

Insatiable

My father used to quote Columbus in saying, “My desire was not to pass any island without taking possession, so that, one having been taken, the same may be said of all.”

Not until that fateful day aboard *Manifest* did I truly understand those words. The day we flew into the Void.

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It’s Corman who has the gall to shake me awake. Good ol’ Corman with his boyish looks and old man’s breath and a figure so fine it makes me almost want to forgive him for donning his ridiculous cowboy vest over his uniform every day. It is his gravelly voice along with the rhythmic plink of water dripping onto the steel frame of my cot that lifts me into consciousness for day number four thousand nine hundred and seventy aboard *Manifest*.

“You need to talk to your father, Catherine.”

“Is he asking for me?” I ask, throwing back my excuse for a blanket and searching blindly for my jacket, too afraid to activate the watch light lest any of the two hundred and fifteen passengers grumble.

“No, he’s not,” Corman says.

His tone disturbs me. Like the engine room, it is much too cool this morning. I find my jacket and put it on, buttoning every button with slightly numb fingers. “What’s this about, Corman? Is my father avoiding his pills again?”

“Nothing like that, no...” He is leading me down the aisle of cots like he’s the captain of this ship, arms swinging, shoulders thrown back, boots slapping against the sterile flooring loud enough to awaken even the most dogged of sleepers.

“Are you everybody’s new alarm clock, Corman?”

“No,” he almost shouts. Then, grumbling, “It’s not my fault you folks chose to sleep in the ship’s belly instead of waiting out the draining machines like the rest of us.”

Classic Corman. He was only six when we started this whole thing. Orphan, I think. His uncle died last year—heart disease.

“Tell you what,” I say once we reach the reinforced steel door that leads upstairs. “While you’re down here why don’t you check the thruster readouts, check everything off, and then go up for breakfast. I can get everyone else’s readouts on my way up to see my father.”

Corman straightens the lapels of his cowboy vest and says in the same, cold voice as before, “This is serious, Cat. I think there’s something really—”

“Did you just call me Cat?”

“I—”

“Whatever. Check the thrusters. I’ll find out what the problem is.” Once Corman turns away from me with a begrudging expression on his round face, I am free to carry out my duties in relative peace.

It’s not that I think Corman is exaggerating the situation. Most likely he’s simply the victim of my father’s spirited nature. This wouldn’t be the first time Captain Condor Aurelius has taken advantage of his regenerative cell serum by downing five tumblers of evaporated whiskey before tottering about his cabin like an institutionalized person until some poor crewmember looks through the window and sees him banging his head against the wall. For some reason they always think I should be the first one on the scene. Do I, as the captain’s daughter, have any real influence over the man who’s been lauded time and time again for his historic achievements across the galaxies? No. Do I like to think I do? Certainly. So I play my

part as first responder to my father's erratic behavior with a smile on my face and a hop in my step. Despite his eccentricities (and perhaps partly because of them) my father makes me prouder than most anything this universe has to offer.

Up the stairs I go, two at a time, then out into the main gravity ring chamber that is tasked with creating gravity for Section A. I spot Alice Fields behind the operator's desk, staring at her semi-circle of blue screens. I wave, call out, "Good morning, Alice. Can I mark you off for today's maintenance check?"

"Oh hi, Catherine. Yes, we're all good here. Holding strong at one g, although as we travel farther away from planet Cortez's sun our solar energy propulsion is expected to drop, meaning less power to the rings."

"So you're saying it's time to hit the weights?"

"Don't worry. We still have a couple months."

"Alrighty, thanks Alice."

Jogging down the white-walled corridors of memory lane. I arrive on the *Manifest's* third deck which houses all living facilities for passengers and crew that are now fifteen hundred. Was it fifteen hundred or fourteen after our last drop? Shaking my head, I pick up the pace. Look at those framed paintings of the past Rome Mission spacecraft! Really beautifully rendered. I watch the gold-plated names flash by as I run: *Augustus, Nero, Vespasian, Nerva, Trajan, Commodus, Septimius, Floria, Maximian.*

Maximian.

I ponder the name. *Maximian*—the reason the past thirteen years of my life have been dedicated to interstellar travel. The *last ever* interstellar travel. I feel the familiar pride swelling in my chest as I pass corridors leading to the sleeping quarters (still damp no doubt from the

water spill), fitness center (shamefully unused), several waste deposit stations (bathrooms), and numerous lounge areas with each one specially designed to remind passengers fondly of their home planet's fashion (only the Phoenicians could truly enjoy their incredibly long and narrow chairs seeing as hundreds of thousands of years of living in half gravity had dramatically elongated their limbs).

Jogging up the stairs to the second deck, which is dedicated to colonization equipment. I hope Corman wasn't lying, and that my father really *has* remembered to take his pills. I will never forget that one day when I was seven, and my father and I were at home watching the now-famous public broadcast of the *Maximian* discovery. When the ship's captain delivered that fateful bit of news my father exploded off our living room couch, cried, "Eureka!", and began to glow—visibly glow—with an intense golden light. Thirty years later and the memory hadn't tarnished in the slightest. After the incident, my father apologized for his abruptness and told me he had forgotten to take his pills, the ones that limit some of the nastier side effects of his regenerative cell serum. To this day I don't know if he was lying or not. But the memory is forever tied to the subject of his pills. I've never been scared of my father, I've always adored him, but in that moment...while he was glowing golden...there was something in his face that I never wanted to see again. Unbridled desire.

There is Fuller descending the storage ladder with a thermal blanket tucked under one arm. I approached him.

"Good morning, Fuller. Have you seen Morgan yet today?"

Fuller presses a button on a nearby wall panel and the ladder folds itself back into the ceiling. "You could check in the bio lab. But no, I haven't seen her. You need status reports?"

