

WELL 8

The drainage differentials for each pump have been logged. The well and its command station have been inspected and passed without need for any spot repairs or notes. The entry room, the fitness room, the showers, the hangar, the yard, the stairwell, the basement latrine, the storage room, the crew quarters, the subbasement latrine, the break room, and the control room have been inspected and passed with no need for notes on integrity confirmation, and each of the aforementioned rooms has been made spotless. All of the lights that turn off are off. It is the middle of the closest thing this place has to night. Not a single thing in this station needs my attention right now. Nonetheless, I can't sleep. I lie in my bed with my eyes closed, and every minute feels like a wasted hour.

Down at the far end of the crew quarters, Oaae begins to snore. This station is made to accommodate up to fourteen crew members comfortably, which feels excessive to say the least: Oaae and I have managed just fine for the entire time I've been here, and before I had arrived, it sounds like Oaae managed just fine all by themselves. Even with Oaae's snoring to keep me company, I lie awake in a crew quarters that demands to be filled with more snores, sneaking footsteps, soft chatter, and the ambient awareness of things being done in the other chambers of this station's body. I can hardly imagine how empty the place was when it was Oaae alone.

With a sigh, I push the blankets off of myself and get up out of bed. I tiptoe out of the crew quarters by the soft purple light

of the emergency signage, and close the door behind myself. Out in the hall, I lean against the wall for a while, and stare blankly at the dimly purple walls and doors ahead. Door to the stairwell, door to the storage room.

Deciding that I'm going to be up for a while yet, I shuffle towards the storage room. Inside, I close the door behind myself, and continue to go along by the dim purple lights. I walk slowly around the rows of metal shelves and cabinets, peering at the dimly lit contents of this treasure trove that lies on the ocean floor.

I do marvel at that: I am on another planet, living at the bottom of this other planet's ocean, cohabitating with an alien—or cohabitating as an alien, to be realistic—and I am bored. I am the product of at least a dozen miracles, medical and logistical, and I have the gall to be snooping through equipment lockers looking for something to do.

As I am walking slowly along down the far back row of the storage room, I pause mid-step, and hold my breath: I can hear something. A sound that is faint, very very faint, is coming from something in this row. There is something that is making a humming. It gets louder and quieter in half second intervals, more resonant and less resonant—it sounds musical.

I move slowly in half steps and pauses, standing tall and crouching low, trying to listen for the sound to grow louder. Eventually I am lying flat on the floor looking at the bottom shelf midway down the row: under a blanket here there are a dozen mysterious lumps that are wordlessly humming to me. Gently, I lift the blanket up and roll it to one side, and see a dozen polished black stones of various sizes, ranging from about the size of an eyeball to about the size of a fist. The one the size of an eyeball is, very faintly, glowing with a yellow light, and it is the one that is humming.

I reach out, and hold my finger near it—it does not seem excessively hot, nor excessively cold, and I can't imagine there is much danger here: I touch the stone; the glow goes out and the hum ceases; I feel the last of the vibrations absorbed in my fingertip.

“Aw,” I breathe.

As soon as the sound comes out of me, all twelve stones shoot into light and begin singing, harmonizing with each other and growing louder and louder and brighter and brighter. I begin cursing, but the sound of my voice only spurs them to be louder and brighter yet.

Shutting myself up, I reach out and put my palm gently over each of them, one after another, making them go out one by one under the touches of my hands.

Carefully, as silently as I can, I back away from the now quiet stones and sit on the floor with my arms around my knees in the far back row of the storage room, trying to pretend to the universe like nothing happened.

I hear the hall lights snap on, and I sigh.

The door to the storage room is pulled open.

“Cel?” Oaae gently calls, over the shelves and lockers.

“Hi Oaae,” I call back. At my voice the stones start to hum again. I throw the blanket back over them and they stop. “I’m alright, everything’s fine. Sorry for the noise.”

“If you wanted to start a band, you could have said so. What do you play?”

I hang my head down to look at the covered stones. “I don’t know, what are these?”

“Far back row, bottom shelf?” they ask.

“Yeah,” I confirm.

“Rememberer rocks,” they answer.

