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THE HUM OF DISTANT NOVAS

by

Emily Jane Lewis

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for a Degree with Honors  
(English)

The Honors College

University of Maine

May 2018

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## ABSTRACT

*The Hum of Distant Novas* is a science fiction story about a woman in need of a community. It builds on the medieval frame narrative tradition and existing works of speculative fiction to create a world in which storytelling is a very grounding, very human part of the day. The protagonist, Jo Wake, books passage aboard a spaceship captained by Tempest Lane in order to reunite with her younger brother across the galaxy. The crew and passengers of *Fascination* tell each other stories to entertain, to react, to speculate, to hurt, and—most vitally—to feel together as they travel through the merciless void of space; they are part of a trend in science fiction that looks to interplanetary space voyages and extraterrestrial expansion with hope.

For the 'rents, who cheerfully endured playing *Harry Potter* trivia with us,  
and for my rival for the (first) library scene.

I am so grateful to you all.

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## ARTIST'S STATEMENT

### Part I: Preliminary Research

All constructed stories exist within frames. We encounter narratives juxtaposed with the rest of our lives, and they are inexorably linked to the medium through which they were conveyed—be that a yellowing paperback, a tiny TV, a postmodernist sports journalism site, or a friend through their tears. Frame narratives call our attention to our experience of storytelling. Authors have utilized them as early as the eighth century—Katharine S. Gittes cites the *Panchatantra*, a work in Sanskrit with an Arabic frame and an Indian story, as the “earliest frame narrative of significance” (9). Frame tales are frequently episodic in nature, connecting to a several-millennia-long history of oral narration. Medieval storytellers utilized this technique to great success—this analysis will dive into its use in *The Canterbury Tales* and *The Decameron* in particular—and we find a resurgence in contemporary literature, particularly writing that build on postmodern ideas. Personally, the use of frame tales in modern science fiction and fantasy works is especially compelling. So what do reminders that you are reading stories do—especially when employed in recent speculative fiction? Why avoid the immersion sought by the majority of fictive writing?

Authors like Boccaccio and Chaucer extend the presence of their authorial voices in their respective narratives by creating personas that they maintain were present at the scenes conveyed; they exist both as active characters and as reminiscing storytellers. In *The Decameron*, Boccaccio's persona paints himself as a humble, moral figure who feels compelled to recount the adventures of the plague-fleeing group exactly as they occurred.

He praises their capabilities as entertainers while simultaneously disparaging himself. As he tells a story fragment in the interlude before Day 4, he assures us that he would never wish “to incorporate any story of mine into those of a company as excellent as the one I have described to you.” (Boccaccio 250). There is a duality in his irony—both self-serving and self-critical, it is a tongue-in-cheek appraisal of his work. Chaucer also addresses his own storytelling skills in *The Canterbury Tales*. Through the character of the Lawyer, he proclaims himself a mediocre, but prolific, poet:

I don't know any first-rate tale that Chaucer,  
For all his little skill in rhyme and metre,  
Has not—in language such as he can master—  
Told long ago, as many are aware;  
If he's not told them in one book, dear sir,  
It is because he's told them in another. (Chaucer 124)

The Lawyer then goes on to name several of Chaucer's works in what functions as unsubtle advertising. In the introduction to his translation of *The Canterbury Tales*, David Wright describes this portrait of Chaucer as a “portly, bookish, well-meaning, rather dim-witted sort of chap, not much good at making love or poetry, but doing the best he can” (xviii). He is a harmless figure, a character unassuming enough that his claims of having merely “compiled” these tales might be believable (Chaucer 503). The poor quality of Chaucer's “Tale of Sir Topaz,” which is cut short by the Host, only affirms the ineptitude of Chaucer the Pilgrim. Of course, this persona is an act—one that adds comedy to the layers of storytelling. With each interjection from the persona, we the audience are reminded that Chaucer the Poet is performing the character of Chaucer the Pilgrim, who

is, in turn, performing the other pilgrims, who are, in turn, performing their own characters, and so on in his recounting; the oral storytelling frame only enhances our awareness of his “continuous voice” throughout as both actor and character (Koff 117). These humble personas exist as sly winks to the audience that add a layer of irony and duality.

The storyteller personas of Chaucer and Boccaccio also interact with the role of the compiler and perceptions of authority. A.J. Minnis posits that the two were familiar with contemporary literary theory and the functions of the *auctor*, who was granted “considerable authority”—as well as responsibility—and the contrasting functions of the *compiler*, with little authority and little responsibility (Minnis 192). Much of this slight responsibility held by the compiler lay in their *ordinatio partium*—the “organization and structuring of the diverse extracts”—which was considered constructive creative work (Minnis 192). The compiler was granted some authority through their arrangement of others’ words—the method in which they “rehearsed” what others had “asserted” (Minnis 193). Recitation allowed them a degree of separation from the work while also borrowing from the authority of the reproduced work; this balanced effect is achieved in these compilations, Minnis says, by the two proposing to reproduce the stories of others as accurately as possible (198).

*The Decameron* and *The Canterbury Tales* are both built on a claim of obligation to history. Chaucer and Boccaccio cite their compulsion to preserve their fictionalized encounters and the tales they heard exactly as they happened—both works are framed as though the author is reporting on true events that they were actually present for. The effort made in both of these works to assure us that the frame is true and that the authors

are not responsible for the contents distances the authors from the texts and creates a barrier against censure. Chaucer defends himself based on this supposed duty in an aside as the tales take an immoral turn, stating:

I'm sorry that I must repeat it here.  
And therefore, I entreat all decent folk  
For God's sake don't imagine that I speak  
With any evil motive, but because  
I'm bound to tell, for better or for worse,  
All of their stories, or else falsify  
My subject matter as you have it here. (84)

Addressing "decent folk," he demurely resists criticisms of immorality in his writing by laying the blame with the characters. If the reader should have moral objections to the narratives conveyed, it is *certainly* not the fault of the faithful, dutiful chronicler. There is a sense of honorability in the semi-solemn professions of Chaucer's obligation. Many of these narratives are centuries old, and preservation of both the stories and their respective pilgrims' interactions is, he professes, his main drive. Leonard Michael Koff writes, "[Chaucer] asserts that he has, literally, through his retelling of them, brought old stories to the public" (37). *The Decameron* is similarly insistent regarding its factuality. Boccaccio totes his role as reporter and rejects the idea that he invented or edited either the frame or the narratives within. In the conclusion, he wonders, with no small amount of irony: "But how was I, indeed how could I, set down any story but those narrated?...But even supposing that it was I who invented those stories and was their author (which I was not)..." (Boccaccio 684). When Boccaccio emphasizes his duty to

record the tales of others, Richard Kuhns notes, he creates “a land of defense against an accusation of untruth” (145). Boccaccio seeks to solidify a sense of history to accompany his frame in order to further this impression of veracity. He does this by namedropping figures who add historical weight, including Saladin, Guido Cavalcanti, and Charles I of Anjou (Gittes 81). He ties stories into cultural works that would have been familiar to his audience—for instance, when Philomena ends her narrative of Lisabetta and the basil pot by saying, “Eventually news of [the events] did get out, which was when someone wrote the song we still sing today” (Boccaccio 286). By working his stories into history and letting them fill in gaps or provide explanations, Boccaccio adds some credence to the idea that his frame is true. These medieval works create believable situations in which storytelling would occur, and the authors push this narrative of factuality. The frames are, to a degree, utilized to avoid criticism, and they therefore must appear largely plausible; each frame must be a form that “imitates non-fiction” (Cooper, *Structure of The Canterbury Tales* 49).

Some authors in modern literature utilize frames to mimic academia and achieve appearances of truth. In Angela Carter’s “A Victorian Fable,” the slang-heavy piece is made legible and comprehensible through a glossary. This forces the reader to flip back and forth between the pages and engage with the text as though it is authoritative and trustworthy. Vladimir Nabokov’s novel *Pale Fire* is structured as an edition of a poem with a foreword, commentary, and index that eclipse the length of the central text. The narrative emerges through the commentary: the narrator, Kinbote, frequently insists that lines in the poem by Shade are in reference to the exile of a king, who we learn Kinbote believes is himself when one digression into the life of the king moves cleverly from

third person to first (Nabokov 247). Kinbote recommends the best method of reading the book, one that requires plenty of tactile page turning, engaging with the verse and his own notes concurrently (Nabokov 28). These notes are frequently only tangentially related to the text, the most egregious example being a note simply on the word “often” that sparks a reflection utterly disconnected from the poem’s context (Nabokov 95). The index is openly opinionated—the section on Kinbote is lengthy and self-congratulatory (“his modesty, 34” (Nabokov 308)), while his definition of Sybil is cruelly brief (“S’s wife, *passim*” (313)). Doubt as to the state of his mind—and therefore the accuracy of his narrative—are introduced through the disregarded comments of others: a colleague calls him “insane” (Nabokov 25); the Department of English at the school where he teaches sends a memo stating he is “known to have a deranged mind” (195); Kinbote himself casts doubt when he imagines a stage play based on the events of the novel and describes his own character as a “lunatic who imagines himself to be that king” (301). His detours and wild claims interact with the academic frame to call into question the veracity of the narrative itself. These scholarly frames present an appearance of nonfiction that interacts with their stories in cleverly structured ways.

Frame narratives highlight the craft of storytelling. When characters in the work tell their own tales, they perform with a metafictional awareness. Koff calls this process of shaping stories “nonlinear”: “Chaucer’s stories seem to both anticipate the direction in which they may be moving and to catch up with themselves by rehearsing where they have been” (118). In *The Canterbury Tales*, the Knight is very aware of the length of his narrative and makes repeated professions of shortening it that read ironically. The Squire, likewise, repeatedly draws attention to his method of storytelling in a self-critical way,

feeling as though he cannot do the story justice. A comparable anxiety about ineffectiveness is present in *The Name of the Wind* by Patrick Rothfuss, where we see Kvothe, telling his retrospective, autobiographical tale, pause to consider how to describe someone (417). He is fearful of leaving an incorrect or incomplete picture, and is aware of how his story is to perpetuate once told—it is intended to be read as the comprehensive, accurate version of the legend he has become. He eventually shrugs his worry off, commenting, “If I ruin this as well, it will be a small thing as far as the world is concerned” (Rothfuss, *Name of the Wind* 419). He also, looking ahead to what he must convey in his telling, makes cryptic remarks about the more recent parts of his past, remarking after one emotionally charged scene, “. . .this is just a piece of the story, not even the worst piece, and I am *not* telling it to garner sympathy” (Rothfuss, *Name of the Wind* 132). His foreshadowing pushes the tale onwards and reminds us that he is engaging with the narrative with full appreciation of where it leads. In the actual play podcast *The Adventure Zone*, we see a similar phenomenon come to its conclusion. Each episode begins with a “previously on” and a mysterious narrator—revealed in a behind-the-scenes episode to be an NPC from within the story itself (“The The Adventure Zone Zone” 0:09:51-0:11:26)—cryptically leading the listeners into the narrative. The penultimate episode of the first arc of the show, in addition to the usual introduction, includes an ending narration that states, “You’re all caught up now. Whatever happens next, well . . . we’ll just have to find out together” (“Story and Song—Finale, Part Two” 1:59:01-1:59:11). This moment, moving from the authoritative impartation to joint experience, parallels the participatory format of the show itself—the Dungeon Master broadly shapes the narrative, and the other players improvise and collaborate in their

performances of their characters. A comparable scene is found in *The Lord of the Rings*, when Tolkien foregrounds the existence of his book from inside the story. As Frodo and Sam, left by Gollum, pause to consider their situation, Sam remarks, “I wonder what sort of a tale we’ve fallen into?” (Tolkien 712); acknowledging their place within legend, he imagines their tale being read aloud from “a great big book with red and black letters” (712). Verlyn Flieger says of this moment: “By forcing the reader to be in two places at once, inside the story on the stairs with Sam and Frodo and outside the story reading the already-written book that puts them there, Tolkien enters the world of postmodern theory” (25). Sam can only speculate exactly how his narrative fits within his history and how it will end, while Tolkien teases us from the perspective of the writer with full knowledge of his plot’s shape. When the creation of the narrative is foregrounded, the audience is prompted to engage with the piece as a nonlinear entity.

The purposes of the tales in these frame narratives vary dramatically. *The Canterbury Tales* is somewhat unique among medieval frames with the prize of a free dinner acting as the narrators’ drive to entertain and impress. The contest is initiated by the Host, and the low stakes of the game generate a sense of order during the long period of travel (Cooper, *Structure of the Canterbury Tales*, 50). *The Decameron*’s characters’ judgments of the stories add a bit of competition to the recitations, but there is no specific goal other than to pass the time effectively; both works feature a master of ceremonies (the Host and the daily appointed royalty) who must be awed. Characters who don’t wish merely to entertain are moved to convey morals or information through their narration. Many of the tales in *The Canterbury Tales*, *The Decameron*, and *Arabian Nights* are conveyed to teach, either the characters within the frame or the audience. Chaucer even

declares that the purpose of *The Canterbury Tales* as a whole is to teach, stating in the Author's Valediction: "As the Bible says, 'All that is written is written for our instruction', and that has been my aim" (503). Informative framed communications can also provide dramatic irony; *The Long Way to a Small, Angry Planet* features articles and messages that provide exposition and, via information about who accessed the material, lets us know what the characters have accessed. At one point, a "Message Not Delivered" notification in the metadata presented at the top of the communication, along with the importance of the contents within (little-known information about an alien species' biology) foreshadows an inevitable clash (Chambers 357). Often, stories arise simply from the need to vent. *Pale Fire*'s narrator's desperate need to voice his tale comes through in his search for the slightest reference to his life (imagined or real) in his friend's poem. *The Name of the Wind*'s Kvothe is similarly motivated to put forth and preserve his own version of his legend, in his own voice. The act of expression contains its own power, but we see tales actively shaping the world in which they're conveyed as well: in the *Arabian Nights*, we see the power of storytelling over death in Scheherazade's lyrical battle for her life. Her frame creates high stakes that make the tales more valuable—after all, they seem to say, they were good enough for this king. There is an ever-present necessity of hype to avoid being murdered; after her first tale, Scheherazade promises, "Nor is this more wonderful than the story of the Fisherman and the Genie" (*Arabian Nights* 70-1). She wins her life at the end of the frame, proving the effectiveness of her tales and her argument that her three sons need a mother (*Arabian Nights* 765); she saves the lives of all the kingdom's young women, too (766). One of her early stories parallels (and foreshadows) the frame in the saving of another's life through

tales: “The Merchant and the Genie” features nested narratives told by a trio of old men, each to win “a third of this merchant’s blood” (*Arabian Nights* 59) if the genie finds them “wonderful” (59). The purposes of all these tales differ, but the lesson is clear: the most compelling and entertaining stories can achieve a variety of goals.

