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Sincerely,

Viacheslav Lazurin



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The Light of Forgotten Times

Written by **Viacheslav Lazurin**

Illustrated by **Thomas Nackid**



I see it again—the flash of a white, pulsing glow. It is born in the darkness of space, right outside the porthole. Looks like a shining flower, growing from the crack between dimensions. In this silent fire, its petals tremble and spark. I push the cold glass with shaking fingertips. My eyes do not hurt, though the all-consuming whiteness flows into my head. Touches memories. Rings. Vibrates.

I lay my head in my palms, feeling the cold sweat. It isn't possible. Am I finally mad? Indeed I am. And if they know, if they find out...they will take me back to Earth. Under the water. To maintain filtrating machines, full of blood.

With effort, overcoming the fear, I look there again. The space is empty. That light has gone.

I hit the porthole with my feet, and gentle hugs of zero gravity take me to the control panel. I pretend to look calm in case hidden cameras record me. The only man on such a big spacecraft cannot be without supervision. Paranoia. I have been working here for nine weeks and still have not detected any spy devices.

As usual, I let the chair restrain me with automatic belts. As usual, I run the standard verification program before lights out.

Initialization.

Please wait.

Module 1 – test passed.

Module 2 – test passed...

Green messages pop up in the log monitor one by one. They are hard to read due to afterimages in my eyes. White pulsing glow. Trembling petals of light. So calm. Hypnotizing...

Module 19 – test passed.

System status – Ok.

No human action required.

Thank you.

You are welcome, Sister. See you tomorrow.

I spit upwards watching how the saliva reaches the ceiling and explodes into glittering drops. They fly into the ventilation shaft. I can't get rid of this taste. The salt reminds me of sweat running down my face onto my lips. Another gravity-related memory. I leave the sleeping chamber and soar into the bathroom. I clean my teeth and tongue with a hygienic laser, but the taste doesn't disappear. Well, it seems there is only one solution. Normally, it takes two bubbles of beer to turn things around.

It happens every morning. I wake up with a headache and the taste of salt in my mouth. Then I fly to the bar to fix it. At least the beer is good. Made of high-quality seaweed. Once, I heard it used to be made of grain, but I don't know what grain is. The Sister probably does; however, that's not why I go to her now, having consumed my regular dose of beer. She is a powerful AI, and she must tell me something.

Initialization. Please wait. Enable verbal interaction?

I tap the green affirmation button and hear her voice.

“Good morning, sir.”

“Morning, sister of an engineer mister! How are we doing?”

“Orbit stable. Currently above day side of Earth. Data on atmosphere activity reported ahead of schedule.”

“Excellent. Now I need a report on all objects passing us since the beginning of the week.

“Please wait. Data being analyzed. Data being analyzed. Data being... Within requested time frame, zero objects discovered.

“What radius have you tried?”

“Twenty-five standard space miles.”

“Is that the max?”

“View range limited because high priority job takes over 90 percent of NPU power. Exceeding current view range limit requires approval of senior engineer on Earth. Request approval?

“No! I mean...no need... How big should an object be so you can detect it?”

“More parameters required. Dependent on my position according to Sun and Earth. Dependent on ability of an object to reflect light and radio waves. Dependent on speed and...

“Please stop! If it’s as big as me, will you see it?”

“Object of such size will be detected with a high degree of probability.”

“Thank you, Sister. Clean the logs of this session.”

“Logs removed. Good morning, sir.”

“End of session!”

Bon appetit. Whenever we had food, my mother used to say those weird words. She never explained what they meant. She kept saying words I did not understand. Island. Land. Seagull. That was her attempt to make me curious. To make me ask something.

Not the best way to cure a mute.

Then she smiled. Then she wept.

Hanging in the middle of the kitchen, I open the nutrition pack. Fish and seaweed, plus vitamin supplements. The stuff has not changed since my childhood. It's the same color as the Earth that moves behind the portholes. Dark brown. That's the shade of the water covering the entire planet.

