

FILTHY SHADES OF GREY

A Short Story

by Dan Jones

BOILERPLATE STUFF

Published by danjonesbooks in 2020

Copyright Dan Jones ©2017

Dan Jones asserts the moral right to be identified as the author of this work. All rights reserved.

www.danjonesbooks.club

Put it all on black, Gen.

That was weird. The voice in her head telling her to lump on black wasn't her own. It was deeper, male, and flowed through her like it was made of liquid metal.

"Place your bets," said the croupier, spinning the roulette wheel with élan. He looked up at Gen from the wheel and flashed her a devilish, untrustworthy smile full of teeth that jutted erratically like tombstones in a graveyard with subsidence. His eyes didn't seem to be smiling along with his mouth. Was he trying to trick her? She looked down, and noted the lump in her pocket. From it she fished a wad of banknotes, rolled up and bound by an elastic band. She never carried cash. She stared at the croupier, who gave her another look she couldn't quite fathom. Was he trying to seduce her? Or humiliate her? She looked down at her navel, and eyed the cash. There must have been ten thousand *glicks* there. She frowned.

And where were the meteors?

"Place your bets, please!"

All on black, Gen.

As the wheel span, so did she, turning on her toes and casting her gaze across the casino floor. A thousand punters eagerly tossed their cash away, grinning like maniacs as they did so, clasping their hands together, gladly offering their souls up to Mammon in exchange for the appearance of the right card or number. The casino floor roared with shrieks of laughter and yowls of despair and anger. Here and there kisses and fisticuffs erupted, like a backfiring social fireworks display. Music – indeterminate, somewhat technically interesting but rather nondescript – blared over the floor, and the toxic stink of human indulgence permeated everything. Why the hell was she at a casino? She'd never go anywhere so crowded, and so vulgar. She'd prefer to be... no, not prefer... it would be more *worthwhile* to be at the Cyber Control Centre on J Deck, her own private cubbyhole and workspace.

What had happened when they'd hit that meteor storm?

"Place your bets, madam," the croupier said, louder and more terse this time. His eyes seemed to be too big for his head, like they were made of lasers. Next to her a fat man wearing a stetson and stinking of halitosis pushed a fist full of chips onto Red 23. A drunk slattern hung off one of his shoulders, slurring sexual promises into his ear. The croupier leant over the table towards Gen, the wheel a mahogany blur between them, and cast those too-big eyes over her. "Are you going to place a bet, pretty?"

"I'm not pretty," she said, matter-of-factly. It wasn't self-deprecating. It was true. She wasn't ugly, either. She was just the way she was.

"You look pretty to me."

Gen smiled, but it was a disingenuous one, one that felt heavy at the corners of her mouth. Hopefully it'd make him shut up. That's what polite people did, right? It didn't seem to throw him off. Still the wheel spun, and he set the roulette ball in orbit around the rim in the opposite direction. To her the wheel and ball seemed its own self-contained little orrery. She made a face at him as the probabilities of winning flashed through her mind. "There's no point in gambling on a roulette wheel. Even if I were to bet on red or black, which looks like evens, the zero and double zero slots weigh the wheel in the house's favour."

"Yeah," said the croupier with an unctuous look. His teeth looked too big for his mouth now, too. "But there's the fun."

She shrugged. She stared at the wad of cash and tossed it nonchalantly onto the table. The croupier watched it bounce across the lush baize and come to rest on number 23.

"Twenty-three Red," he called, a thick sliver of drool running down the side of his mouth. "All bets are off!"

The ball careered round, starting to bounce across the ridges of the slots as its path slowed, and Gen's attention wavered. A man in a raincoat shuffled next to her. A stink of rotten onions – *sulphur?* – hung about him. Dark glasses covered his eyes, while a stained, grey bandage concealed his mouth and nose. Just another freak trapped by the bright lights, then.

She turned away. The casino was well-lit; almost too well-lit. Above her the roof disappeared and the night sky flashed with the chaotic, dispassionate rage of interstellar space: beyond that random viciousness, distant nebulae glistened the gold and pink of hydrogen while, more closely, a dark orb pulsed beneath the grim

possibility of its atmosphere. As that disappeared, an orange stone, perfectly circular, took its place in the sky. That made more sense.

The meteor storm.

"We should have been obliterated by that," she said with a frown, trying to recall some of the navigational calculations and algorithms. Marcks, the Navigational Engineer, could say for sure. He'd been sure the *Neuromantic* had been on course to reach the planet Cozeners-34b until that storm had approached. They'd made serene progress all the way, in response to that unusual Fast Radio Burst picked up on Earth, until that meteor storm had hit. Where was Marcks now? Come to think of it, where was everyone else? None of the people in this casino were recognisable crew.

