

In the Depths of Space

Joseph Zimbleman

331st Century, Year 10, Day 1

Mark was alone. The vast emptiness of space was something he would never get used to. Only the groaning and shuddering of the old spaceship filled the silence. He stared at his tablet's interface as he swiped through the ship's logs. Old messages littered the screen. He knew each of them by heart. Being in complete solitude for the past month had given him ample time to reflect on the past.

Essentially, he had nothing better to do. The old ship didn't offer much in the way of entertainment, which left him to revisit the past as he prepared for the future. He hated many of the files. Yet, he needed to see them, if only to remind himself why his journey mattered. If only to justify it all.

The red glint of his eyes reflected in the screen as Mark opened his inbox full of video and text messages. He pressed on the oldest one, and a video appeared on the screen. Three people stood in frame. His older brother, Buck, their precious younger sister, Autumn, and the most beautiful person he would ever have the pleasure of knowing, his wife, Irinna. He felt a smile creep onto his face as he pressed play.

Inbox, Mark Gelenhal, 331st Century, Year 1, Day 1—

Hey, Mark, his sister said excitedly. We know you're probably busy

right now, since your expedition just started, so we wanted to send you a little goodbye message. We just want to let you know that we're incredibly proud of you, and we know you'll do great things out there. Buck is proud, too, even if he won't admit it.

You got this, buddy. Buck looked at the camera with his usual mischievous grin. Make sure to bring me back something cool. An alien relic or something. Or a woman if you meet someone cool out there.

Buck!

Whoa, calm down, Irinna, I'm just messing around.

Irinna looked into the camera with those beautiful blue eyes that Mark would never forget. What Buck is trying to say is that he misses you, just like we all do. I know you'll only be gone six years, but it's going to be the longest six years of our lives living without you. Just know that we love you and hope you're safe. And you'd better reach out whenever you're not busy. I love you, Mark.

Good luck, Mark! Autumn waved at the camera vigorously.

Safe travels, bro! Buck stood up and reached for the camera.

—End of message.

Mark's smile disappeared as the video came to an end. It had been nine years since he departed on the six-year mission. His time on Earth was like another lifetime. Videos like those were all he had left to remember it.

Mark picked up his coffee from the desk as he stared at the screen, his red eyes reflecting in its glare. He flinched as the coffee reached his mouth, burning his tongue from the heat. He regretfully set down the cup.

The burning sensation in his mouth persisted, adding another layer of misery to Mark's life. He thought about getting some cold water, but he didn't see the point. Instead, Mark stood from his chair, ready to go about his daily routine.

Life alone on the ship was surprisingly easy. It didn't take much to keep everything in order: the spaceship mostly piloted itself. He simply had to set its destination and fix any maintenance issues that arose. Daily tasks were minimal.

First, Mark did his rounds in the ship's lower rooms. Most of the lower areas were reserved for living space. Every one of these rooms was devoid of life, except for a few decorative plants that still survived.

At first, he hadn't bothered to maintain them, but a few of the plants just refused to die and he eventually took pity on them.

He admired their resilience. It reminded him of his own life. His early years hadn't been easy. Neither of his parents had been around since he was five. Mark wasn't sure of the details of their disappearance. Buck knew, but he kept the details to himself, as if sparing them from the truth was any better.

For all of their childhood, Buck took care of them. Often through very unconventional methods. They used the little money their parents left behind to buy a home. All other expenses were left to Buck. Still, Mark's older brother made sure they never starved, no matter the cost.

People always judged them harshly for it. Buck grew quite a reputation back then, and that reputation followed Mark and Autumn like a shadow. Very few people wanted anything to do with either of them. Mark wasn't quite sure what exactly Buck did, but he knew his brother was considered among the best of the best at his work. Law enforcement in their area was very lax, which meant that Buck never did get caught.

Then, Mark landed the job at Alternative Technology and their lives were changed. He discovered his natural talent as an engineer, and the money he earned became enough to support all three of them.

