

THE

# ORPHEUS LOGS





# The Orpheus Logs



## DAY ONE

Ian Irwin slurped strong coffee from a paper cup and read over the messages in his inbox.

When he'd signed on as a legal aide for Celestial Ventures, he'd been fresh out of law school and still believed he could make a difference. He thought the job would lead to a career of exciting cases and big paychecks. Now here he was, four years later, stuck in a dingy, cramped, windowless corner of the corporation's basement offices in San Francisco, doing work that technically could have been automated away years ago. Hell, he hadn't even made it out to the Lunar offices yet.

He took another sip of the bitter liquid and clicked the message marked "urgent." Whatever spark of enthusiasm he might have had for the day evaporated as he read the note. Some poor surveyor - a freelance contractor named Victor Strahm, had gone out to the asteroid belt over a year ago and hadn't returned. Attempts to locate his missing spacecraft, a small scout ship registered under the moniker "Orpheus," had failed to turn up anything. Now, the mission and all data around it had finally been released to the legal department for review. That meant it was up to Ian to trawl through potentially hundreds of hours of log messages in an attempt to deduce what went wrong. To make matters worse, someone had dropped the ball on this one, leaving him only five days to complete the analysis before the government mandated reporting deadline.

Ian groaned. Most mission logs were reviewed and cataloged by the corporate AI, but anything flagged as problematic; death, bribery, smuggling, you name it, all had to be reviewed by a living, breathing human. It was the one qualification Ian had that anyone at Celestial Ventures seemed to care about.

Resigned to the fact that he was about to have a very long week, Ian stuck his earbuds in his ears, created a new document on which to take notes, opened the software to play back the log recordings, and loaded up the first file.

Mission Day One.

The voice on the recording had a slight German accent, as if he'd grown up somewhere away from the fatherland, but with parents who were perhaps native speakers.

I've completed all of the pre-flight checks and I think I'm ready to go. The port-side engine's inductor coil was looking a little corroded, so I removed it and cleaned it. It's good to go now. I've requested clearance from the dockmaster and will be underway shortly, just waiting for my turn to depart.

Ian sighed and made his first note. "I swear," he mumbled to himself, "if I get four months into listening to these logs and you die because that coil failed, I'll scream."

He pulled up the registration and profile information on the Orpheus to examine the ship in more detail. It was old - nearly as old as its middle-aged pilot, with a history of three past owners before Victor and a service and repair record that was patchy at best. The ship had barely passed its last inspection four years ago. Surely this was going to end in a case of equipment failure and operator neglect. Some of these freelance types were like that. They'd push their equipment as far as it could go in order to save a little money. Of course, Ian knew, if the corporations offered fair prices for their contracts in the first place, the surveyors wouldn't have to be so reckless.

Ian spent the rest of the morning listening to the mundane accounts of system checks, cargo manifests, and inner system travel. At one o'clock, he finally decided to step out of his small office for a bit of fresh air.

Moments earlier, he'd listened to an entry from Strahm on day eight of his journey in which the man had been complaining about the lack of detail and information provided about the survey contract by Celestial Ventures. In his rant, the pilot had referred to himself and his fellow surveyors as mushrooms, because they were "always kept in the dark and fed shit." Ian could relate. Of course, that had been followed up by twenty minutes of Victor waxing nostalgic about his teenage years spent growing up in a mining colony on Phobos. In particular, he'd recalled the psychoactive effects of the bioluminescent fungus that grew in the tunnel beneath the waste reclamation facility.

He'd have to speed up the playback after lunch, Ian decided. Solo space travel was, by and large, very boring.

After acquiring a sandwich from the cafe across from the company offices, Ian sent a quick text to his partner, letting them know he'd likely be working late. Then he returned to his dungeon for more torture.

