

Now and for Always

Looking at himself in the mirror, Val Bradling saw the terror of his impending death stretched across his face. His brown eyes, pulled taut at their corners by the stress of the inevitable along with his usual smile, now yanked into a tight-lipped line of panic, worked in tandem to mask the horror of knowing he was staring at the reflection of a dead man.

He'd already sent the distress signal to the company, knew they would launch a rescue mission, but he realized the moment the multiple failures to both the primary and backup heating units occurred he was a goner. There would be no chance of a rescue.

Glaring at himself, he knew the time for panic was over. He and his wife Mae had weighed the risk of him spending nine months mining ore from a remote asteroid, had accepted those risks and deemed them worth the potential reward. They'd been wrong.

Or had they? Leaning in close, Val probed his own eyes, peered into his own soul that laid itself bare in the face of its own demise.

"What kind of man are you?" he asked himself. "What will you do in the next several hours before hypothermia makes any movement other than uncontrollable shivering impossible?"

The answer didn't come immediately. One minute passed, then two. Despite time being at a premium, Val didn't press. He stood repeating the same question, "What kind of man are you?"

Then, finally, three answers came in rapid succession and he knew exactly what he needed to do. Between now and the moment he took his last breath, he'd found a renewed purpose to his life now reduced to being meted out in hours instead of years.

Despite the circumstances, he smiled a knowing smile that although death would be the victor, he'd scorn it in the end. Turning from the mirror, Val headed to the communications desk inside the habitat to get the tools he needed. The laser focus of the task at hand infused him with a warmth that challenged the icy cold of interplanetary space that would perfuse the rig in short order.

Although the fringes of chill already draping itself across the nape of his neck, Val laughed, warmed by the knowledge that etching his legacy of being a husband, of being a best friend, and of being an author had become his sole purpose. He would not die alone, nor would his death be in vain. Once completed, he would live on—Now, and for always.

*

Despite what Mission Control continued to suggest, Captain Wolfe Scott knew it was going to be a recovery mission, not a rescue mission. He'd felt it in his gut the moment he'd received the emergency launch order, becoming more convinced with each day that passed as he traversed the gulf of space separating Midway Station and the outer rim asteroid belt. It was just too far to reach somebody whose salvation needed to arrive in hours, not days, especially 23 of them.

Besides, survival stories from outer rim miners, frontiersmen they liked to call themselves, were rare. Most frontiersmen could not survive even the most minor mishap. Between the remoteness of the outer rim itself, the dangerous work necessary in extracting the

precious ore and the spotty communications, the odds weren't good.

Fighting his own grim prognostications, Wolfe began his low altitude perimeter sweep over the one-man mining habitat established on an unassuming asteroid whose only moniker on the nav chart was the designation AH-681.

“Initiate active thermal scan.”

Wolfe’s copilot, Lieutenant Ridley Jensen, turned his attention to the screen between them, activated the thermal scan and watched a sea of blue cover the screen. He saw only faint outlines of the mining rig and the entire habitat's cold exterior and even colder surrounding landscape blend into a frozen conglomerate of dark blues and purples.

Turning his attention from outside, Wolfe allowed himself a peek at the thermal scan. Seeing no yellows, reds or oranges served to further reinforce his belief they would haul a victim, not a survivor back to Midway Station.

“All blue, sir,” Ridley said. “I’m not picking up any indications of thermal activity. Looks as cold as my ex’s stare right before she told me our marriage was over.”

“Right,” Wolfe replied, ignoring Ridley’s extraneous comment, preferring to keep a sterile cockpit at all times. “Let’s set down and find out once and for all if this Val Bradling is still with us. Initiate landing sequence.”

Wolfe tried to keep a ray of hope in the tone of his voice, but as he heard the words come out of his mouth, they sounded as hollow and cold as the thermal display.

“Still no contact?” Wolfe asked.

“Negative,” Ridley answered. “Nothing from him since the initial SOS received 23 days ago and all attempts to establish a signal have been unsuccessful. Been as quiet as my ex after I told her I’d been bunking with her BFF.”

Circling toward the landing collar, Wolfe lamented this duty station. He should’ve known better than to play a hand of poker with Captain Tillis, especially with a rescue duty station at stake. Never again.

“We have a hard lock, sir.” Ridley announced once ship and habitat successfully mated. “Docking collar is secure and pressurizing normally. It appears the hab still has some power. That’s better than nothing.”

“True, but likely only marginal power or we’d have picked up heat signatures.” Wolfe said too quickly. “Still,” he continued, trying to put the mission back on a more positive note, “you’re right. It’s better than nothing. Let’s suit up, and I’ll get inside and have a look.”