“Uh-huh. We’ll reach planet Bravo in, what, three years? Got to confirm that Morgan stored everything we took out for the Cortez landing in Section B now that the engineers have given their approval.”

“We were working on that yesterday. Almost done.”

“Great, Fuller. Be thinking of a name for Bravo, all right? We’re compiling ideas sometime this week. And do you research, make sure you don’t pick someone who lived outside the eighteenth-century Earth era. Captain’s orders.”

Jogging across the crew deck, waving to friends, exchanging hurried smiles. Day number four thousand nine hundred and seventy-one has officially begun, and that means it is time to work. The Captain (I did my best to separate my father from his job title in my mind) understands how daunting a journey *Manifest* is undertaking and devised a system to keep the eight hundred crew members and fourteen hundred (fifteen hundred?) happily occupied. The naming of the planets for instance is a ship-wide event that is painstakingly deliberated over and serves as a sort of ancient history lesson. Age-old explorers are brought to the table to be studied, analyzed, and then deemed either worthy or unworthy to have their names attached to the last galaxy in the universe. I for one think Hernan Cortes was a perfect choice for Alpha planet. A man who defied orders to further the reach of his conquest, a man who had an insatiable appetite for wealth or land, a man who lived to see beyond the horizon. Cortes reminds me of my father. Not the *Captain*, but my *father*. He too lives for the unknown and the knowledge that he would be the one to discover it. He named me after Russia’s greatest empress for a reason after all.

The Captain’s quarters are located on the northern end of Section A’s top deck and was one of the few rooms on the entire ship to have windows installed. I have only been inside the Captain’s quarters on a few occasions (my father and I prefer to spend time together on more

neutral ground) and each time I find myself staring out into the blanket of space, at the distant suns and moons, at the wisp-like structure of the Mayflower galaxy, completely in awe of the space we have traveled and colonized.

I turn a corner, expecting to find the door to the Captain's quarters unobstructed as usual, *not* expecting to run straight into a security staffer.

"Woah there, Catherine," says staffer Winston, his strong arms steadying me.

I contemplate the frown that is stitched across his thick-skinned face—a common feature amongst the citizens of planet Caldera where the heat can only be described as oppressive. Winston is the heart and soul of Tuesday night poker, and to see him visibly worried is reason to wonder. "What is it, Winston," I say, although I think I know what is troubling him.

"Your father's not in his quarters. In fact, I've been waiting for you or any of the other lieutenants to come by here." His frown deepens. "Did Carman tell you? I sent him to the engine room a little while ago."

"No, he didn't get a chance to."

Winston sucks in air through his teeth, then blows it out in an exhausted huff. "Your father has locked himself in the navigation capsule alone. When we contacted him via ear chip he said he would only speak to you."

"Do you have any idea what he's up to in there?"

"You're not going to like this..."

"I'm *ordering* you to tell me, Winston."

"Daiquiri Andrews from Section C surveillance reported an intentional deviation from the flight path. We are no longer on route for Bravo planet, rather...we are heading into the Void."

###

I believe there comes a moment in every human's life when a passing event makes them pause and think and realize how incredibly lucky they are to be living within that range of years—so narrow in the grand scheme of time—to witness it. My moment of reflection occurred when I was fifteen, seven years after *Maximian* had broadcast the message that the last galaxy in the universe had been discovered.

I remember the day perfectly. My father and I were sitting in the back of an air cab on the way to a Manifest Destiny Program board meeting of which my father was the head. I was staring out the window at the passing traffic and monolithic buildings when my father asked me if I knew why he had named his starship *Manifest* instead of continuing the tradition of naming Rome Mission craft after Roman emperors.

“Because it's your ship,” I responded. “You can do whatever you want.”

My father laughed at that. I love it when he laughs. “You're quite correct, Cat, I *can* do whatever I want. But there's a deeper reason why I named our ship the *Manifest*. Let me ask you another question...Why do you think I've devoted my entire lifespan to space exploration?”

“Because you want to see it all. Because you believe you were created to see it all, to know it all.”

“Yes, Cat, yes. The word manifest means to make something clear to the eye, to present something. That's what our ship is going to do! It's going to present me with the glorious view of mankind's final frontier. Our last voyage into the unknown, Cat. Think of it! And once I've colonized the last planet, once I've seen the end of the line...then I'll consider my destiny fulfilled.”

There was so much passion in his voice that I couldn't help but feel the same excitement welling up inside me. And that was when I realized. *How incredibly lucky I am to be Condor Aurelius's daughter at this point in time. To know that I'll one day see the last star, the last planet...and that my father will be the one to take me there.*

The board meeting was a success. My father's fund proposals to allow Rome Mission: *Manifest* to meet the fullest extent of his vision were hastily approved. But that was no surprise. Who in their right mind would deny Condor Aurelius, discoverer of planet Babylon, founder of the Manifest Destiny Program, initiator of the Rome Missions, father to many genius children, myself included?

No one.

The recruitment process for *Manifest* passengers and crew began in earnest the week following the go-ahead. "I can only accept those willing to sacrifice everything for the sake of interstellar conquest." Those were my father's words, and they became something like a challenge to every young person who sought purpose, every middle-aged person who sought escape, and a select few of the elderly who had seen everything there was to see and wanted one last adventure. They came in droves. From lone galaxies, from forgotten worlds, they came to my father to accept their destiny. Out of the billions that applied only twenty thousand and eight hundred were chosen—twenty thousand passengers, eight hundred crew. Twelve years after the *Maximian* report, the most exalted spacecraft in human history left Babylon airspace to travel across the galaxies to the four habitable worlds at the edge of the universe. Alpha. Bravo. Charlie. Delta. We didn't learn about the Void until later.

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Day three thousand and fifty. The date of our shocking discovery is imprinted in both my mind and my diary—a writing habit that was on the verge of death to be renewed by a diary entry that, for the first time in over five years, didn't involve adding to my list of incompetent crew members (looking at you, Corman), or the equally idle routine of jotting down the current week leaders in calisthenics, poker, and Phoenician draw.

