



CASE WHITE: STARS IN THE TIME OF DREAMING

Ilisa J. Bick

South Bruny National Park, Tasmania

Terra

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Night came very early to the southern tip of Tasmania, and by the time the last smudge of crimson bled away they'd already made love twice on blankets spread upon a deserted beach of snowy-white sand. Afterwards, they were too sated and too lulled by the ceaseless susurrations of the Tasman Sea to bother with the tent, not right away. Still, a chill wind skimmed the water on its way inland, carrying a scent of steel and brine. So they wrapped up in three blankets, cocooning every square millimeter of their naked bodies, leaving only a small woolen oval to halo their faces so they could gaze at a sky milky with stars.

Jack lay on his right side and Clara on her left, and every now and again, they would trade soft, gentle, lingering kisses somehow infinitely tender and so intimate that he was aroused all over again. Clara smelled warm and salty and sweet and a little wild. He luxuriated in the silken feel of her skin, the steady throb of her heart, and he pulled her closer.

Suddenly, Clara gave a little gasp, not of passion but wonder. "Jack, look!"

A thick seam of improbably pale green light stitched an arc across a background of glittery stars. The fireball was so close they could see its flesh boiling away in smoky pillows of gray and fluorescent green; the fireball hissed and sizzled, friction skinning it, flaying the meteor alive. Suddenly, it disintegrated, breaking apart with a *whump*, exploding into whitish-green streamers: not like fireworks, but like something alive reproducing by fission, a series of fiery beads on an ever-lengthening string.

And then the glowing fragments were gone, so far away when they hit the sea that they made only the tiniest of splashes.

"Well." Jack wasn't aware he'd held his breath until he let go of it in a rush. "I've never seen anything like that. Not exactly something you'd wish on, is it?"

"I don't know about that," Clara said. Her voice was thoughtful.

"How do you mean?"



She took her time answering. "Well, you know the medicine men of some of the Aboriginal tribes believe that a child's spirit rides down to Terra on a shooting star. That's how the child finds its mother, and the streamer is like a dreaming track that marks the spirit's way."

"Really." He took a few moments to digest this. Was she saying ...?

"Do you think that's what's happened?" he said, and was surprised when his throat clogged with emotion. He swallowed and aimed for something light and funny, but his voice was still hoarse. "Because I'm telling ya, with a fireball like that, he'll be a bruiser."

She laughed, and when he held her face in his hands, her cheeks were wet. "Or maybe *she'll* be a handful," she said.

"Well," he said, gathering her in his arms, only carefully as if she might break, "just in case the kid's gotten lost along the way ... let's make some fireworks of our own."

Pulling back, she studied his face. "You're sure?"

"Absolutely." And then he silenced her, kissing her thoroughly and deeply, telling her how he felt with his body, and they didn't talk again for a long time.

But later, as she slept, Jack stared at the crystal-bright stars and thought: *Then. It happened right then.*

As it turned out, he was right.



The feeling returned six years later, as he and Clara made desperate love on the sands fringing the Altjira Sea on New Earth. In that instance, however, he was going back to Terra and he couldn't change her mind about remaining on New Earth for another month. An old physician-mentor, Dr. Claude Gaynes, had invited Clara for a visit, and as he'd been her commanding officer back in the day before she went on inactive reserve—as well as a dear friend—she told Jack she couldn't refuse.

"It's a *month*," she said. "What can happen?"

Plenty. That's what he wanted to say, but even though he had a very bad feeling about it, he let her go. Really, he couldn't stop her, never could. But they made love and while there was no shooting

star to fire the sky, the feeling he got was exactly the same: *It happened right then.*

But he didn't know for sure, and now he couldn't ask her because that was five months ago: the very last time he saw her before the Word of Blake buttoned up Terra and everything went to hell.



13 March 3068

...breahnk, breahnk, breahnk...

...what ...

...breahnk, breahnk, breahnk...

...big...bang...breahnk, breahnk, breahnk...explosion, there was an explosion and then...breahnk, breahnk, breahnk...head...I hurt ...

...breahnk, breahnk, breahnk...something screaming in an atonal bleat loud enough to hurt...breahnk, breahnk, breahnk...and now there was a queer smell... her senses swam...scorched metal and the stink of something swampy...breahnk, breahnk, breahnk...

Groaning, Clara tried opening her eyes, but her lids were so heavy *breahnk, breahnk, breahnk* and the noise was too loud, spiking her ears *breahnk, breahnk, breahnk...*

She came to, slowly, her eyelids lifting by degrees, and that hurt because her head was sodden and ached. She didn't even know how long she'd been unconscious. An hour, a few hours, half a day...?

