Fall 2021

**Tidelocked**

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TIDELOCKED

Will Rasmussen
At the edge of everything, Yarrow emerged.

His vessel waded through deep space, dropping out of the knot well before his target to pull less-than-light speeds as he approached. The autopilot spun on and Yarrow stepped back from the controls, assured that he could take his eyes off the windshield.

The trip to this backwater planet would take another hour or two due to his early drop, which was good. Being on time would be terribly rude. Besides, this way he could get a good look at the Solar before he landed. That moment when he emerged right next to a star, blinded by the immense power radiating from it... Well, it obscured the finer details.

Yarrow stepped out of the command pod and checked the datastream. Three planets orbited Helios-864, an unremarkable red giant. His destination was Cyrus, the only habitable in the Solar.

Three knots away from any other civilization for the whole summer.

Oh, the stories he'd be able to tell after! He shuddered at the thought.

Into the cabin, Yarrow picked up a book he'd printed, about the unique circumstances of the planet Cyrus. The seal hadn't been broken. He meant to get around to it on the way over, but there was an enrapturing Serial he'd gotten lost in. That was another reason he took the scenic route. He sat down with the book in one hand, running the other across his skull. One of his Folical Nerves had fallen askew.

He moved to the bathroom to check. Sure enough, one of them had
fallen out the bun. Yarrow put his silver hair down, letting it drape across the front of his face all the way to his chest. He shook it out of his eyes, frowning at his reflection. He then took the Folical Nerves, each strand three centimeters thick, and twisted, locking them together. He rustled into his pocket for a hair-band, so translucent it was almost invisible, and pinned his hair back in place.

He’d installed the damn things when he was twelve, and regretted it ever since. The idea of having nerve endings in your hair was cool, but the novelty weaned off after a few months. Too intimate. With them up and away he could forget they were there.

Stepping away from the mirror, Yarrow looked out the vessel glass at Helios-864. It was currently no larger than his fist and just as dim. He knew, however, that once he reached the planet’s surface the sunlight would be excruciating. He walked to his bags and pulled out a pair of small round sunglasses. His Ocular Filters were neat in a pinch but not designed for close orbit planetoid levels of light, hence the sunglasses. He had a number of pairs in different shapes and sizes to keep things fresh.

It was amusing, his processors flipped improvements to hindrances. His classmates would have a fit when they heard, snickering about how the “Station brat style” got in the way of his choice of Expertise. Yeah, they were probably right. But Yarrow had only chosen Geology by the flip of a coin. He’d come to enjoy it since, but it was by no means his dream job.

That would be even more confusing to his friends. Why do anything other than what you loved? Every time (and there were many times), Yarrow would smile and say he “felt compelled to do something”.

A buzz reverberated through the cabin, indicating that his vessel had received a message. Yarrow dropped his sunglasses in surprise. He was far, far out from the planets, how had someone contacted him?

He gestured to bring up the communication field. It was a correspondence originating from Geravus, the furthest planet in the system. Searching through the message’s metadata, he found a series of addresses, the message had pinged across a dozen satellites before reaching his ship. That was how they found him. The Solar must have thousands, no, millions of satellites orbiting the star to effectively cover to this distance.
What kind of person covers an entire Solar in satellites? A paranoid one. Yarrow knew Colonists were suspicious of outsiders, but this was overkill. He scanned the nearby area and sure enough, seven satellites showed up in all directions. Were they armed? Yarrow had never seen a weapon, but if anyone was going to have one, it would be a Colonist.

Would they attack him? He was invited here, but did the message sender know?

Lost in thought, Yarrow almost forgot to open the message.

"Nigh10gale College CMV 36, Ciel asked me why you’re so far out in the Solar. Do you need assistance? Her daughter is waiting at the DP for your arrival. - Geravus Research Station"

Ah, they were wondering why he was loitering. Seems they were also expecting him on time. He was acutely aware he didn’t actually know what Colonist culture was like. His fathers pressured him to doing some research, but he’d refused. There was no better source than those who actually lived there. He’d figure it out.

Yarrow stepped back into the command pod and booted up the Knotting Drive. He would be there in twenty nine and a half seconds.

Back to the edge.

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Flora Gilg. popped an elbow valve from the hydrolysis pipe and peered into it. Sure enough, it was clogged with a clumped mass of black mud. She cleaned it out, making sure to apply a thicker layer of water resistant coating this time. Doc Silver promised he wouldn’t drive into the marsh again, but she knew it was only a matter of time.

With the repairs finished, Flora closed up shop. No sense in taking in more community requests when her mom wasn’t around. She wiped the grease off her hands and hung up her work jumpsuit.

Next to her mother’s it looked fake. Cheap. Understandably so, it wasn’t lived in, and she didn’t intend to live in it. Just a few more months.

The whole day ahead of her, and Flora had no idea how to spend it. It forced a smile onto her face. Another beautiful summer day on Cyrus, and Flora had every intention of making the most of it.

Her mom’s garage was nestled behind a pair of dunes near the coastline, far from the center of town. At face value it was so larger
skiffs could avoid the narrow paths that connected most of Chlorine. But Flora knew that her mother just wanted to hear the ocean roar while she worked. She jogged to the sand dunes and climbed up the side. Reaching the top, above the grasses, she could see her home.

Chlorine. Nestled in a river delta, only the tops of the concrete buildings of town center visible. Flora spotted the tram at Cattail Station and guessed she had three, maybe four minutes before it reached her. Probably not enough time to get there.

The perfect excuse to grab Rothcoe. She ran back into the garage and wrote her mom a quick note. Technically Rothcoe was in for repairs, but Flora knew it was basically fixed already. Just still running a little hot, which Flora could handle. It was in the corner of the room, de-prioritized when the skiffs came in. Fifty pounds of aluminum alloy, propelled by a tiny NZD that pulled sand in one end and spat it out the other. A hardy beast of burden, until it catches a stone in the foils.

A flawed design, but Flora had a soft spot for it. She pulled Rothcoe out of the garage and carried it over to the sand. Starting it up was as simple as stepping on; when the metal plates detected her weight the funnels spooled out below her feet. Time to rock.

Flora swam across the sand towards the sun. The northern sun, never moving. Not an inch.

As Chlorine approached, Flora considered turning east, spending the day on the shore. Kids were sure to be swimming out there so it would be smart for someone to keep an eye on them. Flora chided herself. She wasn’t trying to fill the day, she was going to revel in it. Her hands would be full enough when the storm wrecked half the machines in the region.

She scanned the sky, searching for imperfections. It was meaningless, the first signs of a storm wouldn’t appear until hours before. But she checked nonetheless. Clear and blue, not a cloud in sight. Well, except the clouds on the western horizon, but those wouldn’t move for another three days.

No, she’d head into town and see what was going on. Flora parked Rothcoe at the river’s edge, careful not to drive it over the line that separated sand from soil. It was a limited device to say the least.

The path into Chlorine was nothing more than wooden slats elevated a few inches above the silt. Flora remembered asking her
father how that was eco-friendly, when it needed replacing after a nasty flood. “Sideways Pine’s from the original seeding of the region, native enough to not cause problems. But the real trick is that wood is biodegradable. As long as we farm it ethically, we’re just adding a little extra mulch for termites to munch on.” She had so many questions at the time, like what ethically meant or what a termite was, but that wasn’t what stuck out anymore. She jumped on the boards, feeling them bend under her feet ever so slightly. The wooden slats were just another part of the planet. Nothing more.

“Flora! What’re you hoppin’ around like a lunatic for?” a voice called. Flora looked down the path and saw Doc Silver, the community’s physician, heading her way.

She brushed nonexistent sand off her shirt and gave the old man a wave. “Hey Doc, just finished fixin’ Mondrain for you. Don’t drive it out past Cedar’s again, go borrow one of the hovering skiffs if you need to head out there.”

Silver shook his head. “So bulky and loud. Make me one like Pollok, without any unnecessary bits and bobs.”

“I’m not gonna sed a skiff for you, Doc. They have the extra parts so they can do anything the community needs.”

Doc Silver clasped Flora on the back as he passed her. “Community this, community that. Before The League fell it would’ve been my skiff.”

Flora watched him as he walked away, rolling her eyes. “Why do you need a skiff all to yourself anyway? Besides, you were born forty years after The League. Can’t pull a fast one on me.”

He waved it off and continued walking. Flora took off into town, not allowing herself to get distracted any more on her quest to find something to distract herself.

The chance came quick. Before she could step foot onto main street she was accosted by a strange tall man with altogether too many pockets on his shirt. Her father.

“Flora. Why aren’t you at the launch platform. The shuttle should be here any minute.”

Flora was surprised, which in turn caused her father to be surprised. They had identical faces of surprise: eyebrows raised, head cocked to the left, mouth open. She looked more like her mother, but she had the mannerisms of her dad.
“Mom didn’t tell you?” Her father asked.

“That’s weird, don’t call her that. She’s not your mom.” Flora said. The words just slipped out, she had no intention of being argumentative. She made a mental reminder to check the levels on her Sedblocker, make sure nothing was off.

Her dad laughed. “Where was that complaint the last 20 years?”

“My apprentice is arriving. Someone needs to welcome him to Cyrus.”

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Yarrow idled his vessel outside the orbital, waiting for the green light to dock at one of the ports. It was taking quite a long time, so as he waited he angled the vessel towards Cyrus’s surface, studying its topography.

For Yarrow it was not a planet at all. It was a massive eyeball staring right at him. Cyrus was tidelocked to its star Helios, so it had no planetary rotation. No night and day. Because it never rotated, one side was always baking in the heat of the sun, while another side was frozen solid. There were dozens of unique conditions this created, and Yarrow watched them all from above, working in tandem to create the eye.

There was the pupil, the hottest point on the planet, dead center. It was so hot that the primary mineral deposits in the crust were superheated into liquid. A bright white mar that swirled as winds pushed the slush to and fro.

The iris, the ring inhospitably, but not unnaturally hot was a barren orange wasteland. He could see valleys and fissures, leftover remnants of tectonic action.

Around that mark, perhaps 30 degrees from the pupil, was a white ring of storm clouds. Cyrus had an active water cycle, and that cycle began here. At this point all water in the atmosphere (which Yarrow was surprised to learn was mostly nitrogen) was forced by the heat to evaporate, yet as it rose above the atmosphere and the air lightened it formed back into vapor. Yarrow tried to imagine what it looked like down there. An endless wall across the horizon.

The massive temperature difference created extreme winds, pushing water from the hot side of the planet to the cold side. Yarrow traced watersheds, mountains and rivers that all flowed back to the
hot side for when the water condensed once again.

And this ring, before the water cooled too far, before the water heated back up, that was where people lived.

Not many, only a hundred thousand or so. The twilight zone, where the sun was just high enough to provide warmth but still low in the sky. A perpetual 7-ish o’clock. Or maybe 7-ish in the morning? What was the difference?

Yarrow reminded himself that he didn’t have the luxury of going by standard 24 hour cycles anymore. On a station it could be emulated, humans were still predisposed to it anyway. But on Cyrus the days were endless and the years only sixteen and a half cycles. He didn’t know what a cycle was, but he was ready to ask.

What a puzzle of a planet! Yarrow was glad he didn’t read up on anything beforehand. Experiencing it firsthand was much more powerful.

Why hadn’t they called him yet? He checked the communication field. Sure enough, no messages. Were they just paranoid Colonists, double and triple checking that he wasn’t coming to take away their rights? He laughed to himself, and then felt silly for doing so. Still, the lack of faith Colonists had in The Judiciary was astounding. Almost a slap in the face to the peace of the galaxy.

Whatever. Yarrow searched the all-encompassing void of space. Not another ship in orbit. If it wasn’t OK for him to dock he had a reasonable enough excuse.

He pulled the vessel towards the orbital, choosing a port at random. He neared the airlock and set on autopilot. He could maneuver a ship in and out of the fabric between space, but couldn’t ever make a proper airlock seal on his own.

As the autopilot lit up, he finally received a message from the orbital. He opened it immediately. It read in all caps, “TURN OFF YOUR VESSEL IMMEDIATELY.”

Yarrow did not turn off his ship, but did deactivate autopilot and slowed his perception of time. He activated all of his memory banks at once; his human brain wouldn’t be enough to come to a quick enough decision.

A shudder ran through his arms as neural pathways connected, well deeper than usual. He closed his eyes, the dim light of the vessel too much to handle. A normal person would have to trust their gut.
He didn’t have to.

Yarrow was a processor.

And with processors he could be better than a person.

So. Was it a threat? Colonists are famously cloistered. So they were stalling for time to decide what to do with him, when he approached they decided to stall even further.

No, that doesn’t fit the preconditions. The message from the outpost. They told him to hurry up and get to Cyrus. If they wanted time, they would have let him continue his leisure cruise.

More information was necessary. But he didn’t have time to find it. Should he oblige their request?

Option A: he disobeys their order.
Worst case scenario: They take that as a sign of aggression. They have illegal weapons. They kill him.
Best case scenario: He escapes and reports the community to The Judiciary.

Option B: he listens and shuts down.
Worst case scenario: They have illegal weapons. They use the opportunity to destroy the vessel. They kill him.
Best case scenario: He is saved from an unseen threat.

An unseen threat?

Yarrow opened his eyes and pulled a cable from under the command module. An emergency kill switch. All power to the vessel is cut. The only thing keeping him alive are thick walls and the oxygen in the cabin. An extremely dangerous choice, but important for one scenario.

A solar flare.

Light washed over him as Helios-864 whipped a tendril of plasma from its surface. Yarrow had forgotten how close the planet’s orbit was to the sun, and how volatile red dwarfs are. The energy passed over his vessel harmlessly, but if he had kept the power on it would have destroyed the internal wiring of the ship. With a knotting drive on board that could have been catastrophic.

Yarrow thanked his neural processors as he turned them back to normal levels. No need to lose his sense of self. The flare subsided as abruptly as it came, and lights around the port he was near flickered on. He could dock.
When the airlock opened, a tall woman stood inside the orbital. She was wearing the fashions of a Spacer like himself, someone born and raised on a space station. Curious, considering she was working in the middle of nowhere for a Colonist planet. He greeted her with a nuanced salu, in the way only a Spacer could understand. Hand waved vertically from forehead to chin, as he nodded down. Respectful, but cautious. His way of asking what the fuck was going on.

The woman gave a pained smile. “So sorry Citizen,” she said, “The automatic flare warning system is broken, and I almost forgot to send a message.”

“It was quite the fright. You could have mentioned it was a flare.” Yarrow responded, but then stopped himself. “I’m sorry, that was rude. Just shaken up.”

The woman gestured for him to enter the orbital. He did. “No, no, you almost died. I should have specified. I too was in a panic. Our response grid is going through some updates, as those planet-side prepare for the storm. I assume you’re the new apprentice headed to Chlorine?”

The response grid? The pieces fell into place. The outpost on a barren world. The thousands of satellites. The paranoid messages. All to protect from the Solar they lived in.

Yarrow missed a step and stumbled. The woman gave him a look of concern. Yarrow spoke. “The solar flares are constant, aren’t they? Flares, Storms, a tidelocked planet. How does anyone live here?”

The woman hesitated. She looked back at his vessel, emblazoned with the logo of Nigh10gale College.

She spoke. “Trust me, no matter how bad you think it is, its worse.”
The air was thick near the launch platform, dust and dirt from consistent takeoffs and landings never quite settling down. The platform itself was little more than a marker above the grasslands, the only building this side of the planet with a concrete foundation. Metal grates rested above it, with specialized hooks to plant the extremely light landers to the platform until they were ready to go up again.

Flora idled near the edge, waiting for whoever her father’s mystery apprentice was. Said father was putting a vac-suit on over his clothes, making sure all the magnetic locks were attached, shimmying his torso to get the baggy fabric to sit right. He would be able to remove it once he was in space, but for entering/exiting the atmosphere it was better safe than sorry. He glanced at her as he fastened the suit’s belt. “Now, Yarrow’s family is very close to ours. Treat him with respect.”

“What? Why wouldn’t I?”

Her father sighed. He brought up a hand to scratch behind his ear, his vac-suit’s belt falling off in the process. Flora snorted. “Kid,” he started, “You’ve been here your whole life. It ain’t exactly a tourist destination.”

“What point?” Flora asked. She knew what his point was, but wanted him to say it.

“He’s a Spacer. Have you ever met a Spacer, and don’t say Kiera up on the Orbital, she doesn’t count.” Her dad sat on the edge of the launch platform, zipping his suit-up.

Flora ground her teeth. “No. But I’m not some xenophobe, not even
Douglas is that old."

"I know kid. You just might be in for a shock."

Flora groaned and joined him sitting on the edge. "How do you even know this guy?"

Her father smiled and pointed up at the twilight sky. "Remember when we went to visit Earth? His parents were in our cohort for the Homeworld Project. Historians. We worked closely on that coastline, you know, the one with the lighthouse. We’ve stayed in touch. Their son is your age, so we had plenty to compare and contrast." He laughed. Flora groaned.

"Okay, okay. Is he going to be helping you prepare for the storm?" She phrased the question like a reassurance, knowing he’d say no.

"Of course!" Ah shit, "I really need the help right now. I’d ask you, but I know how you feel about interrupting your apprenticeship with Ciel" He stressed her mom’s name into its own full sentence to make fun of her. She ignored it, but really wanted to have some snappy comeback. More important things to ask now.

"This is important. I would’ve helped if you’d asked. You didn’t need to send for an apprentice."

"Ah well, too late now. And I’m excited anyway, a new face in the house! But Flora, he’s not an apprentice, but a resident."

"A CC kid? Maybe you were right to warn me."

Her father’s grin vanished. "Don’t joke. This is important to your mother and I. He’s our guest, and you will treat him like a member of the family. We’re vouching for him. That’s enough for most, but you know how people can get around here. While he is here he is one of us. I don’t want him seen as an outsider."

"Sheesh, I was kidding."

He stood back up. "Just making it clear." He pulled the top of the vac-suit over his head and finished attaching it. "I’ll be up in orbit for the rest of the day, so bring him to the house. The bamboo room is set up for him."

Flora smiled. "I’ll show him around town first. College residencies are for a whole year, so he’ll need to know his way around."

"Good thinking. I knew I could count on you."

"Yeah yeah. You don’t have any other children to ask. I’m your last choice."
“And my first.” He pulled her into a hug and headed for the platform. Sometime during their conversation a shuttle landed. It was scary how quiet they were. Flora craned her head to see if their mystery guest had arrived on it. No dice.

Her father waved as he boarded the shuttle. She was going to miss her family when she finished her apprenticeship. But not enough to stay. It was a big galaxy, and she’d seen none of it.

Flora watched the horizon as she waited for another shuttle to descend. From the very edge she could start to see the beginnings of The Belt. She’d barely have enough time to give a tour of town before dark. Besides, it was two birds with one stone. She’d give a tour and finally catch up on what was going on. Her day off might be sidelined, but it was not over.

Cyrus didn’t take much effort to size up. It was tiny, had no noteworthy communities, it was just another Colonist escape from the second voyage. Chlorine was even more remote, there wasn’t another community on this side of the planet. All around her nothing. To the West, there was scorched earth. To the East, an ocean ending in ice. To the North and South, once she exited the Green Belt, a wasteland of local flora and fauna. It wasn’t nothing, it was walls. She was boxed in. Only way out was up.

Still, she had a connection to this place. She watched a small rabbit hop into a pock. How anonymous it was. How free. She stood up and fidgeted with her choker. Yeah, she had some sort of imbalance in her sedblocker. She wasn’t having any... dark thoughts, but her mood was way off. She’d see Silver about it, she was too embarrassed to ask her mom or dad to check.

Turning around, she saw a shuttle descending from the Orbital above the planet. Must be the new guy.

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It shouldn’t have been possible for Yarrow to sweat through his vac-suit, but he swore perspiration was beading up on the other side of the helmet. Wearing a suit for descent at all was strange, it implied that something could go wrong. Yarrow fiddled with the latches holding each piece together. Something deep in his mind was calling out, but he couldn’t figure out what. Perhaps this wasn’t the experience he hoped for.

A hot, musky cabin, a ton of turbulence, this planet was truly
fighting against its inhabitants. How did they live here? It was exciting thinking about this far flung world, but being here...

And then nothing. No motion, no sound, no heat. Well, the landing was well designed, at least. Yarrow wasted no time in removing his vac-suit helmet, wiping off his face and pulling his hair back into a bun. Another reason he didn’t like vac-suits, he had to let his hair down.

He was alone in the landing shuttle, empty except for some reclined seats and the exit hatch. Yarrow walked over and twisted it open. Air hissed when he broke the pressure seals. Interesting, the planet had non-standard pressure levels. Is the atmosphere less dense, or more? He suspected more, if it was less the solar flares above would roast the planet, warning grid or no.

The door opened on its own once he got it started. It flipped up, exposing the planet’s blue sky. A deep, vivid blue, almost purple. He peeked his head outside and looked for the sun. It was low on the horizon, not quite sunset. Late afternoon. What does late afternoon feel like forever?

He pushed up his sunglasses to make sure he wouldn’t have any overexposure problems. He choose his most tinted pair for today, hopefully as his eyes adjusted he could bring out some lighter pairs.

There was a woman waiting in front of him. She wore black shorts and a bright yellow ringer; it made her look like a bee, but he’d never say that out loud. But her face is what captured his attention. Her hair was bright teal, short, and shaggy, like she had just gotten out of bed. Her face was rough with light skin (nothing like in ancient history, her complexion more a teak to Yarrow’s walnut), dark freckles dotting around the bottom of her eyes and over her nose.

