

Mia Molvray
© 2010

The Factory Moved to the Moon

Steve Tarrent haunted the lowermost tunnels of the lunar city. He didn't want to be there, but what else could he do? He'd done every bit of overtime the shrinks would allow. Night school was over. If he went back to his tiny cabin, all 1.5 by 2.3 meters of it, he'd go screaming purple berserk. Stir crazy they used to call it, but they didn't know how good they had it back then. They had real air. They had real light. Not this hell with LED paneling he wanted to smash.

He clasped his hands behind his back and plodded on. He'd filed the papers saying he did this for exercise and so far there hadn't been any questions from the counselors. Or the cops. But if he started smashing fixtures They wouldn't see it as a new form of exercise. He had to act normal. Very, very, very normal. He'd never get the promotion no matter how hard he worked or how many classes he took if he didn't look normal. It was his one ticket home. His only ticket home that didn't mean going back to the streets for himself and the fifteen relatives who depended on him. If he really was normal, he'd go back to his suffocating little cube of a cabin and sleep. But there was no point trying to sleep. He couldn't sleep. Work tomorrow was going to be hell.

Then, because he wasn't paying attention, things got worse. There was Henry Kennault shuffling across a hallway three or four intersections ahead. His hands were jammed in his pockets, his head was down. Steve stopped. Maybe he wouldn't notice him. Kennault was the last guy he wanted to talk to out of a whole city's worth of people, the guy who was always friendly, always full of goddamn good attitudes. The guy who was his only competition still in the running for the promotion.

Henry noticed Steve as soon as he stopped, of course. Henry glanced up and smiled and nodded.

Steve walked on over. What else could he do?

"Hi, Henry. Taking a walk?"

"Yeah." A resigned nod. "Getting away from people. You?"

The obvious question caught Steve stupidly off guard.

"I – ah, yeah, me too." Now he had an easy way out. "I guess since we're both trying to do the same thing, I'll head off this way."

"Oh, that's okay, Steve. You're a friend, and besides, this way you can tell me whether you've heard any scuttlebutt about the promotion."

We're both fighting for it, you crazy idiot! Steve wanted to shout. *Why would I tell you anything?*

"I mean, I know we're both in it together," Henry was saying, "but we're in it together, if you know what I mean. Without buddies, hell, you'd just die in this place."

"I haven't heard a thing, Henry. They're takin their sweet time." That was true, unfortunately.

"This waiting is the worst. Lucy's always asking me. She asked me again this morning. I keep telling her, she'll be the first to know."

"You were sayin the same thing a couple of days ago. How many of these family convos do you get?" Steve didn't get conversations with his wife. He didn't have a wife. He could call his grandmother once a month. When he was feeling really jumpy, like now, he worried that he wouldn't get the promotion, he wouldn't go back to Earth, because it was cheaper for the company to keep a single man on the Moon.

"It's been a week since I talked to her, Steve. It's been a week. A whole week."

It sounded like Henry might go on saying "week" until it was time for the next call. But before Steve could escape, or at least change the topic, Henry went on.

"We spent most of the time planning Mandy's birthday party. She's the youngest and cute as a button. It was nice of Summers to let me take my vacation a month early this year so I could be there for her."

Steve looked at the floor to hide the frown he felt. Was this a mark of favor? Or just routine?

"I even paid for a printout of the latest picture Lucy made special for me." He pulled a small photo out of his pocket –.

"Uh, Henry, I gotta –." But there was no way not to look. He didn't want to see the guy's children.

All three were standing on a path leading to a block of flats, looking straight at the camera. His wife looked bright and cheerful and brave; the older girl stared like she was going to teleport straight through the electronics; and the youngest, grinned like the four-year-old she was. She had large, dark, laughing eyes.

Steve said, "Yeah. Cute. Real cute." He had to say something. He also had to get out of there. There didn't seem to be any air.

"Look, I gotta head this way, Henry. See ya tomorrow."

"Sure. See ya, Steve." Henry was looking at the photo and didn't see anything wrong.

Steve knew he was walking away too fast. He knew it looked bad. It also

meant he reached the elevators for the upper levels long before he was ready for them. There was still no point trying to sleep, certainly not after that. Why did that goofy guy have to make it so hard? Why couldn't he keep his goddamn happy family to himself?

