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About 5,000 words

A GOOD PLACE TO DIE

Susanna Cole

Being charged with first-degree murder isn't as cushy as it used to be. In 3042, there's no prison life sentence, no death penalty. Well... not in the traditional sense. They sentence you to die more *productively*.

#

Someone retches, their vomit splattering against Parson's fatigues and the sand swallowing her ankles. Her stomach rolls. Eyes blink against darkness.

"Get your oxygen mask back on!" Banks yells, his voice robotic through the filter.

A prisoner close to Parson chokes, digging for their mask in the sand.

"Blue Rock to the front," calls Deckers.

The front of what?

Parson stumbles toward the sergeant's voice. Shadowy blotches—prisoners—stand or sit in disarray, some clenching their stomachs, while others heave into sand. With less than a minute on the ground, Indwen is already her least favorite planet. In all their speeches of "planetary unification" and "diplomacy," the top brass never dispense the realities of slogging through terrain that tries to eat you, portal sickness that makes you spill everything you've ever ingested, or toxic air that paralyzes your lungs in seconds. This one is toxic *and* dark. *Ugh.*

No one moves to help the man who gasps as he fishes his mask out of vomit-covered sand. *Ratnose*, Parson realizes from a closer distance. One of the few soldiers who's lasted four planets with her. He stumbles to his feet.

The king's retinue stands poised, twelve soldiers evenly spaced in a diamond formation around King Marcellus and Lucius, the translator. She sneers at a soldier side-eyeing her with disdain as she draws into position on the right flank. *Bastard.* At least he's been trained and briefed. She readjusts her "prisoner gun" loaded with only the bare minimum rounds, in the nook of her arm and scans the hills to their right. It'd be easier if an engorged mound of scar tissue didn't sit in the place her right eye used to be. *At least the knife didn't take an ear.*

Prisoners funnel into position around the king's retinue, Deckers in the lead, Banks in the rear. Nobody says a thing as they begin to trudge, the sky greying. Half a mile in, a shattered metal pole protruding from the sand catches her gaze. Several more lie a few feet from the first with a metal board peeling from the top. She shifts the gun on her arm and counts seven more piles of debris by the time they reach a canyon edge. The retinue stops. Several rows ahead of Parson, Deckers and Banks analyze a map beneath a small green light. Banks gestures into the canyon.

"Sergeant," the king calls from behind Parson. "What's going on?"

Deckers hesitates. "The meeting point changed, Your Majesty. It's in the canyon."

Parson glances at the king, whose eyebrows furrow. Royals don't typically come on dangerous field trips, so this is her first time seeing one up close. He's about the same age as her, no older than eighteen.

"Why would it change? We were just briefed."

"Not sure. We just received a transmission from Headquarters notifying us." Deckers pauses. "Your Majesty, this canyon hasn't been cleared in any prior expeditions."

Parson stills, something cold tripping down her spine.

"It took weeks to organize this meeting," says Marcellus. "It'll send the wrong message and endanger future operations if we don't show."

"Affirmative."

Guess this'll be the one to kill me.

Parson eyes the canyon walls as they descend through uneven rock, pins stinging across her legs. Weeks of constant anxiety, little sleep, and numerous portal jumps have taken their toll.

Morning rays of light spill across red canyon walls as they reach the bottom. A handful of prisoners peel out of formation, slumping against rocks. Deckers glares but says nothing. She readjusts her bun, eyes roving the canyon walls. Parson glances between her and the prisoners that relax, noting the tension in the sergeant's jaw.

She glances at her gun, thumb sliding against the grip. *This time, when they come, don't fight.* It's an old thought, one that increases with each planetary mission. Her good eye flicks to Ratnose. His rail-thin body hunches against a rock, shaking. If she had any money, she'd bet all of it that he won't make it off Indwen—that neither of them will. *What's the point?*

A distant screech pierces the air, echoing strangely around canyon walls. Parson glances up tiredly. Half-asleep prisoners stand, fumbling into a distorted line. It takes a moment, then, brown rocks fall from the furthest cliff. They shift downward, unnaturally fast. Parson squints, shielding the sun from her eyes. The rocks follow in a line as though somehow tethered together, jerking around a large boulder in unison. Then, the first rock angles up.

