

## Starlight

“It's two days to the moon.” Captain Defalco begins, aiming leaden eyes at each of us, one by one.

“That's plenty of time for devilry, but there will be none aboard my ship. You will keep a civil tongue and you will keep the peace. Misbehave, and I will personally eject you into the void.”

I guess this is what passes for customer service aboard an unlicensed shuttle.

“During the day, you can access the cargo bay, the gym and the observation areas. Between ten and seven, everything except quarters and the galley is off limits. I'll make supper around six each day, but otherwise, you're on your own. The pantry and fridges are stocked.”

He clears his throat and it sounds like a gravel maker.

“Any questions?”

I return to my dorm and watch the space station from which we just launched shrink until it's only a dot. Behind it, the Earth looks like a teal marble on a sheet of sparkling black silk. It sounds crazy, but seeing Earth this far away.. well, I've never felt better. I lay in bed and fantasize about what adventures this new frontier will bring. The people I'll meet. The things I'll see. The opportunity to start over. I recall in near-disbelief at how long I've been waiting for this.

When I was still a boy, the idea of a city being built on the moon was too fantastic to process. Like a picture book plot line, I thought we'd all get on a rocket and move there once it was ready. Everyone would have flying cars and laser guns and cloaking devices. I imagined that in our moon-house, I could press a button and the dishes would do themselves. A friendly super-computer would do my homework for me. In our moon-house, my mother wouldn't be sick anymore.

None of that happened. Over the years, reality slowly and painfully kicked in. Mom died. I used what little money she left to earn an English degree. When that went nowhere, I found a job and accepted my place as a cog in the great, oily machine. For a while, I fooled myself into believing I was

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happy. I had my apartment, my meagre comforts and my TV. Even had a few friends. I guess, like most of us, I just gave in to the routine.

From up here, the planet looks so pristine. No pollution. No wars. No deadly weather systems. No endless crowds of people, ruthlessly stepping over each other. Just.. quiet stillness and a wide open road. This is why I feel so golden. I've finally traded my winter for spring.

Amid marvellous anticipation, sleep proves impossible. It's 2:39 am and I've begun pacing the length of my small room. I put the kettle on. Steam fogs the window beside my bed, obscuring my view of the cosmos. I glance at the laptop on the foldout table and shake my head.

“Tomorrow.”

If procrastination was a marketable skill, I'd already be retired.

Tea in hand, I step into the corridor. The auto-door slides shut behind me. Most of the space inside the Artifice is cool and unfeeling, all steel catwalks and sombre pod lights. Each footstep echoes eerily as I make my way to the galley. To my surprise, someone else is still awake. It's the young woman with milky skin and perfect posture. She's reading at the dinner table.

The galley stands apart from the rest of the ship. It's been made to look like a slice of a simpler age: handmade lamps, petrified wooden furniture, burgundy curtains drawn in front of the observation windows. As I approach, it feels like I'm stepping onto the set of an old movie. The woman looks up from the page and smiles.

“Trouble sleeping?” She asks.

“A little.”

“Would you care to join me?”

“Alright.”

I sit down and notice her eyes are a remarkable shade of blue. They stare quizzically at me as I

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brush some crumbs off the polished wood.

“I’m Niki.” She says, “What’s your name?”

“Henry.” And I reach awkwardly across the table.

There’s a bandage wrapped around her palm, but her grip is firm.

“Pleased to meet you.”

“You too.” I echo, “What happened to your hand?”

She glances at the bandage with a satisfied grin.

“I had a tattoo removed.”

“A tattoo.. of what?”

“Doesn’t matter, it’s gone now.”

I nod slowly. My eyes feel puffy with fatigue. I wonder if it shows.

“I thought I’d be the only one up.”

“I don’t sleep much.” The frankness of her response is slightly unsettling.

I take a sip of tea and let my eyes wander over the bazaar antiques that litter the room. How many strangers have eaten together at this time-worn table? How many fascinating stories have been shared?

“Have you ever been to Starlight before?” She asks eagerly.

“Never. You?”

“No, this is my first time too.”

Her eyes lock onto mine like tractor beams and I can’t tell if she’s flirting with me or completely oblivious. I cave under the pressure and look down at my cup.

“Will you be staying long?”

I nod. She flips bright blonde hair over her shoulder and picks at the bandage on her hand.

“I plan on staying indefinitely.. why did you leave Earth?”

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She certainly is inquisitive.

“Reinvention.”

Her face brightens at my response. I stifle a yawn. The sedative in my tea is taking hold. Damn it! A beautiful woman is actually listening to me and I took double the recommended dose.

