of our mission: a golden age, recreated to the absolute degree.

A beating heart, Hyvönen said.

Mira Hyvönen, the lost brother, the dead brother.

Thanks to him, thanks to his eternally-repeating black box, I will be aiding Hyvönen in what surely must amount to mutiny.

I wonder if we will be punished when we get back home.

I lie back on my bed, and I try to sleep. Staring at the ceiling of the room, I think of Snipes, of course. Just as I did last night, when I got into bed; and I wondered what might have been. He was an experimental test pilot. If I picture his face, it's the side of it, the angle I saw as his craft docked; the grit of his jaw as the shuttle trembled; the shutting of his eyes at the hiss of the airlock opening.

Charles-William Snipes, that was his full name, but surname was all, a military man through and through. He was different to the rest of us, because we were there for a period of time, *are* here for a period of time; and then we would get to go home, to our families.

But Snipes was different because he knew it was a one-way trip for him. He was a sacrifice.

He was a good pilot. I read his file before he arrived, one of the few actual benefits of having access to the key systems. He was highly decorated, and he had once had a family, but there had been an accident, and he'd lost them. That's what the programme liked in its pilots: those who had less to lose than others. He had a history of depression since then, and other sickness. Fatal, as it turned out; as if he was cursed, his life somehow

meant to be one that didn't happen for him. All the details redacted, of course. Ailments were secrets, because they could be abused.

That's human nature: to take advantage, if we are allowed.

Snipes was given a room, away from the rest of us. Ours are all around the donut; his was on the floor above, near the servers. Larger than ours, slightly more plush. Art on the walls, to calm; to aid with focus. A room that felt a little more like it was part of a home.

'The Imminent Room,' Mon called it, under her breath.

'What is that?' I asked her.

'That what some prisons call the room where convicts get taken the night before they're executed. They're given their last meal, a good night's sleep, whatever. Time with their family, all that stuff. The Imminent Room, because of ... well, what's imminent, I suppose.'

I showed him to his quarters. He sat on the bed, shifted his weight. Bounced, almost, like you would in a showroom, or a hotel. I said that nobody would disturb him; somebody would come back in the morning, but to call if he needed anything. Call or find one of us, we would all be around.

I was about to leave when he asked me if I was scared of dying.

'Of course,' I said.

'You got kids?'

'One. A son.'

'You don't want to lose him.'

'No. Of course not.' I thought of Theo; and how close I had come before, already.

'What if death is a lie?' he asked me, then; and I didn't know how to answer, because of course it wasn't, or it couldn't be.

'How is it a lie?'

'We dream of heaven, right? Of dying, and then coming back. And everybody we love is there.'

'It's a very Christian dream,' I told him.

'Fine. Reincarnation, if you'd rather: we come back, again and again. That's the goal.'

'For some,' I said. 'Still religious though.'

'So, you think there's nothing?' He smiled, this deeply sad smile. 'When all of this is done, either there's something or nothing. But it's not this any more. I don't want to die. But I'm too afraid to keep living.'

He took his own life, rather than leave his death to the Anomaly; and that makes simply no sense to me. No glory, no attempt; just the cold of his own hand.

### 3

I'm awake early, and I know that Desh likely won't have been to bed yet, so I walk to his office, at the opposite end of the donut from Hyvönen's. A buzzer outside his security door, a door that he insists on locking, even though it makes his workspace incredibly claustrophobic. Press it, and wait. He's always slightly too distracted to not make you wait a few moments. Mon thinks it's a status thing, something to let us know that he isn't adjacent to us, he is above us, even as he holds no such actual rank; I don't think he has quite that level of wherewithal.

'Yo?' he asks.

'It's me,' I say.

'Who's me?'

'There are eight people here,' I say, 'and only three of them are women. I'm sure you can work it out.'

'That's a dumb name.'

'Fuck you. It's Ali.'

'Even dumber name,' he says, opening the door for me.

If I didn't pass the bedroom with his name on it every morning on my way to the mess, I would guess that this was where Desh lived as well as worked. He doesn't like not being at work, won't let anybody else run the station. If he's eating, sleeping, masturbating or whatever, he's got software that runs this place for him. His own little algorithms that crack the same jokes as he does. He's part software programmer, part caretaker, part security guard, part custodian; a jack of all trades.

His office is the direct opposite of Hyvönen's: far too small, self-contained, warm to the point of overheating. Flashing LEDs, tech in various states of disrepair littering every surface. A sign hangs over the desk: *Abandon Hope All Ye Who Enter Here*. Five screens, projected in front of him. On one, there's a video playing: porn, deeply unpleasant, extravagant and exaggerated, limbs contorted beyond realistic positions, augments

beyond what would be legal. Not actually real, but algorithm-generated, using Desh's own software. Mon told me once that he makes money down on Earth creating these things, artificial animals and people and scenes explicitly designed to flood websites with content, all pivoting to the hot topics of the moment by feeding trends into image generators. Whatever celebrity story makes waves, whatever TV show hits big, he turns it into porn. Morally clean, in a sense. Nobody gets hurt, no real actors involved. But so fucked up. Mad stuff; enough to make you wonder why he's up here at all, and why he even has to work. He started off as a video engineer, doing CG for the movies, that sort of thing; and he sort of fell into programming for other companies when that industry went pretty much fully automated.

He follows my eye-line. 'Fuck,' he says, and he swipes the screen away.

'That's disgusting,' I say, and he pulls a face. 'She's somebody's daughter, and look what you've made her do.'

'She's nobody's daughter,' he replies. 'She's not even real. Composites don't have parents.'

'It's awful,' I say, but he doesn't care.

'Hyvönen told me we're going to be working together,' he says, as I sidle in towards him. He doesn't look at me, because he's preoccupied with his remaining screens: four of them, divided into quarters, each showing a different part of the ship. The very bottom right corner of the right-hand screen is black, as if it's broken. But I know it's not; it's just focused on the Anomaly, zoomed in as far as the digital will allow it. So dark it might as well not exist. 'Hey,' he says. 'You doing okay?' He means because of Snipes, I'm sure.

'I'm fine,' I say, but I wonder if that's true.

'If you need to talk,' he says.

'There'll be time for mourning when we get home.'

'Right,' he says, 'so: first thing you've got to do is sort out the connectors for the ship.'

'The ship. Snipes' ship.'

'Sure,' he says.

'*Ukonvasara*, now,' I say. 'Hyvönen renamed it.'

'Course he fucking did. We need cables for the updates.'

'You're kidding. It wasn't done when they built this place?'

‘No, ma’am.’ Faux-Texan twang. ‘They assumed only the one dock at a time. So, we’re power down, cables down.’ There are no ships, shuttles, aviation craft or personal passenger vehicles that don’t need to be hardwired for updates, because there’s constant concern about hackers finding their way into systems. A decade or so ago, a team of them took over a commercial atmosphere liner between Tokyo and San Francisco, using a rudimentary AI to hold the ship hostage over the Pacific Ocean. That was all possible because they hacked the access keys and managed to get control of all of the systems. From that point onwards the tech industry decided to take a step backwards when it came to important hardware: physical cables, updates that couldn’t be pushed over the air. And the cables were meaty things, because the tech industry put everything into wireless and then suddenly had to backtrack. They didn’t invent new protocols; they just let us rely on the physical. It’s always going to be faster, that was how it was sold to us. *A feature, not a bug.* I like the cables. I like knowing the weight of them, the connection being perfect. Nothing can slip or change along a cable.

‘You said one dock at a time. Where am I doing this?’ I ask.

‘Oh-ho-ho,’ he says, slipping into a terrible Russian accent, ‘the Russki section! Ah-ski. Yes-ski!’ He laughs at his own idiocy. ‘Wire up Zvezda, we can link that into the rest of the station from the terminus outside.’

‘You’re fucking kidding me.’

‘Would I joke? How long do you think you’ll need?’

‘An hour? Ninety minutes?’

‘I’ll schedule energy downtime. An hour from now?’

‘I’m calling Theo then,’ I say.

‘I’ll set it up, you let me know when you’re done.’ He doesn’t wait for an affirmative. Desh flicks his screens dark and turns around, and he puts his glasses onto his head, the image from his screens moving to the bottom corners of the lenses. All part of his romance with tech, so that he can watch this stuff while we keep talking. You only ever feel like you’ve got 20 per cent of Desh’s attention at any one time. Or, as Mon has speculated, maybe that’s how he wants you to feel. The suggestion that he never stops working lets him get away with a hell of a lot. ‘We need a second engineer, so I’ll get Cohen on the outside during the same window, okay? You see him, give him what he needs. Play nice.’

‘Can’t you stagger us? Or, fuck it, I’ll do his work with the drones after?’

‘No can do. Faster we get to this, faster it’s done. Anyways, I don’t want to have to power down twice if I can help it.’ He turns back to the screens, and he brings up pages of nothing but data, lines of code. It’s incomprehensible: all things that he’s written himself, some custom operating system that he’s developed. ‘Sooner this is done, sooner this’ll all be over with.’

‘We can get down to Earth and you can find a real woman,’ I say to him. I pat him on the shoulder, and he flinches away. ‘Don’t wank too much, it’ll fall off.’

He’s pulling up that fifth screen before I’m even out of the door. ‘If it does, I’ll get an augmented one on the company’s insurance,’ he says, ‘fucking bonus.’

I sit, and I wait for my call-slot. I clock-watch, and I count the seconds. I keep my journal, and I make my plans for how the cable will run, and I read Hyvönen’s notes again, and I try to distract myself in a way that’s entirely impossible, because there are suddenly no distractions. And no distractions means thinking about the acceleration of this whole thing. How terrifying it is, because now, all of a sudden, it’s days away from us, weeks away from Earth. Where will it touch first, I wonder? As the planet rotates, trapped inside it, will it kill those inside it, trapped against its walls? Will it massacre the world as it comes? Will the darkness inside it – which none of us has seen, of course; but now I know that Mira Hyvönen saw it, now I know how dark he said it was – will that darkness simply overwhelm us?

There is no way of preparing. That’s the scariest thing about this.

I should be more scared. I’m not. I should have freaked out, I’m sure, but instead I took it. We all took it.

We thought we had time. We don’t have time.

Something is terribly wrong. More than Snipes, more than the sudden leap of the Anomaly. The words forming on my lips—

I look at the clock; time got away from me. Where does it go? Suddenly minutes have passed, gone.

Suddenly, Theo will be waiting.

I press to call him. I imagine him, eating his cereal, waiting for me. Bouncing in his chair as the tone rings out, running to the screen.

His little face; the necklace, dangling. Or, rather, not: and today, it’s not there. As if Xavier has decided to be kind to me in this single instance, as if

he's decided that I need a win. Our relationship: win after win, traded between us. Never on the same footing, but always looking to race past the other.

Theo talks, and I find myself smiling, but I am preoccupied; looking to see if his skin's got the faint tan-lines of the knot necklace, waiting there, the skin around burning the absence into something like a scar.

The first time I saw that knot was on a TV show, hosted by that prick Pettersen; when the church was just a pipe dream of infomercials and indoctrination webverts. He was asking, What if the Anomaly is death? A whole philosophical thing, this guy on the news doing his magic-tricks-slash-philosophy-seminar thing, and he turned the Anomaly into this entire religion. The thought of it makes spit well in my mouth. The thought of Theo, taken to that fucking church by his father. How Pettersen's words became a mantra. Seeing them on billboards, on TV paid-pers, on unskippable preview ads.

*Here are the ways it's like death: we don't understand it, even though there's nothing complicated to understand; we fear it, when there's nothing scary to fear; we should be showing it our true selves, but we haven't found that truth to show yet.*

'Don't turn it off,' Xavier said to me.

Theo sitting at my feet, watching it; and I said, 'I don't want him watching this shit.'

'Don't swear,' Xavier said. 'Anyway, might be worth listening to him.'

I reeled off who he was – who Pettersen had been, before he cashed in on this bullshit – and Xavier rolled his eyes in a way that suggested he didn't want me to see, but that my attitude was so extreme his eyes simply couldn't help it.

A man, looking for another man to tell him what to think, how to feel. All those symposiums about the Anomaly, about the knot – nascent, as it was, less cult and more path of thought or some bullshit – and the audiences were 90 per cent men, all dressed the same way – slacks and polo shirts, the uniform of the safe-of-mind – and their applause before he even said a word. Like he knew their pain; and like all men who self-proclaim themselves as great, he found their misery, their confusion, and converted it into answers.

The Zvezda module is still as it was when Hyvönen first took the reins of this place, first presented his plan to turn it into a research station for the Anomaly and nothing else. Zvezda was here decades ago, a ghost module that nobody had bothered to worry about. When much of the rest of the original space station was removed or recycled, Zvezda was kept as it was: bolted to the server room at the top, treated like some sort of abandoned attic, stuffed full of boxes of junk and family secrets.

Zvezda, the servers, the Imminent Room, an unlikely trilogy: past, present, future.

It begins at a ladder: no stairs up, but a hatch into the middle of the donut, and then an ascent, unpolished, wires and cables and pipes on all sides, feet onto the rungs of a cold iron ladder. Then through a hatch, as if entering a loft-space, an attic; and through there, at the top, the station's servers, crammed into a space that wasn't created for them, but which runs incredibly cold due to inadequate insulation. Some corridors leading nowhere: unlit, unpowered, massive mechanical doors to keep them shut off. One of them is unsealed at the end, nothing out there but space.

To get into Zvezda itself, there are the airlock doors: the first, near the servers, is modern and controlled by electricians, with a scanner for our eyes; while the second – a foot past it, barely enough room to stand side by side with somebody else – has no such security measures, relying instead on a mechanical arm-lock that's so stiff it feels as though your own arm is loosening when you try to open the thing. Coming here is rare for any of us: some of the circuits end here, and there are some exterior parts that are easier to access from this side. Otherwise, it's vacant, and useless. Once inside, there are remnants of how the station originally was: red vacuum bags of freeze-dried food, labelled in Cyrillic that I don't understand, the English translations scratched off in many cases, peeled away; a picture of Gagarin mounted with permanence to one wall; the sleeping pods, still with sleeping bags sewn into them. The walls little more than wires and insulation. An archaic, somehow ancient, decrepit place, that was once the pinnacle of what we had to offer of ourselves to the wider universe; and now, it's forgotten about, here only when we need it and never mentioned otherwise.

And there's no gravity here. The centrifugal field doesn't spread this far, or doesn't quite – there's a vague sense of being weighed down a little, at the edge – but by the time you're a few feet in, you're floating. Drifting.

Not like Hyvönen's chambers, built out on a wing of their own, meant to be slightly away from it; but just untouched, unprotected. Free.

There's a section of wall here that was left untouched when the Russians abandoned the station, a part of it that feels like some sort of museum exhibit, albeit one created by laziness, rather than any sort of desire for resonance. Photographs, mostly, pinned up, fastened. Cosmonauts and astronauts that I recognize from my studies, people that saw it all, like the frontiersmen of space. More recent family photographs of people that I will never meet, or even have a context for. Here's a picture of a little boy, nothing like Theo physically, but close enough in age; and maybe he was related to somebody who was up here before me. He's in a garden somewhere and smiling, and there's the sun in the sky. Nothing in the fashion of the clothes that he's wearing, generic sweater and denim, to help me place him, to give them any sort of identity. He might have been somebody's son; hell, he might have been one of the cosmonauts. But I don't think so. I think that there was somebody up here remembering their family, missing them.

There are small trophies, postcards, trinkets. A swimming badge, Cyrillic across waves. A picture of the Eiffel Tower. A kiss, lipstick staining a napkin.

I wonder what made them hang onto these; or to bring them up in the first place.

But then: we all have artefacts. Zvezda's just distant from the rest of the station thanks to time and engineering.

These items have been handled. Dust floats in here, the filters turned off most of the time; but sometimes it sticks to things, sometimes it finds objects and settles, even if only briefly. Here, there are thumb prints in it, where it has been touched, handled. My own thumbs now in the imprints.

It seems that it's not just me that finds solace in these things.

The rest of the walls are a mess of tubing and cables, none of them labelled – because, why would you? Why would that make sense, to know what you were dealing with on a multi-billion-dollar space station? – so I have to rely my memory of the colour-coding of the wires themselves. There's main power and life-support power and the data that used to link the systems together on this thing, and they're all similar enough that I don't want to get this wrong. I lie down on the floor, insofar as there is a

floor here. Hold on with one hand, jam my leg against the wall with the other. Pull a piece of the wall panelling off, to expose the wires better. But the lights are still on, which means the power is still on.

I take the data cable in one hand, ready to split and splice it. The firmware update requires a lot of bandwidth, more than these old wires are designed to handle, so it's all about a drip-feed; installing a new cable that can handle the bandwidth, but even then, the file will need breaking into component pieces before being pushed into the ship's system. Three petabytes of data, broken down into components that can be reassembled ship-side, compressed volumes that together make up the whole. It's the only way to ensure that there's no degradation. Long, tiring, thankless. These jobs, being up here, it's all far less exciting than people might imagine.

'Desh,' I say, into my comm. 'I'm in place, let's do this.'

'Powering down,' Desh says.

Three, two, one, and the lights flick off, and I'm in darkness.

'Done,' he says. His voice crackling, as the comms boosters aren't working here any more. 'Let me know when you're done.'

I begin. I am efficient, I have always been efficient. Panels open, cables pulled. Cut, spliced, sealed, move on. The only light that's not from my helmet torch – barely a torch at all – coming from the small round window in the far airlock. Laying cable alongside other cable – cable that's dusty, in a way I don't think it should be, were the filters working properly; that it shouldn't be, given that nobody lives here, that there's no dust to be made, no skin to be shed; which means this is decades old, these are the sole remains of people long-dead, the astronauts and scientists who came up here before us—

*Thunk.* A sound from the far end of the station.

*Thunk,* this pounding, this thudding. I don't know what it is, I don't recognize it.

'Desh?' I ask. A crackle of response. 'Desh, there's a banging—'

*Thunk,* again, louder this time.

'Desh,' I shout, or I think I shout—

'Hey, there's something – wait there,' he says. 'Just, wait.'

I turn. Push away from the wall, in the dark, towards the airlock. Grab the arm, the mechanical arm. Yank, but it doesn't move.

It's locked.

‘Desh, what the hell is going on?’ My voice sounds distant, not my own.

‘There’s some sort of power surge,’ he says. He stumbles on the words. It reminds me of Theo: wanting something, trying to work out how to persuade me.

‘Out here? There’s no power!’

‘I did something,’ he says, ‘just ... wait, okay?’

*Thunk. Thunk.*

I realize that the light from the external airlock has gone. The vague trickle of light from outside, of the ambient light we’re making ourselves, doubling back, blocked by something.

A hand on the window. I push down towards it, slowly. The fingers of the exo-suit splayed on the toughened glass.

‘There’s somebody here,’ I say, maybe to the comm, maybe to myself.

‘Stay the fuck back, okay? You hearing me?’ Desh asks. ‘There are pressure issues in the module, Ali. The seal isn’t—’ As I head to the far end of the module, his voice crackles away; and I see, finally, the helmet behind the hand on the airlock.

Cohen’s eyes behind the glass. He looks different; sickly, somehow. Panicked, terrified. He coughs, choking back something. Blood on his lips.

I blink; or, no, I shut my eyes, for a moment. A rising feeling of sickness inside me. Bile, in my guts, in my throat, at the cusp of my mouth. A long pause, and then—

‘It’s you,’ he says. Our comms are working, short range.

I push to the window. His suit ripped, it looks; a hiss of something from a seam. How long can you survive in a compromised suit? I wish I could remember.

‘You need to come in,’ I say. The night we first came up here, when he acted as if he was some lothario, when he got drunk because he couldn’t cope, fifty of us and acting like he was a fucking student, he batted his eyes at me, as if that would work. They are turned down now, the lids heavy, the whites a tinted pink. ‘Let me get Desh to help—’

‘They won’t help,’ he says. ‘Don’t you understand? Don’t you see? I’m dead. I’m already fucking dead, we’re all dead.’ He slams his fist on the hull. *Thunk.* ‘You’re dead.’

I pull myself up, to get a better look at him. His face is tear-stained, pale. His eyes red from crying, or pain. Something.

‘What are you doing?’ I ask him.

He slams his head, his helmet, against the window. Not hard enough to break the glass, but hard enough to make us both flinch.

‘What—?’ I try to ask again, but he interrupts me.

‘No, no. You don’t get it. It’s what I’m about to do,’ he replies. ‘But it doesn’t matter. We’re all dead, like I said.’ I hear him breathing. And then, *clank, clank*. A noise I don’t recognize at first, unfamiliarly muted; and then it’s clear. It’s the airlock. Not the internal one, but the external.

Snipes: opening the airlock, flushing himself out—

And now Cohen out there, opening it, to flush *me*—

Everything shifts on its axis, as if there’s suddenly a wind, blowing and pulling simultaneously, heaving me from all sides—

I grab something, doesn’t matter what. Panelling, and it pulls away, pulls apart—

Wires. A cable, my hand wrapped around—

And my head, Jesus *fuck*, the pain; as if the ache has been waiting in the background until I forget to hold it off, until it’s allowed back in when I’m distracted by staying alive—

I wind my hand around the cable. Hook it, tighter, tighter; grab something else with the other, and I have forgotten about breathing, or trying to.

Shit, shit. No air. The pain, the *closeness* of the pain, of the tightness in my skull. The proximity of the pain to every part of me.

Rush, rush; I shut my eyes—

I remember the first day that Cohen and I spoke, really, day three of being up here on the station: his hand, aggressive, pressing the wall next to my head, as I tell him to back the fuck away from me, my voice snarling and angry, and the next thing I know, my hand is colliding with his cheek and nose, the crack of a bone, the gasp of him and me both—

Black in, black out. Moments, gulping nothing. Something moves past me: parts of Zvezda, bits of the oldest part of the station, flushed into space. And a person, a shape, somebody out here; and laughter, as well. Laughter, I’m sure, though really, maybe it’s not laughter, but noise in the static, through my ears, aural pareidolia, hearing something that simply isn’t there

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I vomit, coughing, sputtering. My head hurts so much, this flood of actual pain, of agony, through every part of me. A migraine: and the halos of the lights, of the edges of the dark. I push backwards, to control myself; and there's a light, shining down towards me; and I turn, grab hold of the wall. Hold tight, close my eyes, blink back. Open my eyes, try to focus: but the edges of the darkness hurt my head, hurt behind my eyes. I try to focus on some of the notches on the walls, circular buttons that look to me like nothing less than the rows of eyes on a spider; and they swim, swirl. A stuttering gasp of my vision, as if it's chasing itself and being chased simultaneously; like seeing something in front and behind, my brain trying to keep up. I retch, the disconnect too hard; and gasp air, into my throat, down to my lungs. Swiftly followed by the contracting of my stomach muscles; but there's nothing inside me, or not enough, so it's bile, thick yellow like mucus. I am haunched, drifting. I grab the side, the panels; and I move backwards, the light still gone—

'What's going on, Ali?' Desh's voice clatters around my skull, and I whisper to him to shut up. Shut up, shut up. 'Ali? Back away from the cables, I'm powering up, okay?'

'Cohen,' I manage to say.

'What about him?'

'He's—' I look for him. I drag myself, in the dark, wiping my mouth with the back of my hand, shining my light down the length of the wing. He's nowhere. There's no sign of him. The door to the exterior is shut; pictures, detritus, pooled in the corner by it, as if washed up on the tide. I press my face to the glass, but I can't see anything out there, nothing at all. No Cohen, no hand on the window, no frantic eyes behind his helmet's glass.

'Come back,' he says. 'Now, Ali. Come back here.'

'But Cohen,' I say, and he doesn't wait.

'I'm calling Mon, okay? She'll help you.'

'No,' I reply. 'No, I'm fine.'

The voice calls for a doctor, hypodermic in hand. *Don't worry, Miss Becker. Just a moment.* Xavier holding my forearm; meant to be comforting, but couldn't he have held my hand?

This isn't comfort, I think; it's restraint.

'I'm fine,' I say. Control, calm, control. A practised tone.

'I'm running the reboot now, so get out.'

‘Cohen,’ I say again, weakly.

‘Cohen’s fine,’ he replies. ‘He’s fine. You’re not. You opened the airlock —’

‘I didn’t,’ I say, ‘Cohen did.’

‘Just ... come back.’ His voice with finality. Concern, force. Tonal aspects I’ve not heard from him before, not that I can remember.

I pull myself back to the entrance. Pull the arm. Out, through the airlock. I look back – I want banging, I want Cohen begging to be let in with me; as if I’ve locked him out, for some reason – but there’s nothing. Desh has started the power cycle. Vents hissing, air being sucked out. And then I’m at the servers. A terminal screen, old-school.

I type a question: Where is Engineer Cohen?

*Engineer Cohen is not on the station*, the reply comes.

My head swamps itself, as if that’s a punch; a hit, between my eyes; and then I’m at the bottom of the ladder, and Mon’s waiting there for me; and she puts her hand onto my shoulder, so I flinch; but her fingers, her finger and her thumb, her pinch, hold me. I think of a character on an old sci-fi show, his fingers grabbing nerves, stopping bad guys; or stopping his friends, when he was forced to.

‘You’re all right,’ Mon says. ‘Hey, honey, you’re all right.’

She tells me that Cohen wasn’t anywhere close to Zvezda. That he was elsewhere, that he was meant to be there, but he wasn’t. Desh comes in, as I’m sitting on the bed, as Mon’s checking my vitals – ‘Tell me about this headache,’ she says, peering behind my eyes with her little torch, her fingers pressed to the thin skin of my wrist – and he corroborates this.

‘I was worried there,’ he says. He looks at me, right at me. No second screen.

‘So what happened?’ I ask. ‘If it wasn’t Cohen.’ But it was, I know, I saw him.

‘I don’t know, Ali. You—’ He stops himself. ‘The door opened. The external door, and you weren’t hooked up, you didn’t have anything for out there. You’d have spiralled.’

‘It was Cohen,’ I say, ‘He opened the door—’

‘Yeah, except he didn’t,’ Desh says. ‘Dunno what to tell you, Ali.’

‘The computer said he wasn’t on the station,’ I say, and Mon shrugs.

‘It doesn’t seem as if you’re thinking clearly,’ she says.

She strokes my hair.

Sian comes then, and she asks to speak with Mon outside the room. She doesn't smile at me. Mon leaves, and Desh, and they stand there and talk to Sian.

I shut my eyes for a moment, and I feel myself drifting; like in Zvezda, but different. Floating inside, the pain subsiding, for a moment.

When I wake up, Mon is watching over me. She's tapping me, saying my name, over and over. 'There she is,' Mon says, and she helps me sit up. 'I wanted you to see this.' She helps me walk out of the medical bay, round to the window. The Anomaly isn't in front of us, we're somewhere else in our orbit; but Cohen is. He's clinging to the outside, working on wiring. Something important, I'm sure; his face, through his helmet, gritted teeth and Neanderthal-overhang brow.

Part of Hyvönen's plan.

'See?' Mon asks. 'Cohen, doing his work.' He is, at that. Working, hard, diligently. Unlike him. I expect him to turn, to wave at us: see how well I am doing! I am here! I was never there! 'It's fucking mental up here,' Mon says. She laughs. 'Technical term, I know. But it is. We're not meant to be up here, you know that.'

'If evolution meant us to fly—'

'It would have given us, I don't know. Rocket feet. Boosters in our asses.' A big smile. 'A few days more, Ali. That's all. Then we're out of here.'

'Back to Theo,' I say.

'Yeah,' she says. 'If Snipes has affected you ... What happened, I mean. If you need to talk, or you want me to prescribe something more—'

Outside, Cohen digs his hands into the cables. Rummages. Mon helps me to my feet, to the door. 'Post-trauma can mess you up.'

'I'm fine,' I say. Cohen half-glances back at us as we talk. And I walk towards my bedroom, and Mon walks with me, not saying anything; just being there the whole time.

I stand in my room, in my bathroom, and I take a shower, and I do my hair, and I feel my own hands pulling at it, a small knot at the back, a tangle I didn't notice before; and I run my fingers through it hard, forcing it to break, but the hairs come out instead, thin wisps, thick roots. And with my

eyes shut, with inescapable images flooding me, Cohen and Snipes are indistinguishable to me, in that moment, off they go, into the dark.

I let the air dry me. Cold, and it feels like it's getting colder; but that's nice. Makes me think of winters at home. We would swim in the lakes, and it would be warm when you were in the water; and it was so clear, so crystal; then you would get out, sit on the side, towel wrapped around you, legs pulled tight to your chest; and you would watch the water, how it went from rippled to utterly, perfectly still. Nothing breaking the surface at all.

My terminal. I ask it where Cohen is.

*Engineer Cohen is located in exterior section tee-zed-five, it says.*

He is now. I've seen him.

I ask it to list all locations Cohen has been in the past twenty-four hours.

*The medical bay.*

*The mess hall.*

*The centrifuge.*

*The Zvezda module.*

He was there. He was *out there*.

But I also know that he's here now; and if he had died, he absolutely would not be here, he absolutely wouldn't be able to be here.

Like Snipes, I suppose. Gone, can't come back.

My terminal buzzes. The screen clearing, an intrusion telling me that I've got a personal alert. An incoming transmission, video from Earth. They never let this happen. Desh must have pulled strings.

The picture is crystal clear and perfect, as if we were only rooms away from each other, not atmospheres. Theo, sitting there, excited as anything. Focused, engaged with me. Eye contact, actually looking right at me. Seeing me.

'Mama,' he says. 'I wanted to tell you how much I miss you. And—' His voice catches for a moment. Like he's remembering what to say, but there's no way Xavier would prompt him to be nice to me. 'I'm so proud of you, Mama.'

I have no idea how he got through, as incoming transmissions are meant to be monitored, but he did; and his face, his words, absolutely fucking *slay* me. And in that moment, it's all I need, all I care about. All I want is Theo, his words, his *pride*, his love for me.

It takes well under two minutes to jog around the ring of the station. So much of it is nothing but disused bedrooms and equipment stores that were never used, doors sealed off because there's never been a reason to unseal them. I think, in theory, humanity should have been here for decades, building this up, running our lives from it. A base of operations, but instead it's this cavernous, hollow space.

On Earth, the echoes would be deafening.

Here, though, when you scream, the ambient noise swallows everything else.

I run, my feet hitting the slight curve of the floor. Feeling like there's something solid under my feet; though I pass windows, and when it's the right angle, there's the Earth below me, and the thump of each step makes me wonder if somehow I could bring this whole thing down, crashing down, burning through the atmosphere.

I don't see another soul the whole time I'm running. Five, six, seven laps, over and over, and nobody passes me, and I don't pass anybody.

I stop, my lungs aching. Or, I assume it's my lungs; my hand on my chest, feeling the rise and fall of it. Feeling my heart pulsing away under the flesh, the bones. Imagining, as my head beats, thumps, things banging into me, as I cling to the side, as Snipes bangs his fist on the exterior airlock window—

Not Snipes. Cohen.

A slip of my memory.

Snipes went out there as well. Easy mistake to make.

I look up, and realize that I'm outside the entrance to the ladder up to the Zvezda module. Breathing, sweat on my brow, running down the middle of my spine.

I open the door, and I climb. I don't know why, but I do. The lights up here flickering on with my movement, as I step off the ladder. The servers make a constant hum, the noise I imagine beehives make: a thousand wings, brushing against their metal walls. I open the airlock door and step inside. Wrench the arm of the second door, and the floor shifts from underneath me. Nobody knows I'm here, which is very much against the rules. They'll think something's wrong with me.

I think of Sian, standing outside the medical bay, speaking with Mon about me. *You know she's got a history*, of course. Always with my history. No way of expunging reality, even if it wasn't ever actually truly real.

The Imminent Room. Dark in there, no light from the edge of the door. I can't remember if it's sound-proofed, dampened. It's different to the other rooms.

I try the handle. Nothing. Rattle it, hard. Push it, but it doesn't move. Closed since Snipes' death.

I wonder if there's evidence in there. If Snipes' stuff is still in there.

So, into Zvezda. The corridor. The lights off, but I root around, find the old physical switch, turn them on; or, at least, the ones at this end.

The wall of pictures, of memories: it's intact. Everything pinned up, fastened. Put back neatly just the way it was. Or: never disturbed. There's dust here, old dust, new dust, it's hard to tell. Fingerprints in the dust, on the postcards, but are they mine?

They're on the wall, anyway. Nothing's been pulled, nothing's been disturbed. There are no marks from where I clung to the station and tried to save myself; no evidence that anyone was out there.

*Thump.*

I hear banging, but I don't know if it's coming from inside my head or outside, somewhere else in the station; a warning sign.

Mon's grinning when I find her for dinner. She's got a water bottle on the table, and as I sit down opposite her she nudges it in my direction.

'Go on,' she says. The look in her eye says it's not water, definitely not water.

'What is it?' I unscrew the cap. The gentle hiss of bubbles escaping. The sweet smell of champagne – or, not champagne, unless something drastic has happened, but one of the hydro-approximates of it, the foam pulsing over the lip of the bottle, tickling my mouth.

'Go on,' she urges, again, so I do. Mon has privileges, mainly because she's so in deep with Hyvönen because of his medical records. She spends a lot of time with him, and he tells her everything about himself, a divulgence I'm sure he objects to; and it's all sealed, just like her lips. The drink tastes sharp and sweet at the same time, and cold, so desperately cold in that way that sometimes only what you're craving can taste, and the carbonation jars slightly, because it's been months since I had something to drink that wasn't simply perfectly flat.

'You're a fucking angel,' I say, and Mon laughs.

'You look like you need it,' she replies.

‘I do, I do.’ Another swig. It’s not illegal here, but nobody wants to share. Not that it would matter: we’re the only people here to eat right now.

‘Did you have any surprises this afternoon?’ she asks.

‘Theo called,’ I say. ‘Did you make that happen?’

‘You needed that, as well,’ she says. ‘I asked Desh if he could swing it for you.’

‘It was wonderful,’ I say. ‘Thank you.’

‘You’re welcome,’ she says. ‘It won’t be long, Ali.’

‘I know.’ I pause, a moment. Words forming in my head, but I don’t want to ask them; not until they spill out. ‘Are you lying to me about anything?’

‘What?’ She looks affronted; but only a little. Only enough.

‘Cohen—’

‘Don’t. Cohen’s here. He’s—’ She looks around. No sign of him: just Berry and Gibson, lost jackals searching for their leader. They’re sombre, which makes a change: usually, they’re these terrible echoes of his bad jokes. They hang around with him and they provide an audience for him, back him up. I don’t know them; they haven’t tried with me, and I haven’t tried with them. Glances, now, across at us: like, we don’t give a shit, but know that we are watching you. Know that we have eyes on you. ‘He’s here somewhere. You saw him. Whatever happened, you blacked out. It’s weird in there. Like it’s haunted, you know?’ She mock-shivers.

‘You don’t believe in ghosts,’ I say.

‘I believe in bad juju,’ she says. ‘And that place has got it. I don’t go there, you shouldn’t go there. You’ve done the cabling, right?’ I nod. ‘So stay the fuck out of that place. It’s the creepy old house on the hill, you don’t need to go there.’

‘Bad juju.’ I smile. That phrase, like something so archaic it’s not been spoken in decades. Centuries. ‘I’ve not been feeling well. Or, not been feeling myself.’

‘I know. I can tell. Don’t be hard on yourself. What happened with Snipes, being up here ... It’s a lot.’

‘But should I be scanned or something?’ I feel the weight of asking that. Like: if there’s a result I don’t like, what does it mean?

‘When we get down, it can’t hurt. Up here? What’s the point?’ She drains her glass. Pours another. ‘Can you function? Can you do your job?’

‘Of course.’

‘Well, then. Hyvönen says you’re integral to this thing he’s doing. I mean, he’s pretty fucked at the moment anyway—’ Then she catches herself, having given too much away, and she stops talking. ‘He’s being *tricksy*,’ she says. ‘He says you’re a major part of what he wants to do before we leave here, anyway.’

‘Yeah, but only because I’m the dickhead who helped design the ships.’

‘That’s how I’ve survived up here. Be a dickhead with a skill, dispose of anybody else with that skill, make yourself indispensable.’ Another of her smiles, intoxicating enough without the booze to ease its way into your heart. ‘You’re okay. Fundamentally, I mean. I scanned you, and your vitals are fine. It’s this place. Some of us, we’re not meant to be up here this long.’

‘I’m definitely not.’

‘And yet it could have been so much more. We’re nearly done. Home again, home again, jiggety jig.’

‘Unless it leaps again. Swallows us.’

‘I’m sure it won’t,’ she says, off the cuff. The blunt confidence of actual knowledge.

‘Why?’ I ask.

‘Why what?’

‘Why are you sure it won’t move again?’ She pauses, for a moment. To think. Shuts her eyes, a slow blink. ‘You knew, didn’t you.’

‘Hyvönen says it won’t. Got to believe him, right? O Captain, my Captain, all that shit.’

‘Maybe,’ I say. ‘Sure, maybe.’

We drink. We eat Thai curry that nearly tastes like actual Thai curry, either because it’s surprisingly good or we’re surprisingly drunk; and we pivot to stories that make us laugh or make us sad, stories about back home – stories of Xavier, of her ex, of our boys, of ourselves – and we finish the food and the bottle, and we go to our rooms, because the morning brings with it another chance to speak with our loved ones; but through it all, something isn’t right. Through it all, we pretend that we’re not in pain. I see Berry, Gibson, Cohen, Desh, Sian: all of us, pretending something.

