

STARBORNE

“What lives in you?”

My father asked me that one night, putting me to bed at the age of seven. He didn't look at me when he spoke. He was looking out the window, watching the stars and spaceships trickle over the night sky. I didn't have an answer for him, and he didn't wait for one. He simply turned away from the window and knelt by my bed. “God lives in this planet,” he muttered. “Yet everyone is so eager to leave it behind.”

In school they taught us we *had* to leave the Earth behind. They taught us that soon we would all live in the great expanse, except the stubborn people who would die here. They taught us that the Earth had nothing living in it anymore, certainly not God.

But my father taught me to hold my tongue, to use it only for prayer. I prayed with him, every night, but every night I hated it. I let the “Amen” roll off my tongue like it was a bad taste. I grew up sitting next to him in silence, head bowed and eyes closed, in the center of my empty mind.

I stopped praying the day I left for college. I didn't even think about it, really. It was hard to shoehorn any faith into the cyclical schedule of drinking and sleeping and burning through energy drinks to finish essays. If there ever was a God, He didn't approve of me then. I didn't approve of me then, either. In fact I hated myself in college, and my father hated me too. He told me I wasn't taking my education seriously, I wasn't preparing for the real world, and I wasn't being the woman he had raised me to be. He said that God didn't live in me.

That's because you locked Him up in you, I thought. But I didn't say it. I had enough respect to hold my tongue for the benefit of a sick, lonely old man. He grew a brain tumor while I was away at school, perhaps *because* I was away. I split my time between him and classes. In

his hospital room I let my schoolwork sit forgotten, and stared up at the stars. My father had taught me every constellation when I was a girl. The constant stream of satellites and the shuttles sliced those pictures apart across the night sky, as I sat by the window and waited for my father to die.

My father was convinced that I would ruin my education with bad habits, but really it was his cancer that cost me my diploma. By my senior year he wouldn't let me leave his side. In his last months I missed class after class to sit next to him and half-listen as he muttered about his long-dead wife and his disappointment of a daughter. He held my hand in a vice grip while he told me I was a waste. All I could do was wait for him to fall asleep, but even then I had no quiet. In his sleep, he murmured prayers.

He finally went that July. We were back at the old house after the latest round of chemotherapy. I was letting him hold my hand, but keeping my face turned towards the window.

"Melody," he said, "did you ever find it?"

"Find what, dad?"

"What lives in you," he said simply. I tore my gaze away from the sky and looked at him. His eyes were half-focused on a point above my head.

"No, dad, I didn't," I said. He blinked silently at the ceiling, so I tried again. "Can you explain it?"

It happened so quickly I almost didn't believe it. His eyelids fluttered a bit, and his vision shifted, and all of a sudden he was staring directly into my eyes. We held each other's gaze for the first time in years.

"You are not empty, Melody," he said.

The next second the aneurysm took him.

I left Earth a few months after he died. My boyfriend from college, Edwin, proposed to me two months after the funeral. All I said was, "Please, take me." He was voyaging into the great expanse on an experimental, luxury explorer called the *Starborne*. His sister was part of the explorer's new Council, and the whole family was invited to join her in the highest class homes. Edwin's family had the means to care for us, and the connections to keep us quite comfortable. Edwin and I both knew that I was lucky he loved me.

It was good to leave. Every step I took on Earth reminded me that I was walking over my father's bones, and I didn't want to tread on him anymore. I had done enough of that while he was alive.

We were just drifting through space, same as before, but life in the great expanse was different. It was difficult to notice; The *Starborne* was built to resemble Earth so closely. The explorer had its own soil, its own sun, its own atmosphere. I could sit on my porch and feel the breeze. I could walk through a forest with my husband. I could even go to the beach, just a few blocks from the house. But if I looked out the window after dark, the night sky betrayed the illusion. When my father taught me the constellations on Earth, he told me I could use them to find my way back home.

I was lost in this sky.

Pregnancy in the great expanse was more difficult than on Earth. That was a statistic I had learned in school, but I had never imagined I would live it. I was pregnant four times before I had her. Edwin said we should name her Madison, after my mother. In fact, he insisted. He didn't have his own dead family members to honor, so I guess I provided something for the marriage after all.

With all the work it took to get Madison out of me, she was barely my daughter. She was Edwin's. He loved that little girl in a way I could never understand, in the same way he maybe loved me. He picked out outfits upon outfits for her. He played peek-a-boo, he taught her to read. Edwin stayed home with her while I was at work. His aunt had laid out a standard office job for me, even though I didn't need it or deserve it. But I insisted on working. My father's voice nagged me in my head to earn everything in life. And as the years went on, I relied on the job as an excuse to stay away from the ever-flowing love between my husband and his daughter.

