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AURI

I'm made of concrete. My body's carved from a solid block of stone, and I can't move a muscle.

And this is the only thing I know. That I can't move.

I don't know my name. I don't know where I am. I don't know why I can't see or hear, taste or smell or sense anything.

And then there's . . . input. But like when you're falling and you can't tell which way is up or down, or when a jet of water hits you and you can't tell if it's hot or cold, now I can't tell if I'm hearing, or seeing, or feeling. I just know there's something I can sense that I couldn't sense before, so I wait, impatiently, to see what happens next.

"Please, ma'am, just let me have my uniglass, I could tune in to the Draft remotely from here. I might be able to catch the last few rounds, even if I can just—"

It's a boy's voice, and in a rush I understand the words, though I don't know what he's talking about—but there's a note of desperation in his tone that kicks up my pulse in response.

"You have to understand how important this is."

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“You have to understand how important this is, Aurora.” It’s my mom’s voice, and she’s standing behind me, wrapping an arm around my shoulders. “This is going to change everything.”

We’re in front of a window, wisps of cloud or smog visible on the other side of the thick glass. I lean forward to rest my forehead against it, and when I look down, I know where I am. Far below, there’s a glimpse of muddy green. Central Park, with its brown patchwork quilt, the roofs of the shantytowns and the little fields carved out by its residents, the gray brown of water beside it.

We’re on West Eighty-Ninth Street, at the headquarters of Ad Astra Incorporated, my parents’ employer. We’re at the launch of the Octavia III expedition. My parents wanted us to understand why they were going. Why we were looking ahead to a year of boarding school, breaks spent stranded with friends. This was about two months before they told Mom she was bumped from the mission.

Before Dad told her he was going without her.

Then, as I watch, the trees of Central Park start to grow, shooting up like Jack’s magic beanstalk. In seconds they’re the height of the skyscrapers all around them. Vines leap across to twine around our building in fast-forward. They squeeze like boa constrictors, and the plaster on the walls starts to crack, fine dust drifting from the ceiling.

Blue flakes fall from the sky like snow.

But this part of the memory never happened, and the sight is painful—unwelcome and unpleasant in a way I can’t put my

finger on. I shy away from it, shove myself free of it, stumbling back toward consciousness.

Back toward the light.

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The light is bright and the boy is still talking, and as I return to the confines of my body, I remember my name. I am Aurora Jie-Lin O'Malley.

No, wait. I'm Auri O'Malley. That's better. That's me.

And I definitely have a body. This is good. This is progress.

My senses of taste and smell are back, and I'm immediately wishing they weren't. Because holy cake, my mouth tastes like two somethings crawled in there, fought a battle to the death, and then decomposed.

There's a woman's voice now, from farther away. "Your sister will be here soon, if you'll just wait."

The boy again: "Scarlett's coming? Maker's breath, is the graduation ceremony over already? How much longer do I have to wait?"

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How much longer do I have to wait?

I'm in a vidchat with my dad, and that's the question doing laps around my brain. The uplink delay is dragging on my very last nerve, the broadcast system making me wait a couple of minutes before my replies reach him on Octavia, a couple more before his bounce back.

But Dad's got Patrice sitting beside him, and there's no reason she'd be here except to break the news herself. I think I'm

about to hear that the wait that has dominated my life for two years is nearly over. I think that all the work I've put in is about to pay off, that I'm about to be told I'm slated for the third mission to Octavia.

Today's my seventeenth birthday, and I can't think of a better present in all of time and space.

Patrice hasn't spoken yet, though, and Dad's rambling on about other stuff, grinning like his Megastakes numbers came in. His tent is gone—they're sitting in front of an actual wall, with a real live window and everything, so I know the colony must really be progressing. On Dad's lap is one of the chimpanzees he works with as part of the Octavia bio program. When my sister and I misbehave, he teases us by calling them his favorite children.

"My adopted family is very well," he laughs, petting the animal. "But I'm looking forward to having at least one of my girls here in person."

"So will it be soon?" I ask, unable to hold the question in any longer.

I groan inwardly, tipping my head back and resigning myself to a four-minute wait for a reply. But my heart drops when I see my question finally arrive at their end. Dad's still smiling, but Patrice looks . . . nervous? Worried?

