



A SHORT STORY

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By Kay L Moody

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Starlit Cruise

Twenty four hours ago, Earth was destroyed. With her home officially gone, Seren was more determined than ever to regain a piece of her past. She tiptoed around a corner and entered a long corridor lit with automatic lights. Her wavy brown hair flipped behind her since her nerves made her feet move in awkward jerks. At least no one else strolled through the corridor.

She stopped in front of a blue door with a metal placard that simply read, *Supplies*. After waving her plastic ID card over the scanner, a light blinked green. She grabbed the doorknob and took one last look through the corridor. Still empty. *Excellent*.

The lights activated the moment she stepped into the small closet. Only about eight feet by eight feet, the room

had a large brown cabinet, two short bookshelves, a filing cabinet stuffed into a corner, and two cardboard boxes sitting in the middle of the room. The closet itself had been easy enough to find. The 3D printer, on the other hand, would be more difficult. After nearly two weeks of casually questioning just the right people, Seren still wasn't sure where to start looking.

The brown cabinet on the left was useless. She already knew from her Starlit Cruise instructor that it only held the curriculum for New Earth studies. The two cardboard boxes were also a bust. One was filled to the brim with heavy books and the other had nothing more than extra uniforms and gas masks.

She checked the bookshelves and the filing cabinet, but still saw no sign of the printer. Not ready to give up, she removed every single book from the cardboard box, hoping the machine might have been hiding at the bottom.

But it wasn't.

She stacked the boring, old books back into the cardboard box. As soon as she finished, she kicked the brown cabinet in a huff. After ten minutes of searching, her only reward was a stubbed toe.

She dropped herself onto the box full of books and pushed a wisp of brown hair out of her eyes. From this new angle, she noticed an unassuming wooden box set beside the first bookshelf. The wood of the box matched

the wood of the bookshelf, making it difficult to spot without looking in just the right place.

She got to her knees and moved the box from the floor to the cardboard box where she had been sitting. She sucked in a breath and held it as she lifted off the lid.

A 3D printer sat inside staring back at her like a Christmas gift. With a grin, she lifted out the machine and set the wooden box aside. With the 3D printer arranged on the cardboard box, she unzipped the pocket on her left thigh and pulled out a nugget of melted silver.

Before she could attempt to activate the machine, the sound of footsteps froze her body in place. She tried to duck behind the cardboard box, but wasn't fast enough. Halfway down, she gave up and started standing again.

That was how a very attractive guy caught her mid-squat in a darkly lit supply closet with nothing but a 3D printer between them. He smirked and turned to leave. His leather jacket moved with his body as if molded to it. He stopped with a jerk when he realized the door had already shut behind him. Wearing his smirk like a badge, he began to clear his throat.

“What are you doing?” Seren asked him before he could say anything. She had regained some of her dignity by standing upright now. The guy still smirked, but it looked like he was trying to hide it at least. Something

about it made his eyes brighter. She hated that he was laughing at her internally, but he did look good doing it.

The guy shot a hand out and said, "I'm Vector. Pleasure to meet you."

Seren stared at his hand for a good three seconds while deciding if she should shake it. In the end, she figured why not? His grip was stronger than she expected. And warmer. Before he released her, he asked, "And you are?"

"Seren," she said, but then turned away from him. Could she trust him with her secret? Probably not, but he had already seen her with the 3D printer, so the damage was done regardless. At this point, the safest thing was probably to do her best to pretend she wasn't breaking any rules.

Or maybe she could just explain...

No. No leather jacket was going to distract her today. She had a mission and wasn't about to lose sight of it. "What are you doing here?" she asked him again, hoping it would make her look more confident.

He took a few steps until his toes bumped the cardboard box. He lifted one eyebrow at the 3D printer. "I'm playing hide and seek," he said. "What are *you* doing here?"

She sucked in her cheeks as her stomach dropped. She wasn't supposed to be using the 3D printer and he knew that. Everybody knew that. But at least he wasn't turning

her in yet. She deflected his question with one of her own. “Aren’t you a little old to play hide and seek?”

Vector snorted and slid a hand through the raven black hair on his head. “Normally I’d say yes, but I’m playing with my niece and nephew.” In an instant, his tone shifted. It sounded strange, as if he were forcing the words out. “They’re orphans. My parents took them in and it’s usually my job to keep them busy in the evenings.”

“Oh,” Seren said as a frown tugged at her lips. Their eyes met for a moment while the weight of his words hung between them.

