

The XYZ

Charlotte Day had never been fired before. *Chastised* a few times, perhaps. *Reprimanded*, certainly. *Threatened* with unemployment, on occasion. But never, *ever* fired.

She pulled into the gravel driveway of her house and sat in the car, staring out the windshield at the New Mexico dusk. A soft desert wind rustled the grass and scrub pine that dotted the land for miles around. Charlotte looked up. A plume of light from a falling star flared across the night. It seemed so close she could reach out and touch it. But the stars were far off lights in the sky, and she was stuck here on the ground. She sighed. She got out of the car and walked across the patio to her house. Her golden retriever mutt, Neutron, pressed his nose against the sliding doors and wagged his tail. She slid open the doors and he launched himself towards her.

“Oh, Neut.” She buried her face in his fur, blinking back tears. Neut licked her nose. Charlotte ruffled his fur, tossed her bag onto the kitchen counter, and pulled a carton of milk from the fridge. She tipped it back to her mouth and grimaced. It was sour. She squinted at the use-by date. It was too smudged to read. She raised it up closer to the light.

A crash of crunching metal shook the house. The carton slipped from her hand and burst open all over the floor.

“Crud!” Charlotte peeked outside. *Car accident?* The road and field behind the house looked empty except for a thin plume of dust rising in the distance. She grabbed a flashlight and her keys and slipped out the door, Neut following at her heels.

“Hello?” she called. No answer. She looked to the road. Not a car in sight. She hiked out into the fading twilight towards the dust rising in the distance. As she approached, she saw that it hovered over a long, low, dark pod with an open lid, like a wide coffin. Charlotte reached down to touch it. Neut growled, and something shuffled in the grass ahead. Charlotte swung her light towards it. Two red eyes glinted in the dark and were gone. She tracked the noise with her light and caught the long ears and

feet of a jackrabbit. Neut barked, and she shushed him.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw a burst of green light, and the sliding glass doors of her house exploded. She dropped to the ground and wrapped her arms around Neut. The electric lights in the house flickered room by room, then brightened. A shadow moved through the broken glass inside. The side door to the house burst open. Charlotte clutched Neut tightly.

The shadow appeared in the doorway, so tall it had to stoop to cross over the threshold. Charlotte reached into her pocket for her cell phone and cursed. She had left it inside her bag on the counter.

The figure moved onto the patio and disappeared. Charlotte squinted into the darkness. Something suddenly blocked her view of the house, and what felt like a bag of bricks slammed into the side of her cheek. Her feet went out from under her and the flashlight flew into the air. She stumbled over the long dark pod on the ground behind her. Her head swam and everything blurred. A dark shadow loomed over her. She threw herself into the coffin and Neut leaped in after her. She yanked the lid shut and plunged them into darkness. Charlotte's stomach lurched, and she lost consciousness.

A wet tongue licking her face woke her, but when she opened her eyes, it was still dark. Neut leaned his furry body against her. She hugged him close, and listened, but heard nothing: not the sound of chirping crickets or the howl of the wind across the desert that was usually so loud it rattled her patio doors. She put out her hands and felt around. She was imprisoned in an oblong pod about six feet in diameter that felt like hard rubber. Her hand brushed something cold and glassy, and the pod lit up. In front of her was what looked like a control panel. She reached out and touched one of the buttons.

A panel to her left slid open and at first she thought it was a television screen, but the picture changed perspective as she moved. Charlotte gasped. It was a window. She was looking out a window. It was a window.

And beyond it, falling further and further away, was the Earth.

It's a trick. It has to be a trick. Charlotte hugged Neut and stared until her home was nothing

but a little blue speck in the distance. There was a *thud* and the pod stood still. She heard a whirring sound and the window closed, cutting off her view. A stream of green gas hissed into the pod.

Charlotte choked and waved her hand in front of her face. She gripped her throat, suffocating, then the hiss ceased and the gas dispersed. She gasped and oxygen flooded in. The door to the pod swung open.

Neut jumped out, and Charlotte peered over the edge. *The milk was bad. I'm hallucinating.*

They were in a small room made of the same rubbery substance as the pod. Neut sniffed all around the room, stopped at the right spot, and lifted his leg. Charlotte slowly climbed out.