With the plants taken care of, he moved on to the engine room to check that everything was functional. It was wise to check the engines for repairs daily to prevent disaster. Most of the engines didn't need fuel. They were powered by the reactors, which used a combination of the ship's waste and sunlight.

He didn't mind the task. Even when the rest of the crew had been around, it had been his job. Unlike the rest of them, Mark enjoyed the unbearable heat of the engine room. It reminded him of the day he met Irinna.

It was during his first month working for AltTech. They had him doing similar maintenance in one of their stations back on Earth. Back then, he found the heat of the engines painful, like everyone else. As he was working, he felt a tap on his shoulder. When he turned around, he was looking at the most beautiful girl in the world. She held a bottle of water in her hand and was extending it out to him. In the scalding heat, next to her, it was the best thing he had ever tasted. He remembered she complimented his green eyes as he drank.

When later asked about it, she would look at him in confusion. To

her, it was a simple act, but to Mark, it was completely alien. Her kindness shook him to his core. It was an unfamiliar feeling to receive kindness from someone other than his siblings. Yet there was a girl offering it up to every person she met. It hadn't taken long for Mark to fall in love with that girl and her kindness.

The dreadful heat became too much, and Mark brought his thoughts back to the present. His tasks in the engine room were completed. He had done them subconsciously without the need for focus. Mark rushed away from the engines and quickly slammed the door behind him.

Even after exiting the engine room, his face still burned from the heat. Mark realized he had been so lost in his thoughts that he didn't even know how long he had been in the room. Long enough to give his arms a slight burn, it seemed. He had no doubt his face was a similar sight.

With everything in the ship's lower deck in order, Mark ascended the stairs towards the ship's medical bay, hoping for something to soothe his burns. The ship's medical bay was equipped to handle nearly every situation imaginable. Handheld scanners could identify any known disease, and their replicator could produce anything they needed: ranging from medicine to internal organs. Before their departure, the medical professionals at AltTech calibrated the replicator to fit as many medical needs as they could think of.

The room was lined with shelves of different medicines, ointments, and tools, all prepared ahead of time for the problems deemed most likely to occur. An extra bed lay in the corner in case of the need for emergency isolation. The bed resided inside a casing that could be manually closed and locked from the outside. The pod itself was designed to fit a person's every need. The bed was by far the most comfortable in the entire ship. Mark remembered how they used to always joke about how much better the isolation pod was than their own beds. Kyle and Phoebe would always fight over the rights to the pod.

The AltTech executives had chosen the best of the best for the mission. Joining him were five others: the scientists, Xavier and Helen, the Assistant Engineers, Kyle and Phoebe, and Captain Sierra. Mark missed Kyle and Phoebe. He missed Kyle's innovative thoughts and Phoebe's inquisitive questions. He loved being there to guide them. He was to them what Buck had been to him and Autumn.

With his burns soothed, Mark exited the medical bay and walked into the lounge area of the ship. It was a cozy place. They had the finest furniture of their time. Mark collapsed into one of the reclining chairs and looked blankly at the space above him.

Their lounge was rather large. This gave them the luxury of having many windows in this particular room. Even the ceiling had a good view. Mark found it enjoyable to just stare up at the ceiling and look into the endless void before him. His thoughts really flowed when he did so, and, in such an isolated place, his thoughts were really all he could turn to.

As he reminisced on the past, he pulled out his tablet. Every message, every video, and every call was recorded and kept within his tablet. He could revisit those moments as many times as he wished.

Expedition Starlight began on the first day of the 331st century. Ground-breaking technology brought about the creation of a portal that took whoever entered far out into a distant galaxy, well beyond what was possible to reach with normal spacecraft. With the creation and testing of this technology, a mission was created. A mission to explore the new galaxy and learn as much as possible during a span of six full years before returning at the beginning of the seventh year of the century.