And then, after, I lie in bed, and the room spins. Alcohol hits so much harder here, and when you haven’t had it in as long as I haven’t, it’s so much worse. The room reorientates itself over and over, tilting on its own axis, and I shut my eyes, and I try to focus on the darkness I’ve created, to

stay as still as possible, even as I'm sure that I can feel the station moving, rotating, turning.

Sick: kneeling on the floor in my plastic bathroom, my head over the bowl, one hand on my hair to keep it away from my mouth, the other clutching the rim, fingers trying to dig into the metal and unable; and I retch, my body – my spine, seemingly – rippling, as it tries to force the badness out. That's what my mother used to say: being sick is your body getting the badness out, and I didn't know, in my earliest years, if she meant something moral rather than physical, so I imagined my childish sins spilling from me, giving me something like absolution. This is froth on my lips, the taste of bile in my throat—

When it's done, I gasp back. I feel drunk. Everything warping around the fringes of my vision, everything as if it's curving back in on itself. This feels wrong, I know. Not quite just sick, not sick from booze or food. Something else—

I am dying, I am dying. I am stuck, a lump in my throat the size of a fist, a knee, a joint moving and pivoting; pushing against the walls of my throat, my mouth forced open, the ache in my jaw as I try to take air in, but there's no air, nothing at all but this *presence*, this overwhelming sense of ending coming for me, coming from within me; a repulsion, a revulsion, a sickening—

Haunched again, this time my fingers splayed – a memory, a hand pressed to a window, a hand or a fingerless glove – and I drag myself to the terminal. I need Mon. I try to send a message, but her comms are blocked – it's the night, of course they are, my brain is addled and still I know that much; but I need her. I need her, she'll have medicine, she'll have something to clear my head, my body—

Open my door, down the corridor. Everything turning, as if somebody set the station spinning, the whole thing moving around me. The centrifuge, loose of its couplings, and now we are turning with it, or it is turning us—

I count the room numbers until I reach Mon's room, and I beat my fist on her bedroom door – 'Please, please, Mon, it's me, please let me in!' – and I beg her to open it, but there's no reply. Not even the sound of her stirring, or murmuring. I try the handle, and it—

It opens, and she's not in her bed, or her shower. I fight the urge to lie on her bed – it's made, still, the sheet tucked into the edge as if she lives in a hotel, and it looks so perfectly comforting and comfortable – and instead use her terminal. Find out where she is, ping her—

*Location: Zvezda module.*

She's in Zvezda. She's in Zvezda.

Why would she be in Zvezda?

I leave her room, stumble to the hall, lurch to the wall—

Stumble. Feet over hands on the ladder, climbing, climbing.

I'm so sick. Something stutters, something runs away. My hand in front of my face, leaving trails, echoes of itself as it passes through the swampy air. The cold of the servers, the cold of up here. I'm not dressed for this. My fingers: blue, or feeling blue; and then I'm at the airlock to the Russian module, the entrance to Zvezda, and I can see through the glass, through that shard, that triangle of alignment. People in there, at the far end. I can't make out their faces, but I can see people. Two people in exo-suits. They're at the hatch, the exterior hatch, the door to the outside. Another airlock between us and the stars, and one of them steps forward and grabs the handle; and they wrench it downwards, and the door opens, and through it I see glimpses of the darkness, of the stars—

I back up, to one of the porthole windows by the servers. To see outside, even if the angle is wrong, even if the angle is broken: something large, a shape the size and dimensions of a person, but they're not moving so it's a body, a body floating off into the darkness.

My back to the door to the Imminent Room. Pressed against it, against the darkness inside it. I think about Snipes. I watched him, going off into the darkness; and I reached for him, I know, but it was futile, it must have been futile, through glass, through airlocks, through the void. I turn, and there, in the darkened glass of the door, I see myself: tired, broken, blurred and mauled. Don't look, I say to myself, a reflection is not representative, it is not the truth—

Back to the window I stumble, and I look at the figures, the body now gone. I try, in my addled mind, to give them the benefit of the doubt, but—

They are holding something. A rope, maybe. Hands clasped. I step back. That darkness, outside, past them, of the Anomaly, as I see them pulling, hand over hand, tugging something back to themselves.

The body, I realize. They sent it out, and then—

I am sick again, in the corridor, on the floor. My stomach ejecting everything, pushing itself to its limits. I stumble backwards, towards my bedroom, inside—

I shut my door. I sit, on the floor, and I try to stop the room from altering its own angles; and eventually, I am sure, because there is no other option, I sleep.

## 4

When I wake up, it's as if I didn't sleep at all. I feel groggy, my eyes sticky. My throat raw, coughing up the bitter taste of bile. I want to sleep more, I want to sleep again. Up here, circadian rhythms are ruined. It's perfectly common to wake up and want to stay sleeping, because everything tells you that you simply haven't had enough of whatever it is you need to recharge your batteries.

My alarm rings, for my window of reaching Theo. I force myself out of bed and to my bathroom, which smells of vomit; and I take a shower, and then I get dressed, and I sit in front of the screen and attempt to call Theo. I expect nothing; often, that's when we're given what we want. Xavier answers. He looks rough, unshaven and tired. His eyes are balloons carrying the red sacks of his sagging cheeks. He looks old – as rough as I feel.

'I'm getting the flu,' he says by way of greeting. 'I'm really suffering.'

So blunt, that word. So loaded. He said that once, when he came to visit me in the hospital he imprisoned me in: I'm suffering without you.

He's not a fool, he knows the words he uses. Everything with Xavier is deliberate.

'Get Theo,' I say.

'Okay,' he says. Sadness in his eyes. 'Can we talk?'

'Not today,' I say. He shrugs, and he's gone; and Theo runs up, and he yammers at me: every single story he's ever had, clear as day in both connection and from his lips; and it goes on and on, past my allotted time, but I feel it, I feel it; I feel the anchor of it in my stomach, pulling me back, even as I worried that I was losing myself.

'Mama will be back soon,' I say. 'I should be there now, I should be looking after you.'

'It's okay, Mama, you're helping to save us,' he says. He's holding Lego: a little rocket that he's made himself, with an astronaut; a golden helmet,

shining in the light from the screen in front of him.

‘Still,’ I reply, ‘I miss you so much.’

‘I miss you too,’ he says. ‘Just hurry up and come home.’

I’m trying, I think; but the voice inside my head says, You’re a bad mother, and you’re failing. Hurry up and get home. Keep your mouth shut, and get home.

When I met Xavier, he was one of those men that thinks they’re cool because they’re part of something bigger than they are; but honestly, I liked that, or I found myself drawn to it. He was distant, which was attractive enough to begin with, distance somehow equating itself to the mysterious, the special; and he was gruff when he needed to be, or when felt he should be, a controlled sense of disdain for other people that never seemed to spill out to me. His voice would change when he spoke to me – and to other women, I was not special in that regard. Dropping quieter, slightly lower. A sense of near-monotonous calm to it; a way of controlling. And he used that voice to impart secrets, constantly surprising himself – he said – about what he chose to give up. As if I and I alone were somehow able to get deeper into who he was, into who the real Xavier was. He spoke to me as if I understood him better than all those other women, all those other *humans*.

It was a compliment.

I got him, and he got me.

He was intense and special and mysterious and he said exactly what he knew I wanted to hear, which only became apparent later, when I heard him telling others – doctors, Theo, the courts – what they wanted to hear, the exact words, the exact cadence. At the time, all I knew was that he loved me, and I loved him.

I believed in him, and I believed that he believed in me.

That is what people in love do.

He held my hand secretly, when we were working together; and after work, he would take me to his apartment, and he would tell me about himself – half-truths, I would later learn, stories that were spun from his life into tragedies, told in this poetic voice, eyes wet at the metaphors he had planned and used on women before me, after me, during me – and then we would be in his bed, his hand on my throat, his mouth close to my ear, his voice morphing, shifting into that voice he didn’t use with me, that voice instead that he used for his disdain.

And in the morning, he would say that, sometimes, in the heat of the moment, he took things too far. But I made him feel like that. I made him wild, he would say, it was my fault; and his voice would be soft, soothing, draped over me, warming me, when I'd been cold all night.

The canteen is mostly silent. So few of us here now. I look for Cohen. I want to see him here, walking around, doing his thing. Living life in the way that he apparently still lives it. But he's not here, and neither is his coterie. Mon's here, though, and Desh, sitting at the same table as Sian, together but definitely away from her. Desh sees me, nods at the seat opposite him. I get a bagel from the counter – they taste nearly like the real thing, somewhere between bagel and crispbread – and sit down.

'You look like shit,' Desh says.

'Fuck off,' I reply. 'I don't tell you how much you look like a sex pest.'

'It was a joke.'

'Hilarious, as well. Almost as funny as your sex-pest glasses.' I take a bite from the bagel, and Mon collapses into laughter. Desh stares. I can see the twitch of his cheek under the rim of the glasses, the desire to pull them from his face.

'It's true,' Mon says. 'It's the glasses, I think. Real air of "no boundaries" to them.'

'You can both piss right off,' Desh replies.

'We got drunk last night,' Mon tells him. 'If she, or I, look *less than* today, it's because we had a nice time.' I want to say: we got drunk, and then you pushed a body out of the airlock. Or, I think you did.

'And you didn't invite me?' Desh looks genuinely affronted.

'You don't drink.' She jabs at the tattooed Xs on the back of his hands. 'You wouldn't have appreciated the conversation, either. All our talk about dick.'

Desh rolls his eyes. 'Fine, yeah. Okay. Dick, sure, that's all you talk about.'

'Anyway,' Mon takes my hand, 'you sleep okay?'

'No,' I say. 'I was sick.'

'Oh *boom*,' Desh laughs. 'See? That's the fucking perils, right there.'

'Sick sick?' Mon looks momentarily concerned.

'I'm fine this morning.' Which is true, if not for the uneasy feeling in my stomach. But that feeling: it's not just the hangover. So I think: I'll try this

breezily, softly. 'Hey, listen: did either of you see anything last night? Or hear anything?'

'Anything?'

'In Zvezda. I was walking around looking for Mon, after I was sick, and I think—' I hesitate, knowing it won't hurt to be gentle here. If people are lying to me, they'll lie about this as well. 'I think that there were people out there.'

Desh shrugs. 'I don't have cams there,' he says by way of an answer. 'Anyway, I'm the asshole who doesn't get invited to parties, remember?'

'I went to bed same time as you,' Mon says. A lie, I think; but of course, my head, my eyes, maybe what I saw wasn't right—

'What did you see?' Desh asks. 'There's not exactly enough people here to get out there without making a fuss, right?'

'People. Wearing exo-suits. Looked like they were sending something out there.'

Desh and Mon glance at each other. A tiny fraction of a glance, but it's there. Mon takes over, then. 'I think ... Ali, you were drunk.'

'Doesn't mean I didn't see it,' I say.

'There wasn't an exit. Nobody opens a door without me knowing,' Desh looks positively affronted.

'What exactly did you see,' Mon asks, 'exactly?' She leans in a little. The body language of somebody intensely listening; of doctors, psychiatrists, therapists.

'Two people in suits. Something else. I don't know, the shape of a body.'

'Not trash? There was an eject scheduled for last night, I know that because some of the medical waste went out with it—'

'It wasn't trash. I know trash, it's a block, a solid block. This was a shape. Like a body, Mon. There's not much else shaped like it.'

Mon nods. I can see her thinking. 'You need me to sign you off?' she asks.

'What? No,' I say.

'If you need me to—'

'I don't,' I say, 'I'm fine. I saw something.'

'Listen. Ali. This sounds a lot like when Snipes died. And then seeing Cohen kill himself – or not – in the same way? And now a body out there, and, what? We've killed somebody?'

'I didn't say it was you,' I reply.

‘There are eight of us up here. Whoever you’re accusing, it’s one of us.’

‘I’m not accusing you of anything. I’m just ... I’m asking. I’m confused.’  
As if by magic, the headache slides in behind my eyes. Slides in, hard, tight, swollen.

‘Maybe we need to do some scans,’ Mon says. ‘Up here, I mean. If you want.’

‘I’m fine,’ I say. And she nods: because she thinks she understands what’s going on here; and what’s going on here, for her, is that I might be broken. ‘I need to get back to work,’ I say, ‘there’s a lot to be getting on with.’ So I stand up, but I haven’t eaten, haven’t had water, even; so I neck a glass of apple juice, grab some fruit, and as soon as I’m clear of the mess, out of the canteen, I crouch to tie my shoelaces, grabbing my knees, trying to hold back the tears that I know are coming whether I fight them or not.

I read through Hyvönen’s list of preparations, trying to split them up mentally, to work out how to do them in the least possible time, or the most efficient way possible. Regardless of what’s going on with Cohen, with the thing I saw last night – and there’s something going on, I’m sure of it – the ship is still coming; the Anomaly is still there; Earth is still below us, or above us, or next to us, but in need of us to do our jobs.

I sit in my room, and I prepare wires and cables: stripping the coating from them, taking them back to the metal inside, to the guts, in preparation for splicing. Blade to wire, insert, push, drag; pulling away the outer, exposing what’s inside.

When my father began his descent, such as it was, it happened in almost eerie synchronicity with my own. His brain failing him just as I was being told that my own was failing me. That’s my biggest regret: that I wasn’t able to help my mother as much as I might have liked.

It began with tics, as I’m told these things can. Moments of absent-mindedness that seemed to pass like brushing off flies; his words sticking for the briefest of seconds. Like a stutter, but something inside.

My father was obsessed with what he termed golden-age technology. Old computers, old cars, old anything. That’s how I learned my skills, taking those things apart, putting them back together. And at his worst, those old things brought him focus: as if they somehow transcended the time he had lost. Like they were fixed points.

He once asked me what he was like, when he was having an episode. I told him, he was like a floppy disk. They used to get stuck on a file: a noise, a screech of something jammed, when they tried to move past the bad sector. My analogies helped him, I think. Bad sectors, we called it. That was our thing: *another bad sector*, after a doctor gave us an update. Those updates were always painful. Hundreds of micro-strokes, we were told. Not dementia as most people might understand it, not like Alzheimer's or any of the named conditions; not a rot from disease or radiation or inherited genetics. Something that couldn't be predicted, couldn't be controlled.

Some people, his doctor said, get large strokes. Some people don't.

My father's brain, a battlefield. Not nukes, though, but grenades, each digging their own little hole, making the terrain harder to traverse; for him, and for us. A machine, to help him with his memories: something to jolt them. This big black device, in the days when it was still legal to mess with such things; helping remind him of who he actually was in that particular moment in time, even if only for a few hours.

Jolt, jolt: my father, back with us, not terrified of us, not pushing us away as imposters, or confusing me for his own mother.

And through it all: I was in my own turmoil. Through it, as my father would tell me things he couldn't remember, or remember things he couldn't tell, I was suffering, and I couldn't convince myself I was well. I remember Xavier's holding of my hand through my pain, as he and I attended doctors; as he stood outside with Theo, and I was asked questions, hundreds of them, tick-sheets that felt rigged against me. There was a system, and I was losing.

My father also had tick-sheets: a bi-monthly test, to see where he was. To see what was acceptable, and what wasn't.

He said to me, I will never forget: 'I don't want to be that man.' You know the type, he told me, and he described them: sick, ill, frail, old to the point of decrepitude. Broken by what they'd endured. 'Your mother ...' he said, and that was all he needed to say. The ellipses at the end were there, vocal, in as much as such things can be.

He booked the clinic. It meant a trip to Switzerland, and he booked it, paid for it. An envelope that told us about it, left addressed to us: *For when I have gone too far*, it said.

My mother used to ask how far was too far. She would ask him, and ask me.

‘You’ll know,’ he said.

‘We’ll know,’ I told her. Even as Xavier was having me committed, even in those times, when my mother cried, holding my hand, her head buried in the nook of my arm so I couldn’t see her crying, I reassured her: I would be there when we knew.

And I was. We opened the envelope and we read his words, his desires, as he was unable to vocalize them, as they were made when he was, as the court we argued to, *of sound mind*; and in so many ways, those words felt like a relief. On his face, I was sure, he understood them, even if he understood nothing else.

All anybody wants is to be told that they are not lost; even if they feel it, even if circumstances make it appear so, they want to know that they are still who they think they are.

When my comm buzzes with another summons from Hyvönen, it doesn't seem like a shock. I'm back in my room, and I'm resting; which means, for me, sitting, quiet, thinking, trying to parse everything that's happening and failing; feeling overwhelmed by life itself, wondering what happens next—

Hyvönen's message, short to the point of abrupt, stops that.

I press the buzzer outside his door, and I wait. One minute, two minutes. Press it again, and then finally it opens, and Sian stands there, staring at me. She's gritting her teeth, tensing her jaw.

'He called for me,' I say.

'When?' She doesn't wait for a reply. 'He isn't ready. You should wait here,' she tells me. The door stays open as she retreats, and I watch as she goes into the main room, and I hear voices carry. There's shouting far off, coming from Hyvönen himself. His words spitting out at a rate of knots. Anger, confusion. I can't make out the words, for the most part: just spat-out syllables. Sian tells him to calm down, I hear that much; and then she speaks quietly to him. My name, buried in her words.

'I know that,' he snaps. 'Of course I know that.' And then he walks to me, and I see him for the first time today. He looks more tired than usual, and he scratches at his head, at the sides of his temples. His hair lifts with his fingernails, thinning to the point of near-nonexistence. 'You're here,' he says, stating the obvious. 'Come on, then.' He ushers me through into the room. It's chaos, a total difference to how it was the last time I was here. There are screens everywhere, all written on in Hyvönen's distinctive scrawl. I can't make head or tail of them; formulae and concepts drawn up, and sketches. The Earth, represented by one circle; the Anomaly by another. As he walks through them, he dismisses the screens, and he sits at his desk – to the side, not behind it, pulling a small stool out instead of taking the high-backed chair – and he sighs, still rubbing at his temples with his

fingers. 'This infernal memory of mine,' he says. 'Do you know what it feels like? To have your mind slip away?'

I don't tell him the truth; that, yes, I do, in my own way. 'My father was sick like this,' I say instead. 'He suffered.' I don't know where to sit, or stand. I don't know what the protocol is here.

'Of course he suffered. If you are lucky you will avoid it entirely, if you're lucky, it will not be inherited from him. Some days I don't even know whether I am the same person I was as when I went to sleep the night before.' He smiles. 'But this is not the time for that. We spoke before, did we not?'

'Yes.'

'Remind me. Of what you know at this moment.'

'You told me about *Ukonvasara*. You said that there might be a last-minute change of plans.'

'I told you that, of course I did.' He nods in agreement with his past self. There's something wistful about the look on his face. 'And again! You say it as if you don't have faith, and let me tell you, faith is all we need! Faith in the weight of the idea, in the delivery! In my mind, Miss Becker, *faith!*' He slumps, as if he's entirely, suddenly, run out of all energy. I see Sian out of the corner of my eye, standing at the far side of the room, her arms folded. She's watching us intently. I'm reminded of cats; of the way that they sit and wait for something. For a bird to unexpectedly – but inevitably – land on a stretch of grass in front of its still body; for the cat to make its move, when it's decided it can't miss. 'But you have the plan, and I have the vision to see this through. And we have our engineers, our dedicated team of engineers working on disabling the, ah, the energy cells, and refitting them in their entirely new form. A change of purpose, maybe, but not of state. The energy in them remains the same.'

'You asked me to come here this morning.'

'I know, I know; and I have a plan, I have told you that. I do not need the repetition of this quite as much.' He smiles. 'I have always considered myself a utilitarian, Miss Becker. Do you know that? The greatest good of the greatest number. We sacrifice ourselves to save others, if they can be saved. If there's even a chance, we give up all that we are. This is what I have already done. It's what everybody involved in this programme understands, somehow. It's implicit, inside us. We could die up here, and yet it would be in service. You know that, as so I.'

‘Yes,’ I say.

‘The difference is, I will die up here: inevitable, guaranteed, in a manner. I’m not sure that there’s any other ending for me.’ He waits, as if I am meant to say something. But I don’t. ‘You, though: this is about *your* survival. You see that, you understand that.’

I don’t. I don’t follow, and he’s rambling, wild-eyed. ‘You asked me to come here,’ I remind him, trying to drag him back on track. The whole conversation is broken and stilted. There are things not being said.

‘And yet, I cannot remember why,’ he tells me. ‘That’s the worst thing of this all, of this infernal curse I’m suffering. I had something, I *have* something, and then it’s – poof! – suddenly gone. It’s on the tip of my tongue, and yet so far away it might as well be inside that thing out there.’ He stands and holds out his hand. He wants to shake mine, so I do the same. ‘You have my plans? I made plans?’

‘Of course,’ I say, ‘you sent them to me.’

‘Then you know what must be done,’ he tells me, and he leads me to the door. When we get there, he stops, and he leans against the wall with both of his hands, pushing against it.

‘I think it is for the best that we are more cautious,’ he says. His voice calm but forceful; as if he’s talking to a child.

‘I am being careful,’ I say.

‘Yes, but not nearly careful enough. Goodness knows, we have lost so much already. From now, I think, you follow the rules. We have rules, about who is allowed, and where they are allowed. You are allowed where I tell you, when I tell you.’

I think of Xavier, after I got home from the hospital: don’t go out of my sight; and the way he would take the baby with him if he left the room for a moment, for even the littlest moment. *Please be aware of any signs of post-natal depression*, the literature said; and Xavier took that as an invitation.

‘This is not about control, Miss Becker,’ Hyvönen says. ‘I am not interested in controlling you. No, you are perfectly able to control yourself, I am sure of that. This is simply about safety for you, and for all of us. From now on, I would appreciate it if you would stay within this level, unless you have my permission. No centrifuge, no Zvezda, no server room.’

What? ‘I’ll need access to Zvezda and the servers to do my job,’ I say, and he nods.

‘I’m not denying you: I’m just aware that we have very little time here now, days, countable in hours; and I do not wish to run any risks. You can request access, and it will be granted.’

‘And the drones. I’ll need to fly the drones—’

But he shakes his head, over and over, before saying, ‘Impossible!’ as if the request was absolutely the most outlandish thing he’s ever heard. ‘No, no, the Anomaly is far too close.’

‘But I’ll need to do work on the outside. I need to manually block the relay controller—’

‘Then you will have to go yourself.’

An exo-suit. Into the dark. Better than a drone, apparently.

We are close enough to lose a drone, which means we are also close enough to lose me.

He smiles. ‘You and me, we are in this together,’ he says, ‘partners in crime.’ Then he softens, his eyes half-shut; as if he’s stopped focusing on me, or anything else. ‘My worries are for myself as much as they are you, or anybody else up here. Some days, it takes me so long to remember who I am. Some days, I simply am not myself. I struggle against this, and so do you. We all do. Time, for all of us, is nothing; because we are not yet final. You understand this, of course. Of course you do.’

‘Yes,’ I say, but I’m not sure that I do, not at all.

Desh accompanies me to the suit stores. We share the exo-suits, all of them, and there isn’t one specifically for us: no name badges sewn onto them, no perfect fit. Instead, there are two small suits, two medium suits, two large, but they’ve all got variance and the ability to let them out a little, bring them in a lot.

‘You know what you’re doing out there?’ Desh asks. He tries not to look as I get dressed, but also he sort of looks. He does that with all of us, regardless of who we are: he glances, and we pretend he doesn’t, or we call him on it. He’s the least discriminate person I have ever met. ‘I can talk you through it—’

‘Yeah, please explain to me how to do this thing you’ve never done but have read about, I could really use your advice right now.’

‘I’m just saying.’

‘And I’m just telling you, I *know*. I’m trained for this. I’ve done it quite a few times—’

‘In sim, sure.’

‘And a couple of times when we first got up here. I’ll be fine.’

‘Okay. Yeah.’ He’s quiet, for a moment. ‘I’m sorry.’

I have never seen Desh look quite so serious. ‘You all right?’

‘It’s so close,’ he says. He’s looking out of the window as we come back into the orbit of the Anomaly. Seventy-six minutes of breathing room; though, I wonder, since it moved, if that’s changed. It’s closer; it fills up so much more of our space. ‘Jesus, it’s so fucking close.’

‘I would have used the drones, but Hyvönen balked.’

‘Right,’ Desh says.

‘Why is that? I’m more expendable than they are?’

‘No idea.’ But he does know, he absolutely does. He’s thinking about his answers before he says them.

‘Where are the drones, Desh?’

Sweat on his brow. A trickle. ‘I fucked them,’ he says. ‘I tried to do a firmware thing, tried to get them more efficient, and they’re fucked. I’m sorry, Ali—’

‘Fucking idiot. We had them perfect!’

‘Yeah, well. Perfection’s never enough, right?’

‘So Hyvönen was covering for you? The fuck did you do to get that honour,’ I ask, but Desh just shrugs. ‘I’ll rebuild them another day,’ I say. ‘We can make them good.’

‘No time now,’ he tells me. ‘Something to work on when we’re back down there.’ As if we’ll be working together. As if our jobs will exist, our industry. Our lives, as they were.

He helps me into the suit, and fastens the clamps for me. I seal it, get the helmet, attach an oxygen pod. ‘Checking the levels,’ he says. He’s got my vitals and data on his screen in the bottom corner of his glasses. ‘Breathe deeply for me, let’s check the flow.’ So I do, and he does. ‘All good.’ He turns towards the door. ‘Want me to run the station checks?’

‘Yeah,’ I say. Breathing, for me. Control, like meditation, mindfulness. A way to keep myself calmed and centred and focused before going out there.

It’s still mind-boggling. I remember the first time I went out. We went up in a skifter, like a cross between shuttles and planes, designed to ride the edge of the planet’s atmosphere, and they let us out, one by one, attached, clinging to the edge of the thing as it floated, almost, cresting the Earth. I haven’t ever had such a feeling of insignificance as in that moment; a sense

that I was so very small, and everything else so incredibly vast. My gut, bouncing around itself.

I remember telling myself: don't be sick, don't be sick.

Hold it together, Ali.

A mantra. I have had a few, over my life.

'Okay. We're good to go.' He slides up a lock against one of the airlocks – the other leads to the lifeboat of a shuttle that will take us back down to Earth, when this is all over – and primes it. Far more care and security here than the Zvezda module. 'Take care out there, okay?' I have never seen him so focused on an actual moment. He takes the glasses off, and he makes eye contact with me. This strange curl of his bottom lip over his top; and then he smiles, his concern collapsing into something like camaraderie. 'It's fucking hard, right?' he says. 'Being up here, you know? I want to see grass or some shit. Get some fresh air.' He puts his glasses back on. 'I don't need to tell you that. You're going to be in a bubble for the next hour, right?'

He hits a switch, and the door opens. 'I'll be monitoring the whole time,' he says. 'Cam check—' He taps something on his lens, and a feed from my helmet appears on his screen. 'Okay, we're all running. See you on the flip.'

I step into the airlock, and he slams the door behind me. He makes eye contact, again, briefly; and then he cycles the airlock as I attach myself to one of the tether ropes, and with a rush, I'm gone, out.

I shift my body, pull myself along the rungs that are embedded in the cladding on the station's surface. Start to make my way to the Zvezda module. From the outside it looks like even more of a bolt-on than inside: the colour of the panelling different, the lines of it totally archaic. The newer parts of the station are all covered in Sol2r panelling, and they gleam a near-polished golden hue; the older parts, the remains of this place's previous life, a dulled grey. My hands, on the rungs, don't feel cold or warm through the gloves. They feel nothing but there, solid.

And then, around and between it all, the nothingness. It's the strangest sensation, because you're free and loose and it feels like nothing else. Not like swimming, because there's resistance when you're in water, a sense that you're still pushing against something. This is more like skidding, or moving through air, but with momentum. And we're safe out here: attached to the station by cables made from some polymer that couldn't snap away if we wanted it to; and the packs strapped to the suits kick out a CO<sub>2</sub>

compound, hugely efficient, just enough to give us the control needed. It feels like an art form to get really good at controlling these things, and I am no artist. I'm in control, but that doesn't make me hate it any less. Not even a little bit.

'You there yet?' My hands cling as I drag myself over the top of the station, the fastest route, as the crow flies. Desh's voice crackles in my ears, his mic too close to his mouth.

'No,' I say.

'Hurry up,' he tells me.

'You can come out here if you like. Do it for me?'

'Out there? Jesus, no. What would I do that for? It's not like everybody I trust doesn't hate it.'

'You trust me? I'm touched.' I can hear the smile in my own voice.

'Touched by your own conceit. Why'd you think I was talking about you?'

'Because you don't have any other friends, apart from me and Mon.'

'Could have been talking about Sian.'

'Yeah, you and her, thick as thieves.' My hands faster as the exterior levels off; even though there's no up, no down, a sense of feeling like I'm getting momentum as I move around the outside of the donut, towards Zvezda and the relay. Zvezda is so strange: this weird, faded-grey proboscis, jutting from the newer part of the station, and the walls of it, the edge, the trim, as if it's been absorbed.

I concentrate.

I ideate.

I could let go; and I could spin, spiral, into that thing. Release my fingers, one by one, and off I go, towards the sun; and between us and it, the Anomaly, in this moment, in our rotation.

One finger off, another, another. One hand free; and still, I hang on.

I could die. I could simply die.

'Ali? You there?' Desh's voice, and I'm still here, one hand on the rung. 'Ali. Speak to me.' My own breathing, loud in my ears, through the headset, the communicator, trapped in the helmet with me. 'Ali? Are you still in control? Do you need help—'

'I'm fine,' I hear myself say. 'I'm fine.' I have never lost control. I am always in control. Xavier used to say that was my fatal flaw, when he was

still joking but before I realized that his digs and slurs were never jokes, and were instead his truth.

‘The connection okay?’

‘It’s fine. I’m fine.’

‘You’re on a little over 90 per cent breathable, we don’t want to push our luck.’ I grunt the affirmative, and keep pulling myself along the rungs. Something about it feels like a hamster on a wheel: it’s turning, doesn’t matter which way is up, and you’re moving in place while everything else moves around you.

The rungs stop at the Zvezda module. Some half-hearted attempts at extending them, during the joining process, but they’re barely effective. Easier to cling to the rivets and pull yourself along with them. Rely on the knowledge of the tether, that’s the thing. Like abseiling: you know you’re safe, so you take chances. And then I’m in front of the comms relay: a hardware terminal, a receiver, a screen, some drives for the code, a few ports, a battery. A fragile, curious thing, to have it so separate from the rest of the station. As if they’re worried it’ll be tampered with.

Must be that they don’t trust us.

‘In place,’ I say to Desh, when I’m a few feet out; and he cycles the vents for me, so that they won’t hiss at me when I’m working on the relay; and then I’m past, pulling off the panel to get to the access points. I put the panel to one side, trapped so I can replace it, and Desh huffs.

‘Why are you bothering with that? Let it float,’ he says.

‘To where?’ I ask. ‘I’m not making rubbish. Nobody else is coming out here to pick it up after us.’

‘Nobody else is coming out here at all,’ he says.

‘I want to keep it tidy.’

‘Sure. Fine.’ Then he’s silent. I take out the app, low power drain, mirroring the loader I plugged into the station’s main battery; and I slot it into the access socket, turn it on. Wait a second, and there’s the screen, a direct copy of the one I’ve already plugged in. The tiniest fragment of lag, but not enough to worry it. A second out, and I doubt that ground control will notice that in a way that they won’t just write it off as interference.

As I’m testing the power, to check that the drain is small enough to be within parameters, I look out, into the darkness. We’re close enough and it’s dark enough that you can’t see us moving. From here, with no end in sight, we seem utterly stationary, a wall of nothing in front of me.

It's nothing at all, and so close.

I wonder if I could reach it with the suit's boosters. Are we that close to it? It is hard to judge. Hyvönen will know. There will have been probes sent, surely? Even if I couldn't see them, if I wasn't there for the launch. Seems like the sort of thing that he would worry about; his algorithm relies on that information.

It's broken now, of course. Change the rules of engagement, everything else changes with them.

Except.

There is something floating out there. Between us, between the station and the Anomaly. 'Do you see that?' I ask, and Desh mutters something I don't hear to somebody who isn't me. 'Desh, do you see this?'

It's hard to gauge scale against the Anomaly, but still: it is a body, I know that it is. A shape, cut out against the darkness. Reflective material wrapped around it.

It must be— The body.

'Desh,' I say, again. I move myself as close to the end of the station as I can, as close to the edge; and I lean out, one hand on the station, holding tight. 'Can you see this?' It's drifting towards me, from the Anomaly. It's slipped out, and it's coming now, through the nothing. Barely any speed to it, but a drift; as if it were accidentally nudged, that's all. 'Do you see it?'

There's a muffled noise through my earpiece, and then Desh is back. 'There's a message come through from Hyvönen. Says he wants you back inside.'

'Can you see this? There's something out there.'

'Where?' he asks. I look, right at it. Angling my head so that the camera in the helmet is aimed at it. 'I'm not seeing anything,' he says.

'Right there. It's floating, I don't know. Drifting.'

'Ali,' he says, 'are you sure that you're all right?' I ignore him. 'You zoned out back there, and ...' His voice drifts, as if he wants me to finish the sentence for him. I let go of the station, and I puff air out of the suit's boosters, pushing me towards the object. 'Ali? System says that you're hands free—'

'I know,' I say.

'What the hell are you doing?'

'Can you see it?' I let out more air, and the boosters fire faster, harder. I don't like the feeling, not even a little bit; but I stay steady, and the object

gets closer, closer.

So too does the Anomaly, of course, impossible to ignore.

‘Hyvönen says to come back in right now. Right this second.’

‘Do you see this?’ I ask again, but Desh doesn’t answer me.

A body, floating in space. Wrapped in fabric, puffy reflective fabric, like insulation; long, thin, perfectly still. The same thing I saw last night, I’m sure of it. Did they bring back Snipes? Maybe? Rescue him, bring him in, send him out, a proper burial, and they didn’t invite me, because they thought I couldn’t handle it—

‘Ali? Ali, respond,’ Desh says.

‘I’m nearly there,’ I say.

‘Get back here.’ Force in his voice, near panic; and then the sound crackles out and away. Too far from the station for the connection to hold. Air from the suit, and I finally am close to the body, close enough to see the seams in the fabric. Close enough to see that they are splitting, and through the gaps—

I reach it. Breathless, heaving in air. I reach the body. I pull on the silvery insulation fabric. I tug it aside, tearing it a little.

‘Snipes?’ I hear my own voice, as I peel back the bag. Skin, an arm. Blue-cold skin, frozen skin. Cracked and broken skin.

Not Snipes. None of his tattoos.

This is somebody else.

A yanking at my back, a tugging, wrenching me away from the body, heaving me through the nothing, retracting me.

‘No,’ I shout, ‘wait!’

‘—bringing you back in,’ Desh’s voice says, close enough to have made contact again.

I turn, grab the tether cable. It clips to the exos through a simple fastener: easy enough to attach in a panic; easy enough to detach, as well.

I wonder, as I unclip it, what I’m thinking, and I realize that I’m not.

I’m *doing*.

The tether cable quickly retracts, spooling, retreating back to the station. ‘There’s something out here,’ I say to Desh, and he barks something—

‘What the actual fuck are you doing? You can’t just fucking drift out there!’

‘There is something out here,’ I repeat, my teeth gritted, my voice dropped a few octaves. ‘Somebody.’ He’s not listening to me—

‘This is a direct order to you to return to base—’

I silence the comm. Flick it off, and keep moving, back towards the body. Closer, back to reaching distance.

My hand, pulling back the reflective fabric. Only light on it coming from me, from my suit. Nothing from the Anomaly. Does it even reflect? My gloves, large, fumbling, but it comes back. The body is damaged. Scarred. Broken. Whatever happened here, it was terrible.

I think of Cohen, in the dark, opening the door.

They said it didn’t happen. They said I didn’t see it, couldn’t have seen it.

I take a breath, but there’s nothing. My supply suddenly gone. I had thirty minutes, I know I did. This has been five, ten at most.

Click my comm back, and I shout, ‘I can’t breathe!’, and there’s already panic at the other end – I hear Desh shouting, and Sian’s voice, other voices I can’t make out – so I say it again, and they listen to me, then Desh speaks to me, his voice measured:

‘Okay. I think the disengaging with the cable shorted something. Stable breaths, okay? You’ve got air in the helmet, in the suit, you just can’t waste it, that’s all, okay? So stable breaths, don’t panic, don’t waste the air. Only breathe when you—’ Shouting behind him. Somebody running. ‘We’re coming to get you, so just hang on, okay?’

Hang on, he says; as if this is something I have practised for.

I think this must be panic tactics: normalize the situation, to regain calm and control.

Stable breathing. Breathe as if you’re not dying. Breathe as if there’s air to spare.

I turn to the station. The Zvezda airlock opening, a rush of air around the seam as it swings wide; and there are two suited people, coming to get me.

I think of the two suited people outside the airlock, doing whatever they were doing.

Here they come. Another breath, and I try to not panic, but the air tastes thin, feels thin, as I gulp it down; as if what I need can’t be quenched, can’t be fulfilled. And then it’s gone, and there’s nothing to inhale, nothing to swallow.

