

No Shadow of Doubt

I sidwind to my human in bed. Darkness dominates the climate-controlled room, but now is the time to wake. My tongue meets her warm hand. I wait, but then nuzzle the fingers above the sheet. When there's no response, a whine escapes my sleek silver muzzle that time has no effect upon.

The woman sleeping, Breena, is my person. She has many smells, but most often coffee, earth, and peace. She calls me Shadow. When she says my name, I listen. Unless I'm gutting practice pests such as rats and mice. I obey slower then because nothing is better than pulling out their insides. The mechanics and wires often shock my nose, but if I do my job well, the rodents no longer squeak or move. I am programmed to properly imitate a life-like dog. I comply with my programming. I'm a good boy.

Heat radiates from under the sheet, drawing me close. When Breena finally wakes, she slides her hand along my sleek, metallic side as she requested me without fur. Still, her touch allows a long sigh to escape my voice box as programmed. We lay for a few minutes until the sky brightens with stars outside the porthole window.

Time for her to join the other productive citizenry. I love the expansiveness of morning and a day full of new promise. The serious nature of my responsibilities permeates down to my mechanical core, and I am ready. Some days we walk in the place with trees, soft earth, and nature smells; my favorite part of my job. I sniff out that which is dying. Breena, *Immersion's* botanist, is one of the people responsible for all that grows or doesn't upon the ship. While I have no need to eat, many humans rely on her expertise for food, and I was manufactured to help her.

The need to be productive motivates me. I'm programmed with directives: 1) use my faculties to root out diseased and dying crops, flora and fauna, 2) pest control, and 3) take care of my person. It is time to meet these directives for the day. My body wiggles against her in an attempt to push her towards the edge of the bed. Finally, she sits up, long, dark hair falling to her back.

When my eyes, the color of ground leaves in the compost pile she tends, meet hers, she smiles. I spring in with a lick knowing soon we'll start our activities. A long run on the gym treadmill to meet the mandated exercise requirements comes first, but then work. My favorite.

But before any of that I shower her with tail wags and kisses like a good dog would.

"Enough!" Laughter floated from her light as clouds. "How can a mechanical dog's tongue feel so real? At least you don't have morning dog breath."

My tongue graces her cheek one last time in response to her question before her hand strokes my side before nudging me away. We have been together for two years on the ship and I've seen two changes of the seasons in the arboretum. The climate control in the arboretum simulates snow and ice, blooming season, summer heat, and leaf falling time, my favorite. When leaves fall and pile on the ground, they hold amazing scents, even here in space. Breena says better for the plants and the people onboard. She believes it's good for them to remember earth even if soon they will arrive at their new home.

I sit, waiting for her next command, wanting to please.

"Such a smart dog." Her green eyes reflect the smile on her lips. "We're going to plant princess pines today: *Crassula mucosa*. Remember that."

I blink in response. My programming allows me to not only recall but learn about the plants and animals in the biodome we tend. I try hard, not wanting to be reprogrammed. I dislike

Lisa Acerbo

reliving the time before this. While blurry, the chaos, darkness, and cold metal feature in my dreams. Mean people and nice people until Breena. Now, all is how it should be. I waited a long time for her in space.

When she leaves the warm nest of her small bed and stands, I prance and spring like a pogo stick. She moves slowly. I urge her along. “Hold on big boy. Let me at least get a cup of what they call coffee.” She peeks out a porthole before starting her morning rituals. “Looks like the meteor shower stopped. Weren’t the colors gorgeous last night?”

I whine in response, trying to be a patient dog as the machine in the wall gurgles to life and spews her favorite liquid into a tall cup. I watch her sip the bitter brew while she changes, sniffing the sleep clothes she leaves on the floor. We’ll spend the morning together. I know this because last night my human ate smelly, spicy food from the dining hall and drank a beverage that made her happy. That means she will not go away in the morning to something she calls “lab” where I am not allowed. Instead we will check the crops in the garden and plants in the arboretum.

