

The Last Mortician

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“I just couldn’t take another one jumping out of the coffin like that,” said Owen as he sat in the tavern by the deep red sea. Until that morning, Owen had been the town’s only mortician. Now he’d go down in history as the town’s – and the planet’s – last mortician.

Besides this sleepy, seaside village and the forty-thousand acres of unique farmland that shared its island, there wasn’t much else on Samagon. On the far side of the planet, an archipelago of resorts consumed a small cluster of rocks jutting just above the waves; it was the only other part of this planet that wasn’t under water. The resorts bought up most of the rum that the plantations could churn out and, once a week, the buyers turned this little town into a bustling metropolis of booze.

Today was that day but Owen wouldn’t know it, not sitting in the windowless bar by the ocean of red. No one wanted to see the ocean anyway; just looking at it made you itch; falling in, that could kill you; the red algae took your skin right off. Owen had come to this planet to get over his fear of water but found a whole community under siege by it. Those freakish krakens didn’t help, either. No one went in the water or even on it.

Then, of course, his brother had to follow him here. Owen had wanted to get away from his childhood but Brad had to go and bring it along. Now, it sat next to him at the bar. The twins, Sara and Jane, dried dishes in unison as Owen’s brother, the town’s only doctor, came in and foolishly asked Owen about his day. The twins looked on through sympathetic, wrinkle-framed eyes as Owen told them about his first and last “vanity funeral”.

A few decades before, the virus arrived on Samagon and everyone lined up at Brad’s office to get it. The virus restored cell regeneration, halting and, to some degree, reversing the aging process. It left the twins behind the bar with the color and vitality of twenty-somethings but the wrinkles and worn hips of seventy-somethings.

They'd all heard about what it had done for people back in the more populated corners of the galaxy and everyone was anxious to get it, even Owen. Standing in line at Brad's office, Owen had a big grin on his face until that Johnny Wurser kid opened his smart mouth. "Hey, Owen," he yelled from way back in the line, "what're you going to do for a living now?"

That was the first time it hit him, people wouldn't be dying so much anymore, maybe not at all. What the hell was he going to do for a living? Spontaneously, Owen blurted, "Pet funerals!"

And so it was for almost thirty years, Owen squeaked out a living lying cats, dogs, ferrets, and the occasional tropical fish – not from this planet, of course – to rest. But then they got the shots, too, even the damn fish.

That's when he tried this new "vanity funerals" thing that the urbanized colonies were in to. Mark Twillens was the first. His son, Bobby, bought it for him. Ever since the virus, Mark had been glum and withdrawn. He was happy at first, like everyone, but then he stopped coming to family events, even the holidays. So, Bobby bought his dad the funeral, figuring that would force Mark to show up and give the family a chance to show him how much they cared.

Owen should've known better. He'd heard what people said around the caskets, especially the Twillens family, the largest and richest family on Samagon... but they wouldn't act like that, not when the decedent wasn't actually deceased... would they? But, standing in a quiet corner near the coffin as he always had for the real funerals, both human and pet, Owen heard the same old comments cloaked in ineffective whispers.

"How much do you think they paid for the casket?"

"I bet they rented it."

"I'm going to have one next week, only my coffin will be much nicer."

"...and you won't rent it."

Glancing over at Mark's boiling face, Owen had no idea what to do; he never had to calm down the dead guy before. Reluctantly, he meandered over. Standing over the furious faux-dead, Owen didn't know what to say but Bobby's dad sure did. "Why am I lying here?" asked Mark. "Why am I wasting

my time with these people? We share DNA, whoopee.” He sighed. “Did people act like this at real funerals?”

“Uh...” mumbled Owen, searching for an answer. “Well, yeah.”

“This is realistic then. Good work... I guess.”

Vanity funerals were supposed to be like a roast or an Irish wake, not this. He should’ve known not to try this with the Twillens, not the first time anyway. Embarrassed for everyone, Owen retreated to his post between the flowers. In short order, the comments continued.

“I can’t believe he couldn’t even buy a new suit for this.”

“Keep it down. He’s not dead, you know.”

“Too bad.” Those two words came with a giggle but there was nothing funny about what happened next.

“That’s enough!” announced Mark as he leapt from the casket. Instantly, the whole room fell silent. “Lying there just now,” explained Mark, “I realized I no longer have to spend the rest of my life with you people; I have to spend the rest of forever. I can’t take that. I’m leaving and I’m never coming back. Keep the damn plantation!”

As Mark stomped down the aisle, heading for the door, Bobby called out, “Dad!?”

Mark turned on his heels. “You’re coming with me,” he told Bobby. “Trust me, boy, the money ain’t worth it... it ain’t worth putting up with *them*.”