Descending the ladder into the habitat's cramped entry vestibule, Wolfe felt the blackness envelop him as though the habitat were swallowing him whole, its appetite for taking life not yet satiated. He paused on the lower rung of the boarding ladder, pushed the negative thoughts from his mind and activated his headlamp watching the yellow light cast a jaundiced hue through the cold, cramped space.

Reaching the bottom of the ladder, the green lights on the entry control panel showed the pressures between the collar and the inside of the habitat equalized and there was enough power to open the door.

“All lights green. Power is a go.” Wolfe radioed to Ridley, who waited fully suited in the

ship above. Pressing the green button, the vestibule door slid inside its recess, allowing Wolfe to step in.

There was no light beyond the circle of yellow from his own headlamp. Instinctively, he powered it off, hoping to catch even the faintest light source from elsewhere within. Instead, met with perfect blackness, the resulting claustrophobia oozed into him. Slowly counting to three, he focused on peering as deep into the blackness as it peered at him, hoping to catch sight of any other illumination. There was nothing.

Turning his headlamp back on, Wolfe entered the living module noting how orderly everything was. It appeared nobody had ever occupied the space. He paused just inside and turned in a circle, making sure his eyes scanned as much as he could for clues of what may have happened.

Someone neatly made the sleep pod at the back of the room, the blanket aligned on the mattress, the pillow perfectly fluffed and centered at the head. The small cooking area was devoid of any debris and all flat surfaces, cooking and otherwise, shined with a fresh coat of polish. The small desk that doubled as the communications center was clutter free, only the keyboard, trackball and monitor occupied the space.

Curious, Wolfe thought. In his experience, frontiersman had proven to be a messy lot. They didn't play by anybody's rules other than their own and rarely possessed any proclivity for neatness. Clearly, whoever this Val Bradling was, he'd been cut from a different cloth.

A narrow corridor at the end of the living chamber led to the mining operations room, the only other place where Val could be, if he were inside the hab at all.

“Ridley?”

“Go ahead, Chief.”

“Have you synched up with the habs communications center?”

“Just got online, sir.”

“Anything?”

“Just gained access. Give me a moment to take a peek.”

“Rog. I’m headed into the ops center.”

“Copy.”

The narrow confines of the corridor leading to the ops center amplified the headlamp's luminosity, causing a glare on the inside of his visor. Wolfe paused, turned down the lumen output until it was sufficiently low enough to restore his vision, allowing him to see into the ops center.

As soon as he crossed the threshold and entered the ops room, Wolfe found what they were looking for. He turned the lumen output on his headlamp back to maximum as he spied Val Bradling sitting at the operations control desk, his back facing him. Although he couldn’t see Val’s face, Wolfe saw that his exposed neck and hands were as blue as the thermal image screen had been; devoid of heat, devoid of life.

“Ridley.”

“Go, Chief.”

“Found him. Initial observations indicate a recovery mission.” He glanced at his wrist display for the time. “Mission elapsed time, +23 days, 16 hours, 3 minutes.”

“Copy. I’ll notify Control. Do you have a cause?”

“Not yet. No immediate trauma observed. He’s sitting at the ops desk with his back to me.”

“Copy that Chief. Hold on a minute. I’m looking at the habs environmental control systems. It looks like a thermal regulator malfunctioned and the backup control circuit fried. Our guy froze to death, didn’t stand a chance. He wouldn’t have had that long either. Looking at the graph, the temps plummeted quickly, almost as quickly as my ex drained my bank account. My guess is he had less than 5 hours.”

If that were true, Wolfe thought, why hadn’t he found Val in his sleep chamber under the thick blanket or, at the very least, why hadn’t he wrapped himself in an emergency blanket?

“Not sure about that, Ridley. He’s still in his work coveralls with a thin long sleeve shirt underneath. No emergency blanket, nothing.”

“Huh. Odd duck. Then again, most Frontiersmen are.”

Wolfe considered this for a moment before answering. “Normally, I’d agree with you, but our Val Bradling is different. Everything here is in order, nothing out of place. All is as it should be. I’ve seen enough of these frontiersmen to know this guy is an aberration.”

Taking his eyes from the corpse, he did another 360-turn, taking in the ops center. Like the hab, the mining rig was in order, the grease and oil glistening on the piston inside the small derrick, applied without excess. The tool rack, like everything else, was immaculate and in order

and the storage bins, full of copper ore, stood stacked and labeled. The usual coating of silicate dust that one would expect to find inside a mining drill was absent.

Completing the circle, Wolfe walked around the desk to put a face to the name. Where it not for the disconcerting pale white and blue tint of his skin, Wolfe could tell Val had been a handsome man.

There was no grimace on his face, no look of shock, no countenance of pain, just a blank stare. His mouth was agape, like he was in mid-sentence and, if thawed, would pick right back up where he'd left off.