Directly across from the pod was another glassy control panel. Charlotte touched it and jumped back as a door about four feet high slid open. Neut slipped through it and disappeared into the corridor beyond.

“Neut!” Charlotte hissed. Neut reappeared and sat down in the doorway, looking up at her expectantly. The shadow that had invaded her house had been a lot taller than this door, she thought. Charlotte ducked and stepped through it into a large, circular room, empty except for a glowing column in the center.

A crystalline sphere pulsed with light inside the column, and a spiral stair rose up off to the side. Twelve video screens played over twelve doors that led from the room, one of which led to her pod. Each showed what looked like video feed of twelve different planets. The screen over the door she'd come through showed Earth.

A beam of light suddenly lit up the staircase. Two large, flat, greenish-grey feet appeared at the top. Neut barked and Charlotte shushed him.

“Ohoo vashraa la goodramm ast ee avell chaa a ades, wholl y drace. La Bogda bellen mmay.”

The sounds shifted and rearranged themselves in Charlotte's mind, and then she *heard* him:

“You tell the Godlord that he can go straight to frell, for all I care. The Bogda flyship is mine,” the rasping voice called down. “And you can also tell him that...” A huge head with big ears and saucer eyes poked down into the dim light and stared at her. Charlotte stared back. The big feet padded down

to the bottom of the stairs. Before her stood a small figure that looked a lot like a cross between Yoda and Dobby the house elf in a wine-colored smoking jacket. He pointed at Neut.

“What the frell is that?” the elf asked.

“It's a dog,” Charlotte replied.

“Well, get it out of here! It smells like wrogrot! Wait a parsec, you're not...” His ears flattened against his head in suspicion, and he pointed a long, thin, grey-green finger at her. “Show me your toes,” he demanded.

“What?”

“Your toes! Show them to me!”

Charlotte took off her shoe and pulled off her sock. The elf lifted his eyebrows in surprise and grinned in a way that made Charlotte shudder. His lips literally went from ear to ear.

“*You* don't belong to the Godlord,” he said. He pressed a panel on the stair and a cupboard door sprang open beneath it. He pulled out a bottle full of glowing blue liquid and a glass.

Charlotte pointed an accusing finger at him. “Take us back!” she demanded.

The elf raised an ear. “Which platform did you blow in on?” he asked. Charlotte pointed at the screen with the blue Earth still turning. His eyes widened with disbelief.

“You belong to that little blue rock all the way out there? Are you sure?”

Charlotte nodded.

“You didn't...*run into* anything on the way up by any chance, did you?”

Charlotte poked a finger into his chest. “If that thing belonged to you, you better have insurance, pal, because those repairs are going to cost me a fortune, and I just lost my job!”

The elf ignored her and touched another control. The video screen zoomed in on Earth.

“So it's populated? With others? Like you?” He squinted at the screen as if he might be able to see them.

“Billions,” Charlotte narrowed her eyes. “Why?”

The elf calculated something on his fingers and shrugged. “How much damage could it do?” he muttered. He picked up his drink and headed back up the stairs.

“What did you *do*?” She stomped her foot and the elf looked down at her as if he was surprised that she was still there. He sighed and swirled his glass.

“Recently, I discovered a stowaway in the cellar,” he replied. “So I trapped it in pod #3 and flushed it out the airlock.”

Charlotte gasped. “You did *what*?”

“Look, it's a tiny blue rock in the middle of nowhere. How was I supposed to know it was populated?”

“You didn't even bother to *check*?”

The elf shrugged.

Charlotte clenched her fists. “You have to take us back! I'm an *American*!”

The elf pointed over the railing at the crystal sphere pulsing below in the dark. “See that?”

Charlotte nodded. “Look closer.”

Charlotte pressed her face against the thick glass and peered inside. A dark, forked line ran through the sphere.

“It's cracked,” she said. The elf nodded.

“Right. It's the flywheel for the ship, and it's stuck in a single sequence. There's no choice of XYZ.”