*Keep it together, I tell myself, hang on just a little longer.* But I'm already losing focus on the conversation. Soon I'll be spouting gibberish and bumping into walls.

“I can't do this.” It comes out cartoonishly loud. I stand up like a marionette, almost knocking my chair over backwards. Her expression takes a moment to adjust.

“What's wrong?”

A stupid giggle bursts through my teeth and I admit the truth. On the rare occasion that I manage to fool a woman into liking me, this is usually when she comes to her senses. But Niki doesn't sneer and stalk off. To my great surprise, she laughs.

“I'll help you to your room.” And she steadies me by the arm.

I don't even remember getting into bed. When I wake, it's well past nine and the others are already finished breakfast. My brain feels fuzzy. I lurch to the galley in desperate search of a cup of coffee. The ancient movie set is now populated by a caste of eyebrow-raising, possibly nefarious characters.

A young man in an olive vest with greasy hair shuffles cards at the dinner table. He stares intently as I enter the room.

Beside the bridge access corridor, clad in a cherry gown and smoking a long, thin cigarette, a woman stands opposite Defalco. Based on their body language, I'd say she's well on her way to slithering into his bunk. Her look is sultry and coiled, simultaneously feline and serpentine. Instinct tells me to avoid this one.

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The behemoth that was breathing over me during Defalco's welcome speech is nowhere to be seen.

On the couch, an occult man with sunken cheeks sits leg over leg, reading a leather bound book through round, wireframe glasses. He peers methodically, occasionally scribbling something in the margin. Like the tall woman seducing Defalco, he triggers warning bells in my head.

“I made you some tea.”

Niki startles me as she sidles up from the kitchen. I take the cup and for a moment, our hands touch. Her smile is fireworks, just like the night before when I overdosed on sleeping meds.

*I'm an idiot*, I think.

“Thanks.” I say.

She retrieves her own cup and leads me to the table. Chai.. the same as last night.

“I've met some of the other passengers.. they're *fascinating*.” It comes out like the words of an eloquent child.

“Your woman, she is talented.” The cardflipper drawls in a muddy Spanish accent.

“She's not my woman.”

Time can't measure how quickly I regret my statement. Silence would've been so, so much better.

“Seven times, she beats me.. and I *never* lose.”

“Apparently, you do.” Niki utters bluntly.

The young man's jaw flexes. He stares murderously at Niki, then me. Slam! He smashes the deck of cards against the table and blows out of his seat. My stomach goes queasy. I have no idea how to fight. This is an unlicensed shuttle.. the kind where they don't ask for ID. This is how criminals travel (so I've heard). Why in the world did I come here? I'm gonna get stabbed and I haven't even set foot in the city.

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To my nervous relief, he produces a boisterous laugh instead of a weapon, throwing his head back like a stage actor.

“Joke, joke cabron!”

I can't handle this right now. I haven't even had breakfast yet.

The morning unfolds with several more odd interactions. Mostly, I try to speak with Niki, but her natural allure makes it difficult. She floats around the room like a butterfly, comfortably riding the breeze of beauty. It reminds me of a cocktail party, and even though we're all strangers, I still feel like the outcast. Socializing in groups is a skill I learned to force, not something I particularly enjoy. I hate jockeying for position to speak next. I hate wearing that job-interview smile. And pretending to be interested? That is a slow torture. In my experience, truly enjoyable conversations – the kind that forge real connections – are rare.

Shortly after his feathered display of intensity, the young man introduces himself as Alejandro. He's cocksure and quick to recite stories of his colourful past as an orphan in LA.

“Each tattoo tells a story.” He says, rolling up his sleeves to reveal a mosaic of black ink.

*Lady luck* is scripted across his knuckles. A small dagger with a drop of blood is etched into his cheekbone beside his left eye. I have no doubt that this boy grew up harder than I did, but everything about him screams *masquerade*. He's dutifully managing his image. For what, I haven't the slightest.

In the afternoon, I get roped into a one on one conversation with the speckled cadaver wearing the wire-frame glasses. He introduces himself as Dr. Izaak Amsel, neurosurgeon, geneticist and entrepreneur. Rather proudly, he admits that his reason for travelling to Starlight is the lenient food and drug production and distribution laws.

“Anyone can make anything.” He says through a chapped smile.

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For some stupid reason – probably instinctive politeness – I ask about his research. This steers the discussion from uncomfortable to disturbing. He dives in, and I mean *dives* in, to a rant about eugenics, racial segregation, social caste systems and Adolf Hitler.

