

Pok

The hot water coursed down Eric's back. He rubbed his neck and let the hard jets work his sore muscles. There was nothing like the respite a shower offered at the end of the day. Today particularly lucky because Rob was able to coax the water heater to behave. Reaching for the shampoo, Eric grimaced as a dollop landed in his left eye. Searing pain assaulted his retina. He fumbled as he switched off the shower and reached for a towel. *Well, this sucks*, he thought, as he gingerly dried the offended eye.

A loud thud reverberated throughout the *Pok*. Followed by another... and another. Running quickly to the bulkhead, Eric placed his head to the metal and listened. *What is going on?* Had his shower somehow started a chain reaction rupturing all the old pipes? This thought disturbed him. *Pok* was an ancient Russian spacecraft. Her keel was laid down a hundred years ago during Russia's space renaissance. Her age, compounded with how difficult parts were to source for such an old ship, caused Eric great distress. He was about to radio Megan asking what the hell was going on when the screech of tearing metal and the smell of burning insulation filled the room. A concussive impact blew through the chamber and knocked Eric to the deck. Snatching his towel and rising, Eric heard the whoosh of decompression and stared at the fist-sized hole in the bathroom wall where his head had been under the showerhead moments before. A thick steel cable was threaded through the hole. Following the cable, he saw that it ended in a heavy, barbed, arrowhead-shaped piece of metal embedded in his mirror. The cable, which had been slack, tightened as the arrowhead expanded and spread its barbs. It jerked back through its entry hole, sinking its barbs into the steel bulkhead wall of Eric's shower. Eric heard the *Pok's* hull groan as it was subjected to enormous stress. Shaking his head, he hit the comm button on his radio. "Megan, Rob, put on your emergency suits and prepare to repel boarders." He let go of

the comm button seizing his shoes and his towel. There was no time for anything else. Pushing open the door, he ran down the hall toward the closest air lock. He grabbed one of the silver vacuum suits hanging by the hatch, and jumped into the legs, wriggling the arms up and zipping the front. He sealed his suit by twisting his grey glove into the metal locking ring. It made a satisfying pop as it snapped into place. He grasped his rifle, removed it from its hooks on the wall, and charged it, chambering the first round. He pulled a black lever half way up the white metal wall of the airlock. Eric knew how his attackers would attempt to take his ship. It was how everybody did it. You take away air and power in space and there is nothing left. Humans are fragile enough in an atmosphere, but out here death was always waiting. The air was sucked out of the room and a status light went from red to green. Eric grasped the round handle on the airlock door leading into hard vacuum and turned it clockwise. The door silently opened and Eric floated out into space.

Megan toggled the switch for the proximity alarms. She closed her eyes. Silence. Megan had been milking a migraine all day and the flashing lights and loud beeping did not help. She glanced at the main display screen in front of her. Whoever they were, they were literally pulling *Pok* closer with some kind of grappling array. Eric came on the comm telling her and Rob to prepare to repel boarders. *This is it*, she thought, as she unclipped herself from the worn leather pilot's seat and ran to the storage locker in the back of the cockpit. She pulled her vacuum suit from the locker and started putting it on. "*Here we go.*" She snapped her helmet on and ran back to the pilot's chair, strapping herself in and slapping the comm button. "Rob, prepare for engines at full." Megan didn't wait for a reply before pushing the thruster lever into the red. *Pok* roared to life and surged forward dragging her tethered attackers with her.

Eric pushed hard off of *Pok's* scarred outer hull relying on his tether to hold him. He let his eyes follow the cables to the attacking ship. It looked like the carapace of a cockroach that had all of its legs severed. Where the head would be located was a maw of round openings, six of which currently had the cables tied to *Pok* occupying them. He had to cut *Pok* free. Placing his rifle on his back and letting the suit's magnets hold it, Eric reached for his waist where the many utility clips held various tools for emergency repairs. Selecting the small, hand-sized cutting torch, Eric began to pull himself back to *Pok*. His curved helmet reflected something behind him. Clumsily turning (Eric was not proficient in a Zero G environment), he saw the bright trails of at least twenty rockets bearing straight down on them. He quickly toggled the tongue switch in his helmet, activating his comm. He had maybe five seconds to impact. "Megan. Rockets..." That was all Eric said before *Pok* went into a barrel roll and his tether snapped.

