

MAUSOLEUM

JAMES LOVETT

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DEATH

All vessels have a purpose. The small agile star screamers, often docked at the recreational piers in Saturn's rings, are meant to race and spin alongside streaming comets. The bulbous cloud divers of the Kareton Foundation live a life floating through the dense fogs of gas giants, harvesting vapors in their funnel nettings to fuel the inner ring. And the wickedly toothed hulls of the Martian Wasp-class evaporate pirates in a swarm of kinetic and laser light.

The purpose of the Morana was to crash. To describe her in any way as elegant would have been categorically inaccurate. A cinder block with engines was more apt. She was a mammoth of a vessel. Her titan-tinted hull often cast a clumsy shadow over the rest of the ships in whatever docking bay she found herself. Her rectangular compartments, erratically welded to the least aerodynamic areas of her frame, were sharply sloped, like the armor of a tank. This was true right down to the cockpit viewport; a line of glass sat distinctly inwards behind a set of sloping panels.

It was enough to let the pilot see what was directly in front of them but far enough back so that this wonderfully limited perspective would not be interrupted in the event of a sudden head-on collision.

Given its sporadic boxed shape, one might assume that the Morana was a cargo vessel; all her compartments must have hidden a treasure trove of trade and a smugglers' sandbox of hidden hatches. This was not so, for again, the purpose of the Morana was neither to carry nor to freight. It was to crash. The boxy compartments with which she so rudely littered skyward vistas were not compartments at all. In fact, should an errant marauder, hungry for plunder, happen to float with their breaching tools towards the Morana's exterior, there was a decent chance they would drill with their plasma torch for several days only to find themselves in a dark hole of their own making halfway through the ship. You see, when your purpose is to crash you do not carry luggage. You simply put on the thickest padding possible and trudge on. Such were the rectangular buffers of the Morana, titanium guards denser than a lake of mercury.

An engineer may approach the Morana and ask a simple question. Why be so sturdy? If her purpose is to crash, surely it would be more economical and safer for the crew if the exterior of the Morana were built in such a way as to crumple upon impact. A foolish inquiry indeed, for this is the mindset one takes *in case* of a crash when one's goal for a collision is to have the occupants walk away and the vessel towed to Pluto to be repaired or scrapped. But one's purpose could not be to crash if it were only to do so once. No, the Morana was meant to crash, shunt back up into the sky, and

crash again, over, and over, with minor regard for the whiplash of those at the wheel.

When faced with such a reality of purpose, such maniacal destiny, the befuddled engineer has but one question left to ask: Who in their right mind would ever want or need to fly such a grotesque vessel? A fair question.

The Morana has neither the space for a cargo hauler nor the armament for a military vessel. She has neither the speed nor grace of a racer nor the thrust to be a mooring vessel. She has no external apparatus to attach drilling equipment and houses no strong external radar for mineral surveys. Again, we must wholly observe that every ship has a purpose, and the purpose of the Morana is to crash. An observation that spelled home sweet home for the scientists of the Jupiter Moon Hazardous Exploration Team.

The members of the JMHT all had two things in common: a curiosity for the unknown and an incredibly volatile insurance package. The director of this intrepid science team was Erika Sauer, Ph.D. in Astrophysics. Dr. Sauer was, by all external accounts, articles, dossiers, depositions, notes, and newspaper clippings, of a rather cold disposition. An interview published in *Starborne Press* recounted a personal touch akin to the sternness of space itself, perhaps perfect for one longing to sail across the wake of the darkest of stars. But to the small crew of the Morana, she wasn't cold. She was calculated. She wasn't short. She was succinct. And she wasn't frustrated or irritated, merely tired and restless in her older age. To some degree, she was less a captain and more an elderly mother, caring for her family aboard their rickety home.

In her decade of adventures aboard the *Morana*, Dr. Sauer had seen a great many things of scientific and exploratory intrigue and suffered an almost equal number of injuries. She had broken her arm in two places when they had discovered the bioluminescent Cairn Moth of Triton. When examining the velocity of thermal gales on Io, she was knocked unconscious by a torn compartment in the ship's bulkhead. And she had suffered permanent lung damage after a broken respirator left her vulnerable to vapor pockets on Narvi. Ironically, it made justifying smoking all the easier for her.

