

ACROSS THE VOID

by

SK Vaughn

April, 2045 – Bournemouth, U.K.

‘You’ve gone too far.’

Eve stood at the edge of a garden swimming pond in the fading summer light. The worry lines on her young face were put there by her daredevil daughter, ten-year-old May, who was splashing in the green water wearing her favourite lemon bathing cap and matching goggles. She smiled when she saw her mum’s look of concern, a confirmation that what she was doing truly did present a risk. Eve was not an overprotective parent, but swimming the length of the murky pond, underwater the entire way, did not strike her as either fun or smart. She held up May’s towel.

‘It’s time for lunch, anyway, so please climb out of that muck and –’

‘Time me,’ May cried out, and plunged in.

‘Bugger,’ Eve said.

Under the surface, May was thrilled at the sound of her mother’s muffled exasperation, and further driven to prove she was up to the task. She kicked along energetically for what she thought was a great distance and rose to cheat a quick look at her progress. She was dismayed to find she’d only gone around a third of the way. Already feeling knackered, the cold pond water was stiffening her muscles. To make matters worse, her brief rise to the surface elicited angry calls from Eve to mind her at once and quit the pond before drowning.

*Drowning.*

From an early age, May had been an excellent swimmer, talented and strong beyond her years. The idea of dying in a world in which she felt so at home and confident, perhaps even more so than on land, had been absurd . . . until that day in the pond. With every stroke,

her limbs felt heavier and her lungs ached. She'd taken a quick gulp of air when she surfaced before, but its benefits had quickly dissipated. Somewhere in the back of her mind, her mother's warnings about swimming in the garden ponds began to resonate. The water was always cold and the weather never offered enough sun to warm it more than a few inches below the cloudy, non-reflective surface. And unlike salt water, it offered nothing in the way of buoyancy, especially for a child with very little body fat or mass. Not bad for a dip on a hot summer day, but definitely not to be confused with a swimming pool.

*But I am extraordinary, she thought, I am exceptional.*

Her inner cheerleader had been effective in motivating her before, but it all sounded hollow in her aching cold little ears. Throwing pride to the wind, she surfaced again for a breath, but found she still had the final third of the way to go to make it to the other side, a distance that seemed as vast as the Channel. She gulped air and attempted to catch her breath by treading water, but the exhaustion she felt was spreading numbness over her entire body.

May's limbs fluttered, expending their last measure of strength to keep her mouth above water, and she felt a wooden rage at her stupidity in ignoring her mother's warnings. She tried to lay eyes on Eve one last time, hoping she would understand her silent call for help in lieu of a yell for which her shivering chest held no breath. She saw nothing but the iron grey sky hinged against a dull, mocking landscape, and then she sank like a stone. Holding her last breath was all she could manage and she could feel her ability to do that slipping as well. Her body felt blue with freezing death, like a hand plunged into snow, and the darkness of the weedy depths enveloped her. Then she felt very sharp pain in her chest and heard a commanding voice call out, pulling her from the abyss.

'Breathe.'

December 25, 2067 – Hawking II Deep Space Research Vessel

May's naked body lay suspended atop hypothermic gel in the spectral silence of an intensive care isolation pod. Intubated and attached to every imaginable resuscitation device, her only sign of life was a chirping chorus of robotic noise. The pod, a bulbous cocoon with a milky-opaque skin, pulsed gently in time with her shallow breaths. Its glow was the only significant source of light in the darkened infirmary. Her gaunt face, framed by the frosted observation window, appeared dead.

Sensors detected rapid eye movement, the first light of consciousness, under a barely perceptible flutter of lashes. The pod responded, its white skin blushing, and gradually increased heat while administering neuro-stimulants. Vague flashes of light and muffled, distant sounds were all May's dulled senses could perceive. Her fingers clawed the air feebly as a galaxy of neurons fired throughout her sluggish brain. Her skin flushed under a thin layer of sweat. Every bone in her body hummed with agony and her blood felt like it was boiling through her veins.