“Sister, do you know what ‘bon appetite’ means?”

“Please wait. Data being analyzed.... No references found.”

I was twelve when I finally started speaking. Still, I didn't ask her this before it was too late.

I leave the empty pack in the air and approach the porthole. There, beneath the dark clouds, I imagine how one of the cities floats to the surface of the ocean. I imagine a huge mass of metal with towers, domes, and mechanical limbs. Slowly, confronting the gravity, it raises against the sky that cursed

humankind hundreds of years ago. The sky replies with thunder, when dozens of gateways open and release men and droids, rushing to do essential maintenance. They have little time before the storm, which can smash their home into junk. They readjust the outer locators, fix broken turbines, and get rid of giant piles of flesh covering the armored skin. Chainsaws cut long tentacles off to free the hull of the ship. Gravity cannon killed the creatures before the city surfaced. This time, it isn't that bad: only krakens and hydras. Had there been at least one medusa, there would have been a risk of electromagnetic strike. With a deafening roar, oxygen collectors grab the air—the city takes a deep breath. Somewhere inside, the AI called Brother looks for signals from the Sisters in space. The Sisters know everything. When and where a storm will arrive. When and where the bottom of the ocean is going to explode, giving life to a new volcano. They tell their brothers which depth is relatively safe and what route they have to take in order to survive. No longer does this world belong to people. It belongs to neuroprocessor-controlled siblings. We are still alive because they are kind to us.

Unlike our planet.

Turning from the porthole, I watch how my flying shadow disappears on the floor. In no time, white flame lights the kitchen, hitting my back. It is warm. Alive. I look at my hands and see that the vessels in my wrists are luminous. It's

in me, I can feel it. Coursing through my spine, reaching my ears and toes. A charge of pure energy. Everything is light.

I am the light....

“‘S’ is for seagull. Do you know what a seagull is?”

My tongue does not move. At such moments, I cannot even breathe. She lowers the old book.

“It’s okay, my darling. If you don’t want to practice today, you can go play with...you can go play, sweetheart.”

Feeling her hand on my cheek results in no emotional response. She wanted to tell me to go to play with somebody, but she learned to omit the last word. Leaving the semi-darkness of our chamber, I enter the narrow corridor connecting two worlds—the living module and the filtration unit. Normal children don’t go to the latter one; but I have been labeled as strange, stupid and defective.

And it gives me the freedom nothing else ever has.

The closer I get to section FU-12-7, the more I feel the heat and vibration of the filtrating machines. They suck water in, and then separate trash and biomass from the liquid. Normally, food is produced in the hydroponic gardens and farms. However, whenever some poor creature gets into the tube far enough, it goes into the nutrition pack as well.

What I like here are the columns, the transparent vertical tubes through which water flows in different directions and with different speeds. The room of

miracles, wherein the light is reflected at changing angles. Bubbles dance inside. Some columns are dark brown, some are green and blue. There are even red and yellow ones, as they contain chemical purifiers. The columns of water alter the fluorescent lighting, developing their own language of beams and glares.

The language I could learn to understand.

The two front tubes, the first stage of filtration, are the darkest. The flow is slow, and many predators get inside to grab small fry captured by the stream, and then leave. They are strong and smart enough not to go farther. They look like fast-moving shadows consuming each other.

But there is one that is always calm. Not moving, he waits for me every evening. When I come, I go around the tube, and he follows my fingers on the transparent surface. Too dark, only his blurred shape is visible. But he is my friend. The only friend whom I know by shadow. He listens to my thoughts like no one can. Shares my sadness and helps to let it go. Somehow, my dreams are visualized when we are together. I imagine myself talking, surrounded by people who listen to me. I see and sense it in the smallest details. Feeling how the air fills my chest and then is released through the throat, turning into words. I breathe deeply. In. Out. In. Out. And the vapor sticks to the transparent wall between us.

I come closer and look at the black triangle of his shape. Unlike other creatures, he does not have any creepy limbs or tentacles. He never chases the small fry. He comes just to meet me. To teach me the calmness of the eternal ocean...