Through a marathon of determined pestering long ago, she had managed to drag her good friend Josif Risch aboard her vessel. Risch was more than just a trusted friend to spend time in the verse with. He had medical training, although his credentials changed depending on who asked. Despite settling in as the *Morana's* physician, one could have mistaken Risch for a mechanic or diagnostician for how much he looked after the ship's internal systems. He cared deeply for his floating home despite insulting it at every opportunity. In fact, on paper, Risch was co-owner of the *Morana* and, according to the stipulations of their ongoing research grant, the beneficiary of the flying rock should something more permanent ever occur to dear Dr. Sauer. This arrangement was maintained upon every review cycle despite Risch's medical file being twice as large as Dr. Sauer's.

When Risch wasn't probing either the decks or crew for malfunctions, he was often busy filling in forms and claims for the hodgepodge of insurance companies that, in one way

or another, always proved the same thing to the crew of the Morana: worthless. But, despite the universally acknowledged futility of reporting any injuries or ailments in hopes of a paltry sum, Risch always cataloged every relevant wound, bruise, cut, gouge, and graze with the greatest of detail. Each year, every file grew larger and larger, with the strange exception of one crew member, Lance Dyer. It is not inherently odd to have one crewmate with such a near-immaculate record of health as Lance's, but it is rather miraculous when said file belongs to the crew's security specialist.

Lance Dyer was among the youngest individuals of the crew, second only to one. He was a good shot with a rifle relative to the rest of the crew. He was strong relative to the rest of the crew. And he was always quite careful...relative to the rest of the crew. In truth, the benchmarks by which Lance's performance aboard the Morana was measured were, in a word, nebulous, and the cleanliness of his medical record compared to the rest of the Morana's crew meant he was either incredible in his position or positively abysmal. Hard to say, but at least nobody had died under his watch.

His youthful and spry nature often gave way to a level of curiosity uncharacteristic of the typical security personnel. It was clear that the emblematic pride of the stoic marksmen was a distant pursuit in the back of Lance's mind. Had it *ever* resided there prior, it had been fully evicted by the infectious curiosities of his found family. As such, Lance's rifle was more often holstered than not as he made the conscious effort to offer assistance whenever needed and peek over shoulders whenever it wasn't. His skill

set had become a vibrantly shallow lake among incredibly deep puddles. He couldn't identify toxic plants by the veins in a leaf's petal pattern, but he was happy to take a guess. He didn't know how to properly divert power to thrusters, but he was happy to keep the wheel steady while someone else did. He wasn't sure what part of the hover rover's engine was busted, but he was enthusiastic to hold the flashlight while someone discovered it.

However, the one set of practices even Lance was hesitant to partake in was that of the ship's youngest member, geologist Michelle Graves. Michelle was raised on a less-than-healthy mixture of skepticism, spirituality, and all-around social depravity, resulting in the most cognitively dissonant individual one may have the opportunity to meet. Michelle was anxiety personified, with a haywire social battery and a capricious memory that never knew what information should stay or go. But she could always find a way to stay concentrated and keep her head on the ground. That is, by keeping the ground in her head. That is to say...Michelle ate dirt. Well, not just dirt. Rocks, crystals, unwashed roots. If it came from the ground and wasn't immediately identifiable as toxic, Michelle would happily have a tasting. She ate food, mind you, like the rest of the crew. Her consumption of earthly materials was merely one of unorthodox science, or so she repeatedly insisted.

Michelle believed that tasting the most basic ingredients of a planet gave her some form of heightened understanding of its nature. Whether or not she could discern a planet's geological ages by digging into a five-tiered slice of its crust was, as of yet, undetermined. But what was certain was her

knack for identifying pockets of moisture and the approximate locations of underground caverns based simply on the taste and chew of a sample of soil. Despite this most peculiar of scientific practices, the true surprise of it all was the enduringly impeccable appearance of Ms. Graves's teeth.

