

A woman with blonde hair styled in an updo, wearing a light blue Victorian-style dress with a high collar and a matching hat with a pink band and a large orange circular ornament. She is looking back over her shoulder with a slight smile. The background features red damask wallpaper and a framed picture on the wall.

(CHAPTER 2

LA BELLE ÎLE EN MÈRE

FICTION

Rawly Rawls

La Belle Île en Mer Ch. 2

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Chapter 2

Solitude Was Hell

“So, does anybody speak French?” Anna looked around the small group of survivors hopefully. “Or understand French? Even a little would be helpful.”

People shook their heads. Roy stared daggers at George. Constance looked down the hall at nothing, her cheeks bright crimson. Fortunately, there were no bodies in her sightline. The maintenance robots had picked them all up and carried them off for disposal. *Where would Océane put thousands of bodies?* She focused on that question, rather than the conversation. She knew her husband was about to blow, and that would just compound her embarrassment. The teenager had seen her naked. He had seen every bit of her that wasn't covered by her gloves. Thank goodness she'd kept those on. He had probably heard her and Roy's secret game. It was mortifying. And when Roy blew his top, everyone was going to know that George had seen her in such a vulnerable position.

George tried and failed to catch Edith's eye. She had shown him her bare hand, but now she didn't seem the least bit interested in him. He noticed that she'd changed out of her hotel uniform into a flattering bodice. Her skirts fell all the way down over her feet.

“That is disappointing.” Anna frowned. “If no one speaks French, perhaps Ms. Pemberton has codes to access Océane's systems in the nerve center.” She turned toward Edith. They were all standing in a circle in the hallway, between the mirrored walls. “How about it, Ms. Pemberton? Do you have access?”

“Phhht.” Edith rolled her eyes. “I work the concierge desk. They don't give me codes for their billion-yen computer system. Your son's smart. Maybe he can crack those codes?” She looked over at George.



George beamed at Edith when he finally had her attention. *She complimented me.*

Edith gave him a quizzical look, like she didn't know what he was smiling about.

George glanced at the glove on her left hand in a meaningful way, but that didn't change her nonplussed expression.

"Georgie?" Anna nudged her son in the ribs. He was staring oddly at Edith. Teenage boys were a handful. One moment he was a hero, the next he was a slave to his hormones. She had no idea what was going through his head sometimes. "Sunshine, can you crack those codes?"

"Um ... no." George shook his head. "I don't think that's possible. But maybe some of the tech staff in the ring, or the other spire, survived. Someone else must have thought of using the Faraday cages. Certain staff would have the codes. They might even have the comm net working in those other parts of the hotel. Océane is isolated in this spire from the rest of her system. There should be one or two other Océanes, depending on if the other two nerve centers are connected. I think we should -"

"Can our personal comms translate French?" Albert interrupted George.

"We tried that. The network is down, so our personal comms aren't working as they normally would. The translation apps run off the net, so ..." George shrugged. "The good news is that the food system seems to be back up, so if anyone is hungry, one of the restaurants should -"

"You are a scoundrel, sir!" Roy shouted. His eruption finally burst forth. He pointed an accusatory finger at George. "You are a peeper ... and ... and ... a voyeur. You spied on the most intimate moments between a husband and wife. And ... you stand there pretending like nothing happened. Did you save our lives just so you could exploit us for your amusement?"



"I ... I ..." George had really hoped that they had put the whole misunderstanding behind them.

"What does he mean? Is this true, Georgie?" Anna put her gloved hands to her hips. She could see from George's stricken face that it was true. "You didn't ... you didn't see Mrs. Haversham's bare fingers?" Anna thought it fortunate that she was a strong woman, because otherwise she might have fainted when she saw the discomfiture written on Constance's sweet face.

"She had her gloves on, Mom." George turned to his mother to plead his case. "It was an accident. I didn't -"

"How dare you!" Roy bellowed. "I have yet to hear an apology."