Still, something bothered him. It was her bright yellow eyes. Staring right at him. They could have just been an aesthetic surgery, like he guessed the hair was. But he knew they were natural. Because tight around her neck was a simple black choker with a silver switch.

The woman smiled, revealing a mouth of razor sharp teeth, serrated like a jack-o-lantern.

She spoke. “What, never seen a Colonist before?”

She was a Mutt.

“Not like you.” Yarrow responded. What had he got himself into?

No one had told him this was a planet of Mutts. He was kicking
himself, he should have assumed. Almost no colonist got out of the red years unscathed, and not all of them had fixed their mutations. They preferred the way they were.


“I’m gonna pretend that’s a compliment.” The woman said. “I’m Flora. You must be Yarrow.” She extended her right hand. He wasn’t sure what to do. He tried to give a simple greeting, one even a Mutt could understand. One hand resting on the temple, the other making a low wave.

The woman, Flora, laughed. “We shake hands on Cyrus. Here, lemme show you.” She grasped his hand with her own, wrapping her fingers to keep it locked in her grip, and jerked it all about. There was a level of enthusiasm to it that made Yarrow frown. He retracted at the first opportunity.

“It will... Take some time to get used to that.” He admitted.

Flora looked him up and down. “You should get out of the suit. Put it on the collection rack. Welcome to Chlorine.”

Yarrow walked off the landing platform and started to remove the vac-suit. “No offense, but where’s the town?”

Flora pointed across the field, past a hill obstructing their view. “Just over the bend. It’s small, but it has character. Where’re you from?”

“The Carolina Sunset.” He elected to use the station name, rather than the official one. Perhaps a Colonist would appreciate that. Mutts were known to have impulses, cannibalistic ones. He didn’t want to be on her bad side, but get out of this conversation as fast as possible.

She sat down on the edge of the landing platform. Behind her, the shuttle took off back to the Orbital. “You a station rat?”

Yarrow slipped off the baggy boot covers, finishing removing the vac-suit. “Station brat,” he corrected, “No, but everyone copies their style nowadays.”

“I don’t.”

He raised an eyebrow. What could she know about fashion? He decided to not press. “What’s it like here, on Cyrus?” He asked.

“Pretty boring. Food’s good though,” Flora grinned.

Yarrow laughed uneasily. Was that a joke about eating people? He tried to ignore the remark. “Really? With such an unpredictable
Flora squinted her electric eyes. Yarrow looked away. “It’s very predictable, actually. Aren’t you a meteorologist? Didn’t come very prepared.”

“A Geologist, actually” he corrected, “And the Surveyor who invited me here asked to keep my research light, so he could show me in person this planet’s... Unique circumstances.”

“Mmmm. Yeah, that sounds like somethin’ my dad would do.”

“Mx. Gilg. Is your father?”

“Yep, sent me to grab you. He went to the Orbital for a meeting.”

“In that case, he could have met me up there.”

Flora shrugged. “I’m sure he has his reasons,” She jumped off the platform and started to walk away. “C’mon, let’s scram. I’ll show you round town and then my parent’s place.”

Yarrow watched her teeth as she spoke, finely pointed ends flickering above her lips for mere moments. It was enough to send a chill down his spine. He imagined them biting down on his flesh, cracking bone and tearing off chunks of meat. He was a meal to her.

How were his parents friends with these people? Did they think that those black devices they wore, the sedative blockers, made Mutts docile? It injected them with all sorts of chemicals to prevent outbursts, dulled their senses and their minds. But it couldn’t permanently change them. Surgeries could, but they wouldn’t take them. It was maddening.

He didn’t want to take any chances, but this girl was his Fellow’s daughter. If he wanted to complete his residency he’d need to stay on good terms with them.

They walked through the field. The reeds rose taller than the two of them, reminding Yarrow of an art exhibit he’d seen once. Exactly one million needles, standing at attention, mimicking the crowd in a theater. He could see them now, these little grasses like little needles like little people.

He felt one between his fingers as they passed. The ground here was reddish-brown, hard and cracked into chunks like broken glass. Perhaps the soil had high levels of sodium? Yarrow tried to remember what he learned in his studies.

Flora stopped, reaching a hand up to stop Yarrow too. “Watch
out,” she warned, “Fish’s coming.”

“Fish?” Yarrow asked, eyebrows scrunched.

“Me.” A woman said, appearing from behind a bend in the path. The thick grasses had completely hidden her approach. She was middle aged with a tired face, completely betrayed by piercing, active eyes. Yellow eyes. She had the same skin tone, hair, and as she spoke, teeth of Flora. The whole community must be Mu0s. The same kind of Mutt too. One ship’s inhabitants, all living together at the far reaches of the galaxy. Were they hiding?

The woman Flora called Fish reached for her waist, revealing a black band across her wrist. She rested it against a strange bag attached to her belt. The holster for a gun. A real fucking gun.

“Sheriff Fish, how’s it going?” Flora asked. She put her hands in her pockets. The Sheriff towered a good 2 feet over her, and Flora wasn’t particularly short.

Fish kept her hand on her holster, ignoring the question. “I heard from your mum last rotation that a new arrival was gonna be staying with y’all this summer.”

“You heard it before me. You know my folks, not the best communicators.” Flora defended.

“Uh-huh,” Fish agreed, “So I took it upon myself, as Sheriff of Chlorine,” she stared knives into Yarrow, “That this outsider wasn’t gonna cause a mess for me.”

Yarrow raised his hands, showing empty palms. What a strange woman, some sort of power complex. How had she gotten a gun? Flora seemed calm. Was this normal? Still, she had no authority to do anything to him. “Mx. Fish, I’m here on the Gilg.’s request, I will be a model citizen. But overstep your bounds and I will report you to the judiciary. There is no community law enforcement outside them.”

Sheriff Fish smiled, and pulled out her gun. She didn’t point it at him, she held it by the barrel and presented it to him. “That may work for neutron-star orbiting mega-stations, with twenty-odd communities and an active presence judiciary presence. Welcome to Cyrus, boy. This right here is for the community’s protection, from the environment of our home. But I’m telling you now it will be used for other purposes if necessary.” She put the gun back on her belt.

Yarrow tried to stammer out a response, but he couldn’t come up with anything to say. He was right. These Mutts were crazy, and were
going to kill him. Flora looked at him with concern, and turned to face Sheriff Fish.

“C’mon, Fish. He’s our guest. Leave him alone.”

A shark couldn’t have smiled wider than Fish did. “I think I’ll be able to now.” She left without another word.

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On second thought, maybe parading the foreigner around the middle of town wasn’t a great idea. Flora considered blowing off the tour altogether, but he would need to know where things were. Besides, guests were so rare in Chlorine, and even rarer from off-Cyrus. She wanted to show off.

Still, something about Yarrow concerned her. He looked concerned, no, scared. It wasn’t just their run in with Fish, it started before then. From the moment he saw her. He must really not be used to Colonists. She’d try to curb her behavior for a bit. Act like the characters in those god awful Romance Serials spacers like so much. Reserved. Posh. At least until he was more used to this place.

She elected to skirt around the edge of town, to show Yarrow the sights from above on a viewpoint further inland. While they walked, she studied him. He had all the hallmarks of a big stucom poser. Tight blue pants, a loose printed shirt (ferns in green on a cyan base), his hair was tied up in a bun, which was interesting. It was slate gray, with a dread like quality to it. It was so compact though, like thick cables. And he wore these absolutely obnoxious sunglasses, tiny circles to the point of being useless, and so far down on his nose. Why bother at that point? He noticed her looking and pushed them up. They still barely covered his eyes.

For all his oddities, he cut a nice figure. Good posture, almost annoyingly so, complimented his broad shoulders and wide chin. With such high cheekbones he projected the image of an ancient prince. His eyes were the only thing off about it, a dull iron gray, pupils just a little too small.

She caught all of this through side glances and quick conversations. This guy, he was an opportunity in the making. She’d be leaving soon, far far away from Cyrus. She needed to be prepared for all the different types of people she’d meet. If she could befriend a station rat, she could befriend anyone.
They reached the top of the hill and hopped over a short fence to enter the viewpoint. There were a few benches overlooking the town below, with views reaching the ocean beyond. It wasn’t her favorite spot, she preferred more secluded spaces outside town, but was a favorite to many. So Flora wasn’t surprised when she recognized someone.

“Glas!” she exclaimed, walking towards an old man sitting on a bench. He turned and smiled as she approached, noticing Yarrow in the process.

“Flora, what a pleasant surprise. And certainly a surprise, given your company.” Glas spoke. He beckoned with his hand for Yarrow to come closer. He did, and Flora could sense a change in Yarrow’s behavior. He looked happier, more at ease.

Glas addressed Yarrow, holding out a hand for him to shake. “Douglas Ody, son. But you can call me Glas. The Gilg’s have told me much about you. I’m the Planetologist for the Western Twilight Zone. We’ll be working with Flora’s father on that nasty storm inbound.”

When Yarrow hesitated to take his hand, Glas retracted his. “My apologies.” He waved his hand in a way Flora found strange, and Yarrow repeated the gesture. So that’s what he was trying to do when he first saw her.

“Glad to be of service. I don’t mean to pry, but are you from around here?” Yarrow inquired.

That’s when it hit Flora. The new guy’s reluctance. His fear of Sheriff Fish. His relief when meeting Glas. Her ears rung dry and she toned out their conversation. No doubt Glas was explaining how he was from Dericho, a nearby Solar. An interesting area with a combination of Colonists and Settlers. How that group of colonists was one of only two, two out of three thousand, that had survived the first voyage without major mutations.

Flora fiddled with her choker. Chemical imbalances. Fuck. It was because she was a Mutt. Flora adjusted her choker and chided herself not to touch it again. Not until he was gone. She made careful attention to keep her mouth closed, not show too much teeth. Shit, how would he work with her dad if he was afraid of him?

“Flora dear, everything okay?” Glas dragged Flora out of her stupor.

“Yeah, fine. I know you would love to dive into planning and such,
but he's only just arrived.”

Glas frowned. “So sorry, I can get carried away. Give him the grand tour, work can wait.”

“Thanks, Glas.”

Glas got up to go. “That reminds me, I have places to be. A word of advice to you two saplings from a big ole’ tree. Watching the world is a great way to connect with it, but you can also find yourself lost in it if you look for too long. Humans are best to be looking up every once in a while.”

Once he was out of earshot, Yarrow leaned in to her ear to whisper. “That was nonsense, right?”

“Yeah,” Flora laughed. She stopped laughing as soon as she realized it was showing her teeth.

“Look over there,” Flora told him, trying to avert his gaze from her, “See that long, curved building?”

“The one that looks like a U?”

“Yeah. That’s the community hall. The square next to it is kinda the unofficial town center though. That paved area is the one spot that’s outfitted for removal if we have to leave the planet. The rest stays and decays.”

Yarrow studied the landscape. “Decays? All local materials then. That’s impressive, but, uh. I thought Chlorine would be bigger.”

“The town isn’t even half of the community. Most people live along the shoreline, or in the marsh out south,” Flora pointed out past the town, where the other hill that comprised this valley blocked his view. “Most of our community’s exports come from that area. Lots of organic salts, peat out there.”

“Salts? A Net Negative Device can produce salt.”

Flora chuckled. “NNDs can do a lot, but they can’t synthesize complicated materials.”

“Salt is just Sodium Chlorine.”

“That’s boring. No flavor, no panache. And we're not called Chlorine for nothing. The other minerals in the bog seep into the salt, there are a ton of different varieties the manufactories make. You’ll be so sick of it by the time you leave.”

“So that’s why there’s so many mechanical jobs in the community. Lots of space to cover, intense weather conditions, the
machines must break down a bunch.”

“Yep. I pitch in on repairs pretty often, actually. Normally I help
my mom out with vehicle repair, but I prefer larger devices. Less little
fiddly bits.”

Yarrow pointed into town, tracing his finger along the track of the
tram that ran through it. “Why have vehicles? The Public Transport
looks fine.”

“I don’t think you realize just how far the community reaches,”
Flora countered. She grabbed his hand by the wrist and moved it to
point at the mountains East of town. “See that flickering light on the
hill? That’s where Zinnia lives. Why would we build track out all that
way for just one person to regularly use? Easier to build her a skiff. Or
can you walk that thirty miles?”

“Ah,” He watched the hill intently. Flora noticed a flicker in his
eyes. Interesting. “Point made. Though, it’s only twenty two miles
away.”

He looked at her, and she studied his eyes more intently now.
Near the iris, there were small lines circling, Literally moving under
the surface. “How’d you do that?” She asked. She knew, but wanted to
check.

Yarrow crossed his arms. “I’m a processor.”

“You’re a robot?” She asked, taking a step back.

“No, a processor. A human with some... Upgrades.”

Her guess was correct. He could call it whatever he wanted, but
she knew what happened. Machines grafted on his spine, messing
with his neurochemistry. And he had wanted to be that way. He
chose. He sacrificed his humanity for processing power. “Alright.”
Time to wrap this thing up. She’d talk with her parents later. This was
not okay.

“Let’s go to where you’ll be staying.” She said, walking away from
the viewpoint.

They traveled back down the hill and into town. She didn’t bother
avoiding people anymore, instead heading to the tram to grab on
when one came through. Some people gathered on the streets and in
green spaces watched them as they passed, but no one approached
her. They could probably see her sullen expression from a the orbital.

They passed one building that caught Yarrow’s attention. He
stopped in front of it, so Flora slowed down to see which one it was.

“You have a community restaurant? With a real chef?” Yarrow asked Flora. It was Thyme’s place. It didn’t have anything to distinguish it from a house, except a large sign above the door that read whatever was being cooked for the next meal. Right now it was Tekka Meatballs, one of Flora’s favorites. She would be concerned that he’d ruin the experience, but Thyme always made more than enough food.

“Yeah. Don’t have those on spaceships?” She said with a smug grin.

Yarrow smiled. “We do, but they either have super long waiting lists or most of the meals are duplicated.”

“Duped meals taste the same.” Flora argued.

“Yeah, but it’s the idea that makes it better. Made by a human, not copied.”

Flora agreed, but didn’t want to concede the point. “Well Thyme never dupes her meals. Every batch is fresh.”

He nodded, “Cool.”

“C’mon, we’ll miss the tram.”

They made it to the station just in time. Two trams passed at the exact same time, one in each direction. They each rested on a single raised rail, maybe a foot off the ground. Technically you were supposed to tap the side of the tram to get it to stop and lower a ramp to get on. But that wasn’t cool, so most people just jumped on while it was moving. It was super slow anyway. Flora gestured to Yarrow to watch her, and hopped on the tram. Yarrow followed, and made it on pretty clean, just gripping the handrails a bit too tight as he settled onto the tram floor.

She sat down and propped her feet up on the seat in front of her. Yarrow looked at the empty tram, which could fit around eight comfortably, and decided to lean against the wall instead. He watched the landscape as it moved past, and she watched him. She wondered how much of his brain was plastic. If he had any other prosthetics like the eyes. The hair had to be one, that much was obvious now. She’d seen in a serial that some prosthetics are purely for pleasure, a flagrant display against propriety. It would make sense for someone who couldn’t care about others. At least it was tied up.

Cool off and cool down. Maybe she’d go to the lake. Anywhere far
from here, for at least a bit. When their stop came, she realized twenty minutes had passed in total silence. She hadn’t even considered speeding the tram up. “This is our stop.” She told him.

They departed and walked down a dirt path. She lived in a cluster of homes near the edge of the marsh, nestled between the tram line and the shoreline. This path lead into that area, past a natural barrier of bamboo. All the homes in this area had some form of hedge covering, for a little bit of privacy. It didn’t work.

“Over to the left is the Caes.’s place, and the Leon. Family is in the upper area over there. But our spot is the area near the marsh. It’s three buildings, but only one matters.” She lead him into the green space for their little cul-de-sac. It had a small pool and some picnic benches, with plenty of tree cover.

“It’s a maze,” Yarrow remarked.

“If you get lost no one will take it personally. Just ask for directions.” She lead him under a trellis to a tall home mostly made of glass. The whole front was one segmented, arched window, tinted black on some panels and completely clear in others. “This is our place,” Flora explained. She led him in the front door, which opened into a large living space that took up most of the square footage.

“Mom doesn’t like walls. Kitchen is over in that corner, help yourself to the cooker if no one’s around. No stove or oven, sorry. This is a fab food house.” She laughed. Her dad had taken cooking lessons from Thyme, when Flora was very young. He got so into it, wanted to install a full kitchen. The phase passed.

“Thanks.”

“Our rooms are in the loft, but you’ll be staying in the guest room. It’s one of the other buildings in the back.” She lead him onto a back patio and through a vibrant garden. Another of her father’s obsessions, but this one was caught by her Mother too, so it didn’t die out. They had plants from thirty different solars, and kept a constant eye over it so nothing spread outside the garden. It would suck if they were the reason an invasive species found its way into greater Cyrus.

On the opposite edge of the garden, surrounded by another hedge of bamboo, was the guest room. Basically only used when Kelp or Glas stayed over too late and didn’t have the energy to get back to their place. Flora walked inside and turned on the lights. It was a short and long building, only one room. Flora always thought it looked like a
cargo container. A bed covered one end, while a bathroom cut off from the side of the room. On the far end, glass panels in the floor showed a small stream running under the building. The glass continued up the wall, giving a nice view of the stream heading to the ocean.

“This is for me?” Yarrow asked.

“Yep. Now if you don’t mind, I have other things to do. My parents should be around sometime soonish.”

Yarrow frowned, but nodded. She didn’t really care if he was happy to be left alone. Well, she did. She felt guilty that inflicting this uncomfortable situation on him felt good. At least she could feel guilty. That proved her humanity.

Flora left the visitor alone.
3: Gold Dust

On her way to Doc Silver’s clinic, Flora mulled. The view of the water as the tram slowly rolled, the trees filtering the steady sun, it was old. She felt old, for maybe the first time in her life. She’d been an adult for three years now, and she had done nothing. Waiting until she reached some new level of “ultra-adulthood”, when she’d be ready to actually start her life. Her mom asked her to stay. To do her apprenticeship on Cyrus.

She’d agreed.

Flora hopped off the tram before her stop and walked the rest of the way. She needed to move to think, sit too long and she’d become Glas at the viewpoint, forgetting where the time went.

As she walked beside the track, tram passing her by, she heard a song. A Colonist folk song, playing somewhere unseen.

Our leaky engine’s got a pale blue glow, Jack
Say hello
The captain told me to stay away, Jack
Send her low
If we are to brave this cosmic weather
We must start to row together
’till hell owes
That leaky engine’s changin’ me, Jack
Say hello
New voice on the radio frequency, Jack
Send her low
They took what we had been promised
We drop our oars and raise our fists
‘Till hell owes
Send her low
Say hello

Wind started to blow from the north and Flora shuddered. Tomorrow it would be fall. Flora grimaced, remembering that winter was only a few days away and her jacket was still with Cedar for repairs. She tore her sleeve trying to fish a dropped wrench out of a thicket. Repairs gone horribly wrong. The thicket’s brittle stems snapped as she charged through, unaware of the thorns.

If it still wasn’t fixed by the time the storm hit, she didn’t know what she would do. Steal one of her mom’s coats probably.

Chlorine was busy when she arrived, a stark contrast to the two or three people she had seen when she was showing Yarrow the town. She wondered how many of them knew about his arrival. She didn’t have to wait long to find out.

“Flora, Flora!” Madrona yelled, running up to her. Madrona was five years younger than Flora, not yet an adult, but not really a child. And NEVER knew when to keep her mouth shut. She loved it. Flora grinned as she approached, watching the other citizens watch the two of them.

Madrona was a test case. “Hey Mads,” she greeted back.

“You met the Spacer? What’s he like?” The girl was almost bouncing in place. It would seem careless to an unobservant eye, but Flora knew she was just taking in every detail at her own rate, which happened to be alarmingly fast. When she bounced around her she wasn’t actually looking at her, but for clues.

Well, the harsh reality had to come sometime. “He’s a robot. And he hates Muos,” Her words cutting like a blunt knife.

Mad’s face fell. She powered down. “Really?”

“Yeah.”

The not-so-covert onlookers moved on, continuing with their days. They got what they came for.

Madrona did not. She questioned Flora, returning to her usual religious zeal. “Are you sure it wasn’t a misunderstanding? We can
look scary if you’re not expecting it.”

She was still so naive. Flora hated to be the one to destroy her optimism. “I’m sure. I was the perfect host. He doesn’t think like us, Mads. When they install processors into a person, it makes them more like a machine. They don’t have a conscience.”

Mads wouldn’t have it. “If that’s the case, why are they allowed to install them? Shouldn’t it be against common law?”

“That’s what makes it so sick. They choose to do it. Common Law and the Judiciary won’t interfere with free will.”

“But-“

Flora cut her off. “I’m sorry Mads, I have to go to see Doc Silver. Go bother Glas with your questions.”

“But he makes me help him organize the records room!” Madrona protested.

“I’m busy. This can’t wait.” Flora patted her on the back as she walked away. Hopefully she helped.

It wasn’t long before she reached Doc Silver’s office. It stood alone, on a patch of dry land encompassed by two forks of the delta. With a single bridge the only way on or off while staying dry, the office was its own keep. All it needed was parapets and a drawbridge. Flora waved to a kid fishing off the bridge as she crossed. They didn’t wave back.

Flora passed through the door to Doc Silver’s office. The front room was bare, only containing a few chairs off to one side, and shelves of medical supplies available to the community. Bandages, first aid kits, medicine, there were even some BoneSetts off to one side, even if Silver would insist you come to him so they weren’t applied incorrectly. The light above the only other door in the office was on, indicating the Doc was seeing a patient at the moment.