Mission Day Twenty-Six. The beef jerky was nice while it lasted, but now I'm back to nothing but protein sludge. You'd think I'd be used to it by now, but it still tastes like feet. Don't ask me how I know what feet taste like, but you can trust me. Anyway, I-

Ian skipped ahead, scanning the first few seconds worth of logs from the next three days. If anything interesting were to happen, he guessed that Victor would open with that.

... currently printing a new PCB. The chip tested fine after removing it from the damaged board, so that should solve the problem. I'll install it on the new board and get guard dog back online.

Ian paused the recording and checked the Orpheus's technical manual. He'd spent nearly an hour searching for it earlier that morning, as he listened. He'd finally found a copy on an old discussion group archive from thirty years earlier. "Guard Dog" was a meteor detection system. The aide furrowed his brow. "Ok, so it's just a proximity alarm with a cute name? Whatever." He noted the failure and the repair anyway.

He then quickly jumped through another week's worth of logs before being subjected to an hour of Victor Strahm monologuing about his favorite Fußball team while he talked through a real-time repair of damaged wiring in a non-critical part of the ship's electrical system. The Orpheus really was a piece of junk.

Ian reached into his desk drawer and pulled out a bottle of painkillers. He popped two into his mouth and washed them down with a cup of water from the water cooler out in the hallway. He checked the clock - 3pm. He had at least another three hours of this before he could call it a day. There were still months of logs ahead. His report needed to be completed by Friday. He needed a new strategy, or this would be an impossible task.

After a moment of pacing his tiny office and stretching the tired muscles in his neck and shoulders, Ian sank back down into his tattered leather desk chair. Maybe federal regulations prevented the use of AI on reviews like this, but that didn't mean he had to listen to every minute of boring Orpheus



logs himself. Technically he should, yes. He knew that if he missed something, both he and the company could be held liable, but he was on a deadline.

He'd stick with his theory about checking the beginning moments of each log entry. Hopefully it would be enough to narrow down a timeframe to start a more detailed examination of the logs. He opened a terminal window and wrote a quick script to iterate through the logs, extract the first 45 seconds of audio, and compile them into one file. He'd likely miss small details like the guard dog system or the wiring repair this way, but did it really matter? Time permitting, he could backfill information once he had at least some idea of what he was supposed to be reporting on.

The aide then turned off the overhead lights (their cool white color always made his head hurt worse), set a timer, and closed his eyes for 20 minutes. By the time his alarm chimed, his script had condensed the logs into a much more manageable seven-hour-and-18-minute audio file.

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## DAY TWO

Mission Day One Seventy Two. Okay, kids, we've finally made it. At last, our destination. I think this is probably the largest asteroid I have ever surveyed. What's the line between 'big rock' and 'small planet?' Probably not here, but this is one big rock. I should have charged by the size. I think I am going to land, maybe get out and stretch my legs, go for a little walk? Eh, or maybe not. We'll see. Solo space flight is dangerous. EVAs on solo space flights

are stupid. Still, it is tempting. Alright, time to launch some probes to the surface. They can scurry around without me for a bit, at least. Time is a flat circle and I haven't slept in God knows how long. My little metal minions can work while I get some shut-eye.

Ian paused the recording. Halfway there. It had taken nearly six months, but Strahm had made it to his destination. The aide had cataloged several more small repairs to the ship along the way that he would have to go back and research, but the old tin can had gotten Victor to his destination.

He stretched in his chair. "Well, so far, so good." Sure, maybe Victor's circadian rhythm was a bit off-balance, but all in all, it looked like the mission had been a success until this point. The ship was hanging in there and the Orpheus' pilot appeared to be in good physical and mental condition, despite the months of isolation. Ian was feeling good about himself, as well. He'd made good progress on getting through the backlog of mission logs. For the first time, he started to feel confident that he might actually get the report finished on time.

He made a record of Victor's arrival and positive mental state in his notes and decided to continue listening to the logs from the day of his arrival at the survey site.