Parson steps back. *Fuck*. No matter how many planets she slogs through, she never gets used to seeing *aliens*. They're incredibly weird. And never friendly. A head and a long, *snakelike* body pause, assessing the retinue from a distance. Then, it continues *slithering* down the canyon wall like a Mississippi pit viper. Above it, four more rocks unfold and follow the first.

"Lower your gun," someone barks distantly. "Prisoner!"

Parson's gaze breaks from the wall, distractedly following the voice, and she realizes with a start that it's the king who's spoken. To her. She glances down at her gun, poised in the direction of the aliens.

Dark eyes glare at her. "This is a diplomatic mission. If anyone fires a single round, I will jail them myself."

She blinks. *Is he insane?*

He glares harder.

Fingers clench against her gun as it lowers.

The entire company fidgets when the aliens—*indwens*—reach the canyon base and keep coming.

"Hold!" calls Deckers.

A prisoner ahead of Parson wets himself.

Seconds later, the indwens stop several feet from the retinue, red torsos chittering as they elongate from a barbed tail. The one in the front cocks its head, staring at them with four eyes splattered around a teathed opening. The eyes move individually.

Great.

King Marcellus steps forward, the movement, drawing immediate attention from all indwen eyes. The front one snarls, side flaps flaring. "Okay," says the king in a soft tone. "No movement." He pauses, collecting himself. "Lucius, tell them we're here for the meeting."

The translator, Lucius, offers a series of high-pitched chortles.

The indwens stare.

Parson's finger sweats against the trigger.

"Try again," murmurs the king, and Lucius repeats the sounds. Silence greets them.

"Something's wrong," a soldier whispers behind Parson. "We should abort."

"We can't," says Marcellus and steps toward Lucius.

This does it. A shriek shatters the airspace. Dirt rains from the sky, enveloping the front of the company in a dust cloud. Parson ducks, hunkering down as someone screams.

"Get the king out of here!" someone yells as a barbed tail slashes through the cloud, piercing a soldier's back. He screams as it drags him into the cloud, flashing with blue gun light. Chitters, yells, and the droning reverberation of gunshots echo around the canyon.

Parson glances behind her.

Marcellus stands frozen, eyes blown wide in a lost trance as he stares at the carnage.

Parson! A voice in her mind screams, and it's her mother. Fearful caramel eyes plead.

Tan Kevlar slams into her and she falls, knee banging against a rock. She cusses, glaring at Banks' back as he hustles past and grabs the king. She turns back to the indwens. Needle-like teeth bore into a prisoner.

It'll be quick.

Marcellus stumbles toward the mountainside, terrified.

Like mom.

"Shit," she mumbles and sprints after him.

Prisoners scale the canyon walls, discarded guns strewn in their wake. Only a few of the nearly sixty remain. Whether due to blind obedience or sheer terror, Parson isn't sure. More of the soldiers have stayed but a good number surround the king and translator, aiding them up the wall. *Must be nice.*

It's infinitely harder climbing up the wall than it was climbing down it, and with each step, Parson considers dropping her gun. With only three bullets in the chamber, it's barely helpful. But it's *something*. Better than the rusted hand-knife in her pocket. She hugs the gun to her body, relief filling her as she flops over the ridgeline. But it's short-lived. The portal is a good mile away, and indwen shrieks grow in the chasm behind her.

Debris piles drift past her as she runs. First one; then another. She doesn't look at them, too focused on a prisoner's scream behind her followed by a cacophony of chitters. But the third one—a large metal hull half-buried beneath sand—catches her eye.