"Twenty-three red, twenty-three red!" called the croupier.

A chorus of groans and a few claps and gasps of joy rung out. Somewhere in the corner of her eye she could see a large pile of chips being pushed towards her. Thirty-five to one: she'd just won around 350,000 *glicks* in nothing flat. And she couldn't give a hoot. She shrugged at the croupier, who hung his head, his distorted smile and eyes shrinking by the second.

The man in the glasses and hat bumped shoulders with her. It wasn't until the second bump that she reacted.

"You just won three hundred and fifty thousand *glicks*," he said. His voice was warm but rough, like she supposed mustard gas might sound. "Yet you don't seem to care."

She looked him directly in the glasses. Why should she care about winning money? It didn't make her happy. And what on Earth would she spend it on?

"Come, walk with me," said the man, gently tugging her elbow with a soft, slightly gelatinous hand.

"No!" she cried, pulling her elbow away. "Please don't touch me."

He cocked his head. Beneath his stinky rags and glasses he might have been blinking or licking his lips for all she knew.

As they walked, the other rapacious, boorish people in the casino seemed to slow down, as though a collective comedown had breathed a stupefying vapour down from the stars above them into the room, until they all became silent.

"You don't care about the money?" asked the Bandage Man.

"No."

"Would you have cared had you lost?"

She shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe. Probably not."

"You do realise that many of your crew were..." he swayed his head this way and that, as if sniffing the air for the right word. When he found the word it sounded odd. "...Ecstatic. Elated. Rhapsodic, when they won all that money. And those that lost were..." he sniffed the air again for words. "...Despondent. Crestfallen. Despairing. You know, even your Commander succumbed to the sweet delirium of winning and beating the house."

Gen screwed her brows up, and scanned the scene for any sight of Commander Abrahams, but saw nothing of him, nor of any other crew member of her exploration ship *Neuromantic*. She found it hard to imagine Abrahams as a gambler. Duty bound him, as well as a strong sense of what was right. She'd admired him a great deal.

"I don't believe you," she said.

"You admired him, no?"

She frowned at the way he'd plucked the thought from her, and didn't nod in reply.

"Money," Bandage Man continued. "Such a simple, stupid thing. And yet, look at all the joy it brings." He swept his open palm over the scene of the casino floor. His hand was smooth and grey, like a pebble made of rancid animal fat. He turned back to Gen, and looked her up and down. "But not you." He reached out to touch her face, and she flinched violently, raising her hands instinctively to strike the creature, but she held back. The creature didn't shrink from the near-strike, but rolled its head up in an inspecting manner.

"Don't touch me again," Gen said, firmly.

"Hmmm," Bandage Man said.

The casino melted away, leaving only the fading vision of the stars and that swirling, charcoal world. Something in the back of her mind told her that was where they were headed, before...

Before what?

#

Something brushed the nape of Gen's neck in the darkness, making her shudder.

How much time had passed?

Had she been asleep since the casino? The space behind her eyes ached, and a faint tinny ring stung her ears. And whatever had brushed her neck – fingers, perhaps? – stroked her hair this time, making her catch her breath and jump.

She recoiled, but only succeeded in pressing her back and rump into something else. Something moving. She rubbed her eyes, but the darkness only slightly lifted. Her eyesight had never been perfect, and she'd never felt any need to correct it bionically – she was no assault squaddie in need of a crack shot – but now she found herself yearning to see a little better. Discomfiture slithered through her, around her, as *things* touched her, things like giant snakes, writhing, squirming, breathing heavily.

Her chest and jaw tightened as the snakes touched her again, and she resisted the urge to puke. She recalled a time on deck where one of the navigators had made a pass at her. She wasn't stupid; she knew he must have done it for a bet, otherwise why would he do it full view of his teammates? And while she didn't get any personal enjoyment out of telling him that he made her sick, and that the thought of his naked body on top of her made her come out in hives, she knew he'd feel embarrassed and humiliated by the insults, and somehow that was enough. He'd deserved it.

Let yourself go, Gen.

That voice again.

Fuck.

A soft zephyr blew through the place, warming and cooling her simultaneously.

A crepuscular morass of bodies heaved before her, rising and falling in diastolic rhythm as limbs, heads, tongues, penises and breasts rooted their way around, as though the orgy wasn't so much a collection of people as a collection of free-floating body parts. For a second she swore she could see the face of

Lieutenant Davison, drowning in flesh, gulping for air before she was swallowed by mounds of fat and huge, engorged male members. Gen took baby steps backwards, gulping and hunching her arms into her chest so as not to touch anything untoward, and fixing her gaze to the ground. Her pulse quickened, and sweat pricked her brow, but she swallowed and her head remained level.

