

## Voss

Hours would go by as he watched in the dark, the only light a glow from each of the five tubes set into the metal prison, highlighting the unshaven face of a man with nothing but time to spend. Voss looked deep into the lime green hum emanating from each of the pods and thought how they almost resembled the veins in the underside of his forearm, just protruding enough to be seen from under the skin. *Not long now*, he thought as his eyes closed heavily and his finger tips traced the long tired vein leading to his wrist. *Two more months and my rotation is up*. A thought that Voss repeated to himself on a regular basis to try and keep himself sane in his most lonely and desperate of moments.

Stepping up to the lime glowing panel of the middle pod he looked into the thick liquid inside that his replacement seemed so happy to sleep in. *Is it sleep? Or is it a coma? Will I dream again? . . . I hope not, please Gods don't let me dream again*. Voss begged of his own mind. Hyper sleep had not been kind to Voss, he had dreamt of a life he had left behind and family he would no longer have. Hard choices had led him to sign his contract, but that didn't mean he was free of regret or even guilt. Again Voss' eyes dropped heavy and threatened to stay shut, so he pushed himself away from the pods and the darkened gloom of human cargo he considered to be company and out into a metal tube stretching in front of him with painfully bright florescent lights, making the walk to the crew's kitchen one of squinted eyes and fast footsteps.

Dragging himself into the kitchen, Voss spoke as if he were talking to another person: "Lights at forty percent," the lights in the room dimmed with immediate effect followed by the computer system's calm feminine voice confirming the lights were at forty percent. This allowed Voss to open his eyes fully. *If I ever get off this ship I'm gonna be wearing sunglasses permanently*, he thought as he moved over to one of the few non-metal interfaces protruding from the wall and pressed a three digit sequence and waited, the interface slowly opening one of its smaller panels and revealing a plastic cup followed by the same calm, silky feminine voice naming the liquid "Water."

"Thank you computer," Voss said almost routinely, like thanking your mother or father because you know they are about to tell you it's manners to say your 'please and thank yous.' *I need someone else to talk to, someone that's actually a someone and not a machine*. Footsteps began tapping down the corridor across the room and the light automatically powered on with its glare spilling out into the crew's kitchen. Voss looked down at his cup of water to shield his face from what felt like a torch being shone directly into his pupils, setting his brain on fire. Voss took a sip of his water and prepared himself for the

inevitable. A shadow could be seen on the inside wall of the curved corridor moving towards the crew's kitchen getting larger with each footstep. Voss remained rigid and unmoving, except to take the smallest of sips from his cup of water hoping it would help with his constant headache. Finally a figure arrived with its procession of footsteps and Voss tensed as a reaction to the oncoming encounter. *I need someone to talk to, but not him. I'd rather be on my own than have to talk to him . . . Would I? Would I rather be on my own than have to have the same conversation over and over again, we both know exactly what to say and we both know that nothing will ever change. It's almost as if we're stuck with each other in some mind numbing cycle of constant monotony. The psych evaluation the company makes us do clearly has flaws. Why they CHOSE to put me in the same rotation as him?*

"Voss?" said a voice higher in pitch than his own. It was the first thing he thought of whenever he heard that voice, why does he sound like he is always forcing his words out? He wasn't sure if it was a speech impediment or whether it was just a natural habit of conversing that people develop. "I'm here." Voss replied so quietly he hardly heard himself say the words.

"Adrian?" The voice was just around the corner, forcing itself slightly ahead of its point of origin. Then came the man suited from head to toe in his engineering rig covering him in a hundred or more small metal plates dulled down over years of working in extreme environmental conditions, the dull metal was scraped clean on the knees and around the hands and drew the eye to them.

"How did you get on Neil?" Voss asked as Neil walked into the room and dropped onto one of the stools across from the kitchen table. Neil wasn't wearing his helmet; he had clear blue eyes that always seemed to have a redness about them as if he were in a perpetual state of allergic reaction. Even though it was an automated part of the suit, his helmet was down because Voss had been making fun of him for being 'by the book' and following a protocol that their superiors didn't even follow, especially when they have been asleep on rotation for twelve years. "Same old, same old," his breathing was heavy after coming back from his routine system checks and Voss couldn't stop staring at the gap between his two front teeth as he talked. Voss had the crew maintenance to look after and Neil had the ship maintenance to take care of. "One of the Co2 scrubbers in the Ark is shot. I could do with some help down there if you're done babysitting," they each had their own way of grating on the other; this usually came from berating each other's importance to the mission. In Neil's case he would call Voss 'the babysitter', as he had to constantly report on the status of the crew in Hyper sleep, making sure their nutrient packs and excessively long daily medical checks were operating at optimum conditions. On the other hand Voss called Neil 'the handyman', as his job entailed exactly the same requirements but in

relation to the ship, and what's worse is that neither of them know the mission objective. None of them knew the mission objective, except the captain. A 'need to know basis' was what they were told and, no matter which two of the crew were on babysitter or handyman duty, the number one topic of conversation on everyone's lips was 'what is our mission and why is there a need to keep us in the dark?'

"Yeah I'm done with the crew today. Be nice to stretch my legs anyway," Voss said, finishing his water and crunching the plastic cup up before dropping it into a second panel that opened on touch. *If I'm helping with the Co2 scrubbers then I'm awake and most definitely not in any danger of dreaming,* he thought as he watched Neil push himself back to his feet. Neil look tired, more so than usual. Each step he took looked like it was an effort and his breathing was heavy. *It can't be the suit; they're designed to be an exo-skin, a second layer that protects without weighing a ton,* Voss thought as he followed Neil into the corridor he had previously emerged from.

