

The Dome Above

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He led her down the row of maintenance vehicles, the water between the crafts glowing green from the bright lights on the underside of the habitat.

She laughed, giddy from the repeated sips of spirits from her friend's flask back at the party. "Where are we going?"

"Someplace you've never been," he replied. He raised and lowered a gangplank silently, as if laying a baby down in its crib.

"I don't know..." she said, turning to look back at the entrance of the sub bay. The boy was cute, and she was drunk, but she didn't want to spend the next hour making out in a tin can that smelled like decay and the chlorine they used to cover it up.

"Hey," the boy said, looking at her. He was already half in the sub, leaning on the metal lip of its cylindrical airlock and looking at her. All of a sudden, he had turned serious, the lightly flirting personality he'd worn at the party peeled away like a neoprene dive suit.

"You're special," he said simply. "And I want to show you something special. Alright? So just come on."

He disappeared. The girl looked at the entrance of the bay once more. Then she followed him down and pulled the latch closed behind her. Five minutes later, and the sub dropped down out of line and left the dock.

* * *

"It's freezing in here," she complained. "And everything's just...clammy. And gross."

"Mm," said the boy from the controls. He pulled away from the habitat and set out across the sea floor. Pale fish and paler crabs moved slowly beneath the spotlights of the sub. The girl, on her stomach on the co-pilot's bench, grabbed her arms and shivered.

She didn't know why she agreed to come along. Part of her told her that it was the alcohol, and the fact that he was cute. But another part had responded to how serious he had become back at the dock. Her hearing that she was special didn't do anything for her...guys were always telling her that...but he seemed to believe it. And more than that, he seemed unafraid to say it. Unafraid to be real with her.

But now, cramped and cold and staring at him hypnotized by the controls, she couldn't help but feel just a little bit of regret. Wishing that she had just turned around and gone back to the party, maybe to find a normal, lying guy to go sleaze around with, maybe to just go back to her family's wing and crash. Instead-

“We’re not going to the hydrothermal vent fields, are we?” she asked. “Because I’ve *seen* them in person before.” She laughed. “I mean, I’m wealthy, not...inexperienced.”

“Not inexperienced, huh?” She heard the smirk in his words, and blushed. “That’s an interesting way to say it.”

“You know what I meant,” she said.

“Mm. Well, to answer your question, no, we’re not going to the hydrothermic vent fields.”

The sub was ascending, and somewhat rapidly.

“I’ve seen the relics too,” she said, feeling a little nervous now. “Vehicles of the ancient humans, their instruments of war. I’ve...I’ve been there.”

“Uh huh,” the boy said. A soft voice chimed in over the internal speakers.

LEAVING THE VIOLET ZONE. ENTERING THE BLUE ZONE.

“I’ve been to the blue zone too,” she said, indignant. “I’ve been on hunting expeditions with my father, seen all the big animals-”

“Hunting expeditions?” the boy said. “That’s how you spend your money? Firing harpoons at helpless animals from the safety of a sub? Or an even worse...from a drone?”

“It’s not like *that*,” the girl said. “There’s...there’s procedure, and *ritual* involved. It’s an important part of our *legacy*.”

“Uh huh.” There was silence for a few minutes more, but the girl felt as if they were ascending faster. She swallowed hard.

“Can...can you tell me where we’re going?”

“Nope.” She heard the smirk in his voice again.

“Or how long it’s going to take to get there?”

“Also no.”

She fumed...and feared.

* * *

Some time later, the intercom chimed in again.

LEAVING THE BLUE ZONE. ENTERING THE GREEN ZONE. PLEASE PROVIDE ZONE OVERRIDE CODE.

The boy grunted, then punched a handful of numbers into a keypad down by his knee. There was a chime, and then-

CODE ACCEPTED.

-and the voice went silent. The girl waited for a few moments before speaking up.

“Okay,” she said. Her buzz had worn off, and she was starting to evaluate the situation a little differently than she had previously. “So I’ve never been to Green before. What’s even up here?”

“Not much,” the boy admitted. “More wildlife. A few legacy mines and the old machines we use to run them. A lot of our stuff is situated in Blue and below, though.”

Only select members of the maintenance class had access to Green Zone codes. The girl didn’t know whether to be impressed by the boy’s apparent skill...or if she should assume that he’d stolen the access info.

“So you’re taking me to see more machines? Some creatures that I’ve seen either in school or in movies?”

“Nope. Something better.”

The girl began to wonder to herself if she had to, would she be able to knock him out and pilot the sub back home. If it came to that, that is.

And while she prepared for the worst, the vehicle continued to climb.

* * *

APPROACHING ORANGE ZONE. ZONE ACCESS RESTRICTED. AUTOPILOT ASSUMING CONTROL IN NINE...EIGHT...SEVEN...

The boy swore, then punched in a long sequence of digits on the keypad. The interior lights were flashing red, and in the rear of the sub the girl grabbed her arms so hard that her fingernails dug into her skin.