Day One Seventy Two, or maybe Three, I don't know. I am not awake enough to check yet. I just had a bad dream. I don't normally remember my dreams, but this one was strange. I was down on the rock, no suit. I was checking a probe, when something struck me? I am not sure. I couldn't see what it was. Maybe it was

nothing. I went spiraling away from the surface of the asteroid, out toward the stars. I woke up and it was like I could feel the soreness in my chest where I had been hit. Tense muscles, just nerves, probably. Still, it is so quiet on the ship. It really feels unpleasant. This cold, dark hunk of rock looks less friendly now. I can see the probes below and their lights cast ominous shadows. What are you hiding, big rock? I need more sleep. I need maybe to play some music or watch a video - something to distract my mind. It is not good.

“Damn,” Ian muttered. “Maybe he’s more stressed than I thought.” The aide frowned. Did this mean he should go back farther in the logs? In his attempts to speed up the review process, had he actually created more work for himself? Strahm seemed oddly shaken by something so small as a bad dream. Still, if he’d been alone in space for six months and more than 300 million miles from home, Ian may have felt the same way. Who was he to judge? He had a moment of empathy for the pilot. It was easy to ignore when he was skimming the logs, but really, what must it have been like to be so far away from Earth for so long with no one to talk to? Their apartment felt empty when Taylor went away on week-long business trips to the east coast. A small spaceship for six months would surely drive a lot of people insane. Was Victor Strahm starting to lose it? Ian tried to shake it off. One entry and now he was the one getting carried away.

He continued playing back the recording.

Mission Log, Day One Seventy Five... I think. At least, that is what the ship says. What happened to one seven three

and one seven four, I do not know. This is very strange. I am running diagnostics on the ship and a medical test on myself to try and understand. The last thing I remember was waking up from the dream I described in my last log entry. I was going to check the probes and then get more sleep. Speaking of the probes, they are all dead. Not like, destroyed dead, but they all have dead batteries. They are stranded on the surface, because I was not awake to recall them. They've gone into emergency mode and deployed their solar cells, but there is so little light out here, it would take too long to recharge. I must go and get them, so I can recharge them and complete the mission. Space is very dark. The ship's systems seem mostly fine. The food supply level is where I left it, so at least I wasn't awake and doing things for two days that I forgot about. I'm not sure if that's better, or worse. I will update when I have landed the ship and I begin the EVA to retrieve the probes.

“What the hell?” Ian stopped the recording, pushed back away from his desk, and stood up. He took out his earbuds and dropped them into his pocket, then paced the room anxiously, his mind racing. Two days. How could Strahm have lost two full days? The ship's clock had to be wrong, didn't it? But the probes were dead. If it was just a clock issue, wouldn't the probes still be active? They were good for at least a day or so, surely. Unless something drained their power.

Ian shook his head, trying to break loose the negative thoughts. There had to be a simple explanation. Victor Strahm had finally cracked from the sudden change in routine after months of repetitive isolation. Or perhaps the asteroid he was surveying had some strange magnetic field that had affected his instruments and drained the probes of their power faster than anticipated.

He hurriedly grabbed his jacket from where it hung on the small coat rack beside his office door and slipped it on. He needed fresh air, needed to stretch his legs. He needed to meet Taylor for lunch. He paused, his hand on the door knob. Ian looked back at the computer, remembering Victor's comment about feeling as though he'd been struck by a presence.

"No. No way." He said. "You're just a mad man in an old, broken-down spaceship who took on one more contract than you could handle." Ian walked back to his computer and typed in a quick note.

*Pilot appears to be losing track of days and may not be eating or staying properly hydrated. He may also be hallucinating. This has caused him to become unintentionally negligent in his duties with regards to the survey mission and has necessitated a high-risk EVA activity. The suspected cause of the pilot's erratic behavior is mental breakdown due to long-term isolation in deep space.*

Feeling better for having written it down, as if that added some gravitas and validity to the statement, thereby making it true, Ian turned and confidently left his office for lunch.

Day One Seventy Five, Continued.