"I knew it." Lillian folded her arms with a smirk on her face, watching her brother squirm.

"Don't antagonize your brother, princess." Ernest wagged a finger at his daughter. "Apologize to Mr. Haversham, son." He turned his darkening gaze on George. His voice was a low rumble.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Haversham. It was a mistake. I was following ..." George glanced at Edith, who was looking at him with her mouth hanging open, aghast. "I followed a woman out into the hall. Your door was open -"

"Our door was *not* open." Constance stomped her foot. "We are not perverted."

"I apologize, Mrs. Haversham. It was a mistake." George looked down at his shiny, black shoes.

"Someone here is a pervert." Lillian leaned closer to her brother. "It's you," she whispered.



“That apology will not do.” Roy shook his finger. His wedding ring shone in the bright hall lighting as it danced. “What woman were you following? There are no *other* people alive in this hotel. I will not have –”

“You are correct, we are standing in a mass grave.” Ernest’s voice dropped even lower. “My son made a mistake. He apologized. We have much, much bigger issues to deal with.”

Anna gave her husband a thankful glance. “We need to find a way to talk to Océane. We need to see about the other nerve centers. We need to call for help. The good news is that with food, water, and air, we should be fine until help arrives.”

“Was there another woman? If so, we need to look for other survivors.” Albert stared at George.

“There was no other woman,” George mumbled.

“Océane can help with finding other survivors. But in the meantime, I have a couple suggestions.” Rose stepped forward, trying to assert herself. “If you’ll listen to some thoughts I have ...”



George tuned out the group discussion. His cheeks were hot, and his mind felt fuzzy. How odd a thing that he had saved all their lives, and *still* so much hostility was headed his way. He raised his eyes from the floor and looked around their circle. The mirrors on either side created an odd feeling of many more people than the ten they had. His gaze worked around the circle. His sister, arms folded, lips pressed together. His mother, trying to engage the group in a productive way. His father, trying to prod them all toward salvation. Albert, rotund and disapproving. Edith, still looking confused. Delores, silent as usual. Constance, gazing up at the Roman mural on the ceiling, her cheeks still flushed crimson. Roy, staring daggers at George, his cheeks red with rage. Albert, standing a few paces behind Roy, looking rotund and glum. Rose, trying hard to make people take her plan seriously. She wanted to visit every dock to see if there were any lifeboats, or other transport, left. *Not a bad plan*, George thought.

“There should be docks on the ring, and the other spire, too.” Rose continued. “If the elevators still work, we can ...” She continued to pitch her plan.

Something was wrong. George scanned back around the circle in the opposite direction. He froze. His skin crawled. Was he going insane, or were there two Alberts? There was one in between Edith and his father, and one behind Roy. George looked behind Roy. There was nobody there. His legs felt weak. He had seen Albert standing in both places, hadn't he? Was he hallucinating? His mind fuzzed further. Layer after layer of cognitive dissonance had been slathered on his brain. It was too much. Saving the lives of this group ... all the dead littering the now empty hallway ... seeing Edith's bare hand ... his mother finding out he'd been spying ... two Alberts. George wobbled and fell to the lush carpet, his mind going blank. The last thing he heard was his mother's scream.



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Anna's Diary August 13, 2197

All those poor people! Dear Diary, how can I express how terrible this all is. Thousands of dead guests ... no way to call for help ... only a handful of survivors.

The only bright spot has been the way Georgie has stepped up. He saved our lives! What a gem of a son I have. Even at eighteen years old, he's a natural leader. People look to him for answers! I know the incident with the Havershams will be difficult for George to bear. I believe my son, however, when he says it was an accident. They must have left the door open, and his teenage curiosity got the better of him. He *did* apologize. And clearly, the accusations took their toll, because he fainted. I am at his bedside, writing at this very moment. He looks like he's sleeping restfully. I would have the computer run a diagnostic on him, but it won't speak to me in English. Oh ... he's waking up! He seems well. I'll write more later.