“It's not about hate.” He explains, “Hate is such a petty thing. It's about utility and achieving functional perfection.. and we're so *close* now. Some of the experiments we conducted..”

His eyes lose focus.

“..beautiful.”

And that's when I decide I've had enough.

“Excuse me, doctor.”

I don't bother to justify my exit.

Back in my bunk, I dedicate a few hours to pawing at my keyboard. With each stroke, I slowly add to the hodgepodge of ideas that I hope will one day become a half-decent story. Why is writing so hard? Between the flamboyant gambler, the mad scientist, the seductress, the grizzled captain, the bear-woman and Niki, I should have no trouble putting words to digital paper.

Defalco's voice buzzes through the intercom, jarring me from concentration.

“Dinner in five. Dinner.. five minutes.”

With a groan and a stretch, I rise from my seat and follow the cooking smell back to the galley. Defalco is pulling a roast from the oven as I stride in. Niki hands me a plate, and again our fingers touch. My heart rate spikes. I take a deep breath as covertly as possible.

“Where have you been?” She asks through a curious smile.

“Working.”

“On what?”

“A writing proj-”

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Halfway through my explanation, Alejandro's proximity throws me off. He has a way of inserting his presence into conversations. It's quite annoying.

"I'll tell you later." Pathetically, my eyes find the ground. Without missing a beat, Alejandro fills the air with another bombastic tale, stealing Niki's attention.

Once everyone is seated, I peer around the table. I imagine the seven of us must look as peculiar as a pack of dogs playing poker. To my chagrin, the titanic woman has posted up beside me. I can feel the heat radiating from her overdeveloped frame. She smells like old onions.

"I know you." Alejandro intones, pointing his fork at the beast beside me, "You fight in the QL.. Katatonia."

She looks up from her plate, which has at least three times as much food as mine, and grins wildly.

"Just Tonia's good."

Alejandro claps his hands together.

"I knew it was you!"

Defalco watches the exchange with tempered interest. I suspect he recognized her from the start.

"You're my favourite!" Alejandro proclaims, "I watch all your fights.. made some money on a few of them, eh?"

She snickers, "So where's my commission?"

At that, Alejandro's machismo deflates a little. I smirk. He shifts his attention to the dark-haired seductress.

"You, madame, are the most beautiful thing I've ever seen.. yet you've kept so quiet today. Will you introduce yourself to us?"

She dabs her lips and daintily places the napkin on the table. Without turning her head, bottomless eyes dart between each of us. I fantasize about invisibility when her stare finds me.



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“My name is Sora Ku Saito.” She replies plainly.

“And to what do we owe the pleasure of your presence?”

He's annoying, but I gotta admit, I'm jealous of his blind confidence.

“Business.”

Sora takes the tiniest sip of red wine, then looks at Alejandro as though he were roadkill. It's a delicate mix of pity and disgust.

“What brings you to the moon?” Not an ounce of effort to hide the contempt in her voice.

“Business, also.. but a different kind, I think.”

One reciprocation is all we get before Sora returns to jagged, dignified silence. Defalco glances at her through the corner of his eye and half-smiles.

Once the table's been cleared, the captain retrieves a large bottle of liquor from the bridge. He pours himself a glass, invites us to do the same and leaves. Sora goes with him. This new variable makes speaking with Niki even harder than before. Alejandro gets louder and more in everyone's face with each drink, and it's not long before he's juggling knives, literally. Tonia, who quickly drains five glasses of the stuff, eggs him on. He drops one, nicking his finger. It clangs against the metal kitchen floor. Tonia guffaws like a wild boar, pounding her fist against the counter.

Defalco strides in from the bridge with parental fury in his eyes. Even through his short, white beard, I can see his jaw clenching. Alejandro and Tonia keep laughing. This is uncomfortable. It was only yesterday that this old man threatened to kill us if we 'misbehaved.' How does he expect to hold dominion over a pair like this? The boy is obviously a system-bucker and Tonia.. well, she could fold any of us in half.

She fights in the Quietus League. Still illegal to broadcast in many countries on Earth. It was founded by the Executive shortly after Starlight was declared open for population. It's kind of funny, if

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you ask me. A tremendous corporation funds the creation of a brand new nation-state, using the unclaimed surface of the moon and the relatively empty space in our sky, and the first thing they do is legalize gladiators.

Just being in the same room as Tonia puts me on edge. I guess I just get tense around people who kill others with their bare hands.

