



KINETOFAYETOPHOBIA

That's all there was to it. The solar system was going to hell in a hand-basket.

It's funny the thoughts that occurred when being chased by dozens of tentacles that kept bursting out of the walls and floor, one by one. Each lashed out at Anastasia, trying to gain purchase on some part of her body to do only god-knows-what.

The wriggling, sour-smelling, slimy, boneless limbs brought out a primal fear in her, the kind that makes the back of your legs go numb and your knees go rubbery. The kind Anastasia had to choke back with every last shred of her will if she wanted to live through this madness.

Right, left, right - it didn't matter anymore. In her panic, she'd totally forgotten the layout of this tragic little building stuck deep in the Martian outback. She hoped desperately to find another door out, so that the thing might get caught up in the building long enough for her to get clear.

Charging through the only door she could see, her only way forward, it was marked storage. Looking around, this was probably the last door she wanted. There was no other way out. The room was filled only with storage lockers, but that wasn't the worst of it. The doors to the lockers weren't solid - they had holes in them.

No time to lose, Anastasia did the one thing she could. She grabbed the biggest locker she could find, way towards the back, and dove into it. Fortunately, she could lock the door by putting her hand through one of the holes. She didn't figure the thing was smart enough to work a digital lock.

Her Bandit pistol wasn't going to do much when the time came, but it was all she had. The thing had already claimed her Blizzard submachine gun back outside. She looked frantically around the container for anything that might help, but there was nothing. Then, she froze.

The first slender tentacle gently wormed its way through one of the holes, about hip height. It probed its way through, cautiously but deliberately. The second wasn't far behind, this one much thicker than the first. It could barely push its way through, but barely was enough. The fear gripped Anastasia again, much worse this time. She grabbed hold of a cargo strap, just to help keep her from collapsing.

More tentacles followed, backlit by the lights of the storage room which poured through the holes. She hoped they weren't going to notice her - hoped against all hope - but she knew better. In a few seconds the probing monstrosities would zero in on her and rip her limb from limb. If she was lucky.



One of the larger tentacles inched its way towards her. The tip touched her uniform and slowly slithered its way up. If terror hadn't already paralyzed her, the smell would have made Anastasia vomit. Another came from

the other side, closer every moment. The command came from her brain to fire the gun, but something short-circuited the thought en route.

This was a hell of a way to die.

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Suddenly, the storage room exploded with a bright orange light and she could smell burning flesh. The tentacles spasmed and began to yank their way out of the locker. The room lit up again, but this time some of the flames shot through the holes in the locker, singeing Anastasia's eyebrows and bangs. The last of the tentacles slithered out and she was thankfully alone.

Anastasia kicked the hot metal door as hard as she could. Her combat boot took the worst of it, but the door shot open. The wriggling things were withdrawing into the ground as a figure shot another burst of fiery death at them. It took a minute for Anastasia to overcome her shock to figure out who it was.

It was Felius, who looked downright funny – a bookworm with a flame-thrower. What the hell. It wasn't the weirdest thing that she'd seen today. He just sat there, grinning like an idiot.

No time to waste, Anastasia kicked her legs to get the numb out of them.

"Look what I found," said Felius.

Anastasia pointed at the hole in the ground. "Look what found us. Let's get back to the rover so we can call in an airstrike. I'm not taking any more chances."

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It was good to be back on Gany-mede. She was born in Troy, under

the bright lights of the casinos. Its mayhem felt like home.

Coming back from the restroom, she practically melted into the chair. "Finally," she said. "A hot meal in a civilized place."

Marcus looked carefully around the room, taking in each person in turn, which was something he did everywhere he went. "I ordered for you while you were gone."

"Thanks," she replied. "I didn't want to wait. I've missed Asian food so much. What did you order?"

Marcus smiled. "It's a surprise."

"So I've been correlating the data and this isn't good." Felius had his nose in his computer again.

Anastasia took a sip of her water. It was nice, properly recycled water. "When is it ever good?"

"The reports show that bodies have been going missing from the morgues with regularity. There's almost a pattern to the body-snatching. It appears that two cadavers, more or less, are stolen from different parts of the colony every week and have been for a little less than three months now."