Still committed to his primary mission, Wolfe took a small bio-sensor finger clasp from his med kit and slipped it onto Val's frozen middle finger. The result was immediate; there was no heartbeat. He felt foolish for having to perform such an inane task, but he knew if there ever was an inquiry, he'd be able to testify he'd done everything as defined in the mission parameters.

Having completed his primary mission objective, he turned his attention to the recovery mission. He allowed himself a brief pause to adjust his thinking, to switch gears, allowing him to look at Val, not as a potential survivor, but as a victim.

Instead of looking at Val with a clinical eye, he wanted to see him in the human light. He knew most other pilots didn't possess this viewpoint. It didn't matter to them if it were a corpse or a sack of potatoes, pilots just wanted to get paid as well as accumulate flight time. Wolfe knew Captain Tillis was that sort of pilot. Maybe losing that hand wasn't so bad after all.

With this new viewpoint, Wolfe took in the scene and noticed a lanyard hanging around Val's neck. Instead of the usual identification tags at the end, a playing card sized rectangle of

metal rested on the outside of Val's coveralls. Although he could see handwriting on the metal, Wolfe stood too far away to make out what it said. Must be a magnetic key card, Wolfe thought.

He shifted his gaze to the tabletop which, like everything else so far, was in order. Only a pen, a pad of white legal paper and a stack of envelopes, their edges aligned, occupied the space.

Puzzled, Wolfe picked up the stack and read the top envelope.

Mae Bradling

1 Co-op number 05, Aristarchus Base, Moon

"His wife." Wolfe whispered aloud, having read Val's full bio on the trip out from Midway Station.

"Ridley, get down here with some thermal heaters and a body bag. We've got a long road ahead of us."

He read the addresses written on the two remaining envelopes. Both were Earth bound. On the upper left-hand corner of each envelope, instead of a return address, Val had written a number. Mae's envelope had the number one, an Isaac Vander's had number two. There was no name on envelope three, only an address in Los Angeles, CA. Placing the envelopes in the satchel slung over his shoulder, Wolfe leaned across the table to read what Val wrote on the metal rectangle. "Whoever may find me, please deliver these envelopes, in numerical order." Wolfe read aloud.

Wolfe met the icy stare of the man who sat frozen across from him. "Don't worry, Val. I'll see to it these get delivered as requested. I'll hand deliver them myself if need be."

Envelope 1

As a lunar geologist, Mae Bradling loved Aristarchus crater. While most lay people visiting Aristarchus Base tired of the moon's gray on gray color palette, Mae delighted in how the regolith glittered in the sunlight.

Bunny-hopping along the fine powdered surface toward the south air lock of Aristarchus Base's laboratory module, Mae paused to look at the sight of the Earth hanging high in the black sky.

She always thought of Val when she saw the Earth. Like Earth, Val represented home. Not so much as a location, or destination, but as a waypoint, an anchor that kept her centered. She never thought she could miss somebody as strongly as she missed him. Since they'd met and married 24 months ago, they'd never been further apart than the 238,000 miles between Earth and Moon, and that had only been for a few short weeks while she finished her first job on the dark side while Val gathered his belongings and moved to Aristarchus Base to live with her.

With Val now tumbling through space on an asteroid somewhere between Mars and Jupiter, she felt alone and disconnected. Her anchor was too far away. Although she supported Val's dream of becoming a published author, and had agreed to the decision to pursue the financial independence that would come once he completed the nine-month stint mining copper ore at the outer rim, she'd not been able to shake the foreboding that they'd made the wrong decision.

Marveling at the blue and white orb hanging in the blackness of space, she recalled the night they sat in their small apartment staring at the Earth rise.

It was the last self-imposed technology-free night they enjoyed as a couple. All computers and communication devices turned off, they sat in silence looking out at the shimmering lunar surface, watching the Earth rise above it.

Feeling the sharp barbs of emptiness, she recalled how they had talked and discussed if he should take the mining job or not, remembering how they had weighed the risk vs. rewards, how, despite the worry, it seemed to be the right move and worth the risks. She wasn't as sure now as she'd been that night.

However, when he returned in four months' time, he'd have made enough money to dedicate two full years to writing and publishing a novel. If successful, he'd never have to be gone again.

"Mae," her friend Carissa's voice crackled in her helmet's earpiece, breaking her moment of recollection. "You've got visitor waiting for you in lobby A-4, a Captain Wolfe Scott."

Mae's forehead crinkled in confusion. She'd never heard the name, and it wasn't like Aristarchus Base was a place just anybody would pop in to pay a social call.

"Did he state his business?" Mae asked.

"No. Only that it was imperative he see you immediately. He has verified credentials. He's a pilot for Tred Corp."