She sat and waited, watching a clock in the corner tick. Cosmic time, not Cyrus. But a minute was a minute everywhere (at least everywhere with nominal gravity).

Each minute is shorter than the last. Her mother told her that. She wanted to spend her minutes wisely, before they became too short to be enjoyed. She couldn’t do that in Chlorine. Every slow minute here was a wasted opportunity to see something new.

The light clicked off and the door to Silver’s office opened. Uaro
walked out, baby belly and all, with Silver close behind. Uaro nodded to Flora, and left. Doc Silver called after her, “Remember to come back next week!” he glanced at flora after she was out of earshot. “She’s going to forget.”

“Obviously.”

Silver smiled. “Please, Flora, come in. What can I do for you today, and will you in return make me a quieter skiff?”

She entered the examination room and sat down on the chair-bed-thing. Whatever that was called. “If you really want one that bad, put it on the build docket. But I might be gone by the time we get to it.”

“Psssh, bureaucracy. I have half a mind to go to Zinnia’s place and strong-arm her to move it to the top of the list,” he grumbled on, but Flora couldn’t understand it.

Flora reached up to her choker, fumbling with the silver switch, anxious to unclasp it. “I think I have some sort of sed imbalance. Could you take a look?”

The old man stopped and slowly nodded. He shifted his gait, becoming Cyrus’s doctor. “Alright.”

Flipping the silver switch, flora felt the choker release from her neck. She pulled it off and handed it to the Doc. There was still a rush of adrenaline as she caressed her bare neck, fingers searching for the point where the needle exited her artery. Other than that, she didn’t feel different at all.

The Doc flipped the sedblocker inside out, opened a port with the nail on his index finger, and turned to plug it into a machine behind her. He angled the screen so she could see what was happening as he worked. Visualizations of different chemicals filled the screen, showing how much was left in the device and how much had been used. The Doc flipped over to a time-line, showing when different chemicals had been dispensed. The basic ones followed similar patterns, the heavier ones more erratic in nature. “Are you worried about the sedatives affecting your organic emotions, or is this a regulation problem?” he asked.

“I haven’t had any… Urges,” she defended, “Something just feels off. I can’t explain it.”

“Flora. You, me, we all have HAS disorder. Urges are normal. It’s a desire to act on those urges that this prevents.” He lifted up the sedblocker.
Disorder. What a joke. Her wants weren’t a mental tick. It was something primal within her, calling to be released. She would dream about eating sometimes. The stench clinging to the back of her throat, copper and saline. When the landing festival came around, when they celebrated the end of the red years with synthetic meat, when she could take off the collar and be free.

She brought her tongue down on her teeth, just hard enough to draw blood. If only…

“Looks like we need to get this back on,” The Doc remarked. He unplugged the sedblocker from his analysis device and handed it back to her. She hurriedly strung it back around her neck, flipping the switch. Nothing felt different, but the thoughts stopped.

“Well?” She asked, embarrassed.

Silver shook his head. “All levels normal. You had a spike in Joticone-C five days ago, care to explain that?”

Blood ran to her face, and she looked down. Exactly why she didn’t ask her parents to check. “Not really, no. What’s wrong with me?”

He sighed. “Nothing is wrong with you. I think you’re developing an anxiety disorder, a perfectly normal—if worrying—thing for your age. What I witnessed now, you were so scared of a flare up that you caused a flare up. An uncontrolled flareup, as I had your sedblocker over here. But see, you didn’t do anything.”

“I wanted to.”

“No, you didn’t. Your body wanted to. It’s like an addict trying to get clean. Don’t tell anyone I said this, but a body transplant is a perfectly safe procedure. It’s my duty as your doctor to provide the option.”

Yuck! “No! No, fuck no!” There was no way she was having her brain removed and put in an artificial body.

“Good.” The doc gave a knowing smile. “There are better ways. For example…” He pulled his collar down, revealing a round scar on the side of his neck. “Haven’t worn it in thirty years. And I’m not going around eating people. You’re young, with a complex soup of emotions rattling around. Once you settle down, if you work on it, your only reminder of HAS can be this.”

Silver added one more thing. “It’s all about peace of mind. Staying calm.”
She wondered if she could ever do that.

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Yarrow watched the water trickle beneath his feet, beneath the glass beneath his feet. He wanted to be the water, pushing its way to the sea, carving a path in its wake. But he was not the water. He was the river stone, smoothed over by constant force, worn into an unremarkable shape.

Wow, this place had already done a number on him. Yarrow wanted to like it. Especially the environment, he wanted to bask in nature in a way he had never done before.

Now he was looking for a way out. How long before he could call the college, convince them to let him change his residency? His parents wouldn’t be happy, but they’d understand. There was no way he was safe here, with nothing but apathy and an overtly hostile “law keeper”. What a joke. The planetologist seemed nice, at least. With how fucked this planet was, that’s a small miracle.

Why had the girl who met him at the landing platform, Flora, been so hostile? She seemed to have an adverse reaction to learning he was a Processor. Did she not know it didn’t affect his human mind? Such a backwater planet, she’d probably never met a Processor before. He thought for a moment about trying to educate her, but decided against it. She was a Mutt, if he was too confrontational there’s no telling what she would do. He now keenly understood why there were so few Spacers in Colonist Solars, and vice versa. Settler worlds could have a mix, but he figured the Settlers helped as mediators.

What was he doing? Oh right, watching the water. It was a nice room they had given him. Very nice to not make him use a community guest hab. A little strange, but if he was to be working with one of the family’s members it made sense to keep him close.

Yarrow looked at the book on Cyrus, sitting on a side table. He swept it off the table and onto the floor. He was such a moron. Waiting for the last second to do anything, then running out of time. He couldn’t pretend anymore that it was “wanting to experience it first hand”. No, he simply didn’t want to put in the work.

The bedroom closed in around him. He couldn’t be there right now, static. Yarrow opened the door to his room and exited to the garden. It was a winding, chaotic beast, unusable for any form of produce growing. Near his room the soil was filled by tall stalks of
bamboo, reaching above the building towards the sun.

It also conveniently created a barrier between their place and the neighbors. A wall from where he stood around the garden, cupping the other plants in its strong embrace. He suspected the bamboo served an alternate purpose, its dense coverage preventing the plants from growing outside the garden.

Except there was an opening near the center of the bamboo hedge, a path leading through it. Didn’t that defeat the purpose? Yarrow traced his way through the garden, letting blades of exotic scrub grass pass through his fingers. He reached the opening and peeked through it. The bamboo went further back than he expected, but sure enough there was a way across. Curious, Yarrow stepped off the orderly pavers and onto the mulch. Careful to avoid flowers and ferns around him, he made his way into the path.

The bamboo ended after a left turn, depositing him in an open field. To his right he could see the tram he had taken to get here, or at least the tracks that would hold the tram. To his left was a fence made of wooden posts strung together with steel cables. What was the use of a fence? It wasn’t like there were any housing laws here. At least, he assumed so with all the space they had to work with. Although, now that he thought about it, why have any neighbors if there was so much space?

The question of the fence’s use was answered when a dog came bounding into view, barking as soon as it saw Yarrow. Big and fluffy, Yarrow would have been worried it would tackle him to the ground if there wasn’t a fence in the way. And he had no doubts that the dog would run right into a moving tram if it saw someone it knew aboard.

In fact, the dog did run right into the fence, bouncing off the pliable wiring unscathed. Slowing down just a minuscule, Yarrow was able to get a better look at it. It had an off gray coat which reminded Yarrow of the outer hull walls of his home station. The Carolina Sunset was beautiful on the inside, full of vibrant terrariums, but the outside was too exposed to the nearby star to have fancy coloring. Not that this dog wasn’t a very fancy fella, which it certainly was. The dog stuck its head through the fencing, panting with excitement, and Yarrow cautiously approached. When it seemed safe enough, he patted the dog’s head with one hand and scratched it under the chin with the other.
“Carbon Gizelle Caesar! Where do you think you’re going?” A
voice rang out, and Yarrow looked up to see a woman walking
towards him. She noticed him at about the same time he did, so when
they locked eyes, she raised hers in surprise.

“Nice dog,” Yarrow said sheepishly.

The woman nodded. She had the same hair and eyes as the rest of
the town, and although she hadn’t opened her mouth enough for him
to see, he was sure she had the same teeth. For a moment there, he had
almost forgotten where he was.

“Don’t let her hear that. It’ll go to her head.” The woman replied,
coming up to the fence. She rested an arm on one of the wooden posts
and reached down with the other to grab Carbon by the belly, lifting
her up off the ground. Carbon was not a small dog, so the feat
impressed Yarrow.

“I’m, uh,” He started.


Yarrow gulped. “Uh, residence, actually.”

“Of course,” the woman stared into his eyes. She was probably
around forty, and wore a large straw sun-hat. “I’m Typha Olyve
Caesar, but most people call me Cattail Caes. I live next door to the
Gilg.s. Just got here?”

He wasn’t sure what she meant by that. “Yeah,”

She nodded like they were sharing a secret. If only he knew what
it was. “What’ve you seen so far?”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

Cattail Caes frowned, and petted Carbon with her free hand. The
dog stuck her tongue out and panted. “The girl even show you ‘round
town?”

“Flora?” Yarrow asked, “She did, but it went awry.” He wondered
what this was all about. It seemed less like a conversation and more
like an interrogation. But was he the one being scrutinized, or Flora?

“Ah well, she’s part of the breed good and bad I presume. She’ll
come around eventually, just young and inexperienced. Surely you are
too.”

Humph, Sure, maybe Flora had misconceptions about him. He
certainly didn’t help rectify them. But he couldn’t be faulted for that.
This place, it was.
"I don’t know," he started. Why was he about to tell this woman his worries? She had the same look as the rest of them. For some reason he continued. "I don’t know how to act here. I’ve never met Colonists before, hell I’ve barely met Settlers."

"Spacer through and through?" Cattail Caes guessed. Maybe it was her easy demeanor.

"I suppose so. I’ve lived on planet, at my Collegiate Community. I’m just scared of..."

Maybe it was her dog Carbon, staring at him with careless innocence. "Us?" She said.

That wasn’t what he was going to say. "Yeah."

He turned and started to walk away, ashamed. The people of Chlorine, of Cyrus, they were still people. Saying it out loud made it even worse. But he still felt it, the fear, a chaotic and cold fear when he saw their irradiated eyes, their serrated teeth. The ones that hid a deeper mutation, one of the brain. He knew about them and knew he couldn’t trust them. Even if it felt horrible to admit it.

"Hey, stop." Cattail Caes called out. He turned his head but did not stop. "The Gilg.s will have their hands full with you this standard, but stop by downtown after beltfall. Ask around for me and somebody’ll point you in the right direction. I wanna show you somethin’ the girl should’ve."

What the hell. "Alright, thanks." He started to walk away, but remembered he’d never introduced himself. "I’m Yarrow 774577, by the way. Most people call me Seven."

She laughed. "No they don’t."

The lake just outside town was probably not empty. There were around five hundred residents of Chlorine, and it was a nice day out. Someone else had to be enjoying their last moments of sunlight by the lake. Flora had chosen the far side for just this reason. If there was someone here, they couldn’t hear her and she couldn’t hear them.

She’d hoped for a little more excitement in her plans, but figured she had enough unexpected already. So she relaxed and waited for beltfall.

In the northern sky a large collection of asteroids passed over the horizon, caught in Cyrus’ gravity. They were massive; densely...
clustered in the center, lighter on the edges, a black paint stroke across the sky.

It came from the north, so she sat on the south bank of the lake amongst the reeds. She could see it touching the red sun’s edges, ready to overtake it for a short time. That was what made Chlorine so special. It wasn’t just in the habitable Twilight Zone, it was in The Green Belt. A two hundred mile wide strip that circled Cyrus. The region where the Belt, the collection of asteroids that passed overhead, eclipsed Helios-864.

It was meaningless on most of the planet, but in the two spaces where the Green Belt’s circle and the Twilight Zone’s circle overlapped, there was a sort of pseudo-night. Beltfall.

As The Belt passed over Helios, light scattered across it, creating a halo of bright white beams outlining the Belt. It never got as dark as true night on normal planets, but the sky reddened and the world around her dimmed like a light-bulb in the instant after it’s turned off. Soon she’d need to get a flashlight out of her backpack.

Flora looked around at the sand and remembered she forgot to bring her backpack.

She didn’t worry too much, instead opting to continue to watch the sun hide. She could watch it without worrying about exposure. Gamma rays couldn’t damage her eyes any more than they already were.

Interrupting her contemplation, she heard music playing behind her, getting louder. Harsh noise with bright melodies, some genre popular with Spacers Flora could never remember the name of. Hyper-Dance? Alternative-Indie-Electro-Jump? Either way, it could only be coming from one person.

“Turn the fucking racket down Cedar! How’d you even find me?” She yelled as he approached on his modified skimmer. Why had she agreed to add surround sound she’ll never know.

The music turned down and a deep, smooth voice responded “So predictable, Flor. Watching the eclipse, feeling forlorn, needing a big strong man to keep you company.”

She turned to greet him. He was anything but a big strong man with his lithe chest and angular face, but he was undoubtedly the most attractive person in Chlorine. Not that it was hard, everyone looked the fucking same. Only Cedar’s dad was a Colonist, a mix up at
the sperm bank that created some sort of legal precedent. The result was a young man with some blue in his thin beard and one green, one yellow eye.

He walked up to her and sat down, tossing a beer in the process. She caught it with a practiced motion, puncturing the thin metal casing with one of her teeth. Cedar brewed them himself, and they tasted like shit but did their job.

“No biting retort? What, finally warming up to me?”

“God no.” She sipped on her beer. Her parents would be expecting her soon, to welcome the robot. Couldn’t get wasted this beltfall.

Cedar laid fully down on the sand, dropping the come on for one beautiful but brief moment. “What’s going on then?”

“Fucking Spacer showed up. You’d love him, your battle to be the hippest idiot on this rock would be legendary.”

“No wonder you hate him if he’s so much like me.”

Fuck it. Flora drained the rest of her beer and laid down too, watching the reds and yellows of the atmosphere melt into the white clouds steadily moving north. “He’s a Processor.”

“No shit?”

“No shit.”

“Whoa,” Cedar said, “Yarrow, right? How long is he staying with you?”

“Am I the last person to hear about this?” She argued. No one could be alone, no one can keep a secret in this god damn town.

“Known for weeks. C’mon Flor, does it really surprise you you’re the last to learn?”

She changed the subject. “Where’s my jacket?”

“Not done yet. I had to order the right kind of thread.”

Industrious, cute, and a smooth talking. She couldn’t stand it.

“Must have been busy with Reed. Or are you with Lily again? That would make the, I don’t know, fifth time?”

He turned his head and gave a lazy smile. “C’mon, you know I only have eyes for one woman.”

She mimed gagging. “And how many boys? You’re damaged goods buddy. Maybe if you got a body transplant.”

They continued, as they had time and time before. He annoyed the ever living hell out of her, but it was comfortable, reliable. She
suspected this was why he kept up with it too. If he really couldn’t
take no for an answer, she wouldn’t talk to him at all.

An hour passed. The Belt fully covered Helios, but Flora’s eyes
adjusted quick. She’d probably not need a flashlight after all.

Cedar reached into his shirt pocket—blue and white stripes that
made him look like an old timey sailor—and grabbed a vial of some
sort of liquid. Flora raised an eyebrow, and he smiled.

“Wanna get fucked up?”

Flora thought back to her checkup with Doc Silver earlier that
day. He’d noticed, but didn’t say anything about it. That meant it was
safe from a physicians point of view. Or at least not harmful. She
didn’t think there was a difference. Still, it begged the question, “How
did you get your hands on cobbler venom so soon after last time?”

Cedar laughed. “You don’t think I stockpile? There was a nest of
them at the headwaters, forty days ago. Got rid of ‘em all. Three more
vials are si0ing in cold storage. Zinnia even thanked me for it. Not the
venom, she doesn’t know, obviously. Public endangerment, with some
neighbors not having the seds and all that. But you and me, Flor,” he
poked her choker, than his own, “We can partake all we want.”

Flora spent an embarrassingly short amount of time deciding
whether it was a good idea or not. Cedar split the liquid between two
empty vials and she grabbed one from his hand. “To that leaky engine
on deck C,” she said.

“Godspeed.”

They clinked and downed the venom.
4: Regarding Ascending the Stairs

“I’d rather take the third voyage!” Flora’s father exclaimed, throwing up one hand as if he were delivering a soliloquy.

“I haven’t heard the expression.” Yarrow said, dismissing the outburst. During their dinner Yarrow had learned quick to just roll with it. They were sitting in the large living space that covered most of The Gilg.’s ground floor, at a cozy table in the corner. Across the table the sky was a burnt umber that scared Yarrow when it first started. He’d read that the area of Cyrus they were on had an irregular form of night, but he hadn’t expected it so soon and so abrupt.

“Most colonist groups have similar sayings. The third voyage is death. Not a death of the body, but a death of the mind.” Flora’s father explained. He swung his knife across his neck, simulating cutting his throat. The man would have made a compelling public speaker.

“I wonder where that originated?” Yarrow mused, taking a bite of the meal they had prepared. It was some sort of starchy stir fry warm to the bite and full of spice.

Flora’s mother shot a glare at her partner. She hadn’t done much talking during the meal. “Not now.” She waited a second, wondering if that was sufficient explanation. Ultimately deciding it wasn’t, she added, “The topic would ruin our appetites.”

Yarrow dropped it. Appetites. He almost forgot, once again, that they were Mutts. They were the spitting image of Flora, but tall, more reserved. Both of them had longer hair held back in buns, almost like Yarrow’s own Folical Nerves. Teal, like everyone else. They stared at him with yellow eyes. Flora’s father picked a piece of gristle from his
razor teeth. Flora’s father wore a black band around his wrist, Flora’s mother around her ankle. They were sharks in the churning, and he was a bucket of chum.

That was it. He’d made a huge mistake. He was hitting himself, he let his lust for the unknown overpower his self preservation. He needed to get out of here, but he had to do it carefully. “Mx. Gilg,” he started, locking eyes with Flora’s father.

“Please Yarrow, call me Reed. There are two Mx. Gilgs. Soon to be three.” Flora’s father, Reed, said. There was laughter in his eyes, and he rested a hand on his partner’s shoulder.

“Ciel.” Flora’s mother, Ciel, said.

“Ciel, Reed,” Yarrow repeated, “Thank you for your hospitality, you’ve been wonderful hosts. I just hope I’m not a burden, when it comes to the imminent storm. I don’t want to be in the way.”

Reed dismissed the claim with a wave of his hand, “Nonsense. For the storm itself, I only need an extra hand, nothing heady. Your real work, the residency you’ve been promised, begins after the storm. The entire region needs to be surveyed for damages. Can’t have strong winds eroding a hidden limestone deposit that destabilizes the group below the com hall.”

“Oddly specific, but well put,” Yarrow joked. Reed grinned. It’s too bad he was a Mutt, he reminded Yarrow of one of his own fathers, Pol. Didn’t take life too seriously, except when it counts. Perhaps if Yarrow knew when it counts, he wouldn’t be in this situation.

“We’ll get into it later, now is the time for welcoming, not work. You like your room? Anything you’d like changed, just holler. We made sure to install a wireport before you arrived, luckily my wife is handy with that sort.”

Yarrow rubbed the back of his neck. He could feel the ridge where his basics were installed, neural transmitters along his spine which allowed processors to access his nervous system. He’d never gotten the full neural reroute, and so there was no hole there to connect a cable to. “That’s very kind, but I don’t use the wires. I access datastreams with a screen just like you.”

Ciel frowned. Shit, Yarrow thought, he should have just pretended he did. Reed’s demeanor remained amicable, he seemed better at hiding his bothers. “Oh?” Reed asked, “Your parents said you had opted to have the procedure.” Yarrow noticed his dancing around the
topic, probably unsure of whether it was taboo to talk about. He could subtly tell them otherwise.

“Not all Processor implants are the same. Everyone gets a set of baseline processors that allow for the installation of other processors, but what other ones they have is up to the user. Many users don’t even have Bivors, just physical enhancement and GI replacement. I personally have the neural basics, ocular filters, uh,” he ran a hand along his hair, “these Folical Nerves, some minor gastro work, and a Flight Bivorvack. I can operate a knotting drive without computer assistance, but I can’t connect to the wires. Oh, I also have an emergency p-emitter in my knee.”

“Very interesting,” Reed said, “I’m glad to have learned something today. There’s no one on Cyrus rated to do such a procedure, and even so, we Colonists have a certain irrational pride to our bodily autonomy.”

Yarrow wanted to sneer but kept his mouth shut. The device on Reed’s wrist said something against bodily autonomy. At least he was in full control of his body. In fact, he had greater control over it than a normal human.

“What’s a p-emitter?” Ciel asked.

Yarrow put his foot on the table, bringing his knee into view. With one hand he shielded his skin from the light. “See that red light, blinking?” Yarrow pressed down on his skin to bring it closer to the surface. Ciel nodded. “With enough force it will shatter, and release a specialized kind of energy visible by satellites in orbit. Every satellite has code in their firmware, from way back when the Orion League mandated emergency procedures in all spacecraft. It’ll let whatever emergency services a planet has know where I am, and that I’m in trouble.”

Ciel leaning in closer, to get a better look at it. “That could be useful in some of my projects. GPS can be finicky. Can they be attached to vehicles?”

“I don’t see why not,” Yarrow shrugged.

“Maybe he should resident for you!” Reed boasted.

From somewhere outside, a vehicle skidded to a stop. Conversation at the table went quiet, as the three of them tried to listen to the voices outside. Yarrow couldn’t make them out, but apparently the Gilg’s could, because they shared a look of concern and
Reed muttered “That kid” under his breath.

