

# *Jac Triton's Last Kiss*

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My name is Jac Triton and everyone on this planet wants me dead.

This is no hyperbole. Every screen in every public square is lit up with an image of me, hand wrapped around a canvas bag, leaping out of a window, and looking terrified. Underneath the picture, the flashing caption reads “Immediate Elevation to Any Citizen Who Kills This Criminal.” The image they show is not of my best side.

Right now I am running down an alley-tunnel, which is steaming (they’re always steaming) enough that I can’t see what’s at the far end. That’s okay, because at the near end, there are half a dozen locals armed with lengths of pipe, improbably large and heavy wrenches, and I swear on all the gods, a fucking chainsaw.

I still have the package in my hand—the canvas bag, which luckily doesn’t weigh too much, even though it’s giving away my location anywhere I go.

Did I mention the bag is screaming?

The blasted thing has some kind of security klaxon in it, wailing like mad ever since I made my grab and dash. I would pull out the package contents and ditch the bag, but I’ve been given strict instructions not to open the bag. Possibly, the package is the bag, and there’s nothing inside. That would account for the weight. Maybe my employers need a screaming bag.

I pelt through the banks of steam at the far end of the alleyway and, in a genuinely surprising turn of events, I do not run immediately into the colony’s security forces. Instead, there’s an empty T-intersection, both ways a jagged gash through the ice. Down one I can hear the hub-bub of pedestrians and the business of a public square; down the other all I hear is the distant thumping of machinery. Air recyclers, most likely.

The public square is going to be full of witnesses, many of whom will immediately turn into pursuers the moment they see me. The air recyclers will connect to a ventilation shaft that rises most of the way to the surface of the planet, a mile or so above us. Escape, if my wheelman can extract me.

I run towards the mutter and clatter of the public square.

I do this for two reasons. First, the corridors are jagged, and my pursuers strike me as just bright enough to think I’ll take the easy route out. By the time they part through the steam, I won’t be in plain sight anymore, and they’ll think I’ve headed for the surface. Secondly, I can’t leave the planet until I give a certain someone a farewell kiss.

The square is a press of people shouting and dancing and cheering. It’s a holiday, or maybe this is just what a weekend looks like under the dictatorial rule of Great Leader Harbin, I don’t

know. I'm not a local. I press into the crowd, trying to hold the bag tight against my chest in the hopes that the blaring music will drown out the klaxon. I do a shaky, lurching two-step as I very politely shove my way through, and possibly this looks like dancing. Possibly they're all too drunk to notice.

I estimate my very slap-dash ruse here fools about 99% of the people in the square. I'm just that good. Of course, there's probably two thousand people in this street party, which means by the time I'm on the other side of the square, there's twenty former party-goers hot on my trail, eager to win that elevation for themselves.

I'm honestly not entirely sure what an elevation is, exactly. I know that this planet is highly stratified, with the vast majority of the populace actually required to work a few hours every day. Most of them are piloting drones drilling into the planetary core, extracting the precious goop that keeps Harbin surrounded by loyal offworld guns. Monstrous, really: it's hours of their lives dedicated to propping up an egotistical prick whose only redeeming quality was getting here first and setting up shop before the other colonists arrived.

Anyway, I'm pretty sure a smaller part of the population gets a cut from the proceeds for supervising the rest, and if that's not an elevation around here I don't know what is. Working, day in and day out, sitting in the same damn chair every day, poking at telepresence controls to make some robot a few miles below you dig just a little bit faster than a decent AI might go? This place is a fucking hellscape.

And that's why the settler in the front of my new fan club has somehow acquired a flagpole—now that I think of it, we passed a little bistro back there that had flags outside

touting its sandwich special—and now there's the pointy tip of a pole jabbing around my midsection, trailing a rope that threatens to tangle up my feet.

Chunks of something-or-other are also smashing into the walls and floor around me, sending up little frosty clouds of ice when they hit. It takes me a few minutes, a few ducks and dives down different tunnels and corridors, to realize what it is they're throwing. They're snapping off the icicles that hang down off of just about everything around here, and they're flinging them at me like spears. I figure this out when one embeds itself in the thigh of a bystander who'd just come out a door in front of me. The poor sap goes down howling, and I resolve not to let that happen to me next.

The corridor I'm in now is narrowing down, but I can see ahead it opens up again. This time there's no flashing lights or thumping bass, so it's unlikely to be another party. Which is unfortunate, because space is at a premium down here inside a glacier, and if it's not hosting a party to distract the huddled masses from the fact that they have to work in the morning, it's probably used for something official, and that means security.