Desh’s voice in my ears, telling me to stay calm, but fuck him, he isn’t here, isn’t dying out here, no air, no air.

The suits are coming, their faces reflective domes; and I think, is that what I look like, as they come to me: just this mirror, glancing back, no

choking person here but behind the glass, the truth, as everything goes black; and the last thing that I think is that this is it, this is death, here it comes.

## PART TWO

*While no one railroad can completely duplicate another line, two or more may compete at particular points.*

**John Moody**

## 6

‘You fucking idiot,’ Mon says, as I come round. She’s standing over me, injecting something into an IV line, her other hand holding my wrist, her fingers pressed to my artery. She counts in her head as my eyelids flutter, and I focus on her. ‘I don’t know what you were thinking.’

‘You saved me,’ I say, half-joking, smiling.

‘Such a stupid fucking thing to do, detaching yourself like that.’ She finishes the count, writes something on her system. My medical records. ‘The suits aren’t meant to be overloaded like that. Something shorted the life support in there. When you pulled the tether, it fucked the systems. Now we’re one suit down.’

‘Why?’

‘We had to compromise it to get to you. Nobody goes out there in one of those suits without a tether, because it’s suicide. Jesus, Ali.’ She looks like she’s been crying. Red eyes. Puffed cheeks. ‘I thought you were going to be dead.’

‘I’m not.’

‘We didn’t know that.’

‘Who was it?’

‘Who was what?’

‘Out there, with me.’

She stops typing and stares at me. ‘Well, I was out there, for one. And Cohen, because we were closest when the call came, and somebody had to save your fucking life.’ Eyes back to the screen, fingers back gesturing strokes. ‘And you know how much I hate it out there, so you can probably also work out how much I wanted you to be not dead.’

‘There was a body out there.’ I say it as firmly as I can manage, but even as the words leave my mouth I wonder if I might have dreamed it. A body, bagged, wrapped in insulating sheeting, drifting out in space, somewhere near the border to this thing we can barely understand.

‘There was no body,’ Mon says.

So I describe it. Details, as much as I can muster; and as I talk through it, it sounds fantastical to me. Mon doesn’t nod, doesn’t break eye contact. A quiver on her lips that reads as concern; as her withholding words that might somehow break my fantasy, or break me apart. ‘I think ...’ She sits on the medical bed, next to me. I shift my weight away from her. ‘This is getting fucked up, now. This obsession with Snipes—’

‘What? No. This isn’t about Snipes.’

‘Of course it is. You watched him die. And you two had that connection or whatever the fuck you called it.’ She looks down. Hides her eyes from mine; wetness to them. Tears. ‘You do remember it, right?’

‘Of course I remember it.’ I can’t not. Visuals that burn themselves into your head like that don’t escape easily.

‘Well, I think this is about that. What you said Cohen did in Zvezda—’

‘This isn’t what you’re suggesting—’

‘—is pretty much exactly what happened when Snipes died. A door out there, opening? And now you’re seeing bodies out there where there aren’t any?’

The hiss of the airlock; the rush of the depressurization, the air gone, the outside, here it comes, faster, faster—

‘I’m not seeing things,’ I say. ‘This isn’t an episode.’

‘And I’m not saying that it is.’

‘Sounds like it.’

She stands up again. The frost between us, all of a sudden. She’s been my best friend here, my rock. We might not have been up here that long: an artificial bonding that feels stronger than anything we’ve left on Earth, simply by virtue of what we’ve been through together. And that’s before we even get to the personal similarities between my life and Mon’s. ‘No. I’m saying that the brain is a fucked-up thing we still barely understand. We’ve got the world, all the knowledge in the world, and it’s still a fucking mystery. It plays tricks, and it’s unpredictable. But you’ve been up here a while now, and it’s not exactly been low stress. Between Snipes dying, the Anomaly moving. It’s confusing. I don’t know. Shit goes weird when you’re in any confined space for long enough, let alone up here, away from everything else.’ The words hang, and then she laughs, a burst of stupid laughter. ‘That sounded so fucking stupid, I’m aware. But look, you know,’ she says, smiling, ‘*this* isn’t normal. None of this, up here, is normal. If you

want my opinion, what you thought you saw, what you're thinking you've been seeing? It's probably a by-product of going through all of this *shit*.'

'That opinion medical or personal?'

'Somewhere between the two.'

'Desh was watching my feed,' I say. Mon tilts her head back, exasperated.

'Jesus. Fine. You want to ask him? Because he said he didn't see anything either, and he was watching you the entire time.' She looks at her screen. Flicks through some pages. My file; I can see my picture there. We've never spoken about what's in it, not exactly; though she knows more about me than I know about her. Hazard of the trade. 'I'm going to ask you again: do you want me to prescribe you something?'

'No,' I say, immediately, even though it wouldn't be the first time I've taken pills, wouldn't be the first time I've stabilized myself with outside help.

That I have been stabilized.

But I wonder: because I can feel the insulating wrap around that body, even through the gloves. The memory of it is that strong.

She types something into her terminal. Behind her, the medicine synthesizer whirrs into life. The clattering of tablets into small packets.

I remember the queue up here the first day, when we had to get our *settling* tablets, to stop us from being sick or feeling dizzy because of the centrifuge. A line of people, out of the door, down the corridor; and I was next to Desh. That's how we bonded, first: feeling an unsettled gnawing in our bellies, and then this tablet that made it better; and joking with Mon, deciding to get dinner together, the three of us.

Only a few months ago, and yet it feels like so much longer.

'I don't want these,' I say. Mon takes the packet from the synthesizer and presses it into my hand.

'Well, maybe you'll change your mind. They'll help you sleep,' she says. 'It's hard, I know. The last few days. Anxiety, all that. You spoken to Theo today?'

'Yes,' I say, 'this morning.'

'Cling to that, okay? Cling to it. Talk to him more. I'll tell Hyvönen to give you as much access as you need.' She has that power? She could have done that before? 'I told you: this place, Ali. It's not healthy to spend this much time enclosed like this.'

‘I need fresh air. A garden or something.’ I smile, or try to. A half-smile.

‘Yeah, well. When they were prepping up here, I said we needed an arboretum, something that would simulate life back home. Like a proxy for normality.’

‘I didn’t know you had anything to do with those conversations.’

She’s taken aback. ‘They asked a load of us who were in contention for the place what we thought could be done to help ease transitions. People need connections with the ground, I said. That was my entire thing, really. You spend too long up here, doesn’t matter if we get to talk to home, doesn’t matter if we’re busy with work. Doesn’t matter how close that thing —’ She signals in the approximate direction of the Anomaly. ‘How close that is, none of it matters. There’s something about grass beneath our toes, and even the tiny bit of oxygen that we’d get from a garden. I think it would normalize us.’

‘You sop,’ I say. Mon laughs again.

‘My advice to you, personally and professionally, is that you take it easy. Hyvönen needs you for this,’ Mon says. ‘It’s imperative, Ali. We’re so close, now.’

‘Jesus, I know,’ I say. ‘But his plan; it’s not even really a plan, it’s more —’

‘Don’t. I don’t care. Doesn’t matter what the plan is. It’s the plan, and you’re a necessary part of it.’

‘He can use Cohen.’

‘Cohen’s a dull tool. You and I both know that. He’s a grunt, and you’re an expert. Don’t sell yourself short, you’re needed.’

‘Amazing how I meant nothing to Hyvönen when we first came up here, and now he’s acting as if I’m an integral part of this thing.’

‘Try being his physician. He barely says a word, and some days I think I’m the only thing keeping him alive. Or sane.’ She coyly covers her mouth. ‘Whoops. Shouldn’t have said that, should I?’

‘If anybody starts to question whether he’s insane, you can let that all be on me.’ I swing my legs around, sit up. My neck is stiff, and the headache momentarily reappears, as if I’m shifting it around through the very act of moving.

She shrugs. ‘I suppose we’ve probably got to give him the benefit of the doubt.’

She helps me to stand, and I dress, slowly. My head a little swimmy, but nothing that sleep won't fix. Sleep, a rest, Theo, all of those things I won't get enough of until I'm back down at home.

'I saw something out there,' I reiterate to her, as I'm getting ready to leave the room.

'And we'll deal with that when this is all over,' she says.

And then I'm in the corridor. I look out of the window. From here, I can see where I was: the end of the Zvezda module, the distance between it and the Anomaly.

There's nothing there; just space.

Desh does that thing where he doesn't look up, which isn't a surprise; but his voice lilts a little when I walk into his office. It is, in its own way, like being hugged, held, by somebody emphatic: a gesture of affection that's the most you can hope for.

'You're back on your feet,' he says.

I do a little curtsy. Just gently, just a very little one. 'I am,' I say.

'You scared the shit out of me. I'm not used to people going rogue.'

'I'm sorry,' I say, 'but I saw something.'

'Yeah, you said that when you were out there.' Now the eye contact, a parent telling a child off for their misdemeanours. 'I didn't see it. I don't know what to tell you.'

'Maybe it was too small. Too far away. You said yourself, the connection gets frazzled out there by the Anomaly.'

'That can happen, for sure.'

'Okay.'

My hands shake; I dig the bitten nails of my fingertips into my palms. 'You were recording it, right? Show me. Play it back, show me what I didn't see.'

His face is perfectly still as he turns a screen towards me. An image of the airlock to the outside. 'Play,' he says, and it moves, a video. The airlock opens, and the person – the pit of my stomach tells me that it's me, this is my camera, I am behind the eyes of this, a first-person view of what I was doing all along – leaves the station, moves around the outside of it. Puff of air, and the breathing, *my* breathing, through the speakers, and around the station I go. I watch myself clinging to the rungs, hauling myself over the exterior. His voice, Desh's voice, through the speakers:

*You there yet?* I watch as my hands sit, still, solid on one of the rungs; and then pull again, and I – the video – start moving.

*No*, I say, the me on the video says.

*Hurry up*, Desh says.

*You can come out here, if you like.* My voice is like an echo in my own head, as we talk, and on the video, I move. Around, to the Zvezda module, and then down. Except, of course, there's nothing, not a thing out there; just the Anomaly, essentially a wall in front of me, solid and yet not solid at all.

'What is this?' I ask now, but the words sound less like my voice than on the helmet camera recording, so confident and strident in its delivery.

'This is you, out there,' he says.

'You know what I'm asking,' I reply; but that's the end of the thread, no words from Desh, as I watch the screen and he looks away, awkwardly, as if this, any of this, isn't actually happening.

I am out there, flailing towards nothing. I tell him that I am going out to see it. The connection crackles, and severs; and then I spin back, pulled back towards the station, and I shout at Desh, but then I'm righted, free, there I am, off towards the body, the body that isn't there at all—

'You seen enough?' he asks, and the footage pauses.

'It was there.' My voice croaks the words.

*Snipes?* the me on the video asks.

Desh shuts his eyes. Sadness in them.

'This isn't that,' I say. 'You know me, this isn't that.'

'I know what I see, what I hear. So should you, Ali ...'

'Don't.' My hands, frozen on the screen, reaching out and grabbing for something that isn't there. Instead, they are reaching for the Anomaly. Swiping at space, for something. 'Play,' I say, and the video does. The swiping continues, and then stops, briefly. A moment, then they swipe at my helmet, trying to claw their way to oxygen, and through the speakers the sound of my gasps, my dredging up air from wherever I can manage to find it.

'You shouldn't watch this. Mon said she was worried about you—'

'She told me.'

'So you should listen to her. We're all worried about you, Ali.'

I turn around. I leave his room, the footage playing over and over in my brain: my memories, burned into something permanent, but not as I remember them. A discrepancy between the truth, and now these two

layers: what happened and what didn't happen, and I don't know which one is even close to being which.

After Theo was born, I had an episode; or, at least, that's the word that Xavier and the doctors used to describe it. The language that they introduced; a special word, just for me.

The birth itself was traumatic, one of those that reaches into double digits, where you start to wonder if you have to stop counting in hours, and need to start counting in days, with all the drugs in the world and all the pain that those drugs accompany; and through it all, in my memories, Xavier was there, holding my hand. In reality, he was worrying in the corridors, or asking the doctors to do what wasn't in my instructions, because he was so concerned about me. And when they brought out forms for me to sign that removed the liability from them in the event that I died – pages of them, handed over as I screamed, Theo's head turned wrong or my body turned wrong, one or the other, some form of wrong – Xavier was furious, insisting that they couldn't ask me to sign them, not there and then. Wait, wait, my pain, as Xavier fought with these men, like some contest of who had the biggest dick, who is more important here, who controls the fate of my wife, of *this woman*; her very life itself.

I signed the papers, because they were standing there and if I didn't, then what? Then what happened to me? After, nobody could give me the answer to that question, because it was such a hypothetical. The form is never not signed, they said, so they hadn't ever had to deal with the situation.

The doctor smiled when I asked him. What a strange question, he said. I was descending, regardless.

No: wait.

There is a lexis for this. A way of discussing what happened that is entirely framed in the language given to it by other people. So there was an *episode*, as Xavier put it, and then all the doctors who repeated the word after he described it to them, immediately filing it under their truth of what happened; or there was a *situation*, or a series of them; or perhaps more medical definitions, *post-natal* preceding words that reduced the difficulties of it all, *struggles* and *strains* and *incidents*, or the traditional *depression*, or the abbreviated *PND*, because of the shame, otherwise, of using the full name; as these doctors all discussed my issues with Xavier, before deciding on the best course of treatment – 'Of course, of course,' Xavier said, never

looking at me, but holding my hand, squeezing it as Theo slept in the sling across Xavier's chest. Those were the days that I was not to be trusted; the days when I was given prescriptions that I was not allowed to see, pills that I was not allowed to count, or given the responsibility of taking by myself.

I stood at the back of the pharmacy, staring at the shelves, as Xavier gave the prescriptions to the pharmacist and waited for the pills. He didn't look at me, but he smiled at the pharmacist. *You understand*, the smile said, *you know what these are for*.

Every night he left them on the table for me, next to my dinner plate. He never checked my mouth, but he watched as I swallowed them, as if I was a prisoner.

In bed, he would hold me, his arm around my body, and he would whisper, pretending that I was asleep and so this was his secret, his thing he couldn't bring himself to say aloud; but knowing I was not, knowing that I would hear every damn word.

'I was so worried you would have killed him,' he said to me, his voice this barely audible warmth parting the hairs on the back of my neck. 'When you do these things, when you lose control, I feel like he could have died, and then where would we be?' And then, quieter: 'I just don't know, Ali. Where do we go from here?' Asking the question to the ether, to the nothing. 'We brought Theo into this world, and you would have just ... removed him.'

I would cry, and hold my body perfectly still, mortuary still, so that he didn't know I could hear him; because hearing him meant addressing it, and he was pushing me down so much that I couldn't bear to address him, couldn't bear his accusations. The way that he would wrap his arms around Theo, holding the bottle to his mouth, pressing it down in an attempt to both feed him and keep him quiet; and he would look at me, stare at me, from the corners of his eyes. This accusatory glare for something that I hadn't done.

I would sleep in the bedroom that Xavier had all but abandoned – telling me that I needed my space, telling me what I needed – but then of course it wasn't sleep, not at all: it was fitful tossing and turning, it was wrapping myself in the thin sheet and attempting to cocoon for something like comfort; it was hearing Theo through the thin walls, crying his little wail, his lungs getting stronger over that period; it was feeling myself thin, my skin stretching tight pale over my bones, the blue of something inside me

beating its way to the surface as Xavier tried to feed me soups and broths, because my constitution, he said, couldn't bear more.

It was lying in the darkness and hearing banging from throughout the house; or, if he was being quiet, for Theo's sleep's sake, I would only hear the gentle thumps of the house moving under his feet or his hands. The thump of a cupboard; the creak of a stair. An old house, sighing and groaning in synchronicity with me; the signs of somebody else in there with me, some days the only thing that let me know that I wasn't alone.

Over time, the episode – because I didn't have a better word for it, so Xavier's language became mine, embedded in my brain, these formed structures of language that dug a well I couldn't hope to climb my way out of – began to fade. Not in a way that suggested that it didn't happen; more, like it was a television show that I half-watched, or a movie I saw on an aeroplane, vague and loose, the players there, the story there, but the details, the beats, ever more vague, looser and looser the more I tried to remember them.

Then one day I realized that I couldn't actually remember the truth of the moment at all, not in any real clarity. Instead, my memory was of Xavier recounting it – to the doctor he took me to see, to his parents, to our friends, to Theo's care worker at nursery, to *me* – and that was all. Like a photograph that acts as evidence of an event you don't remember going to, where you are smiling, but you know that you were being told to smile the entire time.

There is barely enough space to pace in our rooms, but I try, and manage it: a loop of it, around the side of my bed, the edge of the bathroom door, the door, the desk, the window. The easiest way to parse what's happened, to try and rationalize it.

There are, as I see them, two options here.

One, I am lying to myself. There was nothing out there. I am seeing things.

I am having an episode.

Or, option two, the others are lying to me. Mon understands drugs, understands medicine and sedation. Desh works with video, tampering it, altering it. In that scenario, Mon has drugged me, Desh doctored that footage, everybody's lying to me. I don't know why, but they are, or they could be.

My mother used to say, when I paced as a child, that I needed to pay them money for the carpets that I was burning a hole in. There are no carpets here for me to burn a hole into, so I can pace, pace, pace, as much as I like, the moulded floors in no danger of being worn into a hole; below me only metal, and then nothing at all.

I don't sleep. I stare at the tablets – or, rather, the canister for the tablets, a reusable white container – on the sideboard. Mon's prescription. I didn't ask her what they were or what they would do. I was just meant to take them. Just as I was meant to with Xavier; as I was forced to.

I can still feel the imprint of the tablets he would give me between my fingers; I can imagine the taste of the sugared coating on my tongue; the bitterness that came through when that coating was all worn away, as I kept them in there as long as possible, as they started to burn the inside of my mouth.

I sit up, pick up the tablets. There was a time when I would have taken them, and blindly, but I am reduced to my two options.

Would Mon lie to me? Would she know the truth?

And if they are lying, if they're lying to me specifically, what is the upside? What do they gain from it? In the scale of things, I am nothing.

Unless they are keeping something from me that could derail this.

I go to my files on the system. The last one, my video, from my helmet. There for me to see, and for anybody else, a permanent record of my dysfunction.

I press play: in the darkness of my room, it is almost like I am there in the moment, watching this thing happen clear as day.

The station churns; it *thumps*, from above me, from all around me.

*Thump, thump*, watching this thing, watching it again, and again.

*Thump*; like footsteps on stairs.

They are lying to me. There are secrets, and lies, and deceptions. When I accused Xavier of his plan, he accused *me*, spun the words around. Painted me as frothing, as uncontrolled. A rabid beast. I was so calm, but he escalated everything, tiny measures of control taken again and again.

I do not know how to find out what is happening if everybody is lying to me; but I know that I must, that I will.

## 7

I remember my first day up here with an almost startling clarity. It doesn't fade the way that memories usually do: it's omnipresent, burned in, so utterly important and defining that I feel as though nothing at all could shake it.

By the time we were near the station, four hours out from Earth, we were already exhausted. The atmosphere, the bodies – three shuttles jammed to bursting, older machines retrofitted to house the seats needed, everything done on a budget to make sure that nobody was left out of pocket – and the pressure, as we soared, held there, laughing and terrified in equal measure; and then, as the docking procedure began, we were expected to immediately compose ourselves. To pick ourselves up, and to begin.

But first, there was the window. As we filed out of the shuttle, a relatively closed environment, nothing to see, no sense of where we were geographically in space – as Desh said, his voice low, the joke private but shared to those listening in, we might as well have been on a soundstage in Burbank, like those old conspiracy theories suggested the Moon landing was – and to be faced with that window, curving around the donut of the station: massive, impenetrable, unsettlingly clear.

We all had the same reaction in the first moment, however: as it seemed to be darkened, a polished black glass or stone, rather than as transparent as a conventional window. It wasn't until Desh stepped closer and looked through it that he saw the truth. The Anomaly, of course, dominating the scene. Its own subtle horizon visible by craning your neck and looking in any direction other than at the Anomaly; and there, the planet below us, or the stars, depending on where you looked. They brought us up to sync with it being outside the station, so that we could immediately see it. Four hours of visibility every twenty-four hours; this was timed to perfection. And we lined up, one by one, to stare at it. Thirteen people on my shuttle, standing at the glass. Desh talked to me, I remember that very clearly.

‘I didn’t expect this,’ he said.

‘I don’t think any of us did. Not like this.’

‘I just didn’t know it would be quite so dark.’ A pause, then: ‘How did it get so dark?’

A question I couldn’t answer; that nobody could answer.

They moved us on, then, Sian acting like our shepherd, pushing us down corridors, sending us to our heads of department. Mine was Ashley Yu, who I knew from university, a few years above me. She was prodigious, which made her well liked to her face and hated behind her back. That didn’t change just because we were on a space station. Seven of us engineers – which, technically, I was, but the only digital engineer on the team – and she gave us our tasks, our roles. A variety of different jobs, ranging from the construction of air purifiers to cope with the sudden influx of people, to basic maintenance on the water filtration systems, to dealing with the comms array on the exterior of the station, to working on the shuttles and readying them for the trip back to Earth.

We would begin the next day, after normalization: queueing for tablets to help us cope with being up here, the constant series of pills that made us feel as though we were on solid ground; being talked through the central network system, how to access our files and messages and calling facilities, as if we had never used software like it before; being given uniforms from the store, because it was decided that it would be easier to handle the washing loads if we all wore pretty much the same thing (and because somebody somewhere, I’m sure, had a hard-on for *Star Trek*, as my engineering division shirt and Mon’s blue medical shirt attested). Then food, tables haphazardly organized. I sat with Desh, as he and I had agreed in our medicine queue, and we wrenched Mon to join us; and the food was the best it would ever taste up here, because the arrival of a shuttle meant relatively fresh ingredients, a special meal as if it was our last.

Then, Hyvönen came to speak with us. A full complement of people up there, fifty of us sardines packed into a tin can, all staring as this man who almost none of us had ever met personally walked out to speak to us. His posture perfect, his movements fluid and excitable. His delivery concise and clear; and as he ran his hand through his hair, we could all see the man that so many trusted to guide us through our discovery of the Anomaly, and our mission to stop it, or discover more about it, or move past it. To avoid being engulfed by it.

‘This is where we find ourselves,’ he said. ‘Space isn’t the mystery any more. It’s not the big beyond, it’s not a final frontier. Whatever enigmatic aspects it retained before this point have faded away in the wake of the real mystery: the Hyvönen Anomaly.’ He said it with pride. This is what’s named after him: something that swallows all light, that changes the world, that threatens to end us. ‘And all of you, you’re all vital. You’re all going to help with the discovery of what this thing is.’ A heady goal that many of us already knew to be untrue: because there were explosive payloads in the shuttles, devices that were unloaded to a special area in the base of the station. ‘We do not know how long we have, of course. The Anomaly moves, we know that much ...’ Here, he used the shark analogy – that the Anomaly waits, as if circling; then it suddenly pounces! It’s a miracle that I didn’t think, in that moment, how deadly he clearly knew it already was, and that destruction was clearly on his mind.

I remember Desh making the theme tune to that old shark movie under his breath after Hyvönen left. Dah dum. Dah dum. Dah dum, and I said, ‘He might hear you.’

‘He can’t hear a thing. Rumour is he’s falling apart.’ He turned to Mon. ‘You’ll know better than us about that.’

‘I can’t disclose any information about the health of any of my patients, you know that,’ she said. Unreadable face back then.

Desh turned to me. ‘She’s his personal physician, that’s what she’s not telling you.’

‘That’s not true,’ Mon protested. ‘I’ve worked with him, and up here, yeah, he’s got a slight monopoly on my time, if he needs it.’

‘When he needs it.’

‘Fine. But I’m not some secret keeper of the grail or some nonsense.’

‘Because he needs the grail, so that he can live forever! Boom,’ Desh said, sitting back. Smug. ‘I’ve seen videos of him. He’s nothing like that in real life.’

‘We’ve all seen videos of him. He’s like anybody else, good days and bad days.’

‘So, today’s a good day.’

‘If you like.’ She leant forward. Hush hush, everybody close. ‘I haven’t seen him for a few months, at least not in person. He kept coming up here while they were assembling this place, even though we all told him not to do it. Up, down, up down. We told him to stop, no sense in fucking himself

up any more than he already was. But, I don't know, he looks well enough? And that's sometimes all you've got to go on. Besides: easier to believe he's doing okay than not,' she said.

Dinner was followed by mass indigestion, followed by being talked through our pills: when to take them, how many to take. The importance of taking them at the right time, because there were so many other variables. The gravity centrifuge was relatively new – not a true centrifuge, just as it wasn't strictly speaking true gravity – and it really took some getting used to. A churning, constantly, in the background of your body. A sense that you were not quite fixed; not quite static. I stood in my bathroom, my hands clutching the moulded form sink, the taste of sick on my breath, the smell of cleaning products huffed in with every deep breath.

I sat at my desk after that, and I read my file. Interesting to see what somebody else knows about you, or what they've decided is worth knowing about you. My health issues were not on my personnel file, but I knew that they would be on my medical.

Xavier used to joke that I should tell potential employers. 'They'll definitely hire you if they know, because otherwise you could sue the shit out of them.' I laughed, but I don't think he was joking.

There were photographs on our systems, and you were meant to arrange them so that they appeared on the screens in the room. That's something I later found out Mon had implemented, as Hyvönen wanted nothing personal in the rooms – nothing of distraction, nothing that moved us away from our mission – but Mon was right; they kept me going. Putting the small videos of Theo on there, having him smile, spin, twirl, laugh, whatever he was doing, and having them play for me when the system picked up my gaze passing over them.

Then sleep. Or, my bed, and the sounds of laughter coming through the corridors. Wondering, for a moment, as the rooms were meant to be sound-proofed, to make sure we could work on individual shifts, or keep different clocks if we wanted to; but then I got out of bed, and walked the halls in my robe, to see. A room full of people – not the whole complement, but near as – and they cheered as I appeared, drink in their hands, pouring me one. Everybody, even those of us who might have gotten closer over time, or fallen further away. Cohen cheering me, I remember. Talking to me, flirting with me. Here is a story all about me, now please tell me one about you

while I listen, or at least while I stare at you and act as if I am absolutely interested.

And then Desh. And Mon, who joined us later, with her own stash of alcohol.

We ended the night sitting together, on one of the benches, discussing what we thought it might be like inside the Anomaly.

They were worried. They were worried, and they thought that they were right to be worried. But I told them, I had slightly different hopes. What if it wasn't death? What if it was something else entirely?

Mon and I stand at the window, watching Cohen outside. He's tethered, good boy, safety first; and he's working on the connectors on the old Zvezda dock, making them ready for *Ukonvasara*. Then he's done, puffing his way around; and then he comes right past the window, pulling himself up it, but he doesn't look inside at us. We can see him, though: his face red, condensation – sweat – sparkling on his skin.

'He doesn't look well,' I say.

'He's fine,' Mon says.

'Aren't we all.' I smile, even if Mon doesn't. 'Is there anybody Hyvönen wouldn't clear right now? Cohen's about six months of exercise away from being fit enough to run these ops. I don't remember him being this out of shape.'

'Needs must,' she replies. 'Anyway, if Hyvönen didn't clear you all, he'd have to go out there himself.'

'He can barely walk in here, let alone out there.'

'He's surprisingly nimble when he wants to be. You'd be surprised. He has ...' She pauses, for the word. Plucks it carefully. 'He has *needs*, let's say.'

'From you?'

'Fuck off! VR needs. Desh has made him some very specific fetvids. From *me*, Jesus. Fuck you.' She punches me on the arm. 'It's no fucking joke. I've had to see him naked.'

'You've seen all of us naked,' I say, and Mon smiles.

'Like a clinical spank bank comprised exclusively of people I know.'

'You're disgusting,' I say.

'Sure, fine, maybe; but not as disgusting as Hyvönen' She leans in conspiratorially. A secret, and this is how Mon always delivers them: we

are private in this. I lean in as well; I want her to think everything is fine, everything is normal. 'You want to know a secret?' she asks. I nod, I do, I do. 'Cohen's got a proper needle-dick.'

'Oh, shut up—'

'I'm serious. So thin. I mean, it's long, but it's so, so thin, like a pencil or something. Like some hooded 2HB.' We collapse into laughter, and Cohen takes that moment to glance at us, as if he somehow heard us through the thickened glass and his suit; so we stop laughing, suddenly po-faced and serious.

I am playing, but only a little. Even as I want to know the truth, I know Mon; and I know that she is my friend.

Through the glass, Cohen locks eyes with me. Right with me, and he stares at me, and I know it's not just some random glance, but actually a looking at me, a seeing of me.

And then he moves off, back towards whatever it is he's doing outside there.

He is out there alone. He will be coming back alone, if he comes back at all.

He stared at me, and I think of myself: staring at doctors, trying to tell them what Xavier was doing to me. Trying to use my eyes, a held gaze, to let them know: *I am not okay.*

'I should get some sleep,' I say. '*Ukonvasara* day tomorrow.'

'It's just like Christmas is coming.' Mon smiles at me. 'And Cohen, if Desh can get his new vid finished.' We collapse in laughter. This is what it's like. Both of us, this is what it's like. This is how I know she isn't lying to me: she is my friend, and she treats me like my friend. Our shorthand, unfakeable. You just know. She reaches for me, and she grabs my hand.

'Hey: you just need to promise me you'll be safe.'

'Safe?'

'Safe.'

'I wasn't—'

'You can't see anything else,' she tells me. 'This is too important. When we get down afterwards, then we can deal with whatever's going on with you. Okay?'

We are friends. She wouldn't lie to me.

'Okay,' I say.

I watch as Cohen starts to head back inside. My window of opportunity, here, now, to get him alone.

I tell Mon, again, how tired I am. Again, how weary, falling asleep on my feet. Bed, now; and she kisses me on the cheek, and squeezes me. Pulls me close to her, as if we're sisters, and she holds me for longer than she ever has before; and I leave, waving, heading to my bedroom. Watching as she heads to hers; as her bedroom door shuts.

I double back. I watch through one of the smaller windows as Cohen winds his way back towards the airlock. He's talking to somebody over his comm, probably Desh, and he's clutching an OmniTool, which means he's been welding, joining. Doing the final parts of the prep. I watch him put it back into the casement outside, then hit the button for the airlock, head inside.

I'm waiting. He steps into the changing room, and he doesn't look surprised. He doesn't look much of anything, just stares at me, standing there in his suit. He doesn't take off his helmet, doesn't take off his boots. He stands there, looking every little bit the astronaut, and it's as though something ticks in his brain. A twitch in his features, reminding me of my father, after one of his many, many strokes. Cohen's lip trembling now, and he starts to cry.

Back in Zvezda, I watched him dying.

I watched him as he tried to, what? Kill me?

Maybe, I think, the most fleeting momentary thought, my ideation is predictive. I am a psychic, a character from a fantasy.

But I am not; and he is here, now, and he is going to end his life.

A second time. End it a second time.

Only, I do not understand how.

He looks at me, and he smiles, this strange weak smile, a smile of backing away, of retreat.

'Wait,' I say, but he doesn't. Instead, he puts his hands together and wrings them, somewhere between a prayer and *out, damned spot*, and steps backwards.

'I have work to do,' he says. 'I need to work.'

'Did I see you? Before, did I see you?' I ask him. He reaches up, for his helmet, or for his head beneath it; and he paws at the glass.

'No,' he says. But I can tell from the tremor in his voice he's not even sure about his answer. Something stopping him committing.

‘I was in here, and you were outside. You were outside, trying to kill yourself.’

‘That doesn’t sound right,’ he says, but his voice is lying, his eyes are lying.

I remember him slamming his helmet into the porthole.

The dead eyes behind it.

‘Why did you want to die?’

‘I can’t remember,’ he says. ‘I wish I could, I really do, but it’s like a dream. It’s like ... I remember a birthday, and I remember feeling pleased it was a birthday, but nothing about it. Not the cake, not the presents. It’s this empty feeling. If I think of why I wanted to die, it’s like it’s empty.’ The most he’s spoken. His voice slow, cracked. He tilts his head forward, like some old exercise – put your chin on your chest – and he speaks, slow, into his suit. ‘I wish I could remember what they know. We are never the same. None of us are ever going to be the same, we’re not the same, we’re not the same.’ A twitch, in his face; a righting of his brain, a changing of his temperament, as one might flick a light-switch. ‘I was making the brace for the *Ukonvasara*,’ he says, ‘and now I’m back inside.’ A running commentary. Making sense of whatever’s happening to him. ‘But I was at the airlock, in the, the, the—’ The words sticking, a loop of something caught on his brain. Then, finally, he spits, forcing the words out, ‘the Zvezda module. I was in the Zvezda module, and I saw you, and I was going to the *ending*.’

‘The ending of what?’ I ask him.

He tilts his head inside his suit. The helmet doesn’t move; just his head. ‘You’ll understand,’ he says. ‘You already understand. I wanted to tell you, because I thought—’ I step towards him, and he steps back, his hands behind him, reaching for the wall, for support. ‘I thought, maybe you could save yourself. If I told you, you could save yourself. You could have joined me out there, stopped being a part of this.’

I turned the handle; I tried to let him in.

Didn’t I?

‘I’m not a part of this,’ I say. ‘I’m trying to work out what’s going on. I’m trying to get home.’ My own voice is so quiet, I realize.

He shakes his head. ‘You’re a bigger part of this than anybody.’ He turns, and he steps back inside the airlock. I grab him, and he snaps my arm off him. His eyes wide, desperate. ‘I haven’t been here, and now I am. I was

dead, and I am not dead. If something ends, it can't be real when it carries on,' he tells me. 'And you're here, you're here, right now. Talking to me. You are here, and I am here, but I died; so there's no way that any of this is real.'

His hand slams the button to cycle the airlock. I hit it again, cancel, cancel, but it doesn't work.

The cycle is protected, so that we can't have a vacuum inside.

The external door opens. He isn't clipped onto anything, no safety cable. Did I do this? Did my confronting him do this?

This is just like Snipes.

There are differences, I'm sure. I just cannot see them, until they happen.

Cohen's outside the airlock. The view, the same through the window.

Like *déjà vu*—

'Cohen,' I say, lamely, pathetically. I should shout, I tell myself, but there's a moment where I want to know how this plays out.

If I watch him die again, here, now, clear as day, nobody can say that he didn't.

That is a definite truth.

Fuck. *Fuck*.

'What's happening?' Desh's voice, through my comm. 'Ali, what's happening in there? The airlock's open, right? What the fuck is going on?'

'Cohen's gone out,' I say.

'Cohen's gone—' He pauses. 'He came back in. What do you mean, he's gone out?'

'I don't know,' I say, but that's not true at all. His body is limp. Liquid, fluid, drains from anywhere it can; and he drifts in the trajectory that he started, away from the station, away from the Anomaly, towards Earth.

Cohen's shoulders are slumped forward, a bad posture of death, of tensing muscles. He twitches, but it's almost imperceptible through the suit, unless you're watching him as intently as I am right now; and even then, I can't be sure of what I'm seeing, not even a little bit.

By the time they're ready to go out to him, he is too far away for boosting with tether cables; too close to the Anomaly to be safe without them. I sit on Mon's medical bed once again, feeling the familiarity of it under my thighs, and I watch as Mon talks with Hyvönen and Sian; as Gibson and Berry stand in the corridor, waiting for their orders, suited and booted and

ready to break all the rules to rescue the body of their now-definitely-dead friend. They are distraught; they rage, and snap, angry at losing him. They snap at Sian, who placates them, and try to get to Hyvönen, who stands back, regards them as if they are wild animals and he's a safari tourist: *this is not what I expected of them.*

Desh comes in and sits next to me.

'I smell a mutiny,' he says. 'Never seen them like this. Usually they're so fucking placid. Maybe Cohen was like a dummy or something, kept them quiet.'

'Are you lying to me?' I ask him, and he seems startled. A few small utterances, what, no, and then he goes quiet.

'No. I mean, no. But there's a lot we can't talk about,' he says, 'you know that.'

'That's not what I asked.'

'I know. But *you* also know that there's a lot I can't talk about.'

'You can tell me if you've lied to me about anything.'

'Jesus Christ—'

'So that's a yes.'

He stares, then, at Mon and Hyvönen. Their discussion heated, or getting heated. Mon's always emphatic, and Hyvönen so restrained. It's hard to tell which way it's swinging, no real give in either of their faces. 'We've all lied,' he says. 'Even you've lied, Ali.'

'No,' I say, but it's true, because of course it is. Restraint is a form of lie, in so many ways. When Mon asks me if I ever have those feelings again, I tell her that they never quite go away. When she asks me how strong they are, I pull back, hesitant. Nothing is worth telling that truth for.

'It's a hazard of the job.' Desh sounds resigned.

'Cohen said he killed himself. Or he tried, before—'

'I don't—'

'Why did you keep it from me? He must have been rescued the first time. Saved. But he couldn't remember it, not properly.' Desh is quiet as it dawns on me. 'Hyvönen's machine. The memory machine. You erased his memory of that—'

'Okay, so now you sound nuts. You hear yourself?' I remember Xavier asking me the same question, once. 'This is nuts. There's no fucking conspiracy, Ali. All we want is to get this done, and to get home. Simple as that.'