But now something must be terribly wrong because she was floating; she shouldn't be floating but there was that ... that *bang* and then the ship rocked with explosions and then she was flying across the room and she remembered the collision of her body with an unyielding titanium bulkhead ...

Must've hit my head pretty hard to pass out.

Her thoughts churned like gooey taffy, *breahnk, breahnk, breahnk* but she recognized the smell now, something metallic, rusty, wet ...

Blood, it's blood...

No. Her awareness slammed back in a rush, sensation suddenly blasting along her nerves, gusting as from a fiery hot wind. Even in the dim, ruddy glow of emergency lights—even as the *breahnk, breahnk, breahnk* of alarms bit at her brain—she saw that sickbay was awash in blood. Blood filmed her face, stinking of wet copper, and because gravity had failed, more cohered in oily globules undulating like something alive. Her hair was matted with gore and dragged in thick, sticky tendrils across her nose and mouth. A sour ball of panic pushed into the back of her throat, and she gagged at the taste in her mouth. The blood was thick, salty and cloying.



The blood tasted like death.

Was she bleeding? What about...had it...? *"Please, please..."* She pawed at her uniform, twisting, straining to see if maybe there was an open wound or worse... *Calm down, can't do anyone any good if you can't calm down...*

Her gray Com Guard uniform was spattered with blood, but other than her head she wasn't in pain and she didn't think she was bleeding. Shaking, she managed the buttons of her smock and anxiously scanned her belly. Her abdomen was smooth and at first glance, she didn't see anything. No gashes, though there might be bruises; the light was so bad, she couldn't really tell.

Still, something might have happened. The damage might be internal. She willed herself completely still and directed her focus inward, imagined all her senses coalescing to a single bright laser point and held her breath, waiting, hoping...

"Butterfly kiss," and then she nestles her cheek against Amy's. Her daughter's skin smells sweet and warm like honey, and as she blinks, her eyelashes skim Amy's cheek, and Amy giggles...

Come on. Her lungs were burning, her heart thudding in her temples, and she was forced to take a shallow sip of air. *Come on...*

There: a slight flutter, and then another...

"Oh, thank Blake," she said out loud, though she wasn't particularly religious. For a moment and despite everything, she basked in a wave of relief. Where there was life, there was hope. She still had that, at least.

First things first: She had to get out of here, figure out what happened, get another message to Jack. *He'll have gotten the first one and he'll be there, waiting...*

Another wavering globule of blood broke against her face, shattering into a million tiny droplets. Still repulsed but no longer panicked, she considered this. Irrespective of volume and despite weightlessness, once blood was removed from a vein or artery, it clotted, without fail, after about five minutes.

But *this...* She skimmed a few of the errant globules into the palm of her left hand the way she gathered foam in the bath for Amy and blew clouds of bubbles or gave her giggling daughter a soapy beard.

Hunh. Much of this blood was clotted and still more was tacky, just beginning to clot. And some was fresh, and she *knew* it wasn't hers, so it had to be...

"Dr. Gaynes?" Her voice was small, barely audible even to her, and no match for the alarms. Gaynes had been right there; they'd been trying to figure out a way to smuggle her onboard one of the DropShips, or maybe have her take Gaynes' place as combat surgeon and get down that way before taking off...

Can't think about that now; one disaster at a time, the alarms are still going and we're not under thrust because the gravity's gone, and that means there might not be anyone left on the bridge to...

"Gaynes?" she called again, louder this time, straining to be heard over the alarms that were still ringing *breahnk-breahnk-breahnk*. She was aware of an icy blackness blooming in her chest, a premonition as cold as empty space and utterly dead: *Almost five hundred crewmen, I can't be the only left, I can't... I've got to get off the ship, I've got to...*

Sickbay was in the *Vision of Truth's* very core, well-protected by armor and astern of the bridge but aft of the twenty-five DropShip bays that gave the *Potemkin*-class its distinctive look of a denuded corn cob. She had no way of knowing what was going on outside the ship; she had no access to a viewscreen, and other than hailing the bridge, she wasn't expert enough to tap into a command channel. And if she hailed the bridge, what would she say? *Hey, there, I'm alive, can I get off now?*

Probably not.

On the other hand, she might be able to make her way to a DropShip or lifeboat, maybe get off another message to Jack—but she wasn't going anywhere until she found Gaynes.

