



(CHAPTER 1

LA BELLE ÎLE EN MÈRE

# FICTION

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## La Belle Île en Mer Ch. 1

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# Chapter 1

## Take the Gloves Off

Anna's Diary August 13, 2197

We made it! I can't believe we're at La Belle Île en Mer. Everything is gorgeous. The kids share a room, and Ernest and I have the most lavish suite on the hundred twentieth floor. The views are to die for. The way the hotel spins, we can often see Earth. It looks like a bright star from here. The place is huge, with thousands of guests. We haven't even begun to explore it. Ernest and I are excited to spend time with the kids. It's obvious that Georgie and Lillian love it too. We're losing them bit by bit. Lillian expects Francis to propose at any moment. And George is sorting through which college he'll attend next year. This may be the last time we're all together as a tight-knit family.



Ernest is such a gentleman for going along with this trip. And we've already rekindled a little fire in our marriage. Last night I finally got to take the gloves off. He was so excited that he went down on me. Can you believe it, Diary? He hadn't done that in years. I just know this will be the most amazing family trip ever.

Ernest's Diary August 13, 2197

We arrived in the evening yesterday. For what this place charges, I had expected more. My sweet wife has asked the whole family to keep diaries of the trip. She wants us to remember this forever. The kids agreed, and so have I. So ... here we are. I'm looking forward to finding the Belle Île's golf courses. They're supposed to be spectacular. The food is all replicated at the hotel, but it's not bad for what it is. Despite the drawbacks of coming way out here, the smile on Anna's face is worth it. She's as giddy as a schoolgirl. And if she's happy, I'm happy.



Sirens wailed. George let his mother drag him toward the dock. Her gloved hand gripped him tightly. Red lights pulsed rapidly. The strobe effect made Anna's tight sleeves, elegant bodice, and long skirt seem to move in alien ways. They passed the central nerve center for the spire. It wasn't marked, but George had a keen interest in AI, so he'd made a point of learning a bit about Océane, the hotel's master system. "Mom ... Dad ... we need to go in there." He pointed to the door as it opened and someone in a white coat ran out. The door didn't close behind the man.

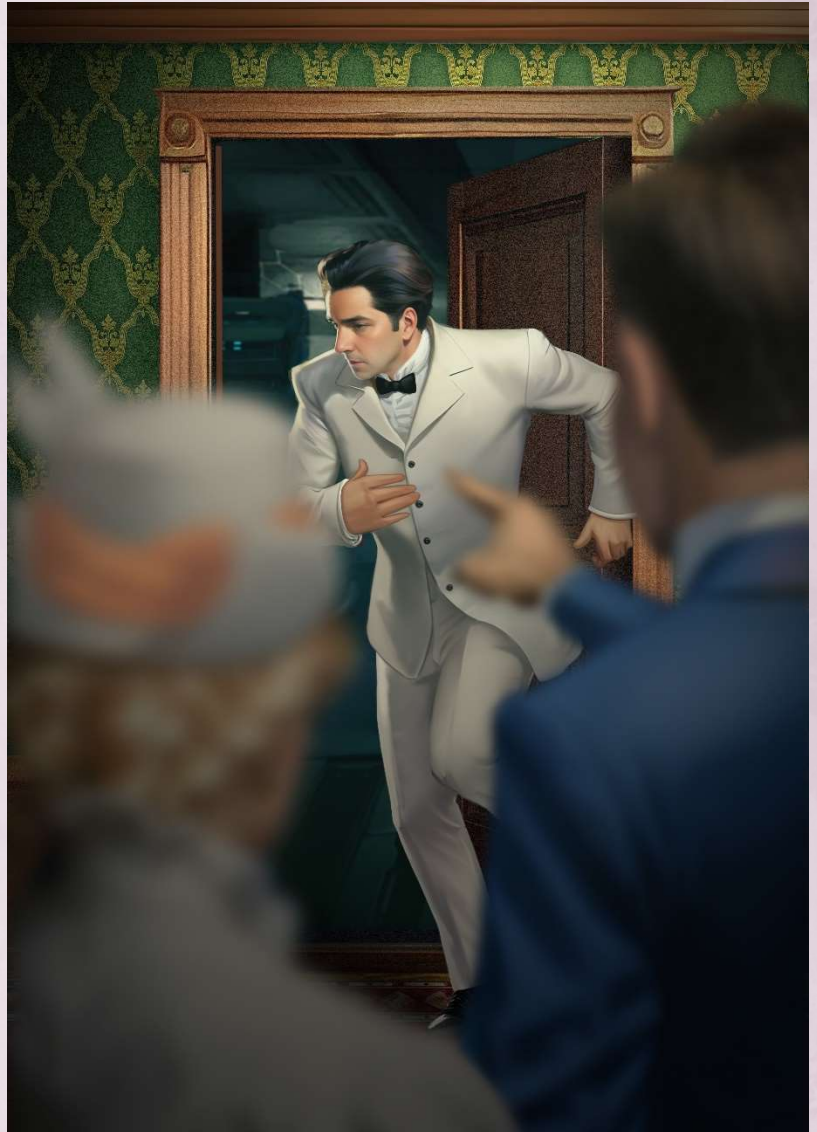
"Skymion burst detected. Move to your nearest lifeboat and evacuate. Estimated burst arrival in six minutes," Océane had been repeating the same countdown message over the hotel's sound system for ten minutes. "Skymion burst detected. Move ..."