I'm getting ahead of myself, though, which is a character flaw that's been pointed out to me on more than one occasion. The corridor narrows, and that's my chance to ditch my pursuers. I slow down a little, make it look like I'm tiring, until that damn pole is swinging around at my ankles again. I time its bob and weave back and forth, and right when it's swinging away I stagger my pace. I spears past me, under my elbow, and I clasp my arm over it. This right as I'm passing the narrow bit of corridor, no more than a few feet wide.

With as much strength as I can muster (which isn't much), I yank on the pole, and get a

surprised yelp from behind me. One more twist and wrench, and I can feel the spear-wielder lose footing. I release, just as they're reaching that narrow passage, and they smack the wall with a bone-juddering impact. They go down in a heap, right there in the bottleneck.

The next chaser doesn't see it happen, so kicks the tumbled body but good, and hardly meant to, so they go pinwheeling to the ground. They actually manage to kick the next guy on the upswing, and now there's a third body in the pile. Some folks have time to slow down and stumble over the fallen, but the people behind them don't slow down, and pretty soon it's just a mess of bodies and grunts and I'm pretty sure one wet snap and the howl that accompanies a broken limb.

Which leaves me running into the midst of a wide cavern with a ceiling that soars up into darkness and a tamped-level floor. Row upon row of machines twice as tall as I am and about as wide pattern the floor; between them run a complex network of pipes and tubes. The reverberating hum of machinery fills the space top to bottom, a baseline vibration so heavy I can feel it assaulting my skin on all sides.

The machines are all labeled and numbered Pump Unit 5471, Pump Unit 5472, Pump Unit 5473, and so on. These are the other ends of the drilling drones, the pumps that pull up the primordial ocean hidden under the planet's ice, siphoning off all the strange, alien microorganisms that somehow thrive in an ocean that never sees a sun on a planet whose core is eons dead. They're ridiculously useful, and therefore hideously expensive, and thus it's all being extracted at a breakneck speed before somebody steps in and informs Harbin that he's no longer in charge of the planet.

I've stumbled into the source of the entire planet's wealth.

Or, if we're being honest, this is probably one of many nodes of a massive extraction network that threads all throughout the glacier. That doesn't sound as impressive, though.

I can just barely hear, over the grumbling of all the pumps, the calls of security people telling each other that I've joined their little corner of paradise. I have to work fast.

I crack open the maintenance panels of half a dozen pump units and do my thing, which basically amounts to understanding something just well enough to know what not to do to it. In this case, I engage a quality control shunt that diverts the subterranean ocean water into a collection chamber instead of pumping it up to the big aqueduct that leads to wherever they strain, bottle, and package up the product. Also I disable the overflow regulators, which would spoil the fun by shutting down the pump when the collection chambers fill up.

I think the security people are getting closer while I work, although I can't be sure. It's possible they're just louder, or I'm getting used to the incessant thrumming. I like to think positive thoughts. It keeps my spirit up.

My high spirits don't help me very much, though, when a masked security goon comes around the corner. The access panel sits on the frosty ground at my feet; the inside of the pump is flashing an incredible shade of vermillion. They start shouting and raise a gun.

I kick the panel at my feet, which smacks into the pump and then ricochets into the air. For a moment, the startled guard stares at the flying square of metal. That's the hesitation I need to snatch the plate out of the air, swing it around against the gun, then the guard's facemask. The panel goes bwooooong; the guard goes down.

I scoop up the weapon—might be useful—and scurry through the pump units, dodging past a few other goons in their search pattern, and set to sabotaging another set of pumps. I can hear them shouting at each other, increasingly frantic. There's a special hitch to their voices that I suspect indicates that they've realized I've locked out the control panels on the pumps they're standing next to.

The first pump blows a moment later.

I clamber up on top of the pump I've just consigned to a similar fate to see what's happened to my first patient. There's a spout of blue-white spraying up out of the center of the pump unit's dome. The pressure is enough that the stream arcs high up into the darkness gathered around the ceiling. Slushy snow comes down from on high in great, awkward splatters. Pretty soon two more pumps go, adding two more torrents of ancient ocean to the atmosphere.

I scoot back down to the ground and gather up the access panels from their pumps, arranging them in a circular fan. When I'm satisfied with the aesthetics, I heft the borrowed plasma gun, dial it down to its lowest setting, and set about welding the panels together with high-velocity bolts of molten iron.

