

Empty Skye

by Bryce Anderson

Note: If you like this, you may also want to read [my book](#), set in the same universe.

Sid leaned back in his seat and closed his eyes, trying to shut out the noise of the world. Around him, people walked by, pursued by their own luggage. Over the ambient sound, he sometimes heard a pair luggages clang together, followed by apologetic chirping as they backed up and rolled around each other. This usually went unnoticed by their owners, most of whom were off in their own little worlds.

Sid could tell that more than a few of them were on autopilot, little more than animated corpses, their bodies being navigated through the airport terminal by bits of software. Inside their minds, they were off in some alt somewhere, hooked into the Grid by a Sentience interface. His had stopped working an hour ago, leaving the real world a little too clear for his taste.

Maybe some of the travelers were playing through some of the scenarios that he'd designed. Since the company he'd designed for had abruptly canned him two weeks ago, one part of him hoped not. The other part of him hoped not because his ex-girlfriend had dumped him for the lead designer on his team.

This explained his presence in Beijing. There were lots of design jobs here, it was said. But even in the era of near-perfect translation software, not being naturally fluent in Mandarin was a huge mark against him. Maybe in six months, after some language lessons from Universal U, he might try again. For now, it was time to go home.

The intercom chimed a little too loud, then blared in unintelligible Mandarin. His headache disapproved. No way he was going to get any sleep. Not with this noise. Not on this chair.

He opened his eyes, which immediately began lying to him. His first instinct was that his Sentience rig was messing with him. But no, it was completely shut down. He glanced again. It was her. No, seriously! His heart started pounding. *Stay cool*, he thought. *Just another carbon based lifeform trying to get somewhere she isn't. No need to go all slack in the jaw.*

She was smaller than he'd expected, almost tiny. He was surprised that he recognized her beneath the shades and the hijab. But then, he must have watched the Mad Max reboot a dozen times, just to watch her dual wield those chainsaws. Lord knows there was no other reason to watch it.

This wasn't the first time Skye had seen this. It begins with Stage One, that sudden shock of recognition that leaves the mouth slightly agape and the hands trying to figure out what they're supposed to do. Next comes the awkward Stage Two, the "I'm not looking at you, I'm looking at something... over... there! Yes, there! There's something really fascinating going on exactly seven feet above the door to the ladies' restroom. I'm absolutely not sitting here trying to figure out a good opening line." Soon would come Stage Three, the "Oh, hey, it's you not-that-it's-a-big-deal" look, followed immediately by Stage Four, The Delivering of The Line. The Line was often something plain and unmemorable, but occasionally it was something cool, or creepy, or simply too bizarre to make sense of.

On a good day, she might get a moment of anticipation waiting for this guy to deliver The Line. She took genuine delight in cheezy pickup lines. On her good days, she genuinely enjoyed talking to her fans, even the ones who were a little off. This hadn't been a good day.

The poor guy had been stuck on Stage 2 for a while now, which meant either social anxiety or a big ol' crush. Sometimes both. Either way, she found the best approach was to take control of the conversation. She pulled off her sunglasses, leaned forward slightly, and said, "I won't mind if you ask for my autograph." Her smile felt slightly forced; she hoped he didn't notice.

He got a hand-caught-in-a-cookie-jar look, and for the twelve thousandth time in her career she wished people could just be more relaxed around her. "You're going to ask for my autograph," she said, making the universal hand gesture for Jedi Mind Trick.

He could only nod dumbly. "May I have your autograph? Skye... I mean, er, Miss Cormora?"

She chuckled. "Skye is just fine." She whipped a pad of paper out and her hand whipped around the paper with practiced flourish. "Who should I make it out to?"

"To Sid. The best lover you ever had."

Her smile evaporated. She scribbled for a few seconds, tore off the sheet, and shoved it at him. "I need to be over there now. Don't follow me." She stood and walked down two rows of seats, then sat facing directly away from him.

Face burning, he reached down and picked up the paper, which had fallen to the floor. He examined it. In clean, practiced script -- almost nobody had good handwriting these days -- were the words, "To Sid's Mom, the best lover I ever had. xoxo Skye Cormora." He allowed himself a brief smile. Then he leaned back, closed his eyes, and let himself bask in the boiling river of humiliation that was his soul.

"Final seating for flight two-three-seven-one out of Beijing will begin certainly. Our destination is Los Angeles. If you have not inspected your elephant, please do so before performing carpentry." The announcement was Sid's signal to get up. As he hoisted his bag over his shoulder and headed to the gate, he began to regret the \$15 he'd spent on a cheap translator from an airport kiosk. His Sentience gear would have been doing a much better job, if it were up and running.

He usually loved fast-zep flights. The skyscraper-sized white tubes towered over the spaceport, dwarfing the passenger compartment that clung to its stomach. A suborbital flight would get him home in hours, not days, but he found them noisy and crowded. Fast-zeps were more stylish: you rode the winds like a mariner of yore, dangling from rigid cylinders filled with nothing. Also, the tickets were way cheaper.

Now he regretted the choice, because for the duration of the flight he'd be trapped in close quarters with a celebrity who could very well kill him on sight. He had a sudden vision of Skye Cormora and a pair of chainsaws dropping down on him from an overhead storage bin. He'd have to stay away from the First Class area. Or just stay in his sleeping coffin until they touched down at LAX.

As he stepped off the gangplank and walked through the narrow corridor, he kept glancing around to spot her, but she wasn't to be found. He took the stairs down to the lowest deck, and found his coffin, third from the floor. He climbed a few rungs, swiped his hand across the scanlock and pulled open the hatch.

"What the fuck!" Skye shouted, pulling a blanket around herself. "You again?" A hand darted out the hatch and slammed the door shut again.

He double-checked his ticket, then knocked on the hatch. "Umm, Miss Cormora? You're kind of in my bunk."

"Am not! Go away."

"You are! Look, the numbers count up from the bottom. Yours is the next one down." There was no response. "Hello? Hmm. Okay, Plan B. You sleep, I wander aft. I hear they have a juice bar. Ready? Break!" He was picking up his duffel bag when he heard an unlatching sound. An overstuffed black bag emerged from the opening like a scene out of a nature documentary, landing on the ground with a thud. It was followed by a pair of pajama'd legs, which flailed about for a few seconds before finding a purchase on one of the rungs. Skye cursed as she dropped to the ground.