Something knocks my head. The empty box of the nutrition package. It hangs in the air in front of my face. Caloric power: 3000 kilojoules. Manufactured in Brother-9 city. Expiring in August 2432. This is what the label says. I look around the kitchen. Look at the portholes.

“Sister! Report! Sister!”

“Request unclear. Please clarify.”

“Any object detected out there?”

“Data being... Since last scanning, zero objects discovered.”

“Report on any violation from the normal order of things. Any!”

“Request processed. Data being analyzed. Module-19 overheated. Not critically. Temporary shutdown advised. Shutdown module-19?”

“Suit yourself.”

As the days pass, nothing changes around me. Each morning, the same headache and the taste of salt. Two bubbles of beer. Then 3000 kilojoules of standard nutrition so I can move and keep faking reasons for being here. Schmuck. The Sister does not need you to maintain the station. Everything is

fucking automatic. Even if she were to screw up, the Brothers and senior egghead engineers would guide her remotely.

They did not assign me to this duty so I am here.

They did it so I am not there.

To navigate through space is now much easier than through the ocean. They left this trivial matter for me: to run the same checks every day to ensure everything is green and everything is “passed.” Each evening, I float into the gym. These machines are supposed to save my body from degradation. I grip the levers. Push and pull. The smart system adjusts the level of resistance according to my abilities. In front of my eyes, there is a pulse monitor. Holographic digits blink in the air. 75 beats per minute. 80 beats per minute...

“...Given the circumstances, it is clear why your current heart rate is so high...”

The face of that bold old doctor still exists in my mind. His words smell of halitosis.

“...Please do not worry. This is just a standard medical procedure. It is always done before transferring to another city...”

I know when my heart exceeds 100 beats per minute, the memories will go away. They will sink in the dark brown water of my past. They will get into filtering system of the present and run through tubes, being purified.

“...Do you fear needles? Just a little sedative... Good boy...”

92 beats per minute. Push and pull.

*“...My condolences. Two stresses at once. That explosion. And your mother...
But you are so young and so strong. You can make it, right?”*

The drops of sweat leave my face and fly across the blinking digits. 96 beats.

“...Nobody thinks you are responsible for that catastrophe. Stop thinking like that. You are being transferred because you need a change of environment to overcome the trauma...”

99 beats.

Post-traumatic stress disorder. This is what that asshole wrote into my profile. Before that, I had never been labeled as defective officially. I was bullied as a freak, yes, called insane, sure, but with no recording into the official database. Even my being mute was considered as a temporary issue, as it was gone when I turned twelve. That was the turning point. I never told anyone how it happened. It was a miracle.

The gift from my friend.

No one would believe me. No one could imagine that an ocean creature somehow affected my mind so that I started speaking. *You...friend....* These were

my first words. The moment I said it was the last time I saw him. He left me. I never saw his shadow again.

Still, I kept coming to the filtrating unit. At the age of sixteen, I became a junior engineer for the water supply systems. I got smart. I got extremely smart. Turned out, I was able to learn whatever I wanted and to elbow aside even elder folks. By that time, the filtrating machines were the most interesting things for me. I played with the water, altering its color and clarity. I kept walking among transparent columns, checking the output of diagnostic tools in each one. By mere vibration, I was able to notice any malfunction. Over time, I got trusted and respected, though other engineers stayed away from me. They feared the way I would look into the water. I called it contemplation. When glares flow into retina and all thoughts stop whispering. When the mind becomes clear. Pure. When I connect to the endless power of the ocean. That would give me the energy and inspiration to learn more. To keep consuming books and technical drawings and go further in this world and even beyond this world....

No one knew that, whenever not seen, I would drop the pressure so many little creatures, caught by stream, could get out and survive. Although it was a dangerous and forbidden action, I knew when and how to redirect the water flows in order to release those beings back to the ocean. At such moments, I felt my existing was not senseless. That I was not alone.

