

*Summary: Bob Alabama and Julia Oregon are part of the eighteenth generation of descendants from a group of scientists who sealed themselves away from the coming wars. The Community, and their AI caretaker Mother, was never designed to last that long. Can Bob break free of his fatal attraction to Julia? Has Mother's source code been compromised?*

Most celestial orbits encircled a luminous entity, but Bob Alabama was trapped in the gravity well of someone much darker: Julia Oregon. The source of his space-time distortion stood a scant meter away, trapped with him in Lift Three by his sabotage. He tried to avoid eye contact, fearful his will would buckle under the pressure from her cyan gaze. His mind free, for the moment, he drank in the rest of her like a Halfer guzzled homebrew. The crust of dirt on her knees marked her as a farmer just as effectively as the brown coveralls with green epaulets. A belt of woven human hair rode low on her hips, cinched with a simple knot over her flat stomach. She had a half dozen service ribbons over her left breast pocket, far fewer than he did. To be fair, he earned more than any soul since Gen02. The knotted loop of a section chief ran under her right epaulet and around her bared arm.

I hope to avoid that as long as I can get away with it. Bob thought to himself.

He smoothed his grey coveralls and verified his epaulets had their seams hidden.

You could not see the event horizon of a black hole. To cross that invisible demarcation was to fall forever as time stretched to infinity.

I could escape. It wasn't too late. Unbidden, his mind rendered the distortion of space-time around a black hole, and charted a course to escape.

NOVEL EXCERPT BY NATE STOVALL (SCIENCE FICTION)

She alternated between yelling at the disabled camera and banging on the sealed elevator doors.

An Oregon of all things. The thought rolled through his mind like a Panzer column through the low countries.

Silence cuffed his ears not unlike how Grandfather Genghis did.

He risked a glance up. Her calloused thumbs were hooked behind her belt. His gaze followed the curve of her wiry arms. Her skin was the same shade as his, the color of soycoff with a splash of goat's milk. Clan tattoos covered her arms from wrist to past her square shoulders. The sleeves of her coveralls were hacked off, another custom of the Oregons. He could feel it, the draw of her darkness pulling him to oblivion. Her expressive mouth was twisted into pursed lips, above which a constellation of freckles splashed on each cheek. He was lost now, his vector set to fall forever.

Her freckles were a bizarre mutation in the Community. She was the only one to have them in the last three generations. Those alone would be enough for her courtship to fill the fight card for Variety Night for months.

He took a deep breath, and looked into her eyes. They were a rich blue, the color of glaciers and tropical seas. Tides of gravity tore his will to ribbons.

Her impossible eyes narrowed. "What kind of Engineer are you? Fix the bunking elevator!"

Those blue orbs haunted his dreams for the last two months. They were sapphires in the genetic sameness of the Community. His own eyes were lighter than most, but still within the brown boundaries of normal.

NOVEL EXCERPT BY NATE STOVALL (SCIENCE FICTION)

“Too much social interaction?” She leaned forward, her half-open coveralls more than an invitation.

He resisted with the help of cobalt nails pinning his eyes to the back of his skull.

Her freckles twitched in disappointment. She poked him in the chest with each word.

”Fix. The. Bunking. Elevator.”

With a snort she turned her attention to the control panel. Her slim finger repeatedly stabbed the ten deck buttons at random. He watched the tendons in her wrist jump with each impact, like a second circulatory system pumping fury into nonfunctional machinery. Eighteen generations of fingers had worn the buttons smooth, obliterating any trace of the Greek letters that once adorned them. Their lift was stuck between Epsilon and Zeta levels, precisely where Bob had planned.

"I do not have my toolkit with me, and the problem might be with the power coupling at the top of the shaft. I'm sure another engineer will get a BFR ticket soon."

She caught him staring. “Why don’t you take a picture so you can go bunk yourself. What’s a BFR?”

“Break-Fix Request.”

She muttered something to herself in her Clan’s language and went back to punching buttons.

Was that it? Was that the reason she had not paired up with a Montana.

Competition for one of the four prospective mates from your designated Clan was always fierce. Mother announced the breeding plan on the Generation’s Firstborn’s twenty-fifth birthday. His birthday.

NOVEL EXCERPT BY NATE STOVALL (SCIENCE FICTION)

That was just over two years ago. His parents waited a respectful six months before the hints and innuendo began. Over the next eighteen months they had alternated between threats, feigned apathy, arranged dates, and even bribery. Last Friday his Mother prostrated herself on the deck and begged him to marry one of the Dakota girls while his Father screamed at him in Klingon, his Clan tongue. It was an epic shouting match that must have sounded like a well-oiled transmission with a handful of spanners and several cats dropped into the works to his Clan Cambridge Mother.

Females felt the urge to pair up far more acutely than the males, the artificial one most of all. As the Firstborn, he had a special relationship with the Community's AI. His whole life he was pushed to excel by two biological parents, and an omniscient artificial one. He was not some parental sadist. There was no bunking way his kid was going to suffer the way he did. Whether his first contribution to Gen19 was second or thirty-sixth was fine by him. Mother, and her breeding program, was an obstacle he would have to deal with later.

She stopped her button mashing to give him a wicked glare. He basked in it like a lizard with a belly full of bugs. One of her eyebrows quirked up.

"I will see if there is anything I can do."

"You do that." She spat. "Keep your clothes on this time."

He pretended to work on the Lift. What would a farmer know about a professional appearance?

Julia began to pace, but the size of the elevator only allowed two strides from wall to wall. Her plastic shoes made a soothing rhythm of clomp clomp swish, on the polished steel decking. Remnants of the adhesive clung in the corners where the linoleum tile long since worn away from a multitude of feet.

NOVEL EXCERPT BY NATE STOVALL (SCIENCE FICTION)

Bob pulled out his ancient multitool from a pocket and removed the screws to the service panel. He poked and prodded the wiring inside while his mind turned inward.

The loss of her parents in the fire of MY513 had turned her bitter. He was eleven when it happened, and the Community had paid their respects to the six empty coffins that terrible year.

Her brother, Carl Friedrich Gauss was a Utah who had embraced faith. The other Gen17 losses were not paired, only Julia and Carl suffered alone.

He pulled the control interface card, and made a show of checking the chips and caps. I should bunk her and move on. Not for the first time he wished he could hack his own source code. Why was he attracted to an Oregon Farmer with the personality of a bench grinder? It would zazz Mother to no end.