Despite her rapidly rising vitals, May struggled to grasp lucidity through a seemingly impenetrable mental fog. She desperately needed a shove or risk death by asphyxiation from the ventilator tube as the pod's life support systems cycled down. It came with a blast of holiday music that erupted over the ship's PA, followed by a canned greeting festively bellowed in multiple languages. With the piercing swell of a child choir singing 'Oh Holy Night,' May's weakened kidneys released all the epinephrine they could spare. The effect was similar to jump-starting a car that had been sitting for weeks in subfreezing temperatures. Her autonomic nervous system quickly followed suit, stimulating her muscles into a violent

shiver to warm up her core. As fragmented awareness sputtered across her mind, the choir hit its shrill crescendo and May opened her eyes.

‘Patient revived. Deactivating isolation pod.’

The calm female voice of the ship’s AI rose over the fading sounds of the machines cycling down. May’s respirator slowed to a stop with a weary sigh. The top of the pod slid open and condensation from the inside walls ran out onto the floor. Completely disoriented, unable to focus her vision, and barely able to move her weakened limbs, she panicked. Her screams couldn’t escape the ventilator and feeding tubes, which were making her gag forcefully. She clutched them with her slowly thawing fingers and fought back the simultaneous urges to cough and retch as she pulled them out.

When they were finally clear, she started to sink into the hypothermic gel, which had become warm and viscous. It crept up onto her chest and circled around her neck, threatening to suffocate her. An electric shock of panic sent waves of painful spasms through her muscles and set her skin on fire with pins and needles. The stinking gel slithered up to her chin, and May lurched and rolled to one side. The pod rocked with her and toppled over. When it hit the floor, she was violently ejected, sliding and thrashing across the room, her IV needles ripping out of her skin. She rolled into something that felt like a wall and laid there in the foetal position, retching watery vomit tinged with blood.

May’s mind was a broken hive, swarming with questions. What she could see in the dark, through her semi-blurred vision, was nondescript. She knew she was in hospital, but where? She had no recollection of being hospitalized or even sick. But she felt very sick, as if she might be dying. Panic coiled around her and constricted, stealing her breath. She wanted to sleep, the whisper of death coaxing her to simply close her eyes and release her grip on life. It was compelling to the point of seduction, but she somehow knew it would prove

lethal. She could feel it. Her hands reached blindly for anything solid to hold as the room spun sickeningly. With the clumsy squirming of a new-born, she began to crawl.

The counter along the wall was almost close enough to touch, so May zeroed in on it, clawing at the floor and shuffling her rubbery feet. Her knuckles rapped up against one of the cool metal storage cupboards and a weak current of relief gave her the confidence to press on. Up onto one elbow, then the next, using all of her strength to push, she found herself on her hands and knees, her weak, quivering muscles barely supporting her frame. She had no idea what to do next, so she waited there until a decisive thought crossed her mind.

*Water.*

Her tongue was so dry, it kept sticking to the roof of her mouth, which still tasted of blood. *Dehydration.* That was the name for what she was feeling. She'd felt it somewhere before, several times. *Low blood pressure.* That caused the dizziness and feeling of weakness.

*Move.*

Her mind was shaking off the cobwebs, bringing the world into soft focus. At the top of the counter next to her was a medical exam station with a scrub sink three feet off the ground. The thought of standing was ludicrous, but she reached up and grabbed the edge of the counter and pulled herself up to one knee, wincing at what felt like hot knives in every joint and muscle. Transferring power back and forth from legs to arms, allowing one to rest while the other worked, she managed to get into a squatting position. That small victory gave her the confidence to persevere. She pulled herself up high enough to throw her other hand into the sink and grasp the faucet. With all her might, she pushed with her legs and pulled with her arms until she was able to stand.

Staring into the metal sink, May smiled proudly. Her lips cracked and bled, but she didn't care because water trickled out when she held her hands over the faucet. She bent over and let it run over her mouth, swallowing every drop she could catch. It tasted so good, she

would have cried if she'd had the tears to spare. After a few more long drinks, the water sparked her light of survival. Her vision became much clearer, as did her mind. An emergency torch was cradled in the wall behind the sink. She pulled it out and switched on the dim flickering beam, cautiously surveying her surroundings.