Above her the stars swirled again, while celestial bodies swam past, providing a beautiful tapestry beneath which the grotesque bestiary heaved and thrust itself into itself. Meteors cruised in and out of view, just as they had above the casino, and Gen screwed her face up in thought. This was no more real than the roulette wheel. But the meteors...

She'd seen them before. *Neuromantic* had approached a catastrophic storm, and then...

Gen closed her eyes, able to block out the crude images, and recall what had happened when they entered that storm. In her cubbyhole down on cyber deck, she'd seen events unfold only via a screen. Hadn't she? The advanced RTG thrusters had avoided one meteor, and then a second... she recalled Commander Abrahams' voice crackling and sputtering over the ship's speaker system. What had he said?

"Come and lie with me, Gen."

He'd definitely not said that, but the voice was real enough, and certainly belonged to Abrahams. Upon blinking her gaze back to the... wherever she was... Abrahams's head seemed to slip out from within the folds of squirming flesh, and looked straight at her. Abrahams was a handsome man – even she could see that – with a strong forehead, piercing eyes, and an all-American smile. Yet here the

smile possessed just the merest hint of crookedness, the strong brow was pale and smeared with a lank sweat, and the eyes had no spark, even as he clambered from the flesh pit, naked, erect, outstretching an arm towards Gen. She'd admired him. Stout, stoic, duty-bound. Didn't fuck with or fuck the crew. In spite of herself she quivered, and for a microsecond she almost felt tempted to take Abrahams by the hand, but more out of pity than lust. She mastered herself, and stepped away.

Abrahams collapsed, his feet stumbling amid the eddies of thrusting flesh sucking him down slowly. A blank-faced woman rose from the bodies and lowered herself onto Abrahams's penis, arching her back in dead-eyed ecstasy, before staring at Gen, and saying, "*Don't you want to be doing this?*"

Gen looked up at the stars, squinting. The pink and blue number-six nebula was coiling away, with the orange stone dully lit some way closer. A sliver of the orange stone had been pared away.

"*Don't you want to have the Commander inside you?*" the fornicating woman moaned, twisting her head this way and that as arms and legs and hands coarsely massaged her body, grabbing and sucking and penetrating her.

"No," Gen said, and she meant it.

The myriad arms sucked Abrahams and the woman down into the seething pot of flesh, until it seemed to broil away, skin and bone becoming one unified soup of tissues and fluids. She blinked at the sight as the human stew washed over her feet, and the sky glistened with the cosmic lights.

"Have you ever been an active copulater?" came the familiar voice of the Bandage Man, sloshing through the maroon puddles with slow, methodical steps.

Gen frowned at him. "Nobody talks like that."

"You do."

She considered that, and found it to be probably true. "Where are we?"

The Bandage Man turned his neck again, as if searching for a satisfying click.

"Have you ever been with a man? Or perhaps a woman?"

She had had sex twice. Once at sixteen, with a boy from college two years older than her. Then some years later with a much older man who lived in her apartment block. The first one had been randy and functional, the second one lonely and barely functional. Both times had bored her thoroughly. That was before the diagnosis, though.

"You intrigue us," said Bandage Man. "Those who didn't gamble, fornicated. Not one of your crew denied both pleasures. Except you."

Gen couldn't help but smile at that. She'd not intrigued many people during the course of her life.

"The orange stone in the sky," she said, looking at the night sky, and then at Bandage Man. "It's gibbous. In the casino it was a perfect circle."

No response.

Gen raised her voice, as much as she dared. "Where are we? What do you want?"

Bandage Man hissed. "The question is... what do *you* want, Genevieve?"

The last of the human remains trickled past her feet, just in time for the floor itself to melt away, and the nebula the last thing that she saw before the blackness overwhelmed her again.

This time she'd done her best to count the seconds that elapsed as the darkness took her, but time seemed to lose its meaning wherever she'd been whisked.

A strange, familiar smell hit her first this time.

Then came a faint, deep throb. A pulse.

Whichever reality she was presented with wouldn't be real. That much she'd figured out herself. Except for the sky. The last thing she'd seen before the darkness and the abyss and the casino was that skyscape, beautiful in its violent serenity as her ship and crew had been...

Had been what?

"Pay attention, Genevieve!"