That's where Ian had paused the recording twenty minutes earlier. Since then, he'd sat, staring at the computer screen,

trying to focus. He'd come back from lunch in a good mood, but hearing Victor's voice had immediately changed that.

The problem with reviewing these logs, Ian realized, was that Victor Strahm was going to die at the end. On some level, he'd always known that. He just hadn't expected to care. He'd done a handful of investigations like this before, but he'd always felt more detached. The usual cause of mission failure was catastrophic equipment failure, or sudden depressurization - things that killed the surveyor instantly. Sitting here, listening to Strahm's slow descent into madness was too much.

On the one hand, it seemed almost cruel. But on the other hand, he felt as though Victor deserved for someone at least to hear his final story. If only Ian could convince himself to click the play button and continue doing so.

Ian swore quietly through clenched teeth. He wasn't ready to go back to the logs recordings. Not yet. If he could find some evidence, some scientific explanation for Victor's loss of time and the drained probe batteries, any outside phenomenon, he'd feel better. At least, he thought he would. If he understood it, then it would be easier to listen to. That's what he told himself, anyway.

Ignoring the recording for the moment, Ian opened a message window and sent off a request for access to any geological, astrophysical, or other scientific data recovered along with the audio logs from Strahm's expedition. It took about fifteen minutes to get a response.

It didn't take him long to find a rabbit hole to fall down.

## DAY THREE

Ian stared blankly out the train window, barely noticing the landscape whisking past, or the other passengers around him. He was tired. He'd had only four or five hours of restless sleep, but his mind was racing.

The survey reports - Victor had sent back survey reports - were nothing exciting. In fact, they were extremely uninteresting. The most shocking discovery for Ian was that Strahm's expedition to the area wasn't the first one for Celestial Ventures, but rather, the third. The first two had occurred prior to Ian's employment, and they hadn't been successful, either. Both had been logged as catastrophic system failure in reports filed at the last minute.

A little late-night research from home uncovered other surveyors reporting strange phenomena out near the far edge of the asteroid belt. Ian had read too many of their stories. He'd had nightmares all night long.

The shuffling of bodies around him shook Ian back to reality just in time to recognize his stop. Hurriedly, he exited the train, nearly bumping into a woman as he stepped out onto the platform. He mumbled an apology and quickly exited the station, suddenly feeling closed in by the lines and barriers and train cars around him. He slowed his pace when he reached the open sidewalk, then took a deep breath and ran a hand under his shirt collar, which had been sticking uncomfortably to the back of his neck. He wasn't sure what a panic attack felt like, but he thought maybe he'd just avoided one. The fresh air and sunlight made the walk to his office more bearable.

Ian entered the Celestial Ventures building and headed toward his office. He paused only briefly in the long, dim basement hallway before placing his thumb on the unlock

panel next to the door. He stepped inside the small room, leaving the door propped open. It helped him feel a bit less confined. He settled in at his desk, comforted by the feel of the desk chair pressing against his back, and quickly checked his messages. He'd sent off several inquiries last night, but so far, he'd received no replies.

With a sigh, he put his earbuds on and turned his attention back to Victor Strahm's logs, which he very much both did and did not want to listen to.

Day One Seventy Five, Continued. I have landed the ship without issue and am now standing on the asteroid's surface. There is barely any gravity, so the ship's landing gear has clamped to the rough surface and I am using the maneuvering unit with the EVA suit. I do not want my dream to become my reality. There are three drones relatively close. I have a visual on one of them. Two more are just over the short horizon. I have not yet located the last one.

Ian made note of the EVA in his logs, relieved to hear that the pilot was exercising some safety precautions. At least he wouldn't be floating off into deep space.

I have been on the surface for about eight minutes and am approaching the first probe. Something strange is happening. I just passed over an area that caused a strange tingling sensation. Maybe it's some electromagnetic disturbance? Maybe this is what killed the probe? The suit battery seems unaffected, but I



feel dizzy and sick. I have taken an antiemetic from the suit's med pack. Do not throw up in space suit - throwing up in space suit is a very bad day.