After his initial shock, Bobby looked around at the falsely horrified faces and realized that, even with something actually shocking unfolding before them, they all wore fake expressions out of sheer habit. Bobby shook his head then followed his dad out the door. That would be the last time that either of them would ever be seen on Samagon.

That was this morning, before Brad came into the bar, dropped his liver-spotted hand on Owen’s tired shoulder, and asked, “Quitting already?”

“I just couldn’t take another one jumping out of the coffin like that.”

As Brad watched the defeat deepen in Owen's eyes, that old guilt crashed over him; like so much in Owen's life, this, too, was all Brad's fault. If it weren't for Brad, Owen would be a doctor like him.

They'd started medical school together but, when Owen found that he couldn't work the micro-instruments without getting seasick, he dropped out. His equilibrium was too far out of whack because of that accident. It happened during their twin month, the one month a year that they were both the same age. They were sixteen. Back then, the brothers turned everything into a competition, hunting, fishing, school, chores, everything. It was all in fun but they both took it seriously.

They were fishing that day. Owen had one on his line, probably the biggest fish either of them would've ever caught. Brad saw it jump. While Owen stood in the boat, fighting that line, Brad laughed, "That fish'll get you before you get it!"

Owen ignored him. That fish was his. He leaned in then pulled back hard. The line snapped. Owen flipped backwards out of the boat. A log, hiding just below the black surface, whacked Owen in the head. He went down, unconscious.

Brad's heart sank as he stood there staring at the fading ripples. He dropped the knife he'd been holding and dove in. He would always remember the sound of that knife hitting the hull, as if it were the nail that stuck the memory to his skull. Three times he had to come up for air before finding Owen under a tangle of branches.

Owen hadn't been down long enough to do any permanent damage, the doctors told them, but that log had cracked his skull pretty good. After that, Owen always walked like there was an invisible rope pulling him to the left. Owen never went fishing again. And, it was all Brad's fault. He was Owen's big brother. He should've been looking out for him. Instead, he sat in the back of the boat and... If it weren't for that accident, Owen would be a doctor; instead, he had no job and who knows what he was going to do now.

So far, Owen's only plan was to get drunk enough to wipe that funeral from his memory. But, he knew what he really needed to do; it was just that *what-he-really-needed-to-do* really scared the crap out of him. He had to do it now; if he waited another week, the fear would win. All at once, Owen forced

himself to his feet. “I need to do something,” he declared then marched out into chaotic village streets beneath the clear, blue sky.

Brad sat there for a moment, stunned by the purposeful look in Owen’s eyes. He decided that didn’t like it. He jumped up and ran after Owen but today was booze day. The buyers and their floating pallets of rum filled the streets. There was no way he was going to find Owen in the middle of all of that. He headed for Owen’s house. No one was home and no one would be home.

Brad checked back every day. He asked around at the bar. He even asked that Johny Wurser kid, now forty but still a kid to them – and still a nosey smartass. But, even Johny Wurser didn’t know where Owen was.

Brad started getting scared.

A week passed without any news. Another booze day came and Brad found himself wandering through the crowded streets, heading for the bar, his mind on his missing brother. Then, there, in front of him, was a man walking like he was being pulled to the left by an invisible string. Brad ran up and grabbed Owen’s shoulder. “Where the hell have you been?”

Owen looked off, his face grim. “I’ve been figuring out what I’m going to do with the rest of my life.” Nervously chuckling, he added, “...now that there’s so much of it.”

A gaggle of arguing buyers, poured between Brad and Owen. Brad pushed his way through but Owen was gone. What the hell was that about? Whatever it was, it left a cold stone in Brad’s stomach. He headed for Owen’s house again but, just like last week, Owen never came home. Where the hell had he been? Where was he now? Brad kept trying his house and asking around the bar but no one knew where Owen was hiding.

As his worry deepened, Brad barely even noticed the big hype around the new UANs, Universal Autonomous Nanites. There was a lot of talk about what they “might” be capable of but all Brad knew for sure was that these things were supposed to be the last nanites he’d ever have to inject into anyone. Sounded like it would make his job easier and maybe more profitable, not having to order off-world

nanites all the time. But, he really didn't care about all that right now. He wanted to know where his brother was.

The Island Council bought the whole population UANs and it was Brad's job to put them in everybody's arms. The line stretched out his door and down the block to the diner on the corner. All day he fired nanites into arms and all he could think about was that it had been four booze days since he last saw Owen. Then, there he was, Owen, in line for his UANs.

