

# Dear Ammi

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Nico loved the darkness best of all, and the darkness loved her back.

For most of her fellow miners, the ones chattering over the short-range comm when their asteroids passed within range, getting back to their Pods at the end of the day's work was a relief. To Nico, it was a chore. The Pod was bright, while the only lights in the Digger were its twin headlamps and the dim glow of the console. The occasional flicker from the ion shield that wrapped her Pod and the active dig site in a protective shell. The Pod had three rooms (four if you counted the airlock); the Digger was as big as the Pod, of course, but it fit so snugly around Nico's body that it hardly seemed to be there at all. And the soft machine hum of the Pod wasn't enough to replace the constant roar of the Digger, the comforting white noise of Nico's day.

Lights flickered on as the airlock constricted behind Nico's back. Already it was overwhelmingly bright, overwhelmingly silent in the Pod. Nico's eyes narrowed, her shoulders hunched. She pulled off her helmet and turned to put it in its locker.

A gauntleted fist clipped her on the chin.

Thanks to the asteroid's microgravity, she went sailing gently across the Pod instead of landing a sprawling heap at her attacker's feet. She scrambled up—too fast. Her feet left the ground and her head crashed into the ceiling. Doing the attacker's work for him—no good. She scrabbled at the floor plate when she came back down, and prised up one of the panels just as the attacker came at her a second time. The panel connected solidly with the stranger's face-plate. Nico's arm reverberated with the impact, and the intruder sailed gently across the Pod.

„Fuck,“ said the attacker, in a high clear voice, just as she settled onto the ground. Not a man, a woman. Young—early twenties, if she wasn't modded. „You cracked my face-plate, kutti!“

„Zio!“ Nico shouted. „Send an SOS to Alpha Outpost!“ The intruder's foot lanced out between Nico's feet, and then it was Nico's turn to drift gently to the floor with her feet over her head.

The AI pinged softly. „I'm sorry, Nico, but communication with the Outpost is unavailable right now.“

„What?“ The intruder was on Nico again before she settled, driving her into the wall at full force. All the wind blasted out of Nico's lungs in one great huff, and this time when she floated down to the floor she did it while whooping for breath. Zio repeated his polite error message.

„Can it, Corps Bore. I disabled the communications array on my way in.“ The intruder wrenched Nico's arms, still encased in her vac suit, behind her back. The movement made it even harder for Nico to catch her breath, but the intruder didn't seem to pay much mind as she secured Nico's arms together with a stretch of silver tape. Nico strained against the bonds, but found her arms thoroughly leashed to the wall behind her with one last length of tape.

„There we go,“ said the intruder, coming around in front of Nico. Nico guessed at accent; English, probably, or Australian at the outside. Dark skinned, but ashy—people got that way after a long time in space. An old make of helmet, now with a spiderweb-shaped crack covering one side of the face-plate. The vac suit itself comprised at least three different models: the green gauntlets of a Chinese military uniform (with bonus brass knuckles added on), the once-white pants of some Engineering Corps cast-offs, the torso and arms some sort of nameless civilian gray. A thick layer of sealant had been painted around the wrists of the suit, where the incompatible gauntlets and bodysuit wouldn't join together without help. „How you feeling, kutti? Got your wind back yet?“

„You Indy fuck-bucket,“ Nico spat. Inside her splintered helmet, the girl grinned. She had grass-green bangs hanging over one eye; the rest of her black hair was buzzed short like Nico's. Four studs decorated the cartilage in the ear that Nico could see, all of them thoroughly blooded—that was why the Corps of Engineers had a piercing ban. Her grassy fringe of bangs didn't quite conceal the star-shaped tattoo over her left eye. There was nothing military about her: she was sheer vac-suited chaos. „How did you get in here?“

The intruder laughed. „Are you kidding? Corps computers are so bug-riddled it's not even funny.“ She shuffled across the Pod and into Nico's storage unit. „Actually, yeah, it's pretty funny. My name's Madhuja—what'll I call you? Besides kutti, I mean.“

„Fuck you.“

„Okay, Junior Technician Nicola Ramirez.“ Madhuja leaned back into the central part of the Pod, waving one of Nico’s storage boxes in both hands. „You know your name and rank are stamped on, like, everything here—right?“

Nico lunged toward her, but only bounced at the end of her leash. §Get out of my stuff!§ Could she get the tape closer to the multitool on her belt? Maybe she could cut through the tape yet.