Only once did I make a mistake. There was a glitch in the system of valves, and I was not able to handle it. It led to an explosion. Two columns went off. Apart from broken legs, I got four pieces of debris in my back, and my lungs filled with salt water. The taste of it still does not leave me. When I woke up in the hospital, my mother was dead. One son of a bitch told her that I was smashed, and she had heart attack. Those who hated me finally found the way to hurt me. I dealt with this pain via deep mindful breathing. In. Out. Closing my eyes and imagining the glares and the sound of running water. And the real world would stop existing. The needles in my vessels would vanish and the hospital bed would free me into endless fall. Then the glares would merge into a strong solid light.

They questioned me a lot. I could have been executed for deliberate sabotage. But I was smart. Extremely smart. Nothing had been logged into the system. There was no evidence of my games with the water. As I was the only one who suffered, it was classified as an accident. Still, they wanted me to change cities. I was reassigned to Brother-36. Same job, other tubes. My profile mentioned post-traumatic stress disorder, but I was still allowed to work as the procedure got more streamlined. From then on, all filtrating units automatically ran so-called "clean-up" procedures twice a day in order to prevent further accidents. That means flushing everything under high pressure. Should any

creature be in there, nothing but bloody mess shoots back into the ocean. I tried to find a workaround to stop it. I did try....

My muscles hurt severely, but that's not why I finish in the gym. 111 beats per minute. The training machine has been blocked.

“Attention! Chief engineer requested in control pod. Repeat. Chief engineer requested in control pod.”

The Sister wants to show me something. I leave the towel, soaked with my sweat, in the air and navigate through a vertical corridor up to the control pod. The door opens after a delay, to which I am still not used. Plus one bump on my head.

“What is it, Sister?”

She remains silent until the holographic image is fully built in front of me. Line by line, she draws the shape of the power sustaining unit, highlighting the core. The curves of the corresponding charts are pictured to the side.

“Module-19 overheated critically. Attempt to shut down failed when server did not respond. Safety latches jammed. Manual unplugging essential.”

“Are you fucking kidding? What's the reason?”

“Reason being investigated.”

“Any suggestions so far?”

“Reason being investigated. Please provide manual unplugging according to instruction number....”

“I am not going outside! Send a droid!”

“Droid ID724583 already sent to disassemble outer protection layer. Human assistance essential to unplug module-19 manually. Droid capabilities insufficient. Please go to gateway number 4. Approximately 72 minutes left before damage beyond repair.”

I try to breathe deeply but feel a strong pain in my upper belly. My diaphragm always hurts when I am scared to death. Inhaling the smell of hot wires, I look out the portholes. The stars slowly pass there as the Sister is rotating. No Moon. No Earth. Only black hungry emptiness waiting for me.

Getting into a space suit is not a big deal. First, three minutes needed to run routine diagnostics. When it's done, the transparent closet opens, and I see the reflection of my eyes in the helmet visor. Then an extra check of breathing equipment. Good. The molecular zip moves with no sound and no trace. The boots and gloves must be on another shelf. Yep, here they are. The tools are kept in fasteners on the belt and hips. I check each, one by one, lest anything is forgotten. The pistol grip, the grid cutter, the mini power tool. What else? Aha, the mallet. Then the scanner and the classic screwdriver. Miscellaneous items in a separate box in the bag. Now it's time to attach magnetic restraints to my

boots. Done. When I put the helmet on, my mind falls into silence. The distant sound of Sister's engines is not here anymore. Only my breathing and tinnitus.

“Sister! Let me out!”

With hissing, the pressure in the airlock is dropped. Then the gateway opens. Remnants of air rush into the void like insane pale ghosts. Feeling the ringing vibration of each heavy step, I creep onto the narrow magnetic stripe. The restraints attached to my boots stick to it, preventing me from taking off due to centrifugal force. The Sister is rotating. She can't stop; she has to keep her face turned to the Earth in order to track and gather needed data.