Day 3,050. 58434 P.B.E.

I've never written an entry at three in the morning before. That should tell you, Secret Reader, that what I have to say is important. So read closely.

I was awakened by my father in a very annoying fashion as he banged on my door the entire time I was stumbling into my uniform. At first I thought he needed me to help him find his pills, but when I opened the door I saw that his face was lit up with an exuberance I had not seen since the Maximian broadcast when I was eight. He told me that the night crew up in Nav had just witnessed unidentifiable space matter come across their radar. When my father asked them to describe it they said it looked like petroleum had been spilled in water. A gently swirling mass of sinister-looking black wisps in the middle of space. It doesn't look like a galaxy. It doesn't look like a black hole. At least that's what my father got from the images the night crew showed him.

The Void, as my father immediately nicknamed it, is located roughly between Alpha and Beta planets. After talking to some of the crew myself, it seems like the general consensus is that this 'Void' isn't dangerous and shouldn't impact our colonization mission in any way. It's just unexpected. Apparently Maximian only scanned for possible habitable planets, meaning that all asteroid belts, suns, black holes, and unidentifiable space matter were ignored completely.

Well, that's the news for now. I'll write tomorrow when I learn more.

I didn't write the next day. In truth there wasn't much else to write about. My father made a general announcement to the ship at large to make them aware, assured them that the Void wouldn't affect our mission and so on. But as he was speaking to all passengers and crew in the crowded dining facilities I couldn't help but notice the pinched look on his face, as if it pained him to say the words *'We will carry on as planned'*.

###

Staffer Winston escorts me to the navigation capsule's outer door. Like the rest of the doors on this ship it is bulky (reinforced with Midport's alien metal), white, and air-tight. But never before has staring at one of them caused my stomach to tangle itself into a knot. What is my father doing?

Winston presses a finger against the intercom chip implanted in his ear. "Captain Condor, sir? Are you there?" He listens for a moment, then says, "Your daughter is here to speak to you...very good, sir." He takes his finger off the intercom and motions to me. "Go on in, Catherine."

The door slides sideways into the wall with a hiss of compressed air. Before stepping inside I give Winston my signature expression—a razor-thin smile with slightly raised eyebrow.

"You'll do fine," Winston says.

I turn and step inside the Nav capsule. The door hisses shut behind me.

For a starship that is over four thousand feet long, the navigation capsule, or pilot's chamber, is relatively small, just a nub at the very front of the ship. Because most of the actual incoming data analysis and flight path trajectory work is done further down the hall, the Nav capsule is usually only occupied by the highest ranking officers and a few engineers whose sole

job it is to monitor the system screens and speak up whenever there's a problem. The room can be more easily likened to the throne rooms of old rather than to a traditional pilot chamber. However, there is one aspect of the Nav capsule that makes it the most important room on *Manifest*. It controls both the primary and auxiliary thrusters. All the buttons and levers and screens that control *Manifest's* maneuverability are inside the Nav capsule. All available processes cannot be shut down. Any actions taken cannot be overridden. My father wished it so.

Although he did not implicitly say so, I believe he wants to recapture some of the magic from the long-gone era of sea travel where the ship's captain could strike a heroic pose behind the eight-knobed, wooden steering wheel. Planted feet, an expression of fortitude as the waves crash over the deck behind him, strong hands gripping the wheel. Free to go wherever he so chooses, bound to no one. Indeed, my father needs no words to express this desire because every time I enter the Nav capsule my gaze is drawn to the ship's wheel set above the north bay window. It is an impressive piece of ornamentation made of furnished mahogany. My father said it was crafted in the likeness of the Portuguese sailors from the sixteenth century E.E.. It's amazing that they even have records of something that old.

There's an almost invasive quality about the wheel, the way it contrasts the rest of the Nav capsule's pristine machinery and modern design. I will even go so far as to describe the wheel as *haunting*.

Embedded above the wheel, near the space where the ceiling meets the wall, is a plaque with raised golden letters. *Veni. Vidi. Vici*. I came. I saw. I conquered. One of my father's favorite maxims.

I spot my father as soon as I enter the room. He is standing beneath the mounted shipping wheel and staring out the north bay window, hands clasped behind his back like any respectable

commander. For a moment I do not make any attempt to initiate a conversation. In a situation like this, it is important to observe the man who has possibly gone crazy. He is standing tall with his head lifted, his handsome swath of chestnut hair tucked beneath his commander's cap. From the side of his face that is presented to me, I can see that he looks content. *Content*, I tell myself. *Not raving mad, not foaming at the mouth*. He looks perfectly calm and collected, no different from the man who used to tuck me into bed every night. He is my father, and I love him, and he loves me.

"Father?" I say hesitantly, stepping forward.

He turns. His eyes are gleaming—*with joy*—with fervor. "Catherine," he says. "Oh Catherine, we are so blessed."

"Blessed, father?"

"Yes, Cat, yes. We embarked on this voyage thirteen years ago with a plan to colonize the rest of the universe. Instead we have been blessed with a chance to go further into the unknown than anyone before us in millenia. What a gift. What an opportunity!"

He's confused, that's all, I think. *Not crazy, just has our priorities a little mixed up*. Fixing a gentle smile onto my face, I take another few steps toward him. "Come, father. Why don't we discuss this outside with Winston and Matilde—"

His head flops from side to side in exasperation. "You're a smart girl, Cat, you understand why I can't discuss this matter with the other crew. They think I'm a three-eyed bug who's better suited for a museum exhibit than the job of starship captain."

"That's not true! Father, what are you saying? Everyone *praises* you!"