The vehicle revved up and sped off, leaving a lone figure walking towards the property. When they got close enough to the lit interior, Yarrow could see that it was Flora. She walked up to the front door and opened it with too much force, the door slamming into the wall beside it. Flora entered the main space and looked at her family and him. Her shoulders were slumped, and her eyes practically glowed in the darkness, like a cat’s.

“Hey,” she said, turning towards the stairs to walk away. She tripped on the first step, sprawling out on the stairwell like a pile of laundry.

“High hell, kid. Just how drunk are you?” Reed asked, walking over to his daughter.

Ciel shook her head, “Not drunk.” She silently apologized to Yarrow, who was still sitting, unsure of how to handle himself in this situation.

Reed picked his daughter up and begun carrying her upstairs. “Is the robot still here?” She asked. He ignored the question.

“That boy Cedar better not be driving his deathtrap of a skimmer high. We have a perfectly good tram system.”

The two of them went out of sight, into the upper floor of the house. Yarrow stood up. “Thank you for the dinner, Mx. Gilg. Ciel. It’s been a long day of traveling, I’m going to get some rest.”

Ciel hummed a low note, her thoughts on some other topic. “This dark only lasts five or so hours. Dim your room’s windows.”

Yarrow nodded and left, across the garden to his own little world. Perhaps that was a small kindness, allowing him to remove himself from the rest of them if he was overwhelmed. Except when he was overwhelmed, he wanted to be anywhere but there.

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That feeling you get when looking out a vessel window into the stellar expanse, that feeling of weights in the gut, that feeling when you just start to descend down a roller coaster, that feeling of being out of your depth. That’s what being high on cobbler venom felt like. It wasn’t the venom that was released that caused it, no, cobbler venom excited the senses, overloaded them to where the smell of freshly baked bread could be too powerful to bear. That was of course because the venom was eating away at your nervous system. Killing you by making you
feel too much.

That feeling of weights in the gut came from the sedblocker counteracting the venom. Sedblockers designed to protect the wearer from intense sensation. An unexpected combination, but a safe-ish one.

It had died down now, Flora’s high. She still felt some sensation deep inside, but it was no longer a pleasant, a throw yourself into the surf and let the riptide take you peace. Now it was a lingering feeling of unease. She’d been awake if not aware for an hour now. Unwilling to open her eyes. Nothing was wrong if she couldn’t see it.

Everything wrong was in her head.

She forced herself to open her eyes, fully expecting to be lying in some field, or at best on one of the downstairs couches. Instead she was tucked into her bed, windows dimmed and cold air blowing through the ducts.

She looked to the clock on her bed-stand. 035, an hour after she had promised her mother she’d be at the garage. But also resting on the counter was a nasaclear and a tube of lotion. Her parents must have helped her into bed. Shit, she couldn’t remember anything after taking the cobbler venom.

She rolled out of bed, landing on the floor of her room. Across the ceiling was the expanded diagram of a net negative drive, pieces of paper torn from some used manual she had been given and taped together. A mess of circuits and wiring, it calmed Flora. Something truly good, something understandable, if enough effort was put in. She’d put in that effort, dissecting a spare drive a few years back. Her parents were nothing but supportive. She looked again at the nasaclear. Dammit, why couldn’t they just be mad at her?

Clearing up her nose first. Then drinking the water. Then changing out of her clothes—she was still in the outfit she wore last beltfall—and heading to the garage. Well, her mom already knew she’d be late. No harm in taking a shower first. And she should use some dental strips.

Half an hour later, at 066, she was ready to go. Out the door and onto Casslamn, pointing it over the hill towards the garage. The circle they lived in wasn’t very far inland, so it didn’t take long. Besides, on a small skiff like Casslamn she didn’t need to use the paths. Skiffs floated, Skimmers rolled.
Speaking of skimmers, as she neared the garage she noticed a small silver sand-skimmer lying against the exterior walls, wires yanked out of its control panel. Shit! It was Rothcoe, she’d forgotten to bring it back in from town yesterday.

“Flora?” She heard from inside the garage as she parked Casslammn. Her mother’s voice.

“Yeah,” she responded, “Sorry about Rothcoe,”

Her mom popped her head out from behind the large bay doors, clad in jumpsuit and covered in hydrolycs. “Being left out with the sea breeze clogs up the capacitors.”

She knew. “I’ll fix it. It was only out there a day, I meant to bring it right back.”

“Okay.”

Flora went into the shop and got ready for work. She put on her jumpsuit, grabbed some welding gloves, and started for the assembly station. Her mother put down the part she was working with and stood in Flora’s way. “We’re going to repair the trawler today.”

Flora groaned. “What is this, a punishment?” The trawler was filled with salt, stuck far upstream after some collection apparatus or whatnot broke. No one knew what broke because the hull was still full of salt, so “repairing” meant digging out all the damn salt.

Her mother stood silently, one of her many long contemplations on how to put her thoughts into words.

“Yes.”

Her mom walked over to the tool wall and grabbed two shovels. “Let’s get going.” Time to get to work.

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The sign of good art, according to Yarrow, was knowing, and then disregarding the rules. All the famous painters had the skill to do amazing traditional work, but instead pushed against those boundaries to make something more interesting. Chlorine on the other hand was a spider’s web, organic and spiraling. It had some semblance of organization and consistency, but not to any aesthetic standard. No, the rules were all practical, and the breaks were all eccentric.

He passed onto the boardwalks that made up the outer limits of what could be considered a downtown and wondered why Chlorine
was even built over a river delta. Surely there were easier places to build? In fact he could hardly think of a worse place to build, with the current constantly eroding whatever was built over it.

Kneeling down over the water, Yarrow studied the sediment underneath. It was a thick silt, pale and reddish like potting clay. Yarrow checked his surroundings, checking for voyeurs. There was no one else around. He laid down on his stomach and reached a hand into the water. The current was surprisingly strong, but he pushed through the wet and scooped up a handful of the silt. Pulling it out of the water, he watched it dry in the sunlight, caking around his fingers. As it did he noticed it clump, so he reached with his other hand and sifted through the mucky deposit. He pulled a few pebbles from his sample, and even more smaller particles of some sort. The sediment itself was made of bits so small he couldn’t separate them. He set aside his pebbles and washed his hands clean in the river.

Next, he did the same with the samples. After clearing the silt from them, he set them aside and activated his ocular implants, magnifying them a few times. The rock was shale-esc, but he couldn’t tell from such a small and weathered piece. The particle was more interesting. It was a crystal, translucent and square. There were a few things it could be, but Yarrow had a pretty good guess.

Like Flora said, they’re not called Chlorine for nothing.

Yarrow stood up to get back on track. Reed had tasked him with retrieving some supplies from town, as well as familiarizing himself with the records room. Back when the site was chosen some two-hundred-odd years ago, there had been a survey of the surrounding areas. Later exploration of the ecosystem occurred but not nearly as expansive as the original one. Yarrow had to find the town hall Flora had pointed out the day before.

Heading further into town, Yarrow discovered that a young boy had stopped at some point to watch him mess with the river. Unsure what to do, Yarrow gave him a simple salu, and walked away trying not to make eye contact.

How was he to find the buildings he had to go to without knowing the town? The streets weren’t marked, and most of the structures weren’t either. Why would they have to be? Everyone knew everyone and where they lived. Except him. At least it made sense how to get to the community hall, even if Flora had pointed it out. It was central,
towering above the other structures. Well, relatively. He suspected it was five or six stories tall.

Yarrow reached it and entered through the front door, a circular automated thing formed from glass. He tried not to notice the increasing number of people, in case they noticed him noticing them. He walked into the hall and breathed a sigh of relief as the door closed behind him. Sure, any prying eyes could see right through, but the physical separation was a placebo he didn’t want to think too hard about lest it stop working.

There was no guide working in the front room, which made sense for a community of this size. But it meant if he wanted help, he’d have to search for someone to help him. He walked through familiar white halls with clear labeling of rooms and maps printed onto the walls. It was like a good therapy session, made him feel raw and seen. Why do all Community Halls look the same? It was essentially a carbon copy of the one on The Carolina Sunset, or at Nigh10gale. There was probably some IG that lobbied communities to keep a standard, or maybe the Judiciary asked nicely.

He went straight for the records room, up two flights of stairs and down a long curving hallway that looked over the town square. There were pretty fairy lights strung up below him, he thought it would look quite charming at night. If only it could get dark here for more than a few hours. Right now there was a young couple sitting against the trunk of a tree, a few children running around a fountain, and an old man sitting on top of his roof, reading. Yarrow recognized the old man, it was Glas, who was sitting up at the viewpoint the day before. That man sure did like sitting.

Reaching the records room, Yarrow tried the door only to find that it was locked. Strange. Why would they lock the records room? It was open to all, in every community. Was there something they didn’t want him to see? Yarrow turned the handle again to no avail.

“One moment,” someone said from down the hall. She was an older woman with tan lines across her forehead and speckled silver hair pulled back. Yarrow was surprised the Mutt’s hair changed color with age. He suspected it ate dye up if any of them tried artificially.

The woman reached into her pocket and pulled out a silver key. She unlocked the door and opened it, holding it open for Yarrow. “Do excuse me. I keep all the doors in here locked so visitors have a reason
to see me.”

“Are you the guide for this hall?” Yarrow asked.

The woman coughed, hunching over in a pseudo-bow, “I’m sure you mean no offense, but I am not. I am Zinnia, the Keeper of Chlorine’s Community Hall, but many like to call me Mayor.”

Yarrow offered an apologetic sala, and Zinnia nodded. She continued, “Now I’ll leave you to it, I’m sure Reed has you going through all sorts of nonsense. But do try to come by Thyme’s Kitchen, so you can be properly treated as a guest of our town.” She smiled and walked away, letting the door close behind her.

So that was who ran the town. A thankless job for sure, the systems of governance that made community living so successful removed the benefits of power and influence. Although that made it sound like a byproduct, when in actuality it was the goal. Well, mostly. A mayor and a sheriff in a tiny town, Yarrow felt like he was in a remnant of the past. Authority just didn’t sit right with him, nor did Zinnia’s demeaning comment towards hall guides. His father Tem was a hall guide before he decided to become a historian. Knowing how all the different departments that ran a community worked, teaching others how to navigate the bureaucracy that surrounded them, it was a noble pursuit.

Yarrow put his thoughts aside and centered his focus on the task ahead. Find the survey reports, collect some geological maps, and perhaps a map of the city to make his next task easier. Time to get to work.

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The trawler was an outdated piece of hardware, rusted sheet metal hull, and no counterbalancing systems to speak of. It laid on the bank of Calassas River, turned on its side, the collection tanks overflowing with salt. The first thing Flora did when they reached the boat was climb up onto the top of the deck. From there she could see all the way upstream, where the chlorine factory used to churn out the chemical in its purest form. The byproduct, salt, and tons of it.

And this is what was left. Tons of the hazardous thing, sinking into the soil and killing the natural ecosystem. Flora examined the area where the salt had overflowed onto the riverbank, how there was a stretch of land circling it where no plant grew. Only dry, cracked earth.
So many of the people of Chlorine dedicated their life to this, to fixing the mistakes of the past. It’s what the trawler was meant to do.

Her mom called out from somewhere under the deck. Flora hopped off the trawler to look for her. “This is a lot more than I’d thought,” her mother said, “All the electronics are buried.”

“I could have told you that,”

The elder Gilg. simply grunted and started to dig. The salt was clustered together, and the strike of her shovel only cracked it in two. This was going to take forever. “Where are we going to leave the salt? Just on the bank?” Flora asked.

“Temporarily.”

Fuck that. There had to be a better way. Flora looked back at the abandoned factory. How did they move the salt?

“We could use a shop vac,” Flora suggested. The vacuum would make short work of the mess.

Flora’s mother stopped and thought. “Too small.”

She was right. They’d have to empty the small container a hundred times, and it was a much more involved process than moving a shovel. But the demolition team working on the factory, piece by piece, they had to have some sort of larger vacuum system. “I’ll ask to borrow a larger one from the demos,”

“Don’t take too long.”

That was as good an answer as she was going to get. Flora hopped on the skiff that got them there and angled it towards the chlorine plant.

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It took Yarrow less than an hour to find what he needed. Once he had everything digital transferred into his memory banks and everything physical copied and printed he left the records room, leaving the hall altogether. Unfortunately no map had the buildings named, so he was unsure how to get to his next stop.

No way to avoid it now. He had to talk to a local.

Out the main entrance and onto the square, Yarrow scanned the collected individuals. The couple? No, he didn’t want to interrupt them. The children? They might not know what he needed. Glas, up on the roof? He was gone. What about the girl sulking by the alley, kicking a rock with her foot? When the girl made eye contact she acted
shocked, but Yarrow had a hunch that it was feigned. He headed to her.

“Hello Mx. Could you help me find something? I’m a little turned around, I’m afraid.”

The girl, a head shorter than him, looked up at him, unsure. “I know who you are.”

Yarrow nodded. “I should still introduce myself. I’m Yarrow,” he started to give the kind of salu you would to a younger sibling, but stopped. They didn’t do that here. He put out his hand to be shook. The girl cautiously took it and waved it around in the air. He didn’t like it much, but it’s how they did things.

“I’m Mads,” she responded, eyes brightening. “I knew you weren’t a robot!”

Yarrow frowned. Not only did she know he was a processor, she had been fed some pretty nasty rumors about what that meant. Flora had said it last beltfall, when she arrived from wherever she’d gone. “My brain is fully human. I just have some extra bits.”

“Like what? Can you fly?”

“What? No. Why would I…”

Mads stuck her tongue out at him. “I’m not sedded, I mean can you control a vessel,”

Ah, of course. “I can. It’s like riding a bike.”

“Whoa.”

“You know, you could operate a vessel too, as long as you used the computer for any knotting jumps.”

“I know that, it’s not the same.”

There were very few differences, but he didn’t want to get into an argument with a child. “Do you know where this is?” He asked, pulling out the list Reed made him.

“The Endoline? Yeah, it’s just over there!” Mads pointed at a building bordering the far hill, on the other side of town, “The blue tram leads right to it.”

“Thank you.” He smiled and put the list back in his pocket.

Mads watched him as he left. He had expected some rough treatment when he arrived, he was an outsider and Colonist coms were backwards, archaic, tradition-bound shitholes (at least according to the serials he watched). There was certainly some of that.
Sheriffs and Mayors and Restaurants. But it was quite pretty at least. And the girl was easily convinced he wasn’t an emotionless machine. Maybe they could grow to tolerate him. The real question he had was whether he could grow to tolerate them. He wasn’t proud to admit it, but in his defense he had his life to worry about. They were simply worried he couldn’t be trusted.

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Flora pulled into the demolition site. There were three people who worked on it, but only two did it full time. Full time for now at least. They were almost done, all the environmental hazards had been removed and innards gutted. All that was left was removing the building itself. The most fun part.

Flora walked near the building, careful not to walk inside. It was a pale concrete, bleached white under the sun. Pressed lines ran up the side of the walls, creating a vertical striping which reminded flora of the kind of sewer grates spacers had on their stations.

“Anyone home?” She yelled into the abyss.

The abyss called back, “Just me!” It was a gruff, low voice, the kind Flora felt would fit well on a tall old tree. It belonged to Glas’ son Pine.

Pine walked out of the darkness, hands clad in bright yellow safety gloves. With the gloves he held a strange spool of copper wires.

“What’s that?” Flora asked.

Pine tossed it to her. “What’d Ciel say if I just told ya? Figure it out.”

Flora examined the copper bundle. It was held in a metal case, aluminum most likely. In the middle of the spool rested some sort of axle, on which was attached a small capacitor. She reached a finger in and it spun freely around the axis. “It’s an electromagnet. Old kind.”

“Dangerous kind. Don’t go puttin’ that near yer new brother.” Pine laughed, mimicking his head exploding with one hand. He was reaching his middle years, hair thinning and a slight paunch. A newcomer would peg him as the most boring person in town. She knew better, everyone in the Ody. family was a riot. As it happened, Flora almost apprenticed under him. But that didn’t let his comment about her ‘new brother’ slide.

“I dislike the robot as much as you, old man. Would this really hurt him?”
“One way to find out.”
“I dislike him, I’m not gonna fucking murder him.”
“Nah, you’ll let Sheriff Fish do that.”

Flora looked down at the electromagnet. She could attach a power source to it. Just in case. But she couldn’t let her parents know. She had a place to hide it. Just in case.

She needed confirmation, that she wasn’t crazy for even considering it. “We’re putting our lives in his hands, but we don’t know that he even values our lives. He had his empathy surgically removed, how can he be trusted to prepare for the storm?” she asked Pine.

“We’ll be up on the orbital, most of us at least. It’s our stuff he’s tryna save. And the plants and shit, I guess.”

Flora looked thoroughly unimpressed.

“Look,” Pine continued, “He’s not part of the breed. There are things he shouldn’t be privy to. Things your parents and their buds will tell ‘im. They’ll try to get the station rat to take our vows. Fuck, they’d give ‘im a sedblocker if they could.”

“Station brat.”

“Huh?”

“It’s station brat,” Flora corrected.

Pine turned around and started to walk back into the factory. “Whatever.”

Flora had trouble believing her parents really wanted to make Yarrow part of their community. They had no motivation to do so. They were just misguided, trying to help out a family friend while grabbing an extra hand for the storm. But that worried her. The storm was not something to put on an outsider. This was unprecedented weather, churned together from the hot side of the planet and tossed in the path of Chlorine. Flora heard stories of Sheven, in the Southern Green Belt, wiped out a hundred years ago by a storm of a similar magnitude. Chlorine had forewarning where they didn’t, but it wasn’t anything to scoff at. This was life or death.

And if Yarrow chose death, she needed to be prepared to retaliate in kind.

Shit, she totally forgot to ask Pine about getting a shopvac. She looked around at the equipment on the edges of the demolition site.
There had to be something she could use, and ask for forgiveness later. It only took a moment to find something. It wasn’t exactly what she needed, but with some modifications, it would work. But first, she needed to hide this magnet.

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It took a while for Yarrow to realize that Chlorine had no streetlights. Day in, day out, the sun was in the same place, the shade was in the same place, and so those were the only spots with lights attached. It was most obvious where there was foliage, the planter boxes cultivating flowers and ferns were arranged on top of the buildings, or in the middle of the streets where the town’s shadow could not touch them. It was careful and well kept, a stark difference to the unkempt growth of the wilds outside town. He wondered who maintained them.

On the Carolina Sunset, plants were revolution. Guerrilla tactics for teenagers trying to exert control over a filtration system that needed to be carefully maintained. They were in the vacuum of space, air was an affront to nature. In the night, masked figures would run down the various halls and byways; leaving seeds in the cracks between the tiles or wall panels. Ivy and moss were especially popular, anything that grew fast and required little soil. Community maintenance declared it a nuisance at first, but that was before Yarrow’s time. Now it was encouraged, practically a rite of passage. The walls were painted green with leaves and stems.

The Endoline reminded Yarrow of that. The side of the building that faced the sun was fully enraptured in some sort of leafy vine, a single window on the upper floor parting the green sea. The other walls were more generic, the same concrete blend that formed most of Chlorine. Yarrow wondered if it was some sort of printable material, built in space and lowered fully formed.

He entered the Endoline and was surprised to find it wasn’t a supply depot at all, but a bar. A long curved wall of colored liquids filled one side, with booths on the other. The place was empty except for a bartender. Yarrow recognized her.

“ Took ya long enough to find me,” Cattail Caes chided, “Almost thought you wouldn’t show.”

Yarrow took it in stride. “Well here I am.” He hadn’t thought yet about actually taking Caes up on her cryptic offer. Looks like Reed had
pulled a fast one on him.

He handed her his list of items to collect. “I assume you don’t actually have any of this,”

Cattail grabbed a pen and started to mark items on the list. “I can get these for you. They’re in the back. Want a drink while you wait?” she gestured at the bottles behind her.

None of the bottles had any labels. He pointed at a thin light blue bottle made of frosted glass. “What’s that?”

She grabbed the bottle and a glass, pouring it in one fluid movement. She didn’t really look like a bartender, with durable canvas clothes and powerful arms. She looked like she should be working at a construction site. When she finished preparing the drink she pushed it towards Yarrow, a strange murky concoction garnished with an orange peel. Yarrow was not itching to try it.

“Well I’ll leave the two of you alone,” Cattail Caes said, and slipped into a back room. Yarrow stared at the drink. Nah, maybe not. He sat down on a barstool and watched the liquid swirl. It was a storm cloud suspended in amber, churning like the waves of a thick, cold ocean, so far away from shore only the fish could witness.

Yarrow’s River Stone was thrown out into that ocean, skipping across the surface. Or had he already lost momentum, and tumbled into the deep? Either way his luck had ran out, no stone skips forever. He was doing an important job here, sure, keeping people safe. But he was helping people who frightened him; he was doing a job he didn’t even particularly care for. He’d be just as happy controlling water tanks or organizing a library.

Well not happy, but content. His fathers always told him that he needed to find what drove him, what he’d love doing. He didn’t understand at first.

There was no need to work anymore. Any human in the galaxy, on any planet, had access to anything they wanted. Food, housing, even electronics could be created from nothing. It was so natural to him, he couldn’t imagine a world where objects were divided between commodity and luxury. Hell, a Net Negative Device hooked up to a fabricator could synthesize another Net Negative Device and fabricator. An infinite world where he was the unnecessary piece. He would never want for anything.

Until he realized there were still things he could do to make the
world a better place. He wasn’t sure what, how, or where, but he’d find something good to do. He had a drive, a knot in his temples, telling him he had to work.