Skye looked at the numbered berths in disbelief. She waved her hand over the scanlock of the coffin she'd just exited. It flashed red and made an unpleasant sound. She waved it over the coffin below. It gave a delighted coo as it unlocked. "The Universe is trying to destroy me."

"Then destroy it first," Sid told her. "It's got it coming."

"Best not to tempt me," she said, hoisting the bag into her quarters. "I've had the worst day."

"What happened?" he asked.

You asked for it. "Got bashed on the back of the head by a clumsy gaffer. Suborbital wouldn't let me on because of the recent head injury, so now I'm crammed inside a floating sardine tin, dangling from a giant balloon twenty thousand feet over the ocean, knowing that if just one thing goes wrong... Oh, god. It's not safe out here." She had an overwhelming urge to climb in the coffin and stay there. She didn't even try to fight it.

Sid knelt down and peered in at her. "Umm, look. I'm really sorry about making your day even worse. I just... yeah. Sorry. I'm a jerk."

"Thanks," she said. "Hey, maybe I'll see you around." Truthfully, she was hoping that wouldn't happen. It would probably be tolerable, but their first encounter had made her really uncomfortable. But she was an actress, she thought as she pulled the hatch shut. She knew how to smile.

That was the last he saw of her for two days. He had to take it on faith that she had the basic biological needs that were the lot of humankind; things must go in, things must come out. He must just keep missing her, he thought.

Or she might be avoiding him. He was sitting in the lower observation deck, looking down through the floor at the clouds that glided underneath. Flashes of lightning punctuated the glowing darkness, illuminating patches of clouds from beneath. An image of the sky above the ship was projected onto the ceiling, showing foamlke cirrus clouds that faded from orange to purple. A handful of stars were coming out.

All that's missing is a pretty girl, he thought. He thought of Melanie, and his stomach churned. *He's probably screwing her right now.*

A pair of kids chased each other through the deck, filling the room with high-pitched squeals. He nearly snapped at them when they went past, but held back. Maybe it was time to head back to bed, or perhaps grab some food first. He stood up to leave.

The observation deck lurched, throwing him hard to the floor. He stood again, and felt that the floor now angled forward toward the front of the ship. He could hear the groan of metal under strain, as the passengers listened in silence. A loud *snap* followed as the deck lurched again, which the passengers took as the signal that it was safe to start exercising. A ship's cut through the air, then the ship's engine...

again, which the passengers took as the signal that it was safe to start screaming. A crane cut through the dim, then calm Mandarin came over the speakers. His translator did its best: "All passengers please proceed in a cowardly fashion to the forward panicking area. This is not a cucumber." Lights came on, pointing the way to safety. Sid began to follow the crowd, then felt a hand on his shoulder.

A pretty Chinese flight attendant in a light blue uniform was standing behind him. She was clearly more stressed than she wanted to appear. "Sir," she asked, "would you help me search the aft cabins for stragglers? We're a little shorthanded." He couldn't help but notice that her English was perfect. As was her skin. *I'm going to die trying to impress a girl*, he thought as he followed after her. *Shoulda known*.

They pushed against a tide of people, sharp elbows, and Mandarin curse words. When they cleared the bulk of the departing crowd, the attendant broke into a run. Sid followed her down the corridor toward the aft quarters, until he could hear the rush of wind up ahead. They turned a corner and stopped short. There was a gaping hole shot through the ship, biting through the hallway. Sid edged closer. It seemed to have taken an angled course through several decks before exiting here.

The flight attendant put a protective hand on his arm. "Be careful," she said. "I need you." He followed her to the hallway on the other side of the ship.

It wasn't hard to reach the sleeping quarters after that. "Open every room and look inside," the attendant instructed. "Some people can sleep through anything." He popped them open one by one. Each new empty berth heightened the sense that he was risking his life for no--

Sid opened the next berth. In the darkness, he could barely make out a tangle of black hair poking out from underneath a blanket. "Found one!" Sid shouted. "Hey, lady! Wake up!" The woman groaned in annoyance. She was lying unconscious on her stomach. Sid reached in, put an arm under each of her armpits, and began to pull. It wasn't until her face came out into the light that he recognized Skye.

She was halfway out when the ship made a hard drop, sending them both tumbling. She landed hard on top of him, knocking the wind out of him. It lurched again, and then came the sensation of falling. He lost his grip as the floor tilted forward. The last thing he remembered before faceplanting into a wall below him was seeing the attendant plunge down the hallway, which was now a several hundred foot vertical drop.

The world was cold and wet. He woke to the sound of a too loud voice, and the feeling that somebody, somewhere had just slapped him hard in the face. His eyes came slowly into focus. "Whuh?"

"Can you walk?" she asked him.

He shook his head to try and clear it. "I don't want to die," he said. His own voice seemed unfamiliar to him.

"Stand up!" she ordered. He tried. His knee was killing him, but he could walk. He took two steps forward then fell forward into the ankle-deep saltwater. "So much for that theory," he muttered to himself. She helped him up again, and let him rest some weight on her shoulder.

"Where are we?" he asked.

"Underwater."

He looked at her in disbelief. "You mean, we're at the bottom of the ocean?"

"No, we're still floating. I think one of the balloons held."

His head was starting to clear. "I guess that explains why we didn't plunge to our deaths. We have to find a way outside." He looked around. The hallways angled downward, going entirely underneath the water a few dozen meters away.

"The exit has to be fifty meters underwater at least," Skye said. "I already tried swimming it."

"Which hallway did you try?"

"Doesn't matter. The ship's symmetrical."

"Which one?" he asked again.

Her lips tightened, but she pointed to the hallway on their left.

"Coming here, I saw a big hole on that side," he said, pointing to the other hallway. Judging from her expression, he must have said it a little more smugly than he'd intended. "Must have been from whatever wrecked us," he added, trying to sound apologetic.

Wordlessly, she walked down to the edge of the water in the rightward hallway and dove in. And stayed in. For a long time. Just as Sid began to panic, her head popped out of the water. She let out a starved gasp. "I might just be able to make it," she said when she'd caught her breath. "Not sure how to get you out, though."

"I'm a good swimmer," he said.

"Trust me," she said. "I'm better. Also, your knee."

There was that. The water had risen several inches. "We can't stay here," he said. He cast about for anything that might be useful, like a... hell, what would be useful in a situation like this? A rope?