“XYZ?” Charlotte asked.

“Three-dimensional coordinates. Usually we just plug 'em into the flywheel, and we're off to anywhere, but...”

Understanding dawned on her. “It's stuck in a single sequence. We can't go *back*.”

“Right. Gotta go forward to go back. Say good-bye to your little blue rock...” The elf paused.

“What did you say your name was?”

Charlotte stared at the video feed of the earth. She might never see it again, and even if she did, who knows how much time will have passed? All the people she knew might be dead. She answered without looking at him.

“Charlotte. Charlotte Day.”

He saluted her. “You can call me Aw-Fal. Say good-bye to your little blue rock, Charlotte Day.” The elf nodded at the screen. The Earth, *her* earth, shot out of sight and was gone. Charlotte stared at the empty space. Neut nuzzled her hand. The elf held out the glass of blue liquor to her. Her hand shook as she took it. He wrapped his long fingers around hers to steady them.

“Awful? You're name is Awful. Great. That's just great.”

“It sounds better when I say it.” Awful pointed at the video screen above pod #4. It showed a ring of planets around a white star. “That's our next stop.”

Charlotte brightened. “You can get the flywheel fixed there!” Awful grinned.

“Sure, we'll just toddle down to the closest gumshop, and say, 'Hey, fix us up with a new Bogda flywheel, will you?’” He chuckled and shook his head. “You haven't an iota how much a Bogda costs, do you?” he asked. Charlotte shook her head. He looked her up and down. “Quite a bit more than you've got, bumstead.” Charlotte couldn't translate what “bumstead” meant, exactly, but she suspected it was an unpleasant word for someone who had very little. She pressed her lips together and knocked back the drink in her hand. Suddenly there were three of him standing before her, and they were all dressed alike. She turned to the planets on the screen. They had quadrupled. She sank down onto the bottom stair. Her lips felt numb.

“What did you give me?” Her voice sounded so far away.

“Joy and happiness. Relax, it helps with the space sickness.”

“What space sickness?” His face swam in triplicate before her. He waved his hand across her eyes, and a hundred more hands trailed behind it.

“*That* space sickness,” he chuckled. Charlotte would not be distracted.

“How much money are we talking?” she asked.

“Money?” The elf gave her a puzzled look. “Oh, tokens, you mean.”

“Yes, tokens. How do I get some?”

“There are only three ways. You can beg for them, borrow them, win them, or steal them.”

“That's four ways.”

“I never beg for them,” Awful smirked.

“What about *working* for them?”

Awful stared at her. “I suppose you *could*. I mean, people *do*. I just can't imagine why you'd want to when there are so many other options.”

The flywheel stopped spinning, and the door to pod #4 rolled open. Steam filled the corridor. Awful strolled towards the pod and glanced back at Charlotte.

“Coming?”

Charlotte stood. The floor swayed under her feet, and she held out her arms for balance. She stumbled to pod #4 and grabbed hold of the doorway. Neut collided into her heels.

“That,” Awful pointed Neut. “...is staying behind. Shoo!” Awful waved him away. Neut jumped up and slathered the elf's face in kisses. Awful fell back into the pod, snorting in disgust. Charlotte squeezed in behind them and the door slammed shut. She touched the glass control panel and the window rolled open. Awful pricked up his ears and looked at her with surprise.

“Figured that out all by yourself, did you?” he asked. She pressed her nose against the glass and nodded, gazing out at the grey planet below.

“What's it called?” she asked.

“Seris.”

The pod sank into the planet's stratosphere and slowed down through the huge trees of a forest. It hit the ground and bounced, scrambling its occupants, then rolled to a stop.

Awful touched the glass panel and the door slid open. Neut jumped out and sniffed along the

ground. He paused at a tree as wide and tall as a skyscraper, and lifted his leg.