Marcus frowned, his eyes on other things. "Necrophiliacs wouldn't need bodies with that kind of frequency. That leaves cults and..."

"Ghouls," finished Anastasia.

Just then, the food arrived. Felius had ordered what many had come to call "white people chicken," while Marcus' tastes tended more towards the exotic – Echizen jellyfish, which can be toxic if not prepared properly. Which is something Anastasia had forgotten when she asked him to order for her.

There it was – san nak ji. A live octopus on a bed of vegetables. Anastasia knocked the chair over jumping out of it and away from her "dish."

"Take it away!" she shouted at the waiter, who promptly fell all over himself to remove the offending delicacy. He bowed and disappeared.

Anastasia composed herself and sat back down. Marcus looked at her, shocked. "What's wrong with you?"

"Kinetofayetophobia."

Even Felius was stumped. "Kinetofayetophobia? What the hell is that?"

"Fear of moving food. It's the closest phobia that translates to tentacles. Remember the thing on Mars?"

Marcus picked up a chunk of jellyfish with his chopsticks. "They've got phobias for everything, don't they?"

"Everybody's scared of something."

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The locals had already tried setting a trap, but had no luck. That meant the body-snatchings were either an

inside job or that the perpetrators were using the access tunnels in the city to get around. Either way, Anastasia and her team still didn't know what they were up against.

While Marcus positioned the local authorities to keep surveillance on any of the two dozen people who might possibly be insiders, Anastasia was stuck with the fun job of crawling through the access tunnels. Fortunately, Felius was sitting at a remote terminal with the city plans at his fingertips.

"At the next intersection, turn left," he said.

Whoever built Troy at least had the sense to make it easy to get around, even for the maintenance staff. The hidden corridors were big enough for a person with gear to stand up in – as well as being big enough to transport dead bodies through. They also had softly glowing lights throughout the tunnels. They may not have illuminated everything, but they were enough to get around.

Anastasia reached the intersection and turned left, only to be greeted by darkness. "Is there any reason the lights should be out in this part of the grid?"

"Hold, please," She could hear Felius typing. "Okay, I don't see any complaints or repair requests. According to the system, no one knows the lights are out. The other utilities are working just fine. Is the rest of the electricity on?"

"I'm not going to lick my fingers to find out, but I can hear the lines humming. Can you turn them back on?"

More typing. "Huh. Looks like someone has taken that system completely off-line."

Anastasia pulled out her pistol and snapped a glow-stick to life. The corridor ahead glowed a sickly green, a color that always reminded her of either Halloween or radioactive waste. Neither was particularly comforting right now. "Well, if someone's taken it off-line, then someone's up to something. Call Marcus and let him know what we've found. But Felius, don't go anywhere."

Fortunately, she knew from experience that Felius had no problem multi-tasking.

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"Wait. This isn't on my schematics."

Those were not the words Anastasia wanted to hear. "Then where am I?" She thought she smelled something funky.

Felius stammered. "Uh... uh... you... you're off the grid. I don't know why there would be tunnels that aren't on the schematics. These are supposed to be the map for the entire city. I got them from the city mainframe!"

Anastasia stepped into what looked like a spacious junction room, but paused when the smell hit her – the

sickly sweet smell of rotting flesh. The green light of her glow-stick slowly revealed something she did not want to see. "Oh no."

"What? What is it?" She could hear Felius pulling out his sidearm.

Though she covered her mouth, Anastasia said, "Don't go anywhere. Stay put."

This room was much larger than it first appeared. Whoever had stolen the corpses had brought them here. Over a dozen dead bodies in various states of decay were arranged in an almost reverent fashion. Some were hung on the walls in carefully considered poses. Some were placed in compromising positions that suggested things that made Anastasia sick.

Stepping further in, she eventually found something that made it all clear, or at least as clear as it was going to become. There, on the opposite wall, was an altar, made of bone and other unidentifiable things.

"Felius," Anastasia finally spat out after a couple tries. "It's not ghouls. I'm sending you images of the altar."

"Oh no," she heard him respond. "We need to get the locals mobilized."

"I'll stay here, just in case whatever sick bastards did this come back."

From behind her, Anastasia heard a voice that made her skin crawl. "Too late. We're here."