Ernest's Diary August 13, 2197

There is nothing worse than facing a problem without the right tools. We're locked out of the main hotel systems, and Océane is practically useless. Our group seems prone to infighting. The Havershams are ridiculous to pester my son after what he did for them. Ms. Pemberton seems to be the only useful person we saved and that is only marginally so.

I must admit, Ms. El Rashidi made a good argument for exploring the other docks. We've sent Ms. Pemberton to her concierge desk to retrieve the dock locations and any other information she can glean on transport off this hotel. When she gets back, I will scout out the locations. If the elevators are still not functional, I'll take the stairs. We need to leave before we're confronted with any more surprises.

Lillian's Diary August 13, 2197

Leave it to George to get caught perverting during the apocalypse. I was out of my mind with horror at what's happened, wondering how things could get worse. Well, Georgie watches strangers doing it and then won't apologize. Things did get worse! We're the last people in this hotel and everyone now knows that I'm the sister of a pervert. Mom and Dad seem to think we're leaving soon. It can't happen soon enough. I want to go home and forget I ever visited La Belle Île en Mer.

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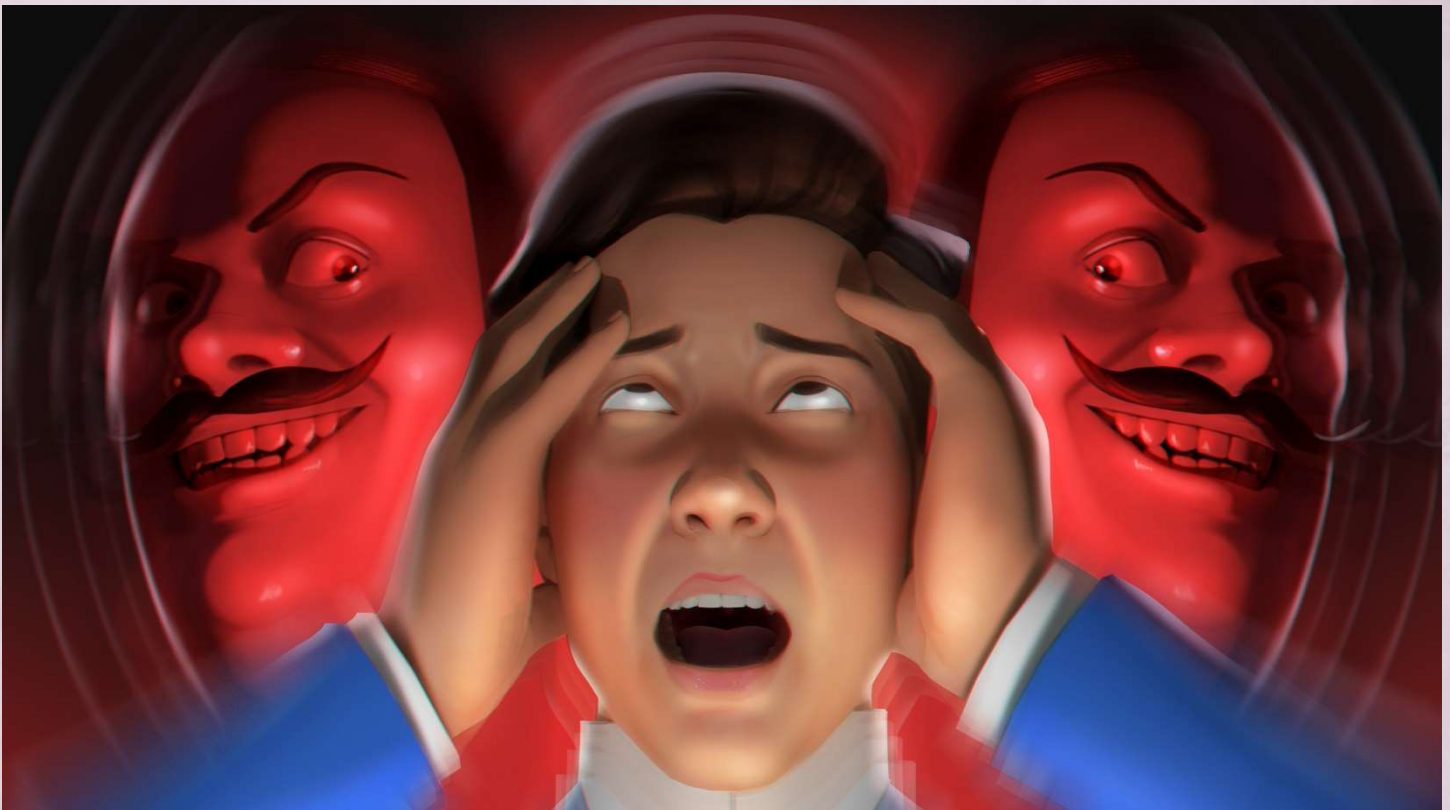
“Mom?” George sat up to find his mother’s concerned face. He was on his bed, still dressed in his suit. His tie had been loosened. He automatically tightened it and centered the knot. “What happened?”