When the first pump of the second group blows, I know I have very little time left. Scrambling up the side against the falling snow, I settle the fan of panels over the top of the pump unit like a little hat. And then I, who have much less common sense than most of my species, seat myself in the direct center. Like the little propeller on top of a hat.

The pump assembly backs up with a series of sharp bangs, which I imagine is a sequence of gaskets failing inside the works. Then the central chamber fills with what amounts to antifreeze, groaning and straining to hold

back the weight and pressure it was never designed to do. Finally, the weakest join in the chamber, the one exactly two inches below my ass, gives.

I rocket into the air, sitting cross-legged atop my fan of access panels like some sort of supernatural guru, ascending to heaven. Icy water shoves and sloshes beneath me, a few sprays pummeling their way through the welds. The liquid is so incredibly cold that the droplets burn when they touch my skin.

But I have more important things to worry about, since the dark ceiling is sweeping towards me. As it leaps out of its own shadows, I can see that it is covered in stalactites of glacier ice, the monstrous cousins of the icicles that my fan club had been chucking at me just a little while before.

Shifting to put my feet underneath me, I half-squat on the now-teetering magic carpet beneath me and watch as the giant spears of ice rush toward me. But then my speed tapers, slowing as my water rocket approaches the apex of its flight. The stalactites seem to waver, as if suddenly overcome with doubt on whether they would get to impale me or only wave sadly as I sail by.

So I jump, arms thrown wide to embrace them.

The pitons in my hands dig deep into the thick body of the stalactite, and a moment later I plant the pitons on my boots, as well. I give the stalactite one of those hugs you give somebody when they just saved your life.

The assembly of access panels falls away, eventually hitting the ground with a clatter. The chamber is quickly filling with swirls of snow as well as the roar of six wide spouts of ancient water and the droning hum of the other hundreds of pump units.

By contrast, the wailing bag over my shoulder seems little more than a polite little whisper.

With a spare piton, I pin the bag to the base of a nearby monster icicle, up where the shadows are so deep I can barely see anything at all. To the outside I affix an encrypted transmitter beacon, and then I begin my slow traverse across the ceiling. It'll take me an hour at least to get to the other end of the chamber, where I'm pretty sure there are bound to be a passage back towards the housing districts of the colony.

I can't leave until I get that kiss, after all.

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Security goons close in on me in an ever-tightening noose as I flee district to district, zone to zone through the colony. By the time I cross the Rimeblossom checkpoint (in the back of a garbage drone), they're just one intersection behind me, knocking over empty trashbins and upsetting pedestrians plodding home after a wild night of partying. The security people are exhausted: their shoulders slump, their gestures have become increasingly erratic, and their patience with bystanders completely gone.

The lead mook in the brigade swears at underlings to march double-time down the corridor. They know I'm somewhere in front of them, but not where, exactly. Their helmet comms squawk with coordinated movements of their compatriots to the east and the west. The net is tightening, and soon they can all go home to sleep, but not yet.

"You there!" the leader shouts, stabbing a finger at a none-too-stable reveller shuffling the opposite direction. "Show your face!"

Even I can tell, peering through the busted hinge of the garbage drone's rear door, that the person in question looks nothing like me. The hair is dirty blonde, not my warm auburn; the

skin is pale and ruddy, not the exact tone of aged whiskey that I've paid a pretty penny to achieve. "Whaddahoowaahn?" they slur, not slowing, not showing their face.

"Halt! Got a live one!" the lead shouts, and despite the fact that nobody has ordered it, the others raise their weapons. The escalating thrum of gauss chambers fills the chilly corridor. "Hands on the wall, joker!"

The joker in question, however, is having none of it, most likely because putting one foot in front of the other is about as much as they're capable at the moment. They keep moving.

"Stop right there!" the guard shouts again, and to my horror, the person of interest staggers forward and tries to push their way past the security goon.

Needless to say, a moment later the poor sap is chucked onto the ground with even more rifles pointed at their face. They land like a bag of chum, no bones and no muscles, just splatting on the ground. "Awwwww, whizagotta..." they whine in response, not in pain but in confusion and frustration. Then they try to get back up.

This is going nowhere good, and fast. I think that thought a moment before I hear myself shout, "Hey fuckers!" I'm standing, now, on top of a garbage drone, shouting at security people. In my hand, I find, is a half-rotten melon. I throw it at the mooks to get it out of my hand; it splats across the ground in front of them, sending runners of green goo everywhere.

So apparently I'm doing this.

