

Death of a Starship Poet

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They found Mewlana's body in the meditation room, stabbed in the back with the chef's best knife. The chef, of course, was furious. It's not like he could walk to the chef store and buy a new one. At this point, The *Vita-More* was more than halfway to the star, Zeta Reticuli, and the settlement on Zeta Earth, although a performance mathematician told me that the concept of "halfway" wasn't valid in folded space. "Distance isn't a functional concept," he said rather snootily when I asked him how many of the thirty-nine light years we had covered. We'd left seven months ago, and we'd arrive in six more. That seemed like more than half the distance to me, but what do I know? I'm a memoirist, not a physicist.

At any rate, the horrified chef dropped the knife to the floor when he heard what the blade had carved last and headed for the sculptors foundry to have a new one made, although, as he said, "This was an heirloom! German manufacture. A limited edition, Wusthof Santoku. My mentor gifted it to me upon my graduation. His family had it for generations."

Mewlana was gregarious. Tall, brunette. She smiled often, wrote funny limericks for each of the pilgrims, favored flower-scented colognes, enjoyed meals made from foods that rhymed, most often slept alone, and sometimes shared with me her progress on her epic of mankind's journey into the trans-human. She'd finished 83 cantos. It was beautiful, but I hadn't talked to her in a couple of months.

Why anyone would kill her escaped me.

Rheinhold, our oldest philosopher, approached me in my chambers. His hair had greyed prematurely, and he liked it that way. We'd spent a great deal of time together in the first month, but he kept asking me things like, "Why is there consciousness?" and "What is sensation?" which I thought was charming at first, but he often stopped to ask in the middle of making love, which just annoyed me. He also put his hand on my shoulder when we were in public and steered me around like I didn't know where I was going. Very possessive. Very clingy. I don't know any paramour who would put up with that, and, sure enough, word got around, and now, unless he had a secret lover, his only company at night was one of the courtesans. I'm sure she only did it to expand her repertoire. Everyone enjoys a challenge.

But as the elder philosopher and the committee chair, he was tasked with the Mewlana situation.

"Jayla, the committee thinks you would be the best person to investigate this. You were not, however, *my* first choice." He stroked his chin as if he had a beard. Rheinhold displayed many affectations beside the invisible beard and the poor conversational timing, but within his field he was respected. "Your art is in studying human interactions. You understand motivation. I hate to take you away from your work, but could you spare the time?"

I really hadn't been working on anything. I told people I was "between projects," but the truth was I had stalled. What topic would be worthy? So, his proposal tickled me. "Memoir of a murder, is that what you are thinking? Why not ask an oracle?"

"They are often . . . vague about specifics. Good on the big picture: 'Your future prospects look bright if you cut that negative person out of your life,' and other such, but that's not helpful. We actually need to know who did this. It would be awkward, you know, if it were to happen again. We are claustrophobic here on the ship."

That was true. At first I thought the *Vita-More* felt spacious with its apartments, studios, performance center, restaurants, and lounges, but with four hundred people and nothing but time on our hands, within a few weeks, there were no more surprises. Lush carpet, brightly colored murals, rich curtains, well-placed ambient light, and handcrafted furniture could only disguise the tightness of our quarters for so long. No room held us all. We even had to make dinner reservations to be assured of a table. And now, after seven months together, it seemed I always ran into people who tired me.

"What about backups?"

Rheinhold stroked the side of his face, going for the imaginary sideburns I guessed. "You'd be lucky to get an imaging now. One extant dies unexpectedly and everyone wants to update their virtual. You'd be surprised how many people miss appointments."

I'd skipped my last three, I realized. "Intimations of immortality?"

"Yes, exactly. So you'll take this on?"

I nodded. It would be exactly like research, except instead of trying to create an entire portrait of a significant moment, I would be looking for the answers to just a couple of questions: Who killed Mewlana, and why would they do it?

As I walked back to my apartment, down a hallway rich with paintings in their heavy frames, I considered avenues for investigation. Who had she been working with lately, or did she have enemies? That sort of thing.

I like writing on paper, which is something Mewlana and I had in common. It's archaic; most of our peers preferred composing mentally, but I'd never been able to keep my stream of consciousness that focused. In the middle of a discursive paragraph on a subject's influences, consciousness. For example, I might insert erotic musings on who I'd been with the night before, or randomly toss in a gossipy thought I had about the subject. Paper's slower, but I can feel the thought to word connection with my hand. A papermaking artisan on the ship kept me supplied with notebooks, each a work of art. She grew ecstatic about fiber content and acidity. I just wanted it to take the ink well. My pen was lovely, formed from a single quartz crystal from a jeweler on a lower deck.