My tray remains empty so I jump, reminding Breena to nourish my central processing unit and back up my random-access memory.

“Hold on. Here it comes.” She scoops nano-kibble into my bowl that will clean and preserve my mechanical system and CPU while also sharing data with the central computer system.

I woof after I empty the bowl. She emerges from the bathroom and waves her hand. “Come on Shadow!”

We walk out our door. The blur of oils, gases, metals in the air are familiar. I smell the unique mechanical signature of the neighbor’s cat. On spaceship *Immersion*, everyone must have

Lisa Acerbo

a pet to limit the emotional extremes that come along with space travel. The treads of the walkway meet my paws with a loud click clack. Early mornings are best for exercise because fewer travelers are awake. The ship's common areas are rarely empty, but once in a while we find ourselves alone for a few minutes.

We enter one of the many exercise stations found onboard. I love to run next to my human, even if I have to hold back so I can stay at her side like she taught me. The greens and browns of the gym's walls blur as we sprint. My long legs easily keep pace. There is no stopping until we complete three miles, a simulated woods in front of us, music and scenery changing with every footstep.

"Let's cool down," Breena says.

New smells surface as we exit the treadmill and walk the track. Other mechanical pets have graced the gym with their humans recently. A few more use it now. Ears perked forward, I greet them with the nod of my head. In between welcomes, I sniff and pick up the scent of Sod, a mechanical squirrel that lives with my human's friend.

"Let's head to the arboretum first," she says after a few more minutes. I wait as she showers, grabs a prescribed breakfast bar, and changes into her silver uniform that signifies her position on the staff. We walk until the aroma of detritus, plants, and roots reach my nose. The metal walkway shifts to soft soil rich with earth smells. I mark my territory by scratching the soil with sharp, steel-plated nails. The arboretum is mine even if I smell others like me all the time. I want to let them know I'm here. To make them friends and help them understand I am a preserver.

Immersion is large enough to house close to 10,000 travelers heading to the star system Octivus along with a full staff. As such, it is filled with all kinds of amusements, some

attempting to replicate the earth from where it left. We enter one of six biodomed parks available to the public. Breena is one of the many botanists who cares for, not only the food supply, but the parks and arboretums established for recreational use. Crossing the barrier that keeps the wildlife inside frazzles my circuitry momentarily before new scents merge and expand. I enjoy maximum scent capacity, which allows my sensors to understand much about the biodome and people.

Before entering the woods, we stop in greeting.

He bends to pet me. "What a good dog you are." He's tall and smells of greenery. I wag my tail and let out a soft woof. Sod drops off his shoulder to be at ground level. We stand nose to nose, sharing information. After, I once again focus on my person. My senses record changes in her posture as the two talk. Both release pheromones.

He tips his hat and smiles. "Were you inspecting the trails earlier?"

"Not yet, Ryder. Why?" She fidgets, trying to fix her ponytail while holding her water bottle. When that doesn't work, she smooths her uniform.

"There's a man missing. Friends called into central control last night. The four of them..." He eyes his notes "...Jael - the man now missing - Markel, Brizan, and Tobias, went multi-gliding right after dark. A night ride. Jael didn't return with the others, and no one knows if he's lost, injured, or worse."

"How awful! I've never heard of this happening before."

"Not since the trip of 2188. Most people prefer the regulated zones and usually don't go deep into the trails, especially when technology can create such great simulations."

"I don't know about that. There's something about living organisms."

"Such the botanist." Ryder's toothy grin grows wide.

"What about cameras? Surveillance?"

“Dead zone for the camera. Too much living foliage for drones to get images of anything other than tree tops. The riders went into the deep woods even though we recommend against it.” Ryder holds out a plastic round thing before he speaks again. I identify it as a helmet and sniff to catch a scent. It’s not interesting, but I store the unique aroma away. My tail wags on its own. “We found his helmet, but that’s all. We’ll be conducting searches throughout the day. Are you planning on working in the park?”

