

# Dispatch from a Dying Solar System

Gwendolyn Taylor

First Place, BSFS Jack L. Chalker 2022 Young Writers' Contest

Richard Montgomery High School—Rockville, MD

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I wonder quite frequently why our people don't spend more time stargazing.

You'd think it would be inherent to our nature. Our ancestors were people of the sky—building telescopes, wishing on meteorites, always gazing upwards. Somewhere along the line, though, we seem to have lost that desire. My neighbors keep their necks bent and their eyes fixed on the ground. *If you don't get your hopes up, they admonish, you'll never be disappointed.*

I can't see the point in that way of thinking. My dad calls me a big dreamer. I make wishes. I keep my eyes skyward.

My mom says I get it from my family. She tells me about them on Saturday nights, when we sit together on the couch and scroll through old photo albums. She shows me Great-Grandma Patty and Great-Grandpa Eric, beaming in their spacesuits, eager to explore new worlds.

Grandma Tiff was a terraformer, making far-off planets suitable for life. Grandpa Charlie was a leading aerospace engineer. They stand with steel in their backbones and starlight in their eyes.

"They were dreamers," Mom tells me, "dreamers just like you. They spent their lifetimes trying to build their children a beautiful future, even if they'd never get to see it themselves."

I like to think the stars that I watch on clear, cloudless nights are the same ones that they wished upon all those years ago. Here on Europa, the constellations are different, but the stars, like the wishes, are the same.

*I wish to survive. I wish for a better future. I wish for us to reach the stars.*

Right now, of course, I can't see the stars. And our wishes are sounding more and more far-fetched by the minute.

\* \* \*

We're sitting in the hull of a mammoth spaceship, huddled together to protect against the cold. Tear tracks have frozen on Mom's face, mirroring the icy flint in Dad's eyes. Our neighbors, the Ibrahim-Maldonados, are sitting next to us, clinging to their shivering twin eight-year-olds and whispering prayers. A few feet away, my friend Janie Madison tries to comfort her sobbing little brother as her parents watch numbly. Emanating from three hundred other scared, freezing families, tension clouds the air like noxious gas.

We've been waiting here since yesterday night, when our scientists announced that they'd finally found a habitable planet in some distant solar system. They told us that this ship would launch us into space near light speed, saving us from our dying sun before it engulfs our poor moon. It was a pretty silly dream, really. After centuries of trying, who would believe that we'd finally found salvation just days from the end? But still, I'm a dreamer. Maybe everyone is, if they're desperate enough. So we gathered in the hull of our unlikely ark and began to wait.

The pilot announced on the intercom that we shouldn't worry, that our plan was foolproof, that we'd be ready for launch in just ten minutes.

That was eight hours ago.

What else is there to do? We keep waiting.

\* \* \*

The funny thing is, we've known this was coming for millennia. Stars, like everything else, die eventually. Of course our sun is no different.

But the luxury of time made us lazy. We had thousands of years before our dying star made problems for our native Earth, so we bickered, got distracted, watched as time drained away like water through our fingers. It was only when we were down to our last centuries that we began to make advancements, and by then, it was a desperate race against the clock. Our grandparents and great-grandparents clung to hope, flung us skyward, scattered us as far away from the slowly expanding sun as they could reach.

We didn't get very far. The Europa colony was their last-ditch effort, and we'll be burnt to a crisp by next week.

I don't have it in me to be bitter. What's the point, four days from the end of the world? Dad calls me a big dreamer. Mom calls me an optimist. Janie used to call me absolutely insane, back when we still hung out after school. But I like to think this was still worth something. We still pushed the limits of the human experience, didn't we? We built spaceships, traveled the stars, colonized planets far beyond our own. Maybe someone, someday, will find what we left behind. Maybe they'll understand what we tried to do. Maybe they'll be proud of us for dreaming.

\* \* \*

At the end of our second day in the freezing hull, the crew tells us to go home. The ship, evidently, won't be sailing through the stars. It'll remain tethered firmly to our doomed moon, as will we. Mr. Ibrahim swears as Ms. Maldonado clings to her children in shocked silence. Janie and her brother collapse into a cold, exhausted heap. My mom's eyes are glassy with ice crystals, and my dad stands stiff with cold resignation. I can tell what they're thinking: *If you don't get your hopes up, you'll never be disappointed.* For a moment, they had let themselves dream.

Failure stings all the sharper now.