After that, only one thing would really be any use. He'd go look at home. It was going to make him feel even worse – it always did – but at least he felt something. Those were the only times when he did.

He suited up. He waited in the airlock. He went out.

At last he wasn't inside something. The world opened out. Grey dust underfoot rolled on to black, knife-edged mountains. He moved his head back, forcing the whole clumsy suit to move with him, and stared at the inky sky filled to his left with one blazing star, gradually changing to his right into thousands of more distant suns. It was always night here, even when the sun was there, because the sky was always black. In the whole colorless universe only the blue and white crescent Earth shone at him like hope itself.

He sat down in the grimy moon dust, his metal arms stretched out resting across his metal knees, and stared at home which hung there in space. As if clouds called up water by sympathetic magic, Steve felt his eyes fill with tears. The clouds swirled so far away, so small, so perfect. He worked with water all day, but he never wept except out here where his mind flew and his body could not follow. Very inconvenient tears they were, too. Out here he was in a suit and the nose wipers in the helmets were useless for more than the occasional drip. Suit designers obviously never cried.

Time passed. The sun didn't move, but the Earth turned. Maybe he'd be able to sleep for a couple of hours now. But after he walked back, and waited for the airlock, and cycled on through, and took his suit off, and started to file his raddisk – his heart sank. The thing was white. Pure white. He'd lost track of time out there and gotten too much radiation. When the insurance company read that monitor disk, his rates would go up for months.

He couldn't stand it. He worked way too hard as it was. His family needed the money, not the goddamn insurance –.

The airlock's control panel indicated someone else was coming in. It turned out to be a boisterous crew of six techs and astronomers returning from two days maintaining the Large Array telescopes on the far side, all trying to sign in and unsuit and file their raddisks at once. There was barely room for everyone in the tiny suit room.

Good.

He pretended to lose his balance, grabbed wildly, swept raddisks out of their box and jammed them all, including his white one, down the recycler chute. His other hand knocked the box itself to the floor. There was a blizzard of dozens of light gray circles everywhere. Everybody scrambled to recover them. Steve jumped up from where he fell and scrambled, too.

When everyone stood back up, he stopped breathing for a second.

The girl he'd bumped into as he flailed around was Zoe. Zoe with the skin like

polished copper and the gleaming long black hair. In the slum he came from, he'd never get within miles of the likes of her, but on the Moon, even in the biggest city on the Moon, everybody lived at closer quarters. So he really had bumped into her. He tried to breathe again. He tried to apologize for his clumsiness.

She was saying, "No problem" with a friendly smile as if she'd known him since grade school. He felt even dumber. She was so unworried, so at ease, so unlike him. So well-spoken, well-educated, rich, young, ... so everything.

The crew was all going to dinner together, now that they were what they called "home." They told him to come too, so he did. Who needed sleep? Sleep when you're dead.

He managed to sit next to Zoe when they reached the cafeteria. Steve was twenty six and he wasn't used to feeling old.

"Being out's my favorite thing!" she was saying. "Do you work outside?"

"No," he said. He had to find something to say. He had to find something quick, before she started talking to someone else. "Not usually."

"So how come you were out?"

A good question. He could've cried in his cabin just as privately.

He had to say something.

"My name's Steve Tarrent, by the way."

"Zoe Trinner." She shook his hand with a smile.

She was even more gorgeous when she smiled.

"So what were you doing outside?" she persisted.

"Oh, just looking at the view," he mumbled. He'd slept about four hours in the last forty eight, he was too tired, and he felt about a million years old. He didn't have it in him to come up with good lines.

"I *thought* you were an Outsider! I go out for fun, too, every chance I get. Although it's really weird how Earth is upside down. It just never feels right."

"Fun?" he said slowly, thinking of the sight of home like a corkscrew to his heart. "I don't know about that. Crying's messy in a suit."

Dear God. He hadn't really said that, had he? Not out loud. He was way too tired.

She stared at him. He could have worked for weeks and not come up with anything that made her take so much interest in him. Of course, he'd been hoping for admiring interest. Not this.

"So what makes you want to cry?" she asked the inevitable question.

What didn't? His mother's unmarked grave. The way he could never make enough money for his grandmother to get a new set of teeth, instead of giving it to some relative who needed it more. This tin can he lived in, full of pre-mixed air. He didn't know how to answer her.

"Last time it was the clouds," he mumbled.