*What the hell happened here?*

The infirmary was in complete disarray, the contents of its drawers, cabinets and sealed vaults strewn about, seemingly torn from their housings by the hands of desperation. *Desperate for what?* Gurneys were stained and stripped. May thought it looked like warzone triage. *How do I know what that looks like?* She attempted to deduce causes, but the glaring deficiencies in her memory and cognition induced a bristling anxiety she was determined to avoid. She told herself to focus on getting her body back to some semblance of normalcy before attempting to do the same with her mind.

'Keep it simple.'

Her whisper of a voice sounded hoarse and foreign, but she was pleased to hear it. And she agreed with the sentiment. Keep it simple. She grabbed up a gown from the floor and slipped that over her head, enjoying its immediate warmth. The water had been a godsend, but she felt the weakness and dull headache of dehydration creeping up again. Her torch beam passed over a cabinet with IV bags behind the glass. That was what she needed. A massive infusion of fluid to replenish what was left of her. Only ten paces away. She shuffled sideways, careful to maintain her grip on the counter so she wouldn't stumble on debris.

When she reached the cabinet, it was locked. Trying to recall a pass code was a torture she refused to put herself through. As she looked around for something to bash what she was sure was bulletproof glass, she saw hand-shaped scanner next to the keypad. She laid down her palm. A small screen next to the hand scanner flickered and displayed:

Commander Maryam Knox, Stephen Hawking II Research Vessel



‘Hello Commander Knox,’ the AI said cheerfully.

‘What?’ May said, startled.

‘Hello Commander Knox.’

‘I’m . . . I’ve just woken up and . . . what did you call me?’

‘Commander Knox.’

‘Commander?’

‘I don’t understand the question.’

The fear May had felt flowering was now terror in full bloom.

‘I’m sorry. I can’t . . . remember. My memory. I’ve been very ill, I think. I’m weak and need fluids . . . and food. Will you please help me?’

‘Of course. What is your illness? Currently, I am unable to access the ship’s network to review your medical files.’

‘I don’t know,’ May said sharply, punishing her tender vocal chords.

‘I’m sorry to upset you. There is a rapid scan unit just behind you. With that I can help assess your condition.’

May turned and pulled the scan unit cart over to her.

‘Exhale into the pulmonary tube and place your finger on the blood test pad.’

May breathed into the tube and fell into a coughing fit. The test pad pricked her tender finger and she yelped from the pain.

‘I am not detecting any known pathogens,’ the AI reported. However, you are severely dehydrated, malnourished, and your lung functions are well below normal.’

‘You’re a genius,’ May said sarcastically.

‘Thank you. We will begin intravenous therapy immediately.’

Guided by the AI, May pulled a vitamin rich electrolyte hydration bag and steri-line pack from the cabinet, along with two epinephrine pens. She slowly transferred these items to

an empty gurney and the AI instructed her to administer the epinephrine pens first before lying down to receive the IV bag. Pulling back the sleeve on her gown, she looked for a decent vein amongst the tracks of bruised needle entry points. Her arms were dotted with strange red blotches, which she also found on her back and legs. Some had scabbed over. Perhaps they were associated with her illness? Her head ached.

‘Commander Knox, please insert the IV needle.’

‘All right, all right. Jesus.’

May grunted and found a vein that had not yet been abused on her thigh and, slowly, carefully, pushed in the IV needle. It felt like she was being impaled with a searing fire poker. Then the drip started going strong and the rush of energy that washed over her was so invigorating, she was finally able to squeeze out a few tears of joy. The icing on the cake was putting on the breathing mask and taking a deep inhale of the oxygen-rich air mixture. She instantly felt stronger and more alert.

‘I’ll give you a mild sedative to help you sleep,’ the AI said soothingly.

May shook her head.

‘No. I’m . . . afraid I won’t wake up. And I need to know what’s – ’

She yawned and laid back, out of breath.