A Nightingale prisoner shuttle.

She stares at it, bitterness welling in her gut. *How many of us have died here?* But there's nothing to do; she runs on. She's coughing up bile when the portal comes into sight. Unfortunately, so do indwens. A large mountain behind the portal *crawls* as dozens of them

slither from its crevices, rushing soldiers and prisoners as they race to the portal. The king's retinue slows, soldiers shielding Marcellus and Lucius who linger in the back.

"Incoming!" someone screams, and shocks of blue lighting flash across dust clouds. A tail slams into a soldier, tossing him. His gun hits the ground, and a prisoner dives for it.

Ratnose. Terror wriggles down Parson's spine as Ratnose unloads the gun into the indwen's dust cloud, just past the portal control box.

"No!" screams Banks, but it's too late. Blue shocks rip the control panel from the ground. Enraged indwen chitters crackle from the dust. A second set echoes from the rear.

#

They're dead.

They're all dead.

It's just a matter of time. She *knows* this. And yet, Parson crouches on the ground, guarding the exposed right flank around King Marcellus. She pumps a round into an indwen's side flaps, shuttering against its scream. "I need amo," she says. The thing pivots toward her, snarling. She pumps another round, knowing it's her last, and watches the indwen go down. Another immediately takes its place. "I need amo, now!"

No one around her responds, either preoccupied or unwilling to share their dwindling supplies with a prisoner.

Her heart pounds as the beast shrieks at her, teeth clacking. *Dammit*. She draws back on the trigger hoping by some miracle there'll be another bullet in the chamber. It clicks on empty. "Fuck," she gasps, fumbling for her knife as it charges. The dull, rust-covered blade drags open. The indwen snarls, a few feet away—teeth, red, and *hatred*.

I've seen worse.

Her eyes grey against its near manic need to kill her, and she charges at it, mind blanking.

#

When she comes to, green sludge pools around her feet and nearly everyone is screaming.

"Open it!"

"I can't!"

Within a perimeter that's shrunk since she left it, Banks and a burly prisoner stand atop a metal grate in the ground, slamming their guns into it.

An indwen bludgeons someone. It goes down beneath a shower of blue.

Ratnose crouches in the sand next to a dead soldier, filling a gun with ammunition.

"It's working," says Banks.

Parson grabs her discarded gun from the sand, kneeling next to Ratnose. She shovels ammunition as fast as she can.

"It's open!"

Ratnose scurries off as Parson tugs at the soldier's water canteen.

A handful of bodies dive into the dugout. Indwens rush it.

Parson rips away the canteen and dashes for the grate.

#

She stares at the battered collection of half-dead prisoners scattered across the dugout. Of the sixty, only three remain, including her. Four soldiers along with Banks, King Marcellus, and Lucius have also survived. She tucks swollen fingers under her armpits, hunching against a jagged rock. Indwens crash against the grate that locks from the inside. Whichever team built it likely lost everyone in the process. Parson shakes her head, letting exhaustion drag her eyelids shut.

#

"We'll have to fix the control box," Banks says when light dims above the grate.

Grim faces stare at the new sergeant, but no one has the heart to say it. *With what?*

He scratches a clump of stubble on his chin. "Anyone know anything about engineering?"

No one stirs. Finally, the burly man sighs. "I was a mechanic before..." *Being shipped off to an alien planet to die.* His brow furrows. "Donno shit 'bout a space portal, but I'll try."

Banks nods, grimacing.

When night falls, they crawl from the hatch. Brown patches of dirt lie where bodies were the day before. Parson glares at them, gaze following a trail toward the mountain. They build a perimeter around the burly prisoner—*Boaz*, he says—as he drags the fried control box to the shaft in the ground. No one's surprised when, after analyzing a collection of torn wires and cords, he shakes his head. "Needs replacement parts."

Banks sighs. "We don't have replacements."