Unlike the bridge, the ship's sickbay had a clear ceiling and floor as well as transparent forward and back compartments because, for some reason no one really understood, patients recuperated more quickly under those circumstances. A circle of workstations stood in the precise center; routine examinations were performed forward in a partitioned bay to her left while four trauma bays lined the wall to her right. These gave way to a deep alcove to the rear where surgeries were performed and the sickest patients held and monitored.

She'd drifted close to a chair that was bolted to the deck, and now she grabbed for it, anchoring herself in midair as she turned

a slow pirouette. Inky pools of shadow stained the walls and floor, and she had trouble seeing much of anything. A glance at the dark workstations confirmed that she could forget hailing the bridge. No power there, either.

Then, for the first time, she noticed that the ever-present background hum of machinery and circuits was absent.

No power means no life support. Cold twists of fear knitted her gut. If we were close to Terra, it's only a matter of time before we get pulled in, burn up... I've got to get off the ship, I've got to get off...

"Gaynes?" She was shaking now, and her voice was ragged, barely a strained whisper. Then she saw something man-shaped in a thick finger of shadow spilling along the deck, but... She frowned. She could've sworn that was an access corridor to points rear of sickbay toward the cargo bays, DropShips and engine rooms. But if that was Gaynes...

"Gaynes, are you all right?" She pushed off from the chair, drifting closer. She made out two arms and a chest, a head and a swirling curl of... hair? That was wrong. Gaynes' hair wasn't that long, and he was lying down, and that didn't make sense either, not without gravity, unless maybe he was pinned by a chair or something. She swam toward the shape, squinting to make out details in the gloom. "Gaynes, are you—?"

At that exact instant the alarms abruptly cut out, leaving in their wake a ringing silence. Her heart thumped in mingled relief and renewed hope. *Has to be someone else alive, or else the alarms wouldn't have cut out.* There was no tug of gravity's return, but maybe the engineers were making repairs and they could get underway, get down to Terra or, at worst, take the lifeboats and escape pods. But things were going to be all right, they *had* to be all right.

Then a bank of paneled ceiling lights popped on one by one, emitting a thin electric hum. Weak yellowish-white lights washed across the bloody gloom—and then she finally understood what that furl of impossibly long hair was.

And then there was nothing at all in the way of her scream.



Com Guard Potemkin-class troop cruiser *Vision* of Truth

Somewhere above Terra

13 March 3068

1630 hours, GMT

Fuck, but somebody shoulda known you don't launch an assault on Friday the 13th.

Still, near as Mackie could tell, things had gone okay, the whole fleet jumping in at a pirate point behind the moon, heading for Terra full burn, ready to kick some Word of Blake ass. A cakewalk, right?

Only the *next* thing he knew, the *Vision* maybe took a hit or, equally bad, something exploded somewhere because one of the engines, the number two he thought, either crapped out or was blown completely to smithereens.

And *then* the *Justice*—one of *their* ships! Leastways that was the chatter coming over his bud right before the comm went down—*Justice* let them have it: opened up wide with autocannon and lasers. Hit them broadside. Fuck knows how many decks got trashed, vaporized, all the air and anything not nailed down sucked right out in the explosive decompression.

And the kicker? Mackie shoulda been dead. Thing was he'd *been* making time scuttling down from the bridge to bay seven because one of the DropShip's comm systems was hiccupping and he was a communications tech (glorified term for scut puppy). Only he'd taken a little side trip, jogging to crews' quarters because he'd been tanking on coffee half the damned day and most of the night before and so he had to...wait for it...yes, take a leak so bad his eyeballs were floating.

That whiz saved his goddamned life. How screwed up was that?

When things starting going *boom*, he'd just finished, savoring that wonderful moment of relief at the very end of a good piss. Not as good as sex, but hey... He tapped, had hold of the zipper and was pulling if you can believe it, and then next thing he knew ...*blam!*

The first explosion sent him crashing face-first into the wall just above the head, like he'd gotten booted in the ass. Damn lucky he didn't zipper off his dick.



Instead, he did one hell of a face-plant. *Whap!* There was a crackly, crunchy sound like someone'd stomped on a buncha eggshells, then his face went nova with pain like to melt his skull. Blood gushed down his throat and spurted over his chin, dripped onto his uniform, and he was choking, spluttering blood spray. His vision blurred with tears and then he was staggering like a drunk, every movement delivering a bone-rattling quiver of pain that hurt right down to his fillings.