"Maybe they used to, but nowadays I've grown deaf to the cheers. Live as long as I have and you'll know what I mean." My father leans an arm against the desk of a nearby monitor

station. “At this point, I’m as foreign to this crew as planet Bravo. They don’t understand, much less appreciate, what gets me excited to wake up each morning, come into this room, and witness all the stars passing us by. ‘What is a relic like me still doing up and around’, that’s what they say. And they say it a little scared too because they don’t like to think about why a fellow who has lived eight centuries longer than they have is interested in the same thing they are. Shouldn’t I, the legendary Condor Auerilius, be in a Delineation Chamber somewhere, leaching out my infinite knowledge to today’s youngsters? Or perhaps I should be a permanent fixture in Babylon’s congress where I would spend my time nodding my head yes or shaking my head no whenever the judicator wants my *honorary* vote. That’s what you expect from RCS users, right?” He sighed, and his head flopped from shoulder to shoulder again. “Do you want to know the kind of knowledge that eight hundred years of life has brought me, Cat?”

Feeling a little overwhelmed, I nod.

“It’s made one thing abundantly clear. And that is that we live in a petty universe. Petty. So much of what we as humankind do is meaningless. Once we ensured the survival of our species for countless millennia, once we eradicated disease and lengthened lifespans, once we conquered galaxies and instilled lasting societies that thrive under the re-establishment of democratic rule...we had created ourselves a utopian universe that was, however pleasurable to live in, doomed to grant every one of our kind a meaningless life. So what gets me up in the morning? For the longest time, it was the Rome Missions. Why? Because they gave me access to new things. New planets, new galaxies. We always need new things to keep us happy, Cat. Something to get us excited to wake up in the morning. And now, with *Manifest*...we are rapidly approaching the last of the presents under the tree. In twenty years time you and I will live in a universe that is entirely *known*. The known will soon become old, the old will become

intolerable, and humankind will become stagnant. For without challenges to overcome, how can you grow? Cat? I want to hear you say it.”

I swallow, shake my head. “You can’t.”

“Precisely.” His response is low and guttural. *Animalistic*. “The rest of the crew either doesn’t understand that or doesn’t want to accept it. But I know *you* understand it, Cat. You’ve always been the most loyal of my children. That’s why I agreed to talk only to you.”

I resist the urge to smile back at him. Normally I would accept his praise wholeheartedly, but now...I simply can’t get past the gleam in his eyes. “Father, we are part of a calculated mission. There can be no deviations. As captain, you know that better than anybody...”

Father makes a face of petulant scorn. “Deviations! The Void isn’t some dying star that we all want to get a closer look at. It’s the gateway into the next chapter of interstellar conquest! It’s an unknown that will give us purpose, an unknown that must be discovered!”

I need to calm him down. I can hear the tremble in his voice. “Father, we have to think about this,” I say with a tone Corman would instantly call out as condescending.

“There’s nothing to think about, Cat.”

“Really? Not the fifteen thousand people whose lives you’re going to endanger by changing our flight path? The only thing we know about the Void is that it’s *there*. It could be a warped nebula, or a, a cloud of...*planetary matter*, or who knows what else. Our purpose here is to colonize the four habitable planets in the Mayflower galaxy. To go anywhere else would use up resources needed for the colonization effort, not to mention risk all our lives.” Quietly I say, “You wouldn’t want to risk my life, would you, papa?”

My father’s gaze falls upon me, and I can see his love for me in his eyes, his twinkling blue eyes, and I feel hope lifting my chin and raising the corners of my mouth. The smile is but a

flicker, however, before my father's gaze slips past mine into the gaping chasm of the world just over my shoulder. His eyes glaze over, and I've lost him to the Void. His mouth moves as if of its own accord.

"There could be new worlds in there. Entire galaxies, perhaps. A doorway to a hidden existence. Just...*imagine*...what lies beyond the Void. And all for our taking! Like grapes hanging down from the vine. Whatever it takes, Cat. Whatever it takes and to whatever end, so long as I leave this life knowing I've seen it all. That's my destiny after all, isn't it, Cat? Created to conquer. Preserved to persevere."

"All right," I say. It is a sigh of defeat. "I'm going to leave now. But please. Won't you allow the other crew to gain access to the Nav capsule, to allow them to advise you? You may be our captain, but you aren't our god."

"Ah. But I also happen to be your father. You can rebel against your captain out of personal honor and feel no regret; you can disobey God out of anger and feel no guilt. But isn't it much harder to go against the will of a father whom you love without feeling the ache of grief or the burn of shame? Think on that, my daughter, while you go."

Winston is waiting outside the Nav Capsule. I start talking the second the door hisses shut.

"Don't worry about the captain, he's fine, he just needs a little time alone, so please...leave him alone." I brush past Winston's smartly ironed uniform and proceed down the hall, taking in deep, calming breaths.

"What did he say to you in there?" Winston asks, hurrying to match my pace.

"Nothing of importance."

“Did you ask him why he turned the ship and added power to the thrusters?” Winston sounds slightly exasperated.

“Yes,” I say. “He wants to take a closer look at the Void.”

“Catherine?”

I dart my gaze sideways to look into Winston’s round, sweaty face.

“Stop walking. Let’s talk.”

I do as he says and give him a forced smile. If only I could escape to my quarters, I could sort out this whole situation and come up with my desired outcome—something I can’t see happening after discussing it with Winston.

“Over here,” Winston says and takes me to a staffroom door. He knocks, opens the door a crack, and pokes his head through. “Lieutenant Syren, would you join us outside for a moment? It’s regarding the captain.”

I groan inwardly. Magnolia Syren is a hot-headed old woman from the planet Osiris, where everyone is taught from birth the values of order and discipline, two attributes that are vital to their mining economy where the life of one individual is often placed in the hands of another. If there’s one person who would damn my father for his actions, it is Magnolia.

She emerges from the staffroom with Winston and appraises me with watery eyes and flaring nostrils. “Catherine.” She states my name like it’s a disease. “You had a talk with your father?”