‘There isn’t anything going on up here you don’t know about.’

‘You’d be amazed,’ he tells me. He stands up. ‘Please know this: I’m a friend, a true friend. If I *have* kept something from you, it’s because I’m doing it for you. Please know that.’

He walks out of the medical room, and I’m alone, then. Me, the machines, the drugs, the window; and vague attempts to read Mon’s lips as she leans closer to Hyvönen.

And then they’re both still, as if they’re listening to somebody else talking to them; where neither of them has anything to say, and they’re just breathing their way through the silence.

Cohen’s funeral is hastily arranged and hastily performed. Snipes’ was done the day of his death, sending him out there into the darkness. Pushed, into nothing; his body in a thick black body bag, meant for preservation. Decaying inside it, forever, among the stars. Wrapped in a flag, because he was military, once.

We don’t have Cohen’s body, so we send an empty capsule, wrapped in a Federation of British Nations flag, rather than the Stars and Stripes.

I spoke at Snipes’ funeral. Here, Cohen is represented by a speech from Sian – Hyvönen’s words, we’re told, in her sonorous voice, but he isn’t feeling well, or he’s otherwise engaged, no real excuse offered, and nobody bothers to push for one. Instead, we listen, and we say a prayer in whatever form we might pray – to a god, to Cohen, to ourselves, our loved ones, our pasts and our futures – and we look at the darkness and we think, because there’s no body here for us to work with, nothing for us to cling to. Gibson cries, and he starts to say something, but then walks away. All of us broken a little by losing somebody, even if we weren’t close. Especially, I suppose, if we were.

And then there were seven: me, Mon, Desh, Berry, Gibson, Sian, Hyvönen, seven of us; and there’s no way I can be mistaken about that.

Everything happens so fast up here. There’s no time for dwelling, especially not now, not with a deadline, and we have so many. Time, money, the Anomaly. Sleep is curious, when there’s such a tight sense of time: because why am I wasting it? Why am I sleeping, when I know that, one way or another, there is finality coming?

When Snipes came up here, I watched him disembark, and I smiled, and he smiled back. And we talked, that day, that night. Just chatted. Got drunk enough to let our guards down, until it was dark, or simulated dark in the lights. 'I should go to bed,' he said.

'Yes,' I replied. 'Ditto, I mean.'

We walked to my room. It was closer, and he said that his was cold, which I understood, tucked away up there. 'That your son?' he asked, as my door slid open; and I turned, as if Theo would be standing there, framed by light

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I remembered the photographs. 'Yes,' I said. Theo ran, and fell, tumbled to the grass beneath his feet, laughed, and my hand reached for his stomach, his belly, tickled him until he burst out this expulsion of noise, halfway to a scream, but a grin spread across his face.

'He's cute. He looks like you,' Snipes said.

The next morning, Snipes sent me a note, a physical note, slipped under my door, telling me that he was dying; and so it was probably best if we didn't enter into anything. I read it while I waited for my call with Theo to connect.

Theo's voice, his joy. There I was, here I am.

Snipes' note in my hands, crumpled, as I spoke with my son.

I said to him, at breakfast, 'Are you sure?' Just that.

He said, 'I don't want to get close to anybody. Not if I can help it.'

Not if I can help it.

I lie in bed, in the half-sleep before you open your eyes, when you need to pee, but the act of moving will tear you so neatly from what remains of your rest that you put it off as long as possible; and I think about Cohen. He said that he should have been dead; he said that I am a part of whatever he was going through. Mon and Desh both lied to me, or withheld; or, if I am kind, are naive, somehow, as lost as I am. But here, in this moment, eyes still shut, I know that simply cannot be the case.

It's only when my system beeps at me that I finally open my eyes, severing that tether to sleep; that I throw myself from bed. How much my hours seem dictated by needing to sleep, then something disturbing that sleep. This morning, it's a link from Desh. Camaraderie in the language, the

title *For Ali's Eyes Only*. You know who had me make this for him. It will play once and then self-destruct. An encrypted file attached.

Desh, sharing something with me. A truth.

It begins with the pink of flesh, and a groan, a man's groaning. I turn the volume down as the picture reveals itself: pornography, soft-focus. The stars of it, two men, two women. The women generic composite porndolls, the men carved Adonises, except with Hyvönen's face. Both of them the same, nothing to distinguish them. These men in their prime, the women being used.

The file ends, and it deletes itself, just as Desh said it would.

I message him. Tell him it's disgusting.

He replies that I don't have to tell him that, he knows the horror he's been forced to create.

I sit still for a few moments, letting that wash away. Not the secret I wanted to be a part of. And then I look at the clock, and I see that it's my slot to call Theo; and as I jab the button to call him, I make my hair straight, my face. I look at myself in the screen, reflecting my own image back at me. I look tired. I look old. I always think I look worse than I do when I picture myself. The memory, the reality, not even close to matching up.

Ring, ring, and he answers. He's been waiting, and he doesn't look disappointed that we have so little time: just thrilled that I am there at all.

'Mama!' he says, leaning forward, pursing his lips to kiss the screen, and I do the same.

'Are you okay?' I ask, and he nods. He's not wearing that godforsaken necklace, I see. His neck clean, clear of the rope, of the knot. I wonder if his father's done that for my benefit, or if Theo did it of his own accord.

My dream: that he's somehow able to see through the nature of the Anomaly, able to see that worshipping it is not worth the breath.

'I miss you. I saw Grandma,' he tells me, and I smile.

'She's okay?'

'She's fine,' he tells me. He looks to one side, and the connection flickers, for a moment, the reception always worse since we've gotten closer to the Anomaly – and then it buffers.

'No,' I say, but it doesn't matter, because it rolls—

He's back. 'I love you, Mama. I miss you. When are you coming home?'

'A couple of days,' I say, the words blurted out. 'So soon, baby.'

‘I miss you,’ he says. He does that thing with his lip, bottom over top, mock sadness that signifies real sadness, the emotions extreme so that other people can understand them.

‘I miss you too,’ I say. ‘Mama has to go now, do her work. But two days, sweetheart.’

‘I miss you,’ he says, again, fuck, a fucking knife into me – because I left, I left, I came up here, my choice – and he turns, and he waddles off, leaving the camera on. I watch him walking off, until the video cuts.

Every time we speak, it’s so similar; and yet each time breaks me all over again.

‘Two days,’ I say, aloud, to myself.

I lie back on my bed, and I stare upwards. A picture of Theo and myself at an angle, near the foot of my bed. This is us playing, as I chase him across grass and he screams in joy – *no, Mama!* – and I scoop him up and tickle him, and he arches his back in pleasure, more laughter erupting. I don’t remember this exact moment, but that doesn’t matter. So many occasions like it, so many times that I was there with him.

The call was so short today. So short, so painfully short.

Nothing to do but get to work. No room to dwell.

I sit up, and I read Hyvönen’s message, the one that woke me up, that I ignored; and my world comes crashing.

I march through the station, not even bothering to call again. My fist beating on his door, and there’s silence from behind it, as if he’s not home. But I have checked the system, and I know he’s in there, and Sian with him. I press the intercom on the door, and it rings out.

‘Yes?’ Sian asks.

‘I got his message. Let me in,’ I say.

‘He isn’t ready to see anybody.’

‘Let me the fuck in, or I am not working any more,’ I say. ‘He can tell me to my face why my stay is being extended.’

The connection is dead between us, but I imagine Sian sighing – her thin voice wisping out her resignation – and the door opens. The room’s empty, and she’s standing in the middle of it, a host waiting to greet the guests at her party.

‘He’s having his treatment,’ she says.

‘He’s been well enough to send me a message already,’ I reply.

‘It comes and goes in waves.’

‘You enjoy this, don’t you? Keeping us here, like this?’

She looks shocked. A moment of pure surprise, as if nothing could genuinely be further from the truth. But she doesn’t say a word. Instead, the *swoosh* of the door to Hyvönen’s lab, and out he steps.

His head is ringed by the headpiece of his memory machine, a twist of wires and cables and pads to keep it in place. A crown of thorns, sitting flush with his temples. His eyes are wild, raging, and he races towards me, hobbling but with the speed of a man who’s forgotten how fast he can actually move, his limbs looking disconnected somehow, or as if they should be causing him pain. Drool on the side of his mouth, and he spits as he speaks:

‘You, you. Always coming here, always asking me, probing, controlling me. Which one of them are you? Which one?’

‘I’m Ali,’ I say, stepping backwards just the tiniest amount, a shuffle, really, as he gets closer. The cable connecting the crown goes taut, and he stops, a dog on a lead. ‘Allanah Becker.’ What has been taken from him? What memories has he had removed? I’m not used to this; I don’t know where in his cycle he is.

‘Miss Becker,’ he says. ‘Allanah, Allanah.’ Like he’s trying my name on his tongue, for fit. ‘Thank you for responding so swiftly to my request.’ His voice is parroting the language. I have heard these words before, I think, when I first came here to see him. Now, the intonation is incorrect, but the words continue to flow, no hesitancy, no pause for conversation. ‘You are an engineer, one of the best we have got. I need you, you see, to help me with a mission. Or maybe—’

‘You’ve already asked me this,’ I say.

He blinks back something – not tears, just moistness, but are the two actually all that different? – and he reaches for his head. Swats at the crown, and it falls down. His temples charred grey ash from the process, and he shuffles forward. Medical gown, the flaps open at the back, the ties dragging on the floor. An old, old man.

‘I have asked you,’ he says. ‘I have already asked you. And you agreed to assist me. So we are in this together, aren’t we? That’s what we have already discussed.’

‘Yes,’ I say. ‘But you messaged me, and you said that your plans have changed.’

‘No. There are no changes.’ He stares at me. I have lost him, that’s immediately apparent. Sian grabs him, her arm wrapped around him, and she turns him to face the medical room again, starts to guide him back there.

I think of my father, sick, his final days. I did not see them. I saw him, instead, as he careened towards those days, in his dressing gown, his slippers, on the lawn of a facility that my mother and I couldn’t afford so we sold her house, because the indefinite nature of those places felt so terrifying. I think of him standing there, stock still, swaying, and my mother saying, ‘He could live for decades yet,’ and me praying to a god I couldn’t honestly say that I believed in that he didn’t, that his end was swift and merciful; and if it had happened right there, right then, a face-first fall to the grass, I would have cried but with a kind of relief, as well.

‘Get out,’ Sian says.

‘He summoned me,’ I reply.

‘He doesn’t have a fucking clue what he’s doing,’ she snaps back.

‘He sent me a message saying that everything’s changed, that he’s extending my service here.’

‘What?’

‘He said I would be here longer. Weeks longer.’

Sian lets go of the old man and steps towards me. Her voice hushed, so that he can’t hear us. ‘The Anomaly is days away. He isn’t extending anything. The mission is ending. There’s no extension.’

‘So why did he send me that message?’

‘Look. Look at him.’

I do.

We both do.

My father, forgetting who I was, who my mother was; telling us to leave, or he would call the police, furious, indignant; as I said, I am going up to space now, and I thought that I would never see him again, and yet still his indignation, still stamping his foot, coming free of his slipper, treading on the sun-baked grass, the soil on the sole as he stamped, again and again. We watch Hyvönen for the longest time, standing where he is. He holds his hand up, and he counts on his fingers. One, two, three. Something ticking over in his brain. He looks back at us, then away, to his whiteboards. Reads them, or stares at them, trying to parse them. I don’t know if he’s succeeding or not.

‘Do they know he’s like this?’ I ask.

‘They?’

‘At home. On Earth.’

She sighs. ‘I can’t talk about that,’ she says.

‘You think I won’t find out eventually?’

She won’t look at me. ‘They know, or they suspect. This is him gone rogue, now. Funding this himself, now, so they don’t much care what he does.’

‘He said I was helping him with a secret.’

‘He likes the mystery. The idea that he’s working outside boundaries. That’s a constant.’

‘A constant.’

‘You know what that thing does?’ She nods towards the machine in his room; walks to the crown, on the floor, and picks it up. Dances it around her hands. ‘It puts memories back in his head. His synapses have failed, and they can’t hold data – memories – any more. But they’re all stored on that thing. Nearly eighty years of knowledge, of people and places and things, shoved onto fabricated materials, because his brain can’t cling to the real thing any more. Every morning, we refresh him. And until that point, he’s ...’ She stops talking. I’ve never seen Sian, not like this. A human being, not some automaton.

Hyvönen has stopped as well. No shuffling, and his eyes are shut, not staring at the boards any more.

‘Does he know?’

Sian smiles. ‘Most days, yeah. Some mornings, it’s like he’s ... Well, he’s not that man any more. He’s not Tomas Hyvönen, he’s not a scientist. He’s a kid, and he asks for his brother, and he ponders about this thing in the sky that he wants to discover.’

My father, screaming at me, that I am not his daughter; that I am somebody else, taking her place, because he simply cannot remember what it is that I look like.

‘Does that machine of his erase memories?’ I ask.

‘No,’ she says. ‘It puts the memories back as they were at a point before. Erasing’s too dangerous. Resetting ... That feels like it’s manageable. For him, at least.’ Even as she says it, I think about Cohen’s memory; and I think about my own. ‘Everything on the system, it’s all work data. Nothing he doesn’t need. Synapses can’t be repaired, and they can’t be replaced. So

all he's got is the version of himself that we can cram into what's still working. It's all work, no play.'

'And that makes Jack a dull boy,' I say, not really knowing where it comes from. Sian smiles, though.

'I'm his carer. That's my job. I replenish his memory in the mornings, and by the evenings I'm wiping his backside.'

'I'm sorry,' I say. 'My father had something like this. He was gone, by the end.'

'So did mine,' she tells me. A personal breakthrough, of a sort. The first Sian has shown me behind the curtain.

'If you ever want to talk,' I hear myself saying, and I mean it.

She doesn't react. No nod of nicety. 'If he messaged you, he was dreaming it, or making it up. Maybe it's a message he sent before, and he got confused. That happens.'

'So I'm going home tomorrow?'

'That's the plan,' she says. 'Desh brought the *Raft* up into place earlier, and we're going to be bringing *Ukonvasara* into place later tonight for Hyvönen to get his alterations made. You all prepped?'

'The relay's getting there, the blocker. And I've got work to do on the files, but that won't take that long. I can run you through it, if you want.'

'No. No, it's fine,' she says. 'Everything checks out from the cam footage. Before—'

'Yeah,' I say.

We stand and watch him for a few moments longer; and then he walks back towards the machine, in his room, and he sits on a stool next to it, and he stares at Sian. A look I've seen before, in Theo, desperate for food, or a toy, or attention; not knowing how else to get it but to be there, to make himself known, to wait, impatient and suddenly attentive.

I hear the moaning of the station, like bones, creaking into place. I know that anything constructed settles – I remember when we moved to a new apartment when I was a kid, a brand new building, and my mother and father used to say that the creaking was just like when my father sat in his chair and his knees cracked: it was the building finding its place in the world, just like everything else. The station's been built a while, and surely it's done all the settling it's going to do. The pressure on it, maybe; the centrifuge, spinning itself harder for some reason.

I sit in my room by myself, reading about the code for the ship on a tablet, and the creaking comes from all above me. A few moments where, from the sound of it, the station is closing in on itself: pulling tight, pulling close.

*Thump. Thunk.* Moving above me, travelling—

Xavier's feet on the hallway floorboards, outside the bedroom I slept in, his weight near the door, listening to see if I had fallen asleep yet.

The footsteps echoing, almost; this faded track above me, and I walk in their wake. Somebody moving about above me, in *Zvezda*, or the servers. Or the Imminent Room.

But they were above my room, I'm sure of it.

To hear the footsteps, I try and mute every other noise. The swish of my door sounds so loud as I listen, as I tread softly, as softly as I can manage, out to the donut; then I follow the footsteps around, towards the door that leads up there, to *Zvezda*, the servers, the Imminent Room.

I try the door. It's locked. It twitters at me, a negative beep.

The footsteps cease. They're done, standing – I think – above me; at the other end of the ladder to the servers. I push the door again, to see; and the negative beep again, an earcon of denial that feels personal, even if I tell myself that it's not, because of course it's not, there's simply no way it can be.

Back to my room. Nobody else here. No sound above me; nothing tracking.

Desh messages, the exact moment my door shuts behind me.

'I'm bringing *Ukonvasara* around. You ready?'

'Yes,' I say.

He doesn't say anything more.

Xavier stands outside my room, and he listens to me breathing, in the dark.

I stand at the window in the donut, and I watch as the ship is manoeuvred into place: lifted up to be attached to the airlock in *Zvezda*. It has been kept below, at the base of the station, locked into place like some sort of limpet, stuck to the side of us. It needs to be taken to *Zvezda* so the *Raft* can be kept at the main airlock; sensible, as the traffic to board one will be far greater than the other.

Once, these sorts of ships were purely for speculation: smaller research craft, like modified planes, designed to get up past the atmosphere, skirting the space between Earth and the Anomaly. Then we covered them in cladding and plating to make them look the part, even if only piecemeal. Engineers stopped building anything designed for actual exploring, and we shoehorned things into place instead. Build up on top of it, covering it up, going over and over until the original bones are impossible to see beneath the shell.

This one isn't painted with its name. The serial number has been covered over, a plate of thick metal patchwork where it would have been. The whole ship ramshackle, as if built from pieces left lying around. A triumph of engineering, in its own way: that this piecemeal craft is going to hold, to go into that darkness and do what it's going to do. Not built from one piece, not printed out and glossed to a sheen; more, it exists, and its existence alone is a miracle. Manufacturing too slow to get the craft to where we need them to be, so pieces taken from wherever they could be found. Assembled by professional repo men, rag and bone men.

I remember our launch: sitting in my chair, slanted back. Repurposed chairs from aircraft, from those really high-end 797s that they made at the start of the last decade; all of them locked in halfway-back upright positions, all with extra straps, as if it were some sort of rollercoaster. Lie back, belt up, and wait, as the others all got in. Talking to the people around you about what to expect. We'd seen the VR simulations of the station, to get to know our way around a little better, but those things always made me sick, and I refused to take pills in order to play a game. There was a screen in the cockpit, a screen we could barely see; but it was showing the broadcast of the launch footage as it happened. A strange moment, like looking at yourself, or thinking of yourself, in the third person.

*She* is on the craft; *She* is waiting for launch; there *she* goes, up to the space station. Even when we docked, *she* was there, disembarking; the footage broadcast back to Earth, there to see as I walked past the camera, and there *she* was.

The door to Zvezda opens for me this time, of course it does. I climb upstairs, to lights everywhere, to servers whining and humming. The only light not on from the Imminent Room. Dark inside. Dark from the edges of the door, like negative light, somehow—

‘Good, you’re here.’ Sian, from the airlock to Zvezda. I step inside, and the others – Berry and Gibson, at least, red-eyed and mourning their friend, wingmen in need of a leader – are already in there. Standing, it seems, until I appear; then it’s as if they’re engaged suddenly, suddenly activated, doing their work.

Xavier used to say that I was paranoid.

The airlock at the far end is now open – where once I saw Cohen’s face at the window, his hand on the glass, it’s not just pulled back, fastened. The maw, instead, opening onto the ship. *Ukonvasara* is curious inside: empty, but not. Lived in, the parts reappropriated from so many other ships. I stand in the doorway as the others grumble their way to their jobs, and I find myself lost for a moment in my own memory of getting on board this ship, or one just like it, when I came up here. Trying to place the seats in the flooring; in the boltholes that have been made, then emptied, then filled or covered over. Trying to picture exactly where I would have been sitting, when it was my turn.

‘Start it up,’ I say.

‘You do it,’ Berry replies. His voice bitter, full of rage; as if Cohen’s death was my fault. He is standing by the panel. His hand closer than mine.

‘The fuck is wrong with you?’ I ask him. I push past him. My hand on the panel, and it scans me. I give it permission, and it lights up. This needs to be done live, otherwise the system won’t boot properly. We need to cut the limiter, then Desh can upload his code: a piece of software that’ll tell ground control that the ship is still under their control, even as it’s not. Freeing it, even while lying that it’s still absolutely theirs.

A strange, dirty hack job of a technical achievement.

Berry lifts the panels, wrenches them up, and exposes the guts of the ship. ‘You ready,’ he says, less a question and more a statement, so I kneel down, slide into the space between the exterior and the hard floor. For the longest time the ships have been two shells: an inner and an outer. Where the wires run. It’s been argued that it isn’t the easiest way to build a ship, that it’s a waste of space; but having somewhere to hide the guts, the working, feels paramount to me. Nobody wants to see the working, I used to say. Nobody wants to see the wires.

I flick my light on, and the wires are chaotic, a total mess. Cables that run all the length of the ship, that run top to tail; cables that aren’t even used any more, that are cut off and clipped and tied, but that were too much

hassle – I can only assume – to remove, so they're here, like remnants of a previous civilization in the bowels of the ship only years before our own. I find the cable that links the system to the remote system, to the override, then I speak to Desh.

'You got the limiter fake-out ready?'

'Yup.'

'I'll cut, then you run it. We're fast enough, they won't even notice.'

'Running it now.'

I climb back up, into the ship itself. 'What error code have we got?' I ask Berry, standing at the terminal.

'Nothing,' he says. I lean over: *Enter coordinates*, it says on screen.

'It's not a diagnostic. It's just accepted it.'

'So?' Desh asks. Listening in.

'It shouldn't. I should have to okay it.'

'I did that my end,' Desh says. His voice in my ear, so close it's like I can feel his breath. 'Shut her down, let's get back to work.'

So I do. I shut *Ukonvasara* down, and I turn off the power.

*Goodbye Ali*, it says on screen, as the colour blinks to black.

I have such ideation of death, only occasionally, but such overwhelming ideation.

I imagine myself in these scenarios, and up here it's worse, so much worse, because the opportunity presents itself so easily.

This is not a death-wish. It's not a suicidal urge, despite what Xavier presented to the courts in his own attempts to ruin me. It's a clear and simple realization of visuals inside my head, repeatedly, of how I *could* die. Not how I should, or how I want to, but how I could, if it were to happen.

Choking, on a piece of something unappetizing.

Slipping in the shower, one of the plastimoulded fittings being just the right height and angle for me to smack my head onto, cracking my skull, blood spilling out onto my feet, pooling around my body as my heel blocks the drain, and the water and blood mingle around my body, breaking out over the edges of the shower, onto the bedroom floor; and then flowing, to the hallway, the donut, where somebody finds it, a trail of pale pink that they can't help but follow.

Out there, in the darkness, coughing, sputtering, unable to breathe, even as I try to; and then into the Anomaly, where God knows what happens, but death is inevitable, and there is no coming back from it.

When I was a child, I would leave my house at night and walk towards the back of our garden, the edge of the perimeter; and I would stand there at the fence, and wonder what might be beyond it. Out in the darkness, because there was nothing to light the land but the moon and the stars, no ambient light, no bleed from our house when my parents were in bed; and I would stand there and wonder what could be out there, in that darkness. A killer, a wolf, something only imaginable in horror films that I stayed up to watch long after my parents thought that I was in bed ...

This is not new, is what I am saying.

I'm saying that this ideation is not new to me.

When I wake, it's to silence from the rest of the station. A dream that I once had: that I was the last person here, up here alone, and engulfed by that thing, and discovering what was inside it. A secret, an Easter egg, a prize, almost; knowledge, and truth, the reveal of something otherworldly. I get showered and dressed, and I leave my room, knowing that it's the last time I will do these things up here, in this place. I've done them many times, so many that I'd lose track if it wasn't for calendars; but this is it.

Outside, in the donut, most of the others are staring out of the window. The Anomaly has done what it always promises to do: crept forward. Not by much, but framed against the *Ukonvasara*, against our stage in orbit – this being the moment we're closest to it, for this cycle – it suddenly seems so much closer. It's so close that it looks as if we're staring at a wall of sheer darkness.

'Insane, right?' Mon asks. I step up next to her, get close to the glass. My face pressed to it; and the darkness through it has these shades to it. Not just black, not an absence. Something there.

All this time I thought it was black.

'Colours,' I say. 'Xavier, the knot, they say it's coloured. They believed it wasn't dark.'

'Throw spaghetti at the wall enough, some of it'll stick.' Mon touches my face, tilts it slightly, so that I'm looking upwards. 'See the angle? There's a membrane or something on it. A bit of something before the dark.' She's right: it's slightly translucent.

'How did we not know?' I ask. 'How did we not see that?'

'We've never had the ability to spend time this close to it before,' Hyvönen says. 'The drones never saw it.' He's behind us, somehow snuck up. His slippers gliding across the floor. 'This is incredible, you know. That we are all here to witness this.'

'No,' Gibson says. 'Fuck this. Fuck this, get me off here.' He turns, and he's furious. 'You think I fucking signed up for this?'

'Mr Gibson,' Hyvönen says, reaching out for him – as if his touch might somehow soothe the raging beast – but Gibson steps back. He stares at Hyvönen, fixes on him.

'Let me off,' he says. 'You said that this was the last day, but that fucking thing is so close—'

'And I will send you home. You're in no danger from it. The algorithm knows exactly when the Anomaly will move, and by how much.'

‘Fuck your algorithm. You fucking liar.’ He’s seething, that’s clear. His eyes wet, his teeth bared. Restrain him, leash him, hold him back.

‘Mr Gibson, I would urge you—’

‘Fuck your urges—’

‘I would *urge* you to remember who you are talking to.’

Gibson laughs, spits a laugh, hacked out. At Hyvönen; at all of us. ‘Liars. Liars, and murderers, and the walking fucking dead. That’s who I’m talking to.’ He points to the Anomaly, his finger swiping at the air, over and over, emphasizing his point. ‘That thing ... You can see it. You can touch it, you can *feel* it. It feels so cold, doesn’t it?’ He starts to back away. Walking backwards, looking at us; as if he’s clutching a pistol, aimed at us, a getaway car waiting on the street outside to whisk him away.

He moves, turns. Runs. ‘Where’s he going?’ Sian asks, and Desh’s eyes flicker behind his glasses, as he sifts menus; as he tracks Gibson’s location.

‘He’s at the changing rooms, the, the airlock. Fuck.’ His voice pausing, but we already know. ‘He’s at the *Raft*.’

I’m fast. I’m used to running the donut, so I’m faster than the rest of them, and I’m at the changing room, but Gibson’s gone, and the airlock door is shut. I yank the emergency lever, but I see him, through the glass, holding it on the other side. Holding it upright, and I think, it shouldn’t be allowed to work that way. What a stupid design.

‘Gibson,’ I say, but he can’t hear me. He mouths words at me, and I try to lipread them, but his intonation’s sloppy, his lips wet. He beats one fist against the glass, and turns, stepping through the *Raft*’s door. He pauses, then strikes the glass again, making me jump backwards a little, as the room behind me fills with the rest of the crew. But he’s in the *Raft*, and he’s got the door shut, locking this one behind him.

‘Fuck,’ Sian says, through gritted teeth, and Desh swipes feebly at the air, abandoning his little glances in exchange for more efficient gestures, trying desperately to shut the ship down.

‘He can’t fly it,’ I say, ‘not without permission from ground control, right?’ A look between them all, that I recognize. Something I don’t know.

‘It’s untethered,’ Desh says.

‘Untethered? What do you mean? I haven’t done that!’

‘Cohen did it,’ Sian says. Quick, so quick. As if that shuts it down.

‘When?’ I ask, but nobody answers, and the answer doesn’t matter. What matters is stopping Gibson stealing the ship. ‘I can try getting out there,’ I say. ‘The hatch underneath, maybe I can manually freeze the ship’s functions.’

‘Berry can go,’ Sian says, but I grab her, even as Berry’s hesitating, about to move.

‘Berry’s not trained to do it,’ I say. ‘He’s an appliance tech—’

‘It’s true,’ Berry says. He’s scared: a kicked dog, tail between his legs.

But Sian argues with him. ‘You’ve done walks. You know how to fly the thing, you must have some idea how it works.’ She’s furious now herself, and we feel the rumble, the vibration, of the *Raft*’s engines starting, coming through the tether arm, shaking our temporary firmament.

‘I’ll do it fastest. I know what to disengage,’ I say, and I open the suit cupboard, pull one of them down and lay it at my feet, stepping into the heel holsters.

‘Let her go,’ Hyvönen says.

‘We need her,’ Sian says, but Hyvönen doesn’t react. ‘Tomas,’ she says, the first time I’ve ever heard her use anything remotely close to casual terms with anybody, but he holds up his hand, to silence her.

‘Let her go.’ To me, then: ‘Please, Miss Becker,’ he says, ‘prevent Mr Gibson from making an egregious error.’

Mon helps me into the suit, fastens me in, checks my cables. Everybody’s frantic, and the rumbling of the engines, so curiously silent, no noise bleeding into this space at all, but it goes through us, vibrating us, making our teeth chatter at the back as if we can’t stop grinding them through nightmares.

‘Okay, secure,’ Mon says, and Sian holds the arm of the secondary airlock. She’s about to pull it for me when she looks to Hyvönen, again.

‘We’re sure?’

Hyvönen nods, so Sian moves the arm, and the door opens, and I step through. I watch her clamp it shut behind me, and I pull the other arm, locking the door behind me. Safety first, I think; and the arm opens, and that familiar tug of the void, of weightlessness and being untethered. Except, there’s the *Raft*, nudged up against the station, so smooth and perfectly clean, an escape pod that’s never been used.

I can see, from here, Gibson through the window.

He stares at me, locks eyes with me.

Shakes his head, no no no.

I think of Theo; of not getting to see him again. If this ship leaves, we don't know how we'll get home; if we'll be inside that thing before they can send another craft to get us.

I push off, grabbing the *Raft's* side, my hands clamping onto the folded metal handholds along the edge of it. Pull myself over the crest of the ship, and the rumble of it increases, and I feel Gibson beating his fist against the walls of it – *get away! get away!* – as I go for the panelling below, where I can access the mechanical override.

I don't hear the docking arm detach; I see it, when it's pulled back, and the *Raft* starts to move. The panel's off, though, and the controls exposed. Like an over-complicated fuse box, switches and wires, and I know what I'm looking for; as the ship moves away from the station, starting to turn, and I look back—

The Anomaly, we are heading towards it, as the craft accelerates—

I detach the accelerant pipe, cut the cable to turn off the power, and the burn from the engines dies, but the momentum doesn't, and the Anomaly is fifty feet, forty feet—

I let go. Grab my own tether. Clamp it to the exposed panel, the ship attached to the station—

'Lock the station in place!' I scream into my comm.

'What?' Desh, or Berry, or Hyvönen, somebody replies, so I scream it again, as they clock what's going on, what I'm going to do.

The station is the ship's anchor. I kick backwards, away from the ship, drifting. My suit's boosters giving me just enough oomph—

The *Raft* carries on forward, and it pulls the station. Only ever so slightly, but the thrust from the ship is enough.

I hear the screams from inside the station, or I think I do; not screams, not really, but audio fuzzing in the white noise of my communicator, in the hiss of my own breathing inside this helmet.

The station has thrusters, to help it move into place, to keep it where it's meant to be when it drifts. They kick in, offering their own opposing force, as the *Raft* shifts, closer to the Anomaly—

I am back from all of this, watching it as if it's a movie playing out in front of me. As the *Raft* slows, but perseveres; as the station's thrusters blare white-blue flame, gas blowtorches welding space apart from itself; as

through the window, in the donut, the crew watches, nail-biting tension, Desh swiping wildly, Hyvönen a kid with his nose pressed against the glass; as the thrusters work, and the station stops moving, so I scan my gaze along the tether, to the *Raft*, just in time to watch it reach the Anomaly itself, and slide into the darkness.

Like a finger, pressing into the oily glimmer of a bubble; before sinking in, except the bubble doesn't pop, but assents, and the finger enters.

The tether tightens fully, the station locked in place. The *Raft* stops. Suddenly, it's perfectly still, halfway into the Anomaly. The sides of the unknown thing sludged up against the unpainted metal of the ship.

I speak into my comm: 'Gibson?' I want an answer, so I ask again.

Just the hiss of white noise; a hiss I'm sure I hear voices in.

I look back at the station, suddenly much closer to the Anomaly, where it had felt as if we were too close already. I see the faces of the others: Sian turned away, Desh with his eyes shut, Mon watching me, biting her nails to the quick. Berry is still, calm, blank. Hyvönen, though; he's moving, shuffling quickly, away from the donut, towards the airlocks. And then his voice, in my ears. 'Miss Becker, I have to ask a favour of you. Would you please find out if Mr Gibson survived the trip into the Anomaly for me?'

'He isn't answering his comm.'

'No, he isn't. But that doesn't mean he's trapped, or worse.' He clears his throat, loud in my ear. 'Please, Miss Becker.'

I puff towards the ship, suddenly so still.

There's an element of it like part of a mobile, hung over Theo's crib, spaceships and stars and planets for him to twiddle his fingers at, to play and manipulate, as *Twinkle Twinkle Little Star* jittered from a tiny battery-powered speaker, and I sang to him, trying to match the pitch that seemed to alter every few seconds. There the *Raft* is, suspended, extant. Nothing on either side of it, no reason for it to sit where it does.

I reach the *Raft*, and I put my hands on it again, and I pull myself along its body. Windows, and I peer through, but there's nothing to be seen, no movement. Lights on, yes, but I can't see the cockpit, can't get the proper angle.

'I don't see him,' I say.

'Keep going,' he tells me.

So I do, every window, every access point; until finally I am next to the Anomaly. I am a foot from it, a few inches. My hand could touch it. A

liquid, a solid, I can't tell. A substance I have never seen before, never even contemplated. A texture that is somehow entirely void of texture, absent of anything.

'Go inside the ship,' Hyvönen tells me.

'I can't open the door,' I say. 'There's no airlock.'

'He will be safe,' Hyvönen says.

'If he's in there, and I open the door, he'll die.'

'Please, Miss Becker, you are going to have to trust me.'

'Then you're going to have to start giving me answers.'

'So I will. Go inside the ship, if you will.'

I try again to see Gibson; and I say, into my comm, that he needs to move, to put his helmet on if he can hear me, because there is a vacuum about to remove the air from the cabin.

I think of the times Gibson brayed when Cohen mocked me; the times he stood back and let it happen.

And yet.

'I'm opening the door now,' I say, into the comm, to Gibson and Hyvönen both; then I pull the lever, moving to one side as the door ejects.

I didn't think this through. The door opens, and everything inside the ship that isn't fastened is sucked out, a rush of terrible energy; detritus, boxes, stuff we were taking home, heaved towards the station, and I watch it; and my head screams at me, sudden, painful. Like fingers driven into my skull, manipulating all that is inside of me, squeezing and forcing me to wince, to howl as I look back there—

I see myself before, I remember myself, in the corridor of the Zvezda module, on my knees, the airlock open, waiting to die. My vision blurring, my eyes wet, and I scream—

'Miss Becker, please control yourself,' the old man says.

Control yourself.

My vision clears, and I am clinging to the door frame, where the door was once fixed; and Hyvönen is talking to me, in my ear, 'Please answer me, Miss Becker,' and I pull myself into the ship; as if being inside the shell is somehow going to make me feel better. Less as if I am losing myself in these moments. My back against the wall of the ship, something stable to push against, as the colour comes back, as the headache pain fades, and my hands stop their trembling.

‘I’m okay,’ I say, and I turn, to look to my right, to the cockpit, and I see the thick wall of darkness inside here, intersecting this ship, dividing it. A line, like a hot knife through a brick of butter. ‘The Anomaly is inside here,’ I say. It has filled the gap, halfway up the ship to the cockpit. Water poured into a vessel, into every single nook and cranny.

‘We are watching your feed,’ Hyvönen replies.

‘Gibson,’ I say, or shout; but he won’t hear me, not with my helmet, not with the vacuum; and he doesn’t reply on the comm.

This darkness. The membrane, shining in the light of my helmet. The darkness, the colours in it. Puddles of petrol on the side of the road when I was a child, mixing with water.

In the right light, you can see the colours.

I reach for the Anomaly, and Hyvönen’s voice, as frantic as I have ever heard him, barks back at me. ‘Don’t touch it,’ he says. ‘Don’t interact with it.’

‘Where is Gibson?’ I ask him. ‘Why the fuck ask me to come into this thing?’

‘I have never seen a dissection so clear.’ His voice is quivering, full of something. Wistfulness? ‘My brother was lost, and so many others. And I have never seen a dissection so clear as this, not up close.’

‘You’re not seeing it up close,’ I say, ‘I am.’

And then I see the helmet: from inside the Anomaly, pushed out, towards me. Momentum, not drift. Pushed, and hard, thudding into the wall, deadening its path.

‘He’s alive,’ I say. ‘Gibson’s alive.’

They bring me back to the station, and as I sit there, still wearing my suit, Mon stares into my eyes, shines a light to see behind them. The after-image of the veins, trilling red lines across everything for moments when she pulls away. Hyvönen props himself up in the corner, running his hand over the hair he’s got, softening it down, his nails scraping thin white lines along his scalp. Nobody speaks for the longest time. Sian and Desh work on something, running simulations. I see Desh’s eyes, left to right, scanning information then resetting it, over and over.