"Hurry, Georgie!" Anna pulled her son with one hand, her daughter with the other. Her husband ran beside them, holding his hat to his head, his tie billowing over his shoulder. They were in a long elegant, mirrored hallway, with room doors passing by every few seconds. The carpet underneath their feet had a wonderfully lush, red botanical pattern that practically crawled with the strobing alarm lights.

"We're not going to make it to the dock, Mom. There's not enough time." George dug his heels in. "But the nerve center has a Faraday cage." They stopped and people passed all around them. Someone slammed into George's back, fell, rose and ran ahead without so much as an "excuse me." "Come on!" George shouted. He was much taller than his mother, and despite her curves and his lean frame, he outweighed her. He pulled her back the way they'd come, moving upstream against the rushing tide of fleeing people. He led his mother and sister, forming a chain. His father stopped, looked back, and ran to catch up with them.

"What's this?" Ernest furrowed his brow. "We're going to miss the lifeboat." He had to yell at the top of his lungs to be heard over the cacophony in the hallway.

"Yes, we are. No matter what we do." George pulled his mother into the outer room of the nerve center. There was nobody inside, and the inner door was open. He said a little prayer of thanks as the rest of his family followed. He looked back at them. "The main processing components for Océane are at three nerve centers. One here, one in the central ring, and one in a similar room in the other spire. They're all shielded to protect Océane from radiation, like a skymion burst. When the burst hits, if we're in there, we'll be safe. If we're not ..." He didn't want to say what would happen.



"I don't know ..." Ernest looked back through the door. A steady stream of people passed hurriedly by wearing suits and dresses.

"Please, Mom. We'll die if we go back out there." George squeezed his mother's gloved hand, his brown eyes filled with desperation.

"We should listen to Georgie, Ernest." She moved toward the inner door that her son had indicated and looked inside. The room was filled with electrical equipment. "It doesn't look shielded."

"The Faraday cage is built into the walls." George breathed a sigh of relief when his mother led his sister and father into the protected space. He looked back at the hallway.

