

Intense arguing from within the forest drew my attention from the pleasant scenery. Wandering towards the aggressive shouts, I nearly stumbled straight into a clearing in the center of which was, unmistakably, a spaceship. Two people stood beside a short metal ramp leading down from its center.

“We’re definitely lost!” one of them screamed — a girl with rage smeared across her face and hair the color of ripe plums. She stormed at the other person — a scruffy-looking boy with lemon-yellow curls — and shoved him. Hard. “This is your fault! I told you to take a left at the Teloiv Nebula and you didn’t! You can’t pull your nose out of your own air tank for even a minute, can you?!”

“For the last time, we are *not* lost,” the boy growled, balling his hands into fists. But he didn’t look so sure. “The navigation system must have just been wired incorrectly; we’re still heading in the right direction.”

“Oh yeah?” shrieked Plum Girl, throwing up her hands and gesturing wildly to the trees around them. “Then tell me, you burning genius, where in Eicil’s name are we right now?!”

Lemon Boy spluttered something unintelligible and crossed his arms over his chest. “If you would give me a minute of *quiet*, maybe I could figure that out!”

The girl made an exasperated sound. “We don’t *have* a minute! We were supposed to be at the Training Center four space-hours ago, you atom-brained—”

“So what do you suggest we do, Esya?” he shouted, the anger building in his voice. “Are you really so heartless as to erase the ship’s InterLight at the first sign of difficulty? I thought you weren’t prejudiced against artificial consciousness, but I guess I was wrong.”

The girl — Esya — stiffened, spun suddenly on her heel, and walked off towards the other end of the spaceship. When she reached the inlaid metallic door, she stopped.

“You don’t know anything,” she said. “The ship’s entire system is fried, probably from the atmosphere of that absurd planet you flew us by. Our only choice is to resort to manual controls. Why don’t you stay here and find a way to drag your ego back up to space on your own? I’ll be removing the InterLight so I can get home.” Lemon Boy paled. Reaching out, Esya tapped a quick rhythm against the door and it slid open with a low hiss. She paused, and when she spoke again her voice was quiet. “Our highest priority is always getting back, remember? We don’t have the luxury of sparing time for our personal attachments. You signed up to be an Orbiter, so deal with the consequences.” With that, she stepped into the ship and disappeared.

I only realized how long I’d been unconsciously holding my breath when my throat began to itch. For several seconds I struggled valiantly to subdue the pressure building in my chest, but

in the end it was too much; my arm did little to muffle the sound of my cough in the otherwise silent clearing.

The boy whirled, grabbing for a strange, chunky contraption at his hip. It bore a faint resemblance to a spring-loaded grappling hook, except instead of a hook it had what looked like a detachable blade at the end of the cord, and a collection of small vials were strapped to the slender handle.

He opened his mouth and turned slightly as if to call for Esya, and then thought better of it and flipped his attention back to the clump of trees where I stood trembling.

“Come out now,” he said sharply. “You won’t be harmed if you comply.”

Somehow, that... did not sound very safe at all. For a few adrenaline-spiked seconds, I imagined all other possibilities: sprinting back to the trail for dear life, remaining “hidden” until I was either forgotten about or forcibly dragged into the open, or going into some ridiculous offense with sticks and pebbles as my weapons. Unfortunately, none of those options sounded very promising. So I took a deep breath and stepped out from behind the tree I’d been pressed against for the past several minutes.

Lemon Boy started slightly, as if he hadn’t actually been expecting anyone to appear. The tip of the grappling hook dipped slightly in his surprise, but when I edged forward, it snapped back to point at my chest.

“Woah there,” I said nervously, putting up my hands. “Unarmed, see? Very not-dangerous.” I gave them a little shake for good measure.

His eyes narrowed and I got the feeling I wasn’t doing a fantastic job of explaining myself.

“Look,” I began, “I was just taking a walk nearby and I heard shouting so—”

I was cut off suddenly by a loud clang and an accompanying curse from the spaceship. Both Lemon Boy and I tensed as one of the metal ports in the underbelly of the ship peeled open with a screech and coughed out a thick cloud of smoke. The boy rolled his eyes with a practiced frustration and muttered something bitterly under his breath. Taking this as some convenient form of divine intervention, I slowly started backing into the forest and towards the trail again. I had gotten in about three steps before the huge blade buried itself in the ground inches from my foot. I squeaked.

“Where exactly do you think you’re going?” I shuffled my feet slightly and tried not to meet the boy’s eyes, but his gaze felt as if it would burn right through my head. With a meek smile, I looked up (and immediately regretted it). His eyes were a violent, fiery shade of magenta

— narrow, and fringed with thick yellow lashes. I was surprised I hadn't noticed the color earlier; now that I had, I couldn't seem to notice anything else. Every other surrounding color paled in comparison.

"Well I just figured you might want to go check out that uh..." I gestured vaguely to the rapidly dissipating smoke surrounding the spaceship, but he didn't budge.