There was a silence. Then she said definitely, as if she'd solved a problem,

"You look real serious. I bet you work too hard."

Carefully he studied the far wall of the cafeteria, his face expressionless. *Of course. He worked too hard. It might be a good idea to pop down to Earth for a little*

vacation.

“What?” he said, his reflexes doing what they could for him, “You have some ideas on a good way to relax?”

Then he cursed himself. Was he crazy? She must have barely started college. He’d barely said hello to her.

“Absolutely,” she nodded. “You should try yoga. It’s really wonderful, and it’s much easier in lunar gravity than Earth’s.”

Yoga. Yeah. Right. For a moment she didn’t look young and beautiful. Just very young.

“Well, you sure are the strong silent type,” she said as he continued to stare at the wall.

“No,” he mumbled. He had to say something. He had to be polite. “Not so much. I, actually – . I, uh, work, and go to night school. How about you?”

“I’m doing this internship in astronomy because I’m really hoping to get into the honors program at Moon U.”

Nobody called it The Lunar University of Arts and Sciences. He didn’t know much about how college worked, but ... the honors program?

“Isn’t the honors program for kind of advanced students? How –, how old are you?”

“Eighteen, but I got early admission and now I’m angling my hardest to get third-year standing so I can get a dorm room. Living at home when you’re not a kid anymore really sucks.”

And then, when you grow old enough to be younger than that, you’d give anything to go home again.

“But somebody does your laundry,” he said, trying the stock response.

“Hey. This is the Moon. They’re not going to be far away. I’ll get the housekeeper to come pick it up at my dorm.”

She was grinning, as if it was a big joke. *The housekeeper.* It had been obvious even across the room that she was rich, but he hadn’t known she was so far out of his league. If he annoyed the kind of parents she must have, he’d probably get fired.

“So you work, you study, and the rest of the time you’re out looking at the view,” she was saying. “I wish I could do that instead of being cooped up in a window room. How do you keep from maxing out your radiation?”

“I use the observation lounge when I’m maxed out,” he said. He hated it. It was always full to bursting, and nobody was ever quiet. It was almost easier not to see Earth than to see it with somebody dribbling cheese crackers down the back of his neck.

She seemed to think so too.

“Ewww. The lounge is awful and it smells. Why don’t you use a window room?”

Steve looked at her. Apparently, she needed to have it explained to her that some people didn’t have window rooms. Should he tell her that he was lucky because unlike the lineworkers who lived in dorms, he actually had a berth to

himself? The words stuck in his throat, squeezed by the bitterness of being an arm's length away from someone with no problems in her life.

"I don't have a window room," he said.

"So go to a friend's."

A few seconds trickled by.

"I don't have any friends with window rooms."

"Well, you do now," she said very definitely. "You come right over whenever you feel like it and use ours. Us Outsiders have to stick together."

Steve felt his breath stop, again. Then he exhaled slowly and carefully. Did she like his looks, or something? Did she think being poor was exotic? Did he care? What would her parents say when she dragged in some peon and laid him on the mat?

"Uh, Zoe, that's, uh, very kind of you. Maybe you should ask your parents —"

"My *parents*? You're *my* guest."

Great. He could either piss her off or piss her parents off. And yet —, and yet, she was trying to be nice, in her own way. She was just so young. And so rich. What did she know?

"Zoe.... Look.... I don't know how to say this exactly, but, uh, I —, I mean, your parents don't know me, and my whole family depends on me, and I —, I —." He sputtered and stopped. He could see she had no idea what he meant.

"How much family have you got?" she asked, missing the point as he'd known she would.

"My grandmother, five brothers and sisters and two of them have families, two uncles, an aunt, three cousins, —"

"Oh. You don't mean your own family. Well, you just tell me when you want to come over, and I'll introduce you."

"Uh, thanks," he said. "Thanks."

"*Not his own family*?" *Whose were they then?* The whole thing was like a dream. Not a daytime one, but a real one full of people he didn't and couldn't know.

- + -

Steve sleepwalked through work the next day. He'd known it would be hell. It wasn't the first time he'd done his job on no sleep. He needed every brain cell that still worked to be on task, but most of them did nothing but repeat: One mistake, no promotion. One *big* mistake, no job. He forced himself into a tunnel vision of the mind. *Do only one thing at a time. Check it first. Check it later. Then check it again.* He and Kennault had to go out to one of the automated water mining stations. They had a small truck's worth of equipment to re-machine a part for which there was no replacement on hand. The stress tests said a water pipe regulator valve was going to leak. That would not be

good. Not in the hard vacuum out on the surface. They'd be suited up, handling precision drills with hands made of metal sausages. And he, Steve, was sleepwalking very carefully through one thing at a time. Henry better be in better shape.