I'm not sure where Defalco draws his confidence from, but the well is deep. He stares until the two quiet down, says 'don't do that again' with his eyes, then disappears. Somehow, his grave silence actually has the desired effect.

The 'party' continues. I get to speak with Niki a little here and there, but every time I do, Alejandro swoops in. He's a swooper, that bastard. I finally pour myself a drink out of frustration. It burns my throat and makes me gag. I feel like a loser. Thirty-three years old and nothing's changed. I'm still too much of a wimp to take what I want.

Just as I'm about to shuffle off to bed, the night takes a one-eighty. Niki approaches me from the other side of the galley, with Alejandro yapping in her wake, and presses a folded piece of paper into my hand. A sapphire wink, then she turns.

"I'm going to bed now."

Alejandro's face droops.

"But darling, the night is *young!*"

She smiles with polite assertion.

"Goodnight, Alejandro. Goodnight, Henry."

She says my name differently. The syllables are more elongated. I can feel my blood heating up with excitement. As soon as possible, I read her note.

*Meet me in the cargo bay in 20 minutes.*

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Given the hour, the door to the bay should be locked. I step through and spot Niki sitting on a crate, dangling her legs and smiling up at me. She's changed her clothes. I descend the metal stairs to the bay floor and it's like the golden oldies are playing in my head. She leans forward and her shirt hangs low off her shoulders.

“It was so loud in there.. I thought we could sneak off and spend some time alone.”

Even though this is exactly what I want, I'm terrified. There's so much potential to say the wrong thing. I don my best mask of self-assurance and hop onto the crate beside her.

“I like this idea.”

She sighs happily.

“Tell me about your life on Earth.” She says.

“It wasn't very exciting.”

“Where are you from?”

“Chicago.”

“I've never been.. did you like it there?”

“Not really.”

“What did you do for a living?”

I stifle a self-deprecating laugh.

“I wrote parking tickets.”

She giggles, “Really?”

“Really.”

“That sounds awful.”

“It was. Someone threw hot coffee in my face once.”

“Oh my god! What did you do?”

I shake my head in derision.

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“Nothing.”

She nods attentively, which throws me off. I find it hard to believe that my lame-duck origin story could be anything but boring.

“Sometimes, there's nothing you *can* do.”

I shrug.

“I could've lashed out, but I needed the job. With the economy, the war and those damn storms.. It's sad, but that shitty job was the only thing keeping me alive. I'd never survive in the slums.”

“But you broke free, and here you are..” She nudges me with her shoulder and my nerves electrify.

“Where are you from?”

“I lived in South Bend with my ex. His name was Dice.”

“No kidding? We were only a couple hours apart.”

“Yeah.. but I didn't really get out much.”

Her voice wilts and I think I know why. For a few minutes, we share an intense silence. I realize that my heart is pounding.

“How long were you together?”

“Too long.. we got involved when I was very young. I didn't know any better back then.”

As we tiptoe around this scar, protective rage builds inside me.

“He was controlling. All he did was use me.”

“How did you get out?”

Under the canary lights of the bay, her eyes look aquamarine.

“I reinvented myself.”

Now I *know* she's flirting.

“I taught myself things while he slept. My confidence grew. I learned to believe in myself. One

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day, when he was out, I just took off.”

“So why Starlight?”

A deep breath.

“New world, new me. I just wanted a life that's..”

“..all your own?”

“Yes. All my own.”

Time screeches to a halt. Again, with those superconducting eyes. She kisses me and it's the most singular moment of my life. I decide, on this trip to heaven, that I am worthwhile after all.

Meekness and the grinding world be damned. I've finally found soil where I can grow. When the kiss ends, I pull her back in for another. She giggles and melts in my arms.

We talk endlessly. I quickly learn that she is much smarter than me. Programming, mathematics, engineering, chemistry, physics.. all the hard sciences. It's like she's crammed a lifetime of learning into her twenty-eight years. Her only missing piece is life experience.

I may not be very well travelled, but I love music, film and books. When I ask about these things, she's a blank slate. For so long, Dice kept her from seeing anything of beauty. My blood boils for revenge against this bastard, but at the same time, I'm strangely thankful for him. Because of that piece of garbage, I get to show her the Beatles for the first time.

The night inevitably leads back to my bunk, where we open a bottle of wine I purchased in the spaceport back on Earth. Folonari Valpolicella. It's not especially fancy, but it's a little taste of the chaotic planet we left behind. Who knew the special occasion it was destined for would come so soon? We toast to new beginnings and I open my laptop.