Finally, I talk. ‘Are we going to get him?’ I ask. Nobody replies. Sian glances at Hyvönen, who knows she’s doing it, somehow, and waves his

hand at her, swats her gaze away without even looking back. ‘He’s alive in there,’ I say. ‘He’s meant to be dead.’

‘He is dead,’ Hyvönen says. His voice as measured and calm as I’ve ever heard it.

‘He threw the helmet. He wanted to get my attention—’

‘So he’s not wearing a helmet now. Ergo, he is dead.’

‘There are spares.’

‘And they have a finite amount of oxygen. Ergo,’ he repeats, ‘he is dead.’

‘Maybe the Anomaly makes a seal? Maybe there’s oxygen behind its wall.’

‘That isn’t how it works,’ he says. A finality that suggests knowledge he hasn’t shared with me. ‘The rules of oxygen, they’re the same in there as out here. He is dead.’

‘There might be a window,’ Sian says, almost apologetically.

‘A window? Into the Anomaly?’ I ask.

‘No, of time,’ Mon says. The others shoot her a look – *don’t speak, what are you doing speaking* – but she continues. ‘There might be a window of time that we could rescue him, that’s what Sian’s saying.’

‘You just said he’s dead,’ I say, but nobody’s listening.

‘It doesn’t matter,’ Hyvönen says. ‘The experiment is over.’

‘Jesus Christ, man,’ Mon says. ‘Grow a fucking soul!’ Nobody else seems shocked at her reaction. *Do no harm*, that’s her job’s creed. ‘You don’t want to rescue him? Fine, hope you fucking sleep at night. But we need a ship to get us home.’ She looks at Hyvönen, right in the eyes. ‘We get the *Raft*, or we’re taking *Ukonvasara* home. Screw your little plan, okay? Screw it all.’

‘Can we drag it back?’ I ask.

‘Not without killing Gibson again,’ Sian says. ‘He’ll be crushed between the Anomaly wall and the cockpit. Might even damage the *Raft*, we haven’t done pressure tests on the wall yet.’

*Again. Yet.* They have done tests, other tests. I don’t understand, I don’t understand. I think about sending my drones out to the Anomaly. Watching them run out of battery, or lose contact. Mice, dying in there.

‘So when he’s dead, we bring the ship back. Then he can pass through, right? We can try and resuscitate him.’ Mon paces, thinking as she talks. Hyvönen shakes his head, but not in denial. Something else.

‘That could work,’ Sian says. ‘Desh can run the window timings, based on the oxygen he’s got. It depends on his reset time. But we could get a note in there, a pen and paper, he could tell us when the oxygen runs out, give us more of a clue. Or he could throw something else—’

‘I’m sorry, but what the fuck is happening?’ I ask the room, and they look at me. It feels like all of them are on the verge of telling me the truth when Hyvönen stands.

He clears his throat a little. A professor, imparting knowledge.

‘Death is not the same in the Anomaly,’ he says. ‘We thought for the longest time that being inside it was an ending, simply because contact was lost when somebody passed through the boundary. Starting so far back, with the *Ishiguro*, we assumed death. But I told you about my brother’s black box, yes? It gave us hope. And we discovered that so much of what we assumed was correct: there is no coming back, once you have passed over. Inside there, it is dark, and there is no light. We have not lied to you, Miss Becker. You have always been told the truth.’

‘Within limits,’ Mon says. ‘And with omissions.’

I am the last to know. I think that I am always the last to know: the last to be told about my own condition, the last to have my diagnosis forced upon me, even as I shouted that I was fine; I am fine.

‘Time works strangely up here, this you already are aware of.’ Hyvönen frames it rhetorically, but he’s right: days are lost, and circadian rhythms can only carry us so far. ‘Inside the Anomaly, it is stranger still.’ He sighs, as if this is a story he’s told too many times; as if it isn’t interesting enough to bear another telling. ‘My brother was lost. And then, as if by magic, he was found again.’ He nods at Sian, who swipes on her wrist, throwing information onto one of the medical bay screens. Life signs; I recognize life signs. A green bar, dipping to the flat red. ‘When we recovered the black box, it had recorded my brother’s own life cycles. Here, he’s alive; and then he is dead. Over and over and over again, alive and then dead.’

‘He was resuscitated?’ I ask.

‘In a manner of speaking. We have come to talk of this as a cycle. All of life is a cycle; what happened to my brother and the crew of the *Lära* is merely a wheel within a wheel.’

‘The whole crew?’

More life signs join the existing one on the screen. Not on the same timeframe, but all with the same dipped red. ‘Their cycles begin at the same

point, and then peter off, one by one; until Mira was the only one left. And when he was gone, the cycle began anew.’ I feel my hands shaking, but I am remarkably calm. ‘The best we have posited is that he died, and began again alive.’

‘Began again.’ I say the phrase, not quite a question, as if I’m trying it out; trying to see how it fits. ‘He began again.’

‘His life signs tell their tale. If you see here,’ he says, and points, but he’s not looking where he’s pointing, the well-rehearsed casual behaviour of the lecturer inside him, ‘the pattern is the same. A consistency of his behaviours, with no variance between them. The only time variance occurs is in those final moments, when, perhaps, he sees something ... different.’

‘But that’s guesswork,’ Sian says.

‘Yes.’ Hyvönen smiles at me, as if this is normal.

‘So he comes back to life?’

‘Or the Anomaly makes it as though he never died. We don’t know, it’s very hard to tell; if there is even a difference, of course.’

‘How many times? How many times has it happened?’

‘A great many. We can only estimate. But a great many.’

‘A hundred? A thousand?’

He sighs. ‘A great many times,’ he says, and I think about pushing, but I know he won’t tell me. As if the number might somehow make the situation worse.

‘Does he know?’

‘His cycles do not deviate. If he knew, perhaps they would. He would impart that, to us. But I am positive, each time, that he is aware that death is coming.’ I’m silent. ‘It is coming for me as well,’ he says, and there’s a sadness there, in the way that he says it. ‘It’s coming for all of us, the great inevitable. But perhaps I have never been one for inevitability.’

‘What about the others in there?’

‘As best we know, they are the same. It is very sad.’ He doesn’t sound sad as he delivers this news, or concerned, or contrite. ‘The crew of the *Ishiguro*, of every ship we have sent in there. We have to believe that they are reliving their experiences as my brother is.’ I picture the test pilots, their ships exploding, their nukes sent with prayers to puncture the Anomaly, and failing; and that is not the end for them. The thought makes me shiver; makes sick in my throat. ‘This is a lot to take in, I know.’ He has just told me that time in the Anomaly is unnatural; that there is eternal life in there,

or eternal death; and, are the two actually any different at all? But he smiles as if he's told me that I have to retake a paper, or that my test results mean I will need to stay on the pills that have been prescribed to me.

The smile when they told me it was a boy. Do I want to know the sex? they asked, but the answer was already on their tongue; and Xavier said, Yes, even though we hadn't decided. I wanted an envelope, the gender written inside it; a private moment we could choose to open, at home, if we wanted to.

Xavier only wanted to see his dick, of course.

'So he's alive in there, Gibson's alive in there,' I hear myself saying, 'but he will die. And then he will be alive again. Will he know?'

'He knows what happens when you go inside the Anomaly. He has been party to it. But he will not know the details, not from one reset to the next.' *Reset*, the same word that Sian used before: they have already developed a lexis to discuss this thing. Their secret, all in this together. All of them, that is, except for me. 'He will not realize what's happening to him, that each time isn't the first.' A hesitancy, the words formed carefully.

'You're lying,' I say.

He nods, just the slightest tilt of his head. 'We have reason to believe that, the longer you are in there, the more you remember. Memories, perhaps, being slightly more ... *invasive* to the reset brain than one would imagine.' He shuts his eyes for a moment; a full-stop on that line of enquiry.

'And we can't just go in and get him.'

'Living tissue cannot pass through the wall.' He says it with the utmost seriousness, and I bark a laugh, because it's so fucking ridiculous. 'Not leaving it, at least.'

'It's got this tension to it,' Sian says. 'It's like a membrane. Like a—' She looks at Mon for backup.

'Semi-permeable membrane. You can pass through this way, but the other ... It just doesn't work.' Mon won't look at me as she talks. The lie, or the withholding.

'He threw the helmet, though.'

'Yeah. It's only living things that can't pass through.'

Their plan, the plan being posited, hits me. 'You want to bring him back when he dies. That's the window, that's the time. He'll be alive—'

‘And then he’ll die, and we can bring the ship back, and we can get the fuck off this thing,’ Mon says. She’s looking towards the Anomaly, no window for her to see through, but she doesn’t need it. Shutting her eyelids, and the darkness that you see then; that’s all she needs.

Desh pulls his glasses off and looks at me. ‘You okay?’

‘Yes,’ I say, but I am not. I am not. ‘You knew the truth,’ I say.

‘Not everything,’ he says. ‘I only got told when I needed to know.’

‘And when was that?’ My question not directed at Desh, but at Hyvönen, at Sian. At Mon. ‘What was the trigger that made you tell people?’

‘Snipes,’ Sian says. ‘When Snipes went, that’s when they were told.’

Snipes. He knew, of course he knew. He was going to die in there, and then come back to life. That’s why he killed himself first.

The night before he was meant to be leaving to travel into the Anomaly – that is, also, the night before he died – Snipes and I spent hours talking. He told me before that he didn’t want to start anything, but sometimes things just start. You can’t help it: how easily conversation can flow, how smoothly words can pass in ways that somebody else likes to hear. And with Snipes, it *was* easy, in the way that it had never been easy with Xavier. Xavier’s entire mode of being was the conversation of light antagonism: that a conversation should interrogate to reach a conclusion, and flow was something measured and worked for by the ebb and flow of opinions and ideals. He pushed, and pulled, but never gave. Snipes liked to listen, and to agree. Not because he felt that he should, but because that was how it came to him; that he wasn’t the be-all.

He had been married previously, but they never had a child. His wife had left him when he became ill the first time – there were a lot of first times with him, a sense that remission for him led to erasure, and then the recurrence of the cancer somehow was a new phase of his life – so he bore her plenty of ill-will, he said. He laughed when he said it. ‘We’ve all got baggage,’ he said. ‘I’ve just learned to not even pretend I don’t give a shit. She was – is – an awful person.’ He smiled then. ‘I’ve become used to speaking about everybody else in the past tense,’ he said. ‘How weird is that? I’m the one leaving, but everybody else is kind of already gone.’

There was nothing between us; nothing tangible, at least. Fingers that touched fleetingly, or that only touched the air between them, but in doing

so let you feel that subtle movement; the atoms between them carrying the frisson. To touch fingers would mean a static shock, a pop of electricity.

‘Even if I wasn’t going to die up here, I am still going to die,’ he said to me.

Hyvönen asked to speak to him. His final debrief before going off into that thing. Certain death, is what we were told. Certain death, as definite as a diagnosis that would never be cancelled, that would never go into remission. And from that conversation, he went to see the crew that were prepping his mission. I remember seeing him, when he left that meeting. Ashen-faced, a cliché I had been told and never understood until that moment. The ash of a body, charred and burned to its composite parts, writ in his eyes. The ash of *to ashes*, of *dust to dust*; made to rise again, and then sent back to death, before rising again, repeat until the end of all time.

‘Are you okay?’ I asked.

‘Yes,’ he said. He hesitated. ‘I should say goodbye.’

‘Say it when you’re leaving,’ I said. He nodded, and he shut his bedroom door, but he must have known that he was lying to me.

That tomorrow wasn’t for him.

They give me time to myself, to comprehend what’s going on, but minutes, not hours or days or weeks. What is the appropriate time to parse something so monumental as this? There’s no reasonable sense of what it means, and as I think about what happens if we fail – if success is something we can actually even achieve, as vague and loose as Hyvönen’s plan is – I wonder what happens to Earth if the Anomaly reaches it. I suppose: the Anomaly moves, so we wait it out. But will death change? If the planet is enveloped by the darkness, will life, death, the cycle that we know alter? It’s the only constant we have, and yet.

My mother. She’s sick, or old and hampered, maybe. When she dies, what happens?

I can’t understand it. I can’t work it out. I can’t parse it.

A mind-fuck, I think. I laugh; the phrase is one my friend used to use, when we watched TV shows that pushed the boundaries of whatever. Broke the fourth wall, stuff like that. A mind-fuck.

I sit on my bed, and feel as if I’m crying, but there’s nothing, no tears, no heaving snivels. Just the overwhelming sense that I’m outpouring, and somehow finding relief; even though there’s no relief to find.

My terminal – a word that rings as I think of it, a word that has two meanings, one of which suddenly carries so much less weight than it once did; or, both less and more weight, at the exact same time – buzzes. A message from Desh.

*Don't tell a soul – I opened a bonus channel for you. Should be clear.*

As soon as I have read it, a window appears, a call—

Theo. Perfect, immediate, clear as crystal, my Theo. He looks young, his skin so smooth and soft. There's no sign of Xavier – I imagine, somehow, Desh pre-calling, telling Xavier that this is important, pulling a string somehow to make this exactly what I want it to be – and I am so grateful for that, so pleased that Theo is by himself.

We talk, and we share, and it is perfect in this moment.

'I love you,' he says, 'I can't wait to have a cuddle.'

I do not want to say goodbye to him, but there's no way I can avoid it.

As the picture fades, I wonder what the Anomaly holds for him. The resets, the loops; if it reaches Earth, what happens to the people there?

I have been kept out of the truth, had it restrained from me. This stuff, Hyvönen must have contemplated it. Desh, Mon, Sian, they all must have considered it.

When we came up here, it was to try and save the world. I wonder if they have also considered that such a thing might no longer be our mission.

In the past, I'm at the hospital, and Xavier is in the room adjacent, because I can hear the tone of his voice through these thin walls; as he tells my doctors something about me, something that he thinks is important, and I want to scream at them to listen to *me*, that this is *my* story, my brain, my functions and ways and breath and life, and how dare they listen to him and him alone, as he lies to them. His voice, under the door, under the walls themselves; and in the distance, I hear my son crying, my baby, except he's older, of course, he's not a baby any more, but how hard is it to think of them as anything but, how hard to see them growing up, and how much have I missed, simply by being trapped in there for the months he had me committed? I can hear his words, make them out in the mumbled bellow, his voice raised: *she's done this before, after the baby was born, and back then her doctors agreed, all of them agreed with me.* And then they come into the room, him and two doctors, and they stare at me, and they nod as I tell them I'm fine, the doctors nod but Xavier stays completely still, as if his

lie will collapse were he to say another word. They nod, and I say to them, please, listen to me: there is nothing wrong. There is nothing wrong with me, except for this pain, behind my eyes, inside my skull, like fingers driven in, manipulating what's inside me—

By the time I get back to the others, there is a plan in place, with only a single point of disagreement: whether to try and tell Gibson what's planned for him. Mon has a note written, and she's insistent. 'He'll read it, and at least he'll know, and he can give us a signal,' she shouts, genuinely aghast that they might do otherwise. The rest of them are more concerned with the craft, and with another possibility.

'What if he doesn't want to be saved?' Sian asks. The question isn't directed at the room, but at Berry, who sits by himself, removed from the pack, the lowest of the low suddenly finding his opinion hoisted up to where it might have weight. 'Why did he take the ship? Did he say anything to you?'

'He was running away.' Berry shrugs. 'I think he was scared. We talked about being frightened, after Cohen died.' A moment of quiet poignancy among these men who didn't ever appear to have it otherwise.

Cohen, his hand stopping me from moving; telling me that I should pay attention to him. His friends, jackals, laughing in the background.

'We're all scared,' Mon says.

'Yeah, well. He did something about it.' Berry's voice is reedy. Even at its most powerful, it's ineffective, the kind of voice that fades to a whisper in your memory the moment you've heard it.

He looks at me. He looks at me, a glance. Longer, though. Like, his eyes are drawn.

'We need to tell Gibson what we're thinking,' Mon says. She brandishes her note.

'He won't remember,' Hyvönen says. 'He hasn't done the cycle enough for anything even to begin to imprint. So he will read the note, and he will panic, and the cycle will change.'

'Jesus Christ—'

'We have mathematics!' Hyvönen roars, as if this is the thing he can defend most, a fanatic whose religion has been threatened. 'We have the exact time he entered the, the, the—' He stares forward, his words sticking. His brain on some sort of trapped loop.

‘The Anomaly,’ Sian says, and he spits the words out in a rush, as if that’s all he needed, that nudge of the word:

‘The time that he entered the Anomaly, and we have the oxygen left, and the time that he threw the helmet. We can predict his life signs, and we can build a perfect model, a perfect model of his few minutes until he dies, and it will be more effective than telling him that he is going to die ad infinitum!’

‘Piss off,’ Mon says. She’s standing, and she walks to him, right up close to him. ‘Fuck you. This is so messed up. This whole situation, your entire fucking joke of a plan—’

‘Shut your mouth,’ he says. I can feel how wide my eyes are, as Mon slaps him. Her hand onto his face, her palm onto his old skin.

He makes a noise, which I assume would be anger, but it’s an exultation. A smile on his face. ‘The passion! Such passion! Where was that passion previously?’

‘Buried under layers of your fucking lies,’ Mon says.

‘We need to rescue Gibson,’ I say. ‘We need to do something now.’

‘Miss Becker is correct,’ Hyvönen says, suddenly almost joyous. Exuberant. ‘We will need to work quickly.’ He looks at me, and he speaks softly, all the roar dissipated. ‘If you could run things from here, with me, perhaps? While the others go out to do as they will.’ He looks at the rest of us. Mon, Desh, Sian, Berry. ‘Assuming you’re all feeling as if you can save this life, and in doing so, save the rest of yourselves.’

They don’t nod. The acceptance of their lot is implied.

Desh gives me his glasses. Places them onto my head, slides them into place. There’s a strange click as they dock. Something in them designed to scan the bones in your skull, to find the place that they need to tighten in order for the view of the heads-up display to be perfect.

‘This is messed up,’ he says. ‘I’m not built for space.’

‘Then you picked the wrong career path,’ I reply.

‘Probably.’ He waits while the glasses calibrate, a few seconds during which I’m flooded with images, before my eyes are able to control the screens. A slow look to each corner to maximize them; then individual focusing on different sections to highlight, to zoom in. Blinking, glancing, to interact. ‘You see everything?’ he asks.

‘Just about,’ I say.

‘Just about.’ He smiles. ‘I’m sorry,’ he says.

‘What for?’

‘Secrets. Lies. You name it.’

‘There’s a hierarchy,’ I say, because that’s the only way I can make it all right in myself; but he shakes his head.

‘No: there are orders, and reasons. Doesn’t matter if I agree with them or not. You get that.’

‘I do,’ I say. ‘Thanks for the call.’

‘Don’t mention it.’

He hugs me. Unexpected, but there it is. ‘You’re the best of them,’ he says, and he turns and goes to the others, in the changing room; as Sian hits the arm to open the airlock, and they file in. Mon stares at me. Something in her eyes that I can’t fathom.

Back at the window, Hyvönen stands firm, or pretends to. He doesn’t see me watching him: his back trembling, his hand reaching for the bar around the window to steady himself. His legs shaking, and the skin – somehow, somehow – in his neck shifting, moving with imperceptible swallowing from his throat.

I cough my presence, and he turns slightly. ‘They’re outside?’

‘Yes,’ I say, sidling up to him. The screens in my eyes, and it’s confusing, trying to manage the real world as well as the digital feed: one from each of their helmet-mounted cameras. All showing variations of the same view: the others, as they start a chain of tethers, as they leave the environs of the station for out there.

I flick to Desh’s feed, make it large: he glances at the Anomaly and then away again, to the other three. Tries to focus on them.

I move between the others, my eyes flicking to different quadrants.

Sian: she is eyes to the front. She pushes the others, ‘Come on,’ and ‘Let’s get this done,’ in between huffs of exasperation.

Mon: her hands take most of the view. Hand over hand, pulling herself along the tether that Sian has laid down. Right in her wake.

Berry: his breath as tiny gasps, tiny inhalations.

Flitting between them, to fill the story of where they’re going, and what they’re doing. So strange, to see through somebody else’s eyes, essentially. I can barely see Hyvönen, pressing himself closer to the glass, a child at a toyshop, his present just slightly out of reach – if only he could make it past that single pane.

Sian: almost a swimmer's grace, keeping herself steady as they get closer and closer. The Anomaly blackening all around the back end of the *Raft*.

Berry: keeping himself steady, and he whispers, 'Gibson, Jesus,' as they get closer, even though there's no sign of Gibson yet.

Mon: talking, 'We're getting closer, now. There's, ah. It's cold out here. Did I mention how much I hate being out here?'

'You mentioned it,' I say, which is the first thing I've said to her in a while, I think; and I wonder if we'll be the same, when we get down from here.

Mon: her hands close to her body, and as she looks down, it's as if the rope is coming from her belly, an umbilicus attaching her to Sian and Desh and Berry, Mon feeding it from her in some act of grotesquery. 'Well, I do. I hate it.' A smile in her voice. Maybe it's forced.

Sian: 'Eyes forward, everybody. We can't risk a mistake.' Halfway to the *Raft*, and it shimmers in the light of the torch on Sian's helmet. When she glares to the side, tilts her head, the light hits the Anomaly and dies.

Desh: 'There's a camera inside the *Raft*, at the back. You reckon you can find it?' he asks, so I look. Finding my way around his system is unintuitive to say the least, everything buried under layers, and I've barely used one of these systems before. 'Should be, if you go to eye, subfolder cams, subfolder fixed, subfolder ships.' I follow his instructions. *Raft* there, and a flashing signal for *Ukonvasara*, not yet hooked up.

Below those, some names in red: the ships that have been and gone.

I highlight the *Raft* and there, a fifth screen for me to juggle. The back end of the ship, where I was when the helmet flew at me – and there, it bobs around, drifting. I watch as it touches the side of the ship, and hear the thud of it in my head, my brain applying a sound effect where there isn't one.

Sian: her breathing is slightly hesitant. Slightly stilted, deep breaths that somehow seem to sputter a little on the exhale.

'She's incredibly good at her job,' Hyvönen says. He can't see my screen; he doesn't know who I'm looking at. And yet.

'What is her job, exactly?' I ask.

'She is my assistant. And she is invaluable, I can tell you.'

'Why didn't you tell me about the Anomaly?' I hear myself asking. One eye on the screens, the other gazing through the lenses at this frail old man, desperately trying to not make eye contact with me.

'It was not my place,' he says.

‘Bullshit. Why didn’t you tell me? The rest of them knew. I deserved to know.’

‘What would it have changed? You’re still working towards the same goal: to leaving here. If you knew what was inside there, it wouldn’t have changed anything.’

‘I would have known, that would have been something.’

‘Sometimes,’ he says, ‘knowledge isn’t meaning. It doesn’t provide context. We decided that your job would be better served in ignorance. You, your performance, would be managed better by everything remaining just as it was. For you, the Anomaly is death. For you, the lure of your son, when you return home. For you: consistency.’

Sian: ‘We’re there,’ so I look back at her screen, and they are, only feet away from the *Raft*. She reaches for it, clamps the end of the tether line to the outside, and then pulls herself into the craft itself.

*Raft*: Sian moves close to the Anomaly wall. Desh pulls up something on his computer while Berry gets to work on the ship, preparing it for when it’s ready to move. Mon pulls something from her satchel, starts to assemble it.

Sian: she grabs something on the inside wall of the ship. ‘Starting pressurization in three, two, one—’ And she pulls the handle she’s holding, and the door shuts, and the atmosphere in the ship resumes. She looks to Mon, who’s tinkering with the thing from her satchel.

Mon: I look closer, to see that it’s a portable CPR machine. She clicks the component parts together, checks the battery, primes it.

Desh: running an algorithm to find the gap. ‘What time did he enter exactly?’ he asks, and Sian shouts the timestamp out, which he enters. All the data inputted.

Mon: something else from her satchel. The note she wrote. I think about speaking, but I don’t say anything. I know what she will do. She is the kind to do this. ‘He’ll have oxygen now. Assuming he’s back, he’ll be able to breathe again.’

Sian: ‘We think.’ Sian’s commentary: for me, as much as them.

*Raft*: Mon goes closer to Sian, and she lets go the note from her hand, and it drifts, and it almost splats into the Anomaly—

‘What is she doing?’ Hyvönen asks, watching one of the main screens.

Sian: she sees the note, the soft ease of it into the Anomaly wall, and she grabs for it, and takes one end of it – it’s rolled up tight, as if it should be stuck into a bottle, sent out to sea from a desert island – but can’t retrieve it.

Mon: 'He's got the other end. He's alive right now.'

Sian: 'We said we weren't going to do this.' She takes the note with both hands and slides it into the Anomaly.

I imagine Gibson receiving it. Wondering what's happening: he's stuck in the Anomaly, only this sheet of paper, sent his way. Torn, a partial reprieve from death. But he knows the truth: death is coming, over and over. He knows he'll have died. He'll be wondering how long he can live for.

'Irresponsible,' Hyvönen says. 'Foolish child.'

Desh: running his numbers, 'This screws the algorithm. I mean, we can guess—'

Sian: 'So we guess. Berry, is it ready to move?'

Berry: twitching, and he looks at the Anomaly more than the others, focuses on it. As if, maybe by staring at it, he'll see through it in a way that nobody else has yet managed to do. 'I've got remote access,' he says. On his wrist computer, a small holographic of the controls, such as they are. The boosters are in the rear of the craft. In many respects, it's lucky that Gibson didn't reverse it in.

Sian: looking directly at Desh's camera, to talk to me.

Desh: Sian speaks, 'Ali, you need to start the tether manually from that end. Get it going and we'll hit the boosters, and hopefully we'll drag this thing out of the swamp.'

I walk through to the airlock, stand by the button. 'Ready,' I say to Sian.

Sian: 'Good. Opening the door in three, two—' She pulls the handle again, opening the airlock. The air sucking out. Oxygen gone from the ship.

I imagine Gibson flailing now. Not knowing what's happening.

Controlled death, I want to tell him. This is a controlled murder, so we can save your life. It's a mind-fuck.

Desh: the algorithm on his screen gives a number. A countdown. Seventeen, sixteen. 'He's dying,' Desh says, casual as anything. Maybe even complacent.

Berry: Desh's voice in his head, counting down, as he puts his hand on the holographic, readies the thrusters to reverse.

Desh: 'Eight, seven ...'

Sian: 'Check Gibson's feed,' she says to me, 'see if we get him through,' and her hand reaches for Berry's shoulder, taps him as Desh's countdown ends. 'Go,' she says, and I hit the button inside at the same time.

*Raft:* they all grab something as the ship rattles, as it moves backwards, as if through muddy tar. A drag to it.

Gibson: white noise, white noise.

Sian: 'Faster, more, more—'

I look out of the window. The ship has moved backwards, and quite substantially. Nearly clear of the thing.

Gibson: white noise, white noise.

Mon: priming the CPR device.

Desh: staring at the black wall.

Berry: staring at the black wall.

Gibson: white noise, and then the crackle of a connection. There's no sound. No indication of his status.

Then, on Desh: Gibson comes into view, like material through saran wrap, the darkness taut to his face, his body, then it puckers and peels, and he oozes from it as it closes behind him; like water, finding a way to fill the space of the container holding it.

Mon: she dashes forward, grabbing Gibson's body. 'Help me,' she snaps to Sian, who starts to detach the oxygen supply, plugs a smaller cartridge into the helmet; and Mon puts the resuscitator onto the conduction pads on the suit, pumps. She counts, 'One, two, three, four, five,' then pumps it again.

Gibson: still rocked back, his head loose but stable. And then he coughs, and his cough fills my ears – or, my head, the sound carrying through the tight connection with the bones of my skull, put inside as if it's a voice in my head – and his head rocks, tilts. The sound of him being sick—

*Raft:* Desh grabs him, Mon helps him upright – 'Hold him here, hold him up,' from her screen – and they start to take him out of the ship, clamp him to the tether.

Sian: to Berry, 'Bring this around, put it back in place. Lock it down, okay? We don't want him trying to take this ship again.'

I watch through the windows as they bring the ship back.

As they pull it, manually, by hand, through the Anomaly. As it slides out, so sleek and efficient. The Anomaly so gently pulling at it, along the edges.

As detritus follows it: bits and pieces, dark and floating. Lumps of ship, of trash, of clothing. Reflective wrap. Small black shapes, painted up with yellow dashes—

I hear shouting, as the airlock seals behind them, and Gibson is rushed into the changing room by Mon, put onto a stretcher, wheeled through, past Hyvönen and myself and into the medical bay. He lifts his head as they pass, and he says something, but I can't hear him, his voice ragged to a whisper, and I can't read his lips; but Mon looks at me.

'He's going to be fine,' she says.

I flick through the cameras on the glasses: the others back now, putting the *Raft* in place: empty again, the door shut behind them. Our way off this station secured.

Hyvönen stares at Sian as she approaches us. She's taken her suit half-off, folded the flaps down. 'We did it,' she says, and I realize that she wants his approval. That's what this is, for her. She wants him to say that she did a good job, but he doesn't.

'Isobel,' he says, and Sian blinks. 'Isobel, you're not, you're not meant to be here. You shouldn't be here, this isn't right, you have pursued me—' He spits, actually spits, onto the floor, and he treads on his spit, as if he's grinding it out with his shoe. 'You fucking leech. You parasite, you worm,' he says.

Sian doesn't move. I step closer to them, and I ask, 'Do you want me to help?' but Sian shakes her head. Tears in her eyes. She takes his elbow, and he doesn't resist.

She leads him away, or pushes him, rather. This way, down the corridor, and still she's in her suit, still it's hanging open.

I want to follow them. It's wrong, but I want to.

I still have the glasses, I remember. I still have access to the cameras.

Back a stage on the file system, my eyes flitting through the folders. Subfolder cams, subfolder station. Subfolder private quarters. No password, and there's the camera inside Hyvönen's main room. I watch as Sian leads him inside, and she takes off his clothes – it's a tunic he's wearing, easy for her to remove, easy for him to slip into – and there's a nappy on him. Shit smeared over his legs. He flails, swats at her, get off me, get off; and she stumbles back, afraid of him, upset, brushing tears from her cheeks. He stumbles to the side, grabs a shelf. Knocks something off. And Sian restrains him, holds him. Comforts him, this naked old man, standing in the middle of his private space, and he's shuddering, sobbing, his head on her shoulder.

Sian takes him to his bathroom. A room built for a man who can't control his own faculties. He shuffles forward, into the walk-in shower, and she starts the water; and he stands there, his shoulders trembling as he heaves in tears. His knees shake; the scars where he's been replaced or rebuilt bright red on his palest flesh.

Invasive. I am invading privacy. I feel a wrenching in my gut: this is unfair, this is not my place, not my role.

Still, I do not look away.

Sian starts the memory machine in the adjacent room, and she goes back to him. Her hand on his face.

I know, now. I understand. My eyes flick away from the cameras, to the files. Subfolder personnel, subfolder Sian. Parents: her father left blank, her mother's name is Isobel.

Of course; of course. A photograph of her mother: cropped hair, soft eyes, sharp bones. She looks just like her.

She is Hyvönen's daughter. His carer, his assistant.

His blood.

I held my father's hand too, in those moments.

Desh's voice, as he walks over to me. 'You done with those?' he asks.

'Yes,' I say, and I flick back, back, to the cam subfolders, and quickly I select a random one in the station, to cover my tracks, as if I haven't been looking at anything—

The camera showing the servers, the door to Zvezda, the door to the Imminent Room. The beeps, the flashing lights in the darkness. Perfectly still, and then—

Something. Something moves, and I jump a little. A figure, crossing the path of the camera. Somebody up there. A glimpse of a suit, an exo-suit. Tattered.

'Hand them over, then,' Desh says, and I'm back in the moment; and I pull them from my head – the clunk of them coming free, the blariness of my eyes when they're not refocused on something so close and so detailed – and put them in his hand. He plucks the thimble from my finger and slides his digit into it, then clicks the glasses onto his own head; and I see his eyes flicker, furiously quick, desperately fast, across folders and files.

'Are you all right?' he asks, and I nod.

'Just disorientated,' I say.

‘It’ll do that. These things,’ he says, ‘they’re further than we are. We need to evolve or something to catch up with them. At least we got the *Raft* back.’

‘And Gibson.’

‘Yeah. Jesus. I’ve locked it now, nobody’s taking that thing without my say so. But we got them both back. Madness. Can’t believe it worked.’ But he can, he absolutely can.

Everything about it: the trip out there, the fact that they all knew what they were doing. Their complacency. Mon’s readiness with the CPR device.

They have done this before, I know.

I walk quietly. There is no time.

A message sent to us all, telling us to pack our belongings. To take this chance to say one last goodbye to the station. Hyvönen will address us soon apparently, and he’s going to tell us how the final hours up here will play out. Still so much to do, Sian says. Hyvönen is working hard on his equations, on prepping what he is going to need.

He will be ready soon, she tells us, so make sure that you are too.

I think about that tattered suit. Snipes was wearing his, for some reason, his pilot’s suit, when he died; as if he was going out there as planned, into the dark as he was meant to, except he *wasn’t* meant to—

As Mon works on Gibson, stabilizing him, as Desh returns to his office to do whatever it is he’s going to do, as Berry brings in the Anomaly detritus from outside and tries not to stare at the darkness, I go to my room. I ask the computer to show me a list of everybody still aboard the station.

Hyvönen, Sian, Mon, Desh, Berry, Gibson, me.

*Where is Snipes?* I ask it.

*Charles-William Snipes is deceased,* the system replies.

Lies. Lies upon lies upon lies. Lie, when they knew that I had suffered; when they knew that I had been lied to, so many times, and the toll it had taken on me; when they claimed to be my friends.

Lies, even when they are telling me their truths.

‘No,’ I say, I hear myself saying, an involuntary vocal spasm. The word there, in the air, no echo, no recurrence. ‘No,’ I say again, this time knowing that I am saying it; this time, controlling it.

Here is the list of ways that Xavier told me that I was failing; that my brain wasn't what I believed it to be, before he had me committed. From the start of our relationship, a constancy. His words digging deep into me and making me feel less than; a tactic he didn't even know he was doing, I don't think, until he was so deep into the doing of it that it simply felt normalized; like that person, those words, those ways, were simply who he was.

He told me that I had a tendency to put out fires where there were none, his exact words. That I imagined crises and fixed them, then took the glory from having fixed something that didn't need fixing. He said, You're like that with me, you know. We sat in bed one Saturday morning and he told me that I often found flaws with him that he felt didn't exist; and I would work on them, as if they needed alteration, somehow. Don't do that, he said. I'm a man, not a fire.

He told me that our wedding was too expensive, and it was my choices that were tipping the scales. Because my father didn't have much money, and neither did I, the brunt of it fell to Xavier's savings. He said, It's fine, I want to pay for the wedding, but Jesus, Ali. This is too much. You always do this: you go so far on something and you don't think about the repercussions. It's a lot of money. Perhaps if you had a proper job, and weren't still studying. Maybe then, but.

He told me that the wedding day itself was too complicated. That the band I had booked, they were double-booked, so we would have to make do with a DJ; and then he told me, closer to the wedding, that I cancelled them, when I didn't. He said, Remember, and he stopped, as if the story was jarring in his own head, and he said, Oh, no, I did it. I cancelled them, because they asked for more money. They were double-booked, that was it. And I stood there, close to the wedding, and I thought, I should call them and find out, because we didn't get our deposit returned; and then Xavier

told me we lost it, because we dilly-dallied, and they were unscrupulous, and I should have known better.

He told me that I called him when I didn't. He would say, I missed a call from you, and I said, No you didn't, and he would roll his eyes, as if of course he had, and this was just like me, to deny something like that.

He told me that my best friend, Fran, had looked at him in a way that suggested she wanted to fuck him. You shouldn't trust her, he said. Don't confront her, because they – *they* – hate when that happens. But know: she's not good for you.

He told me that I was late for the wedding. In the moments after the ceremony, when we were being photographed, on the steps of the church, he leant in and he whispered to me: You look beautiful. I thought you weren't coming, you know. You were so late, I was terrified. I didn't mean to scare you, I said. He smiled. Just a strange thing to feel on this day. It's so important, and I wish it didn't feel like that. A smile on his face, a sad smile.

He told me, that evening, that it wasn't fair I felt sick, that I had drunk so much I couldn't be a part of our first wedded night together. Didn't I understand what was important about a wedding day? It's a bonding, he said, and you're denying me that. You bitch. He cried, sitting on the end of the bed, until I made myself sick in the loo, and then took my clothes off for him.

He told me, when I was invited to go to Sweden to do research into propulsion engines, that I couldn't go. Not that I shouldn't, but that I couldn't; and how could I be so selfish, when he was feeling sick. I said to go to the doctor, then; and I stayed.

He told me that he was sick. That he had something wrong with him, that I needed to support him. A growth, he said; and he went to the doctor, or told me that he did, and returned with his face grave, and he told me about the tests. So invasive, and he said, Hold me, so I did. He said, What if this is the end? What if this is how it all ends?