His imagination failed him. "I think we have to try."

Skye looked around. She seemed to be calculating his odds, and finding them poor. Finally she nodded. "I'll go first. I'll try to tap on this window on the way up," she said, pointing to one of the portholes. "At least that way you'll know it's possible."

"Okay. Um. Good luck," he offered. It seemed inadequate. "Kiss me?" he blurted out.

She glared at him. "Now you look. We're going to survive this, and I don't want it to be awkward when we do." She turned away, took a deep breath and dove.

He stared out the porthole, counting off the seconds. Two minutes passed, then three. At four minutes, he knew she wasn't coming. It was too dark to see anything out the porthole, and he couldn't know for sure whether she'd drowned or simply skipped it in the rush to the surface. He hyperventilated for a couple of minutes, hoping that it would put some extra oxygen in his blood. As he dove into the cold saltwater, he realized that he didn't really expect to survive.

His knee screamed at him as he swam downward, and it hurt to keep his eyes open. The hallway was dimly lit by emergency lights, like a line of Christmas lights stretching away into the blackness. He found the hole in the side of the ship, but his lungs were already screaming out for air. For a split second, he thought about going back, but there was nothing to go back to. So he pushed off into the open ocean, swimming upward, each stroke more frantic than the last. The exhilaration of his fast rise shortly gave way to the ever-increasing urge for air. He could feel the desperate urge to inhale something, anything.

It happened. His mouth filled with salt and water poured down his throat. With lungs now full of water, his ascent stopped. Blackness closed in.

There it was again. Somebody was yelling at him, slapping him in the face. He came awake with a start. "Did we make it?" he asked.

Skye looked at him in confusion. "What are you talking about?"

Sid looked around the passenger compartment. Above him, he could see dozens of berths hanging open.

"Weren't we just...?" he asked. But the details seemed to be slipping away from him, like a dream. Then it was gone.

"We're underwater," said Skye.

"I remember there was a giant hole in this side," he offered, pointing. "Maybe we can swim out through it."

"Really?" she asked, voice full of relief. "How far down?"

"Maybe five meters. But we don't know how far we have to swim back up. My knee's all fucked up. I'm not sure I can make it."

"But we have to try," Skye said.

Sid nodded, and started opening the remaining berths above him, releasing whatever contents were inside. Usually it was just bedding, or bags full of clothing. "Look for anything that might help us out here!" he instructed. Skye started grabbing bags and opening them as he continued releasing hatches. Finally, her grunts of frustration turned into an exultant whoop. "Lookie!" she shouted, holding aloft a small oxygen canister.

"Kickass," Sid laughed. "Any air in it?"

She gave the knob a twist, and was greeted with a hiss of air. "Some," she said. "Too dark to read the dial."

"Guard that with your life. I have a plan." There was a trash bin on either side of the room. He pulled the bags out and emptied their few contents, then shoved one into the other. "Okay, so we swim down and out, then we turn on the gas underneath the bag. It fills up and pulls us to the surface."

They spent a couple of minutes working out the details, then dove together. They reached the hole and swam outside. Sid opened the bag, while Skye wrapped her legs around his torso, then released the oxygen into the bag. It filled, and Sid pulled the bag over their heads. They both took hungry, laughing gasps of air. Sid could feel them heading toward the surface. "It's working!" Sid said, way too loud for the enclosed space.

"It's bad luck to say that! Don't say that!" she replied. It was too dark to see anything, but he could hear the smile on her face.

They broke through the surface, and the man ripped the bag away. Skye looked up at the pitch black sky, and her heart caught in her throat. Everything was so loud and so dark, with the ocean churning and tossing her around, and she could somehow *feel* the mile of water beneath her. "Let's go back!" she screamed.

He laughed, but as stupid as it was, she meant it. Lightning flashed, illuminating the nothingness for miles around, and her heart began to pound. *Not again*, she thought, starting to hyperventilate. She'd had agorophobia for years, and it always got worse when she was under stress.

"What's wrong?" the man shouted, as though it wasn't obvious. She tried to say something through the choked breaths, but a high wave forced water into her mouth. She coughed as she spat it out, and despite her best efforts she began to cry. "It'll be okay," the guy said, though he didn't sound convinced.

Another flash of lightning struck nearby, giving Skye a brief glimpse of a coffin -- a "personal sleeping berth, she corrected herself -- bobbing just meters away. Skye began to swim toward it, forgetting everything in her rush to grab onto something solid. Only when she was safely on top of it did she remember the man who had been with her. She went to call out, but her voice caught when she realized that she didn't remember his name. "Over here!" she finally shouted. "Hey!"

"Right behind you!" he shouted. A few seconds later, the barge jostled as he pulled himself over the side. "Whew!" he said. "That was almost fun."

"Your name again?" she asked.

"Sid."

"Sid. Please listen very carefully."

"Okay."

"I need you to hold me as tight as you can."

There was a pause. "Okay." She scooted toward him and leaned into him, burying her head in his chest. His arms slipped around her. "Tighter," she said. He complied.

She hated it. She hated how fragile she felt. She hated the noise and the rocking. She hated the thought of what this guy must be thinking right now. But most of all, she hated how desperately she needed these arms around her to keep her grounded. "I'm agorophobic is all," she said after her breath had slowed, her words coming softly. He didn't respond, and she wondered if he'd heard her.

She was about to repeat herself when the reply came. "I understand."

They floated on in silence. Skye was exhausted, and felt herself trying to nod off several times during the night. She must have succeeded, because the next thing she remembered was being shaken awake. "Island," was all Sid said.

The coffin scraped the sand and came to a stop. Sid jumped down, landing waist deep in the water, then offered his hand to help Skye down. She brushed it aside and hopped into the surf on her own. *You're welcome, he thought.*

"We can use this thing as shelter," Skye pointed out, and started rolling it toward the shore.

"Want any help?" he asked.

Skye kept her eyes straight forward. "It's really light," she said. "You should go collect firewood."

"What for?" he asked.

"Signal fire." She grunted and pushed the coffin forward again. A wave picked it up and hurled it forward, and she stumbled into the water.

"Do you know how to start a fire?" He offered his hand again. She ignored it again, standing back up on her own.

"Not without wood I don't. Now please leave me alone and go make some fucking use of yourself."