A purpose, putting effort into something, it was rewarding.

He’d come to the far ends of the galaxy to find it. Find his passions. And he still hadn’t. Was Geology something he could help people with? Sure. But was it the right choice for him? He had no idea where to even start unraveling that question.

Cattail Caes walked back in with a pallet of bottles. She placed them on the bar’s counter, and looked at Yarrow’s untouched drink. “Ah well,” she said, and downed the glass in one gulp, “Can’t let a good drink go to waste.”

“Is this all… Alcohol?” Yarrow asked of the bottles she brought out.

Cattail nodded.

“Why?” Reed had sent him all the way across town for booze? He was supposed to be helping prepare for a deadly, once in a lifetime storm!

Sensing Yarrow’s anger, Cattail put a hand on the pallet of alcohol. “Look. Basically the entire town is gonna be up there,” she pointed at the ceiling, “in a tiny ass orbital, only able to watch as their homes may or may not be wrecked. Getting them hammered is essential.”

Yarrow shook his head. Sure, some Spacers drank, but it had fallen pretty heavily out of fashion. While the addiction and hangovers could be treated easily enough, long term brain damage was still a problem. Plus it was just kinda gauche.

“C’mon, let’s leave this here. We’re gonna go for a walk.”

Yarrow stood up. He could refuse, but to be honest he was curious. Cattail had insinuated that there was something he had to see, and he couldn’t imagine why. Those were his favorite kinds of questions, the ones where he couldn’t even guess a potential answer, let alone the right one.

She walked outside and he followed. They headed away from town, up the hill that Flora had brought him to when he first landed the day before.

“Everything we do in Chlorine, everything on Cyrus, it’s designed to be removed at a moment’s notice. The buildings, the roads. In the
span of 48 hours it could look like we were never here at all. “She told him unprompted.

“Removed or reclaimed?” Yarrow asked. He watched the wooden boards beneath his feel pass by, felling their grooves underneath the soles of his shoes. They were set into the ground with metal spikes, no way they’d come out easy.

“Almost all reclaimed.”

That struck Yarrow as a waste of resources and time, but he kept his mouth shut. He wasn’t yet an expert of this planet’s ecosystems. The one thing he did know though, as they exited town and the raised streets, roughing it on dirt paths of trampled wheat grass, is that this was not going to be a melting pot for sentience. In fact, that old remnant of The Marsnapp didn’t even apply. This grass they were trampling through, the flowers they passed, hell even the wooden boards that made up much of the river delta’s infrastructure— they were from earth. At least, some evolutionary parent was.

What an interesting puzzle he’d uncovered. This planet should be impossible. Supposedly everyone on the planet were Colonists. The Colonists landed well after The Orion League’s formation, and the writing of The Marsnapp. But all the plants here were earth-descendant, which means it had to be seeded pre-Marsnapp. But if it was pre-Marsnapp, there would be Settlers living here.

There were a few solutions to his catch-22, but he was unsure which the answer was. He didn’t want to ask Cattail Caes, or even Reed. This was to be his own personal challenge. To discover the secret through deduction, not research.

“Not gonna bite?” Cattail said, glancing back at him. He bit. “It’s obviously not for Sentient species discovery.”

“Obviously. All in 48 hours. Why so quick?”

Yarrow had his own puzzle, he didn’t need another. “Tell me.”

Cattail Caes stopped at the top of the hill, the very same one he had been on yesterday looking down at town. Caes was looking the other direction, back towards the launch platform. Yarrow crested the hill and saw what she was looking at. Beyond the platform, up the river and east, in the middle of the field, was the wreckage of a spaceship. A purple and blue thumb sticking out of the earth, he was amazed he’d missed it the other day.

“Figured the Gilg girl would avoid mentioning it. This is why. No
matter how happy we are on Cyrus. No matter how safe our claim to the planet is. No matter if there is an interstellar government or not. We may have to leave again. So we’re prepared.”
5: Pangia Girls

Far from the Calassas River, where the mountains bucked the soil, forming a barrier between delicate sheets of gold and noble towers of green, there was a research tower. Tower 11 once stood tall among the tree-line but had long since collapsed, a remnant of when her breed weren’t quite sure they could survive on Cyrus.

Now it was a literal footnote, revealed to Flora by Glas when he brought her to all of the climate trackers that encircled Chlorine. One of said trackers stood on the stone foundation of Tower 11, three metal claws sticking into the sky, measuring atmospheric and seismic readings. It was Flora’s job to repair the three dozen trackers around the valley, but Tower 11 stood out. Because she’d found something no one else had.

Flora pushed aside an overgrown shrub to reveal a hatch. Opening it up, stairs led into the basement below what once was Tower 11.

When she’d discovered it the stairwell had partially caved in, but now strong wooden beams kept the structure from collapsing around her. She walked into her hidden fortress, closing the hatch behind her.

The basement was cold and dry, the product of a dehumidifier Flora had set up. The room was circular, with a large hole in the center where there was once some unwieldy machine. She’d replaced it with a workbench, where personal projects scattered the counter-top. A portable Net Negative Drive sat in a corner powering the whole endeavor, and an extra strand of the lights the community used in the town square filled the room with a soft yellow glow. She never turned
anything in here off, there was no reason to. The NND was tiny in comparison to the ones powering Chlorine or her parent’s place, but it did its job all the same. A steady stream of free electricity, forever and ever.

Flora placed the old fashioned electromagnet on her workbench, deciding to tinker with it later. For now she sat town on the frumpy couch she’d printed ages ago, dimmed the lights, and turned on a Serial.

A portion of the basement faded away, from the workbench to the stairwell. In its place an image was projected, a sea of clouds, as the title tune for her favorite Serial turned on. Starway Spirals, a swashbuckling adventure spanning generations. As the blimp the Serial was set on appeared, Flora was in a deep trance. It was campy, sure. Ancient treasures, pirate battles, characters dying and coming back to life. But she fell for it. A world much like her own, where travel was free and individuality was treasured. But a world with real conflict, with hardship and hunger and murder.

The plot-line she was watching now concerned a city in the sky, ruled by a cabal of cruel barons. The crew of The Spiral had lost their ship and had to navigate an unfamiliar setting, unsure who in the city could be trusted and who would report their actions to the villains.

She also liked their fancy suits and top hats.

It was a Spacer show. All Serials were. Basically everything chic and new was. She didn’t particularly care about either of those things, but she thought about Yarrow. His strange clothes, sunglasses, hair. His implants. He cared about his appearance, no, his aesthetic. She thought it was quite strange to have a culture that is controlled by trends rather than tradition. He was a station brat, clinging to metal buildings in the vacuum of space just so he could seem a little cooler. Living where humans weren’t meant to live for street cred.

Why did he even care about being hip? He gave up his emotions long ago. Or maybe just his empathy. That was in a lot of Serials too, the slippery slope from person to evil artificial intelligence.

Well. He did display one emotion. Fear. He was scared of her. Her! There were plenty of Serials about Processors falling in love. She didn’t watch them, because they almost always had to do with a vessel captain plotting holes through the fabric of space with their trusty knotting drive. Nah, no space for her. The sky was much better.
Shit, someone on her show had died. She’d missed it lost in thought. She turned off the serial, her secret hideaway changing to its normal appearance. She’d try again later. Cedar was basically a station brat, he’d have good advice. She’d find him somewhere downtown.

But first, she had to finish this machine that would clear out the trawler. She could go all the way back to her mom’s garage, but…

She probably had the materials here.

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“Is this safe?” Yarrow asked as they descended in to the abandoned wreckage.

Cattail Caes, in front of him as they traveled down a corridor overgrown with every kind of low light plant, just smiled. “Done this a million times. Safest place on the planet.”

“What are we?” Shit, this was it. They were gonna kill him. Eat him. At least he had his p-emitter. If he died, The Judiciary would be on them like vultures.

Cattail Caes didn’t respond. Shit. Shit shit shit. Yarrow activated his neural processors and started to think at a breakneck pace.

What did he know about Colonists? Very little. Each group was wildly different. Most had mutations, and some had to wear devices that stopped a rare mutation called Hysteric Anthropophagia Syndrome, an irrational urge towards cannibalism. This planet had to be one of those planets. This structure they were in was likely a piece of the colonyship that brought them here, judging by its age. It must have some significance for the people of Chlorine, what had Cattail said? “I want to show you something the girl should’ve”. Was this some sort of ritualistic site where they ate people? Was he next? Cattail Caes had been nothing but nice to him, but it could be a front.

No, a lie didn’t make sense, not when so many other members of the town were openly hostile. They didn’t have to trick him here, he remembered how strong Cattail Caes was. Perhaps another mutation? Either way, she could have knocked him out and dragged him here with no issue.

So she had a genuine reason to bring him here. Something he didn’t know but she thought he should. Colonists had a private culture, but he still wished he’d done more research before arriving. His dad Pol had told him “Some family friends who live terrestrially
need help, and it could double as your residency,” and he’d jumped at it. Now he wondered if his dads knew he wouldn’t look too into it. If they thought this would be an important lesson in planning.

He turned off his memory banks. Went back into normal comprehension, deactivated everything his Bivors could do. There was nothing he could do anyway, just had to see where this went.

He followed Cattail Caes into an atrium. The first thing he noticed was the smell. Wet mulch and decomposition, like his parents’ compost bin before it was emptied. But there was also the saccharine smell of flowers, trying to hide the decay. It didn’t work.

A metal grate surrounded the outside of the room, which was hollowed out of whatever this ship used to be. In the center was a huge plot of mulch, thick lavender plants dotting its surface. At irregular spacing wooden stakes were planted into the ground, etched with something Yarrow couldn’t make out from this distance. A portion of the hull was cut out to illuminate just the sod. It gave the room a holy feel, light scattering across the dust in the air.

There was another person here. He knelled with his back turned to the entrance, looking at one of the stakes. He didn’t seem to be a Colonist, his hair was a deep brown rather than the garish teal. He didn’t acknowledge their entrance.

“Let’s not bother Cedar,” Cattail Caes. whispered to him. He nodded and she walked along the grate to one side of the room. Yarrow followed her. “This is the escape pod my ancestors landed on Cyrus with. Know why they had to escape?”

Yarrow didn’t answer. He knew a rhetorical question when he heard one, he asked himself them constantly. Cattail continued, “The Century Ship was made before Knotting Drives. When it was outfitted with one, it couldn’t handle the stress. The engines all went dark, the generators stopped working. We barely made it out in time. There were eleven pods, and they all while all pods were launched, some people didn’t make it on one in time. Our pod crashed into the ocean, and washed up on the shores of what is now Chlorine.”

“We?” Yarrow asked. He didn’t want to push too hard, but this was ancient history. Cyrus had to have been settled two hundred years ago at the earliest.

Cattail Caes gestured to the soil in the center of the room. To the numerous wooden stakes in the ground. “All of Chlorine is buried
here."

"Earth burial?" Yarrow said at full volume. He couldn’t help but express his shock.

"We’re one breed. We are all buried together. Those stakes represent a member of our breed. The ones alive, and the ones dead. It reminds us of a time when we were forced to bury our bodies in the soil, for the nutrients they gave."

He had heard of The Red Years. Watched a number of Serials about it. She was conveniently leaving out that they ate the bodies first. "Reed mentioned the third voyage." Yarrow asked without asking.

"Hasn’t happened yet. First we traveled to our birthright solar, went through so much suffering to get there. On the first voyage we were changed by The Red Years, whittled into one breed. Mutts, as you Spacers like. The second voyage was when we arrived at the birthright solar and found it stolen. Already settled by people that left after us and arrived before, using knotting drives. They sent us away to a new place. Here, Cyrus. That was the second voyage, much shorter. Only a few minutes. And now here we are."

"The Settlers forced you to leave? You didn’t carve our your own section of the planet?"

"That how they teach it in your collegiate communities?"

He took a history class, on the formation of The Orion League. They hadn’t been too specific. A lot of wars between little planetary nations and the Colonists completing their 300 year trip. But it always ended in a settlement, a peace deal of some sort. "Yeah," Yarrow answered honestly.

"Hah! For the bigger ones maybe. Our breed was small, barely numbering 10,000. They had the ability to kick us out altogether, so they did. Fighting against them would have been suicide."

She looked at the atrium around them. Scanned her eyes along the rim at the top, at the sky above. She gestured towards Cedar. "We are still small, but we are stronger now. Cedar is here remembering his father. Your Resident family and I think you can fit in here, but do you see why it will be hard?"

The young man out in the lavender heard them mention his name, turned around, spoke to them. He had a deep, quiet voice. "A spacer wouldn’t understand." Yarrow looked at the man, barely older than him. Cattail Caes had called him Cedar. His eyes were strange, half
green half yellow. He carried two wooden stakes under one arm. One read “Histol Lend.” and the other read “Cedar Lend.”

Ugh, elitism. He’d seen it from so many people on the Carolina Sunset, in his clubs at Nightgale. Every group had one. Looks like this guy was Chlorine’s. “Try me.”

Cedar walked over to them, crushing lavender under his shoes, revealing the black muck underneath. Like prints in fresh snow. “We have been on this planet for over three hundred years. How many bodies do you think are in this pit? More than the number of stakes.” Cedar smiled. He had striking features, Yarrow had to admit.

What was the connection between the stakes and the pit? Thinking of thousands of decomposing corpses in that pit, stagnant, rotting, crumbling into the soil, it made him sick to his stomach. Cedar stuck out his hand for Yarrow to shake. He tried to match the movement, but nausea caused him to miss. Cedar didn’t make any note of it.

“Flora told me ‘bout ya.” Cedar mentioned off-hand. Yarrow winced. “Yeah, you two got off on the wrong foot. Me, I can’t pass up the chance to talk to someone on this fucking rock whose heard of Guerango.”

Ah, so he knew something about Spacer culture. He thought himself superior to the other Colonists because he thought he knew about ‘high art’. Yarrow could play along. “Oh my god I love their early work. So raw, unfiltered. It really says something about the failings of the Apprenticeship program.” Yarrow gushed. That last part just flung out before he could realize it was a bad idea.

Cedar recoiled. As he did, Yarrow noticed a black band around his wrist. So he didn’t look like it, but he was a Mu. “I think the Apprenticeship program has treated me well. Brought me here, to my home. Besides, I haven’t listened to anything before Countenance.”

“Yeah, I can’t really speak for something I wasn’t a part of, sorry. What else do you listen to?”

The strange boy rolled his shoulders and waved off the question. “Oh you know, whatever’s new. I’m like obsessed with spacer culture. Not just music. The Serials, the Parties, the Drugs.”

Yarrow ignored the drug comment. A common stereotype of station brats. “Have you seen The Grace? It came out a few months ago. It’s about a brother and sister who—“
“Not my kind of thing, no offense. What’s an ecstasea party like? I’ve always wanted to go.”

Yarrow grimaced. That was not his kind of thing at all. He had been to one, but left after two minutes. He didn’t like not being able to control his body, and horny gimmick parties just made him feel clammy. “It’s okay, I guess.”

“Oh, I get it. You’re an elitist,” Cedar acted like he was making a joke, but Yarrow didn’t think it was, “Only watch the acclaimed shit, that pretends to be deep.” His earlier guess as to Cedar’s deal had been dead wrong. He didn’t know what Spacers were like. He just believed the stereotypes on Serials.

Cattail Caes sighed. “Cedar, stop.”

Cedar rattled his hands, shaking the wooden stake in each one. “Sorry Typha. I just want to get to know you Yarrow. Maybe help you learn to cut loose. That’s like Spacer’s whole deal, I’m surprised you didn’t learn it. Oh! I get it! You must have implants! That’s why you don’t care about any of that stuff, right?” Cedar watched him stand there. Yarrow was growing increasingly uncomfortable. He looked to Cattail Caes for an escape. She was watching Cedar.

Why even bother correcting him? “Sure.” Yarrow was done with this asshole acting like he understood him.

“You know,” Cedar said, grasping a hand on the black choker around his neck. Tugging ever so slightly. “We can take these off. Our bodies can be placed in the ground and we’ll be nothing but food for worms. All it takes is a few short years and it would be like we never existed at all.”

Cattail Caes butted in, placing an arm across Yarrow’s chest. He wasn’t going to do anything, the motion was meaningless. “Your point Cedar?” she asked.

“He dies, and those bits of metal in his head stay around a long time.”

Cedar walked off, out of the atrium. “Nothing human about that.”

Her jury-rigged vacuum made short work of the salt in the boat. Flora and her mother had cleaned out the engine room by midday, and decided to leave the rest of it for tomorrow. Her mom took the vacuum, which used a large hose to deposit the salt directly onto a skiff, back to the garage, leaving Flora with a long walk back into
She wondered for not the first time in the past few weeks what she’d do with her day. She didn’t have the energy to go back to Tower 11, nor did she want to go home. Yarrow was probably there. Instead, she headed into Chlorine proper to find someone else who was as bored as she was.

She found him lounging under a madrona tree, carefully cleaning mold off of his father’s marker. Cedar. He didn’t comment on her approach. Flora didn’t say anything either, just watched him work on the wooden stake. He kept excessive care of it, cleaning it every week or two. His hands flitted along the wood grains, feeling for green seeds finding their way in, or areas of moisture rot. He had a pick for the larger sections, but used sandpaper for most of it. When he found a spot, he would pick a sheet of the appropriate grit and run it along the width of the stake, slowly, carefully. Not wanting to take off any more of the material than was necessary.

He broke the silence after a minute or two. “What happens to the pod when the storm hits?” It wasn’t exactly a question, more of a statement of distaste.

“I’m sure my dad has a plan.” Flora sat across from him.

Cedar’s eyes narrowed. “Or Mx. Gilg will delegate it. To the new guy.”

So he had met Yarrow. Sure, he was new and interesting, but why did he have to take over every single fucking thing she talked about? “It’s too important. He wouldn’t do that.”

“Oh really?” Cedar grinned—maybe grimaced—and set down the marker. “Then why was he being carted around the grounds by your neighbor?”

“Which one?”

“Typha.”

Figures. Typha always had some sort of plan or scheme. To be fair, they were almost ways a fun surprise, but she kept everything so close to her chest. “I think that’s just Typha. You know how the Caes. family is.”

“There’s only one Caes. left.”

Flora snorted. “Filly moved off-solar, she didn’t die.”

“Well I don’t see her around anymore.” Cedar said. Flora didn’t
like this mood Cedar was in. It wasn’t like him. He was light and friendly, not whatever this was. She half expected him to be friends with Yarrow.


Cedar stayed just as morose. “You say that.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

Cedar sighed. Well, she wouldn’t be finding a good time here. Flora stood up and turned to walk away. As she did, Cedar placed a hand on her shoulder.

“He’s weird, he’s not like a Spacer. He’s a processor, right?”

Flora nodded.

“You shouldn’t let him live with you. He shouldn’t be allowed here.”

That’s a little intense. Flora turned around to look at Cedar. His face was contorted, his green eye swirling like a hurricane.

“We may not like him, but we have no right to get rid of him. He’s still a person.”

“Is he?”

Flora took a step back. She wondered if that’s how she sounded, when she complained about Yarrow. “He’s just different. There’s nothing worse about it, his morals just aren’t the same as ours.”

Cedar laughed. At her.

“Don’t do that.” She told him, brushing his hand off her shoulder.

Cedar laughed again. “I’m sorry. It’s just you don’t get what you’re saying. When I lived... with them, Spacers were so... Vapid. Only caring about their own pleasure. I finally escape to here, and there’s a whole different attitude. We’re actively trying to be better ourselves, be a productive member of the breed. So to me, it sounds like you’re saying hedonism is better than our people.”

“Why the fuck do you listen to all their shit then!” Flora was getting angry now.

“Don’t get me wrong, I love debauchery. We should all let go sometimes, being uptight isn’t going to help anyone. but it’s base, animistic. It’s not fulfilling. Only here, as part of the breed, are we really human.”

Wow. This was insane. Flora was going to talk to Doc Silver about
this, Cedar might need to see a therapist. Something with Yarrow had triggered him hard, probably about when he lived with his mom. Flora stepped back, turning around and walking away. When Cedar tried to reach out, she swatted away his hand.

So much for any fun on this rock. She decided to hop on the tram and head home. Cedar had one good point, what were they going to do about the pod?
6: Everything Merges with the Night

When Flora arrived at her place, she found no one home. She was hoping to talk to her dad, but for now she could just relax in peace. She headed upstairs to her room and flopped down on her bed. Spreading out her arms and legs in all directions, she laid there, staring at the ceiling. She wasn’t even looking at her diagram of a NND. No, she was staring into nothing. Trying her best not to think.

She needed to get the hell out of here. It was as easy as boarding a shuttle. There were few communities that would refuse her, fewer still that were allowed to. She wouldn’t go to a community that didn’t want her, obviously, but it was nice to know the option existed.

The problem was her apprenticeship. She loved engineering, building and fixing contraptions. She couldn’t live without it. The issue was she had no idea where mechanics were needed. As far as she could tell they weren’t. Machines repaired themselves these days. If she wanted to find a place where her work would be appreciated she needed to find some small unknown community on the edge of the galaxy, somewhere like Cyrus. But then it would be like she’d never left!

Anywhere big there were going to be Spacers. And with Spacers came Processors. If she truly didn’t want to be stuck in tiny Colonist community, she needed to learn how to deal with processors.

Flora looked out her window. It had a view into her parent’s garden, and past the vegetables and vines she could see the room where Yarrow was staying. The windows were fully open, letting the cool afternoon breeze in, and she could spot Yarrow through the
window, accessing some sort of device he had placed on the table.

