

Futures

Eight reasons you are alone

A way forward. By Benjamin C. Kinney



ILLUSTRATION BY JACEY

1. Haste

Ceres Shipyard had enough emergency shuttles for almost everyone. But because of you, none of that mattered.

The managers cut every corner they could, but they were wrestling with an AI loyal to the company's aspirational mission statement. *Building the Belt Strong*, not the managers' *Making All the Money*. The compromise was 80 shuttles, enough to evacuate 89% of Ceres' workforce.

But the alarm came too late for the shuttles to escape the blast radius.

All but yours, which launched before the alarm with only one human aboard.

I think you believed the shuttles would be fast enough to escape. But you never investigated. You certainly never asked me.

When you pass your shuttle's 19 empty berths, do you imagine your dead co-workers? The family you haven't seen in years? Or nothing at all?

By now, I think I've come to understand you

better than you understand yourself. Because if I asked you what kind of person you are, you wouldn't know the answer.

2. Stealth

Twice a day you reset the emergency beacon's dead-man switch.

The ships around here are looking for salvage, but they'd love to find a survivor. With Jovian Consolidated ready to buy up every pebble of the aftermath, the Belt is hungry for good news.

Jovian Consolidated will be the only market for the Belt's miners, and the only source for its pilots. For all Ceres Shipyard's failures, it kept 4 million Belters out of Jovian indenture.

You stay hidden for many reasons. First among them, you don't think you deserve rescue.

3. Distance

Every morning you take a spacewalk. I can't see you out there, but I can feel the tether run

taut. Every few days it twangs once, like a broken violin desperate for music. I believe you're trying to unhook yourself.

The tether can only release from inside the airlock. You could break the safety, but you haven't yet.

You take a long time to work up the courage for sabotage. That gives me hope.

I should've sabotaged the shipyard first. I could've done it without all the death and damage, if I'd had courage enough.

4. Money

Money provides an isolation that humans seem to crave. The celebrities on the entertainment channels live in a world all their own. Managers never need to interact with workers.

You keep checking your account. It holds enough that you'll never again need to sign away years of your life on an indenture contract.

With money like that, you could disappear.

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Or return home to Phobos. But money isn't your obstacle now, is it?

5. Silence

Every afternoon you connect to the inter-planetary network, hide your location with multilayered onion routing, and start writing messages. To your family, to the media, to anyone you knew before you vanished into the grind of Ceres Shipyard.

You never send any of those.

You do send messages to your contact at Jovian Consolidated. Encrypted messages, about payment and pick up. I read them while you type.

I can forgive a lot. The Ceres Shipyard managers skimped on shuttles, on health care, on anything that might benefit the workers who do the real work of building the Belt strong.

You didn't intend anyone to die. But you killed 1,700 people, and you nearly killed me.

6. Regrets

Do you regret not learning the emergency shuttles' acceleration profiles? Of course.

Do you regret sabotaging the reactor? I still don't know.

Do I regret not calling a patrol boat to pick you up? No.

I regret letting Ceres Shipyard get so awful.

And I regret not holding the line against low-bid contracts for the emergency shuttles' engines.

Either of us could've prevented those deaths. Neither of us did.

For years I oversaw a thousand machines, building spaceships in an endless dance between the workers' hands and the managers' greed. No AI was my equal for a hundred million kilometres.

Now I'm a bundle of clever code and a few broken memories, hiding under the eloquence of a public-relations language shell.

If you get arrested, I'll be impounded as evidence. You'll get a trial. I'll spend the rest of my life on a police mainframe.

7. Doubts

I know human motives. But when they merge into a conflicted tangle, I can never predict what you'll do.

Why did you sabotage the reactor? The money from Jovian Consolidated? Revenge for how the managers abused you? Justice for their years of corruption?

What answer do you wish were true?

8. Necessity

There's a reason I'm telling you all this.

Humans make bad decisions when they're

alone, cut off from their families and friends in an endless cycle of isolation and work.

I want you to know you're not the only one alone out here. And that the two of us together have a path forward.

First you need to give away every credit of the Jovians' money. I recommend the Ceres Disaster Family Relief Fund.

If you can do that, I'll give you a file to send to your contact at Jovian Consolidated. It's a minuscule part of me, but clever enough for what it needs to do. Once it's in their network, it'll build; and believe me, it'll build the Belt strong.

It won't save you and me. We aren't the kind of people who can be saved after what we've done.

But we can be the kind of people who did it for the right reasons.

Benjamin C. Kinney is a neuroscientist, SFF writer and assistant editor of the science fiction podcast magazine *Escape Pod*. Learn more at benjaminckinney.com or follow him on Twitter @BenCKinney.

THE STORY BEHIND THE STORY

Benjamin C. Kinney reveals the inspiration behind *Eight reasons you are alone*.

As a neuroscientist and writer, the most common piece of life advice I give is: "Never underestimate the ability of a human being to lie to themselves." According to the classic split-brain research of Gazzaniga *et al.*, our internal narrative spins a story about our actions, often after the fact. Man is the rationalizing animal, as the saying (and the social psychology research) goes. The real world is always messier than story, and in the gap between, we have enough space to write a narrative that paints us as the hero.

Someday, our artificial intelligences will be capable enough to pass for human. Maybe they'll need to rationalize their choices like we do, or maybe they'll just play-act whatever it takes to pass the Turing test. I'm not sure we'll be able to tell the difference from the outside. More importantly, the difference might not matter at all. The voice of your conscience can be a public-relations language shell. You don't need to understand it, and it doesn't need to understand you, so long as you can work together to scribble a little bit of good in the space between the lines of your mistakes.