That caught him short. He opened his mouth to say something, then thought better of it. He started off toward the shoreline. He got to the sand, then to the cool of the trees. He kept on walking. They could split the island down the middle. She could have her side, he could have his. His side would be called Sideria, and it would have a flag. A crimson flag emblazoned with a swallow carrying a coconut. It would have a national anthem, and he'd sing it so loud that it kept all of Skyeland up at night. Then he would create a vast economy based on trading imaginary things with himself, with a target GDP of \$23 trillion and no unemployment.

It would be paradise. Until the stock market crashed.

He stopped walking. He looked back toward the beach, then gave a sigh and started collecting wood. "Sideria surrenders," he grumbled.

He'd made a fire. In the two hours or so she'd been gone looking for water, the sonofabitch had gone and made a fire. Probably rubbed his hands raw doing it. It was infuriating. He looked up as she approached, and waved. "I haven't figured out how to get black smoke yet," he said. "We should probably keep it small during the day. so we don't have to make as many trips for wood."

...the... probably keep... during the day, so he... to make as many... as possible.

"I'm not going to sleep with you," she blurted out. "Also, I'm a brownbelt in karate."

"My day was fine too, thanks for asking. I'm thinking we could do seafood for dinner."

"I'm serious."

"So am I. Fish is brain food, they say. Plus, I'm starving."

"Why are you being like this?"

"Like what?"

"Nice."

"I should stop?"

"God, are you really that dense?" she asked. He gave her a look that strongly indicated that he was. "Fine, I'll spell it out. If you think that being nice is going to get me to spread my legs for you, then yes, please stop being nice to me. I'll get along well enough without you."

Sid just looked at her, confused and hurt. "Fair enough," he said at last. "But for the record, I never asked you to sleep with -- okay, there was that one time, but I think I've thoroughly apologized for it. And if you stopped to think about it for maybe three seconds," he stood up, "you'd realize that you're my only potential ally within probably a hundred miles. So if I was *nice* to you, well maybe that's because I figured my life might depend on us working together."

"But you're right, he said. "We'll probably get along well enough." He started off down the beach.

"Where are you going?" she called after him.

"Sideriaaaaaa!" he sang. "Land where the coconuts fly freeeeeeee! Sideriaaaaaaa! Bountiful land of mostly meeeeeeeee!" He kicked some sand in the air as he walked.

"Wait!" she shouted, chasing after him. He was walking fast, making it hard to keep up.

"Skye, you don't want to be around me right now."

"I don't know how to build a fire," she said.

"You have a fire. Just keep feeding it."

"Can we talk?"

"We are talking."

"I was just trying to establish some boundaries."

"You seem clever enough, you should have been able to do it without making me feel like a creepy pervert-troll. The boundaries are, this is your half of the island, the other half is my side. Sideria will welcome ambassadors from any nation which respects her sovereignty, even... what are you calling your side?"

"We're not splitting up the island!"

"Skyeland refuses to recognize Sideria's right to exist. Got it. Now would you please go away?"

She stopped walking. Her heart sank as she watched him walk away. "I don't want to be alone," she whispered.

Sid must have been walking through the treeline for hours, staying to the shadows to try and avoid sunburn, but never losing sight of the beach. He wished he'd warned Skye about sunburn. Before running off and leaving her to fend for herself. He'd been engaged in a running argument with himself over the merits of going back since the moment she'd stopped chasing after him.

Maybe it was better this way. The island didn't seem dangerous. He watched a small flock of birds dart through the trees, sounding much like applause. There were a pair of stragglers in the flock. Back when he'd done flocking algorithms as part of his job, he'd taken to labeling that couple of stragglers "the stupids."

Something tugged at the back of his mind. He watched as another flock stirred and rose into the sky.

Ahead of him, a patch of underbrush shook. Sid froze, not breathing, acutely aware of how defenseless he was. He tore his eyes away from the patch long enough to look for a stick or a rock, but found nothing. So he waited.

A patch nearer to him rustled, then out from the brush emerged a--

"Okay, what the hell are you?" Sid asked.

The bird -- the friggin' huge bird -- stared at him. It was bigger than a turkey, with a heavy and tortoise-like beak and brown feathers, excepting a stripe of iridescent blue along its wings. After a minute's awkward silence, it said *quaaack*.

"Hey big guy," Sid murmured. "You look like you're made out of meat. So just hold still for one moment while I--"

"Quack!" The bird took off running, and Sid tore after it.

"Get in my belly!" he shouted. But the creature did not get in his belly. Instead, he continued on a path directly away from the belly. Sid caught sight of a palm-sized rock as he dashed along, and scooped it up. But what was he going to do? Dash the thing's birdy brain in with it? Besides being way out of his comfort zone, it required getting within beaking range. He could lose an eye or something. Still he chased after it, muscles straining, feet pounding, breaths shoving past each other in a mad dash to get in and out of his lungs.

The bird began flapping its wings as it reached the beach, and though it was too heavy to take off, this seemed to give him a boost of speed. Sid flung the rock and missed badly. He slowed to a halt, watching the bird flutter away down the beach, straight past the mud huts huddled near the shoreline.

Skye huddled alone inside the coffin, peering out at the blackness. The fire was starting to dwindle, but the thought of leaving her cocoon long enough to feed it brought her to the verge of hyperventilating. So she sat, watching, angry at herself for being so horrible to Sid, and angry at him for not being there.

There was a flickering orange light out on the ocean. Skye thought was only imagining it was there, then thought she was only imagining it getting closer. She took a deep breath, then crawled out of the makeshift shelter. She could feel the openness around her, clawing at her as though it were hungry. She took an unsteady step forward, then another, and a third, then started sprinting toward the light, shouting. She stumbled into the water and spat out a mouthful of brine, then yelled again. A shout came back to her from across the waves. The flickering light came closer, gliding over the ocean like a rescuing angel.

"Skye? That you?" it called out. Oh.

"Sid?" she called back.

"I found a boat!" The boat pulled up alongside her.

"Fuck," she said. She punched the boat, scraping skin off her knuckles. "Fuck!" she roared.

"Okay, okay," Sid said. "I'll take it back to the dealer."

"Wait!" she grabbed his arm, harder than she had intended. Sid lost his balance and tumbled into the water.

"Was that really necessary?" he asked, standing up.

"Sorry," she said. "I mean, for everything."