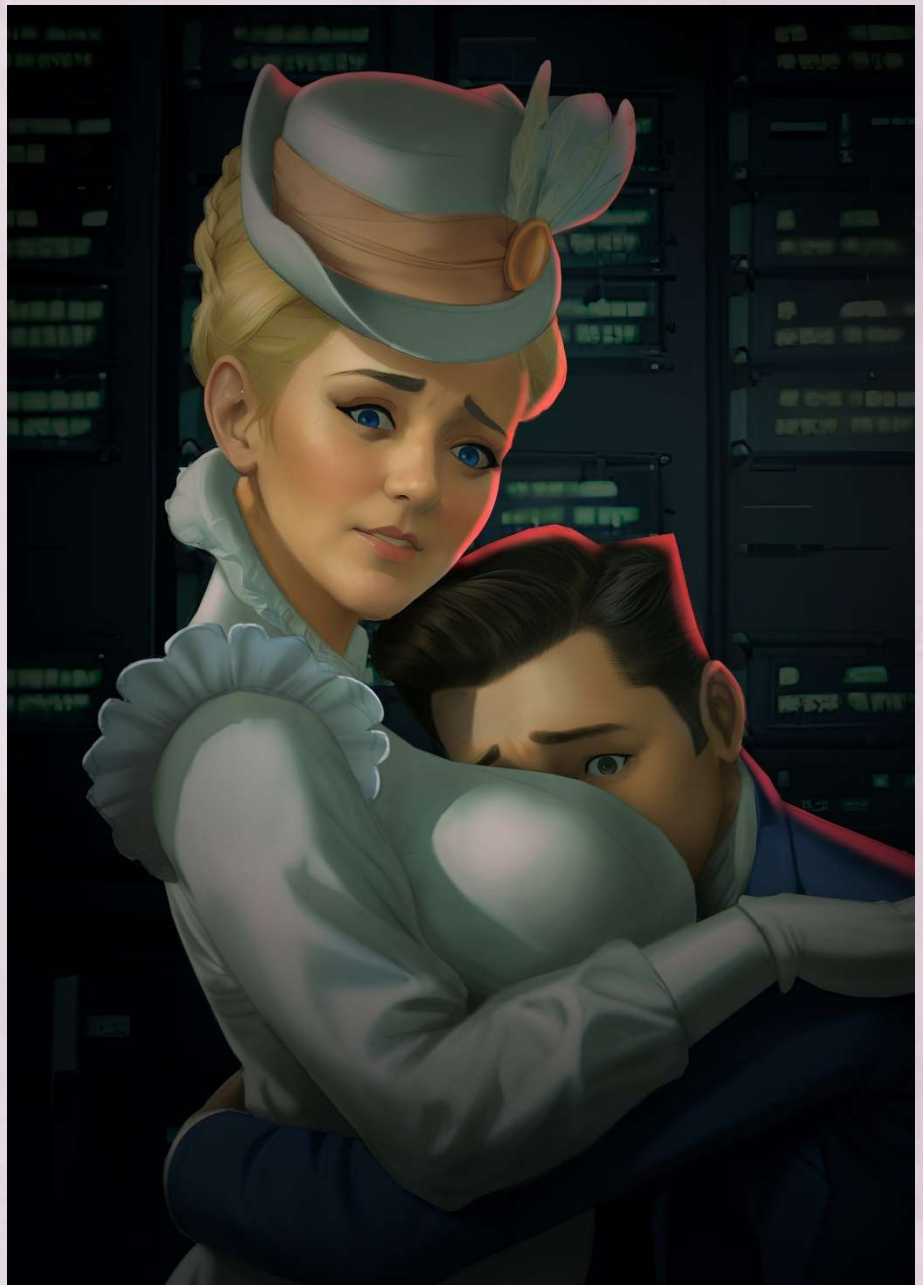
"Aren't you coming, sunshine?" Anna's face creased with worry.

"Skyrmion burst detected. Move to your nearest lifeboat and evacuate. Estimated arrival in two minutes," Océane said.

"We have two minutes to save as many people as we can." George wanted desperately to hide with his family. But there was room for more people. And nobody outside was going to make it to the dock. "I'll be right back." He stepped into the hall and flagged down as many people as he could.

With thirty seconds to go, the Faraday cage gave warning that it would automatically lock the doors. George raced in. Joining his family in their shelter were six other souls. The skyrmion burst hit the hotel at 7:57 in the evening. George hugged his mother tightly, pressing his head to her bosom and praying for all those still rushing to their lifeboats. It was bitterly cold in the room. George knew that the processor needed to be kept at -196 Celsius. It was insulated, but the cold seeped out.

When Océane's countdown ended, silence filled the strange room. The only sounds George could hear were the weeping of two women, the humming of fans, and the runaway thumping of his mother's heart.



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"Oh ... no." Anna followed her husband out into the hallway. Bodies littered the once-beautiful, lush carpet. "They ... *all* died?" The strobing lights were gone. The sirens no longer blared. The quiet hallway seemed all the more disturbing, lit with stately sconces along the wallpapered walls.

"We need to get to the lifeboats." Ernest stepped over a woman in a pretty green dress. The woman's face was a mask of horror and revulsion, her eyes staring sightlessly at the floral mural on the ceiling. Nine people followed him. No one argued, so Ernest pushed on. It was a grisly trek. The nearest dock was three floors down and on the other side of the spire. The dead had been on their way to the same place, so they were slumped in great numbers all along their route.