She whipped around in one practiced motion and squeezed the trigger, aimed right in the face of the portly, sweaty man licking the curved blade. The gun didn't fire. She pulled the trigger three more times. Nothing.

The man snarled. "Must be magic."

Without missing a beat, Anastasia jabbed a knife hand into his trachea. The man stumbled backwards into another, choking violently.

She didn't need a firearm to make sure these low-lives paid for their crimes. This was not Anastasia's first barbecue.

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There was a satisfying thunk as the Knight's Errant corvette formed hard seal with the dock. Welcome to Warden Prime, also known as the Eye. The gigantic space station hovered over Earth and was the primary center of Warden operations for the entire solar system.

Anastasia cued the comm. "Ladies and gentlemen, please stay seated until the captain has turned off the fasten seatbelt sign. Also, be



careful when opening the overhead compartments as things may have shifted during flight. Thank you for flying Warden airlines. Welcome to the Eye."

Powering everything down, Anastasia zipped up her suit and headed for the airlock. Marcus and Felius were already waiting for her.

"Man, is it good to be back in civilization!" said Marcus, smiling. "If the Captain's feeling generous, maybe we can get a vacation day to go planetside. It's the perfect time of the year for the beaches in Ibiza."

"Hanging out and getting burned by the sun while having smelly salt water sprayed on you sounds like a blast," added a particularly sarcastic Anastasia. "I'm sure the Captain will see that as an important use of our time."

"I don't even know how you call yourself human. What do you think, Felius?"

As usual, it took Felius a few minutes to realize someone was talking to him. "I'm sorry. What?"

"Figures," replied Marcus.

And with that, they walked out of the docking area and into the busy halls of the most notorious space station in the solar system.

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Captain Calado was waiting for them in a debriefing room. The heavily scarred man stood staring out the window at the Earth below. He was the kind of man that made people wonder whether or not he was boiling with anger on the inside. The patchwork color of his hair, which couldn't decide if it was black or gray, didn't help.

Marcus made a happy sound as he grabbed a seat at the conference table. As the only one of the three that was from Earth, it made him nostalgic – homesick even.

"I never tire of the sight. Do you, Agent St. Croix?"

"Absolutely not, sir," replied Marcus.

Calado turned and assessed his underlings. "The report got here weeks ago, so we can skip most of the BS. Any new thoughts?"

"Always, sir," began Felius. "We put our heads together on the trip and came up with several hypothesis. However, given the facts, it seems like it was Primoris Nox. Not many other cults would be that organized and want to play with that many dead bodies."

The Captain poured himself a glass of water, but didn't bother to sit down. "Cults, huh? Monsters I get. I like monsters. They're ugly and nasty and you know you should shoot them. Cults are full of people and people are devious. They're hard to root out. Too bad we can't just hook everyone up to a lie detector and flush them out."

"We believe we broke the back of that particular cell. The morgues on Troy should be safe again. Until the next time," said Anastasia.

"Well, the locals will be keeping an eye on things in the meantime. On to new things for you. So, which do you want first – the good news or the bad news?"

Anastasia almost laughed. "Let's hear the bad news first."

Calado turned to look back out over the beautiful blue planet. "I know

"I promised you a rotation on the inner planets, but something's come up. I need you to go right back out again."

Anastasia saw Marcus twitch. Too much time on the outer planets made him unhappy. She never really understood why.

"Something's up on Callisto," continued Captain Calado. "Local scientists thought they read something strange in the atmosphere. They thought the epicenter was in one of the impact craters. Naturally, they went out to see what they could find and never came back. The readings look real. The data has already been uploaded to your ship."

Marcus put down his glass. "Sir, why us? I mean, isn't there someone closer?"

"Believe it or not, Agent St. Croix, this is a busy agency. We don't always have the luxury of sending who is closest. You're between cases and Agent Kiss is Jovian. Any other questions?"

"What about the good news?" asked Anastasia.

Calado snorted. "Since when has there been good news?"

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As they approached the Jovian moon, Felius read statistics off his comp, like he always did. "Callisto is the outermost of the Galilean Moons, with low enough radiation to make it

ideal for colonization. The surface is covered with giant impact craters. Ursa, the only colony on the planet, has been constructed in one of them."