“Way to make an impression, dog,” Charlotte murmured as she climbed out. She looked around. They were standing in a wide road covered in broad dead leaves. The trees lining the road had been hollowed out and fitted with arched doorways. Knotholes had been knocked out for windows, like portholes in a boat, and some of the trees had carvings over the doors that looked like script. Charlotte thought that perhaps these might be businesses or services offered, but the area was quiet, and the trees seemed uninhabited. Charlotte squatted down. She picked up a wide leaf and felt its soft veins in her hand. It felt as real as real could be. Suddenly, she stood up and spun around in the middle of the road. She laughed out loud. She had thought she'd be stuck in an office forever. Awful clapped his long fingers over her mouth.

“Shush! We don't know if they're friendly!” he hissed into her ear.

“You've never been here before?” she hissed back. “There are only twelve pods! How long have you been on that ship?”

A look of understanding passed over Awful's face. “There are only twelve pods, yes. But each one goes to a whole host of planets.”

A stone stuck in Charlotte's throat. “So when we come back around to pod #3, it won't be Earth?”

Awful nodded. “It'll be the next planet after.”

“That's Mars.” Charlotte sank to the ground.

“You know anybody on Mars?” Awful asked.

“*Nobody* knows anybody on Mars.”

“I've a friend on Mars,” murmured a voice behind them. They turned. A tall, thin form stood in the doorway of one of the giant trees. At first, Charlotte heard only a group of sounds, *Eet-at-hickt-litctic Mars*. Then the sounds rearranged in her mind. Her eyes widened.

“It was the mist!”

Awful gave her a sidelong look. “What did you think the mist was for?”

“Disinfecting.”

His eyes widened. “Disinfecting what?”

“Disinfecting me.”

Awful roared with laughter. “You? Nothing in creation could disinfect you! Your biological form is positively *crawling* with heebie-jeebies.” He shook his head. “Disinfecting *you*.” He chuckled and turned back to the Serissian. She stared down at Neut as if she'd never seen a dog before, which, Charlotte thought, she probably hadn't. Charlotte looked at the sign above the door. It was marked by linear symbols that were strange to her, but if she concentrated she could catch the gist of them. This sign read something like, “Medica.”

“Would you like to pet him?” Charlotte offered. The Serissian slid towards them. Her single, slender leg ended in a wide grouping of tendrils that groped across the ground like tree roots. She had multiple arms like branches covered in loose, grey-green scales like thick leaves. A single round eye shimmered out at them through her scales.

“Who is this?” she asked, pointing at Neut.

“It's her *pet*,” Awful spat, rolling his eyes.

“And is she, yours?” The Serissian pointed at Charlotte. Charlotte pressed her lips together.

“I am *not* his pet.”

The Serissian reached out to touch Neut's fur. “Can I shave him, your pet?”

“What? No!” Charlotte stepped between Neut and the Serissian. The Serissian withdrew her branches.

“Will it harm him?”

“Well, no, but...” Charlotte bit her lip and tried to think of a reason. “It's undignified. He'll be...laughed at by all the other pets.” Awful snickered, and she glared at him. “Why would you want to shave him, anyway?”

Keeping her eye on Neut, the Serissian opened the door to her tree a little wider. Inside, another Serissian leaned against the wall, his branches drooping. A sickly white rash ravaged his scales.

“I am the medica for this quadrant, and this disease has plagued my people for a long, long age.” *That accounts for the quiet road and the empty shops*, Charlotte thought. “We've theorized a cure, but lack the resources to make it,” the medica continued. “Until now.” She leaned over and held a few strands of Neut's hair in her tendrils. “There is a protein in here we call Red-Yellow 64.”

Charlotte stared at her. “How do you know?”

The medica held Neut's fur close to Charlotte's eyes. “It's right here, in the fur, plain as the leaves on the trees. Do you not see it?” Charlotte shook her head. She glanced in at the sick Serissian hunched against the wall inside. He looked out at her with one big listless eye, and a couple of the white infected scales fell from him to the ground, leaving a red gash behind. The sick Serissian shuddered with pain, and Charlotte winced.

“My pet's fur would cure this sickness?” she asked quietly. The medica nodded. “You won't hurt him?” The medica shook her head. “All right,” Charlotte agreed. “You can shave him.” The Serissian threw her tendrils around Charlotte, and Charlotte stiffened. It was like being embraced by a pile of summer leaves.