Characters are compelled by each other’s stories to respond with their own takes, contributing their own voices to a conversation. The Reeve responds to the Miller’s Tale with an anecdote defaming millers, using dramatic irony in a similar way to the previous story. There is frequently a pause between stories to reflect and comment in *The Canterbury Tales* and *The Decameron*, and tellers are willing to openly acknowledge the relation of their own tale to one that came before. Dioneo begins a tale with: “I should like to tell a story that to some extent resembles the last one” (Boccaccio 367). Characters interact with each other both intentionally and unintentionally; speaking to the development of themes as orchestrated by the author, Helen Cooper writes, “A theme will be developed, dropped, and picked up again, and when Chaucer returns to it our perception of it will be modified by what has intervened” (*Structure of the Canterbury Tales*, 71). Themes of wives, clerical corruption, and infidelity extend throughout Chaucer’s writing. The Monk alone includes several concise tales within his span as storyteller that, as a collection, criticizes wives, which then inspires the Nun’s Priest’s and Wife of Bath’s tales. *The Decameron* is also given coherence via brief, daily themes. The existence of the individualistic, discontinuous narratives does not detract from the impression of wholeness in these collections, though the “centrifugal forces” required of the frame are substantial (Cooper, *Structure of the Canterbury Tales*, 29); unity arises from these thematically connected reactions.

Interruptions to the framed tales serve as reminders to the reader that cancel out the immersion that most narratives look to achieve. The Knight's frequent interruptions of his lengthy tale to state that he intends to keep his tale short give us a feeling of the perpetual drive behind his telling and reestablishes the circumstances. Lauretta of *The Decameron* gets sidetracked in a comparable way, pausing her tale to give a lengthy censure of courtiers before returning to her narration, commenting, "But to pick up where I left off—I got carried away more than I intended by my righteous indignation—" (Boccaccio 56). Characters' awareness of time manifests in their surroundings as well. Scheherazade purposefully times her stories so that she will be interrupted by the day and leave a cliffhanger, thus extending her life—the king thinks, "By Allah, I will not kill her, till I hear the rest of the story" (*Arabian Nights* 61). Kinbote's recognition of his setting manifests in comments in the Foreword that end up further enhancing his unreliability: "damn that music" (Nabokov 15), he interjects, supposing that the source is an amusement park when it is really, we later learn, merely a radio (235). Shade also addresses his environment and the circumstances of his writing within his poem, remarking on "this index card" (Nabokov 53) and openly speculating on possible titles for the work itself in an aside: "But *this* transparent thingum does require / Some moondrop title. Help me, Will! *Pale Fire* (68). Kvothe's tale is deliberately interrupted by its narrator, too: he pauses to ready the inn for rush hour (Rothfuss, *Wise Man's Fear* 364), to silence his listeners' emotional reactions (*Name of the Wind* 132), and just to take a break from performing (*Name of the Wind* 332). He is also interrupted by a pair of customers who unintentionally force him to pause his story (*Wise Man's Fear* 625). *The Canterbury Tales* features an unbidden interruption as well, in the form of the Summoner

responding negatively to the Friar's Tale; he is quickly hushed by the Host in an effort to keep the narrative going. Though not an active interruption by a character within the tale, Angela Carter's "The Loves of Lady Purple" breaks the framed piece to foreground the frame. The piece includes Lady Purple's tale "as performed by the Professor's puppets" (30). It is isolated as though it is the contained tale as staged—even given a line break, font, and a title distinct from the rest of the short story—but it then says, "The Professor's puppets dryly and perfunctorily performed these tactical maneuvers like toy soldiers in a mock battle of carnality" (Carter 31). This fluidity blurs the distinction between told tale and frame that mimics the supernatural blend of human and puppet that characterizes Lady Purple herself. These interruptions and breaks in the framed action create tension, layer irony, and generally speak to the frustrations of linear storytelling.

In interrupting their narratives, storytellers will occasionally disrupt the frame by addressing their listeners and readers directly, blending the distinction between the characters hearing the account and us. There is often a feeling of playful interactivity to this tactic. The Knight, for instance, directly asks his audience to determine their feelings about the situation in his tale: "Now all you lovers, let me pose the question: / Who's worse off, Arcita or Palamon?" (Chaucer 37). Nabokov, too, asks that his readers pause to consider their reactions and foregrounds the format in which he is writing when Kinbote declares, "I trust the reader has enjoyed this note" (147). Chaucer, likewise, anticipates the reactions of his readers, though he expects some to dislike the bawdiness of many of his stories:

And so, should anyone not wish to hear,  
Turn the page over, choose another tale.

There's plenty of all kinds, to please you all:  
True tales that touch on manners and on morals,  
As well as piety and saintliness;  
I'm not responsible if you choose amiss (84).

This disclaimer serves to deflect blame onto the offended readers who chose to read his tales despite his posturing as a virtuous recorder. The audience is given an active role when they are included in this way; they may choose to skip around, or to experience the narratives linearly within their frame. This technique calls attention to the frame and serves as a reminder that the reader is not the only audience: there is a hierarchy of experience in the frame.

The nesting of stories inside one another is a particularly fascinating tool that produces what Helen Cooper calls a "*mise-en-abîme* effect" (*Structure of the Canterbury Tales* 5). In The Nun's Priest's Tale, a rooster and hen relate dreams and cite exemplary stories to win arguments. Philomena of *The Decameron* includes a teaching moment in her tale on the first day when Melchizedek uses a tale to avoid punishment. In fact, *The Decameron* as a whole is one massive nested story: Boccaccio addresses a supposed intended audience of courtly ladies in his introduction, fourth day interlude, and conclusion, telling them (and us) the narrative about the group of men and women, who in turn relate their tales; his apologies and sweet talk to his stated audience read as tongue-in-cheek to his implied readers. The *Arabian Nights*, a deep series of nested tales is conveyed in Scheherazade's "The Hunchback." Within is the Christian's story, the Controller's story, the Physician's story, and the Tailor's story—within which is a young man's story and the Barber's story—*within which* are the tales of the Barber's brothers. It

is a complex, wonderfully choreographed piece. Rothfuss' *Kingkiller Chronicle* features nested tales as well. Early on, he provides a justification for Kvothe's memory abilities: he is capable of remembering every important interaction of his life verbatim because as a child, his teacher, Abenthy, assigned exercises to strengthen his skills in recollection. This is why Kvothe is able to recount perfectly the stories told by Trapis and Skarpi to the children of Tarbean, as well as the fables spun and recounted by himself, Hesper, Marten, Dedan, and Tempi that serve to pass the time on their quest in *The Wise Man's Fear*. This explanation keeps the reader from being drawn out of the narrative—we can believe Kvothe and the frame because he has this gift. Stories within stories within stories demonstrate the capacity of the frame to establish settings in which narratives may be shared.

Regardless of a tale's intended purpose, its telling demonstrates a few key things: time to spend spinning stories (and listening to them), a recognition of value for both the tale itself and its goals, and a bond between teller and audience. Kathleen Forni remarks that Chaucer's frame is most recognizable and invaluable for possessing "a narrative structure affording the communication necessary for a sense of community and social communion" (60). Frame narratives foreground the sheer necessity and impact of storytelling. When applied to science fiction and fantasy literature, they assert that the sharing of stories will continue in perpetuity, regardless of universe, or world, or time, or the presence of magic. They assert that the shaping of narrative is a craft with inherent worth, and that there will always be an audience for tales in some medium. They assert that stories are intrinsic to being.

## Part II: Reflection

It was the first two books of Patrick Rothfuss' *The Kingkiller Chronicle*, which I read in early 2017, that initially sparked my fascination with frame narratives and drove me to look into their origins, their popularity in the medieval era, and their contemporary use in genre fiction. His series is a masterful example of the literary device that builds a world of legends and community; his use of the frame pushed me toward the preliminary research I completed over the summer, which was incredibly useful in helping me structure the frame and stories of my own work. I was able to incorporate elements I saw in previous examples of frame narratives like audience interruptions, tellers drawing attention to the structure of stories, tales as responses to earlier tales, and addressing the listeners.

I chose to write a novella because I thought a frame narrative of my own would be an engaging way to respond to what I had learned in my preliminary research. Additionally, it was personally important to fulfill a creative option; throughout the past four years, I've needed to push much of my creative writing (outside of workshops) aside, largely because of time constraints, and this year-long project allowed me to make fiction again—albeit with an academic constraint.

It was important to me to create a world in which storytelling is seen as vital, manifesting the thesis of my theoretical framework. When traveling in space, characters are literally ungrounded; they rely on artificial day/night cycles and arbitrarily-defined mealtimes to create structure and make them feel human—or, I should say, like beings. For them, the daily morning story is a ritual that lets them stay socially connected, emphasizing the importance of this tiny community in space, and which gives them a

marker of the beginning of each day. At the beginning of the story, Jo is untethered. She is working at a bar with several robots, far from her home planet and the only being in the universe to whom she feels a strong connection: her brother, Arman. It is through her journey on this ship that she realizes what she is missing by letting herself float through her life; the community storytelling tradition on *Fascination* is one indicator of how lonely she is. Most importantly, this optimistic central argument allowed me to create a work that echoed the hopefulness and sincere joy that are present in several of my reading list texts.

It has been a tough year—politically, creatively, academically, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera—but this project has been incredibly rewarding. I'm grateful to the Honors College and the English Department for this opportunity, and to my advisors and committee members for being my readers and guides.

## CHAPTER 1

An arc of golden lightning illuminated the dim sky beyond the dome. Mere minutes before the first star would rise coolly above the tired planet of Bel, and hours before its smaller, fiercer sister would burst across the horizon, there was a dark hum charging the circulated air of the protected cities. It is possible that the currents of energy from the stormy expanse outside would help fuel a restless urge buried beneath stagnation and alienation and guilt.

Regardless, the day rose—exhaustedly, aloofly it rose.

\*

It began with a beleaguered, robotic sigh. Or rather, it ended with a beleaguered, robotic sigh, built from hours of observing the being's distant looks, comments to customers that were more snide than usual, and tangible evidence of slack: an empty bottle unstacked, an empty glass unfilled.

The bar had been quiet that night, with only the murmurs of strange travelers filling the hot, cozy room. A few shimmering holograms of folks had sat in pairs with present beings, many of them bots or near-bots, sharing drinks in unshared spaces. Outside, a sign glowed with the bar's name—THE MOLTEN DUST—in an acidic green, save for a few dead pixels in the corner that provided perpetual irritation for the owner and only added to her endless list of troubles. A stout tidybot softly whistled an old Eydyyn love song as it coaxed various liquids from the floorboards.

Once the first sun had risen and the doors had slid shut behind the last customer, it really began.

FL-N7, sighing again, set down the glasses she'd been collecting with a *thunk*. Her eye-esque screen buzzed angrily as she turned to the only Earthlin working at the bar. "You had better tell me what has you so distracted before I go mad," she said archly, appendages folded in an approximation of crossed arms, the picture of sternness. "And do *not* try to sneak out of this. Jo, I know you, I know when you're upset, and—"

"For all the stars, stop," Jo Wake said sharply, throwing her cleaning rag onto the counter and running a sweaty hand through her hair. "Nothing's *wrong*, I just have some...news." She watched the other bartender warily.

"Bad news."

"Not necessarily. Just listen. I... I got a message from Arman this afternoon."

FL-N7 stared at her blankly. "Arman."

"My little brother. Back home on Hilmeron?"

"You have never mentioned an Arman in your entire life. When have you ever talked about your family with me?"

"That's not—Anyway, he sent a comm about a spell ago and it just got here. His partner of five years just died." Jo twisted the rag in her hands. Asking for favors was torture. It should be outlawed by CHORYS as a barbaric practice.

"My stars."

"Yeah, and I know it's sudden, and it's awful timing because the holiday is always so busy, and N is still on family leave so you don't have a being to work the bar, and this puts a ton of pressure on you, and sure, I guess I'm sorry for that, but...I have to go see him."

FL-N7 glared, expressionless. Jo knew she should feel remorseful for leaving the bar without the presence of a flesh-and-blood being—she had arrived on Bel two standard years ago, just as FL-N7 was realizing how impersonal her business seemed, and had filled an inter-being absence—but she couldn't quite muster it. This was why she couldn't let anyone rely on her—she'd failed Arman, and now, as a result, she was failing FL-N7.

The bot rolled into the kitchen with her collection of glasses and continued finishing up. After a few minutes, she returned.

“How long do you need off?”

“It's about seventeen days there if I don't want to go into debt. I'll only be there for a couple days.”

“Three galactic spells?” She gave a wobbly sigh. “I don't know how I'm going to swing this, but...okay.”

Jo bristled. “Look, Flan—”

“Don't worry about it dear, I'll figure this out.” Her light brightened. “Hey, do you have transport yet? I know a ship that came in—wow, last night actually. The *Fascination*. I'm not sure where they're heading, but I know the engineer, Avery. I'll call them, see when they're leaving, and if I can get you passage—”

“No, no, that's fine,” Jo interrupted hastily. “I don't want to cause more trouble. I've no problem paying my own way. Thanks for the tip.”

