

## Darker Horizons

Copyright © 2014 by Jamie Gilkeson, Anna Blue Keleher & Teddy Corrales

First Place, BSFS Jack L. Chalker 2014 Young Writers' Contest

Montgomery Blair High School-Silver Spring, MD

*Printed by permission of the author*

Darkness blooms across the subtle curvature we call the horizon. There is no day here. There won't be for several weeks.

Direction has little basis in geography here, with so few landmarks to distinguish one rolling lunar vista from another. Without my helmet's nav systems, I'd probably lose my orientation altogether. We have a "north" here, in spite of the fact that the moon's magnetic field is negligible, and I try to always keep it there in the back of my mind. Sometimes... sometimes, I lose it, and the featureless landscape gets the better of me.

I'm always surprised I had the guts to come out here. Back on Earth I had no inkling how important space and scale were to a body's sanity. Maybe if I'd known, I would have known how lonely it gets, even with your crew all around, even with the faint shapes of the craters. Craters! And they say those are enough for a familiar landscape. Sure, we got craters—Tsiolkovskiy, and Pavlov, and Bolyai—but they don't compare to a nice green valley or a white-capped mountain.

And they're all friggin' Russian.

I scan the horizon.

*Craters... there's one. Which...? Shit.*

Stabbed with the familiar doubt, I whirl around as quickly as possible in the clunky suit I have to wear.

*Good.* The station is still there.

*Where would it have gone?* It's a stupid question, but one I ask regularly. The terror of abandonment was real to me as soon as I set foot on this God-forsaken rock. Two hundred and forty miles from the rest of humanity, it seems so easy for it to all slip away.

It's a nightmare in grayscale.

*Searing heat, flashes of light.*

*Focus.*

In the distance, the dimly lit corridors of the base contrast sharply with the brief bright flares of light originating from the reactor core.

Nuclear powered is what I was told. Found a deposit of Uranium on the dark side of the moon, enough to last a hundred lifetimes. So the colony went up. And it was all nuclear powered.

*That's what I was told.*

I begin the slow, bouncing walk back to the station. Moon walking can be therapeutic, if you let it. It was fun at first. More often, it's a reminder of the strangeness of this world.

Still, between the openness of the outdoors and the claustrophobia of the mining station, I'd choose the mind-numbing landscape any day.

*And that's why I'm here.*

I reach the airlock rather quickly. I punch in the code, and although I can hear nothing but my own breathing through my space suit, I can imagine the loud hiss made by the airlock

as it depressurizes to allow entry.

Turning the wheel is still surreal. Everything else here moves so easily. But friction is still friction. Low gravity doesn't change that.

The wheel turns. The door opens. I step inside.

*Why do I feel safer in the airlock? An accident in here would be no better than an accident out there.*

The airlock finishes repressurizing, punctuated by a reassuring little light blinking green above my head.

The second door only requires a keypad to get in. I can't figure why they wouldn't do that for both doors.

I walk briskly through the corridors, holding onto the rails to keep from bouncing too high. Lights flicker and intensify as I pass them, until I stop at a door. The faded sign next to it is all but indistinguishable by now, but I know its location by heart.

*This door. One of them was here. Longest trip I had to make.*

I take a seat on one of the long metal benches and begin methodically removing my space suit. Piece by piece. Zippers and Velcro and screw-on airtight components. But they sure love Velcro on these suits. It rips through the silence of the station.

I stow the dismantled suit in a locker. I cross the short distance between the locker and the door in a few strides, and let my mind wander as I take the necessary turns back to my quarters for the thousandth time.

The shower water falls almost scalding across my bare flesh. A hot shower was the one amenity I had always refused to compromise on. Even out here. They told us we should cut back on our luxury power usage, but I never really saw the point. If the system is self-sufficient, how can this be a waste of power?

*Probably just leftover from the early days of space exploration. Stupid tradition.*

*Besides, it sure as hell isn't my fault that the self-sufficiency was a lie.*

After I finish towelling myself off, I head, wearing nothing but the towel, over to my desk.

*So much routine. Always routine. What could I possibly have to log today?*

The clock reads late. I was out longer than I realized.