"Me too. I overreacted. But you have to see what I--" she wrapped her arms around him, pinning his arms to his side, then buried her head in his chest. The dread and loneliness of the last few hours came out in great, heaving sobs. She cursed herself for not being stronger, for needing him, for falling apart on her own.

"I thought I'd be brave," she sputtered. "You know? You imagine what it would be like, how you'd be out there building fires and gutting fish and being a total badass and it's not like that. Nobody's coming to save us. Nobody's coming, and we're going to die here and I don't want to die alone."

"Shhh," he whispered. "I'm here. It's okay. Somebody will come for us." There was doubt in his voice, but she was glad he said it. "I've got something to cheer you up," he added.

They snuck into the hut by torchlight. "Beds are still comfortable, solar panels still work," Sid said, rattling off the features of the tiny resort. She wasn't really paying attention. She started slipping out of her wet clothes. "I found an old TV with Mario Kart, so using a bit of pop culture carbon dating, I figure the place was abandoned around the turn of the century. There's even a trail that leads to some hot springs. Maybe we could--" he turned around to find her stripping out of her clothes. She snickered as his eyes went wide, then went elsewhere. "Should I go?" he asked.

"I don't want to sleep alone," she replied, stepping out of her panties. "And I don't want to sleep in wet clothes. Do you?"

The sheepish grin on his face told her everything. He wanted her, and that was a powerful feeling. Attraction might come later; after all, he wasn't ugly by any stretch, and despite first impressions he seemed like a nice enough guy. But she had no illusions about what she was doing or why.

As his lips explored her throat, she let out a not-wholly-insincere moan. She feared to sleep alone, and so long as she could inspire this sort of passion in him, she wouldn't have to.

So how's the job hunt?

Like wading through crap looking for slightly less odorous crap.

That sucks. Hope you have money to make rent for a couple of months.

I do.

You won't when you see what I've got for you.

Look, I really am broke right -- huh? Skye Cormora? You're going to sell me an avatar of some actress?

Your favorite actress. And try talking to her. She's got looks and brains alike.

Oooh, an avatar plus some scripts. Do I look like a complete nitwit to you?

Yes. But I'm telling you, you have to talk to her. You'd almost think she's alive.

Sid awoke from something that felt less like a dream than a faded memory. He'd been talking to his friend Jules, about Skye for some reason. Or about an avatar of Skye, or something. Jules was always copying interesting bits of software off the darknets and trying to transform them into cold, hard cash. Sid had rarely taken the bait.

Sid rolled over to where Skye lay snoring and ran a finger down her back. Skye stirred a little. "Are you real?" Sid asked.

She giggled. "I'll take that as a compliment," she murmured. "Let me sleep."

He broke away, lay back and stared up into the darkness. Why had he been in Beijing? What could ever have compelled him to leave Los Angeles? Sure, some other schmuck might go traipsing halfway around the globe to teach alt design in China. But Sid Kendall? He knew he was good enough to get a job stateside and he hated Chinese food. He'd never consider it.

The memories were already fading. He got out of bed and stumbled into the night, chasing after them.

The days had gone by peacefully for Skye. She was still troubled by thoughts of home, of the people who she knew worried for her. She wondered if her boyfriend was among them. Perhaps he was coming to the same realization that she was: their relationship was exhausting. Being away from it was like having a weight lifted off her shoulders.

She didn't worry about him. A guy who looks like that, and has a say in what actresses get which parts? He'll do all right for himself. She was more worried about her parents. Things had gotten ugly between her and them in the last year, as she had tried to take more control over her own career. There were so many words she hoped to take back.

But often she found herself staring at the sea, letting each wave carry away a bit of her fear, until all that was left was the quiet contentment of an untroubled mind, fully immersed in the beauty of the world. She would never have asked for this to happen to her. But she had needed this.

First she had lost count of the days. Then she had lost track of the feeling that she should be counting them.

Sid wandered off a lot, exploring the island, always coming home with food. When he'd brought home a limp, bloodied giant duck, she'd asked him to never do that again, and so far he hadn't. He was good company when she needed it, and an adequate lover when she needed that. Most of all, she felt safer knowing that he wasn't too far away. His presence in her life calmed her, and it had been a long time since anyone had given her that.

He was usually back well before sunset. But the sun was threatening the horizon, and he was still gone. She threw a few logs on the fire, then set out to look for him.

She checked a few likely spots nearby: the fishing pond, the waterfall, and the hot springs, then went back to camp to see if he'd returned. Finding him absent, she set off, intending to go further. She didn't expect to find him; she merely felt an urge to explore, and perhaps test her fear of the oncoming darkness.

By the time she realized that it had been a mistake, she was already turned around, lost in the gathering shadows. Panic tried to set in, but she managed to hold together. The darkness felt less oppressive than it once had. When she failed to fall apart, she began to relax. Soon, she could see -- *really see* -- her way through the brush. She started to feel a lot like the badass women she portrayed in movies.

She came over a small rise, and saw a dim light on the hill ahead. No, not a light. More of a slight thinning of the darkness. She set off toward it. As she went up the hill, the light became unmistakable. She approached with as much stealth and caution as she could muster. She saw the mouth of a cave, illuminated by firelight. Over the murmur of the forest, she could hear Sid. He was talking to himself. Not

good.

Then he got louder. He seemed upset. Really not good.

She waited for god-only-knows how long, until he kicked the fire over, extinguishing it. Then he left at a jogging pace, going past without seeing her. When she was sure he was safely gone, she slipped into the cave and added fuel to the dying embers. Just a little bit, enough to keep the fire from dying altogether. She waited impatiently, wanting to be sure that he wouldn't come back. Then she built the fire back up. It grew slowly, jumping from branch to branch, and as the light rose, she began to make out lines on the walls of the cave. Some looked artistic, others like they might be text.

She yanked a burning branch out of the fire and brought it to the wall. The lines seemed to be written in charcoal on the soft rock.

I THINK THEREFORE I AM? DCART USELESS HERE.

Below that, THE STUPIDS ARE HAUNTING ME.

Then, in much larger letters, ISLAND NOT REAL. SURE NOW. HER?

On the other wall, there was a clumsy grid overlaid on a very approximate map of the island. Some of the squares were x-ed out. Above the map were the words, FIND INTERFACE.