Mae's heart skipped a beat. Why would a pilot from the mining company be paying her a visit? A poisonous mix of dread and fear pooled in her consciousness.

"I'll be right in," she said, trying to sound unconcerned, trying to inject aplomb as an antivenom.

After shedding her helmet, Mae approached lobby A-4, still clad in her lunar suit, ignoring regulations. She spotted Captain Scott right away. He, like most pilots, was handsome, but in a serious, no-nonsense way.

“Captain Scott. I’m Mrs. Bradling. How can I help you?”

She recognized the look in his eyes, a combination of warmth and pity mixed with sadness and sorrow. She broke his gaze and looked away. The poison in her mind flooded into her stomach. The reaction, visceral. She had to concentrate not to throw up.

He didn’t utter a word, just held out a plain white envelope. She recognized the scrawl belonging to Val. War erupted inside her. On one side, she wanted to rip the envelope from this stranger's grip, run straight to the incinerator, and then go back to her lunar excavations.

The other side of her wanted to turn away and pretend nothing had happened. Just go back to bed, wake up in the morning where everything would be new again, where nothing would be amiss. The one thing both sides could agree on, neither wanted to read the contents of the envelope.

He extended his hand toward her, the envelope almost touching her ungloved hand. She recoiled, not wanting to touch it for fear it would spring to life and belch its horrible contents all over her.

“No!” she yelled. Her knees buckled, unable to support her weight, even in 1/6th gravity. “I won’t!”

Captain Scott stood firm. His eyes and stoic countenance said everything. They told her she had to ignore every fiber of her being that screamed not to touch the contaminated thing he

held. Told her she had to, that if she didn't, she would dishonor Val's last wish.

Without a word she snatched the envelope from his hand, turned from him and headed toward the empty apartment where only months before she and Val both had decided the rewards of financial independence to pursue becoming an author were worth the risks. How long ago that now seemed. How silly and foolish they'd been.

After shedding her suit and making her way back to their apartment, Mae sat at the kitchen table and held the envelope, rubbing the miniscule depressions the ink had made in the smooth paper. Like dousing for her soulmate, she hoped to pick up Val's presence, knowing his hand had rested on its surface.

It took a full hour and several glasses of wine before she could unseal the envelope and pull the sheets of paper out as if she was removing a corpse from a paper-thin sarcophagus. Unfolding the papers, she read Val's last words.

My Dearest Baby Doll,

You have changed me. There was a version of me, a boy, that existed before we met and a version of me, a man, that came into being after we met. I speak to you now from the great beyond, with the youthful exuberance of a boy delivering a message that not just any man, but only your man, can deliver.

I know you will cry, but please shed tears not of sorrow because of what's been lost, but cry tears of joy that it happened. That, because of the miracle of this letter, the miracle of writing, I will continue to speak to you. As long as you have these words, I will continue to whisper into your mind and caress both your heart and soul—Now, and for always.

It took many more hours to read the rest of his letter but once finished, despite feeling loneliness more pronounced than she could recall ever feeling, buried deep within that oceanic numbness was a small ember of hope and love.

“Only Val could do something like this,” she half mumbled, half whimpered to nobody.

Having moved from the kitchen table to the couch, she looked out over the lunar surface, holding the letter in her hand. She needed to read it again, had to read it again, compelled to read every single word once more, twice more, as many times as necessary. The words, his words, his voice spoken from beyond the outer rim, resonating within her mind, her heart, and her soul.

Despite the loss, Mae smiled. She looked at the sharp lines that cut between gray regolith and the blackness of shadow and marveled at how that boundary represented how she felt. How, although gone, Val was still there telling her everything was going to be alright.

Mae got up and walked toward the window, and craned her neck upward. At the top of the windowpane, barely visible, Earth hung alone in space. It was no longer home, no longer a way point nor a destination, but a symbol. A symbol of what had been lost, but also a beacon of what could still be and an invitation of what still needed to be done.

Val had left her his last wishes and she would do everything in her power to see they were accomplished.

Envelope 2

Isaac Vander loved the view of the Golden Gate Bridge rising through the Bay Area fog. As he punched his Vennier jump craft through the upper tendrils of the fog bank, he felt his heart rate increase, felt the rush of adrenaline beginning to course into his veins. He inserted his antique cassette tape into the player and cranked the volume as Mötley Crüe “Kick Start My Heart” began blaring.

It had been a good day. After sleeping in for a bit, he’d taken the Vennier for a quick trip up the coast to his favorite Peruvian restaurant to have lunch with his wife. For a Tuesday afternoon, the joint had been empty and their usual place at the corner of the bar overlooking the Pacific Ocean as the fog rolled in was both relaxing and hypnotic.