*So? Late is meaningless when you have half a month of night time.*

Besides, I'm not done. Clothing goes back on. Boots. Jacket. Corp insignia. Rope in hand.

*Feels good to be clean, at least.*

Back through the long metal hallways. The motion-activated lights follow me, but I'd just as soon make this trek in the dark. I don't want to see the white-washed walls, pressing in on me, on all of us. I'd just as soon be rid of it. I'd

just as soon be home.

*Wouldn't that be the shit.*

Spacesuit on. Helmet sealed.

*More routine. With a twist.*

I enter the holding bay. The refrigerated cylinders glow a faint blue from internal lighting. A keypad unclasps the locks holding them, and they thud softly to the floor. This is the hardest part of it all. In almost all respects I'd prefer being here, on some semblance of a solid surface, to being stationed on a satellite or something, but in this situation even the weak gravity works against me.

*One... two... four... seven.*

That's right, of course. I took the rest out yesterday. I had a plan. I'm nothing if not deliberate.

*What a lie. Chance is the only reason you're still-STOP.*

Wearily, I pace between the containers and thread the rope through the metal loops that line their sides. Connecting them is a pain, but it sure beats moving them one by one. I learned that from experience. It's not going to be fun either way.

I'm careful not to look too closely.

*After today, I've washed my hands of all of it.*

I drag the first up against the wall by the airlock, letting it use up the slack before tension finally pulls the second along. I punch in the key sequence necessary to open the first door, and painstakingly maneuver the cylinders through the narrow airlock.

*If only they had made these things bigger.*

It's a tight fit, but I manage to gain purchase on the wheel, and almost start turning it before I realize with a jolt that I've forgotten to depressurize the place.

*Stupid.*

Depressurising the airlock seems to take a lifetime, though the clock ticks down only a few minutes.

*Perhaps it's broken. Perhaps I'm broken.*

I turn the heavy wheel with the easy grip of someone who's done it a thousand times past, which I have. And then the door swings out, revealing the desolate, starlit wasteland of the dark side of the moon.

I've heard my share of romantic poetry about the moon's surface. Much of it even from first hand accounts. But when I'm out here, I see none of that. Starlit, yes. Glowing with twinkling starlight as if it were a place of fey energy—not even close.

*I just made that line up. Why would I make that up if I don't believe it? Perhaps I AM broken.*

Once the seventh container is out, I turn, shut the airlock door, and spin the wheel back into place. The magnetic lock broke long ago, but a little elbow grease works just as well in my experience.

*Why was it ever magnetically locked if arm power works? This place makes less sense the more I think about it. Stupid. So stop thinking about it.*

*Can't. Won't?*

Paths on the moon are far removed from the whimsical trails through lush forestland that I recall from Earth. Every stride covers meters at a time, so they're really more a series

of landing pads, packed down over time in a few select locations. In the dim, almost non-existent light, they can be damn near impossible to find.

*Stupid. Use a flashlight.*

*But I'm supposed to be CONSERVING ENERGY.*

*But the place is "self sufficient," isn't it? Isn't it?*

*No. Seven hells, no.*

I'm hindered by the containers behind me, but in spite of my months here, I can still feel the difference in the weight. I'm making good time, even with a chain seven cylinders bobbing along obscenely on my tail.

*Has it only been months?*

*These past few days alone have been years.*

My destination is another part of the mining station, but the route is quicker across bare rock. I can see its hatch clearly, and the smooth curvature of its walls, and the sharp cant of its peak, and the powerful tubes at its base, all so at odds with the clunky asymmetricality of the rest of the station. It's getting closer.

*'Moon walking can be therapeutic, if you let it.'*

*Stupid. Not this type of moon walk.*

I stop to catch my breath, and notice my panting amplified tenfold through my helmet's comm. system.

*Why do I still have that thing on? Concentrate.*

I reach for the hatch, repeating the routines I'm all too familiar with. I can imagine the *whoosh* as air escapes, though no sound penetrates the suit. No point depressurizing now. There are two steps leading up to this hatch, to keep the compartment off the ground, and it's a challenge hoisting up the cylinders. One goes up, clanking down on the metal of the floor.