One by one, we file off the spaceship and into the icy night air. Three hundred stunned, silent families cling to the suitcases they packed in a moment of beautiful delusion. The stars twinkle overhead, beautiful and desperately far away. But I still don't have it in me to be bitter. I make a wish anyway, the same wish that my parents and grandparents and great-grandparents made before me.

I wish for us to reach the stars.

If not in one way, then in another.

Then I take Mom's hand and begin to walk home. There's only four days left now. On a cosmic level, that's a blink of an eye.

\* \* \*

On the second day, Dad cooks us a big dinner. He uses the last of our freeze-dried beef, stewing it with onions and garlic and red peppers flown in from the farms on Io. We might as well enjoy the last of our food, he says, before it gets too hot and stifling for us to enjoy anything at all.

They distributed cyanide pills the other week, a painless alternative to an otherwise drawn-out death. Janie's family, I know, took them last week, crushing them into glasses of apple juice and red wine at their last dinnertime. I think the Ibrahim-Maldonados might have taken them too. I haven't heard

any noise from their apartment since we walked home together from the doomed spaceship. Mine are shoved in the back of my dresser. I'm not ready to take them yet, but I guess nobody ever is.

After dinner, we sit together on the roof with our telescope. We don't need jackets; the weather is getting warmer every day. As the sun inches closer, Europa's everlasting winter is starting to thaw. Wind doesn't bite at my cheeks when I step outside. Tears can fall unfrozen down my mother's face. I imagine that this is how spring might have felt back on Earth, back when there was still an Earth. I focus my telescope on Saturn and see that its rings are beginning to melt.

I'm starting to understand how much of a miracle every breath is. The sheer amount of human brainpower that was required to create an atmosphere on Europa is staggering. It took thousands of engineers and astronomers and stargazers and dreamers for me to sit here, breathing cool air and watching a sky full of constellations that they wouldn't even recognize.

They didn't save us. Nothing did. But I'm glad they tried, at least.

I know that there was little point in hoping for a future. The stars never meant to grant me that wish. But still, the night sky was so beautiful. I wish that I could have stayed.

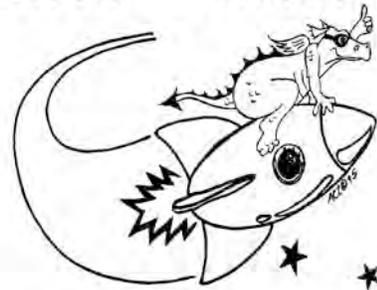


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# Hamilton: Bronze Pioneer

Roshan Rao

Second Place, BSFS Jack L. Chalker 2022 Young Writers' Contest

Friends School of Baltimore—Baltimore, MD

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“We shall begin this meeting of the Cabinet shortly. If Secretary Jefferson would like to commence, we shall; upon the issue of autonomous parts for modification of the human form. You may begin, Sir.”

Thomas Jefferson stood and cleared his throat.

“Thank you, Mr. President. I believe that the use of autonomous parts (such as arms fashioned from materials such as bronze or steel) are not a wise use of the Treasury’s money. I simply cannot advocate for us to walk among our fellow humans with precious metals in our figures. It is unnatural for us to modify ourselves such in a way that Providence frowns upon. All of you here, are good, God-fearing men like myself. None can stand against His word. Likewise, there is no substitute for human labour; there is no manner in which a metal machine can perform tasks such as those involved in the furtherance of our agriculture (which, as you all know, is the very lifeblood of the South) with the precision that a human hand, built of flesh and God-given bone, can.”

There was some nodding, some hushed whispers of agreement and disagreement. The President stood once again. “Thank you, Secretary Jefferson. Secretary Hamilton, you are permitted to submit your primary argument.”

Alexander Hamilton stood, ignoring the snickers from Jefferson’s side of the room. “Thank you, President Washington, sir.” He, too, cleared his throat and began to read from his paper.