"Name and species," he ground out through between his teeth, glaring. He had hardly blinked and a new blade was already aimed at my chest.

"Sorry?" My voice had dropped to a hoarse whisper. Suddenly everything seemed a lot scarier.

"Name. And. Species."

"Violet. Violet Bell." I paused. "Human."

He stilled. "What did you say?"

"I'm huma—"

"No, not that. Your name. You said..." He trailed off as if the word itself would bite his tongue if he spoke it.

"Violet."

"Eicil's blood," he breathed. "There's no way..." As he spoke, his cheeks flushed an unnerving fuchsia and the grappling-hook contraption slipped from his hands.

I swallowed. "What are you talking about?" A sick feeling wrapped around my stomach. "Do I know you?"

"I—" He swiftly cut himself off, shaking his head as if to clear it. Striding over, he grabbed my shoulders and locked eyes with me again, this time with horrible urgency. "What day is it? *I need to know what day it is.*"

At this point, I didn't dare question the situation or his demands and instead stood as still as possible as to not provoke any further violence. "September 19th." With a moment's more thought, I added, "2043."

"No," he murmured, staggering back. The boy began muttering to himself, shoulders tensed, fingers tangled in his pretty lemon curls. He was trembling fiercely. "I— I should have listened to that burning note and stayed at the station — I shouldn't have left." He squeezed his eyes shut. "I wasn't trained in this. Eicil's blood, what have I done?"

Well, it was safe to say that I had absolutely *no* idea what was going on. Here I was, next to some raving lunatic with a pointy weapon and a bizarre ship in the woods. So far, I'd been politely playing along in the hopes I could leave quickly and interfere as minimally as possible

with this absurd situation, but maybe I should have just called the authorities from the start. In any case, I had decided I wanted no more part of these rapidly escalating circumstances.

“Okay, um... I’m really sorry about uh—” I scrunched up my nose a bit, unsure of how to continue. “—Well, *whatever* you’ve got going on here, but I’ve really got to get going, so...” I hooked my thumb over my shoulder at the path I’d come from, and giving him another one of my signature weak smiles, I made my second attempt at leaving. Hopefully I could use whatever form of distress he was in to escape and put this entire encounter behind me.

I hadn’t even gone two steps when he grabbed my arm. Any fear I’d felt was rapidly replaced with impatience. Gritting my teeth, I turned back to face him.

“What is it you *want* from me?” I snapped. “I was taking a perfectly nice walk, added in a little detour, and this is what I get? Some crazy kid with colored contacts and an inability to leave strangers alone? No thanks! Let me *go*.” By the end of my little speech I was almost out of breath; despite my forceful tries, I hadn’t managed to wrench my arm from his alarmingly tight grasp.

“In exactly two minutes this universe is going to shatter,” he whispered, voice low.

I snorted. “You’ve got to be kidding me. Now this is just ridi—”

“*Listen to me!*” he shouted, and I promptly shut up. “There’s no time to explain. All I can tell you is that this universe is done for and if you don’t come with me *right now*, we’re both going to—” He grip on my arm tightened. “It’ll be worse than dying.”

“You’ve *really* lost it if you think I’m going to go anywhere with you,” I scoffed. His grasp loosened and without missing a beat, I immediately snatched my arm away. “I’m done with this.” Rubbing the place where his fingers had dug into my skin, I turned and started back toward the path. He could shoot whatever knife-hook-things at me that he wanted; I was getting home. This had been more than enough for one day. Thankfully, I neither heard nor felt any sign of Lemon Boy attempting a pursuit. Some part of me wanted to look back just one more time, to reassure myself I hadn’t stumbled right into a dream for the past several minutes. But that was overridden by my intense desire to pretend it had never happened at all.

It happened suddenly, only a matter of feet from my face; the air split with thin spider’s web cracks like glass dropped onto marble tile. The shatter lines weren’t two-dimensional — they looked like multi-faceted crystals suspended over the ground. I stopped dead in my tracks. The crystalline fractures jumped in bursts, swallowing everything in front of me faster than I could register. Within a matter of seconds the world collapsed: trees broke into thousands of

shining pieces, the sky splintered into a dozen shades of blue, the ground crawled with cracks like strange, geometric worms. The destruction approached at a sickeningly rapid pace.

I didn't even think. Scrambling back, tripping over my own feet, I dashed back to the clearing where Lemon Boy was tapping a code into the side of the ship, shoulders slumped. A glance behind me confirmed that the fractures were gaining both size and speed — the crystals were now the size of small cars. I watched as with two cracks, the place I had just been standing transformed into an iridescent... nothingness.

*"Open the door!"* I shrieked. The boy spun, bright eyes widening as he took in the scene: a small, frazzled girl sprinting at the ship with the universe shattering at her back. He jabbed a pattern into the metal pad and the door slid open.