“Well I certainly don’t play rememberer rocks,” I tell them, and they let out a tiny, quiet laugh that makes me smile because I don’t think I was actually supposed to hear it.

“Do you play?” I ask.

“Outside I do. In here with the air, most of the instruments don’t sound right.”

“Can we go out so you can show me?” I ask.

Oaae mutters obliquely blasphemous curses, and answers, “It’s the dead middle of the quiet cycle. Come to bed, Aiae’ae’aeoe’oe.”

It’s been a while since I heard them call me that—Aiae’ae’aeoe’oe. It’s a nickname that I earned early on for my apparently outrageous behavior within this very orderly station. The first time Oaae called me that was when I was trying to

make candles in the break room, and Oaae walked in at a rather messier part of the process—I think when they called me Aiae’ae’aeoe’oe that time it slipped out by mistake, because when I did ask its meaning later on, it turned out to be quite a harsh word that I wouldn’t have expected from them. But from them I find it endearing now, and it’s stuck.

As Oaae scolds me, I actually do feel drowsiness finally washing over me—maybe it’s only a survival mechanism to escape from this beratement, but if it works it works. I ask them, “Will you play for me tomorrow?”

“Yes,” they say. “If you would hear me.”

I get up and come follow after Oaae to bed.

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The next day proves inopportune for musical performances, as duty has called Oaae and I away from the station nearly as soon as we had woken up. Riding passenger, I find myself zoning out on the long drive.

“Cel?” they say at one point, when my eyes have been resting on their hand for a while.

I snap up to looking sidelong at Oaae’s face. Then I remember myself a second time, and I look ahead as we ride along. They do not like to be looked at. This is an enigma, as they are naked and their skin is patterned with phosphorescent geometries that look like writing overlapping itself, a forest of glowing sentences. Oaae—which means green—glows green. When there is another Oaae with us, my maintenance assignment partner Oaae is frequently called Oaae Aioa’oa: Slim Green. Where I am from they would be a bodybuilder. Here, they are lithe.

“Sorry,” I tell them, and I am sorry. Nonetheless, it feels disingenuous—to me—to be apologizing while so conspicuously averting eye contact: I am telling them the truth while screaming with my body language that I am lying.

But that is not how they read it, of course. “I understand,” they tell me generously. More generously, they change the subject. “We’re almost there.”

The rover plows on slowly along the ocean floor. The road is lighted, though only in one area at a time. As we near the edge of

this radius of light, the next megaton lamp chunks on, illuminating about another quarter mile of the road. Fish scatter away into the dark. The lamp that had been guiding us previously shuts off shortly after we have left its radius.

Oaae and I live on planets that are in orbit with one another. Many of my people still consider Oaae's planet to be our moon, even though both planets are of similar mass, and theirs is of significantly greater volume. My people are amphibious, and live on coasts and in the shallow ocean shelves—though recent biomedical developments have expanded things. Oaae's people are strictly aquatic and live on the ocean floor: we did not know they existed until decades after we had arrived on their planet—this planet. At best, while down here, I am considered an alien. At worst, I am a demon. On my planet, myths portray the afterlife as being downward, because we see our dead sink. On their planet, myths portray the afterlife as being upward, because they see the dead of thousands of species falling out of the dark hell overhead down onto them—bodies which are husks that have already been harvested of their souls.

The next megaton lamp chunks on, and I groan exuberantly. At the end of our road, just beyond the tall lamppost, there is the corpse of a whale. Many fish scatter as the light is turned on, though the whale corpse continues to writhe with scavengers who are either blind to light or are undeterred by it. Oaae laughs at my continued wordless bemoaning of the situation. They then press a button on the rover and pull a receiver to their mouth.

“Arrived at Seven Two. Large carrion covering the grate.”

They park the rover just before the lamppost. The rushing of waters passing by us disappears, and it leaves an emptiness in my hearing for a moment, until gradually, the softer drone of the currents comes to fill it. The current here is slow. The ground is waves of silt littered with rocks, with the solitary line of the paved road flowing over it. The writhing whale corpse is the most massive feature that the megaton lamp illuminates.

