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FORSAKEN

THE JOURNEY HOME

A tale of lesbian love, adventure, and mystery on a hostile alien world.

Forsaken: The Journey Home

PREVIEW Edition, Chapters 1-10

By Lily Lancaster

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Also note that this is a preview and is still being written. It doesn't necessarily reflect the final product, but should be pretty close.

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Chapter 1 - Watching the Sunrise

In a vast, open field covered in snow, a young girl with bronzed skin stood, her white nightdress fluttering in the winter breeze and her milk chocolate hair whipping back and forth in sudden gusts. Beside her towered an older man, mid-forties or so, his deeply tanned skin glistening with a few spots of sweat, despite the frozen atmosphere. Together, they stared up into the night sky, where millions of glittering stars winked at them.

“It’s happening soon, right, Papa?” said the young girl, her gaze locked on a region of space her father had pointed out to her moments ago.

“With any luck,” the man muttered. Raising his voice, he spoke to the girl, placing a reassuring hand on her shoulder. “Today marks a very important occasion, Livia. Today is the day myth becomes reality, the day when humanity puts forth all its scientific knowledge to birth a new star.”

“So you and Mama are like its parents?” Livia said, still scanning the sky.

The man let out an amused chuckle. “Yes, you could say that, I suppose. In a way, the gas giant we are about to ignite is similar to an egg about to hatch, giving life to something new.”

“What did you mean by miff, Papa?”

“Ah, well, in the old days before we left Earth, many myths of creation existed, you see. Some of them were grand, pantheistic ideas of gods personifying natural phenomena like the sun or moon. Others had just one all-powerful creator who did everything with the wave of a hand.”

“Mm, Milliam taught me some of that, it was really confusing,” Livia opined.

“You should pay proper attention, Livia, it is important that we remember where we came from, and how people used to think.”

Livia finally dragged her gaze away from the sky in order to stare at her father. “Why?”

The man hunkered down to bring his face low enough to look his daughter in the eyes. “Because forgetting our history has always led to horrible things happening, my dear Livia. The Great Libraries of our beautiful capital world

Titan Prime exist in order to preserve all that is good, and bad, about our history for this very reason.”

“I don’t understand, Papa...” Livia said in a small voice.

“Nor should you. Hold onto that innocence for as long as you can,” he said, his own tone soft, gentle, loving. He glanced at the sky. “Oh, I think the show is about to begin.”

“Ah, we almost missed it!” Livia said, once again locking eyes with the sky.

“Time to put your glasses on,” said her father, putting a pair of what appeared to be sunglasses over his eyes.

Livia did so. “I can’t see anything now...”

“You will soon, trust me.”

A few seconds later, a blinding flash in the inky black sky spread, flickered, then faded to a soft yellow glow, which itself soon vanished. Left in its place was a bright speck of yellow, pulsating and flickering, along with a slight lightening of the sky itself.

“Waa, pretty!” said the girl, bouncing up and down in excitement.

“Isn’t it, though? Give it another few minutes and it’ll be daylight here on Agnola. Won’t that just be amazing?”

Livia grinned. “Yep!”

The brand new sunlight of a birthed star rushed towards them, hitting the planet and chasing the darkness away, melting the snow and increasing the temperatures to a modest spring level. And in the sky, a second, much smaller sun now burned, almost ready for duty...



Awakening with a vague grunt, a young lady with milk chocolate hair reaching to the small of her back sat up in her queen-sized bed and had a morning stretch. Hah... morning. Terms like that lost some of their meaning on a world with two suns, either of which—or both—could be in the sky at any given time.

The double doors leading to her balcony had been thrown open to let in the winter breeze. The winter breeze that wasn’t all that different to a summer

breeze ever since the micro-sun had been ignited some ten years' previously. A world where winter only really came once every few years. Pure paradise compared to some planets.

She swung her legs out of bed and shuffled into her fluffy slippers, yawning non-stop. "Mm... too early..."

The room's door opened and in walked an early thirties woman, dressed in a stylish yet functional maid outfit featuring knee-length skirt, a frilly blouse, and a put-upon expression. She placed her hands on her hips. "And what time in the morning do you call this, Livia?"

"No harm in a little lie in every now and then, Milliam!" Livia said, standing.

"You lie in eight days a week, young lady," Milliam retorted.

"Not for much longer," Livia muttered. She spent a moment dressing in something casual involving a flowing one-piece dress, then headed downstairs for breakfast.

Milliam followed, tucking her deep brunette locks back under the maid hat she wore. "Your father has only your best interests in mind, you know that. Joining the business will do you good."

"Running an agriworld is hardly the glamorous pursuit I'd imagined ten years ago," Livia whispered to herself. Watching a new star being born had filled her head with romantic dreams of exploring the galaxy, of finding adventure and mischief and action, of going down in history as some explorer of exotic new worlds as-yet undiscovered.

It had also filled her head with partially-remembered scientific words and terms she could never fully bring to mind. Her father had attempted to explain how they were artificially altering the mass of a gas giant using some truly staggering technology Livia had a hard time wrapping her mind around.

Magnatronic? No. Magnagravitic? No. Gravometric? Don't think so. Gravity-magnetic? No. Well, it was something like that, she couldn't be expected to remember such fancy scientific terms she'd only heard once when she was eight years old. Whatever the right terms were, they'd succeeded in causing the gas giant to undergo nuclear fusion, creating a smaller, secondary sun in the solar system for the purposes of extending growing seasons.

And with her eighteenth birthday having happened only a few days ago, Livia's father—the owner and CEO of this entire agriculture planet—had decided she should join the family business.

Reaching the grand dining room in this excessively large mansion, Livia dropped into one of the many empty seats surrounding an oblong table approximately the size of the Titanic 2.0, a luxury starliner someone had thought it would be amusing to name after the original disaster. Fortunately the gargantuan vessel had managed its maiden voyage without bother and was now several years into its operational lifespan.

From the far end of the room, a man strode in. Harold S. Blueman, Livia's father and agriworld magnate extraordinaire, looked a little more careworn than the man of ten years' ago, his hair greying a little now, despite many anti-aging technologies being readily available; he preferred to stay true to nature as far as possible, at least when it came to his own body.

He walked over to Livia and smiled. "Morning, Liv. Enjoying some final lie-ins, are we?"

"Yes, she is," Milliam said, bringing a tray with bacon and eggs and a glass of orange juice, freshly squeezed. She placed it before Livia, gave Harold a good morning, and headed back to the kitchen.

"Haha, all to the good!" Harold said, laughing heartily. "When you're finished eating, come see me in my office, I have a little something for you."

Livia okayed him, feeling a tinge of excitement and wondering what he might have got her. Probably just a uniform for her new job or something. He meant well, and Livia loved him to bits, but he also had a tendency to think everyone else was as interested in the business of agriculture as he was.

With breakfast out of the way, she zipped upstairs to her father's luxurious study, a wood-panelled affair lined with bookshelves, a drinks globe by one of the open windows, and his desk, a mahogany-like monster twice as long as she was tall. An old English adventurer from Earth's ancient history would have felt right at home here.

Harold himself was seated behind the desk, poring over some documents and comparing them to figures and details on a holographical display emitted

from a long, thin device embedded in the desk's surface. He glanced up at her. "Ah, there you are, come closer, come closer!"

Doing so, Livia adjusted her posture to be a little less taught. "So... you wanted to see me?"

"Yes, yes! You remember a year or two ago, when you told me about your, how shall I say, interests?" Harold said. "I had a long, hard think about what I, as your parent, should do for you. It is not my place to tell you who you should be attracted to, but as your father it very much *is* my place to ensure you have the tools and abilities to make a successful life for yourself."

"Okay..." Livia said, unsure where he was going with this.

"With that said, I did a little digging and found something I think you might enjoy. Call it an extra birthday gift, or perhaps you could think of it as an early New Year's gift! Only another week until the dreaded year 3000, when all our technology will magically stop working. We'd better enjoy it while we can, yes?"

Livia giggled at this. Some ridiculous doomsday cult or other had prophesied the end of the world when the year 3000 came about, along with the usual nut jobs declaring that all technology would break because of a rounding error in the code or something equally silly. Some things never changed.

Harold opened a drawer in his heavy wooden desk and handed over a golden envelope, sealed with a strip of tamper-proof silverium. "Here you go, my daughter."

Grasping the envelope, Livia used her father's silverium de-sealer, waving the small smartphone-like device back and forth over the silver pattern holding the flap closed. The silvery seal vanished like butter under the summer sun, and she pulled a folded paper out. Unfolding it, she read the letter, her eyebrows variously going up and down with surprise and shock:

Do you long for something more? Are you fed up of being alone? Or perhaps you're confused about yourself and would like to meet some like-minded people? Or maybe you're simply looking for some temporary companionship? If you answered yes to one or all of the above, Lesbian Liaisons can help! We run regular trips, camps, and galactic excursions for

ladies like you, with everything you could possibly want or need provided in one affordable—or, if you prefer, extremely expensive—package.

This Gold Ticket has been pre-purchased by someone close to you, dear reader, and entitles you to a special millennium voyage to Euphoris V, a pleasure system like no other! Sip cocktails on the sandy beaches of Ventris, enjoy skydiving and snorkelling in and around the reefs and skies of Carnolious, and maybe, just maybe find that special someone you seek. We look forward to seeing you there!

Subject to terms and conditions.

Two happy beads of moisture rolled down Livia's cheeks. "Papa..."

"I realise an agriworld like ours might not be the best place to find someone who meets your needs, Livia. If you're interested in that, of course. If not, well, I can refund the ticket, no prob—" He was interrupted by his daughter running around the desk to hug him. "Ahaha, it appears my gift is well-received!"

"It's the best present, thank you, Papa!" Livia said. "I'll start preparing right away!"

Giving a gruff chuckle, Harold nodded. "Yes, off you go, Daddy has work to do."

With a hop and a skip, Livia ran from the office, through the great hall—with its twin staircases and plush red carpets—and over to the other side of the house where her room was situated.

Here, she opened *not* her regular wardrobe, but the second one, the one she kept locked at all times. Rooting around among the hangers, she pulled out something unexpected: a cheerleader outfit, complete with short bouncing skirt and pompoms.

"Mm, should I take this?" she muttered. "Or perhaps I should bring the bunny girl outfit? Or the tennis one? I wonder if there's room for all three..."

A sharp knock at the door startled Livia and in walked in Milliam, a suspicious look on her face. "I hear you're going away, young mistress?"

Livia had instantly jumped several inches in fright, tossing the cheerleader outfit on the floor to the other side of the bed where it'd be out of sight. At

seeing it was only Milliam, she relaxed. “Oh, it’s just you. Don’t do that to me! You nearly gave me a heart attack.”

“But where else will I get my entertainment?” Milliam asked, head cocked.

“I am not your entertainment!” Livia snapped, retrieving her outfit and carefully laying it out on the bed.

“Denying it doesn’t make it any less true,” Milliam said. “And I still fail to understand why you’re always so antsy about your father discovering your hobby. I can’t imagine he will object.”

“I don’t want him getting the wrong idea,” Livia muttered. “I love dressing up, and I love these outfits of mine. But he’s also expecting me to join the business. It’d be awkward if he found out I want to travel and model old Earth fashions and clothes. I couldn’t do that to him.”

“Well, I suppose it’s up to you to decide what you want this trip to be, then. A final nail in the coffin you’ve already resigned yourself to? Or the start of something new and fresh and exciting? Think carefully.” Milliam exited, leaving a thoughtful—and possibly slightly annoyed—Livia.

Just one week and she’d be on a flight to Titan Prime for two weeks of fun. Just one week. Unfortunately, as she was well aware, one week could feel like an eternity when waiting for something as exciting as this...