"It'll be soon, Jie-Lin," my father promises. "But . . . we're calling about something else today."

. . . Wait, did he actually remember my birthday?

He's still smiling, and he lifts his hand up into view on the screen.

Mothercustard, he's holding Patrice's hand. . . .

"Patrice and I have been spending a lot of time together

lately," he says. "And we've decided it's time to make things a little more official and share quarters. So it'll be the three of us when you arrive." He keeps talking, but I'm barely listening. "I thought you could bring rice flour when you come. And tapioca starch. I want us to have just one meal that didn't come from the synth to celebrate being together again. I'll make you rice noodles."

It takes me a moment to realize he's done, that he's waiting for my reply. I'm looking at the pair of them, their hands interlocked, Dad's hopeful smile and Patrice's pained grin. Thinking of my mom and trying to process what this will mean.

"You've got to be kidding," I finally say. "You want me to . . . celebrate?"

Arguing back and forth with a four-minute delay doesn't really work, so I keep my transmission on. Saying everything I need to before he gets a chance to answer.

"Look, I'm sorry you have to hear this, Patrice, but obviously Dad wasn't considerate enough to tell me in private." I turn my stare onto my father, my finger pressing the Transmit button so hard my knuckle turns white. "First off, thanks for the birthday wishes, Dad. Thanks for the congratulations about winning All-States again. Thanks for remembering to message Callie about her recital, which she nailed, by the way. But most of all, thanks for this. Mom couldn't get clearance for Octavia, so what . . . you just replaced her? You're not even divorced yet!"

I don't wait to hear their delayed reply. I don't want to hear new versions of the same old excuses or apologies. I stab a button to kill the transmission. But before I can rise from my seat, the frozen image of the two of them wavers.

I see a flash of light.

It's so bright, the whole world burns to white. And as I squint against it, put my hands out in front of me, I realize I can't see anymore.

I can't see.

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I can see.

I'm lying on my back, and I can see the ceiling. It's white, and there are cables snaking across it, and somewhere above me is a light that hurts my eyes. I hold up my hands in front of it like I did in my dream, almost surprised I can see my fingers.

But weird dreams aside, I have my name now. And I remember my family. I was part of the third shipment of colonists to Octavia III. Progress!

Maybe I'm on Octavia now, and this is cryo recovery?

I stare up at the ceiling, eyes half-closed against the light. I can feel more memories hovering just out of reach. Maybe if I pretend I'm looking *this* way, away from them, they'll come creeping out. And then I can pounce.

So I focus on something else and decide to try and turn my head. I pick left, because I think that's where the guy's voice is coming from. I feel like one of those strongmen you see in vids trying to tow a whole loader drone by hand as I strain against the inertia, putting every atom of myself into the effort. It's the weirdest sensation—immeasurable exertion without feeling a thing.

I'm rewarded with a view of a glass wall, frosted to about waist height. The guy's on the other side of it, pacing like a caged animal.

My brain goes haywire, trying to process too much information at once.

Fact: He's hot as all get-out. Like, chiseled jaw, tousled blond hair, brooding stare with a perfect little scar through his right eyebrow, this-is-just-ridiculous hot. This fact takes up quite a bit of my mental real estate.

Fact: He's not wearing a shirt. This is now making a play for Most Important Fact and currently seems very relevant to my interests.

Whatever those are.

Wherever I am.

But wait, wait a minute, ladies and gentlemen and everyone both otherwise or in between. We have a new contender for Fact of the Century. All other facts, please step aside.

Fact: Though the frosted glass obscures all the interesting details, there can be no doubt about it. My mystery man is not currently in possession of pants.

This day is looking up.

He frowns, making the very most of that scarred eyebrow.

"This is taking forever," he says.

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"This is taking forever."

The man in front of me is whining again. We're lining up for cryo, hundreds of us, and the place smells like industrial-strength bleach. There are butterflies in my stomach, but they're not nerves—they're excitement. I've trained for this for years. I fought tooth and nail for my apprenticeship. I've earned this moment.

