

## PAUSE

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“Stasis in three...two...one...”

The computerized voice falls silent, and for a long moment, the only noise in the tube is the sound of my nervous little breaths. I half expect the voice to say “Welcome to Titan,” the way I've heard it welcome me to Luna or Mars on previous trips.

When nothing happens for about a minute, I allow myself to accept to truth: *that crazy bitch did it. She actually did it.*

There's a rap on the tube door. “Wakey, wakey, Becs!” calls a sing-song voice. Not waiting for me, she slides the door open.

Lane is one extremely red-haired head shorter than me, and the pale, freckled-flecked body under it is sturdy and compact. Physically, we're almost opposites; I'm thin where she's busty and wide-hipped, long-nosed where hers is short and upturned, my skin is dark, and my hair is long and shiny-black.

On paper, I'd be “the pretty one,” I guess, but it's never worked out that way. Lane's the one who always gets the guys; she has spark, attitude, daring. The kind of daring that puts ideas in her head—for example, hacking into the stasis chambers so that we alone, out of a crew of thousands and a passenger manifest of hundreds of thousands, would be awake for the trip to Titan.

It's surreal, walking down the endless robes of tubes and seeing a silent, frozen face in every one. They're not in comas, or cryonic suspension, or any of the old, unreliable ways people used to travel over large distances in space. They're frozen in time, their eyes open, faces in whatever expression they were making at the moment the stasis chambers turned on. Row after row after row, in a cargo bay the size of a city block, and this is only one of who-knows-how-many.

“Spooky,” I say.

“Don't turn chicken on me, Thorpe,” Lane chides.

“I'm not! I just...I still don't think this is a great idea,” I say. “If Ms. McKinney finds out about this...”

“Myra is in stasis like everybody else,” Lane says. “We have the ship to ourselves for three months. Look, we worked all summer. And now we're skipping an entire year just to earn enough to graduate. Three months to get to Titan, three months slapping together a colony for these rich assholes, and then three months back. Why not enjoy ourselves on the trip instead of skipping over it in a stupid stasis tube? Who's it going to hurt?”

“Us!” I say. “We could get fired.”

“We won't get fired if we're careful and clean up after ourselves. All we need to do is get back in the tubes when we get to Titan and act like we skipped over those three months like everyone else. As long as we put everything back how it was before that, nobody will know. Oh—that reminds me.”

She stands still for a moment and winks. I hear the brief, whiney rev of an imager.

“Holo-selfie,” she explains. “So we can remember what we look like now. We'll have to style our hair the same way, use the same makeup, same clothes, everything. Ooh, speaking of which, let's take these off. Wouldn't want 'em

getting stained.”

Lane strips down right there—it's as private a place as any, even if it doesn't feel like it when



you're surrounded by people—and we change out of our crew uniforms. They're nothing fancy, just jeans and black T-shirts with the name of the company, Titanic Erections Inc, on the front. Lane slips into a tight red tank top and black skinny jeans; I toss on a sweater and my rainbow leggings.

“I still don't know about this,” I say.

“Look, let's just explore the ship,” Lane says. “Let yourself have *fun*, okay? We can always go back in the tubes if you don't enjoy yourself. I promise.”

I really am curious about the ship, so I agree. We leave the stasis tube bay and walk down a long hall, emerging into a gigantic hangar that makes the one we just left look like a broom closet. Pallets of premade housing units are stacked to a ceiling so far above us it looks hazy. It's amazing to think there's a whole city packed up in here.

After several miles (about halfway across the room), my stomach growls. Lane laughs. “Yeah, I'm starving too. Come on.”

We're a long way from the commissary, but that isn't where she's headed. Instead she ducks into a small side room stacked floor-to-ceiling with room-sized cargo crates. The first one she opens is itself crammed with flat shoebox-sized containers.

“Jackpot!” she exclaims, ripping one open. The air fills with the scent of hot pizza and freshly baked garlic bread.

“Lane!” I say.

“Whff?” she says around a mouth full of pepperoni and cheese.

“That's stealing! I mean it's one thing just to explore, that's not hurting anything, but—”

“Come on, don't tell me you're happy eating the stupid nutri-cube crap they give us when there are boxes and boxes of stasis-packed food just waiting for you, all hot and delicious and freshly prepared...” She wafts the scent over to me. I'm drooling, in spite of myself. It *does* smell delicious.

I shake my head. “What happens when they notice meals are missing?”