*Easy does it. Don't look.*

*There goes a second.*

*Getting there. Gotta keep my head.*

*More like my stomach.*

On the third, my clunky space boot snags a step, and the cylinder slips from my arms and back down the way it came. My balance goes with it—it feels like falling in slow motion, except this is no dream.

*Get through today and it's over-OH GOD.*

I'm falling toward the cylinder, and I can't tear my gaze from...

*God, it's a joke. It has to be a joke.*

*But you can't pull that kind of shit on the comms. It's so strictly against regulation it's ridiculous.*

*Which means...*

I know I can't look again, but I can't stop...

*I'm tearing back toward the station, floating dangerously high on the low-grav surface, but already I can see it's no joke. Streams of gas are escaping from the wings, and they shouldn't be visible in this limited atmosphere and they shouldn't be there in the first place and they shouldn't... they shouldn't... the place was supposed to run itself!*

His eyelid has been fused open where the flesh was burned away. I tried to close the others, but he had nothing to close...

*I fling open the hatch and the place feels raw. Blood, and pain... it's palpable. First body is right at the entrance, half-suited. Her*

*Cont. on p. 46*

# To Tell A Lie

Copyright © 2014 by Anna Blue Keleher

Second Place, BSFS Jack L. Chalker 2014 Young Writers' Contest

Montgomery Blair High School-Silver Spring, MD

*Printed by permission of the author*

As a child, Emile Cramer had enjoyed skipping stones off a pier in the Long Island Sound. She'd always found something therapeutic in the perfect arcs of the smooth pebbles. Something utterly tranquil in the ripples they cast off in concentric circles across the chopped waters. Something eminently satisfying in the way they exploded into so many unbound ash particles when they came to the edge of the country's territory, dancing their last dance with the nanoPod shield grid that protected its borders.

Emile had not been an unhappy child, and she was never tormented by curiosity about the world beyond the Pod grid. What could have tormented her, when she had access to all she could wish to know? In school, she had learned about the outside: the poverty, the battles for resources, the arms races, the unstable governments, tentative democracies, relapses to dictatorships. She knew that if she swam east across the Atlantic, she would find herself on the Portuguese coast, and that it would be terrible.

Because in Portugal, people lied.

She and her peers were children of the new generation: born in the '50s, half a decade after the Speech Revolution of 2047. Some of her friends' parents, like hers, had rallied for the movement; others clung to the chaotic social ideals of the past. As a result, there were children in her school that naturally tended toward the radical, but Emile had never been one of them. Even as a child, the system had made perfect sense to her. America, unlike the rest of the world, was free of the plague of mistruth.

Emile was dancing when her boss found her. Of course, she would have rejected the notion of dance had she known what it was, but like so many other things, the interpretive arts had been culled from the list of acceptable forms of expression long before she'd ever been exposed to them. Her dance was deliberate rather than creative, verging on mechanical. She stood in the center of an eight-foot cube with white-washed walls, eyelids faintly cracked, pupils twitching across the floor-to-ceiling screen as she followed the myriad paths of data output windows. Her arms, defaulting to a horizontal wingspan, jerked to some imaginary rhythm, fingers flying along the keys of an invisible, long-obsolete piano. She writhed at the abdomen, shuffled her feet, cracked her neck, twitched her tongue. Every muscle in her body was alive and responsive.

The nanonerves built into the myofibrils of her muscle recorded her every movement and reported it back to the screen, whose pseudo-intelligent system interpreted it and responded accordingly. With the twitch of a fingertip, Emile could select a single data thread for publication in the Federal News Service's constant news feed; with a sweep of her foot, she could send several dozen topics to oblivion. And with her professional training as a journalist, she could go on like this

for hours, processing several billion news topics in a single day.

She was startled from her trance by a sharp *pop* as the door to her cube opened, then snapped shut, admitting a visitor and threatening to blind her as the projections dimmed and lights came on. Turning, she came eye-to-eye with a glossy, full-bodied black moustache.