I said goodbye to my mom and my little sister, Callie, yesterday, and that was by far the roughest part of leaving. I haven't spoken to Dad since the Patrice Incident, and I don't know what either of us will say when we're reunited. Patrice herself has been okay—she's sent through a few briefing papers she needs me to read, kept it friendly and professional. But of all the people he could've picked, my father had to start boning the woman who was going to be my supervisor?

Thanks again, Dad.

I shuffle a little closer to the front of the line. In a minute it will be my turn in the showers, and I'll scrub myself within an inch of my life, don my thin gray jumpsuit, and step into the capsule. They knock us out before they get the breathing and feeding tubes in.

The girl in line behind me looks about my age, and nervous as all hell, gaze flickering around the place like it's ricocheting off everything it lands on.

"Hi," I say, trying on a smile.

"Hi back," she replies, shaky.

"Apprenticeship?" I guess, aiming for distraction.

"Meteorology," she says, her grin a little sheepish. "I'm a weather nerd. Hard not to be, growing up in Florida. We get all the weather."

"I'm Exploration and Cartography," I say. "Going where no one has gone before, that kind of thing. But I'll be back at base a lot, too. We should hang out."

She tilts her head like I've said something strange, and the whole scene shakes, shivers, a bright light flickering somewhere like a strobe. The girl closes her eyes against the flashes, and when she opens them again, her right eye has changed. I can

still see the pupil, the black edge of the iris, but where her left eye is brown, her right has turned pure white.

“Eshvaren,” she whispers, staring at me like she doesn’t see me.

“. . . What?”

The whiny man in front of us in line whispers the word. “E-E-Eshvaren.”

When I whirl around, I see that his right eye has turned white, too.

“What does that mean?”

But neither of them replies. They just whisper the word again, and it spreads up and down the line like a forest catching fire.

“Eshvaren.”

“Eshvaren.”

“Eshvaren.”

Eye burning, fingers trembling, she reaches out to touch my face.

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Oh, hello, touch. I see you’ve decided to join us. And now you’re here, I can tell every single part of me is hurting in ways I didn’t know had been invented yet.

Another wave of pain hits me, sweeping away the last of that creepy memory-that-wasn’t-a-dream thing and reminding me my body seems to be just as messed up as my head is right now. I’m reduced to panting, to whimpering with a raw throat that catches and gags at the effort, to just *existing* until the hurt starts to ebb away. But with pain, and touch, comes proper mobility. And that means I can push up onto

my elbows and look across for the guy once more. His lower half has turned dark gray, and from this I deduce he is now, unfortunately, wearing pants.

This day really *is* turning out to be a bust.

The pants discovery prompts a tickle of a question in my head, and I look down beneath the light, silvery sheet that currently covers me to check what *I'm* wearing. Turns out that the answer is “nothing at all.”

Huh.

I look back at the boy, and at the same moment, he turns to me, his eyes widening as he realizes I'm awake. I draw breath to try and speak, but I choke, my throat stinging like someone's ripping out my vocal cords one by one.

“Are you okay?” he asks.

“Is this Octavia?” I wheeze.

He shakes his head, blue eyes meeting mine. “What's your name?”

“Aurora,” I manage. “Auri.”

“Tyler,” he replies.

And I should ask him where I am. If we're on the *Hadfield* and I was pulled out early, or if I'm on Earth and they aborted the mission. But there's something in his gaze that makes me shy away from the question.

He lets his forehead rest against the glass between us with a thunk. Like I did at that window on Eighty-Ninth Street. The memory catches me unawares, bringing with it a sharp wave of I-want-my-mom. This boy looks just as lost as I feel.

“Are *you* okay?” I whisper.

“I missed it,” he finally says. “The Draft. I missed the whole thing.”

And I've got no idea what a Draft is or why it's so important. But I ask anyway.

"Had somewhere else to be?"

He nods and sighs. "Rescuing you."

Rescuing.

That's not a good word.

"Who knows who I got," he says, and we both know he's changing the subject. "I was supposed to have four of the first five picks, and now I'm stuck with the bottom of the barrel. The dregs. And I was just following reg—"

"The news isn't *all* bad, Ty."

The low purr comes from somewhere outside my field of vision. A girl's voice.

Tyler swings away from me like I'm yesterday's news, plastering himself against the front of his holding tank. "Scarlett."

