

Infection

Jacoby poked irritably at the conveyor feed button. He waited, tapping his boot impatiently. Nothing happened.

“Load next,” he said, but the computer didn’t respond.

“Piece of crap!” He pounded the monitor housing with a calloused palm. The screen flickered and went black. *Figures. First Anna, and now you.* He reached around and started tightening cables behind the monitor.

“Wives, crappy work gear. Why can’t anything just work,” he muttered.

“You and Anna have another fight?” Mike, from the adjacent workstation asked. Jacoby had been so caught up in his thoughts that he didn’t notice him approach.

“Stinking dumpster fire of a night, man,” he said, fidgeting with his workstation.

“Yeah? Looks like it. You look like shit. She hassle you about re-upping your contract?”

Jacoby nodded, and glanced at his reflection in the glossy monitor. His hair was a tangled mass of brown. Dark bags hung beneath his blood-shot, brown eyes and there were more than a few white hairs mixed in with his stubble. He looked like hell.

“That’s why I’m single, man. Dragging a lady all the way out here is a sure-fire recipe for trouble. She want you to transfer back home?” Mike said absently, flicking rock fragments off of his shirt.

“She wants to see her folks. Says deep space mining is for people who’ve got nothing and nobody. Her folks don’t understand how hard it is to get approved for this gig. The money’s better than anything I’d get planet-side. They’re filling her head with garbage.” He glanced at his workstation as the monitor beeped.

Jacoby turned back to Mike and caught sight of his sour-faced supervisor, Janice, entering from the admin hallway. Lately, their interactions seemed to be butt chewing's or nasty looks. He'd received a performance write up the day before, which devolved into an ugly shouting match and the threat of a suspension. He knew he wouldn't receive any more warnings. Jacoby would simply be stranded in deep space, without a job.

He tapped the load button again, but kept an eye on Janice. The conveyor motor finally started to hum.

“So, how'd you get her to agree to another year out here?” Mike asked.

Jacoby looked away, his brow furrowing as the computer cycled loudly through its deep scan and mineral analysis protocol. He reached up to rub the sleep from his eyes, but did not respond.

“Wait. You didn't tell her before you re-upped your contract?” Mike scoffed, covering his mouth and leaning back dramatically. “Damn, no wonder she's so pissed with you, man!”

Jacoby flipped him the bird, but he had already turned to walk away. He lacked the necessary patience to put up with Mike's bullshit. He turned back to his monitor, rubbing his temple and wishing for some relief from his pounding headache. To top it all off, his mouth still tasted like stale liquor.

Guys like Mike couldn't understand the strain of keeping a family together. He didn't have to deal with the expectation and the disappointments. Not to mention her family back home constantly dumping pressure on Anna's shoulders. What do you see in Jacoby? He's just a dirty miner, working for laborer pay in the middle of nowhere. Braniman Kopecky's son was just promoted to Senior Tech advisor. He just bought his own private shuttle. Anna hated their meddling, and told him that she would love him no matter what, but Jacoby would rather be kept

in the dark about their feelings towards him, or anything else for that matter. Ignorance really is bliss.

“Analyzing sample, please standby,” the computer chirped, breaking him from his melancholies. Lines of data appeared on the monitor, flooding the screen in a wash of numbers and metallurgic data. He had to look away. The numbers and symbols flashed by so quickly they made his stomach turn.

“Mineral analysis complete. Composite iron, tungsten, nickel. Radioactive elements cobalt, iridium, rhenium. Trace targets silver ten percent, palladium fourteen percent. Warning, void detected,” the computer said, spitting out preloaded target results before beeping loudly.

Jacoby perked up. *Fourteen percent palladium!* That was double anything he had ever processed. A hundred pounds of palladium would more than cover his quota. Hell, it might even land him a bonus. *It might crack a smile on Janice’s fossilized face. Hell, she’d probably shatter.*

“Now that would be a sight!” he said, dismissing the unreliable computer’s void warning while reveling in the idea of his supervisor crumbling into pieces.

The conveyor started to turn, and a moment later the hatch slid open. A large chunk of rock appeared, roughly twelve feet in diameter. Pre-processing had already pulled the gravity anchors out, leaving a number of perfectly bored holes.