“My fellow Cabinet members; Secretary Jefferson’s stance against the use of autonomous metal parts in manners to fit within the boundaries of our societal norms does not stem purely from his piety, or lack of impiety, but instead from his desire to preserve the system of labour which the Southern colonies use for their ‘furtherance of agriculture,’ namely, persons from the continent of Africa brought to our shores unjustly. If autonomous parts were given to the common white farmer, he would have no use for his slaves. I present to you all this case: if a white slave-holding man is given an appendage of bronze, that can be fitted with any farming tool known to man, as well as those of a human, the efficiency at which he can perform these menial tasks is increased by nearly a thousandfold.” He paused to look at each man sitting. “And not only thus, but these modifications are already working their way into our society. They are especially popular among the youth; young American ladies are having their jaw-bones replaced with sharper, more attractive golden ones; and the young men are opting for the rifle-arm: the humanoid arm that mechanically converts itself into a rifle, complete with ammunition storage and powder. An old man who has gone blind in one eye, can have his sight restored by a mechanical eye. Even a family’s dog, having lost a limb, can have it replaced and his youthful exuberance restored. I rest to you, my fellow Cabinet members, that Secretary Jefferson’s argument is once again to preserve his own self-interest in slave labor, forcing other human beings to bear the weight of the Southern economy on their backs alone. Thank you.”

The Southern side of the room began to whisper again. Thomas Jefferson sat, listening to James Madison say something quietly in his ear—a strategy to counter, perhaps—but did not hear.

Instead, he sat there, thinking. Who was this stupid, little man who dared to accuse him, the Secretary of State, of forcing slave labor? No. He was not forcing slave labor. He was simply preserving what the South stood for. Jefferson bit his lip, trying to convince himself. Yes. Just preserving the South. Keeping Virginia the way it was. And how could these New Yorkers tell him any different? Was Virginia not providing food to their colonies, anyhow? Look at him.

Look at Hamilton. Sitting there, smugly smiling. He must think he could rule the world. He wasn't even a true Americ—

The muttering and debating were hushed by the President. "We shall reconvene at the noon hour tomorrow," announced President Washington. "I will deliver my judgement then, but for the remainder of tonight, gentlemen, return to your homes; it has been a long evening and I intend to give you all some time to reflect upon tonight's events. You are all welcome to leave, and I bid you all a good night."

Outside the courthouse, the Cabinet members loitered for a good while, smoking their pipes and making casual conversation. Jefferson was the last to leave, though without the air of cordiality the others so delicately held. "Hamilton," said he, approaching Alexander Hamilton and grabbing him sharply by the collar—"you of all men should understand what this will do to the economical state of this country. I will not stand idly by and watch you destroy it under a bravado of freedom; all you seek is to control the means by which my fellow Southerners and I make our livelihoods. And good Sir, it would be within your best interest to not sit upon your throne made of bronze"—he gestured to Hamilton's left arm, a polished bronze mass of gears, wires, and pistons that mimicked the movement of humanoid muscles—"and embrace that which makes you *human*."

Hamilton smiled. "Dear fellow, your manner is most deplorable! Why, we are simply discussing amongst ourselves the new tailor who has just opened his shop just a quarter-mile south of here, in comparison to our own personal tailors. And you grasp me by my collar, accusing me of abandoning my humanity. All of us here have moved past the matter till the morrow; outside the court-house is where we convene to talk of subjects other than politics."

The other Cabinet members had gone quiet, watching the conflict. Clearly still angered, but aware of his surroundings, Jefferson let go of Hamilton's collar. "We shall see. Till morrow, indeed." He collected himself and departed.

\* \* \*

Late that evening, Alexander Hamilton lay awake in bed, staring at the bronze appendage on the nightstand. Every time he attached it to his shoulder in the morning, his nerves flared with memories. Memories of the war, of losing his human arm to a British cannonball, and being fitted for a bronze one. Memories of late nights, writing hundreds of letters and manuscripts and documents with that arm. Of holding his infant child.

Maybe this is why, he thought. Perhaps the reason he argued so vehemently for the use of these arms and limbs was for the value of the memories it stored. In addition to near-perfect craftsmanship, the most skilled artisans of the metal were able to store memories within it. Not everyone opted for it; many of the upper-class elites were content with having part of their faces replaced with gold, purely for use as a status symbol, or for resisting musket balls. Secretary Hamilton thought it important that everyone was deserving of the chance to relive their happiest and most tender moments, while also being able to reflect upon more somber memories.

Satisfied, he turned over to face his wife, already asleep, and himself fell into the moon's embrace.

\* \* \*

At the noon hour the following day, the Cabinet met once again to hear and discuss further the President's judgement. Tensions were about—each side of the room spoke in hushed tones, anxiously anticipating President Washington's final decision. Jefferson looked smug, determined as it was to win. He knew the President's Virginia beginnings would drive him to sympathise with the South. He grew up on a farm just like the ones Jefferson had in Monticello. Perhaps he'd invite Washington to Monticello, to visit the heavenly gardens, as thanks for supporting his initiative against metal limbs. Oh, he could just dream of it.