She was sitting at a dining table, again oddly familiar. The smell came from the dinner in front her of baked trout with herbs and lemon, with potato dauphinoise and a parsley sauce. She used to love this dish; it smelled the way her mother made it, before she came to think of food as functional. It was one of the tiny handful of fractured, vague, partial memories of her mother she could easily recall. For a second there was an apopemptic flicker of something inside her, something she couldn't quite place, but it made her heart flutter and her eyes blink, and before she could realise or recall what it was, it was gone.

"Mum?" she asked gently into the room. In response, the walls of this place seemed to throb anew. They were a kind of translucent orange, mottled with strange veins of red and grey and blue darting this way and that. Behind her, the room tapered out into an exit with a bright light at the end of a tunnel.

Far above, the orange stone had become a semicircle.

"No, Genevieve," came her father's voice from across the table.

No.

"Dad." She ran her fingers across the edge of the dinner table. There was the dent where she'd hit it with her toy sword when she was six; there the gnarled knot in the wood grain; here and there the various nicks that gave it its unique signature, just as she remembered it. Across from her, her father sat, dressed in his Sunday suit, with that same dreary look. Gen gulped, and thought to eat some of the food, but simply stabbed a bit of fish with her fork and held the tines to the light.

"Don't play with your food, Genevieve," her father snapped.

She glowered at him, before eating the fish. It tasted moist, succulent, earthy with the herbs and zingy with the citrus.

"My God, girl," he continued. "You're even madder than I thought. Do you really think the First Contact Federation will accept someone like you?"

Gen's senses spiked. "I'm not mad, Dad," she found herself saying, quite unbidden. She shifted in her seat, trying to get comfortable, but couldn't.

"Stop squirming, girl," he said. "You need to pull yourself together. Stop this querulous, self-indulgent mewling."

She blinked hard and rubbed her eyes. Was this a memory? Or something simulated? Above, the pink and gold of the nebulae and the orange half-stone seemed more distant than ever.

"It's not self-indulgence, Dad," she said, flatly. "The doctors called it Schizoid Personality Disorder."

Her father screwed up his face and waved away the explanation. "You're bloody mad, girl, and there's no way they'll let you near any such important programme. Don't waste your life when you'll just be disappointed!"

She shrugged. The memory seemed distorted, somehow. After her mother died her father had become a bastard, broken even, but nonetheless, she couldn't find it within herself to care, or hate, or even pity him. In some ways it was a relief, not having to worry about his own constant mewling and self-indulgence. She put another piece of sweet fish and salty potato into her mouth.

"They will take me," she asserted. "I'm a highly competent quantum cryptanalyst."

"You're barely human. Where's your grief? You never wept for your own mother. What kind of monster are you? And take your elbows off the table."

"Where's mother?"

Her father put his head in his hands and looked more exasperated than ever. "My God. You really are quite insane. To think, my own daughter... your mother and your brother are dead, Genevieve. They died when you were four. It's just us. Just me."

"This isn't real," she called out, but her father didn't respond. "My father never cooked this meal. This was my mother's dish."

All the while the walls throbbed with that pulse.

A hand pressed upon her shoulder, and she fought the instinct to wriggle free of the grip, knowing at once who it was.

"You're in so deep, Gen," said Bandage Man, stepping out from behind her and kneeling by her. "We had to dig so deep. The memory was almost lost, like a wisp of a fraction of a fragment just beyond the reach of our fingers."

"Three local days have passed since the casino, haven't they?" she asked. She flicked her gaze to the orange stone in the sky. "It's a moon, isn't it? The *Neuromantic* survived the meteor storm, didn't it?"

Bandage Man placed a hand gently upon her own. It was wet, unpleasantly slimy, as though he was made of a viscous sort of liquid. She took a deep breath through the nose to still herself.

"Do you know where you are, Gen?"

Gen sniffed deeply, furrowed her brows and tucked her chin into her chest like an errant child. The faint jelly-like qualities of the walls were clear. "My mother's womb. I remember being here so vividly. I used to reach out to her. It was like she was already dead while I was still inside her. And when she died, I felt abandoned." She paused. "Do you know what abandonment feels like?" When there was no answer, she told it. "The purest distillation of terror. A place of absolute hell, of perfect isolation, a prison that shifts shape. It was like I used up a lifetime's worth of terror in that one grief-stained episode." She turned to look at Bandage Man. Its bandages were stained and the stitching failing, with trickles of grey goo seeping out between the seams. "So why do you think these prisons you make me could compare with the ones in my own soul?"

Bandage Man seemed to suck in a breath, but it sounded more like a squelch. When it spoke its voice sounded strained. "Your father is disappointed in you, Gen. And your mother is dead. Does that mean nothing?"