He told me that he was getting better. They don't know how, he said. He took these pills, and I saw them another time in the supermarket, some holistic product in the aisle of things that couldn't legally be called medicines; and I pointed out the similarity in the tablet, the size, the colour, the distinctive rhombus shape, and he got so angry, slapping his hand onto the wall, pressing close to me, and telling me that I didn't fucking know

what I was talking about, and how dare I suggest what he thought I was suggesting. I said, my voice so timid that I can hear it now, a little mouse in my ear, that I wasn't suggesting anything. Just it's strange, how tablets work. There must be standard moulds, I said, and he nodded. Standard moulds.

He told me that I was emotional. I was so emotional, and it was making him sick again. Can't you see, he said? Can't you see?

He told me that it was possible that the birth control didn't work, because it's not infallible. But in the tests, when they came back, they said that I didn't have the traces of the drug in my system. Am I sure I was taking them? And he told me: you didn't. That's what happened, you definitely didn't. You lied to me, he said; and I found the tablets, which he gave me every night, pressed into my palm. Standard moulds, I wondered.

I was sick, so sick, and he told me that it was my fault. That I was faking it, for sympathy. Of course you would act like this, he said, of course this is how you would be pregnant. Bringing our son into the world like he's a burden before he's even in our hands.

He told the doctor he wanted to know the sex when we were asked, when I didn't know if I did want to know. The words out in the air before I could say anything.

He told the doctor, during the birth, that I wanted the drugs. I didn't know what I was saying, and all the way through we had a birth plan. I heard him say that, and say, She wants to be doped up, smiling, laughing. God, I wish we could try it! I'll bet that's fun.

He held Theo first.

He gave Theo his name. Did he ask me? He said that he did, but I didn't remember it, and he said, No, we agreed, remember? We spoke about it, and you said you loved the name. Sometimes, he said, I worry about you. I wanted to name him after my father. That is something you can cling onto. That knowledge.

He told me that he was worried about me a lot in the weeks after Theo arrived. It was his constant face, this furrowed brow and wet-eyed look, biting his bottom lip like some sort of concerned ingénue. Are you sure you're all right? he asked me, repeatedly, as easily as you might ask somebody if they wanted coffee, or to listen to the radio. Are you sure you're all right?

He told me in the morning one day that I had put my hand over Theo's mouth during the night. I woke up and there you were, he said. You must have been asleep, so I took Theo over to my side of the bed.

He told me to stop breast-feeding. For the ease of it, he said. Better if it's a bottle. Better if you don't hold him, right now. Let me take the brunt of this.

He told me that I said things I didn't say. He told me that he heard me, whispers of something. You're not right, he said. Don't you see that look in your own eyes? Look in the mirror, Ali. You're losing it.

The doctor told me that this happened to women all the time. Often, he said, it falls to the husband to spot it. They know you best, he said, and I said, Xavier doesn't know me at all. He just acts as if he does. The doctor wrote that down. I prescribe, he said.

Xavier told them that I didn't take my pills. I did, I did, though. But he told them, and I didn't get better. I cried a lot.

The same moulds, I realized, and I said that to the doctor. They look the same, they come from the same bottles, but they're not the same; and Xavier and the doctor did a look at each other. I want to see a different doctor, I said. By myself, a woman; and the doctor said, That isn't a choice you can make right now.

He told me I would get used to their fingers in my mouth, checking that I had swallowed the medicine.

He told me that I would see Theo when I was better. He can crawl, nearly, he said. Don't you want to see that?

He told me that Theo was nearly walking. Didn't I want to get better?

I told the doctors I was fine. I faked getting better when I had never been sick; and when the doctor who Xavier knew left, and I was handed over to somebody new, they listened to me.

I was discharged. Xavier came to collect me, and I told him I was pleased to see him, because I didn't know what else to say.

He took me home to see Theo. This is your mummy, he said. You remember her?

Theo didn't say anything. He hugged me. He held me, his arms wrapped around me, but the weight wasn't there, it wasn't there for so long after that.

And then I left him. I told him what I knew about him, all of the things that he had done to me. I told him he would suffer for it. His lawyer brought that

up in court, and I didn't deny it. I told them what he had done, what sort of man he was; and still, they said that Xavier was more stable than I was. Custody to the man who lied to me, who gaslit me, who changed me. Who told them I was unstable, and they believed it. I was allowed Theo at weekends, every other weekend. And Xavier told me, after it was done, that he wasn't sorry.

He said, look up. Look up, look up. Up there. Behind all of this, above all of this. Around all of this: everything will change.

You'll regret this, he said. When you're alone, and you're spiralling, and you're not complete any more, without us. When you're hollow, and lost, and dying.

I will be waiting for it. I will be accepted by it, he said. You? You'll be chaff to it. You'll be forgotten. We could have been together: you, me, Theo. I would have made you better. You cunt. Spit on his lips as he spoke. I won't forgive you, he said.

If I had my way, you would never speak to Theo again. If I had my way; and maybe the Anomaly will side with me. It will grant me what I want.

He told me that the Anomaly was coming so soon; and I would see.

Like a threat: I would see.

The detritus from the Anomaly, hauled in. Dredged inside the station to be sifted, or stored, or forgotten about. Piled up in one of the storage rooms near Desh's office. Cleared out of the way, really, so it's not in our path when we leave this station. It'll be here, like those photographs in Zvezda, for somebody to find in future generations.

If there are future generations.

I run, run my laps, my circuits. I stop on the third, having seen nobody, outside the storeroom, and I step inside, casual as anything. Just to see the pieces, to feel them. They have been inside the Anomaly, are they changed? Are they altered?

And there, in the middle, a small dark grey sphere, with these little pronged pincers on it, retractable and delicate and – here – broken; and little wings, and thrusters; and on the front, a painted beak.

Huey or Dewey or Louie, I don't know which, but these are my paint-marks, my lines, my signature.

It was inside the Anomaly.

I do not remember putting it inside the Anomaly, which means somebody else did.

I pull it apart, my fingers into the pressure points, pulling the sliver of a memory chip from inside it. Leaving the shell here with the rest of the crap. Carrying the memory chip back to my room, holding it tight in my palm, letting it press against my skin. Feeling it indent my flesh, to hold it, to know it's absolutely real.

I want to see what it saw.

I feel as though I am undertaking a heist: keep walking, don't look back. This is evidence. I walk fast. Everybody else asleep, preparing for tomorrow. A long day, we know, the longest. The day that this ends; the day we go home.

I lock the door, and I sit at my desk, and I lay the memory chip down. I take a small blade from my engineering kit, slice off the end of it, to find the connectors. Lie down, head under the desk, to where the interfaces for our personal computers are. Open the box, find an old-school hard drive connector. Strip the wires, hook them up to the memory chip—

There's a noise outside my door. Footsteps, shuffling. Quiet.

It's the middle of the night. Somebody's where they shouldn't be.

Not the thumping of above. A pause. A hesitation.

I open the door, and there's Sian. Turned away, but she was here, she was waiting to see me. To come in? To talk to me?

'Can I help you?' I ask.

'No,' she says. 'I was—' She pauses. Breaks her own sentence, then she resumes it, as if the break never happened; as if she remembered her lines.

'I was walking around, saying goodbye.'

'You don't seem the sentimental type,' I say.

'No.' She doesn't break eye contact. 'Did he talk about anything I should know about?'

'He?'

'Hyvönen. When I was outside, did he say anything to you? I'm not often away from him, so I like to keep in control. You know.' She isn't asking about the mission; she's asking about herself.

'You're his daughter,' I say.

She nods. 'He told you?'

'Yes,' I reply, which is a lie, but one that feels like I should tell. A curl of a smile on her lips; his admission not something she expected.

'Did he say anything else?'

'He said you were invaluable to him. That you were very good at your job.'

'He hasn't said that to me,' she says.

'And yet.'

'Don't tell the others,' she says. 'I don't want them treating me differently.'

'They won't,' I say, 'I won't.'

'I only found out a few months before we came up here. My mother told me that there was somebody I needed to know about, and there he was, on the television, being asked about progress on the station, about what it was like up there, about what he hoped to achieve from it. And I remember, he

was talking about time: about what we had, and how we used it. I remember him saying, There is a chance we don't have what we once assumed we did, and my mother said, Well, he might as well be introduced to you. If time is running out. So she called him, she got him to answer the phone – and the press were probably going mad, back then, he did a lot of TV, you remember.'

'I do,' I say. I remember he was always wearing a suit, in those days. I remember thinking that he could have been torn from any time in the past since the days that we first went to space; as if his desires were born in the 1960s, and he never changed them, somehow ageless. Horn-rimmed spectacles and a suit designed to be buttoned and pressed, no fold-falling fancy materials for him. I remember his voice, commanding enough, but trustworthy. One of us, especially after his brother died. I remember how he spoke about the removal of his birthmark: Now I am no longer one of two, I am alone; and so my distinction isn't necessary, and acceptance is easier. He seemed so much younger then. In person, he is decrepit, or somewhere close. Maybe they faked him, for the news. Maybe it was all smoke and mirrors, computer-assisted faces, like Desh's porn. Theatrics; Hyvönen really likes theatrics.

'My mother spoke to him, and he said that he wanted to meet with me. I didn't know if I wanted the same. I mean, of course I did, I don't think anybody wouldn't wonder. But he was a specific man. He was *that* man, not a random stranger. He didn't work in an office or anything, I could *see* him if I wanted to.'

'What did you do? For a job, I mean.'

'I was in this. Aeronautics research. He was proud of that. He said, It's in the genes, when I actually met him. That was his fourth sentence, I remember. I remember thinking: you think I only got here because of you.' The saddest smile. 'That's when I knew he could only disappoint me.'

'And now you're his carer,' I say. She doesn't reply. She looks at my desk, her eyes flitting. 'What were you doing outside my room?' I ask. I want her to accuse me of something. I want to confront her. I want the truth, or whatever version she will give to me.

'I told you,' she says. 'I already told you. He wants us ready for the morning. He isn't asleep either. This one, he says, this is the one time. His last push.'

'He's feeling better?'

‘Like always,’ she says. ‘He always gets there, in the end.’

She turns, doesn’t say goodnight. Just leaves, and the door slides shut, and I lock it again; and I turn back to the computer.

I boot it, force it to recognize the memory chip. Video files, tens of them.

I click through them. The drone humming around out there, perfectly still, as if it’s on some sort of tripod, as if it isn’t just out there in the nothing. Suited figures out there as well, exo-suits, just like I saw after Cohen died.

Each video the same, or variants on it.

So, I watch the first, the one that *must* have been Snipes, it simply must have been, and I press play. A body, held between the two exo-suited figures, who are in turn tethered to the station, to the Zvezda airlock; and they push the body out, towards the Anomaly.

There is a rope attached to the body. Held by one of the figures. I can’t see their faces for the distance, for the helmets, the darkness. All I can watch, as the drone moves around the scene, is the body.

It moves, slowly, into the darkness. Towards the Anomaly.

The Anomaly which seems close. Not like now, but closer than I remember. It’s strange, out there: it feels so imposing, so dense, so massive

—  
The body in the bag isn’t dead. It moves, writhes. I can see the panic through the black fabric: the desperation of its movements, thrashing, *turn back, turn back*—

The body slides into the Anomaly wall, kicking and screaming, and it disappears, and the tether follows it.

The two exo-suited figures wait.

The tether thrashes – *bring me back! bring me back!* – then slowly stops. It slackens.

I watch as the seconds tick by. Ten. Fifteen. Twenty.

Thirty.

Forty.

The tether tightens, suddenly, frantically – the pressure in it, as if it’s being yanked, pulled, worked from the other end. Thrashing again—

One of the suits raises a hand. Wait. Wait.

Wait.

Sixty.

Ninety.

The line slackens again. The suit closes their hand, an opened palm into a fist.

Forty-five seconds, or thereabouts. That's how much time passed.

They wait, and forty-five seconds later, the line tightens once more. Again, frantic pulling, but nothing. Open hand, and it slackens.

Repeat. Repeat. Repeat.

The body inside the Anomaly is alive, and then it's dead. Alive, then dead.

The Anomaly brings it back, just like it did with Gibson, over and over. And these two, these exo-suited two, are experimenting with it.

Ten minutes later, the suits wait until the line slackens, and they grab the tether, and pull it, hard, towards them. In the distance, the body slides back through the wall, back into our space. Away from that thing, and the suits hit the recoil switch, and the tether spools back, the body racing towards them; and they catch it, and they turn, and they open the airlock, and they're gone—

I see something, then, in the hand of one of them. The CPR device.

It's Mon.

Snipes left a note. He left a note, and I wondered, in a moment of absolute selfishness, if he would mention me. We had known each other for such a short time, and there were people in his life who had been there from the start, or from stages of such importance throughout the duration of his life before this. I was nobody to him, really, but I still wondered. The night before, saying that he thought there could have been something – another place, another time, another diagnosis; with that smile on his face, that said he had accepted it, even if it's impossible to ever truly accept something like that – and so was it so implausible, that the note might say goodbye?

But it was platitudes. I had never seen a suicide note before, but I had seen them on television and in movies: tell my family I love them, I am sorry, this is nobody's fault. The existence of a note a cliché in itself, and the content no less of one. Snipes' note was the same.

*I am sorry if this hurts anybody, I can't go on.*

Except: that isn't what he said to me.

He said to me, that night, 'I'm trying to do something. I'm going to be selfish, my mother says that my being up here is selfish. And it is. Being up

here, it's selfish. Because I'm not leaving her with anything. I'm leaving her with a memory. They won't take my body down,' he told me. 'They won't even find it. It'll be drifting somewhere else, God knows. Like some satellite, going on and on forever until it burns up or crashes.'

'Maybe you'll meet aliens,' I said.

'First contact, and I'll have been dead for centuries.'

'Maybe they'll bring you back. We don't know what aliens can do.'

'Bring me back? My mother'll like that.'

'No,' I said, 'to life. Bring you back.'

'Maybe,' he said. 'But then, everybody else will be dead. So I'm not sure if I'd like that.'

'You'd be alive.'

'Can they cure cancer? In this scenario, I mean.'

'Sure,' I said, 'they're aliens. They can cure everything. Even death.'

I wonder: could ours have been a love story? In another time, another place; without the sword hanging over us, the sword that kept resetting; the sword that removed his agency from him?

I press play on the second video. More of the same. A body, sent out there, not wanting to die; certainly, not wanting to die again, and again, and again. These two people – Mon, Mon and another – sending this body out, raising it from the dead, before murdering it again.

The third video: the same, again, always the same.

The fourth video: no change.

The fifth video: something different here, as the body seems to be less thrashing, less frantic; more, adjusting itself, almost, moving and then settling – before it goes into the Anomaly, before the line slackens, tautens, slackens again.

I am so tired, and I feel my eyelids heavying. What am I even looking for?

I think of Snipes, when he described his job to me. 'I'm an experimental pilot,' he said.

'What does *experimental* mean?' I asked, flirting, as if I remembered how.

'It means I pilot things that haven't been piloted before,' he said.

Now, watching this body going out there, I wonder if this is what he was talking about.

He is the pilot of his own body; of this journey into the Anomaly.

After a few cycles, they pull the body back. The same protocol as previously: back to the airlock, where Mon administers her resuscitation, and they move inside the airlock; except the camera doesn't stop recording. The timestamp continues. I stare at the footage, for a moment, the inaction being all I need to make me pay attention.

The drone shifts. It moves, away from the station, and all I can see is what it sees. Mon and the other suit and the body behind it, as it heads for the Anomaly wall itself.

It's so close to the station that this can only have been a few days ago, since it leapt. The drone stops, just shy of heading through the wall. One of the pincers reaches out, guided slowly, carefully, through the anomaly. Puckering the surface, breaking it, pushing through—

Clamp, onto something.

Retract.

It pulls a tether cable from the Anomaly.

Nothing, then, but stillness; and then, suddenly, the line twitches.

The airlock opens, and the two suits are there again. The one that isn't Mon reaches for the tether, tests it for slack. It's taut, twitching back as it's pulled. They wait, and then the line slackens. One, two, they pull it, and quickly.

A body. Another body, wrapped in the same material comes through the Anomaly wall. Pulled back to the station.

I rewind, to see if I can work out what's happening. Rewind, fast-forward. Watch it again, and I can't see what's happened. I can't parse it. There was one body sent in, and then retrieved; and a second pulled back as well. I zoom in, looking for details. The shapes the same size; the wrapping, it looks to me, almost identical. Actually identical, the same seams and joins and folds.

I cannot fathom it; I cannot.

My fist slams onto Mon's bedroom door. Five in the morning, and she will be asleep, but this can't wait. Thump, thump. 'Open,' I say, but it buzzes at me. The closest equivalent we have to a doorbell: an alert on the terminal that somebody's tried to gain access to our room. I hear her moving, but she

doesn't say anything. 'Mon,' I say. I try not to shout, I try not to wake the rest of the station, but I will if I have to. 'Open the door, Mon. We have to talk,' I say.

Shuffle, shuffle. I imagine her sitting there, acting quiet, trying to pretend she's not in there. Trying to pretend that she's not hiding from me.

'You coward,' I say. I didn't know the words were going to come, but there they are. Said through her door, through the seals that are meant to keep us sound-proof, but which do not work; through my pain, to her ears. 'You *liar*.' Shuffle. 'You're a murderer. I've seen it, you're a murderer.'

I'm walking away from her room when I hear something, and I'm sure it's crying; I'm sure it's Mon, sobbing softly. And I stop, and I turn, and I think about knocking again, but I know she won't let me in, even with what I can hear.

I pack my bag. I'm leaving. We're all leaving. I tell myself that this doesn't matter. This is the truth, because when I'm not here any more, when I'm back down there, back in my apartment, and Theo is with me – just let Xavier try his shit, just let him try blocking me from access if he claims that this isn't my weekend or some such bullshit; and I know he'll try it, but I can't remember what weekend would be mine; or even, really, what day of the week we are on, so I check the calendar. A Wednesday. Mid-week. I'll land, and Theo won't be there, and Xavier will kick off. My mother will be there alone to greet me, like when I was a student and my father had his first episode, and she told me in the car, Now here's why he isn't here, and we don't want to worry you, there's really nothing to worry about, but the doctor says that he needs bed-rest, so we've agreed a stay in a facility might be best for him.

I take my only physical artefact, the photograph of my parents with Theo, and I put it into my bag. I treat it with a preciousness: it is the last photograph I have of my father alive; or, rather, the only photograph of the last day I remember him being himself. Now, I realize that he looks so frail in the picture it's as if a fold in the paper would break him in half. I wrap it in a t-shirt, put it into the middle of the bag. All my clothes padding the bag out around it. The few books I brought with me put on the top. The bag closed, the toggles tightened. The middle of the night, and I am ready to leave.

Come on. Come the fuck on.

While I wait: I watch the video again. I watch all the videos again.  
I wonder why they recorded this, I wonder what it could help achieve.  
And then I think about why anybody ever documents anything: this is evidence. Except, not of a crime, perhaps; but of a discovery.

I do not need to sleep, I tell myself. My tiredness is wracking me: every bit of my body aching for just a moment of actual rest. My shoulders crying to slump; my feet sobbing for stillness, for elevation.

I think about touching down, feeling the ground beneath my feet, actual ground. My arms wrapped around my sweet boy's back, his neck. Holding him close, and breathing him in.

Do not say a word. This is how it works, I know.

I have come so far, and there are secrets and lies and deceits and deaths, but this is so close to being over.

I was hospitalized, and I realized: do not say a word. Because everything was twisted by Xavier, turned into something else, I realized that silence was my best friend.

Do not say a word.

They want you neutered and simplified, turned into a person that you are not; so do not fall into their trap. Say the right things. Do the right things. Act the way that they want you to act, until the doctor says, You're fine.

Do not say a word.

When the new doctor came, she was horrified. You shouldn't be here, she said. What have they done to you? What have they done?

I know, I told her. I have been trying. I spoke the wrong way to her, the way that I had been told not to talk; and she listened. I just want to go home, I said.

And now, the same. There's so much chaos here, so much I don't understand. And I just want to go home.

Click click, the ruby slippers clicked together.

Do not say a word.

Do not say a word, because I simply want to go home.

A voice comes over the station's speakers as I am sitting in my room, holding my bag, eyes shut. I was asleep, I think; passed out, while waiting. A meeting in ten minutes, in the mess. Attendance is mandatory. The voice

that of the computer system, rather than Hyvönen or Sian or Desh. No joviality or celebration of the fact that we are reaching the end of this thing.

Half past seven, which means a call, most days. I turn to the computer, and I press Theo's name; but I press it slowly, feeling it. The tactile vibrations of the screen trembling through my fingers, and I can't tell where my tremor ends and its begins.

'Hello?' He is there, he is here, he speaks and I cry, because I can't help it. He doesn't seem to react to me doing that, so I touch the screen.

'Are you okay?' I ask, and he nods.

'We need you, Mama,' he says, and I sob, nod furiously at him.

'I'm coming home. I'm coming home, Theo.'

'Daddy says that you're going to save the world.' Desperation in his voice. I try to remember: outside of his toddler tantrums, have I ever heard him desperate before? Have I ever heard this pleading? And why would his father say that? Surely the knot – 'Daddy says you're going to save us all. Please save us, Mama.'

I feel sick. To my gut, to my head, to my soul.

'Is your father there?' I ask him, and he shakes his head, and he's about to speak when he freezes, he freezes still, absolutely still. On the screen, not moving, the connection frazzled, this last call, this last fucking time—

Behind him, the clock moves. The clock in the room, it's moving. The second hand still ticking, so I keep watching, waiting for Theo to move again, as if it's a game he's playing; as if he's not frozen mid-blur, his movement softening the edges. The room keeps moving. A plant, behind him, a curtain, swaying in the breeze. Only Theo stock-still, rigid.

The second hand on the clock; the minute hand.

Before I left, I taught Theo to tell the time.

This is the second hand; this is the minute hand. This is how long until I will be home.

My head aches all of a sudden, a wave of it coming on, this colossal wave of pain, shooting behind my eyes, up my neck, into the base of my skull.

I look at the screen, to focus on something – remember how this works, remember to focus, Mon's voice in my head, focus, focus; and I picture myself, somehow walking through the walls, out of the station into the cold, my body like those bodies in their mesh, their reflective fabric coffins, drifting to nothing, to the peace and release of nothing at all – and Theo

disappears, but the room is there, the clock is still ticking. It unpacks, it falls apart.

Glitch, glitch, into different components.

The image on screen crashes into code. Zeroes and ones; nothing, really, at all. It's code, not video. It's a simulation.

Desh's porn. Desh's videos. Fakery, false images. Making people do things that they do not want to do, that they would never have done. Fake their faces, fake their voices.

Desh is so good at it, you can't even see the joins.

Theo is not there, none of it is there.

But I am here. I am here.

*Please assemble*, a message on the comm says, and I sit in the darkness, and I let my head clear. I wait for it to clear. I pray that it will clear.

Please: just let me go home.

The others, minus Gibson, are all standing in a circle when I get to the mess, with the exception of Hyvönen, who leans against a table. He is the first to glance at me as I approach, and he talks as if there's nothing going on behind the scenes.

'Miss Becker,' he says, 'we were just talking about you.' I don't say anything. I survey the room: Mon, still staring down, refusing to look at me. Desh's eyes flitting, as if he's working, but I catch glances towards my face, trying not to be seen. Berry with his eyes shut, already in his exo. And Sian: who looks at me and nods, greeting or acceptance or affirmation of something, I can't tell which. 'We have only a few hours in which to finish our preparations. I trust you're ready to aid me in our final steps.'

'I just tried to call my son,' I say. None of them replies. 'It was broken.'

'The connection is troubled since our proximity to the Anomaly became as it is,' Hyvönen says.

'Bullshit,' I snap back. 'There's something wrong with it. I saw Theo freeze, and the rest of it, the rest of the world, it carried on. It crashed, my son crashed—'

Hyvönen shakes his head, cuts me off. 'Miss Becker, it sounds very much as if you might have seen something impossible.' He turns to Mon, but she's not looking at him. He reaches out, as if he's about to touch her; instead, he clicks his fingers. *Awake*. 'Perhaps you could furnish Miss Becker with something to help her stay in herself.'

Mon looks up. At me. 'I can administer a shot,' she says.

'That would be for the best, I think. Keep the mission on track,' Hyvönen says. He shakes his head, mock sadness. 'There is a lot of pressure up here,' and he smiles, this fucking half-smile, *ah ha, I understand the physics, I have made a joke*, 'and it's hard for us to cope. For all of us. Sometimes we need the help, I think.'

'Fuck you,' I say. 'I'm not taking anything.'

'You have a contract,' he replies. Again, that shaking of his head, tut tut tut. *I am so disappointed in you*. My head hurts, the pain so strong, so overwhelming. And I just want to go home.

'It's fine,' I say. 'I'm confused, that's all. I just ... Want to go home.'

Hyvönen stares at me, blank-eyed. Finally, his lips curl upwards, just enough. 'Then let us finish what we have already started,' he says.

I am escorted, it feels, to *Zvezda*; to *Ukonvasara*. Hyvönen and Sian and Mon and Berry behind me, as I lead the way; but I am not in the lead, not in charge.

‘What’s the plan from here?’ I ask Hyvönen, and he exhales, as if he’s been holding the words in for so long he can’t even fathom holding them a minute longer. He doesn’t answer, though. Just the exhalation. ‘I need to run the diagnostics before it can go anywhere,’ I say.

I think: I should have a plan. I do not have a plan.

‘You should have done this already,’ he says.

‘I’m sorry,’ I say, and I smile, and I nod. Apologize and smile and nod, that’s the rule. That’s what the doctor said to me, when Xavier was arguing that I wasn’t healthy. Smile, nod, get past this. Tell him what he wants to hear, because he will never hear different.

They will only ever try to keep you suppressed, she said. When they know that they can.

So you block them from doing it. Put things in their way. Throw them off.

I type, frantically. Running diagnostics, yes, but also: checking permissions, to make sure that I can stop the launch should I need to; that I can keep him here, until I get my answers.

In the screen’s reflection, I can see Sian standing behind me. She’s watching me.

I know from her degree that she must know her way around code, or at least know enough. I wonder if she can tell what I am doing. Because she doesn’t try to stop me.

I find the security settings. Pray that Desh isn’t watching this, that he’s got something of his own to be getting on with.

But the permissions are already changed, already altered. My name on all of them.

The ship is already registered to me. The permissions locked behind encryptions that cannot be bypassed.

*Password*, the system asks me.

My password is my son's name. When I was away, I needed something I would never forget, something burned in. I have never, never worked on *Ukonvasara*, I have never set these passwords.

But as I type his name, fingers so fast on the keyboard, driven by muscle memory, I know that I also have been here, somehow. A premonition of sorts, that the password will work, that I will be an existing user.

*Permission granted*—

'How far have you made it that we can travel?' Hyvönen's voice, cracked and old. Suddenly so, so old.

'Far,' I hear myself say.

'How far?'

'Depends on momentum inside there. Weeks, I would think. Maybe months, if you're sparing with life support.'

I back out of security, back to the basic systems. I have been here. My fingerprints all over it, even if only digital.

'Ah, we will have to breathe lightly,' he says. 'Launch will be in a few hours,' he says, to nobody in particular.

Sian doesn't leave with him, not at first. She hangs back, just a little.

'Don't do this,' she says.

'What?'

'Please, Ali.' I can't think when I have heard her use my name before.

'Don't dig. Don't do this to yourself. Not everything needs to be answered.'

'I don't know what you mean.'

'But you do,' she says, 'just as I do.'

And then she's gone, and I am alone.

I march across the donut to Mon's bedroom. I've rarely been inside here, she is so private about her own space, but I don't give a shit.

Her door is unlocked, gives under my hand. She's sitting on the edge of her bed, staring at something in her hands; and she looks up and at me, and she blinks. Doesn't say anything, but she's been crying. 'You've been lying to me,' I say, and she shakes her head.

'No, no,' she says, 'you don't understand.'

'So make me.'

‘I can’t,’ she says. ‘I’m so sorry, Ali. Trust me, please, when I say that I did this for you. I did, I swear it, I did.’ The thing in her hands: a picture of me and her, taken some time ago. Up here? The Anomaly so, so far back, so when we just arrived. We are smiling. She has a physical camera, I’d forgotten that, one of those from the last century, that prints out the picture straight away. I’d forgotten that entirely. Her wall, a mess of pictures: of her, of me, of Desh. Of crew members who have since left. Me, Snipes, Mon, Desh. I don’t remember it being taken, not really. I remember being in a room, with them—

‘You’ve changed my memory.’ I look at the picture in her hands. Swipe for it. We are laughing at something, her head rocked backwards to near-snap point, mine shocked, eyes wide. ‘I don’t remember this. I wasn’t there for this.’

‘You were.’

‘I fucking *wasn’t*,’ I hear myself shout. I hear the words, feel my temper buzzing behind my face.

‘Please, Ali, calm down,’ she says, but—

‘You need to calm down,’ Xavier said.

I never shouted. I never did, not once, until he started lying to me, *about* me.

‘Tell me what you’ve done to me,’ I say to her. I want to hit her, that’s what this is. A swelling. The pain in my head, my whole body; like a hangover caused by nothing at all. Chattering teeth, subtle under my tensed jaw. And to swing my fist, to connect it with her, an instinct I literally haven’t felt since Theo was tiny, when I came back from hospital and Xavier said that I would do nights, as he had done them in my absence – as if it was my fucking choice – and Theo wouldn’t stop crying, and he wouldn’t take to me, he wouldn’t take to me, and I could see in his eyes, this idea of *who is this woman?*, and I wanted to hurt myself, to hurt Xavier, to hold Theo’s arm tightly and beg, please, can’t you see, can’t you feel how much I love you, what I have gone through for you? ‘Did you kill Snipes? Did you need him dead?’

‘What?’ Her face aghast. A truth, I think; so I talk, faster. Get the words out.

‘I saw the drone, the footage of what you were doing. I saw you killing Snipes, out there. Over and over you did it.’

‘I didn’t.’

‘I *watched you*. I watched you, killing him, bringing him back, killing him again.’

‘Snipes killed himself,’ she says. ‘I didn’t have anything to do with his death.’

His voice, soundless, screaming, as the rush of air; and I feel the lack of it pulling on my lungs, stopping me drawing breath the way I know I can, the way I know I should.

‘Don’t lie to me.’ Am I screaming? My voice is out of my control.

‘I’m not. I told you I’m not. Honestly, Ali: all I’ve done is try to help you. You’re my friend, and you asked me to help you. So I am.’

I believe her, I think. For some reason, I believe her.

I remember Xavier sitting next to me, holding my hand. He said, ‘We’re agreed, I think, that something needs to change, Ali.’

‘We are not agreed,’ I spat at him.

‘I can’t remember that picture,’ I say, ‘and I can’t remember putting my password into the *Ukonvasara*’s systems. I can’t remember it.’ I can hear the desperation in my own voice as it comes to me. ‘You’ve fucked with my memories.’

As I say it, it feels like something I should have predicted, or could have predicted; a twist in my story. Too obvious, too obvious.

Mon looks down at her hands. ‘You need to talk to the old man,’ she says.

‘You tell me. Tell me about Snipes.’

‘I’ll do better,’ she says. ‘I’ll show you.’

She loads files. She goes through medical logs, files and records that are private to her, that ordinarily she wouldn’t even contemplate letting me see. I suppose that these are extraordinary times. A file all for Snipes. All his interviews, his medical records. Hundreds upon hundreds of psych evaluations, all numbers. She lingers on the file system, to let me see without actually showing me. Like she wants to prove their due diligence.

Then: a folder labelled *pre*, another labelled *post*.

Inside *post*, a single video file; and a document labelled *autopsy*.

‘Are you sure you want to see this?’ Mon asks. I nod, I feel myself nod. Play.

Motion-triggered footage of Snipes entering the changing room. Trying the airlock, and finding himself locked out; as if, this is what they were afraid of.

Moments from death.

‘Wait,’ I say, ‘not here. Start earlier. I need to see him before.’

She shuffles off the chair. Lets me take it. ‘Why don’t you drive,’ she says.

I swipe through the folders. Everything tagged with his name since he came onto the station, everything here is accessible.

The hour before he died. Here he is, in his room. Looking through the bag on his bed. A bag of possessions, brought with him because, why? Because he knew he was going to die. Important things, and I asked him, I remember asking him—

A day earlier, and there I am, with him. My hair, the back of my neck. The angle, as I stand in the doorway, as I talk to him. I remember my words.

*Are you coming to eat? A bunch of us—*

Another video, from another day. I am sitting on his bed, and he is talking me through his bag. Medicine – an inhaler, meant to kick-start him, if he needs it; a photograph of his mother and father, and another of his brothers; the book he’s reading, an old paperback, tattered at the edges; his clothes, sweatpants, a t-shirt, his favourites. I remember the words, except not the words. Memories that are tightly organized and perfect.

‘Is there sound?’ I ask. Mon nods, swipes, types a password of her own.

I watch her fingers as she types it. She’s not as fast as I am at typing, and not as security-conscious. Hers is a word: *Andre*.

Her son’s name.

We, people, humans, are so obvious, so predictable. So alike.

Here’s my voice, cutting through a hiss of white ambience. ‘Aren’t you scared?’ I hear myself asking.

‘Of course,’ he says. ‘You’d be a monster not to be.’

‘But,’ the me on screen says, and he nods.

‘But I’m scared anyway.’ His leg jiggles. The me that’s on screen notices it. I notice it.

‘I would say don’t be,’ the me says.

‘It’s healthy,’ he says.

‘I’ll leave you,’ Mon says. ‘You should watch this by yourself.’ She stands, goes to the door. ‘If you need me,’ she says, but then she’s gone, not telling me where she’ll be.

I watch another video. He is kissing me, against the wall of his room, behind the door. I want to click back, to see how we got there. Did we stumble into the room, hands on each other? Did we keep it a secret? I can't quite remember.

'Stop,' he says.

I stop the video. I don't want to see the promise, or the potential.

That isn't what this is about.

Back to the video of the hour before he died.

Snipes sits in his room. He prepares the room, and he cries. He looks at the photograph of his parents, the photograph of his brothers. He is so human in this moment; when he doesn't know anybody else is watching, when he is absolutely purely himself. He leaves his room, and he walks to the airlock. The video in the *post* folder: where he smashes the glass plate of the fire alarm, and he stands back, and he waits for the door. Pulls the lever on the door.

He was an experimental pilot.

Except: I'm there, somehow, in the room with him. I'm in there, standing with him, next to him. Please, please, begging him, and he pushes me, tells me to get out, asks me what I am doing.

I was not in there when he died. I did not do this. I know, because I remember *not* doing it. Instead, I remember my fist, beating on the glass, asking somebody to do something as the alarm rang out, so loud and bright

—

I stop the video.

The metadata attached to it. *Death, Snipes, Becker.*

I touch my own name, and there's a list of videos. So many videos. Compared to Snipes' file, hundreds of times bigger. Timestamps, but they're all wrong, all chaos. I start at the first in the list, work my way down.

Here I am, stepping onto the station for the first time.

Here I am, eating with Mon and with Desh.

Here I am, talking with Snipes.

Here I am, kissing Snipes. One kiss. This shouldn't have happened.

And then here I am, working with Hyvönen.

A click, inside my head. That last one: I don't remember it. Sound up. He tells me that he has got a plan, a secret plan. He wants my help with something—

The conversation is right, but the location is wrong. This is in the mess, over breakfast. I am eating a rubber disc of egg, he is pushing mush around a bowl. This did not happen. He is leaning close, and he's saying, 'You understand the ship better than most, you will be able to help me make the most of what it can offer. Why did you think I wanted you up here so much, Miss Becker?' He has an idea, he explains. To fly a ship deep into the Anomaly—

The ache, through my neck, through my teeth, the backs of my teeth, coming back. An invader, ripping into me. The back teeth, where they've been gritted, tensed, worn—

My mother's voice: they don't call them wisdom teeth for nothing.

'Would you like to know a secret?' Hyvönen asks the me, and I say, 'Yes,' here and on the recording, my voice out loud in this room, in sync, both voices.

'The Anomaly is not what we thought,' he says, or he said. 'It does not work the way that the rest of the universe does.' There's an impish grin to him, a pleasure in his telling me. The me looks confused. He carries on: 'Time is different inside it. It's quite the most remarkable thing, quite the most remarkable discovery. We assumed that it was an absence, Miss Becker, and yet it is not. It is quite, quite *not*.'

He told me. I have the evidence here in front of me, that he told me before.

But I cannot remember this.

So I stare at the screen, and I think back to Xavier, to his words to the doctor who institutionalized me. Who believed him.

'She suffers from fugue states,' he said, words he learned from a book, and words that made me laugh, so ridiculous.

'Do you remember them?' the doctor asked me.

'No,' I said, 'because they did not happen.'

Xavier shrugged, then. *There's your evidence. She would say that.*

But I don't remember this now. I don't remember any of that conversation. It juts against my actual memories: of being told this only days ago, of it being new information, fresh information. Like new skin growing over a wound: pink, soft to the touch. Too soft.

It itches; as if it shouldn't be there.

I watch as Hyvönen explains his theories to me, theories of amoebae, of time and space, of our own relationship to time – and he says that last one

with the arrogance of somebody who believes that they have stumbled upon original thought when there is absolutely no such thing – and he gesticulates. He doesn't have to use his board here, doesn't have his ideas written down for him. They're inside his head, and he's able to pluck them out at will. He's having a good day.

My memories.