Boaz glares at him. "Ain't my fucking fault."

Parson's eye rolls as she stares out into the darkness, too tired to listen to them bicker again. *Wait.* "The prisoner shuttles," she says, and their squabble cuts out. She points at the nearest debris pile, barely visible through the darkness. "There are crashed prisoner shuttles all over this planet. We passed seven between here and the canyon."

"Worth a shot," says Boaz, and no one can say otherwise.

Banks divides them into teams and assigns debris piles. Parson is paired with Ratnose and a stubby prisoner who stutters. She glares at Banks' team with a soldier and Boaz. Marcellus and Lucius peel off with two soldiers. Clearly, hers is the expendable party.

"Let's go," she mutters, and they trudge to their assigned shuttle.

Marcellus' party takes a shuttle close to theirs while Banks' party treks to one on the other side of the portal.

"Keep watch," she tells the stubby man, and he nods as she and Ratnose crawl into the shuttle. It's hours later, and they've stuffed only half of the control panel into their pockets when the first gunshot sounds. Parson and Ratnose scurry out of the hull, guns poised. But the stubby man points toward the king's party. Blue energy blasts fill the night sky.

"Shit." Parson sprints toward it. *Maybe indwens don't all sleep at night.* But when they arrive, it's not an indwen.

A dark, humanoid shadow slices through a soldier's chest as Marcellus fires at it, blasts landing directly on its torso and skipping off like pebbles dancing across a lake. The other soldier already lies in a puddle.

"Help me stop this thing!" Marcellus shouts when he sees them.

Ratnose and Stubby pull out their guns and begin firing.

"Don't! You'll waste amo!" Parson shouts as the blasts ricochet off it.

They ignore her.

The shadow tilts.

She fumbles for her knife, searching past cords and the shuttle debris cluttering her pockets as it drops the soldier and shoots toward Ratnose. It tosses him, then Stubby like ragdolls, and reaches for Lucius. Parson dashes at the thing, tugging her knife open as its hand plunges into the translator's shoulder.

"No!" She hears Marcellus scream as she flings herself at the shadow. Its momentary distraction with Lucius costs it precious reaction time, and she grips its back, stabbing frantically. The thing shrieks, dropping Lucius and backing away as it claws the puncture points.

With the portal grate nearly a half mile away, it's too far for them to make. Parson's gaze flings around wildly, hunting shelter. She clocks the hull of the prisoner's ship. "Get up," she yells at Marcellus who clutches the translator. "Get him into the ship, now."

Together they drag the translator to the hull, shoving it on its side, then heaving it back over them. They squeeze into a narrow pocket, praying the shadow isn't strong enough to topple it... or rip *through* it. A green light clicks on. Parson blinks against its harsh glow.

"Sorry," says Marcellus.

Lucius groans from where he leans against the king's chest, fatigues darkening with blood.

"Hand me your jacket," Parson says.

Lucius shakes as she tightens it around his shoulder. "You've done this before."

Her lips press together.

"Thank you."

"That's the second time you've run at one of them," says Marcellus, watching her. "I saw you run at the indwen."

Parson flinches as something shrieks outside the hull. "So?"

"Most people run away." His gaze flicks to the ground.

She snorts. "Why bother?"

He frowns. "We could make it. There's still a chance."

"Maybe for you," she mumbles. "In case you haven't noticed, we're looting prisoner shuttles. Countless prisoners have died on this planet and others. This is my fourth."

Marcellus stares, eyes wide.

Her stomach churns with the truth of her words. "If we make it out of here, you may be crowned a hero, but I'll just get shipped to the next planet until one of them kills me."

Silence greets her.

"You think like a dead man," says Lucius, and Parson immediately feels bad. His eyes are warm and friendly, even as they grow dim. "Like you were dead long before the aliens."

Parson blinks. "Maybe aliens aren't the worst demons I've encountered."

Marcellus snorts. "What could possibly be worse than indwens?"