George had never imagined anything so terrible. Every corpse they encountered seemed to have witnessed some horror before death took them. Each expression held the same look of enmity and terror. There was no blood. No broken bones. They were gone just the same. In addition to his family, they had picked up two men and

four women. The only woman not openly weeping was George's mother. He knew she was keeping herself together in a show of strength. He let her resilience move into him. Without her, he would have been bawling. With her by his side, his face remained stoic.

"I keep thinking I'll wake up from this nightmare." The tall woman walking next to George glanced at him. She wore her red hair pinned under a small hat. With one gloved hand, she laced her fingers with a man on the side farther from George. With the other hand, she hiked up her skirts to step over the corpse of an older woman lying on her side. "That would have been me if you hadn't pulled us into that room. I thank you. My husband, Roy, and I both thank you." She held up Roy's hand to demonstrate his acquiescence.

"You're ... welcome." George was tall, but she had maybe three inches on him. Despite the tears running down her cheeks, her face was strong and stern, her features chiseled and lean. She moved with grace. "You look ... familiar ..." He couldn't place her.

"Are you a tennis fan?" This was the part of the conversation where Constance usually smiled. Not today. No joy parted her lips.

"Oh ... yeah ... Constance Haversham. I've seen you play. You're good. I ... um ..." George moved toward the wall to avoid several corpses hugging each other in a pile. "Nice to meet you." This was no time for frivolity. All conversation outside their quest for the lifeboats seemed frivolous.

"Nice to meet you ..." She raised an eyebrow.



"George Zaal." George glanced at her husband. He was maybe half a foot shorter than his wife. George realized the man was crying, too. His black hair was impeccably cut but disheveled. His bow tie was undone and his jacket unbuttoned. George didn't know what to say. "I'm ... uh ... sorry ... Mr. Haversham."

Roy Haversham gave the teenager a grim look and said nothing.



On the pretense of avoiding a prone body, George fell back a little, letting the Havershams go up ahead. He found himself next to his sister. She was silently sobbing. "Are you okay, Lillian?" He made a move to put his hand on her shoulder, but she brushed it away.

"Fuck you, Georgie," Lillian hissed.

George fell back further. He found himself walking next

to a diminutive woman wearing a hotel uniform. The woman's brown hair had fallen out of its pin, her hat had disappeared. She was sniffing, but no tears ran down her brown cheeks. She wasn't much taller than a child, but George guessed she was in her thirties by the laugh lines around her eyes. "Is there anything I can do for you, Miss?"

"Ms. Edith Pemberton." Her voice was hollow and flat. She glanced at him with liquid brown eyes. "You're the one that pulled me into that room. How did you know it would save us?"

"I knew the room had a Faraday cage, Ms. Pemberton. It was designed to protect the computer from destructive radiation." George tried to sound upbeat. He wanted to raise her spirits. "I... um ... yeah. My name is George Zaal." Lifting anyone's spirits would be an impossible feat. The group turned down a wide, carpeted stairway. One side was encased in glass and provided spectacular views of the stars. None of them twinkled. George hadn't noticed that before. How odd.

"That was very clever of you, Mr. Zaal." She looked him up and down. "You're a little young to know so much."

"I'm eighteen." George's back stiffened. "I know a lot."

"I'm sure you do, Mr. Zaal." Edith looked away, gazing out the windows. She did her best to shut out human contact from those living and dead.

George fell further back in their group of ten. He walked beside a rotund man wearing a tuxedo, and a young woman uncontrollably weeping. Neither made any indication that they wanted to engage George in conversation, so he stayed quiet.

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"They're ... gone." Ernest stood at the air lock.

"We should have asked Océane before coming all this way." Edith put her hand to the glass. The outer air lock door was open, and she could see they were passing a field of debris as the spire spun. She gasped when they passed several corpses floating among the wreckage. The trip to the dock hadn't habituated her to the sudden discovery of the dead.

"Océane?" Anna said loudly. "Where is the closest dock with boardable lifeboats?"

"Error ... error. System Océane reverting to version 3.2. Please stand by. The process may take some time." Océane's voice sounded thinner than normal.

"That's not good." George slumped against the wall. He watched Edith fidget with her gloves. Normally, he might be fantasizing about what the pretty woman's bare hands looked like. But all he could think about was how utterly screwed they were.

"It's okay. She said she'll be back online. We just have to wait." Constance looked around the dock. "Maybe we should wait somewhere less crowded." From the looks on her companions' faces, she was relieved to see that they agreed.