She watched him for a while. He hunched over the archaic screen, typing on some soft silicone surface with only one hand. She wondered if she’d been too hard on him. He was obviously nervous in a new environment, maybe her appearance and culture just surprised him. She wasn’t comfortable with the metal in his head, and he wasn’t comfortable with the mutations in her DNA. Mutual discomfort isn’t horrible.

Flora left her room and the main house. She mused about why Yarrow hadn’t been put up in there. For some privacy most likely. She walked among the garden, taking a meandering path around the edge to keep him from seeing her approach. She wanted the element of surprise.

When Flora finally reached the Bamboo Room, she could hear soft music playing inside. No vocals, just the flow of two stringed instruments, improvising on each other’s sounds. Flora knocked twice.

Yarrow opened the door within moments, confused. He wore a tight black button up with little orange stars. Orange sunglasses perched low on his nose, with lenses also in the shape of a star.

“Hi,” Flora said, not waiting for him to ask why she was here. “Heard you met Cedar.”

Yarrow clenched his teeth. “You know him?”

“Huh? There are like, twelve people our age this side of the planet,” Flora said, “But yeah, he’s a friend. An annoying friend, but a friend. I don’t know what went on between you two, but I’m sure he was super rude.”

“He insinuated that my death would be immoral, I think.”

What. God, visiting his dad made Cedar so melodramatic. “Well, really sorry about that.”

Yarrow stared at her, expressionless. She could almost see the wires surging in his processors, trying to decipher what emotions to ‘feel’. Once he figured it out, he stepped out of the doorway. “Want to come in?” He asked.

Flora nodded, and Yarrow stepped back inside his room. He sat down at the table in the corner, where he had set up all sorts of charts and maps around a strange machine. Sticking out one side was a rotating spoon, similar to an old fashioned weather gage. Flora leaned against one of the walls, opting not to sit down.
Flora looked around Yarrow’s new room. He’d not decorated it too much, just adding a picture of his fathers to the hutch and a pennant of his Collegiate Community. A brown bird on a black backdrop, the number ten formed the bird’s beak. She wondered what it was like to be in a place where everyone was her peer. Well, her age. Culture was a whole ‘nother thing.

“What’s your stucom like?” she asked, opting for the slang term. Yarrow looked over at the pennant and smiled.

“Oh, not too interesting,” he offered, “We have a lot of interest groups that compete to have the most members. I never joined any, but one guy was in twelve.”

He was expecting her to know what any of that meant. Something about the way he expected everyone to be on his wavelength was admirable, but it left a knot in Flora’s stomach. She wished she was part of that life, but Yarrow should understand she wasn’t. “No, what’s a stucom like. I’m not in the program.”

“Oh,” Yarrow took a deep breath. “Everyone there is in the same boat as you, which is nice. Same tests, same homework. You form a close bond. But it can kinda suck too, you’re always there, in this choreographed environment. It can be hard to deviate.”

When she was younger, when she was supposed to be sleeping, she’d hear her parents complaining about the Collegiate system. She needed to be careful bringing them up to Yarrow. “So, like, being put in it so young, with such a strict learning path. Must be hard.”

He shrugged. “I could’ve left anytime I wanted. The pressure sucks, but you learn such a wide variety. I’ve heard you in the Apprenticeship Program are all about careers, careers. Doesn’t that seem a little old fashioned?”

“It’s a lens. We’re not expected to get a job, it’s just how the content is organized. The programs that our community ordered have all sorts of subjects. Historian is a career, I’m sure you know.”

Yarrow paused. “It seems,” he fiddled with his sunglasses, wouldn’t make direct eye contact with her, “It seems that we both have some misconceptions about our schooling.”

It was more than just their schooling that was wrong. The wayward glances, the fidgeting. The emotionless glaze. He was trying to hide his fear. They didn’t understand each other at all.

“I’m examining the soil formations on the ridge up north,” Yarrow
changed the subject, “If the rain gets too intense it could cause a landslide. I was worried any slippage would follow the path of the river, but now I’m concerned it could wash out the marsh. People live out there, right?”

“Not really, only at the edges. There’s lots of heavy machinery out there, for salts. Could a landslide bury the machinery?”

“Possibly. It’s far more likely that the sediment is fully washed out to sea, but that comes with the issue of eroding the foundations of the marsh equipment, causing structural failure. I’d have to look at the structures firsthand to know for sure.”

Here it was. The chance to reach out an olive branch. “I’m heading up that way tomorrow morning, to repair some substations. You can join me if you’d like.”

Yarrow looked up at her with silver eyes. They matched his hair perfectly. She realized, meeting his own, that the lines in his eyes were actually tiny circuits, transistors and diodes laid just below the surface of his cornea like silver on PCB, pale and lifeless against the glaze. She hoped she wouldn’t regret this.

“Sure.”
“Sure?”
“Yeah.”

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Yarrow excused himself from The Gilg.’s dinner table that beltfall to experience the restaurant in town. If things seemed dicey he’d abscond before you could say abscond, but if it was quiet enough perhaps he could find a corner and keep to himself.

The ride to Chlorine was slow and uneventful. Yarrow could see over the horizon The Belt, getting ready to smother the landscape in shadow for a scant few hours. Yarrow cracked his neck, releasing the tension that had built up from his conversation with Flora. She’d been kind to him, but he still came out feeling anxious. Less than before at least. She was scary, but less like a wild animal and more like a guard dog. She wouldn’t attack unless provoked.

Yarrow hopped off the tram a few minutes away from the restaurant, the tram never once slowing down as he did. He wondered if anyone ever got their leg caught under the track. This place was raw, untamed. He felt the tall grass as he passed, picking off the top of one of the stalks, rolling it between his fingers.
Despite the light levels being exactly the same as hours earlier, Yarrow could’ve sworn there was an evening cool in the air. A light mist perhaps. He made a mental reminder to check the humidity meter later, perhaps this was part of the storm rolling in.

As he approached the restaurant he could hear loud conversation through open doors. He looked at the menu above the place. It simply said “Thyme's Special”.

Yarrow walked through the door, keeping his head low. The room was organized like a cafeteria, with three long tables taking up the majority of the room. As he walked in, the room went silent. He raised his head to find two dozen people watching him, all with teal hair and yellow eyes.

Well, except one. An old man stood up and beckoned Yarrow to him. “Welcome to our humble town son. Come, sit with me so we may discuss things.” It was Glas, the man from the hill his first day here. Yarrow walked over to him.

While he was sitting down, Yarrow watched the rest of the crowd. Four people left. Perhaps it was a coincidence? No, he caught the eyes of Sheriff Fish as she left. She put a hand at her side, presumably where her gun was hidden. Still, as he watched the crowd more and their gaze shifted away, they didn’t seem hostile. Just curious.

Douglas was sitting with five other people, all bearing the telltale signs of a Mutt, all completely unalike from the other. One person caught his eye, an enby wearing a tan apron, glancing nervously at the kitchen behind the far wall. They must be Thyme.

“Do you have a coat rack?” Glas asked Yarrow out of the blue. Yarrow studied his face, trying to determine what the hell he meant.

Thyme rolled their eyes, clearly having heard whatever this was before. They stood up and left to go back to the kitchen. “A coat rack,” Glas continued, “Is the sign of true adulthood. When you live with your parents, or whoever raises you, they provide you a place to put your coat. It is not in your control, you simply have it. When you leave home you think you are an adult, you have all sorts of freedoms, you can spend your day however you want. But you have yet to choose a place to settle down, you have yet to requisition your own home to be built in the community of your choosing.”

Glas grabbed a pitcher of water and poured himself a glass. “At the time, you are confined by your impermanence. You live in a guest
hab, or a college dorm. There are limits to how you can define your space, and limits on the time you have in a day. Why would you need a coat rack when you could just use your closet?” Glas drinks the water, fast, all in one gulp. He sighs. Yarrow watches his lips form sounds, still wet from the water. “When you’ve finally set down roots, when you finally have the foresight to know your guests will also need somewhere to hang their coats, that is the true marker of adulthood. Before then you are in a transitional stage. Not a Caterpillar, nor a Butterfly.”

He pours himself another glass of water, and then one for Yarrow. He passes it across the table. “Understand?”

“I’ve never worn a coat in my life.” Yarrow answered honestly. He grabbed the water and took a sip.

That put Glas off kilter. He mumbled something under his breath, then said, “Yes, well, my apologies. No need in space I assume.”

Well shit, now he felt bad. “I think I get it, though.”

“Well you’re going to need one. Seasons on Cyrus are only four days long. And with the storm rolling in we might get snow this winter.”

Cyrus couldn’t have seasons. Because of the planets short distance from Helios, Cyrus spun fast. Like, really fast. It made a full rotation around Helios in around 400 standard hours. It’s the reason the planet’s rotation became synchronous with the star, the reason Cyrus never changes its time of day. And without an axis it would never have seasons, as the sun always hits the same places with the same intensities.

Yet Glas here was telling him it was going to get colder. Even snow. Yarrow was wearing a short sleeved shirt, and it felt fine in this open air room. A little chilly, but the belt was covering Helios right now.

“Seasons?” Yarrow asked him.

Glas looked to his friends gathered with him. He gave them knowing nods. “On Cyrus, the weather is the winds. As the hot spot gets scorched by our sun, the cold spot is essentially a vacuum. You wouldn’t be able to breath there. But this pressure imbalance is important, because it allows places like here to have nominal air pressure. It’s a little thicker, as I’m sure you’ve noticed, but close enough to earth standard that no one minds. But when there’s one
very cold area with low pressure, and one very hot area with high pressure, what happens?”

Yarrow didn’t need to rack his memory of meteorology courses. Glas had already provided the answer. “Strong winds.”

“Smart boy. We have the windy season, the cold season, and the hot season. Wind gushes from the hot spot towards us, heating up the air. But as soon as that wind is on the cold side it gets cold here. Excess condensations rains down, slowly making its way back to the hot side. Then we get another gust of wind, bitingly cold, moving the clouds back to the hot side. That’s where we are now, a calm summer.”

Yarrow looked outside. He hadn’t thought about it before, but he hadn’t felt any wind while he’d been here. Actually, he’d never felt wind his entire life. He counted on his fingers the number of days to the storm, every four days being a new season. If tomorrow was the start of the windy season, then another four days of cold. “The storm will arrive when the cold winds begin.” Yarrow mused.

Glas nodded. “We noticed the pattern in our calculations two months ago. Every windy season there are clumps of water vapor much denser than other areas, and stronger winds pushing it. This is going to be a big one. A hurricane. Good thing we’ll be off-planet.”

One of the patrons sitting with Glas shook his head. He had a thick mustache, a darker blue to his hair. He reminded Yarrow of a barrel, thick and grainy, held together with straps of metal. The metal around his neck. “I’ll be damned if I’m going on that cramped orbital while my studio might be pushed out into the ocean!”

Glas rubbed his head, clearly having gone over this before. He could get seriously hurt, or worse. Yarrow decided to intervene. “Neighbor, I’ve been measuring the potential ground slippage. If the ground gives way structures could move as far as three miles. It really isn’t safe to stay.”

The man steeled his gaze. “I am not your neighbor.”

That had just slipped out of Yarrow. He was not a member of this community. He blushed tried to make himself small.

“The boy means well, Pollen.” Glas came to his defense. The man, Pollen, scratched behind his ear, giving a sheepish smile.

“I’m sorry. I’m just worried about my bowls.”

Bowls?
Thyme walked out of the kitchen with a large tray. They could barely hold it despite their statue. Upon it sat nearly twenty bowls. Thyme passed each out, reaching the table with Yarrow, Glas, and Glas’ friends last. As Thyme laid a bowl at Yarrow’s spot, they smiled at him.

It was some sort of soup, filled with veggies and square chunks of meat. The meat was speckled with red flakes, and it smelled delicious. Thyme sat down next to them with their own bowl.

Glas picked up his bowl, admiring it in the light. The bowl itself was a work of art, a delicate glass thing with swirls of green and gold. “Fine work as always Pollen,” He boasted, before adding “And Thyme, of course.”

“I’m gonna be ticking, Glas, you haven’t even taken a bite yet.”

Glas performatively took a spoon and slowly brought a scoop to his mouth. His teeth, blunt and normal like Yarrow’s own. He swallowed the bite and made a loud humming noise. “It’s always good Thyme, you can’t surprise me anymore.”

“I’ll make it bad for you then...” Thyme grumbled.

Glas leaned across the table to Yarrow, and told him under his breath, “Leave Pollen be. His glassblowing studio is near the com hall. Strong foundations. He’ll be fine if he can keep projects from falling off high shelves.” Glas went back to his meal.

Around him, the citizens of Cyrus started to eat. Chatter quieted but noise did not die down, replaced with the sounds of utensils on glass and fists on tables. Yarrow watched them for a moment, before realizing Thyme was watching him. Waiting for him to take a bite.

Yarrow looked at the dish again. The meat, it was strange. Soft as he pressed his spoon into the bowl, smelling spicy but sweet. It wasn’t human, right? How would they even get human meat? Could they fake it in a mealfab? Yarrow glanced at Thyme, just for a moment. He could see the sharp, sharp teeth in her mouth.

Yarrow was about to activate his neural processors, figure out once and for all if it was what he thought it was, when he noticed Glas. Also eating the meat. He wasn’t a Mutt. A Colonist but not a Mutt. Well, if it was human he could go to a doctor and have his memories removed. He brought the spoon to his lips and smelled it more. It did smell good. Here goes nothing.

The broth was hot and savory, salted well with a hint of onion.
The broth was hot and savory, salted well with a hint of onion.

He smiled at Thyme. “I don’t think I can ever go back to fab food.”

Flora sat on the floor in her room, slowly dissecting an area projector, the kind used to play Serials. Small mechanisms and the wires connecting them were laid out in an orderly fashion all around her. She was currently examining the multi-faceted lenses that created the illusion of a window into another world. There were thirty seven in all, bunched so small that she had to use a magnifying glass and tweezers to detach one from another. No wonder they were so volatile, one tip and the tiny glass would shatter. She wondered how it calibrated the edge of a room. First she’d have to determine how the lens received data from the cameras…


Her dad entered, careful to walk around the pile of parts she had arranged. He sat at the foot of her bed. “So, we gonna talk about last beltfall?” he asked.

“Please, no. I’m sorry.” She put down the lens and gave her dad her full attention.

“I know. How was your day then?”

“Long. Eventful.”

“Specific.”

Flora sighed. She was so tired, she just wanted things to go to normal. The past few days had thrown everything into the wind. No, that wasn’t right. It was the past few months. Things didn’t magically get tiring when Yarrow arrived. “Sorry dad, I’ll be better soon.” she told him, and herself.

“You don’t have to apologize,” her dad rested his arms on his legs, hunching over to be closer to her height on the ground, “This is a tough time for you, I know. Your apprenticeship is nearing its end. It’s daunting.”

Flora nodded slowly. “I don’t know what to do with all these choices. I don’t know if I’m ready.”

“You’re very capable Flora. It’s hard to remember that when you leave home you still have a home. We’ll be here for you.”
“What if I choose the wrong community? If I go somewhere people don’t understand me?”

“Then try again? Your mother and I may’ve been born on Cyrus as well, but we’ve lived on other Solars. You’re young, if something doesn’t work come back here and we’ll find a new place for you.”

He was trying so hard, and he was right. But coming back to Chlorine, it sent a shiver down her spine. She needed to enjoy her last few rotations here, they would be her last. She had to make somewhere else work.

Changing she subject, she told her dad about her plans with Yarrow tomorrow. He seemed surprised.

“I’m glad you’re getting along. I wasn’t sure it would happen.”

She frowned. “Well I wouldn’t say that.”

Flora stood up, realizing she’d trapped herself in a circle of electronics. She leapt from her seated location onto the bed, to avoid stepping on anything. “Whoa there!” Her father laughed, wrapping his arms around her shoulders and hugging her.

The sun was now fully blocked by the belt, the world outside invisible from the safety of home. Her dad peered out the window, into the warm dark. “Yarrow’s not back yet. Hmm.”

Flora shrugged. “Did you hear about him and Cedar today?”

“Typha made sure of it. That hothead.”

“He told me earlier today that Yarrow isn’t a person.”

Her dad frowned. “And what do you think?”

“What?”

“He’s different, right? What does that mean?”

“He has different morals.”

“Different culture, not different morals. I’d say most healthy people have the same morals. Different ways of phrasing them, perhaps.” Her dad sat down next to her again. “Flora, a Processor, it’s a change. A difference. Not a flaw. We’re different, aren’t we?”

Flora looked at her father. His freckles, his eyes. The things that lied beneath the surface. “We’re fully biological.”

Her father held up his wrist. Across it was his sedblocker. “Are we?”

She didn’t know. They were an edge case.

He continued, “The real difference between Yarrow and us, is we
can take these off. Which is an amazing benefit, don’t forget it. His is permanent.”

Standing up, her dad messed up her hair with his hand. Oh, who was she kidding, it was always messed up. He walked over to the door and started to leave, turning around just before closing it.

“Let’s treat him well, okay?”
Cedar Histol. couldn't stand being alone. Any moment not with others was a moment wasted. Still it sometimes couldn't be helped. He was heading back from Reed’s house—the younger Reed Jia., not Flora’s father—and was riding the tram to a beltfall appointment with the mayor. It was dark outside, he couldn’t see 5 feet past the tram. If only he had the full mutations. He had his mom to thank for that. At least he’d gotten the important one, the band across his wrist was a reminder of that.

The tram slowed down to a crawl. Someone must have triggered a stop. If only he could see who it was. Well, they would reveal themselves soon enough.

A gruff man with a warm smile took a seat right next to him. Cedar smiled at the presence of his friend Pine. Pine wrapped an arm around his back and pulled him into a seated hug. “How’s my second favorite half-breed?” Pine shook his shoulder.

“You’ll drown in that much self love,” Cedar shot back. Pine and him were the only two people in the community with only half of the breed’s genetics. But while Pine’s father was Glas, respected elder, Cedar’s mother was a Spacer. He left her years ago, but her genetics remained on his left eye.

Pine let go from their embrace and picked up Cedar’s father’s stake. He felt the ridges with his fingers, deep in thought. “Good work as always,” Pine told him, “He’d be proud.”

“I won’t let him be forgotten. If I’ve my way his marker’ll be there long past when I’m buried there with him.”
There was a lull of silence. Pine set the stake down. “There’s honor in being forgotten,” he lectured Cedar. God, he really tried to be his dad sometimes. Cedar was twenty two, the six years with his father had been enough. He didn’t need a surrogate. Still, Pine continued, “He’ll still be there when the stake has decomposed. We just won’t know his name.”

Cedar tried to defuse the situation with humor, “Awfully bold to say you’ll still be around by that point. I give you another three years tops.”

“Fucking less if that station rat sticks around,” Pine grumbled, “He’ll be the end of us all.”

“I ran into him earlier today. Sent me ticking.”
Pine narrowed his eyes. “Today? He wasn’t…”

“At the pod, yeah. Typha took him there.” Cedar relayed.

“Fucking Caesars. Trying to undermine our community for generations.” Pine said. “You should’ve done something. He has no right to be there.”

“Do what? There’s nothing we can do about him being here. He might have no right to our breed, but he has every right to our community. It’s so dumb.”

Pine’s eyes lit up. Cedar balked. Nothing good ever came from a Pine idea. “We can scare him off. Rough him up a little and he’ll run back to whatever metal monstrosity he came from.”

It was a dumb idea. It was mean, and had every chance to fire back in their faces. But someone had to step up. Cedar felt something stirring in his heartstrings, a duty to act. “You know what he’d hate? The sealing pond.”

“Now you’re talking kid. That’s certainly creepy. You’ve gotta go there soon anyway,” Pine gestured at the stakes he was holding. “Next time I see the kid, I’ll get him to go to the red glade. All you have to do is get there before him, and spook him when he finds the pond.”

“I don’t know, by the time you find me he’ll already be there.”

Pine fished around in his pockets. “Not if we use these,” he pulled out two small radio devices. “Found these in the demo site today. They’re short range, but I can send a signal when I send him to you.”

If he took the radio, he was agreeing to Pine’s plan. Get Yarrow to feel too unsafe to be here.
Cedar tried hard to justify it. Yarrow was a freak of nature, and a danger to his community. He had every legal right to be here, but that didn’t make it right. Yarrow was breaking a rule of decency, of not poking your nose in other people’s businesses. He would be here for a summer and then leave with stories to tell of the grotesque colonists with their backwards beliefs. He thought he was better than them, he’d made that clear enough at the escape pod.

Something still held him back. It must be Flora. She was taking this cultural exchange her parents had set up hook line and sinker. He just wanted to show her the truth. Prove to her that the Spacers would trample over everything that made Cyrus great. She’d lived here her entire life, she didn’t know what it was like out on space stations. How much better they had it here. And she wanted to leave! She was already in the best place in the galaxy! A place with love, a place with unconditional belonging. Only being part of a breed could get them that. Why couldn’t she trust him, that other places were missing what they had?

He took the radio from Pine’s hands. He wanted Yarrow gone, but not until Flora knew why she should stay in Chlorine. It would actually be simple to show her. She didn’t even need to be there, only see the aftermath.
Yarrow woke up after exactly seven hours of sleep. Even while his brain was resting his processors could complete some small tasks. He found a way to set one to gently wake him up after a set amount of time asleep. It was better than waking up at a specific time, because on a planet with a non-standard day/night schedule (or in Cyrus’ case, none at all) sleep had to be routine. The four hours of pseudo-night The Belt provided was not enough, obviously.

Yarrow turned on the lights in his room, trundling over to his closet. Just because he always got a perfect amount of sleep didn’t mean he was well rested. He’d tossed and turned the whole time.