We sit. Being that I can't look at Oaae, I look ahead, at the whale. I attempt to see the positives. One positive: the scavengers down here are living creatures too, and if the whale has passed on anyways, it is good that the whale pays their life

forward, however unwittingly. Another positive: I will get to say I touched a whale today.

There is a click before the radio comes back to us. The voice that comes through is free of any distortion, as though the radio operator is in the rover with us, and not miles and miles and miles away. "Copy. Clear them if you're able."

Oaae picks up the receiver again. "Copy." They set it down, and we get out of the rover.

We begin towards the trunk. We both walk, although now that we are free of the rover, Oaae is spreading their fins out: the fins originate from the shoulder blades, and extend out far above their head and far out to either side, and come near to touching the ground as they walk.

I open the trunk. Out of the corner of my eye, I can see that Oaae is looking at the whale, gauging the situation. "Might be a three-cap job," they decide.

I agree. "Dibs on the tail," I call. I am regretting this enough as it is, and do not need to feel worse about myself by cutting into the creature's head. I reach into the trunk, take a two-foot long knife by the blade, and hand it handle-first to Oaae. I also presumptuously hand them a pair of capsules, while taking only one capsule and knife for myself. They accept the two capsules that I offer. I close the trunk.

The two of us push up off of the ground, and begin swimming for the whale—I for the tail, Oaae for the head. With webbed hands and feet, I am able to propel myself perfectly adequately. With webbed hands, webbed feet, fins, and muscles like a shark's, Oaae darts to the whale's head and is almost done planting the first capsule by the time I have even arrived at the tail.

When I do reach the tail, I attempt to work without any thought of sentiment or ceremony. I use the knife to cut through the fleshy matter down to the spine. I pull the long wire from the capsule, then thread the wire around the spine and fasten it back onto the capsule, forming a secure loop. I then yank on the apparatus to confirm it is in fact secured. It is indeed.

"Ready?" comes Oaae's voice.

"Ready."

"Deploy on zero. Three, two..."

I count the one and the zero in my head, and on zero, I press a button on the side of the capsule and swim away. I can hear the hiss of the capsule aggressively inflating against the will of the deep ocean's pressures. When I am away, I stand on the ground and look back at the whale. From the tail, mid-back, and head, three lumps are now growing. Soon, the balloons are lifting the whale off of the ground, up into the dark ocean overhead.

When carrion is clear and far beyond the highest light of the lamp, Oaae and I swim back up to where the whale had been. There, there is a grate, a mesh of thick wires reminiscent of the patterns on Oaae's skin, though the grate does not glow. We confirm that the whale was the only obstruction, and then we head back to the rover, put away our equipment, and sit back down.

Oaae speaks into the radio: "Obstruction cleared. Returning to Well 7 to reenable Seven Two."

We have returned past three of the lamps before the reply comes back: "Copy. Thank you."

Oaae leans back in the driver's seat, and keeps one hand under the steering wheel, while the other rests on the center console. I realize that I am staring at their hand again when they pull it out of my sight, to their side.

I sigh, and begin to speak, but they cut me off.

"I know," they say.

Rushing water drones on. We near the edge of the light, and a new light snaps on. We near the edge of that light, and a new light beyond that snaps on.

They suddenly ask me: "On your planet, are there people like me?"

I am paralyzed by just how many things they might mean when they say *like me*. People of her species? People who are polite? People who are beautiful? People who are nonbinary? People who are technicians? People who are good at board games? People who are green?

"Like you in what respect?" I inquire.

They consider how to phrase it. With careful wording, they say, "People who are born of one sex or the other, but choose not

to subscribe to the labels or gender roles that correspond in their society to a physical sex.”

Nonbinary. “No.”

Their hand twitches.

I realize I have been cruelly blunt, and seek to clarify why my answer came so readily. “At the moment, it is unclear whether or not my species has any males. None has been seen for over three hundred years. I can’t think of anything in our modern culture that you would call a gender role. So to have someone who does not subscribe to gender roles... in one respect you could say everyone in my society is nonbinary culturally, but by label, everyone so far as I know of is female. The only gender-neutral pronoun we have is for animals.”