*"Esya!"* he screamed into the ship. *"Up! Now!"* Then he whipped back to face me, panic slashed across his face. I was still about 40 yards from the ramp, legs and lungs burning; the distance seemed unfathomable. I could almost feel my heels shattering as I raced reality. Lemon Boy climbed into the doorway as the ramp began folding up, and the ship spat another cloud of dark smoke. It began to make a strange, hollow humming sound. 20 yards — my throat was starting to close up. The spaceship lifted slightly off the ground, the grass beneath flipping wildly. 10 yards — the boy reached out his hand, and I reached out mine. I heard the deafening screech of what sounded like glass on glass.

I grabbed his hand just as the ship pushed itself over the cracked treeline and into the clouds.

"Hold on!" he yelled, struggling to hoist me up by the arm. My legs were dangling wildly, and I didn't dare look down to see how high we had already risen for fear of my body locking up completely. With one more immense tug, Lemon Boy yanked me fully into the ship. I landed right on top of him, hair tumbling into his face, hands skidding across the cool metal floor. We were both breathing hard, and for one timeless moment we just lay there, panting, shocked by the series of events that had led us to this point. I could feel the spaceship lifting higher and higher, the pressure wrapping firmly around my ears. He smelled like oranges and snow.

"Thanks," I finally managed, pushing myself off him and rolling onto my knees. My heart was still pounding hard, wound tight with nervous energy. Too stunned to yet feel the full embarrassment of lying across a complete stranger, I stood and brushed the dirt from my pants. The sliding door still gaped open — a hungry mouth stretched wide to pull us into its belly. But outside...

"Don't get too close," said the boy, getting to his feet. "It spreads fast."

“What... is it?” Bracing myself against the interior wall of the ship, I peered out at the shrinking landscape below. It looked like the interior of a cracked marble — jagged chunks of land, tree, and sky snapping and disintegrating quicker than my eyes could keep track of (as if my eyes could make any sense of what they were seeing). The fractures leapt higher, twisting and screeching as though the ship had stolen something they couldn’t bear to part with. I turned to face Lemon Boy. “And where exactly are you taking me?”

His features were impossible to read, yet all the same they darkened as he looked out into the ruins we’d escaped. “We’ll take you somewhere safe.” He paused and glanced over at me. “And it’d be better if you didn’t ask questions.”

“So you expect me to just sit here without a thought after running for my life?! I mean, I don’t even know what I was thinking getting onto this thing in the first place,” I said, waving at my surroundings. “Clearly, it was a panic-driven decision because no one in their right mind would *ever*—”

“Listen. If you hadn’t boarded this ship, you wouldn’t *exist*, just like everything else out there. The life you constructed there is gone now and nothing will bring it back. Take comfort that you weren’t shattered today, at least. The multiverse aligned to keep you alive, and for now that can only mean one thing: this was never your dimension to begin with.” Without another word, he strode off down a corridor that bridged to a spacious chamber filled with glowing dials.

As he walked away, a small slip of paper fluttered to the floor from his pocket, tugged loose by the wind buffeting the ship from outside. Stooping to pick it up, I unfurled the paper and instantly felt my skin go cold. This must have been the “burning note” he’d been muttering about before. The one he hadn’t listened to.

*RECIPIENT: CORLYN BESK*

*LOCATION: ANSTAR CIRCUIT*

*SENDER: [REDACTED]*

*WARNING — DO NOT LEAVE STATION*

*RISK — SPACECRAFT BREAKDOWN (INTERLIGHT MALFUNCTION),*

*UNIVERSAL COLLAPSE (LOCAL TIME SEPTEMBER 19TH, 2043), DETRIMENTAL  
CIVILIAN INVOLVEMENT (VIOLET BELL)*

I reread the last two lines several times, unable to understand what my name was doing on a note from this strange boy’s (Corlyn’s?) pocket, and unable to shake the eeriness of the

words “universal collapse”. My fingers closed around the paper until it was nothing but a crumpled lump tucked in my fist. I felt lost, confused, horribly out of place, and above all, terrified. The past ten minutes had been disorientingly jarring, not to mention I had made one of the most reckless decisions of my life by clambering into this ship (even though I was fairly certain it had saved my life). But it was all far from finished; now I was left to sort through the aftermath in a foreign place with foreign people telling me unbelievable things. Even if I was starting to believe them.

Taking another step closer to the edge of the doorway, I let the wind tear the crumpled note from my hand and into the myriad of fractures below, shattering it like the rest. It scared me that I understood absolutely nothing. Yet conflictingly enough, the fact that I wanted to know more scared me too.

The ship’s door gave a hiss and began to slide shut slowly, forcing me to take several steps back. That was my world falling apart beneath my feet; the world I had grown up and laughed and cried and worked in. *Right there*, it was being torn into microscopic fragments as I observed vainly from afar. And I... wasn’t worried at all.

I turned down the hall Lemon Boy had taken, eyes hard to the foreignity, the oddities at every step. Below me, the universe swallowed its own existence in a dazzling collection of sky-shards. It seemed I had stumbled into something bigger than a single reality.

I didn’t look back.