

Too Shrewd for Dreams

By Friday

The orb's beauty went unnoticed by Climan. There was work to be done.

The vulture circled it, examining every side as the gravity tube held it in suspension. The sphere appeared to be made of a green gelatin-like substance, with the occasional black fault running through it from core to surface. All faults converged at the center, a single black dot.

Climan was the captain of the *Silver Key*, a salvage vessel. Military wrecks, asteroid mining station explosions, the occasional civilian wreck. Anything floating in the void, Climan wanted. The highest price went for bodies, of course. Payment for closure.

This sphere was unlike anything Climan had ever seen. The crew found it while drift-scanning their destination, Thulcu nebula for a reported military wreck—enough reward to keep the ship floating another few years, money desperately needed. Fifteen other salvagers already there, drifting, and all had missed it. The *Silver Key* would have too, if not for Reamely. The naked mole rat heard it thunk the hull (“Like someone tapped the ship on the shoulder!”) and insisted they take a visual look around with the outside cameras. Anyone else Climan would have told to shut up. But the mole rat's keen ears, lab-grown for mining, could hear a conversation across the decent-sized ship, and Climan reluctantly allowed it. It didn't disrupt the radar search, after all.

Radar showed nothing. Sharp eyes found a green sphere in the black void.

At first Climan appraised it as a jewel, possibly an emerald. It had the consistency, the color. He figured an asteroid had blown up (mining accident, ship-to-rock collision, rock-to-rock,

it was easy to name the possibilities off the top of his head) and the gem, encased inside, had been sent hurtling into space.

Now Climan was certain it wasn't. The orb rippled.

The first few times, Climan dismissed it as a trick of the light, an illusion created by his tired eyes. But the ripples had become unmistakably visible now. The warmth of the ship was thawing it. No longer like a gem, now more of a jelly.

That was the main reason Climan was alone in the room with it. His crew, the cowards, made excuses when they noticed it too. If he had Reamely's hearing, he knew he'd probably hear them plotting to mutiny, to eject the salvage without his consent. "Technical difficulty," they'd say. That's what they always said.

All the screws missing from the captain's chair? Climan's tail feathers still hadn't recovered, several broken until a new molt. Technical difficulties, the crew had said. Couldn't fix it on their low budget, they'd said.

He'd shown them. No hot water? Technical difficulties.

It had escalated.

The vulture's computer missing a hard drive?

Technical difficulties.

Crew quarters smelling of noxious jet fuel?

Technical difficulties.

Strained as the tension was, the find had reinvigorated them—an emerald the size of a crew member? Money healed all woes.

And now they were likely planning to blow it out the airlock, and maybe Climan as well.

Technical difficulties, he was sure the report would say.

The sphere rippled like it'd been hit with a laser bolt. The violence of the movement snapped Climan's attention away from his predicament. Until now, the ripples could have been anything: an air current, a slight miscalibration in the gravity inside the tube, possibly just the natural at-rest state of the substance—super-cooled water climbed upwards, after all, everyone knew that. Who was the captain of a scrap ship to say what was weird?

But this, no, this was dangerous. Too much energy in it. The substance looked like it might blow up, vibrating so much the edges blurred.

It was enough to make Climan decide the sphere should be ejected. He walked as quickly as he could to the intercom. He wasn't going to abandon the sphere, of course, just tow it outside since it was stable in the cold vacuum of space.

He never made it to the button. The ship disappeared.

Climan stood alone in space.

All around him, stars glittered in the infinite black. The Thulcu to his right nebula spiraled purple, its tentacles reaching in every direction. He could see it, *see it*, the three-dimensionality of it even in its impossible vastness. He could feel how tiny he was. A forever walk away from the nearest arm. So tiny they could search for his body for millennia in it and never come close. Encroaching, cold, numbness.

Behind him, the sphere was no longer a sphere. Instead, an enormous beast that seemed as large as the nebula itself hovered, thin stringy tentacles covering its face. Its head was all Climan could see, it was so gargantuan. So large the beast was that the stringers in its tentacles dwarfed Climan, the cells of its being large enough to hold the vulture and more. Its eye, red with three black concentric circles, looked towards the distant scattering of space dust.

For uncountable aeons, Climan floated, shock removing all sense of time.

Then the eye snapped down, staring upon him.

And I am just born, it boomed.

The crew found Climan curled on the floor, babbling. His words made no sense. “Savior, time, stars, birth, death, end, doom!”

Reamely shrugged at the rest of the crew. “Out the airlock?”

“With which one?” a weasel asked.

“Both, why not,” the mole rat replied. “Any objections?”

No heads moved, no words were spoken.

“Then get him there. If anyone asks—technical difficulties. He was in the airlock when the computer system went haywire, the poor bird. If only we’d been paid enough for proper maintenance.”

Several heads nodded seriously, as if in practice.

The crew left Thulcu nebula space minus one vulture and one sphere.

Too busy were they in their mutiny to notice: *The green egg no longer held its black veins and embryo!*