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MINE

a short story by

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Reaper 401 contemplated the blurry spattering of stars above him, wondering where his beloved was now. Had she reached Mars yet? Or was she still watching that sky slowly change around her shuttle, hoping the new constellations held more hope than the old ones?

“What’s the hold-up, Julio?” Reaper 513 hissed.

It was a gross breach of protocol, using names at a time like this; a cruel and caustic reminder of what they’d chosen to give up. Worst of all, that particular name wasn’t even his. Because of that, Reaper 401 didn’t answer. He just tilted his gray-streaked head further back, towards the smeared clouds of sulfur dioxide and thick clots of water vapor. He closed his eyes and tried to picture his vibrant childhood on the Italian coast, a world that had always seemed like a painting. Pastel houses, cobalt water, everything candy-bright and brimming with potential. Was his imagination exaggerating, latching onto the excess of color like a life raft in an endless gray sea?

Did he care?

A sound jolted him out of his memories, a sterile electric ping from 513’s tablet.

“That’s the signal. Time to haul ass.”

“Indeed it is,” said 401, opening his eyes to the yellow-tinted fog curling malicious fingers up the nearest skyscraper.

“C’mon man, don’t get sentimental on me,” said 513, fingering his tool belt. “We’ve got our orders.”

“Why did you take this assignment?” 401 asked, looking the shorter, paler man straight in the eyes, chocolate meeting icepick blue.

“What the fuck, dude, you want to do this *now*?”

“It’s important to remember the why, *amico*.”

513 shifted from foot to foot, but 401 didn’t budge.

“For my family, ok?” 513 blurted at last. “They went up with the last Mars colonizer, my wife and two boys. My youngest has asthma and the vapor clouds were killing him. This job bought them the ticket. That enough for you, old man?”

“Yes,” said 401 with eerie calm. “That’s enough.”

“Can we get this over with now?”

“You didn’t ask me why I signed up.”

“I don’t’ fucking care! I just want this goddamn day to be over!”

401 frowned, the expression a prickling hint of the storm in his mind.

“All right. Let’s go.”

~

There had always been a jump of electrons between their hands, an invisible lightning bolt of electricity that passed from his Italian caramel to her shining Nigerian black. It was as though their souls had been destined for each other since the very birth of the universe, as if her beauty was a current that could be diffused into him.

“You’re missing the sunset,” she said with a smile.

“It doesn’t compare,” he answered, tugging the soft fuzz of her hair and letting it bounce back.

Her eyes glistened like oil spills.

“Don’t be stupid. There’s only one advantage to the world ending and it’s the goddamn sunset, so look.”

“What man could look away from you?”

Her laugh was the peal of church bells as it echoed over the incandescent mountains and murky golden sea.

“See, how can I believe you when you say cheesy shit like that?”

He smiled and pressed a hand to either side of her face, planting a kiss on the crease between her eyes.

“Because I love you?”

“I suppose that’ll do,” she said. He felt more than saw her happiness capsized under the bitterness that was never far from them these days. “Why do you have to stay behind?”

She’d asked the question endlessly as they waited for her Mars Visa to go through. And endlessly he’d hated himself. He’d never lied to her, not to hide his mother’s prejudice or his previous loveless marriage or the depression that sometimes clung to him like a restless ghost. But now....

“You know why, il mio mundo.”

“No, I really don’t. Why do they need you for crowd control? It’s not like you forced everyone in Asia to transfer to Ethanol fuel all at once. It’s not like you told those scientists in Germany to start screwing around with atmosphere engineering. You’re an analyst, not a grunt!”

“I’m what they need.”

She pulled back, eyes flashing orange in the dying light.

“They’ve already ruined the rest of the world. Why can’t they leave us alone?”

“Everyone must make sacrifices,” he said, running a finger over her velvet cheek. She leaned her head into the touch. “We all have a duty to do what we can.”

She glared at him.

“Don’t you quote the fucking president at me.”

~

Their target — the monstrous *Sisyphus* shuttle — was settled like a demigod in the middle of Central Park. Surrounded by the corpses of trees and the hollow sentinels of abandoned buildings, it seemed to watch their approach with cosmic disapproval, as if it might jerk away from them at any moment. Reaper 401 sighed as the back entrance came into view. It was a tiny man-sized hatch in the ship’s mountainous flank, conveniently inconspicuous at ground level.

The engineers had only designed this door in the most recent vessels. The first wave hadn’t needed them.

“Here we fucking go,” muttered 513, hunching his shoulders as he consulted the bright screen of his tablet. 401 didn’t respond.

200,000 people. There were 200,000 people sleeping in that behemoth of graphene and steel, plus as much of their home planet as they dared carry to Mars. DNA of important species, seeds of edible plants, megadrives with all of humanity’s knowledge.

So much to save.

Running his hand over the skeleton trees of the park, 401 allowed himself to indulge in one small tear, beading at the corner of his eye and stinging the dry and blistered flesh of his face. Even the water in his body was infused with sulfuric acid at this point, coursing through his veins like Earth’s vengeance.