I think I- Whoa, what ze hell?

The entry ended abruptly and Ian raced to find the next file, he was breathing quickly, his own head was beginning to spin a little. He fumbled with the software for a moment then played the next entry.

I saw lights! Patterns in deep space... so many colors moving toward me rapidly. Then, just before they reached me, something dark out of the corner of my eye. Now here I am on the ground over the first probe. I've collected it and will rest a moment before I continue. People who lose their vision can hallucinate, because their brain does not get enough visual stimuli. I wonder if it is the same in space when there is nothing but blackness to look at.

Ian paused the recording once more to collect his thoughts, impressed at Victor's composure and rational thinking despite what had just happened. It helped him find his own sense of calm. If Victor could be out there in the blackness of deep space protected only by an EVA suit and keep his cool, Ian could surely manage sitting safely at a desk on Earth.

Alright. I have collected the first probe and moved on to the second one. Things have been mostly normal. Every now and then I see shadows that feel wrong, but when I turn to look, everything is good.

Perhaps the curvature of the asteroid and the rough terrain is throwing off my perspective. I... ah... hang on. There, second probe collected.

Anyway, I was about to say that perhaps I have been in space too long. I might need a long vacation down a gravity well after this. I do not feel in control of my mind and... oh God. Help me. I cannot move. My legs are not working. What is this? I feel a pulsing sensation through my body. It is making my ears ring. The lights... I see ze lights again!

Ian quickly pulled the earbuds from his ears and threw them onto the desk as he stood up and stepped backwards, nearly falling over his chair. "Holy shit." He whispered. His mind raced back to the stories he'd read last night. As much as they had disturbed him, a part of him had hoped they were still just ghost stories from surveyors out in the asteroid belt, meant to bring a little mystery and intrigue to an otherwise dull job.

Shaken, he stepped out into the hallway and filled a small paper cup with cold water from the water cooler. He drank it and then leaned his back against the cool concrete block wall, shutting his eyes. He was here, he reminded himself, in a dingy basement office of Celestial Ventures, San Francisco, Earth. He had a nice, two-bedroom apartment with his partner Taylor. They had a cat named Mittens.

Ian opened his eyes. "Ok, Victor. Let's see what else you've got to tell me." He pushed away from the wall and returned to his desk. His message inbox was still ominously empty, but the logs were waiting, and the sooner he got through them, the sooner he could go home to Taylor and Mittens.

He pulled up his notes and added his next update.

*Pilot is experiencing “strange phenomena” while continuing his EVA. Recovery of the probes is thus far successful, but interspersed with dialog about visual hallucinations not consistent with cosmic ray hallucinations and physical sensations of vibration, nausea, dizziness, and paralysis. Moreover, he may not trust himself, as he states feeling “out of control of his mind.” This, along with his analytical thinking and deductive reasoning suggest that, while his mental state may be degraded, he is not currently a threat to himself or to the mission.*

“Good enough.” Ian thought as he re-read the entry. It felt so clinical and in such contrast to what Strahm was experiencing. The log entry almost made it sound like the whole thing was Victor’s fault. If he’d just been able to hold it together and not go insane, things would have been fine! Ian thought about that for a moment. He didn’t actually know yet what killed the pilot. Maybe it was something different entirely. He’d leave the entry as it was for now. He could always change it later.

I used the maneuvering unit to break free, I think. Fuel levels are down 15 percent and I am.. not where I was. I wish I could remember. Every damn time! Am I going mad? Is someone or something doing this to me? My head hurts. I have collected the third probe. Perhaps I write the others off on an insurance claim. I am not certain it is safe to retrieve them. Heh, will CV pay me for three probes? Probably not. At this point, I’m not sure they will pay me anything. I do not think I can complete the full survey. Whether the danger is

real or imagined, it just does not feel safe.

Ian frowned and made note of this entry in his report. This was something he knew the company would care about. They may not care about Victor, but they'd love a chance to lessen the payout owed to his family.