Hamilton, however, looked calm. Here he hoped that Washington would agree with him—Hamilton had visited the President that morning, convincing him as frantically as he could of the revelation about memories that he'd discovered the night before. Still, he was nervous, but also prepared to lose. Jefferson could very well convince the President otherwise. Whatever will happen will happen.

The President took his stand, once again, in front of everyone. "Thank you all for meeting here once again to receive my judgement upon the issue of artificial limbs for common use. I do not wish to create any more conflict between the two parties concerning this. As such, there will be no more discussion of this following today's session." He paused to verify that everyone understood. "Now then. My position on this matter is thus: I agree that the use of autonomous limbs should be extended towards the common people, fashioned by certain artisans that have been properly trained to fit these for integration with human bodies."

Hamilton smiled. Jefferson frowned. Murmuring broke out amongst the two sides of the room. Washington gestured with his hands to quiet the room, then continued.

"Secretary Hamilton approached me this morning and convinced me of the value these artificial limbs hold as it applies to memory. Given that, with the other numerous benefits surrounding them, I find it best to not limit the artistry and engineering that these men have woven into their webs of bronze. I myself am aware of the benefits these limbs have given us in our warfare, and believe that they may be integrated into other parts of our society. They will also open up new trade pathways with France, and, God willing, perhaps even Britain some day. I have begun to speak with our colonies in Europe and in Southern America. The world will speak of the American Empire with reverence, as they are using our artificial limbs on their own bodies and flying our American airships.

Thank you all, gentlemen, once again, and God bless this great nation."

The two secretaries shook hands with civility, and quitted the chambers presently.

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#### *First Place*

#### **"Dispatch From A Dying Solar System"**

Gwendolyn Taylor

Richard Montgomery High School—Rockville, MD

#### *Second Place*

#### **"Hamilton: Bronze Pioneer"**

Roshan Rao

Friends School of Baltimore—Baltimore, MD

#### *Third Place*

#### **"Just a Test"**

Johan Shattuck

Friends School of Baltimore—Baltimore, MD

#### *Honorable Mention*

#### **"Rebelling Metal"**

Camilla Florence Carrera

#### *Honorable Mention*

#### **"He'll Be Here for A While "**

Vincent Reynolds

#### *Honorable Mention*

#### **"Water Day "**

Allison Xu

# Just a Test

Johan Shattuck

**Third Place (Tie)**, BSFS Jack L. Chalker 2022 Young Writers' Contest

Friends School of Baltimore—Baltimore, MD

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The dense jungle air was making me sweat, so I pinched myself. I lifted my head and addressed my surroundings. The thick mud floor was covered in vines, swaying from tree to tree at ankle height. I smirked. Those fuckers are gonna try to trip me.

I continued with caution, lifting my feet high with each step so as not to catch on the vines. I knew the real dangers were still ahead; who knew what those guys had come up with this year.

Just as these thoughts were running through my head, the sound of a far off vine being crushed reached my ears. I stopped and turned. All I could see were the thick brown trunks of kapok trees and the dense green cover along the ground. I let out a deep breath and kept moving forward. After only a couple steps the sound of the vines doubled. I stopped again and this time moved in my high arching gait to the side of one of the large trees and lowered my weight. I waited patiently, my breath held and my heart rate rising. After what felt like forever I rose again, and let out a soft chuckle. What am I scared of? I loped back out and continued through the jungle, legs high and landing soft. An eerie silence accompanied me, and I sped up. The birds that had been singing when I first found myself here had ceased, and all that reached my ears were the soft crunches as my foot impacted with the ground.

After a few minutes of speed walking with no particular plan or direction, a loud crash behind me broke the silence. My head snapped to turn, and about 50 yards back in the direction from which I had come lay a thick brown tree, freshly downed. I froze with one leg raised midstep. Slowly, over the tree, clambered two hands and then a whole body. The figure propelled itself off the log and landed in a crouched position on the ground. Their head turned upwards and reached my eyes.