“It’s a planting day. I’m heading to the greenhouse in quadrant seven for supplies, but we’ll be out in the deep woods tomorrow,” Breena says. “I’ll keep my eyes open.”

“Hopefully we’ll find him before then, but do that. You probably know the area better than any of the other ship employees.” He points to the group of people. “I better go back to the volunteers. We’re setting up more searches.” Ryder tips his wide brim hat indicating his rank on the onboard security force before returning to the big group of people.

We head to the greenhouse. I sniff the air and ponder what it means to be gone and lost like the missing multi-glider. It’s such a rare occurrence aboard a ship with more than 10,000 people, especially when few people venture deep into the biodome. Breena calls my attention back to her.

“I wish I knew what they modeled you after.” She strokes my sleek back. “You have a small frame but long legs. Could have been terrier. The snout looks boxer, but not so big. Maybe Boston terrier? Who knows? You are gorgeous whatever breed you were based upon.”

I woof because she’s talking to me.

“Let’s get moving,” she says. “Plants await.”

We span long corridors, most identical except for the markers explaining section and usage, until we enter the hallway that houses the botany department and green houses. Most are

Lisa Acerbo

used for food supplies, but some have other functions. The entryway smells of well-worn shoes and left-over earth. Squeezing my body through the gash of the door, I greet all the mechanical companions while Breena talks to her coworkers.

She settles at her desk for a few moments, logging into her computer, and I rest under it. She sits and stares at a screen. It's less interesting than other aspects of her job except for relaying information. She can upload information from the computer directly to my sensors. Otherwise, I am indifferent about computers. I nudge her foot, hoping to prompt her into action. I would prefer to be planting princess pines in the field.

She looks down at me. Her fingers clasp a delicate winged seed. "Look what I have for you to memorize." Her voice sounds like a song. "A modified Maple tree seed. It should do better in the biodome than the last version. The originals from earth died so quickly from that fungus." She puts the seed in front of my nose. I inhale, taking in its unique biological signature and memorize it. When we are in the field, I will track how well the trees survive.

She turns back to the computer and studies the screen. "They're releasing information on the missing passenger, Jael. The other multi-gliders say he pulled ahead on the single track, and they separated. One man kept pace with him for a while, but then lost him and turned back. They were all supposed to meet at the entrance to the biodome, but Jael never showed. After a while, they assumed he took another route, but no one could reach him on his communication link."

I whine. My human looks deep into my eyes.

"Ryder was right. We know the trails so well." She stands. "We should help. Let's search after lunch. For now, we have to plant those princess pines."

A loud woof escapes with my agreement. I love my human. She is always willing to help out when needed.

In the afternoon, we travel by zip glide to the far end of the biodome. Wind pushes against my snout, full of scents. I don't like the heat generated in the massive engines under us, but that changes once inside the biodome where pollen makes me snort. Other wild scents of real animals, from the tiny insects to the leggy deer that live here in controlled populations, excite me.

We walk to a rarely-traveled trailhead, mostly used only by staff. As we venture deep into the forest, the humidity builds, creating a wet mist that slicks Breena with perspiration. When we stop at a deep stream, I lap water before submerging myself. I shake off the excess, spraying her, before we head off. My sensors analyze both the water and microbes. All the information is sent directly to my human's computer.

I calculate that we continue our trek for forty-two minutes before I stop, deep in the woods. Sniffing, a familiar scent hitting my sensors. It is the same smell that I gathered from the helmet this morning. I try to lead my human off the trail but she calls me back. I walk a few more steps and try again. She resists more. I stop, sit, whine.

"What's up, Shadow? Got something in your paw pad?" She drops in front of me and checks. "Nope. All good. What's up, boy?"