There is quiet.

“I—”

“WHAT?” Oaae roars, and then we are both laughing so hard that they have to park the rover. I am doubled over with my head between my knees, crying, and they are trying to say something, but cannot get through the first word without cracking up again and again. Eventually when we have composed ourselves better, they give up on what they were going to say, and instead just ask, “HOW?” and I laugh again, and am about to speak again when they interrupt again to roar, “HOW TO ALL OF THAT.”

Thinking back, I personally have never spoken about this topic with anyone here. I had assumed that surely somebody at some time had. Perhaps not. Or perhaps so, but not in such a way that it became common knowledge.

Being that Oaae has parked us on the side of the road in all of the excitement, I get out of the rover, and tell Oaae to come over to the sand. “It’s okay if you look at me,” I mention to them. I am wearing clothes, anyways—leggings and a top that both hug my body tightly, but flow loosely in faux-frays at the ends of the cuffs. I merely mention it because I will be on my knees leaning over the sand to draw with my hand, and it will be difficult for them not to see me.

“For my species, this is a woman.” I make a basic drawing in the sand. Skinny compared to people of their species. Two arms, two legs, with long toes and fingers, and webbing between the

digits. As a finishing touch I draw a vertical line for a vagina, and Oaae hums to themselves in a way that seems pleased.

I move over on the sand to give myself more space.

"This is a man." In the sand, I make a basic drawing of a figure in profile with no arms or legs, only flippers, dorsal fins, and a tailfin. His face is elongated. I do not draw it, but I point at a place on his underside, and say, "The penis comes out from here."

"That..." Oaae is stunned. "That is... They are... dolphins?"

I snicker. "There are some differences that make them easy to distinguish. The men have these wavy ridges along their backs, and their tailfins are more pronounced into the two points..." I try to make these details more exaggerated in my drawing, but I am not an artist.

"I know it would be insensitive to accuse you of joking..."

I shake my head. "If I'm being perfectly honest: I had learned about your culture's genders before I came here, but I was shocked when I arrived and discovered all of you were serious about it."

They seem very amused by this.

"So, anyways. I can relate, I guess. But this is real."

"Are you three hundred years old, then? Older?"

"Hm?" I am baffled.

"You said there have been no men for—"

"Oh! No. Well." I think of how to explain. "If you want to count from when I was conceived, I am three hundred and fifty, or somewhere around that old. But we tend to start counting from when we hatched. I'm twenty nine. I know your mothers and fathers are very important to you, but I never knew mine. They were dead a very long time before my clutch was stirred up."

"How do—stop me if I'm probing, actually."

"Go ahead," I say, and sit cross-legged.

"What happened to all the men?"

"We don't know. My understanding is that they come and go in cycles. There are cycles of an individual, where he will be present one week and then not present the next, vacillating between the two. Then there are cycles of them all, where there will be no men anywhere for a matter of years—or in exceptional

cases, centuries. Apparently when one of them disappears it's quite startling. They just—they burst into a tangle of lights, and then they're just gone, suddenly."

"When they come back, do they not say where they've been?"

"They don't speak. Well. They don't speak in a language with words as the language of the women has, or as your language has. Their vocalizations are more meant just to convey emotions. I suppose I shouldn't say it's only *their* language. Women can speak it too, actually."

"Can I hear? Or is that rude to ask?"

"Gimme a sec," I say. I sit still and concentrate on flexing my neck. thin slits on the neck below the jawbone open up, and from them, a sound like a very high-pitched whale call comes out.

Oaae squeals. "What did that one mean?"

"Just means what I'm feeling. I'm having a lot of fun right now."

"Aw."

I shrug. "Can't really help what sound comes out. It's extremely difficult to lie with that voice."

"Awwww!"

I stand up from the sand, and the two of us make our way back into the rover. For the remainder of the drive I manage to keep my eyes forward and not feel weird about it.