"My father had no reason to be disappointed. If he had lived he would have seen the successes I achieved. He thought he grieved for both of us. My well was dry." Across the table, her father, head in hands, wept as the table wafted away into ashes, and the smell of warm trout became lost in the cool freshness of autumn rain beneath iron skies. Her father stood, shoulders shaking, sobbing audibly over the grave of her mother as the funeral party trudged away down the hill. Gen watched, tearless, absorbing the judgmental gazes and stares of the attendants and mourners. She knew they were wondering why she had no tears to shed. "There was nothing left. I stood upon that hill by my mother's own grave, and I could feel the colour being sucked out of the world. The green and gold of autumn, the smells of food and grass, the splash and cry of rain and song, it all died. Not immediately. Slowly, almost imperceptibly, until the whole world became a spectrum of grey. That's why I knew the casino wasn't real. To me, there's no red or black. Dad always said it was my curse."

Bandage Man made a clucking sort of noise, a gnashing squall like a cancerous newborn rooting for a nipple. "What do you want, woman?"

Gen sighed. "To leave. To finish these games. To get back to work. What do you want?"

"To feel," he said with a pained growl. "To feel *something*."

"You won't get that from me," she said. "Let me go."

#

Gen's eyes opened first, and then her limbs registered the cold. A second later she sat up, spraying liquid everywhere, and she swallowed in a huge breath of cold air that burned her throat and made her lungs ache. Cramps seized her stomach and bent her double, sending waves of nausea up her gullet. Shivering, blinking, she wiped the slimy muck from her eyes, and placed one hand on the rim of the ovular pod she was in. Naked. She breathed in hard – how long had she been holding her breath? – and tried to settle herself. Splashing in the pod with her was a kind of dark, oily ichor, while tiny iridescent gold and pink dots floated in the air above her. The ichor clung to her, and despite many attempts she couldn't quite scrape it off. It felt just like the touch of the Bandage Man. The thought of him close by to her naked body made her look around, covering her breasts with her arms.

There was no casino any more, no orgy, no fish dinner; about her was a blasted, charcoal landscape of blown rubble and fissure-ridden rock. Jagged black mountains in the distance punched up to the coloured sky, frozen in a moment of ancient violence, their flesh scorched by eternities of dried lava. Low, grumbling bubbles popped in the air, perhaps indicating there was a swamp or body of liquid nearby. A thin, light mist of yellow and white blew gently about the landscape. Everything seemed to fit the planetary model their orbital probes had created from the data they'd harvested. So the *Neuromantic* had reached its destination. Much to her surprise, the thought calmed her and, newly steeled, she found the air not to be so cold as she first imagined. And it was breathable. Gingerly, she stepped from the pod. Her legs were almost jelly, and she had to grip the side of the pod to stop herself toppling to the ground.

"Where am I?" she said, once her feet felt more reliable.

No response.

"Where am I? Where are you?"

Only the slow broil of the mountain returned her call. There was nothing for it. She'd have to explore the surface.

Mercifully, the ground was smoother than she'd thought; hardly comfortable, but not torturous. After a few footsteps a juddering pain shot through her big toe, and she howled as she looked down to see what she'd stubbed it on. Another pod. Something – a vague feeling: broken, but familiar – pricked at her, just behind the eyes, but she shrugged it off. The pod – slightly larger than a bathtub – was dark, like obsidian, and more of the dark ichor bobbed around in it. High above her, a loud hiss made her start, like something venting gas.

Her jaw trembled as she stared into the pod. After a second, a pallid face surfaced from the oily murk with a fountain of bubbles. She stepped back as the face settled, a bolt of alarm tensing up her neck. It was the face of Marcks, the ship navigation engineer. Against the oily murk his face looked completely white, as if the colour had all been sucked from him.

"Marcks," she said, her voice little more than a ghost. She thought about trying to shake his shoulders, but didn't want to touch him. "Johnny. Can you hear me, Johnny?"

He can't hear you, Gen.

Gen spun around to see who had spoken. Nothing greeted her except the slow hiss of the fractured landscape. A shiver raced across her shoulders.

"Who's there?"

He's quite dead, Gen. Braindead, I suppose you might call it. The voice squirmed inside her mind, like a worm in bleach.

Bandage Man. She blinked and rubbed her eyes. "Where are you?" She looked up at the sky, and thought of a more pertinent question. "Where are we?"

No answer.

"We're on Cozeners-34b aren't we?"

No response. She looked to the heavens. The orange stone in the sky had turned crescent. It must be a natural satellite. *I'll name you S/2185 C 1*, she thought, half-smiling weakly at her own joke. More importantly, three local solar days must have elapsed since they... since she...

