

Under a Dying Star

by Michael C. Daconta

- John -

I raised my cup to my compatriots that stretched before me in a sea of outstretched arms. Two hundred thousand people on the fields of Densmore under the hazy skies of our dying Sun. Two hundred thousand of the strongest survivors of a frigid decade as we watched the dark blotches infest and spread across our once vibrant source of heat and light. With me were my four loved ones, each having bonded with me through the trials in these long cold years. All colleagues in the Lindenhall University Astronomy department brought together under special assignment from the government. With my drink aloft, I gazed deeply into each face and remembered ...

- Elena -

Elena was a tireless research assistant who stood beside me the night we first discovered a new sun spot marring her brilliance. One year later, the dark blotch had expanded by twenty percent and the entire world stood up and noticed. The university seemed to slow to a crawl – students shuffling through the day without expression. Our lab had just received a special dispensation to calculate the rate of decay and select a new solar system for our race to inhabit. An armada of space crafts was being assembled by both the government and large multi-national corporations. I convened our research staff and suggested we celebrate this honor bestowed upon us. To my shock and dismay, Elena refused. Later, after the groups muted rebound for happy-hour drinks at Bartleby's. I cornered Elena at her desk.

“What is wrong?”

A dark red curl slipped over her brow as she shrugged. She would not meet my gaze.

“Please, tell me.” I gently covered her petite hand.

Her eyes were dull and her voice listless, “I want to be alone”.

“Ok, but tonight we should celebrate. We should celebrate together – as a couple.”

“I need to be alone for awhile – maybe a long while. And ...”

“No ...” he quickly cupped her hand and begged, “Do not leave the lab. Stay with our work. Lose yourself in the work. It is all we have left...”

Elena did leave for six months and then returned. I never mentioned her leaving and we returned to our routine. And the work did sustain us – for a while.

- Adam -

Adam was the youngest researcher on our team. He was also a brilliant mathematician with a side interest in Astronomy. His work hours became erratic in the third year of our research. I awoke soaked in sweat in the middle of the night in a mild panic. I had dreamed of flames engulfing the planet, the University burning as our Sun

went Supernova. My lab windows shattered, the curtains blazed and our staff flailing about as they burned. I quickly drove to the university, desperately needing to see the lab. To my horror, flames burst from the lab windows just as they had in my dream. In fact, the radio announced scores of fires ablaze throughout the city. I stumbled out of my car in front of the lab just as Adam burst out of the front door. He shrank back in horror as we faced each other. Scrawled in graffiti across the front of the building was the message, “BURN BABY, BURN!!!” Adam sprinted off towards the parking lot. I intercepted him and tackled him about the waist. We tumbled down together and he began to curse me. Not giving up I grabbed his jacket and screamed, “Adam, what are you doing? How could you destroy our work!”

Adam cackled and spat out his words, “You are a fool! I hate you and I hate this whole stinking, ruined world!! I hate it! I hate it!! I HATE IT!!!”

Adam swung a fist at me which crashed into my mouth, splitting open my lip. As blood ran over my chin, I gripped harder and looked at him.

He swung and hit me again.

I said softly, “Don’t go.”

He hit me again and again. I held on until he stopped. Bleeding and bruised, I whispered, “I hate it too - but I will still be here tomorrow.”

And so was Adam. We moved our lab to another part of the university even as the waves of rioting and burning swept across every industrialized nation on the planet. The planet raged and grieved in a seesaw-fashion for three harrowing years. Through it, amidst the sirens and warnings, Adam feverishly scrawled, calculated and theorized scrawling row after row of equations. The team attempted to keep up with him through long discussions and probing questions but was consistently outmatched as his brilliance burned bright.

- Lawrence -

Lawrence Hannover was our most senior research assistant and he never let us forget that. He toddled in each day puffing his meerschaum pipe even though smoking in the building had been banned for over twenty years. He would loudly assert that he worked here before that rule was in place so his habit was grandfathered in. Lawrence asked me to speak with him as he took a smoke break. He hobbled a bit as he carefully descended each step to the courtyard. I took his elbow and steadied him as he went. The stairs and courtyard were covered with a dusting of powdery snow despite this being mid-July. The weather system had become increasingly erratic. In the courtyard, Lawrence turned to me as he fumbled with his pipe, “Bad news, John. System XXVI is also a bust – zero chance of water.”