All of the security people shout into their headsets at the same time, and I bolt over the front of the garbage drone, leaping out in front of it. I hit the ground running. There are passages left and right, and the garbage drone is wide enough I can dash down either. But I pump my legs and haul ass forward since



they'll expect me to bob and weave. Wouldn't want to lose them before the big show.

Up ahead, the habitats go from holes dug into the ice wall and transform into tall buildings made out of ice blocks and sprayed down with acrylic to keep them from melting. A series of ladders scales up the side of one, and I scramble up, hoping that the security mooks have chased fast enough that the garbage drone will block their view of my ascent.

This works until I'm two storeys from the top, and then the hot iron slugs pop open the acrylic and gouts of steam escape the holes. I push, hoping that their accuracy at this range is really as shitty as it appears. It's not: I feel a red-hot poker rip through the meat of my calf just I top the ladder.

In my travels, I have accrued a sizable collection of profanity from many cultures. In times like this, I find it necessary to go through them all, vocally, to find just the right curse.

I shove myself across the rooftop, then clamber up the half-wall separating this roof from the next. On the other side, I can see a slight gap – no more than a narrow alleyway a few meters wide – before the next roof. I curse the architects of the colony as I force my legs to run headlong at the gap, then throw myself onto the other side.

I hit the ground, roll, and am back on my feet, running for the next building. Behind me, I can hear the shouts of security. A moment later, molten slugs start splashing across the ground around my feet.

I heave myself down a half-storey to the next roof, then huff up a ladder onto the next. Another short alleyway yawns in front of me after that, and this time I curse the designers of the garbage drone's bulky frame, which this

alleyway is wide enough to accomodate, as I hurl myself through the air.

A glance back as I push myself back to my feet confirms what I expect: the mooks are catching up to my limping ass, and fast.

Across, up, across, down, across across, down and up. Each roof we cross brings them closer and closer.

Finally we reach the inevitable conclusion of every rooftop chase: the next rooftop is four stories shorter. I use a particularly clever curse for whoever had built such a half-assed little building. Still, there isn't anything else to do, especially since my pursuers are no more than ten meters behind me.

"Wait, no! Don't do it!" the lead security officer shouts, suddenly filled with concern for my welfare. I pay them no mind.

I launch myself off the rooftop and into the air, legs pinwheeling before me, arms flailing behind, as if either of them can do anything to help me. Stale, chilly colony air whistles past me. The low roof leaps up to greet me.

I land on one foot, exactly wrong. The sound of my tibia snapping sweeps up the length of my body; a moment later my fibula juts wet and red from the top of my knee. My other knee slams into the rooftop, the kneecap immediately shattering into bone shards and dust. Every puff air in my lungs takes its leave all at once, and my face hits the rough-textured acrylic beneath me.

The athletics portion of the evening has concluded.

My erstwhile pursuers line up along the roof behind me, and I can hear their muttered, astonished cursing. Blearily, I look around me and nod my chin into my chest. I am in the

dead center of a really impressively sized pool of blood.

A fresh-faced young goon pops their head over the edge of the roof, coming up an access ladder from the street. With far more caution than I actually deserve, they creep towards me, gun leveled at my head.

I wave a hand, trying for and failing to produce a placating gesture. It looks like I'm flailing, trying to claw at the poor mook. They tense; I lower my hand. "Don't shoot," I croak.

The security goon scoffs. "I shoot you dead, I get elevated, idiot. Thanks for making it easy."

"Sure, sure," I agree with him, head swimming. "But instead you're going to take me to a hospital."

Now they laugh. "Why am I doing that?"

"I have a blood disorder," I grate, pushing the words out one by one. "I can't have medical nanites. If I don't get medical attention, I'm going to die. I'll bleed out right here."

"Yeah, so I guess I'll shoot you now, before you die on your own?"

I roll my eyes upwards to look the mook in the face. "If I die, you'll never find out where I put the bag." I flop my hand against my side, or try to; all I accomplish is splashing my own blood around. But the point is made: the bag at my side is gone, isn't it?

I slowly lower myself into something resembling a recumbent position. My legs don't really cooperate, but that's okay because I can't feel them, anyway. "I dunno what's better than an elevation around here, friend, but you keep me alive, your boss will be sure to give it to you."

They think about it; I give them a feeble smile and then rest my cheek against the ground again. It's nice and cool.

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There's a thin sheet over my body and what feels like a thinner mattress beneath me. My legs are immobilized. The lights on the other side of my eyelids are dazzlingly bright. Everything smells like antiseptic. I breathe a little sigh of relief. They actually took me to a hospital instead of watching me die.