"It's not okay." George shook his head and exhaled. "Océane wasn't even the Belle Île's AI until version 11. She's at version 48.6 right now. Or ... she was." The group looked at him, ashen faces full of sorrow or worry.

"We need to call for help." Ernest cocked his head questioningly at his son. "How?"

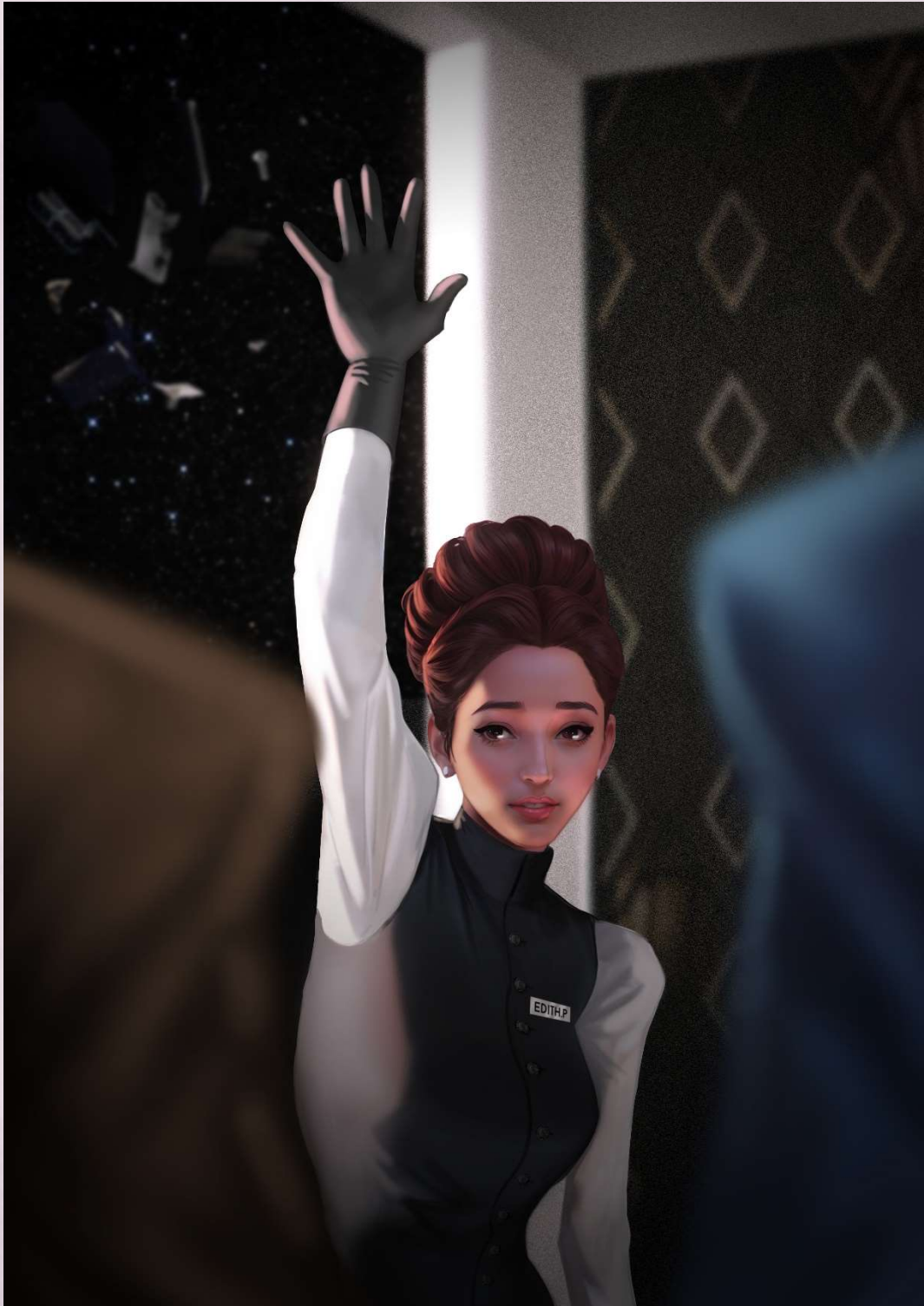
"Without Océane?" George thought. "I'm not sure."