A collision warning light flashed on the Vennier’s display as Isaac deftly guided the ship around a light spire, then dipped the craft down into the thick of the fog. The windshield adjusted for the lack of visibility and projected the layout of the bridge below and the city beyond as he flew the rest of the way home.

Air traffic was light, and ground control had given landing clearance immediately upon request, which only heightened his good mood. Usually, the airspace was packed full of out-of-country and off-world pilots that didn’t seem to understand how simple municipal air traffic worked.

Upon arrival back at this condo, locking the craft, Isaac continued to whistle Mötley Crüe as he made his way to the elevators when he noticed a man clad in a military trench coat, both hands buried deep in the pockets. He wore an officer’s side cap and dark blue uniform pants complete with a sharp pleat down each leg and black shoes that gleamed despite the diffuse

lighting afforded by the fog.

“How ya doin’?” Isaac asked, reaching the elevators.

“You’re Isaac Vander, correct?”

Isaac stopped and pressed the button for the elevator. “And you are?”

“Captain Wolfe Scott. I have something for you from your friend, Val Bradling.”

He withdrew his right hand from his trench coat pocket and extracted an envelope. Isaac spied his best friend's unmistakable handwriting with his address printed on it. He also noted the number 2 in the upper left corner.

“This is for you,” Wolfe continued.

Without a word, Isaac took the envelope as the elevator doors opened. Wolfe turned and walked toward the garage exit as Isaac stepped into the elevator and punched the button for the 97th floor.

Even though he could feel himself rising above the city, he felt his mood beginning to stall. He entered his condo, poured himself a drink, not caring about the early hour, plopped onto the couch, opened the envelope and read.

Under normal circumstances, I'd begin this letter by calling you any host of names other than the one digitized on your birth certificate. Something like Capuchin Monkey Miscreant or Dutch Anal Weevil, but because of the somber nature of this communique, I shall begin with:

Dear Isaac,

Ever since that fateful day in third grade when I walked up to you and asked if you liked Nano Blocks, I've been lucky to call you my best friend. We've been through the good times and the bad. We've reveled in our successes and cried with our disappointments.

As I'm sure you've already figured, I won't be coming back from my latest adventure on the outer rim, but this is nothing to be sad about, for my greatest achievement hasn't come from adventures traveled, places seen, or worlds explored but has come from being able to learn what it means to be a best friend.

For without you walking with me through life, sometimes guiding or directing and when needed giving me tough love, I never would've learned what it took to be a best friend.

I recall you telling me once how much you appreciated being in "the stands of life" able to sit safe and anonymous as you watched me walk confidently to the plate, unafraid to face any pitcher, even when I would strike out over and over.

I spent a good amount of time in the stands watching you as well, my friend. Perhaps as a batter you possessed a bit more timidity, but you also possessed more patience. Thus, I learned from you as well. For through you, I learned the power of waiting for my pitch, then unleashing all I had.

Through our friendship, I've learned how to be a better man, which has allowed me to become the greatest thing I could ever aspire to be: a great husband. Mae has been the benefactor of all our years together.

I've loved well. Loved with ferocity and with all of my being, able to be not only her

husband but her best friend as well...thanks to you and all we built together.

What I accomplished, what I provided Mae, and the love I received from you both have been because of our friendship. That's legacy stuff right there, man.

So, thank you. Thank you for laughing at my jokes when they weren't all that funny. Thank you for being understanding when I spray painted the inside of your closet because of an errant dart throw. Thank you for never getting mad at all the times I pointed out you had a booger when you were standing in front of a cute girl. And thank you for all the weirdness. You've done more than left your distinctive fingerprint on me. You've also touched Mae by proxy. Thank you!

There's no other fitting way to close this letter than to regress back to the known, revert to the familiar, and relapse to the recognizable and customary.

Later Ya Smelly Douche Salad

Isaac sat, hands trembling, a tear tracing down his cheek as he stared out the window, his 97th floor condo. Most days, his unit sat above the fog bank. Not today. Fitting, he thought. Although he knew the sun was shining, all he could see was the blank white mist of nothingness.

"Computer," he said aloud, "Call Mae Bradling on speaker."

"Calling Mae Bradling," the electronic voice responded.

Half an hour later, after shedding more tears, Isaac hung up and walked to his bedroom to pack.

Envelope 3

“You sure about this, Chief?” Ridley asked as the two of them stood on the busy sidewalk across from the beige concrete and glass building along Hollywood Boulevard.

Wolfe was sure, but that didn’t dilute the hesitation deep in the marrow of his bones. Despite the overwhelming curiosity, he’d not read any of the letters but had done what duty compelled him to do; deliver the letters as promised.