‘It’s imperative you allow your body to rest. I will monitor your vital signs closely and wake you up with a stimulant if there are any issues. Also, the epinephrine you’ve had will prevent a deep sleep. Does that allay your fears?’

‘Yes, thank you,’ May said reluctantly.

She had no reason to trust the AI. Who was to say it had not been the cause of whatever disaster had befallen the vessel? Maybe the sedative was not going to be so mild? *But if the AI wanted you dead, you would have never gotten out of the intensive care pod. AI only became aware of you after waking.*

May shut down her internal dialogue and chalked it up to paranoia brought about by whatever affliction had beaten her into submission. Of course she felt vulnerable. But if the AI was not to be trusted, she was lost anyway. And she had no recollection of having a problem with it before all of this happened. *Before all of this happened. What was that like?* She prayed that when she woke up, she would realize it was all just a nightmare. She could joke about it with her crew. They would all have a good laugh.

As she closed her eyes, to ease her mind she concentrated on them. She could see some of their faces. They were blurry, but bits would come in and out of focus, along with partial names. A memory of them slowly assembled itself. They were together, looking at something. Their mouths moved quickly as they spoke, but May couldn't understand what they were saying. Eyes were narrow with concern, maybe even fear. Briefly, the scene sharpened. The crew were looking at May, peering down as if she were on the floor. Hands probed, feeling her neck for a pulse. A man moved in closer and listened to her breathing. Jon? Had she stopped breathing? They were shouting 'Commander Knox,' clapping their hands in front of her face, shining a light in her eyes. They were trying to revive her.

‘Commander Knox?’ the AI called out.

May woke back in the infirmary with a start. The scene from her dream lingered. *I was dying. My crew was trying to revive me. My crew.* She tried to hold onto the memory of their faces, but they kept slipping out of her grasp. *I was dying.*

‘How was your rest?’

‘What? Fine.’

‘Do you feel better?’

‘A little. Stronger.’

‘I’m glad to hear it. Please remove your IV needle and dispose of it in the proper receptacle.’

May slowly drew the needle out from under her thin, tender skin and felt strong enough to walk it to the medical waste bin. ‘Silent Night’ was piping through the PA – some sort of poly-lingual falsetto pop version sung by what she pictured was a chorus of eunuchs in red turtlenecks. All was not calm and all was sure as hell not bright.

‘Could you please shut that horrible music off?’

‘Yes.’

When the music stopped, May could think a little more clearly, but more questions arose, demanding her attention. She fought to clear the cobwebs. *I am Commander Maryam Knox. Hawking II Research Vessel. NASA.* Where was Mission Control? Why weren’t they helping? How could they have let this happen? What is *this*? She tried to recall what happened, but her memory was like a television with intermittent signal cutting through static. Random fragments danced mockingly on the tip of her tongue, just out of reach.

‘I was dying . . .’

‘Please repeat,’ the AI said.

‘I’m trying to remember. But my head . . . things are foggy.’

‘Are you experiencing memory loss?’

‘I can see bits, fragments of things, peoples’ faces. I can’t put it all together. I can’t remember. God, what has happened to me?’

‘Are you able to recall long-term memories, such as where you were born, the names of your parents, and where you were educated?’

May reached into the past and found it refreshingly accessible. She wanted to run through as much as possible for fear she might lose it.

‘I was born in England. Hometown, Bournemouth. My mother and father, Eve and . . . Wesley. Both pilots, now deceased. My father passed when I was very young. He was a Royal Marine. Killed in action. I remember pictures of him in uniform . . . holding me as a baby . . . his brilliant blue eyes and white-blond hair, brushed back . . . he always looked so razor sharp. Mum raised me. She was an RAF pilot. The only black woman in her cadet class to make Wing Commander. Very strict. More of a drill sergeant than a mum. But she taught me to fly . . . I have no siblings. Prepped at Duke of York Academy. Royal Air Force College at Cranwell. Officer training. Then test pilot programme, space programme. My husband is Dr. Stephen Knox – ’

May stopped short. She felt an ache of sadness mentioning Stephen, but had no idea why. In that moment she realized there was something about their marriage, something wrong, lurking in the edge of the shadows like a restless spirit. She could barely bring herself to acknowledge it, let alone mention it to the AI.