Alone in my apartment, I opened a notebook, then interfaced with the directory. Mewlana formed in the space by my table. She wore a standard imaging robe for her backup. The memory room is chilly.

"Jayla!" she said.

"Hello, Mewlana. Sorry to disturb you. You're virtual."

She smiled, then looked at her own arm. "Thanks for saying so. I can never tell at first. You changed your hair."

"Yes, weeks ago. So, I've got some bad news. You're dead."

Mewlana frowned. "How much have I lost?"

The date for the backup showed above her display. "One-hundred and fourteen days."

"Damn, I really liked that body." Then she brightened. "Could we go to my apartment? I'd

like to see what I've written in the last four months."

"Fine. Meet you there." I turned off the display.

Virtual life is disorienting. People turning you off, for example. You're sitting in one place, just chatting away, and then the room changes, and maybe different people are there. It's startling if you've been stored for several hundred years. Catching up on the news is terrible. What they need to do is to give you a display from your side of the interaction so you can see what time it is and where you are. It's disconcerting to always have to ask the time. I'd bet my performance mathematician would tell me "Time isn't a functional concept," and he'd be right, when you're virtual.

I called Aphra, a short woman with round cheeks, one of Mewlana's friends and an outstanding poet in her own right, to meet me at Mewlana's apartment. She might be able to tell me what had been going on in Mewlana's life during the missing time. Aphra was inside when I got there, going through Mewlana's closet. "I kept some clothes here," she said. Her hands shook as she folded an outfit on the bed. "They won't decant her for at least a couple of years once we get to Zeta Earth. This is tragic. You have to be extant for the competitions, and nobody goes to a virtual reading anymore. She won't be able to defend her title. What a loss."

"Ah," I said, while figuring out how to access the directory in Mewlana's apartment. "The Akhmatova Festival is next week. You're competing too?" Mewlana had decorated her apartment with beaded and sculpted wall hangings that shifted color or moved depending on where you stood in the room. It was like standing in a particularly vivid and surreal dream.

Aphra said, "Yes, but it wouldn't matter. Have you read her cantos? Brilliant. Utterly brilliant. No one else would have even bothered reading after she performed."

I found the interface. Mewlana appeared. "It's like teleporting. I'd forgotten how abrupt virtual life is. You miss the transitions."

Aphra sobbed, "Mewlana, I'm so sorry this has happened to you. It was so unnecessary."

Mewlana laughed and took a step toward Aphra as if to embrace her before remembering they could not touch. "It's not so bad. If Jayla wouldn't keep activating me, the next time I open my eyes, I'll be extant and on Zeta Earth."

"True," I said. "In the meantime, Rheinhold asked me to investigate your death." I called up an image of her corpse. Aphra gasped, but Mewlana leaned in for a closer look.

"I'm glad I don't have to remember that!" she said. "One wound in the back. Very efficient. Why would someone kill me?"

"I was hoping you could tell me."

"Last I remember, everything was fine. I read a piece of the cantos to a breakfast group, then I went to the backup session. I had an idea about the next section I was going to work on that evening. I keep the poem in the desk. I was on cantos 79."

I said, "I've read it up to 83. Exquisite work, Mewlana."

Aphra stood at the desk. "It's not here." She pulled the drawer all the way. It was empty. "She always kept it here."

It turned out that Mewlana did not make copies of poems while she worked on them. She'd been writing this piece for four years and made no copies! Some of her readings from the poem had been archived, but much of the work only existed on those pages, and whatever she'd written since her last backup would be gone altogether if we couldn't find it.

Mewlana cried, "I never took the poem from the room! I only composed here!"

I talked her down from hysteria before I turned her off. I mean, time wouldn't pass for her, and it would be no fun for the next person who accessed her to deal with the emotional mess. Hopefully, when I talked to her again, I would have the poem.

Aphra wasn't helpful either. Between sobs, she said she hadn't visited Mewlana for several weeks.

I thought about her clothes in Mewlana's closet. "Weren't you sleeping here?"

Her face darkened. "She said she couldn't concentrate when I was with her. I wanted to share my drafts, but she said my voice was 'infectious,' so I moved on."

Aphra left, but I stayed in Mewlana's apartment, taking notes. The beaded hangings shifted

colors around me. Writing memoir is about making sense from the chaos that is life. Nothing has meaning, really, not on its own until we start making the connections. One of my favorite techniques is to sit in someone else's space and to try to absorb something of their personality from how they inhabited it. How they live is one of the threads of their life. Whether I was instructing them on their own memoir, or if I was ghosting it, their objects became meaningful. I'm pretty good at paying attention to objects.