Hours later, Henry stopped the rover. Steve tried to get back to what passed for wakefulness. He'd taken his last joe-pill half an hour ago. One more, just one more in the next 24 hours, and some shrink would want to know why. They started dealing with the housing over the regulator, every bolt and bit slippery with moon dust. Hours after that, they were still bent over the regulator, trying to force it to cooperate. Like all machinery, it had a critical need detector which went off the minute it saw Steve's frame of mind. It kept finding new ways to frustrate all their efforts to fix it. Steve stood up for a minute to stretch the kinks out of his shoulders.

There was a strange, faint blurriness over Henry's back. Steve stared at it. Right near the suit at the waist joint when Henry moved there was a hairline wisp of escaping gases. The blur was moisture, he knew that. But the leak had to be corrosive oxygen from the feed line that passed through the suit near there. Those were always the first lines to leak. The gas vaporized immediately into nothing at all. It was a slow leak, too slow for Henry's suit to realize it wasn't normal, and Henry was too busy working to look at his readouts.

His body wouldn't tell him much about losing oxygen. The feeling of suffocation came from too much carbon dioxide, and that wasn't Henry's problem. He'd notice he couldn't think too clearly, and then he'd pass out. Steve wondered how much time he had.

All Steve had to do was say nothing until it was too late.

Are you insane? half of him shouted. *You're going to murder a guy for a promotion?*

It's not murder, the other half muttered. *And, yes, I am insane. But I'll be insane on Earth.*

You can't do that!

Just watch me.

He tried to pretend to work on the regulator, so as not to draw attention to anything else, but now he was completely useless. His last remaining brain cells were busy yelling at each other and there were none left for work at all.

All he had to do was say nothing. *How long would it take?* He better be ready to switch the main shut-off valve in case Kennault keeled over at a bad time.

You can't do this!

It wasn't as hard to say nothing as it might have been because Steve couldn't see the man. It was just a bunch of jointed metal with a black, glassy, reflecting globe on top, moving slowly, tightening things. Then it would stop moving. Then Steve would call for help. Then, much later, there'd be a chaplain walking up that path in the photograph he'd seen. Then . . .

The thin wisp of gases kept vaporizing out of the suit.

Then . . . Steve's fingers moved to push the radio button in his suit.

You idiot! This is your only chance!

But apparently the first voice had been right. He couldn't do this. Not now that he'd thought about that path. And the woman and the girl and the four year-old at the end of it. His fingers moved in their own time and did their own thing. His voice joined them.

"Henry, your suit's leaking at the back waist joint. If you straighten up, that may slow it down. I'll call for rescue."

"What? Huh? What? Oh-h, *shit.*"

And so on. Steve knew what Henry was going to say before he said it. He knew what the dispatcher was going to say. He knew what he was going to answer. The movie rolled on while the voice in his head beat on the wall that kept it in and screamed *You idiot!*

Was he? Maybe he was. Was that better than being a killer? He wasn't sure right now. It was his own fault that Henry would be flying back while he got to drive the rover all the way to the city by himself.

- + -

Steve didn't remember much of the trip back, or reaching his cabin, or falling into his bunk and passing out. He did know that his alarm was already howling for him to go to work. He swore at it, threw some water on his head, and stumbled off to his job. This was going to be his life from now on.

The worst part? It was his own fault. That thought kept pounding him every time somebody did something annoying, which was all the time. A lineworker forgot to fill out a maintenance log. Steve practically had to sit on his hands not to beat the guy up. *I coulda not been here, listening to your stupid-ass excuses.* The gal down in Inventory didn't have the part he'd ordered two months ago. *If I wasn't an idiot, I'd never have to hear you chew gum over the intercom again.* The boss told him to bring in some official paper archive records. *That's the file clerk's job! It's not my goddamn job just because I was in the room. None of this would be my goddamn job if—!*

Wait a minute. Only major contracts had physical paper copies. The only paper-type contracts in the office right now were his job, Kennault's job, and the promotion. If the boss had to initial something, the decision was made. She was sitting there, looking like a stuffed owl, when she knew.