I carefully turn my gaze that way—it still takes thought and strategy, my body refusing to do anything without a plan—to see who he's greeting. There are two girls standing there in blue-gray uniforms, the same color as the pants he seems to have acquired. One has flaming red hair—orange, really, amazing dye job—cut in a sharp asymmetrical bob that swings around a chiseled chin just like his. She shares his full lips, too, his strong brows. Her uniform's skirt is impressively short. She's tall. And she's gorgeous. Presumably, this is Scarlett.

The second girl has a narrow face and a soaring phoenix tattooed right across her throat (ouch). Black hair, longer and spiked on top, shaved to fuzz down the sides with more tattoos underneath. I can tell she has dimples and that her smile would be huge, but I have to deduce it all without seeing the

real deal, because right now she looks like somebody killed her grandmother.

“Cat?” Tyler says to her. His voice is low, pleading.

“Ketchett tried to draft me,” Cat says. “And a bunch after that. I told them I already had an Alpha, he just couldn’t make it.”

“Told them, huh? Is Ketchett still breathing?”

“Yeah,” the girl smirks. “Next time you go to chapel, you might wanna say a prayer for his testicles, though.”

He exhales slowly and presses his palm against the glass, and she lifts hers to press it back in return.

The girl with the orange hair watches them. “I didn’t have to insist *quite* as hard,” she says, wry. “But I could hardly leave you out there alone. You’d probably get yourself killed without me to talk our way out of trouble, baby brother.”

Tattoo Girl pulls up her uniform sleeves, revealing more ink. “Speaking of getting yourself killed, you wanna tell us what you were doing Folding by yourself? Thinking with your other head again?”

Scarlett nods in agreement. “Rescuing damsels in distress is *very* twenty-second century, Ty.”

. . . *Say what?*

Tyler holds up his hands, like, *What do you want from me?* and the girls turn to look at me on my slab with curious eyes. Checking me out. Weighing me up.

“I like her hair,” Scarlett declares. Then, as if remembering I’m an actual *person*, she speaks to me, louder, a little slower. “*I like your hair.*”

The second girl sniffs, obviously less impressed. “Did you tell her the bad news about her library books yet?”

“Cat!” the other two snap in chorus.

An adult voice cuts in before they can get any further. “Legionnaire Jones, your quarantine has cleared, you’re free to go.”

Ty looks across at me, and our eyes meet. He hesitates.

Did you tell her the bad news?

“You can call in the morning to find out when you can visit,” the voice says.

He nods reluctantly, stepping out of his holding pen as the door hisses open in front of him. With a last glance at me, the trio leaves the room, Ty’s voice fading out of hearing as he disappears from sight.

“Hey, can I get a shirt?”

My brain’s starting to assemble more facts now, agitation creeping in as the lethargy of cryo slips away.

Where am I? Who are these people? They’re in uniforms—is this some kind of military facility? If so, what am I doing here, and am I safe? I try to croak out a question, but I can’t make my voice work. And there’s no one to ask anyway.

And so I’m left alone in silence, every nerve throbbing in time with my heartbeat, my head swimming with half-asked questions, trying to wade my way free of the confusion I didn’t know came with cryo.

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I don’t know how much time has gone by when I hear voices again. I’m in the middle of another strange dream-thing, this one of a world thick with grasping green plants, blue snow drifting down from the sky, when—

“Aurora, can you hear me?”

With effort, I push away the image of the place I’ve never

seen and turn my head. I must have been dozing, because there's a woman beside me in the same blue-gray uniform as everyone else.

She's perfectly white. And I don't mean I'm-half-Chinese-and-you're-whiter-than-me white, I mean pure-as-the-driven-snow white. Impossibly white. Her eyes are a pale gray—the whole eye, not just the iris—and they're way too big. Her bone-white hair is pulled back into a ponytail.

"I am Greater Clan Battle Leader Danil de Verra de Stoy." She pauses to let me digest that mouthful. "I am pleased to meet you, Aurora."

Great Clan what now?

"Mmmm," I agree, not game to risk a different kind of sound.

Nobody ever calls me Aurora unless I'm in trouble.

"I imagine you have many questions," she says.

She's evidently not expecting a reply. I nod a fraction, willing my focus to stay with this moment.