„Relax, kutti, I’m not eating your Twinkies.“ Nico strained to see around the door into storage, but couldn’t get far enough. Indies often carried splodes with them; was Madhuja booby-trapping the place for after she’d made whatever getaway she had planned? „Not yet, anyway. You hungry? Need me to fetch you some nosh?“

„I don’t need anything from you, Leech. I know what you are.“

A storage bin banged into place. „Yeah, because I told you. I’m Madhuja, ta-fuckin’-da.“

„Where did you crash your offloader?“

A sudden stillness from the storage room. Sure, there were others this far out: the Kuiper research stations, the gas miners passing back and forth from Earth to Saturn and Uranus, even civilian mining operatives. Accidents happened to them too, but they wouldn’t have showed up on Nico’s doorstep covered in mismatched uniforms and piercings. The Independents, though... A ridiculous name for such an organization. There was nothing „independent“ about them. Their short-range offloaders cruised the belt for sites already opened by Corps engineers or civilian ones, then swooped in to poach while miners were off-duty. Not technically illegal, not with the sorry state of asteroid belt claims. But a pain in the ass anyway. Nico had never been targeted by Leeches before, but the Corps had only redeployed her Pod here three weeks ago, after she’d depleted her last site. Leeches loved fresh sites.

„Yeah,“ said Nico, into the silence. „That’s what I thought.“

„Aw. You think I’m shite? That cuts real deep, kutti.“ Madhuja emerged from the storage unit with a medikit in hand, and plopped into Nico’s chair. She popped off her busted helmet and kicked it across the floor; it drifted gently to a rest beside Nico’s bedroll. The entire rest of her spacesuit followed; Madhuja shimmied out of it like a caterpillar that had changed its mind and squirmed back out of the cocoon. It too floated across the room and came to an unsettling rest draped across Nico’s bed with its arms and legs akimbo.

Meanwhile, Madhuja rooted through the tubes and pockets of the medikit. „Oh, come on,“ said Nico. She couldn’t get the tape down to the multitool, but she thought she could saw it against the rough edge of the belt itself. „Offloaders don’t come equipped with their own medikits?“

„Offloaders that belong to rich fuckers, maybe.“ Underneath her vac suit, Madhuja was much skinnier than Nico would have guessed. Nico could almost have counted her ribs through her ratty tank top; she could see the tiny red bruises across both shoulders that must have been the result of the offloader crash. Despite her state of dress, Madhuja had sweat beading her upper lip—what did she have to be nervous about? She had Nico dead to rights. „I look rich to you, kutti?“

„What you look like is a skeleton.“ The tape found the rough patch on the belt, and Nico felt it begin to give way—but painfully slowly. „Maybe you *should* have eaten my Twinkies.“

„Yeah?“ Madhuja had shaken out a cocktail of painkillers into the palm of her hand. „I think I found something here that runs more to my tastes.“ She tossed them into her mouth, and swallowed them dry, though her face contorted with the effort. „And that I won’t puke right back up.“

Nausea? Nico could use that. Maybe she wouldn’t even have to fight the Leech, just let the concussion work itself out. „You hit your head in the crash?“

Madhuja pulled a moue. „Aww, you worried about me, kutti?“ She patted her waist and swung her hips from side to side. „Just maintaining my girlish figure.“

„Have you ever seen puke in microgravity? I don’t need that flying around my house.“

Madhuja crammed the rest of the medikit into a space in the console. „This? This isn’t a home, it’s a barracks. A tiny, shitty barracks.“ She jerked a thumb at the door. „My offloader? It wasn’t any bigger than this, but it was my home, mate.“ She pursed her lips, then stood. „Speaking of which... hey, computer, how do we pack this thing up and get out of here?“

„Unknown request,“ said Zio. Sometimes Nico thought she heard just an edge of sarcasm in that tinny voice. Just wishful thinking, probably, but she liked it. „Unauthorized recipient. Nico?“