"Megan, Rob, put on your emergency suits and prepare to repel boarders." Rob woke with a start as the intercom carried Eric's words into the rusty dark engine bay. Rob shook his head and repeatedly slapped his face. He was way too groggy for this. Boarders? Like people from another ship? He shook his head again and glared ruthlessly at the brown bottle on the floor by his makeshift bunk. *That was a mistake.* He stood up and looked around. Everything seemed O.K. The reactor was on, all the status lights were green...well, all except for the radiation shielding one, but he was pretty sure that was just a faulty sensor. Besides, if they really were getting boarded, then radiation poisoning was the least of their concerns. "Rob, prepare for engines at full." Megan's voice came through the comm. "Shit," he instantly regretted not putting on his emergency suit when Eric's voice had first ordered it. Rob ran to the pallet of clothes he had been sleeping on since his and Megan's fight two days ago. Before he got there, *Pok's* thrusters surged to full and the reactor began to shudder. All the panel status lights went

yellow--except for the shielding, which went red. *Huh, so maybe it did work?* Snapping back to it, Rob dug his suit out and started to put it on. *Where the hell is it?* He dug all around, but his left glove was nowhere to be found. Suddenly, he heard the rockets start impacting the sides. “Rob, the fire suppressant system is down.” It was his sweet, lovely wife again. Well, no time for the glove. He grabbed his toolkit and ran down the corridor to see if he could keep them all from roasting alive.

“Megan. Rockets...” Megan’s hands deftly slammed the flight stick hard left, sending *Pok* into a barrel roll. She felt the entire vessel thrum with the repeated detonation by the projectiles. She had been too slow. Her console displayed error after error. *Pok* was crippled. Megan slapped the release on her chair’s safety harness, and floated up. Gravity must be out now also. Glancing at the monitor, she checked their position relative to the assailant. *Fifty meters and closing, so they were still being reeled in.* Looking through all of the damage reports, she noticed that Engineering was open to vacuum. Rob! She pushed off her chair hard and started sailing down the corridors, through the cramped kitchen, past the two bunk chambers, and finally to the door leading to the engine room. Grasping the handle in both hands, she turned it. The door unlatched, opening with a surge as the last of the air left the room. Megan held fast to the handle until the decompression was complete. She slowly let go and floated in the middle of the engine bay. It was dark. Tools bobbed around. A wrench bumped into her helmet. She reached up and pushed it away. An assortment of old clothes and rags floated around her. Her lungs constricted and air ceased to circulate to her blood. In front of Megan, floating unobtrusively, was Rob’s left glove. She grabbed it and looked around the room with her suit’s built-in headlights. Tears formed on her face as she saw a stiff figure floating in the back. Clutching a section of conduit, she pulled herself forward, then let go and allowed the momentum to carry

her to the figure. She collided with it and turned it around to face her. Rob's frozen pallor stared at her. He hadn't stood a chance when they lost atmosphere. Megan let go and kicked off the bulkhead wall heading back to the cockpit. Now she needed to find her brother. She hoped Eric had fared better than Rob. Megan made it back to the cockpit. She was about to use the ship's scanners to find Eric when the door behind her opened and a single shot echoed throughout the empty ship. Megan's body sagged but stayed upright floating in the cockpit facing out to the universe.

Eric opened his eyes. He was stiff, and the readout in the lower right-hand portion of his helmet was flashing red, warning him that his oxygen reserves were almost empty. The attack was over. *They must have left me out here unconscious.* His lungs were burning and his thoughts were dull. *I'm dying of asphyxiation, aren't I?* Eric's body floated along with *Pok* in the deep regions of space. The two belonged together in life and so they stayed together in death.

Re – Animate

Yes or No?