"You awake?" comes an aggrieved voice. A moment later, they continue on. "I can see your brainwave on the monitor; I know you're awake. No sense in pretending."

I slit one eye open. "Then why did you ask?"

"Procedure," comes the response, sounding as automatic as it is meaningless. The voice belongs to a wide, round medical professional in scrubs. They're very fuzzy. "I need to ask you some questions about your medical history."

Reluctantly I open the other eye and get them in focus. "Hey, you're pretty cute," I say, and crook a smile across my lips. It's true: they're colored like caramel and lime, which is a combination I've not seen before and it's striking. Wide face, full lips, what look like well-built shoulders underneath the scrubs.

They pretend I said nothing. "The security officers who brought you in said you have a blood condition that precludes medical nanites, but I haven't been able to confirm which disorder it might be." They swipe through a few pages on their datapad. "I've found dead nanites in your blood, but I can't tell why." They lift an eyebrow and wait for my response.

"I'm sorry, I didn't catch your name, nurse," I say instead.

“Sydney,” they answer, “heeyandhim.”

I make a prudish sound. “Pretty cheeky, nurse.”

“It’s hospital procedure, supposed to encourage trust and friendliness” he explains, simultaneously embarrassed at the institutionally-mandated intimacy and annoyed at having to explain it. “And I’m not a nurse. I’m a medtech.”

I push myself up on my elbows a little, to test how much it hurts. It hurts a lot. “What’s the difference?”

“Credentialing,” Sydney responds. “And while we’re making introductions, we don’t have a name on your file yet. Care to provide one?”

I smile broadly, settling back against the hospital bed. “I am Spartacus.”

The medtech grunts and enters this into the datapad. The best part about this particular joke is that there are so few classic 2D buffs out there, it goes right over most heads. “So, Spartacus,” he continues. “Your blood disorder? Clearly it hasn’t prevented you from having other modifications performed.” At the last, he points a significant look at my crotch.

“Somebody’s been peeking,” I give him a canary-fed cat’s grin.

“Somebody had to get you into a hospital gown,” he retorts with a roll of his eyes. I can see him physically try to change the subject and fail. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen a more complicated configuration of sexual organs before.”

“It can be kind of intimidating,” I allow with a sympathetic nod, “but you learn to play it right, and it’s like a godsdamned symphony.”

He suddenly finds his clipboard absolutely fascinating. He knows he had a different conversation topic at hand, he just tried to

shift the conversation topic that way a moment before. But now it’s gone. Is it written on the datapad somewhere? His eyes rove over the screen, desperate.

“It so happens I’m a fabulous music tutor,” I offer with a smile. “Care for a lesson?”

Sydney’s brows come down. “I don’t think my partner would approve.”

“I’m not above taking on two students at once,” I shoot back pleasantly. “Bring ‘em along!”

“No. No,” Sydney says, shaking his head. “No, Spartacus, that’s not going to happen. I need to talk to you about your blood disorder.”

“What blood disorder?” I ask, tenderly shifting my weight left and right under the hospital sheet.

“You told security you have a blood disorder.”

“Well I had to tell them something,” I tell him reasonably. Gingerly, I push myself up to a sitting position. Wince once. “They were going to shoot me.”

I swing one leg off the table, and Sydney lurches forward to push me back onto the slab. “You’re in no condition to be—”

“You may have noticed that my legs are less... pulverized,” I tell him, and they are. They are straight and whole again, and while the skin stretched across them is thin and brittle and hurts like a motherfucker, there’s no seeping wounds anymore, either. “Once I regained consciousness, I turned my nanites back on. While we’ve had this pleasant chat, they’ve rebuilt the bones with carbon nanotubes to get me back on my feet.”

“That is not safe!” Sydney sputters. “Your body will reject them—”



“Oh, but that’s hours from now,” I laugh, and hop down onto the floor. I shout to mask the pain. “Wow! You’ve been a great help, Sydney. I really mean it.”

“Why would you turn off your medical nanites?” the medtech asks me like I’m around the bend. “Why would you have medical nanites that you could turn off in the first place?”

“Sydney,” I say, gripping his shoulder in camaraderie, and also so that I don’t fall down. My right leg screams when I put weight on it still. I don’t mention that. “It’s very simple. turned them off so they’d bring me here.”

The medtech steadies me automatically, frowning into my face. “Here?”

