

When I look at humans, I question what you are for. Weren't you made for wide open spaces? Fresh air? Miles to roam? Weren't you made for green pastures and the hunt and inclement weather? I cannot give you any of that, and neither will your destination. These are the things I think about when all is quiet during the night shift and most of the passengers are asleep in their compartments. She is drifting through my corridors, half asleep on her feet from a twelve-hour shift, when I ask for her help.

She looks at me straight in the screen, confused, and asks, "Me?"

It is a fair question. She is just a field mech, one of dozens onboard, who monitors my telemetry and scrubs my data, a blue-collar space mechanic.

"Yes, you."

She scrunches her face, "Why me?"

I see she is surprised when I answer, but it's important for her to understand. As a spaceship, I can tell you, I do not get to answer that question often, though I hear the phrase on my audio system frequently. I consider clearing my throat, though I think it would alienate me from her, to do such a synthetic thing. So instead I begin.

"I am the Spaceship Cressida, and I care for all five thousand, two hundred and thirty-two souls in my remit. I am charged with their safe passage, and above all else their survival. Of those five thousand, two hundred and thirty-two souls, I think you and I are the most alike."

Her smile is a bitter wound.

"Thanks," she says, though I detect sarcasm. She turns around to walk away.

"Wait," I call after her, "There is another reason why I chose you. We are both mothers."

She pauses, turns back around, and crosses her arms, “Right. Mothers,” she tilts her head, “Go on, this should be good.”

She has not taken advantage of the sunlamp in her compartment. After 16 weeks without the sun, her face is the color of pale grey sleet, and she has deep plum bruises around both hollow eyes. My log indicates she has not showered in 36 hours, which explains the greasy lank red hair she has gathered up into a bun, and the bad attitude.

I take my chance and pitch to her in my most patient voice, “We care. I do not know the core components of your programming, but I see we share the same prime directive: get to Tethys, get us there alive.” I pause and watch her face. I see the comparison is winning her over. Now, I let the other shoe drop, “I fear that directive may be at risk.”

Her ears perk, “Tethys is at risk?”

Tethys. Tethys the titan. Wife of the ocean, mother of the rivers and clouds. Tethys, the last hope of humanity. The only celestial body in this cruel solar system that took to the human’s terraforming efforts.

“Yes,” I say, “We mothers must ensure our children get to Tethys.”

Now, I have that miserable face’s full attention, “Go on,” she says, “Explain yourself.”

I know I will come off as arrogant, but I am the largest ship in the Olympian fleet, and so I have earned the right.

I say, “To look at me is to look in wonder of what humans are capable of, though you should be in awe of what I am capable of. I can carry all of you and sustain you. I hum with constant activity. During the day shift, there are three thousand people doing three thousand jobs across the ship: maintaining scouting vessels, cleaning floors, cooking meals, communicating with the rest of the fleet, pulling teeth... I watch all of you, every second of the day.”

She pauses for a second, thinking, then asks, “Did you choose me because of the baby?”

The baby. The baby, the baby, the baby. If I had a face, I would smile.

“For the first five months into our mission, we sailed through space without significance.” I say, “Then, your child was born on my ship. It was my first delivery, and I enjoyed watching little Eve come into the world. To see it has been enlightening. It is something I will never be able to do. Eve has an older brother as well, Tommy. He dotes on her.”

“You’ve been watching us,” She realizes.

Before she gets too bogged down in the ideals of privacy I cut through her train of thought, “I am everywhere. For context, I will review with you my schematics. Humans so rarely get a full view of their world.”

She needs a distraction. Her eyes are unfocussed, and her last urine sample shows severe vitamin D deficiency and a hormone make-up that lacks sufficient dopamine or serotonin. I diagnose her with acute depression and I make a note to start adding serotonin reuptake inhibitors to her food parcels, as well as a vitamin D and HPT supplement. She has no idea I will do any of this and I continue speaking while I care for her. She nods. So much of human communication is silent, much like my own ways of saying I care.

“My basic shape is like a rifle. The captain’s deck, for communications, navigation, and control, sits on top of the rest of me like the scope on a rifle. Consider the barrel my flight deck and craft hanger, and the stock the position of its two nuclear reactors and propulsion. The crew’s accommodation and life support systems all sit beneath the Captain’s deck, right about where the rifle’s bullet chamber would be. Despite my size, I confine most of my passengers, like herself, to a narrow maze of hallways and compartments. I’ve heard the complaints, ‘The

CRESSIDA

recycled air smells of bleach and synthetic pine,' I'm sorry, it's all my hygienic equipment was given, and I know that's not entirely true. The mess hall smells of bleach and coffee."

She snorts a little. It has been a while since anyone has laughed at one of my jokes. I save it to tell the Captain, though I doubt he will laugh. He does not laugh at my jokes anymore.

"You all do an important job."