Rob selected yes. "Please deposit 200 chips." The emotionless voice pried through the singular speaker in front of him. A screen folded up and Rob placed his thumb on it, granting the Re-Animate booth access to his accounts. "Thank you for using Re-Animate and do take care of this body." The screen folded back and a mirror slid up. Rob groaned and punched the wall. Re –An was a genetic lottery. Consciousnesses were stored on their server planet. The whole planet was literally a giant hard drive. New bodies were grown in the closest booth to the point of death and were the result of one of the hundreds of genetic possibilities after combining the source material. This was always half of the mother's genes and half of the father's genes. Essentially

one always looked different. The only thing one got to keep aside from one's mind was one's thumb print. Rob looked in the mirror and a twenty-year-old blonde woman with blue eyes looked back. *Shit...Megan is not going to like this.* Rob opened the door and walked out into a nice lobby. It included a clothing store and a grocery market. All Re-Ans spawned naked and hungry. Rob walked to the clothes store and begrudgingly bought a bra and underwear, a tank top, some cargo pants and a pair of boots. He struggled getting the bra on and was immediately uncomfortable in it. Up to this point he had been lucky and only spawned as a guy. This was also his first death as a married man, and he had heard things sometimes got complicated when that happened. He walked to the grocery store to pick up some protein bars and a water bottle. On his way out he went to press his thumb against the payment screen. Rob dropped the bars and water and stared at the screen. It flashed error, displaying in small text: "Insufficient Funds." Rob started running. He needed to find Eric. If Megan had died while their accounts were empty, she would be denied access to spawning. Her mind would be stuck in limbo before she was purged from the database in forty-eight hours. He knew that if Megan was dead his only option was to recover her from Re-Animate's servers.

Re-Animating always made Eric uncomfortable. The first time he had died and returned he had to go to a therapist for weeks. She told him it was not uncommon that individuals experience this trauma--after all, she had said with a smile, "Our minds are meant to die with our bodies, not to be downloaded and sent back out to die again." The mirror slid up and Eric closed his eyes. It was always kind of trippy looking at a new face that also felt like it belonged to you because it was, well, *your* face now. He opened his eyes and smiled. A not-half-bad-looking guy with short brown hair and brown eyes looked back. The worst part was over. Eric stepped out and headed for the clothes and food.

Rob was on the planet Versailles which was much too opulent for his now bankrupt ass. He needed to find some way to contact Eric, but he couldn't afford a new personal transmitter. Stealing would be difficult. Rob didn't have a choice, though, and scanned the walkway for his target. It was raining, so there weren't many people out walking. He saw an older man quickly trudging through the water leaving swirling muddy pools in his wake. He was on his PT. Rob started following him.

Eric walked out of the Re-An facility and took a deep breath. Across the street there was a bar. It was raining, but Eric did not hesitate to cross. Sitting at a table in the back, Eric asked the waitress what planet he was on. Apparently it was Versailles, which explained the price of the drink. He was sitting at his table letting his eyes get lost in the caramel-colored grain of the wood. Picking up his glass, he tilted it back letting the burning liquid soothe his thoughts. Through the front bar window he saw some blonde chick run up and tackle an old man who was on his PT. They both went down in the rain and mud then the blonde stood up and ran away with the PT. He shook his head and threw some chips on the table. That reminded him he needed to buy a PT. Eric left the bar.

Rob was sprinting, his legs hurt, and he was having a hard time catching his breath. The PT he had stolen was clutched in his hands and, thankfully, still unlocked. He turned down a side street and stood under an overhanging balcony, glad for a momentary break from the rain. He keyed in Eric's number and waited. Your number was tied to your thumbprint which was tied to your PT, so if Eric had a PT by now this should work. He waited patiently as the screen displayed in blue letters: "connection failed". He tried again, waited, but the screen was white except for the black loading bar at the bottom. This was taking forever. He glanced left and right. *Good, still alone.*

“Hello?” A strange male voice answered on the tenth try.

“Eric? Is that you? This is Rob. I don’t have much time. Where are you?”

“I’m on Versailles, you?”

Rob sighed. Finally this was the break he needed!

“I am on Versailles, too! Eric-- My and Megan’s account is dry. She can’t spawn. I mean, I had to steal this PT just to talk to you.”

“*What?* How could this happen? I know things were a little rough, but you guys should have told me before you dropped below 200 chips each!”