Their love made me feel empty. Love always did, just like faith.

Madison was barely ten when the *Starborne* exploded. I remember every detail of the night. There was a chill in the air as we crept towards Christmas. Synthetic rain was drizzling over the windowsill. I hadn't heard a prayer for fifteen years. Edwin and I were wrenched out of our sleep as we felt the whole house jolt and shudder on its foundation. Right away I thought *earthquake*, but of course that was foolish.

"What the hell was that?" I asked. Edwin shook his head and got up to check on Madison. I stayed in the bed and scrolled through the news. Every time I refreshed the feed, the situation seemed more dire. *Explosion Rocks the Starborne. Electrical Failure. Hundreds of Casualties. Thousands Injured. Over Twelve Thousand Starborne Residents Evacuating in Escape Modules, Returning to Earth. Revolutionary Propulsion Technology Fails. Tens of Thousands of Passengers' Lives Thrust into Jeopardy.* The sheets next to me grew cold while I read on, as by and by the headlines shifted. *Starborne High Council Decrees Vessel Is Stable, Urges Citizens Not to Panic. No Further Evacuations. Explosion Contained. No Chemical Threat.* It took less than an hour for the news feed to spin from total panic to total control. In the other room, I could hear Edwin, with a tremor in his voice, tell his daughter that everything was

okay. She was crying, and his voice was shaking. But as I lay in the bed alone, all I could feel was a slight curiosity over whether or not I was going to die that night.

“I am not empty,” I whispered to myself. I wasn’t quite sure why I said it.

The next morning, we could smell smoke on the air. It wasn’t campfire smoke, cooking smoke, not even the smoke from a burning building. This was a sinister, *living* smoke. Even in the house with all the windows shut, it curled through the air. There was a twist in the scent that I couldn’t identify. The smell of a whispered threat.

Our town was abuzz with the idea that this was all some sort of ruse, and the *Starborne* was in deeper disarray than the Council suggested. Neighbors passed around articles that mused vaguely about the nature of the explosion and the government facility where it had occurred, and the untested technology that powered the *Starborne*. It felt like fear mongering to me, but most people ate it right up.

“They should be evacuating us, but they can’t,” my coworker Akshada said to me in the breakroom. She was glowering into the coffeemaker. “The escape ships aren’t pilotable, they just launch you out in a predetermined trajectory. But there’s nowhere to send us.”

I rolled my eyes while her gaze was on the coffeemaker. “The escape modules take us back to Earth. I read the news.”

“They can’t take us back to Earth,” Akshada said like I was stupid. “The explosion knocked the *Starborne* off course. Those refugees who got sent off in the pods won’t make it anywhere. They’ll just freeze to death in space pods. That’s the only reason they stopped sending them out. The angle’s too steep and the distance is too far. We can’t get back now.”

“I’ll believe that when I see the math,” I said. Like I could comprehend the math.

“There’s a link I’ve seen. It’s all calculated. I’ll send it to you.” Akshada took her mug out of the coffeemaker, and stared into it like she didn’t have the energy to drink it. “We’re all drifting in a fancy tomb.”

Edwin said the smoky scent was fading, but as the months dragged on, it seemed all the more pungent to me. I pored over the equations in Akshada’s link, but they were far beyond a failed bachelor’s in engineering. The comments underneath, as well, were riddled with confusion: some people insisted the data and variables were unapproved, others insisted the equation was accurate but that the government-approved data was doctored, and deeper and deeper into an incomprehensible hole. The link was taken down a few days after Akshada sent it to me, so I guessed it was false after all.

My clothes started to smell like that horrible smoke. So did my hair. I couldn’t be free of that scent. Edwin said I was paranoid, but I thought he had just gotten used to it. He never paid enough attention to the world around him. We fought over it, a couple of times. As the weather warmed I refused to leave the windows open, but it was too late anyway. The smell was already in the house. It was in everything. There were more and more news stories cropping up accusing the *Starborne* High Council of keeping things under wraps. Akshada went full blown conspiracy theorist, so much it was almost amusing.

“They’re flooding the atmosphere with gases,” she said to me one day, in an undertone like we were spies. “Tainted air that keeps us complacent.”