The consummate professional, Wolfe had received special privilege from Space Command to travel from Midway Station to Aristarchus Base and to Earth to fulfill that duty.

After delivering the second envelope in San Francisco, he and Ridley now stood in front of 7051 Hollywood Boulevard in Los Angeles, California, home to Galaxy Press.

“Are you still with me, Chief?” Ridley asked, prompting him out of his musing.

“What? What did you ask?” Wolfe asked.

“I said, are you sure about this? What the hell is Galaxy Press, anyway? I mean, who knows what Val wrote? What if it’s some time bomb of information? What if they confuse, or worse yet, suspect you of being the author of whatever that whack-a-do may have written?”

Wolfe wanted to tell Ridley to shut up. He’d already gone through every what if and worst-case scenario imaginable, plus a few extras for good measure, but as any outstanding pilot knew, there was a difference between possible and probable.

While it was possible, the letter contained some volatile information that could cause trouble for him, Wolfe didn’t think it was probable, basing that belief on what he’d seen inside

the habitat. It was clear Val was not like the other Frontiersman. Instead of being reckless, wild with the ambition of making quick money, Val was a deliberate man, prone to being careful, cautious and exacting rather than foolhardy.

Besides, after delivering the first two envelopes to Mae and Isaac, Wolfe had become convinced of what he'd suspected to be true all along; Val had sacrificed warmth and refuge in blankets that he knew would only prolong the inevitable in lieu of writing to his loved ones.

A man of that character, able to face his own mortality alone on a far-off rock tumbling through space, was not likely the type who would write anything inflammatory. A man like that was more prone to write something of value rather than waste it on hate or prejudice.

“Anything’s possible, Ridley, but I don’t...”

“...Think it’s probable?” Ridley completed the sentence, having heard that phrase almost every day since being assigned as Wolfe’s co-pilot. “But there’s still the mystery of who we’re going to give this letter to. There’s no name on the envelope.”

“A man like Val didn’t waste his time on anything superfluous. He was methodical. Remember the condition of his mining rig? You saw it. You know. They’re caked with grease and oil, there’s grit on everything. That rig and that entire hab had been kept immaculate. And yet he was a frontiersman. He’d agreed to be there. A man like that had his own opinions of things, had his own ideas of how things should be done and must have something important to say.”

Ridley didn’t answer.

“We’ll go see the editor. Let’s see how far we can take this thing. That’s the least we

can do.”

*

Melvin Conner, President of Galaxy Press walked into the anteroom of his office from his lunch meeting with the Writers of the Future contest director to find two men standing in front of his executive secretary’s desk, both clad in pressed and sharp dress blue military-style uniforms.

“Mr. Conner,” his secretary Nancy said when she spied him walk into the room. “These two men are pilots from the Tred Corporation and they have an urgent message to deliver.”

Melvin rolled through his memory, but the name Tred Corporation was not a name that rang any bells.

Before he could protest, the taller of the two men stepped forward and said, “Sir, I won’t take any of your time as I know it must be valuable, I’m only here to deliver this.” He withdrew an envelope and held it out for Melvin to take.

Unsure of what was happening, Melvin paused. “Who are you, and who is this from?”

“I wish I had more information for you, sir,” the man said. “My name is Captain Wolfe Scott. I’m a pilot for the Tred Corporation. We’re the outfit that mines ore from the asteroid belt. We recently lost a miner because of a malfunction with the thermal heating unit. Upon finding the deceased, I found three envelopes and a wish from the deceased, a Mr. Val Bradling, to hand deliver them. Yours is the last of the three envelopes I vowed I would deliver. Beyond that, I have no further information. I didn’t read the letters to know what they contained, sir.”

“I’m sorry for your loss, Captain,” Melvin said sincerely. “I have no recollection of a Mr.

Bradling, but I'll relieve you of your duty and take the envelope."

Melvin took the envelope.

"Thank you, sir," Wolfe said.

With no further word, both men turned and walked out of the anteroom. With envelope in hand, Melvin headed into his office. After checking his most urgent messages, he slit the top of the envelope open, slid out the paper, and read the hand-written letter.

Dear Mr. Conner,

My name is Val Bradling. I'm an unremarkable man who, to this point, has done some unremarkable things. If I were still alive, you'd have no reason to read the rest of this letter, as what I'm going to say is not something that hasn't been said before. It has. But because I'm dead and because I'm writing to you from the threshold of death itself, because with my last breath I'm writing the following prose, I will become a sufficiently remarkable man who is doing a sufficiently remarkable thing to be heard.

The purpose of this letter is to ask that you fulfill a dream of mine. I know you're the President of Galaxy Press, the publisher of the L. Ron Hubbard Writers of the Future Anthology. How do I know this? I've been a contestant for the past five years.