"I'm afraid I have bad news," she continues. "I know of no way to break this to you gently, so I'll be frank. There was an incident while your ship was en route to Lei Gong."

"We were traveling to Octavia," I say quietly, but I know the name of my colony isn't the point. I can tell from the careful reserve in her voice that there's something much bigger coming. There's a pressure in the air, like the moments before a storm breaks.

"You were removed from your cryopod improperly," she continues, "which is why you're feeling like you've been turned inside out. That will improve soon. But the *Hadfield* was the subject of an incident in the Fold, Aurora."

“It’s Auri,” I whisper, stalling.

Incident in the Fold.

“Auri.”

“What kind of incident?” I ask.

“You were adrift for some time. You may have noticed I don’t look like you.”

“My mom always said it wasn’t polite to point out that sort of thing.”

She has a sad kind of a smile for that. “I’m a Betraskan. I’m one of many alien species Terrans have encountered in the time since you boarded the *Hadfield*.”

My mind flatlines with one long *beeeeeeeeeeeeeeeep*, all coherent thought shutting down.

Alien species?

Many?

Does not compute, please reboot.

“Um,” I say, very carefully. My brain’s trying its best to throw out possibilities and getting nowhere good. Are these people conspiracy theorists? Have I been kidnapped by psych cases? Maybe they *are* military and they’ve been keeping first contact from us civilians?

“I know this must be difficult to process,” she says.

“We encountered aliens?” I manage.

“I’m afraid so.”

“But the Fold to Octavia was only supposed to take a week! If we didn’t even get there, it’s only been a few days, right?”

“I’m afraid not.”

Something’s trying to creep across the corners of my vision, like water seeping in, only this water’s phosphorescent,

pricked with a thousand points of turquoise light. I shove it back and focus my attention on the woman at my bedside.

“How . . .” My throat closes over. I can barely whisper the question. “How long was I gone?”

“I’m sorry, Aurora. Auri.”

“How *long*?”

“. . . Two hundred and twenty years.”

“What? You’ve got to be kidding me. This is—” But I don’t even have words for what this is. “What are you *talking* about?”

“I know this must be difficult,” she says carefully.

Difficult?

Difficult?

I need to speak to someone who’s making sense. My heart’s thumping wildly, trying to burst out of my chest, matching the pounding in my temples. I clutch the silvery sheet to myself and sit up, setting the world whirling. But I manage to swing my legs over the edge of the bed and haul the sheet around me like a toga as I stagger to my feet.

“Aurora—”

“I want to speak to someone from Ad Astra, someone from the Octavia expedition. I want to speak to my mom or dad.”

“Aurora, please—”

I stumble my first few steps, and momentum carries me to the door, which slides open as I approach. Two women in blue-gray uniforms swing around to face me, and one steps forward.

I try to dodge, but I nearly fall over sideways and she grabs me by the shoulders. My hands are busy holding up my

sheet, so I just kick her in the knee. The woman yelps, her hands tightening painfully on me, fingers digging in.

“Let her through.” It’s Battle Leader White Lady’s voice behind me, and in total contrast to my panic, she sounds calm. Kind of resigned.

The woman releases me, and my legs are shaking as I totter forward, my throat tight, as if someone’s squeezing it.

And then I see the windows across the hallway. I see what’s outside them.

Stars.

My brain tries to understand what’s happening, flipping through options and discarding them at top speed. The view outside the windows isn’t a wall. It’s not a building. It’s a huge sweep of metal, studded with bright lights, stretching away from me in a long curve.

Those are spacecraft zipping around it, like a school of tiny fish darting around a shark.

This is a space station. I’m in *space*. This place is impossible—it makes the Cid Shipyards that the *Hadfield* launched from look like a gas station somewhere out in the boondocks.

This place is impossible.

Unless that lady really is an alien.

Unless I’m really in space.

Unless this really is the future.

Beeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeep.

Does not compute, please reboot.

I’m 237 years old.

Everyone I know is dead.

My parents are dead.

My sister is dead.

My friends are dead.

My home is gone.

Everyone I know is gone.

I can't.

The next wave of the vision comes for me.

And this time I let the glowing waters sweep over my
head.

And they pull me under.