EVA Summary Report. I have recovered three of six probes. While on the asteroid, I experienced several strange sensations. Ah, you know it all already. Listen to the damn logs if not. I am too tired for your bullshit.

Ship is back in orbit and I feel better now that I am off that rock, but sometimes it feels like I am not alone. You'd think I'd welcome that, eh? No. Better alone than this. Something in the ship's computer system was damaged during lift-off from the asteroid. Two of my sensor panels and half my navigation console are out. I will have to fix them before I can leave. So much for orbital survey work. This mission really is done. God, I want to go home.

Victor sounded tired, Ian thought. He didn't just sound sleepy. It was more of the bone-weary, aching tiredness of a man who had endured too much hardship, like a soldier coming back from war, or an estranged spouse talking about their abusive ex. The man's demeanor had changed so quickly it was jarring. The implied "if I can" at the end of Victor's log was like a punch to the gut for Ian.

"You're not going to make it, bud." Ian sighed, and then

picked up the coffee mug on his desk and threw it across the room as hard as he could.

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## **DAY FOUR**

Ian had gone home and argued with Taylor. The two rarely fought, unless one of them was looking for a reason to do so. This time it had been Ian who'd chosen to make everything into a conflict. He'd recognized it. He knew he was doing it. He just hadn't cared.

He'd slept on the sofa and had apologized this morning before leaving, but it was an awful way to start the day and his second night of truncated, tormented sleep. Ian laughed when he thought about it. He'd been pushing his partner away, but felt more connected than ever to the Orpheus' doomed pilot.

He was on his third cup of coffee by the time he sank down behind his desk. He finally had replies in his inbox. All of them told him he lacked the proper level of clearance for the information he had requested. Mission logs older than five years were archived and would not be retrieved without proper authorization and cause. A lowly legal aide with a curious streak had neither.

Ian told the empty room exactly where Celestial Ventures could shove its "proper authorization" and then lodged a slightly more professional complaint, and a plea for assistance, with his direct supervisor.

He looked at the earbuds laying on his desk. He didn't want to listen. Victor was going to die soon and Ian didn't want to know the details. Is this why all of the other reports were generic, last minute entries that he was convinced at this

point were all lies? Had it really been some kind of cover-up, or had the truth just been too painful to listen to?

Ian considered doing the same. For a long moment, he thought about making up something plausible and going back home to bed. Strahm had given him an out with the multi-level computer failure. Hell, maybe that was the actual cause and Ian wouldn't be making up anything.

In the end, though, he couldn't do it. Victor Strahn and the surveyors from the two previous missions before him deserved better than that.

One Seventy Six. Repairs are going slowly. It is cold on the ship. Then it is hot. Sometimes, I lose track of hours, just float around and stare at the walls. I see the lights now every time I close my eyes. Their colorful, geometric shapes would be quite beautiful if they weren't so terrifying. Sometimes I feel the tingling, too. I want to sleep. I want a cheeseburger and a chocolate milkshake.

Ian made note of Strahm's continued visual disturbances and loss of time and numbly continued listening.

Mission Log. Day One Seventy Eight. I did not lose a day, I just didn't record anything yesterday. Honest. My headache is getting worse. I am now taking the maximum safe amount of painkillers. The nav panel is fixed, but sensors are not. I have decided that's good enough and have left the asteroid.

I am charging the recovered probes to deploy in close proximity to the ship since sensors are down. Two of them are charging nicely. One needs to be repaired. In the meantime, I am doing a lot of looking out ze window.

I am still having disturbances, but I think I am learning to live with them. The lights lull me to sleep, where I am wrapped in a warm embrace. I still feel it around when I wake up, like a lover holding me close. It brings me peace.

It is good to be pointing back toward Earth.