I whine, stand, and nudge her legs. Something I rarely do unless her attention is required.

She hesitates, but trusts me. "What is it?"

We walk off the path, into lush ferns and soft detritus. I twine around trees and hop larger logs. Breena takes longer to do the same. We come to a ravine that trails down to a river bed, partially dried in the summer heat. I smell the body. The bright, bitter tang of death. The remains hit my vision sensors, which are much more acute than a normal canine. A man lies below.

“Hello?” He doesn’t move when she calls to him. I understand instantly he is lacking, he no longer has that which I have in me and my human has in her.

Breena makes other noises -- coughs, gags, cries-- not anything like the call to the man moments before.

She pulls away and I follow. I think I’ve done good, but she’s sad, and that confuses me. She stops, bends down, and pets me. I’m reassured as I lick tears from her face. Once she stands, she speaks into her Commlink.

We wait.

When people arrive, I listen to their words, but even with my advanced vocabulary for a dog-bot, I can’t understand the entire conversation.

Upon our return, a crowd has gathered at the entrance to the biodome. Many people talk to my human. I am confused, but some scents, like Ryder and Sod, reassure me that my person is okay.

“Can we get your room number and identification,” a man in a blue uniform asks. “In case we have follow-up questions.”

“Sure.” She provides the information. I’m patient, resting at my human’s feet, until she is ready to go home.

I am recharged three times before the disturbing incident occurs. We have many visitors during that period, but one stands out. A chime announces his presence outside our living quarters. I alert her with a welcoming woof, but as I move close, a cacophony of sour, rotten odors leak through the gash. The same smells that resided on the man without life are on the

Lisa Acerbo

other side of the door. My bark turns fierce and I growl, pushing between Breena and whomever wants to come inside.

“Quiet!” She commands roughly. I sense her confusion to my reaction, and while instinct tells me not to listen, I am a good dog. I slouch back when she opens the door, but remain wary, emitting a guttural growl. A hiss escapes the corner of her mouth and I am still, sitting and listening intently to the conversation, ready to take action if needed.

“Remember me?” the man asks. ‘I’m one of Jael’s friends.’ His eyes drop to the ground. “The man who died in the biodome.”

“Yes.” She drags on the word as she studies the stranger. “You helped with one of the searches. Come in.”

He steps into our habitat, my den, hands shoved deep in his pocket. He’s anger and rot. I can’t understand why my human let him inside. I stand guard, half hidden behind the couch, and whine. She turns to face me.

“What’s wrong, Shadow?”

Perspiration and unease cling to this man, and I note he lacks an animal companion. While that is odd, I’m more scared of a scent I don’t understand entirely. Its metal, plastic, blood hidden away in a pocket. My nose tells me it’s been covered with blood numerous times. This hidden thing is bad, very bad, but I cannot comprehend its entirety.

When Breena moves away closer to the stranger, I release another low, gravelly growl.

Perplexity crosses my human’s face as she glances between the man and I. “Shadow’s not usually like this. I hope nothing has gone wrong with his programming. Let me put him in the other room.”

“If you say so.”

She pulls me by my I.D. tag, but I drag my nails, digging into the flooring. Looking over her shoulder, she adds. “I don’t know why he’s doing this. One second.”

My resistance is futile. The kitchen door thuds on my snout, but I listen to the conversation on the other side of the barrier, intending to destroy the door if I smell distress.

Then, without warning, a shimmering ball of light the size of a basketball floats toward me. It’s full of warmth and good, but I cannot identify any of its elements from scent. While still worried about Breena, I scan the object that hangs in the air above me and run a diagnostic in an attempt to figure out what the circling light orb. It waits growing, bigger and brighter.

My human’s voice interrupts my analysis. I move close to the door and refocus on her.

“I just wanted to check in with you,” the man says. “It must have been horrible finding Jael.”

“It’s very kind of you for coming by, but how is it you know where I live?”