She looks at him, hard. "Have you ever thought about the people who put you out here with them?" She watches his eyes narrow.

"I don't like what you're implying. I volunteered for this. Someone needed to step up—lead from the front, and I needed to prove my value. Win, win."

"Is that what they told you before they tossed you out here?"

He glares at her, all friendliness dissipating. "Like you'd know anything of politics."

"No." Parson shrugs. "But I know people. Sometimes the ones you trust the most are the least deserving of it."

"Damn, you're bitter."

"I'm realistic." She holds his gaze. "We're going to die on this planet."

He scoffs. "If life is so pointless, why bother fighting?"

"I-" She searches his face for whatever reminded her of her mother and drove her to follow him from the canyon that day. But his eyes are black, not caramel. There's nothing similar about them. She glares at the ground. "Good question."

A long moment passes before Lucius coughs, voice barely above a whisper. "Whatever you've experienced, isn't all there is to life. There is always good, even with the bad."

Parson snorts, eyeing the blood soaking through the jacket wrapped around his soldier.

"Name one good thing about this moment."

His lips curve in a small smile. "The creature is gone."

Parson's head whips toward the wall she last heard it scratch at. It's silent. *He's right.*

"Take my canteen and ammunition," says Lucius.

She nods, fingers gentle as she unclips it from his belt.

"What are you doing? He needs a medic," says Marcellus.

Parson glances away. For all her *bitterness* as he called it, she doesn't want to watch this.

"There aren't any. If you want to make it back before sun-up, we need to go, now." She feels his eyes bore into her.

"You want to leave him." His voice drips with accusation.

"Marcellus," says Lucius.

"If we get the portal open in time—"

"We won't." She looks at him—at eyes that glare with hatred. Cold settles around her.

"She's right," whispers Lucius. "Not about everything. Even in its most painful, life is still worth hoping for. But, for me, this is it, kid." He taps his pocket.

Marcellus reaches into it slowly, pulling out a small radio.

"If you get the control panel up and running, radio that line to connect to Commander Pierce. It should work with the same frequency as the portal." Hazy eyes meet Parson's. "He'll help you."

Marcellus nods. "We'll come back for you tomorrow night."

"Okay," says Lucius, dim eyes smiling.

Once they've crept out, they carefully replace the hull over Lucius. "Goodbye," whispers Marcellus, and they sprint through grey light toward the grate.

#

Neither Banks, Boaz, nor the remaining soldier asks what happened. Parson tosses the shuttle parts onto the floor beneath the grate and settles into her corner as indwen shrieks echo distantly.

"This might be enough to fix it," says Boaz as Parson slips into sleep.

#

It's not. They're missing some sort of pressure condenser valve. When Banks tries to split them into two teams to search for the final piece, Marcellus refuses. "It's too dangerous with these few people," he says, and that's the end of it. They trudge to a shuttle.

Parson and Marcellus stand guard outside, eyes searching each shadow. Tonight, nothing stirs, and the others emerge only a couple minutes later, a valve in hand. *Perhaps Lucius was onto something*, thinks Parson.

She glances at Marcellus, who trudges alongside her to the portal, half-expecting him to demand they go back for the translator. But he doesn't. *Not completely stupid, then*. A hollowness fills his eyes now, and Parson almost misses his naivety. *Hope*, he called it. Dark eyes glance back at her, and she finds herself bumping his shoulder with her own.

He blinks, a small, surprised smile tugging on the corner of his lips.

She smiles back, lighter somehow as they walk to the portal.

Morning is too close when they arrive, so they crawl back under the grate. Parson's stomach rumbles, legs shaky as she folds into her corner and sips water from the canteen she

pulled off the dead soldier. It's nearly gone. She jolts as fabric grazes her arm, surprised to see Marcellus in her corner.

"Can I sit here?"

She nods.