When we arrive back at the base, Oaae parks the rover in the hangar, and then the two of us make our way into the transfer chamber. When the doors on both sides are securely locked and fastened, the water begins draining from the chamber, replaced with oxygenated air. Oaae begins applying a salve to their skin to help with the exposure to the air. While in this chamber, I always think that I can hear the nanobots in my bloodstream whirring extra hard to adjust for the changing pressure, though I usually come to the conclusion that it's just my imagination. Still, I frequently spend much of my time in this chamber trying to hear and dishear them.

After a while, we hear the lock disengage on the door to the interior of the base. Oaae turns the lever on the door, and then pauses. "Shoot, I think I left the rover's lights on."

I open the slits on my throat to speak my emotions, and what comes out is a tone of endearing amusement. There are, of course, no lights on the rover.

“What was that one?” Oaae asks, in reference to the vocalization.

“Wouldn’t you like to know?” I answer.

“Well I’m going to pretend it means you think I’m funny.”

“Uh huh.”

“Does it?”

I vocalize again, and the same tone emerges.

Oaae gives up and opens the door. Inside, I collect Oaae’s equipment from them and go to put everything in storage, while they go off to reenable pump Seven Two.

When our respective jobs are successfully done, the two of us find ourselves in the station’s break room, a place with calming brown walls that are not flat, but instead jut out and in in the shapes of rocks. At the center of the room are two sofas back to back, each facing an opposite wall of the break room. Oaae sits on one sofa and I sit on the other, each of us holding a game board and a dish full of pegs.

“C7,” Oaae calls to me.

I make a noise of disbelief, and hear Oaae snicker.

“Hit,” I tell them, and insert a peg into one of the game pieces on my board. I hear them insert a peg into their board as well.

“C7,” I guess back.

“Y’got me. Hit.”

“Wait really?”

They snicker again, but confirm that yes, that was, in fact, a hit.

—

A few weeks later, Oaae and I are driving out to pump Seven Two again to see why it stopped drawing water last night. We are both in agreement that it’s probably another whale, though we won’t know until we get there.

Oaae and I are cracking up as we discuss the oddities of their language’s verb tenses, when from the rover, the voice of the communications operator comes through. The message is hardly

a second long, and was clearly cut off almost immediately after it began. I did not catch any of what was said in the brief time that the message did come through. I ask Oaae if they caught anything, and they say that they did not. Oaae eases off the accelerator and picks up the receiver.

“Say again.”

We wait. There is a momentum to all of the smiling and laughing we have just done—it lingers in my body physically, and relaxes into somber professionalism as we wait for the operator to repeat.

The radio clicks. “Well 8 has gone dark. Signatures indicate the facility is completely non-operational. There is no indication they are receiving our communications. Drop all non-critical tasks from Well 7 and move to Well 8. A HomeOps team will meet you outside. More teams are moving in but will not arrive until tomorrow.”

“Copy. Moving.” Oaae slows down, does a U-turn, and then pushes down on the accelerator, and we are off.

I am terrified.

“Has this ever happened before?” I ask. I know it must not happen often. Not since I’ve been here.

Their answer is only comforting in the sense that we can clearly share in a sense of solidarity: they sound terrified too. “I have never heard of anything like this,” they say. They grab the receiver. “Requesting any additional information. What could have caused Well 8 to go dark?” This question is sent in desperation. If there was any additional information, it would have been shared in the first message.

We rumble along.

The radio clicks. “You will likely be the ones who will be able to tell us what might have happened, soon enough. Apologies.”

Oaae grabs the receiver. “No harm done. Thank you.”

Hours pass. We do not talk much. We go from lamp to lamp, scaring off fish, a periodically moving dot on the ocean floor.

Eventually when we are arriving at the edge of another lamp, the next lamp does not come on, and we are rocketing into sheer darkness. Oaae screams, I scream, and they brake. The other lamp goes off behind us, and we come to a stop, and the only thing in the world that I might be able to see is the glowing

patterns of Oaae's skin, which I am not allowed to look at. Something brushes against my face and I shriek. It goes away. It was likely a very harmless fish, but in any case, I do not like it.

Oaae swears. Out of the corner of my eye, I can see that they are reaching for the transmission. Carefully they put the rover into reverse, and bring us back into the range of the last lamp. When the lamp chunks on and we are comfortably inside of its radius, they switch the rover back to drive.