The person who I was facing was completely covered from head to toe in a jet black body paint. The only clothing was a small, tan loincloth that hung from their slender waist. I couldn't see their face; donned over it was the skull of a ram, complete with arcing horns. Through the eye sockets of the skull an uncomfortably bright green gaze reached me. What appeared to be human teeth were strung in a sash around their neck. In one of their hands was a very short and curved weapon, which was breathtakingly spotless and silver. Both I and the mystery figure were still for a moment, until a second person heaved themselves over the log. They were identical to the first, except a little taller and wore a boar skull instead of a ram. A silver flash came in my peripheral vision, and I turned to see three more of the figures directly to my left about the same distance away. I turned back to the log and now saw five there, all staring at me. I let myself take a long, 180 degree glance in the direction of which I came. The figures were everywhere, stepping out from behind trees in pairs or trios, all their eyes following me. None wore the same skull. My vision flicked past a giraffe, an elk, a pig, and many more I couldn't identify. In a rough estimate I would say there were about 50 in total.

I took a deep breath and reminded myself where I really was.

As of this moment I was still, my body suspended in a gelatinous liquid that was cool to the touch. I was completely naked, save for the wires that were suctioned to different parts of my forehead and the screen that covered my eyes. Outside the little shell where I lay were the test proctors, following my every move and observing what I was seeing in real time. An overexcited proctor tried to explain all the science for me as I prepared myself for the test, talking about how the jello-like substance I was submerged in was able to convert data from the software to trick my body into experiencing different environments and senses. It probably was all very interesting but I hadn't paid him any mind. The nerves to pass the exam were too great.

A data-induced fly buzzed into my hair and brought me back into the reality I was experiencing. All of the animal tribe were extremely relaxed, with questionable posture and some even leaning on nearby trees with their short swords. Their vibrant green eyes shone out from behind their masks. Even though I couldn't see any faces, I had a sense of a collective amused expression coming from them, as if I was a seal at a zoo doing particularly well at balancing a beach ball. I thought hard to recall the research I had done to prepare for the examination; I had to dig deep online to find anything, but a trustworthy source had revealed one phase: the fear test. I had no doubt that this jungle environment I was experiencing was that stage. To pass, I just needed to control my heart rate, stay calm, and avoid panic. My next move wasn't clear; I sure as hell wasn't going to turn my back to the tribe, but I wasn't going to go at them either. Sure, the test proctors admire bravery, but challenging the 50 armed animal people would just be stupidity. I once again scanned the crowd and my eyes fell on the original figure with the ram skull. Unlike the others who were all standing lazily, he had maintained his crouched position and his eyes were sharper, more fierce. His intense gaze froze me, and we stood, locked in each other's beams of vision, a heated staredown. While maintaining eye contact I regained some of the confidence I had lost, and imagined I looked intimidating holding my ground in the presence of so many. The ram must not have agreed, however, as he sprung forward out of his position and began bolting towards me. As soon as he jumped, the entirety of the crowd burst into motion, and the small bit of confidence I had gained left me as I turned to run. Even with only their first few steps I could tell they were fast, so I dipped my shoulder hard and accelerated as best I could. I took a few strong strides and began to find my rhythm, then my foot caught. The damn vines. Shit. I hit the ground hard and slid in the mud to a stop. In my fear I had forgotten to run with high steps and ended up being completely taken out by the foliage. I heard the sounds of crunching vegetation behind me and knew I was done for. I pressed my face hard into the mud and waited for the worst. I waited. And kept waiting. Nothing happened.

After a couple of minutes the adrenaline wore off and I realized my face was no longer absorbed in warm mud anymore, rather a cold hard surface. I pulled my head up and assessed my surroundings.

The humid jungle was gone. I now lay on cold, dusty concrete that was grainy and rough.

There wasn't much light but I could see the concrete extended out only a few feet further on either side of me, then bent up to form the walls and turned once again to form a roof. The whole dim hallway was the same gritty material and it had the stuffy condensed feel of an unfinished basement. I pulled myself back to my feet and tried to regain some composure and some dignity. I guess I had kept my cool just enough to pass the fear phase. The rest of the exam would be a mystery to me; I hadn't been able to scrounge up any information about the other stages.

Just a test. Just a test. Just a test.

In front of me, warm orange light glowed from underneath a wooden door. The light casually grew in intensity and then faded, and I concluded it must have been coming from a fireplace. After a few deep breaths, I felt calm enough to push forward and pull open the door.