"What happened to my ship?" she said.

The voice of the Bandage Man breathed deeply in her ear, like a nuisance caller. They were coming for her. She turned on her toes, away from the blanched corpse of Marcks, and ran. The mists rushed past her, and she could see more pods appearing from the gloom as she rushed away from this graveyard, and as she passed each one the faces of her crew members bobbed up to the surface, staring at the sky in wan, dead-eyed rigour. She passed De Klerk, the ship Chief of Staff; Margoyles, the Head of Medicine and Care; a dozen others, and at last the face of Commander Abrahams. All dead. She had to get away, and find the ship.

You can't escape, Gen.

After a minute or so, when the soles of her feet burned and screamed for relief, the mists around her cleared a little, and the graveyard disappeared. Before her was a vast valley, hewn from the roots of enraged mountains that looked as though they'd been torn down and rebuilt a thousand times, their sides rippling with

cracked red veins that throbbed with ancient subterranean heat. She stopped to catch her breath by a huge boulder, and placed her hand upon it for support, but balked when it felt its surface: warm, soft, almost mucilaginous, like...

Don't touch us, Gen.

She flinched, and fell onto her backside as she saw what she had touched. Sprouting from the rock was a large, grey, globulous mass, almost the shape of a coat hook, tapering from a wide base to a narrow neck with a sort of eyeless, mouthless bulb at its apex. It dully shimmered in the soft light, and gossamer-thin tendrils of its slime hung in the air as Gen pulled her hand away, covered in it. She tried to speak, but found the words had turned to dust in her mouth.

"Wha... what are you?" she said, though the sound was no more than a husk. Somehow she thought it didn't matter if she didn't say the words aloud.

We are merely citizens of this world.

"What did you do to my crew?"

Whatever we did was purely born of the vigour of scientific minds.

Gen awkwardly clambered to her feet. Her muscles ached, her stomach was cramping and she couldn't shake the alien slime from her hands, but she forced herself to move. If she was here, then the *Neuromantic* must have landed. If she could find the ship she might be able to recover the launcher and leave this Godforsaken place. She rubbed her eyes and looked around. The valley. It was the only place large enough for a ship the size of the *Neuromantic* to be grounded.

Surely you understand that?

She'd have to clamber a couple more hundred feet up a huge rocky outcrop to peer down the valley. Making the ascent, she saw it was strewn with more

boulders, most of them with more of the grey coathook aliens sprouting from them. It became apparent that the rocks themselves – cold, dead, grey things on the exterior – were the gestational bodies that housed life. Life not as she recognised it, but real, pulsating life nonetheless. As she passed each of the limbless, static creatures, taking care not to touch them, she could feel it, them, probing her mind.

What do you feel, Gen?

"Shut up. Shut up," she said, weaving this way and that between the rocks, trying to get a glimpse over the lip of the valley. She almost put her hands on another coathook alien, and fell away.

"What the hell are you?" she whispered, more to herself than to the alien.

Perhaps not so different from you, once. Creatures of exploration, of discovery, of knowledge. Crude, rudimentary things. As time passed, our ability to emote was lost to evolution.

Gen stared at one of the aliens. It was impossible to tell whether or not it was staring back. Could they see her?

To achieve perfection that which is deemed genetically unnecessary must by definition be jettisoned.

She traipsed up the valley.

We lost the ability to emote, to feel. But you people...

She started just on her feet, then had to revert to clambering on all fours as the terrain worsened.

...you people are emotionally incontinent. You offered so many tastes...

Just a few more steps to go until she would reach the lip and be able to survey the valley.

...Despair, elation, ecstasy, repugnance, humiliation...

Gen stopped as though she'd been struck in the gut. A pain zapped her behind the eyes, and she staggered as the thought revealed itself in sudden clarity.

"That's why I'm alive? Because of my condition?"

You intrigue us.

She bent over, panting for breath as the thought bathed in sudden clarity.

"That's why you got in touch with us? Just to suck us dry? Why?"

As we said. To feel, out of curiosity. Do not think of it in moral terms, Genevieve. Morality is dependent upon emotion.

Gen frowned. It didn't make sense. "That's not true."

It is axiomatic. Look around.

Gen choked back a lump in her throat. A long-lost but familiar nub swum about the edges of her consciousness, never threatening to show itself in more than fleeting pangs that had long since lost all meaning.

There it is.

Gen screwed up her face and gritted her teeth, trying to fight the old feeling.

"You murdered my crew. All of them. You invaded my mind just to feed on my memories?"