He drops to the ground next to her, unfolds his Kevlar, and lays on it like a pillow, offering her the other side. She lays down and lets sleep take her.

#

Everyone's soundly asleep when Parson sits up, eyeing the light that slowly dims above them. *It's almost time.* Soon, she'll *know*. She'll either get off this rock, surviving her fourth planet, or the portal won't open and there'll be no more chances.

Her eyes flit to Marcellus, asleep next to her. His appearance is more boyish—lighter, almost humorous. She smiles. It's weird being friends with a king. Parson blinks. *Friends?* After months surrounded by threats, the word feels odd in her mind. But yeah... friends. They're not yet but someday, she hopes they could be.

Lucius' words flood her. *Even in its most painful, life is still worth hoping for.* She shifts a piece of hair out of Marcellus' face. Perhaps Lucius was right. Today, *somehow*, she hopes they do make it out.

#

A loud blare echoes across the desert. *Fuck.* She knew it was never going to be this easy.

Boaz put the valve in the control panel. The soldier secured it in place. Banks pressed the call button. And then... then the machine *screamed* at the sky, alerting every god-forsaken creature for miles of their whereabouts. *Fucking great.*

Parson cocks her gun toward the mountain as shrieks echo.

"Come on, connect," says Banks, hitting the box. It murmurs in reply.

Marcellus stands next to her, twisting knobs on the radio Lucius gave them. It does nothing, to which she shrugs, hiding her quivering hands against the gun.

"Nightingale. What's your comms key?" A voice crackles through the control panel.

Parson's gaze whips toward it.

Banks stares, mouth gaping in shock.

Boaz elbows him, hard in the gut, and he stutters, pressing a button on the box.

"This is Blue Rock, uh, 4210."

A shriek echoes closer and Parson's gaze flicks to the mountain as static cracks across the box. *Come on.*

"Blue Rock, what's your status?" the voice replies.

"Our status is..." Banks waves his hands. "We need immediate retrieval."

"Your mission status?"

Banks hesitates. His eyes land on Marcellus and flick away. "Pending."

Pending? Parson frowns.

The static crackles. "One moment, Blue Rock."

Marcellus glances at her, brow furrowing.

"Something isn't right," she whispers.

He nods. "I'll handle this." He rolls his shoulders and stomps past Banks toward the control panel.

Wait. "Marcellus-" She lurches toward him as he hits the button.

His head tilts questioningly toward her as he speaks. "Nightingale, this is King Marcellus Black. Open the portal, now."

Banks stiffens next to him.

Parson stares at him—at *them*.

Boaz watches Marcellus from the side.

Static crackles. "Blue Rock, you are not cleared for retrieval."

Parson stares, dumbfounded as something clicks into place. *He wasn't meant to survive.*

She looks at Marcellus, lost.

He squints at her. "What?" Behind Marcellus, Banks' gun swivels.

"Get down!" Parson's finger tugs on the trigger, but she's too slow.

The bullet tears into Marcellus' back, and he falls, Banks dropping behind him. A shadow moves in the darkness.

She screams. Indwens shriek around them as inky shadows spill from the mountainside. Blue lights up the sky in chaotic spurts. A barbed tail slashes overhead, and Parson ducks, narrowly avoiding it as it clocks the other soldier's arm. He screams as it tosses him, and Parson dives toward Marcellus, pinning him beneath her as blue showers around them.

Boaz swivels left, ducking behind the control panel as her gun tracks him. *Fuck.*

She fires at a charging indwen. It chitters, hitting the ground. Again, bullets from Boaz's gun hit the ground around her. She returns fire, careful not to hit the control box.

He yells sharply and goes down. Something dark drags him away from the portal.

She screams, hitting the control panel button as she fires at an indwen, then another, and another as they spill from the darkness.

"4210," she yells at the box. "He's dead. Open the portal." She glances down, praying she's wrong.

Black eyes meet hers, and she smiles, trying to be hopeful.