They walked with one following the other for a few minutes, down the stretching corridors and around corners where the corridors met at low hanging bulkheads. If it weren't for the fact that Neil came the same route every other day to check on the Ark, Voss would have had to have stopped and asked the computer for directions on a number of occasions. There were never any straight access routes to the different quadrants of the ship and all of the walk ways had the same fluorescent lights that made Voss walk around with his eyes looking at the dark plated floor, occasionally looking up in his peripherals to see where Neil was taking a turn or climbing down an access ladder. After seven or eight minutes of following Neil by sound and peripherals, Voss noticed that Neil was really starting to sound out of breath and had sweat trickling down the back of his neck. *I've got to say something, just to check he's all right.* "So Neil, you feeling ok?" Voss asked curiously, "I mean, after the big sleep? It can knock your immune system about if you don't take it easy."

"And when do I get to take it easy Voss?" Neil said as he continued to march on through the Ark. "Don't worry about me, I'll be fine. Look," he pointed at another ladder with a head height hexagonal sign above it reading 'Ark storage one level down.' The drop down to the lower level was pitch black until Neil started to make his way, taking long and heavy breaths with each step down. The further he got the more lights automatically switched on. Voss followed Neil down the drop and found him waiting for him at the bottom leaning against the wall still dragging in long slow breaths.

"Shall we take a minute before getting on those Co2 scrubbers?" Voss asked to try and buy some time to let Neil get his breath back before he had to find and diagnose the scrubbers that needed resetting. The problem for

Voss was that the more they stood still and waited the more his wandering mind, dreams and consuming tiredness nearly got a hold on him. He quickly tried to think of something to say before his thoughts betrayed him and made him think of the unthinkable. He hastily tried to distract himself with more work. "I've got to wake up Elliot day after tomorrow, some kind of ecologist or something."

"Elliot Walger? Do you know I can't even remember half of the rotation crew let alone who we have in cargo?" Neil said as his breathing started to become regular, making Voss feel better.

"Andy Elliot's who I'm pulling out of cold storage. Not Walger. So we've got to make sure that the Ark is firing on all cylinders," Voss said as he slowly began to move and show Neil he was ready to carry on to the Co2 scrubbers. "Andy Elliot? Never heard of him," said Neil, uninterested in the sleeping stranger.

"You'll be making his acquaintance in forty eight hours, give or take, so let's get this show on the road shall we?" Voss explained as he gestured a hand to the Ark storage entrance. Neil took the hint and pushed himself off the wall with metal; scratching against metal, as much physical protection as his engineering rig offered, it couldn't do anything for someone who is suffering from a fever or what ever infliction it was that Neil obviously had. *If he would let me examine him I could probably help, but I know he would rather suffer than let me treat him. Co2 scrubbers were one thing, but actual medical assistance? No way.* Voss continued to watch him as he opened the outer doors to the Ark storage centre using retina scans and voice recognition software. There were only a few places on the ship that had such high levels of security: the Ark storage centre, the flight deck and the brig. There was however one area of the ship that not even the Captain was granted access to; this was solely the property of the company sponsoring the mission. Voss never really gave it much thought, the company paid his wages and the missions funds, and as far as he was concerned he was a company man. He was paid to be.

Voss' concerns lay right in front of him. Neil Duerdon. A man who rubbed him the wrong way ever since he had first laid eyes on him, a man who appeared to be suffering some infliction but would not accept any help, a man who would usually take any opportunity to belittle or poke fun at Voss who seemed to have forgotten that is how their working relationship functions. *Maybe he wants something from me. He's after something, or he is really ill,* Voss thought as they moved into the quarantine chamber waiting for all antigens and foreign materials to be removed before they could enter the Ark storage centre. *Maybe he's brought me here to ask for my help with something, something that's not exactly within the company policy. Or maybe he's screwed up and the Co2 scrubbers are just pretence to get me down here to help him with whatever else he has got brewing*

*under his jittery sweaty surface. He won't even make eye contact with me! If he's ill or carrying some kind of infection picked up from his weakened immune system, then at least a couple of trips through the quarantine lock will give him the once over. If there's anything big it will be flagged up.*

"Ok Voss, we're gonna head through the first storage compartment to the stand alone mainframe so I can find out exactly where the Co2 scrubbers are packed up," Neil explained without looking at Voss. The quarantine chamber had filled with thin moisture that was being pumped into the air; you could see it floating in the air forming a translucent layer over everything.

"Don't we already know where the scrubbers are malfunctioning?" Voss asked, keeping Neil busy and his mind distracted.

"No we don't. Computer has alerted me to the non-functioning scrubbers, but not to their location. Ark storage has a stand-alone system designed to keep running if there is a problem with the ship. Company's orders, Ark storage has a higher priority than the cargo decks," Neil said with a hint of authority, as he had information Voss didn't.

"Seriously?" Voss let Neil's arrogance slide.

"Yeah, seriously. Cargo decks are full of employees that the company don't have to pay if they don't wake from hyper sleep, whereas Ark storage is full of their investments. Who knows how much money they've invested into this centre, could be Billions, even Trillions," as Neil finished his insightful tangent into the company's expenditure, the quarantine chamber's doors opened with a release of air pressure allowing both of the ships crewmen to enter the Ark storage centre.