“Understandably, you’ve been under a lot of stress. We’ve put so much on your young shoulders. And then the Havershams overreacted to that misunderstanding the way they did.” Anna forced a reassuring smile onto her face. With the dead bodies removed, she was finding it easier to pretend things weren’t so dire. “You fainted. How do you feel?”

“I’m ... okay.” He reached for her gloved hand and held it tightly. He relaxed as he felt the strength of her grip. “I’m so sorry, Mom. It was an accident. I didn’t mean to.”

“I know.” Anna nodded. “It was unfortunate that it happened. But let’s focus on the bigger picture.”

That reminded him of the two Alberts in their meeting. “I saw Mr. Dmytruk in two places at the same time right before I ... collapsed. There were two of him.”



“Don’t fret, sunshine.” She leaned over and kissed his cheek. “You were stressed. There’s only one Albert. The hallway has mirrors on either side. Your mind was overstimulated, and you thought you saw two of him. There’s only one Mr. Dmytruk.” She wiped the kiss off his cheek with her gloved hand and stood up. “Get some rest. I think your father wants to hike this tower and check on every dock. It’s a good idea.”

“It’s dangerous, Mom.” George tried to get out of bed, but his mother gently put his head back on the pillow.



wishing the locks worked.

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“Océane, can you turn on the elevators?” Ernest pressed the elevator call button. The doors did not open.

“Il y a un blocage dans le puits entre les étages trois et quatre. L'ascenseur ne fonctionnera pas tant que le blocage n'aura pas été retiré. Les machines de maintenance ne sont pas disponibles pour cette tâche,” Océane said.

“The skyrmion burst is past us. Océane is doing the best she can do to make things run smoothly. Your father will take the stairs. It’ll be tiring, no doubt. But not dangerous.” She tried out her reassuring smile again. It felt somewhat natural.

“Don’t go with him, Mom. I need you here ... with me.” He tried to soundly manly with his request, but that was a tall order.

“I’ll stay one room over. I’m not much for hiking.” Anna moved to the door. “I think Ms. El Rashidi wishes to go with your father. It was her idea after all.” She opened the door and looked back toward her son. “Stay in your room, Georgie. I don’t want you roaming the halls. Let’s put a damper on any more friction with the Havershams.”

“Yeah, sure, Mom.” George nodded and put his hands behind his head. “But I am getting hungry.”

“I’ll come back for you after you’ve taken a good long nap. We can explore some restaurants together.” One more forced smile and Anna slipped out of George’s room. She closed the door gently,

"I think that's a no, dear."