No amount of mental training could have prepared me for what I saw. I was correct that the light was flame based, but instead of being from a fireplace, a large fire smoldered in the middle of the room and reached a height of at least five feet. The room wasn't massive, it was about the size of a living area in an average American household. However, the walls extended up for ages to the point I couldn't even see the roof. From floor up to nothingness rose stacks and stacks of books, more than I'd ever seen in a single room in my lifetime.

But that wasn't what caught my attention. Suspended by a chain that reached up into the unknown was a cage that rested approximately six feet above the open fire. The cage was iron and large, comparable to a king sized mattress. Inside the cage, with a blood-soaked rag covering her mouth and tears streaming from her eyes, was my girlfriend of a year, Lily. A bellow escaped my mouth. No, it wasn't real. I stepped forward but as I did a man emerged from the other side of the fire. He wore a sharp suit with a red tie, and a Jason-style hockey mask over his face. As he walked his sportcoat opened slightly and I saw a gun-shaped bulge protruding from an inner pocket. He was armed. I didn't even have to check to know I had no weapon on me.

"You know what I want. Speak or she dies." He stated calmly, with an accent I couldn't quite put my finger on. As he said this, the chain went slack and the cage dropped a foot closer to the fire, then snapped aggressively as the chain gained tension again. Lily let out a muffled yelp, and crawled away from the center of the cage where the iron had started to glow orange with the heat.

Just a test. Just a test. Just a test.

"I don't know what you're talking about." My voice was shaking but I was telling the truth.

"The codes! The damn codes!" The man responded, sounding aggravated.

And suddenly it all came to me clearly. Ingrained in my mind, as if it had been there forever, came a six digit combination. I knew it was important, so important I couldn't tell anyone. The information I didn't know I had 30 seconds ago now felt sacred, as if I had been entrusted to hold this secret for an entire nation.

Just a test. Just a test. Just a test.

"I don't know what you're talking about." I said again, though this time I was lying. The man simply let out a sigh, and I watched as the cage dropped another foot. I shouldn't have let myself look but I did. Lily's clothes had dark lines running across where they had been in contact with the bars, and her hands hung limply out the side of the cage. She was almost unrecognizable, with huge yellow and orange heat blisters covering every inch of exposed skin. Her eyes met mine. They were dark eyes, the color of a deep roasted coffee, and they pleaded to me without words, screamed to me without sound.

Just a test. Just a test. Just a test.

Was it? My memory was shot. All I could process was the code, and now Lily's sad dark eyes and burned skin. I hunched over and yelled. I didn't know who I was, why I was here, or where I had come from. All I knew was I loved the girl in the cage, and in my head was highly confidential information I was to share with no one.

"Are you ready to tell me?" the hockey mask demanded. I didn't respond, simply let out another scorching yell. I was full of frustration and confusion. I tried to only focus on the ground. I

heard the chain snap down again, the cage was only three feet above the fire and soon the bars would burn Lily alive.

"C6ZXW7!" I blurted. I was completely unaware I was saying it until it was leaving my mouth. I had broken down.

\* \* \*

With a gasp I shot upright out of my lying position in the shell. The wires fell off my forehead and I pushed the screen off my eyes. The gelatinous goop oozed off my naked body. In front of me stood a skinny man in an oversized lab coat, the same one who had briefed and prepared me for the test. Under his arm was a steam-pressed towel with a large Navy logo printed boldly on the white fabric. He obviously was uncomfortable with me in my new state, and he let his eyes wander over the ceiling as he addressed me.

"I'm sorry, private. You have failed the cyber torture simulation of SEAL basic training by releasing valuable intelligence to the enemy."

He awkwardly reached to pass me the towel while still averting his eyes. He sidestepped until I was within range and able to take it from him.

"Dry off, then proceed immediately to your bunk and pack your belongings for departure. The Navy wishes you luck in your future endeavors, whether that be retaking the BUDS program or another path. Studies have shown a 32% increase in success for candidates on their second try."

An excited look flooded his face when he shared the statistic, but when I didn't respond he quickly turned and shuffled off. I removed myself from the chamber and used the towel to wipe off the thick liquid. As I got dressed my mind was twirling between different emotions. The adrenaline from the simulation had yet to decrease, and the disappointment of failing began to seep over me. It had been my dream to be a SEAL since childhood, and I had failed to make that dream a reality. I didn't know what the future had in store for me. Testing again was always an option, but I didn't know if I could put myself through everything another time. I knew one thing for sure, though: as soon as I got home, I was proposing to Lily.