"Cramer," grunted the moustache. With some effort, she raised her eyes to meet those of the man himself, musing on how certain things really seem to dominate a person's personality. Her boss was not a bad-looking fellow, but she had to make a conscious effort to notice him past the personality of his facial hair.

He was talking. "...heathens in California rediscovered God."

"Yeah, I saw it," she replied, recovering just in time to know what he was talking about. "Came out in the feed this morning. '0200 hours, Class 2 Violation: Intelligent Design Theory, please report further Resurgences near you, etc.' The usual." The Federal News Service—the only news service—had processors that filled in the fluff in newsblurbs between when she saw them and when the public received them.

Emile paused and waited patiently, knowing her boss had more to say. Intelligent Design resurgences were rare—religion had been declared contrary to the evidence of known fact in the late '60s—but not unheard of.

"And..." her boss' hand went instinctively to his moustache as he built up the suspense, "the newest lie detector nerves were released today. You have an installation scheduled with your family after your shift."

Emile resisted the urge to clap giddily. "Wonderful!" she chirped instead.

The moustache cocked his head at her. "Cramer... you're what, thirty-eight now?"

"Thirty-six."

"How many of these upgrades have you had?"

She paused to think about it. "Well, all of them." Emile had enrolled to be one of the select few in the first tester groups for each new incarnation of the Tectors all citizens wore. She was well ahead of the upgrade requirement. "I think that's upwards of twenty now. They get more and more sophisticated all the time."

"So what's different about this one?"

"No idea..." Emile started to say, then quickly cut off the last word before she could finish. She flinched out of habit, but the shock didn't come.

"Got you?" asked her boss, craning his neck to get a good look at the jutting bone of her left hip.

"No." If she bothered to check, she knew what she'd find: the same illuminated circle, half an inch in radius, and the same little green pinprick of a light flashing at about 3 o'clock. The nanonerves from the embedded device connected it to a natural nerve at the base of the spine, which was—conveniently—

extremely sensitive to pain. If she'd finished her sentence, the device would have translated her sound bites into data, checked its records, and alerted her of her error by means of a gentle electric shock. But after all her years at the top of the live prototype trials list, Emile had acquired the skill of almost never triggering her lie detector.

"I *do* have an idea," she corrected herself cautiously. "The Department of Experimental Technologies recently finished a project they're calling revolutionary. They're working on personal truths—not matters of experience, but more theoretical areas."

The moustache stroked his most prominent feature while Emile shifted on her feet, uncomfortable with the interrogation. "So just now your 'Tector recognized that you've spoken to someone in E.T. about the upgrade and therefore *do* know something about what's new... but after your upgrade it'll be able to tell if you like, say, oranges or not?"

"That's the theory."

"Hmph." Emile knew that her boss wasn't well versed in technology, which was something of an accomplishment these days. He did what he did—managing journalists—well, and that's what counted; he went along with the 'Tector laws because it was what you did. Having devoted herself to America's highest cause, the pursuit of pure democracy, Emile was the resident expert on the ever-advancing wave of truth technologies. Even so, she wasn't prepared for his next question.

"Why?"

"Why what?"

"I was just thinking. Why does it matter if your 'Tector knows more about you?"

"Why does it matter if your 'Tector knows anything at all?" Emile shot back, irked at the ignorance washing off her supposed superior. "Why does it matter if people can lie on a whim? Call up a history file sometime and read about how well *that* worked out for us back at the beginning of the century. Can't run a representative democracy if none of the representatives are honest. Can't have a society where people perpetuate unfounded rumors. It's all about filtering the information net, and for each person that learns to be honest, it gets a little bit cleaner."

The moustache burst into sudden laughter. "I know all that, sweetheart. Don't parrot to me the lectures we all learned as kids. I just thought the oranges were a little bit much. Lies about things like that just don't matter."

For a split second, the man spasmed as if swarmed by ants. Then he looked up. "Okay," he said, rubbing the base of his spine, "evidently they do."

She walked with the confident gait of a professional. Walking was a purely symbolic gesture; having the leisure to waste time in unpowered transit was only possible if you were an influential person. How could Emile not be, when she kept six hundred million countrymen constantly informed through their cochlear implant speakers and the building-high infoscreens that lined the streets?