Anna shrugged. She looked around at the small group assembled there. Albert stood with his arms resting on his belly. He had finally changed out of his tuxedo and now wore an everyday suit. Delores stood near Anna, biting her bottom lip. She had been arguing for the group not to split up. Rose was next to her husband, looking adventurous. The young woman wore a determined expression. Anna wondered what her story was. Who had she been traveling with? Unlike Albert, she was too young to be traveling on her own. She looked no more than twenty-five. The rest of the survivors were resting in their rooms. Anna turned her attention to Rose. "Take good care of my husband, Ms. El Rashidi." She winked at the woman. "Bring him back to me."

"Pay her no mind, Ms. El Rashidi. She's joking." Ernest gave his wife a prim hug. "There's food and water in the hotel. We'll be well provisioned wherever we go. We shouldn't take more than a few hours to go down and back up. If there's a lifeboat waiting for us, we'll find it."

"There is a lifeboat." Rose nodded her dark curls. "I can feel it." She tightened her gloves and hiked her skirts up so that her clothing was more practical for stairs.

"Are you sure you won't go with them, Mr. Dmytruk?" Anna turned a smile on Albert. "I would feel so much better if another man joined my husband and Ms. El Rashidi."

"If that is your desire, madam, send your son with them. That is, if he's not busy with some other salacious tomfoolery." Albert turned and ambled back to his new room.



Anna frowned at his back. Perhaps it was better that he *not* go on the exploratory mission. "Okay, dear. You're a hero. Good luck!" Anna kissed her husband once more on the cheek and watched him depart. She and Delores waved as Ernest and Rose descended the stairs. When the explorers were gone, Anna and Delores turned and followed Albert down the hall. She glanced at Delores and could see the woman was on the verge of tears. She gently slipped her arm into Delores', locking them together at the elbows. "They'll be fine, Mrs. Salazar."



Delores nodded and leaned into Anna. She was a couple inches taller than Anna, but she bent and rested her head on the older woman's shoulder.

"You're not worried about my husband and Ms. El Rashidi, are you?" Anna waited, but Delores didn't answer. "May I call you Delores, Mrs. Salazar?"

Delores nodded against the woman's shoulder. She knew she was staining Anna's sleeve with her tears, but didn't want to move away.

"Where is your husband, Delores?" Anna pitched her voice low, giving it a gentle timbre.

"We ... we ... were on our honeymoon." Delores's sobs were mostly silent. "He was ... was ... golfing when ... it happened. Do you think he's ... all right?"

"Oh ... I see." Anna put her arms around the woman's quaking shoulders. "I don't know, Delores." Anna knew perfectly well that this poor woman was a widow, but she didn't have the heart to tell her. *But for the grace of the gods, this could have been me. I'm lucky to still have my men.* "What's his name, dear?"



It took Delores a while to tell Anna. She trembled. Up ahead, Albert arrived at his door and disappeared into his room. Farther down the hallway, she saw a robotic cleaning crew move into view. The strangely humanoid creatures were mostly mechanical, with minimal biological parts. Delores shivered. She would have preferred that the hotel had been staffed with Alternates, which looked completely human. But, of course, that would have been expensive and controversial. They were steaming the carpet and wiping down the mirrors. "His name is ... Carlos."

"We'll do our best to find Carlos, dear. You have my word." Anna detested lying, but sometimes it was for the best. She guided Delores into her room and sat with her. The woman needed company, and Anna could check on her children later.

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The nightmare put George into a cold sweat. He was running down long, luxuriously finished hallways, trying to hide from the pursuing Albert. The rotund man ran with an awkward gait, his belly grotesquely swaying from side to side. Despite this, every time George looked back, the man had gained on him. George turned down another corridor and pulled to a stop. Albert stood waiting for him there, too, a wide leer on his normally dour face. George turned and ran the opposite way, now pursued by two Alberts. When he turned a corner, he ran into a third. And then a fourth. Soon a whole army of ungainly, and unnaturally fast, Alberts chased him down.

A soft hand pressed to George's forehead. "Mom?" His eyes still closed, he wrenched himself from his nightmare, grateful that his mother had come back. But wait ... he decided he must still be dreaming because the fingers that caressed his brow were wonderfully bare. He opened his eyes. "Ms. Pemberton!"