"Well," they say. Then they add nothing more.

"Well," I agree.

The two of us wait in the rover, parked beside the lamp post.

Oaae grabs the receiver. "We believe we are near the base. The lamps are out. Waiting for HomeOps to accompany us farther unless you advise otherwise."

They set down the receiver, and as soon as they've set it down, a new voice comes in through the radio. "Copy. HomeOps to Crew Seven, we are thirty minutes out. Are you in light?"

Oaae picks the receiver back up. "Confirmed, we are in lamplight."

"Copy."

A short time later, the communications operator comes in. "Copy. Wait for—"

The radio is silent.

A minute later, the radio operator speaks again. "HomeOps, mind your band. I have not received so much as a request for permissions to the Crew band."

HomeOps quickly retorts, "Blame Aioa."

A second voice from HomeOps also chimes in, this one male: "Hey! Oo'oa'aa was the one who—"

I hear a clamor, and then the radio is silent.

"Think they'll be as fun in person?" Oaae asks.

"Hope so," I say, because sounding optimistic about anything feels like a good change of pace.

The ocean current slowly drones, and nothing in sight of the lamplight moves. Oaae turns the rover around, and they and I wait, facing the road that we came from, anticipating a distant light, that will grow less distant in intervals. What comes instead is a realization that there is the sound of something large moving above us. I try to look up, but the lamp overhead shines

into my eyes, and I swear in my own language. Oaae snickers. Then before we know it, there is a craft coming to ground in front of us, having apparently arrived from out of the darkness overhead. The craft has ten large wheels, three cannons that I can identify, and a glass dome on top in which two people sit. Aioa and Oo'oa'aa—Yellow and Purple.

I only glance directly at them for a fraction of a second before I catch myself and look down.

From the craft, I hear the groan and the current of a hatch opening. "Come aboard!" calls the voice of Aioa, the male who is yellow. "Leave your rover there!"

Oaae and I get out, and swim over to the craft. Inside, I follow the glow of Aioa's yellow light out of the corner of my eye, and find a seat up in the dome.

"Aioa!" Oo'oa'aa scolds. "You didn't tell them! I gave you one job!"

"Hey—OW, hey!"

Oo'oa'aa speaks to Oaae and I. "Hi, it's a pleasure to meet you, really. Now. Please look me in the eyes."

I do not. I gather that Oaae does not either.

Oo'oa'aa tries again. "If you're going to be working with us, it's for a very special reason: because politeness is out and survival is in. Look me in the eyes. I will not say please about it again."

I have known Oaae for almost a year now and have never made eye contact with them. To the customs of these people, which may be more ingrained in me now than I had realized, it is as though Oo'oa'aa is asking for my hand in marriage.

"Thank you," Oo'oa'aa says as my head is still bowed. I gather that Oaae has looked up. I do the same, and look Oo'oa'aa in her eyes. The eyes of these people are black. I think I had learned that once, but had thoroughly forgotten it. "Thank you," she says to me as well. Her tongue glows in the same hue of purple as the patterns on her skin.

From a control console, Aioa looks over at me and asks, "Is it true you're a spy?"

I get to watch as Oo'oa'aa punches him, not lightly.

"Better a spy than a demon," I tell him, and shrug.

Aioa says something under his breath that I do not catch.

Getting to look at Aioa and Oo'oa'aa without modesty, I can now fully appreciate why Oaae is described as slim. These two are as broad as they are tall. Each wears an X-shaped harness over their chest, onto which rifles, grenades, and blades are strapped. I have never before today seen true weaponry on this planet, and had seldom seen it on mine beyond that used for hunting.

Oo'oa'aa looks at me, and I again look her back in the eyes. A gesture that once felt natural on my planet now feels aggressive. "What shall we call you?" she asks.

"Cel," I tell her. My name is actually Stedl, but "Cel" is difficult enough for a species who does not ordinarily use consonants. From anyone other than Oaae, I prefer Cel to what many here are naturally inclined to call me, which is, in fact, Aiae'ae'aeoe'oe—demon.

"Cel," Oo'oa'aa says back, with difficulty.