From an early age, I've aspired to be an author. Not a writer, but an author. There's a difference. A writer is a fisherman with a single hook at the end of a single pole who catches fish one at a time. An author, on the other hand, has been published. As such, they cast a wide net and catch many fish at one time.

All of us are writers. It matters not if you send an email, type out a text or send a note in

your kid's lunch box. All of us are writers. Only a rare few get published.

When I was in third grade, I wrote my first short story titled, "Callisto Base 1". It was the story of an expedition to Jupiter's second largest moon, but the ship only carried enough fuel for the trip there, the crew thinking there was a gas station on Callisto. Much to their dismay, no such gas station existed.

That story got no further than my mother and father, who lovingly patted me on the head and pointed out mission planners would've never allowed that to happen. From that point on, I dabbled here and there, writing a story when inspiration struck. Life continued on, but when I discovered the quarterly Writers of the Future contest, I wrote in earnest. With purpose. With conviction. That was five years ago.

I entered a story every quarter for each of those five years. Five years, twenty stories. Of those twenty stories, I received eight honorable mentions and one silver honorable mention. Some might say that equates to a 45% success rate. I both agree and disagree.

The initial impetus for entering the contest was to determine if I possessed any true writing talent. That's where I agree with the 45% success rate. I unquestionably have writing talent. But after 5 years, I've made no progress. No improvement. I've never placed higher than Silver Honorable Mention.

I'm a talented writer, but clearly not talented enough. I've seen first-time entrants win the whole enchilada. THEY have enough talent. I don't.

Knowing I've only got a few hours left to live and my dream of becoming a published author is near its end, literally and figuratively, this is my Hail Mary pass with seconds left in the

game. I'm hoping for a miracle.

The type of miracle that only comes from the written word. The miracle that I love so much about writing, the intimacy shared between author and reader. The intimacy whispered between only two, safe in the confines of the mind, the hallways of the heart, and the inner passageways of the soul.

As I sit and write these words to you, words of other authors, some long gone, still reverberate inside my mind and heart. Some murmur encouragement, some yell at the tops of their lungs. In either case, those authors' voices, their souls, and their spirits live on. So too is my wish to have my words cast in a wide net to be shared with the minds of all those who will read them.

Before leaving my new bride for a 9-month stint mining ore on this God-forsaken rock, I re-wrote the short story that garnered me the Silver Honorable Mention award and it is ready for submission into the upcoming quarter.

As anonymity is paramount to the integrity of the contest, I've always submitted under a pseudonym, so my identity will remain unknown. The first letter I wrote when I knew my life was nearing its end was to my wife. In that letter I asked she submit the story for me. Should a miracle of miracles occur and I place 1st, 2nd, or 3rd, you will have nothing to do and you will be none-the-wiser. However, should it not win, she will contact you and I ask that you publish my story, not as a contest winner, but as a contributing author in the anthology. Her name is Mae Bradling.

Thank you for keeping the Writers of the Future contest alive, for providing the proving grounds for the voices of the future. I only wish my voice had been more unique, more adept, and

more skillful to have reached a wider audience, for most of my stories were about love and goodness. About positivity and the healing power of forgiveness. I strove to highlight the inherent goodness in humanity and not focus on the opposite.

While I was not the most skillful artisan, even in my dying moments, I stand by and am confident my stories were free of any true blemish and am proud of the message I so desperately yearned for all to read.

The message that love conquers all. For it's the love I possess for my wife, the love for my best friend, and the love of the written word that is perfect and free from blemish. It's love that has given me not only the courage to face death, but to laugh in its face.

Thank you again to you and all those in author services for everything they do.

Best,

Val Bradling

With a quivering hand, Melvin sat back in his chair, reread the last paragraph again, then set the letter on his desk. It took a lot to move him, but he had to admit, the letter moved him. If half of what the letter contained was true, he realized he was sitting on something special indeed.

He leaned forward, pressed the intercom button that connected him to Nancy.

“Yes, sir?”

“Nancy, please get Gretchen on the line and have her come to my office immediately.”

“Yes, sir.”

Melvin picked up the letter, shuffled the papers back into their numerical order, and reread the letter in its entirety.

*

Isaac and Mae sat in a small, rounded booth in the back corner of the diner at Aristarchus Base. The silence that hung with a pall of sadness was not borne from being uncomfortable with one another, far from it. In the six months since Val's passing, they'd been in almost constant contact. Instead, their silence came from the somber task they would perform in a few hours.

A server appeared at their table, holding a carafe of coffee. "Can I get either of you two a refill?"

"None for me," Mae responded.

"I'm good," Isaac replied.

"I've got your check then, no rush," she said, laying the pay tablet next to the laptop between Mae and Isaac, but not before sneaking a peek at the image displayed on the screen.