Chapter 2 - Escape

Floating in the vast darkness of space, a small flotilla of ships drifted towards their destination, running on minimal power and letting inertia do a lot of the hard work. Here, in the equally gloomy hallways of one of the vessels, another young woman was just getting up.

A cramped cabin greeted her eyes, dark and gun metal grey with a few minor concessions to regular human needs, such as a poster of the crazy popular idol duo known as Stardive, or the soft and comfortable rug bought from a bazaar on Calidan VI, a space station known for its many bargains, some of which really *were* too good to be true.

Her bunk in this sedan-sized room, built into the superstructure itself and furnished with a supremely comfy duvet she'd owned since a young age, faced an oblong porthole looking out into the velvety blackness outside, giving her the company of little more than a billion stars. A view she'd always loved.

Falling out of bed, this young lady, much of an age with Livia, but with pale skin—the result of life spent in space—managed to get to her feet on the second try and tied her wavy caramel hair into two loose ponytails. She let out a brief sigh and got dressed in a worn but good quality check dress.

First up, breakfast. The galley was dim and silent as usual, the various magnetically-locked pots and pans giving the shadowy and blue-tinted room an air of menace, as though the uneven shapes and surfaces might come alive and attack her at any moment—

—she grabs a knife from a nearby draw, slashing the monster with a '*shink!*' of metal on metal, ducking and weaving her way around the inanimate surfaces, expecting them to come alive at any moment, too. Fending the monster off, she bumps up against a cabinet, her retreat halted, no way out.

Suddenly, a beautiful elf maiden appears! Rushing forward to engage the beast, the elf cuts a malformed arm off, molten metal blood pouring from the wound as the monster wails. She wields an elf blade! Made from mithril and

sharp enough to slice solid metal in twain. The elf pirouettes and dances, cutting and dismembering, until—!

A loud clang awoke the girl from her pleasant daydream of monsters and elves. She looked around to see the family's pet cat unconcernedly licking its fur after managing to knock one of her pans onto the floor. Fortunately the pan was empty, but still, her heart would be taking a few minutes to settle back down after *that* little fright, especially mid-daydream.

"I'll feed you in a minute, Damocles, I promise," she said, shooing the tabby onto the floor and out into the hallways of the ship. "Gotta make breakfast for everyone first." Another brief sigh escaped her lips.

But first, a cup of tea for her. She walked to one of the many compact cupboards and tugged her personal mug free from its restraining clamp; unlike old naval vessels, which rocked and rolled on the high seas, space-faring ships rarely had to deal with such things, except when traversing the Warpway. A web-like series of hyperspace conduits enabling faster-than-light travel, the Warpway could be quite the bumpy ride, especially on entry and exit, necessitating special measures for valuable breakables.

On the side of her mug, the name 'Yuriko' had been printed in a curly font. A present from caring, if slightly out of touch, parents. With a hot cuppa in-hand, she began the process of preparing breakfast. Salads, fruits, nuts and cheeses, cured meats, and a small cup of brown ale. Simple but tasty, filling but cheap. That was the way of the Troupe.

Six full plates now graced the work surface, two for her parents, one for her, and three for the siblings. Oh, and a bowl of food for Sir Cat, before she forgot. With that taken care of, breakfast was served.



In the dining cabin, the six of them now ate their meal with gusto. Yuriko, as the sensible oldest child of the four, ate quietly and occasionally fielded a flung nut or piece of cheese from her more exuberant siblings. Mealtimes were always the

same in the Toporov Troupe's Home Barge, their little house among the stars. Noisy, sometimes argumentative, and generally a lot of fun.

Except for those occasions when her parents decided to bring up *that* topic...

"When are you going to find a nice boy to settle down with, Yuriko?" asked her mother, a saintly woman by the name of Alexandra. As the joint head of the Troupe, she took care of costumes and writing, two things Yuriko also enjoyed a great deal.

Yuriko's father, a muscular man called Pavel who dealt with the business side of things, cleared his throat and raised his voice to be heard over a minor din coming from the younger end of the table. "We won't be around forever. Someone will need to take over once we're gone."

"I know," Yuriko said, doing all she could to avoid sighing again.

"We're fine for now," Pavel continued. "But what about next week? The week after? The audiences have been getting smaller and smaller."

"Maybe you should expand the performances a bit?" Yuriko said. She'd tried to get them to change and grow several times over the last year or two, but her efforts always fell on deaf ears.

"People come to see our traditional performances," Alexandra said, waving a piece of bread.

"You just said yourself that less people are coming!" Yuriko said, and slapped a hand over her mouth. "Sorry, I didn't mean to talk back."

Pavel shook his head. "We want to hear your thoughts."

Yuriko almost choked on her beer. They wanted to hear her thoughts? Hah! It was always the same. She shared her thoughts, they completely ignored them. "You know my thoughts, Father. I think we should try something new while we still have the audiences." *But you won't listen, will you?*

"Our traditions are important," Pavel said. "Who will keep the old ways alive, if not us?"

"Tradition doesn't put food on the table," Yuriko muttered, just as a piece of bread spread with jam flew past and gave her a much needed distraction.

"Yakov! Stop throwing your food."

As she dealt with the usual issues of a young child who'd apparently decided that food was made for throwing rather than eating, her parents returned to their own meals. Another largely pointless conversation at mealtime involving things Yuriko had no interest in. Nothing new there.

With their breakfast done, she returned to her room and sat on the bunk. She stared out at the stars drifting past as they floated towards the destination of the next big show their parents were putting on; a massive station in orbit around a Habworld called Durann. Yuriko knew little of the world itself, just that it was similar to ancient Earth in overall climate and geographical make-up.

But the space station in orbit high above Durann... ah, *that* was of interest! By all accounts it was like a floating Las Vegas, that old Earth city some people of a certain persuasion still remembered centuries after the planet itself was reduced to stellar dust. Not a place her parents might want to visit in person beyond that necessary for business, but the crowds looking for an evening of theatre were always good patrons for the Troupe. At least, they *had* been. These days, not so much.

Sliding a hand down under her mattress, Yuriko pulled out a silver envelope and opened it to remove the letter within. It had taken *months* to save up the money she needed for a Silver Ticket to the Year 3000 Lesbian Liaisons event. But saved she had, even forgoing some of her regular indulgences—such as existed—just to ensure she could go.

The ticket was the easy part, however. Figuring out how to tell her parents... *that* was the hard part. In the end, she'd decided that telling them wasn't strictly necessary. Not with what she had in mind.



Arriving at the station Yuriko liked to think of as Space Vegas, the Troupe's small flotilla of vessels docked at one of the hundreds of ports along the station's underside. As the various members of the Troupe—Yuriko's own parents plus the additional cast members, several dozen stage hands, and technicians—piled

off the ships to enjoy an evening relaxing in a space larger than a small car for the first time in several weeks, Yuriko also slipped out.

The kids were all tucked in and the family nanny was there to keep an eye on things, leaving Yuriko to put her plan into action. The plan that would likely result in her either being grounded for eternity, disowned, or possibly even thrown out of the nearest airlock.

Okay, perhaps that was a little hyperbolic, but her parents' reaction was unlikely to be *good*, that much was certain, regardless of the fact she was an eighteen year old and therefore technically a legal adult. Technically. She hardly felt like it most of the time, though.

Threading her way through the brightly lit and metallic halls of the station, she reached a purchase kiosk she'd determined the location of with some judicious research several weeks previously. Here, she plugged in her personal data crystal and booked a flight across to Titan Prime, the Empire's capital world.

Her ticket to the Lesbian Liaisons Year 3000 trip had been expensive, but the cost of a ticket all the way across a whole spiral arm of the galaxy to the Titan Nebula had made her eyes bulge. Many illicit agreements with other members of the Troupe had been made in order to secure the additional funds she'd required. Cleaning, running errands, sewing new outfits, there was no limit to the jobs she'd worked.

But she was here now, and all her hard work and effort was about to pay off, and pay off *big*. It was the job of but a day helping out the Troupe, getting the stages set up and ready for the following evening's performance, at which point she wouldn't be needed again and could therefore disappear without arousing suspicion until it was already too late.

On-board the Stage Barge, the largest vessel in their little flotilla, Yuriko busied herself to the point of being suspicious; giving enthusiastic responses, putting a crazy amount of effort into her backstage cleaning chores—polishing the wooden stage had always been a hated job, but today she enjoyed it simply because she knew she'd soon be free—and rushing back and forth to deliver food and drinks to the crew.

Standing on the stage, looking out over the audience seating, she took in the brightly-lit space; the artificial skylight above providing its strong lighting for the performances; the red drapes hung around the walls and second floor boxes; the stillness and anticipation of a full house, something they'd been getting less and less recently.

"Maybe it wouldn't be so bad if I could stand here more often," she whispered to herself.

It was rare that she got to enjoy participating in an actual performance, and most often only as an extra. But when she *could*, ah, the feeling, the *rush*. It was unlike anything else she'd experienced, except maybe that one time she'd experimented with her own body. *That* had been comparable. It was just a shame she so rarely had the time to enjoy such things. Or to find someone *else* with whom to enjoy such things.

Yuriko checked her antique pocket watch and nodded. Her jobs were complete, the Troupe were relaxing in their rooms or over in the Common Barge, or off enjoying Space Vegas, and her flight was due to board in less than two hours. With a deep breath, she returned to her room, got changed and grabbed her bags, then sneaked out and ran for the airlock.

And laid on her bunk's mattress, a letter to her parents, apologising for running off on a two week-long trip without telling them...

Chapter 3 - The Ranger

A deep growling, as of a hungry big cat in a very bad mood, drifted through the vines and trees and skeletal bushes of Safron, largest and most popular wildlife park on planet Mathira. The growling was immediately followed by a roar, as of a hungry big cat in a very bad mood who also wasn't about to take any shit from a human park ranger.

Rustling, as of feet running as fast as possible, accompanied the roar until a young man dashed out from the trees and into a large clearing, where he frantically radioed for the damn gates to be opened.

“Get a move on, guys, that maira isn't playing games here,” he yelled into his lapel-mounted micro-radio.

The big metal gates swung open to let him to rush through and have them close behind him. Turning to look at the treeline, he scanned for movement, for the tell-tale rustles and shivers of a large animal hunting for prey. Prey which had now escaped back to safety, once it had become apparent that the animal in question had been spooked by something and was nowhere near as docile as it should be.

A young-sounding female voice came over his radio. “*What did you do to my friend, Matty!?*”

“I didn't do anything! I was just taking her usual meal in when she decided to be a jerk!” the ranger named Matty replied in a terse tone.

“*Maira don't just attack for no reason,*” came the irate female voice's response. “*Forget it, I'm coming over myself.*”

“Be my guest,” Matty muttered, making his way over to the ranger hut for a stiff cup of coffee with a shot of his special coffee liqueur to calm his thundering heart, as if caffeine and alcohol would do anything except make it worse.

A few minutes later a young woman in her early twenties arrived at a trot, halting before the gate. She wore a beige pair of hotpants, a beige shirt, and a beige pair of boots thick enough to withstand a building collapsing on them. Contrasting with this, her hair was as black as a sunless night, held in a large

and bushy ponytail reaching to her belt. And her skin, a deep coffee tone, hinted at someone who probably spent far too much time outdoors.

Scratching her head, the new arrival wondered what could have caused her favourite animal in this whole park to become so agitated. Mairas were normally pretty chilled, only becoming aggressive when actively hunting for food. They were also able to sense their prey via a poorly understood psychic ability of some sort, meaning they were rarely spooked or bothered by humans or other creatures unless they specifically picked up hostile intent.

Best way to figure it out would be to see the animal in person, so she radioed into the ranger hut, a large building made of reinforced hypercrete, originally a bunker built during a long-forgotten war and repurposed when the park had been opened.