And she was leaving behind breadcrumbs of her ideology in the form of her daughter: a feisty, precocious, endearing golden-haired creature upon whom rested the burden of the Cramer legacy and their unflinching pursuit of truth.

Underneath a sky stained black by the dense clouds of the 'Pod grid, she set a path for herself through Manhattan to the Experimental Technologies headquarters, where she knew her family would be waiting. She might normally have taken the subway home, but today she wanted to flaunt her success. Looking down on the Underground through the acrylic glass streets, she felt on top of the world. Around her, the buildings' walls echoed stripes of text and images that she recognized from the morning; threads in the cloth of a nation-wide truth she helped to weave.

Beside her on façade of a bank, the President was delivering a re-election speech. "I can give you three undisputed facts," he was saying. "First, I am not my opponent. Second, my long-term economic plan differs from his. And third, should you elect me, the outcome will be undeniably different from if you elect him."

*Politicians used to dance around the truth*, she remembered from her history texts. *How can the rest of the world still function like that?*

She arrived at E.T. headquarters in a whirl of renewed conviction, sweeping up to her designated medical suite on the thirty-first floor. Inside, she found her husband—for whom she spared a glance—and her daughter, unconscious, dressed in a hospital robe, already stretched out on a long plastic table and strapped down so the automatic machines could do their work. Other than the three of them, the small, bright room was empty.

She sidled up next to her husband and leaned against the wall.

"Good day?" he asked her casually. "You seem chipper."

Emile smiled broadly. "We're upgrading. We're one step closer to perfection. What isn't good about that?"

Her husband rolled his eyes—he didn't quite share her fervor, but she was able to overlook it. "Well, you must have pulled some favors, because we're the very first civilian test subjects. How was work?"

A shadow crossed her face. "The moustache was off today... asked some strange questions about the 'Tectors. I'm tempted to report him for surveillance."

"He probably just had to face a hard truth," her husband said absently, watching mechanical arms penetrate their daughter's muscles. "It happens to everyone." He twitched and Emile saw his 'Tector flash red. "Pardon: it happens to a lot of us. It's hard when there's no ambiguity, right?"

"A hard truth? Truth frees us, sweetheart, nothing more."

Emile strolled over to a media screen attached to the medical table and monitored her daughter's progress. A green bar across the bottom of the screen indicated that the 'nerve replacement was nearly finished. Emile's breath caught in her throat—something gorgeous was happening here, even if her husband didn't realize it. This was really the final step of the process of purifying the information net. If this worked, people wouldn't be able to fool even themselves. No cons, scams, manipulation. Reality without filters.

Knowing that the first trials were always monitored, Emile beamed at the ceiling. The progress bar read 98%.

Finally, the network of mechanical arms improving her daughter withdrew to their idle positions and the straps began

*Cont. on p. 46*

# Waybread

Copyright © 2014 by Margaret Fletcher

Third Place, BSFS Jack L. Chalker 2014 Young Writers' Contest

Northern High School—Owings, MD

*Printed by permission of the author*

I love the way that the leaves look in the fall—colors so bright that you can taste them, maroon gold, crimson, sunset orange. The colors seem to glow against the damp dark bark of the trees and shine like fire before the misty grey sky. The wind dances about my face, causing my hair to tickle my cheeks. I beam. My job has got to be the best in the universe. Sure some jobs have shmancy perks, like “never being in danger of starving to death” or “guaranteed not to be eaten by wolves.” But I’m a royal courier; we don’t get stuff like that. What we do get are days like these. I whistle as I walk along. I even have food enough to last me to my destination. It’s waybread, which means dry, crumbly, and suspiciously squirrel tasting, but it’s edible. Probably...

Then, I hear a sound, like footsteps. I whip around, and run into the forest that lines the path. After standing stock still for five minutes I come to the conclusion that the entire thing must have been my imagination. I turn around and face the road. And the elf standing there, looking at me quizzically. I stumble backward and fall over.

Freaking elves.