Lane snorts. “There are what, a million passengers on this ship? More or less. And they all ate a meal after coming aboard. So there's already a million meals missing. We could eat *ten thousand* of them and there would only be 1% more empty slots. You really think they'll notice?”

I did some quick math. For both of us over three months...Lane can absolutely inhale food when she wants, but I doubted even she could eat fifty or so of these generously-portioned meals per day.

“But... it's still stealing.”

“Is it stealing if I take one French fry off your plate?”

“Technically—”

“What if I break off half of one teeny tiny little fry in the bottom of the carton which you'll never even notice? That's what this is like, Becs. How can it be stealing in any serious way if they don't *notice*?”

Maybe it is wishful thinking, or maybe it's just that wonderful smell and my own empty stomach, but I'm starting to see her point.

“Okay,” I say.

We raid the other cargo containers. Each one has a different kind of food. I grab a Mexican dinner and open it to a taco platter with rice and beans. It's delicious. Lane goes back for seconds, this time grabbing a thick steak with mashed potatoes, and it looks so good I just have to try it.

The steak is *too* thick, as it turns out. I can't finish it.

Lane nudges me. “Clean your plate.”

“Can't. Too. Stuffed.”

“We've gotta jettison whatever you don't eat. It's a waste of food.”

“Well, unless you can magically make my stomach bigger...”

She can't, of course, but she does take the remaining half-steak and most of the mashed potatoes, piling them on her own plate to make a steak sandwich and a small potato mountain. I don't know where she finds the room, but she proceeds to polish the entire thing off.

“Mmmnn,” she says. We both check for crumbs or anything else left behind, but the floor is clean. Lane nods in approval.

“See?” she says. “There's no evidence we ever ate at all.”

“Not on the floor, anyway,” I say, looking significantly at her stomach. It's so distended with the two-and-half dinners stuffed inside that I feel queasy just looking at her.

Lane just grins and burps.

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Today we explored, as usual, and now we're relaxing by the pool, as usual, Lane licking cake crumbs off of her fingers. She folds up the empty cake box and drops it in a bulging sack of paper waste before ripping open another one. I have to admit, I thought she would get sloppy, but the place is still sparkling. She's serious about not leaving any evidence.

“Here, have a grape,” she says, flicking one at me. Well, okay, she's mostly serious. I don't open my mouth. I'm too bloated and sluggish after stuffing myself with pie and pasta for lunch, and my reactions are shot. The grape bounces off my forehead and drops into the folds of my robe.

“Nice,” Lane laughs. “Hey, find where that rolled off to, would you?” But I don't need to look; I can feel the cool bead of fruit against my skin. It fell into my cleavage.

I've never really *had* cleavage before. I probably wouldn't have much of it now if my old swimsuit wasn't so tight on me that my larger-than-I'm-used-to breasts were squashed together. I've always been pretty flat, so it's weird to be developing them, and only a decade or so late! I just wish I could credit delayed puberty, and not the fact that I've been eating like a pig for two months.

“I think it bounced over by the hot tub,” I say, feeling mischeivous. Or maybe I just want to see if she can hoist herself out of her deck chair after sucking down another gigantic lunch. She's sunk so far down into the stretchy web of plastic bands that her rear end is almost brushing the floor.

She grunts and slides half off of the chair before struggling to her feet. She stretches and scratches herself, nails scritchng against the shiny green fabric covering her midsection. Lane's always been sort of thick, but she used to be dense, compact. Now she's getting soft, her generous pot belly burying once-flat abs like a dollop of too-rich sour cream.

“Hooo-kay. Where are you, little grape?” Her water-soft feet slap out a rhythm on the wet plasticrete. With every slap, her soft flanks and wide rear end jiggle. “Okay, where is it?”

“There! Right by your foot!” I say. She looks down. I wonder if she can even see her feet. I used to wonder how she ever saw over her chest, and even though her bust has only gotten bustier, her belly is starting to scoot out ahead in the bulginess race.

I hear her grunt as she lowers herself to the tile and plops down heavily. “I don't see it.”

“You're sitting on it!”

“I don't feel anything!”

“Maybe your butt's too soft and squishy? Like the princess and the pea?”

“The princess's fat ass and the grape?”

“Something like that. Hey, Lane?”

“What?”

I pull the grape out, show it to her, and pop it in my mouth.

“Oh, fuck you, Thorpe!” She grins and flips me the bird. “You were really getting me worried.”

She slides into the bubbling jacuzzi water like a greased elephant seal and sighs. “Mmm. I'm gonna miss this. Get over here and join me?”