“I don’t mind being in charge of them,” he said suddenly. “They’re good kids. They just miss their parents. To be honest, I do too. Their dad maybe have been my only brother, but he was still my favorite. His wife was amazing, too.” His tone shifted again as he leaned up against the brown cabinet behind him. “I also lost my grandparents,” he said. “And my best friend. Who have you lost?”

Her heart pulsed with heavy beats until it felt like lead in her chest. When had such a terrible question become commonplace? That was easy to answer. It started a year ago. When deadly asteroids started falling and everyone started dying.

“I lost my best friend, too,” she said, feeling a thread of connection with him through their similar loss. She

frowned. “And I lost my grandparents, but almost everyone did in the noxious gas event. I lost a few cousins, but I didn’t know them very well. I’m not sure if that makes it better or worse.”

Vector frowned as he rubbed his palm against the side of his pants. “I know what you mean.” He gave a sidelong glance to the 3D printer. A twinkle of brightness appeared in his eyes as yet another smirk formed on his lips. “So, what *are* you doing? No one is supposed to use the 3D printers without special permission. Since you’re sneaking around in a closet, I’m guessing you don’t have that permission.”

So much for her act. She moved her mouth to one side and then the other. Even as a lie started forming in her head, she swatted it away. There was no point denying it now. “I have my own material,” she said, holding up the nugget of silver. “I’m not stealing any resources. And I have pictures and everything. I just want to make some earrings.”

Her attention turned back to the machine, which unfortunately, didn’t have some big red button to activate it. After diligent searching, she did find the *ON* button on one side next to a built in keyboard and digital screen. Once it was on, she tapped the digital screen and even tried typing a command into the keyboard, but the screen stayed blank. A heavy sigh fell from her mouth.

Vector pursed his lips as if thinking. A moment later, he reached around her and ran a finger along the top of the screen. Suddenly, it blinked with the words *place photos on the tray below*.

“Thanks,” she said as she gave him a playful nudge with her shoulder. She set her photos in the right spot and soon the screen blinked *place material in start tray*.

She set the silver nugget right on top of the photos and Vector let out a puff of air. He flattened the smile forming on his lips and said, “You’re supposed to put it on the top tray.”

Heat filled her cheeks as she shook her head. She moved the silver nugget to the upper tray and said, “I’m an idiot.”

He shrugged. “You’d be surprised how often people make that mistake.”

With the nugget in place, the printer started whirring and the heat began melting the silver. “How do you know so much about 3D printers?” she asked.

He shoved his hands into the pockets of his leather jacket with eyes brighter than ever. For some reason, she gulped at the sight. It probably had something to do with the fluttering now cascading through her stomach.

“My brother made 3D printers for his job,” he said. “He gave us a bunch of different kinds throughout the years. I thought I knew a lot about them, but my niece and

nephew know even more. They're like little Mozart geniuses, but with 3D printers."

She tried to smile, but it wouldn't quite come. "How old are your niece and nephew?" she asked.

His grin grew wider as he puffed up his chest. "They're both seven. Twins. Neya is curious and loves jewelry. Jax is extremely loud, but he's sweet. They both are. Their parents died in one of the last asteroid waves less than a month ago. We thought we'd all make it on the *Starlit Cruise*, but... not quite."

Everyone knew Earth would be destroyed someday, but *someday* seemed so far away. For years, people thought it would be pollution that finally did it. Or the sun exploding. In the end, it was an asteroid. Just like with the dinosaurs. At least smaller asteroids started coming a year in advance, giving just enough time to prepare.

Eleven days earlier, ten days before the apocalyptic asteroid arrived, humanity set off in high tech spaceships headed for New Earth. In a twist of cruel irony, they called the trip the *Starlit Cruise*.

Tears welled in Seren's eyes as she thought of Vector's brother and sister in law. She wasn't exactly sure why. She had lost people too. Everyone did in the year leading up to destruction day. But maybe children losing their parents seemed worse than her own loss. She still had her

immediate family. Or maybe it was a chance to mourn the terrible ordeal all of humanity had endured in the last year.

Either way, she didn't particularly want to cry in front of a stranger. Especially not a cute one. He seemed to notice her discomfort and changed the subject. "Why are these earrings so important to you? You must have gone to a lot of trouble finding this printer."

She slithered her hand through her brown hair and averted her eyes from his gaze. "It's stupid," she said. It wasn't stupid. Not to her. But now that she had a chance to explain it out loud, it did sound stupid. Or, he would probably think so.