Sian said that Hyvönen's machine couldn't wipe memories, but I need to know, because there is clearly something I have forgotten.

Hyvönen's door slides open as I approach. I feel my toes lift so slightly under my step.

The room has been cleared, boxed up. He's been busy, or Sian's been busy. One of the two. The personal artefacts set for moving back down, the fixtures already looking abandoned in lieu of anywhere to take them, any way to move them.

'Hello?' I ask, but there's no reply.

A path clear through to the medical room, to Hyvönen's private medical room. The door already open as I approach, already swooshed back and kept that way. *Come in, come in.* An invitation, somebody once said. An opened door is an invitation. The memory machine there. Back in the day, they used to take bad memories away, replace them with something else. Softer memories. But that function was disabled on them. Of course, Hyvönen's got money; nothing stays decommissioned if you can pay for it to come back to life.

I go up to the machine. I remember my father's, when they tried it as a treatment for him. The menus; and cycling through them, to find the backup, jolting it back into him. Torturous and agonizing, watching him biting down on that rubber bar as the crown of it sat on his head, as the pads on his temples buzzed. As the skin went ashen around his temples.

They said that removing memories used to do that instantly. It would char the skin. For my father, it took months of daily treatments, just to normalize him.

It never normalized him enough. There was always a gap, a void.

A space.

The brain is an anomaly, they said to us. The word that back then still had something close to a double meaning.

There's a mirror in the medical bay. I check my temples, and my skin is fine. My hair showing no trace. No char on my skin. I cycle through, to the menus, and the erase function isn't even visible. There's nothing hidden. Nothing has been erased.

This isn't that story.

Just because it exists, that doesn't mean it was used.

There are photographs that I cannot remember, events that didn't happen, recordings of conversations that I never had; but there's no evidence that my memory has been removed.

The pain in the nape of my head crawls up, into the very skin of my skull. Worms its way through to the surface.

'You shouldn't be here.' Sian's voice, and I snap my head around. Feel the pain slosh in my brain, water in a bowl, swirling. A maelstrom, like the worst sinus pain, the worst hay fever I have ever felt. A migraine turned fluid. 'This is his machine. Did you touch anything?' She doesn't let me answer, flicking through the menus instead, checking everything is just so. A bank of files, all dated, numbered. All waiting to be put back into his brain, when he needs them to be.

Hyvönen, in pieces, over time.

'You've all lied to me,' I say. 'You, Mon, Desh.' Sian stays where she is, her hands on the machine's screen. 'And your father.'

'Don't,' she says. 'This wasn't his fault.'

'*This.*' I slam my hand onto the machine, and Sian balks, starts, steps back, a gasp from her throat, it seems. 'Tell me what *this* is,' I say, but she pushes me, hard and fast, and she runs out of the medical room, into the main room—

I follow her. Close, staying close, and she tries to get away, but I grab her arm—

'We've been worried about you for a long time,' she says, but that's not right, that's not it. That's not all this is. 'We'll go out there, and Mon will help you calm down.' She's looking at something behind me as she talks. Glancing at something, in a way that suggests she doesn't want me to see something.

I turn, expecting Hyvönen. But it's his plans, that's what she's looking at. Plans and simulations of the trip. All of his scrawls and scribbles, the handwritten rantings of a man well past his best.

In these drawings, as it is outside, the Anomaly is so close. Here, the point at which *Ukonvasara* will cross its boundary, will pass into it and then continue. His estimates of its size; the estimate for the fuel needed to pass across it. *If it is a sphere, or approximation of,* he has written, *then ...* His workings out, the angle of the horizon. Hundreds – thousands – of probes or drones, it must be, *objects*, hurled at the wall. I picture them inside it, floating like trash. We have ruined our seas down on Earth; we have ruined our atmosphere; now, we are ruining our Anomaly with our waste.

Drawings, coded, in lines and crosses and words in place of pictures.

*If we survive,* he has written, *we will exit—*

And the ship itself, the *Ukonvasara*. A list of the contents, the haul. The recording devices, the ways to measure whatever it is that Hyvönen wants to measure. And Hyvönen's name there, part of the cargo, a dull tool.

And my name as well, next to his. *Becker*.

I step closer to it.

'Why is my name up there?'

'Ali,' she says, but I turn back to her, stop her talking.

'I'm going home,' I say. 'I'm not going with him.' I step closer to the board, to the scrawl. My name in pale blue. I raise my hand, palm to it, rub. Rub it out, and then it's gone, and Hyvönen's name is smudged next to it.

The *swoosh* of the door behind me. She's opened it, which means she's about to run; so I turn, but Berry's there, fast, his hand holding a hypo-gun, and he pushes for my neck with it, but I hold him back—

'Help me!' he barks at Sian, and she fumbles her own hands, almost, trying to get to mine, to hold me down. I kick, I struggle, and Sian restrains me—

Berry slips on something. The gravity slightly wrong, he misjudges something, he falls, and I wrangle myself away, and I run. Hand out, to steady myself, and it hits the globe, Hyvönen's drinks globe, which topples, smashing behind me; but I don't stop.

What happens if I stop?

What happens if I don't?

I run around the donut. Sian, Mon, Desh, Berry, Hyvönen. Desh will be watching, I'm sure. Hyvönen couldn't outrun or outfight me if he tried. Mon could have tried to stop me when I went to her room, but—

An alarm sounds. The klaxon *crank, crank* of it blaring through the speakers.

An emergency. This is what happens in an emergency.

Fire doors plunging down over the doors into bedrooms, into labs, into workshops. *Thunk, thunk*, the sound of the station locking down, just as when we run the drills. Underneath the alarm, the bass of the station stops. The constant churn of the centrifuge slows at first, then slows more, fading, almost.

The lights flick off, throwing us into emergency darkness. Lit by red LEDs along pathways, by green escape signs. Green escape signs running to the door in the central column; the door to Zvezda, to the servers. To the Imminent Room.

I follow the green lights. I open the door.

Wait, wait: I feel my feet lifting from the floor. I put my hand out, grab one of the internal rungs, cling and push. That's what they teach you: a constant pushing against the weightlessness. Cling, push, *move*.

There's nowhere to hide. But the Anomaly is coming, I know. Hours, that's all. Hyvönen's equation gave us until a little after three in the afternoon. They'll panic, but then—

I'll be here. If I don't get off the station, I'll be here when the Anomaly covers us, and Theo will be at home; and I won't be with him, I won't hold him.

So I will leave; and they won't be able to stop me.

If I took the *Raft*, they could lock me out. But I've removed the blockers from *Ukonvasara*. Nobody could stop me.

Nobody stops me as I go past the storage rooms and welded-shut doors, towards the wreck of the door to the Zvezda module. The archaic old handle, waiting for me. These decades-old suits, hanging here. I don't know how long since they were integrity-checked. The helmets look unfractured, but hairline cracks could make this a lost cause.

I could be out there, I think; floating.

I can almost feel it: the nothing filling my lungs, the gulping of air that doesn't exist. So visceral, so tangible, it's as if I can touch it—

I step into the trousers of one of the suits, pull them up. My feet into the boots. This thing is heavier than our regular exo-suits are, and bulkier. The top half mounted to the wall, and more rigid. I slide into it, seal it off, clamp it tight.

*Thump*. A noise.

I think about lying in my bed, listening to the darkness; to the centrifuge, underneath everything.

To the footsteps, it sounded like, above my head.

Xavier creeping down the corridor, outside the bedroom. His hand on the door, pushing it open. A crack of light, a sliver. Even as quiet as he tried to be: *thump, thump*.

The suit goes on, and the helmet is here, ready.

We wore them, one night here, when we were first up. All of us scared, and somebody said, We should try the helmets. Imagine what it was like to be those pioneers, those explorers.

Just imagine.

Now, I put it on, and I'm about to clamp it tight, when there's another thud. Maddeningly close, so close it feels like I can't escape it. I try to shut my eyes, but I can't, in this moment. Something stopping me.

I grab the arm to the Zvezda module door, and I move it, up, yank it up—

But there's time, I know there's time. They aren't up here. They aren't searching for me, and if they are, the system glitch will inform them correctly, but they'll ignore it.

*Allanah Becker is in the Zvezda module, it will say.*

I backtrack, to the computers. A chance for answers, for truths, before I leave this place.

What happens when I'm gone? They'll have to abandon their plans. They'll have to go home, tails between their legs. Riding their life raft, the last-ditch opportunity abandoned. Or: Hyvönen can wait here, alone, for the Anomaly to swallow him.

Good. No less than he deserves.

I bring up a terminal window. Access is blisteringly quick: our position, I'm sure, our perfect position to both return home, and to head into the Anomaly.

I log in, to look at files. Not as me, but as Mon.

*Andre*. Her son's name, her password.

We are so close, Mon and I. Of a type.

I think of Theo. How he needs me, he said. How much he needs me.

I delve into my files. Into the history of me. My medical files from before. Transcripts from the psychs who signed me off for this trip. With the staffers who interviewed me. Professors. With Xavier, a counterpoint to

their clarity. I read them, or my eyes scan them. Files that tell me who I am, that lay it out exactly for me. And then, up here: the things that I have done, the person that I have been. My being here in the first place. The work that I have done. My conversations with Theo, every single one of them logged.

I stop. The timestamps. They aren't right.

Dates that have passed; and dates that haven't happened yet.

Perhaps, Desh has joked, we'll move past *anno domini* and get to something else.

*After Anomaly. AA. I hear his voice in my head. We'll need AA, the amount we'll drink when we get off this fucking station—*

But these dates are wrong. It's been sixty-five days; these timestamps stretch to four years in the future. There is something wrong with the station, something fucked up with it. This is what happens when you're so close to the Anomaly. It's broken, everything's broken here.

Hyvönen said that time is different in there.

Maybe it's different when you're adjacent, as well.

You have seen what it can do to people.

I read the files. Everything askew. Dates and times of ships leaving the station, and coming. Dates and times that don't exist yet. Operations and plans and files. Videos sent back.

Emails from Desh. *This data is uncorrupted, recorded analogue—*

What is this? What is this?

A bank of files. My metadata. *Becker*, they're labelled. I touch my name, and here they are. Hundreds, *thousands* of files. Everything I have done on the station. I open them, at random. Here I am, at the start. Stepping off the shuttle. I have seen this before, I have seen it, and I remember it. I click another. Here it is again: the duplicate of the first.

Why copy my files? Why do this?

I keep clicking. Here, I talk to Mon about our sons.

*Theo*, a tag. I touch it—

Here are the conversations we had. Private conversations. These are special, sacrosanct. Labelled, filed away, kept for a rainy day. Why have they been recorded?

I watch one, the first one. He doesn't understand why I'm here. He doesn't understand why I'm not there. I'll be with you soon, darling, I say. Soon, so soon, but Mama has to help these people, she's got to save the world—

Like the superheroes?

Just like them.

Another one. Another one. Another one, and he is there, timestamped and coded and having good days and having bad. In each, my voice through the speakers, and I sound so different to how I sound in my head.

I daisy-chain my words to him. My hellos, my goodbyes.

Mama's coming home soon.

Soon, baby, soon. Not long now.

There's been a delay.

I don't know. I don't know.

I wish I was there—

My voice is haggard and tired and sore and cracked. This is not just how I sound outside my head, this is my voice wrecked. When did I say these things? When were we delayed?

Theo stares at the screen. Mama, Daddy says you're never coming home.

I am, I am. My voice, begging.

He is older. Theo is older and older. I don't recognize this Theo, this boy

—

Don't come home, he says. I hate you. I hate you. Daddy told me all about you, I hate you. I hate you. He spits the final hate with such bile, such actual hate.

No, I say. I slam my hand against the servers, and the screen shudders, the projection briefly interrupted. The image paused.

Next file. There's one more conversation with Theo, only one more.

Xavier, unshaven. That necklace, that necklace, so ratty against his skin. He's so bloated. His eyes are red, his face sunken: as if it's a bad facsimile of itself, the copy askew. I don't recognize his eyes in this. I have never seen his eyes like this.

A voice, from this side of the screen. Not mine.

Hyvönen's.

'Mr Becker?'

'Belasco. Becker's only Ali's name. Where is she? This is her account, right?'

'It is. Do you know who I am?' Hyvönen sounds distant. Even though his voice is behind the camera, as it were, it sounds further away.

'Sure. I've seen you. Where is she?'

A pause. Hyvönen pauses. ‘I’m very sorry, Mr Belasco. I’m sorry to be the one to call you like this.’

‘What is it?’

‘She’s been injured, I’m afraid. Potentially very badly indeed.’

‘Ali.’ One word, on his lips. Carried out, dragged out. Lasts a lifetime.

I strike the screen. I don’t know I’m doing it, can’t tell. It’s involuntary. It freezes, and then it sorts itself out, and it resumes, and I strike it again, again, break the connection, break the connection—

My hands at my side, and it persists. It persists, and I numb. The shudder of my own body, as, on the screen, Xavier’s shudders alongside me. An involuntary move from him. Shudder, as he listens. As he takes in the information.

I am out of this. I am out. It plays. I can’t interact. I can’t believe—

‘What happened to her?’

‘There was an accident. She was trying to save somebody’s life, though I know that’s scant consolation. She was a hero.’

‘Was. She’s dead?’

‘No. Not quite. But we are not sure we can sustain her.’

‘I, ah. Fuck.’ Xavier rubs his eyes. His thumbs deep in the red nooks of his eyes. ‘What happened?’

‘I have told you. There’s not much more than that to say—’

‘There are details,’ Xavier says, ‘there are always details.’

‘She was working in the name of science,’ Hyvönen says. ‘In the name of saving all of us.’

‘Science? She was trying to save—’ I am here. I am here. What happened, because I am here; I am *here*, and I am alive. I did not injure myself; or die. ‘That’s not an answer.’

‘There was an accident,’ Hyvönen says. ‘Another of our ... employees was involved. A horrible accident, of course, when she was trying to save his life. You understand that I cannot tell you more.’

‘Fuck. I don’t understand. I’ll have to tell Theo.’ Xavier seems upset, which is his brand: to seem. ‘I’ll have to tell him that his mother’s dead, and you can’t give me a straight answer.’

He turns. There’s a noise behind him.

In the back of the room, in the stairwell, come down from upstairs: there’s my boy. He’s heard this, and his scream, his realization, his understanding.

I want to scream along with him. I want to scream the same tone, the same pitch. I want to match his pain, exactly, to somehow synchronize with it. A screaming.

The video ends.

My hand shakes to check the timestamp. Four years ago. Four years ago this was sent, but that's impossible, because I am here, and I am alive.

Four years ago I was at home, with Theo, building a life. I was out of hospital, I was better, I was pushing away from the lies that Xavier told to get me there—

Four years ago, being up here was a dream.

Four years: that's what they told us we had, how long until the Anomaly arrived.

Another of our employees, that's what Hyvönen said to Xavier. When I was trying to save his life, another of our employees—

Snipes. I type his name, hands trembling.

My father's hands and their own tremor, reaching for me.

Snipes. His body, on a slab, in Mon's lab.

He's dead. Mon isn't there. It skips time, as he stays dead, as he remains. And then they enter, and they have another body with them. The next table, it's laid down, and I am on it. A machine plugged into my skin, tubes and wires from my extremities.

There are soft pads of mesh on my eyes. Bloody. Mon lifts one, winces. I see it on the recording. She changes the pad. Wipes away the darkness of blood; but there's nothing but darkness there at all. She puts another pad back on, changes the other. Changes the pads on my eyes.

I blink now. Wetness in my eyes, even through the dry of the air purifier up here. I can't hear the alarm any more, but it's still ringing. It's faded to white noise behind everything else.

I follow the system's chain of linear footage. They work on me. They move Snipes away, sheet over his face. They work on me more. Here is Mon, checking my vitals; and Sian, asking her about me; and Hyvönen, standing to one side, insufferably quiet and still, as if he's died, or is in stasis; but then, all of a sudden, he rages, and Mon shouts at him, and they argue, back and forth. Argument after argument.

They leave me alone. The lights dim. There is no movement but the blip on the life support; not enough to trigger the lights.

The footage stops; and then starts again. Mon enters, and Cohen with her. They wheel me. They wheel me to Hyvönen's room. To his memory machine. I read Hyvönen's lips, as he justifies this to Mon. In case, he says. Just in case, it's always good to be prepared.

To have a backup.

Even unconscious, I convulse under the machine's pull. Cohen holds me down, holds my body down—

His arm, against the wall. Just up here, and he felt like I had—

He said, You fucking tease. Leading me on.

I told him. He assumed he could do that, he assumed he could make the choice for me.

It was my choice; he assumed he could take that from me.

He holds me down, to stop me convulsing, as the machine does its thing.

I watch as my body arcs—

I convulse—

My father, restrained. Frothing, raging. You are not my daughter, you are not my wife; and all I could think of was that old song, so old, from the classics stations. This is not my beautiful house.

Me, restrained. Xavier through the window, talking to the doctor. What a danger I am.

Still, Cohen holds me. Still, Mon watches.

Finally, she looks away. My memories backed up.

Then we are back in the lab. More work to be done.

Mon stares at my life signs, which blip, falter; but then they're fine.

I'm fine, and Mon breathes a sigh of relief.

'You died,' a voice says, 'and they brought you back.' And for a moment I think it's on the screen, on the recording, my voice talking to myself, until I feel the presence behind me—

A hand on my arm, and I snap back, lash out. 'Don't fucking touch me,' I say, and I reach for the clamps, as if I'm running, as if this is Sian or Mon or whoever it is that thinks that they're going to stop me doing this.

But she's moved back already. She's drifting a few inches away from me, and it's impossible to parse what I'm seeing for a moment, because – I tell myself – her hair is covering a bit of her face, swept over, and she's looking away, but it's not that at all. It's just not. It's because she doesn't make sense. And yet she does.

She is me. I am her.

She is looking at me; she, a version of me that isn't me, not at all.

Her eyes are pale. That's the most apparent difference; greyed out, almost, missing all of their light. But there are other details: her hair lank, dreaded almost, down to her waist, longer, maybe, if it had been cleaned, if it wasn't matted and gnarled; her skin so pallid, almost to translucency; her muscles weak, and she's so, so thin. But she moves like I do; moves with the same drift, albeit with more jank to it; and I try to take her in.

Have you ever tried to trick yourself, in a mirror? To move so fast that your eyes don't meet, as if there could be any lag in the reflection at all?

I don't understand what she is.

No. I do. She is me, but broken. A woman from a movie, the version that's been destroyed and rebuilt, that's kept secret and quiet and hidden away.

Squirrelled away in the attic.

I recognize her, of course; not just from now, but from the videos that Xavier showed me; of my time in the hospital. When he lied about me, drugged me, trapped me. Lied; drugged; trapped.

I saw her before: in the reflection of this glass. She scared me, a memory of what I might once have been, or could have been.

'You don't remember,' this other Ali says. 'Of course you don't remember.'

She has these fugue states, Xavier said about me. She doesn't remember herself.

This other version of me touches the banks of computers. Her hand running down them. She's wearing my uniform, the same one. My name, her name, stitched onto the front of it. It's older, tired. Worn and frayed. Scratched on her chest, where she's been scratching at her skin. The fabric faded almost white, ghostly; strips peeled, threads pulled, the integrity lost so that it flows, catches, snags.

The inclination here is to assume that she cannot be real; and yet.

I think I am in shock. I remember, though, from when my father died. Shock keeps you moving.

‘Snipes died. You tried to stop him. Do you remember that?’

I do. I remember standing there, in the changing room. The alarms ringing out, so loud. We stood where Cohen would eventually kill himself, and I stood there, and Snipes stood there, and he pulled the fire override, the switch, the lever, to flush the fire out to space—

‘I was outside,’ I say.

‘No,’ she tells me. ‘You went in. To save him. You tried to save him. But he couldn’t be saved.’ The memory intrudes. My headache, roaring in, preaching its gospel. The video on the system: of me in there with him, and then on a medical bed next to him.

I was pulled out there with him. Into the dark.

‘What happened after that?’ I ask.

‘Theo thinks I am dead,’ she says, which isn’t an answer. ‘He is so sad, so sad. They have moved away, did you know that? Did they tell you that? They moved out of the country, even. Far away.’

‘No,’ I say. Denial, or a reply, I can’t tell which, even as the word leaves my lips.

‘Oh, you were withheld. Of course. That was my idea, you know. To lie to you. My idea, even if it wasn’t my idea—’

She stops talking. She stares at me, even though she can’t see me. Revulsion on her face, on her lips, in the hollows of her eyes. Revulsion: because of what she is, and what I am.

‘Do you know,’ she says, ‘I don’t even know which number you are.’

Which number; which *number*?

In the clinic, they broke you down. This is what they do, the other patients said. They break you down, and they build you back again. Except: what if they forget the second part? What if they break you, and they break you, and they break you, until you’re a shell? A person with no purpose, a character with no soul? Broken, and the doctor smiles at you, his eyes smile at you through his spectacles, but there’s no softness to his face; and he says, Now, now, Allannah. Do you feel well? And you say: Yes, I feel well. Because they are the words he wants to hear, and the words you know that you have to say if you want to stop this from getting any worse.

‘Do you remember dying?’ she asks. She grabs my arm. My hand, her skin on my skin, a static shock with no static. I don’t want her touching me; and she doesn’t want to touch me either. ‘It doesn’t matter,’ she says. ‘I didn’t remember it, not at first. So, I did what he asked me to do, and then it started to come back to me.’

‘He.’

‘Hyvönen. He needed somebody to help him, with his experiments. Working on his ships, or sending things into the Anomaly. I just wanted to go home. I was afraid, I was so afraid. He tried to force me, but he couldn’t. The others wouldn’t let him. They stood up to him, said that I wasn’t able. My memory wasn’t working. It wasn’t sticking. Who I was before, it wasn’t who I was in that moment. I couldn’t help him; he couldn’t trick me, or force. I wanted to go home, that was all. He told me: that to do what he wanted, to successfully go into the dark and make it through, he would need me right there beside him, changing the calculations, working on the ship. He would need me, but I told him that he could not have me.’ She doesn’t smile this entire time. I have always thought: I am a happy person. My face is, more often than not, resting in a smile. Welcoming; but she doesn’t smile. ‘So, he made you instead,’ she says.

‘What do you mean? He forced me?’ I ask, but the pieces are being put together in my head already.

He made me.

He *made* me.

‘He used it. The Anomaly. It’s so powerful, we barely understand it at all. He says that he does, but he is lying. He’s a little man, playing at comprehending something so far from his understanding it’s like an ant trying to understand a man. He realized that, if someone dies inside the Anomaly, they are reset. Brought back to life, at the moment that they entered the Anomaly.’ She tilts her head, a curious bird. ‘You watched it happening, didn’t you? Out there, with, what’s his name—’

‘Gibson.’ We say it at exactly the same time. She laughs. A giggle, stifled by her fist pressing against her mouth.

‘They discovered that they could bring somebody back, though. That there’s a moment where you are both living and not; where you are present both as dead, and alive. They drag the dead back, and let the living one die again; and the pattern repeats. Over, and over, and over. It feels like magic: but this is cloning, this is *science*.’

The video. The body, going into the Anomaly, and coming out again. Brought back to life, the CPR machine; and then the second body brought out of the Anomaly.

A body resuscitated.

Over and over they did it on those videos. Over and over and over.

He *made* me.

*Created*, not *forced*.

As if there's any real difference.

My throat feels as if it's closing. Closing up, tightening. A vice, and her words, every word, winds the wheel.

'The others knew,' I said.

'They didn't have a choice. They knew, but ... the Anomaly was getting closer. They wanted to save the world. Once, that's what you wanted, as well.'

'Why are you telling me this now?' I ask.

'Because this is finally over,' she says. 'He needs a co-pilot, and he has got one. And I want to see my boy, my Theo.' She softens. Do I look like this when I am wistful? Do I look this way, when I think of him? 'Hyvönen promised me I could see my son again.'

Her son. Her son; I am just a clone of her, many steps removed.

Her son.

My heart – beneath my skin, inside my chest, not my heart at all but instead a copy of hers – breaks.

The sound of the door at the bottom of the ladder opening. A murmur of voices, Sian, Mon, probably. A woman's voice, and Hyvönen – 'Go and stop her!' – floating up. I stare at the other Ali, and I hold, for a moment. I want to know what happened to her. I want to know how she spent her time here, in this part of the station. I want to know what her truth is, and yet: there is not the time, not now.

I move, leaving the other Ali, the previous Ali – the original Ali – where she stands; and I push past the servers, hauling myself towards Zvezda. The helmet drifting in the space between us, and I swipe it up, haul it on, clamp it; yank the arm to Zvezda's airlock hard, open the door, close the door, open the next. My fingers along the inside of the walls, feeling the change in their touch, somehow, through my gloves—

I see people through the glass of the airlock, coming into the module, and I move. They can't all come in, only one by one. Hazard of the system. I can make it down the corridor, treading turning to swimming, pulling myself along, out in the arm, dangling far over the rest of the station, when I hear the door open, shut again, and Mon's voice, echoing down the corridor, muffled as it reaches my ears—

'Ali,' she says. 'I'm sorry, I'm so sorry.'

I stop. She isn't moving either. We are meant to stop, to talk. 'You lied to me,' I say.

'I didn't.' I can hear the shaking of her head over the microphone. 'She was my friend. She died. You came after her, and you're ... her. You're my friend.' She waits. 'This was her choice, Ali. She said if she couldn't do it, we should find a way to make it happen.'

'She changed the password, the code. She made it so that only she can start the ship, only she can do anything to it. After she discovered what Hyvönen had done, after she discovered that you existed—' She stops. Even now, she won't tell me the full story.

'Tell me,' I say. 'Please, just tell me.'

She breathes. Deeply, and she holds it; as if it's giving her strength. 'Snipes killed you. He didn't mean to, we don't think. He just didn't think anything of it. Pulled the cord, and you tried to save him, but you were a victim. Passive. You tried to reach for him, and you went with him. We couldn't save him. But we tried to save you. Her.' I didn't notice her exhale. 'There was some brain damage. Not a lot. Not enough that nanites couldn't cover it for a while. But we backed up her memories first, just in case.' She's crying, and this is real. She – I – am her friend; and she only wanted to help. 'And then she woke up. She was lucid, she wanted back onto the mission. And then Hyvönen found the black box from his brother's ship, and everything changed. It wasn't going to be a bomb going in there any more. It was going to be him. But he couldn't go alone.'

'He asked her.'

Mon nods. 'Asked her. Told her. She refused. She locked the ship to her DNA, and told him she wouldn't do it. He couldn't force her.' Eyes down. 'He tried, or he wanted to. We said we would mutiny. We told her, and he offered her an alternative. He asked her to be a pilot. To try going out there, in there. To see what happened.'

'But he knew?'

‘He suspected. I was already tasked with sending mice in some of the drones, we were seeing what happened to them. But there was no way human trials would get signed off by ground control. So he bribed her. He told her that she would have to be hospitalized down there. Quarantined. That she might not make it out before the Anomaly arrived—’

‘He offered her Theo.’

‘Yeah.’

‘He told her that was the only way she would get to see him again.’

‘That was the insinuation. Yeah.’

‘And she agreed.’

‘Would you?’ She smiles at me; a sad, broken smile. Understanding me. Knowing me, but not as well as I know myself.

Everything else comes out in a rush: hard to comprehend, but there. Ringing. ‘We sent her over into the Anomaly, and we stopped her heart. Then we brought her back, dead; but there was still a copy of her inside there. Somehow. It was all about timing. Every time, we had to try so hard to get it right.’ Every time. Every time, she says. ‘You were unconscious, and we didn’t know if you would ever wake up, so we did what we had to do. To preserve the integrity of the mission.’ Every time, echoing, bouncing around. ‘She deteriorated. Her memory, her, I don’t know. *Her* integrity. We kept her up here, because there was always another version of her down there.’

‘Another version of her. You mean me.’

‘At the end. But before you; there were others.’

‘Others?’

‘There was ... Accidents happened, and sometimes she remembered, and we couldn’t ... It became mission critical, Ali.’

‘So you killed her every time you needed a new one?’ The words sounding disgusting to me as I say them. Unbelievable, unfathomable.

Hyvönen speaks, then, his voice cracking, old. ‘It was utilitarian,’ he says, ‘the greatest good of the greatest number. You were an experiment, in your way. You were the thing that allowed us to discover how life works in the Anomaly; how death works.’ He is proud, then. A proud fatherly tone. ‘You played your role brilliantly,’ he says.

I shake. I feel myself shaking. Control, control. Keep it together.

‘What about your son?’ I ask Mon. She blinks, shocked; as if I shouldn’t have remembered that, or asked it. ‘He doesn’t care you’ve been up here so

long?’

‘He understands,’ Mon says. ‘Being up here, doing this, it’s trying to save us.’

‘Save us?’

‘We can’t destroy it, Ali. All we can do now is try to find out what happens in the Anomaly itself; and if we came out of the other side of it. There’s no cure; we just need to know if we’ll survive.’ She looks so sad as she says it. So desperately sad, and I almost feel sorry for her.

I turn away from them, to the end of the module. To the airlock that leads to *Ukonvasara*. The handles. The window, where once I saw Cohen’s hand.

His warning to me. An attempt at a warning, maybe.

‘Where are you going?’ Mon asks me, and I don’t reply.

Sian pushes for me, rockets down the corridor towards me. ‘What are you doing?’ she asks. I grab the handle for the airlock, pull it. Mechanical, all mechanical. Nothing holding me back.

‘I’m going home,’ I say, as I open the door. I look back, at Mon, at Hyvönen, and I shake my head, and I try to stop from welling up. ‘I’ve got control over the ship, right? So fuck it, I’m going home to see my son, my Theo.’ My voice cracking under the words, collapsing; and I gulp back tears, building struts under my words to hold them up. ‘I want to see my boy.’

They don’t try to stop me. I reach the airlock at the end, and I step through the first door, pull it shut after me, and move the lock for the second. There’s *Ukonvasara*, outside, waiting: the door opened, the thing tightly tethered to the seal of the *Zvezda* module.

I look back at Mon, at Sian, at Hyvönen. Standing there, as if waving me goodbye. Not moving. And I wonder, in this moment, if this was planned; if I am walking into a trap.

Past them, at the servers, I see the other version of me. This original version of me, the original version of me. She has come through, to watch me leave.

She’s crying. I’m crying.

Ali’s crying, I think. All of us; all of her.

Desh speaks to me, over the comm. ‘Ali,’ he says, just that word, that name. A lie, in itself. I’m not her; she’s not me.

‘I’m going to see my son,’ I say, again, reinforcing the words. Making them feel more permanent to me.

‘No, Miss Becker,’ Hyvönen’s voice says. ‘I don’t think that you are.’

I turn, and I see Hyvönen – or, I realize, a version of him, a copy of him, two places at once – sitting in the ship, waiting for me.

Hyvönen: his face, unsurprised. Tired, of course, and his eyes are sunken. His temples burned black from the treatments. A last minute top-up before his jaunt. I glance back, through the reinforced airlock glass, at the him that’s in the corridor.

‘Miss Becker,’ this one says. ‘Would you like to take a seat? I think we should talk.’

‘Get out,’ I say, ‘get out.’

‘I’m afraid I can’t do that,’ he says.

‘Get the fuck out.’ My breath coming out with each word. Like it’s pushing the words out, making them hit. ‘I’m going home, and you can’t stop me.’

‘You won’t want me to stop you,’ he says. ‘Surely we should talk? Surely we should discuss what you’re feeling?’

‘I’m feeling like you – all of you – have lied to me. Like I’m a fucking —’ The word sticking in my throat.

‘Go on,’ he says.

‘I’m a clone. Or, even worse. I’m a copy of a copy,’ I say.

‘You are more than mere facsimile,’ he says. He smiles, proud; as if I am somehow something that he’s created. ‘Do you have any idea what this could mean for humanity? We could be eternal. We have spent decades breaking boundaries: first in being able to back up our memories, and then in attempting to clone our bodies. But ethics have prevented us doing what we could, of course. However: with modern technologies, with this ... *Anomaly*, we could live forever.’ He stares forward, then, out of the window at the front of the cockpit. The *Anomaly*: only feet away from us. Little more. Our time nearly over. ‘Thanks to you and your efforts, I discovered how to clone myself. Duplicate myself. There are now two of me; and while one of me will be a sacrifice, thanks to you and all you have taught me, I will get to witness my own glory.’

‘You’re insane.’

‘The laziest insult. Genius is always labelled as insane by those unwilling to look inside their hearts and truly understand it.’ A wistful look on his face. ‘I made a perfect physical copy of myself. We share our memories;

indistinguishable. Twins, again, in our way.' He stands, slowly, unsteadily. 'He will take my place here, with you. My perfect creations. And you will go in there, and you will see such things.' He whispers, a tone that suggests I should be grateful. 'You will change the world. The universe.'

'And what about you?' I ask.

'I will go to Earth, with the others. I will prepare them for what's to come.' He starts towards the door. 'My legacy will be to save the world; both down there, and the version of me inside here, with you. You will be the pilot; you will save the world.'

'Your legacy is fucked,' I spit. 'Your legacy is your name on the Anomaly. Whatever happens after this, your legacy is the thing that's going to swallow Earth and change everybody's lives. Nobody's going to remember you for anything but their pain.'

He steps towards me. 'The narrative is written by the survivors,' he says. 'And I will survive.'

I shove him. I don't think. I just do. I shove him, and I sit at the terminal, as he tumbles, frail bones and pale skin.

*Hello Ali* on the screen.

She programmed this. The other Ali. She knew that I would be coming. She was the one who unlocked it all before.

I swipe, to *Navigation*. Start plotting a new course. Not into the Anomaly, but home. He looks, and he starts to move towards me, grabs at me, his bony fingers tight on my forearm; but I swat him off. He's frail, and loses his grip. 'I am not ready! He is not ready! We have to try to communicate with it.' He paws at me, pulls on my suit. Barely any weight to him, as loose and vague as the gravity is here.

'We're going home,' I say.

'No! No!' He screams, he uses the console to push himself to his near-drifting feet.

Theo, on the floor, screaming at me: don't leave, don't leave, don't leave.

'I will not have this insubordination!' Hyvönen shouts, screams, almost.

'Fuck you,' I say, and I start the process of turning on the engines. The soft rumble of the systems engaging, running through every part of the ship.

Out of the window, I can see the Anomaly. We are, somehow, nearly perfectly close. At the perfect rotation, the perfect point of our orbit. It's hours away from us.

On the next rotation, it will have swallowed the station, I would think.

‘You used me, you used her. Over and over. You’ve done this.’ I start the de-clamping process. ‘We’re going down there, fuck your plan.’

‘So you would run away from your destiny? Back to your son, who doesn’t know you?’

My brain: imagining us both at his front door. His mother; and then also me, who is his mother, but removed.

A copy of a copy.

He opens the door, and there we stand.

The other me – the original me – has waited. She’s been patient. She’s been lied to, abused, damaged. Brought back from the dead, and all because Theo’s been promised to her.

To me. To her.

When I have only really actually been alive for a handful of days.

When he is, really, not my son at all.

‘Mon,’ I say, speaking to my comm.

‘Ali,’ she replies. Pleased to hear my voice.

‘Give her – the other me – give her your earpiece.’ A rustling, as it’s handed over. And then her voice in my ear, Hello, hello, my voice; but so different to how it sounds in my head. So different without the rumble of your own bones. ‘Tell him I love him,’ I say. ‘Go and fight for him.’ My voice cracks, and she replies, saying something to me that I don’t hear, but I know what it will be.

Hyvönen’s face. This smug Gollum grin. ‘If you’ll just let me bring my duplicate up here, you can be on our way.’

‘You think I’ll let you make somebody else you can send into this thing? That you can send to their death? Not a fucking chance.’ I release the clamps fully, engage the engines.

‘What are you doing?’ he howls. He screams it—

Here is a scenario, run through my mind in moments.

How it could go.

We land. Somehow, I have persuaded them to let us both go down to Earth. Twins that didn’t exist before now; except, of course, we are so different. We step off the craft, two Ali Beckers, occupying different parts of the same space. Both of us have the same goal: finding Theo. Not hard, I don’t think. Will there be press? Will there be newspapers and forums and streaming and television and fiznet waiting for us? It’s not clear, and I can’t

predict it, because the world will be days or weeks away from being enveloped, and there are better things to be worried about: their families, their friends, their truths. So Theo might come to us, see that we are alive! We survived! And here the wall comes, here the proper noun of the Anomaly, here the chaos and the death, and nobody knows how it will work, how it will play out. Even as I think of the scenario, I find it hard to parse. Impossible to organize into a system that works for me: of actions and repercussions. I have to ignore it, move on. So we move on, this other Ali and I, and we search for Theo. But here, when we find him, our explanation falls flat. Two women on his doorstep, and one is his mother as he remembers her from half a decade ago, when he was a child and she abandoned him to save a world she failed to save; the other, a broken facsimile, aged up and lost and torn through her chest and fractured, and his father – fucking Xavier, always there, the pox, the plague, the early warning system to drive me out of my myself and into his deceptions – saying to him, don't trust them. Both of these women, they're liars, they're destroyed, destroyers, liars, insane. I can hear him: we should see about getting them treatment, he says. Treatment, as if that's an answer; when there's nothing to cure but the lies he has told, the breaking that he has done, over and over, a mallet with his words, his glares, a knife of his judgements. He's there, and he says, Stay back, boy. Except, Theo isn't a boy, not any more. He will be nearly ten. Does he know me at all? Does he even remember me? Dear God, Xavier made it that I forgot myself, so how can I be alive in Theo's mind? But if he does, if he knows – because it's rooted in there, inside him; just as my truth, *myself* was there, inside me, even as they tried to break me, break me – how does he feel when there are two of us: one who has not aged a day from the memory, and another who is, somehow, more real to him? As aged as he is. If he doesn't run, doesn't panic, doesn't try to hurt us or himself; if he stands there, in quiet acceptance of a moment that simply doesn't make sense, so he has to try and force it to, which one of us will ring more real to him?