The alarms shrieked as emergency lights flushed an angry crimson, and there were more bangs after that, more explosions, and they were much worse because he was weightless by then, gravity totally kaput, so every shock wave sent him careening against the walls like a pinball, rattling around like a pea in an empty, well, *can* before everything just...stopped.

Near as he could figure it, *Vision* now was dead in the water, alarms drilling holes in his brain and nobody home on the bridge. He knew because that's the first thing he tried, hacking into a command channel to figure out what the fuck went down. Got squat. Hell, he figured half the crew was either splattered or doing a little unscheduled EVA without suits.

There was one only thing about which he was one hundred percent certain. His nose was busted. From going to the goddamned *can*.

How unreal was that?



Right about then, Mackie noticed something else: no vibrations. *Oh boy.* He pressed himself against a bulkhead and held himself very still, breathing in shallowly through his mouth.

Nothing.

Mackie exhaled his held breath through parted lips very, very slowly and he felt as if something more essential were escaping than just carbon dioxide and water vapor and whatever else came out when he emptied his lungs. It was like he was letting go of hope because he knew exactly where the ship had been when it was hit and where they'd been going.

Astrophysics 101: Orbital velocity depended on balancing Terra's gravitational pull against the ship's inertia. The speed a ship need-

ed to maintain orbit depended on altitude. Now, considering that the ship had zip in the way of engines but was pretty close to Terra; had really, not to put too fine a point on it, been *screaming* in at full burn...well. You didn't have to be a rocket scientist to get that one. Game over, man.

Although from the ground, the results might be kind of beautiful—and how sick was that.



So, okay: For the time being, he needed to make his way forward because he sure as shit wasn't going back where he *knew* there was enough radiation to flash-fry his nuts. Yeah, sickbay was a good start: shielded, access from all points, and only five decks between it and the bridge. Hell, at the very least, he could maybe scare up a doc to fix his nose.

Which was why he was headed that way when the alarms cut out and a second later, he heard the woman scream.



Horror blasted through Clara, searing her brain—and she couldn't stop screaming, screaming, *screaming*.

Gaynes was cut in two. Everything below his legs was on the other side of the emergency door that had slammed down with the ruthless efficiency and force of a guillotine. Pressure in Gaynes's abdominal cavity had forced bowel through his diaphragm and then out his mouth. What Clara had mistaken for shanks of hair were instead blood-soaked ropes of extruded small intestine that billowed under weightlessness like bloated worms.

The image burned itself onto her retinas. She wanted to tear out her eyes. She reeled back, spinning away, clamping down on her screams, trying desperately not to vomit—

And that's when she saw the crewman barreling into the blood mist that still drenched sickbay. As he hit the blood, he let out a yell: "What the hell is all this shit, are you all right, what the fu..." His voice died as he got a good look at Gaynes. The crewman's face was bloody, but she glimpsed enough skin to see the color dribble away, and his eyes go buggy with shock.



"Aww, fuck me." He scuttled back with little crablike motions, scrambling for some sort of handhold. "Shit, *shit*..."

He was just a kid, maybe twenty, tops, scared to death and his nose was smashed and off-kilter to the left. There was blood smeared over his face and on his neck, and clots the consistency of grape jelly speckled the neck of his uniform. But he was the first living person she'd seen and that, combined with some of the ship's power coming back, somehow made her better able to control herself.

More importantly: He might know how to get them both out of here. He'd made it to her, right?

"Hey, hey." She moved until she blocked Gaynes's body from his view. "It's okay. I'm a doc, I'm Clara, and you're..." Her eyes flicked to his smeared name badge. "McAndrews?"

"Mackie." His voice was nasally, as if wads of cotton had been stuffed up his nose. He was also skinny, all elbows and angles, and when he swallowed, his Adam's apple bobbed. "Communications tech." He added, unnecessarily, "I broke my nose."

"Yeah, I can see that. Do you know what happened?" She listened with dimming hope as Mackie told her about the engine blowing and then the hits they'd taken broadside, and the *Justice*. Mackie might be mistaken about what he'd heard, but it made a sort of awful sense and would explain the timing, too. Their ship's engine goes, and then the *Justice* finishes them.

She said, "Did you hear if they got out a distress? Have all the lifeboats gone?"

Shaking his head, Mackie snorted, masticated something, made a face, and then spat out a gob of clot on the breath of a curse. "Dunno. We're just dead in the water." He added, "We were heading right for Terra, you know. I mean, we're talking right down her throat."