“Chart results, grid layout.” Jacoby stepped back and sized up the asteroid. A Laser grid appeared, breaking up the rock in sections. Each square opened up with a wave of a hand, displaying that section’s mineral composition in a 3d hologram. He circled, scrutinizing each section until he found what he was looking for.

“Rotate sample ninety degrees clockwise.” He donned his apron and reached for his face shield, but reconsidered and pulled on his goggles instead. The idea of being trapped in a sealed mask with stale liquor breath was far from appealing.

He donned his gloves as the tool ring descended around his workstation. He powered up the plasma saw and adjusted his goggles. Jacoby checked the computer’s cut vector and depth, but leaned in as one of the holographs changed. The computer had updated the image with a hollow cavity, roughly the size of a basketball. There was a void after all, and it was sitting directly over his palladium deposit. *Damn! Maybe it’s just ice. Or, the scanner is acting up again.*

Every rock jockey knew the protocol. It was drilled into their heads continuously. All voids were to be drilled, tested, and secured before cutting or processing began. Jacoby knew it was for a good reason. If a void was a pocket of methane or hydrogen sulfide, it could be ignited by the heat of plasma cutting. Explosions in deep space mining made a bad day worse, and he didn’t want Anna taking him home in a box. Tested samples were always processed by the Hazard and Special Drilling team, and any deposits they processed would be theirs to claim.

“I ain’t giving away this haul,” he muttered, glancing over to make sure Mike wasn’t looking before waving away the void hologram. Then he deleted any mention of the cavity from the computer. He knew what would happen. H.S.D would pad their numbers with his find, and he’d get a dud rock full of junk mineral in return. He’d fall even further from quota and Janice would finish tearing him a new hole. He’d never get a chance to work a day of his new contract. She’d just send him packing.

The plasma saw hummed gently, the contact points heating up as the shield unfolded. Jacoby lowered the blade into his first cut, the hot plasma easily parting the smooth rock. The air around him was filled with the hot, salty smell of melting silicate.

Jacoby followed the computer's angle, cutting quickly. He felt a tremor in the handle. *It's just the saw. Probably needs resonance adjustments again.* He pushed the blade deeper into the rock, confident in his decision to continue.

The handle shook and jerked violently. He panicked and tried to pull the saw free, but it moved sluggishly. If the saw became stuck, the rock would cool and fuse to the blade. They would never get it out. Forget quotas, Janice would eat him alive if he ruined a ten thousand credit plasma saw.

He put all of his weight forward and felt the saw break loose. It cut for just a moment before sinking in all of the way. Jacoby's wrists turned painfully and he stumbled forward. The saw's safety engaged as soon as his hand came free, instantly powering the tool down.

Cursing, Jacoby kicked the rock. He leaned in and yanked on the handle, but it was stuck firmly in place. A strange noise filled the air, leaking out and around the saw blade. It sounded like a basket of angry snakes.

A cloud of vapor burst from the cut rock, enveloping him. Small, wet droplets spattered Jacoby's face as he staggered backwards.

Gas! He swiped at his face, but it was in his nose and mouth. He had already breathed it in. *No, not gas. Gas isn't wet.*

Filling with panic, Jacoby stumbled towards the emergency button on his work terminal, a plan forming in his mind. *I'll tell them the void didn't show up on scans. That it was an*

instrument malfunction. They had to believe him. That way, they couldn't blame him for the ruined saw either.

He dropped a heavy palm on the duress button and sagged forward onto his knees. He suddenly felt very tired, very heavy. Jacoby tried to remember the excuse he had concocted, but his thoughts had grown sluggish. His head throbbed and everything began to spin.

He lifted a hand and managed a single step towards Mike before sprawling, face first onto the ground. Jacoby rolled over, gasping for breath as people swarmed all around. A fuzzy, dark ring settled over his vision. Someone was shaking him and talking, and then everything went black.

“Jacoby! Wake up. Jacoby!” someone shouted out of the darkness.

Air flooded into his lungs as his eyes popped open. He was flat on his back, a host of faces hovering above him, all staring and whispering.

