

Closure

By:

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1,477 words excluding title

Marisa lifted the hopper cover and cleared the jam from the feeder. Closing the cover, she gave an expert hit to the lower portion of the hopper using her palm, and then pressed the "Clear" and the "Start" buttons.

The pills resumed flowing, filling each bottle with the proper number of ... What were they? Oh, yeah ... Peruvian slimming and toning herbal miracle powder; all natural, organic, and used by the ancients to prolong life and promote a healthy and youthful appearance.

Marisa pondered the fact "the ancients" life expectancy was half that of modern humans.

Half the grief, worry, and misery.

She had lived through the late stages of the middle-class boom, the beginning of its demise and the rise of powerful interest groups who did not care if everyone knew they owned Senators and Congressmen.

Opportunities dwindled, good jobs disappeared, and menial jobs became the norm. Jobs like working at this pill factory without benefits, and barely making enough to pay for food. The government took up the slack, providing all sorts of "free" benefits.

Ancients Peruvians might have called it slavery. The politically correct term was "contributing" to society.

Mark had predicted it; he had seen it coming, and it was the reason he signed up for the dangerous asteroid mining run. He knew they had no hope of beating a system designed to keep everyone in their place.

He called it "the return to feudal times." Privileged individuals enjoyed the benefits of technological wonders, medical advances, lives of incredible luxury and gave no thought to the vast majority of people struggling with little hope beyond that of survival.

The offer was tempting. Riding on a mostly automated mining spaceship, one made the run to the asteroid belt, return, and be set for life with an above-average pension, guaranteed housing and free basic medical.

Still, Mark would not have tried it without the added insurance; if the person died during the trip, their family was entitled to those same benefits. Marisa had argued, pleaded, threatened, but ultimately could not stop him from going; he was doing it for them both, but mostly for her.

Eighteen months out, on the return leg, the signals from the ship had stopped. One year later Marisa learned about the buried clause in the contract Mark had signed. Without telemetry reports indicating the ship had malfunctioned, it was assumed the pilot had either erred or intentionally sabotaged the mission; no benefits would be paid to the survivors.

That was nine years ago, and she had been single ever since. She could not accept that Mark was gone; he was the only one for her, her soul mate; no one could take his place.

Single people did not fare well. Most were unable to earn enough on their own and did not qualify for as many benefits. Marisa could not afford an apartment and now lived in one of the many group homes. Even that was difficult to manage, but it was shelter.

Marisa's focus returned to the present. A buzzing indicated an electrical malfunction and smoke was seeping from behind the control panel. She removed her gloves to pry the panel open. It came loose, and the hose used to transport the cleaning acid sprayed her face and hands; a melting wire had cut through it.

Marisa staggered backward, unable to open her eyes, and unwilling to use her hands to wipe them; like her eyes, they too were burning.

Her involuntary yell and movement caught the attention of the shift supervisor. The supervisor rushed Marisa to the washing station and helped her rinse both her eyes and hands. Finally able to see, Marisa looked at the supervisor; the woman was not happy. This was going to cut into production quotas, and also required reporting a safety occurrence.

"May I go to the restroom to wash up?" Marisa asked, wanting to soothe the lingering burning of her hands and eyes.

"Your break is not for another half hour." As she spoke, the woman motioned to the repair crew, pointing them to Marisa's machine.

"You can work at one of the auxiliary machines until then."

Marisa looked at the woman. Frustration, anger, perhaps common sense drove her reply.

"No."

Turning, Marisa walked to the restroom. When she exited, both her shift supervisor and the plant manager were waiting for her.

"To my office." The man did not wait for an answer; he just led the way.

Marisa followed, still clutching the wet paper towel, occasionally using it to wipe her eyes.

The office was stark; a desk, a table, and two chairs. The man motioned for her to sit.

Marisa shook her head. She was not going to have him tower over her. "No thanks; I sit all day."

The man sat down behind the desk. He looked at her; he was half smiling.

"Leaving your post is cause for dismissal. As you know, we have a long list of applicants waiting to take your place." The man enjoyed what little power he had, leveraging it whenever he could.

"Please," Marisa tried and almost succeeded, in keeping her voice from trembling, "I need this job. I'm a good worker and always exceed my quota. This was an accident."

"Well, you did walk away when asked to return to your station."

The man stood, and came around the desk. He was her height, but still tried towering over her. "Now, I suppose I could be persuaded to be lenient . . ." He let the word hang out there, looking at Marisa with a big grin on his face.

Marisa looked at him for a few seconds before answering. "I would rather die."

The man lost his smile and was about to say more when a growing sound encroached; sirens, the sound of helicopters, and what sounded like low-flying military jets. The man went to the window, looked out, and then ran out the office door, yelling "Stay here!" as he went.

Marisa went to the window.

A craft hovered about forty feet off the ground; a craft with strange markings. At least sixty feet long, it was big but not as big as what cast a shadow over the entire parking lot.

That craft hovered a couple of hundred feet from the ground. Marisa guessed it was at least three hundred feet long and a hundred and fifty feet wide. The large indentation on its underside matched the shape of the smaller craft, which was now extending a ramp.

The metal being that came out was at least seven feet tall. As it stepped off the ramp, a dozen police cars stopped on a semi-circle in front of it. Policemen exited the cars and using them as shields, drew and trained their weapons at the robot.

Marisa ran downstairs. She wanted to witness first hand the first human contact with an alien race, even if it was a robot. She absentmindedly thought robot overlords could not be any worse than human overlords.

People choked the exit, preferring to remain in the safety of the building. She pushed her way through, finally standing outside and no more than one hundred feet from the robot.

Regular army personnel had joined the officer's ranks. The robot did not move, staring down the barrels of a number of weapons as helicopter gunships came into position, one opposite Marisa, and one off to her side.

The robot turned to look at the closest gunship. In the process, it turned toward Marisa. It stopped and seemed to focus on her. It took a step toward her just as the bullhorn blared.

"STOP!"

The robot slowly lifted one arm. The hand, or what passed for a hand, resembled a closed fist, and as it rose, a finger-like protrusion extended. It pointed above them.

Everyone looked up. Port after port opened on the underside of the big ship, all manner of barrels protruded from the openings. Along the periphery, shutters opened, and what looked like articulated weapons dropped, each acting independently and focusing on different targets.

The robot resumed walking toward Marisa, who took an involuntary step back. It stopped a few feet from her and extended its other hand, also looking like a closed fist. Stopping a foot from her chest, the fist slowly opened.

It took a few moments for Marisa to recognize Mark's wedding ring. Her eyes swelled with tears as she reached for it. Lifting it gently from the outstretched hand, Marisa clutched it to her chest, her eyes closed in grief.

After a few moments, she opened her eyes. The robot had not moved and stood in front of her with its hand still outstretched.

Marisa looked up at its head. As she did, words scrolled across the featureless metal.

"Mark is waiting. He sent me to get you off this rock."