MELISSA

Lost time.

BY TROY STIEGLITZ

The receptionist looked up from her desk with a warm smile. “Can I have your name please?”

“Yes ma’am, my name is Captain Carter Harrison. I’m here to visit Mrs Melissa Taylor.”

He was a young man with short-cropped hair and an athletic build. He wore a decorated military uniform. He shifted his weight nervously from one foot to the other and crumpled and folded his hat between his hands.

“Oh, Mr Harrison — Melissa has been expecting you. She’s been asking the staff about you all week. Now don’t take it personally, but she’ll probably forget your visit and will be asking about you all over again tomorrow. Here’s your visitor’s identification,” she said as she handed over a white badge. “Please use the computer to check in and head down the hallway to your left. She’s in room 3417.”

He nodded, took a deep breath and started down the long antiseptic corridor. His palms were clammy and his heart was pounding as he peeked in through the open doorway of the room.

An elderly woman was lying peacefully in bed with her eyes closed. A blue and white knitted blanket was pulled up to her waist. He paused for a moment and then softly knocked three times on the metal door frame. Melissa slowly opened her eyes with a smile and whispered: “Daddy.”

“Hi, sweetie,” he said as he choked back tears and entered the room. She had aged so much since he had seen her a few months before — of course, a few months’ ship time meant that years had passed on Earth.

“How was your trip, Daddy? Did you bring me back anything?” Her eyes were sparkling, but the sentences were strained. She had never resented his absence from

her life — even into old age she had always welcomed him home with a girlish enthusiasm.

“I sure did, kiddo.” He reached into the front pocket of his jacket. “I brought you this coin from the new colony on Stratus 8 and this diamond from the mines on Archibald. The crew was able to get some time away from the ships during our refuelling stops.”

She smiled and nodded towards her dresser. Hundreds of small trinkets, stones

thesis defence and I missed your wedding ceremony...” he trailed off as his bottom lip began to tremble. He bit it and wiped back his tears with the sleeve of his itchy wool uniform. Then he gently took her wrinkled hand with his own.

“I was only supposed to work as a captain for a couple more years, but after your mother died we needed the money, sweetie — and we had just lost so many men in the First Interstellar War...” He stopped and fought back his emotion. “I couldn’t just abandon the Terran Fleet after that. I had — I *have* a duty to our planet. I know that I’ve already told you this a thousand times, sweetie.”

The captain sat and held her hand for a few more minutes in silence. He pulled the knitted blanket up to Melissa’s chest and drew the window blinds.

He knew that this was probably the last time that he would see his daughter alive. It would be nearly five years’ Earth time before

he returned from his next assignment.

“I love you, Melissa.” He gently kissed his daughter on the forehead, put on his hat and quietly left the room.

Outside he hailed one of the waiting air taxis. He paused before pressing the hatch-release button and looked to the sky. Hundreds of air cars swarmed upwards into the clouds to dock with one of the massive ferries floating above the city. His ferry would be leaving the atmosphere soon to rendezvous with his convoy of orbiting starships. He still had another 30 years of planetary service before he retired, he thought. He would lose hundreds of years of Earth time before his service was complete. Each time he returned home he would learn that loved ones had passed away and that new ones had been born. He drew a deep breath, pressed the hatch-release button and climbed inside. ■

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