“Yeah, you seem plenty complacent,” I said without looking up from my lunch. I was only half listening.

“The High Council is orchestrating all of it.” Akshada leaned further, so close that we were nearly touching. “I can tell it’s working on you. It’s working on *everyone*. It should be so

obvious to everyone. The gas they're using has this horrible, terrifying *smell*," she hissed. That word sent a physical jolt through me, like a blast of cold air. I stared at Akshada as she leaned closer, eyes bulging with paranoia. "But no one notices it. Can't you smell the smoke, Melody?"

I wanted to say no and just stay the hell out of it, and my mouth was opening to tell her to back off. But I drew a breath to speak, and in the moment I did, I could *taste* it.

"I can," I said, and to my surprise, my voice came out just as hushed and tense as hers. Now we were co-conspirators. "I know exactly what you mean."

"Thank you," Akshada breathed, and I thought she might be close to tears. "No one else can even tell, Melody, no one can tell, it's just you and me." She seized my hand and pulled me right up close to her. I could smell her breath: it smelled like peanut butter and urgency and reality as she repeated: "It's just you and me."

I am not empty... Akshada was right. Everyone but her seemed so strangely docile. Edwin had always been a little aimless, but in the months after the explosion he was downright stupid. I could probably have straight up told him that he was breathing poison, and he would have just shrugged it off. Most nights when I came home, he was just stretched out on the couch. Sometimes he was watching TV, sometimes he was asleep, and sometimes he was just staring at the wall with glassy eyes. Life even dwindled in Madison, and she slouched about the house like an old, broken woman. Akshada said it was the gas that drained them, and I think it was, but I think it was my fault that draining them was so easy.

I am not empty... Akshada and I had to meet in secret. In the deserted breakroom, in stolen moments, in supply closets in between shifts, little by little she opened my mind. Nothing on the *Starborne* was as it seemed, not anymore. We obsessed over the news. Every single article praised the High Council for the quick response and the maintenance of order. Theorems on the

Starborne's ruined trajectory and declining air quality were savagely debunked by well qualified scientists, Eventually they sank back into the casual, typical news cycle as if no explosion had ever occurred. It all seemed so cloudy to me, but Akshada pieced the stray corners of lies together and built the real truth: this "expert" was suspiciously new to the position, this statistic was pulled from thin air, this live reporter who had been so lively before, now read the day's events with a monotonous lack of energy.

"Like pigs, all docile and fattened up for the slaughter," she said, and I giggled like a schoolgirl, curled up with her in the broom closet.

I wanted to tell Edwin about the smoke and the brainwashing, but Akshada insisted it wasn't safe. I didn't fully understand her until Madison idly mentioned that a boy in her class had been absent ever since he threw a tantrum because the classroom was "too stinky". I passed this along to Akshada.

"I knew this would happen," she said. "No one can know what we know. They're rounding us up, and silencing us. They want this place to ease into death like we're falling asleep. They don't want people like us to *wake up* and cause a panic."

There was always the innocuous "they" with Akshada: the High Council, I supposed, or the law in general. But over time the threat morphed in my vision, until I could only imagine an undefined mass of evil cackles and gnashing teeth, waiting for me to slip up so they could drag me away from what remained of my family, and devour me. Nightmares would haunt me where I was torn apart and eaten piece by piece in agony, and I could barely get through a day without being so gripped by the terror I was reduced to tears. Each time I caved, Akshada rushed me away from view and held me tight while I came back to myself. To clear my mind, she asked me questions about Earth.

“I was raised in the great expanse,” she whispered, stroking my hair while I lay, shaking, across her lap. “I only ever saw it in glimpses.”

“I used to think Earth wasn’t so different from the *Starborne*,” I said. My voice was hoarse, it had been hoarse for months. “But there are things back home that... that couldn’t follow us here. Things we need, that have gone missing.”

Akshada’s hand trailed down my hairline and around my chin, cupping my face in her palm. “What things, Melody?”

“The stars,” I whispered. “Our stars. And...” *And what?* I stumbled through an explanation of my father, and prayer. I told her about his stubborn refusal to leave the Earth, and his conviction that God would be with him on that planet. I repeated his last words to her, in a voice lower than a whisper. *You are not empty, Melody.*

“I think he was wrong,” I whispered. “I think I am empty.”

“Do you really believe there’s nothing inside you?” Akshada asked. Her trailing fingers found a tear running over my nose, and she wiped it away.