“Eric, seriously, we each had enough sectioned off just for spawning. Somebody must have leeches her.” (Leeching refers to capturing somebody, drugging them with a powerful sedative, then attaching a bootleg thumb scanner and tricking Re-An into thinking they are dead and then charging them over and over.)

“Where are you? We need to meet up now!”

Rob looked around, “To be honest I have no clue.”

“Can you find your way back to the Re-An station?”

“Yeah, I think so.”

“Good. Listen, there is a bar across the street. It’s called the Golden Draft or something. I’ll be there.”

Eric hung up. Rob dropped his stolen PT, and started running down the street. On the bright side, it had stopped raining.

Eric placed his newly acquired PT back in his pocket. It was a short stroll back to the bar and he made it in under five minutes. Eric sat down at the same table with the same drink and waited. The same attractive blonde whom he had previously seen tackle an old man walked in and made her way to the bar. She seemed uncomfortable in her skin. Eric walked up to the bar taking a spot next to her. He turned and smiled, "I don't suppose you know a friend of mine who goes by the name Rob?"

She turned, glared at him, and downed her drink in a single gulp.

"Screw you, Eric."

Eric laughed for a solid minute then finally composed himself.

"Oh man, this is too weird. Is it wrong that I find you strangely attractive?"

Rob ordered another drink then turned to him with a sigh.

"Megs is in danger."

Eric placed his hand on Rob's back.

"I know. Let's go get her."

They both stood up. Rob turned to Eric.

"What's the plan?"

“We get to the docks and purchase the cheapest flight to the *Pok*’s last known location. You fix her while I try to figure out what happened to Megan. Assuming, of course, you can fix *Pok*.”

Eric looked straight at Rob. Rob was determined.

“If you get me to *Pok*, I’ll get her moving.”

They both headed for the door. Eric used his PT to hail a transport to the space docks and they both climbed in. Rob closed the door and they sped off.

Megan was curled under the main control console in the cockpit. Her cheeks were tearstained and she had her eyes closed. This was the start of her 30th loop. She had been stuck reliving the last forty-five minutes of her life over and over again. At first she had been angry. What had happened to the emergency funds? Had Rob spent them? But now her memory was foggy and she couldn’t really remember why she was stuck in this loop. She knew it had something to do with a policy Re-An had on data storage. During that time Re-An would continue to delete a small part of her memories every half hour. Megan didn’t move and didn’t look up when she heard the cockpit door open and a single gunshot fire. “...Put on your emergency suits and prepare to repel boarders.” Megan silenced the proximity alarms and sat in the pilot’s seat. She blinked her eyes slowly and tried to remember when she had last heard that voice. It sounded familiar, but she couldn’t figure out who it belonged to. This bothered her, but she shook her head and went to put on her suit like the voice said.

Pok floated motionless through the viewport in front of Rob and Eric. They were both busy putting on EVA suits while their unconventional pilot injected more of some strange green viscous drug into his arm. Rob looked around the ship. He was still extremely bothered by it.

This vehicle had no business being in hard vacuum. There were sections of the ship with thin tape covering what he prayed was not a hull breach point. The floor was littered with household extension cables that snaked from a nasty looking engine all the way to the pilot's console disappearing in a maze of bare wire and broken leads. Eric's voice came over his suit's comm, "We are ready to enter the airlock. Standby for decompression." Rob turned to look at the pilot who fell out of his chair shaking and smiling. Evidently the drug had taken effect. Rob sighed and walked over to the pilot's console. He threw a switch, but nothing happened. He toggled the switch back and forth twice, then he kicked the console with a resounding thunk. The airlock door lit up and opened with a green light. Eric walked in and Rob went to join him. They cycled the air lock and found themselves once again in the cold expanse of space. Rob checked his tool belt and activated his thrusters while aiming for the biggest hole in *Pok's* side. Eric followed.

Eric floated into *Pok's* cockpit intent on accessing the footage from the survey camera they had agreed to fasten to the ship for some mapping and charting company a few years ago. It took some time and a little TLC, but he managed to clean up and zoom in on their assailant. The cockpit door opened and Rob walked in.

"I still can't get used to you in that body," Eric said.

"Well, get used to it buddy, because I'm too broke to afford a new one."

"Fair enough. How are repairs coming?"