„Absolutely do not pack up the Pod, Zio. We’re staying put.“ Until Outpost Security gets here to take out the trash, she didn’t add out loud. Where did this stupid Leech get the idea that she deserved Nico’s Pod for the wonderful achievement of pulverizing her own vessel? Only an Indy could be so selfish. Nico had heard of them before she enlisted—she’d gone to school with a boy who’d run off to join the Indies for whatever riches and glory lay on the other side of a career of looting. But her mother had raised her right, and when there wasn’t enough at home for Nico to justify staying there any longer, she’d found an honest way to make a living. To send money home for Mamá and the boys, even. And all this so someone else could just swoop in and take it the easy way?

No. No way in hell, not while people were counting on Nico. Outpost Command and her family both. She found new vigor as she rubbed her wrist against her belt.

„What the fuck ever,“ Madhuja said. She got down on hands and knees with a grunt, and began crawling beneath the computer console, the screened one where Nico could watch videos from Earth or pick up visual communication from Outpost: updates, new training, fresh orders. „There’s always a manual option. I’ll figure it out.“

There was a manual option, but it was biometrically linked to Nico. Of course, if Madhuja had hacked the door, she might well do the same again. Unless Nico stopped her.

Nico paused in sawing at the tape as Madhuja backed out from under the console and stood. She staggered once, and caught herself on the back of Nico’s chair. Nico watched through lidded eyes as she swayed and steadied herself. „Feeling okay?“ she asked.

„Don’t get your hopes up, kutti.“ Madhuja turned to her. Her lips were cracked, though not bleeding. Her offloader must not have had the conditioned air that

Nico's pod did. Good, Nico thought. She wished a lot worse than chapped lips on Madhuja.

„It's not hope. It's happening.“ Nico's hands were working again. How much longer? „I've seen concussions before. I just have to wait you out.“

„Yeah?“ said Madhuja. Her voice brittle suddenly, like the spiderwebbed glass in her faceplate. From behind her back, she produced a gun. Not one of the fancy flechette guns that the armed Corps guards carried, just an old-fashioned handgun. One leveled at Nico's forehead. „And what if I get tired of you waiting for me to drop? If I just plug two bullets in you right now?“

„My brothers,“ said Nico, and her breath caught in her throat before she could finish the thought.

She stared at Madhuja, at the fingers wrapped around the gray gun, at the steady wrist, the straight arm. Madhuja, in turn, stared at her. Finally the gun dropped, made a soft sound against her thigh. „Fuck,“ she said, then flopped into Nico's chair. „It's not a concussion, kutti, I promise. Just a touch of leukemia, nothing to get your knickers bunched over.“

The word punched Nico in the chest. The ashy skin, the little bruises. The fatigue. Blood cancer. „You're sick?“ she asked, inanely. Her hands started working at the tape again, because they didn't know what else to do.

„Terminal,“ agreed Madhuja. Microgravity amplified her swagger as she pushed up out of Nico's chair and resumed her search, this time in the space where Nico's bedroll was. „You think I come out here for my health? No ion shield on an offloader, kutti. Live hard, die young...“ She upended the bedroll, which drifted across the Pod like a lumpy magic carpet. „And send some fuckin' money home before you do.“

Behind Nico, the tape snapped.

Madhuja spun, one hand going for the gun. Nico brought her hands up, a pointless defensive gesture. Or one of surrender, she wasn't quite sure.

And the entire Pod shuddered.

„Shit!“ Fatigue or not, Madhuja cleared the Pod in one great leap and landed beside the console. „Where's the camera? I got to see what's out there. Gimme it!“

Nico barely kept her footing in the wake of the tremors. Too much was happening for her to think, and it had been so long since she'd had to think at all. Wake up, check on the Pod and the Digger, go out and dig, come home, watch a movie, go to sleep. Should she prevent Madhuja from looking outside, keep her one step farther from what she wanted? Should she ignore whatever the hell had sent aftershocks through the asteroid under her feet? She made a choice. „Zio,“ she said, and braced her free hand against the wall. „Show us.“