"Shh." She smiled and put a naked finger to her lips. Edith wasn't wearing gloves on either hand. "You were having a nightmare. You ... needed me."

"You're in my room." George said dumbly. His mind raced to catch up with the situation. "Why didn't you come to my defense with the Havershams?"

"I couldn't tell everyone that I'd taken my glove off for you, could I? Do you want your mother thinking me a harlot?" Edith playfully walked her fingers over his face. "Such a handsome young man. And so smart and charming."

"I don't ... um ... I mean ..." George arched his back with pleasure when she slid her fingers past his lips. He had read about such things, but he had never thought it would happen to him.

"Well ..." Edith blushed. "It's not everyday that I do this for a man. Go on ... suck on them, silly." She rolled her eyes in friendly way.

"I thoufff youfff werfff mad atfff me." His words were garbled as he sucked on her fingers. Her digits were wonderfully delicate, small, and soft. He could feel the fingers from her other hand walking up his trouser leg.

"I wasn't mad at you. It's just that I can't let anyone know about us. You understand, right?" Edith took hold of his erection through his trousers. "My, you're big!" Her eyes got big and round. "This will be delightful."

"Mmmmmmmppphhhh." George closed his lips and sucked harder on her fingers. He wanted to please her, but was a little out of his element. When she deftly unbuttoned his trousers and pulled them, along with his underwear, down his legs with one hand, he understood that she was *very much* in her element. He wondered if she often did this with guests. When he felt the soft coolness of her skin on his dick, he decided he didn't



care. She played gently with his foreskin, stretching it over the wide dome of his cockhead and back down again.

“When that terrible thing happened earlier ... I thought I’d be all alone.” Edith took her hand out of his mouth, making sure to scoop copious amounts of saliva. She moved the hand to join her other and pumped his cock with both of them. “I was terrified I’d spin by myself here ... forever. But you were so resourceful with that special room. That was very clever. And you deserve to be rewarded.” He really had saved her. She was a social creature and solitude was hell.

“I ... do?” He shrugged out of his jacket, pulled off his tie, and unbuttoned his vest.

“So humble too.” She leaned her dark lips down toward George’s bloated cockhead.

“Oh ... you’re going to put it in your mouth. Well ... uuggghhhh ... of course you are.” He watched her with wide eyes. She was a dainty woman, and the way she nearly unhinged her jaw made his dick look gigantic.

“You look ... amazing.”



“Mmmmmpppphhhhhhhhhh.” Edith bobbed her head on his substantial penis. Her left hand moved from the shaft to his testicle, massaging it rhythmically.

“You’re wayyyyyyyyy ... ugh ... better at this ... than my ... ex-girlfriend.” George watched her face bulge around his dick. Her brown hair was pinned up with a small hat, so it was easy to observe her expertise. “So ... warm ... and tight ... and I can feel it ... at the ... at the ... aaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh.” He erupted in her mouth.

Edith’s slurping, sucking sounds changed to gulping.

“Aaaaahhhhhhhhhhh.” George threw his head back on the pillow, gripped the covers, and thrust his hips up at her. This was so much better than masturbating or the stuff he’d done with girls his own age. It was so good, in fact, that he wasn’t even embarrassed about how quickly his orgasm happened. “Oooohhhhhhhhhhh.” His hips jerked as Edith gulped down the last few spurts.



When his climax was over, Edith stood and wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. “I’ll visit you again, George Zaal. I like you very much.” Her smile was bright, and her brown skin was unblemished by cum. She’d swallowed it all. “But if you approach me out there, I will pretend this didn’t happen.” She gestured toward the door of his room. “This has to be our secret.”

“Yes ... okay.” With vague disappointment, he saw her pull on a glove. Before she could put on the other one, he held out his hand. “Before ... you go ... can we hold hands ... without your glove?” It was electric when she put her bare hand in his. He looked at her smooth skin and nimble joints. “You’re beautiful, Ms. Pemberton.”