FL-N7 stared at her. “If you're sure.”

“I am. Thanks, Flan.”

They finished closing up The Molten Dust, shut down the tidybot with a gentle pat on the head, and parted ways at the door. Jo departed on sleepy, artificially cooled streets for her apartment, stomach churning with the anticipation of returning to space.

\*

Around Jo's apartment, the muted sounds of beings waking to alarms gentle and harsh faded through the walls, which were still set to their default colors. It was largely empty, save for the comforts that came with the place and the things that had been in her suitcase when she had arrived. What was the point of making it look homey when she'd never intended to stay for long? She settled into an ostensibly comfortable apartment-issued chair with the mail from her brother blinking across her tablet:

*Hey Jo,*

*It's been a minute, huh. I could probably translate the time on here versus Bel, but...I'm not going to. A few months based on the standard capital at least. Hope it's been good to you, anyway. The time.*

*So, it's not been great here. Manny...*

*Fuck.*

*Manny passed away a few days ago.*

*I wish they told you how quiet your place gets when it's only your place again. It's unbearably quiet, Jo. Like, I blasted one of those awful generated shows yesterday morning so it wouldn't sound so empty anymore. And then I got a bit hooked on it? Don't tell Pop I'm watching this now if you talk to them before I do. He loves these trash shows. And then I had to spend his entire funeral today not quoting semi-meaningful lines from this miserable show at his stars-damned family.*

*He would have loved that, Jo.*

*Hope your holiday is good.*

*Arm*

She felt ready to burst. The guilt that had been accumulating like crud inside of her since she'd first received his message that afternoon hadn't been dispersed by her decision to visit him, couldn't be contained by her desperate attempts to close herself off from herself. She should have been there long before this. The one person in the universe that she was responsible for (their parents could manage themselves without her) and she couldn't even be bothered to make the little trek without the prodding of tragedy—it was too far and too cumbersome, she told herself; and wasn't this what comms were for anyway? Maybe her problem was letting herself feel responsible for anyone, she thought, before pushing the notion away. She was going to visit now. She was going to make things *right*.

Her reply was terse, and too awkward, insufficient, tapped out hastily as she tossed three spells of clothes and basic cleaning-nanobots and -gels into a large bag, and tried to stave off the gross prickling of insufficiency that crinkled like pliable Ormien glass under her skin:

*Arman,*

*I'm coming over for the holiday. Don't get fussy about it. I'll be there in 17 galactic standards. I'll bring some food.*

*Hang in there.*

*Leg*

She double checked the *Fascination*'s takeoff time and coordinates, prodded a button on her bag that sent it, fizzling with particle movement, to the Pier, and left for the stars.

\*

Bel's Pier 3 lacked the inhospitable busyness it would have when the Earthlin holiday grew closer, but it still had that sense of breathless expectancy that pervaded all planets' takeoff and landing spots. Bel was, for most, a transitory planet, filled with travelers pausing on their way *elsewhere*; Jo was a stagnant exception. Ships glinting in the sibling suns glided gently into the third city of the planet via several semi-orderly tunnels that plunged through the thick, near-translucent wall of the protective dome and brought with them hazy blue clouds of elements from the unsafe atmosphere. They landed within a grid of parked ships ranging from luxurious voyagers to imposing mass carriers of imports and data. Little stood still within this wide arc of the city, save a few newbie tourists gaping at the bustle. Bel's gates were your standard hurried, transitional spaceports, in the middle of a system, in the middle of everything it seemed.

Jo took the activity in stride and anxiously sought out the landing site for the *Fascination* within the grid. This was her first time back in this port since she'd landed on Bel two years before—not seeking to stay, but not exactly planning to leave either. It felt weird to be a traveler again in the place she'd been living in. At last, she reached the coordinates and, peering around a massive, gilded passenger cruiser—the ship.

*Fascination* wasn't much to look at. It had a small, wedge-shaped, dull red hull, into which were built several observation windows. The name was lovingly painted in

space-faded silver on the side. A few curious, tiny docks lined the sides, most of which were empty.

Jo stopped by a luggage materializer near the ship and let the scanner prick her finger, wincing as it assured itself her blood was hers. She hoisted her duffel bag over her shoulder and haltingly headed forward. Standing at the top of the entrance ramp was a stunning Earthlin woman whose bushy, springy hair was drawn up into a pair of fluffy puffs on the sides of her head. She wore a wide, enthusiastic smile and a flowy, pale pink dress that popped prettily against her rich brown skin, and she bounced on her toes as Jo approached; her vivacity was infectious and irresistible.

“Hi! Are you one of our new passengers?” Her voice was vibrant with enthusiasm.

Jo nodded.

“I’m Seldom. Second-in-Command aboard the *Fascination*.” She beamed charmingly. *Everything* about her was charming. “Welcome to your home for the next couple spells. Are you Idly, Verity, or Joseppia?”

“Just Jo’s fine.”

“Hi Jo! Come with me, let me show you around the ship.”

She was about to lead Jo deeper into the ship when a low voice boomed, “Wait!”

A heavysset Earthlin man jogged toward them, a large, ovoid, seemingly seamless suitcase floating obediently behind him. He was flushed a warm copper. “Really rather you didn’t leave without me. I’m Idly, by the way.”

“Welcome to *Fascination*! Come on with us, I’ll give you the tour.”

Seldom led them up the ramp and through the entrance, which housed a few crates of supplies being transported, and up a couple stairs into the hull proper. The hallways were two beings wide and just grubby enough that you wouldn't feel terrible about making a mess. Windows marked the bluish-white walls periodically. The first mate explained that the ship was constructed like a wedge; the engine rooms in the back were the most spacious, with ladders and ramps leading to separate floors and the constant droning of the engines. It narrowed and quieted as you moved forward. Next were the living spaces. Finally, at the point of the ship, was the bridge.

“This actually used to be a cataloging ship for a bunch of Conservatory scientists. Those teeny docks outside were for scientific drones. We still have a few of them, actually, but don't really get the chance to use 'em. Down that corridor are the engines, et cetera. You can usually find Avery and Puck there if you need them for anything, but it's easier to just ping them through the ship's intra-communication systems.” She gestured to a little blue button on the corridor wall. “These are everywhere. Maybe we should go say hi to th—”

A loud banging and an angry screech interrupted her.

“Uh.” Seldom shrugged. “You'll meet them at dinner anyway.” Idly snorted. They continued down the corridor. Jo was becoming keenly aware of the straps digging into her shoulder. She eyed Idly's expensive case enviously.

“Digs are split in two—here are the passengers', and crew's are around this hallway and to the left. There's only three of you for this leg, so you all get window bunks.” Seldom motioned to two of the doors to her right, with *J. Wake* and *W. T. F. Idly* *C. W. T. W. F. T. R. T. W. N. A.* scribbled onto placards. Inside each was a cozy little

domestic space with a hand-crocheted blanket on the cot and a fairly large, circular window of star-turned glass currently tinging the hull of a neighboring ship slightly purple.

Idly pointed his luggage into his room and eyed the small space critically. “Cute,” he said dryly, locking his door with a twist of the bio-sensitive dial.

Jo tossed her bag onto the floor with a sigh of relief. “Who made the blanket?” she asked.

“Tempest, our captain. She’s great at that cool art stuff. She’s been trying to teach me for years.”

Jo exited, closing the door carefully behind her, and they continued the tour.

“This way toward the front of the ship. Up here is—Oh, Hank! Wait up.”

A man with an angular face and a small mouth paused on his way towards the crew bunks and turned toward Seldom suspiciously.

“I want to head back toward the back and wait for our last passenger. Can you finish up the tour with Idly and Jo here?”

He frowned at her. “Did the Captain tell you to do that?”

“No, I wanted to do that. Tempest doesn’t tell me to do anything.”

He glanced at the pair of passengers. “Fine. But quickly, I have to prep for exit.”

Seldom rolled her eyes dramatically. “It’s a one-way tunnel out of the dome, Hank. I don’t need you to navigate a *tunnel*.”

“And then off the planet? You want to go through an electrical storm and knock out your systems? Have fun piloting the ship when you—”

“*Fine*, fine, for every damned galaxy—I’m heading back outside to wait. *Please* do as I ask.”

Hank glared at her as he left, then turned to the two of them. “Okay. Forward, I guess.”

He walked swiftly down a ramp and toward the front of the ship.

“Um. To the right is the common space, and next to that is the kitchen.” Inside, Jo heard a pair of voices laughing. “It used to be an astrochemistry lab, back when this was a cataloging ship. Now non-essentials do their work in there, and also don’t work, I guess. There’s also a door down that hall leading to the emergency shuttle. Two-being emergency pods are throughout. I mean, you can see them.”

He pushed ahead through a door that instinctively slid open for him and onto the bridge.

“Captain?” he said crisply. “Two of the new passengers are here.”

The woman turned from the paper she’d been scribbling notes on and smiled softly at the pair of them in turn. Her thick, dark curls bounced around her bright brown eyes. She was wearing a blue and gold jacket that originated as formal wear from CHORYS’ prestigious Conservatory, but that had been neatly altered with hand-crafted embroidery and a few small, shiny mementos.

“Hey, I’m Captain Tempest Lane. Welcome aboard.” She extended a hand and Idly took it, followed firmly by Jo.

“I trust Mr. Lo here has done an excellent job acquainting you with our beloved ship,” Tempest said. There was a spark of mirth in her eye. Jo couldn’t help but grin. When she glanced Hank’s way, he’d already left. “We’ll be departing shortly. Make

yourselves comfortable. Supper is at nineteen hours. We find a routine makes travel easier for most, but don't feel beholden to it."

They thanked her and Jo made her way back through the ship toward her room. She didn't bother fully unpacking; it wasn't worth it. After a little while, the ship rumbled to life around her. Outside the window, the purpley world shifted and fell gently beneath her. She watched the other ships go by, and then the tunnels, and suddenly they were far above the planet she'd tentatively called home for two years, ascending faster and faster toward the upper limits of the horizon. The artificial gravity kicked in—a little lighter than Bel's, a little dreamlike, which left her a smidge nauseous. Beneath them, just before the ship left the sky behind, one of Bel's frequent storms fizzled angrily—but then they were off of the planet, out of the atmosphere, driving into the limitless, unsettlingly wide carpet of space.

It was horribly beautiful.

## CHAPTER 2

The little blue button in Jo's room dinged cheerfully: "Supper will begin in three minutes."

Jo groaned. She unlocked her door, wobbling a little in the unfamiliar gravity, and peered into the hallway—empty. Most beings had probably already arrived. Considering her protesting stomach, she decided it was worth talking to beings to get food. Plus, FL-N7 had pointed her to an okay ship—or at least, an experience better than the couple times that she'd let herself be crammed, artificially asleep, into a pod and fired toward her destinations. Their focus on involvement was a little uncomfortable, but the ship was clean and let her be conscious and walk around; maybe supper would actually be good.

The common space was the picture of comfiness. A long rectangular table ran down the center of the room, filled nearly to capacity with noisy, friendly beings. Mechanisms allowed the table to stretch to fit the number of beings aboard; currently, there were twelve chairs that had emerged from beneath the floor. The only empty spots were two on opposite sides of the table and one between Seldom and another Earthlin, where a little bot was currently sitting, saving someone's seat. On the far side of the room, an old Earthlin-style bifurcated swinging door split the room from the kitchen, allowing a gorgeous, sharp smell to ripple through. To her left was a window that expanded across the entire room, showing off the stars.

Feeling a little sick from the artificial gravity, Jo claimed one of the two open seats near the middle. To her right was a massive, muscular woman in a bright red tank top and clingy pants laughing uproariously with Seldom; to her left was a tall, spindly

Earthlin with fair skin and short graying hair that matched their grubby nails; they caught Jo's eye and gave her a terse nod. Between the pair of them, Jo felt tiny.

Hank shouted irritably in the direction of the kitchen, "Galaxia, dinner is late. If you needed longer to prepare, you should have programmed that information into the ship's schedule."

The burly woman to Jo's right frowned. "My sols, leave him alone, man."

"I'm just *concerned* that I won't have enough time to finish my work if dinner isn't going to be on time."

"Hank," Tempest said warningly from the head of the table. "Not tonight."

An Earthlin woman on Tempest's other side stood up, rolling up the sleeves of her yellow sweater. "I'll help," she said cheerfully.

"Oh, no need, Simone, I got it." The man in the kitchen emerged, dark hair flopping in his eyes, prodding a huge, unsteadily floating bowl of rice and yellow Nthonian crickets toward the table. A small cheer went up from the crew, followed by laughter. He took the empty seat opposite Jo and the bowl clanked its slow way around the table, ending with Tempest.

Once everyone had filled their plates with the sweet, crunchy meal, Seldom piped up. "Before we eat, can we go around the table and introduce ourselves real quick?" A groan went around the table as beings begrudgingly put down utensils. "Shut up, it'll be quick. I'll start. I'm Marlowe Seldom, I'm your pilot and Tempest's right hand." She turned to her left and looked down at the little bot; Jo suddenly realized that it wasn't saving someone a seat, but instead occupying one.

“I am Mercy. I help Madame.” It looked to Seldom, as if to confirm that it had contributed the required amount of inter-being interaction, and she nodded proudly.

“I’m Blue. Blue Lee,” the brawny woman said, grinning at everyone. “I kick asses that need kicking.” She looked at Jo expectantly.

Jo didn’t meet the others’ eyes. “I’m Jo Wake. I’m headed to Hilmeron.”

The lanky Earthlin next to her spoke next. “I’m Avery Oberfeld. Engineer. Don’t ask me to fix your hardware. I don’t care.”

“What if it’s really important?” Idly, the passenger Jo had met earlier, spoke up with a sly grin.

Avery glared at him. “If it’ll put the ship in danger of blowing up, I might take a look,” they said gruffly.