“I did, ma’am.” If I forget to add ma’am at the end of every sentence, she will mark me up, my rank notwithstanding.

“Why is your father being so obtuse?”

“He wants to get a closer look at the Void, ma’am. For research.”

Lieutenant Syren takes several steps in quick succession so that within two seconds she is positioned less than a foot away from me. The nauseating scent of her honeysuckle perfume hits me like an ocean wave. “*Research*,” she scoffs, her brow wrinkling, her nostrils dilating. “Never have I seen such a display of unprofessionalism in my life.” She ticks off my father’s breaches of conduct on her fingers. “Changes course without approval, restricts access to Nav Capsule, disregards nano-com, siphons unwarranted power to thrusters...need I go on?”

“No, ma’am.”

“Mhmm.” She turns to Winston. “I want you to alert Fenway. Tell him to come up to the flight deck with a squadron of security personnel equipped with ray guns. If Captain Condor refuses to open that door, then we’ll have to cut it down.”

“That would be considered mutiny, lieutenant,” I say quietly.

“Oh, honey,” Magnolia says, piercing me with her glare. “What your father’s doing is much worse.”

I managed to escape Lieutenant Syren’s clutches relatively unscathed. She didn’t order me to stay on the flight deck to await further instructions, so I considered myself lucky and moved on to more important matters. Like how I was going to stop Syren from forcing herself into the Nav capsule.

I am sitting alone in my quarters—much nicer than the average passenger sleeping arrangements, as mine is an actual four-walled room instead of a partition and furnished with two traditionally designed high-backed chairs, a standard hibernation chamber, and a mini-bar against one wall (the provided drinks were Siberian and not to my liking). I recline my chair and stare at my bare wall. Once upon a time, these walls were adorned with various astronomical charts and

posters of different players from Babylon's laser tag team. I took it all down when I earned the rank of lieutenant at the age of twenty-eight. Somehow it didn't seem fitting for a starship officer to fall asleep beneath the smirking face of Monicher Wakefield.

The wall is bare and I still stare, I think in a stupor. All too soon, however, my father's words glide gracefully into my head.

"Isn't it much harder to go against the will of a father whom you love without feeling the ache of grief or the burn of shame?"

What 'will' does my father want me to go along with? He never got around to explaining that part. If he means letting him steer the ship into the Void, then I'm willing to suffer a little grief and shame to possibly help save fifteen thousand lives. Of course I am. What I'm *not* willing to have happen is for Lieutenant Syren and Fenway's security squadron to *commit mutiny* and melt open the Nav capsule door, drag my father out, and humiliate him in front of the entire *Manifest* population. Condor Auerilius has earned more respect than that.

Another possibility floats to the surface of my mind. Assume I allow Syren and Fenway to break into the Nav capsule. Will my father go quietly? I ponder the image of him glowing golden the night of the *Maximian* broadcast. I remember the handful of times he picked me up from school looking like he had just been in a bear fight. And I wonder—will my father go quietly?

###

Every year for the past ten centuries, three notable individuals from any planetary origin, occupation, or background are chosen by Babylon's supreme chancellor to receive a lifetime supply of regenerative cell serum. These individuals have, in Chancellor Downing's own words, "surpassed the expected level of influence on a universal scale". My father founded the Rome

Missions. The other two recipients that year invented the hibernation chamber and discovered a highly convenient use for the pickleberry plant respectively. In my opinion there only needed to be one award that year.

Interestingly enough, this ‘award’ ceremony was put into place by the developer of RCS as a means of advertising his new product. Dawson Creed was one of many people I did reports about in school, and was although admittedly not one of the most ingenious persons in the universe, certainly one of the most charming. He would mount his little stage in a building somewhere in Friendship, Babylon and broadcast to his viewers with open arms and a tantalizing smile. I still remember his sales pitch.

“Citizens of Friendship...of Babylon...of the Greengrass...of the M21...of the Universe! I welcome you all to join me in forty-eight hours to witness the first ever annual award ceremony that will give three individuals a cup brimming with the water from the fountain of youth. Fountain of youth, you ask? That’s right! Regenerative Cell Serum, or RCS, will preserve the body you spent years perfecting in your youth. One thousand years guaranteed if taken once a week! Are any of you laughing in your seats? Calling me a mad scientist? Listen, folks. In forty-eight hours I will be presenting these renowned figures of our time a lifetime supply of RCS. Julian Yang. Analise Schooster. Melbourne D’Ambrosio. A lifetime supply! I invite all of you to observe these famous figures over the coming decades and notice, whenever they make their frequent public appearances, how they don’t seem to age a day. Restorative surgeries can only take you so far, folks. Scan the code below to order your first dosage, and don’t forget to tune in Friday to watch this historic event.”

Good ol’ Dawson Creed. He died ten centuries ago. One thousand years as advertised. He made a brief appearance on a galactic broadcast just weeks before he passed away. I remember

watching that video for my school report and being shocked by how little the man had changed. Physically at least. His voice sounded like chunks of gravel being filtered through a chain link fence. In the video, Creed explained how his body had reached the predicted level of tolerance to the serum, and that within the year his body would fall apart so rapidly that daily change would be noticeable. He told us all that he wanted to go out on his own terms, untethered to the creation that had made him so wealthy.

But there were rumors. Unconfirmed observations of Creed's fluctuating physical state during his last hundred years that no historian dared include inside his biography, but that inevitably spread by word of mouth from planet to planet for centuries after his death. The most outlandish of the rumors stated that Dawson Creed had developed a mutation serum that could turn himself and others into ten-foot-tall killer rabbits. If you wanted a more reasonable story to believe, then you had to get close to the source.