Quit playin your bleedin games and just say it!

He bit down on his tongue with a split second to spare.

"Yes, Ms. Summers," he said, and went to get the papers.

He returned, he handed them over, and went on with his job. It was not the sort of job where you could be absentminded. That was okay. But what was he going to do when he walked back to his closet and saw the green blinking light demanding a thumbprint for a Class One confidential message? He was in no

shape to hear he'd been sentenced without parole. He might snap. He couldn't risk that.

When he felt this way he went out on the surface until he could stand his life again, but that wasn't an option now. He wouldn't get a new raddisk until they were done investigating the missing one, and if he tried using the work disk for his own time, there could be hell to pay. The only alternative was the observation lounge No. He really would kill somebody if that was the only way he could see the sky.

There was one other alternative. He could send a message to Zoe.

- + -

Steve stood in his work clothes on the carpeted, uppermost level of the city outside a polished door. He really should have changed, but there was no way he could have gone into his cabin and faced that message light. Hell, he couldn't even stand to think about it. He'd done this fool thing instead, and now he felt like a monkeywrench among the salad forks. A grubby monkeywrench. He wondered how long it would take the security guards to pick him up for loitering up here. He forced himself to push the buzzer. He should have looked these people up, now that he knew Zoe's last name, but he'd been too busy trying not to think about it.

He'd wondered whether Zoe would open the door, in which case he should look pleasant, or her parents, in which case he should arrange his face in some respectful way. But he'd forgotten who these people were. They didn't open doors. The personnel did that.

He was shown into a sitting room. His cabin would have fitted inside about ten times over. He hadn't done more than notice the leather furniture when Zoe came in.

"Hi! I'm glad you didn't wait too long to come because the window was just resurfaced last week, so it's really clear right now."

"Last week? Nice. That'll be nice. The one in the lounge looks like it has cataracts by now from all the UV."

"Yeah, they deal with it once a decade whether they need to or not." She rolled her eyes.

A woman who had to be her mother came in. She was dressed much like the maid who'd opened the door, but she was looking at him as if she was measuring him for something.

Steve stood up. His mother had tried to teach him manners, long ago, but maybe they weren't the right manners for here. Maybe the woman was measuring how much his overalls didn't fit.

Then a man came in, dressed in rumpled baggy clothes such as only one of the owners could have worn.

“Meet Steve,” said Zoe. “This is my mom and dad.” As an afterthought, she added, “Laelia and Max.”

How did you tell an eighteen year-old that they weren’t all on a first name basis? He said he was very pleased to meet them. He shook their hands. Everybody sat down. He obviously wasn’t going to the window room yet. They must not be done measuring him.

“Zoe said you work in hydro?” asked the woman.

“Uh, yes.” He almost said “ma’am.” “McKenzie Hydro. I trained as a tool- and die-maker, but here most of what I do is make sure nothing leaks.”

“McKenzie? That’s one of our subsidiaries.”

“Mom runs Everest Maglaunchers,” Zoe piped up.

“Just the loony office, pumpkin,” said her mother with a fond smile. It was gone by the time she looked back to Steve.

By then he realized he’d heard of her. Laelia Singh. CEO, Lunar Division, Everest Consolidated Interplanetary Freight Launch Services and Consulting. She was his boss so many levels up he’d hardly been aware she really existed.

“Ah,” he managed to say.

There was a bit of a lull. Was it up to him to say something bright? He was staring at the polished black glass surface of the coffee table. Was everyone looking at him? He did what he could.

“Uh, Zoe mentioned an interest in astronomy. Is that from the business connection?”

“No,” said her father. “That’s my fault. I teach physics at Moon U. and I’ve been talking physics at her since before her first words. She talks back, too. Recently, that is.”

Another fond smile.

Steve realized he’d only been guessing before. Now he knew in his bones that he’d be nothing but a grease spot if he merely coughed the wrong way near their daughter.

“Hey, you can’t take all the credit, honey,” her mother was protesting. “What about the trip out to Titan?”

He’d given them something to talk about. That was good, because he had nothing. Nothing at all. His brain seemed to be freezing up from the leather upholstery and the butler bringing in some kind of drinks and cookies.