A wave of conflicting emotions washed over Ian. Victor's last entry sounded much better. The man sounded more like himself and more at ease. But that was also disturbing in its own right. The back and forth nature of Victor's mental state was alarming. Ian wasn't sure he trusted the man's assertion that he hadn't lost more time. He also wasn't sure he trusted Strahm's new-found peace with the disturbances he'd found so terrifying only a couple of days earlier. "Peace" may have even been an understatement. Was something manipulating the man?

Ian took a deep breath and weighed the gravity of the situation. He'd tried for days now to believe that Victor's altered mental state was the result of the long-term isolation of his deep space survey mission. However, that was becoming harder and harder to rationalize, given the evidence he was hearing.

Victor Strahm wasn't alone and the Orpheas was heading back to Earth with an alien entity onboard. Had this

happened before? Had Celestial Ventures known this was going to happen?

Ian hurriedly typed out a whole new set of notes on his phone, storing them in a place far outside of Celestial Venture's networks.

Mission Log. Day One Seventy Nine. Last night, I dreamed that the lights were guiding me to a whole new world. I stood on a beach at night, with black sands and gentle waves. Two moons hung low in the sky overhead. A strange resonance, almost like music emanated from distant cliffs. It was hauntingly beautiful. Perhaps the strangest part is that I was not alone. There was someone there with me, a woman. I had never seen her before, but it was like I have always known her. She was beautiful. She is the one who holds me while I sleep.

Anyway, it was just a dream. I am sounding crazy.

I have given up on repairing the probe. It was an exercise in futility anyway. Losing three probes or four, it hardly matters. I have sent back to the company what data I have collected from the two good probes and the sensors before they were damaged. It is not much, but hopefully it will be enough for at least a partial payment. At this point, I will be happy if it covers my expenses.

Oh well, no point in worrying about that



now. There is a long flight home first and not much to do. Perhaps I will nap again and dream about the woman, eh?

Ian felt a cold shiver run down his spine. He did not like this at all. "Victor, no." He whispered. With a trembling hand, he moved to load the next log file into the playback software, then stopped abruptly. It was the last entry.

Hours later, well past the end of his work day, Ian pulled himself slowly up from where he'd been sitting. He hadn't listened to the log entry. Instead, he'd fled his office to the large atrium in the center of the Celestial Ventures office complex. He'd found a quiet corner beside a bubbling koi pond surrounded by greenery and had hidden himself away there ever since. There he'd spent the next several hours alternating between typing notes on his phone, staring into the cool water, and obsessively checking his messages for a response from his supervisor. He was desperate for anything that might be helpful.

He called Taylor and explained as much as he reasonably could; the assignment, the report, the research he'd done and what he'd found, Victor's journey and experiences on the asteroid, what had happened after he left and the strangely seductive hold that the entity appeared to have on him. He was breaking at least a dozen company policies and maybe one or two laws, but he didn't care.

Now, with darkness creeping in and the shadows growing long in the large, man-made garden, Ian's own paranoia was ramping up, urging him to get moving. He finally shuffled out of the building. Taylor met him outside the front door. Ian had never felt so broken or filled with so much dread and uncertainty.

He knew he was in for another night of no sleep and he knew that tomorrow, Victor Strahm would die.

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## DAY FIVE

Ian arrived at the office an hour later than usual. His head was pounding and his eyes felt gritty. He'd drank heavily last night and suspected he'd be doing so again that evening. As a long-term coping strategy, he knew it was a bad one, but at least he'd slept. If only it felt that way.

"Alright, let's see how this damn thing ends." Ian declared as he loaded up the final log entry. He then collapsed into his desk chair, having resigned himself to his fate, and played back the recording.

Mission Log. Day One Eighty. The woman in my dreams, she is a tricky one, always just out of reach. It is maddening! Such beauty. Were it not for the fleeting moments when sleep fades and I feel her embrace, if I could I would go to sleep and never wake up. Last night, I took the sleeping pills so I could enjoy more dreams, haha! Her world is so rich and beautiful, unlike anything I have ever seen. She shows it to me, and it is haunting and dark, but full of wonder. I long to go there, but she insists we cannot. Her world is dead, lifeless for eons. This makes her very sad. She has been on the asteroid for a long time and misses her home. I know the feeling.