“Well, hey there, Jacky. I thought you were having a fit there for a moment. You okay?” Jacoby's vision cleared and he focused in on a face. It was Yuri, the shift emergency responder.

“Uh, what happened?” Jacoby sputtered, looking at his workstation, and locked eyes with Janice. Her face scrunched up in a sharp scowl. The fluorescent lights set the wrinkles around her eyes into sharp contrast, making her appear withered and hard. She looked pissed.

“You went down like a bag full of tailings,” Yuri said.

“I got lightheaded. Think maybe I'm coming down with something,” Jacoby lied. *Better to deal with Janice later, after some cool down time.*

“You look a little rough. Why don't you head down to the clinic and get yourself checked out. At the very least get a vitamin booster and some rack time.” Yuri helped him up, and looked

to Janice. She pressed her lips together, forming a pencil-thin line, but offered no argument. At least none she would share now. It would come later, when he alone could take the full brunt of it.

Jacoby signed the incident form, received his company mandated coaching, and declined a wheel chair, insisting he was capable, even when Yuri argued that someone should accompany him. He hung up his goggles and apron and walked out into the plant proper. The din of mechanized conveyors, plasma saws, and hydraulic pumps instantly washed over him. It made his ears ache and his head throb.

Jacoby didn't pull his hands away from his ears until he stepped into the elevator. The ride to B deck was blissfully quiet and dark, until the chime sounded and the door opened. His fists balled up and he almost punched the elevator panel, but after a deep breath he relaxed.

Why did it anger him so much?

The clinic was busy, so Jacoby checked in and took a seat. He tried to ignore the murmurings, but the hushed conversations quickly irritated him, like a sink dripping incessantly while he was trying to sleep. He decided to sit, staring into the black of space beyond the window, and count the stars.

He waited so long that he dosed off, and bounced his face off the window when a nurse called his name. Jacoby limped back to the exam room. His body ached. Not just his joints, but his muscles, and even his skin. He stayed as cordial with the nurse as possible, but the room was full of instruments, and their constant beeps and chirps stabbed into him painfully. The clinic physician walked in with a flourish, going straight into a well-practiced spiel.

“I'm Doctor Reeds. Not feeling well today? Well that's no good, no good at all. Lots of people on station are struggling with bugs right now. You trap this many people together in a

sealed can floating in space and bugs are gonna flourish. They go gangbusters. So, the old saying goes. Misery loves company.”

Jacoby could only nod. He had a full-blown rock crusher rumbling in his head and his saliva felt thick. He thought that he might actually throw up. Doctor Reeds checked his temp, his glands, eyes, nose, and throat. Pretty much the standard company issued med evaluation.

“Yep. Definitely think that’s it. Someone on the last ore freighter bound for earth had a bug. Influenza E. Nasty little bug. Problem is it’s a virus, not a bacterium, so antibiotics are worthless. All I can do is give you a booster pack of vitamins, minerals, and synthesized immune boosters. I’ll send a com note down to production excusing you for a few days of rest. I do need your consent to draw a blood sample for base analysis, just to be on the safe side,” the doctor said, the wheels of his chair squawking loudly.

Jacoby took a deep breath, swallowing hard. The sound of his voice grated against his nerves, but the noisy chair almost unhinged him. Horrible impulses pushed their way into his thoughts. He had to look away, or he thought that he might actually strike him.

“Sir?” Doctor Reeds said, tapping him gently on the shoulder. Jacoby swung about, fists balled and jaw clenched. The doctor barely touched him but it felt like he had dropped a hammer on his back.

“I just need your consent for the blood draw, sir,” Reeds said rather meekly.

“I’m...sorry. Just not myself today, I guess. Go ahead.” Jacoby took a deep breath and tried to force his raging heart to slow.

He cringed and bit his knuckle as the needle slid into his arm. He had to look away as blood filled the auto-syringe. There was something about the thick, deep-red fluid that unsettled

him. The booster injection was less painful, but he could feel the solution filtering into his veins. It felt cold, then hot. He could've sworn he felt it bubble.

The doctor's face flashed in and out of his vision, his mouth moving comically and his words assaulting him. Jacoby wanted to bite him, or pummel his face until he couldn't make noise anymore.