Nothing in the apartment seemed immediately helpful, though. Mewlana was a tidy person. She'd straightened her bedding before she'd left the apartment on the day she'd died. There was no evidence that she'd entertained anyone.

Either someone she knew killed her, and then my goal was to identify the criminal and figure out why, or the attack had been random. I shivered thinking about that possibility. How could I investigate a random murder? What if Mewlana had been in the meditation room contemplating her poem, and someone whom she had no connection with decided to end her?

Not only could I not solve the crime, but what could be more frightening than a homicidal person on board a starship? Anyone could be next.

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Aphra had left the desk drawer open. The missing poem settled my nerves. If Mewlana was just in the wrong place when the killer came along, the poem should be still in the apartment. Unless something else was going on, her death and the poem were related.

Gathering all the poets into the same room was nearly impossible. They were an uncooperative lot. Some didn't like each other. Some were massively eccentric, and some might agree to come to a meeting, but then get lost in a composition and miss. I put high priority naggers on their invitations that couldn't be turned off. They were a sour-looking lot when I walked into the upper deck conference room. I suppose I would be angry too if for every ten minutes for the last two hours, a voice piped in my ear, "You have an important meeting at three o'clock. Please be on time."

Almost everyone on the ship self-identified as a poet, regardless of where they spent most of their time. Poet-ballerinas. Poet-musicians. Poet-synchronized gymnasts. Poet-origamists. Sometimes I even wrote poetry. So I limited the call to entrants in the Akhmatova Festival, which cut the meeting down to thirty-six, but it didn't start well.

A slender poet named Octavio who was stripped to the waist, the better to display the poems he wrote on himself, said, "Is it true that someone is targeting bards?"

"You're not a bard, you underdressed poser," snapped someone from the back of the room.

"Why are we worried about this?" said Lanying, who wore what looked like pajamas. "It would be a crisis if she were *erased*, but what's the problem?"

I wondered if Lanying thought she had a chance at the festival prize. "I don't believe anyone else is in danger . . ." although it suddenly occurred to me to wonder who was the next favorite for the festival now that Mewlana was out " . . . but you can help me to figure out what happened if any of you had contact with her in the last week."

The meeting went downhill after that. There were numerous angry versions of "We will not spy on each other," and "Our private lives must remain private."

Prickly bunch, the poets. I gained thirty-six suspects that split the crowd roughly into quarters: the Jealous, the Dismissive, the I-don't-cares, and the Falsely Sad.

The other topic concentrated on Mewlana's cantos. Where was the poem? Except for the Dismissives, there seemed to be universal agreement that the real loss was the missing epic effort. They'd all heard at least a part of it.

Near the end of the meeting, Rheinhold stepped into the back of the room. He stood next to Aphra; put his hand on her shoulder while saying something in her ear. Probably checking on my progress. I don't know what he made of the ruckus.

I went to the meditation room to clear my head. No evidence that Mewlana had died here existed. Bots sanitized the surfaces. The view window sported no smudges. In folded space, the window revealed nothing. The performance mathematician would tell me "Perception isn't a functional concept," and the blackness I perceived out the view window neither was

nor wasn't there, but I found the black purity soothing.

Crime isn't exactly unknown—some people study historical novels—but it's rare. In a society where people live indefinitely, it doesn't take long to figure out who should spend their time as virtual personalities where they can't harm anyone. Many of the people in the directory are flagged, and no one activates them.

While researching, I accessed more information about the bad old days than I wanted. Humanity hated itself for a long time, as far as I could tell. Just the stuff about prisons was disturbing enough. Murders, theft, rape, terrorism. The litany hurt to read. Crime investigators, though, they looked like artists. I liked the shape of the word on the page: "detective."

My friends are surprised when I tell them what gets me excited about my art as a memoirist. Most people think a memoirist writes biography, but it isn't like that. Memoirs are about a meaningful time or event in a person's life. I like talking to dozens of people about an incident that many of them didn't find significant. I enjoy reading old messages about trivial matters. I relish the little personal items that most people overlook, like how someone folds their clothes or how they eat their meals. I like watching what people do with their hands. You can learn a lot from just focusing on hands. Do they keep them still? Do the hands have a route (on the table, touch the face, touch the other hand, back to the table)? Do the hands flutter like birds? Do they count out unheard rhythms? Are they tensed or relaxed?

And that is just the hands. I like watching what people do with their eyes. I like speech mannerisms. Posture interests me. How someone organizes their closet fascinates me.