"I patched the holes in the hull with several sections of interior bulkhead."

"Really?"

“Yep, your room got a whole lot roomier. Although, there isn’t exactly any privacy anymore.” He snorted.

“HmMMMM how about the engine?”

“I was just about to try striking the core when you called me up here, so whadya need?”

“Come look at this,” Eric gestured to the console he had been working on. Rob walked up and looked at it. “So, that’s the ship huh?” Eric nodded. He then said, “While I was trying to find some sort of marking or clue as to who they were I found this.” Eric typed on the console and enlarged a section along the side of the enemy vessel. It was grainy. He typed some more and the picture resolved itself. Rob’s countenance changed. Eric saw fire in his eyes and noticed him visibly shaking. It made sense after all. The picture clearly showed the blue and black letters spelling RE-AN CORP. It hadn’t been pirates or rogues who had attacked them, it had been the very company that provided a service protecting them against such things. Rob looked at him, steel in his blue eyes. “I’m going to strike the core. You plot a course for Re-An HQ. Let’s go get the bastards.” Eric nodded, but Rob had already left.

Rob gripped the massive striking handle on the outside of the reactor. The Russians made good stuff, but this was an ancient way to start a ship. It was reported that you had a one in two-thousand chance of a mis-strike which normally resulted in the ship imploding and a new tear in space. His hands were sweating as they adjusted on the worn rubber handle. No pressure, right? Rob closed his eyes, “For Megan”, he whispered. He threw all his might into his arms and pulled down. The massive handle caused the gap between the two electrodes in the reaction chamber to close rapidly. There was a deafening crash and a burst of light. *Pok* roared to life with all the

status lights green--even the radiation light. Rob grinned and stepped back. He tapped his headpiece. "Eric, we are golden. Get us out of here."

"Copy. Stand by for full burn."

Rob wrapped his arms around one of the support beams and held on, closing his eyes. *Pok* started shaking and he could feel her power as the main engines warmed up.

In the blackness of space, the Russian ship *Pok* ignited like some mythical creature back from the grave. Banking to the left, her engines flared and then she was gone--entering the realm of faster-than-light-travel. Her heading was the planet designated as A-3207, but normally just referred to as Re-An HQ.

Megan didn't know where she was. There was this loud alarm that she couldn't turn off and some guy yelling at her to repel boarders. The most alarming fact was that she was looking out a window and instead of seeing her yard she saw outer space. Megan just wanted to go home. This was all too confusing.

Eric glanced at the time on the main screen. They would be leaving FTL in another half hour which meant Megan only had two hours left. Things were going to get interesting. Eric keyed his comm, "Rob, meet me in storage. Time to get the gear ready."

Approximately seven miles outside of the Re-An server planet a barreling Russian ship exited FTL, bearing straight for the atmosphere without reducing speed in any manner.

Pok shook like a creature being exorcised. She bucked and groaned under the stress of re-entry. Eric's hands were devoid of any color as they constricted tighter around the flight stick. Rob was sitting next to him managing all the alarms and warnings that were going off

incessantly. Through the cockpit viewport only flames were visible which were growing higher and more brilliant. Rob yelled over the din, “This might be a bad time to mention that *Pok* is not designed for atmospheric landings.”

A loud explosion sounded from the rear of the ship and *Pok*'s altitude started decreasing rapidly.

“What happened?” Eric shouted.

Rob quickly scanned his readouts and cursed under his breath.

“Main coolant pump went out. Reactor just overheated and shut down. Looks like we are in an unpowered descent. In other words, um, we are crashing.”

“Get back to engineering Rob, and fix the damn backups.”

Rob jumped up and started running. He knew their only chance was the emergency thrusters. If only he had done a better job fixing the coolant pump. Rob stopped in front of the master panel. All of *Pok*'s wires went through here. He opened it up and the panel burst into flames. *Shit!* Rob reached over and grabbed a fire suppressant off the wall and started spraying. The flame went out leaving behind a charred pile of wires. Then the emergency lighting went out. Eric's voice came over his comm.

“Rob, what the hell is going on down there?”