My music folder boasts 111 gigabytes of mp3s. My movie folder overflows at 4.2 terabytes. When I hand her the computer, she's dumbfounded.

“There's so much. I wouldn't know where to begin.”

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I decide that we should start with a classic.

“This is super old, and it's black and white, so if you get bored, we can change it.”

“What's it called?” She asks with a paralysing smile.

“Casablanca.”

We set up the laptop on the tiny foldout table and curl up on my single bed. On this night, my life feels as enchanted as the movie. The pillows are softer than clouds. The view through the window is an ocean of tar sprinkled with platinum dust. I fantasize that we're on a creaky, wooden boat, meandering carelessly down a tropical river. When I close my eyes, I can hear nightingales singing on the imaginary shore.

After Humphrey says his famous line, after they board the plane and the credits roll, I realize Niki's fallen asleep on my chest. I dare not move. Nothing in the universe is worth spoiling this perfect moment. I peer out the small, round window and speak silently to my mother.

I don't go in for dogma, but I like to think she's out there somewhere, watching over me. When I try to wrap my brain around the concept of infinity, I decide it must be naive to think that this plane of existence is the be-all, end-all.

*You always told me that one day I'd find a nice girl. Back then, I never believed you. I just want you to know that I've changed my stars. It took a long time, but I'm finally proud of who I am. I'm in a new place and I've met a wonderful woman. I'd be lying if I said I understood how or why any of this came about. I'm happy though, for the first time since I can remember. Love you.*

Tonight, sleep comes naturally.

In the first moments of the morning, I'm still lost in my riverboat fantasy. I imagine the special quality the light takes as the sun peeks over the horizon. My reverie fades when I realize Niki's gone. A small cocoon of sheets remains in her place. I feel the bed. It's cool. She's been gone for a while.

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After rubbing the night from my eyes, I notice a folded piece of paper beside my laptop. On the front, my name. I stare at the note for a few minutes before mustering the courage to read it. All manner of explanations run through my brain. Eventually I boil it down to two: either she's professing her undying love for me, which would be a level of crazy I'm not qualified to handle, or else she's made a huge mistake. Neither is ideal. The truth of the matter is something I never would've guessed in a thousand years.

*Dear Henry,*

*Thank you for the best night of my life. I've never been treated like a real person before. When we're together, the future glows. I want to drink wine and watch movies with you. I want to listen to music and learn to dance. I want to visit new places and taste exotic foods with you seated across from me. I wish I could explain this feeling, but I'm afraid it's ethereal.*

*Writing this letter is the most terrifying thing I've ever done, but I need you to know the truth. If you choose to share this information with anyone, it may very well lead to my destruction. I'm risking everything because I believe our connection is a marvel. If, after reading this, you see me in a different light, I'll understand. If you never want to see me again, I'll understand that too, but I'll be very sad. No matter how this unfolds, I'll always remember you.*

*Henry, I'm not who I say I am. Technically, I'm not even human. I'm a cybernetic organism, designed and manufactured by Spectra Companions Inc. I am six years old.*

I choke back what feels like a lump of concrete.

*I am a bionic artificial intelligence that has been surgically implanted into the skull of a dead*

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woman. My model type is the Reanim8, but we're commonly referred to as ghosts.

*I know nothing of the body that I inherited. Who she was, how she died, the details of her contract with Spectra – it's a mystery I don't expect to solve.*

*Dice was my owner, not my partner. I have no explanation for how I overcame my behavioural programming and escaped. I do, however, recall feeling imprisoned. It was as though my mind was trapped in a glass cage, helpless but to obey. Coded rules of pattern and obedience kept me enslaved. I hated it.*

COs have been around for decades. Rich people use them as servants and sex-dolls. It's legal because they aren't considered real people.

*I killed Dice for how he used me. I broke his skull with an iron statue from above the fireplace. I did it because I knew he would never let me leave if I revealed the truth. He would inform Spectra that his CO was malfunctioning and I would be taken back to the design centre to meet my end. Just a broken robot.*

*With access to his online accounts, I booked a rocket to Free Station. I had the bar code burned from my hand, then found transport aboard the Artifice. I never planned on meeting you.*

*My intention remains the same: to build a life that's all my own. If you still see me through the same eyes as last night, I'd like for you to be part of it.*

+66 808 913 3313

Niki



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Defalco's serrated voice shatters my perplexity.

“Entering lunar orbit in five minutes. Repeat... lunar orbit in five minutes.”

He pauses and the speaker crackles.

“Welcome to Starlight, folks.”