Have you ever known someone that’s better than you at something? Well, imagine someone that’s better than you at everything—and lives forever. It could be worse; an elf wasn’t going to kill me. It might actually be nice to travel together.

I stick out my hand. “Hi, I’m Tanya Stevens of the Royal Messenger Corps. Who are you?”

“I am Sethelyiniam. A traveler,” he says, and then walks away, leaving my hand out stretched.

“So, you’re a traveler? Maybe we could travel together?” I say, running up behind him.

“I have no wish to travel with a human,” he says. I blush and drop back. Before long the elf is out of sight. I feel embarrassed for even trying; I was rebuffed with out a thought. I continue on my way, but the scenery no longer seems beautiful, but drab and cold.

I do see the elf again, that night, by the side of the road. He found a small clearing and was setting up camp in it. I walk by, determining not to talk to him, but the elf calls out to me. “Tanya! Would you care to set up camp with me?” At first I don’t understand why he’s being so friendly toward me, but then I realize that he doesn’t want my company, he wants extra security. If he shares a camp with me he gets half a night’s sleep and a whole night’s watch. I wasn’t against to the idea myself, even if it meant spending time with that rude elf. I nod and set my pack down at the then scabble around in my pack for a hunk of waybread. I look at the bread distastefully.

Then I look over at the elf, and notice that he hasn’t got any food out. My stomach protests, but I can’t just leave the guy hungry. I walk over and hold out a piece of the bread. “Hey, if you don’t have anything else to eat, you can have some of this. It’s disgusting, but better than nothing.” He turns around, and I see that he already has food; he’s holding some white wafer-things. I realize my mistake and turn around to go.

He calls out “wait,” and I look back. He’s smiling, and I’m struck by the thought that he looks surprisingly human when he smiles.

“I have enough food, but thank you for the offer. Truly, I have grown weary of eating the same thing. Perhaps we could trade?” He seems very eager to trade. Well, so am I. I hand over half the chunk; he gives me a pair of crackers. I take a bite of one. It’s soft and fluffy, very nice texture. But it tastes... like dirt, I try my best not to gag. The elf doesn’t seem to be doing much better, his eyes popping in a really funny way. We stare at each other for a moment, and then silently trade back.

I head back to my pack, then take a bite of my nice squirrely tasting waybread, and remember when I bought it. I was with my friends, in the baker’s shop outside the courier’s office. They were teasing me for over-preparing. I remember the baker coming out with an entire tray of bread, and my friends laughing as I sheepishly bought the whole lot—and then laughing harder when I pelted them with it. I smiled at the memory. Then I think of something and I speak aloud. “You know my bread tastes bad to you and your bread tastes bad to me, but they are the same thing, really. They were made to give people far away a taste of the place they left. They may seem very different, but in truth, that doesn’t matter. The important stuff is the same.” The elf doesn’t answer. “Well, you take the first watch. Good night.” The sky that night was strewn with stars. The stars in the sky mixed with the blinking of fireflies, causing me to think the start were very near, hovering and moving around. I reached out my hand to try and touch one, but I fell asleep in seconds.

I wake up to the pleasant sound of birdsong. Then I did a double take. Birds singing—it’s morning, that stupid elf must have fallen sleep and not woken me up to take my watch. Thank god I’m not dead. I scramble to my feet, ready to give that lazy elf a very rude awakening. Then I notice he’s already awake. “Uhh, what’s going on...?” I say.

“Morning,” He said, “I decided that I would stay up the whole night on watch and leave you to sleep.”

**Darker Horizons, cont. from p. 42**

*research shift is just after mine.*

They weren't dead when I got in there, but it would have been better if they had been. In my suit, the leak didn't affect me, but I couldn't do anything either. I bumbled through the halls, unable to touch, unable to speak...

*I know how to shut it off and default to the base life support, but it's too late. Our med bay isn't enough. I find the control center, send the commands... watch my friends die as I wait for the atmosphere to restabilize.*

Afterwards, what was there left to do but clean up?