The best of the best were chosen for the mission. Before joining AltTech, Captain Sierra was a renowned military leader. Xavier and Helen were widely considered the best scientists alive. Phoebe and Kyle were AltTech's most skilled engineers, aside from Mark.

During his time at AltTech, Mark's skills as a mechanic and engineer surpassed those of anyone else. He could build spaceships and habitats more efficiently than anyone else. With time being so important, his presence had, naturally, been requested on the mission.

The first year of the expedition held most of Mark's fond memories. Once they were through the portal, everything went smoothly. They made many remarkable discoveries on the first day alone. At least, that's what the scientists kept claiming, and Mark was content to believe them.

Some nights, he and Irinna would talk for hours. He would tell her what he could about the expedition, and she would tell him all about her day. Mark remembered several instances where they both stayed up all night and he had to work through the next day without sleep.

One day, Mark saw on his tablet that Irinna had left a short message. *Please get on video with me tonight. We really need to talk. Love*

you.

At first, nothing seemed different when they talked. She spoke about her day, and Mark was content to listen. Then, she said words Mark would never forget.

“Babe, I’m pregnant.”

Mark’s world was knocked completely off balance by a whirlwind of emotions. The joy of starting a family with Irinna was a dream come true. But the timing was very unfortunate. Their child would have to live without a father for the first few years of its life. Moving forward, he would constantly be reminded of this fact, no matter how many times Irinna urged him not to feel guilty.

Over the following months, Mark made sure to check in with Irinna constantly. He always made sure he had time for her, no matter how busy he got with work on the spaceship. Occasionally, he would talk to Autumn as well.

With the money Mark earned at AltTech, he was able to help get Autumn into a good college. Shortly after his departure, Autumn began her studies. Mark wasn’t surprised to see her thrive. He had always considered his sister a genius.

Buck’s life was also turning around. After trying for months, Mark finally got his brother on a video call. Buck spent most of his time talking about the changes in his life. He had finally gotten a proper job.

A few days after the call with Buck, Mark’s son was born. They named him Adam, after Irinna’s late grandfather. Adam came into the world strong, healthy, and with green eyes just like his father’s. Mark took every opportunity he had to see them whenever possible. The first year of his mission really was the best.

In the second year of the mission, Captain Sierra chose the location for their base of operations. A small moon with breathable air and water. Xavier and Helen noticed a few signs of alien life, but never caught sight of anything.

During the construction of their base of operations, Mark was unable to contact Irinna as regularly. It was difficult for both of them, but they did their best to make use of what little time they were given. It was during this duration that Mark got on a video call with Autumn.

“Buck got in an accident,” Autumn cried, tears streaming down her face. “H-he didn’t make it.”

It took him five minutes to get those words from Autumn. She could barely compose herself enough to give Mark any information. Not that he was given time to process it anyway. They were on a tight schedule—there was so much that needed to be done in their six years. Captain Sierra gave Mark little time to mourn the death of his brother.

By the third year, their base was considered operational. With a proper place to operate, the pace of everything increased dramatically. The scientists had more room to work. Mark found himself growing busier each day.

Captain Sierra always had something new for the engineers. They didn't waste a single second. Mark had less and less time to himself. He could feel a gap beginning to form between him and Irinna. It angered him.

His relationship grew even worse with Autumn. Buck's death sparked a change in her. She grew more distant from Mark. She rarely sent messages and stopped trying to call altogether. Irinna told him Autumn was starting to fail her classes. She just stopped caring. Adam was the only one who still got her to smile.

Thinking back, it was difficult for Mark to remember much about how he spent his time. They did so much work that year. Built a whole damn station on that moon. Yet, it was all a blur to him. The only memories that stood out were the very few times he saw Irinna and Adam. He remembered every detail of their meetings.

The fourth and fifth years tested what remained of his resolve. They were on a three-month-long trip to the planet that the moon orbited. The planet was habitable, though conditions were much worse. Most of it was a frozen wasteland.