The monitor flickered to life, briefly flashing on the romantic drama Nico had paused last night at lights-out, before a starfield darkened the screen. The camera on the outside of the Pod tracked automatically, and centered and zoomed on a particular section of the field. All Nico saw at first was stars, but Madhuja's grunt of recognition made her approach for a closer look. There was a small flash of light from the center of the field—just before the deck tilted under her feet once more. This time, she hung on to the console to keep from pitching forward. Now she could see the dark blocky shape where the light-flash had originated. „What is *that*?“

„That,“ said Madhuja, with grim satisfaction, „is a Viper.“ She shrugged when Nico gaped at her. Vipers were Indy enforcer ships, meant to blast their way through blockades or provide the firepower for fast raids on Corps outposts. What was one doing shooting at Nico's Pod? „Hey, good news is there's only one. Other one must have busted up in the thicket. Ha!“

Nico grasped the console with both hands. She could feel tears in her eyes, and blinked furiously to clear them. She wasn't going to let Madhuja see her crying like a baby miner on her first rock. „You brought Vipers here? You're going to get me killed!“ A thought struck her. „Turn the comm array back on and we can signal the Outpost for help.“

„Nah,“ said Madhuja, and elbowed Nico out of the way to spin the console over to herself. „First of all, I didn't actually disable your comm. I just crashed into it. Sorry!“ She held up a hand and started talking faster to forestall Nico's outrage. One finger jabbed in the direction of the Viper; the patch of blocked starlight had grown larger on the screen. „Second, it's not like your pals at the outpost are getting here in time to save our sorry asses from that thing. And third off, the shelling is just them trying to scare us. They're not gonna blow atmo on us, though. If I'm dead I can't tell 'em where I sold that platinum lode I poached, right?“ She squinted at the screen, her tongue protruding between her teeth. „They'll force their way into the airlock. This is going down with guns, not missiles.“

„Is that supposed to make me feel better?“ Nico asked, and her voice cracked on the last word.

Madhuja looked up from the screen. Nico expected a sarcastic retort, some dire predictions about firing a sidearm in a pressurized Pod. But Madhuja's brows drew in tight together, and she asked, „You got family back on Earth, Nicola?“

Madhuja's words from earlier echoed back to Nico. She broke eye contact, glared at the screen. „You think I'm out here for my health?“

Madhuja ducked her head, huffed a laugh. „Okay, yeah, stupid question. Little sister? Brother? Got a mom and dad yet?“

„Just my mom.“ Nico dragged her arm across her eyes. „And two younger brothers. They're in high school right now.“

„Uh-huh. And Mama Ramírez wants them to grow up to be big strong Corps Bores just like Big Sis, I bet?“

Nico thought of Alex's underage drinking citation and the time Anthony had been planning to hold up a convenience store. He hadn't gotten caught, except by Mamá. Mamá hadn't told Nico, but Alex had let it slip in the vid message he'd sent at Nico's last birthday. „Probably wouldn't be the worst thing that could happen to them.“ Madhuja snorted. „What about you?“

„One sister. Just a kid still. But so smart, I mean, shit.“ Madhuja's shoulders pulled back, stretched wide under the weight of the pride they carried. „I'm not stupid or anything, but her? She'll be someone, you know? Like, a rocket scientist or a doctor.“ A laugh. „Cure leukemia or some shit, I don't know.“

„Why aren't you in the Corps?“ The question burst past Nico's lips. There was health care, maybe not the kind that cured cancer, but better than no ion shield and people shooting at you all the time. „A couple of years without piercings would've killed you?“ Those were the wrong words, and Nico knew it as soon as

they'd flown out of her mouth. Back home, at the recruiting station, she'd seen a half-dozen other teachers' kids lined up. None of the school board's broods were out here carving up space rocks. But at least there'd been the option.

Madhuja's mouth twisted, but her voice was soft. „Ha, no, kutti, I know what kind of death's got my name on it.“ Madhuja mimed blowing her own brains out with one finger. „Didn't even try for admission. Your guys don't send recruiters to my side of the pond, you know.“ Her voice hardened. „Besides, only a couple of years to make some money, you got to go big. The Indies are my lottery ticket, kutti—you know how expensive med school is?“

„No.“ There had never been bigger dreams on Nico's radar than a Pod, a tour of duty, a pension.