“Nah, I'm comfy,” I say.

“Come on! You know once our little vacation is over, we'll be doing nothing but installing these for rich jerks. Better get good and sick of them now. That way, no regrets.”

The truth is, I'm *already* kind of sick of them. Maybe I'm the sort of person who needs to work to

keep busy, or something, but I've been getting tired of just sitting around. There's only so much exploring you can do when everything is packed up, and we don't dare get too crazy with the unwrapping—we're already going to have to scrub and re-seal the pool, which is a fairly big job. Honestly, I'm actually kind of bored out of my skull, which I guess explains why I've been overeating.

I lift myself out of the chair again and meander over to the hot tub, where I see the rest of the explanation for my lack of discipline; Lane is opening up *another* box of food. “Cheesecake?” she offers. It's hard to eat in moderation with Hurricane Lane raining food on your head.

“How *can* you?” I ask. “I just watched you eat a cheeseburger, french fries, an ice-cream float, a plate of tacos, and an entire German chocolate cake! Where are you *putting* it all?”

“It's all in knowing how to pack efficiently,” she grins. She forces a piece of the rich, gooey cheesecake into my hands. “Here, practice on this.”

“Oh, god. I shouldn't.”

“Suit yourself.” She stuffs half a piece in her mouth and moans in bliss, sinking down into the warm water. The top of her belly breaches the surface, a sleek island of flesh above a churning volcano of food.

I nibble at the piece despite myself. It's good. It's *really* good, even when I'm already so stuffed I'm almost nauseated. I wiggle my toes in the hot water while Lane lies back, arms resting on the rims of the hot tub, eyes closed, as contented as a sea lion sunning herself. We chat about inconsequential things.

I'm running out of stuff to talk about. I find myself eating just to have an excuse to be silent.

I've almost finished off my piece. Lane has worked her way through four of them. She looks at the cheesecake—still half of it left—and bites her lip. “Becs, you want another piece?”

I feel my throat constrict at the thought of more food. “No,” I gag.

“Come on, Thorpe, help me out here.” She gestures to the cheesecake. “This is *not* a one-woman job.”

“Then don't eat it all now!”

“I'm not going to waste a perfectly good cheesecake,” she declares. And she doesn't—she works her way through the rest, piece by piece, until the box is empty. Her face is slick with sweat, and has taken on a pale, greenish pallor.

She holds up the back of her hand to her mouth and I see her cheeks inflate with a stifled belch.

“Oh, god. Can you die of cheesecake poisoning?”

“If you can, you're a goner.” I reach for another box.

“How about a change of pace? Maybe a nice burger?”

“Don't you dare!” Lane says. She runs a hand over her stomach, which is so full I can see it bulging even under the layer of blubber. “God, I'm gonna burst.”

“Relax, I'm joking. Like *I* need any more food, either.” I pat my middle. Okay, I haven't quite ballooned the way Lane has—maybe because I'm taller and it shows less, maybe because I usually stop eating when I'm merely stuffed to the gills instead of gorging myself to the brink of explosion, probably both—but I'm not exactly thin any more. Actually, I've probably qualified as at least 'chubby' for a couple of weeks now. At least, I've got enough of a belly now to be able to lift it up and let it fall.

“See?” I say, doing just that. “I'm getting so fat.”

“You sure are,” Lane agrees. “You're turning into a real little piglet, Thorpe.”



I laugh. “Boy, remind me not to go to *you* for comfort next time I feel insecure.” *And if I'm a piglet, you're a blue-ribbon sow*, I want to add.

“Don't worry about it.” She pats her own stomach. “We'll work off these guts soon enough. They're going to drive us like slaves on Titan.”

“Yeah, but it's going to be exhausting in the meantime, carry all that stuff along with—with all *this* stuff! And it's not like Ms. McKinney is going to go easy on use just because we're out of shape. She'll probably take one look as up and assign up *extra*—”

I freeze, horrified. My eyes meet Lane's and I can tell she just had the same awful realization.

I don't really know how we could have failed to realize that gaining so much weight would make our deception stupidly obvious. We were so focused on cleaning up after ourselves, not leaving a crumb of a clue on the *ship*, that we didn't even notice we were packing pounds of evidence onto our own bodies. We'd acknowledged we had to look the same and then...never thought about it again. We could just trim our hair and change back into our old clothes, right?

We know right away we're straight-up fucked, but like marooned spacers clinging to our last tank of air, we refuse to acknowledge the inevitable.