They were talking about the places Zoe had been. Then the father had to go and ask him whether he happened to know the little observatory right at the main spaceport on Mars.

“Uh, no. No I don’t. I’ve never been to Mars.”

He managed not to say *No, sir*. He managed not to say *I’ve never been anywhere except here and New Iberia*. His mother and grandmother had worked themselves to the bone, sending him to vocational school. He wasn’t going to apologize for himself to anybody. But it was amazing how much effort it took.

“Well, Steve didn’t come here to talk to you guys,” Zoe announced. “Take your drink, and anything you might want to eat, and let’s go see the view.”

They went. Steve was exhausted. But one look at Earth through the enormous clear window wall made him forget that. He'd never seen it like this. It was so clear he ought to be able to reach out and touch it. There were no scratches on any helmet visor. No clicks or gurgles or hums from any suit in which he could barely move. Just him and home, pulling at him so much he felt pain in his chest.

He always felt that pain. He knew what came next. He couldn't cry here, for God's sake. Zoe was standing there, looking at him.

Well, no, he could tell she was looking at the view, but it came to the same thing. It was another thing he'd forgotten to think about. This was worse than the observation lounge. He could do whatever he wanted there. He could probably die there, and nobody would notice for hours.

He stopped looking at anything. He fought down the pain. He tried to make polite conversation. Zoe was bubbling over about the view. She was pointing out a new hurricane in the Southern Ocean. She could just sit here and watch it forever. He should come over whenever he wanted. It was fun to have someone to share it with.

It was like having a friendly puppy jumping up to get him to play ball. She made him feel like somebody's grandfather. Had he ever been that young? Probably not. He'd never been that rich.

"Next time we'll set the telescope up," she was saying. "With some digital zoom you can even see big monuments, like the Eiffel Tower."

"What kind of scope is it?" he asked.

"Thirty centimeter refractor. I got it for my last birthday after I'd pestered my parents for years."

"I had a refractor when I was a kid. I'd track the work they were doing on the moon, like building the helium factory in the Apennine range. Never thought I'd end up here."

"Wow. How'd you get your parents to give you one? Mine kept saying I wouldn't take care of it right till I was older."

"Oh, nobody gave it to me. I made it. It was just a little one. Ten centimeters."

"You – you *made* a refractor? When you were a *kid*? How old were you?"

"Eleven."

She stared at him with as much admiring interest as he could have hoped.

"I think that's when my mother decided she was going to keep me in school as long as she could make me stay." He shifted his gaze to the jewel crescent of Earth, bigger today. "But only my Gran saw me graduate."

"Wow," he heard her say, quietly. This time she didn't tell him he worked too hard.

He hiked back to his tiny cabin, and he wondered what his life could be like if he actually did get it together with her. He always worked. She played. They might be good for each other. He smiled thinly to himself. More likely, she'd play with him. That'd be fun for a while. Then it would turn out that he was a million years old and she was a kid, and he'd get crucified by her mother. But so what? All they could do was fire him and send him back to Earth. Wasn't that where he wanted to be?

Then it wouldn't matter what the big, official, confidential message said. He stopped for a second before letting the door read his face to let him in. It didn't matter how many times he told himself he knew it was going to be bad news. He didn't know. That meant he hoped. If only there was some way to kill the hope, then he wouldn't be standing here, sick about what was going to happen when it died.

The only good thing was he'd spent the last half hour with a totally new set of problems. The sight of home hadn't brought him relief this time, but at least his burdens had shifted to a different set of muscles. It helped somehow. Now, bad news felt like it would crush him instead of snap him. He wouldn't do anything if he was crushed. Crushed was safe.

The door to his cabin opened. The computer read his palmprint. The message came up. Hope beat in his throat.

He had to read the message twice before it sank in.

They were giving him the job. Him. Not Kennault. Him.

He sat on his narrow bunk. This was what he'd worked for. All that overtime, all that night school, it had all finally paid off. He could go home. He could really live there, not just scrape by on the wrong side of the tracks. He'd arrived. He'd never needed to come within minutes of murdering somebody.

The last thought spread through his first reaction like frost. He hadn't dwelt on it since it happened. There hadn't been time. But whenever there was time.... He could work himself to death, and there would always be time to remember that.

He was a murderer.

He knew that now. It was a high price to pay for a ticket home.

Bullshit. You didn't do it. And even if you had, it's not murder if somebody else is too stupid to check his suit. You pressure-checked your suit, and you were sleepwalking.