To try and make you feel. We thought you were strong where your crew mates were weak and succumbed to temptation. You were not.

"Get out of my head!" she clutched her hands to her ears; futile, as the voices still came. Tears now stabbed at her, her shoulders ached and her back spasmed with the effort of the climb. Just a few more feet.

You were merely apathetic.

She reached the edge of the valley and peered over.

But perhaps there is one thing you still can feel.

A vast black nothingness yawned out from the guts of this spiteful world. No *Neuromantic*. No launcher craft. Just a vast, unending swirl of thunderous gas clouds, dark storms and nebulous, rocky liquid churning in on itself. Her breaths came harder now, each one a jackhammer filling her lungs with acid as the mountains grew up around her, grinding out of the molten earth with a deafening crunch, the cracked fingers of behemoths reaching to block out the stars and the orange moon she'd just named S/2185 C1, until she seemed infinitesimally small, an insignificant pinprick among a world of megaliths, a speck of dust lost to the Abyss. Before the stars were completely lost from view, and the world swallowed her up, she could just see the tiny shape of a delta wing spacecraft arcing its way up into the troposphere of Cozeners-34b, abandoning her.

"No," she mouthed. She instinctively reached up towards the sky in desperation. But within a blink of the eye, the *Neuromantic* was gone, and the mountains closed in on her.

Terror.

Gen opened her mouth to scream.

#

Gen's eyes opened, and her limbs registered the cold. A second later she sat up, and she swallowed in a huge breath of cold air that burned her throat and made her lungs ache. But this time the cramps didn't hit so hard, and the nausea seemed to

settle more quickly. There was no slimy muck on her this time, and as her eyes blinked and blurred into focussing on what was out there, she realised this time wasn't in any type of obsidian pod.

She looked and felt around her. Soft light. Familiar, worn cotton sheets. Creaky bunkbed. A quick scan of the tiny room – chipped mirror over a steel sink, cheap cosmetics lined up on the shelf above it, the earthy stench of sleep – confirmed she was in her bunk back on the *Neuromantic*.

A thought nagged at her.

Lucy. Thinking to check on her bunkmate on the top bunk, she swung her legs out from the bed and placed her feet on the freezing metal floor, which made her wince. After the cold subsided, the realisation hit her.

Gravity.

They'd landed somewhere.

She wasn't naked, like she had been at the... at the what?

Something pawed at her mind – a memory? Or an emotion? A red mountain? A black mountain? A mountain of people? She padded her feet on the floor to acclimatise them to the cold, and gingerly stood on jelly legs.

"Lucy?" she called in a dry husk of a voice. She cleared her throat and tried again. "Lucy? Lieutenant?"

A glance onto the top bunk revealed Lucy was indeed lying there, covered by her duvet, face to the wall. Gen wouldn't normally give her roomie a prod – Lieutenant Davison thought Gen to be something of a freak, and wasn't shy in saying so – but something about the queerness of her dreams compelled her to do

so. When Lucy didn't respond, she shoved her a little more aggressively until, exasperated, she climbed up the bunk to roll Lucy over.

Her breath caught in her throat when she saw Lieutenant Davison's grey, lifeless face, the pallor gone from her skin and the spark from her eyes, the muscles sunken and withered. She must have been dead at least a couple of days. No apparent sign of trauma or wounds to the body. How long had she been asleep? The thought of investigating her body for a cause of death crossed Gen's mind, but the strange thought that she'd already seen Lucy naked popped into her head, and reasoned that she had no cause to do so again.

Sighing, and creasing up her face into a frown, Gen thought to alert the Medicare team of the death. Lucy had never been anything other than a bunkmate, and Gen had vociferously argued against sharing a cabin with anyone – a request that Abrahams had denied owing to space constraints more than anything – yet she was sorry Lucy was dead.

When nobody answered from Medicare, Gen swore. Gen hated swearing usually, and had picked up the habit when she realised that's what normal people did in stressful situations. With no-one around to hear, it seemed like a silly habit to maintain. "Fiddlesticks," she said, correcting the swear with something more fitting. She'd have to get hold of Medicare in person.

It wasn't quite as simple as all that. Everywhere she turned, as she navigated the ship in deathly quiet, she happened upon the bodies of her crewmates, all dead, all seemingly having passed in their sleep with no sign of violence or distress, as though the life had been gently extracted from them. The first few discoveries made her jump and her skin crawl, but after that there was something macabrely

predictable about the death lurking behind every corner, office, cubicle and bunk. The growing feeling that she was truly alone didn't really faze her, as it might a better person. She'd been alone forever, ever since that day on the hill at the cemetery. Really, this was nothing new.