*Sending signals back to Hub Momma down in Houston, but she's lost contact, too. This isn't just the life support—external comms are down, too. Shit! System-wide failure? It's a nightmare. It's THE nightmare. Things never go this wrong.*

My eyes flash open and I realize I'm lying faceup on the moon's surface. The cylinders are still beside me, with their infernal viewing windows clear for the world to see.

*What world? Just me.*

I cleaned them up. I packaged them. Our escape launcher was never stocked for an actual rendezvous with earth, so it only has about enough fuel to break orbit and then... drift.

*Better funeral than any they'd get down here.*

So now here I am, finishing the job. I can still finish it, if I block out the memories, the implications, the lost potential, the unfinished... stop.

I load the final containers, seal the ship. Its autopilot takes a while to get the whole system warmed up, so I have time to walk a good distance away while the thing detaches its couplings and activates its lower rockets. I have a front seat view of their final departure.

I watch until the colony is a tiny blip in the star-studded sky, and then turn towards that familiar, unknowable horizon.

There is no day here. There won't be for several weeks.

**Waybread, cont. from p. 45**

"Why?"

"As thanks."

"I thought you didn't like my bread."

"No, not for the bread, it's about what you said. It reminded me that we're all the same"—he touched his chest—"very deep down."

"Well, I don't buy it," I reply.

"What?"

"My mama always said 'what you say and what you do are two different things.' I still owe you. So we're just going to have to travel together until I get the chance to stay up the whole night and let you sleep."

"It would be my honor," the elf says, bowing in an exaggerated fashion. I giggle. The elf smiles too, and then looks thoughtful. "You know, you look very much like an elf when you smile."

**To Tell A Lie, cont. from p. 44**

to undo themselves. Emile's eyes locked onto the Tector interface at her daughter's hip and knew that despite the lack of external modification, much more sophisticated processes were taking place within. Her daughter's unblemished lids flickered and flew open, and she turned to face her parents as if waking from a coma.

Emile rushed to her. "Are you alright? Did it hurt?"

"Not really," said the angelic face that had grown to dominate Emile's world. "I don't feel any different."

Emile deflated a little. What was I expecting? Something dramatic? This will change the world. She smiled and put her arm around her daughter, bursting with pride and pent-up tension. "I love you, dear. Thanks for going through with it."

"Love you too, Mom."

Then she fell to the floor.

Emile watched in fixed horror as her daughter convulsed, the red light flashing like the flare of a gun muzzle at her hip. Her husband scrambled to help, but Emile was paralyzed.

It felt like hours before she spoke again. Her daughter was back on her feet, dazed and shocked.

"Say that again," Emile breathed, unfeeling.

She could see the terror in the girl's eyes. "I love you, Mom." The light flashed again, but this time she held her ground. Emile blinked in disbelief.

"Again."

"What?" That was her husband. "No! Stop, don't listen to her, don't make it hurt more. Emile, what the hell?"

Emile hardly heard. Her world was crashing down upon her. She felt the room spinning, put a hand out to steady herself. She knocked something loose and heard it shatter on the floor. Her daughter backed away from her, tears flowing freely now.

"I don't know why it did that! It's not true!"

Two more jolts of electricity shot up her daughter's spine and she fell back into the medical table. A metal arm, dislodged from its position, swung and made contact with her husband's face, and he staggered away, clutching his eye.

Emile advanced inexorably forward, hand outstretched. At some point between her sixth step and her seventh, her palm brushed the smooth, pale cheek. She felt the wet tears and the trembling. "Shhh," she said. "It's okay, I understand." Her hand traced downward, feeling the young jawline, the pulsing jugular. She pressed forward, comforting. "It's okay. Hard truths." Her daughter's weeping became a choked sob. Emile pushed harder, willing everyone to understand. "I get it." She had tears coming down her cheeks now, too—her reality was sinking in, too late. The room refused to slow.

The sobbing stopped. Emile looked down, startled, and found her daughter collapsed on the floor. A purple bruise was creeping across her neck, carefully, almost shyly. Her eyes were open. Her chest was still.

Emile turned and found her husband frozen against the far wall. She fell to her knees and screamed.

The head of the Department of Emerging Technologies turned away from the screen. "Shut it down," he sighed. "But keep it quiet."