Owen didn't look like Owen. He looked serene and serious all at once. Brad tried to get Owen to say what he'd been up to but Owen played it coy. Whatever he was doing, he didn't want anyone to know about it, not yet anyway. Owen walked out with his nanites, leaving Brad with another thousand arms to inject and no new answers about anything.

Six booze days later, Brad sat at the bar, hidden from the chaos of the buyers, looking glum as he waited for his rum. Jane sat a double on the bar and said, "Johny Wurser saw your brother."

Brad straightened up. "What? Where? When?"

"Down by the shore," explained Jane. "He's been hanging out in a shack west of town, just off the Compton Plantation."

Brad stared off, puzzled. "What the hell is he doing out there?"

Jane shrugged. "Go ask him?"

Brad stood up, ready to head for that shack when Johny Wurser threw open the door. As the patrons cringed under the tsunami of light and noise, Johny Wurser yelled, "Doc Smalls! Hurry! One of the buyers!"

Brad followed the kid out into the chaos. Knowing who they were, the crowd parted, clearing a path right to the accident. A hover-cube had failed, sending a pallet of rum skidding sideways, injuring dozens before landing on a buyer's leg. Eight dockworkers held the pallet up while two more drug the unconscious buyer out from under it. The pallet had crushed the leg from the knee down.

Virus or no virus, if Brad didn't act fast, this guy was going to die. He unclipped his nanites and minicomputer from his belt and left them aside. The belt was what he needed; he had to stop the bleeding

with an old-fashioned tourniquet before he could use the nanites to put the guy's leg back together. Brad slipped his belt around the thigh and scanned the crowd for the other part. "That!" he yelled, pointing at a large wrench dangling from a dockworker's tool belt, "Give me that!"

The dockworker handed it over. Brad slid it into the belt but, before he could tighten it, the leg started to re-inflate. The UANs!

For several minutes, a pocket of silence enveloped the scene as all eyes watched the slow motion phenomenon of the nanites at work. It was almost like watching a cartoon. The bleeding stopped and, gradually, the bones pulled themselves back together. The leg was red and swollen but the bleeding had stopped and the bones were whole again, mostly.

The crowd irrupted into cheers. Through the hollers and applause, Brad could hear that Johny Wurser kid call out, "So, what'll *you* do for a living now?"

Brad didn't know.

An hour later, he was still lost in a fog of disbelief when he found his brother's shack by the sea. Nearby, looking out over the red ocean beneath a blue sky stood Owen. Brad walked across the soft, red sand and stood beside him. After a few moments of silence, Brad told him about the leg, adding, "I guess we're both out of a job, now... thanks to me... in a way."

Owen gave him a sideways look. "Want to make it up to me? Take me fishing again."

"What?"

"Ever wonder why I moved to a planet that's mostly water?" asked Owen. "All these years, I was supposed to be fixing my phobia. I sure picked the wrong planet for that, huh?" He chuckled. "Come on; I'll show you what I mean."

Owen led his brother into the shack. Other than a cot shoved in the corner, the place looked like a taxidermy shop. The tables and walls were all covered in young kraken pulled from the shoals. They looked like squid, with skin as red as the sea and a lot more tentacles. A barbed spear, some as long as half a meter, jutted from their bulbous heads, while a shiny, black ring circled their heads, allowing the kraken to see in all directions at once. Some of them were preserved quite well while others had no eye-

ring, missing limbs, or cracked skin. A big one, almost three feet long, hung over the work table, its eighteen legs curled out in all directions as if it were about to lunge at you. “If I can do that with one of the adults,” said Owen, “we can have a new job together, a tourist attraction. *Come fish the mythic kraken!*”

“You want to go out on *that* water and fish for *those* things? What, do you think you’re a kid again?”

“Hell yeah! Look at me!”

Brad looked at him and realized that all the signs of aging that had slipped past the virus were slowly vanishing under the nanites. He looked at his own hands. His liver spots had faded and the skin was tightening back to where it belonged. The changes were subtle, not like what happened with that leg, but they were definitely happening.

“The week after that screwball funeral,” explained Owen, “I was over at the resorts, cutting deals. They gave me one of their old rescue boats on the condition that I can show them a preserved adult. If I can, I’ll get the boat and they’ll make me a featured attraction.” Owen put his hand on Brad’s shoulder. “I need your help with this. Nanites or virus or whatever, I don’t think I could land a big one alone. Come with me?”

A cold hand grabbed Brad by the heart. What if something happened again? Just because the nanites can reassemble a leg, doesn’t mean they can keep you from drowning... or from getting your head pulled off by a kraken... or from having your skin dissolved by that red algae. Still, the thought of being in a boat with his brother again...