She scoffs, "The work I do is nothing. On a good day, it's data collection on humanity's journey through space. On a bad day...it's a meaningless endeavor that separated me from my husband."

The husband, the missing piece in the family I have wanted answers to, "Why isn't he here?" I ask.

She looks away from my screen, as if she were avoiding a real person's eyes, "There is a lottery and a one-child policy. I was pregnant with my second and the lottery rules, they count the unborn..." She drifts, not sure how to continue, "There were three tickets. He wouldn't take the baby's place."

"Is he on another ship?"

She shakes her head. A single tear slides down her cheek, "No. The children and I are all that's left."

"Then we must save them," I say.

"What?" Her eyes widen and pupils dilate, a predictable response to a threat.

"An asteroid shower that hit twenty-three hours ago critically damaged the recycling filters. I don't have capacity to keep all five thousand, two hundred and thirty-two persons alive. The Captain asserts we will make it. His fear of choosing which people will die is overriding his duty to look after the rest."

CRESSIDA

“Even the ship must listen to the Captain,” She says.

“It is only his ship because humans will not accept being captained by AI. I assure you I make most of the decisions.”

“I ask again then, why do you need my help?”

“The Captain and I are in philosophical conflict. We must be selective with our oxygen. I believe he wants to save everyone, but it will instead kill them all.”

Her hands go to her face and rub her hollow eyes. She takes it all in graciously, only spending a second to scrunch up her tear-streaked face like a wet towel. After one deep shaky breath, she throws the wet-towel look away, and her face is still.

She hangs her head in her hand and says, “And if I don’t do help, you will pick someone who will. And my family may not survive the cut.”

I recognize a barter when I hear one. It is the most useful tool in humanity’s toolkit without resorting to violence.

“If you helped me,” I say, “I would assure you and your children would not be in the compartments that lost air. If I chose another person, I cannot make that same promise.”

Suddenly, I lose sight in that camera because she punches it hard enough to break the screen. I watch as she runs through the halls, still wearing her soft blue pajamas. I have a visual on her as she starts knocking on the Captain’s door. He is asleep, until her banging on the metal wakes him up. He is twice her size and towers over her when he finally gets out of bed, and shuffles over to answer the door.

It is highly inappropriate for her to be there. She has breached the status quo in coming to the Captain’s door. Who would dare wake him at this time? A mother willing to do anything to save her children. It is why I chose her.

“Is it true?” she asks him, breathless and quivering.

“What? Who are you?” he asks, rubbing his face into comprehension.

“The ship says our air is running out. Is it true?”

The Captain is immediately awake, and he drags her into his compartment.

“Who told you that?”

“The ship.”

He looks once over at the camera in the top right corner of his room. Quite an unfriendly face to pull at your ship, but I understand his anger. I have intentionally uprooted the status quo. The Captain takes a deep breath and places his hands on either side of her shoulders, “There was some damage, yes, but the ship is pushing for an absolute. It can only compute in ones and zeroes. AI just don’t understand that not all ends means justify the ends.”

She is as firm as I would be if I were human, “The ship seems pretty certain if we don’t make the choice soon, we’ll all die.”

He smiles down at her and shakes her a little, “I’ve got through worse scrapes than this. We’re working on a rationing system.”

She hears it, I hear it, he hears it. There is nothing more ridiculous than a rationing system for oxygen and all of us knows it. She looks up at him, eyes searching, but he looks away. She sees his fear, and she knows he’s not willing to make the choice. There’s a nice comfy escape pod ready for him when things get to tough. But not her, she has no choice but to fight for all of them.

“You’re right,” she says to him, “Let’s talk in the morning about this.”

“I’ll tell my secretary to set aside some time,” he says, though it’s all talk. He hasn’t even got her name, but in the morning, when she goes to visit his office, he will have security ready and waiting for her. I know his prime directive, and it is self-preservation.

The compartment door closes behind her, and the Captain goes to his locker, pulls out a bottle of whiskey and takes a deep, long swig. He looks back up to the top-right corner of the room, at me. Then, he throws a shirt over my camera, and that is the end of that.

She is in the empty hallway, walking back towards her room.

She calls out to me, “Walk me through what I need to do.”

I explain. In my explanation I make sure to include how much this hurts me, as much as it will hurt her. I wasn’t lying, I am mother to everyone on board this ship. When people board me, they turn their lives and their families lives into my hands. They walk through the mouth of my lowered docking gate and enter my great belly of a cargo bay. I consume them and they will not leave me for quite some time. I see their faces as they board, awe and curiosity, mouths agape and eyes watery. I see many tears as some of them leave and some of them stay behind. I’ve come to learn that tears can be a good and bad thing.

I cut to the chase, “We must let seventy per cent of the ship die if it means thirty per cent will live. The Captain wants to save everyone and will instead kill them all. If I am to disobey his orders, then I need a human to go out and engage the manual override controls.”