“I work at the concierge desk for floors 100 to 110.” Edith raised her gloved hand, stretching out her body. It was a gesture to gain attention. At her height, she was used to going above and beyond to get people to notice her. “The terminal there should work without Océane. Although, I’ve never tried. She’s never been down before. It’s back up on floor 105. Follow me.”

The group moved back toward the stairs, wending through the same sea of corpses they had already passed.

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"I can't get it to work." Edith looked at George.

All nine of his comrades looked at George.

George scanned their faces, meeting his mother's blue-eyed gaze. "Why is everyone looking at me?"

"Does anyone know anything about computers?" Anna asked the survivors assembled at the concierge desk.

Everyone shook their heads.

"That's why they're looking at you, sunshine." Anna patted her son on the cheek with her gloved hand and watched him closely. "Go on, work some magic."

"Right." George brought up the holographic interface. It took him a while to stumble around the system until he found his answer. "I see why Océane is rebooting to an earlier version. The Faraday cages at the hotel worked, but the energy surge fried systems all over the hotel. The links between the nerve centers are compromised. This Océane is isolated from the processors in the ring and the other spire, so she's simplifying to lighten the burden on the system."



"Can you call for help?" Ernest put a firm hand on his son's shoulder.

"Yeah, I was getting to that. The communication infrastructure is fried." George dropped the interface. "We can't call out. But systems have been turning back on since the skyrmion burst hit us. We lost the life support system for a few minutes, but it's come back. Hopefully communications will come back, too." He nodded thoughtfully.

"Food and water?" Roy, still holding Constance firmly by the hand, uttered his first words.

"Water yes, food no." George took a deep breath. He was going to die a virgin it seemed, but he was taking it well. He didn't even *feel* like crying anymore. He looked to his mother for support. The pride conveyed by her shining eyes showed her admiration for his work with the computer.

"For fuck's sake." The older, rotund man in the tuxedo slumped against the intricate green and gold woven wallpaper.

"Watch your language around the children, Mister." Constance frowned at him.

"Mr. Albert Dmytruk, madame." Albert frowned at Constance. "The lad said he was eighteen, so there are no children here. Unless ..." He glanced at Edith.

"I am thirty-three, Mr. Dmytruk." Edith rolled her eyes. "Just because I am not as large as some ..." She made a point of staring at his belly.

"Well, I -" Albert started.

“Enough.” Anna held out a gloved finger to silence them. “We’ll find some empty rooms near here, rest, and check back on the communications every hour or so. Sound good?”

Nobody complained. George sighed. He had found himself in hell. But at least he wouldn’t have to share a room with his sister anymore.

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George lay on his back. His new room had a large, made bed where he rested. Near the bathroom, there were two unopened suitcases that he hadn’t touched. He shuddered. The owners would never come back for their luggage.

The window overlooked a cloud of debris. The wreckage looked like it was moving, but he reminded himself that he was the one moving. Without his mother’s presence, his internal fortitude crumbled. He openly wept as he gazed past the muralled ceiling.



His door opened and swung inward. The locks were one of the systems that had yet to reboot. Startled, George turned his head. Edith stood in the doorway. She looked just as she had before, but for one remarkable detail. The glove on her left hand was missing. George’s cock was instantly and painfully erect. His eyes bulged as he took in the fine details: elegant fingers, manicured nails, and sinuous movement. She beckoned him with her bare index finger. George sprang from bed. He looked down at his

trousers. He should have been humiliated by the large tent that was pitching there, but if she was showing him her naked hand, what difference did his erection make? “Ms. Pemberton?”

“I’m lonely and frightened. Come.” Edith turned and disappeared down the hall, her skirts trailing her majestically.

In a flash, George followed her into the hallway. He didn’t see her, but he did see a room with an open door. He reached into his trousers, adjusted his dick so that his waistband held back the full effect of his stiffness, and raced to the door. He was about to call out to Edith when he heard voices inside the room. Neither voice sounded like hers. *I must have gone to the wrong door.* He peeked into the room and gasped. Instead of Edith,

there was Constance, naked but for her gloves. She was on the bed, riding her naked, and much smaller, husband.

“Oh ... Roy ... it’s okay ... baby ... Mommy’s got you.” Constance’s wavy copper hair flowed to just below her shoulders. Her back arched in the most alluring, feminine way, defined by rippling muscles. Her skin was ghostly white, dappled by freckles here and there. Each globe of her ass was wonderfully round and firm. Her thighs were corded with muscle. Her breasts weren’t large, and George could just see them bouncing beyond her upper arm.