Jack...Amy... Clara felt that deep-down flutter again, and she closed her eyes, putting a protective hand over her belly. The fluttering subsided after another few seconds, and when she opened her eyes, she saw that Mackie was staring, his eyes clicking from her face to her abdomen then back.

She said, "I don't suppose you know if we made it into orbit or..."

Mackie's mouth tugged into a grimace. "Way I figure it, one of three things is gonna happen. One, we've already skipped right off the skin of Terra's atmosphere, and we keep on tumbling until we get power, which might be never. Gives us time, but not a lot. Two, there's an outside chance we were high enough and going fast enough that we slipped into orbit, and then we can hang out here for, oh, a couple two-three centuries."

"Or three," she said, her tone already a little dead, "we burn up." She paused. "But the lights..."

"Are just lights. Don't count if we don't have life support, or enough juice to power up an engine." Mackie wiped away goo from his chin. "And you got to think there're big chunks of the ship just gone, and that means we're open to space."

"Why would that matter?" But she saw why. No life support also meant no heat. With huge sections of the ship open to the deep cold of space, their heat would bleed away like marrow sucked from the remnants of a cracked bone.

Still, she snatched at the slim hope that the lights meant someone was in charge somewhere. There was still time. Maybe they could get to a DropShip or further forward or...

She gasped as the ship reverberated with a faint rumble, enough to visibly shake free some of the blood adhering to sickbay's walls. But when she looked toward the air vents, there was no corresponding rust-colored bloom. *Still no air, but if there's power...*

When she met Mackie's eyes, she knew that she wasn't imagining things. "What was that?" she asked, and then when the rumble came again and stronger: "What *is* that? Are those DropShips?"

He shook his head slightly. "No. Maneuvering thrusters, I think... yeah, and now..." The rumble grew louder and more sustained. He pulled himself to a bulkhead and spread his palm over the metal as she did hers to her belly.

Feeling for signs of life...

"That's an engine," Mackie said, and his lips split in a grin. "We're moving!"

"To where?" she demanded. She was afraid to hope, but she couldn't help it, and her belly knit then twisted as a squirt of adrenaline shot through her veins. "Are we breaking off, getting away?"

"Hang on, hang on." Mackie was fumbling a communications bud into his ear. "Just a sec. Let's see if the command channel's back..." He closed his eyes, listened and then he was nodding. "Got it, I got it, I got the bridge and..." His voice trailed away, and then his face crumpled.

"What?" Dread seized her heart. "What are they doing? What...?"

But in the next second, as blood rained onto the deck and she felt gravity's fingers on her flesh, she had her answer.

She blurted, stupidly, "But they can't! We're still here! We're still alive!"

"Yeah?" Mackie's eyes were already a little dead. "Like that counts? We're nobody, man."

A protest rose to her lips, but she silenced it before giving it voice. He was right. They *were* nothing: just the faceless cogs driving a machine of war as every soldier before and after them would be.

This had all been a mistake: she shouldn't be here; she was inactive reserve, had been pressed into service well before she'd even *known* or realized that she and Jack had...

Desperate, she said, "I want you to do something for me," and then she told him what and why. Not all the gory details. Not even that she and Gaynes had smuggled out word to Jack so he could clear out with Amy. She told him just enough. Maybe it was unfair. He was just a kid, after all.

Tough shit.

When she was done, he was silent for three seconds, five. Then he said, "I don't know if I can do that. It's not *you* or the..." Breaking off, he looked away as if he couldn't bear to look her in the eye any longer. He gestured helplessly toward the banks of still-dark computers. "It's... I may not be able to figure it out in time before we..." His voice broke not with tears but frustration. "Fuck, I'm just a *tech*."

"You can do it, Mackie," she said, "you—" Suddenly, she was dropping as gravity returned; she rolled just in time, caught the impact with her shoulder but had the wind knocked out of her. She felt queasy.

"Here." A hand on her arm, and then Mackie was helping her to her feet. "Are you..." His eyes dropped to her abdomen, and his grip on her arm tightened. "Is it...?"

"I'm okay," she said, though that was far from true because things would never be okay again until, maybe, far into a future she wouldn't inhabit. "Mackie, we don't have much time."

His features settled into granite. "Don't get your hopes up. Even if I can, I probably won't get more than ten, fifteen seconds, max."

Not time enough to say all she wanted but time enough for a meteorite to flare to life. Time enough for the passage from darkness to light.

Time enough to make a child.

"Just make it work," she said.