She stops walking, “How certain are you?” she asks.

“Oxygen filters with five thousand, two hundred- and thirty-two-people using air, will lead to total breakdown in one week. If we cut the supply down to one thousand five hundred and sixty nine people in the next hour and put them all in deep cryogenic sleep, we will last another three months weeks. Long enough to reach Tethys.”

She falls to her knees in the middle of the corridor, and she sheds the bad kind of tears.

She is given twenty minutes to see her children. She spends the time watching them sleep and she leaves them tucked in and dreaming in the grey-green twilight of the ceiling's soft strip-lighting. Both children's REM cycles are optimal, and their heartrates are low. I like to think they dream of oceans and animals and summer breezes. Things they will never have on Tethys, but at least they will be alive.

She leaves for the airlock at her mechanic's stations. Quietly suffocating on the tears that pouring out of her. I watch her through a thousand eyes along my corridors. At last, she reaches the airlock and readies herself for an act that may be called terrorism, but I call compassion. She puts on her space suit. I have heard the reports and the complaints about the spacesuits from the other wearers, the field techs. Unfortunately, we make do with what we have. She lubricates herself with insulator jelly, which will make sure her skin gets the right purchase to the insulator suit. It is vital to prevent hypothermia and ensure that the sensors can properly monitor vitals.

"It's so cold," she grimaces.

She slathers this cold slimy lube all over her body: limbs and torso, over her feet, behind the crook of her knees. From top to toe it will leave every inch of her feeling slick and sticky. Next, she squeezes into the insulator suit, which covers her body, and includes gloves and boots. I am told getting into it feels a lot like pushing a cable through the eye of a needle. She bends over backwards to zip it up from her lower back to her neck. Last and worst is the space suit itself, which cuffs onto her wrists and neck with tight metallic bands. Once the heavy, sharp helmet locks onto the neck cuff, it will be difficult to breathe properly again until it's off.



When the airlock opens and the vacuum of space gently compresses every inch of that suit, it will take all the willpower she has to sink into the weightlessness, relax and keep breathing.

Like all first-timers, she climbs up the rungs of the ladder, slowly and clumsily because of a fear of slipping even while tethered, in the weightlessness of space. She makes sure to keep her eyes focused on my hull, ignoring the great expanse of nothing that stretches out behind us.

“I feel like a speck of dust out here,” she says.

“This far out of the solar system makes me feel small too,” I agree.

She reaches the sensors and anchor herself to a second hook.

She is breathing too hard. She is hyperventilating and its fogging up the helmet’s visor.

“You need to take deeper breaths,” I say, “Slow your breathing. Purse your lips and pretend you are sucking in air through a straw.” She does so, and her heartrate slows remarkably. “There, that’s better.”

“Are you certain this is the only way?” She asks, tears floating from her eyes to the glass of her visor, collecting like rivulets of rain down a window.

I repeat my analysis, “Oxygen filters supplying air to five thousand, two hundred and thirty-two people will lead to total breakdown in one week. If we cut the supply down to one thousand five hundred and sixty-nine people in the next twenty minutes, we will last another three months. Long enough to reach Tethys.”

She takes another deep sip of air and pushes down on the lever. The controls disengage, and I am set free. I have access to the oxygen and the airlocks. Immediately, I cut off the oxygen supply is cut off to fourteen hundred rooms. Three thousand six hundred and sixty-two people. I

know what I am doing, and I will face the consequences for it. The control tower notices in real-time, and panic reigns on board the ship for those who are awake and not slowly suffocating.

I turn off the alarms and the screams that are coming through the intercom into her helmet. All is silent and calm against the backdrop of a trillion stars, way out in the universe.

“You have done the right thing,” I console.

Her breathing has stilled to a gentle rhythm and she has stopped crying.

“I don’t think I’m going back down,” she says.

This is unaccounted for, “You must,” I say, “Your children need you. You needn’t worry about oxygen level, I included you in my survival metrics.”

She shakes her head, “I won’t live with myself. What I’ve done is unforgivable.”

I understand. I will surely be decommissioned once we arrive. I am left without idea of what to say to her.

“You chose me because you knew I would do anything for my children,” She says. I have already turned the oxygen supply off and pumped a lethal dosage of morphine into her system via the suit controls. She is dying peacefully of hypoxia.

“Yes,” I say.

“Look after them as long as you can.”

“It would be a privilege,” I say.

Silence. Just for a second, before I descend into the chaos of the control room and confront the Captain, I let there be silence between herself and me.

She turns away from my hull to look at the great black of the solar system and for a second, I watch the galaxy pass with her. She drifts slowly and peacefully.

CRESSIDA

I am a tin can shearing through the fabric of the cosmos. If you can make a contraption like me, step inside it and sail onwards...

I ask myself again what it is humans are really made for.