‘All of that feels solid,’ she marched on, ‘like it happened yesterday.’

‘What about your training and duties as Commander?’ the AI said.

‘A bit murky when I first woke up, but now most of it feels readily accessible, like instinct or muscle memory.’

‘Do you remember falling ill or being intubated?’

‘No, that’s the thing. I have no recollection of any of that. And other, more recent memories are spotty, a lot more fragmented.’

‘I am not able to formally diagnose you without a full neuro panel, but based on the fact that you are having the most difficulty recalling short-term memories, versus long-term, you may be experiencing a form of Retrograde Amnesia.’

‘Amnesia?’ May scoffed. ‘I thought people only had that in shite B movies.’

‘It is quite common in cases of traumatic brain injury, encephalitis caused by infection, and exposure to large doses of anaesthetic or sedative medications – ’

‘In my case, that may be all of the above,’ May lamented. ‘Is it permanent?’

‘I am unable to find any predictor models for recovery. It appears that is determined on a case by case basis.’

‘What about treatment? Are there drugs that can help?’

‘No, Retrograde Amnesia patients are usually treated using occupational therapy and psychotherapy techniques that use cues to stimulate memory recovery over time.’

‘Over time,’ May repeated.

‘That is correct. Depending on the patient, that process can take as long as – ’

‘I think I’ve heard enough for now, thank you.’

‘You’re welcome.’

May thought about the mission. The further back in time she went, the more clarity. She recalled the launch and a good deal of the journey to . . . Europa. But that’s when things began to fracture – reaching orbit, the planetary expedition. The pieces became smaller and more disassociated on the return journey, when she had somehow become ill.

‘Would you like me to run some more tests to assess the problem?’

‘Later,’ May snapped, her mind rubbery and stomach growling angrily. ‘I’m dizzy and starving, my head is aching, and I’m about to start crying. I hate bloody crying.’

‘Your blood sugar may have dropped below normal. There are glucose tabs in the compartment near where you found the IV bags.’

May ate as many of the tabs as she could fit in her mouth. They were sickeningly sweet, but dissolved quickly and made her feel more focused. They also reduced her headache to a dull, distant throb.

‘That’s better, thanks. Onto the galley.’

May realized she wasn’t entirely sure how to get to the galley.

‘Eh, can you guide me there?’

‘Please place your palm on the wall screen and login to the command console. I will provide a highlighted route on the vessel map.’

May placed her hand on the wall. The wide, wrapping screen came to life in vibrant splinters and the NASA logo appeared, followed by a dossier photo of May in a NASA flight suit with her name and title. Her image took her breath away. The woman in the photo was happy and healthy, with radiant brown skin. Her mouth was slightly curled in the beginning of an ironic grin that sparked brilliant eyes possessing all that they surveyed, like the subject of a painting whose gaze one cannot escape. She examined her reflection on the screen to make sure she was looking at the same person. The resemblance was there, albeit painfully vague. Everything about her now looked sickly. Her once closely cropped hair, with subtle gold highlights on the edges of her curls, was now matted and dull, and her skin had gone pallid. The grief she felt for her lost self – not just what she’d looked like, but what she’d what she’d known and who she had been – brought on bitter tears.

‘Is everything all right?’ the AI asked.

May couldn't answer. Every word became a lump in her throat. It was imperative she do something, anything, to improve her hideous appearance. She tore open the staff supply closet and traded her filthy gown for fresh surgical scrubs. Booties warmed her freezing feet. After sucking down some nutri-gel packs in the closet, she scrubbed her face with soap and warm water. Onto the hair, which was matted beyond repair. She had no other choice but to shave it down to stubble with surgical shears. When she was finished, she looked in the mirror. Some of the colour had returned to her skin and her eyes were a bit brighter.

*There, now you look like a proper corpse,* she thought, managing a smile.