I nod, and then I remember that this gesture likely means nothing to a people who don't look at each other, and I say out loud, "Yes."

Aioa keys something on the control panel, and the craft lurches forward. He keys another thing, and lights chunk on: the ground all around the circumference of the craft is illuminated, and suddenly we are now our own megaton lamp. It is not until this very moment that I appreciate what a power core this craft must boast.

We rumble forward. We pass ten dead lampposts, and then the front face of Well 8 comes into our light. Oo'oa'aa instructs us to wait with Aioa while she gets out and has a look at the station. She swims forth on her fins to the door, interacts with a panel beside it, and then swims back. "As expected," she reports. "Nothing."

"Caliber?"

"Mid."

"Aye aye," Aioa says, and then without ceremony, he presses a button on the console that causes a cannon to fire. The wall beside the front door has a hole blown into it, and I gasp as I realize that no water is rushing in to fill the facility: it is already filled.

The fact that these facilities are dry is the entire reason that I work at one. They are a rarity among a species who would ordinarily live the entirety of their lives submerged. These well stations are only dry because the technology harbored inside requires it. If the entire facility is flooded, then the well may be damaged to the point of requiring complete reconstruction.

Some 200 years ago, the species of this planet realized that the pressure on the ocean floor was growing, and that this would soon become a catastrophic problem. Inexplicably large volumes of extra water were appearing in the ocean, source unknown. The wells were made to remove the extra water to places unknown, and alleviate the growing pressure. It is a common folk theory that the water is being teleported around in time, and that they are causing their own problems, only putting off the increased pressures perpetually. Scientifically there is no consensus on whether the water is being destroyed from the wells, teleported, or moved temporally, but there is agreement that it is at least going away from the here and now.

Oo'oa'aa speaks to us: "We'll lead, you two follow. This station is similar to yours?"

I confirm, as I have visited a few times before: "The layout should be identical."

Oo'oa'aa and Aioa lead the way out of the craft, and I follow alongside Oaae. The two agents swim, darting forth into the hole in the wall that their craft has blasted. Each agent has a flashlight on their harness that lights the area ahead of them. From inside, the two of them call "Clear!" one after the other.

Oaae and I swim after them, and arrive inside. The layout is indeed the same as our station, though seeing it dark and flooded, it feels unreal.

Aioa speaks a command to me. "Point us to the well core."

I point towards a hall. "Last door at the end of the hall."

The agents lead, and we follow. At the door, they find that it is fastened shut, but they are able to blast it open. The stairwell beyond is already flooded as well.

Oo'oa'aa curses in her language, and I concur with her.

The agents take point. As we go, I give them directions down through the facility, to the well core. Soon, we are at the central control panel. There is a plate of glass that overlooks the well:

before the glass is the control panel, and beyond the glass is the well chamber. Both sides should be dry. Neither side is. The light of the agents' flashlights does not reach to the well core itself, but it reaches beyond the glass enough to know that the station is flooded all the way through. There has been a catastrophe here. I cannot help but note that we have yet to see the crew of Well 8, a perfectly charming duo usually referred to as Cyan and Short Green, husband and husband.

Aioa turns to me, not looking at me directly, but from the corner of his eye. "What is your assessment of the damage to this station? Is it recoverable?"

I grasp at anything I can give him other than bad news. "Other than the hole you blasted in the wall, I have yet to see anything that would cause total flooding. A flood of the surface floor... dangerous and unprecedented as far as I'm aware of, but plausible. Flooding to the control room, to the well chamber... I would suspect every piece of electronic equipment in this facility is fried, though I'm at a loss as to how—"

All of us are cut short as a something dashes into the light in the well chamber, and then dashes away again. Oo'oa'aa and Aioa draw their rifles, and I shout at them to put them down. They do not listen to me. I shout again. I can hardly believe that I have seen what I think I have, but if it is true, then I will not allow him to be shot.

"A male," I tell Oaae, getting nothing from the agents. "It's one of the men."

Oaae calls the agents motherless bastards and demands that they lower their rifles.

They do so, and look sideways at Oaae, and at me.