A response came in via a relaxed and deep male voice of the type one could easily fall asleep listening to. "*Ranger Command. Go ahead, Tina.*"

"Open up the maira's gate, please, I'm going in to see what's wrong with her," said Tina.

"*Are you certain? An angry maira isn't something to trifle with, you know this better than anyone,*" came the reply.

Tina puffed her chest out. "Who do you think I am? No one knows mairas better than me!"

The voice from Ranger Command came back, this time with an amused tone. "*Very well, Tina, but be careful.*"

"Always," Tina said, moving through the opening gates and making her way into the dusty jungle, with its creeping creepers and vacillating vines.

All around her, the buzzing of insects and imperceptible hum of overpowering amounts of life made her relax; being surrounded by greenery and animals on all sides had always made her feel secure and welcome, like she belonged.

Closing in on a clearing she knew her maira often liked to loiter near for sunbathing purposes, she looked about and focused her senses, alert for the distinctive feel of her friend's mind. She found it a second later, homing in on

the powerful sense of mild irritation she now felt herself, vicariously experiencing it through the maira's own connection to her mind.

"Dammit, Matty, it really *was* you! He knows better than to feed the maira if he's angry about something, idiot..." Tina muttered. "I'll have to have words with him when I get back, grr..."

She calmed her own mind, taking some deep breaths. If she tried communicating with the maira in an irritable state, she'd end up with much the same situation as Matty had. A few more steps and Tina was in the clearing, a shaded area covered by a canopy of trees over a rough and dusty area a sleepy maira might enjoy taking a nap in.

A rustle off to one side indicated a presence, two eyes peering out from the dense growth surrounding the clearing. Revealing herself, the maira stalked forward, sniffing the air.

Tina faced the tiger-like animal, with its jet black fur and crimson stripes. Except unlike a tiger, a maira was substantially larger, to the point where a human could ride one quite easily... if they dared.

Locking eyes with the animal, Tina stepped forward, just one step, no more. "Come here, Amethyst, it's just me, don't be worried."

The animal padded forward, maintaining eye contact as two long appendages behind its ears flowed out like the tendrils of a Warpway portal. Spying the box holding the maira's meal—some choice cuts of meat prepared with love and care by Tina herself—she maintained eye contact and crab-stepped towards it.

While it was true that maira were generally docile creatures, happy to sit and bask in the sun even with random humans wandering nearby, an annoyed *and* hungry maira could result in difficulties of the sort usually reserved for the likes of gazelles or zebras or other animals at the lower end of the food chain. And Tina had no intention of becoming anyone's meal today.

"I've got your munchies right here, girl, don't worry," Tina said, eyes still locked into those of the maira. Opening the white cool box, she tossed a couple of slabs of meat across, where they were deftly caught in the maira's jaws and wolfed down with every sign of enjoyment.

The last few pieces of meat disappeared down its human torso-sized mouth, followed by Tina sitting on the dusty surface and crossing her legs. She stared at Amethyst, watching the magnificent creature as she sat on her haunches and proceeded to lick her fur, seemingly uninterested in further interactions for the time being.

“Feeling a bit calmer now?” Tina asked, not really expecting an answer. A soft purring sound, reminiscent of a happy cat, only deeper and containing a hint of menace, indicated Amethyst was probably back to her usual state of docile laziness, much to Tina’s relief.

Satisfied that Matty’s idiocy had been undone, Tina got to her feet and headed back out to the main clearing where the fence and its enormous ultra-mesh gates were located. As the gates closed behind her, Tina broke into a run, finding her way to the ranger hut and upstairs to the canteen. Here, she homed in on Matty and sat opposite him at the metal table he occupied. He was presently staring out of one of the open slit windows, barely aware of her.

“So... what the hell crawled up your ass and died, Matty?” she asked, her tone calm yet carrying a hint of anger.

“Huh?” Matty said, turning to her. “Oh, it’s you. The maira okay?”

“No thanks to you. You’re annoyed about something, right? I could tell as soon as I saw her! Maira react badly to angry people, you know that, right? That whole psychic thing they’ve got going on?” Tina pointed to her temple. “Or do I need to recommend you be sent on ranger training *again*?”

Matty leaned back in order to be out of range of his superior’s anger. “Uh... right, yeah. Sorry, it just slipped my mind, is all!”

“The rules are relaxed a bit when it comes to maira because they’re really chilled out most of the time. But don’t go thinking they’re not dangerous, Matty,” Tina said, waggling a finger under his nose. “There’s a reason we don’t let people feed them if they’re angry about something.”

Matty sighed. “My fiancée broke it off, Tina. Guess I was just distracted and didn’t think of the consequences. Sorry, it won’t happen again, I swear! I can’t lose this job, it’s all I’ve got left now.”

Sitting upright and crossing her arms, Tina stared at him for a moment, contemplating whether to put him on doogol duty as penance; no one, but *no one* wanted the doogol round. They were officially recognised as the smelliest animal ever to have lived on any planet, ever.

The doogol's retched stench was approximately reminiscent of a skunk crossed with sulphur, rotten eggs, and a week-dead corpse, which had then been eaten by a tyrannosaurus rex and excreted back *out* again, then left in the sun for the next several days.

In the end Tina relented and instead put him on kitchen duty for the next week. Preparing the maira's meals might help give him a little more perspective on things, much as it had her when she'd first started out as a park ranger. She stood and headed back out. "Sorry to hear about the fiancée, by the way!" she called over to him as she left.

Matty sighed and went back to staring out of the window.



Returning home late that evening with Mathira's large moon waxing high in the sky, giving the entire landscape an unearthly and ethereal feel, Tina unlocked her front door and stepped across the threshold of her little bungalow. Most of the rangers at the park had places nearby in case they were needed for anything, and this little property had tickled her fancy the moment she laid eyes on it.

This area of the city, way out in what she thought of as the sub-suburbs—an area so far outside the city limits it barely counted as part of it—was quiet, calm, and safe, the perfect combination for a park ranger who dealt with noisy animals and potentially life-threatening danger on a routine basis.

Tina pulled her heavy boots off and dumped them on the tiled area just before the step up into the house proper; a necessary concession when muddy boots—dry and dusty mud, which was arguably worse than wet mud for the way it drifted *everywhere*—were a daily occurrence.

Next up, the living room, where her posterior immediately graced her supremely comfortable armchair. She reclined with the footrest up, sighed, and

closed her eyes for a time, then opened them again and glanced over to the table to her right where a golden envelope lay.

She grabbed it and pulled the letter out, re-reading it. “I bought the damn thing, but do I seriously want to go on this trip?” she murmured, folding the letter and tossing it back on the table. “Even if I found another girlfriend, chances of her being okay with the crazy hours I work are pretty low, huh?”

Another sigh was followed by a trip to the kitchen to get a cup of tea. Waiting for the kettle to boil—a matter of maybe fifteen seconds even with modern technology; thermodynamic laws were something mere humans hadn’t yet found a way to circumvent—she mused further on her decision to purchase a ticket for Lesbian Liaisons’ year end millennium trip.

“I suppose it *has* been a while since I last enjoyed someone else’s company...” she said, pouring the water into her cup and stirring while staring at the ceiling. On the other hand, literally speaking, her fingers made for perfectly fine companions on the rare occasions she felt a need to relieve some tensions, so maybe getting a refund would be best, while she still could?

“Twenty-three and still relying on my own hand, hah...” she said, blushing in the gloomy atmosphere. “Or that damn thing Kerry bought me. Told her I didn’t need it, but did she listen?”

A heavy sigh this time. Wonderful friend, Kerry, to be sure, but far too sexually open for her own good. Especially her love of sharing... toys. Yes. Tina appreciated the gesture, but the problem was that she didn’t have the appropriate equipment to enjoy one of *those* toys, the feminine variety. A spot of G-modding to get a dick had seemed like *such* a great idea at the time...

Primarily because she’d been seeing someone who was into girls but also liked being filled to the brim. Then the relationship fell through because of Tina’s job and she was stuck with her new equipment, unless she fancied spending *another* week of her limited holiday time in the G-mod clinic to get it undone.

“Why didn’t I?” she murmured, unconsciously stirring her tea to the point of creating a miniature whirlpool in the mug. She had her suspicions. A week of suspended animation for the modification process was a pain, sure, but at the

end of the day it was easy to have a quick tug when she needed some release, and time was always her greatest enemy when so much of her life was spent at work.

In the end, the embarrassment of receiving such a toy from her friend combined with her inability to enjoy it had led to her unceremoniously dumping the dildo into a box in a closet, at which point she'd put it out of mind.

She finished making her drink and returned to her comfy chair to put her feet up again. The golden envelope was still where she'd left it, taunting her with its possibilities, but also worrying her...

Well, she had a couple of days yet, and refunds were guaranteed even up to mere *hours* before the event was due to start, simply because so many wanted to go and there were never enough spaces. Doubly so for a special event like this one. Young ladies all over the empire would prepare their suitcases regardless, on the off-chance someone cancelled at the last minute and a ticket became available.

And now Tina felt awful. "I managed to snag a ticket, yet here I am, hesitating. Some other girl could use this, maybe find someone to love, or at the very least someone to... do things with." Yet another blush. "Okay, decision time!"

She grabbed the ticket and stared at it, her mind stuck at a junction, unsure whether to go left or right. To enjoy the trip, or to refund and give another girl a chance at love...

An hour later, she still hadn't managed to decide, so she went to bed in hopes that a fresh morning would help illuminate her.

Chapter 4 - Shy But Well-Read

The stillness of the air pressed in on one Hailey Granston, librarian extraordinaire and lover of all things bookish. Windows existed in the Grand Library, oldest and greatest of libraries on Titan Prime, but they were never opened for fear of introducing unnecessary drafts into the cathedral-like structure; drafts turned pages without permission, a cardinal sin here.

While the windows let in copious sunlight, they were also several hundred metres above ground floor level, and the original architects had apparently failed to think of adding automatic systems to open them. As such, the library had to make do with some light air conditioning to keep the vast space at a reasonably comfortable temperature.

Making her way around one of the hundreds of bookshelves towering over the stone flag floors, Hailey arrived at her favourite reading table, near the very back of the library, out of the way, rarely used, *peaceful*. All around her, lamps flickered and gave off a subdued yellow light, designed to simulate the soft glow of a candle while reading.

She unhooked her librarian badge—a physical indicator of her job in these most hallowed of halls, a holdover from centuries ago, before holotech badges became the norm—and placed it on the table, then reverentially laid the enormous tome she carried under one arm next to it. Seat out, bottom in seat, make self comfortable. Now she was ready to read.

Hunching forward over the book, her short brunette hair, falling to her chin with a little curl inward so it rested just underneath, fell forward, providing a useful privacy screen; the fringe to either side of her eyes gave her blinkered vision, a useful thing when reading.

Less useful was her hair's tendency to stick up and poke out at odd angles no matter what she did with it. Hairspray helped, but also felt horrible to the touch, so she avoided it whenever possible. Better to deal with it looking a bit messy than have it feeling like she'd stood under a glue shower.

As Hailey read, a dark-skinned young girl drew closer and closer, moving from bookshelf to bookshelf, darting from shadow to shadow, avoiding the librarians wherever they might be found and preparing to strike...

The new arrival edged nearer to the ancient wooden reading tables, sidling around one of the two-metre thick columns holding the ceiling up, and soon she was ready. Another step, then another. One more, around the table, her target in sight, and then—

“HEY-HEY, HAILEY, HOW’S IT HANGIN’!” the girl yelled.

Hailey *jumped*, banging her legs on the underside of the table. Her head dropped in response, thudding into the pages of the book, then ricocheted back *up* until she hit the backrest of the chair. It was a surprise she didn’t have whiplash. Or a concussion. Her skin, already pale from all her time being spent indoors, drained of what little colour it had, making her look like a ghost.