Everything is a story, and if a story is about assembling meaning out of chaos, then that is what I do.

But my approach wasn't fruitful so far. Nothing that I learned about Mewlana helped. I needed to focus on suspects, the thirty-six poets, all who had a better chance at the festival with Mewlana ineligible.

Octavio found me in the meditation room. Up close, I saw his poems were programmable skin art. He could change the display's wording, color, or font. He could animate them if he liked. I didn't go for skin art myself. They say you can't feel the images moving, but the idea bothered me. His pants cut off the poems. I wondered how far down they continued. I wondered if he ever used that to his advantage. "Come back to my room to read the rest" or something like that. Instead he said, "Some of the poets are arguing that the festival should be canceled." He looked worried, but he met my eyes when he spoke. The limerick that crawled across his forehead and down the side of his face was distracting.

"Really. I would have thought you all would be happy to see her out of the way."

"You have a low opinion of poets then." He put his fingers against the viewing window. No reflection. Just the infinitely deep black beyond. "Some contend that because she was last year's champion we should show respect."

"You could ask her." I wondered why Octavio had sought me out.

"I don't like to disturb the virtual." He traced letters on the window. "We should do readings in here. A few chairs, and this as the background . . ." He indicated the blackness. ". . . would be perfect." He turned toward me suddenly. "I don't think one of us could do this. We're closer than you think. It's not a poetic thing to do, and it was Mewlana. Do you know her reputation among the writers? Her works are lessons in the craft. No, I don't think a poet would do it." His hands were still. There's an interesting behavior I know related to what someone does with their hands when they lie: they will cover their mouth. Octavio believed what he said about the others.

"I'll keep that in mind," I said. One of the articles I'd read said that sometimes the guilty person would try to become a part of the investigation. I wondered if he had other reasons to talk to me.

"Killing is a strange thing," he said. "It's everything and nothing."

"Excuse me?"

"It just is," he said. "You should watch yourself. If someone was willing to kill Mewlana, they might be willing to kill you too. Save yourself often."

He left. I was touched that he cared.

If Octavio was right, and none of the poets did it, then who would have motivation? Mewlana was loved.

While reading the historicals, I discovered that old time detectives had access to information that I didn't. They could do phone taps (I had to look up "phone" to see what that was), or record conversations secretly, or look at a suspect's financial records. Clearly they had no sense of privacy. Nobody would tolerate that intrusiveness. What was the point of living in civilized times if you couldn't keep your information to yourself? Still, I wished there had been a camera on the meditation deck, or cameras in the hallways. If I was one of the old detectives, I could rush in and say, "Go through the tapes for the last twenty-four hours." Then I'd know. There was no way to track anyone's movements. All I could depend on was what witnesses were willing to tell me.

I gathered my notes, checked the directory for my dinner reservation, and headed to the upper level restaurant where the poets often ate. At the door, I scrolled for my name and table. I could see at a glance who else would be in the restaurant I knew, and I could invite myself to sit with them, which they would then be given a chance to accept, but I didn't want the conversation. I scrolled backward. The board showed me who had sat with whom for several days before.

The restaurant's reservation board had never attracted my attention before. The list of names and pairings slid up and down. How interesting! For a memoirist, relationships can be the whole story. The meaning of an event arises out of how the actors interact. The reservation list laid out connections. I could see among the poets that the Dismissives ate with each other, which made sense. No one likes to hang out with a negative person except another negative person. They can reinforce their opinions when they're together. The rest of the poets appeared to mix it up. I could see friendships, writing partners, and casual acquaintances. Then I saw a pairing that surprised me. Night after night for the last month, the same couple, and they ate breakfast together, too.

I checked into the backup center on the way to my room. I would have hated to lose my progress so far, but what I'd heard was right. People were nervous. The imaging artist, a haggard, young-looking fellow, said, "We're booked, but the appointment I'm supposed to be doing now is late. You can take this slot or wait a couple of days."

The imaging took twenty minutes. I felt much better knowing I backed up.

I had a suspect, but I needed proof, and to get that I needed witnesses. Three of the four committee members met me outside the apartment door. All philosophers, the two women, who spent a lot of time in the fitness rooms and looked it, and a man in a wheelchair. "I broke my foot," he explained. "Being extant has risks."

"We must search his belongings," I said.

It took a lot of debating. Privacy trumps almost everything, but, as I explained, "Privacy depends on ethical behavior. If a single citizen flaunts society's rules, then everyone else's privileges are threatened. Since my suspect would only lie if we accused him, we need proof, which I believe is in his apartment."