“Come in! Come in.” She waved them inside her tree, her scales rustling like silk as she followed them in.

“You don't really suppose they can actually *see* protein molecules, do you?” Charlotte whispered to Awful. Awful shrugged.

“What do you call him, your pet?” The medica asked. “And what do you call yourselves?”

“That's Neut,” Charlotte replied. “And I'm Charlotte Day.” The medica nodded and turned to Awful.

“Umm...,” Awful glanced out the window. “You're probably safer not knowing.”

The medica nodded. “As you wish.”

Inside, the room was big and airy, filled with furniture built from thick slabs of wood. The medica patted a big wooden table, and Neut leaped up on it. He licked the Serissian's face and her tendrils rubbed together, the way a cricket chirps by rubbing its wings. The sound rearranged itself in Charlotte's mind, and she realized the medica was laughing.

“I will send samples of his hair to every quadrant.” The medica turned and looked at them. “You have saved us from a great evil.”

“We may have brought you a new one,” Awful said, looking out a knothole. “The Godlord is coming.”

Charlotte glanced over Awful's shoulder. What looked like three Serissians surrounded their pod, poking and prodding it. “How do you know?” she asked, but already she could see that something was off about them, as if they weren't really there.

“Look at their skin,” Awful said.

Charlotte looked. “There's no shimmer.”

Awful nodded. “Life is luminous. The Godlord ensnares the spirits of death, and then sends them out to claim what's his. They're his Baggers.”

Charlotte stared out at them. “And you left one of *them* behind on Earth?” She glared at him.

“You're lucky it was only one. *One* is relatively harmless.”

“Oh, yeah, it only destroyed my house!”

“Three of them, and you're in real trouble. They can summon the Godlord when there's three of them.”

“The XYZ,” Charlotte murmured. “What will he do to you when he catches you, this Godlord?” Awful shivered. “You don't want to know.”

As if they'd heard him, the three Baggers turned their heads towards the knothole. Charlotte ducked. They were heading towards the medica's tree.

“Time to go, Charlotte Day,” Awful said. “Medica? Got your fur?” She had shaved most of Neut's body and was collecting every hair into a pouch. The medica nodded. She slid across the room and barred the door. Something that sounded like a battering ram pounded against it. The wood split open and a hand slipped through.

“Sorry for the trouble,” Charlotte said to her.

The Serissian shook her leaves. “Your Neut will alleviate much suffering, Charlotte Day. If there's anything I can do for you, you have but to name it.” Charlotte pricked up her ears.

“I *am* in need of a Bogda flywheel. Got any spares lying around?” Charlotte figured she might as well put that out there, just in case. The medica rubbed her branches together, which translated to Charlotte as a smile.

“Serissians have no use for flywheels. We are rooted to Seris; we cannot leave.” The bar on the front door split in two. The medica slipped up a narrow ramp built into the inner wall of the tree and beckoned them to follow. Charlotte, Awful, and a hairless Neut hurried after her. They landed on the second floor in a large round room ringed with tall cupboards. The Baggers stomped up the ramp just behind them. The medica strode across the room and threw open a wide door. Charlotte rushed towards it and skidded to a stop. A bridge made from a tree trunk crossed high over the road below. The bridge's railing had rotted and fallen away, and the floorboards of the walk were broken. A ramp

led down to the road on the other side. Awful shoved Charlotte out of the way and dashed lightly over the broken boards, his long, wide feet sure against the wood. Neut touched the bridge with a tentative paw, then trotted across. He got to the other side and looked back at Charlotte with a hesitant wag of his tail.

“Sometime before the next revolution, Charlotte Day!” Awful scampered down the ramp to the road below. Charlotte glared down at him and swayed. At least thirty feet of open air divided her from the ground. She swallowed. There was the sound of a scuffle behind her and she glanced back. The Baggers rushed towards her. The medica stepped between them but one of the Baggers slammed her to the floor. Charlotte reached out to her, but the medica waved her away.

“Go!” she said. Charlotte nodded, closed her eyes, and stepped out onto the bridge.