Mindlessly flipping through his clothes, he pulled out a burgundy jumpsuit. If they were going to be in the marshes today he’d need something that rode high on his legs. Didn’t want to ruin an outfit. He picked out a pair of shades to match it, orange hearts.

Good thing too, because when he walked outside the bamboo room he was accosted by a bright glare. Despite the shades. Once they did he could see huge clouds overhead, blanketing the sky. They moved so fast, like a timelapse. Loose strands would descend below the cover only to whimper out into nothing, like the solar flare that hit him on his way to the planet.

Flora sat on the back porch, in shorts and a t-shirt. Black and yellow. Yarrow recognized it from his first time meeting her. How long ago was that? Only two days?

He walked across the garden and up to her. She was sipping from a white mug. “Coffee? she asked, passing him another mug.”
“Thanks,” he responded. He didn’t usually drink caffeine. It was incredibly addictive... But he didn’t want to seem ungrateful. He took a sip. It was hot, scalding his tongue. He yelped in surprise. Flora smirked.

“Nice romper,” she said.

“It’s a jumpsuit, but thanks. Were you wearing that when I arrived?”

Flora looked down at her clothes as if she was only now realizing she was wearing them. “Eh, I guess. They’re clean.”

Yarrow set down the cup of coffee on the porch, unwilling to burn his mouth more. “You look like a bee.”

Flora raised an eyebrow. She set down her coffee too. “Okay? I guess let’s get going.” She rubbed her hands together and stood up “We’re gonna be pretty far out today, let’s borrow a skimmer.”

She left, heading towards the hole in the bamboo where Yarrow had met Cattail Caes. He hurried to catch up. “It’s a compliment.” He clarified.

Flora kept walking. They passed through the bamboo and walked down the hill, towards the tram beyond. Yarrow stole a glance at Cattail Caes.’ house as they walked, catching a glimpse of white fur rolling around in the yard. He’d never had a pet. But if he had, it would have been a dog.

They reached the tram and stopped. “How do we get a skimmer?” Yarrow asked.

Flora was fiddling with some gadget from her pocket. Yarrow caught a glance. It had a retro LCD display, Flora was fiddling through some sort of list.

“I can call one from my mums workshop. Hold onto this for me,” she threw the device to Yarrow, who caught it in the air.

“Why are you giving this to me?” he asked,

“Just for a bit. My dad’s got you running around all over the place, this’ll make it faster. I work next to all of them anyway it’s not like I need it. Just don’t tell my mom.”

Yarrow mimed zipping his mouth shut. They waited for a few minutes in silence. Yarrow watched the clouds, Flora out at the mountains.

Down the tram rail came a small cart, one solid chunk of
fiberglass, all bends and inclines. It drifted to a stop in front of them. “Meet Hesse,” Flora said.

“Like the sculptor?”


Yarrow took a careful step onto the skimmer. It lowered under his weight before re-correcting, bobbing like a boat in the ocean. He settled into one of the seats. “That’s basically my name, but it’s unique. I like it.”

“Personally,” Flora continued, sliding into the seat next to him, “I think this one’s more of a Koons. What do you think?”

Yarrow laughed. It certainly was. “Hesse would be a better name for a vessel. One with one of those nets.”

“A tread lattice? Yeah, for sure.” Flora kicked the vehicle into gear, sending them down the tracks. She veered off slightly, across the grass and towards a nearby hill.

“You know a lot, for…”

“For what?” Flora looked at him, scowling. No no no, he hadn’t meant that.

What had he meant? “For anyone. Art and ships.”

“Well I want to work on a vessel. Gotta know how they work. As for the art, again, my mom’s obsessed with that era.”

“My dad too. Tem, specifically. He works to curate super super old art, which need special treatment before they can be copied.”

Flora was still looking at him, not at where they were going. Yarrow glanced ahead, making sure they were in the clear. She got the hint and turned back to control Hesse. “What did you mean, it’s like your name?”

“My last name. I’m Yarrow 775477.”

“What? You just have a number?”

“Not just any number. It’s the station unit my family lives in. It’s also their address, in a sense.”

“That sucks.”

“Why?”

Flora sneered, showing off her spiked teeth. Yarrow now realized that they fit together when closed, making a zig zag line between the top set and bottom. “I wouldn’t want any rando who might hate me
to know where I lived.”

Well, it’s not like they could do anything. Harassment could get you kicked out of a community. In fact it was basically the only reason people were forced to move anymore. “What’s Gilg. mean?” he asked.


“Huh. That explains Cattail Caes.”

“Who?”

“Your neighbor???”

Flora stopped the skimmer at the top of the hill. She bawled laughing. She got off the skimmer, put a hand to her head. “Fucking hell, you mean Typha?”

“Nobody calls her Cattail?”

banging her fist against the side of Hesse, Flora finally calmed herself down. “Fucking Cattail Caes. I can’t believe it.”