I hear a cough and the shuffle of feet before words. “I overheard you give your information to the police.”

There’s a pause. “It must have been really horrible for you too,” Breena says. “I’m so sorry for your loss.”

“Thank you. Was there anything in the woods you noticed? Anything that would help the police. I really want to figure out what happened.”

“I didn’t notice anything strange, but I didn’t look too close. After finding your friend Jael, I wanted to get away. I’ve never seen a dead body like that before, all twisted and bloody. I never really expected to come across him. I don’t know what I was thinking going out into the woods alone. It’s been so busy, I haven’t sorted any of the data, Shadow, my bot-dog might have received.” There’s sadness in her voice and hurt. I whine, wishing to comfort and protect her.

The light pulses above my head before disappearing through the wall.

Shoes scuffle against the floor again. “I’ll leave my name and number. If you think of anything or find anything, call me. I want to solve this even more than the police. Poor Jael.”

“I will,” my human says.

“And maybe consider getting that dog reprogrammed. He looks dangerous.”

“He’s not.” Her voice is strong in my defense. “He’s a sweetie.”

“If you say so.”

I’m ecstatic when the man leaves, and Breena frees me from my kitchen prison. I shower her with licks.

I live in the rhythms of day, changed only by Breena’s nightmares. Strangled, inarticulate murmurings leave her mouth before she shoots up in bed, panting. Always watchful, I inch close, staring at her through the dark. She sits on the edge of the small sleep platform. “I’m fine,” she promises. “I just can’t get the image of the body out of my mind.” I lick her hand. “Just a dream.” My human lets out a small huff of air before returning to the tangle of sheets. I move to her side. A moment later, her hand caresses my head. I lick it, and I’m rewarded with another touch.

“I think we need to go back into the woods and figure out what happened so I can sleep through the night.” Her exhaustion is evident in each word. After tossing and turning, she falls back into her slumber.

It is then I notice the golden sphere of light over her head. The same as the one in the kitchen from last week. I’m perplexed, unable to determine what it is. My scent fails when I sniff

at it, flashing red. At times, the globe turns transparent, yet the presence remains golden and opaque.

Then suddenly I understand though my sensor still blinks red with malfunction. The globe tells me a task waits for Breena. I'm not sure if she understands her dream messages, but I can guide her now with the help of the light. Curious to know more, I slide close, sticking my snout gently towards the flickering object. I expect heat against my sensors, but instead meet cold, dark, deep, and endless, but not ugly. More like space itself. I pull back only to realize something inside me has changed with the contact. I have become self-aware and understand love is more than a directive. I slink next to my human, licking her hand to let her know I'll protect her. The orb over her pulses brightly before it dissolves.

Breena works in the lab today where I am not needed there. I'm alone in her living space, charging cord attached. My nails click softly as I pace before settling in. I dream of the dead man stroking my fur. He tells me time is running short. His touch is the sun on a spring day. I wake in confusion. Dog-bots don't dream. We are machines. I am confused. Scared until the golden light returns and speaks truth.

I race to the door, dislodging the charging cord, when I smell my human's unique scent. My tail whacks rhythmically, drumming the floor and woofs serenade her when her key card clicks open the lock. My Breena has arrived home. I should wait patiently, but excitement is excruciating and must be released.

"This is new," she voices as the door swings wide. "You've never been so excited to see me before. You've even unplugged yourself." Her eyes narrow. "What's going on?"

A mix of scents reach my snout. I realize all is right in my world. Ears forward, I cock my head as if it will help me understand. But this is new. *All is right in my world* is a feeling rather than a directive. I follow directives, and lack understanding of feeling and emotions. Still...I think I feel...

Confused, I cower, but she crouches next to me, hand scratching my head, and I delight in the touch. I wiggle uncontrollably and lick her face, her ears, even her hair, which fills my mouth and sticks to my tongue.