"I beg you, open the door for me."

The agents look to Oaae.

Oaae seconds what I have said: "It is of existential importance. Do as she asks."

The agents glide over to the door that leads into the well chamber. After a brief moment, they pull it open, and I swim through, into the dark. I flex my throat, and call out. *Intrigue*, my body says.

From the darkness, I hear back a call of lust.

I am electrified by it, tickled, and I echo the sound back to them in my own voice, albeit faintly.

I swim towards him. Out in the dark, among the pipes that feed into the well core from this station's many distant pumps, the man and I meet. He presses his nose against my chest, and I curl around him, stroking along his head and down his body. I can discern nothing of how he has come here, how his presence ties to the flooding of this facility, where he and his kind have been for the last three hundred odd years. I can only know that he is here now.

I hear a second call then, and my side is nudged by another man. I shift one of my hands to him, and stroke the both of them.

They each vocalize lust to me.

My vocalization in response is that of longing to know more, but also of unmetered willingness. I pull off my clothing, and both of them begin upon me immediately: I begin vocalizing pleasure and a feeling of newness much louder than I have ever voiced, while they are vocalizing pleasure and a sense of conclusion, though the conclusion to what, I cannot know the full of. I hold each of them afterwards, and the three of us settle to the bottom of the well chamber. I am elated, and I tell them as much.

Distantly, I can hear Oaae trying to justify this to the agents, and I smile, appreciative of them. With another stroke to each of the men's heads, I find my clothes and put them back on. By the time I have, the two men have swam off to a higher corner of the well chamber, and appear to be playing some game of swimming after each other and bumping into one another. Feeling I should not agitate the agents further by keeping them in suspense, I slowly begin returning towards the control room. I make my hands visible as I approach. When the agents do see me, they do not shoot, but their guns are drawn and pointed, and I am nervous.

"Have your men caused this?" Oo'oa'aa asks.

As I am trying to think of how to tell her that I can't know, I notice something. A rainbow of lights on the wall ahead. After a brief flash of these lights, they are gone. I am on the verge of tears. "They have just left, in any case," I tell her.

The agents usher me to the corner, and take turns watching me as the other makes radio contact with forces beyond this station. It is many hours before my story is understood to be the factual case of my species, and that although something of a tragedy has occurred here for them, something of a miracle has occurred here for me. I eventually find myself without a gun barrel pointed at me. Oaae hugs me, looking at me as they do, and I am shocked.

“I’m happy for you,” they tell me.

From my throat, I vocalize happiness in return.

—

I live on the surface now of Oaae’s planet. The surface of this planet is almost entirely ocean, but I have found a shelf in a warm enough region where the water has deep enough pockets to hide my clutch, and shallow enough regions to raise the young as they hatch, though I will almost certainly be dead before any of them do hatch. In that sense my task here feels pointless at times: I am raising eggs for some future creature’s breakfast to be had on the day after I die.

Nonetheless, I keep at it.

Much of the job of preparing the clutch is in smoothing the stones at the very pit of the pocket, while sharpening those at the mouth. One day, as I am using one stone to chip off fragments of another, I glance up and see that a shark is approaching me. Dread sinks through me, not because the shark is immense, but because he is only slightly larger than I am: If he has a mind to, he will fit through the mouth of the pocket with ease, and that will be the end of me after all of this.

I sink my way back into the depths of the pocket, hoping that he might lose interest and go find easier prey somewhere else, but still he approaches.

Then, in a rainbow burst of lights, the two men flash into being just ahead of the shark, and shriek at him in vocalizations I dare not repeat. The shark reels around, looking between the two of them and everywhere else as he tries to get a handle on what this is. In his confusion, the shark turns around and darts away.

As he goes, one of the men disappears too in a tangled rainbow of lights, but the other one stays. He comes to me. Stopping short of me in the water, at the entrance of the pocket, he voices appreciation and apology. I voice thankfulness back, and draw farther back into the pocket, inviting him in. He follows after me, and the two of us swim around and around in gentle circles in the small smooth pit, making voices at each other.

The other man must go attend to other business—I cannot ascertain the details—but this man is here to stay.