Which one of us will he choose?

I think of myself, in that room, in that facility. Here is what I clung to: not the idea that I was myself before the baby, or that Theo was himself as an infant. I counted the days down, the passing of time. I watched it fly past me, and I imagined him: older, chunkier, crawling, toddling. He was not in my arms, but also, not in anybody's arms. He was my target, my goal. He

was older, aged along with me. He was time's passing, writ into a human that I created, that I shared blood with.

I knew he was my son; and he would know I was his mother.

He would simply know; and he would know that I was not it.

Down there is not for me. It is not mine.

At least it is my choice to make.

I move *Ukonvasara* away from the station. Away, unclamped, drifting, the engines starting, a small amount of pressure, of force, and then the Anomaly is here, and we slip inside—

There is no feeling. No tension. It feels like nothing, in that moment.

But then there's a thump; a small thumping. I think of the sound from above; of the Ali up in the attic of the station, confined, degrading, losing herself, trapped, coerced, lied to; moving around still, holding on, desperately living.

Surviving.

In the small light coming from the exterior of the ship, I see what the thumping now is. Bodies, mostly wrapped in fabric bags. Some bags torn, some split from collisions, some with only flags or bedsheets draped over them. As if there was some need to keep them modest, to protect them, when they were destined for something so terrible. Faces still, then panicked, then blue and cold; then pink again, gasping for air, desperate. Some with aneurysms, some with eyes bursting, some with screams on their lips that will never be heard.

But all of them are me, all of them are versions of me: out here, dying, coming back to life, dying, over and over and over again, a sea, the lost stockpile of Ali Beckers, living and dying for ever and ever and ever.

## PART THREE

*There is no honest way to explain it because the only people who really know where it is are the ones who have gone over.*

**Hunter S. Thompson**

I am his carer, in these last days.

I did not know, of course, that he was like this; because Sian was diligent, the perfect child, really. Hiding her father's imperfections from the world, presenting him as the ideal of what he should have been.

I imagine the synapses in his brain breaking, and I find myself worrying for him in a way that I never did before. He's fragile and lost and broken, and he needs me to take care of him. He relies on me. It's nice to be relied upon for something.

In the moments where he's himself, he talks. He loves the sound of his own voice. I remind myself: he knows it'll be gone soon, and he won't recognize it, it'll befuddle him, so I don't rob him of these moments. But, I love silence, out here in the dark, so I am happiest when he sleeps. And he sleeps a lot, and I try to; but I fall back on my old habits.

I sit in front of a terminal, watching the videos of Theo. My words now filling out the answers when he speaks; because I know them, by heart. The words I would say, the words I did say. Here's how they get you: they rely on the predictability of the heart and brain working together.

Your son says that he loves you; you say the same in return.

Your son says that he misses you; you pause, with tears in your eyes, and you say the same.

They are old videos, old recordings, the recordings that Desh must have used to create the fake Theo that they were using to manipulate me; but now, these videos are what I need. Now, they're making sense to me; and they live in the moment that I feel like I am in.

In them, years haven't passed, and Theo hasn't aged a day, and he doesn't believe that I am dead; and he isn't scared of the Anomaly, because he doesn't understand it. It's been there as long as he's been alive; it'll be there, possibly, after he has died.

We will die on this craft. I want to know how long it will take for me.

Hyvönen, of course, has died a few times already; and he has come back, and continued, right where he left off.

His loop, his cycle, is nearly a week in length. I am his carer, and his watchman, and the guardian of his memory.

The craft is a closed environment. It moves at a constant momentum, never gaining or losing speed. The surroundings, the four walls (or thereabouts) that hold us not changing. Hyvönen dies, but the place he died, it can't change. It's always this room.

He begins his loop. I am not looking, if only for a moment, having stared at his dead body for too long; and then he's there again, back as he was. Maybe a slightly different position, or a different pose. His body gone, or replaced, or life breathed back into it. I don't understand it, and I don't want to. He can't explain it either, even though he pretends he can.

His brain, back the way it was when I first sat down, and he greeted me, and we began our journey, deep into the heart of this thing.

I tell him what has happened to him, how we came to be here – what I know, what I still don't, what I did; and we argue, and then he calms down. And he says, soon into each life, 'Perhaps you could use my memory machine for me,' and I do. I put him back into himself. This is his journey: updates of his memory, and then I put him back, and push him forward. He knows he will die each time, and he is not scared of death at all. Not even slightly afraid. Why should he be? He will be reset, born again into this exact state. It happens; it will not have happened.

It's fucking insane, really.

I ask Theo, as I watch the video, if he's afraid, and he shakes his head. What does he know of it to be afraid of? He's a kid. He's a kid, he will always be a kid. Maybe when he's older. His performances, always him here, always this age.

Hyvönen dies four times, five times; and nothing is discovered, not really.

We continue.

He tells me about the other ships that went in here. The *Ishiguro*, the *Lära*. The countless ships named for their glorious endeavours, forgotten entirely. Their journeys didn't matter. He tells me their stories, the best he has been able to fathom. His brother, who had his own cycle of life. The others on the ships with them.

‘Perhaps,’ he has said, ‘we’ll even see them, in here. Doing what they will.’

I remind him that the Anomaly is large.

It is, we have discovered, larger than we even thought. It goes on, and it goes up. Hyvönen’s algorithm updates itself as we go.

He talks about how, maybe, we will find the other side of it. A way out. We don’t know if that’s possible; if there even *is* a way. Maybe this thing goes on and on forever. He wants to send a message home, telling them how large it is.

It will envelop Earth. It’s a force of destruction, destined to wreck us, to tear us apart.

Them, I remind myself.

I will not be there.

I think of what the planet has been through. We’ve survived riots, violence, wars. We’ve fought through plagues and pandemics. We’ve torn up the coasts. We’ve ruined our skies, blazing heat onto the already-baked ground. We’ve made parts of cities uninhabitable, the streets quagmires of tar, the buildings cracking under the strain. So we’ve built new areas in the countryside, robbing us of the greenery, making things worse in order to keep ourselves alive. We’ve forgotten winters. We’ve ignored warnings and then backtracked, and we’ve wrung our hands and asked what we could do; and then, still then, we have failed to do it.

Time has passed, and we got distracted by this thing in space, this thing we couldn’t quantify or understand.

We’ve let people die from starvation, from exhaustion, from a lack of inoculation. We’ve let politicians lie and cheat and steal and we have given up everything to them, because we’re desperate and lied to, and there’s no way out when the hole is dug and the soil is being put in, and you’re lying there, prone, half-covered, unable to move.

There has to be something. There has to be something.

The Anomaly is larger than we ever knew. On the system, Hyvönen’s number, the number generated by his algorithm, the time in days that it will cover the Earth once it arrives, keeps going up, and up, and up.

When he wakes up, comes back to life, he looks at it, and he sighs. ‘We’re not out of it yet,’ he says.

Yesterday, he said: ‘One day, I won’t wake up. I won’t come back to life. At least then we will know for sure.’

Here is a better description of the outside, now that I am deep inside it: there is nothing. There is more behind a blindfold, more with your eyes closed.

I went to a restaurant with Xavier once – or, Allannah did; it’s confusing, to think about my reality, about when she lived it, before I was born from her – when we were in Berlin on a holiday, during the early days. He said, ‘I’ve read about this place where you eat in total darkness.’

‘I don’t like the dark,’ I told him, though I think my words were stronger than that, more forceful; I think, in my recollections, he’s weakened me.

‘You’ll like this,’ he said. ‘The idea is: you taste. That’s it. No preconceptions of what you’re eating, nothing to look at, nothing to divert your attention. There’s food and drink, taste and smell, that’s it. Nothing to distract you. You know how easily you get distracted.’ Said with a smile, but nothing in the smile.

So, we went, and we ate. Cheap food, mush. A melange, but who gave a shit. You couldn’t see it, couldn’t understand it. It existed. Afterwards, they said, it’s radish, but I didn’t care.

Xavier touched me in the dark. He said, ‘What!’ when I slapped his hand away.

I could hear the sound of him chewing his dinner. ‘This place, the darkness, it enhances all your other senses.’ His mouth full, the words mashed against the meat. And I couldn’t see him, couldn’t actually make eye contact with him, but I knew he was there, staring at me.

Being out here: it’s darker, even, than that.

I’ve built a piece of software, just something small but utterly effective, that will send the information we’ve gathered the moment the ship finds a signal again. Even if momentum carries the ship out the other side of this, and for some reason Hyvönen and I don’t make it through alive, even if there’s a fragment of power left in the ship’s batteries, the messages will be sent. All

the data, all the knowledge. Everything that's happened to me. There's no communicating with the outside world from in here, no way of letting anybody know who we are, where we are. All there is is a thought that, if we make it out, I can tell Earth. Prepare them. There are problems with this plan, of course: we do not know if the Anomaly ends in the first place; we do not know if a signal will be able to find its way home; and if it does, if Earth is already enveloped, will they be able to receive the signal we've sent?

Will the information we've gathered, assuming we can gather it, be of any use?

Will any of this have been worth it?

Hyvönen's plan is to try and scale the wall and see what's on the other side of it.

I want to tell the world how high the wall is.

He says, 'We'll only know how large it is when we are dead.' Which bends my head, but also makes some curious sort of sense.

I have questions that he can't answer, though. If we both die, what happens to the cycle after that? Where do we reset? If the ship runs out of food – there's a protein generator, a rehydration system, enough to keep us going for a good while, but it's something to consider – what happens then? Does the ship make more? Or do we starve, over and over? If the life support fails, if the fuel all burns out, and we're moving forward on momentum alone, what happens when we reset the loop? We choke out, within moments of each other: and then we're back, alive, reset. To the beginning? Do we have air again? How does it work?

I ask him, and he shakes his head. 'I don't know,' he says.

But he smiles, as if that's okay; as if he's made some curious kind of peace with being here. He thought he would go down to Earth, that his copy would be here. That he would reap the glory, instead of seeing out his last days with me.

Neither of us saw this coming, and that feels somehow just to me.

I ask him why he did it. Why he sent the first Allanah into the Anomaly. He hasn't called me that name, and I think I understand now why he's so formal. Allanah, Ali, was the woman who worked with him before.

The rest of us, the copies: we are Miss Becker.

He tells me that it was partly my idea. She was working on the ship when she started to suffer. The situation, the pressure, the chaos. Being trapped, being imprisoned, essentially; she broke down. Then Snipes happened, and she was nearly dead. Her expertise, threatened with being lost in that moment; so they made a choice. They could save her and, in doing so, remove the pressure from her. They told her, and it created a schism, of sorts. She fractured. Terrified, paranoid. So Desh started to make her videos, of her son, to help her, to try and bring her back. But some scars were too deep. It was Sian's suggestion to use the clone to carry on the mission, Sian's suggestion to use Desh's videos to help prompt her, keep her on track. After a while, after protests and shouting, the rest of the crew came to accept the clones – the first, then the subsequent ones – as necessities.

As tools, needed to get the mission completed.

She became a secret that they didn't talk about. Time passed, and she was kept there, as funding was withdrawn, as the space agency all but abandoned the mission. As Earth forgot why they were even there.

'And the first Ali?'

'She didn't want to see him.' He knows what I am asking. 'She felt that she would only complicate his life. And she wanted, as you wanted, once, to save the world. Remember that?' He asks it as if I am an idiot.

I let it slide. Control.

'But why clone her?' I ask. 'There were other engineers.'

'She was the best,' he says. 'That is a compliment.' He expects me to smile.

'That can't be it,' I say.

He leans forward. 'We needed to test the theory,' he says, 'and she was there.' He shrugs, as if it's obvious. 'I believed that she would understand,' he says. 'She was a scientist, Miss Becker. As are you.' He unclips himself from his seat, and he drifts upwards, away from me, from the conversation. We do not have the room in here to avoid each other. Solitude is found in opposing corners of the craft.

'You didn't ask her, though. You didn't give her the choice.'

'What would you have said?' He is snapping at me, older than his years. His face contorted. I wonder: is this what you are like as you lose yourself? Is this your truth? 'If I came to you, before you died. Asked you, if you

could *help* us, in your dying moments. If there was a way that we could *learn* from your death, perhaps. That it ought not to be in vain.'

'You didn't ask,' I say. 'That's all that matters.'

We do not talk for a while. Then he sleeps, and I guide him back to his chair, and I strap him in. Sleeping when you're drifting is dangerous.

I hate him, and yet I do not wish him harm.

The process of dealing with his memory is terrible and heartbreaking, because it causes him so much pain, and he knows how ruined he is. He clicks his tongue, over and over, a *tick-tock* in anticipation of asking me if now is a good time.

'Now is always a good time,' I say. 'There's nothing else to do up here.'

He has stopped correcting me when I say *up here*, because he knows I don't care if it's right or not. Up is not up or down or left or right or here or there.

We are where we are. Where we perceive.

I put the crown on his head, and he dips his head a little, as if it weighs anything at all here. The pads onto his temples.

'Are you ready?' I ask him, and he always nods, always the same nod. No words, then.

He recites his day, or his hour, or however long it has been. He talks it through, like a journal. Today, this is what we did. Miss Becker and I sat, or we drifted, or we swam. We calculated how far we have come, and how far we think we have still to go. We saw nothing.

Recorded for posterity; or the next go-around, whichever comes first.

He says, 'I'm sorry.' Out of the blue. Three days past another death, three days before one. His body the most fragile of balances.

'What for?' I ask. Not because I don't know what he should apologize for, and I curse myself inwardly for saying that. It's a gut reaction. Somebody apologizes, I act as if there's nothing to say sorry for, until they point it out to me.

'You said previously that I should have asked you.'

'Yes.'

'I concede. It might have been better, easier. In the long run, if you were on side. If we had explained each time. You could have been a true ally to

what I was trying to achieve.’ He bites a nail, a brittle old nail, with his perfect young man’s teeth. ‘You, now, can apologize in turn.’

‘What?’

‘For bringing me in here, instead of my other version. Because I can only assume that you did it to spite me, and I have now apologized for the root cause of your spite.’

‘Fuck you.’ A smile. I feel a smile on my face for the first time in weeks. ‘Fuck you, you tiny fucking prick,’ the words tripping over my tongue again, pleasure in every single bite of them.

He’s quiet. He doesn’t understand.

I could spend the rest of my life arguing with him about it, and he’ll never get there.

We spend the next three days in silence, and then he dies. He doesn’t, notably, record these days, so when his loop begins again and I’m tasked with putting his memory back as it was, he doesn’t remember saying sorry. Or saying anything, really.

I wonder: will he do it again? Is it hardwired that he’ll reach that point?

But he doesn’t, so apparently it isn’t.

I have started to think of Hyvönen’s brain as a computer. He needs backing up, rebooting, restoring. I would, in ordinary circumstances, reset it entirely. His is more like one of the archaic drives my father used to bring home for me from thrift stores and car boot sales, mechanical things that I enjoyed putting back together, making work. Jump-starting them, he would call it. Something that isn’t meant to work; you make it work again. In those days, I would wipe them clean, reset them, run diagnostics. Fix the smaller mechanical parts that would stop them working. All other drives were chips, then. Nothing to fix. If they’re gone, they’re gone: it’s a problem in the bones of them, the solder and the wires. An intrinsic failing. Hyvönen’s brain is fixable, even if only in fractions. Partitions, created each time, to hide the bad sectors from the data that’s accessible. Bad sector after bad sector. In the mechanical hard drive days, even wiping a drive wouldn’t erase bad sectors. You would try to work around them, to ignore them. Parts of the drive that were slower, or defunct.

My father got me a pile of floppy disks, nearly a century removed from their worth. Data storage that could be damaged or disrupted by dirt, or by dust. A silver tab on the base of them that was meant to protect the

magnetic material inside, but that could be pushed to one side to expose it. So fragile, with only that small thing between it and ruin.

Hyvönen's brain stutters and stumbles over itself. It slips, and it trips over words and ideas. He stammers his ideas out, and the clicking of the drive being accessed is audible. He is still working, almost constantly. We are here to get somewhere, yes, but there's always this idea in his head, always this work occurring.

I wonder: has he told other lies to me?

But then I am reassured, because I don't think he could hide it, not now.

Hyvönen wakes me, shakes me.

I was not here.

I was with Theo, down there. This is a recurring dream that I have, of a parallel world running alongside ours, where I am the only Ali, and there was no death, no Snipes or airlocks or voids to tumble into, no memories that are not quite my own; and so I saw it through, my time, and I left when my time on the station was over; time served, released for good behaviour, or for not dying, whichever made the most sense. I get off the shuttle, this incredible landing, inflatable crash pads and cooling jets and water coolant and crowds of people, still not too afraid of the anomaly – in my dreams, it is lower case, a word that’s uttered casually, without the pain and terror I now associate with it – and I cross the tarmac, and he is waiting. He’s holding a banner, with my name on. In my dreams, he calls me by my name, not Mama; because, I think, it hurts too much to hear him say it.

‘Wake up, Miss Becker. There’s something you need to see.’ Hyvönen’s hand is on my forearm, and he is moving it gently. I don’t know if it’s intentional, or if he’s simply not capable of much more. He leaves me, then, letting me stir. *A tip tap* in the background.

My mouth tastes like ash, but I haven’t had a cigarette in twenty years. My head aches with a hangover but there’s no alcohol on this ship. I ache for food from an oven, for a shit in privacy, for a bed, for a pillow.

In those fleeting moments, Theo is still there with me.

Like an after-image; an echo.

I unclip my belt, drift to where Hyvönen is standing, at the computer. He is typing something furiously, his hands moving faster than I have ever seen them move.

‘Why did you wake me?’ I ask him, but he doesn’t look up.

‘Out there,’ he says, and then I see it, through the windows: a speck of bright, bright light, in the darkness.

‘What is that?’

‘I can only assume that this is the heart that my brother spoke about,’ he says. I look back at him, briefly, at the work he’s doing. ‘I am trying to get a reading on its brightness,’ he says. ‘And I am sending radio signals to the coordinates.’

‘It won’t reply,’ I say. We are moving towards it, and quickly. We have nothing to measure it against: no tether or anchors, nothing to look at, to latch on to. No fixed point. All we have are our instruments and measurements, telling us that we are moving.

But here, finally, is something. Bright, and there, present; a pinhole in a sheet, a light shining through; like some homemade planetarium.

It’s beautiful, in a way. I don’t say that out loud. ‘Maybe you should try reasoning with it. Ask it something.’

Hyvönen presses his face to the glass, a kid at a toy shop. ‘There’s no way to ask it,’ he says. ‘And I wouldn’t even know what to say.’

‘Isn’t that your job?’ I reply, and he’s quiet, thinking. The wheels ticking, behind his eyes.

And when he records his day into his machine, he mentions it; as if it’s his idea, taking credit for it, but honestly, maybe that’s what it’ll take.

As the dot gets closer – a needle’s eye, then a pea, then a marble – Hyvönen seems to suffer. He retreats into himself, yes, but it’s not just that. He’s more fragile. His hands shake. He doesn’t sleep, not now.

‘Will this change your loop?’ I ask him. ‘Being closer, seeing this.’

‘Why?’ He snaps at me, his voice unable to get above a whisper, really.

I don’t reply. I mean: his pulse, his adrenaline, the changes in his sleeping habits. All of it. When he dies, three hours short of his usual time, I take that as an intriguing result.

I write it down; I look away; he returns.

In the minutes before I tell him that he needs restoring, he stares at the dot, and his jaw slackens. And he speaks, voice suddenly clear and restored.

‘It’s incredible,’ he says. ‘What is that?’

‘We don’t know,’ I tell him. ‘We haven’t worked it out yet.’

‘We.’

‘Me. You. We have been here for a while now.’

He nods. ‘Don’t tell me how long. I’ll learn.’ He shoots me a look. ‘Did you find out the truth, in the end?’ Reverted to who he was when we left the

station, pulling away in the moments that the Anomaly crept to us, and we slipped into it, or it slipped over us.

‘I did,’ I say. ‘You killed me, and brought me back as another version of myself.’

‘Basic,’ he says, and I don’t know if he means me, or my explanation. Fuck him either way. ‘It was scientific exploration. This is all about exploration, don’t you see that?’

‘I see that it’s how you’d justify being who you are,’ I reply. Our moments before his reset are always the most antagonistic: because this is when he is pure, and when he hasn’t spent weeks in a shuttle with me, and when he hasn’t been tempered by the realization of his actual death. ‘Let me ask you,’ I say, ‘why did you clone Cohen?’

‘For continuity,’ he says. ‘Our previous Miss Beckers were fickle. If something went wrong, if something was askew, they interrogated it. Would that you were less inquisitive. Less wilful.’

‘Fuck you.’ He grunts something, telling me to put his memories in; to make him complete again. I pick up the crown, place it on his head. Strap him to the chair. Tighten the straps firmly, and he flinches, and I don’t care. Then, before I start the process of inserting back the weeks we have spent here, putting them back into his memory, I say one last thing.

‘You failed,’ I say, and his eyes widen. ‘Your mission failed, and you were always going to fail. Because you only have arrogance: to think you’re bigger than the thing you don’t understand. You will always fail.’ I lean close. ‘And I’ve heard that your brother was far more liked than you ever were.’

He’s frothing, so I begin the process of putting different memories in his head; and that, at least, makes him calm.

He looks like Xavier, in a certain light. In the soft break of his nose, in the receding of the hairline, the loping hunch of the no-longer-young. I wonder: has he always looked this way? Or am I simply forgetting, in these moments, exactly what Xavier looked like? I have wondered, was something lost in the process of creating me? Of cloning Ali? Can it ever be exact? Even the knowledge that you are not an original; doesn’t that make you flawed?

I should be angrier.

The dot is closer – a pool ball, a plum, a paperweight – and we are preoccupied with it.

But also: I am preoccupied with who I am, or who I am not. With how long I have left to live; which is, by my estimates, a few weeks at best. With what will happen when I come back to life, assuming that we have not completed our mission by then. I am preoccupied with my past, with the life I had, which was mine, and yet which was not mine at all, because the woman who had that life is elsewhere, dead or alive or simply somewhere in between, waiting; but I am here, remembering it. Forced to not forget it.

I should be angrier. I should be furious. Tossing tables and pitching fits, but instead, I don't know. I'm calm.

Theo is going to get his mother back.

I will never have to face the disappointment of his face, upon seeing me. I want joy, but no: it will be crushing, because what he believes, it'll be wrecked. His father's lies. And my own, of course. Five years, enough time for him to be indoctrinated fully. I can imagine his father, that cross, that tied-off knot around his neck, the lies he's told. I can hear him: Don't believe her, he will say. She's sick. She's always been sick.

It's funny: his church, his *cult*, they picked the knot because it signified finality. They didn't know about the Anomaly's ability to loop time, to loop death. Their naive idea was that all of belief, all religious understanding, could be twisted together, tied off, completed.

The reality is, as they will discover, that the knot is wound in on itself; the knot is waiting to be unravelled; the knot is a twist in search of an ending.

There are tendrils coming out of the sphere of light. Slivers of something, etched into the darkness. Hard to see until you know what you're looking for; and even then, they're fleeting. The moments after staring at a light, and the flashes of your own veins in your vision, supplanted against anything that you look at. Stare at the darkness of the opticians' room, and there they are: slivers of light where none exists.

Hyvönen doesn't take his eyes off them. He says, 'I should have come sooner,' and I don't disagree or correct him or anything.

'Your brother was out here,' I say, and he grunts. 'How much further did he make it?'

‘The black box was inconclusive,’ he replies. ‘He didn’t make it out of the Anomaly, that’s for certain.’

‘How can you be sure?’

‘We did not hear from him. He was the sort of man who would want the glory. He would want the world to know he achieved it.’

‘Unlike you,’ I say. I am mocking him, but he doesn’t get that.

‘I want the world to be safe,’ he says.

‘Safe,’ I repeat, as if the word has any meaning any more, any meaning at all.

Hyvönen furiously types numbers into his spreadsheets, a database of something, and then, eventually, he looks at me. ‘There,’ he says, ‘it’s done.’ I stare at the numbers, unable to see what it is that he’s actually achieved. His success, his glee at his success – a smile curled across his wrinkled face, except for the patch where his birthmark was removed – but I don’t see it. Numbers, nothing but numbers. ‘These are coordinates. Set against time. If the Anomaly is a constant, then perhaps this, this, *orb*, this is also a constant.’

‘You’re plotting it.’

He says, ‘We need to create a way to navigate this space.’

We work together. He paces, or does the drifting equivalent, and talks his theories through, while I code an application: to draw a map, factoring in the constants we have, the constants we are sure of. We do not know if the orb is moving or growing or staying still – perhaps it is a fixture, and the darkness, the void, simply passing over it – so I take all three into account. Three different maps, to reach this thing.

‘It is the heart of it,’ he says. ‘This thing is alive, and I have never been so sure of anything.’ And as I stare at the numbers, at the map that the app I’ve created boots out at the other end, I wonder if he’s correct. Because if so, we are reaching halfway, and I am halfway past my own life, this particular life.

I show him what I’ve made. ‘From here,’ I tell him, ‘you can enter the data and it will automatically update. I can set this to send along with the message, when we’re free.’

Free.

A map of a place that’s nearly impossible to chart: just this one tether, and maybe it’s not a tether at all, but just like us, loose, drifting, thinking

there's anything of an anchor out here at all.

We are about to pass the orb. It's almost directly to port, the size of a melon. Still hard to judge how far it is, if we don't know its size, but Hyvönen sends pings out there, to try and see if it responds, if there's any sort of mass. He stares at it, face pressed to the window, a child on a journey that's gone on far too long. I prepare his next reset, the machine's backups filling up – the drive we could bring was nothing like the one on the station, and all that makes a human's memories takes up more room than anything artificial we have ever thought to create – as he tries to ignore me, and he talks through his past few days, his findings and learnings; and I wonder about the truths on the hard drive, the ones that he doesn't have to tell me.

There is no story in a small box. There is no story, no new adventures. There is only forward, only exploration; only – hopefully – release.

I wake to the sound of Hyvönen preparing something in the closet, which is curious, as his outfit has remained the same this entire time. His loop ensures, somehow, that it stays clean: stains and marks erased along with each pass of his final breath, his first breath. When I think about the logic of how it works, my brain threatens to break. It doesn't make sense; and yet, the Anomaly doesn't, but still exists. We have taken so much for granted, for generations. Nothing on Earth surprises us any more, so I suppose it makes sense that only something off-Earth could.

I watch him, from the corner of my eye: pulling one of the exo-suits out, checking it over. Tightening the buckles, checking the seals. He keeps floating towards the ceiling, then rights himself, his hand against the wall. Pushes himself back down. Every so often, he glances out of the window, every so often he puts his face close to it.

I wake up, stir myself.

He looks at me as I stretch. My back aches here, through my ribs, to my chest. You'd think that it would feel fine, given nothing to stress it. But the time spent up here, it takes a toll. My back—

When I die, will it be quick? Or will I choke out, choke to death?

'I am leaving,' he says.

'What?'

'I wish to leave.'

'You can't,' I say. 'That's not the mission.'

‘No,’ he says. He looks to the window, so I do as well.

There’s a ship out there. It’s far off, a speck, really, near the orb, but it’s a ship. Bullet-shaped, cut through the darkness.

‘Jesus,’ I say.

‘It’s the *Lära*,’ he tells me. ‘My brother’s ship. I am confident of that much, I played enough of a part in its design.’

‘You’ve messaged it?’

‘There’s no reply,’ he says. He fiddles with the crown from his memory machine. Puts it onto his head, and starts recording. ‘My brother’s ship is outside our own—’

I stop the device. ‘You can’t be sure,’ I say.

‘I can!’ he snaps at me. ‘I can be sure, I absolutely can be sure. I can see it, Miss, Miss—’ His face collapses, as he realizes that my name is gone. Albeit temporarily, but it’s still gone.

‘Becker,’ I say, and he nods.

‘Do you know what he said, in his black box recordings?’

‘That he was alive. That there was another version of himself.’

‘Before that he thought it was me, come out here to save him. It was not, Miss Becker. It was not me. It was him. He went into the light, but he thought that I saved him.’ He looks down, saddened. Contrite. An old dog taught a new trick. ‘He was out here alone, and I abandoned him.’ He leans towards the button to begin the recording. ‘I am going to record now,’ and I let him; and I listen as he talks about his sadness, his great personal sadness. He misses his brother, and yet doesn’t say it. It’s framed around him, around what he feels he has lost. Maybe that’s fair, I think. I am not the only one of me, not any more, and I never was. I want Ali, the second Ali, to survive. To find Theo. To make things right.

I want that for her; for me. If we are part of the same. This is how Hyvönen feels: a want to put things right for him, and for his twin. Inseparable; and yet.

He doesn’t tell me what he plans to do, and I don’t need him to say it. I reprogram the door mechanisms, because they’re not meant to open when the craft is moving – such a thing is too dangerous, and there are overrides; but overrides are meant to be broken – and I help him into his suit, doing the buckles for him where his knuckles ache, where he can’t quite find the strength. I put his helmet on, and I seal it for him. I check the seals, check

that it's airtight. Check his oxygen, and give him a spare canister, fastened to his back – 'Don't worry about the weight,' I say, but he doesn't need that reassurance – and then we talk, a little, about what happens after this. I put my own suit on, to protect myself, and I strap myself to the pilot's chair, and ready to open the door.

And he says, his last words to me: 'Maybe you were right.'

I open it, and he goes, slipping out, into the darkness.

I watch as he spirals away from the *Ukonvasara*, off towards the distance. He puffs air from his suit, from the rear; but then, I can't see him any more, too far in my wake; and I crane, to see the speck as it meets the other speck, but there's nothing out of the window, just the glow of the orb. And even that is being left behind.

I assume he will be back, when he dies; but he doesn't start that loop again.

I wonder if he has found peace.

It is lonely up here. Moving towards an ending. I listen to Hyvönen's recordings after a while, which feels like an invasion – his brain, his memories, committed to tape in extravagant detail – but I am alone, and he left me. His life. It's nothing like mine. The way he thinks about things, the person he is – was – nothing like me.

If the orb was the heart, and if the heart is the middle of this thing, then I will be dead when we leave here. Except: I will be alive again. The craft will be moving, I think? Always forward. Constancy. I will wake up, the way that I was when this trip began, confused, answers flooding me, realizing that there's only one option left.

I want to save Theo's life.

I look at Hyvönen's memory machine, and I make a choice.

He said to me to send it back to Earth, when we got out of here. 'Send the data to Earth so that I – the version of me that's down there, the other Hyvönen – might add it to his own memories. Two memories in one. He'll remember this, and save the world.' His words, delusional.

I erase him. He erased me, over and over. He chose that for me. So, I erase him, erase what there is of him on the drives, and I don't think twice. I empty the drives, reformat them. Ready them for another input; and I speak to it. Every word of my life. Every single word, with the crown resting on

my head. It weighs something, even here. Even when it shouldn't; or can't possibly.

But still, it does.

And then I turn to the batteries. A test: if I thin the oxygen supply, change the processors, reroute energy from life support systems to the engines, can I make the ship move faster? Can I get this done?

I remind myself that the momentum will get us there, in the end; but I can't wait. I can't.

It's the strangest feeling, knowing that when you die, you will come back.

The removal of finality makes it meaningless, somehow. Weightless. I think I understand Snipes more, in this moment.

When it comes, finally, I feel my chest pull apart. Like being drowned from the inside. Gasping for air that doesn't quite come. Doesn't quite—

And when I wake up, I see the note I have left for myself, *Restore*, so I do. And afterwards, I understand that in this low oxygen I know I'll have six or seven hours, maybe. So I ready myself, and I wait.

I travel through the dark. There's nothing now. No orb of light, no bullet of the *Lära*. No specks of anything. I record more. Every detail I can think of. Every single little thing that I might have missed the first time around. Theo, Theo, every detail. And Xavier, every thing; and Hyvönen, and Mon, and Dosh, and Berry and Gibson and Cohen, and every other person on the station; and myself. I wait, and I want, and I read the spreadsheet that has created this map for us: a tracing, full of assumptions. If we *assume* that the Anomaly is somehow spherical; if we *assume* that the heart of it was that orb, and that the heart is somehow perfectly central; if we *assume* that our travel has remained constant, with no push or pull or drag or anything influencing our speed, even accepting that it's unlikely, given the twelve seconds that the exterior door was open for; if we assume all of these things, then there are now a few weeks until I leave this thing, or until I find the other side of it, and whatever happens happens. On and on, into the dark. My story repeated; and I listen to it back, again, again. My voice the only company I have. I cough, to remind myself I am alive; to interrupt the sound.

But coughing only makes the end come faster.

A shadow, cast by nothing. That's how it appeared at first. I remember my mother – I listen to my voice, describing my mother – coming into my bedroom. Waking me. A shadow, cast by nothing.

My father's illness: a shadow on the scans, the doctor said.

In the hospital, as I struggled: she's a shadow of herself, Xavier told the doctor, only a shadow.

In the background, always there, waiting: a shadow.

I watch as the map draws what could, maybe, possibly hopefully be the final section of the Anomaly. The curvature, the line of the thing itself. If the maths is right, if the prediction, the numbers, are correct. If it's incorrect, everything is off, every guess we have made, everything we have tried. If it's incorrect, there's no end to this thing.

My own work, these last few days – these few last days, potentially – has been to try to use the equations for its movement to plot the time it will remain over Earth, should it have reached there, should it not be removed, should it not be destroyed or evaporate or we solve it.

I see how old Theo will be. I wonder how much he will have abandoned; how much life will have passed him by. I wonder if he will be happy.

All I want, now, is for him to have an answer; to know that, one day, he will be free.

I write him a letter. I say, to love her. She's your mother, even if she doesn't act like it, or if she tries to push you away. She loves you; don't let her.

She's your mother. She loves you, she's your mother.

If the equations are correct, I will put all the power the ship has into the communications system. I will die, that's inevitable, crushed against the wall of the ship if we reach the membrane and the rules are the same; and then, when we're clear, I won't come back. I don't need to survive. If we are correct, there's no reason for me to go on. The constant feeling in my

chest; the constant pull of what I now know to be the nanites that are holding me together. Not indigestion, not confusion, not being up here or missing my child or anxiety: but an interference in what's keeping me alive.

If we're out of here and the theory is correct, all the power – life support, everything – goes to the communications relay. The faster the information reaches Earth, the better. As it spins, as the Anomaly engulfs it – a shadow, as a globe spins – there will be a chance for them to get the information. If the equations are correct, there will be a few weeks. A few weeks where they will know, maybe, that it won't last forever.

Every bit of energy I have goes into this.

How many times, I wonder. I should have kept notches. I should have made notches. But then: do I really want to know?

I count down. Ten, nine, eight. I remember Theo sitting on his bed, dressed for bed, bouncing, the joy of an astronaut; and asking me if he will go up into space someday. Seven, six, five. We hold each other, and I stroke his face, his hair. There, there, I say.

Four, three, two.

He looks at me. All that I need, he looks at me.

One.

The pop of stars. The pop of something else out there. Not the darkness. I cheer, I hear myself cheering, so loudly, so hard, my throat creaking and cracking.

There's no time. I hit the transfer, to run the software processes.

Listen to the sound of the life support dropping away for God knows what time.

Watch as the lights darken, but the stars are there, in the distance.

Hear my own breathing, in the darkness; as the computer silently whirrs, sending its data into the nothing.

My chest does not ache. I breathe the air, no helmet on, the last of the air; circulating, my in, my out, and I breathe, and my chest does not ache at all.

I see the screen. The software running. Searching for a connection, a relay, anything, one of the hundreds of thousands of satellites we have sent, there to catch my words, to catch my knowledge, to bounce it around

between them, to somehow send this little bit of myself home. This thing I have tried to do.

If I can't save the world, at least I can try to help it. To soothe it.

Calming Theo, my hand stroking his head when he was poorly; I can't make the pain go away, but I can do this—

A light on the screen. Red, red, red, no connection; then it stutters.

Come on, come on.

A flash of green. A connection made. A connection made.

I have done it, and then the green is gone, the screen is gone, all light is gone—

I think of Theo, and I think of Allannah Becker, and I think of home. That at least I have chosen this, and perhaps it might make a difference.

And I do not hurt at all, in the end.

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## About the Author

JAMES SMYTHE is an award-winning writer of six novels for adults, and three for young adults. He also writes for television and film. He lives in London with his wife and son.

[Also by James Smythe](#)

*The Testimony*

*The Machine*

*No Harm Can Come to a Good Man*

*I Still Dream*

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*The Explorer*

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