He’d said goodbye to her almost six months ago. She’d said “I’ll see you soon.” She’d said she’d wait for him. She’d said that they would marry and have a beautiful life together, even if it couldn’t be in the chiaroscuro sunset of their cherished home.

He’d said it all back.

The lie tasted like bile now.

It wasn't until 513 spoke that 401 realized he'd stopped walking.

"Jesus, man, are coming or what?"

401 pushed off the tree, wiping his cheek and ignoring his partner's resentful murmur.

"Of all the fucking loonies I had to end up with..."

They found the control panel to the hatch easily enough. It wasn't even guarded. All the same, 401 scanned the park around them as 513 plugged his tablet into the port, waiting for the passwords to register. After a long, silent moment, there was that *ding* that seemed to run bone-deep in humanity, that positive mechanical affirmation that you did something right.

The thought sent chills up his spine.

How can this possibly be right?

"We're in, Julio," 513 hissed.

"All right," sighed 401. "Meet back here in ten."

Without an answer, 513 trotted off in the vague direction of the engine room. 401 had no idea what his companion's mission was. Both of them were kept carefully oblivious of the other's orders, minimizing the chance of a mission failure. Or sabotage.

Their deadline was approaching on swift and inevitable wings, but 401 couldn't help the instinct to pause and admire the stasis pods stacked in a honeycomb pattern around the ship's hollowed-out middle. Even though he knew they were filled with living, thinking, dreaming humans, the small sarcophagus-shaped chambers felt alien. Something as far from him as Mars.

What have I become?

When they arrived, the parking lot was already full of children, their frantic, panicked shrieks filling the air like the cry of extinct sea birds. He could feel his beloved's distraction as she fought the tears that had been lurking in their shadow all week.

He squeezed her hand as he helped her out of their vintage Cadillac, pressing it to his chest.

"It's going to be okay."

She nodded, but kept glancing at the smallest of the children, a tiny tow-headed girl who was clutching to a tight-lipped woman in uniform.

"Maaaaama!" screeched the child, shadowed by her two older, stone-faced brothers. "I don't wanna go!"

They both stared as the woman tried to console her sobbing daughter.

"Come, il mundo mio," he said. "We must check in. We don't want the Pods to fill up."

He'd meant it as a joke, but she didn't smile. Instead, she looked at him with eyes full of that flashing determination he adored. She pressed her lips together once, as if in warning. Then, his wonderful African beauty pulled her hand free of his and strode over to the family.

"What's your name?" she asked, crouching in front of the child.

The little girl hiccupped herself into silence, huge blue eyes turning up to her mother's face. The mother, who looked exhausted by the thought of talking, only nodded.

"Frieda," said the girl in a timid voice that was at violent odds with the volume she'd just been producing.

"Well, Frieda, aren't you excited to go to Mars?"

Frieda hiccupped, suppressing a sob.

“N-no,” she said, throwing an accusing glare up at her mother. “I w-want to stay with M-Mama!”

“Well, I’m sure your Mama is going to join us very soon.”

His beloved was watching the small girl, which was a blessing because at that moment his brown eyes met the mother’s pale ones and a secret passed between them like a classroom note. The children, distracted by the kind stranger kneeling before them, didn’t see their mother’s face crumple.

“Don’t you worry, sweetie, I’ll be taking care of you while your Mama is busy.”

“I don’t want to leave her down here,” faltered the small girl. “It smells bad.”

“But your Mama needs to make sure all the other little girls get to Mars. You don’t want them to be stuck in the bad smell forever, do you?”

Frieda’s limp blonde hair stuck to her face as she shook her head.

“Good.” She jerked a thumb over her shoulder. “You see my man? He’s going to meet me up on Mars, just like your mother. Do you want to wait with me?”

Her hand shone in the speckled sunlight as she held it out to the little girl. Dark fingers waited like ancient columns that would stand until the end of time.

Finally, the girl accepted.

Perhaps it was a tragedy that they never got the desperate, clutching farewell they’d both been dreading. But, as his love herded the children onto the Charon, this ending felt right. A drop of mercy in a world suddenly short on it.

“I don’t know how they expect us to do this,” said the mother beside him as they watched their lives disappear into that frightened crowd. “I-I don’t think I’m s-strong enough.”

He tried to smile at her through the pollution of his own ache.

“Think of them, my dear,” he said, voice raspy. “For they are everything.”

~

401 wandered down to the control room, trailing his fingers along the bumpy walls congested with Stasis Pods. All those poor people, foxes in a burning den; mothers, children, hopeful youths.

He located the console he’d been trained to find, fingers hovering over the keyboard.

Could he really be such a monster?

“Stop right there,” snarled a familiar voice.

401 twisted around to find the wild eyes of Reaper 513 glowing like embers in the half-light.

It took him a moment to notice the pistol pointed at his forehead.

401 gaped, his muscles freezing. Through the sludge of shock, he forgot his comrade’s code name, his tongue stumbling over the only thing that came to mind.

“Peter?”

“That’s right, asshole, I’m *Peter*. A real fucking human, standing in front of you, not wanting to die.”

“What’s going on? Why are you here?”

There was a thrum as the ship’s system woke up, activated by their raised voices.