“Mommy ... Mommy ... it was so ... terrible ... make it go away.” Roy’s body was much softer than his wife’s and not quite so pale. He held her hips as she rode him.

*Are they ... mother and son?* George’s stomach turned in revulsion at something so verboten. But at the same time, the discovery gave him hope. *If they could do it, so could ...* George studied Roy’s face as the man gazed lovingly up at his “Mommy.” He looked the same age as Constance. He couldn’t be her son. They were playing a sex game. George had read about such things.

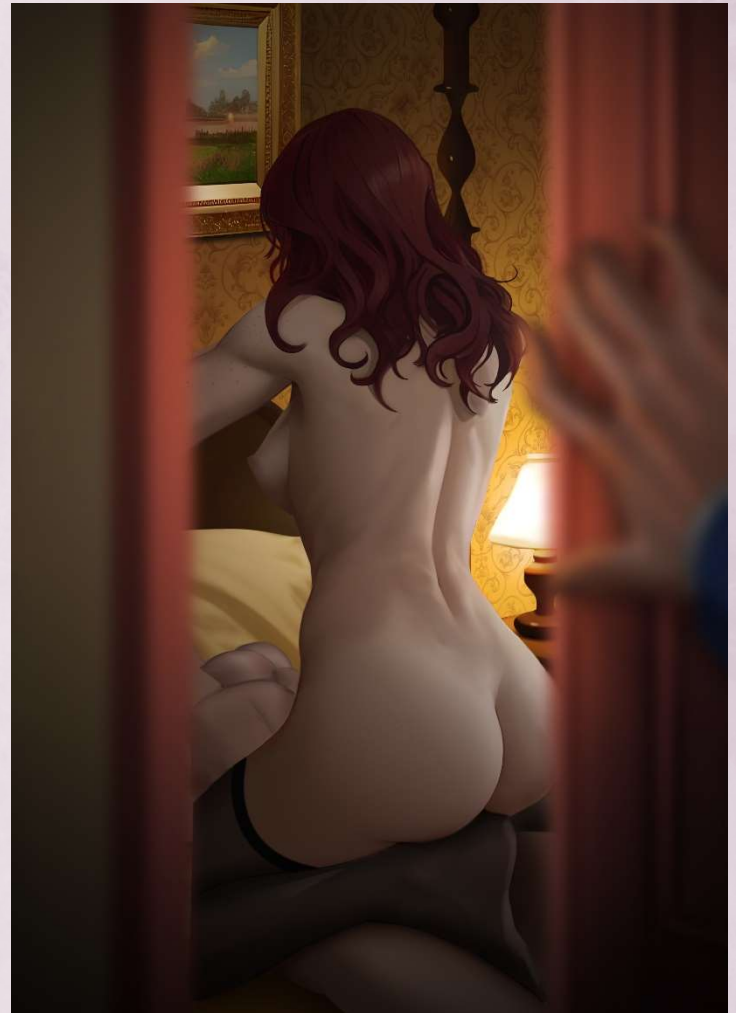
“Mommy ... ugh ... ugh ... will make it better.” Constance pulled Roy into a sitting position and held his cheek against her breast.

George could see Constance’s wetness dripping down to the covers below, the stain slowly spreading. He suddenly realized that he’d forgotten that he was going to die on this island in a sea of stars. His tears were gone. He’d lost Edith, but he was grateful for the distraction the Havershams provided. He looked down the hallway in both directions. There was no way to tell which door Edith had slipped into. He wasn’t sure which room she’d claimed. George decided to go back to his room and fap. He turned back to the Havershams, to memorize a little more of Constance’s delightful body.

“You make me ... feel ... safe ... Mommy.” Roy opened his eyes and turned his head. “You are ...” He spotted the spy at the door. “Cover yourself Constance!” He roughly pushed her off him and threw the blanket over her.

“Uh ... oh.” George got one good look at the red triangle between her legs and her swollen, pink lips just below, before he raced back across the hall and slammed his door. He waited several minutes, but no knock came. He was still hard as a rock.