"Spill it," he said. "I got the printer working for you; the least I deserve is to know why you're using it."

A lie might have been a good idea, but of course, her mind went blank. She twisted the strands of her hair over and under each of her fingers. The words came out slow and heavy. Like honey. "There was this jewelry shop that was really trendy before the asteroids came. Everyone had these star earrings and I wanted them too, but my parents said I had to buy them myself. I was saving for college, so it took forever to get the money. Then, the asteroids came and college was out the window for every person on earth. It sucked, but I thought, at least I can get those earrings. At least when we go to New Earth, I'll have something to

remind me of a simpler time when all I cared about were a stupid pair of earrings.”

Seren whipped the hair around her fingers even faster as she tried to swallow the lump in her throat. She tried to blink away the ridiculous tears forming in her eyes. “Then the jewelry shop warehouse was destroyed by an asteroid and they stopped making the earrings. There were a few left, but only millionaires could get their hands on them. So...” she shrugged. “I got some pictures from online, bought a nugget of silver and...”

The words caught in her throat. It all sounded so silly now that she was saying it out loud. Even worse than she imagined. She braved a glance at Vector, but instead of his usual smirk, his face was grim. “That’s...” he started. More surprising than anything, he had to stop because he was choked up. He let out a cough and said, “I like that. Something to remember about how it used to be. I used to collect antiques, but we had to leave most of them behind. It’s a shame. Earth has such a rich history and it’s all going to be lost now. All I have left is a pair of dice from ancient Rome and a Massachusetts coin from before the Revolutionary War.”

He rolled his shoulders back and his smirk returned. “But, hey, at least we have a future. Not everyone got that, so maybe I should quit complaining about losing the

past.” He plucked the photos from the 3D printer and asked “Why did you want these earrings specifically?”

“Because of the star design. I always loved the stars,” she said as she took the photos from him. “Ever since I was a kid, I wanted to be among the stars. I never dreamed it would happen so soon.” She folded the photo in half as a frown overtook her. “I never imagined it would happen in these circumstances either.”

His smirk fell again as he looked into her eyes with a knowing nod. A minute later, the earrings plopped out onto the bottom tray. Without hesitation, he scooped them up and started to blow on them with short puffs of air. “They’re still a little hot,” he said.

Before she could thank him, the door whooshed open and Seren jumped in front of the 3D printer to block it from view. Instead of the Starlit Cruise patrol she expected, two young children jumped into the room.

“Found you!” the boy shouted as he pointed at Vector. Seren could tell right away that this must be Vector’s nephew, Jax. Loud, but sweet.

“What are those?” the girl, presumably Neyla, said as she stepped toward Vector.

In an instant, her eyes lit up with an innocent look of wonder. “Those are my mom’s earrings,” Neyla said.

“Uh,” Vector started.

“They are, they are!” came another shout from Jax.

“No—” Vector started to pull his hand away, but the young girl had already grabbed the earrings out of his hand.

“Momma said if we ever lost her, she’d find a way to us, and here she is.” Neyla handed one of the earrings to her brother. “One for you and one for me.”

For once, Jax’s voice was quiet. He nodded solemnly.

With a heavy gulp, Vector shook his head. “No, I’m so sorry—”

Cutting him off, Seren said, “Sorry, it took so long to get them to you.”

Neyla and Jax looked up at her in surprise, noticing her for the first time. Seren smiled and said, “Your mom gave me these earrings a long time ago. She said she wanted each of you to have one. And...” She dipped down until her head was level with theirs. “She said whenever you hold the earrings, you’re supposed to remember her hugging you.”

As if on command, they both shut their eyes and squeezed the earrings into the palms of their hands.

“Seren,” Vector said. “You don’t need to do that.”

She sniffed, then lifted her chin with a smile. “I forgot. I should stop clinging to the past and be grateful for the future instead.” She gave him a knowing nod, but his face was glued in a look of surprise.

“Will you play hide and seek with us?” Jax shouted.

“I can’t.” She glanced down at her watch and jumped toward the door. “I have to go. My family is expecting me in a few minutes.”

“Wait,” Vector said. He had jolted toward her, but suddenly caught himself and tried to stand in a more relaxed position. He ran his fingers through his raven black hair and took a moment to compose himself. “What about tomorrow?” He leaned forward expectantly. “You could... do you...” He cleared his throat. “Do you want to play hide and seek with us tomorrow?”

She tucked the folded photo into her pocket. With a smile she said, “I’d like that.”

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