The new arrival watched this with interest, nodding a few times in satisfaction. “Mm, that worked better than expected! How’s it going, Hailey?”

Hailey had by now managed to compose herself, rubbing her aching thighs and forehead, and glaring at the black-haired girl standing nearby with a grin on her face. “That was mean, Shelly...”

“Also fun!” replied Shelly, her cheesy grin widening. She skipped around the table and took a seat opposite Hailey. “Watcha reading?”

“The abridged h-history of the Ascension War,” Hailey murmured, finding her place and resuming.

Shelly’s permanently amused features temporarily went AWOL, leaving behind the look of someone who’d just eaten something sour. “Eeh? That boring old stuff again? When are you going to start reading some fun stories? Like Fairy Fiends of Fairfax Folly? That’s a great story, really bloody and grim, haha!”

“Y-You know I don’t like that type of thing,” Hailey said with a sigh and a stutter. Her friend regularly tried to get her to read or watch or even directly experience—via Reality Dive’s virtual reality holographic horror games—some truly awful media. It got quite tiresome after a while.

“Boo, you’re no fun. Okay, how about this instead?” Shelly said, pulling two sparkly tickets from a pocket and holding them up. “Don’t tell me you’ve forgotten that Stardive are putting on their next show tomorrow?”

A gasp accompanied Hailey’s chair falling backwards as she got to her feet, her mouth an ‘O’ of shock. “I’d completely f-forgotten! I’m the worst S-Stardive fan...!”

“Good thing you’ve got me to remind you, huh?” Shelly said, the mischievous grin returning to her chocolate features. “Here you go!” She tossed one of the tickets over to Hailey, who caught it with all the grace of a fish practising basketball.

“Th-Thanks, Shelly,” Hailey said, bobbing her head in gratitude.

“Any time, partner!” With that, Shelly jumped to her feet and ran for the exit. “I’ll pick you up at six tomorrow, okay?” she called over her shoulder, eliciting a disapproving glance from several of the still on-duty librarians.

Hailey okayed her and went back to reading, though she was far too excited at the prospect of seeing her favourite idol duo to actually concentrate...



Six o’clock in the evening rolled around the next day and Shelly arrived at her friend’s house, a modern little apartment in one of the many starscrapers that dotted the surface of Titan Prime, capital world of the human Star Empire. Piercing the sky like God’s knitting needles, these megastructures were the very pinnacle of architectural wonder, grazing the upper atmosphere of the planet, they were so tall.

Hailey exited her flat near the ground floor—she was far too nervous of heights to even *consider* the higher floors—and took the lift down, meeting up with Shelly in the green and grassy courtyard outside.

Marble statues and sculptures stood at strategic locations, depicting various heroic people throughout the ages; Professor Inklestein, father of the Warpway; Lady Arnaud, heroic freedom fighter and all round paragon of justice; Captain Yamantan, hero of the Ascension War. Hailey knew each and every one of them

intimately, as though she had been present during their various triumphs and tragedies.

Shelly grabbed her friend's hand and tugged her along; Hailey would probably end up staring at the statues for the next hour or two if left to her own devices. "Ready for an awesome show?"

"I can't w-wait!" Hailey said, doing her best to keep up with Shelly's brisk pace. Spending most of her time reading resulted in rather less stamina than she might like. "I've never seen them live before, haven't been able to g-get tickets."

"Isn't it a good thing you know me, then?" Shelly said, navigating her way around the bustling crowds and making for one of the many deports dotted about the streets; an amusing portmanteau of *dimensional* and *teleporter*, deports had made the tedious business of getting around a megacity considerably less mundane, allowing for instantaneous transference of a person and their possessions via dimensional wormholes to any other part of the city in a fraction of a second.

They stepped into the deporter pod and the door whooshed closed behind them, at which point Shelly punched in their destination: the colossal Sky Stage, a floating arena on the outskirts of the city where the biggest and best bands, groups, and idol units put on their spectacular shows.

Materialising in the pod at the other end, they headed over to a towering structure of glittering silver and glass. Inside the foyer, they flashed their tickets and made for another deporter, this time taking them to the Sky Stage itself, literally a stadium in the sky.

"Where are we standing?" Hailey asked, raising her meek voice to be heard over that of the crowd already present. Her face ran with a few droplets of sweat, and the show hadn't even started yet.

Shelly consulted her ticket and pointed. "This way! We're actually not far from the front, got lucky with these bad boys, haha!"

The air was already filled with the usual scents associated with any live event; fast food, sweat, various aftershaves and deodorants and perfumes as the people attending attempted to suffocate the rest with their own particular choice of smelly stuff. And at this altitude, an additional metallic hint of ozone as the

energy shielding surrounding the stage fizzed and buzzed, keeping the harsh atmospheric temperatures at bay.

Arriving at their designated location near the stage itself, they settled down to enjoy the show...



It was later. The sky had by now faded to a pastel orange shade as Titan's sun dipped below the horizon, bathing two exhausted girls in a calming and relaxing haze of amber. Wandering the bustling streets, Shelly decided a few drinks were in order after their enjoyable live event.

A brief deporter trip to a place near Hailey's home resulted in them now relaxing together in a small pub of the sort common on Earth a full millennium ago, long before the planet itself was destroyed. The air in here was cool and clean, the perfect place to unwind after a sweaty and hot idol show.

Sitting back and crossing her legs on the seat, Shelly grinned. "Aaah, love those two, seriously. Sanyuu's just the prettiest girl!"

"I like Misa, she's really cool and collected," Hailey replied, sipping her bottle of peach alcopop.

"Can't say I'm surprised, Sanyuu's the total opposite of you. She's got that sexy thing going on, really outgoing and extroverted, haha." Shelly downed half her bottle and let out a '*paaa!*' of contentment. "Though honestly, I think you'd be better with someone like that. Too much similarity can be boring, right?"

"I'm not sure I'd h-have the energy to keep up," Hailey murmured.

"Oh, really? Are we thinking naughty thoughts, my innocent friend?" Shelly asked, the grin now so wide it nearly touched her ears.

"No, I'm n-not!" Hailey snapped, or at least as close to a snap as she ever managed to get, which was really more like one of those little dogs that were all bark and no bite.

Chuckling at this, Shelly placed her drink on the table and rooted around in her rucksack. She produced a silver envelope and handed it across the table.

“Guess now’s as good a time as any. Here, a present for my favourite friend’s super well-timed birthday. Aren’t I just the most awesome girl? Yep, totally am.”

“It’s still a few days until New Year and my birthday, you know,” Hailey said, giggling as she took the proffered envelope.

“Sure, but you’ll see why I’m giving you your present now instead of on the day, when you read what’s in ye olden envelope of awesome,” Shelly replied, guzzling the rest of her bottle and heading to the bar for a fresh one.

Meanwhile, Hailey used her phone’s built-in silverium removal tool to open the sealed envelope and tugged the high quality letter out. Her heart rate, already a little unsteady due to alcohol and Stardive’s event, ticked up here, combined with heavier breathing and a degree of palpable excitement.

Shelly returned, placing two bottles on the table. She grinned again; it was an expression that seemed to come naturally to her. “You can thank me now or later, or both!”

“This isn’t one of your p-pranks, right?” Hailey asked, her eyes running as though all the peeled onions in the world tormented her.

Shelly’s expression softened. “Nope, just me wanting to give the friend I love a special little present for her birthday. You’ve mentioned wanting to make new friends, and that you’re afraid to approach girls for... well, you know, things *other* than friendship, haha. So I figured this trip seemed like the perfect way to give you what you want.”

Moving around the table, Hailey sat with Shelly and gave her the tightest, most affectionate hug she possibly could. “It’s a w-wonderful gift, thank you!” Even better than the anthology of historical significance she’d received the previous year for her 18th. All sixteen volumes of it. Shelly routinely made Hailey’s life a living hell with the pranks, but she made up for it with a heart the size of the galactic core.

“Any time. Might want to pack some nice clothes, hmm? Lots of pretty girls going on this trip by all accounts, you might get some action finally!”

Hailey mustered the courage to gently poke her friend in the shoulder. “Y-You’re embarrassing me...”

“Nothing wrong with wanting a bit of fun! All of human history has basically been about getting laid, right?” Shelly commented, watching with interest as Hailey’s face illuminated the bar.

“B-Broadly speaking, yes,” Hailey said with a brief laugh. She returned to her seat. “I’m a bit nervous about taking a trip like this by myself, but I’ll try not to let you down!”

“Was that a promise to get laid?” Shelly asked, her grin now so wide it was possible the top of her head might float away.

“I didn’t mean... uuu, Shelly...” Hailey muttered, looking at the floor.

Shelly giggled at this adorable response, then pulled another silver envelope from her bag. “You’ll have some company, so don’t worry, we can go on the pull together!”

“Eh?”

Shelly wagged the envelope. “I said I’m coming, too. No way am I missing the big year end event, haha!”

Hailey’s face lit up like a fusion reactor. “Th-This’ll be the best trip ever!”

Another tight hug preceded an hour or so with a few more drinks, followed by heading home so that they could prepare for their trip.

Chapter 5 - Stardive

At around the same time as Hailey and Shelly had been making their way to the Sky Stage, two other girls were enjoying a spot of pre-live naughtiness. The two members of the insanely popular idol duo Stardive were presently relaxing in their dressing room on-board a small, movable space station orbiting Titan Prime.

Sanyuu, their energetic member who had tanned skin and corn blonde hair, stood before their supremely comfy black leather sofa and placed her hands on her hips with a grin on her face.

“Come on, Misa, you know you want to,” she said.

Their second member, the cool and calm Misa, pale-skinned and cobalt-haired, crossed a leg over the other and sat back in their comfy sofa. “*You* want to, you mean? I don’t understand why you can’t just finger yourself if you need to. Always dragging me into frustrating pre-live naughtiness...”

“That’s why it’s fun!” Sanyuu enthused. She crawled forward onto the sofa on all-fours, kissed Misa on the lips, and whispered, “I haven’t got any pants on right now, you could just slip a hand up and...”

“Argh, fine!” Misa muttered, cracking as she always did. Her girlfriend and partner could be *quite* trying sometimes, though not necessarily in a bad way. She pushed Sanyuu down along the length of the sofa and slid her skirt up. “I’m giving you two minutes. If you haven’t finished by then, tough luck.” Opening her own personal holo-display in a cool blue tone, hovering in the air next to her, she navigated to a clock app and set it for two minutes, then went to work.

Sanyuu waggled her legs back and forth as the initial buzz built to something firmer, closing her eyes and moaning. “Mm, getting some action right before an event is just the *best*...”

Misa paused her action in order to glare at her partner. “I’d rather we enjoy ourselves *after* our events, Sanyuu. Why do you always feel this need to play games?”

“Because games are fun!” Sanyuu whispered, gasping as Misa went all-in. Judging by how good she felt already, the two-minute challenge today wouldn’t be all that difficult to achieve.

“Ready to pop?” Misa asked, glancing at the timer: 10 seconds left.

Sanyuu responded through the medium of orgasmic release, her moans so loud that Misa worried they might be heard, if it wasn’t for the incredible soundproofing they’d insisted on when they had this station built.

Coming back down as the pleasure slowly faded to a wonderful glow of euphoria, Sanyuu got up and gave her lover a wet kiss and a smile. “Not even two minutes to done, that must be a new record!”

“You know we’ll have to shower now, yes?” Misa said, exasperated. “And we’re on in less than half an hour.”

“You worry too much,” Sanyuu replied with an unconcerned grin.

“One of us has to,” Misa said, crawling off the sofa and heading for their ensuite. “Come on, let’s get freshened up, we have about twenty minutes for the fastest shower ever.”

“Aww, and here I was, hoping to give you one in return,” Sanyuu muttered, getting to her feet, a little unsteadily, and following her partner.