South Bruny Island, Tasmania**14 March 3068****0430 hours, GMT+11 (Daylight Saving Time)**

Early fall now on South Bruny, five hours past a spectacular sunset of scarlet and fiery orange washing an aquamarine sky—and the thirteenth of March was come and gone. And still, no Clara.

For about the eightieth time, Jack fished his earbud from a breast pocket. But the reading on the tiny display was the same: *Ready*. Sighing, he cupped the bud in his palm.

Come on, Clara, you got word to me once, you can do it again.

The bud was silent.

He fed the fire with more bloodwood. South Bruny was much warmer in March than July but still chilly most of the year round. Cold nipped his face, and his breath plumed. As the greedy flames ate at the wood, the wood bled crimson sap that boiled and spit hissing sparks that briefly flared heavenward only to blacken and die. Somehow, given this place, that was fitting.

He'd quietly and quickly gone about packing up supplies, and then taken himself and his five-year-old daughter off to the island. They'd simply left. Calmly, though, not in a panic because then people would want to know why, and he couldn't risk that. He'd felt guilty, clearing out of Sydney, but the city was a major target and things might get very ugly. Here, on South Bruny, the only other living beings were the hordes of muttonbirds in their rookeries along black basalt cliffs that fringed the island. Here, Amy was safe.

And, of course, *now* the world did know.

Ground stations had picked up the Com Guard fleet hurtling toward Terra, and he thought they must already have engaged in battle. Was, in fact, nearly certain because he'd tuned in a Terran broadband channel, and a North American announcer had said something—he hadn't caught all of it—about intense flares visible in the burgeoning twilight there.

That was almost two hours ago on the other side of the world. He might not see a thing for many hours yet, if at all.



He could do nothing for Clara except wait and stare at a moonless sky so crowded with stars it was as if someone had dusted the night with diamonds.

Amy slept in the circle of his arms. There was something infinitely precious in the way his daughter surrendered to sleep with perfect trust that he would keep her safe—and that her mother would keep her promise.

Suddenly, the tiny bud in his palm *brrred* to life. He was so startled he nearly dropped it. With trembling fingers, he jammed the device into his ear.

"Clara?" He thought he heard something, a faint fizz, and then a voice faint as a bee, and then his body tensed, went rigid, and he said, more urgently, almost shouting, "Clara, Clara, is that you?"

In his lap, Amy squirmed, mewled like a kitten, and then she was struggling to sit up. "Da... Daddy? Daddy, what's wrong?"

"Clara!" He was shouting now. The fizz in his ear was dying, and he thought he heard her. "Clara, for God's sake, answer me, answer...!"

"Daddy! Daddy, look!" Amy had scrambled off his lap, but what made him look at her was her tone: not questioning, not frightened.

Enchanted.

Standing on tiptoes, Amy was pointing at the night sky. "Look, Daddy, look! Shooting stars, shooting *stars!*"

And then in his ear, a miracle, Clara's voice, clear as a clarion bell: "*Jack, by the time you hear this...*"

"No." Jack felt something seismic shift in the very core of his being, as if the earth beneath his feet were giving way, opening to an infinitely deep black chasm. His blood iced in his veins, and he thought that his heart must have stopped beating because nothing could live in such cold, nothing.

No.

At his side, Amy was still crowing with delight, and then he did look. Must look. Had to.

Clara.

High above, flowers of scintillating blue and purple streamers scorched the night sky. They spread out in ever-widening bursts, draped into shimmering tangles as the bigger pieces turned to fireballs screaming to earth. And even as he watched, he saw that there were still more ships up there—their plasma trails straighter or arcing graceful swirls as fighters dove and spun, and the night sky was alive with contrails, some brighter than others, as other women and men fought and died in these newborn and fraudulent suns.

In his ear, the bud was silent. Clara's voice was gone.

His mind swirled with vertigo, and sand bit his knees as his legs buckled, as he teetered on the brink of a darkness blacker than the void. Without realizing it, he'd wrapped his arms around his daughter the way a drowning man snatches at a branch, but whether he held her, or she braced him up, saved him from the abyss, he didn't know. And it didn't matter.

"Don't be sad, Daddy." Amy tugged at his hands. "It's too pretty to be sad. Come on, Daddy, quick, make a wish, and it'll be all right, just make a wish!"

"Clara," Jack whispered, and then the streamers and brilliant trails and all those falling stars fractured to smeary prisms as he finally let go of hope and his wife and what they'd made together for a future he would never know, and wept.



It rained souls through what was left of the night.