“Let’s keep going…”

~~~

They reached the marshes soon after. Paths made of metal grating cut through green stalks, making a maze in the mud. They flew over the more barren spots, where the earth was caked and cracking, water filling in the seams. Flora could hear the buzzing of insects, and she spotted a huge dragonfly passing them, dipping down to touch the water. And then it was gone, the skimmer moving much too fast to appreciate it.

Flora noticed the wind before she could feel it. She could see it in the rustling of the grass, in the way the clouds started to bunch overhead. It hit her like a hairdryer, hot and dry, rustling her hair. Her shirt was tucked in, she planned for the windy season. Yarrow on the other hand was becoming a human balloon as the wind found its way into his jumpsuit and billowed around his body.

“What the fuck?” he exclaimed, turning around and trying to push the air out of his clothes.

Flora wondered if there was wind on stations. She didn’t expect it. “It’s wind.” She put simply.

Realization dawned on his face, and he broke out into a smile. “I thought wind would hurt. This is... Pleasant.”

“Just wait for the cold winds.”

Flora stopped the skimmer against a small structure sticking out
of the marsh. A building made of bright red panels, a sloped roof over it in that wavy shape that caught the rain. The whole structure stood on stilts ten feet above the marsh below, a metal walkway wrapping around the outside. Hopping off the skimmer, Flora stepped up to a door leading into the building. She looked back at Yarrow, who was struggling to get off the skimmer. She waited for him to finish, then opened the door and stepped inside.

It was a marsh-water extractor. It gathered brine from the sea floor and sucked it through a huge pipe into this tank. From there any organic materials were filtered out, and the leftover water was kept in a separate tank to be taken by someone and laid in a flatbed. There, subject to the heat of Helios and the breadth of time, the water would evaporate and leave the salt behind.

Or, it should. She'd received a request to fix it, the water wasn't moving from the filtering tank into the storage tank. Flora knelt by the power transformer, hoping it was just a blown fuse. She flipped the panel open and thick black water poured out. Well shit.

“Stay back,” she warned Yarrow, in case of electrocution. She walked outside the building and turned off the NND powering the structure just in case. Then, she grabbed her toolkit and got to work.

There had to be some sort of corrosion in tank if it got into the electronics. Hopefully she wouldn't have to fully gut it. She closed the intake pipe for the extractor and started to drain the water inside the tank. Once that was done she could inspect the damage.

She turned back to look at Yarrow. He stood in silence, watching her work. “This will only take a minute,” she lied.

“Need help?” Yarrow asked.

Flora had to resist snickering. “I'm the mechanic here. I know what I'm doing.”

“What?” Yarrow frowned, “Handing you things. Don't be so protective.” Yarrow turned and walked out of the shed, opting to sit on the edge of the stilts instead. Back to her.

Well she'd fucked that up. Flora sighed and grabbed a ladder so she could reach the top of the tank. She made her way up and into the metal tank. It was gross inside, lined with algae and mold. No wonder it had failed, it obviously wasn't being cleaned regularly.

Down at the base of the tank she could see the problem, a broken filter, puncturing the side of the tank. Water had likely filled up the
entire rotor chamber, she’d need to come back with a vacuum. Good thing she’d designed a new one just yesterday.

For now she’d patch the hole and replace the transformer. She lifted herself out of the tank and walked back down the ladder to grab sealant. Then back in. Then ten minutes in a fusty, putrid water tank while she traced the hole and lined a watertight seal. Shit, she’d forgotten the replacement sheet. She lifted her head out the tank, and noticed that Yarrow was back in the shed.

“Yarrow,” she asked, “Could ya please grab me a seal from my kit? It looks like a round black circle, about ye big.” She made a circle with her thumb and index finger. Yarrow nodded and fished in the bag for one. He was able to find one and handed it up to Flora.

“Thanks,” Flora said. She applied the seal and hopped out of the tank. “Well, I feel gross.”

“It’s no big deal,” Yarrow replied, “I’m happy to help.”

“No, I mean like physically. It’s super gross in there,” she pointed at the tank.

Yarrow laughed. His laughs were like hiccups, short, all in one breath, with pauses in between each. “Oh.”

Flora grabbed her toolkit and headed back to the skimmer. “Let’s get outta here, I’ll do the rest later. What did you want to see?”

Yarrow hopped on after her. “This kinda building is about what I expected. High enough it should be fine if it floods. I heard there were climate trackers out here? Do you know where any are?”

“For sure! It’s my job to maintain those. I promise they’re in better shape than that, which is my mom’s job.”

“Mmmmm Ciel’s slacking?” Yarrow joked. Flora turned Hesse back on and pointed it north.

“Whoever is filing maintenance requests is. Don’t bad mouth my mother.”

Yarrow held up his hands in apology. They set off towards the climate tracker.

The climate tracker sat next to a field of flatbeds, each holding a thin layer of salt. Since it was the end of the summer season, Evaporation had finished and now the salt had to be collected before it started to rain.

Flora set the skimmer down on an empty flatbed. “Here it is.”
"How many are there?" Yarrow asked. He walked up to it and pulled a device from his pocket. It was a tiny orange screen with a cable dangling off one corner. He searched for a port to plug it in. In that moment Flora realized Yarrow didn’t have the wires. He had to connect to machines just like the rest of them, with his hands. She examined the back of his neck closely, looking for a filled hole, any evidence of an unused wireport, but couldn’t find any. She was dumbfounded, she had absolutely no idea why he was a processor. He’d stuck all that metal in his head, and she couldn’t figure out why. Perhaps there was no reason. Maybe he just wanted to be that way. Pure frivolity. Flora frowned, but she wasn’t sure why.

"Flora?" Yarrow said.

"Huh?"

“How many climate trackers are there.”

“Oh, sorry. Thirty, all around the edge of town.”

Yarrow turned back to her. There was fear in his eyes. “Are they all like this one?”

“Yeah.”

“This firmware is decades out of date.”

“I’ve never touched the firmware, I just fix the sensors.”

Yarrow gazed out at the marsh beyond, towards town. She knew it was impossible to see from here, the hills were in the way. But she let him look for it.

“I need to get back into Chlorine and talk to your dad.”

“Okay?” Flora was worried that she’d messed up. She was rude to him back at the extractor, dismissive of him now. She really was making an effort to be kind to him. But it wasn’t working. She was afraid it wasn’t even her fault. That there was some impassable distance between Colonists and Spacers. For the first time in her life she felt fragile, like one of Pollen’s vases. When she was younger she was malleable molten glass, now she had cooled off and taken a final shape. If she was going to change it now she’d shatter.

Flora drove them back into town.
After checking the Gilg Residence and finding it empty, Yarrow asked to be dropped off at the Com Hall. He exited the skimmer and watched Flora drive it off, who knows where. She was much nicer today, if guarded. What was going on with her?

Searching the Com Hall for Reed, he couldn’t find anyone. Not even Zinnia, the “mayor” of Chlorine. According to Flora, this is where her dad would be if not at home. Perhaps he was up on the orbital again, having a meeting.

He knew that there were good reasons for him to be left out, but it still hurt. No, frustrated him. They asked him to resident here, not the other way around. And he was barely a part of the preparations, relegated to errands and chores.

No, that would change after the storm. He was doing those things because his expertise wasn’t useful at the moment. He was the cleanup crew. He’d only been here three days, he had another six months to go. And he’d do it. No more plans to get out early. He’d stay here the summer, no matter if these people freaked him out, no matter if they hated him. Besides, they couldn’t hate him the entire time. Flora had flipped from hating to, well, he wasn’t sure, but it was something better. He could get the rest of the town to at least tolerate him.

But first, he had to find Reed. Hell he’d take a shuttle onto the orbital if he had to, this was important. If the firmware was out of date, all the data collected from the storm could be wrong. It needed to be updated before the storm hit.
Yarrow walked out of the Community Hall and looked for someone else to ask about Reed’s whereabouts. He didn’t have to search for long, a man approached him instead.

“Heard yer the newbie,” a gravely voice said. The man didn’t quite have the look of a Mutt. Brown hair, blue eyes, the only mark was his sharp, sharp teeth. He didn’t wear a sedblocker.

“Yarrow 774577,” he introduced himself, sticking out a hand in the colonist style.

The man didn’t take it. “Don’t worry ‘bout that, I know it’s unusual for ya. Name’s Pine.”

Yarrow smiled. Someone coming to his level instead of forcing him to come to theirs. It felt nice. “A pleasure, Pine. Would you happen to know where Mx. Reed Gilg. is? I’ve been looking for him all over.”

Pine stood there for a moment, deep in thought. “I think I saw him just outside town. Follow the river upstream a ways, then when you hit the lake turn left. There’s a grove of trees in the field. Head into them and look for a pond. You’ll find him there.”

“Okay, thanks!” Yarrow waved goodbye to Pine, and started to walk upstream. Such a strange set of instructions, but if he wasn’t there he could just head back. It wasn’t like he had any better ideas.

He almost ran into Mads, the young girl he’d met the day before, on his way out of town square. She must have been watching him talk to that guy Pine. “New guy, uh, can we talk somewhere private?”

He was curious as to what she had to tell him, but he absolutely had to speak to Reed as soon as possible. The whole town could be in danger. “Let’s talk in a few hours? I can meet you outside the Endoline.” He chose the only other place in town he knew how to get to.

“Uh, but,” Mads started, but Yarrow gave her an apologetic salu and rushed to the tram line a block away.

Yarrow hopped on the tram as it passed him by and sat as it headed out of town. Apparently the tram turned around at the lake, so it was perfect for his needs. Why didn’t it go North, to the launch pad? It was strange that the way you get into town wasn’t connected to the town’s primary form of transportation. Well, it wasn’t like the town was accessible at all to those with mobility issues, so having a remote entrance certainly made that point.

Yarrow found himself at the grove of trees sooner than expected. It
wasn’t far out of town at all. In fact, in the distance he could see the escape pod Cattail Caes, no, Typha, had taken him to.

As he walked into the grove on a dirt path, he searched for Reed. He didn’t seem to be anywhere. The trees hid that this entire grove was actually a recess in the ground, like the remnants of an asteroid impact. Perhaps at the lowest point in the center he would find Flora’s father.

The path lead him that way at least. When he reached the bottom the trees opened up into a small clearing, maybe 50 feet across. Nobody around.

Although, there was something interesting on the forest floor. A small pool, perfectly circular, at what Yarrow could only guess was the exact center of the grove. Whatever liquid was in it was a deep red. He hoped it was some sort of rust contamination in the water, but he had another guess. He stuck his fingers in the water and then put them against his nose. Metallic, sure, but sweet. He dabbed a drop onto his tongue to check. Blood.

Before he could react to his discovery, someone entered the clearing behind him. Yarrow turned around, still on his haunches, to see Cedar. When their eyes met Cedar dropped those two stakes he always held to the ground.

“That’s not for you,” Cedar growled.

Yarrow held his hands up, “Sorry, I didn’t know, I was told—”

Cedar ran at him and pushed him into the pool of blood. Despite being only seven or eight feet in diameter, it was deep. Must be some sort of well. Yarrow thrashed around as the thick liquid covered his jumpsuit. Cedar reached in and grabbed Yarrow by his shirt collar, lifting him out of the pool with little effort. Shit, he was strong.

On instinct Yarrow activated his bivorvac processors. He could see Cedar swinging a fist at his torso, holding onto him with his other hand. First, he needed to avoid the attack. Yarrow twisted his hips, hoping that Cedar’s grip wasn’t as intense as his upper body strength. Sure enough, he was able to come loose. As Yarrow fell he jammed his legs between Cedar’s, sending him to the ground with him.

They lay at the edge of the blood pool. Yarrow wasn’t sure even with his enhanced reflexes he could get up faster than Cedar. Why was he doing this? He must have been tricked into coming here, somewhere he wasn’t supposed to be. Not that having this kind of
clandestine place (ritual site?) was legal, but that didn’t matter to Cedar. So all Yarrow had to do was calm him down. Thankfully Yarrow, with his processors, was perfectly composed.

Yarrow rolled on top of Cedar and straddled his chest. He had no chance to hold down his limbs, so he needed to work fast. A broken nose would hurt but not do any permanent damage if he did it right. Yarrow wasn’t sure if he knew how to do it right. Don’t hit upwards, but to the side, right?

Before he could decide Cedar had come to his senses and kicked Yarrow in the groin. Sliding off him in pain, Cedar took the chance to stand up and kick Yarrow in the chest.

Fuck! He couldn’t stop Cedar without hurting him. Maybe he could run faster, but Yarrow didn’t like his chances.

Yarrow didn’t know any self defense, why would he? Who would attack him? Apparently a crazed Mutt. Oh god. Yarrow checked Cedar’s wrist, he was wearing a sedblocker. But he didn’t want to take any chances. An unconscious douche-bag would be better than a dead him. He just had to use his enhanced perception to hit him without being hit.

Yarrow grabbed onto Cedar’s leg with both hands and brought him to the ground again. Time to try the nose thing.

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On the other side of town, where the river met the sea, Flora stood in the surf, watching the waves roll in. There was nothing on the other side of the ocean, just ice and the cold. There was no reason to travel into it, except for the rare fishing trip.

That wasn’t always the case. Out on the ocean rocks, back when the Salt Mill was still in operation, they built a lighthouse. It was still there, a spire of white stone, but it only turned on for the landing festival. It was built so shipments of salt could be safely transported from Chlorine to space vessels floating in the water. Before Net Negative Devices were easily produced, there were no shuttles to and from a planet’s surface. The vessels had to take off directly from it, in the water.

The water was up to her ankles, the sand beneath her toes slipping further into the sea. She wasn’t sure why she was here. The sea was a hard edge, not like the mountains in other directions.

When she was little, she’d walk to where the water hit her knees,
then would try and run as fast as she could along the shore. It felt like her brain was moving too fast for her body, she couldn’t keep up, and she’d fall face first into the water.

She decided to try that again. She walked to about the same depth as it would have been then. The water barely hit her calves. And she ran towards the lighthouse, as fast as she could. Every step she took was awkward, slow, but her feet were only under the water one at a time. She didn’t fall at all. Flora looked back at where she left her shoes, feeling accomplished if a little silly.

As she walked back to her shoes, she saw a tuft of blue-green hair poking over the sand dunes. As soon as it came it disappeared. Someone was watching her.

She grabbed her shoes, not bothering to put them on, and walked across the sand towards the voyeur. She ran up the side of the dune and found Mads lying down, surprised.

“Hi Flora,” she said nonchalantly. Flora grabbed her ear and made her stand up. “Ow!” Mads exclaimed.

“What’re you sneaking around for?” She interrogated.

Mads held up her hands, “No, no! I came to tell you something! I just didn’t want to bother you while you were doing… Whatever that was.”

“Well?”

“I saw Yarrow talking to Pine, and Pine told him to go to the Red Glade. But he didn’t tell him what it was. Is Yarrow supposed to be there?”

Oh shit. No, Pine was trying to get Yarrow to go somewhere he shouldn’t. Yesterday Cedar had gone to the pod to clean his father’s stake. That meant today he’d be at the sealing pond in the red glade, anointing the stake before placing it back in the burial pit. God dammit Pine! “We need to get there now.” Flora ran to Hesse, which was just a little further inland. Mads followed her on. “Madrona. I was wrong. Yarrow, he’s cool.”

“I thought so!” Mads pumped a fist.

Flora shot through town to the glade. It didn’t take long, if she pushed it Hesse could reach speeds of up to fifty miles an hour. Flora cut the engine abruptly in front of the glade and hopped off. “Stay here, I’m serious.” Flora warned Mads.
Flora took a side entrance into The Red Glade. She remembered coming here on her tenth birthday, becoming part of the breed. For some it happened later, or sooner. It was all about when you felt ready. Now she wasn’t sure if she was ready then, nor if she was now. If she wasn’t part of the breed, and was offered the chance today, she wasn’t sure if she’d take it.

Flora reached the glade and stood back, examining the scene within. There were two dark, bruised bodies on the forest floor, slick with blood and dirt. One of them was holding the other down, pressing their neck down with one hand and their arms with the other. Sheriff Fish stood a few feet away, pointing her gun at the attacker. How had the Sheriff gotten here? Her answer lay at her feet. Flora picked up a radio. The only person in town who used a radio was Fish, for communicating with Zinnia about Gatherer nests in town. Cedar had called Fish in, and lost in a fight to Yarrow. She had her suspicions on which came first.

“Stop Yarrow, or I’ll shoot!”

The attacker was Yarrow. He had Cedar pinned to the ground. She was dumbfounded that he was able to accomplish such a feat. He looked at Sheriff Fish and Flora caught a glimpse of his eyes. The circuits running under the skin were flaring up with blue light, just like they did when a processor was flying a spacecraft. Whatever he was doing, his processors were doing it for him.

Yarrow let go of Cedar and stood up, hands in the air. Slowly, the light faded from his eyes. The blood was clearly from the ritual sink in the middle of the glade, the two of them seemed relatively unharmed.

Sheriff Fish grabbed Yarrow’s hands and zip tied them together. She’d never been able to get real handcuffs. With both of their backs turned, only Flora was able to see Cedar struggle to get back on his feet. Unlike Yarrow’s, the look in his eyes was very familiar to Flora. Cedar opened his mouth wide, preparing to lunge at Yarrow.

His nose was red and black, Yarrow had broken it. That was no small feat. Flora herself could bench two fifty, and she hadn’t exercised a day in her life. Cedar made physical shape a lifestyle, even if you couldn’t tell it by his slim frame.

It was a setup. Pine lured Yarrow here, Cedar called Fish in beforehand, and lost on purpose. Well it didn’t really matter if he lost or not, Sheriff Fish would believe anything he said over Yarrow.
Cedar jumped at yarrow and bit down on his arm. Yarrow screamed with pain, and Sheriff Fish grabbed Cedar’s head, pulling him off and throwing him to the ground. Fish was the only one who could do that to Cedar. Flora just watched.

She turned away in disgust and left the glade. That was stupid. Cedar was such a dumbass. Nagging at the back of her brain, him prone and fully at Yarrow’s mercy. She didn’t know if that was real or not, and it scared her. Mads was nowhere to be seen when Flora went back to Hesse, and so she hopped on and pointed it towards Tower 11. Her secret spot had insurance. She’d taken it from Pine on a whim, but now she needed to fix it. Just in case.

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Yarrow was brought to a bare room, somewhere on the edge of town. The door locked behind him. A cell in all but name. What, were they going to leave him here until a Judiciary agent showed up?

Maybe he deserved it. He’d used his processors to hurt someone. That was never his intention, but it happened.

The bite on his arm was still bleeding. As if his clothes could get any more blood soaked. He sat and looked out the window. No bars, that would have been overkill. Clouds still covered the sky, but they seemed to be growing darker. Way off in the distance, over the water, Yarrow could have sworn he saw something.

An old man walked into the room, in medical scrubs. He nodded to Yarrow and opened a cabinet along one of the walls. “My name is Silver, I’m the community physician. If you could lie down on that table so I could examine your arm,” he asked.

“But I can’t leave,” Yarrow muttered under his breath.

The doctor wore an incredulous frown. “Why wouldn’t you be able to leave?”

“Because...” Yarrow trailed off. He was in a doctor’s office. Not a cell. Well, that was embarrassing. Yarrow got on the table and presented his arm to the doctor.

“Mmm, clean, no tearing. You got lucky.”

“Lucky he didn’t kill me,” Yarrow retorted. He couldn’t believe he’d started to trust these people. They’d taken a chunk out of him! They had a pool of blood just lying around! They were crazy.
“That’s not how Fish described the scene,” The doctor was so matter of fact, so emotionless, it calmed Yarrow down. Just a little.

Doctor Silver applied some ointment to his bite and wrapped it in gauze. “You’ll be fine, just don’t put too much pressure on it. Come back to me tomorrow and I’ll replace it with fresh bandages.”

Yarrow sat up. He breathed slow, deliberately. “Thank you,” he told the doctor. He simply nodded.

“Oh, wait here. You have another visitor.” Doctor Silver walked to the exit and opened the door. On the other side was Sheriff Fish. She stared at him with utter contempt.

“He can’t leave.” Fish corrected the doctor.

The doctor waved it off. “Fuck off kid, you’re lucky he won’t report Cedar.”

He won’t? Yarrow wasn’t sure about that.

“He’s the one who instigated.”

“I sincerely doubt that. It’s just two hot headed kids roughing it out. Just keep them away from each other.”

Fish grumbled but didn’t argue. Seems she didn’t have the final say. Either way, Sheriff Fish wasn’t the visitor. From around a corner Cattail Caes walked in.

“Hey big guy. How you feeling?”

“Hey Typha,” Yarrow shot back.

She snorted. “Someone corrected you. Oh well, it was funny while it lasted.”

Yarrow snuck another peek out the window. “Does anything out there look off to you?”

“Huh?”

Yarrow used his ocular filters and zoomed in on the horizon. He could see pitch black clouds, and then a flash of lightning.

**The storm.**

Yarrow freaked out. It wasn’t close, but it was too close to be days out. It was coming now. And Yarrow knew why.

“Cattail, we need to get to Reed now,” Yarrow said.

“Back to Cattail already? I keep winning. Sorry, Reed and Ciel are up in the orbital. A Coolant tank broke and Flora was gonna head with you this morning, so Ciel took Reed to help her. Why?”

There was a lot to unpack there about Flora showing him the
marsh being more important than a dangerous leak on a space station, but Yarrow didn’t have time. “What about Glas? Is he here?”

Cattail Caes nodded. “Should be at his house.”

“Show me the way.” Yarrow stood up and walked out the door. Sheriff Fish stopped him, but one deadly glare from Cattail made her back down.

They walked out of the clinic and Cattail lead him through town. Everything was off, all the calculations Chlorine made. His breathing sped up, and he felt an urge to use his bivors to slow everything down. No, he shouldn’t, not after using it so extensively in the fight. It would be bad for him. Yarrow felt light headed, in a giddy but terrified way. Sensory overload.

Glas lived near the center, in a tall concrete pod with a glass dome on top. Yarrow could catch glimpses of tropical plants in the dome. It was some sort of greenhouse. Earlier in the day he would have been immensely interested in it, but right now he just wanted in.

Cattail Caes knocked on the door. After a moment, Glas answered. “So nice to see you two. Yarrow, why are you covered in blood?”

“The storm is on the horizon. The predictions are wrong.”

Glas fiddled with a pair of reading glasses. “My predictions? No, no, they’re all automated. Our satellite network detected the path of the storm, and our—”

Yarrow cut him off, “Climate trackers determined when it would arrive? Yeah, they’re out of date. Severely.”

“That’s not good, but it doesn’t mean—”

“I SAW IT WITH MY OWN EYES!” Yarrow yelled.

Glas stopped. Cattail Caes and him were looking at Yarrow with concern. They probably thought he was having a breakdown. Maybe he was, he had a bite mark on his arm, he was covered in blood, and he was not thinking straight. But he saw what he saw.

“Okay, come inside and show me.” Glas invited them in. Glas’s home was cluttered, but in the way that someone who has done a lot of things creates clutter. Photos lined the walls of Glas in exotic locations, books were piled on the floor as they had outgrown the shelves. One particular portrait caught Yarrow’s eye. He didn’t want to ask, it wasn’t important right now, but Glad had too keen an eye.

“Pine, my only child. His mother died years ago. He can be a pain,
but that’s family.” Glas lead them up a wrought-iron spiral staircase into the dome above. Yarrow was right about it being a greenhouse, it was hot and humid. There was a breakfast table in the center, and along one edge was a brass telescope.

“Where did you see the storm?” Glas asked him. Yarrow pointed over the water. Glas fiddled with the knobs of the telescope, and hunched over, peering through the eyepiece. He looked at it for a long time. Without looking away, he said: “Your eyes are really something else, boy. What kind of optical zoom do you get on those?”

“Four hundred times.”

“Typha dear, sound the emergency alert. Evacuations start now.”

Cattail Caes ran down the spiral staircase, and presumably out the door, leaving just Glas and Yarrow. “Thank you,” Glas told him, “You’ve likely saved many lives today.”

“How much time do we have?” Yarrow queried.

“Come with me and we’ll sort it out.” They went back downstairs and to an archaic computer station. Glas opened a desk drawer full of data drives and fished out one in particular. “This is the updated firmware. Let’s transfer the data to it.”

Glas stuck the drive into the computer and worked some magic with programs Yarrow had never seen before. The Planetologist at work. “We have two hours,” Glas told Yarrow, “More than enough time to evacuate everyone. I’ve sent the new data to the orbital, now let us head to the landing platform and evacuate with the rest.”

But what about the climate trackers? They still had the out of date firmware. Without the new firmware all the data collected during the storm would be useless. “You go, I’m going to go update the trackers. Give me the new firmware.”

Glas shook his head. “It will take too long. They’re all over the valley, even with a skiff you wouldn’t have time to make the last shuttle up.”

“So I’ll go stay with Pollen. You said yourself his place would be safe. If I can’t fix at least a few of them I’ll have nothing to work off of after the storm.”

There was a prolonged silence. Yarrow didn’t like it, it was wasting time.

Finally, Glas spoke. “I don’t like this, but you can make your own
decisions. Just promise me when you see the storm with unfiltered
gaze you head right to Pollen’s studio. Even if you’re on the last
tracker, don’t hesitate to head to safety.”

“I promise,” Yarrow replied.

“You’ll need a skiff,”

Yarrow pulled the device Flora had used to call a vehicle remotely
from his pocket. Flora had never asked for it back. “I’ve got a way to
get one,”

Another cupboard was opened and Glas handed Yarrow a map
and the firmware data drive. “The climate trackers are marked in red.
Don’t take the third voyage just yet.”

Yarrow gave a soft smile, and left the house. Outside water
dropped on his face. He looked up.

So this is what rain felt like.

Yarrow walked over to the tram rails and called a vehicle. While
he waited for one to arrive, he looked around. He could see people
climbing the hill, walking towards the lander. He zoomed in, looking
for people. He saw Cattail Caes and Sheriff Fish, Pine and even Cedar.
He was looking for someone else. He couldn’t find Flora.

Far, far in the sky. Just below the clouds, a spacecraft floated. A
red light was attached, brighter than any light Yarrow had seen in his
life. It emanated at the pace of a whale’s song, dimming from nothing,
to full blast, then back to nothing. There was no way she could miss it.

Right?
Hunched over her workbench, Flora looped wires around wires, untangled messy circuitry, and tried to figure out how to power the damn thing. She turned over every storage shelf she had, looking for an old fashioned battery. She didn’t like what she was making, but she needed to have it. She didn’t know when it might become necessary.

That fight... She had only caught the end of it. She wondered what had lead to that moment. Cedar below Yarrow, fully at his mercy. Was Mads right, and Cedar had instigated something? Well it didn’t matter. You don’t fight violence with more violence. You take violence off the table.

She heard a resounding boom from somewhere outside Tower 11. Damn, the wind must have blown down an old tree. She could also smell the beginning of rain. Good thing she’d brought a jacket.

Some music would drown out the noise outside. Flora called up her speakers to play a random song. It choose the low beats and sharp vocals of a spacer song, one Cedar had given her. She skipped it. The next was a local Cyrus band, over in the biggest community on planet, Undertowe.

_My name is a_  
_Garden weed,_  
_It used to be a cure for depression._  
_Now I can’t even go_  
_In my garden,_  
_In my garden,_
Without seeing myself.

My other name is

A long dead king,
Killed of long dead disease.
If I could get it
Would it kill me too?
I sure hope so,
I sure hope so,
But I'd be just as glad if it drove me mad,
’Cause I’d never wonder again.

Aha! She didn’t need to find a battery, all she needed was a wireless connection to the NND. She only had one device with such a connection, her projector she watched Serials with. Sorry Starway, you'll have to be put on pause.

She opened up her projector and pulled out the receiver. What a spectacular piece of technology, using knotting holes to transport not matter, but energy. And all used in an unassuming toy. She loved the future. Disconnecting the wireless receiver and attaching it to the electromagnet was no problem, now all she needed to do was flip it on.

Flora powered up the electromagnet, watching the internal axis spin around the copper coils. She let go of the device and watched as the projector pulled towards the magnet. It worked!

Now how to turn it off?

Flora reached for the magnet, but it was more powerful than she’d anticipated. It clung to the metal table, she couldn’t pick it up and knew no amount of effort would change that. Shit, she needed to turn off the NND.

She turned to the corner to see the Net Negative Device detaching from the ground and flying at her head. The magnet really, really worked. A sharp pain. Consciousness left her and she fell into a dreamless sleep.

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Jessery Cleenq was a twenty fifth century artist and pioneer of the zero-g art movement. While art utilizing the zero-g nature of space
had been attempted before, Cleenq’s avant-guard approach to abstract art caught the public’s eye in a way none had before. Cleenq’s “room paintings” used acrylics devoid of any form of canvas, instead suspending the paint in zero-g chambers on the space station Ceres. While not reaching true success until their death in 2546 (Gregorian Calendar) / 32 (Intersolar Calendar), their work is now one of the most highly prized pieces in the art world.

Yarrow had downloaded a glossary of artists a few years ago, stuck it in his bivor processor. Now, as he was riding Clinq, the misspelled bastardization/vehicleization of the person, he wished he’d put in more information about driving.

Straddling the coastline had been easy. Yarrow had updated seven climate trackers there. But now as he entered a wooded area to the East of Chlorine he had to avoid trees rocks and all sorts of hazards. No way could he crash the skimmer, if he did he’d have no way to get back to town before the storm hit. But if he didn’t go fast enough he wouldn’t have time to update all the climate trackers.

However that paled in comparison to Yarrow’s biggest issue. It was cold. The rain was pelting faster and faster, which had the convenient effect of washing the blood from Yarrow’s clothes. If that was it Yarrow would have loved the rain.

He was only wearing a jumpsuit, which did nothing to protect him from how cold the water was. His hands were shaking as he took the wheel of the skiff, jerking about. It took him five tries to attach the data drive to the last climate tracker.

When did hypothermia set in?

Yarrow could see the next climate tracker in the distance. It was his eleventh one so far, not even halfway. This one stood on some sort of stone foundation, ruined bricks of some structure lying nearby. Hopefully that was old damage and not thrown over by this storm. If Yarrow had been more lucid, he would have been shocked to see concrete foundation this far out of town, countering the town’s claim of being able to be disassembled in 48 hours.

But the long haired boy was cold, wet, and barely clinging on. It took all of his effort to focus on the task at hand.

Yarrow dropped from the seat of Clinq and shambled over to the climate tracker. Grabbing the data drive from his pocket, he jammed it into the input port. Luckily the programming within was smart
enough to automatically determine it was an update, Yarrow didn’t think he could muster the effort to do much more. “Just one more” he told himself. Another tracker and he’d call it good and go back to Chlorine.

The climate tracker beeped, signaling the update process was complete. Yarrow walked back to the skimmer and pointed it towards the next climate tracker.

He grabbed the map from the dashboard to double check the next tracker location. But the ink was too smeared, and when he picked it up, the map fell apart in his hands. So much for that.

The map may not have been, but the data drive was waterproof. Fuck, he’d forgotten the data drive in the port on the climate tracker. He slid off the skimmer and trundled back to the concrete foundation. He was barely walking, it felt more like swimming upstream. He couldn’t feel his hands anymore. He couldn’t feel anything, he wasn’t even sure if he was moving. No, there was the climate tracker. He made it.

Yarrow reached for the data drive and collapsed on the ground. He didn’t think he’d be getting up again. He wanted to reach for his p-emitter in his knee, send out a signal for help. He couldn’t even muster the energy to move his hand. They were locked in place, like he was encased in a brittle shell. Consciousness left him and he fell into a dreamless sleep.

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Flora woke up with a throbbing headache. She couldn’t see a thing. For a moment she was worried she’d went blind, but then remembered what happened. The NND had been destroyed. The power was cut. Flora fumbled around in the darkness, looking for the exit. She needed to go home, see Doc Silver about a possible concussion.

She grasped rusty metal with one hand. It was the old machine she’d shoved into the corner, from when Tower 11 still stood. If she remembered correctly, it was a furnace. If she remembered correctly, it still worked.

A flick of a switch and a small flame spurted out in the middle of the metal contraption. One problem solved.

Her workshop was a mess. Metal everywhere, all her shelves thrown off the wall. Fuck. Flora walked towards the exit and opened
the door, water gushing in as she did. She’d forgotten about the rain. Or, no. It wasn’t rain. Flora walked outdoors and could see it. The storm. The gusts were intense, stronger than the windiest season she’d ever been alive for. The rain pelted sideways. She saw a crack in the sky, and heard lightning. Fuck, fuck. She needed to get out, back to town. It would be dangerous, but she could do it. She was a Colonist. A part of the breed. A little bad weather never hurt her.

Well, it hurt, but she could handle it. It felt like when she accidentally bit into her lip, but all over her body, every second. Determined, Flora still walked out into the downpour...

And nearly tripped over a body. It was Yarrow, face down on the remains of Tower 11. She was shocked, couldn’t fathom a reason he was out here in the middle of the storm. Must have done something extraordinarily dumb. He better not be dead.

Flora flipped him over and checked his pulse. Still breathing. She couldn’t carry him back to town by herself, and she doubted the skimmer was going to work any longer.

It may seem a simple decision, to bring Yarrow back to her basement, but Flora thought about it for longer than she cared to admit. That was her space, no other soul had ever been there. If she left him here, no one would know she didn’t help him. Maybe he’d survive.

She was just as bad as she thought Yarrow was. Not helping another person because she was only thinking about herself. Yarrow was all the way out here for some god forsaken reason. He was out here in the storm when he clearly didn’t need to be. Nor was he prepared for. She needed to do the same.

Flora threw him over her shoulder, grunting in pain. The headaches were getting worse. Maybe she’d be the one to not survive this. Either way she had to try.

It took ten grueling minutes to carry Yarrow back to tower 11, all the while being smothered in the cold and the wet. But she made it. She dropped him on the couch, and closed the door behind her. The noise died down, muffled by feet of earth and rock. It was just the heavy breathing of Flora, the soft breathing of Yarrow, and the flicker of a flame in the furnace.

She hoped he’d wake up.
Yarrow awoke in darkness.

“Hello?”

“The lights are broken in here, sorry.”

No, he could see. He could see two yellow eyes, two stars burning in empty space.

“Flora. You saved me?”

“I guess.”

“Where are we?”

“The storm is going on outside. We’re in a basement under that place you collapsed. We’ll be safe here.”

“Thanks.”

“I wasn’t going to just leave you out there.”

He tried to make her out, but his eyes still hadn’t adjusted to the low light. They were designed for station light, not the intense rays outside or the complete absence inside.

“How did you find me? I was worried you wouldn’t make it onto the shuttle in time.”

“Oh, you worried?”

Yarrow groaned. “Of course I did. I’m not a fucking emotionless robot, Flora.”

The yellow eyes dissipated. Maybe he’d been too harsh. “I know,” Flora apologized, “I was trying to make a joke. We barely know each other. Came out wrong.”

“Sorry.”

“My fault. To be honest, I didn’t know the storm had arrived. I was under here, and got hit by a science experiment gone wrong.”

Rough outlines of the room around them faded in, his eyes finally adjusting. Flora was huddled at the foot of the couch in a ball, wrapped in a thick blanket. He had one as well. Under a tangle of cyan hair he could see a red gash along her forehead.

“Flora, you’re bleeding.”

“I’ll be fine. You’re in worse shape. You were almost frozen solid when I found you.”

“Thanks for the blanket.”

“Good thing I had two, or one of us could have frozen.”

He shuffled in the blanket, trying to make himself more comfortable. He was still so, so cold. Wait...
“Where are my clothes???”

“What clothes? You mean the pile of water you were carrying around? If I hadn’t taken them off you definitely would have froze. I had to do it too, and I was only out there for five minutes, tops.”

He glanced down at her again. Sure enough, while she was huddled inside the blanket, he could see down her chest where the fabric parted. Her skin was spotted like a jar of cinnamon. He hadn’t paid it mind before, but she was quite pretty. Not like a scenic vista is pretty, but like an abstract piece of art, enrapturing in a way he could feel but couldn’t describe.

Oh god, he must be really out of it. He grunted and turned onto his back. She’d gone out in the storm and saved him. He’d owe her for a long time.

That didn’t mean he was okay with her stripping him. “Still, like”

“Oh come on. You’re the one who lived in a den of deviancy up in space. I… Didn’t like doing it either.”

“Den of deviancy? Do you know anything about space stations?”

“I’ve seen serials.”

“Serials! And the serials about the red years, those are totally accurate, right?”

“But that’s history,”

“It’s the same thing. Heightened reality.”

“I guess.”

Maybe they could grow to understand each other. Their parents had. Friendship was often based on mutual strife. This was pretty big strife. He wanted to understand her. He wanted to not be afraid of Colonists. They deserved as much.

“Yarrow.”

“Yes, Flora?”

“What’re space stations really like?”

“Big. Everyone thinks they’re cramped, claustrophobic. But this planet is so much worse. The Carolina Sunset could hold one hundred million people, ten times what it has now. There’s so many empty rooms, places not yet filled in. Huge rooms that could fit your entire town, with nothing but four walls and artificial gravity. Here, everywhere has something. Even the empty space has grass and dirt and bugs. On the Carolina Sunset, when there’s nothing it’s really
nothing. Like deep space.”
  “I’d like that.”
  “It’s lonely.”
Flora sighed and replied, “Sometimes you need a little lonely.”
  “What’s Chlorine like?”
  “You’ve been here, you know what it’s like.”
  “What was it like before I got here. What’s it like to someone who belongs here.”
  “If I knew what it felt like to belong here I’d tell you. But it’s nice. Close. Everyone knows everyone, everyone cares about everyone. They’re nosy too. They want you to be like them. You’re a reminder that not everyone can be like us.”
  “Being different is the best part. Making up for each other’s weaknesses.”
  She paused, considering the point. “Minor differences. I think having deep, profound similarities with someone is the best part. Understanding them.”
  Digital eyes. Zooming in on hers. Trying to understand them.
  “Maybe a little of both,” he conceded.
  “Sure, a little of both,” she agreed.
Yellow eyes piercing his own.
  “Yarrow.”
  “Yes, Flora?”
Flora leaned closer to him. “I’m still really cold.”

She had pointed teeth and an injection collar around her neck. He had a circuits for hair and a prosthetic mind. Neither of them were human.

Did that matter?

He made room for her on the couch. “Me too.”