A noisy exhalation from Madhuja. She jerked her head at the screen, where Nico could now make out some of the features of the approaching Viper in the dim starlight, the cold brightness of the so-distant sun. „Not long now. Listen, kutti, you stash yourself in storage, okay? It's me they're after, right, and you didn't nick anything—“ Nico palmed her handgun again. „And you're not even armed. So, you go be a good little turtle, all right?“

Madhuja added a shove with her free hand, but Nico didn't move. For one thing, there wasn't much power behind the one-handed shove. For another, she was paralyzed by the vapor of an idea. If she moved, it would drift away like smoke. „You do all the maintenance on your own offloader,“ she said, and Madhuja grimaced.

„What the hell, kutti, you need a mechanics lesson now?“

„No,“ said Nico, and looked back at the screen. „But if you could divert some power from, I don't know, the lights in here, maybe the life support too, do you think you could amp up the ion shield enough to fuck with their computers when they come across?“

Madhuja stared at her, lips twisting. Nico flushed. „Shut up, okay? It was just a stupid idea.“

„No,“ said Madhuja, „*you* shut up. I'm thinking.“ Her jaw worked, and she squinted into the empty space over Nico's shoulder. „They'll survive a landing at that height. Especially if they get their system back online before impact. But it'll fuck them up good, no lie.“ She slapped Nico on the shoulder. „Not bad for a Corps Bore. You gonna open up system access for me or what?“

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Nico stayed out of Madhuja's way while she worked. She could do the bare minimum to keep her Pod and Digger up and running, but Corps miners just weren't expected to have the same level of down-and-dirty engineering knowledge that kept Indies alive. Her equipment was good, and for anything short of a catastrophic breach, Outpost wasn't too far away. Of course, catastrophes happened out here sometimes too. Just not often. Madhuja's Indy lottery ticket had long odds and a high cost to play, but a big pay-off; Nico's ticket was a much surer bet that would never make her rich. Just comfortable, and safe. Safe enough.

She followed Madhuja's advice to get back into her helmet and seal up her vac suit; Madhuja did the same while waiting for her jury-rigged setup to reboot.

„What are we going to do if they survive the crash and come in guns blazing?“ Nico asked, and Madhuja grunted as she settled her spiderweb-cracked helmet onto her shoulders and activated the seal. It held atmo, and they both breathed a sigh of relief.

„Kutti, anyone ever told you that you worry too much?“

They were both standing in front of the console when the Viper came across the ion shield. A faint blue glimmer ran down the length of the Viper when it hit—a discharge of static electricity, a gift from the ion shield to the Viper’s hull. The engines stayed lit, but the controlled descent faltered. The heavier bow end of the ship, where the fuel tank lay beneath the ship’s belly, pitched downward, caught in the light gravity field afforded by the asteroid. Madhuja sucked her teeth. „Maybe we’ll get lucky and they’ll blow on impact.“

„I’ll never be able to repair the comm array if it goes up in flames,“ said Nico.

„You’ll never be able to repair it if you get a bullet between the eyes, kutti.“ The dim light of the screen waved on Madhuja’s ashy face. Nico looked away.

They both felt the shudder of impact through the floor of the Pod. There were no aftershocks though, no ex post facto explosion. Nico looked to Madhuja for instruction, but Madhuja just stared at the screen. „Fuck,“ she said, not angrily. Just tired. „Okay, kutti, hang tight. I’ll be right back.“

„What?“ Nico cried, but Madhuja had flung herself across the Pod and into the airlock. It had already contracted by the time Nico could follow her—she banged one fist on the inner door and shouted for Madhuja. But of course, there was no response; the inside of the airlock would be full of vacuum by now.

And what to do when it finished cycling? She could follow Madhuja through the lock if she had to, but what then? Was this all some elaborate set-up on the Leeches’ part, to somehow enlist Nico’s Pod in signaling a pickup? Crashing a friendly ship seemed a long way to go for a lift, but Nico had no idea what passed for common courtesy in Indy circles. She pushed off from the airlock and made her way back to the console to check out the outside video display, just in time to watch a small vac-suited figure pick its way out over the rocky landscape toward the Viper’s landing site. By the time Madhuja reached the Viper, she was hardly more than a gray speck on the stream, and Nico watched the ship’s airlock absorb her like a dark sponge.