“*Hello, how may I help you today?*” HERA asked in the neutrally polite tone that, after endless drills, had begun to haunt their nightmares.

“Listen, *Julio*, I have no intention of dying on this goddamn planet,” Peter snapped, waving the gun. “We’re gonna take this ticket and get the hell out of here.”

“Peter, have you forgotten? There aren’t enough supplies—”

“There are,” said Peter, his irises rimmed in white. “There’s plenty for just the two of us. No passengers. No cargo. Just two new Martians headed for space.”

“What a terrible waste —“

“Waste?” spat Peter. “You wanna talk to me about *waste*? We are about to blow up a three *trillion* dollar spacecraft full of two hundred *thousand* human beings. What kind of waste is that?”

“*I’m not sure I understand the question,*” said HERA.

“It’s mercy, Peter.” 401 kept his voice smooth and steady, the way he would talk to a bucking horse back on his father’s farm. “Would you have them suffocate from carbon monoxide, or die of acid rain?”

“Fuck them!” Peter spat. “*We* can still see our families! We can *live*! Don’t you have someone up there you care about?”

401 couldn’t help but flinch.

“Hah,” said Peter, the gun quivering. “See, you want it too. You don’t want to die here either.”

“Of course I don’t, *amico*. Of course I don’t. But sometimes one must—“

“Don’t give me that self-sacrificing bullshit,” said Peter, spittle flying. “I’ll kill you right now!”

“*I’m sorry, I do not understand,*” said HERA.

“Look,” Peter panted. “Just... just wake them all up. We’ll tell them there’s a problem with the ship, that we need to evacuate and clear the area. Then we’ll launch when everyone’s looking the other way.”

“*Was that a request to wake the passengers from cryostasis? I will need the Hades override to complete that action.*”

“You think people will look the other way from their only chance of escape? My friend, this ship is all they have left. They’re not going to leave it for any reason I can fathom.”

Peter growled in frustration.

“They’ll do anything we tell them. You have the codes. Together, we control this ship!”

401 sighed. Peter’s words were an arrow right into the middle of his doubt, piercing the very thing he’d been avoiding. But he was surprised to find that doubt empty, echoing.

He might be a worm on a hook, but it was the hook he’d chosen.

401 spread his hands. “What about your child’s future? Would you jeopardize that?”

“He’s going to die anyway.” Peter’s eyes were swimming in tears now, pleading. “No one knows if we can survive on Mars long-term. They say it’s hopeless. I-I just want to see them again. P-please.”

401 took a deep breath. “You may have lost hope.” He straightened. “But you will not steal mine.”

“Don’t you — ”

But Peter was too late. 401 dove to the ground and rolled beneath the control console, expertly opening a hatch as he went. He flinched as a bullet pinged off the grating, heard Peter’s panicked curse, felt footsteps clattering towards him. But he had run through this simulation a thousand times. They’d prepared for frenzied civilians and desperate vagrants and ex-military commandos. They’d trained for the limited time they might have to do their job. And, of course, there had always been a Plan B.

Nowadays, everything was Plan B.

On the old-fashioned keyboard that had been installed under the main console, 401 typed out a rapid-fire series of commands. His fingers didn't shake as he gave the ship its horrific instructions. He didn't waver. A hand wrapped around his boot, tugging viciously.

“Not yet, *amico*.”

He stretched to reach the final key, using every last inch his genetics had blessed him with. Blessed or cursed, it didn't matter now. He was just the messenger. Just a pawn.

Suddenly, the other man threw his weight back, rolling both of them to the middle of the room.

When Peter saw 401's sad smile, the blood drained out of his face.

“No...”

“It is done, my friend. I'm sorry.”

It wouldn't be as stylish as the silent, sinking power-down that had been planned, not to mention that the explosion would take out half the city.

But perhaps that was mercy too.

Peter began to flush, eyes popping, fists clenching. But before he could speak, HERA's serene voice washed over them.

“The fuel lines have been compromised. Please enter command code Hades or the ship will be destroyed. Approximately one minute until detonation if no course of action is taken.”

“How dare you?” Peter pressed the gun to 401's forehead. “*How dare you?*”

401 was quiet as he rolled to his knees, ignoring Peter's roaring threats and curses. Head bowed as if in prayer, Reaper 401 allowed the calm to wash over him, savoring it, letting it smother his doubts like the thick clouds outside.

“Thirty seconds until detonation.”

“STOP!” Peter screamed. “UNDO IT! FIX THE SHIP!”

Tears were coursing down Peter’s face. 401 tipped his head down so he didn’t have to watch. He heard the clatter of the gun, the pounding of footsteps, the crash of the door.

It didn’t matter.

There was no escape for any of them now.

“*Ten seconds until detonation,*” came HERA’s voice.

“I’ll see you soon, my love,” 401 whispered, closing his eyes and picturing her glorious smile, more beautiful than any sunset. “Out there among the stars.”

“*Three seconds until detonation... Two... One...*”

Taking a last, sweet breath of toxic air, a nameless man prayed for forgiveness as two hundred thousand souls were vaporized.

The End