“You can give me one *after* our event,” Misa called back, raising her voice over the sound of their shower. “I’ll be about ready for one by then.”

“Well, I guess it’ll do,” Sanyuu sighed.



After their lightning fast shower, they got into their outfits for the event, sexy hotpants and boob tube combos, plus knee boots. They now loitered at the door leading out to the main station.

“Shall we show them why we’re called Stardive?” Misa said, taking her partner’s hand.

“Let’s!” Sanyuu replied, beaming all over her face.

They exited their dressing room and walked a short hallway through to the Drop Chamber, a circular room made of heavy duty plasteel, with foot-thick

blast doors sealing every section of the area. In the centre of the room, a deep, circular shaft was cut into the floor, leading down several hundred metres to an exit into Titan Prime's upper atmosphere. Force fields and several iris-type blast doors in the shaft itself kept the room safe from the harsh temperatures and lack of atmosphere.

Here, they were prepared for the first stage of their show; a special winged suit each, red for Sanyuu, white for Misa, with four directional pulse jets, two for the legs, two for the arms to allow for manoeuvring during their drop, and energy shielding powerful enough to protect a small starship. A number of members of their staff wandered back and forth, helping them dress and performing final safety checks.

Pulling their helmets on, the two girls stood opposite each other at the edges of the shaft. On two of the walls, massive screens showed the scene down below at the Sky Stage, allowing the idols to see what the crowd could see.

They looked at each other, nodded, said '*let's dive!*' in perfect sync... and dropped into the shaft, accelerating to incredible speeds via a series of magnetic rings embedded in the shaft itself, which fired the girls from the bottom of their private space station like a coil gun.

The sensation of speed took their breath away every time, the way the shaft whizzed past in a blur, the sheer force applied to their suits, and the way the human brain processed extreme speeds, it all combined to give them a buzz it was near-impossible to find anywhere else, even in the bedroom.

Dropping face-first towards the planet, barrelling through the atmosphere as their suits' energy shielding kept the intense heat from turning them into charcoal, they both activated their pulse jets, aiming for the Sky Stage and releasing red and white smoke from ejectors on their ankles.

From below, the effect was striking, a crisscrossing pattern of smoke weaving back and forth across the sky as the two idols dived out of the starry heavens towards the stage, giving rise to their unit name. Soon, the smoke ran dry and all that was left was to slow their velocity and coast the remainder of the distance until they touched down on the main stage.

The crowd went wild, cheering and crying their names as they slipped out of their suits and their nano-fit outfits reappeared, coalescing around their lithe forms like *magic*.

Instantly, they launched into their first number, a fast and energetic track which had them dancing back and forth across the stage as the crowd went ballistic, jumping up and down hard enough that the Sky Stage itself might bounce with them as a show of solidarity.

Having warmed the crowd up, Sanyuu grinned at the thousands of people who filled the arena from wall to wall. “Hey, hey, you beautiful people, are you ready for a night of fun?” she cried.

The audience responded with a deafening roar.

Misa stepped forward and took over. “As we close in on the new year, and a whole new millennium, let’s make tonight’s event something truly special! We can’t do that without you, so are you ready!?”

Again, a roar, this time loud enough it could probably be heard around the other side of the planet.

They faced each other, hands out and palms touching, and launched into the next song... and beyond.



Nearly three hours later, the two of them took their bows and exited into the backstage areas to change before the trip back to the station.

“Aaah, that was the greatest,” Sanyuu murmured, eyes closed as she relaxed on a sofa that was nowhere near as nice as their own, but still pretty good, all things considered.

Misa issued a vague nod. “Yes, a wonderful experience as always!”

“Nearly time for the *next* wonderful experience,” Sanyuu added with a naughty grin.

With her cheeks turning a happy cerise colour, Misa nodded and gave her girlfriend a cheek peck. “Now we can take our time.”

After half an hour of lounging around and drinking isotonic drinks, they were ferried back up to orbit, where they made a beeline for their luxurious dressing room and occasional den of iniquity. Here, they stripped their sweat-stained outfits, enjoyed a moment tongue-tied, and headed for the bathroom to shower together.

And on a table beside their supremely comfy sofa, two golden envelopes were arranged side by side, gently touching like lovers snuggling in bed.

Chapter 6 - Dyson's Factory

High in orbit around a factory world owned by Vesta Enterprises, the galaxy's largest and most prestigious manufacturer of vehicles and munitions—both civilian and military—a patch of empty space flashed blue-white like a pulsar, followed by a web-like series of equally blue-white tendrils groping and grasping, as though an Elder God had decided to pay a visit.

A ship slipped out from the dimensional opening, long and bulky with dozens of football pitch-sized cargo pods along its frail-looking fuselage bulkheads, reminiscent of leaves sprouting from a single plant stem. The rift into the Warpway closed and the ship made its way towards the barely visible planet; Vesta's orbital factories blotted out the sky like a swarm of flies around a rotten carcass, giving rise to its nickname of Dyson's Factory, named after the famous Dyson Swarm megastructure.

Each segment of the factory was a gargantuan cube or hexahedron-shaped construct, anchored one to another with gravitic repulsors and attractors to keep the whole swarm positioned correctly around its host world. Approximately once every three seconds, a new starship rolled off an assembly line, and once every millisecond some piece of machinery or weapon was stamped out, ready to ship.

Dyson's Factory gave new meaning to the term burning the candle at both ends; the factory never slept, most of its important functions wholly automated with a skeleton crew of managers and engineers and technicians to keep the machine oiled and running.

And one other unofficial member of crew in addition on this particular day, a fair-skinned young lady of some twenty years, blonde-haired and green-eyed, her wavy locks worn in a sexy and wild ponytail. Daughter to the CEO of Vesta Enterprises—a woman by the name of Caliente, but known as the Ice Queen for her cold and clinical business acumen, though only ever out of earshot—this girl had once again managed to sneak her way aboard one of the factory sections.

Sauntering between smelting equipment and cauldrons of molten metal, she yawned and stuffed her hands in the pockets of her scruffy pair of jeans, idly chewing some gum. A glance here, a glare there, and soon she was at the other end of this particular space, a cavern for the manufacturing of... something boring.

She'd never really bothered finding out what they actually made, it was just a convenient place to kill some time, a place she shouldn't be, and therefore a place that came with a level of excitement she had trouble finding elsewhere.

Entering a new area, a spacious expanse filled with shipping crates containing finished goods, she stopped as a young man approached. Another yawn was followed by a glare, as if daring him to get in the way of her exploration.

He came to a halt and smiled, a nervous affair containing little humour; this was the smile of a man who knew this girl *really* should not be here, but also that she happened to be the CEO's daughter.

"Uh, hi again, Charlotte," he said, bobbing his head. "So... uh, I'm pretty sure the manager asked you not to wander around here again, because it's dangerous and he doesn't want to see you getting hurt. But uh... I can't help but notice you're here again, haha..."

Charlotte blew a bubble in his face. "Bored, needed something to do. So this is it."

"How do you even get *in*?" he continued, exasperated. "This is a secure facility! Or it *should* be. Now I'm not so sure."

"Easy enough. Ship captains like cute girls, right?" Charlotte said with the glimmer of an amused smirk on her lips.

"Either way, *please* stop wandering around, we'd hate to see anything happen to you," said the young man, thinking more appropriately that he didn't want to see anything happen to *him* or his job. "Shouldn't a healthy young girl like you be off exploring the galaxy or something?"

"Hah, if I could," Charlotte muttered. She raised her voice again as an idea popped into mind. "Though I guess a trip somewhere or something could be fun. Got any suggestions?"

“Eh? Me? I have no—” Idea? In fact he *did* have an idea, but suggesting it would probably get him fired... into the sun.

Charlotte noticed his expression. “Hmm, seems you’ve got something in mind? Let’s hear it, I might be able to get you a special bonus or something if it’s fun.” Not that Mother Dear would ever actually go for it, but it was fun seeing what she could arrange regardless.

“I’m not sure I should, you might take offence...” he muttered.

“I don’t take offence at things, it’s a pointless waste of time and energy. Trust me, I won’t be angry or anything.”

He sighed. “All right, fine. My sister has a... a, uh, a lesbian friend. She was telling me her friend’s off on this year end special trip for, you know, girls like them? I don’t want to imply that you—”

Charlotte waved a hand, shutting him up. “My sexual preferences are my own, but you don’t need to worry, I said I wouldn’t be offended, and I’m not.” She giggled, an unusually energetic one. “A lesbian trip, huh? Well, why not? I’ll talk to mother dear and tell her you were really helpful. And that you asked me not to be here. She’ll be happy to know how diligent you are. Off you go, then.”

Charlotte turned on a heel and strolled back the way she came, chewing her gum and blowing bubbles, a strangely amused expression on her face.



“Now,” Charlotte said as she made her way back to the airlock she’d used on the way in, “how do I get back home today?”

That cargo ship had been most handy, yes, but it had also docked now and wouldn’t be leaving again for another day at least. Hmm. This could be tricky. Normally there were more ships coming in and out, but today seemed to be a quiet one, and jumping to another factory section required a ship... which she didn’t have, hence her current predicament.

Her problem solved itself as her phone rang. She tugged the tiny device from her back pocket and activated it. The phone shifted and changed shape, becoming a pen-sized device she could hold up to her ear. “Hi, Mother Dear.”

“Don’t you ‘mother, dear’ me, young lady!” came the irate response. *“Are you sneaking about the factories again? You are, aren’t you?”*

“I was just wondering how I was going to get home. If you can send a ship over to, uh”—Charlotte paused to look about for the factory designation, finding it on a large plaque above the main loading bay—“factory Vulcan 7, subsection 227? That’d be great. Also, there’s something I want to try, will tell you about it when I get home.”

Her mother, silent for a moment, sighed. *“We shall talk about your laissez faire attitude when you return, young lady. I’ll have someone collect you momentarily. Stay put, understand?”* She cut the connection.

Half an hour later a small and sleek vessel arrived at one of the crew docking ports, letting Charlotte on-board, where she crashed out in the co-pilot’s currently empty seat. She looked at the pilot, a handsome young man she may or may not have accidentally on purpose had some fun with during a drunken evening when her mother had been away from home.

He winked at her. “Getting into trouble again, Lotte?”

She shrugged. “You even need to ask?”

Pulling out of the docking bay and through the protective energy shield leading into the vacuum of space, the pilot set a course for home and placed his feet up on the console, hands behind his head. “Lady boss still keeping you on that tight leash, huh?”

Charlotte emitted an annoyed sound, a sort of cross between a dismissive ‘pff!’ and a snort. “Mother Dearest is the reason I have to keep running off to find fun things to do. Being stuck on that space station all the time is as boring as a life free of sin. I thought she’d banned you from having anything to do with me after that last party? Getting into your own trouble now, Tony?”

“Haha, she relented in the end,” Tony said, making an okay symbol. “I’m her best pilot, and normally the one she calls upon to come pick you up. Can’t buy trust like that, Lotte.”

“About the only thing she hasn’t tried buying, then,” Charlotte muttered.

They neared their destination now, a space station roughly the size of a small town orbiting the third planet in this system, a partially habitable world

nobody ever visited on account of the giant, predatory lobster-like monsters that stalked the surface. It was a nice enough world to orbit, though, unlike Dyson's Factory.

Flicking some switches on the console, Tony dropped his feet back to the floor and placed the ship into autopilot mode for docking procedures. A solid *'thunk!'* indicated the docking clamps had successfully engaged, and a second, softer thud heralded the arrival of the airlock umbilical.

"Better not come in with you, the boss was in quite the foul mood when I left," Tony said, again winking at her.

Charlotte rolled her eyes. "Nothing new there. Thanks, Tony, appreciate the lift." She exited with a wave, making her way into the surprisingly airy hallways of the station, all beige and white and silver. Clean, certainly, but also a little clinical to Charlotte's eyes.