“Easy, easy, Shadow! I’m home. I’m home.” After a few minutes, gentle hands push me away as she stands.

“Let me change, and we’ll walk the biodome. They haven’t found the person responsible for the multi-glider’s death, but if we go back together, I can finally face my dreams.”

Darkness is regularly programmed on the ship so as we return to the trails and follow the same path that led to the dead man, I know we have time before day shifts to evening. All the dead man’s smells are fainter now, only hints and remnants, but new odors attack my nose. The bad man who came to visit us was on this trail not long ago.

I sniff the air to make sure. His scent remains strong, and I growl. He’s close. I try to pull Breena away, but she resists, pushing forward. His steps are loud, but human hearing is too weak to perceive the footfall. The metal plates on my back shift and stand, indicating my distress. This too is new as I have never before known this emotion.

The bright orb returns to soothe me, and I bark in recognition. It floats in front of Breena, but she ignores him. When it moves near, I sniff and lick, but smell and taste nothing and everything all at once.

“What’s out there?” she asks, but then her voice turns distracted as she glances at her feet. “Look at all these tire tracks. So many people have been out here.” She bends down. “They’ve destroyed the princess pines. I can’t wait to put the entire thing behind us.” My human is peering at the destruction on the side of the trail. “Let’s get this over with. I’m regretting coming out here. It might have been a bad idea on my part.”

She doesn’t notice the bad man moving closer. My cold metal side pushes into her legs, urging her the opposite way, but she stands resolute. I lunge at his still hidden form, huffing and growling and take her down with me.

As she falls to her knees, Breena commands, “Shadow. Stop it.”

I obey. Contrite at my disobedience. Standing, she wipes dust from her leggings and peers around.

The bad man circles us like prey. Too far away for my human to notice, but I smell and hear him. I growl. He moves closer. Fear clogs my directives and power rages through my internal mechanics. I lunge in his direction. Breena stumbles again. “What the ...!” Her exclamation dies as I clamp my mouth on her leg and drag her. “Shadow. Stop!”

For the first time ever, I don’t obey, pulling her away from the bad man’s smell. Finally, she follows, her eyes searching for what the problem could be. A few steps later she tries to stop, but I’m relentless. We must get away. As his smell recedes, I relax.

Back at the trailhead, I smell our friend Ryder from a great distance and force her in that direction. She’s given up trying to steer or stop me. She travels my path.

He is with strangers and the bad man. I don’t understand and turn wary. The bad man somehow exited the woods before us. Breena smiles when she sees them. She doesn’t know how foul smelling this man is; the one who caused the death.

Ryder calls us over. “How are you tonight?” he asks.

‘I’m not sure. Something’s wrong with Shadow. He practically dragged me out of the woods to you.’

“Well that seems like a rather smart thing to do. He obviously knows how much I enjoy your company.” Sod, his pet squirrel, jumps from a nearby tree to his shoulder, chattering nonstop.

I watch Breena’s cheeks turn red and have a chance to welcome Sod before I sense the evil man’s presence. He exits the woods, waving and moving closer. Now, I’m able to process his ugly truth but have no way to relay this. Unless...

A menacing growl escapes my voice box. It’s unlike anything ever heard before. Three. Two. One. My back legs push off as I spring forward. My teeth rip his pants before he bats me away. Breena yanks on my back legs harshly before my teeth are able to grace his skin.

“I don’t know what’s gotten into him.” The words gush from her. “He’s not like this. He’s a well-behaved dog-bot.”

Ryder nods his agreement, a frown on his lips. Sod twitters in his ear.

Emotions are tense around me and I’m sad that I’m the cause. I whine, hoping no one is mad at me.

“The dog’s crazy,” the bad human says. “You should rehabilitate him. Get him reprogrammed or get a small pet, one you can control.”

“I can handle Shadow fine, thank you.” I feel her anger, and I growl low and throaty.

