

# I

SHE DIDN'T SEE THE SHARK until it was too late. She drifted beneath the ocean's shimmering surface. It quivered, unbroken, through deep distant blue, aquamarine, and into bright turquoise around the sparkling white center created by the unseen sun. She glided over fossilized flowers and petrified plants, her eyes too dizzied by hot bright colors to study the blacker shadows. Schools of shimmering fish parted around her as she swam onwards. First golden damsels scurried by, their little fins flashing yellow, then she burst into a cloud of zebra-striped sergeant majors. As she sank towards the sand, translucent blue fish whisked from a darkened arch. Slowly propelling herself with her fins, she peered curiously into the shadows: a smooth grey shape, undecorated by the bony coral that clustered on all the other rocks – then it whirled towards her, flying towards the mouth of the arch. Its tail swung heavily to each side, the clean sharp fin cutting through the water. Before she had time to register its fatal streamlined jaw, it was opening to show the ranks of serrated teeth... Everything snapped out of existence.

She opened her eyes.

“If you don't mind, *miss*, there's other people who want to try the VEC 2025 – people who might actually buy it.”

The sallow salesman sneered at her from the safety of his nylon suit and plastic counter. She glanced around, still dizzy with shock. The showroom had filled up with the lunchtime rush, lines three deep around every stand. Rush and Pure dominated the exhibition. Their names darted on spotlights around the hall and holograms projected snippets of the wealth of experiences they offered. The Rush extracts were restricted to their extreme sports, given the number of children milling about, but private black-and-purple booths girdled their stand.

“Umm – yeah,” she said, trying her most charming smile. “I'm gonna come back with my brother to actually buy it, I just thought I'd pick one out first...”

“So have a look,” he said curtly, waving at the plastic-wrapped VECs hanging on display. “They come in pink, silver, black and green. Fashion snapons over there.” His thumb gestured to the other side. “But *this*,” he lifted the headset off her, “Is going to the next customer.”

Dawn sighed, annoyed, and pretended to examine the display. Her brother could afford one, but that didn't necessarily mean she got one. She checked the time on her cellphone and swore abruptly, earning herself a nasty look from a woman wearing three kids and a “Proudly Pre-Pregnant” t-shirt.

“Pregnancy is a violation of the rights of women!” bellowed Dawn over her shoulder as she pelted from the showroom, late for her protest.

Marianne dumped the thick package from her publishers on the carved Indian living room table and yanked the cork from a bottle of wine. Usually, she'd open Champagne at this point: a tribute to the first, mesmerizing time she'd received a whole, bound, covered book with her own name on it. However many lined her shelves now, she always tried to remember the initial excitement. Waving a stick of incense, she muttered “evening ambiance” to the control switch. The overhead light slowly dimmed as little LED lights brightened, the music system flicked on, the volume of her evening playlist rose steadily. She lit a candle and a cigarette and curled up on the sofa. The package stared back at her.

“Music off,” she snapped irritably. “TV on – film list. Select 2Ds. Down... down...” She scrolled through her collection of old 2D classics, looking for one to pass the slow evening alone. “*Da Vinci Code*.”

She was old enough to remember the old, flat films, which the babies who ran the publishing house thought incredible. Marianne found them soothing – the way they stayed on the other side of the room, but forced you to imagine your way inside them with their clever angling and lights. This time, her imagination failed her. While Sophie Neveu was unraveling great swaths of plot to the hero, Marianne ripped the package open. Her own face beamed on the cover, alongside the strong lined face and grey hair of everyone's childhood hero, the astronaut Jack Firestone. The art team had played with the hologram: dusty golden light spun behind them as she angled the book and their eyes changed strangely. *Godspeed: Breaking the Metaphysical Plane* it declared, in letters only a little smaller than her own prominent name. She stared hard at his face, her mouth working, and flung the book back on the table as her tears broke. Past the age of 25 though, tears lost their novelty and their ability to ease heartache. She stopped crying, lit another cigarette, filled her glass again and reached for her VEC. Now *this* was immersion.

“Activate *Massage Parlor Pleasure*,” she choked out and lay full length on the sofa, closing her eyes. Within the world of the VEC, her eyes fluttered open on Henrik's long blonde hair and barreled chest approaching her.

Ray spun slowly, his legs drifting in the direction that his vision told him was up. His head, by the same logic, pointed downwards. His inner ear, usually responsible for such decisions, did nothing but make him feel sick. He breathed slowly and deeply to control the nausea while he reoriented himself mentally. Gradually, he came to believe that the doorlock he'd come through was at an angle on the “ceiling” of his capsule and that his feet hovered above the “floor”. Using the handholds, he turned himself around painstakingly, maintaining the idea that wherever his head pointed was up. He'd played a similar game as a child. With his mother's dressing room mirror held against his waist, he'd walked around the house, looking intently at the mirrored

ceiling, pretending it was the floor. He persuaded himself to step over the ledges as he passed through doorways and to carefully circumvent light fittings, though he bumped his knees on the furniture. When he walked out onto the porch, he imagined himself carefully balancing on the struts of the overhang until the blue sky of the heavens came into view. He'd sit down at the steps, then, staring at the mirror, wondering if he had the courage to leap into that blue beyond. If he did, would he discover the ability to fly? Or would he just fall off the Earth? Both had appealed. Now he could do both. He allowed himself a few more lazy turns, lost in the meditation beyond the nausea, and then settled in front of the doorlock, telling himself it was upright and so was he. He pressed a button on his suit and gravity began to return.

Les lingered under the Louvre's glass pyramid, lost in happy wonder at its cleverness. A true pyramid, the relationship between its square base and its altitude respected the golden ratio. This made a slope of about 51.1827 degrees, more or less – pretty much what a pile of salt achieved naturally. Then there was the simple beauty of its geometric panes: his eyes flashed happily over the diamonds and triangles of glass so neatly slotted into space. Through these refracting panes shone the pale blue sky of a Parisian spring. He could understand the mathematical beauty of it, but the other, visual beauty caught his heart and squeezed it strangely. How did this work – that through his eyes, just cornea, he absorbed something that made him want to cry with love?

No-one paid much attention to the gangling young man with prematurely thinning hair who stood staring upwards, except an older Italian woman with striking, crumbling, good looks.

"Les," she called impatiently, folding her arms over her wide bosom. She'd been brought up in a time when the sun was not so terrifying and her already olive skin was permanently stained with gold, her cleavage overlaid with a fine net of wrinkles. Her wide mouth was painted dark red, bleeding a little into the skin around her lips.

"Coming, Mamma..." With a last lingering look, he trailed after her.

He halted again, dumbfounded, in the foyer. A headless angel, its wings outflung behind and its bust forward, dominated the staircase. The massive marble figure seemed to stand at the gates of the Garden of Eden, forbidding him to go further until he could come to terms with its beauty.

"Les!" his mother called again, already at the top of the staircase. "Will you come on? I want to see the Mona Lisa this time and I left supper on the stove!"

"Yes, Mamma," and he hurried on, only to be stopped short on the landing. "I don't get it," he said, as they made their way down the wood-paneled corridor hung with priceless works. "If I'm so clever, why can't I *understand* all this?"

"What's to understand?" His mother shrugged.

"Why it's so beautiful – why I feel like I'm seeing more than is there – why

