

The moment the door sealed closed, Jill grabbed at her chest, a sharp intake of breath stabbing deep into her. She fought to breath for what seemed like the first time since waking up. Tears formed in her eyes as she staggered backwards and sat on the bed. Air came in gasps, tight and harsh. The rigid calm of only seconds before evaporated and she could only place her head in her hands as tears left her eyes and fell to roll down her cheeks.

It had been eleven months since Matt was wounded. Only four since he had been released from the constant military hospital ship rounds. The doctors had encouraged him to talk about the ambush and being wounded. It had taken time, but eventually he had. By now Jill knew almost everything, the patrol, the small farming village, the explosives hidden on the civilian trucks, the three hour long firefight, the fifteen other Assembly marines who had been killed, and most of all, the three bullets that had almost taken her husband. Matt had talked about it all, but the nightmares still continued.

Some nights were more merciful than others, but when they were not, Matt always left on a run. The first few nights of this, Jill had tried to go back to sleep. It was three hours before she gave up the first time. Only a single hour the next. By the third time, she no longer even tried. Instead of sleep, she wrote.

Jill had written short stories throughout high school. Never anything polished, and certainly never anything to be published, just a way to relax, an activity different from the math and science of her usual studies. During her second year of college however, as the work of a xenobiology major began to increase, her drive to write had fallen away. Matt's first night running had been the first time she had tried writing in nine years.

For four months now she had written short stories, detective stories like the ones she had always read growing up. It was the pattern she enjoyed, the formula. Nothing too strict or rigid, but when typing, she held the control and could see all the familiar elements. In a detective story, the bad guys are the bad guys, and the good guys catch them. As simple as that. No politics. No war. No backworld farmers picking up guns and declaring independence from the corruption of government. Just a good guy, and a bad guy.

Jill wiped away the few tears that clung to the skin beneath her eyes. In the black room, she sat quietly, composing herself. With the door closed, the sound suppression made the whole world seem silent. Even though she knew the mechanical hum of the antigravity generators surrounded her, all she could hear were her subtle half choked breaths.

Feeling no new tears forming in her eyes, she got up and went to the desk where, beside a number of folders and test results from her lab work, sat her portable terminal, a clear, lap sized tablet, the gentle blue glow in the upper right hand corner the only sign of power. Grabbing it, Jill went to her side of the bed and, adjusting the pillows, sat down placing the terminal against her thighs. Making a quick circular symbol across the screen, the terminal came to life, the only source of bright light in the room.

Her fingers went to work opening a new document. The background of the main page was a single picture. In it, Matt had one arm around her, his face smiling forward, while with the other hand he held out the camera and took the picture. She had her hair pulled back in a ponytail, her eyes were closed and she was kissing him on the cheek. Behind them the light green of grass filled out the rest of the frame. It was a picture from

two years before, their fourth wedding anniversary. Matt had arranged to come home from a deployment a week early and had surprised her with a full day in the Elysian countryside, including a picnic and a trip to a vineyard. Until that day, Jill had never seen a vineyard.

Before her eyes could even see the picture on the terminal screen, the same picture they had seen so many times, a blank white page appeared over it. Jaw clenched, Jill set her fingers over the keyboard. *Fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck!!!!* she smashed into the keys.

She took a deep breath and again put her head in her hands. For four nights in a row she had written on one story, finishing it, a rarity. Now all she had was a blank screen. Jill shook her head and managed to laugh a little. A blank screen with the word *Fuck* written five times and four exclamation marks. The slight sting returned to her eyes, but taking a deep breath, she held it back. Holding down the delete key, she again cleared the screen.

Alone, she sat in the dark, staring at the empty white page on the terminal, waiting for Matt to come home.