Rob replied curtly, “Hold on, I'll figure it out.” He came running into the cockpit with the ship's vacuum cleaner. “Why did the lights go out, and what on earth are you doing with our vacuum?” Eric asked.

“You don’t want to know, and it was the only cable long enough.”

He promptly cut the power cable off the cleaner. He chucked the vacuum to the side, stripped the wires with his teeth, simultaneously pried the main console’s access panel open and started wiring the cable into something.

Eric looked at the altimeter and felt light-headed.

“Rob, we are only ten-thousand feet above the ground.”

Rob started running down the passageway with his newly acquired power cable in hand. He turned and shouted back, “I know! Stand by the thruster controls and hit them at full when I say go.”

Eric quickly returned to the pilot’s seat with his hand hovering over the firing button for the thrusters, his ears straining to hear Rob’s command.

“Go!”

Before Rob finished, Eric slammed his hand down on the console. The thrusters ignited and *Pok* rattled. The altimeter showed a slow in descent, but they were only one thousand feet above the ground. Eric grabbed his seat restraints, fastened them and closed his eyes.

“Megan. My name is Megan. Isn’t it Megan?” She didn’t know anymore. She didn’t care anymore. She heard a door open. A lonely gunshot echoed through a ghost ship that was more of a remnant than a reality.

George did not apply to be a janitor. He grunted, pushing a giant broom across the floor of the main lobby at Re-An HQ. His job title was Infrastructure Specialist. Nowhere did it say

floor sweeper or bathroom cleaner. Yet, here he was sweeping the damn floor with a broom. His boss, Frank, walked up. “When you finish sweeping up, be sure to vacuum my office and empty the trashcan.” He didn’t wait for George to reply before he stepped onto one of the elevators and left. George was seriously contemplating pissing on his desk when he heard a loud roar coming from outside. He looked through the lobby window. George dropped his broom. Heading straight for the lobby was a flaming meteor or something. He dove behind one of the generic lobby couches just as it crashed through. Shards of glass flew through the air hailing down on him. The very foundation of the building shook. George stood up and surveyed the crash. The front window was gone and what was left of the two lobby security guards was smeared around the room. Lying unceremoniously in front of him was a devastated ship with the barely legible letters P-O-K. The front viewport exploded and ejected across the room. A slender blonde woman with a shotgun and a small rectangular device exited first, followed by a dark-haired man with an assault rifle. Several alarms started sounding and the sprinkler system activated. The blonde clipped the small box to her waist, cocked her shotgun, and blew the head off the first guard to run in. The guy chucked some grenades at the side entrance, obliterating the response team. They both climbed down from the ship and walked toward him.

Rob touched his side gingerly. That landing had broken several ribs. He looked around the lobby. At least they had made it. In front of them was a short pudgy guy wearing some kind of work overalls. Eric, who was beside him, leveled his rifle at the guy and questioned him.

“You know where we can find an exec with respawn privileges?”

The short guy’s entire face glowed as he smiled and said,

“Yeah...yeah! I sure do. I can show you his office.”

Eric nodded. George spun around, walked to the elevator, and pressed the call button. The door opened and all three walked in. Their new guide scanned his thumb and selected floor two hundred.

The elevator was playing some bland music that annoyed Eric. He fired his rifle into the speaker which made the pudgy guy jump. Rob looked at Eric but said nothing. The elevator stopped. They unpinned a grenade each and tossed them through the opening doors. Before the doors opened fully, the grenades exploded and the hallway--along with five would-be defenders--lay in bloody ruin. As they followed George down the corridor, Rob discharged his shotgun reducing a guard into a bloody pulp and moved on without flinching. They reached the end of the hall, turned left and stopped at a corner office with the nameplate Frank Dietz on the door. Their guide turned to them,

“This is the guy you want to talk to. He is the head of the Re-Spawn department.”

Eric nodded. “Thanks. Now clear out.”

Without hesitation George ran off, disappearing around the corner. Rob looked at Eric. “Ready?”

Eric nodded. They both turned, raised their right legs, and kicked the door open. They came crashing into a spacious office with a large desk, state-of-the-art interface console, and several plaques on the right-hand wall. The window in the back took up the whole wall and offered a commanding view of the planet below. Behind the desk stood a scrawny bald man in his late fifties. He was holding his chair in self-defense.