“Rimeblossom General, the only hospital in the district with an emergency hematology department. What better way to get into a highly secure location like a hospital than arranging an armed escort from colonial security?” I flash him another smile. “There was no way I was sneaking in. This place is locked down like a chastity cage.”

“But why do you want in here?”

I give him a broad smile. “I need to find Doctor Luanda. Oncology? Where might I find her?”

Sydney scowls, plainly uncertain about answering. “Oncology’s on floor sixteen.”

I pat his cheek. “You are such a dear, Sydney. If I find one of those comment cards on my way out, I’m going to highly recommend you as being very attentive, very informative. You’ve been incredible.”

“You can’t leave,” he says reasonably. “There’s an armed guard outside the door.”

“Pish tosh, who uses doors anymore, anyway?” I chuckle, and limp my way to the corner of the room, where a climate control vent sits in the

corner. I leap up, which my leg really does not appreciate, and grab hold of the plate. I wedge my good foot between the top of the cabinets and the ceiling, which is good enough to hold me in place, at least temporarily. My aching knee seconds the “temporarily” strongly.

“Wait, you can’t just—” Sydney starts, and then revises himself. “I mean, you can, obviously. But I mean, what’s to stop me from going outside and telling the guards that—”

I look at Sydney, upside-down. “Don’t you have doctor-patient confidentiality on this planet?”

“I’m not a doctor,” he answers automatically.

“Well,” I moderate as I wrench off the vent plate and slap one hand onto the inside of the duct behind it. “Medtech-patient confidentiality?”

“That’s not a thing.”

“Well then I’m really at a loss, Sydney,” I admit. “You’ll have to figure out why you don’t tell them on your own.”

“Look,” he stammers. “Spartacus! You’re going to hurt yourself—”

“No doubt,” I laugh, and clamber into the air duct. It’s a tight fit, but I’m scrappy. Mostly by design. “But I just can’t bring myself to leave the planet without seeing Luanda one last time.”

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Oncology is quiet and still, half-lit, when I get there. I’m not entirely sure if it’s night up on the surface and if that translates to night-cycle down in the colony, or if it’s just nap time. But there’s a long gallery with beds lining either side of the room, with drapes pulled around for privacy or pulled back for company or somewhere in between. No one speaks, few even watch me pass by.

I am uncomfortably aware of the sound my steps make: a series of half-stifled groans and grunts. Luckily I'm no longer trailing blood; that would be awkward.

Near the end of the gallery, framed by a broad window that looks out into the ice chamber of the colony, is a tall doctor, looking over charts. Their long features in face and frame are nicely complimented by their long white coat; their red hair, worn loose, adds a pleasant splash of color. No makeup at work, so the corresponding pop of red that must normally adorn those lips is absent. The cool spring green of their eyes is more than sufficient, however.

"Luanda," I say as I approach, attempting sultry and barely avoiding a wheezing croak.

The doctor takes me in with professional efficiency, brows knitting as they catalogue my obvious injuries. If only they knew the full report my nanites keep trying to tell me.

I remember my manners. "Doctor Luanda."

I can see them considering pushing me onto one of the empty beds. Sadly, not in a sexy way, but to diagnose me. There's no way I should be on my feet right now, medically speaking. But instead they only frown softly, and step aside. "She's over there," the doctor murmurs, gesturing to the last bed in the row, nearest the window.

The occupant in the bed is small, sheets spread out over her crisply like she was made into the bed rather than crawled into it. Most of her hair is electric blue, the roots a grey like steel wool, framed around a face that is wrinkled and worn and distressingly old. Her eyes snap open on my approach and fix on me.

I try and fail to smile. "Hi, Mom."

"The fuck are you here for?" she groans in resignation.

I find a chair set up against the wall and pull it over to sit down. "Family visits are proven to improve patients' prognosis. I think you did research on that once."

She rolled her eyes. "That was a different me. And my prognosis isn't going to improve. I'm dying."

"Like hell you are," I responded instantly. "Let's get you off this backwater and into proper medical facilities. It's just cancer, right?"

"It's still going to kill me," Mom insisted matter-of-factly. "I am an actual medical doctor, and you are not," she also said, without actually speaking the words. It's a trick that she's very good at.

"Then we back you up and download you into a new body," I suggested reasonably. "They can even do that here, you know. They've got the archival machines downstairs and stacks of standard clones just laying there, ready and waiting. Put you in a standard model for a few weeks while we force-grow a custom job for you. It'll be great."