Surprisingly, despite the much harsher conditions, the planet had life. There were animals oddly similar to some that might be found on Earth. The scientists hypothesized this was because the traits of those animals were life's best way of surviving in such harsh conditions.

Xavier and Helen were so fascinated by their discoveries one day that they had to be forcibly dragged back onto the ship when it was time to leave. Or so Mark was told. He didn't participate. He was too stunned to be of use.

Earlier that same day, Irinna called Mark over video. His eyes wid-

ened when he noticed she was in a hospital.

“Wha—”

“Mark, w-we need to talk,” she said, tears already forming. “I know it’s gotta be really selfish of me to put this on you while you’re doing such important work, b-but I . . . I can’t keep this to myself.” She covered her face with her hands. Tears flowed out of her hands and down her arms as she continued, “I’m sick. Th-there’s n-no cure. Doctors say I have a couple years at best.”

Mark didn’t know how long he had spent sitting on the ground staring at the black screen of his tablet after the call ended. Long enough for them to pack everything up and prepare the ship for takeoff. Phoebe had supposedly overheard the call and explained it to the others. They helped him get to the ship, though he had little recollection of it.

They set him down in his chambers during their departure. Mark stared blankly up at the ceiling as he lay on his worn bed. Irinna didn’t want to tell him because she thought it was selfish to put her problems on his conscience, as if he wasn’t the selfish one for taking away the time they could have spent together during her final years.

Captain Sierra gave him a day off. One fucking day. After all the pain he had endured, that was his compensation. After that day was up, he went back to work.

His work became even more taxing as time went on. The fourth year turned into the fifth, and what time he could have spent with Irinna in her final years was instead spent engineering a second spaceship with some of the materials they had collected during the expedition. Mark suspected they needed a second spaceship to fit all of the samples they had collected.

Mark was barely able to see Irinna once a month. He knew it was hurting them both, but she didn’t let on. Irinna stayed as strong-willed as ever. Mark, on the other hand, felt his own resolve begin to crumble.

Their sixth year changed everything. Mark noticed that they weren’t making any preparations for their departure. Instead, they seemed more focused on the newly constructed spaceship. He had assumed it was for storage on their return, but he began to grow doubtful. His suspicions grew as the year came closer to an end.

Mark noticed that no one else seemed to be excited about going home. When he asked the scientists about it, they brushed off his sus-

pitions, citing the love of their work. He did catch up with Phoebe one time between missions. She said she couldn't wait to go home either, but the look she gave him was one of pity, not of anticipation. Kyle reacted similarly.

Mark wasn't sure what tipped the balance for him, but he soon found himself sneaking into the captain's quarters of their old ship to discover what he could about the inner workings of Expedition Starlight. Only Captain Sierra was briefed on everything. It was no secret that certain parts of their mission were hidden. Captain Sierra was to debrief the crew on a case-by-case basis, based on her own judgment.

The computer in Captain Sierra's room was heavily secured. It required a password and clearance from the fingerprint and eye scanners. In other words, there was no possible way for anyone other than Captain Sierra to pass the security checks.

Fortunately for Mark, he had built many of these systems, including the one on the ship, so he knew how to disable them. After a brief period of tearing at the inner workings of the computer system, he had complete access to its files. He looked through the most recent mission reports and made a startling discovery.

Captain's Log, 331st Century, Year 6, Day 1, Mission Report #127—

Today is the start of the sixth year of this mission. An important anniversary for sure. We have made a lot of progress in the past five years. The new ship will speed things up greatly. I must admit, the decision to bring Mark Gelenhal on this mission has raised our efficiency. His skills as an engineer are unmatched. However, I can't help but fear the conflict that may arise once he learns the truth. He's starting to ask questions. It's causing discomfort. Phoebe approached me recently. She asked if all this was really worth ruining someone's life. It won't be long before Mark learns that we don't have the technology to return home.