SIX...FIVE...

“Come on!” the boy yelled. He reached up and popped open a small panel above his head, then began fiddling with the wires that fell out.

FOUR...THREE...THREE...THREE...

The lights went out. This time it was the girl’s turn to swear, which she did as well as any maintenance crewmember could have. A few seconds later, the lights both internal and external flared back up again.

“Sorry about that.” The boy sounded embarrassed, something that he hadn’t seemed capable of.

“The Orange Zone?” the girl said. She raised a fist and brought it down on his calf, hard.

“Ow! Jeez!”

“Do you know how much trouble we’ll get in for being out here? And beyond that, how...just...unsafe it is! Take us back down to Green. Now!”

“Hey, I told you I’d take you someplace that you’ve never been,” he said. “And I guarantee you’ve never been to Orange.”

“Well *obviously*,” she replied. “But it’s not like it matters. I can’t even see out the windows back here, the lights are practically turned inwards.”

“Oh yeah,” the boy replied. “I did that on purpose.”

“What? Why?”

“Because I wouldn’t want you to think that the Orange Zone was what I brought you out here to see.”

“What...what are you- *huh*.” The engines whined beneath them, and the sub began ascending even faster.

“Where...where are we going? What are we doing?”

“Just hang on...”

“No, you tell me *right now*—”

APPROACHING RED ZONE. SIXTY SECONDS OUT. AUTOPILOT ASSUMING-

The boy reached up into the overhead wires and twisted something. The engines worked harder, and the voice got louder.

FORTY-FIVE SECONDS.

“No. We are *not* going to the Red Zone!”

“You’re right, we’re *not* going to the Red Zone.”

The entire vehicle was shaking. The girl’s teeth chattered together as she shouted at him to descend. The boy yelled back at her over his shoulder.

“We’re going *through* the Red Zone.”

The lights inside the sub were going insane. The voice was blaring warnings about poisonous gases, deadly decompression, and irradiated waters. The girl began crawling forward, over the boy, grabbing for the controls. The two wrestled for a moment, her hands scrabbling for the twin joysticks, him trying to keep his full strength in check.

Then the water, that everpresent water, that damned damp that humanity had hid itself in for far too many generations, split apart before them. The vehicle rose up and for a brief moment the pair could see a different type of blackness up above them through the main window. Then the sub crashed back down and sent the two of them tumbling in a heap against the glass.

“Get...*off* of me,” the girl said, pushing and kicking. “Get *off*!”

“Yeah, no problem,” he responded, easily. He pushed himself away, disentangling their limbs, then reached up overhead from the middle of the vehicle.

“What...oh my *God, don't!*”

“Relax,” he replied, and he turned the wheel on the airlock.

It took the girl several moments to realize that she was still alive. Slowly, she pulled her hands off her ears and raised her head, looking around. There was no water in the sub. There was no *boy* in the sub. It was just her, curled up on the clammy foam pilot pads.

She unwound herself from the fetal position and slowly crawled towards the airlock where she had last seen the boy.

“Come on up,” said a voice from above.

She stood, her slender shoulders fitting easily through the alloy cylinder, the top of her head barely reaching above the outside lip. She reached up and grabbed the rim and gave a little jump. The boy caught her beneath one arm and helped her up and out of the sub.

“Careful,” he said as she wavered back and forth up above. She gasped. They were parked in the largest dock she'd ever seen. Empty space stretched out on either side of them for miles. The lights on the sub glowed green beneath the water, and she spotted a school of fish, each a foot long at least, swimming past the great lamps.

She took a deep breath...and realized how different the air was up here. It was richer...fuller...smelling like salt instead of decay. There was a breeze moving past her, ruffling her hair, as if she was sitting in front of a heater fan...yet there was no fan, nor any other object that could be seen nearby. And best of all it was *warm* up here...warm in a way that she never, *ever* felt in her home, as nice as it was, with the walls and the blankets constantly damp-

“Ugh,” the boy said, leaning over with his head between his knees. His feet were inches from the water. Terrified that he was going to fall in, the girl grabbed him by the shoulder and hauled him upright.

“I'm okay, I'm okay,” he said unconvincingly, brushing her off of him. “It's just...different up here. The motion. It takes me a few minutes to get used to it.”

She hadn't fully realized it before, but the sub was rocking back and forth on the water. The girl looked around them. All of the water was moving, rippling, swaying in the darkness, each peak reflecting in it a single coin of light that was stretched and shattered among the millions of tiny waves.

The girl looked up for the source of the light and gasped. Above them, far, far above them, in the vast velvet dome that encompassed what she began to suspect was not a dock at all, a great silver disk watched over the world below.

“What is that,” she whispered. The boy looked up, still sick, but starting to feel better.

“No idea,” he said. He took a chance and reached for her hand. She didn't pull away.

“But I plan to find out.”