Idly was next, sitting at the opposite end across from Tempest. “I’m What The Forgotten Idly Crafted While They Waited For The Rescue That Would Never Arrive.” Someone whistled low. “Yeah, thank you. My stop is the D’lent outpost.”

Hank nodded. “Hank Lo. Head navigator.”

The cook spoke next, in a soft, lilting accent. “I’m Marvin Galaxia. I handle communications and translation, and I prepare meals.”

A murmur of thanks for the meal erupted and he smiled.

A short, plump Eydyyn girl with grayish blue scales and wide yellow eyes beamed and gave a little wave. She was one of only two non-Earthlins on the ship. “I’m Puck Noble. I’m assistant engineer under Avery. Nice to meet you guys.”

The next being was a built, tall, very Earthlin-looking Daughter of V’Owrin with a wide smile and dark, deep-set eyes. Her purple skin was reddish under the warm

lighting. “I am Verity Sun. Also a passenger. I am going to the mines of Ormiea for a research project.”

The woman who’d offered to help Marvin with dinner smiled shyly, tucking a stray dark hair behind her ear. “I’m the physician here on *Fascination*. My name’s Simone Gray. Simone is fine though.”

Finally, they’d reached the captain. “I’ve met all of you already, of course, but I’m Tempest Lane. I’ve captained this ship for—what, four years now?” Seldom nodded proudly. “I graduated from the Conservatory a few years back, fell in love with this ship and never left.” She smiled. “Now let’s dig in before the anticipation kills us all.”

The crew and passengers fell to their meal appreciatively.

“Hey Puck, did you find those connectors for the comm system you were looking for?” Marvin asked.

Puck shook her head. “Sorry, I didn’t. They had some for the YTL system, but it would have been super expensive to fit them to *Fascination*.”

“Oh, that’s too bad. Maybe on Talvrend? It would be nice to get the syntax issue in the commons fixed before the leg to New Achilles.”

“Why don’t you just order it from CHORYS and have it left for pickup on Talvrend?” Avery suggested. “It’s a waste of time just to hope that one of the shops in a port will have them.”

Puck nodded, a reptilian blush blending the bright green scales across her face into a cool mass. “I’ll do that.”

“Good,” they said dryly. “It’d be nice to have my assistant actually helping me in the engine rooms instead of worrying about our ship’s grammar slip-ups.”

Drifting gently through space, they continued to chat about their upcoming destinations, about the work they loved to do and loved to complain about, about past encounters the new beings could never know. It was dynamic and lovely, and incredibly lonely.

After everyone had finished, Tempest, who'd been talking animatedly with Verity about research grants on Ormiea, tore herself away from the pretty alien and addressed the company.

"For those new here, breakfast is at six hours," the captain said, eyes lingering on the new passengers. "Not a whole lot is regulated or mandatory on this ship—" Hank snorted loudly and Tempest sent him a sharp look. "—but we like to have our meals together. And each morning, someone tells us a story. It can be anything you'd like, so long that it's reasonably entertaining."

"Is it some sort of competition?" Verity asked.

"Not really. It's chiefly a routine that wakes us up and keeps us from getting lost. Anyway, see you all then."

A few beings stood up. Puck started gathering bowls to take back to the kitchen. Avery scrolled through notes on her tablet.

Blue stretched languorously in her seat. "Hey, who's the next storyteller anyway?"

"I think Simone was next," joked Marvin, watching her with a small, teasing smile.

"I just went the other day!" she protested.

"I know, but your story was so short, I don't think it counted."

“That’s so unfair. You’re awful.”

“Stars, no flirting at the table, please,” Avery groaned. “It’s horrendously cute.”

Jo slipped out of the common space behind Hank and made her way through dim blue passages to her room. Locking herself in, she tried to find sleep; within the dreamy lightness of the ship, she couldn’t be sure if she had.

## CHAPTER 3

Breakfast was clearly more miserable for some than for others. Jo was not one of the perky ones, rubbing off her bartender schedule and the new-space unease that had kept her night unrestful. Seldom, too, looked a little worse for wear, huddled over her drink with a dark look in her eyes. Puck and Idly, on the other hand, were discussing high-end engine models with an uncalled for enthusiasm. Hank had clearly been up for hours, judging by the tense alertness in the way he sat and the resigned fatigue in his eyes.

Jo took a seat next to Simone who nodded shyly at her, dipping her bread into her morning soup.

“You’ll get used to the ship clock, don’t worry,” she said.

“Thanks,” Jo murmured.

Everyone eventually trickled in, and the room hushed naturally.

“Anyone want to volunteer a story?” the captain asked softly.

Idly spoke up immediately. “I’ll go. Are there any rules?”

“Just make it good,” said Seldom.

“Just make it *short*,” said Avery, who, judging by the way they slumped in their chair, had clearly not taken to the morning. “I’ve got things to do once I wake up.”

“I feel like you’re calling me out, and it’s not nice of you.” Blue pouted jokingly. She got a few appreciative early morning chuckles.

“I got this,” said Idly. “I heard this rumor when I was back home on the Grev’r Space Station orbiting Halaxeas.” He leaned broadly back in his chair, running a hand

across his scruffy beard. He had coarse, tight curly hair and astute, darting dark eyes above an easy smile. His voice was quick, dark and smooth like an archaic clarinet. He cleared his throat dramatically. “This is a story about an irredeemable man kicking ass. You won’t have heard of him.”

### *Idly’s Story*

When I tell you that Custom J knew he had lost everything, believe me.

When I tell you that Custom J would lose so, so much more, believe me.

He made his home on Halaxeas after regaining his name—another tale for another time—and had worked hard to earn the trust of its king. You should interpret “working hard” as “fulfilling favors that, by the nature of their immorality, cannot be considered trustworthy.” He arranged goods transfers, stood as a substitute for masked duels, silenced political grumbling. All with careful, precise flicks of his blade. What a foolish king to trust him. And what a foolish king to, when Custom J betrayed him, attempt to destroy him.

The trouble began with a dance with the king’s son. The boy was towering, and broad, and awkward, and fucking beautiful, and Custom J couldn’t resist his bashful request and sweet smile. He led the boy around and around the silver ballroom, twirling with a kind of bumbling grace, and the king scowled from his throne. He knew the secrets the charming

rogue might breathe into his heir's perfect ear, knew the damage the knowledge of his furtive political movements would do to his idealistic boy, knew where the flirting of a dangerous man may lead. That couldn't happen.

That night, the man the king had relied on found his home razed. The embers were still popping with angry sparks. The royal mark was scratched into the dust outside—all must be official, all must be by the rules. Custom J walked through the residue of his life, seeking any remains, anything to cling to, certain that he'd lost all but ready to hope.

From the nothing left, he found two things. First, an ear. He brushed off the dust and found the same little freckle that had been on the lobe of the prince's, along with a new mark: a careful symbolic gash. The king had killed his own son to keep him from Custom J's corrupting tongue, believing that a dead heir was better than one who knew all his secrets. Second, his beautiful dagger. And this is when shit gets *good*.

Because he took out everyone. The shady beings who'd helped him finish jobs, the suppliers, the guards, the servants who'd won the king's trust, the members of the court he'd aided—*everyone*. He slit their throats and bellies, merciless, staining the pristine castle with the layered gore, dancing around the ballroom, illuminated purple by Hallaxean candlelight, in a way not entirely different from just a few long hours before. Hidden no longer, he took out everyone complicit in the king's

will, everyone who'd helped Custom J get close enough to get the boy killed.

Outside the king's quarters, he found a glimmering silver bot—massive but sly and quick, an excellent weapon. It drew a sword and introduced itself as Custom J; they'd used his data to create a bot that believed they were him. A last attempt to wholly break the man, by stealing his name.

And man, the fight was every flavor of awesome. Picture Custom J darting around his bot self, jabbing at artificial tendons, dancing around the curve of the longer blade, being matched dodge for dodge, slice for slice—until suddenly he wasn't, and the false Custom J was downed. A crumpled image in his name.

The king was not expecting Custom J to reach his quarters. As I said, he was a foolish king. Custom J cut off his ear first, of course, but made his death quick; after all the work he'd done to get there, despite the ache of guilt and grief in his bones for the prince who he'd ruined, he couldn't stand to let the king get a last say.

Petty kings delude themselves, seeing gods in their gilded mirrors. Custom J saw no such thing in the reflection of the silver castle's few immaculate spaces—he couldn't meet his own eyes. No one has seen this legend since. His revenge was his last aria.

“What a quaint tale to start the day,” Seldom said dryly.

Blue was bouncing in her seat. “How have I never heard this story before?! I love Custom J. I want to know everything. Where did he go next?”

Idly smirked. “No one knows. This is the last we’ve heard of him. Most people actually haven’t heard of him, even on Grev’r—this is a *very* obscure story.”

“Oh come on,” Jo said, grinning despite herself. “There’s no way this is true.”

“Every single word.”

## CHAPTER 4

The excitement of the breakfast tale soon wore off; Jo spent the first day of the journey lying in bed, staring at the ceiling, relearning how to drift. She'd forgotten just how unsettling the strange gravity could be: a constant reminder that they weren't tethered. Those who eagerly pushed into the void with exploration and adventure in mind were terrifying—at least Jo, bouncing from planet to planet, had firm destinations in mind (even if none so far had ended up being as grounding as she'd hoped). Marvin was kind enough to send her a couple meals after the ship asked why she wasn't at lunch and she claimed space-sickness.

Late that night, sick of the deadening ennui and unable to sleep, she mustered the energy to get up and wandered out of her room and through the ship's corridors, munching on her leftover cold crisps. *Fascination* floated, sleepy, serene, monitoring for asteroids, space junk, and other ships and keeping its passengers alive; its engines and computers hummed and groaned and softly chirped with the effort. Jo roamed the corridors on light feet. It seemed as though all the crew was asleep, trusting the ship to keep them safe—until she pushed onto the bridge.

Hank, furiously scribbling large arcs of potential trajectories through interstellar paths, started and turned to Jo. “What are you doing here?” he asked, his voice tight with anxiety. His eyes were red.

“I couldn't sleep.”

He hesitated and drew his jacket tighter around himself, not meeting her eye. “Me neither.”

The two looked at anything but each other for a long moment, uncomfortable in their solidarity, each wondering what kept the other awake at night.

“I should let you work,” Jo mumbled, backing out hastily. She paused at the door. “Goodnight, Hank.”

“Night,” he said softly.

\*

The bot surprised them all by asserting their turn to tell the next story on the second day of the journey.

“I have not participated in multiple cycles of the tradition,” said Mercy. “It is fair.”

“If you say so, bud,” said Seldom.

“What’re you treating us with?” Idly asked.

“I could provide a summary, but most beings prefer to experience narratives in their entirety.” Mercy slowly climbed into their seat, struggling to lift their own weight. They shrugged off Seldom’s offer of help. Their small body was off-white, with two stocky legs and a pair of narrow arms that retracted back into their back. The rounded dome of their head had a single circle of green light for a face. Their voice slurred a little with the processor disorder that made every movement an exhausting puzzle, for which their makers hadn’t yet scripted a patch. “You would call this a fairytale. I understand that they are important to you.”

## *Mercy's Story*

In a system unknown to modern beings, in a time unknown to modern beings, there was a beast. She had grown old and weak and longed for the days when she could run and hunt and play.

One day, the beast met a hunter in the forest. He approached with his spear, seeing that she was weak.

“It is great foolishness to attack a creature whose blood holds more magic than yours,” said the beast.

The man laughed. “I bet I have far more magic in my blood than you do. You are ancient and lazy and feeble. My blood flows strong.”

“Prove it,” said the beast, and he did. The man cut his limb with—”

*“My dad always told me he cut his hand,” interrupted Blue. “It sounds more dramatic.”*

*Mercy stared at her. “Shut up.”*

The man cut his limb with the spear, and the two watched drops of blood fall.

“See?” said the man. “Watch how my blood congeals into perfect beads of life. It is clearly magical.”

The beast agreed that the man was indeed magical but correctly assured him that she was more so. The man, determined to prove his vigor, sliced off an extremity, and the two watched his blood spurt and sputter as he sank to his knees.

“See?” said the man. “Watch how my blood surges with such youthful energy. You must admit that it is more magical than yours.”

The beast agreed that the man was indeed magical, but assured him that she was more so. The man, angry and struggling to lift his spear, sliced into his belly, and the two watched his blood pool around him.

The man struggled to find his voice, and the beast ate him.

“Wow, bud, that was great,” said Seldom.

The bot chirped softly, clearly pleased.

“Maybe next time, don’t waste being’s time with a story we’ve all heard,” Avery commented dryly.

“Don’t,” said Tempest and Seldom simultaneously.

“That is the reason why I conveyed it,” said Mercy, glaring blankly at her. “Non-mechanical beings are highly forgetful.”

## CHAPTER 5

At breakfast on the third day of their journey, the promise of solid ground and real air doing more to wake them than any breakfast could, Seldom and Blue conspired to volunteer their communications expert as the next teller; he sheepishly acquiesced, much to everyone's delight. Marvin's voice was sunny and mellow, crisp with his Earthlin accent. He had an angular nose and dark hair perpetually falling over his warm brown eyes, which he tucked behind his ears with an infinite patience. He zipped up his brown coat and smiled crookedly at everyone.

"This is a story I heard when I worked as a line cook at the Conservatory, a long while ago," he said.

"It isn't a poem in New Old Spanish, is it?" Avery interrupted. "Kinda like to understand the story I'm hearing."

"No, this is mostly in Standard. Only a couple bits in Earthlin Spanish and English," said Marvin, smiling sheepishly at the responding groan. "It's verse from the first diasporatic Earthlins, so it does get a little, ah, clumsy. Forgive them—it was two long standard centuries ago, and they were so very new to the others' language and life among the stars, having just been invited to join CHORYS. It takes time to learn an alien tongue, and you'll see that there were holes in their vocabulary. But it's good verse. I hope it makes you as content as it made me."