Then nothing. Nico paced the length of the Pod—not nearly long enough to make for good pacing—while trying to think. Had Madhuja turned herself in to the Indies to spare Nico’s life? Was she with them, planning an assault against the Pod? What could there be in Nico’s little home worth selling her out for? Should Nico be planning a rescue mission, or a guerrilla attack?

She thought of her mother, and her two idiot brothers. How was she supposed to do right by them? And what would Mamá say now?

„Hey, kutti,“ chirped the short-range in Nico’s suit, making her heart skip a beat. Madhuja’s voice was out of breath, but clear as day.

„Madhuja?“ Nico fumbled to open the channel on her end. „You all right over there?“

„I’m alive, right? I’m on the Viper’s comm, not quite as shiny as your stuff, but beggars and choosers. I put a few bullets in the, what was it, Indy fuck-buckets?“ Her laugh crackled the comm channel. „Coast is clear if you care to tag along. Or if



you just want to loot their galley, I figure I owe you before I fix this thing up and take her out of here. For letting me crash at your place, you know.“

„I'll be right there,“ said Nico, and the airlock was already cycling.

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Madhuja closed the channel while Nico bounced over the rocky terrain toward the Viper—attending to the damage the ship had taken in its landing. But the airlock opened at Nico's request, and she ducked into the long low corridor that ran up the core of the ship to the cockpit at the front. A body lay just inside the airlock, a bullet hole in the side of its helmet; another was crumpled at the foot of the ladder up into the pit. Nico shuddered.

The ship had vented its atmosphere, according to the readout in her suit; she left her helmet on as she stomped down the corridor and pulled herself up the waiting ladder. „Madhuja!“ she called, pinging for an open channel, as she bounced up the last step into the dome. Madhuja was sitting in the pilot's chair, her back to Nico. She didn't react, her hands still on the console as Nico wriggled into the small space. „Hey, Madhuja, what are you looking at?“

Nico bent over Madhuja's shoulder to peek at the console. Nothing there, the screen was asleep. She looked back at Madhuja, whose face was not just ashy but icy white, whose face-plate was no longer laced with fine spider-web cracks but blown out completely.

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The comm array on the Viper was still functional, short-range and long-range alike. Nico radioed the Outpost for assistance to recover the Viper wreck and to repair her own comm array. Madhuja's body she cleared away herself, and her Digger cut a deep wide grave in the asteroid face. Far from the mineral deposits Nico was here to mine: even in death Madhuja would never be surrounded by riches.

She left the plateless helmet on the floor next to her bed. She thought she should remember, that someone should. The Pod was still quiet and dark, but sometimes the helmet whispered its guilt when Nico tried to sleep. She still didn't move it, and after a few nights it kept quiet after lights-out.

It was three days after the crash and two days before the garrison arrived from the Outpost that Nico remembered Madhuja's time in storage.

She found what she was looking for in the box of freeze-dried potatoes and peas, and beamed it over to Zio right away. It wasn't video, like she'd expected, just raw text. Not in English, nor any alphabet Nico recognized, or knew how to pronounce. But Zio translated it for her automatically: *Dear Ammi, if you're reading this I'm already dead...*

At the end, two strings of numbers. A bank account and routing number? The message didn't say. Nico wondered how much ill-gotten Indy wealth lay hidden behind those digits. She wondered how many years of college it would pay for, whether it could manage the down payment for a better house, one out in the suburbs where the air was still clean. Cleaner.

She wondered how old Madhuja's sister was now.

Not fair, she thought, not fair. Not fair to plug away on this asteroid, and the next one, and the next one while an answer like this fell through her hands. So much money. Thirty pieces of silver, or thereabouts. Good job, Nico, you deserve it for committing manslaughter.

But there was nothing fair about burial in an asteroid field, either. Only a piece of Viper wreckage to mark the place. Nothing just about suffocating fast instead of dying slow. Indy fuck-bucket, Nico thought. Damn Leech. Thief, burglar, swindler, crook.

„Zio,“ she said aloud, before she could change her mind. She turned her back on the console. „I’ve got a packet for Earth. Priority one, okay?“