The boards creaked under her weight. She held out her arms for balance and took another step. The wind gusted and the bridge swayed. Charlotte dropped to her hands and knees. Neut whined and put a paw on the bridge.

“No, Neut! Stay!” Charlotte cried.

“Here! Dog!” Down below, Awful clapped his hands and Neut cantered down the ramp after a single look back at Charlotte. Awful grabbed hold of Neut's collar and held his nose in disgust.

“Get your potput down here and mind your beast, Earthgirl, or I'm throwing him out the airlock,” he threatened. “Don't think about it! Just go!”

Charlotte took a deep breath and went. The clawed tendrils of the Baggers passed through the empty air behind her, missing her by inches. She crawled on all fours to the other side, and as she hit the landing, Charlotte heard a sharp crack. The limb holding up the bridge splintered with the weight of the Baggers behind her. The bridge snapped, and they plummeted to the ground. There was a buzzing sound and the smell of ozone filled Charlotte's nose. The Baggers had disappeared in mid-air.

Charlotte shot down the ramp. Awful grabbed her hand and they fled to the pod. Neut jumped inside, and Charlotte and Awful clambered in after him. Charlotte looked up and saw the Serissian's

face at the balcony door. Her crystalline eye and grey-green tendrils shimmered in the pale light. Here lived a people whose eyes were wide open; they could look at a thing and see the stuff it was made of. Charlotte wondered what else they could see.

“Catch, Charlotte Day! I hear these are useful Outthere!” The medica tossed a cloth pouch to her, and it clinked when Charlotte caught it. The air buzzed, and the Baggers appeared on the road. Awful touched a panel and the pod door closed. They took off from the ground and shot out beyond the atmosphere. Charlotte opened the window and pressed her face to the glass. The gray planet retreated from them in a blur of impossible speed. She turned to Awful.

“Do you get that kind of a welcome wagon at every planet you visit?”

Awful stared out the window with a troubled look on his face. “I usually have more arcs.” The word “arcs” rearranged itself in Charlotte's mind. An arc was a unit of time, like an hour.

They returned to the ship and Charlotte and Neut followed Awful upstairs. At the top, Charlotte stopped and stared. She stood in a big round lounge with soft couches lining the perimeter. A transparent dome capped the top of the ship, and through it Charlotte could see the whole vastness of space. A blue and gold nebula of light floated above them. She sat down on a low couch, opened the pouch the medica had given her, and pulled out a tiny silver coin. Awful took it from her. He held it up to the light and peered at it closely, then clamped it between his teeth. Nodding, he handed it back to her.

“They're worth fifty tokens. Each.”

“Each?” She spilled the coins out onto the floor. Neut sniffed them as she grouped them into piles.

“Nine-hundred-fifty...more than a thousand! How much is that? Fifty thousand tokens? Wow.” She ran her fingers through the pile.

“You're rich,” Awful smiled.

“We can buy a new flywheel to fix the ship! I can go home!”

Awful opened a cupboard and pulled out the bottle of electric blue liquor. He glanced down at her pile.

“Fifty thousand, you say?” he asked. Charlotte nodded. He poured the liquor into a glass and handed it to her. “Only another ten million or so to go.” Charlotte's face fell and she groaned.

“I'm stuck here!”

Awful rolled his eyes. “Yep, it's a real tragedy: rich as a godlord and stuck on one of the rarest ships in all the galaxies, doomed to travel across the universe and see things no other fishmuck on her planet has ever seen. It's just *awful*.” He poured the last of the liquor into his glass and held up the empty bottle.

“I hope you're planning on using a small portion of your ill-gotten gains to buy us some more joy and happiness.”

Charlotte threw one of the tiny coins at him. He caught it one-handed and held it up to the light.

“Hmm, this should get us the good stuff.” He chuckled. “About fifty barrels of it.” Charlotte stared at him in shock and looked down at the pile of coins on the rug in front of her. Her face suddenly lit up.

“I *am* rich! *Really* rich!”

Awful smirked and turned towards a little sleeping room off of the lounge. “On to pod #5 tomorrow?”

Charlotte nodded, still staring at her pile of money. “Maybe I'll find some more tokens.”