### *Marvin's Story*

This is a few of *los mitos* we, some of the

First to travel to the *stars* to join the great, *harmonious* CHORYS,  
have gathered.

Take it with a critical ear, if you must, but they explain the *fate* of  
our fellow ship that

Was lost to the *stars*. First, *nosotros especulamos*:

Maybe the ship, dear vanished *Lancelot*, hit an asteroid. Maybe,

Too new to the galaxy to know its dark tricks, those young

Earthlings met their

Grim end having been knocked off course by a foolish *colisión*.

We

Don't know the planet they sped, *turbulentamente*, towards after

the *crash*—some

Fear they had already left their designated path before the accident.

They skated the orbit of a nearby planet and wildly

Spun towards *sus* little moon: *un satélite natural*.

*Muchos people* say that that was the ship's tale's end, but

To others, that *close* lacks *closure*—they

*Suppose* that *los restos del* ship and moon, though but ash, weren't

just

Lost, but combined as debris into a *new* moon. *This version*

*supposes* that

*Lancelot's* loss did create something *new*. Some do fear, however,

that

*Fate* is not so poetic.

This first take was maybe too grim—don't fear, they spun *muchos*  
to *suppose* lost *Lancelot's fate*.

Under unwary eyes, mistakes happen. This tale reminds us of this,  
explaining

*The disappearance* of the vessel as nothing more than an accident.

The assumed

Safe engines were simply not: a fuel leak caused their apparent  
doom. The engine

Wings having caught *ardiendo* from within, they may have found a  
planet close,

Of which we of course know nothing for certain, and diverted

The *failing* ship *a la seguridad*. The

*Alien* planet was beautiful—

Friends, we tell of a shimmering golden sea, and a towering  
canopy of *trees* bearing

Some beautiful, *sugary-sweet fruta*, and a sun that eternally rests *al*  
*anochecer*. Some

Believe a delegation of strange *aves*—or not quite *aves*, but  
winged *aliens*—met

The lost *people*, the lost beings. The confused

Crew were wary, having not yet  
Lived on balanced terms with other *sapient* beings. Before  
Long, they agreed to meet with the delegation  
And despite the crew's initial suspiciousness, the kind *aliens* were  
Happy to offer the stranded *humans refugio seguro*. We think this  
company still  
Lives on *este* uncharted planet.

Under the safe wings of the *alien* friends, some believe the crew  
lived long and happy lives.

We have one last reason for the loss of the ship—and we  
Hope it will not sour the mood to relate it, after such a happy  
ending.

Our third story is much the same as the  
Last—the same leak, the same *cast*. But this  
Tale does not name *mala suerte* as *la causa*. Rather, it  
Was the work of *esos* strange beings that sent the ship to its new  
home. These are  
Not mere *aliens*, but *gods* of  
Incredible power, who, *algunos dicen*, decide mere mortals' fates.  
You know the power of a charming *king*; the crew  
Must have been enraptured by their glimmering feathers, their

*alien* tongue. You  
Know the *intoxicación* of a stunning *new* world;  
The crew must have tasted of the golden sea and felt the last grains  
of will slip away. It is  
Curious, you may say, that the CHORYS has no record of other  
vessels in  
Danger having been stolen away, no children *plucked*  
Of their universe and *nursed* by this hungry *especie aviar*. We  
reply, there is still much  
Unknown to us, *viajero querido*, in the vastness of  
*Space*. And therefore:

We hope our last tale was not incredible; you must know the  
curious danger of unknown *space*.

“I’m so glad I hired you,” the captain sighed. “That was beautiful.”

A flush bloomed across Marvin’s tawny skin at the praise.

“Okay, so,” said Idly. “My Earthlin *anything* isn’t great. So there were definitely  
points where I had no stars-damned clue what you were saying. But it sounded pretty?”

Marvin laughed and stood up to start putting away dishes, along with a couple of  
the others.

“If I can be honest,” said Verity, “it is laughable how much Earthlins value  
themselves.”

“She has a point,” said Puck, nodding enthusiastically. “CHORYS would have certainly found them!”

“Oh, let us have our mysteries,” said Marvin. “We love a good sense of existential dread.”

\*

After breakfast, everyone who wasn't guiding the ship stayed in the common space to watch the looming planet of Talvrend gradually fill the wide window.

“This never gets old,” Simone said softly. “I wish I could go with you today.”

“Why aren't you?” asked Puck.

“My lungs are acting up again,” Verity said, rubbing the back of her neck sheepishly. “She kindly offered to stay with me here. I told her she did not have to—”

“I absolutely do,” Simone said firmly. “Don't worry about it. Marvin can pick up everything I need.”

Outside, the city that was their destination was transforming from shining dot within a gray atmosphere to a detailed mass of towering orange buildings with rounded roofs. Each structure was carefully balanced on the cliffside that arched over a hazy gray unknown below; in the shadows of the buildings, protected from the planet's unforgiving weather, was the city itself, comprised of white, classical Earthlin-esque arches and domes carved into the cliffs. *Fascination* followed several ships darting under and around the outcroppings, hot rain pinging off its hull. It docked at one craggy cliffside, powering down with a tired sigh, and the full crew gathered at its entrance. The rain sizzled as it fell at their feet. A few cover bots that Sel had called zipped over to the ship, ready to float protectively over their heads.

“Please be careful and don’t do anything *too* foolish,” Tempest said, casting a stern glance around her crew.

Simone passed a shopping list to Marvin as they began to split off. “It’s really not as bad as last time, I promise. And if you can’t find everything, don’t worry about it.”

“I’ll be fine,” he said.

Tempest and Avery led a hovering crate of goods toward one archway; Sel and Puck, carrying Mercy, set off toward a central courtyard in the sloped cliffside, looking to drum up new jobs and pick up a shipment ordered from CHORYS; and Idly and Blue followed the sound of nearby music toward the main shopping district.

Jo started absently wandering in the same direction as Idly and Blue. The tropical rain was already starting to seep into a hole in the toe of one of her boots, despite the loyal bot above her, and she muttered a soft curse.

“Hey, Jo,” Marvin said, bounding to catch up with her. “You aren’t busy, are you? I might need some help with Simone’s list...”

She immediately saw his request for the kindness it was and hesitated. She got the sense that he would be somewhat devastated if abandoned and she didn’t want to have to deal with that. “Yeah, sure.”

He beamed.

“Okay, she says she needs something called ‘Forgovian paste,’ which at least sounds somewhat familiar...”

The two made their way up the slope, through an archway gleaming white in the rain, and onto a bustling street. Vendors camped precariously under a few safe awnings.

Some crowded in the doorways of more prosperous businesses and called out promising deals to passers-by. Travelers fluttered between the opportunities.

Over one doorway was a glowing sign, flickering with age: MEDICINAL WARES OF TENACITY. Jo nudged Marvin's arm and the pair of them squished through the street's customers and the man camped out at the door shouting about sleeping aids. Inside, surrounded by dense shelves of liquids, gases, and herbs, a heavysset Child of V'Owrin leaned against the counter. They were wearing an open vest made of coarse Ormien wool. Their violet skin was striped with the characteristic dark bands of age; the feathers across their shoulders and down their upper arms had grown soft as well. They brightened as the pair walked in.

"Hail and grant you the leniency of the stars!" they said, straightening up. "I am Tenacity, and I try to keep my shelves stocked to help anything that ails you."

"And grant you the same," Jo and Marvin responded automatically. Tenacity tilted their head and grinned, recognizing the pair's fluency in V'Owrin customs.

"My partner requested a couple things," said Marvin, pulling the scribbles from his jacket. "Well, a few things. I'm not quite well-versed in any of this..."

"Yes!" They were bouncing on their toes as they reached for the scribbled paper. "Ah, she must be the medic of your team? Yes, yes, I can help with many of these. And I have a friend down the road who can guide you to the rest, certainly..."

Tenacity pulled various jars of exotic salves, solutions, and swarming nanobots and laid them on the counter, scrawling notes on a crumpled tablet that would be sent to Simone's device. Marvin forwarded them a couple bits in payment and the pair left the shop to find the last couple items on the list.

Marvin was clearly in his element in the chaotic marketplace. He embraced the jostling of the crowd with an exuberance that seemed unnatural, grinning at the shouts and laughs that rose above the constant roar of various forms of speech.

“Goodness, it’s wonderful to be on-planet,” he sighed happily to himself. He turned to Jo. “So why are you going Hilmeron anyway?”

Jo bristled at his curiosity. She wasn’t interested in making friends in these three spells. “Family.”

He blinked. “That sounds great. Is it a holiday thing? I’m guessing you haven’t been off-planet lately—just, you know, most don’t get space-sick if they’re out a whole bunch...”

Jo let him trail off without responding, then sighed. “The holiday, yeah.”

He nodded and didn’t ask anything else. They managed to find everything on the physician’s list, but, as they walked quietly back to the ship, Jo couldn’t help but feel as though she’d done something awful, as though she were incessantly making the same inter-being mistakes. She pushed away the guilt and focused on getting back to *Fascination* in time for takeoff—even if that left Marvin a couple steps behind her.

\*

When they got back, Verity was trying to repay Mercy for bringing back an order of salves that Simone had forwarded to them. The others gathered at the ramp onto *Fascination* looked on, amused.

“Well then, let me at least help you with something needs doing, if you do not want anything,” Verity was saying.

“No.”

“There must be some sort of favor I can do for you.”

“No.”

“Man, we do not usually see bots working in labs—I am not familiar with what you like...um, you do not eat any...like, robot snacks?”

Mercy just stared at her.

“Sorry, I—I guess I should have asked your owner instead.”

The bot recoiled in disgust. “I call Marlowe Seldom ‘Madame’ out of respect, not *servitude*,” they said flatly. They turned and ambled up the ramp, outrage evident in every little step.

Tempest put a hand on the Daughter of V’Owrin’s elbow. “Mercy kind of likes doing things by their own rules. You’ll get used to it.”

“I don’t meet bots a lot.” Her feathers were ruffled in embarrassment. “I’m sorry if I was weird.”

“Not at all!”

Once everyone was onboard, the ship rumbled back to life and took them back into the strange starry expanse; if *Fascination* was as revitalized by gravity and the feeling of rest, she didn’t show it.

## CHAPTER 6

On the morning after their excursion to Talvrend, they gathered at breakfast. A buzz of anticipation accompanied the full-belly feeling of time spent with their feet on solid ground.

The beloved physician had been prodded into telling that morning's story, reluctantly; there was some uproar about her claim that her stories weren't creative enough to carry breakfast, and she agreed quickly to their entreaties in order to silence the abundant praise. Simone had bright, big eyes, tiny curves of ears, and a petite smile, and her fair skin seemed to be pink in an everlasting blush. Her slow, warm voice contrasted the swift, continuous movement of her hands—never fidgeting, always moving with purpose, whether to adjust a button or lay a quick hand on someone's forehead. As with every morning, she had her dark hair twisted securely into a bun and sat alert and cheerful, clasping one of Marvin's teas.

“Since I always get mixed up and think Talvrend is in the Talvi system, this is a tale I know that takes place there,” she said softly. “My mother used to tell it to me, back home in the city of Caimaug. I hope I do it justice. Um, here we go.”

### *Simone's Story*

In the old days of the Talvi system, when the people of its first planet, Talvoa, were starting to spread across its other bodies in earnest, there was a librarian. She had been flying since she was a child, and she knew the ways of space and the scarcity of entertainment on the distant ice

planets. So she lugged several crates of donated books onto a rented FTL cruiser and took to the stars to make sure the children of settlers weren't starving for new literature. She traveled with a hand-drawn map of cosmic routes to take and asteroid fields and debris to watch for, updated with rumors of dense space from kindly travelers she met on the way.

She met families for whom books had been a bigger priority than food in the move from the first planet and traded books with them eagerly. She met families who had only ever heard stories orally, who repeatedly read aloud the new tales slowly and dramatically to wedge them in their memories, and gratefully gave the books back to her before she left.

And on one ice planet within the ten body star system, she met a girl.

The seventh planet from the Talvric sun grumbled with volcanic vigor; the third homestead the librarian visited on the planet was unsettlingly close to one hot, menacing crack. When she knocked, a girl with a rifle peeked warily around the door, brightened when she saw the basket of books, and ushered her in. She had shiny green-black hair, kept stacks of journals of attempted tea recipes, and could talk for hours about the literature of Old V'Owrin. How could the librarian not stay until nightfall, when the blinding glimmer of the frozen, craggy expanse gave way to the dark, warning glow of the magma beneath the fissure?

After a few days, the librarian convinced the beautiful girl that there was more literacy work to be done elsewhere, and they parted

sweetly. The librarian moved onward. She delivered and traded books across the rest of the ice planets and started her slow cycle back around the system. It was lonely and wonderful work. Every standard year or so, she found her way back to the seventh planet from the Talvric sun, found her way back to the woman who wasn't quite waiting for her, but was always bouncing-on-her-toes eager when she saw the librarian's ship land.

Um, the original version of this tale really goes into detail on the rest of her travels, but I'll abridge it: fifteen standard years of traveling emptied her crates to a meager collection—trading and spacefaring accidents and raider attacks and time will do that—and, finally, breathlessly, she found herself again on the beautiful girl's—no, certainly woman's by now—doorstep. Her stomach was in knots; would she even want her to stay? Nothing about their semi-yearly meetings suggested permanence. Suddenly, she felt intrusive. What did she even have to offer? She was a retiring traveler with little to her name but a few stories and nowhere else to go. She turned to step back onto her vessel. But the woman with green-black hair opened the door, having heard the whine of the ship's engine, and saw the cases of clothes, trinkets, and food (and books) and greeted her with just as bright a smile, and that is why the traveling librarian of the Talvi system stopped making her rounds on her vessel of tomes.