As an RCS winner, my father was invited to watch the future RCS ceremonies live in the studio along with a select crowd of Babylon officials and other winners and their families. On one of these occasions, while *Manifest* was still in its earliest stages, my father decided to take me with him to the ceremony. To this day I remember only one thing about it—the conversation I had with the Babylon official seated in the row above me. It was an ad break, and my father was busy talking with the show host in front of the stage. This bit of our conversation became embedded in my memory.

“Do you know what they say happened to Dawson Creed?”

“No, sir.”

“They say he could withstand a laser beam that was aimed at his heart. Said his house was broken into one night by a few men with ray guns...he took their heat. Killed them all.”

###

Will my father go quietly? No, I don't think so. The only question now is: what am I going to do about it?

I sit up in my recliner and begin pacing my posh quarters, stopping by the mini bar to grab a Siberian cocktail which I down with three swallows and a grimace.

Option 1: I can do nothing. I allow Syren and Fenway to break into the Nav capsule and face whatever consequences there may be. I remain a passive observer. In fact, I need never leave my quarters. If anyone wants to contact me, they can do so through my nano-com. Reasons not to go through with this: It will mean dishonoring myself by knowing about a mutiny and doing nothing to stop it. It will mean abandoning a father whom I love.

Option 2: I can oppose Syren. I can run back up to the flight deck, alert all the officers who I think will take my side (officers who despise Lieutenant Syren in other words), and convince her to let the captain remain in control. In taking this course of action I will be honoring my father's request and playing the role of a loyal lieutenant. However, it will also mean purposefully creating conflict between myself and Magnolia Syren, an action that will no doubt make the next twenty-some years of this voyage a living hell. Also, it will mean putting my trust in my father not to act recklessly. What if the Void turns out to be dangerous, and I'm responsible for all our deaths?

Option 3: I can personally relieve Captain Condor Auerlius from his duty. I pour myself a second vile drink while I think this option through. I'm sipping on the third when the last puzzle piece falls into place. For several minutes I do nothing, just lean against the bare wall with a drink in one hand and watch the ice cubes melt into the golden liquid. Then I set the glass down and leave the room.

The shake occurs shortly after I arrive at the flight deck's south side. One moment I'm hurrying down the hall, paying close attention to the room labels above every doorway, and the next it's as if a giant robotic arm has attached itself to my back and has jerked me into the air. It's a sensation I'm quite familiar with. Weightlessness. Null gravity. I watch, suspended halfway to the ceiling, as what used to be the right wall tilts to become my new down. The background droning noise increases in volume and suddenly I'm flying forward along with a couple loose lavatory towels before the string suspending me from the ceiling snaps, and I fall gracelessly to the polished floor. I get to my hands and knees and dry heave.

He's siphoning more power to the thrusters, I think, struggling to regain composure as the nausea abates. Must have disrupted the gravity ring calibrators.

Allotting a disproportionate amount of solar energy to the thrusters could also explain the unusual drop in temperature I felt when I woke up this morning. Possibly even the flooding to the passenger quarters last night.

My father wants to reach the Void as soon as possible. What is going on in that man's head?

I need to hurry if I want to keep my father out of trouble. Already I can hear the distant shouts coming from the flight deck's northside where Lieutenant Syren and Fenway are no doubt trying to force their way into the Nav capsule. Slipping on one of the fallen lavatory towels, I almost fall over in my attempt to resume my quickened stride. I kick away the towel with a curse, forget walking, and set off down the hall at a jog.

When I arrive in front of the Nav capsule, the scene that greets me can not have matched my fears more exactly. Lieutenant Syren, in all her supercilious glory, stands with her ironed

gaze fixed on the capsule door, her shoulders back, her lips pursed. My nausea comes rushing back at the very first sniff of her honeysuckle perfume.

I stop a few yards behind her to likewise watch the door, though my gaze is sodden with worry instead of conceit. Five of Fenway's security men are standing in front of the door, equipped with reflector face shields and outfitted in kevlar mesh. In their hands are military grade ray guns, capable of burning a hole through a ten-foot stone boulder at a distance of a hundred feet in less than thirty seconds. Most airlocked doors on *Manifest* are constructed of a titanium core with a Midport metal shell. If the entire door had consisted of Midport metal, then Fenway's men would be wasting their time; but the shell's purpose is to withstand fires not lasers; ray guns will probably penetrate it in a couple of minutes. It's hypnotic, the way the five laser points glide up, down, across the doorway, creating a molten rectangle outline. I tear my gaze away and focus on Syren.

"Lieutenant," I say smartly. The old lady swivels her upper body toward me like she's an automation, programmed to multi-task.

"Catherine," she enunciates, making it clear she does not believe me worthy of my rank.

"I would like to be the first to enter the Nav capsule, ma'am."

"So you can aid your father in sabotaging this mission? Deactivate the gravity rings, perhaps, to enable his escape?"

I don't bother telling her that the Nav capsule didn't control the gravity rings. The security men are already halfway done with their rectangle. "My father will fight you, ma'am," I say. "He won't go quietly, he'll try to kill you."

...he took their heat. Killed them all.

Syren's pursed lips slacken slightly. "Is that so? How selfless of you to be the first victim."

I shake my head vigorously. I have maybe thirty seconds. "My father loves me. If you let me go in first, I'll convince him to come quietly. I'll convince him to surrender control of the Nav capsule and I'll give him the chance to reassign his duties as captain. I may even mention your name, Lieutenant Syren."

The idea of assuming the captain's role excites her as I knew it would. My eyes dart back and forth between Syren's calculating expression and the nearly finished rectangle.

"Very well, Catherine," Syren says at length. It comes out as a huff. "But if anything...out of the ordinary occurs while you're in there, I will not hesitate in declaring you the captain's accomplice of this most sensational crime."

I turn away before she finishes. The rectangle outline upon the Nav capsule door glows a brilliant orange, shifts unsteadily back and forth, then falls outward with a metallic clang.