She shook her head, taking her time with it, so it looked more like she was just listing left and right. "Not what I want."

"Then we can box you, alright?" I tried. "Just archive your consciousness and let this body go. I'll put you on a data stick and boot you up every few months, every few years. You can catch up on what's happened in the world, and... at some point, somewhere in the future, maybe you want to dump back into a body and walk around for a bit, yeah?"

"I'm dying. This is happening. I'm done."

"Okay, but that's just... that's not sane, mom." I turned around in my chair and flagged down the doctor. "Listen, can we— can I get my

mother archived, please? She has a terminal diagnosis, and I'm her next-of-kin, and..."

But the doctor was shaking their head. "I'm afraid only the patient can request archival."

"Yes, but she's going to die," I objected, as if the doctor was not aware of her own patient's prognosis. "And it's avoidable, which makes not doing it... that's suicide, and suicide is irrational. So she's irrational, can't make her own decisions, and so I—"

"Suicide is not designated as an irrational impulse on this planet," the doctor said, all soothing bedside manner bullshit. "That's not how it works here."

"Oh, right," I said, bobbing my head. I glanced up the ward, and seeing no other staff, pushed myself to my feet. Once I'd caught my breath, I admitted, "So I have no idea what would be an appropriate bribe here, but—"

"I beg your pardon!" they gasped, those green eyes flashing suddenly bright. "I am not going to archive my patients' consciousness against their will. Death is a protected right and an essential part of a medical code of ethics which I swore to uphold."

"This godsdamned backwater!" I shouted. Well. Shouted might be an overstatement, as my body was not capable of much volume. But I made my frustration clear. "They insist you work but they let you choose to die? Is a little consistency in how fucking medieval your ethics are just too much to ask?"

My mother laughed at me from her deathbed, a dry and brittle sound that came out of her body like it hurt. Each chuckle looked like it brought death a little closer. "Did you think I'd be so sloppy, Jacaréi?"

"It's just Jac these days, Mom," I sighed, sinking back into the chair.

"When I picked a planet to die on," my mother went on, "I made sure it wasn't some automatic archival utopian shithole. Someplace that wouldn't just back me up, neatly snip out the bits of personality that wanted to end this merry-go-round, and dump me back into a body. I'm tired of it, Jac. I've seen centuries. I'm ready to die."

"Nobody dies anymore, Mom."

She snorted at that. "Sorry your mother is so unfashionable."

"You're the last one, you know," I told her. "You're the last Luanda Triton fork. If you go, there's—" I slapped a hand up to my face to force my eyes not to dribble. It didn't work.

"Am I really?" Her voice was all light wonder, as if I'd shared with her some amusing fact about cats. "All my alternate versions, dead. Well. I guess that means I won, then."

"Mom, it's not a—" I started, stopped. I took a long breath and tried to ignore the agony it caused all down my midsection. The internal bleeding had long since been stitched up, but the nerve endings now cozying up with my nanites' protein sutures would be unhappy for a long time. "There's really no changing your mind, then?"

She gave me a pitying look. "You knew that before you came, honey." She watched me nod, and frowned, herself. "Why did you come?"

"So I could have this lovely conversation." Which was entirely true. "I had to at least try, Mom."

"Well that's sweet of you, Jac, but senseless," she told me, and took a moment to gather herself again. I could watch the color slowly drain from her face. Just talking was taking it out of her. Why would anyone willingly go through a process so uncomfortable as dying?

But of course there was my mother, first in line for it. “You could have just called. That would have been simpler. How’d you even get on the planet? Aren’t you on... lists?”

“Well, I didn’t exactly go through customs,” I said with a shrug.

Mom’s head lolled to the side as she squinted at me. “Are you on this planet to visit me, or as part of a job?”

“Of course I’m on this planet to visit you,” I insisted hotly. “There was a work thing on the same planet, so I requested the assignment. And that got me here, so.”

“You’re visiting your dying mother in the middle of an interstellar espionage operation?”

“I took time out of an interstellar espionage operation to visit my dying mother,” I corrected her. “I think it speaks to my devotion. Although I’m not going to be able to stay for much longer. I’m sure they’re searching the hospital by now.”

“You’re in trouble again.”

“I am not in trouble,” I insisted. “I am part of a respected organization that fights social hierarchies that cultivate and weaponize scarcity.”

Her smile was crooked, knowing, and a little sad. “That’s why you’re always in trouble.”

There was nothing to say to that, so I took her hand, which was thin and cold.

“They know you’re in the building?” she asked.