In the end, they agreed. While we were searching, I worried we would be caught. I didn't want a confrontation without the proof.

We found Mewlana's poem hidden behind a painting on the bedroom wall. I held the sheets in my hand, the first cantos on the top page. She'd finished six more sections since I'd read it last. It was all I could do to not sing with joy.

"I couldn't destroy them," said Rheinhold. He stood at the bedroom door. "How did you know?"

The poem felt fine in my hand. "It was about Aphra, wasn't it?" I said. "You had feelings for her, and you thought if Mewlana couldn't compete at the festival, Aphra would win."

Rheinhold's gaze dropped to the floor. "Mewlana won last year. It would have made Aphra so happy to take the wreath." He looked defiantly at me and the committee, crowded into his bedroom. "And she still might. This changes nothing. Aphra will be the best poet this year."

The committee member in the wheelchair said, "This is disappointing, Rheinhold. Now we must decide on an appropriate response."

Rheinhold looked surprised. "Response? I'm guilty of bad behavior. I'm sorry. You have the poem back. I'm sorry for that too. What other response would be necessary?"

"You murdered someone!" I shook the poem at him.

He raised his eyebrows. "No one died. We can talk to Mewlana right now if you would like. She's no more dead than you or me. I've inconvenienced her at worst."

My face heated. He looked so calm, so assured. "Mewlana had not backed up for one-hundred and fourteen days before you put a knife in her back. That person, the one who wrote ten more cantos to her poem, the one who made memories and evolved and felt moments that are now lost forever, died. That's murder, Rheinhold, not an 'inconvenience.' You killed almost four months of her."

The committee agreed. They decanted Rheinhold to the directory. The more I thought of the punishment, the more I liked it. His personality was flagged, of course, so it was unlikely he'd ever be extant again, but rather than the timelessness of virtual life, he'd be accessed repeatedly by scholars, psychologists, historians, and story tellers. They'd all want the same conversation from him, though. "Why did you decide to kill your victim, Rheinhold?" or "Can you describe the guilt you felt afterward?" or "What failings in your own life were you compensating for?" No one would ask him his opinion on consciousness or sensations. Every waking moment would be about his crime, and that was it.

The Akhmatova Festival went on without Mewlana. Aphra withdrew despite the other poets' (probably insincere) protestations that Rheinhold's actions were not her fault. Without Mewlana or Aphra competing, though, the competition was the most entertaining in years. Multiple upsets. Octavio made it to the semifinals, while the wreath went to a third-year entrant who no one would have predicted as the winner.

A month afterward, I met with the newly decanted Mewlana. Aphra was right. Normally, Mewlana would have been virtual until a proper vessel was prepared for her on Zeta Earth, but with Rheinhold condemned to the virtual, it seemed a waste not to use his body.

Mewlana held her, now his, poem in his lap for the first time. We sat in the guest area in his apartment. I'd grown quite fond of his decorating sense. "Now that I finally have it, I'm afraid to read it."

I smiled. Of course, he looked like Rheinhold. To be extant, Mewlana accepted the committee's offer of his body. He told me that this was his third incarnation as a male. "It's a change of pace," he said.

This body's hands were much larger than what he was used to. Clumsily, he thumbed through the pages until he reached the seventy-ninth cantos. "This is the last one I wrote." He reread it. Mewlana's hands trembled as he turned to the eightieth cantos. I'd read them all. I knew the rest of the poem, while Mewlana, who had written it, did not. At least this Mewlana did not. He read halfway into the unfamiliar eightieth cantos, then turned the pages over. "I didn't write this. It's not mine."

A gap in existence between a backup and restoration can be troublesome. There are instances of a backup becoming extant after years of further life. The person who they were continued on without them. They might have started a new career or married or had children. A person does not stand still after being backed up. Naturally, there will be an adjustment. "Of course it is," I said. "You wrote every word. They're brilliant words. You must keep writing. I want to see how the poem ends."

"So do I!" said Mewlana, "So do I. Here, you take these." He handed me the last ten cantos. "I never want to see them again, at least not until I finish writing the poem, my poem, not this . . . this masquerade."

So I left Mewlana in the apartment to write, and I took the ten orphaned cantos with me. They were so, so evocative. Really the best work he'd ever done. Would he be able to do them again? I knew he could not, at least not exactly the same as these. He was becoming a different person from the Mewlana who wrote these every minute he lived.

This Mawlana, the one I held in my hands, truly had been murdered. What a tragedy. Someone would have to write her story. Someone would need to write her memoir, and now I knew what my next project would be.

I clutched the fragment of the poem to my chest.