The metal horizon stands against the abyss, holding burning far-distant worlds. Never will we reach them. Sooner or later, we are doomed to die in the water of the flood sent by a higher power. Brothers and Sisters will keep our history as a warning for those who might come to see how pointless our existence was. We don't know what sins our predecessors committed in the past. What we know is that we did deserve everything we have now.

The acid of fear runs in my vessels throughout the body. Gripping the handrail along the path, I hitch the safety tether to it. Still, I feel very insecure.

“Sister! Guide me!”

“Go straight 24 meters. Ignore all intersections.”

I did see where to go. I just needed her to talk to me. My kneecaps shake as I walk to the destination, where the spider-like droid stands in front of an open hatch. It has already disassembled the outer protection layer and stored the metal plates in its mandibles. When I am done, it is supposed to put them back. The droid reminds me of those little spiders whose webs I saw many times in the hydroponic gardens. When I am finally at the hatch, I try to think about fruits and flowers, lest I go crazy.

“Please remove the seal.”

“Sure, Sister. I remember how.”

The seal is designed in a way that only those who have five fingers can take it out. Precautionary measure. Even high-level droids are not reliable enough to do such a thing. That must be a human decision. Done. I put the seal carefully into temporary storage inside the big spider.

“Now pull the red lever beneath.”

“Don’t worry, beauty. I know what to....”

Strange... I have never seen such pattern before. Like a white scar, engraved into darkness. Right in front of my face. It takes me time to realize that this is a crack in the helmet visor. The stars dance and race around me. My feet are free, and the torn pieces of magnetic restraints flutter on my boots. Funny.

The Sister used to be the whole horizon. Now it's just a little circling bubble. It glitters so far away.

“Attention. Oxygen. Tank. Damaged. Attention. Oxygen. Tank....”

That's not the voice of the Sister. Too monotone. Too robotish.

“Initializing. Reactive. Stabilization.”

Small rockets in my elbows and shoulders spray one by one until I stop rotating and hang in the middle of nothing.

“Sister! Do you hear me? Sister!”

No response.

“Sister! Take me back! There was an explosion! Take me back!”

“Attention. Oxygen. Tank. Damaged. Twenty. Five. Percent. Left. Attention....”

The safety tether passes by, wriggling....

Now I know what my last desire is. When everything is over, I want my spirit to go there – to those worlds. To see the light of their suns. To contemplate the glares of their oceans. From here, I see the dark brown disk of Earth. My dying home. This is as it should be. Things are born. And things die. I don't regret. I did my best to live, breathing mindfully and looking into mysteries of this world. I got as far as I could. Now I am ready to go further.

“Attention. Oxygen. Tank. Damaged. Twelve. Percent. Left....”

I left filtrating machines when they got bloody. I worked at schools and hydroponic gardens. I changed many cities, teaching people and teaching myself. Then I needed loneliness. I found it here. Although many people were against my being here, that was beyond their power. Brothers selected me. The computer gods of humankind.

I close my eyes one last time, imagining the sound of water. And the glares, merging into light. I am going to enjoy the last percentages of the air, being grateful for every breath. Then I feel the strong wind, taking me gently.

The wind?

I see it again—the flash of white pulsing glow. It hugs me, touches my face. We soar together. It takes me back to the Sister in a cradle of light. It is warm. Alive. It talks to me in a language of images. They blink and spark in my mind, telling me the answers I sought. Now I understand those words from my mother’s book. Now I know the secrets of life. And what to tell the Brothers when I am back. We are all made of the same energy. We all complement each other. Nothing is against us apart from our beliefs.

Through the trembling beams of light, I can now distinguish the shape of my savior. His streamlined body. His fins and tail. These beings did not go extinct. They went to the ocean of stars.

You...friend....

We reach the gateway number four. He leaves me in the airlock and then fades away. I look where he was a moment ago and still feel his presence. Now I understand what I have always felt, though I had not realized it. None of us are alone. Wherever we go, we remain connected....

Good-bye, my friend. Good-bye, the light of forgotten times, when the ocean was blue. And belonged to beautiful dolphins.

THE END