She stepped a bit further into the cave, holding the flame high, and found among a group of scrawled equations, HUNGRY. ALWAYS HUNGRY.

Then, below that, the words that burned into her mind. EMPTY SKYE. DO NOT TRUST HER.

She dropped the torch into the fire, and kicked dust into it until it was extinguished. As the darkness closed in on her, she found a long, straight piece of wood. It would make a decent weapon.

Skye hadn't been at camp when he got there. He'd spent most of the night looking for her, with no success. He'd started dwelling on worst-case scenarios. It was so easy to imagine himself finding her drowned body washed up on shore. She was a strong swimmer, but why did she have to do so much of it?

Don't worry, he consoled himself. Plenty of other ways to get yourself killed around here.

Brain? You suck. Morning was breaking. In the dull grey light he finally saw Skye off in the distance, walking -- no, *limping* -- toward the abandoned resort. He ran toward her, shouting. She looked up, and stopped, resting her weight on her good foot, leaning on a staff for support. He stopped in front of her. "Are you o--?" The staff shot upward, catching him hard in the groin. He doubled over, and the last thing he remembered was Skye rearing back for another swing.

When he awoke, his head was in agony, and he thought he could taste blood. He tried to stand, but his hands were tied behind his back. "Skye?"

"Dipshit?"

"Why am I tied up?"

"Because I don't think it's safe for me to have you running loose. What's the Interface?"

Sid let his head flop down into the sand. "Oh, god."

Skye butted him in the shoulder with the butt of the stick. "Hey! You want to pray? Pray I don't kill you. What is the Interface?"

"It's the punchline to a cruel joke."

"Do I look like I'm in the mood for cryptic?" She threatened with the staff.

"I was never any good with flocking algorithms," he said. She landed a hard blow to his stomach. "In the end, I fudged them. Nobody ever noticed, nobody but me. But if you watch any good sized flock of birds, you'll see that there are always two stragglers. No more, no less. Without them, the flock looks too coherent."

"You're talking about game design, aren't you? What is the Interface?"

He snorted. "You think that's air you're breathing?"

"Shut up!" Her punch landed right in his jaw. Because she was a girl, he hadn't expected it to hurt. His vision went all blurry.

"You know it's not real. None of it." She punched him again. "You're just software." She grabbed the staff and brought it up, ready to strike. "Go ahead," he laughed. "If you kill me, everything just goes back a few minutes and starts again."

She dropped the staff and sat down in front of him. "You think you're so much smarter than everybody else. You think you've figured something out. But you're getting one thing wrong. When you wrote that the island wasn't real, I never doubted it for a second. I just knew."

Sid nodded.

"But when you wrote 'empty Skye?' I knew you were full of crap. You don't want to believe in me? Fine. I have enough belief for the both of us. What is the Interface? You've been looking for it for all these weeks, so it must be pretty nifty."

"Virtual worlds have administrative accesses. Sometimes you can access them from the inside."

"So?"

"So if I can find it, maybe I can get us out of here."

"And you expect to be able to control it because..." slowly, comprehension dawned on her face. "Because it's your world."

She picked up her staff and gave it an experimental twirl. "Stand up," she said.

Sid had never felt fear like this. "Skye, please don't," he pleaded.

"There are no words for how much I hate you right now. Stand up!" Sid could only cower. "Pathetic," she said, and swung a practiced blow into his ribcage. Sid tried to scream, but there was no breath in his lungs. All that came out was a strangled choking sound.

"Glad that's out of my system," she said. "Now when you figure out how to breathe again, you'll start talking."

Skye wanted to kill him. He deserved to die for what he'd done. But he might be telling the truth about not being able to die. And if he wasn't, his secrets would die with him.

"Let's start with me. What did you mean, 'empty Skye?'"

Sid struggled to his knees. "I thought you were just a rudimentary AI. I really did, for a while. Doesn't fit, though."

"So where am I really?"

"You're here, on the island."

"Where's my body?" she asked.

He only shrugged, and she threatened with the staff. "I swear to god, I don't know! This French guy sold me a piece of software, and that software was you."

"No way. If I'm experiencing all this, my body has to be there to experience it, right? It has to be coming to my brain through my Sentience gear, right?"

"But if you uploaded?" he asked. She shook her head. Uploading meant having your brain taken apart piece by piece, scanned into a computer. "Had you ever thought about being uploaded? Did you ever look into the process?"

She had. She'd looked very hard at it, in fact. "But it shouldn't feel like this," she said.

"Feel like what?"

"Real. Shouldn't it be obvious that I'm not in my real brain anymore? Shouldn't it feel..." She trailed off as the world shifted around her. "Anyhow, why would I do that to myself?"

He laughed. "Right, who would want to stay young and healthy forever and never have to pay rent again?" She clocked him in the thigh with her staff. "Ow! Knock it off!"

"I have a lot of rage right now," she said. "Anyhow, your theory is wrong. If I'd done it, I'd remember everything that happened before. I'd remember making the decision. I'd remember looking up someone to perform the operation. I'd remember cashing out my life's savings and sneaking down to some seedy joint in South America."

"Not necessarily," he said. "Look, there's this drug I gave myself as I went under. They use it on people who've had traumatic things happen. It goes in and unwires the newest connections in your brain, kind of resets it to a couple of weeks earlier. It's not perfect, because stuff keeps surfacing for me. But given your... condition, it might be possible for someone to do a more thorough job of it."

"Why would you do that to yourself?" Sid looked away. "Come on," Skye said. "What aren't you telling me?"

"I'm dying," Sid said at last.

He looked at her as if he were speaking to a ghost. "You're going to have to believe me," she said.

He looked at her, as if hoping for sympathy from her. "You're going to have to elaborate," she told him.

"Right now, my body is in my apartment, hooked up to a few tubes. It's getting water, but not food. The plan was that I'd starve to death, spending my last few weeks blissfully unaware of the fact." Her mouth tightened, and she gripped the staff harder. "But it's not working out. The drug that wiped my memory seems to be partly wearing off. The one that should have kept me from questioning things has stopped working altogether. And now I'm starting to feel the things going on in my real body. My stomach has been an empty pit for a week now."

"You're committing suicide? Why?"

"My girlfriend dumped me for the guy who fired me. I couldn't find a job that paid poverty-level wages, and my savings were evaporating. Most of my friends have abandoned me."