“Yes, I heard.”

His pipe clattered to the yard and I retrieved it for him.

“Very bad news, John. Very bad.”

“There is always XXVII.”

I noticed his hands trembling as he attempted to refill his pipe.

“Very, very bad news,” he mumbled.

“It is all right. I will break the news to them.”

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Lawrence gave up and stuffed his pipe back into his sweater and began in a shrill voice, “please don’t tell them the truth... Tell them we need more time.”

I drew silent. He continued, “I will work harder. I’ll even pull double shifts! I just want more time!”

I patted his back and said, “let’s talk about it over lunch. I am buying.”

Before we turned back, he blurted out, “I want more time!”

“I understand.”

We talked for two hours at lunch and many nights over the next six weeks before we agreed that we would not ask the commission for more time.

- Jimmy -

I had not really been afraid until my favorite apprentice and protégé collapsed in the lab in the spring of our ninth year. James Morgan, “Jimmy” to his friends, slumped over his celestial charts before spilling to the floor. His face was gaunt and pale. Elena screamed and ran to him. I dialed 911 and we rushed him to the hospital. In the ambulance, the paramedics showed us the needle tracks riddled across both of his arms. Elena and I hugged and cried. We blamed ourselves for not seeing the signs that were so obvious now. Suddenly, the paramedic gasped and turned away.

Jimmy’s undershirt was stained with a bloody, circular imprint.

Elena buried her head in my shoulder.

The ruddy-faced paramedic regained his composure and cut off Jimmy’s tee-shirt.

I lowered my head as a wave of sorrow crashed over me. My Jimmy... How have I failed you?

Carved into his chest was our dying sun. Scabs, scars and dried blood twisted within the large circle that covered his entire chest. I knew each gouged, bloody hole because they precisely mirrored the spots of our darkening sun. Our newest find last month still bled in the upper right corner of his personal, failed sun. His right nipple had been torn off. I looked away as Elena’s tears soaked my shirt.

Elena and I visited Jimmy every day in the hospital for a month. Jimmy recovered quickly with the methadone treatments. I never saw Elena so alive or so wonderful as she was with him. At nights they even re-read his favorite books together. I engaged Jimmy back into our work. Together, we cared for him. Together, we again cared for each other. On the weekend before Jimmy could return to the lab, we secretly married in St. John’s Parish where she grew up.

We took Jimmy to our new quarters adjacent to the lab. As our deadline approached, I convinced the commission to allow us to set up twenty-four hour operations by allowing us to live together in the University. Every member of the team agreed and they all joined in with Jimmy’s rehabilitation. Jimmy became our symbolic fire around which we gathered and joined hands.

We worked in the lab, we shared chores, and I even occasionally cajoled them into games which they thoroughly enjoyed despite their initial protests.

At the dawn of our tenth year, as the size of our report increased we began to formulate a plan. A plan that would keep us together.

However, this plan was one that the commission did not know of and would not approve...

- John -

And now as I raised my cup, our plan was ready to be executed. Before us was the 752 page report which we burned one sheet at a time. The commission never saw the report – instead we sent it to the press with an executive summary that began:

“It grieves us to report that our research, though exhaustive, has concluded with no suitable solar system within reach of our current technology. We analyzed every known solar system with the possibility of water. We calculated our traveling capability given even marginal technologies that could be further developed on the journey. We tried every combination of known variables on the closest systems to increase the odds of our survival. In the end, we are absolutely certain that all launch attempts will result in horrific deep space failures.

We also chose not to issue the full report to the international solar commission due to clear prior signals that a negative report should be delayed as long as possible. We cannot condone the extension of our research for the sake of pacifying the public. We have more faith than that. So, now we leave you to the joys of your long goodbyes and the hope that we may somehow, somewhere, someday meet again.”

It was time to complete the plan. The drink we raised was poison hemlock and our plan was to finish our research together. We did not want to go as stragglers. We did not want to go alone in fear. But most importantly, we felt this necessary for our conclusions to be regarded as truth – if not to the commission, then to the masses.

So, I looked one last time at my comrades and said, “I ask you to follow me one last time – to the brink – to the brink of ... solidarity, of tenderness, of commitment and family.

I love you all.”

I drank the poison.

They drank with me.

We hugged each other in our own constellation, our own solar system which generated its own light and its own warmth. Our work was finished... together.

- The End -