“Maybe we can still get into our old clothes,”

I say hopefully. Lane's eyes dart from my belly to hers and back again. Her eyes say *you're crazy* but her mouth says “Might as well give it a shot.”

I actually can still get back into my old TEI uniform, but it isn't easy, and when I look at myself in the mirror it's obvious that I've stuffed myself into too-small clothes. My jeans are bursting at the seams, my T-shirt is so tight across my breasts it's practically obscene, and the fabric around my middle clings to a pudgy donut of fat. Sucking in my stomach helps a little, but not much.

Lane is even worse off than I am. She can't get her pants over her butt, let alone zip them up, and her shirt doesn't even cover her belly. After nearly fifteen minutes of tugging fabric and squashing flab into new and exciting configurations, we give up.

“Forget it,” Lane says with a shrug. “Like it would fool anyone for a second even if I *could* get it in.”

“What are we going to do?” I whimper. Being fired will be the least of our problems. We could go to jail for this!

Lane sighs. “We'll just have to leave.”

“Leave?”

“We'll take an escape pod back to Earth. Then we can figure out what to do. Hell, we could even say we never got on the ship in the first place.”

“Will that work?”

“I don't know! If not, I'll have months to think of something better.”

I can't think of anything better, so after one more we-were-never-here sweep for garbage, we head for the pod bay. The TEI jumpsuits we change into aren't exactly stylish, but they're recommended for all small-craft piloting, and frankly, they're a lot more comfortable, since they actually fit.



Problem: the escape pod only has one stasis chamber, and stasis chambers are made for one person, not that we don't try to squeeze together anyway. A few months ago, we might have managed. Now...

"Cloff the doah," Lane says. Her words are muffled because her face is stuffed into my cleavage. My free hand flails for the door.

"Harfer!" Lane says, squashing herself forward. I feel like I'm being crushed under a warm, moist mattress. I pull harder on the handle.

"Harfer!"

"Your ass is hanging out the door!"

"Juff pull harf—"

"Ow!" I shriek. "Watch your teeth!"

"Yoah stuffid boofs are fuffofafing me!"

I pull harder, feeling like an overripe orange under a heavy juice press. Lane's lips are squashed against my left breast. Her own breasts are being forced into the depression between mine and my belly. One thick leg slips between my thighs. We're mooshed together like a couple of doughy sardines, but the door just...won't...shut. I released and yank it forward multiple times, Lane grunting as it smacks her pillowy rear.

Finally we give up and tumble, exhausted and slick with sweat, to the cabin floor. For a moment we just lie there, chests heaving.

Lane laughs wheezily. "Did...did we just have sex?"

"Not funny." Especially since, unlike Lane the Magical Mattress Maiden, I'm a virgin. "Now what are we going to do?"

"We'll have to switch off," Lane says with a shrug. "You take it for a month, then I will. Thank god we've got supplies."

So I hop in the stasis chamber alone, set the timer for a month, hit the button, and step out again a month later.

Here's thing about space travel: it takes a long time, and it's boring. If we were getting bored hanging out together on the way over, imagine how bored it's possible to be cooped up in that little pod for a month, completely alone. Lane has been that bored for a month, and

apparently she's filled the time by eating. She's gotten even *fatter*. From my perspective, she's just packed on another fifteen pounds or so in less than a minute. Even the bulky jumpsuit is starting to get tight on her. "Wow," I say. "You just—" I gesture with a hand in front of my belly. "**Bloof!**"

She grins. "And now it's *your* turn to bloof out. See you in a month!"

So here I am, and yeah, I'm bloofing. No matter how much I tell myself to lay off the food, I keep finding myself heading back to the stasis boxes piled next to the chamber, working my way through them

one by one. I can't help glancing at Lane every time, a chubby timesicle frozen in midriple and staring back sightlessly, as if she were a cautionary photo I taped to the fridge in a futile attempt to keep me on a diet.

I'm worried about TEI catching up to us eventually. I'm worried about how we're going to pay for classes now. I'm worried about what my friends will say when I come



back pushing fifty pounds heavier. I know Lane will think of a way to handle things—she always does—but the nights and the days are long and bleed together, and I have more time than I want to roll things over in my mind.

Three days until Earth, and still nothing to do but play math games like “how many helpings of pasta fit in one Rebecca?” I’m currently up to four point five, carry the pitcher of margaritas.

Boy, am I bored.

And boy, am I *full*.