So I share with her memories of my world, of Earth. I do not know now if I am awake or asleep, but I show her all of the people and all of the beautiful places I visited as a child, before-before my father died and I had to take corporate contracts to feed my little sisters.

Ian paused the recording and took a deep breath, giving his emotions a moment to catch up. It had never been stated, but for some reason he'd just assumed that Victor Strahm was a surveyor because he'd chosen to be. The fact that this may not be the case shook him and only added to Ian's feelings of sorrow and trepidation.

She likes the stories. She is very excited to see Earth, to find a new home. She says we will be happy there, together. She is very delighted and says others may come.

Ian shifted uncomfortably in his chair as Victor's voice dropped to a whisper.

She seduces me and offers me incredible things. She pleases me, and every part of me aches to let her. Is it a trap? A test? In her eagerness, there is a darkness, a hunger. Though it pains me greatly, I cannot trust her. I am not bringing her to Earth. I have changed course. I am going back to ze asteroid. There she will not be a threat. There she cannot control others, cannot harm Earth or its people. There she-

Victor screamed and Ian nearly jumped out of his chair. Seconds later, the log file ended abruptly.

Ian gasped for air, his heart pounding. "Victor!" He shouted. He scrambled for his phone and began typing furiously. The distraction helped only for a moment as tears welled up and his body began to tremble. After all that he had endured, Victor Strahm had been murdered. He'd been killed by an alien entity willing to lie, manipulate, and murder to get its way. The man hadn't deserved any of it. In many ways, Victor was just your average guy who'd been in the wrong place at the wrong time. He'd taken a mission that was cursed from the start. Victor surely hadn't known about the other failed attempts before him. Would that have changed things? Ian liked to think that Victor was smart enough that he would have said no to the contract if he'd known the danger.

Ian traversed the small office and locked the door. Then he slid to the floor in front of it. The Orpheus was still missing, but Victor Strahm was dead. He'd been dead for a long time, of course, but for Ian, it had only just happened. He knew he'd only been given a small glimpse into the man's life, but he'd liked Victor. The connection, however brief and one-sided, had felt so real.

Ian stood and paced circles around the tiny room, giving in to restless energy and the raw emotions stirred up by Victor's sacrifice. That scream, Ian kept hearing that scream. He knew it would haunt his dreams for months to come. He sank back to the floor and sat, head in hands, for a long moment, trying to quiet his mind.

He still had to file the damn report.

Ian got to his feet and stumbled back to his desk. He wiped

away tears as he sat down and returned to his notes. Victor Strahm was a hero and Ian knew what he had to do.

*After repairing the ship and leaving the asteroid, the pilot's mental state continued to deteriorate. He became delusional and developed paranoia and a sense of urgency around a growing, unseen threat. It is believed he changed course at some point after roughly one and a half day's travel from the asteroid in order to flee from perceived danger.*

*It is this office's opinion that Victor Strahm suffered a psychotic break due to the long-term effects of isolation aboard a small, poorly maintained spacecraft.*

*Ian Irwin, 928592  
Celestial Ventures, Legal Division*

Ian read over the report one more time and clicked "submit." It was a lie, of course. He hated that fact, but telling a lie now was the only way of protecting the truth later. He knew that if he submitted the truth, the corporation would suppress it so fast that the whole record of Victor's expedition, as well as the two previous ones would be erased within the hour. If he gave them what they wanted, said what they wanted him to say, then maybe there would still be records to investigate later when the time was right.

Having done his duty to the company like a good monkey, Ian stood up from his desk, slipped his phone into his pocket, and exited Celestial Ventures for the last time.

On his way to the metro station, he placed a call.

"Hello, yeah, news desk? My name's Ian Irwin. I'm a legal aide at Celestial Ventures and I have a story I think you need to know about."





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