—End of Mission Report.

Mission Report #127, Response—

Captain Sierra. This message is straight from the top. Continue preparing what you can for settlement. Do not begin construction of anything that is a clear giveaway until Mark has learned the truth. Keep him ignorant for as long as you can. Once he discovers the truth, dispose of him if necessary. These beginning steps were crucial. We would

not have been so successful without Mark Gelenhal, and he would never have agreed had he known the portal we created was a one-way trip. So, tell your crew that, yes, it is worth ruining one man's life for the benefit of our species. Because of your crew, we'll finally be able to colonize this new land in the near future.

—End of response.

Everything else Mark found among the other files supported what was summarized in those two messages. At one time, learning such a truth might have broken him completely. Yet, the suffering he had already endured gave him the strength to keep moving.

Mark remembered the events that transpired afterwards very well. The crew were all hanging out in the lounge area of their base of operations. Everyone was there, including Captain Sierra. That was where he confronted them.

"Did you all know?" Mark asked the question immediately upon entering the room. They all looked at him in confusion, wondering what he was talking about.

"Know what?" Phoebe looked up from her notebook.

"Did you all know?" he asked again. He could feel the tension in the air. There was a divide in the room between looks of pity and of concern.

"Yes, they did," Captain Sierra answered plainly. "Even your subordinates knew. You're the only one we couldn't afford to tell. I hope you can—"

"Dammit!" Mark yelled. "How could you do this? I can't believe you pieces of shit. How can you justify this? I go through all of this, just to learn that I'll never go home again?"

"Mark, calm yourself," Captain Sierra ordered calmly. She stared at Mark with an intensity that made his skin crawl.

"No, he's right," Phoebe interjected.

"Phoebe—" Kyle warned.

"He's completely right," Phoebe said as she stood up from her chair. "What right did we have dragging him here with us? We all knew what we signed up for and chose to come anyways, but he didn't. How can we say that sacrificing his life for the betterment of our cause was justified?"

"Don't encourage him, Phoebe," Xavier warned. "We don't know

if—”

“I can’t believe this,” Phoebe exclaimed. “How can you all sit there, thinking about everything that has happened, and say what we did was right? I think—”

“Don’t,” Kyle warned again.

“Mark, are you with us or against us?” Helen asked gently.

Mark let out a genuine laugh at the question. “My brother is dead. My sister’s mental health is ruined, and I’ll never be there for her—or any of them. I’ll never be a father to my child. My wife is dying, and I’ll never see her again. And you ask if I’m with you?”

“He’s right,” Phoebe said softly. “We never should’ve—”

A loud gunshot broke the silence. Mark remembered the pain he felt as he fell to the floor. He remembered how helpless he felt in that moment. Everything seemed so pointless as he stared at the blood beginning to pool around his face. Everything went dark.

Three years later, Mark opened his eyes again. He could remember being confused at first. His last memory was one of death. Then he noticed Kyle and Phoebe standing nearby, watching him as the memories came back.

Mark had anticipated Captain Sierra’s actions. He suspected she would determine him a threat to the mission. So, before confronting the crew, he went to the replicator in their old ship. Within its system was the prototype of a Mindstream, a small metal device that scanned your brain, recorded everything it saw, and kept a copy.

It was a rather faulty design. A prototype like the Mindstream wasn’t meant for actual use. Human brains were incredibly complex, and to replicate that was beyond difficult. Mark knew that better than anyone. The Mindstream was a prototype of his design. So, in that moment, he found himself at the complete mercy of his own creation.

