

Depth of Knowledge

My eyes started glazing over from looking at the CMiner 2.0 feed. It had taken an hour or so to find the patch of iron on the seafloor, and then it had taken the rest of my shift of 12 hours to pick at the rock and signal helper bots down to fetch the minerals. I looked at the time. Twenty seven hours had passed since I had watched my grandfather silently slip into the waters above us. My gaze shifted onto the empty bottle in my hand. I was on my fourth helping over the suggested amount of protein shake, and Jacoby hadn't shown up to take control yet. Shaking the bottle, I got to my feet. My joints protested the sudden change in alignment. Today was the day corporate would come down to check in on us miners. I didn't want to be at the meeting but coming from a long and well-respected line of miners, it was unavoidable, I guess. *I need another bottle*, I thought while turning toward the snack counter. No sooner had I taken a step than Jacoby walked into my compact cubicle. Jacoby yelped, and water from his cup flew all over my shirt. I gaped as the water seeped into my clothes and dripped off my hair.

"Jacoby," my voice hoarse, and struggling for a hold on my running brain.

"Laura, I'm so sorry, I didn't mean for- OH Oh - uh, do you want a napkin? I'm sorry for being late, my aunt, I- I'm sorry." I schooled my expressions while he stumbled along. *Breathe in. Breathe out.*

"It's okay. It's okay. I'll just clock out, and go to my pod, and get changed. It's no big deal," I rasped.

"I - Are - No - Okay," he said, frowning slightly at my dismissal of the situation. He could tell I wasn't talking to him. I was talking to myself-trying to calm myself down from being exposed to the water that killed my grandfather. Taking deep breaths, my feet weighed the path back home. Down the hallway, up the residential shute, and on R25 - resident 25. When I got to

the pod, memories of grandfather waiting, or the water for him boiling swarmed me, threatening to choke the filtered air out of my lungs. Tears leaked across my face. *I can't even drink water*, and anger tore through me.

"Laura? Oh my God, what- what happened?"

"Mom?" I sniffled through the tears that seemed to come from everywhere. "I - I killed grandpa, the water - it - mom, it's poison. I - I gave it without boiling because I was tired, and then he got cold, and, and-" I had fallen on the floor at some point, tears and snot fell over my already soaked shirt.

"Laura, hun, you didn't do that," she said while I stared at the ground, unable to meet her honey-warm eyes or the scrunch on her forehead. I don't know how long I stayed there or when my dad came in, but after some time my mom had pressed my outdated phone into my hand.

"What? What is this?" I wiped my nose as I looked at her face.

"I checked on what you said. You were right, hun. Before you look at it, get ready. The meeting's in 20 minutes," she smiled at me before walking out to start her shift. I sat there for another minute, reading the lab report, mom had sent me. Figures comparing regular and abnormal stared back at me. *Get ready*. I pushed off the wall and stood up. I needed to do something.

I walked out of the QuickLev with a sort of plan. There would only be three executives at the meeting today. On the other hand, there would be many more miners.

I sat down at a table. Cups full of clear distilled water were placed all over the room. It was distilled because the management wouldn't drink our desalinated water. In a couple of minutes, the meeting room was filled. Three people came in with little bots trailing them. A couple of

people took sips of their water. The discussion started on the other side of the room with the usual complaints.

“Shifts are too long.” “Not enough workers.” “No way to get off the platform.” “The Ocean is getting darker to mine in.” My attention snapped to the girl across from me. I chimed into the second of silence left behind that statement.

“And the desalinated drinking water is also getting affected,” a few heads turned my way, but the executives focused on the other girl.

“What do you mean, ‘the water is darker to mine in’? We put lights on your bots, use it,” one said, the other two chuckled. I gritted my teeth while the girl said something about it getting worse and worse. Understanding that they were not going to listen, I toggled a few commands on my phone, and pushed myself out of the confining chairs. The aged HoloPro whirred to life with a click on my phone.

“This is the report I received on the desalinated drinking water, an expense the company has taken up to keep people on this mine. The reports show an unhealthy amount of iron, basaltic matter, and other minuscule particles, which are too small to filter out through the new, compact systems we have. The mining that we are doing is disturbing the ocean's seabeds, and through natural cycles of water movement and the synthetic water currents made by the presence of our base, the minerals are floating up and around. This means it will be harder to mine for metals and, of course, process any drinking water on the base. Water that we need to survive, to live. If you want our community to continue getting precious metals and minerals from the ocean floor, you need us to be healthy,” I said. The executives looked bored, but my people were paying attention. The girl nodded her head and smiled, a silent camaraderie was forming.

“Why should we work for a company that can’t even keep us safe from this? We are only low-skilled workers, why can’t you bring in people to help? To study these areas before mining and threatening your operations and my people?” I added hoping to reach out to the people in suits, the people who were now drinking their above-world water. They won’t do anything, I realized. Each of us was a bot holding their bags. Useless by ourselves. Unless we made a team to clean our water better, to study the mining environment better. So I asked, “can we have resources for a school?” At this one of them spit their water out, laughing. I cringed at the water spilling over the floor.

"School? That's your solution? Fine. Let there be a school. Tell me, what do you plan on teaching in this," he paused and air quoted, " school of yours."

"Marine science," the girl said. I nodded my thanks and looked back at the executives.

"And some mechanical engineering, biology, and environmental science. If corporate won't do anything, we will."

"And what will you do without corporate?" One of the women on the board asked lazily.

"We don't have many other choices than to strike or leave the base. You can't strand us here and we refuse to be taken advantage of," an absentminded nod later, she stood up. The other two followed suit.

"The meeting is over, we will contact you about your proposition later."

A rippling roar went around the room, but the executives left the way they came, distanced and aloof.

Taking a shaky breath, I searched the room for the girl. The girl from earlier was still sitting in her seat. Careful of the many bodies around me, I made my way to her. I would do something.

Within a week we got our first message from corporate, approving our plans. Within a month, managers of the program were established, and select groups of 4 were assigned to be the preliminary test group by the mining community. The groups gradually got bigger till eventually, there was a wide number of specializations that helped us mine and connect more effectively. Gayatri, the girl that stood with me that day with corporate, and I became directors of the program. I asked to be exempt, I'd rather study and improve conditions. Within a few months a more improved water filtration system was developed, where we could get important nutrients and minerals right from our water. For me, it was all an effort to drink water again, but at least I knew the reason for my somewhat mad approach to mining with the community and keeping it safe at the same time. Knowledge has and would definitely take us to new depths.