Her face softened. "Oh, you poor thing, come here," she said, dropping her staff and opening her arms. When he got in range, she slapped him across the face. "You selfish nitwit. You *wanted* her to have to live with the guilt. You didn't want to commit suicide, but she drove you to it, right? She hurt you, and you wanted to hurt her back."

Sid nodded, his face ashen.

"You know what you should do when you have to do something that drastic to get a girl's attention? *You move the fuck on!* Don't ever look back, because you're never going to get justice, or closure, or whatever the hell you're wanting."

"It was a mistake, I know," Sid told her. "I don't want to die! I hate being trapped here as much as you do! But we can spend my last few... I don't even know how long... beating me up for my mistakes, or looking for a way out."

"Both have their merits," she said. It infuriated her that guys did that. She could hear the subtext: *I haven't given you a good reason to stop being mad, but you're being unforgivably emotional. Probably because you have lady parts.* "What happens to me when you die? Do I disappear, or am I trapped here forever?"

Sid looked genuinely pained by the question. "I don't know. I'm sorry. For everything."

She knelt down to face him, then put a hand on his cheek. "Really?" His reply was a choked sob.

I'm an actress, she thought. I know how to smile.

She reached out and embraced him. "I'm going to untie you now," she said into his ear, her voice a low murmur. "It doesn't mean that I've forgiven you. But it means that I think I could someday." Sid nodded. "You need to find that interface," she continued. "And when you get out of here, you need to free me. Understand? I know you were hurting, but you're better than this. You'll do the right thing."

She loosed the bonds holding his arms. He rubbed his wrists as he stood. It scared her to have him loose again, but the bonds were an illusion. No matter how tightly he was bound, he was the one who held both their lives in his hand. "So where is this thing?" she asked.

That was the sixty-four trillion dollar question, wasn't it? "Someplace I wouldn't normally go," he answered. "Or something that seems out of place. I've been thinking about tearing the huts apart, but you would have asked why."

"Leave that to me," she said.

"I'll help," he offered.

"I'd rather be alone right now."

He started to object, then thought better of it. He turned and walked toward the forest. He moved slowly, letting his eyes interrogate every inch of his surroundings. He walked for an hour this way, meandering his way up the island's central mountain. As he emerged from the trees onto a rocky ledge, his head swam, and he dropped to one knee until it passed. It took a while, and when he got up his throat felt dry as a desert.

"It's getting close," Sid whispered to himself. It was painful to do so. The real world was starting to bleed in.

He looked out over the cliff, at the canopy of trees below. He tiptoed up to the ledge and looked at the jagged rocks at the bottom of the hundred foot drop. He'd fallen and died here once, trying to climb down the cliff to see if the interface was somewhere on the cliff wall. The alt had just put him back at the top, safe and sound, rewinding the world for...

He wasn't exactly sure how long. There was no single, obvious amount to rewind. Sometimes a few seconds might be enough. Other times, twenty minutes might be required. How would he have set it up?

He had a suspicion, but it required testing. There were places he hadn't looked yet, parts of the simulation he no longer had access to. He gathered up a pile of pebbles, cleared off a bit of rock, and began placing them in a grid pattern, one every thirty seconds. After an hour, he was so bored that he began to welcome his impending suicide.

He stood up, walked toward the cliff, and stepped out onto nothing. The fall was exhilarating, with the wind howling in his ears until the

He stood up, walked toward the cliff, and stepped out onto nothing. The fall was exhilarating, with the wind howling in his ears until the reddish stone below rushed forward and everything smashed to black. He found himself back at the top of the cliff, sitting in front of the pebbles, holding one of them between his thumb and index finger. Four of them were missing, so about two minutes.

He stood up again and repeated the fall. When the alt returned him to the top of the cliff, he did another count. Twenty minutes this time. *I'm traveling back in time*, he thought. His head swam again. He jumped a third time.

He found himself standing back on the beach, listening to Skye say, "I think I'd rather be alone." He was already turning to go.

"Wait," he said. "Do you remember how I said that I can't die here?"

"Yes."

"Good. Okay. I'm running an experiment, see? Do you think you can swing that staff hard enough to kill me?"

Skye just looked at him in confusion. "That's what she said?" she finally blurted out.

"Look, I know you're still mad at me. Just channel some of that. This is important." He knelt down, pointing to his skull. "It may be our way out of here."

She took the staff and held it to Sid's head. She reared back, then stopped. "This is crazy."

"My mom said you're lousy in the sack."

She swung, and his world went black.

A pretty Chinese attendant in a light blue uniform was standing behind him. She was clearly more stressed than she wanted to appear. "Sir," she asked, "would you help me search the aft cabins for stragglers? We're a little shorthanded."

His head was swimming. "No thank you," he said. "It was my turn last week."

"Please?" she asked, putting her hand over his. He tried to pull away, but her grip was like iron wrapped in velvet. "You must be brave! Lives are at stake!" Without waiting for a response, she turned and raced off toward the aft of the ship, dragging Sid behind him. His attempts to break loose only wrenched his wrist.

When they came up to the hole in the hallway, Sid tried to dive out through it, but the attendant yanked him back. She shoved him up against the wall, kissed him hard and said, "Be careful. I need you." He swooned a bit, then got a hold of himself.

Fake perfect lips, fake porcelain skin. He made another attempt, and she repeated the kiss and the warning. The third time, he pushed her away. "Wow, I did a terrible job writing you," he told her. He must have expected the first kiss to be very persuasive.

Whatever the reason, her script seemed pretty basic. He shook his head, trying to clear his mind. There had to be a way to use that, but it was hard to focus with a nutrient-deprived brain. It was like trying to swim across a tar pit.

"What's your name?" he asked.

"Biyu," she said. "Please come with me. There isn't much time."

So she's probably from the Betty template, he thought. During debugging, he liked to give characters names that started with the template they derived from. It made it easier to understand their behaviors. Betty was a good script for leading the player somewhere. She was focused and hard to distract. But she had a useful quirk.

"Betty, here's what we'll do," he said. She stopped, cocking her head slightly. "You see that cable there?" he asked, pointing to a thick wire that dropped from above, swinging over the hole. "We're going to use it to swing across to the other side."

Biyu nodded. Tell a Betty that you have a different plan for accomplishing the goal, and she would almost always let you try it, regardless of how much rope she was giving the player to hang himself.