“Of course I don’t,” I said, but those words felt empty too. “Or maybe I do,” I amended. “But I know my father saw something in me. Right before he died, he saw it. I just want to know what it was.”

“Perhaps it was love,” Akshada said, as her spindly fingertips brushed over my bottom lip.

Akshada and I never kissed in the daylight. The sun on the *Starborne* was not a star like on Earth. It was an artificial ball of light that hung above us, unmoving. It felt like a watchful eye, and every beam of light slanting across a room was reaching out to find something. Only the nighttime, the stars, were real. They were not watching, they were not judging, they were not

jealous or betrayed by those stolen kisses. They were only lifeless flecks of dust in the void. In their stare, Akshada and I were unseen.

Perhaps I knew that Akshada was crazy. I suppose I was going crazy too, in my own way. My madness came in bursts, and hers was more of a steady descent. Months ago Akshada had told me that the explosion itself had been our death sentence, and we had considered that the gas was just a way for the High Council to kill us all kindly before we starved or froze in space. But Akshada grew to believe that we resisted the toxins because the two of us were chosen to reverse that death sentence. That as the people around us grew weaker we would grow stronger, and defeat the High Council, and I guessed rewrite physics, to return to Earth.

“It must be something in our blood,” I countered. “Or something genetic that gives us a different reaction.” This had been our original thought, and even as the rest of life spiralled out of reason, I held onto it. But Akshada was beyond that conclusion.

“You can’t explain this with science,” she insisted. Her eyes glittered as she moved closer to me, leaning into my hair as her voice dropped to a whisper. “This is destiny.” I shuddered, as I felt her breath against my ear. “I love you,” she said.

If I could have said that to anyone, I would have said it to her. But when I tried there was nothing in my lungs, so I kissed her in silence.

Akshada could have made me happy, in some life or another. But she was such a short fuse, and I was such a loose cannon, that the clashes between us were more and more frequent. Akshada thought we could head to the capitol, confront the High Council, and reconquer the *Starborne*. The more she talked the more I saw the insanity in a woman I had idolized. Were we crazed, drugged fools, or were we destined for greatness?

“We’re powerful,” Akshada insisted, nails digging into my skin and eyes boring into my soul. “I can feel the power in you. Can’t you feel it in me?” At that point it had been well over two years since the explosion, and I could barely remember who I had been before it had struck. That girl living idly on the *Starborne*, struggling for a baby she couldn’t have to please the man she didn’t love, to spite the father she’d never truly known... there was no power in her.

“There’s nothing inside of us, Akshada,” I said cruelly. “We’re nothing.”

I am not empty...

She left soon after. She drove to the capital to confront the High Council herself. I stayed behind, where there was no one to hold me when the visions took me, no one to teach me what to know or what to fear, no one to love me at all. I existed in a manic haze. Every breath pumped that cruel, triumphant poison into my lungs. I stopped going to work, because I didn’t think I could find my way there or back without hurling myself into the manmade sea. Aside from my increasingly frequent nightmares and fits, I blended in well with my zombified family.

Akshada never came back. I supposed she was dead.

I am not empty...

I lost track of the months, couldn’t say whether it had been three years or ten since the explosion first rocked the *Starborne*. But there came a day I couldn’t remain holed up in my bed anymore. It felt like a cage. I threw away the sheets and stumbled out into the living room.

Edwin was out on the couch — I realized he hadn’t come to bed with me in days or maybe weeks — he was stretched out there next to Madison. They looked like corpses, and I had to press my head to my husband’s chest to feel his breathing. I tried to feel sorrow, or pain, but it wouldn’t come. I felt nothing looking at my family. They looked like statues, like memories. I

couldn't live with memories anymore. I couldn't live in this house. I backed away on shaky, unused legs.

Just before I forced myself to look away, Edwin shifted his hand ever so slightly to wrap his fingers over Madison's shoulder. In his last moment, he held on to his daughter as I left them behind.

I am not empty...

I left by myself, right down the middle of the deserted street. I had hated my bed, but outside it was worse. I couldn't escape the toxic air. The sun was beating down, and I had long considered the sun an enemy. Slowly my lurching walk became a run, a scramble to get free of this still, hateful world. I rushed down random streets like a rat in a maze, frantic for signs of life. I sprinted up the garden path of a random house and threw the door open without knocking. It was unlocked, and no alarm was raised as I entered.

There was an old woman on the floor just inside, sitting propped up against the wall. She looked serenely up at me, where I stood heaving breath on her doorstep. We locked eyes, just for a moment, and then she turned her gaze away. I pushed down vomit in my toiling stomach and went to pull the door closed behind me, but before I heard a voice drifting down from the upstairs.