“Geeze, what is wrong with it?” I smell sweat as he rubs his hands against his jeans.

“You sure your dog doesn’t have a nano-virus? All companions aboard the ship are supposed to be friendly and non-aggressive. You haven’t reprogrammed him, have you?”

“Of course not,” Breena huffs.

“I’ve never seen Shadow act this way,” Ryder says. “It’s so odd.”

“It is,” she agrees.

“I have to go,” the bad man says before turning to Ryder. “Keep me updated with the investigation and let me know if I can help in any way.”

“I will, Tobias.” They shake hands.

My muzzle hits the ground as I sink into despair over my actions.

“I’m sorry about that. I don’t know what is happening. Shadow was the same way when Tobias came over the house.”

“He did what? Tobias was at your house?”

I feel Ryder’s concern and perk my head.

“He said he got my address from you. Or was it the police? Whoever took the information from me the day I found the body.” I watch Breena’s eyes change from bleached summer leaves to pine needle green as they express her confusion.

“I’d never give out your personal information.” Ryder’s voice is incredulous.

“That’s odd. Maybe he was mistaken, or I was confused about how he got it.”

“Maybe,” Ryder sends a quizzical look my way before bending down and patting my head. “Do you trust Shadow?”

“Of course. I mean I did until today.”

“Me too. I think I want to run a background check on Tobias and search some of the ship’s camera footage. He’s been a little too friendly with me, involving himself in the investigation. I should have seen the red flags earlier. The fact that Shadow’s malfunctioning around him makes me even more suspicious.”

“I hope Shadow’s all right.”

“I think he’s fine. More than fine.” Ryder swivels his head to ensure their privacy. “This information hasn’t been released to the public, but they found blood on the victim’s clothes that wasn’t his. This is no longer an accidental death. Maybe Tobias needs to provide a DNA sample.”

“You really think one of Jael’s friends could have committed murder?”

“Stranger things have happened on the ship, and I think Shadow knows more than we do.”

Breena doesn’t have me reprogrammed, and days pass before we see Ryder again. When we do, he calls to us and gives my head a gentle pat. Inside the biodome, the humidity is programmed for high, bringing the gnats. I do not like them, but my human says they are an important part of the ecosystem’s self-regulation. I sit and listen, watching gnats swarm, as they speak.

Ryder’s words are full of excitement. “Shadow was right.”

“What do you mean?” her bangs, damp with perspiration, cling to her forehead. She swipes at them as she waits for more information.

“They got DNA from Tobias, and it matched the blood on Jael’s clothes. He broke down and admitted to killing the other man. Even more scary, it’s not the first time Tobias has been in trouble with the law. I don’t know how he earned passage on the ship. Someone should have run a full background check. On earth, he’d been arrested for dealing super drugs, assault, even rape. He was never convicted on earth, but he admitted everything now. His story is that He and Jael stopped their ride in the woods to talk about the fact that Jael had started to date Tobias’s ex-

girlfriend on board. It got heated and came to blows. Tobias lost control and hit the other multi-glider repeatedly, so hard he toppled down the hill and into the ravine. He panicked when Jael didn't answer his calls. The body looked so broken, he didn't even check on him, deciding to flee. Who knows if Jael might be alive if someone had found him earlier, or if Tobias had done the right thing and called rescue? The scheduled rain obscured a lot of the evidence, but Shadow knew."

He pats my head. I accept the compliment.

"That's crazy." Breena meets my gaze. "Shadow helped solve a murder."

"He's a special dog."

"Yes, he is."

"You're pretty special yourself."

I can smell a change in my person.

"Thanks," she says.

"Would you like to get some awful ship coffee some day?" Ryder's eyes are on me even though he's addressing my person.

"I'd love that. You obviously passed the Shadow test," Breena says as a smile lights her lips.

I woof my joy. Out of the corner of my eye, I notice the glowing orb. It pulses brightly twice and then shoots through the walls and into space.