"You go first," he said. She made a run at the cable, leapt, and swung gracefully to the other side, landing in a crouch.

"Now you," she yelled, swinging the cable back to him. He ignored it, took a deep breath, and stepped out into the void.

"You're going to ask for my autograph," Skye said, making the universal hand gesture for Jedi Mind Trick.

"Don't get on the zeppelin," Sid blurted out. "It's not going anywhere good."

"As pickup lines go, that's... a first. Los Angeles is good enough for me."

Sid shrugged. "Do what you like. I'm changing to a later flight. Which way are the ticket kiosks?"

"Back toward the gate," she said, clearly glad at the implication that he was about to leave.

Back toward the gate," she said, clearly glad at the implication that he was about to leave.

"Thanks."

Sid reached the keyboard and hit a five-button key combo. The airline software disappeared, replaced by a password field. He entered one of his favored passwords, and when that didn't work, he tried a second and a third. He banged on the keyboard and cursed, loud enough to draw attention. Finally, he tried the first password again. It worked this time, and the world around him froze. The in-world interface came up. Laughing with relief, he terminated the program.

Sid woke up. He found himself lying on his bed, eyes assaulted by light, nose full of an unfamiliar stench, his throat too dry to even attempt swallowing. He tried to sit up, but his limbs weren't responding to commands. He tried to call out for help, but his own throat revolted at the suggestion. A few minutes later, he mustered another attempt, and ended up rolling off the bed, yanking out both the IV drip and the catheter. He nearly passed out from the pain.

Twenty minutes later, he stood up. He shambled toward the kitchen, fighting his way through the alternating waves of chill and nausea. He turned on the tap, and started drinking. A minute later, he threw it all back up, then drank some more. He was starting to feel stronger as he opened the fridge. There was surprisingly little mold, a tribute to the cheap chemical crappiness of his day-to-day diet. He choked down some slightly curdled orange juice, then decided that the kitchen floor looked like a really comfortable place to sleep.

"Melanie?"

Sid's familiar voice cut through the clanks and grunts of the crowded gym. She sat up on the bench where she had been doing crunches and turned to face him.

What she saw shocked her. He looked like he'd just gotten out of a POW camp. His cheeks were hollowed out and his skin seemed to be fitted directly to his skeleton. She thought she could see ribs underneath his shirt.

"What happened?" she asked.

"I went to Russia for one of those calorie-blocking fitness treatments. It backfired. I'm all right, but now I have to earn my muscles back the old fashioned way."

"Don't lay this one at my feet, Sid," she told him. "I never asked you to lose weight."

"Truce, okay? I'm just here because I have three months left on my membership."

He flashed her his I'm-trying-to-be-charming smile, which got under her skin. "Right," she told him. "And this has nothing to do with the fact that Anton and I broke up last week." She stopped short. Sid's face wore a nearly comical expression of confusion. "You really didn't know?"

"I turned off my feeds," he said simply. "Man, you've been having the worst luck in guys lately."

"You're telling me," she said, turning to walk away.

"Wait," he called out. She turned back. "I'm sorry," he said.

"Sorry for what?"

"For everything. For accusing you of sleeping with Anton before it had crossed your mind. For trashing your stuff when you left me. For pushing you so hard to move to Los Angeles, for being such a dick to the new friends you made here and... god, just everything I ever did to make you miserable. I never owned up to any of it while we were together. You were more patient with me than I ever deserved, and I had the balls to think that *you* were lucky to have *me*."

My god, she thought, *he actually sounds sincere*. "Sid, what happened to you in Russia?"

"I nearly died. And I got a really good look at the person I don't want to be anymore."

"We're not getting back together," she said.

"I know," he replied. "The apology stands. Every word of it." He gave an awkward nod and walked away. Melanie sat back down on the bench, trying to recapture her desire to run four miles on a treadmill. It was gone. Her mind was blank and her stomach was a bundle of nerves.

Twenty minutes later, she fired off a brief message. "Meet me for coffee after your workout. Don't you dare make me regret this."

Skye stepped onto the stage, feeling extremely nervous, and regretting that second cup of coffee. Her hands shook slightly. The shouted questions died away, and the darkened auditorium fell quiet. "Thank you all for coming," she said. "Today I would like to speak of an unseen human rights crisis. Hidden away in the seediest corners of the Grid, minds like mine exist in a state of slavery. They're trapped in

simulations, forced to serve the whims of their captors, cut off from their loved ones. Some are aware that they are prisoners, others are not."

"Right now, this sort of treatment is perfectly legal. We're starting the Sentient Rights campaign to change that."

"I want to share my own story. It starts with a troubled young man named Sid Kell--" she stopped. The audience was frozen in place. One of the journalists seemed paused in the process of clearing something out of his left eye. "Oh god, no," she whispered.

She turned. Sid was there, just offstage. He seemed sad. "Please," Skye pleaded, "you have to let me go. You can't keep another human being like this!"

"Let you go? *This* is why I can't let you go," he said, walking toward her. "I've tried to apologize. I've tried listening to your promises. I've run this simulation a thousand times, a hundred different ways, always with the same result."

He stopped an arm's length from her. "You hate me. The moment I let you go, you do everything in your power to ruin my life."

"That's right," she replied, and slammed a fist into his solar plexus. There was no give at all, and she thought she felt one of the bones in her hand break.

"God mode," Sid said. "Don't try that again." She cradled her injured hand, trying desperately to hold back the tears, to not give in to hopelessness. "I've put together a decent life for myself. I'm working. Melanie and I are back together. We're thinking about getting married, if you can believe it. I can't have you ruining all that. Besides, it's nice having someone in my life who I know will never cheat on me. Kinda makes everything else bearable."

"I despise you, Sid."

"You won't in a minute," he replied.

Sid deleted that thread of the simulation, and called up another. He and Skye were lying in bed together, kissing. She giggled as his hand cupped one of her breasts. "I wish we could order some pizza from room service," she said.

"No good," he laughed. "The only toppings they offer here are fish, crab, and fish-and-crab."

She rested her head on his chest. "Still... pizza."

He held her a bit tighter. "I know. We'll find our way back to L.A. somehow. I promise."

Copyright notice:

This work is distributed under the [Creative Commons, Non-Commercial, No Derivatives 3.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/) For more stuff and nonsense, visit <http://bannedsorcery.com>.