"Hold!" I scream at Fenway, who is about to duck into the room. "I order you to hold while I conduct the initial review."

Fenway looks at Syren for confirmation. She nods—a spasm of the neck—and he waves me through.

I examine the still freshly cut hatchway. From what little I can see through the smoke, it appears that my father has turned off all the lights inside the Nav capsule. Darkness stares me in the face. Unbothered, I sink into a crouch and step over the bottom foot of what little door remains—

—A hand shoots out from the smoky blackness, fingers splayed and groping. Before I have time to react it seizes my arm and yanks me through the hatch. The hand lets go as soon as

I'm through, and I stagger backward, pressing myself against the wall. By the light of the hall coming in thick and muted through the smoke, I spot the shadowy outline of my father standing opposite me. His eyes glimmer bright.

"Hello, Catherine," my father says without feeling, as though he's a poor man's automaton.

"Father?"

"Three hundred and twenty thousand kilometers."

"What?"

"We are three hundred and twenty thousand kilometers away from the Void." It's amazing how much he sounds like my childhood robot, Frank. The thought sends shivers up and down my spine.

"What does that mean, father?"

"It means that we are close. Close enough to dream, close enough to touch, yes...close enough to touch."

My momentary paralysis at seeing my father resemble something from a childhood nightmare breaks, and I begin running my hands along the walls for the light switches, certain that my father had deactivated the voice control. But I feel nothing but smooth aluminum skimming under my fingertips.

"What are you doing, Cat?"

"Trying to find the lights so I can get your pills. You're talking nonsense."

"Don't waste your time, please. I threw the pills away."

I stop searching and crane my neck over my shoulder. "You what?"

"I don't need them where I'm going, Cat."

As the smoke clears, the light pouring in from the hall becomes brighter, better illuminating his rumpled uniform and gaunt face. How long has it been since he's eaten?

One shout. That's all it will take for Lieutenant Syren to come running. She'll come in with Fenway and take my father away and lock him up, sure, but won't he be better off? Lock him up and he'll be humiliated, but leave him alone and...*what is happening to my father?*

...he took their heat. Killed them all.

I rush up to him, stare up imploringly into his detached expression that could have been carved from stone. "Father, pleeeeeease." I slap him. He doesn't react. I slap him again. Still, it is as though he's admiring a sight one hundred thousand kilometers away.

Three hundred and twenty thousand.

"You need to come with me out into the hall," I plead. "You aren't fit to be captain anymore. You aren't fit to be a god, and you certainly aren't fit to be my father, so please. Come with me!" I tug on his arm, but unlike me, he is immovable.

"No, Catherine." And just like that his voice returns. His *normal* voice. The one that used to sing me to sleep a lifetime ago. "You must understand...I can no longer stay on *Manifest*. It is as you say. I'm not fit to be captain. There's always been too much explorer blood in my veins for me to adequately address the needs of others. It is time I strike out on my own."

"What are you saying?"

My father raises his head, calls for the lights, and phosphorescence immediately fills the room. He leads me over to one of the desks and points to the only monitor that is up and running. I take in the display. *The pre-flight procedures for one of our Ravens*. An emergency nondynamic starcraft. A starcraft that could only be set for a linear course. I look up from the monitor, eyes wide.

“The nearest Raven launch room is just off the flight deck hallway,” my father says calmly. “You will escort me there. I don’t want to give whoever’s out there a reason to grab me. I don’t want to have to hurt anyone.”

You’re hurting me by acting this way! I want to scream. If he only would submit himself, let go of his obsessions, and allow me to talk some sense into him. Although my father has had many children from many wives over the course of his lifespan, I like to believe that we have a special bond, that my interests and his interests are the same. As Corman would say, with his fascination with Earth-age western movies, “*You’re the sidekick, and he’s the head honcho.*”

He’d listen to me if we were talking in my quarters right now, each sipping a Siberian cocktail while we debated the merits of deviating from the flight path. He’s not crazy, just confused. I’ll get him to see sense.

“All right,” I say. “Let’s go out into the hall.”

“To the Raven,” my father agrees.

###

Lieutenant Syren glares at us in suspicion when we emerge through the door.

“It’s all right,” I reassure her, my hand clasped securely around my father’s. “I’m taking him to his quarters for his medicine.”

“*To the Raven,*” my father whispers forcefully into my ear.

I nod surreptitiously.

Syren’s shrill voice followed us down the hall. “The captain belongs in a *detention* center, Catherine!”

I glance over my shoulder to find that Fenway's security people are following us at a distance. I wonder vaguely how much trouble I'm going to be in when this gets resolved. *Plenty, if Syren can help it.*

"Utility corridor coming up on your right," my father whispers.

My gaze never wavers from the staircase at the hallway's end. I hear only my own harsh breathing. My father's hand tightens around mine.

"Turn here!" He's tugging on my arm.

I swivel sharply, almost hitting him in the head with my elbow. "I'm *not* letting you do this, I'm just not. You need to come back to reality, father. You were appointed captain of *Manifest* out of respect and good faith, and you need to honor their decision by fulfilling the purpose of this mission."

To my relief, the glimmer in his eye seems to deaden; but the relief quickly morphs into horror as his gaunt face twists into one of anger. He lifts a quivering finger. "You just *try* to stop me..."

Not giving myself time to think, I throw back my head and scream, "The captain is resisting orders! Secure him!"

The guards converge on him in an instant. Knees bent in combat stance, stun guns raised, faces obscured by face shields. Fenway swaggers forward, a pair of restrainer cuffs dangling from one hand.

"The game's up, captain. You played your heart out."