She entered the living area's spacious open-plan lounge, finding her mother already there and talking on the phone to some underling or other. The moment the imposing woman hung up, Charlotte launched into a speech she'd prepared on the way home.

"Please just let me speak, I know you love cutting me off and making decisions for me, but I've found something I really want to try," she said. In reality she just wanted to get away from home for a couple of weeks, the destination didn't matter much. She went on to describe the young man she'd spoken to, following up with, "He mentioned a special event for lesbians, and I want to go on it!"

Her mother's expression froze at this.

Charlotte exulted, pleased at catching her mother off-guard for once. She wasn't actually gay, but she was damned if she wasn't going to use anything she could in the fight against her mother. "That's right, I like girls! What of it?" With any luck, the shock would be sufficient for her mother to actually make a mistake.

She'd read once of the concept of the Oedipal Mother, the parent who refused to let her child go, who made an unpleasant bargain which amounted to doing absolutely everything for the child and ensuring they never had to think

or work or worry. Unfortunately, the *other* part of the bargain was that the child could never *leave*. Sometimes Charlotte believed herself trapped in some nightmarish fairy tale, a web of her mother's making.

A sigh was all her mother deemed it necessary to respond with. She walked forward to her daughter and raised both arms, causing Charlotte to flinch. This momentary tableaux was broken as she dropped the arms and pulled her into a hug.

This was enough to surprise Charlotte into abject silence. She'd intended to shock her mother to the point of making a mistake, but had apparently had the tables turned on her. The anger rose instantly. Even when she finally made a move, finally put her foot down, her mother outmanoeuvred her by responding in the exact *opposite* way to what she'd expected.

Caliente tightened the embrace. "It appears I may have held on to you too tightly, Lotte. For that, I apologise."

"What...?" Charlotte muttered, pulling her head back enough to look up into her mother's eyes, the eyes which were filled with tears. "What the hell? Why are you upset!? I'm the one who's upset! The one who's been trapped in this space station for years because *you* won't let me leave! This isn't fair, what the hell..."

"You always had terrible timing," Caliente added, releasing her daughter and stepping back. "Even when you were born, it couldn't have been a worse time, right during one of our busiest periods." She chuckled, her normally cold features thawing to reveal several laughter lines in her forehead.

"What...!?"

Holding a finger up to her daughter's lips, Caliente motioned for Charlotte to join her on an immaculate white sofa near the window. The window itself showed a panoramic vista of trees and a lake and blue skies, a simulation to alleviate the usual cabin fever of living life on a space station.

"When your father passed away," Caliente continued, "I had to take over running Vesta Enterprises. I poured my heart and soul into this place. But then you had that serious accident just after your tenth birthday..."

"The one I still don't remember?" Charlotte said, frowning. Ten years spent being unable to leave the station—except for the occasions when she managed to

slip away, like today—as a result of an accident she couldn't even remember. Talk about the worst luck to go along with her worst timing.

“The doctors told you that your mind had suppressed the event due to the trauma. Don't you believe them?”

Charlotte shrugged. “Hard to believe someone when I don't have any memory of the thing they're talking about.”

“One day your memories might return, but I'd think long and hard about whether you actually desire such a thing, Lotte. Some memories are best left buried.” Caliente gazed at the fake window scene, a haunted look on her face.

“Mum?” Charlotte said, using the familiar term for once. Her mother's face was harrowed, but the accident was ten years ago and she was fine now. Surely it shouldn't still be causing her this level of upset?

Turning back to Charlotte, Caliente rearranged her features into a smile. “Apologies, the memory of that day can be quite vivid, even now. In any case, what was this thing you wanted to do? I was thinking this morning that perhaps I'd been too strict with you. Too... protective. So I want to make it up to you in some way. Of course, then you went running off on one of your little excursions. Again with the terrible timing, hmm?” She chuckled at her daughter's glowing features.

“Oh...” Charlotte murmured, glaring at the floor as her cheeks lit up like a sun going supernova. Snapping at her mother and being confrontational when she was about to let her go somewhere anyway... yeah, she was right about Charlotte's timing being the absolute worst.

Charlotte spent a moment explaining about the Lesbian Liaisons year end millennium trip, though she didn't bother backpedalling on the whole being gay thing; she figured it was worth keeping that little lie running in order to avoid problems at this stage. Her mother could change her mind or decide Charlotte shouldn't be going on a trip for gay girls if she wasn't actually that way inclined, and Charlotte wasn't going to take *that* risk, thank you very much.

“If that's what you want to experience, then I shall arrange matters,” Caliente said once Charlotte had finished. “I wonder if there will still be tickets available? You say the event is only a few days away...”

“I’m sure you’ll figure something out,” Charlotte said, giving her a quick hug and a thank you for *finally* letting her spread her wings.

“Yes... well, I find there are few problems a big enough wad of credits can’t solve,” Caliente said, stifling a motherly giggle. “Perhaps on your return, we could... catch up a little?”

“I’d... like that?” Charlotte hazarded. Yeah, the chance to properly talk, to maybe spend a bit of time as *peers* rather than a pampered daughter who nevertheless had no real freedom. That sounded... fun? Yeah.

She excused herself and walked to her room, where she intended to do the biggest, silliest dance of happiness until she passed out from exhaustion.

Chapter 7 - The Arrival

The day of Lesbian Liaisons' big event had finally arrived, for a given value of arrived. With hundreds of planets in the Empire, each with their own unique orbits and day lengths and seasons—not to mention all the space stations and migratory fleets—a single standard day could span an entire week or more in real time terms. But even with sophisticated calendars tracking everything down to a billionth of a second, people still managed to turn up five minutes late.

Titan Prime, a planet known for bustle, was even busier than usual, at least around the Queensway Starport area the event ships would be departing from. The vast, cavernous spaces of the port itself already held the dozen luxury starliners which would whisk the thousands of girls and ladies away to Sapphic 7, the galaxy's finest lesbian pleasure resort, located on planet Ventris.

In one of the many comfort lounges at the starport's terminal buildings, Tina relaxed with a cup of ultra-coffee after a sleepless night spent going over various sexy scenarios in her mind.

To the point where she'd eventually had to relieve some tensions with her VR Fem-Fap 5000™ and its wonderful groinal attachments, something she rarely used because it left her feeling drained. Euphoric, but drained. Handy when she had insomnia, at least, though certainly no substitute for a real lady's... parts.

She stared out of the lounge's exit to where people milled back and forth in the brightly lit hallways of the terminal, noting with excitement that effectively *everyone* was not only female, but also pretty dang hot to boot. A two week getaway where she could focus on intimate matters without worrying about work—at a job she enjoyed, naturally, but still a job which loved to intrude on what little personal life she had—was too much of an offer to pass up.

A golden head of loose and wavy hair caught Tina's eye, her gaze immediately dragged around to stare at a girl who looked roughly of an age with her, maybe a year or two younger, green-eyed and blonde-haired, and, Tina had to admit, with one *hell* of a nice rack.

Charlotte sauntered over, poked the buttons on a vending machine until she had a cool can of fizzy drink in-hand, and collapsed on the same sofa as Tina occupied. She glanced at the slightly scruffy black ponytail and grinned. “Here for the event?”

Tina nodded, her heart thundering at already being accosted by someone. “Y-Yeah! Can’t wait to check out the beaches. You?”

“Just here for a bit of bird watching,” Charlotte replied, waving her can around.

“Not here for the event?”

“Nah, I am. Long story,” Charlotte said, switching her attention to the crowds of women. “Didn’t realise there’d be this many people. Lots of people into women, huh?”

“Uh... I guess?” Tina hazarded. “You wouldn’t be here if you weren’t, right?” She fiddled with a few strands of her midnight hair, bringing them up to her lips and gently flicking the hair back and forth, an old habit from her childhood. Talking to regular people when she was used to spending most of her time with animals could be a chore. Sometimes she wondered how she’d managed *any* relationships in her life. Thanks to the confidence brought on by alcohol, she figured.

“Eh, I prefer a bit of sausage, if you get me?” Charlotte added, breaking into amused laughter as Tina’s face glowed.

Crossing a leg over the other, Tina wondered if perhaps this beautiful, busty, and bountiful girl meant she preferred women who’d engaged in a spot of G-modding. Women like her. It was hardly rare, plenty of people tinkered with their bodies to add or remove bits and pieces, as well as those who took a more mix and match approach, though the latter tended to be out in the less regulated areas of the Empire.

Tina took a breath to steady her nerves. “W-What’s your name, if you don’t mind me asking?”

“Charlotte. You can call me Lotte, if you like,” Charlotte said, extending a hand and shaking. She got to her feet. “Anyway, gonna go explore a bit more, it’s

my first time away from home, I'm gonna enjoy the shit outta it! Maybe see you later."

"I'm Tina, nice to meet—" Tina began, but Charlotte had already wandered off. She finished her rocket fuel coffee and made a face as the tar-like substance slipped down her throat.

She tossed her empty cup into a nearby Atomiser™ recycler machine to be reduced down to its constituent atoms and turned into a fresh cup for another customer, and wandered off to see if she could find any other gorgeous girls to connect with before they boarded.



Yuriko had also arrived on Titan Prime, carting along a large wheeled suitcase in weary hands. She'd managed to afford a Silver Ticket and the travel expenses to get to the Empire capital, but the advanced model hover suitcases were *way* outside of her budget, much to her general chagrin. She was now attempting to figure out where, in this insanely crowded city, she might find the starport she needed.

Titania, the capital city of Titan Prime itself, was so sprawling that it covered an area of the planet the size of a small moon. Unfortunately, this meant it required multiple starports to handle the mind boggling amount of interstellar traffic into and out of the city on a daily basis.

A glance at one of the many street signs told Yuriko she was currently on precisely the wrong side of the city. Apparently Titania had something called... deporters? Yuriko had never had occasion to use such fancy technology, so trying to figure out exactly where she needed to go next was something of a problem...

"This is totally the wrong way, Milliam!" came a petulant female voice from behind her.

Yuriko turned just in time for a girl with milk chocolate hair and an annoyed expression to barrel into her, knocking her flat. "Ow...!"

Rebounding backwards into Milliam's chest, Livia emitted a brief squeal and rubbed her head. "Watch where you're going!"

This resulted in a stern injunction from Milliam. "The only one who needs to watch where she's going is you, young lady."

"A-Anyway, let's go—!" Livia attempted to say, but her maid bopped her on the head before she could take a single step. "Ow! Milliam!"

"One of these days you'll learn to be more polite, Livia. But apparently not today," Milliam said with a head shake that made Yuriko giggle.

"In any case, come along, Milliam, we have a liaison to keep!" Livia stated, striding away. "Why do Lesbian Liaisons have to use the starport on the other side of this godforsaken city? Honestly, now..." she muttered as an afterthought. Deporters were fabulous, but they also had specific entry and exit nodes, meaning you still had to walk or otherwise travel the in-between segments of the city.

"Um, you're going to the Lesbian Liaisons Year 3000 event?" Yuriko asked, shrinking a little as Livia turned to face her.

"That's right," Milliam said, hoping to put this nervous girl at ease with a relaxed smile.

"What's the matter? Lost?" Livia said, standing with legs spread and hands on hips.

Yuriko's ears burned at this. "Y-Yes..."

"I suppose you can join us, right, Milliam?" Livia said, thinking she was being magnanimous rather than mildly insulting.

"Heading to the Queensway Starport?" Milliam said, receiving a nod from Yuriko. "This way, then," she said, taking her hand and leading her to the deporter they'd been heading towards before their little accident.



"Are you s-sure you know where we're going?" Hailey asked as she and Shelly stepped out of a deporter with their luggage. The streets of Titania were familiar enough to her, even at their morning busiest like now, but she'd never even been

off-world before, and the city's various starports were officially Terra Incognita. Or they would be if Terra still existed. Titan Incognita might be more appropriate.