\*

The crew was lazing around the common table after Simone's story. Tempest had offered to teach Verity how to knit and was helping her retrieve a dropped stitch on the lumpy rectangle of fabric. Idly had read an article about game theory in constructed spaces and was reciting what he'd learned to the table; Hank was the only one actively listening. Suddenly, Blue sat up from her slumped position, knocking her tea across the table, and gaped at the scene outside the window. "Look!" she shrieked.

Avery swore at the mess creeping near her and punched a quick code in the table's surface to absorb it. Tempest was halfway out of her seat before, peering outside, she spotted the source of Blue's excitement. "Are you—are you talking about the space crabs?"

"They're fighting! Isn't that cute?" said Blue, practically bouncing in her seat.

The two insect-ish pests, glimmering in the starlight were circling around a dark, deserted old beacon. Their long, spindly legs jabbed at each other and the vacuum in a way that could only be called unsettling; it was surreally slow and insectoid and desperate and *creepy*.

"What do they want with it?" asked Marvin. The whole group was watching them now.

"They like to nibble on the outer coating," said Puck. She was determinedly not looking at the eerie scene.

"Actually, it's the beacon itself that draws them in," said Idly. "Even abandoned, it's probably still giving off dull signals. The snack is kind of secondary."

"Man, they are really going after each other," murmured Seldom. Indeed, their fighting was escalating in fury. One of them was a little bigger than the other, and its

movements were getting increasingly more desperate as the older, smaller crab got more and more hits in. Seldom grinned and glanced at Tempest. “Five on the big one.”

The captain tried to hide a smile with a sigh. “Ten.”

Within a few minutes, the crew was lined up at the wide window, cheering and cursing at the suddenly vital battle as it reached its conclusion with the solemn, fearful departure of the larger crab.

“Coward,” muttered Hank victoriously, perched on the edge of the table behind the others.

A few of the losers wandered begrudgingly toward their duties for the day. Seldom jostled Tempest in a playful mock-shove on her way out, and Tempest soon followed to assume the helm. Some of the winners stuck around to watch the littler crab consume his prize before getting bored and leaving.

As Mercy wobbled toward the door to follow Seldom, Avery lay a hand on their dome. “Wait up. I need to ask you something.”

Mercy turned toward them. They were silent.

“I need to override the ship’s protocol for ejecting those junk observer pods.”

“That is against ship protocol. Also, I do not have jurisdiction over the ship’s protocol. I would advise that you ask her.”

“It’s overgrown and cruddy and clogging up the connected exhaust line. I just need to get rid of the thing. Can you do that for me? It’s *barely* bending a rule.”

“I am not interested in why you would like to override the ship’s protocol.”

Avery ran a hand through their hair. “I can’t believe it’s so damned difficult to get you to do one simple thing. I *know* you have access.” They glared at the bot. Mercy did not respond. “Whatever. Fucking useless machine.”

Mercy watched them stride toward the engines before giving off a low, sustained beep and slowly turning to follow Seldom to the bridge.

## CHAPTER 7

Avery leaned back in their chair, eyes shut. Their short, wavy gray hair was a little damp with sweat and grime—they had already been up for a couple hours, getting an early start at work in the engines (they had also taken the time to chide Puck for not being as motivated, which crushed the poor alien. They'd shrugged off their jacket and were wearing a tank top as well as pants that had more pockets than seemed physically possible. Their mouth was carved in a perpetual frown that deepened as they considered the morning's story. Their eyes snapped open.

"I've got a fine one." The head engineer crossed their long legs. "It's an epilogue. You'd better recognize the source material." They began, pausing between each sentence to give them weight:

### *Avery's Story*

It was a hot day on a hot planet of no importance.

The traveler was lonely in a way that few know.

And yet, she was certainly not alone.

She was not used to the heat yet, so the way in which her vision swam was still uncomfortable.

The layers of sweat on her skin were still uncomfortable.

The numb timelessness and the repetitive crunch of bright blue sand underfoot were still uncomfortable.

She rehearsed what she might do should she meet another traveler.

Should they recognize her, she had a silver light cannon she'd stolen from a mortal—warm from the heat, for once, rather than the memory of a blast.

Should they not, and leave her alone—she'd learned it was wise to avoid prodding.

Should they not, and ask for her help—well, she had a catalog of devious scenarios for folks who were foolish enough to ask for help.

She'd never know a sense of solitude.

The threat of meeting someone else she'll have to hurt keeps her on edge.

Good.

Avery uncrossed their legs and leaned forward.

“You might have picked up that it finishes the diasporatic Earthlin legend of the trickster who fell in love with a god. I like it.”

“Oh, Carlotta?” said Marvin. “I didn't even pick that up! I always wondered what happened when she was banished.”

“I knew,” said Idly. “I just assumed from the start.”

\*

Jo turned into the sharply twisting corridor that led deeper and deeper into the engine rooms, looking for Puck. The bluish-white walls seemed to glow with the heat of the working ship. Jo rubbed her sweaty hair out of her eyes, irritated. She heard the yelling hidden just below the clamor of the engines and hesitated before walking closer;

the voices got clearer as she wandered closer, and in an instant, she rounded a corner and into Puck. The alien let out a tiny squeak and put a hand on her shoulder to stop her, eyes wide.

“I didn’t mean to eavesdrop,” Puck whispered. “But Avery...”

Jo finally caught the furious voices. “*That’s* what this was about?” said Avery.

“Your *bot*?”

“I’m not saying I wasn’t stupid,” said Seldom. “Sure, I was. I’m just saying maybe next time you shouldn’t treat Mercy like some piece of equipment, and then we can avoid all of this.”

“You can’t pin your mistakes on Avery,” said Tempest. “*You* decided not to ask them for help and almost cost us—”

“What do you want from me?” said Seldom.

“I’d like you to be a team player. Don’t give me that look. You aren’t just my partner, you help me lead this ship. I thought you knew what your stars-damned job was.”

“Everyone on this ship isn’t exactly open to working with others. Hank—”

“Don’t start,” said Tempest sharply. There was a long pause as they stared each other down. “I wish I could say that I can’t believe you’d be so petty. But perhaps I expected that you would be able to overcome that to do your job.” She was silent again. “Just work with our crew next time. I don’t care what they’ve done to irritate you.”

Puck grabbed Jo’s hand and the two hastened back out the corridor, away from the thrumming engines.

Puck leaned against the wall, eyes closed. “I hate hearing anyone get in trouble,” she said softly. She let out a long sigh. “Here, let me see your tablet. I’ll see what I can do.”

“Thanks.” Jo hesitated, wondering if she should stay, and, hearing footfalls emerging from the engines, slipped out of the corridor and back into the public part of the ship.

## CHAPTER 8

The navigator of *Fascination* leaned back in his seat, arms crossed, leg bouncing, eyes dark. His dark hair was carefully combed out of his face in that effortlessly professional way that made you think of androids. The crisp neatness of his Conservatory jacket, which he always wore, only added to this image of near-artificial spotlessness. His voice was low and brisk.

“This is a story about lying,” he said shortly.

### *Hank's Story*

Long ago, on a planet called Anissem, a woman fell in love with a small moon. Her name was Lisabetta. She was lured by the song of its rays and pledged her heart to it one bright night.

The woman had three brothers. They earned their meals in the market of Anissem, selling mined ores and treasures. The market was weak and they were not. This was not a coincidence.

One night, the oldest spotted his sister in the garden, happily gazing at her love. The brothers had never noticed the distant rock, having spent their entire lives looking down; finally looking up, the eldest was lured by the promise of wealth. The next morning, he told his brothers of the excavation opportunity awaiting their gluttonous pockets. They'd sent a crew up to the satellite by the following day.

Lisabetta noticed that her beloved was growing increasingly wan and pockmarked over the following spells. She worried for her faraway lover; she built a telescope to investigate its illness. She saw tiny beings crawling over its rocky surface, burrowing, gouging, hollowing their way through her moon. She saw an explosion of rock that sent uncontrolled pieces of moon spinning from its surface—one particular piece fell towards the planet's surface, toward the lovelorn woman, reeling, a streak of white, and crashed far from the family garden where the stunned woman sat.

Over a couple sleepless, furious nights, she built a locator for the fallen bones of the cherished moon. Above her, the crew was detonating the last skybound remains of the satellite; Lisabetta didn't get to see its final moments, focused so on her device. She didn't know that her brothers were selling bits of moon ore, promising its restorative properties to wealthy, gullible shoppers from other systems. It took her days to locate the remains in the woods. When she finally found the tiny crater, she wept over the meager wedge.

The original story really dwelled on her mourning, and I'm not interested in that. This isn't a story about the magic of love or truth. It's about two-faced assholes who call themselves family.

What she did next was bury the rock in a potted herb. By some weird coincidence, the plant flourished. Other tellers will assure you that it was her tears, or maybe the moon's ore *did* have restorative powers and

the brothers were more truthful than they thought. This isn't that kind of story.

Eventually, the brothers noticed the thriving object. You can't hide your love forever. They stole the plant as Lisabetta slept, and found the rock hidden in its soil. They sold both for a magnificent sum, and their sister would feel the hardened, dark emptiness of betrayal in the pit of her stomach for the rest of her life. The end.

"I was really hoping for a happy ending there," whispered Puck, disappointed.

"I don't know," said Jo, "I kind of liked it as is."

Hank met her eye briefly. Maybe similar darknesses kept them up at night.

\*

Jo leaned her head against the cool glass of the window in her bunk, curled up in a blanket, watching the nebula pass by outside. The dusty molecular cloud, a bright, gaseous swirl, was dotted with new, hopeful little stars. She knew the colors would look different through true glass, but the bright mass was still breathtaking in this violet translation.

She heard the familiar click of Puck's claws in the hallway outside, and a knock on her door.

"It's unlocked," she called. The door slid open, and Jo turned her head. "Hey, Puck."

"Hi, Jo. Just dropping off your tablet. It should be okay now."

“Thanks.” She unfurled the tablet and, to her relief, the screen successfully chirped awake as it snapped into place. “Hey, did you see this view?” Jo turned back to the window. “It’s almost like slow travel is worth it sometimes, huh?”

“Y-yeah,” Puck said. She was studying the floor resolutely, as though it were a puzzle to solve, and was trembling a little. Jo frowned at her. Her eyes widened.

“Aw, Puck...” she said softly. She pulled the blinds down, and her room immediately compensated for the sudden darkness with a warm artificial glow. The young alien let out a shaky breath.

“Why did you take a job on a ship anyway, if you’re so afraid of space?” Jo asked, gesturing for her to sit next to her.

“I didn’t realize how scary it would be.” She was clutching her tail for comfort. “The stars looked so aloof and fascinating from Gladyyn. Then you get up here, and they’re just *right there*, and nothing’s tied down, and nothing’s firm or safe...” She turned to Jo suddenly, scales shimmering with panic. “Please don’t tell the others! Especially Avery, or the captain. I don’t want to lose this job, I love this ship so much—”

“Don’t worry. Your secret’s safe with me.”

## CHAPTER 9

The captain sat forward in her chair and put down her knitting, her tousled curls bouncing around her forehead. She looked around the table with her large, warm eyes, and her tawny brown skin flushed as she met Verity's gaze. Her voice was soft and controlled; she said, "This is about a woman who was very clever and very enamored. It is—" she blushed deeper—"not someone else's tale."

### *Tempest's Story*

Our protagonist was from a planet where to give gifts was to bare your soul.

Trade was treacherous and often mortifying. Once, an envoy came to the planet and asked for a place to sleep in exchange for *coin*. Can you *imagine*.

*This earned a little chuckle from some of the crew.*

On this planet, in this tradition of tender displays, a woman was falling in love. It was not unheard of to present gifts to those you cared about, but you had to be extremely careful. A gift is best when it's wanted as well as suitable. As I said, this woman was very clever. She wished to write the most beautiful song in the world for her beloved.

She was not, as it happened, especially talented at performing music.

But the song was buried inside her, emerging naturally through each moment spent with her beloved, and she knew she could coax it out with hard work.

She wrote and practiced for hours every day, withdrawing from her daily life. As it were, she began to withdraw from her beloved too and earned a hurt scolding from them. After that, she was careful to balance her private project and the rest of her life.

One morning, when her beloved woke, she stood beside them with her instrument.

“This is for you,” she said, and played.

I cannot get across how perfect this song was. It captured everything the woman felt about her beloved and everything her beloved was. It was stunning. It might ruin all music to have it played. It was intricate and simple and near divine.

The listeners waited for a long moment when the captain stopped.

“That’s it?” cried Simone. “What happens? What does the beloved think?”

“I’m not sure yet,” said Tempest, blushing sheepishly. “I didn’t know their reaction.”

\*

That night, unable to sleep again, Jo roamed the ship’s hallways and spotted Captain Lane and the scientist by the door to the bridge, holding hands and whispering about science, and suddenly everything made sense.

\*

The scientist had dark hair that was twisted into a braid behind one of her long, pointed ears. Her eyebrows were furrowed over her deep-set eyes and her broad nose was scrunched up adorably in thought. She wore a no-nonsense, pale yellow jumpsuit that hid the feathers across her shoulders and arms. She glanced to her right at Tempest and gave her a wide, sheepish smile.

“This one is not as sweet as yours, but I think it is intriguing. My father told it to me once when I was very small.”

### *Verity's Story*

Once a girl fell asleep and was transported to a strange planet. She knew she could not have been asleep for three reasons: one, she recognized in the moment that dreaming was a possibility, which never seemed to happen. Two, she experienced time as she would expect to. And three, she kicked a rock and winced. She was a very logical and scientifically-minded child.

*Tempest smiled at this.*

She decided to look around where she had been placed, but not to venture too far. An orange planet that dominated the sky turned lazily, so close it seemed just beyond the horizon. The sky was dark, but the planet she was on was alit with warm, glittering dust that hummed peacefully as it passed her. Tendrils of dark plants danced enticingly.

When she woke up the next morning, she told her folks about her experience. They promised it was a dream, despite her insistence.