"Ana, this is your neck of the woods. What do we need to know?" asked Marcus.

The moon loomed larger every minute and they were about to break atmosphere – though the thin layer of carbon dioxide and molecular oxygen didn't really mean anything in terms of entry. Anastasia kept her hands on the controls. "It's a bedroom community mostly. People do tours elsewhere in Jupiter space and then come back to homes here. It's quiet. If you don't live there, there isn't much of a reason to go there."

The former cop in Marcus started to show through. "Okay, so I'm assuming that means low crime. Any racial tensions to worry about?"

"No. Callisto has about eighty thousand residents who do whatever they need to keep Ursa a nice place to live. Most of the crime is drug smuggling, domestic disputes, or minor property crime, with the occasional drunken assault. Honestly, it's some of the biggest bang for your buck property-wise anywhere in the outer planets."

"Thanks," replied Marcus. "I'll remember that for when I retire."

"Get yourself geared up, smart alec. The locals don't like disturbances and they'll view us as exactly that.

You'll have to do some fancy talking to keep them happy."

Oblivious to the rest of the conversation, Felius chimed in. "Wow. There's a subsurface ocean more than 100 km down. Is anyone researching that? Could that have anything to do with these readings?"

Anastasia brought the Knight's Errant into Callisto's airspace, slowly descending over the frost-capped peaks surrounding the massive craters. "There's a small outpost that's been digging and taking samples, but it is really radioactive down there. I'm no scientist, but it seems like it wouldn't have anything to do with what we're looking at."

Up ahead, she could see the giant dome of Ursa. She cued her comm. "Ursa Spaceport, this is Warden vessel Edge of Dawn requesting docking clearance."

"Edge of Dawn, you are cleared for docking on pad five. Welcome to Callisto."

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They hadn't even gotten out of the docks before Ursa Security met them. Just to make a point, there were five of them. Another warm Warden welcome.

The one that was clearly in charge led the pack. He had a round face and the kind of eyes that lied. In the past, he looked like the kind of guy who would have suffered from male

pattern baldness, if such a thing hadn't been cured. He approached and held out his hand. "Welcome. I am Lieutenant Ismo Jarvi, Head of Ursa Security. Governor Amarnath asked me to greet you."

Marcus stepped up to shake his hand, smiling disarmingly. "Pleasure. I'm Agent Marcus St. Croix. This is Agent Felius Fickerwith and Agent Anastasia Kiss."

Jarvi turned and ran his eyes up and down Anastasia. "Kiss? Is that intentional?"

Though she wanted to immediately bathe herself, Anastasia knew that you catch more flies with honey than vinegar. So, she gave him one of her best smiles, the kind that typically got men to do what she wanted. "It should be, but it's actually Hungarian."

Jarvi looked pleased, so Marcus took the opportunity. "So, Lt. Jarvi. We have no intention of making your life difficult. We'll make our way to the site and get out of here as soon as we can."

Jarvi tore his eyes away from Anastasia long enough to relax. "That is wonderful news. We'd like to minimize your exposure to the population. Our citizens prefer a quiet life, one unhampered by the kind of concerns Council agents like yourself most often represent. We've prepared the gear you'll need on our end, so gather up the rest of what you'll need and we'll escort you there."

There wasn't much choice, so the three Wardens went back into their Knight's Errant and headed to the armory. Marcus snorted. "For once, I wish these colonies weren't so worried about whatever crap they're worried about and start worrying about what's really going on. They do have bigger problems."

"That would make our job easier. Except that it's also our job to make sure they don't know what's going on," responded Felius.

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The place in question was several hours journey from the colony. The rover took them as far up the side of the crater as possible, and it was on foot from there. The extremely low gravity of Callisto made it both harder and easier for them to get up the slope. They each wore heavy weights on their ankles to maintain some traction, and grapple guns and ropes allowed them to reach the lip of the crater with only some small fuss. Fortunately, it was the middle of the day or the whole thing would have been nearly impossible.



Anastasia was the first to the rim and what she saw there made her gasp. This only served to make the other two scramble to join her as quickly as possible. What they saw was not lost on them either.

