

The Final Nail

By Michael J. Allen

Sydney Johnson drove the last nail into his oldest son's coffin. The final note sent chills through him. His throat tightened and the hairs on his neck rose, as if someone was standing on his grave.

He wiped crimson sap away from the spot where the nail pierced the dark wood. With the same cloth he dried both his tears and his brow. The carpenter turned away and stared into the cloudless lime sky. He cursed the planet, the counsel and himself.

A shadow fell over him, making him jump. His wife crumpled into his arms.

"I know, Ann, I know."

She shuddered and shook. "No, there's been another death."

Cold washed over Sydney from inside out. "Go in the house and lock the door. I'll go see Marcus."

He watched her walk away. The once vibrant woman he married trudged toward their home. Concern rose to the forefront of his thoughts. The way she walked, she seemed drained of life. Not that he could blame her with the loss of both children in the last month.

His chest burned and his palms itched. He thundered across the lawn, angrier with each step. He stopped and ripped a sapling out of the yard. He tore it to pieces, wringing the small black trunk in his hands and venting his anger on the innocent sapling. He discarded it on the road and turned away from the ocean-front village. His gait increased with each stride.

Faces met him on the road, many he had not had the time to get to know since the advance colony setup team landed on this world. Many were hollow, though some echoed his own anger.

Where ever he went, they watched him. The attention exacerbated his temper. His furious march ended in front of a neat wooden cabin. Layers of white paint could not conceal the black pudding color of the wood underneath. It was like another insult. Sydney pounded on the door with both fists, as if he could beat the color out of sight.

A muffled voice was quick to reply, "Enough already! You don't need to break anything."

A series of grunts, curses and oaths wafted through the door. The squeal of wood against wood accompanied the sudden retreat of the door and Marcus stood framed in the doorway.

Marcus was young and lean like many space station born men, his frame hiding the strength and tenacity that made him an excellent lumberjack. The out of breath man met Sydney's gaze. "Damn door keeps sticking. It's not the only one either."

Sydney nodded. "Yes, I've taken the plane to my own several times. Must be this confounded humidity."

"What is it?"

"There's been another death. I need a hand."

Marcus was impossible to read. "I heard; the horses are ready and waiting."

Moments later the two men stepped off the road's end into a lush field. The two were sullen, each burdened by more than their tools. Two draft horses followed at tether's end. A four-eared rodent bolted from the high grass. Both men scrambled for tools that might serve as weapons.