Three hours later, Owen stood at the bow of a twelve foot rescue skimmer. Dozens of plastic jugs bobbed over the red waves; hooks bated with stink-blob fish dangled just below the surface. The adrenaline pulsed through his neck but Owen wasn’t going to let it win. He defiantly stared down those waves, just as he had on the beach.

Sitting in the back of the boat, Brad couldn't escape the memory of Owen falling backwards, his head hitting that log. He kept seeing that fishing line wrapped around the anchor rope as that huge fish jumped... his knife dropping from his hand...

Suddenly, one of the jugs sucked under the water. Owen grabbed the rod. He pulled back with all his might but the kraken braced its many legs against the side of the boat and pushed. Before Brad could even get out of his seat, Owen was in the water.

Owen found himself submerged in red. The algae gradually dissolved his skin but left his corneas alone. Everything burned. Right in front of him, the kraken struggled to disgorge the hook, its meter-long spear swinging wildly. Terror rippled down Owen's spine. From crown to tentacle, the thing was longer than he was tall.

As it pulled him down, Owen threw off his fear and punched the kraken right in the eye-ring. It yelped. Suddenly, something had Owen's belt. It was Brad. He was dragging Owen back to the surface, back to the boat. Owen couldn't let the kraken escape; he pulled the steel line to him and grabbed the creature by its squirming legs. It flipped and jerked but Owen wouldn't let it go.

Reaching the boat, Brad hauled Owen onto the dive platform and Owen dragged the kraken on after. The monster flopped and flailed but Owen held on. While Brad acted as a tether, Owen wrestled the monster into the boat and stabbed it right below its boney spear, killing it instantly.

Owen collapsed, his skin dissolved almost down to the fat. Brad wasn't as bad but even breathing made his skin scream. He went for the medical kit. He had to work fast before his brother went into shock. As he readied a gun full of nanites programmed for exactly this situation, Owen started laughing. Brad turned and watched as Owen's skin slowly regrew. Gradually, his own skin did the same. The UANs struck again.

"Hey," said Owen, still laughing, "when I was in the water, I stopped being afraid. Can you buy that?"

Brad wasn't laughing. "It's all my fault," he said.

Owen sat up on his elbows. "What's your fault?"

“You’re whole life, the accident, everything.” Kneeling over the loaded gun, staring at the deck, he confessed, “I cut the line. The fish was so big. I didn’t want you to win. I didn’t want... I didn’t mean to... I saw the fish jump. The line was caught on the anchor rope and I had my knife in my hand so I cut your line and that’s why you fell and hit your head. It’s all my fault.”

Owen smiled. “Didn’t you notice my walk? No more pull to the left.”

“When did that happen?”

“After you shot your way to unemployment,” said Owen, grinning at the irony. “I had to relearn how to walk straight!” Sitting up, Owen explained, “That line would’ve broken anyway. I knew it when I was pulling on it but *I* wanted to win.” He put his hand on Brad’s shoulder. “That’s been eating away at you all these years, hasn’t it?”

Brad didn’t answer.

“You know,” said Owen, “if I hadn’t dropped out of med school, I wouldn’t have been able to pull this off. They don’t teach you anything like taxidermy in med school.”

Brad couldn’t argue with that. Still, a lifetime of guilt doesn’t vanish in a moment.

“Well,” declared Owen, “unless them nanites could’ve built me gills in a hurry, you just saved my life so you’re back up to even.” He stood up and looked over their catch. “Come on; let’s see if I can do what I think I can do with this thing.”

They brought in the rest of the lines and headed for shore.

Six months later, Owen walked along the soft, red beach, the water lapping over his feet. Now that the nanites had some practice fending off the algae, it didn’t even hurt any more. Still, for tourists, the deadly danger of the red waters was worth paying a premium for.

His walk ended at the tavern by the sea. It still had three windowless walls shielding it from the madness of the buyers and the sellers, but the ocean-side wall had come down; a new patio spilled out onto the sand. Sara stood behind the bar, alone. Behind her hung the first adult kraken ever stuffed and mounted.

After a quick shot of rum, Owen smiled at Sara and said, “When will I get you out on the water, just the two of us?”

“Sorry,” explained Sara, as she tried to mask her smile, “in our old lives, we only ever dated other twins. We’re sticking with that in our new lives, too.”

“You’re in luck,” said Brad as he walked up and slapped his brother on the back. “It’s July. This month, we are twins.”

Before Sara could answer, Jane called out from the back. “She’s going!”

Sara poured them each a shot and headed to the back to have words with her sister.

Brad offered a toast, “To second chances.”

“To twins in bikinis,” countered Owen.

“Same diff’r.”

As they drank, they watched the horizon transform the sun into a brilliant ruby, spreading a scarlet sky over a darkening sea of beautiful red.