“Give up now and I’ll call the guards off,” Frank Dietz said.

Eric placed his rifle on the table.

“You see this,” He gestured to the rifle on the table. “That’s what I’m going to use to kill every single guard you send up here. No matter how many times they reanimate in your basement and keep coming.”

Dietz put the chair down and stared at them defiantly.

“Go on, just kill me.” He stuck his chin out. “However, if you think a high level exec at Re-An fears death you are terribly mistaken.”

Eric grinned and slowly walked towards Dietz removing his combat knife as he stepped closer. Rob spun and started firing down the hall at the new wave of guards. A couple of them managed to get a shot off this time. Eric grabbed Dietz forcefully.

“I’m not going to kill you Frank. I’m going to cut off your hand and use it to gain access into the Re-Spawn system.”

He didn’t think the man could get much paler but Dietz surprised him. Eric slammed his right hand down on the table and ran the serrated portion of his knife across the wrist joint, cutting through the tendons. Dietz passed out when he got halfway through. Eric didn’t know if it was from the pain or the lack of air. Frank hadn’t stopped screaming since the blade first touched him. Eric picked up the severed hand. He heard boots running down the hall. Scooping up his rifle he yelled “Switch” to Rob and tossed him the hand. Then he knelt in the middle of the doorway, sighted the first attacker, and squeezed the trigger. The first man dropped, the guy behind him tripped on his body, ate two rounds and fell. Eric just kept sighting and firing, trying to buy as much time as he could for Rob.

After Rob caught Dietz's hand, he ran to the console and scanned it in. The console unlocked, displaying whatever program Dietz had been using last. It was a coded message. Rob stared at the title: "Jackal Protocol". It was a mandate detailing the use of Re-An drone ships to prey upon isolated Re-An users in deep space. The business model showed the financial gains of repeatedly causing patrons to buy new bodies. It even factored in selling their ships and cargo if salvage was possible. Rob clicked on the bottom where the header "No survivor clause" was linked. He immediately felt sick as he scanned it. The clause explained how any survivors who lived through an attack must be leeches to prevent any chance of Re-An incrimination. That was why they killed Megs. Several bullets shattered the window behind him. Rob closed the message program and frantically started searching through the Re-Spawn files. He selected Spawn management, then storage, and then finally--search storage? He clicked yes, and typed in Megan Quessenberry. Her file came up. Rob said a silent thank you, and then clicked on it. Megan's face appeared. Next to it was a countdown to data purge. It said fifteen seconds. Rob quickly selected the Recover option. The screen then prompted him asking if he wanted to use Re-Spawn Deluxe. (Re-Spawn Deluxe was a service provided to the wealthy that allowed for them to spawn in an exact replica of their former body. It was insanely expensive.) Rob selected it. The screen displayed a confirm option. He clicked it and it asked for an override hand print. Rob reached for the hand, but it was gone. He then realized he didn't hear any more gunfire. Looking up, he saw Dietz and Eric struggling. Dietz's severed hand was stuffed in his pocket and his left hand was clutching Eric's knife with which Dietz had stabbed Eric in the back. Rob drew his sidearm and fired without hesitating. Dietz fell to the ground with a hole in his head. Eric grimaced and reached down to pick up the hand. He gave it to Rob.

"Thanks for that." Eric said.

Rob accepted Dietz's hand, scanned the computer, double checked that the order went through, then picked up his shotgun, pumped the handle and grabbed Eric.

"Come on, let's go. She is spawning on floor nineteen."

"Right."

Eric stopped Rob as they reached the elevator. He bent over to pick up one of the fallen guards' weapon and ammo. His knife was still stuck in his back up to the hilt. He had decided to leave it to help stop the bleeding. They entered the elevator and Rob selected nineteen, and then placed Dietz's hand on the screen, granting them floor access.

The elevator descended. Rob looked at the knife in Eric's back.

"You do have enough money in your account right? Because I am not coming back here for you."

Eric laughed.

"Don't worry, I do, and I even transferred some into yours. You know, just in case."

"How very kind of you."

The elevator reached the floor and stopped. Rob unclipped his last two grenades and handed one to Eric.