The next night, she was transported to this bizarre planet again. She explored further than she had the previous night, but still stayed in view of the rock she had appraised. It was dark again. She took notes on the geography of the hills around her and the formation of the planet and few stars above and peered at the strange flora from as close as she dared to get. It was wonderful.

When she woke up the second morning, she insisted again to her folks that she had traveled. She pointed to the dust that had settled on the pages of her notebook as proof. They grew irritated at her insistence and took her to her doctor, who told her that she had nothing to worry about.

That night, irritated that no one believed her, she pushed herself even further. She walked for miles and miles across the planet's surface. The plants flinched from her path, hesitant to actually touch her after all their alluring efforts. The dust felt cold on her skin.

When she woke up the next morning, she was determined to monitor what happened to her at night. She snuck into the hospital and "borrowed" recorders and scanners. When her folks found out what she had done, they had her sedated with a highly suspect concoction and treated for high neuroticism. *Verity's nostrils flared.* Their brutality would leave a lasting mark.

Years later, when she managed to emerge from their foul, tranquilizing fog and make it back to that mysterious planet, it was not the same, and neither was she. It was cold and uncomfortable to walk on its soil. Every breath of sharp air made her wheeze. They had done their best to ruin it.

She pulled a scanner from her pocket and attached the nodes to her temples. This time, she would not fail to record her experiences, even if it hurt.

\*

Their brawny protector claimed the next morning's story. She was massive, with long hair in a ponytail, sharp, beige cheekbones, clever eyes, and an easy, bright smile. She had on a long, tight dress and her voice was deep and warm: "Verity's thing yesterday made me think of this! I picked it up from this hysterical dude at the port on Bel."

### *Blue's Story*

Folks wonder how the Children of V'Owrin got their characteristic feathers. Some goofy-ass legends say that they stole plumes from avian things on their planet and glued them to their skin until it sort of just became natural, but they're such a damn gentle species that that can't be it.

*Jo glanced down the table at Verity. Her face was carefully blank.*

I heard that it started back in a time when what covered the Children's naked shoulders was a coat of spiky fur. One day, an especially vain Son of V'Owrin got a clump of mud tangled in his spikes and spent days upon days combing it out, convinced there was some little fleck of mud left. When he finally deemed it clean, he realized that he had combed his quills in the spot so that they split into soft, fluffy feathers. He was thrilled and spent spells combing out the rest.

The other Children got jealous of the pretty new feathers and tried it out for themselves. After several years of loving their new look, one of them made the bright connection that they now looked like the avian critters that dominated their sky and wondered if they were able to fly.

As you could guess, they were way too stocky to get off the ground—

Blue stopped as a chair scraped back across the floor. Verity, clearly mortified, quickly tried to steal out of the room despite the attention she'd already unwillingly earned.

“Ver, wait,” Tempest called, rising swiftly and following her out.

Blue watched them, baffled. “What’s up with them?”

## CHAPTER 10

The next morning, as they prepared again to make a landing, they gathered at breakfast to hear the young mechanic—sat cross-legged at the table, facing away from the window as usual—tell her story. She stared down at the table with her wide, yellow eyes, holding onto her long tail.

“As you may know, we don’t tell stories linearly on Gladdyn and Eysa. So the not-knowing of all your stories is, um... frankly, insufferable. Sorry. But here’s one I know that takes place on my home planet and uses Eydyyn construction.”

### *Puck’s Story*

I remember a story that ends like this:

Years have gone by. The old man has found his old normal again after a while, and he’s pretty happy. One day, an old friend from far away stops by and asks if he will accompany her and a pair of his younger neighbors into the thick jungle. They’re looking for flora, gifts, and a little adventure. They go carefully, as you do, until one of the young Eydyyn starts at a rustling and pulls out her knife. The creature is bigger but still walks with the same awkward waddle, and its wings are scrawny with disuse. Don’t worry, folks, they don’t hurt it; it darts out from a cluster of trees and bounds around the group in an ecstatic circle. The old man steps forward and it embraces him. It’s clear that the two of them feel safe together.

Most storytellers say that it's rare to have that kind of joyous moment, but I don't think so.

You can probably guess how it starts—a cub, abandoned near the edge of the place where the forest thins, having fallen from the treetops, wailing a bit too much like a kid. It has no eyes, short, fat legs, and tiny wings that shimmer bright orange in the pale little darts of sunlight that leak through the jungle canopy. Don't worry, it'll find its home. At first, that home is with the elderly Eydryn man that found it. He has powdery blue scales, a long, drooping snout, and twisting horns. He is lonely and warm-hearted and the only one interested in saving the tiny, wild beast. So he scoops it up and brings it home, and he clumsily tries to feed it various things from his cupboard before he finds that it likes the slimy wild herbs growing in the dark corners of his garden. When he falls asleep that night, the cub curls up on his chest, resting its wings across his belly. By the end of the story, its warm wings will be long enough to wrap around the man.

And then, you know, the cub becomes not a cub. Its cute waddling and scabbling across the kitchen floor becomes less cute. And the old man, knowing that his house is only so big, starts taking the creature on longer and longer walks into the darkest parts of the thick jungle. And eventually—oh man, do I not like this bit, even though we know what's coming, so I'll be brief—he leaves the creature behind and it wails like it did months before, deeper, sadder.

Now you know how the creature, at long last folding its Eydyyn friend in its warm, safe wings, grew up and got released into the jungle.

\*

*Fascination* eased gently onto the fields of grass outside the capital city of New Achilles, finding an empty plot in the chaotic assortment of parked ships. The city was roughly hexagonal, built on a slope that led to a massive, opulent tower in its center. A trio of colossal pink-white statues in the form of strange winged beasts stood proudly around the tower, looking out over the city. Even in the dim light of sunrise, it was clear just how colorful the buildings clustered around wide cobblestone streets were.

Everyone but Hank stepped out of the ship; he'd mumbled something about staying behind to coordinate their route to Hilmeron. It was disorienting experiencing morning again for the second time in several hours; Jo was realizing just how much she relied on structured time.

Verity and the captain quietly broke away to go into town together; when Tempest glanced back, Seldom caught her eye and, beaming, gave her an enthusiastic thumbs up, earning a warning glare.

"You couldn't find a closer spot?" Blue complained, stretching.

"Did *you* see anywhere closer?" Seldom retorted. "I did my best. You should go back and ask *Hank* why he couldn't be bothered to help. What do you have to worry about anyway, Blue, you're the fittest being here."

Blue brightened at the compliment and was soon bouncing toward the city with more pep than anyone. The towering buildings glinted alluringly in the rising sun, their

lights fading off to compensate for the advent of day. Dry, blue grass crunched softly beneath their feet as they pushed out of the ship.

Blue read information about New Achilles off her tablet. “There’s some cute little Ormien-style restaurants nearby. Or! A repose house, one with a pretty good reputation.” She waggled her eyebrows at Jo. “Good selection too. What’s your poison—women? Men? Neither? Anything in between?”

“None of the above,” Jo mumbled, not meeting anyone’s eye.

Puck’s ears pricked up. “Really? Me too!”

“I thought you were dating that girl you met on Talvrend,” Marvin said curiously.

Puck blushed a pretty green. “We are, but I’m not into her like that.”

“Oh, ok,” said Marvin. “Well, my vote is for food. Good moons, let me eat someone else’s cooking for one day.”

“What kind of cook can’t stomach his own food?” Simone teased.

“Oh, my food is fantastic. But I do miss being surprised by food sometimes.”

They all decided to try the breakfast of one of the Ormien places for their lunch. It was a bright blue little building near the edge of the city; on its wall was a mosaic of a small planet partially eclipsing a large round sun. In the second floor of the building opposite, a young Daughter of V’Owrin was stringing cuttings of plants out to dry on the line stretching above the street.

Inside, an Earthlin man was labeling a series of little sampling bowls that would decorate the counter beside touristy trinkets. He nodded sleepily at the first few of them, then stood up straighter when he realized how many of them there were. The restaurant

was dim in anticipation of the dawn. The only other customer was a being huddled under a cloak in the corner, sipping from a steamy bowl. He didn't look up.

Seldom stepped forward and ordered a little of everything for everyone to pass around. The Earthlin's eyes lingered briefly on Mercy; then he hastily started preparing their lunch.

"What a beautiful shop," Marvin said. "So what made you want to go into Ormien cuisine? It's so rare for Earthlins to find themselves cooking professionally in this style."

"A friend died and I took over," he said shortly. "She was the one who taught me."

"Really?" Blue said, peering at the samples. "I figured you must be Ormien in some way with those long arms of yours."

"Blue," Simone groaned softly.

The man didn't look up from his work, but his ears flushed a dark red. He was pushing around bowls and tossing in ingredients a little more forcefully now.

Blue, ignoring Simone, fiddled with one of the trinkets for trade on the counter: a string of shimmering beads coated in green dust. "What do you want for these? I know it's polite to barter with parts of you. I can give you, I dunno, a lock of my hair?"

A gravelly voice behind them—the cloaked stranger in the corner—spoke up: "Bud, are these tourists bugging you?"

"Don't worry about it," the man at the counter muttered. He glanced at Mercy again. "They'll be off-planet in a few hours anyway."

Blue glared at the man behind them. "Glad to see we're getting to see the best of this planet in the little time we're here."

Seldom put a hand on Blue's elbow and got shrugged off. "Come on, Blue, he's not worth your time."

"She's right," said the cloaked being. "Just take your lame little walking gadget out of here and you won't see any trouble."

Seldom's eyes filled with fire.

"Here we go," mumbled Jo.

## CHAPTER 11

“Don’t talk about them like that,” said Seldom, as Avery said, “Watch your tongue.”

“I told you this spot was no good,” growled Blue.

“Incorrect,” said Mercy. “You did not express a negative sentiment about this location before this time.”

“Oh, shut up, you,” retorted Blue.

“Stars don’t let it speak,” said the cloaked being, standing up.

“I *asked* you to mind how you speak about them,” said Seldom, spinning to face the being behind them. “What kind of backwards planet is this?”

The Earthlin owner leaned against the counter, letting his apron fall to the side to reveal a little light cannon on his hip. Jo exchanged a glance with Puck, whose eyes were wide.

“Tiiiiime to go,” said Marvin, grabbing Simone’s hand and elbowing Seldom.

The figure reached into their cloak. “Agreed,” Seldom responded, pushing Blue toward the door before she could try to fight them.

They collectively scrambled outside, disrupting the quiet morning with their pounding footsteps and panicked shouts. There was a thrumming, mechanical crescendo like an intake of breath—then a flurry of purple sparks and a scorch mark in one of the murals they were running past.

“Can you call Hank?” Seldom asked Mercy as they sprinted down the alley.

“Yes, Madame.” Mercy lagged behind for a moment as they connected to the ship, struggling to keep up. They were soon bringing up the rear of the group, with Jo.

Hank didn’t pick up for what felt like months. “What is it, Seldom?” he drawled.

“I need you to start the ship,” she yelled.

“Stars, what’s going—”

“Not important. Do it now.”

“I—I don’t remember how.”

“*Hank.*”

“It’s not my fault your piloting procedures are so illogical!” he shouted fretfully.

They heard a cannon recharge again, and then another blast—this one dislodging a roof tile that crashed to the ground just behind Blue, who paused as if to turn back to face them before Simone grabbed her arm and dragged her forward.

“Are those *shots*?” yelled Tempest.

“Oh, uh, hey Captain. Didn’t know you were on the comm.”

The thundering of shoes on pavement quickly turned to the crunch of shoes on crisp grass. They wove between parked ships—Avery flinched every time the blasts hit one of the innocent vessels.

Suddenly, Jo heard a *clunk*. The sputtering whirl of Mercy’s boosters was faltering; glancing back, she saw the bot had stumbled and was falling farther and farther behind the group. She hedged for a brief moment—then caught sight of the glint of a cannon behind them and kept running. Surely the bot would find their way back safely. But she *had* to get to the ship before it left. She couldn’t be responsible for everyone.

They all turned a corner and the ship was there, fired up, ramp extended as it gently hovered a couple inches off the ground—though even Jo recognized that something was off. The engines coughed in a weak roar.

“*You need to crank the stability aid, you clod!*” Seldom yelled, leaping onto the gangplank.

There was a rattling cough of shots. Then a metallic shriek—*Mercy*, Jo realized, stomach dropping. She was already scrambling up the ramp with the others. Seldom had already sprinted up the stairs toward the front of the ship.

Catching their breath, they heard a shot from their captain and spun around. Tempest, almost at the ramp, was turning back to help Verity, who was half-carrying, half-dragging the bot to safety. Jo stood, frozen, as Blue ran down to help the pair onto the ramp.

With all onboard, Tempest punched the blue button on the wall and shouted for Seldom and Hank to take off just as a shower of purple sparks dinged the side of the ship. Within eternal moments, the ramp closed and the artificial gravity kicked in as they flew from peril; amid the terrified, exhausted chorus of panting came sighs of relief.

“Madame?”

Everyone turned to look at Mercy. They’d been shot through the side, leaving circuits charred and sparking.

The captain leaned down. “She’s piloting us out of here.”

“I know.”

“Can you assess what’s been damaged?” she asked.

The bot thought for a long moment. “Not at this time.” Their speech was more slurred than before.

“We will do whatever it takes to fix you up.”

“I understand. Merci, Captain Lane,” they said quietly.

Tempest didn’t look up from the little bot. “What. Happened.”

## CHAPTER 12

“I can’t believe we have to have this conversation again. The fact that you would instigate a fight on a strange planet, putting our ship, our *crew*, in danger... it’s so stars-damned disheartening to know I can’t trust my own first mate.”

Seldom’s response was too quiet to pick up.