The control box statics.

A shadow darts behind Marcellus. *Banks*. She lifts her gun, but it clicks on empty.

Banks snarls at her, blood covering his shoulder. His eyes fill with hatred, knife ready, and suddenly she's back in her family home in Gulfport. Her father, not Banks, charges her with a knife. Her mother's blood covers his hands. Chestnut hair sprawls behind a counter covered in shattered glass and whiskey. *Not again*.

Parson runs at *him*, tugging her blade from her pocket. She jerks left as his knife slashes the air with militant precision. He grunts, surprised but no less angry. Heels dig into rock, and she jumps, taking ground on a small hillside to his right.

Eyes follow her, body angling for another attack. He slashes but she leaps anyway, unafraid in the wake of adrenaline and rage. Her foot connects with his knife. She winces against the pain, kicking as hard as she can. It falls, and she stabs into flesh.

#

Marcellus' breathing is shallow when she kneels next to him. A gun braced against his torso fires toward indwens that shriek but stay back, dissuaded by momentary blue flashes.

"Hold on," she commands, digging Lucius' radio from his pocket. She hits the button, yelling at the thing. "Commander Pierce? We need the portal opened now." She glances at the glaze dimly washing over his eyes.

His lips tug up. "You were right."

"Shut up," she says, hitting the button again. "Commander! He will die if we don't get out now!" She shoots an indwen darting through the shadows.

The radio remains silent.

"Catherine," he whispers. "They'll kill my sister."

"They won't." Parson tugs him upright, bracing his body against her own. She shreds her sleeve and wraps it around his back.

"Hey, Parson."

"What?" she replies distractedly, pressing the fabric against blackening fatigues.

"I'm glad we didn't give up." He smiles, coughing wetly. Dark, unseeing eyes shimmer.

"It was fun."

A laugh escapes her lips. "Me too. Your hope thing was worth—"

His head grows heavy against her shoulder.

"Marcellus," she says, tapping him. He doesn't respond. "Marcellus!" She doesn't move to lift her gun when an indwen runs at her. The sky lights with vibrant blue, and then, white.

#

Her thumb presses against the rusted knife deep in the pocket of her slacks as the silent procession trudges around the corner. A warm hand falls on her shoulder, the titanium casket within view. *It looks like a refrigerator.* She glances back at Commander Pierce. Stress lines etch across a somber face, though he hides it well beneath his black ceremonial uniform—the same as hers. He nods, sympathetic. She tries to nod back, grateful, but too worn to show it. Her gaze returns to the casket as the soldiers in front of her slowly draw past. Now, it's her turn.

Marcellus.

She squeezes the knife to stop herself from placing a hand on the titanium.

It's been over a week since she returned to Nightingale, Marcellus' lifeless body draped over her arms and a half-severed indwen splattered across the portal room floor. The full room of spectators—both control room operators and Commander Pierce's soldiers—stood frozen in place, staring at the gore. Four arrests have been made since, with the head operator charged with

the king's death. *As if*. Her eyes flick to the line of men and women in expensive suits adjacent to the king's coffin.

"Private Atwood?"

Parson glances at a girl several years her junior in a long black dress. *A diplomat's daughter?* Parson nods politely, wishing she was beneath a heavy blanket.

"I wanted to thank you," says the girl. Dark circles surround eyes that stare at the floor. "I've been told you were with him."

Words choke in Parson's throat. "I was."

Black eyes meet hers.

Suddenly, Parson can't breathe. *Catherine*.

She looks worn. Broken.

Parson's shoulders square as she steps toward the girl. "He was hopeful..." she whispers. *That's not it*. She thinks back, remembering how he smiled in the cavern. "Steadfast."

Catherine's eyes water. "Would you have lunch with me?"

Parson nods as Catherine passes her a card, an email address etched into it:

CatherineOfNightingale@gmail.com

Her lips tug into a grin.

End