During its creation, Mark sent a message to Kyle: *Kyle, I trust your judgment. I know the truth. I’m not going to stay silent about this. In case something happens, I left a Mindstream in your room. It’s the prototype I told you about. I trust you to make the right call. If you decide that everything was justified, then so be it. If I die today, I leave my fate in your hands.*

In the end, Kyle chose to side with Mark, as did Phoebe. It took over three years for them to build a new body for Mark. They took their

time, making sure to hide all evidence of their actions. They fabricated whatever they could with the medical replicator, including skin, a heart, and most other internal organs. They did what they could with organic materials and filled the gaps with mechanical parts. Mark's new body was designed to look exactly as his old one had. The only notable difference was that his once green eyes now glowed red.

Mark brought himself back to the present. He had lingered in his thoughts of the past for too long. He still needed to visit the ship's cockpit. He stood up from the recliner and walked towards the front of the ship.

The lounge was pretty, but the cockpit was, by far, the most beautiful view in the whole place. The front of the ship came to a point, and that point was almost entirely made of the same strengthened glass that was used for their windows.

Staring out at the sea of stars before him was once a sight he had considered breathtaking. Now, all he saw was an endless void. His perception had changed a lot over the years.

He checked the ship's trajectory on its radar. He was close. Captain Sierra and the scientists were on an expedition back to the frozen planet for a few months. In their ignorance, they had left Kyle and Phoebe behind to continue work on the small moon. Mark's old companions didn't hesitate to use the given opportunity to bring him back.

Mark chose to leave Kyle and Phoebe on the small moon. If he survived, he would return to them once it was over. Mark doubted he could ever forgive Kyle or Phoebe for what they had taken part in, but for their change of heart, he could at least bring himself to spare them. Let them suffer in their regrets, just as he did.

He sat down in the pilot's seat. A handgun lay resting on the dashboard. He often considered using it on himself. A simple solution to his pointless existence. But then he would watch the video to remind himself that his job was not done. Not until someone paid for the consequences of the damn mission.

Mark pulled out his tablet and went to the most recent messages for one final reminder. After he had been brought back, the first thing he checked was his tablet. Three years was a lot of time. He remembered how his heart skipped a beat at the six unopened messages. All of them from Irinna.

The first message was very simple. *Hey, I know we just talked re-*

cently, but can we get on a video call soon? It's been a while since I saw your face. The next four messages were similar follow-ups. Each grew more and more concerned. Then it ended with a video.

Inbox, Mark Gelenhal, 331st Century, Year 7, Day 3—

The room was empty, except for a doctor leaning against Irinna's empty hospital bed. *Hello Mark. I know it's probably strange seeing an unfamiliar face. I'm Dr. Cole. I'm terribly sorry to be sending this to you, but your wife, Irinna, passed away. She was a strong, kind woman. Truly a gift to this world. It is a miracle she was able to fight her condition for so long. She passed yesterday, the day after you were meant to return. We were quite shocked by her passing. She was strong for so long. It's almost like she simply lost the will to keep fighting. Anyway, I'm sure you don't want to hear much from me right now. I promised her I would send you her final message. In a moment, it should start playing.*

The video switched, and Irinna was lying in her hospital bed. She had dark circles around her eyes and red marks from recent tears.

Hey Mark. She said, tears already beginning to form. You said you would come back. You promised. She paused for a moment to regain her composure before continuing. A man came to me yesterday. I'd been bothering the executives at AltTech since you stopped responding. They finally told me the truth. You aren't coming back. You never could. You knew you weren't coming back, and you lied to us. She was fully crying now. She continued to speak as she struggled to get the words out. I-I loved you so much. I-I g-gave you e-everyth-thing. How could you leave me behind like that? Everything we did together. Did it mean nothing to you? Do I mean nothing to you? You were my every-thing! But it was all a lie, wasn't it? She stopped speaking as she fully broke down. She continued crying for two minutes before recomposing herself once more. When you see this, I want you to know that I really did love you. I guess it was one-sided, though. You never loved me. I see that now. Goodbye, Mark.

—End of message.

Mark didn't know if he was the same person anymore, but seeing that message broke him every time. Irinna died thinking he hated her, and he could do nothing about it. He would never forgive himself for that. He would never forgive the people who lied to him for that. He would

make them pay.