It didn't take a genius to recognize that something very strange was happening. A thick, swirling mist filled the crater about halfway to the top. They could see the shadows of something growing up out of the ground – maybe stalagmites or even trees? Either would be way out of place. Even worse, there were sounds. Noth-

ing lived on the surface of Callisto, so there should be no sounds other than the ones they were making. Something also seemed to be glowing down there.

They stood in awed silence for a moment. Finally, Anastasia was the first one to speak. "We're going to have to go down in there, aren't we?"

Without waiting for an answer, she took her first steps down towards the bottom of the crater.

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It felt a little like diving underwater. Going under the mist layer was more than any of them could have expected.

Felius stepped up to the gray trunk-like thing before him. It had delicate tendrils splayed out from the nearly eight-foot top.

"Don't touch it!" cautioned Marcus.

Felius turned and frowned. "Do I look new?" He took out a scanner and nudged the thing. The tendrils swayed as if caught in a breeze. "Whatever it is, it's alive. Wait, that could mean..."

Anastasia and Marcus stood back while Felius did something that looked very technical. He then waited patiently, until his comp beeped. "The mist layer is actually an atmosphere."

"What? How is that even possible?" asked Anastasia.

Marcus wasn't far behind. "What kind of atmosphere? Can we breathe it?"

Felius held his hand up and closed his eyes, the way he did when he was asked too many questions at once – not something that happened infrequently. "One answer at a time. How is this possible? I don't know and it will take a lot more research to get even close to an educated guess. What kind of atmosphere? The kind that can support life, just not ours. Open your helmet now and you'll asphyxiate." He paused, thoughtfully. "Better than explosive decompression, I suppose."

"Great. Let's review. Life and an atmosphere." Marcus was getting agitated, as he did when trouble loomed. "Don't we have enough to leave and call in a better equipped team?"

Felius answered his question by ignoring him and walking deeper into the crater.

He walked about another ten feet and stopped. The others joined him, quickly discovering what had grabbed Felius' attention. That plant was only the first. They were entering what appeared to be a forest. An alien and foreboding forest, but a forest nonetheless.

"Should we be taking samples or something?" inquired Anastasia.

Felius shook his head. "I'm not touching anything until we're on our way out."

Anastasia lifted one of her feet and noticed something she'd missed in her shock. Things felt heavier. "Uhh, guys? Why does it feel like I don't need the leg weights anymore?"

The other two finally noticed as well. Felius took off his weights and tried to walk. It wasn't bad. "The gravity is definitely higher in here. I'd guess about half a G. And before you ask, I have no idea how that can happen."

Anastasia and Marcus followed suit and shed their weights. The increased gravity made it much easier to press forward.

There appeared to be many smaller plants, if one could call them that, growing amongst the bigger ones. It was as if what they were seeing were only the first shades of much larger things to come.

Not much further in, they came to what appeared to be a stream, though the liquid flowing down it seemed to have a silvery sheen on its surface. There was some kind of thick growth near the bank of this stream, with blue and pink speckled fronds, perhaps a little like ferns. However, the texture was wrong – more leathery.

Felius was the first to the stream. He knelt carefully down near the edge, sticking some kind of device into it. The surface tension of the liquid was much greater than that of water and he had to push a little harder than normal.

Meanwhile, Anastasia walked over to investigate the speckled growth. Again, it felt like she should be underwater someplace like Europa to be seeing things like this. However, something caught her eye behind the fronds – several somethings, in fact. Gently nudging the plants aside with her assault rifle, she saw a patch of football-like objects, set upright in the ground. Each was white and rough, with an almost vein-like texture.

"Tell me these don't look like eggs," she said.

Felius was up like a shot. "Oh no. Of all..."

Before he could finish his sentence, something large charged through the alien forest near them. Anastasia took a defensive stance and looked every which way, trying to find the thing that was most likely mom. The others drew their firearms, too, preparing for what they knew was the inevitable.

From out of the mist, something wriggled. Several meaty, green tentacles, tipped with black talons, moving with sinister purpose. Anastasia could feel the chill creeping up the back of her legs.

"Not this again," was all she said before opening up with her assault rifle, its blaze lighting up the alien forest with flash after flash.

Yup. The solar system was going to hell in a hand-basket.