The instant Fenway reached out to grab the captain's shoulder, time seemed to slow dramatically. At first my attention is drawn to the purple tongues of static electricity that loop around the insides of the restrainer cuffs. Snap, crackle, buzz. The electric sounds mix strangely

with my harsh breathing echoing inside my head—a cacophony that feeds dread like no other. Then, bursting onto the scene like an intrusive neighbor comes my father’s roar. It drowns out the buzzing and breathing, takes on a life of its own as it undulates, then stretches, creating a violent rhythm that my brain overplays with images from every recallable instance of my father’s fury.

“...he took their heat. Killed them all.”

My eyes suddenly take over for my ears, and all sound is sucked out via vacuum. I am left only with the sight of my father glowing brilliant gold. It is a righteous light, I decide. Like the light exuded from the train of an angel's silks or from the tips of her wings. A holy light.

One by one, I watch the guards’ fingers compress the triggers of their stun guns. Sizzling streaks of white light burst forth from the muzzles, warming my face, causing me to squint. But the impaired visibility does not inhibit my ability to witness Condor Aurelius: The Divine. Golden light rolling off him in waves, he stares down the stun rays. He takes their heat. The barely perceptible beams of light from the stun guns collapse into his shimmering aura, melting against the gold and sending ripples down his holy shroud. Condor’s determined expression does not change. He takes their heat and then advances. I scream—or at least I think I do—but if my father heard it, it didn’t affect him. I try to move, to intercede, but the full-body paralysis I experienced back in the Nav capsule has returned in full force, rendering me as attached to the floor as an infrastructure beam. And so I am trapped. My only saving grace is that Condor’s wrath breaks free from the slow-motion lens from which I’ve been thus far viewing the action. In three rapid blinks of the eye, it’s all over. One—Condor reaching out and grabbing the first guard’s neck while lashing out with his foot at a second guard’s midsection; two—Condor’s fist

breaking through one guard's reflector shield and sending teeth flying; three—Condor snatching up a dropped stun gun and sending two shock rays into the remaining two guards.

Condor holds still, and my brain has a chance to recover from the overstimulation. I sink to the ground as my knees unlock. Five men down, one with a burn mark around his neck so severe I can plainly see the black handprint.

I look up at my father with fresh eyes. *Do I know this man?* My answer is no. What father would use his daughter as a means of escape? What father would be needlessly violent in front of his child?

He is crazy. The thought enters my mind kicking and struggling. It doesn't take long before it settles down.

"Catherine."

I hear him.

"You need to listen to me, Catherine."

He is no longer glowing. He looks resigned, not at all concerned about the five men crumpled in heaps just outside the corridor.

"You need to approve my launch request in the Nav capsule. The program is already running on the monitor I showed you earlier."

"Syren may have already changed our course. You'll be out of position."

"I sabotaged the navigation system. It will take her time to break back in. You need to go."

“You betrayed me, you know that? I knew you were obsessive, but I had no idea you had feelings for nothing else, for *nobody* else.” I pause, then ask in a broken voice, “Did you ever love my mother?”

Condor tips his head. “Why would I waste my time building that relationship? It’s been hundreds of years since I’ve felt love towards a fellow human. For me, love is meaningless, just like the daily routine of everyone in existence is meaningless. Why should I concern myself with anyone that’s going to be obsolete in a matter of a hundred years, a hundred and fifty if that person undergoes the surgeries. Can you answer me that?”

“Just because something isn’t going to last forever doesn’t mean you can’t enjoy the experience. Not everything you do needs to be as big as pioneering the Rome Missions or colonizing the rim galaxies. I...I thought you knew that.”

Condor does not reply for the longest time. And when he speaks it is as if he did not hear—or worse, did not understand—a single word of my response. “You can come with me. You can be at peace, knowing that every generation to come will not see anything you haven’t seen or conquer anything you haven’t already conquered. What greater comfort can a father give his daughter?”

“There are more people on this ship than just you and me,” I say fiercely. “Someone needs to lead them.”

In a voice better suited for a formal staff meeting, Condor says, “You’ll make a responsible captain, Catherine. I’m proud of you. Now my last order to you as captain of *Manifest* is to go deploy emergency starcraft number three. Do it now.”

“You will most certainly die.”

“But not before I become the universe’s first witness to the final frontier.” Condor smiles, and I catch the familiar glimmer in his eyes before the lids gently close, the wrinkles on his forehead smoothing over. “This is our high destiny,” he recites, “and in nature’s eternal, inevitable decree of cause and effect we must accomplish it.”

###

I find myself faced with a terrible choice. I am staring at the monitor that displays the startup sequence for Raven number three. I see the big red button, the one that says *LAUNCH*, and my finger hovers like a bee over clover.

Lieutenant Syren is crumpled in an undignified heap just inside the doorway. I used one of the stun guns on her when I discovered her trying to override Condor’s restrictions on the thruster controls.

The button sears into my vision. *LAUNCH*. Do I have the nerve to send my father to his doom? If the Void doesn’t turn out to be anything dangerous, then his death will be an arduous process. The Raven will continue its linear trajectory unless acted upon by planetary force, and Condor will be strapped into his seat with no food, water, or emergency oxygen. He will grow weaker and weaker every hour. He may last several days. Several days of aimless space travel, unable to get up from his seat, hardly able to move his head, slowly dying. Is that really what I want for my father?

And then I remember. Condor is no longer my father. He is no longer my captain. But I may have been wrong when I said he wasn’t fit to be a god. I picture how he looked immersed in that brilliant golden glow—noble and awe-inspiring, the child of Columbia. As a father Condor wasn’t who I thought he was. His declared love for me was, in his own words, *meaningless*. But

his insatiable need to explore coupled with his unexplainable power elevates Condor Aurelius in my mind. He is a being beyond understanding. A manifestation, perhaps.

The launch button blinks red, adding an eerie quality to the darkened Nav capsule as the red splashes intermittently against the ceiling, the walls, the Portuguese sailing wheel, the Roman maxim. I lean closer, my lips mouthing the words, *high destiny*.

I press the button.