Jo was laying on her bed in her room, listening to the fight in the crew’s corridor. It was clear just how furious Tempest was to not make some attempt at privacy for this argument. Folks had been popping in and out of the corridors for the past half hour, storming in to make a retort and storming away to stew in their rooms and listen. Jo hadn’t participated. She didn’t think she could face Seldom—though she didn’t know if the distraught pilot knew that Jo had had the opportunity to save her mechanical friend. With a start, she realized her guilt about leaving Mercy behind was just as sour as her sense of shame for having abandoned her brother for years. Why did she feel so damn upset about a robot on a ship she’d only been on for a few days?

She listened as Seldom, letting her fury over Mercy’s injuries raise her voice again, deflected blame onto Hank for not being able to fly them to safety sooner.

She listened as Hank condemned Tempest for leaving the group.

She listened as Verity stepped out into the corridor for the first time to stick up for Tempest.

And eventually, she pulled a hood over her head and let music drown out the angry, scared shouting and the thundering of her own shameful heart.

\*

It was clear from the cautious glances and silence that no one wanted to go to breakfast the next morning, but the thought of leaving their fragile schedule had made each of them balk as they'd individually thought of it. Avery was one of the only beings missing, working on patching up the other: Mercy.

"I bet Sel's itching to entertain us this morning," Blue joked. She peered around the group, hoping she'd lightened the mood a little.

Seldom, staring down at the table, looked up and met Blue's eye. "You know what? Yeah. Yeah, let me tell you a story."

The pilot looked exhausted with worry; her bright eyes were sullen with guilt and grief and she slumped over her coffee. The absence of both her wide, easy smile and her constant companion made her look half-finished.

"I heard this back when we were at the Conservatory. I'm not giving you a summary."

### *Seldom's Story*

I hear back in the early days of CHORYS, they used cryosleep super rarely. It was really more of a medical procedure than an everyday tool, and—and—you know, *actually, I can't. I can't entertain you right now.*

Seldom stood up and walked out, leaving the rest of the crew to either watch her go or stare fixedly anywhere else.

\*

It was absurdly early in the fabricated morning—or perhaps late in the false night—when Jo, sleeplessly roaming the ship, heard noises of frustration coming from the helm. She let the doors slide open for her and Idly, leaning over the navigation computer, jumped and turned, swiftly hiding what he was holding behind his back.

“Hey Jo! I was just—well, I thought I would—I—I done goofed.” He sighed and tossed the object—a tool Jo recognized as one Puck had used to adjust something on one of the communication panels—onto the floor in front of him. He sank into the navigator’s chair and dropped his head in a hand.

“What did you do?”

“Hank was fussing about how his ‘real-time trackers’ or some shit were running slow and needed to be calibrated, so I thought I’d pop in and fix them... and now the ship is outlined in orange? And when I ask it to plot out courses to nearby planets it sends me on a loop around the galaxy instead?”

“Oh.”

“Yeah. And I also sort of stole this from Avery.” He kicked at the instrument and then winced. “Fuck, I shouldn’t have done that. It’s just—” He let out a discouraged sigh. “Everything sucks and I just wanted to help without bugging anyone.”

Jo hesitated. Hank could easily fix this better than either of them could—and his expertise would ensure that she would still arrive on Hilmeron on schedule—but she wasn’t excited about introducing yet another source of inter-being tension when everyone was already so angry at everyone else for what seemed like everything. Something had snapped within her watching the problems her inaction with Mercy had caused; this was a

problem she could at least *try* to alleviate without hurting anyone. Arman didn't have to be the only other person in the universe.

“I think you picked a weird way to help, dude,” Jo joked softly, leaning down to pick up Avery's tool.

Idly smiled and scooted the chair aside so she could access the nav computer.

“Yeah, maybe.”

The two of them fiddled with settings, arguing quietly over which ones to implement and hurriedly undoing the decisions that made the screen buzz angrily or changed the colors of the stars, until it looked more or less normal. They waited for a breathless moment, watching their little ship hover in place with the course to Hilmeron laid out before it—then nothing obviously terrible happened and they breathed a sigh of relief. Idly clapped Jo on the shoulder on their way out. One crisis had been averted.

## CHAPTER 13

It would turn out, however, that Idly wasn't the only one hiding a problem with the ship that night.

Jo, who'd offered to sneak Avery's tool back to engineering before it could be missed, didn't hear Puck working over the growl of the engines until she turned a corner and nearly ran into her. She'd taken out one of *Fascination's* blue buttons and was huddled over the communicator panel behind it.

The young engineer explained that this was a problem that had been stealthily escalating for a couple days, and that Mercy would usually fix a communications issue so complex, and that she just wanted to help, and that it had grown to something that terrified her, and that she didn't want to bother anyone, and that she didn't want to be just another problem on the ship—and Jo understood.

The ship garbled something unintelligibly from the speaker.

"I think I might need some help," Puck whispered.

\*

Jo hovered in the doorway on the bridge with Idly, anxiously watching Tempest, Hank, and Seldom coordinate with the engineers across the ship. With the ship's network and Mercy both out of service, they had to use the crackly comms on Tempest's tablet to hear Avery and Puck. The inability to communicate had spiraled into a larger issue with *Fascination's* interconnected systems that Jo didn't fully understand. No one had asked her and Idly yet why they were awake at this hour, or why Jo had been in engineering.

“Hank, I asked you to run a diagnostic on ship movements, *if you would mind terribly*,” said Seldom shortly.

“I’m trying.” His voice was tight with worry. “There’s something wrong with the navigation computer.”

Jo met Idly’s eye.

“That was me,” said Jo. Idly said nothing.

Hank stared at her.

“I—” She couldn’t think of a good reason to have been on his terminal. “It’s not important.” She outlined what they’d done with his settings and he swiftly undid their damage.

“Wait,” said Puck. “What if we rerouted the interval couplers so they communicate with the rendering drives first?”

There was silence for a moment. Then Avery spoke up.

“Worth a try,” they said.

The crew and passengers on the bridge waited for a long breath, listening intently to the instructional whispers and the metallic hums and squeaks of instruments.

“Hello?” came Puck’s voice, ringing clearly from the panel on the wall.

A collective exhale. “It looks okay,” said Seldom. “You did it.”

It took a few minutes for them to confirm that the rest of the connected systems of the ship were functional too. For the first time in days, they’d had a win.

Even Hank couldn’t hide his small smile once they assured themselves that everything was okay. “Fantastic job, Puck. Your inventive thinking is clearly invaluable.”

As they walked off the bridge, heading to their rooms to change from pajamas or to the common space to relax until breakfast, daylight was rising on *Fascination*. They stopped short, seeing Blue ambling toward them.

“Do you know where Simone is?” she asked. She was swaying slightly and looked unnaturally pale.

“Asleep, I expect,” said Tempest. She leaned forward instinctively to hold Blue’s shoulder, scrutinizing her. “Are you okay?”

Blue pulled her hand from her pocket. It had swollen to a frightening green mass. “Uh... not great.”

She collapsed into her captain’s arms.

## CHAPTER 14

It was Jo's last night on the ship.

She was at dinner and everyone was there. Blue was fine, hand returned to its pre-poisoned size and wrapped in bandages to keep her from fussing with it. Mercy was back too, perched in their seat next to Seldom; their fixes were patchwork but functional. Verity had greeted the bot especially enthusiastically. She proudly pointed out to the group that she had repaid the favor she'd felt she'd owed, much to Mercy's dismay.

Marvin had produced an exuberant spectacle. Jo got the sense that this was as much to celebrate the restoration of the ship's normal and to diffuse lingering tensions as to wish Jo goodbye. Hank muttered a snarky comment about the soup, but a moment later he caught Marvin's eye and the corner of his mouth twitched.

After their bellies were filled, Idly unsubtly tiptoed out of the common space and returned a few minutes later with a silver instrument that looked vaguely like a long lute; it was elaborately carved and was clearly an article of the Grev'rian upper class.

Blue was aghast. "How have we not heard you play this yet?!" she asked.

"I'm not good at it! But I just figured I'd play a little something since we'll be one less before breakfast."

Jo tipped an imaginary hat at him, beaming. She felt more comfortable than she had in years.

He haltingly played a few notes before fumbling a chord, muttering a curse, and starting over. He picked up speed and settled into the rhythm once his fingers caught up to their memories. Simone perked up and started mumbling the words under her breath.

Idly stopped. “Do you know it?” he asked excitedly.

The physician blushed. “Sort of. It’s ‘The Limitless Summer,’ right? My older sister used to sing it to me.”

A couple members of the crew gasped and nodded, recognizing the title.

Idly started again from the beginning, playing even more confidently. In a matter of moments, several were singing along and everyone was clapping as in time as they were able. Verity coaxed Tempest into a dance that evolved into a complicated jig, which sent the captain collapsing into her chair with laughter. Blue climbed onto the table and was stepping daintily around dishes in an elaborate upper-class dance—when later asked, she would reveal that she used to sneak into wealthy parties to dance with cute girls.

Perfect nights cannot be planned; they are constructed on precarious alignments, knitted together by tears of laughter and the momentary burning away of shared fears. They ground us in those desolate, unforgiving spaces where the only sound is the low hum of distant novas.

\*

Jo’s tablet woke her a couple hours before the ship’s time would tell them it was morning. She leaned across her bed and peered between the blinds in her bedroom window: Hilmeron’s dark green surface took up most of the view. From here, she could see the second star of Hilmeron, a distant red dot just beyond the curve of the planet, nestled within the quintet of (far more distant) stars in which it made its home this time of year. Instantly, she was struck by the most incredible pang of homesickness she’d ever known.

Simone and Hank were the only ones up when she walked onto the bridge, wobbling a little as they entered the atmosphere, save for Mercy powered down by the pilot's side. They were arguing amicably about the best port in which to land.

"I told Tempest to take the night off," said Simone. "She asked me to thank you for her for riding along with us.

Jo watched their careful landing dance, gripping the handrail lining the wall—though Seldom's maneuvering was fairly smooth.

The ship shifted into the planet's gravity and Jo felt oddly safe in a way she hadn't for a long time. She pushed down another wave of homesickness.

Hank shook her hand. Seldom hugged her. And then she walked through *Fascination's* artificially pre-dawn corridors, paused by her room to hoist her heavy bag onto her shoulder, and quietly left; for a moment, as she stepped down the ramp, she wondered how many homes she'd end up leaving in search of new ones. Behind her, the ship powered down, letting its crew sleep just a little longer.

## CHAPTER 15

Outside the bustling port where she had left *Fascination*, the lights of the city were popping on as it transitioned from afternoon to evening. Jo managed to pick up a bottle of something and a pack of the crisps she hoped Arman still liked without undergoing the worst-case scenario of getting recognized by someone she'd grown up with. Her brain prickled with guilt that she had to consult her tablet just to find his apartment. The bot at the complex's door was unbearably slow and pedantic, but she managed to get inside and upstairs. Soon, she was at the door, double-checking that it was indeed his. She stared at it for a long moment. She fought an irrational urge to flee.

Just as she leaned forward to finally knock, the door opened, startling her.

She stared at her little brother. He'd made an attempt to trim his beard but had clearly gotten distracted before finishing one side, leaving him both comically and pitifully lopsided. He stared right back at her.

"How'd you know I was outside? Were you watching for me or something?" she asked.

"No. My house chimed when you showed up, dip."

She grinned.

He grinned too. "Are those Crunchers?"

"Let me put down this sack of boulders first."

"Fine, fine."

It was cramped with mess. He and Manny had managed to create a cozy little home from their CHORYS-issued place; the walls were programmed with sweet photos

and clips of silent videos, the furniture was a mix of apartment-issued items and unique pieces, and mementos seemed to multiply the more places Jo looked. Emptied boxes of gifted home-cooked food, as well as the remnants of synthesized meals, littered the area between the couch and the kitchen. Her brother bustled around the kitchen picking things up and haphazardly, often arbitrarily putting them down elsewhere. “Uh, I got your message, obviously, so I tried to make everything look better. It doesn’t look all that nice, but it’s better... which, I guess, makes me look like a real slob...”

“It looks fine, bub,” she said softly.

They were both silent for a long moment as he continued helplessly tidying and she made herself as comfortable as she could manage. They weren’t yet sure how to manage the years-old parts of each other that were strangers.

The two of them sat down, poured drinks, and pried open containers of warm, synthesized food that was just standard enough to be comforting but not boring. Gradually, the conversation shifts from hesitant small talk to warmer exchange; the lonely traveler recounts the antics of her time onboard *Fascination*, along with some of her oddest bartending stories, while the grieving brother talks about Manny and some of the weird and comforting experiences he’s had in constructed spaces here in the apartment in the past few spells.

It is awkward and wonderful.

Back on the ship, the crew wakes up:

The pilot receives a newsletter from her mechanical friend’s manufacturer detailing patch notes with uncertain side effects for consciousness and identity. She looks down at the sleeping bot by her seat and sighs heavily.

The pedantic passenger speaks to a friend over his comm, roaring with laughter as a swarm of irritable nanobots brushes his teeth.

The scientist, despite the uncertainty before her, feels safer than she has in a long while; beside her, the captain turns over, burying her head in her blankets, and—if just for a moment—ignores the artificial dawn for the first time in years.

The brawn has been working out since before dawn and relishes the early ache her muscles have earned. She's furious that her hand is still out of commission, but it is looking better—or, at least, less green.

The physician pulls on her jacket methodically and hushes a yawn; she watches the cook pad back from the bathroom, half-asleep, and shakes her head with a little smile.

The engineer, laying in bed, scrolls through a list of things that need doing and adds a note to explain more thoroughly a concept their young co-worker had asked about; they are becoming less repulsed by the notion of teaching.

The enthusiastic novice mechanic stretches in her carefully-constructed nest and is, as usual, electrified by the promise of a new day; she fully believes that she is worth keeping around solely because of her technical skills and is keen to learn more.

The navigator leans back in his chair and watches the city lights flicker on on the screen before him as the synthetic morning lights up his surroundings. He is still too terrified of his dreams to sleep. He'll be okay.

When their day begins, it will be night here. They will adjust.

THE END

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