"Here goes nothing," Rob said as they unpinned and chucked them down the corridor. There was an explosion followed by smoke. Eric stuck his head through the door. The hall was empty.

Rob looked down the corridor with Eric. Aside from some smoke it was clear. At the hallway's end there was a massive steel door with a hand scanner to its right. They both walked up to it and Rob placed the hand on it. The door clicked and swung open, revealing a cavernous room lit by an eerie blue light. There were row upon row of cylinders with people inside of them. The ceiling was a massive array of cables and wires. Rob looked to the left and saw a substantial hangar door that opened to the outside. Walking to the edge of a railing, he realized that they were on an elevated platform. Below them was a dock with hundreds of ships. Some were leaving and others arriving. Eric walked up next to him.

“This must be where they grow and deliver the deluxe Re-Spawn bodies.”

Rob nodded, open mouthed. “Let's get Megs and get out of here”

Eric turned back towards the cylinders. Rob followed quickly

“She is in chamber 2148.”

They both ran over to the tubes, following them to 2148. Eric and Rob stopped. There she was--just as beautiful as when he married her. He hit the unseal button without hesitating.

The door opened revealing blinding rays of blue light. She blinked and looked around. Her eyes adjusted and she realized that she was in a tube. She was in a room full of people in tubes. There were two people looking at her. One was a blonde woman, the other a brown-haired man. They were talking to her. They were calling her Megan. Was that her name? It sounded like a nice name. She heard loud noises. The brown haired man turned and pointed a...what was that called? A gun! That's it-- he pointed a gun and started shooting. The blonde girl pulled her out. They were running. Why were they running? Oh, shit, why wasn't she talking?

“Why are we running?” Megan yelled to Rob.

“Follow me and stay close.”

“Who are you?”

“Megan, I’m your husband and that’s...” He gestured to the other guy-- “your brother, Eric. You have been stuck in the Re-Spawn server and--your memory has been affected.”

Haha, my husband. That was funny, but Megan was pretty sure she would never marry. They were running downstairs towards some ships. Eric was still shooting at something. Eric...Eric—the name struck a chord deep in her. Eric mattered.

Eric shouted at Rob.

“Rob, use the detonator now!” The blonde girl reached to her belt and unclipped a small black rectangle.

“Goodbye, *Pok.*” She pushed a button. The entire building started shaking and giant chunks of ceiling and conduit started raining down. The floor also started opening up. What was that Rob thinking? Was he crazy? Rob...Rob... *Oh no, I am married to a Rob!* She remembered a fight, a floating glove, and a body. She turned to him, still running--they were about five feet from the nearest ship.

“Rob, I remember! I remember!”

He looked at her and smiled. She didn’t know why she was crying. They reached the ship where Rob placed a severed hand (*Did she even want to know?*) on the lock and the ship’s ramp

descended. Rob took up a position, firing from the ship's entrance ramp as he covered Eric's approach. He yelled at Meagan.

“Get on the ship!”

She nodded and ran onboard straight to the cockpit and sat down. She was flipping switches and turning dials before her butt hit the cushion.

Rob reloaded his last two shells. They had made it. Eric came sprinting up the ramp with bullets flying around him. Rob turned to follow. He stopped suddenly with one foot on the ramp. Eric turned to look at him. His eyes widened. Rob felt cold as he fell on his knees. His body began to shake. Looking down at his chest, he realized the shaking was being caused by bullets ripping through him. He fell back and rolled off the ramp as it closed. The Re-An Ship lifted up and rocketed out of the collapsing building into space.

Megan threw the lever that sent them into FTL. She heard footsteps behind her and swiveled her chair, smiling. She started speaking before the chair circled around.

“Guess who remembered she is a bomb-ass pilot?” She stopped abruptly. Eric was alone looking at her.

“Where is Rob?”

Eric lowered his eyes. “He got caught on the ramp. He is gone. I'm so sorry.”

Megan said nothing. She didn't cry, didn't betray any emotion. She merely spun her chair around and started looking through the navigation charts for the closest civilized planet.

Re – Animate

Yes or No?

Rob selected yes and smiled. The face of a man smiled back through the mirror.