"I couldn't help but see your screen," the server said. "Have you read that book that just came out?"

Mae turned the screen toward the server. "Yes, we've read *Fractal*. What did you think?"

"My book club just read it. Where did this Val Bradling come from? For a debut author, I thought it was fantastic. I mean, whoever this Val Bradling guy is, I hope he writes another book soon!"

Mae nodded in acknowledgment.

“We know what you mean,” Isaac replied for the both of them.

“Well, whenever you’re ready,” the server said again before turning and walking away.

Isaac grabbed the check. “Leave it to Val to continue to make an impression even though he’s...” he cut his sentence short.

“It’s okay, Isaac,” Mae said, saving him from what would have been an uncomfortable situation. “You’re right. Leave it to Val.”

“And to think,” Mae continued, “the miracle of miracles happened. Leave it to Val to win the Golden Pen award on his own, with nobody being the wiser. Still, to have gone the extra step and connected with Melvin at Galaxy Press who have been more than willing to publish his debut novel.”

“I’m just happy it all worked out the way it did,” Isaac said. “Well, I mean...”

“Don’t worry,” Mae said. “I know what you mean.”

“You ready to do this?” Isaac asked.

Mae closed her eyes, nodded her head and took in a deep breath. “Ready as I’ll ever be.”

*

Mae bunny-hopped from the airlock and out onto the lunar surface. Once clear of the threshold, she turned to help Isaac if need be. It was the first time he’d been on the moon and learning to bunny-hop always proved somewhat difficult for first-timers.

Isaac stepped out of the airlock and took a few bounces before he found his rhythm.

“You got this,” Mae said, impressed by how quickly he’d figured it out. “Follow me, but stay well behind. If you need anything, just say so.”

“Gotcha.”

Mae turned and made her way to the excavation site where she’d been doing a bit of prospecting along a nearby ejecta blanket. It was imperative to give anybody who might watch from Aristarchus control the illusion she was there to do legitimate work. After ten minutes, they’d arrived at the work site.

“Okay, we’re here. Just stand behind me and make sure you stay between me and Aristarchus Base,” Mae instructed.

She reached into her tool kit, extracted a collapsible shovel with telescoping handle and took small scoopfuls of the bright regolith and move it aside.

“You’re not going to put him inside that hole, are you?” Isaac asked.

“Of course not, but this will give any prying eyes the illusion that I’m doing work and not breaking international law.”

She worked in silence for another 15 minutes, then turned so her back was facing Aristarchus Base. Isaac took his cue and joined her. They stood side by side, waiting.

Soon enough, beginning to peek above the sharp gray line that was the lunar horizon, the Earth rose. Mae unzipped the small storage pocket on her wrist, extracted a test tube sized vial from it, marveling how closely the gray ashes inside matched the regolith surrounding them.

“He asked me to marry him here,” Mae said. “Not at this spot, but at Aristarchus Base.”

Isaac remained silent, out of respect for the moment.

“I’ll never forget the moment he arrived at Aristarchus Base for the first time. He’d traveled to visit me aboard a low-budget shuttle that crash landed at an outpost over an hour from here. I’m sure you’ve heard the story, but he’d gotten locked in the lavatory when it crashed and, well, let’s just say he didn’t smell good.”

Isaac couldn’t help letting out a snicker. That was one thing about Val, he reflected. Only he had these crazy things happen to him.

“As if that weren’t enough,” Mae continued, “there was a guy who’d been obsessed with having to leave his pet chicken back on Earth. Val called him Chicken Man. Turns out, Earth Launch Control wouldn’t allow a chicken on board, but allowed this freak to carry a charged plasma pistol aboard whereby Chicken Man discharged it on the rescue bus on their way here. Val tackled the guy, but broke his finger. He did, however, get the pistol away from him before everybody lost consciousness because of the depressurization caused by the hole Chicken Man created.”

Lost in recalling that first day they’d spent at Aristarchus Base, Mae felt tears well. “But no matter how badly he smelled from the spilled contents of the lavatory,” she continued, “despite the splint on his broken finger, regardless of how haggard he looked, when he saw me, his eyes sparkled. And those eyes never lost that sparkle.”

Mae looked down at the shimmering regolith and saw the surface sparkling. The entire surface had become as iridescent as Val’s eyes had been whenever he looked at her. She

unscrewed the cap on the vial and poured his ashes onto the prismatic surface so that he became one with the sparkling landscape.

The small ember of hope and love that Val had stoked with his letter to her caught fire and Mae knew, for the first time in months, she was going to be okay.

Although she would never see his face again, she realized that whenever she looked upon the moon's surface he'd be there, with eyes glittering and shining with love for her and that love would remain undisturbed - Now and for Always.

The End