And what ship would be complete without the local engine gremlin crawling around, making unsettling noises in the vents? The beloved grease monkey, the mutated pneumatics expert, the Quasimodo of the boiler room. One could claim the *Morana* hosted all of these and more thanks to the hunched figure of the elderly zoologist Samuel Alden. Granted, the hunch was not a defect of any kind, merely the slouch of a sad, old curmudgeon since his wife was dead. And, of course, the ghoulish sounds in the vents were just him occasionally crying because his wife was dead. It was true that he supplied the engine with the aforementioned monikers typically given to the ship's engineer, but not directly. In fact, it is of some concern whether Samuel can even hold a wrench steadily for more than a minute. Instead, the engine room had become a well-heated menagerie for the ancient ecologist. There was indeed a grease monkey, but it was just a monkey typically covered in grease. The mutated pneumatics expert was a surprisingly rigid serpentine creature that moved more akin to a piston instead of slithering. And the Quasimodo of the boiler room, well, nobody was quite sure what it was and frankly preferred it be covered up in the corner should they ever come down for a visit. All in all, while the engine room was cluttered with anatomical sketches and behavioral analysis handwritten and taped across the walls, it was unclear to the crew

whether the continued “adoption” of such creatures was indeed for science or simply because poor Samuel was lonely...because his wife was dead.

But they were a fine crew indeed, with a corporate emphasis on the word *fine*. They were hard workers, unique thinkers, and loyally underpaid scholars. A scientific hive mind formed by years sailing amongst the dangers of the universe together, which craved but one thing more than anything else: vacation time. And while JMHT vacation time was rarely approved, it was more than often taken. After all, when you set a precedent for investigating weather anomalies that often result in radio dead zones, who’s to say you’re not still on the job? Surely, you wouldn’t be just floating through space refusing to answer the comms. No, of course, you wouldn’t. But the JMHT certainly would.

And what a relaxing vacation the darkness of space could be. Planets were work for the JMHT. They’d seen too much to set foot comfortably into the seas of “paradise” worlds. Breaths of fresh air were more anxiety-inducing than anything due to acquired habits of scrambling for rebreather helmets. And as for the people, well, people were tedious. The public was always fascinated by the crew’s exploits. They always yearned to hear more about their adventures when the scientists wanted nothing more than to shut up and sleep. But space? Space was wordless, noiseless, lifeless. Not even gravity could touch them, and all but the closest stars kept their distance, twinkling just enough to lull one into dreams. It was tranquility, the softest comfort from the coldest embrace. And they all loved it.

On the twenty-third hour of the twenty-fifth day of June, the JMHT found themselves on one of their beloved “voidcations”. Dr. Sauer lounged back in the cockpit, letting the glimmering string of the narrow viewing port hypnotize her into relaxation. In the quietude of the loving vacuum, she could feel her beating heart slow. The aged organ pounded away with a stubborn pace that the captain could feel in the lobes of her ears. As the view of gold-speckled black glowed, she let her eyes grow tired and breathed in rhythm with the pulsing lights of the controls. And just as the pounding slowed and faded from her ears, a faint hissing noise crept along. An irritated eye cocked open, and the pounding slowly returned as Dr. Sauer stood to go investigate.

“What could it be this time?” Sauer thought as she walked with her ears close to chrome panels. She searched for the source nearby, but the noise wasn’t coming from the flight deck. Instead, it seemed to climb up from the maintenance ladders below. Sauer rolled her eyes as she realized and descended into the clogged depths of the ship. With any luck, it was just another oxygen leak, easily patched with some tape. The water line would be similarly easy, but mopping in low gravity was always a pain. However, the blasé irritation on Dr. Sauer’s face changed to alarm as she continued to descend further into the Morana and found that the hissing grew louder as she neared the Viral Containment Room. They had just finished a job snap-freezing a series of deadly microbes on Cyllene. If the containment center failed and the temperature rose too high...they might not get their bonus.

SAMPLE