The ship's computer beeped to signal that it had arrived at its destination. Mark looked outside, stunned. There really was something wrong with him. He was so lost in thought that he hadn't noticed that the ship had landed. He had arrived.

Mark let out a huge sigh, grabbed the handgun from where it was resting on the ship's dashboard, and activated the doors. He crept up to the ship's doors as they began to open. He stayed as tight to the wall as he could while he tried to get a glimpse outside. He landed right next to their ship. They were probably already outside the doors.

It didn't take long for his suspicions to be confirmed. "Kyle? Phoebe? Why are you here? You were supposed to stay on the moon." There was a hint of fear in Helen's voice.

Mark heard footsteps approach, and he was met face-to-face with Xavier. Xavier reeled backwards in shock and fell to the ground at Mark's feet, fear in his eyes. Before Xavier could say anything, Mark pointed the gun and fired.

Screaming and shouting ensued. Mark turned the corner and fired at Helen. He missed his shot as she dove behind some nearby crates. Mark exited the spaceship and walked towards the boxes that Helen had hidden behind. He could hear her crying to herself as he approached. Then it occurred to him. Captain Sierra was missing.

His instincts screamed at him to turn around, but, before he could, he heard a gunshot that wasn't his and felt a bullet embed itself in the back of his skull. Shock from the impact knocked him to the ground.

"You dumb bastard," Captain Sierra hissed. "You just don't die, do you?" She kicked his body with her boot. "I knew we shouldn't have brought you with us. I tried to warn them, told them this would be a disaster, but they didn't listen. Now look what you've done. You don't even have the decency to die and let us continue our work."

He felt Captain Sierra slam her boot into his side as she continued, "How are you even alive?" Captain Sierra pressed her boot against him again, this time flipping him over onto his back. Her face paled as she looked into his red eyes. Mark reached for his gun as Captain Sierra shot him again. He felt a searing pain in his heart, but he ignored it. His heart had felt worse.

As Mark grabbed his gun and pointed it at Captain Sierra, she looked down at him in disbelief. Mark met her eyes one final time before

he pulled the trigger. Captain Sierra's lifeless body slammed against the frozen ground and the world grew silent.

Mark felt the bullets exit his body as the mechanical mesh within him worked to keep him alive. Luckily for him, he wasn't entirely human anymore. It still hurt though. Gun in hand, he stood and advanced towards Helen with violent intent.

"Please," Helen begged. "It was wrong what we did, but I can't change it. Captain Sierra said you had to die. We needed to go public with the mission once the deadline for our return passed. For that to work, your family had to believe you intentionally went on this one-way trip. We needed you dead so they would believe the lie. It was horrible of us. Please—"

Mark became deaf to her words. He pointed the gun at her, ready to shoot. Then he heard a noise come from his tablet. It was still clipped to his waist. He unhooked it and stared at the screen. He had a new message. It was from Autumn. With the gun still pointed at Helen, he opened the message. It was only a text.

Mark, I know this will reach you, but I doubt you'll respond. Today's a special day. It's the anniversary of the day you left us behind. Not that you care. Anyway, I figured I should send you one final message. My therapist said it might help me move on. I've been taking care of Adam since Irinna passed. It's what Buck would have done. I'll teach him to keep his promises, unlike you. This will probably be the last message you ever receive from anyone on Earth. Congratulations, Mark. Everyone who cares about you is dead or moving on. Hope you're happy with your life.

Mark stared at the tablet in silence. Helen looked up at him nervously, waiting to see what he did. After a long, drawn-out silence, he gestured towards the ship. "Get in the isolation pod. I'll decide what to do with you later."

She gave him a confused look. Puzzled, but still fearful. "W-why are you sparing me?"

Mark looked up at the sky. He imagined that he was looking at Earth, somewhere off in the far, unreachable distance. "I have a message to send," he said simply.

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