“Thank you, George.” She withdrew her hand and slipped it into its glove. “When we’re alone in your room, you can call me Edith.” She gave him a wink and walked toward the door, her skirts rustling behind her.

“Thank you, Edith.” His eyes were filled with adoration as he watched her backside move across the room.

Edith stopped at the door, a gloved hand on the handle. “You need never thank a lady for enjoying herself with a handsome, charming young man. Nevertheless, you’re welcome.” With one last smile, she opened the door, slipped out into the hall, and closed it behind her.

“Wow.” George exhaled and lay on the bed. He stared right through the muraled ceiling into infinity. His dick was still standing at attention. He remembered that the doors didn’t lock, so he hustled to the bathroom to reach his second climax. It was lucky his mother hadn’t checked in on him when Edith was there. His parents had forgiven him for the accident with the Havershams. If they caught him with Edith so soon after, they might start to think something was wrong with him. He paused as he entered the bathroom.

Is something wrong with me? George was in the middle of a catastrophe, and he was thinking with his lesser head. But ... neither situation had been his fault. It was Edith and her alluring bare hands, both times. He shook his head, started the shower, and began fapping.

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“Almost to ... the ring.” Ernest glanced at the *Fourth Floor* sign as they descended the wide, carpeted stairs. On the right side of the switchback, they were currently heading toward the long window that made up one wall of the stairway. He could see debris passing by, but no bodies. “You know, Rose, something odd is going on.”

“You mean that we haven’t found any lifeboats?” Sweat soaked Rose’s bodice. She was exhausted from the descent. She didn’t look forward to turning back around and climbing all those stairs. Especially without any good news to share when they got back.

“No.” Ernest turned on the switchback, putting the window to his back. “We’ve been exploring the hotel for hours and found no bodies.”

“Océane picked them up.” Rose shrugged. “She probably spaced them.”

“Yes, that’s what I thought at first, too.” Ernest rubbed his chin. “But if that were so, there would be thousands of bodies floating around the station. I haven’t seen more than a few through this window. And I didn’t see any when we stopped at the restaurant with the wide view.”

“Hmm.” Rose turned it over in her head. “That is odd.” On the off chance that Océane was speaking English, Rose tried their resident AI again. “Océane, what did you do with all the dead?” They passed the third floor. There was supposed to be a dock on the second floor, so they planned to leave the stairway soon to check on it. And then they would see about accessing the ring.

“Vous n'avez pas l'autorisation pour ces données,” Océane said.

“The hotel wouldn’t have facilities to hold so many people. Not by a long shot.” Ernest thought things over. “Maybe she put them into the reclamation system? If so, I can hardly think of a more horrible way to treat the dead.”



"Would that mean that we're eating the ..." Rose's voice trailed off. Her feet stopped, her right one a step lower than her left. She was vaguely aware of Ernest stopping a few steps behind her. There was a floor to ceiling obstruction ahead. Her gloved hand went to her mouth. "What ... is *that*?" With her other hand she pointed at the shiny, black thing. It seemed to be pulsing with a dyadic beat, almost like a heart. There was a faint rainbow sheen on its surface the color of an oil slick. The obstruction was mostly opaque, but she thought she could just make out shapes below the surface. She caught sight of a partially dissolved shoe. And then long blond hair floating. She shrieked when she saw a green eye blink near the shimmering surface. It wasn't connected to any body that she could see.



"I ... stand corrected." Ernest stared, the color disappearing from his cheeks. "This is a much more horrible way to treat the dead. What is it?"

"I have no idea." Rose took a step back. "We should leave. We should leave right -" A shiny, black arm more than ten feet long reached out from the barrier and seized Rose around her middle. She screamed, but could not break free.

"My ... gods!" Ernest turned and ran. Rose's scream ended abruptly when he heard a sickening crunch behind him. He dared not turn around to determine her fate. He had to leave. He needed to warn the others. Something had gone very wrong with La Belle Île en Mer.