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Solar Winds

by Juliet Robinson

Everybody in my world knows that regular work is only another name for being robbed and dying of boredom. Which is why most everyone is signed up for the Habitable World Program. The lists are long, but it is possible to skip a few levels if you are suitably qualified. Of course, getting qualified is expensive. I was lucky, I had a great aunt, she had no children and when she died, she left everything to me.

I had spent that money on the best higher education I could manage. I graduated with a first in Environmental Energies. That sent me scooting up the ladder. I landed a place on the colony Neander and a ride on Solar Winds. I had counted myself lucky, I had skipped the first waves of colonisation. Things would already be off the ground and running when I got there. I had been excited.

'Join the space race, live the dream,' I muttered as I shook out my rag and started to dust down possibly the four hundredth solar panel of the day. I didn't dare look up and along the row that stretched endlessly before me. 'Fuck this shit.' I should have stayed on bloody Earth, I could have been a barista, a store worker, a teacher, anything, other than this.

My beautiful shiny education, what a waste. I should have spent that money on anything else. I had arrived at Neander to find that I was the least qualified colonist, the least experienced, the least of anything really. A bloody colony of geniuses. Instead of being an important part of the energy project I was the handyman, the maintenance boy, the grease monkey.

Well that all ended tonight. The Solar Winds was in orbit and about to return to earth. I had bribed one of the port workers and had sorted myself a ride out of here. Tonight, I was to pack myself in one of the many crates set to return to earth.

Once the ship was underway, they wouldn't waste fuel turning around for a stowaway, I would be home free.

After my shift ended, I headed to the canteen where I gorged on vat grown dross. I stuffed myself and my pockets, no sense in being a hungry stowaway. I then sauntered along to the space port, grand name for a strip of blasted dirt where I packed myself into a crate. I settled down to wait, I must have fallen asleep because the next thing I knew I was being shunted all over the place, it was a rough take off. Spaceside all the work was done by bots and drones, I didn't even have to stay quiet. I just waited patiently for them to unload me. Again, I fell asleep.

Hours later, I woke to utter silence. No engine hum, nothing. I ate, waited, and slept again. The next time I woke I was desperate for a piss. Since the silence continued, I decided to risk leaving my hidey hole. I crept from my lair with unneeded caution, the cargo bay was empty. As was the rest of the ship. No crew, no bots and only emergency lighting. Solar Winds was a ghost ship. I found a toilet and relieved myself, then headed for the bridge. This was also empty.

Unnerved I powered on the ship's AI. 'Settler Morrison, Kyle 2904. Ship where is everyone?'

'Why are you here 2904?' The ship asked.

Figuring I had nothing to lose I explained everything. After I finished, she was silent for a good while.

Finally, she spoke. 'You might want to sit down 2904.' I ignored her advice and waited for her to continue. 'My orders are to remain in orbit. I will not be making a return trip to Earth because there is no Earth to return to. Neander is the last remaining foothold of humanity in the universe.'