But a much larger voice, one that filled his whole skull and echoed around the world answered back: **BULLSHIT.**

He had to get busy. He had to learn not to think about it. There were a million things to do before he left. The company had him flying out tomorrow. It wasn't like anyone on the Moon needed a lot of time to pack. Well, somebody like Zoe might.

Zoe. Oh, come on, he told himself. It was totally pointless to think about her. On Earth there were real women, not just dreams who would turn into nightmares.

He wondered what would happen if he ever did find the time and the woman to actually get married and have a family. Would he tell her who he was? Would he tell his children? Would he live his entire life hiding himself from everyone? Hiding himself from himself?

He clenched his jaw and started going through the forms he had to fill out to make his acceptance of the job official.

- + -

He stood in the spaceport departure lounge. A bunch of co-workers were there to see him off. Everyone was supposed to be there about an hour early for what was billed as a going away “party.” His boss had even come out, looking like an owl, which she always did, but a relaxed owl, an owl who wasn’t expecting a report yesterday. His co-workers had made him a card and bought him a funny hat. He knew he should put it on and clown around, but he couldn’t. It would have been easier to click his heels together and teleport to Earth.

The spaceport was on a high platform. The rough uneven dust piled onto the lunar city was spread out below, with here and there the reflections of a few windows poking up. He looked away to stop thinking about the windows.

Henry was there, of course. Being nice about things, naturally. Congratulating Steve. Shaking Steve’s hand. Saying he was jealous with a big smile and red-rimmed eyes. He looked like he’d caught Steve’s sleeplessness. It wasn’t hard to imagine his latest call home. It wasn’t hard to see that he’d never live with his wife and children until everyone was too old to care.

Steve felt like a piece of shit. He hadn’t even murdered the man. He wondered whether he could feel worse if he had. There was an old saying that when the gods want to punish you, they give you what you want.

God damn it, he’d done everything he was supposed to do. Studied, worked without end. There was supposed to be a pay-off for that, a reward. There’d been some false advertising somewhere if all he got was his very own berth in hell.

Maybe he should try something different. Go right off the rails.

He walked over to his boss.

“Could I speak to you for a moment?”

She nodded, surprised.

“Over there, maybe? A bit more private?”

Another nod, more surprised.

“What was the main thing that made the company decide to give me this promotion, rather than someone else?”

The boss’s eyebrows went further up.

“It was many synergistic factors, Mr. Tarrent. The Board felt that your

dedication was particularly exceptional. That was perhaps the main thing that gave you the edge.”

“So it wasn’t any question about Henry Kennault’s competence?”

“Well, really, Mr. Tarrent, I’m not at liberty to discuss other applicants.”

“Ms. Summers, we both know Henry was the only other contender toward the end. There’s not much time. If the company doesn’t have any issues with Kennault doing that job, and if it doesn’t change my chances for future promotions, I’d like you to give it to him. If we act now, he could take my seat on the ship under an emergency order and it would all be much simpler.”

The boss’s eyebrows climbed even higher and stayed there.

“But – why, Mr. Tarrent? You gave everyone the impression you very much wanted the added responsibilities, even though the salary is slightly lower since the work is on Earth.”

“Oh, I do. No question about that. But, well, it’s that Henry has a wife and two children. That’s all.”

The boss studied him. For a moment she looked like someone’s mother rather than her usual owlish self.

“I’ll remember this,” she said. “That’s extraordinarily generous of you.”

“Oh, no,” he mumbled. “Not really.” She obviously thought he was being modest.

Things were a bit confused for a while after that. There was the dumbstruck silence, the frantic race for Henry to pack what he could, Steve’s promise that he’d send on the rest, and the sudden departure.

It was done.

Steve took a deep breath. The air was pre-mixed and smelled faintly of dust from having been through the filters hundreds of times. But what the hell. It did the job. That was all that really mattered. The LED panels weren’t daylight, no matter how daylight balanced they were, but they lit things up. They did the job. Even the observation lounge, it might not be the ideal ... no, that was one step too far. It was pure goofiness to expect that dump to be good for anything. But he did have a friend with a window room these days. Who needed observation lounges?

He waved goodbye to his coworkers and set off toward his cabin. He’d be back at work tomorrow, but right now he was going ... home.

+ + +