"Who'd you think I am?" Shelly said, shaking her head in despair. "You trust me, right?"

"I trust you to play tricks on me whenever you can," Hailey replied with a giggle.

"It's because I love ya," Shelly added, dragging her friend along whether she was ready or not.

"Speaking of l-love, are we going to, um... stay together while we're there?"

Leading the way down a set of stairs to an underpass below one of the busier main streets, Shelly grinned, striding along as though she had no cares in the world. "You wanna go on the pull together? I'm up for it if you are."

"I might feel more confident with you there." Hailey thought for a moment. "Though you might also be too o-overpowering for me to get a word in, haha."

Shelly paused, tugging her friend to the hypercrete wall as people streamed past. She gave Hailey a peck on the cheek. "You see someone you like, lemme know and I'll make sure to stay out of the way, I promise. Or I can talk to her for you, if ya like?"

"I'd like to try and approach some people by myself, but I'll b-bear your offer in mind, Shelly, thanks," Hailey said, giving her best friend an intimate hug.

With time running out to actually get to the starport in time to board the starliner, they untangled themselves and ran for the final deporter, the one which would take them to Queensway Starport.



Meanwhile, Sanyuu and Misa had arrived at the starport and crashed out in one of the lounges, snuggling and enjoying a bottle of wine between them, attracting occasional glances from the other ladies in the area. As the professional girls they were, both of them experienced with interstellar travel during their various

idol events and activities, they'd had precisely no problems finding their way to the correct location.

But finding their way to the starliner without downing a couple of bottles of wine and maybe having a bit of fun in a bathroom somewhere, ah, *that* was the hard part.

Chapter 8 - The Journey Begins

The various attendees lined up at the entry gates, piling on-board each of the dozen starliners, the air filled with a palpable sense of excitement and possibility. With seats taken and a half-hour wait endured before take-off, the vessels began their pre-flight checks.

Seated with her friend, Hailey fairly *vibrated* with excited nerves. She looked out of the window at the hangar the spacecraft still resided in, the windows of the terminal visible in the distance. “I can’t b-believe we’re really here. It feels like a dream!”

Shelly grinned and gave her a sharp poke in the thigh. “Not a dream, right?”

“Ow...” Hailey mumbled, then giggled. “I can always rely on you to remind me what’s real.”

“What are best friends for?” Shelly said, the grin widening to dangerous levels.

Further forward in the more luxurious first class gold cabin, Livia reclined in her seat with a glass of champers. “This is the life, isn’t it, Milliam?”

Milliam, seated next to her, sighed. “Quite. Let me say this, Livia: I won’t be the one cleaning up after you if you have too much to drink.”

“The resort has people for that sort of thing, Milliam,” Livia said, waving her glass about. She sat up and looked behind them. “I wonder where that plain girl went?”

“She was holding a silver envelope, so I assume she’ll be in the rear section of the liner,” Milliam said.

“Oh. How sad,” Livia said.

Milliam wasn’t certain if her charge was genuinely sad that someone was of lower means than her, or if she’d just done that thing where she was unintentionally insulting. It was quite possibly both.

Meanwhile, Tina was making her way along one of the three isles in an attempt to find her seat. “Number sixty, number sixty...” she muttered until she

found the appropriate digit and an empty spot destined to be graced by her posterior.

Well, at least it was an aisle seat, which suited her perfectly. Tina had never liked window seats, especially not for any sort of long-haul interplanetary journey, where the windows showed little more than the blackness of space or the whiteness of the Warpway.

“We meet again!” came a voice from in front of her seat.

Tina leaned out and was confronted by the cute face of Charlotte. “H-Hello, there!”

“Looks like I’ll have some conversation on the trip,” Charlotte continued with a saucy grin.

“Uh, I think there’s a bar further back? Maybe we could have a drink or two later?” Tina hazarded. Seriously, how *had* she managed to have *any* relationships? Give her a bad-tempered animal and she was confident as anything. But a cute girl talking to her? Instant shutdown.

“I’m up for that, sure,” Charlotte said with a nod, and sat forward to await departure.

Finally, in the same section as Livia, a certain idol duo were already fast asleep in their seats. Sanyuu’s face was presently pressed against the hyper-reinforced plastiglass window, while her girlfriend and partner snoozed peacefully on her shoulder. That bottle of wine before boarding had gone straight to their heads...

A simulated female voice came over the speakers, announcing that the flight was about to get underway and would everyone please fasten their seatbelts. A gentle rumbling as the starliner was reversed out of the hangar, with several of the others already visible taxiing out to the runways, told the passengers that their trip to paradise was about to begin.

The sleek vessel was similar to a jumbo jet, only much wider and flatter, reminiscent of a killer whale if you were to cut it in half and replace the rear with six massive sub-light thrusters and a Warpway generator, then paint the whole thing a delectable cream colour.

Inside, the passengers watched as the first three vessels got underway, each taking off from its designated runway and quickly ascending to the heavens. Soon, it was their turn as the craft arrived at its departure point and the engines went full-burn, propelling them forward and up, up, up into the blue skies and beyond.



Travelling through the tangled web of the Warpway, the vessel slipped and slid, twisted and turned, navigating the complex routes presented at every juncture. Hyper-advanced navigation units—sometimes known as VIs, Virtual Intelligences—helped, and were in fact effectively essential to safe traversal of this chaotic mess, but humanity had been at this game for a very long time now, making the Warpway the safest and most convenient method of interstellar travel.

Other methods existed, such as vast, moon-sized wormhole stations known as *fleet-shifters*, which were powered by miniature black holes and could send entire fleets from one system to another in the blink of an eye. They were similar to how deporters worked, just on a massive scale. But those were hardly *compact*, and you were stuck using specific, pre-defined entry and exit points.

Likewise, other theorised forms of faster-than-light travel—warping space, folding space, hyperspace, jump drives—had largely been a series of complete failures for a variety of reasons. Then the Warpway had been discovered and scientists gave up on the other options; why continue wasting time and resources when a convenient option has just been dropped into your lap?

The worst part of travelling the Warpway was the mesmerising, almost hypnotic chaos outside. Looking at it for extended periods could lead to headaches, nausea, and even loss of consciousness. For this reason, all vessels were equipped with panels which closed over the windows for the duration of the journey.

The *best* thing about the Warpway was how quick and convenient it was. Travelling between star systems was the matter of a few minutes to half an hour,

and even longer trips such as this one, where they were covering hundreds of light-years, still only took hours.

Unfortunately, while the Warpway was safe and reliable for a good 99.999 percent of the time... it's always the 0.001 percent that gets you.

Chapter 9 - Pod People

Tina sat on one of the stools at a large bar in the central lounge section of the liner. In her hand, a glass of Silean Ultra Rum and coke, and in her stomach, several thousand butterflies. They were probably only an hour out from Euphoris V now, and she was attempting to pull together the courage to do something terrifying.

Beside her sat Charlotte, who was presently sampling a number of different alcohols. She'd decided that the best way to do this was by mixing them all together in a single glass. "Haha, oh man, that's disgusting," she said after her first mouthful, screwing her face up. "Here, have a taste!"

Leaning over, Tina hesitantly took a sip and made her own face, something approximating the generally disgusted expression she used on the rare occasions she had anything to do with the park's doogol population. "Ew..."

"Right?" Charlotte added, and downed the whole glass. She shook her head, stuck her tongue out in that way people did when they'd just eaten something *incredibly sour*, and slammed the glass down on the wooden bar top. "Okay, mixing stuff should be left to the professionals. Gimme what she's having, bartender!"

The young woman behind the bar did so, sliding the glass along on a cardboard coaster.

As Charlotte went to take a deep gulp, the vessel shuddered, spilling a few drops of her drink on the carpeted floor. "What the hell...?"

"First time in the Warpway?" Tina asked.

"For any length of time..."

"It can be bumpy sometimes, perfectly normal," Tina reassured her.

"Eh, I'm not bothered. I live on a space station, this isn't so different," Charlotte said, and downed her drink. "Mm, this is better."

"You live in on space station?"

"Yup. Well... hah, dunno about live. Survive might be more accurate. Everything I needed except my freedom."

Tina raised her eyebrows ever so slightly. “Sounds rough.”

“I slipped out whenever I could, but that was nowhere near often enough. Looking forward to checking out some other places, now I’m free,” Charlotte said, guzzling half of her glass.

“I’d be happy to accompany you, maybe a date or something?” Tina suggested, finally feeling like she had enough courage—the liquid variety as much as anything—to try pushing a bit further.

“I’m not making any promises!” Charlotte replied with a wink. “Don’t want to be tied down, you get me?”

This caused Tina a moment’s pause, wondering what Charlotte might be getting at. Sure, the obvious reading was that after being trapped for whatever reason, being free now meant not wanting to be tied down to a single person. Perfectly understandable. But Charlotte had also intimated that she had an interest in *sausage*, which just made Tina wonder if she was using tied-down in a similar way...

“An open invitation, then?” she said, thinking this seemed a safe bet.

“Sure thing!” Charlotte said. “Gimme your tacts.”

Tina nodded and swiped in the air next to her, opening her personal terminal’s holo-screen. Tapping a few times to get to her contacts, she pinched an entry and tossed it towards Charlotte, who caught the glowing holographic bubble and attached it to her own terminal display, where it melded into her contacts, the few she had.

Swiping the display away, Charlotte leaned closer. “Let’s explore!”

“Eh?” Tina said, finger raised as she went to close her own holo display.

“I’ve only been on transport ships before, I want to see the rest of this one before we get there.” Charlotte jumped from her stool and grabbed Tina’s hand, tugging her along towards the rear of the ship.

Behind the bar section of the fuselage was one of several areas for the waiting staff to prepare meals on the longer flights, and past this were the silver seats towards the rear. Passing through here, they arrived in a small area where they could hear the deep, thrumming hum of the microfusion reactor and engines.

“This looks interesting,” Charlotte said, leading the way through to a maintenance ladder she’d spotted which led down to a lower floor, near the main cargo hold.

“Uh, pretty sure that leads to the transport shuttle?” Tina hazarded. “My dad used to fly one before he retired. He told me that most of these big starliners have a shuttle for ferrying supplies and emergencies.”

“Sounds good to me, let’s check it out!” Charlotte said, dropping down the ladder several rungs at a time. Opening a sliding door in this short hallway, she was greeted by the shuttle bay. The shuttle itself was held in place by a docking arm, suspending the vehicle above a bay door in the floor. “Nice, some privacy at last.”

“Privacy...?” Tina said, gasping as her new friend pushed her against the hangar wall. “Ch-Charlotte?”

“I’ve never done it with a girl before,” Charlotte added, sliding a hand up and down Tina’s thigh, inching closer to her most intimate area and edging the skirt she wore further up with each tender grope. She pressed herself closer, breast to breast, and stared into Tina’s bright blue eyes.

“You haven’t? But you’re on this trip...” Tina said, attempting to gather her wits.

“That’s why,” Charlotte whispered, angling for a kiss.

“Oh... oh! Right, sorry, that was thoughtless of me,” Tina murmured.

“You can make it up to me with a kiss,” Charlotte said, closing the gap and touching her lips to those of her hostage, the taste of rum and coke still lingering there and making for an altogether pleasant first kiss with another girl. Pulling away, she smiled. “Never thought I had any interests in girls before, but I reckon I’ve been missing out.”

Tina had her eyes closed, surprised and elated at potentially getting some action before they’d even arrived at Euphoris V. And she had another two weeks yet! How many more encounters might she be able to enjoy in that length of time? And how many of them might be with Charlotte?

She was about to augur in for another kiss when the ship *lurched*.

“Perfectly normal, huh?” Charlotte said, steadying herself against the wall.

