

# Futures

## Conflict resolution

Sisterly love. By Holly Schofield



ILLUSTRATION BY JACEY

I push Alicia hard, deep into the liquid, gripping her shoulders when she squirms. Silver balls of air bubble from her nose and her lips move as if she's trying to speak, to cry, to plead. Finally, she sags into the viscous liquid. Her eyes stay open, staring at the ceiling of Cargo Hold One, strands of hair floating towards me like imploring fingers. One last glimpse as I close the lid. Her lips have become calm, accepting.

I swipe at my tears.  
I've made the world a better place.

### One hour ago

"Sis, are you sure? It's chilly in here." Alicia peeks through the doorway.

I ignore her and heave my kit bag onto the makeshift bunk. Stacks of shipping crates loom above my personal stuff. Not very cosy, but lugging everything to Cargo Hold One is worth it. First, it passes the time for 20

minutes, always a plus during this interminable journey. More importantly, sleeping in this creaking, cold, ass-end of our courier ship means I won't have to listen to Alicia's quiet breathing all night long in the crew cabin.

She keeps trying, of course. "Move your stuff back? We can sleep different shifts, eat at different times. I'm so sorry you're hurting."

"I'm not *hurting*," I say. "I'm annoyed, and depressed. And I want to be by myself."

She slides the door shut after her and I'm finally awesomely, wonderfully, alone. I give my cryopod an affectionate pat. Moving the cryopod's fluid canister, tubes, cables and portable controls has taken a big chunk of the past 20 minutes but its presence is comforting.

Darkness roils in my thoughts. After we finish this courier run, I'll book the cryopod on an interstellar long-hauler, climb inside, and travel so many light years away, Alicia will be a

distant memory. No one to measure up to; no one to see me fail. And fail. And fail.

It will be like I never had a sister.

### Ten minutes ago

"You don't *have* to lick your finger like that." I need to eat sometime, and the infernal yam stew is even worse cold. So I stride into the galley, successfully ignoring Alicia until she sticks strawberry goo in her mouth for the one thousand three hundred and twenty-third day in a row.

Our situation is my fault. I'd insisted on negotiating for this equipment delivery to some stupid colonists and I'd badly underpriced our fee. After delivery, we'll end up more in debt than ever.

Then, while reading our latest disastrous loan statement and getting angrier and angrier at myself, I'd placed our order to the port food supplier. Just as my verbal transmission about

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the two foods I hate most – “NO yams or strawberries!” – went through, I’d smashed my fist down on the panel, muffling the first word.

Alicia wouldn’t have lost her temper like that, and would’ve confirmed the order instead of impatiently signing it off like I had.

Alicia hasn’t complained, though. Why can’t she bitch like a normal person?

I shovel in stew, wishing my mind could be as blank as the bulkhead I’m staring at.

Alicia gets up. “I like strawberries and yams.” She rubs my shoulder as she passes by the tiny galley table. “And I like being here with you.”

The thing is, Alicia really means it. Not a mean bone in her body. A truly nice person.

It’s so unfair.

The only thing I’ve ever been better at than Alicia is doing maths in my head – something computers can do faster anyway. She carefully compliments me on it all the time.

She makes me crazy.

I slam my stew container into the galley bin and open my mouth to express an emotion I’ll be ashamed of later and that’s when the stream of meteors hits.

First, a deafening bang.

A high-pitched hiss.

A 2-centimetre opening in the hull above the bin.

We catch each other’s eyes and dive for our p-suits.

Alicia, first to the rack, shakes her head and points. A dozen holes pierce each suit. And a thumb-sized hole in Alicia’s cryopod, fluid already oozing out.

Alarms sound as automatic SOS signals transmit to nearby ships. Help will come, in hours or days.

We have only minutes of air.

We run into the corridor and Alicia hits the door seal closing it behind us. Useless. The meteor shower has hit the corridor too, its raw grey metal now pockmarked with blackness.

On to Cargo Hold One. There, my pink washcloth is already being sucked towards the biggest hole.

I hear – no – *feel* Alicia collapse behind me. Chest burning, I drag her towards my cryopod, dizziness blackening my view.

I hold up two fingers: both of us can cram ourselves into the single-person pod, and sleep until help comes. She reluctantly nods: less chance of survival with two. I glare at her. It should be feasible in these conditions.

But then, oh goddess, then ... I can’t help myself. I do the maths.

X days into our cargo run, Y light years to the nearest ships on standard shipping routes, Z amount of life-sustaining gel.

Easy maths.

I do it again.

And again.

One, I mouth at her. Only one of us can make it.

She points weakly at me.

That gentle look in her eyes, even here, even now.

I will never be like Alicia.

I forgive her then, during that fraction of a second. For the person she is, the person I long to be, for the dab of strawberry in the corner of her mouth. I see her goodness, and the world, and my place in it.

In that moment, I find peace.

That’s when I grab her shoulders.

**Holly Schofield’s** stories have appeared in *Analog*, *Lightspeed*, *Escape Pod* and many other publications throughout the world. You can find her at [hollyschofield.wordpress.com](http://hollyschofield.wordpress.com).

## THE STORY BEHIND THE STORY

**Holly Schofield reveals the inspiration behind *Conflict resolution*.**

I once worked with tree-planting crews and other silvicultural technicians in northern Canadian clearcuts. During coffee breaks, sitting on the truck tailgates, we’d swap life stories. One crew member, Derek, told me how, a few years previously, he’d seen an advertised contract to thin a tree plantation in a valley so remote it was accessible only by helicopter. He hastily placed a bid, then asked a close friend to join him in what seemed like a lucrative venture.

Derek made all the arrangements. He and his friend set up camp amid the alder stand, expecting the work of cutting down every third tree to take about five weeks. After a few days of little progress, it became apparent that the blurred aerial photograph in the information package hadn’t revealed how dense the alder had grown, or how rough the terrain was. Derek had bid a woefully low amount. The two of them spent the next five months wrestling chainsaws amid clouds of blackflies and mosquitoes, earning less than minimum wage. Midway through the summer, short on food, Derek radioed in a new supply order at great expense. A burst of static muffled the word ‘No’ in front of the words ‘canned beans’. Guess what the helicopter dropped off cases and cases of?

By the end of the contract period, they were barely speaking, their friendship forever ruined. Derek got a tear in his eye that day as he told me about the guilt he still carried. It recently occurred to me that space travel might create a very similar type of isolation with similar stresses. That was the starting point for this story and, as I wrote it, the two sisters’ relationship grew from there.