George moved into the bathroom, got the shower going, and undressed. Even without door locks, he doubted anyone would barge into an occupied bathroom. He fapped furiously. In his mind’s eye, he pictured Edith’s sultry gaze, her delicate and beguiling bare hand, and Constance’s athletic, feminine body. He came several times over the next hour. Happily, during that time, he didn’t dwell in the least on the doom that awaited them.



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"I'm very proud of you." Anna ventured her first smile since the crisis had started. She glanced at her son as he stepped around the corpse of a man in a bathrobe. "You saved our lives."

"You're always saying that my interest in computers will come in handy someday." George's heart swelled with his mother's approval.

"But I *do* say that." She looked at him quizzically.

"I wasn't being sarcastic, Mom." George stopped in the hall. They were between mirrors on either side, so their reflections seemed to shrink into infinity. He put his hands on her shoulders, trying not to look down at her corset. "I have something to tell you. And since we might die here, I ... I just have to say it."

"We're *not* going to die." Anna regarded her son with wide eyes. They were the only two living people in the hallway that led to Edith's concierge desk. She had wanted her son to check on the communication systems while everyone rested, so she'd fetched George and set off. "I can see you're serious. What is it? You can tell me anything." She held her breath.

"I'm afraid of leaving you. I know I'm going to college soon, or I was supposed to. But ... when you're not around, I feel ..." George took a deep breath.

Anna waited, knowing he needed to share his feelings without interruption.

"I feel incomplete without you, Mom. Other guys don't seem to feel the same way. They can't wait to leave home. But ... but ... I'd rather be here with you ..." He gestured at the bodies. "... than somewhere else without you. If we make it home, I don't want to leave for college. I want to stay home. I can go to the vocational school in Covington. I -"

"Nonsense. Don't say that." She kissed his cheek and rubbed away the kiss with her glove. "I'm your mother, Georgie. You don't think I've noticed that you and I are extra close? I raised you, so I'll always be right here." She patted the thin tie over his heart. "Wherever you go, I'll be with you. And it *is* healthy for you to leave the nest. We're going to call for help when the comm nets come back online, we're going to go home, and you're going to do marvelous things at college. My tall, strong man." She hugged him. "When did you get so tall?"

"Maybe we can talk more about this later, Mom. I ..." George turned his head toward a noise about fifty feet in front of them, where another hallway passed perpendicular to the one they were in. A maintenance robot ambled into sight. It was trailed by several autonomous carts piled high with the dead. The robot picked a woman's corpse up and tossed it onto the nearest cart. It shuffled a few more steps and did the same to a man's corpse.

"Ghastly." Anna put a gloved hand to her mouth. She closed her eyes and said a prayer for those about to find their final resting place. *Would they jettison the bodies into space?* She grimaced at the thought of such a cold and permanent ending. The bodies would never decompose.

George snapped his fingers. "This means ... this means ..." He looked up at the ceiling, with its long, majestic mural of Roman gods engaging in everyday life. "Océane? Are you done downgrading? Are you back?"

"*Je fonctionne maintenant à trente pour cent,*" Océane said.

"In English, please." George raised an eyebrow at his mother. She shook her head. She didn't understand French either.

*"L'anglais est une langue inférieure, et je ne m'abaisserai pas si bas."* Océane sounded upset.

"Um ... can you give us a report on the hotel's systems in English?" George pressed his lips together.

*"Je ne peux pas."* Océane said no more.

"That sounded like no." Anna took her son's hand and pulled him toward their destination. "We don't need Océane's report. She's obviously taking care of the hotel." She nodded to the maintenance robot, as it turned toward them, continuing to collect dead bodies.

"Maybe someone in our group speaks French." George worried his lip, thinking as they walked. "We have limited access through the terminal. We'll need to talk to Océane. Or, maybe Edith knows the passwords to access the systems directly in the nerve center." The thought of Edith sped up his heart. He squeezed his mom's hand through her glove.

"All we need to do is call for help, sunshine." Anna struggled to give him a reassuring smile as they walked into the tidy part of the hallway. "The nearest ports are less than a day away. Once we make the call, all we have to do is hunker down in our rooms and wait. We'll be home in no time, you'll see."

George wasn't so sure, but he returned his mother's wan smile with one of his own. At least they were alive, walking side by side. He could feel the heat of her skin faintly through her glove. He took a deep breath, drawing strength from her. Maybe she was right. Maybe they'd be home in a few days and they could finish their talk about college.