The office blurred and a strange gurgling, sucking noise reverberated out of his belly. He was in a hallway, but not entirely sure how he got there. *How much time had passed?* His head was really throbbing now. It felt like it was going to split down the middle. *I hate the pain, hate the damn pain!* Everything seemed to make him angry.

Jacoby stumbled past a group of admin workers. They laughed and joked, walking importantly in their overly tidy uniforms. He hated their faces, and their happiness. They didn't pay him any mind as he tripped and fell through a service door. His stomach gurgled and whined again. He could feel it shake his whole body.

Something sour and thick pushed its way up his throat. He heaved and bent over, retching all over the wall. It was thick and his stomach cramped so hard he almost crapped his pants. The vomit ran down the white walls and fell with a "plop" onto the ground. It was bubbly, stringy and green. There was blood too, pockets of red blood.

The sight of blood sent a wave of anger rushing through him. He couldn't rationalize it, but he liked the way it felt. Like strength, and power. The anger grew more intense, and he slammed his fist into the bulkhead over and over. Bones in his hand snapped. The pain felt surprisingly good.

Jacoby staggered back out of the service passage. The group had gone. *Better for them.* More convulsions wracked his body, crawling up through his chest and neck. His anger swelled

as the convulsions moved into his head. A peculiar crawling sensation pushed forward from behind his eyes.

Jacoby staggered across the hallway and leaned against the outer bulkhead for support. The stars twinkled, surging like blistering pinpricks of light. He took a half-step back, barring his teeth as he caught sight of his ghost-like reflection in the window. Black veins crept through his pale skin, forming dark rings around his eyes, which now looked like dull, shadowy pits.

“Anna!” he moaned, a glob of green mucus slipping out of the corner of his mouth.

His vision narrowed, the anger that had so consumed him a moment before loosening slightly. Jacoby’s heart fluttered as he thought about his young wife, and how stupid he had been to dwell on their fight for so long. *She was right about him not telling her about his new contract. He was a fool.*

Jacoby stumbled down the passage and into long-term housing. He flashed between rage, inconsolable depression, and intolerable joy with almost every step forward. Fear tied them all together.

He held his wrist up and let the reader scan his imbedded id chip. The door chimed softly and whooshed open. Anna sat on the padded window seat, her head was down and her hands were crossed over a book. The overhead light struck her curly blond hair and it seemed to catch fire in the light. It appeared that she had dozed off waiting for him.

Jacoby took a step towards her, but horrible, murderous thoughts clawed their way into his mind. He saw flesh tearing, blood spilling, and her beautiful, delicate hair, matted and ruined. The wave staggered him and he barely caught the corner of the wall. The book hit the ground with a thump as Anna woke with a start.

“Coby, I didn’t hear you come in. I wanted to...” she moved towards him, but Jacoby threw up a hand.

“No!” he growled and threw his body down the hallway, bouncing haphazardly between walls.

“Coby!” Anna called after him, but he stumbled into the bathroom. Jacoby turned and put all of his weight against the door, slamming it shut. He closed his eyes as more horrible thoughts ripped through him.

“Coby,” she whispered from the just outside in the hall, and started to cry. “Coby, don’t be mad. I’m sorry. I’m sorry, Coby. I was wrong.”

“Just go away, Anna. I can’t...I can’t deal with this right now,” he growled, barely stifling the urge to slam his face into the door. He couldn’t bear the thought of her being hurt. He loved her, cherished her. She made him want to be better.

“Don’t push me away, Coby. Please! I don’t care what my family thinks. They can go to hell. All that matters is *us*. Please, let me in!” she sobbed.

Jacoby could feel her body heat through the door. He rose to his knees and rested his face against the cool metal, muscles all over starting to twitch involuntarily.

“Please let me in, honey.”

He could smell the mint on her breath, and the sweet musk of her body. Lusty thoughts flooded through him, but even those gave way to the anger. Fingernails scraped against the door, digging, splintering, and tearing into the paint. *Anna was trying to pry the door open.*

“*Wait, no...*” But it wasn’t Anna. His right arm flopped against the door, his broken fingers scrabbling against the metal like thick spider legs. Jacoby reached over and pulled his arm back just as his fingers curled around the door release.