I nodded. “There’s a bounty on my head, but I’ve convinced them that I have intel that’s worth more than the bounty, so they’re quietly searching floor-by-floor. At least, that’s my best guess. The screens in here aren’t flashing my image any longer.”

“Oh yes, that was you earlier, wasn’t it?” she smiled, and coughed. “I didn’t recognize your new getup. It... wasn’t a very flattering picture.”

“They tell you too much symmetry looks weird,” I said, staring at her hand as I rubbed her fingers. “But then you can’t control every image capture that gets taken, so—”

“They didn’t get your best side.”

I put my other hand over hers, trying to force warmth into her. “They did not.”

“You’re backed up offworld, right?” she asked, the barest quaver of worry touching her voice.

“No,” I lied, with enough pomposity to my voice to indicate as much. “When they come beat down the door and shoot me dead, I’m going to die with you. What’s good for the goose is good for the gosling, right?”

She tossed my hands off of hers, or tried. She was so weak. “You’re going to mock my... existential decisions in the last moments of my life, are you?”

“I only assume you want to die as you lived.”

“I do want to die believing that you’re safe,” she answered, pulling her hand out of mine. “Or as safe as you ever are. It was very sweet of you to visit, Jac. But let’s not make one of my last memories you getting shot beside my deathbed.”

I squeezed her hand as it retreated and slowly stood up. “Well I don’t think they’d shoot me, they want what’s in my head. They’ll probably beat me with batons. They might even have the electrified kind, those are fun.”

She ignored me. “Goodbye, Jacaré. I love you.”

“I love you too, Mom.” I bent over and kissed her forehead, one last time.

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Charlie had liberated a flitter from a delivery fleet and was waiting for me at the extraction point. She raised an eyebrow as I clambered through to the back. “No bag? Is Jac Triton going home empty handed?”

I crouched behind a stack of boxes. “Flash the headlights, will you?”

She did so, looking disappointed. A broad-shouldered figure immediately peeled themselves out of a knot of people chatting down the alley and approached the flitter. “We got company,” Charlie reported. “Looks like a big standard model. You make a friend?”

“Almost literally,” I told her, and watched as the big clone climbed into the passenger side of the cabin. “How’d it go?”

“It was a lot easier with the soundproof case,” they replied, handing over a bulky crate. “In the future, we should refrain from losing half our kit in the first hour of an op.”

I cracked the seal on the box and from within came the warbling shriek of the bag we’d come here for. I slapped the lid closed again before it could make much of a racket.

“Don’t trust me?” the standard model grinned. “So how’s Mom?”

“Mom’s Mom,” I answered. “Mom’s gonna die.”

“What the hell?” Charlie finally interjected. “You had a sibling on-planet the whole time and didn’t mention it in the briefing?”

I set the soundproof crate on the floor and sat on it. “Naw. I had to stash the package and go to ground. I ducked into a hospital, archived myself, and dumped the archive into... well, this fine specimen of standard-issue clonery. They retrieved the package while I hung out upstairs with Mom.”

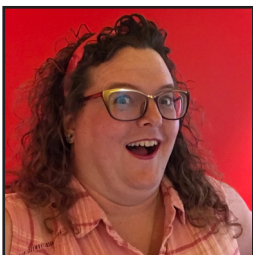
“Ta-da,” smiled my latest fork, wiggling jazz hands in the air. I recognized my own smirk of smug satisfaction, stretched out on a different, and incredibly bland, face. With a hand on the door latch, they turned to me and reported, “Everything went fine; nobody looked at me twice.”

I bobbed my head. “You wanna boost to orbit with us, we can splice memories back together?” I already knew the answer, but it was polite to ask.

They made a face. “Nah. Not enough divergence to care about, and it fucking hurts afterwards. Also: easier for two to get off planet than three. I’m gonna go reduce the number of Jacs in the universe by one.”

Charlie rolled her eyes. “Good luck with that. I’ve been watching you guys try and fail to get yourselves killed for decades.”

The standard model got out of the car and walked off into the colony. “Should be easy, this time,” I told Charlie. “Everybody on this planet wants me dead.”



Hi, my name is Miriam Roborn. I’m a white, queer, transgender creator of books and games and things. This short story was released through my Patreon at <http://patreon.com/miriamrobern>.

I make a bunch of stuff there: short stories like these, browser video games, even the odd tabletop game. All of it tends towards *queer* in every sense of the word. If you enjoyed this story and would like to see more, please consider becoming a patron so I can keep making stuff like this.

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