She made her way to her own office. She was in charge of cryptographic data management. Perhaps she could figure out why this was happening.

Gen loved her cubbyhole of a workspace on the *Necromantic*, despite it being cramped and badly lit, and when she snuck inside, enclosed by the walls humming with electronics, barely able to move, she felt a bit more secure. It was strange to be in here without weightlessness, but she quickly settled in to her familiar work routine of managing and decrypting the communications data sent and received by the *Neuromantic*.

Odd.

The autonomy framework within the navigational unit had plotted a course correction in light of new intelligence; the ship's sensor suite had detected a potentially catastrophic hazard in the vicinity of the ship. The meteor storm. She checked the date of the readout against the date showing today. Three days ago. That had been when they'd approached the apparent meteor storm, when they'd been hit and she'd had those strange dreams. But the telemetry read-outs from the environmental mapping algorithms stated there was no meteor storm. Furthermore, the health conditioning and management systems showed no meteor damage sustained by the ship. In which case, either the sensors had made an egregious error – which they never did – or...

"It was a spoof," she said out loud to her computers. "Someone spoofed those signals."

She smiled in appreciation of the trick. The *Neuromantic* used quantum cryptography to encrypt and protect its communications from being intercepted and broken. Utterly uncrackable, regardless of which civilisation you were from. But it couldn't tell friendly comms from hostile comms. That was down to human analysis. By the time the human analysts would have seen the spoof and disentangled it, the navigation computers would already have acted upon the data, especially in extremely hazardous circumstances.

Curious, she stepped out of her cubbyhole office and made her way to the ship's Command and Control Centre, and to the transport exit. Bodies lined the way, slumped in chairs and at workstations like a grotesque guard of honour for her.

After she donned her spacesuit, the transport ramp whirred and clanked open at her command, and she stepped out to see where they had landed.

A blasted, bleak strip of rust-coloured rock stretched out before her and the ship. Dead orange mountains speckled the distance, while a cloudless pink sky gently hung overhead.

You are a worthy representative of the human race, Genevieve.

Her breath stuck in her throat as the rasping voice, cold and familiar, tapped the inside of her head.

"Where are you?" she called.

Strange, quasi-images of slick grey limbs, like enormous gelatinous penises, came to mind as she trotted off the ramp and looked around. To her astonishment, parked beside the vast, scorched hulk of the *Neuromantic* was another huge

edifice, four times as tall as the humans' spacecraft, but one the likes of which she'd never seen before. Shimmering under the light of the bright suns overhead, it looked glabrous, as though it had been artfully sculpted from one complete piece of material. No joins or harsh angles jutted from it, and no fire or atmospheric friction seemed to have abraded it, while no doors or windows seemed to break its smooth surface. On three spindly legs it improbably balanced.

We've waited so long, Genevieve.

All of a sudden the recollections came flooding back to her. The casino, the orgy, the family dinner, and the doomed escape on that hellish simulated world, and she almost dropped to her knees as the memories collided against one another in her mind's eye. She shook them off to regard the huge edifice once more.

"Waited?" she repeated. "For what?"

For someone unclouded by the fog of hubris, of humiliation, of arrogance, of despair, of greed, and the myriad other stains on the living soul.

Gen turned and scanned the landscape. The images of the aliens from her dreams – *not dreams*, she reminded herself – came to her, but she couldn't see them anywhere.

"Why me?"

We needed someone who would listen, who would not balk at what we had to say. You may consider yourself, with your condition, an unlikely candidate to relay the message to your kind, but to us you are the pinnacle of human evolution. The rest of your crew were not.

Gen shifted, trying to put the compliment out of her head. She didn't want to feel uncomfortable, especially if they were able to read her thoughts.

"So you did kill my crew." That much was clear, now. "And you were the ones who sent the Fast Radio Bursts we picked up on Earth. We found you."

Yes, we reached out to your world in the hope that you would listen. As for your crew, do not think of it as murder. They were simply unable to withstand the emotional duress under which they were placed. Have no doubt that what we subjected them to would pale in comparison to the truth. Do you harbour any animosity toward us for this?

Gen considered this for a second. "No."

Indeed.

"So where are we? Cozeners 34b?"

That is your name for this place, not ours. But, yes.

"It's your home?"

No. Our home was destroyed long ago, by hubris, humiliation, arrogance, despair, greed, and a myriad other stains. Here is where we have merely waited. For you. For you may not yet be beyond saving. Will you listen?

Gen swallowed. She suddenly felt very calm, as though this was where she belonged. "Yes, I'll listen."

Good. We have a great many things to tell.