“Uh... no, this feels unusual, the ship shouldn’t move like that,” Tina said, wobbling around and attempting to remain upright. “We should—” She was cut off as the ship lurched again, depositing them both onto the floor.

“I’m guessing escape pods might be a good idea?” Charlotte suggested, rubbing her butt.

“Y-Yeah, let’s move,” Tina said, getting to her feet and offering a hand.

Meanwhile, at the luxury front end of the vessel, a siren now blared.

Livia covered her ears. “Aargh, what is that racket!?”

As if in answer, the simulated voice came over the speakers once more.

“Attention all passengers, this flight has encountered a problem and emergency measures have been initiated to drop out of the Warpway. Please calmly find your way to an escape pod at your earliest convenience. Have a nice day.”

Naturally this had the exact *opposite* effect and caused an instant stampede that was anything but calm.

“Come along, Livia, we need to move, fast,” Milliam said, tugging her charge out of her seat and moving towards the connecting door, doing her best to remain upright among the veritable cavalcade of people vying for position at the front of the pack.

Reaching one of the stairwells down to the lower deck, Livia rushed along and was immediately separated from Milliam by the crowds already there. Like the motion of the ocean on a swimmer, she was pushed further and further down the fuselage, her carry-on bag clutched tightly in one hand as though her life depended upon its survival.

“M-Milliam!” she yelled, but her voice was swallowed by the din all around her as people pushed and shoved and angrily shouted at each other. Livia was soon left on the floor, trampled underfoot and doing all she could to avoid getting a foot in her eye.

Nearby, the Stardive duo had managed to fight their way along by the simple expedient of ducking down and sliding through, around, and between people’s legs using their superior athletic dance skills, dashing into one of the escape pods and breathing a sigh of relief.

Livia's world, meanwhile, consisted almost entirely of feet and a number of bruises. "L-Let me out...!" she cried, all the while attempting to struggle back to her feet.

"Here, take my hand!" came a familiar voice.

Looking up, Livia saw the face of the girl she'd bumped into earlier, who was somehow managing to remain upright despite the press of people. She grasped Yuriko's hand and let herself be tugged along, unsure how this girl managed to *slide* through the crowds, allowing Livia to push through in her wake.

"W-Why are you here?" Livia asked, stumbling over her words at the same rate as she stumbled over her feet.

"The escape pods at the back are already full," Yuriko said, barging through the crowds and leading the way to the next escape pod bay, though she wasn't hopeful that it would have any empty pods left. It was already packed with people and the pods were equally full.

"Maybe the other side of the ship?" Livia suggested. "I hope Milliam managed to get to one..."

"Yes... let's hurry!" Yuriko said.

The second escape pod bay was also filled, leaving them to head to the third of four. Then the fourth. All of them appeared to be pretty well full already.

Yuriko uttered an expletive in a tongue that Livia didn't understand, then switched to standard *incom*, the interstellar commerce language that almost everyone learned when growing up, no matter their background or place of birth. "Why is everything full? These ships are supposed to have enough pods for everyone, right?"

"I suppose so?" Livia said. "I... might not have had much experience with this type of vessel before."

The simulated voice, in all its cheerful ignorance, once again faded in to inform them that the ship was experiencing more severe difficulties than at first believed and they were preparing to exit the Warpway, where the escape pods would be free to launch.

Arriving a little out of breath, Tina and Charlotte looked around the final escape pod bay and their expressions dropped.

“They’re all full,” Yuriko said, nodding at them and shrugging. It was strange, she couldn’t seem to feel all that upset or annoyed. It just seemed to be the way her life worked.

“Well, what now?” Livia asked the world at large. “There must be something you can do!”

Another two girls turned up.

“Looks like we’re not the only ones out of luck,” Shelly said, holding Hailey’s hand and glancing about the small group.

“What about the shuttle?” Charlotte said to Tina, just as the ship lurched once more.

“What shuttle?” the other four said in unison.

Chapter 10 - We'll All Go Together

The six of them now stood before the shuttle.

“How’d you find this?” Shelly asked, head tilted in a questioning manner and a huge smile on her lips.

“Uh, that’s...” Tina murmured.

“We were exploring, that’s all you need to know,” Charlotte said. “We should be able to use this to get out, right?”

Shelly trotted forward and jumped up the steps leading to the airlock in the vehicle’s left side, just before a stubby wing. She punched a button to the side of the door and it slid aside. “Looks like it.”

“And who, pray tell, is going to *fly* it?” Livia said, standing with hands on hips and a huge pout on her lips.

“I can do that. Probably,” Shelly said, and disappeared inside.

“You can?” Hailey said, rushing over and up the stairs.

“I’ll tell you about it later,” Shelly called from her position in the cockpit.

“Um, if we’re going to use this, shouldn’t we get some of our things first?” Yuriko suggested. “Who knows where we might end up?”

“Do we have time for that?” Charlotte said.

A heavy thud coincided with the starliner rocking to one side, as though one of its engines had just burnt out... or possibly detached. The vessel’s inertial dampers and artificial gravity generators helped keep everyone basically upright, but it seemed they were out of time.

“It’ll take a few minutes to prep anyway, you six grab whatever you can while I get the shuttle ready!” Shelly yelled from inside. “Hailey, grab my suitcase if you can find it.”

Hailey okayed her and jumped back down, nearly twisting her ankle as she landed.

Splitting into pairs—and Hailey by her lonesome—the five of them ran for the cargo bay and grabbed whatever looked familiar, hauling the items to the shuttle and dumping them inside.

Shelly had jumped into the pilot's seat to the right of the cockpit, leaving a seat free to her left, and was now doing her best to remember her training; she'd had the initial basic training for shuttle handling downloaded directly into her brain for a job in the recent past.

While the job in question had fallen through, the training itself still persisted and might well be about to save their lives... or potentially get them all killed.

An explosion somewhere behind the cargo bay lit a fire under their collective behinds, resulting in a last few items being tossed on-board and the entry ramp being thrown off to one side once they were all aboard. Crowding around the entrance into the cockpit, they now waited impatiently for Shelly to get them the hell out of there, and Hailey took the opportunity to jump into the co-pilot seat to be near her friend in the event the worst happened.

"It's coming back to me," Shelly muttered, pressing holo-buttons and attempting to program the navigation computer. "We can't open the bay doors while in the Warpway!"

"Is there an override?" Tina asked.

"Uh, probably?" Shelly said, finding the remote controls for the bay and activating them.

"*Automated drop procedure cannot be initiated while in FTL transit,*" came a robotic male voice.

"Damn!" Shelly muttered. She looked around the cabin and her gaze came to rest on something outside the shuttle, visible through the front cockpit window on the opposite wall; a depression in the wall with a sturdy-looking handle. "There, that must be the manual override for the doors. Someone needs to pull it and get back inside the shuttle *fast*. We can't afford any delays when we exit the Warpway, who knows what's going on with the starliner. It could explode or anything!"

"I'll go," Charlotte said. "I'm pretty hot at running." Mostly because that was one of the few things she could do on the space station without her mother getting angry at her.

“Great, be quick, I’m not sure how much longer we have,” Shelly said. “Once the doors have opened, we should be able to drop the moment we exit.”

Dashing out of the airlock door, Charlotte dropped to the floor and rushed for the emergency release. She struggled to open the transparent panel covering the lever, but eventually managed to tug it free and toss it on the metal floor of the hangar. Grabbing the lever in both hands, she yanked it across.

“*Manual override detected, opening bay doors,*” the robotic voice said.

“Oh-shit,” Charlotte muttered, *sprinting* back to the shuttle and jumping up to the door, where she was pulled inside by Tina. The door slid shut behind her and sealed with a loud hiss followed by a clunk.

Outside, a siren blared, along with orange flashing lights flooding the bay and making it look like a cheap dance club. Below the shuttle, the bay doors dropped a few inches, then slid back to reveal the white whorls of the Warpway, the extreme negative temperatures outside held at bay by a blue energy field crackling and buzzing.

“*Preparing for drop,*” said the robotic voice.

“What!?” Shelly said, frantically poking the holo displays, flicking switches and pressing buttons on the console before her, and even praying to whatever deities might be listening, for all the good that might do. “I didn’t tell it to do that, what the hell...!”

“We can’t exit the ship while we’re in the Warpway,” Yuriko said in a panic. “We could end up anywhere!”

“I don’t think we have a lot of choice!” Shelly yelled back. “This thing’s working on automatic now!”

“Oh, this is just *fabulous!*” Livia continued, throwing her hands in the air.

“Don’t blame me! It’s not like I’ve done this before,” Shelly snapped at her. “Oh crappola, I don’t think I can stop it. Uh, uh... okay, everyone hold onto something, this is going to get bumpy. I should be able to take us somewhere we can land, but without a proper Helper System or a dose of Calm, I can’t guarantee anything.”

A loud clunk and a heavy vibration told them that the arm’s hydraulics were lowering the shuttle down to the opening.

“Here we go!” Shelly yelled as the shuttle dropped and passed through the energy shielding.

They cleared the underside of the starliner just as the host vessel opened an exit node from the Warpway and transitioned back to normal space, leaving the shuttle to traverse the white tendrils of the Warpway by itself, directionless and chaotic.

Fifteen minutes of frantic piloting by Shelly as she poured her entire being into *willing* them to a safe destination was followed, with much terrified screaming from the five others in the vessel, by her *finally* managing to find an exit node.

She yelled for everyone to hold onto something and piloted them out of the Warpway, which spat the shuttle out with all the ceremony of someone ejecting a watermelon seed from their mouth.

Activating the reverse thrusters and getting their random rotations under control, Shelly brought the craft to a relative stop after their bumpy exit, and sat back with a sigh. “We made it...”

The others crowded into the cockpit once more. Before them was a planet orbiting a regular main sequence star, burning bright and yellow. According to a quick scan by Shelly, the world was apparently habitable and relatively safe. Certainly more so than staying on a shuttle with limited oxygen and supplies.

But the planet’s surface looked... odd. Blotches of stormy blackness covered vast areas of land, flashes of white indicated storms of the type you’d normally only find stalking the intense atmosphere of a gas giant, and huge stretches of the world looked to be choked with dense vegetation, visible even from orbit, some of it a regular green colour, but other areas more of a vibrant bloody crimson.

“I don’t like the look of this planet. Not one bit,” Tina said. It reminded her of Mathira, her own homeworld, but even that jungle-dense planet had plenty of reaches where deserts and cities and regular weather ruled. Not so for this place.

“I don’t like the look of it either, but there are more of us here than this ship can sustain. We have to land!” Shelly said, setting the shuttle’s autopilot

routines for atmospheric entry. “I’ll try and put us down somewhere green, at least.”

“Warning, atmospheric shielding working at sixty percent efficiency. Atmospheric entry is not advised,” said the shuttle’s annoying voice. *“Warning, deceleration thrusters working at fifty-five percent efficiency. Attempted planetary landing is not advised.”*

“Great, screwed if we stay up here, probably screwed if we try to land,” Shelly muttered. “Well, sorry, girls, but we don’t have a lot of choice. We can’t use the Warpway, and our oxygen and supplies will run out real fast with six of us on-board. Down we go.”

“Let me guess, we should hold onto something?” Livia sighed.

“And b-brace for a bumpy landing, too,” Hailey said. “We don’t want any broken bones.”

Shelly flew them towards the planet and initiated the automatic procedure for atmospheric entry. “Let’s hope our luck holds.”

The shuttle began its descent.

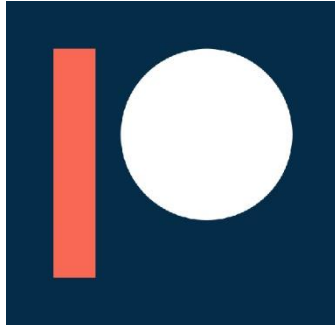
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