"Is someone there?" It was an old man's voice, shrill with panic. I leapt over the old woman and powered up the staircase, following the man's voice as he went on, "I can hear you, I can hear you, please help me!"

I drew up short when I saw him. He was in an open bedroom, all hooked up to wires and machines, with an IV bag pumping fluid into his arm. The image was so striking, so familiar.

Stars and constellations danced across my vision, as I realized that this was more than a simple old man.

“Dad?” I whispered.

For a moment I thought he said “No.” But then, through my boiling thoughts and the sound of my heart pounding in my chest, I heard his warbled voice say my name. “Melody.”

“Dad,” I repeated, and a sob tore out with it. “Dad, you’re here, you came back to me!” My whole body was shaking, the world was hazy. I stumbled to his side, and fell to my knees, clasped my hands like I was praying. “Tell me I’m not empty,” I pleaded. My voice came out like the whine of a beaten dog. I half expected the man — this man who seemed to shift in and out of being my father — to ignore me or even to laugh. But to my surprise, he took on a stiff, steeled gaze, as though something deep within him were powering the words.

“You are not empty, Melody.” It was the very same cadence, the very same slice of time from just before his death.

“Then tell me what lives in me,” I begged him. My grasping fingers found his decaying hand and I held it in a vice grip. I couldn’t let him die before he told me what he knew. “I had a family dad, I had a child, I had... I had this romance, but nothing came alive in me, dad, I’m just this *void*! But you told me I wasn’t empty, dad, you knew I wasn’t empty, so tell me what you saw in me!”

He ripped his hand away and I realized he was slamming his head up and down against the pillow, groaning with pain. “Dad, come on!” I shouted. “Come on!” But with each pound of his head he was weaker, and all I could do was watch and scream as his struggles faded, the agony eased out of him, and little by little he grew still. This time, he died slowly. This time, his death brought me pain.

And as he died, the pain came alive in me. I could feel it like a flare, like one of the panic attacks that Akshada would soothe and cradle and kiss out of me. But Akshada wasn't here now. Without her, the flame was building... building as I remembered my father's hand tracing stars in the sky and whispering prayers to me and tucking me into bed, muttering to me on his deathbed... I could *feel* all of it. The pain was burning me up. It was living in me.

Finally something was living in me.

I somehow made it back down the stairs, but at the door I paused as my eye caught the old woman sitting there. She was gazing at the wall, unmoving. Whether she was alive or dead was impossible to say. The *Starborne*, which had been draining little by little for years, was finally empty. All of its humanity was sucked away, until the entire god damned place was just as void and lifeless as I had been for my entire forty-three years of life. I should have felt right at home.

But now I knew what my father had seen in me. He had seen that pain, no matter how much of my life I had spent refusing to feel it. Only now, when the *Starborne* was so cruelly painless, could I finally feel all of it. The pain of my father's death was burning in me. The pain of watching my husband and my daughter diminish was burning in me. The pain that came from watching Akshada storm out of the office building and never come back was burning in me. I could feel the pain of the decayed old woman, the hollowed family of five, every empty soul and insane outlier, and even the High Council. All the life from the *Starborne* was draining into me.

I lurched out onto the street. The sun was growing dim — there was no sunset here on the *Starborne*, only a colorless fade to night — and all I could do was watch as the last day ebbed out of the sky. I wished for the pigment and peace of sunset, but there was only a black sky. The *Starborne* died and left me as the only living thing on its surface. I was sure that death would

take me as well, but I was kept alive by the unfamiliar pulse of full, furious emotion. I stood for hours, frozen in artificial twilight, waiting for my pain to fade.

“I am not empty. I am not empty. I am not empty.” The mantra no longer felt like a lie. It felt like fire. In mere seconds, it consumed me. A roaring, uncontained flame of life tore up my fingertips, through my chest, and into my heart. I was no longer a lost, hollow woman. I was human. I was in pain. I was alive.

In the last moment, though, I doubted it. When I lifted my head to the sky, it was empty. The very last remnant of Melody hissed in the back of my mind, *You're empty. You're alone. You're too late to be anything else.* I almost believed her, but the fire consumed her too. The pain burned away with her, and as it did, my new eyes locked on a single star in the blackness. It winked at me like a heartbeat.

“I'm alive,” I whispered into the great expanse.

And I let the life kill me.