

Lost in Translation



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Volume 1, Chapters 1 – 7

Chapter 1: One Coffin Closes, Another Becomes Available.

One way to solve a problem is to create a second, much worse problem, making the first seem quite manageable by comparison. Once you are in the throws of this new obstacle, the solution to the first will quickly seem obvious and simple. I know this from experience – my own assassination attempt now seems quite solvable, a drop in the bucket, compared to the problems that followed.

Let me start from the beginning, with problem number one.

My name is Marie, and I am a distant cousin of the previous king of the Southern Lunar Nation. Our nation, and our monarchy, was formed out of colony a few centuries ago, after a rebellion against political influence from earth. We have enjoyed peace since, and slowly have become more democratic, like our northern neighbors. The citizens of our nation are granted the power to veto by vote many actions of the king – including, but not limited to, choosing an heir to the throne in the absence of a living son or daughter.

Which is exactly what our previous king did, writing his choice into his will mere days before passing suddenly in his sleep.

The morning after his death my family's butler, Fredrick, came to my quarters three times to deliver a message. The first was to tell me that the king had passed away suddenly, and that the general public had not yet been informed. The second was to tell me that his will had been read, that he had chosen me to be his heir, and to stay put until further instructions. Before I could fully process this news – I'd met the king on a number of occasions and he'd seemed to like me, but hadn't thought I'd be included in the will at all, let alone be given the most important piece of his estate - Fredrick was at my door again. His third message was an invitation to an impromptu dinner celebrating my selection.

I frowned when he delivered this last piece of information. He simply stood there in the doorway, waiting for me to respond. Fredrick was a tall, lamppost of a man, whom many had described as cold and skeletal in nature – but they didn't spend as much time with him as I did. He wore a smile often, but usually sat in his eyes rather than across his mouth.

It had been missing when he'd delivered the first message, and present when he delivered the second. Now it was gone again.

"An impromptu dinner? Since when does anyone in the royal court do anything spontaneous?" I had tried, on multiple occasions, to organize casual get-togethers with other royals, with little success. Asking people here to do so much as spend the afternoon at a skeet shooting range required a month of planning and half a dozen staff members, much to my eternal confusion.

"Yes, that is the message I was told to deliver to you, Lady Marie."

He spoke carefully – everyone in the castle did. There were bugs in the wall – not an insect invasion but an invasion of privacy, all in the name of security. As far as I knew, the constant surveillance of royal property did little to deter crime and treason. Instead it deterred everyone from saying what they really thought. No one liked the system, at least as far as I could tell given that no one could talk about it. Perhaps I would be able to get rid of the bugs when I was queen.

"It sounds... quite spontaneous," I repeated. "What do you think my father would say, if he were here?" It was a trick we all used. Everyone was more likely to say what they thought if it were through someone else's mouth, particularly if that person was in a position of high authority. My father didn't mind that I invoked his name so often in this way, and even if he did, today he was out on business on the other side of the solar system with the rest of my immediate family.

"I think he'd tell you to look into it further. You've suddenly been given a lot of authority, and... it would be prudent for you to start exercising more caution. Perhaps some investigation into this invitation would be good practice for the sort of shrewdness you will need, as queen."

"That does sound like him, Fredrick. Although... I only get that authority if its not vetoed away from me. The chances of that have to be pretty high, don't they?" The king had started to become senile during the past few years of his life, and most of his actions had been quickly vetoed by either committees of the aristocrats around him, or by the general public. Given the fact that I was only twenty years old and people had little faith in the king's judgment at this point, another veto seemed likely.

Fredrick smiled. "Ma'am, your approval rating is over 65%. The latest polling data came in just a few weeks ago."

"That... sounds quite high. Is that high?" I never looked at the polls. I figured once I started reading them, I'd never be able to stop checking, comparing myself to the other royals. That didn't seem like a great idea for my mental state, not to mention my relationships with my peers.

"It's high. Not the highest, by any means, but well above the average. And well deserved, I might add." I shook my head, but said nothing, reminding myself that we were in the castle. Surrounded by electronic bugs, skittering through the rafters and happy to report on anything said against a member of the royal family.

"Thank you. Now, what are we going to do about this dinner? Hypothetically speaking, using this as an exercise in prudence, if it were real..."

"It would look awful for you not to attend. If it were not..."

"If it's not, I wouldn't have to worry about that for very long." A veto wasn't the only thing that could stop an heir from ascending the throne. A sudden death would also do the trick. Once I was queen, I'd have the benefit of all the security I could ever want. But I wasn't Queen today, and I couldn't be seen acting as such by the general public yet. It would be a few more days until I had the option to walk around with half a dozen body guards at my side.

"Sounds like I need to visit the kitchen," I declared. "They're all terrible gossips over there, if something seems wrong, they'll know."

I paused at my vanity before we left the room and, after a moment of hesitation, picked up the wig that was displayed there on a plastic head. It was the trend for lunar women to dye their hair purple. The day before I was scheduled to obey this social phenomena myself I'd realized I could wear a wig instead of dying my own hair. Most people didn't know that the purple was fake and that my black hair was the real thing. I assumed I wasn't the only woman who'd done this, but no one brought it up. The bugs probably didn't report on such minor complaints and deviations from the norm, but it was hardly worth the risk.

I put the wig on and tucked my real hair into it, picked a loose thread off the collar of my dress once I noticed it in the mirror, then left my quarters.

Fredrick followed me down to the kitchen. We went in through the back, avoiding the other royals in the building while we tried to find a cook with a moment to spare. Specifically, the head cook Amalia.

A few degrees warmer than the rest of the building, the kitchen was filled with half a dozen ovens and twice as many people. When we arrived there was someone else already there who was not a cook or member of the staff. A tall figure I didn't recognize, who's appearance was mostly that of a middle aged man and partially that of a vulture, was towering over Amalia. I couldn't hear the words he was saying, but I could see Amalia flinch as he spit them across her face.

Fredrick and I watched him leave, then waited a moment before entering.

Chapter 2: Poisonous Politics

Amalia had already busied herself slicing vegetables when I entered the room, and didn't notice me quite as quickly as some of the other workers. I raised a hand when they started jumping to attention. "Hello, everyone, don't let me interrupt you. Actually, on second thought, let me. When did you all last have a break?"

I got a few shrugs in response. I drew myself up to my full height. "By royal decree, everyone take a ten minute break."

"Ma'am, this soup will burn..." said a man near the back, as others made their way to the door.

"I'll stir it," said Amalia, making her way to the pot before he'd even finished his sentence. "Go stretch your legs."

He frowned slightly. "You've been standing here longer than I..." She waved the comment away before he could finish it.

"Nonsense, you need it more than I do. I don't have so much leg to stretch." It was true – the woman stood just below 5 feet tall.

"I'll see to it that she takes a break." I assured the man stirring soup. He hesitated, then passed the wooden spoon to Amalia.

"Now, what's on your mind, child?" Amalia asked me, as soon all the other cooks had left the room. Fredrick hung around the entrance, and Amalia and I both pretended not to notice him taste testing the freshly made deserts.

"Who was that, just now?"

"He's one of the one's who organized this dinner. I don't recall his name. He doesn't live nearby, and this is my first time meeting him." She didn't have to tell me that last part. No one who knew Amalia would talk to her like that. For one, she was the head cook, and one of the best in the country. Secondly, she was everyone's grandmother. She had no biological grandchildren, but ask anyone in the castle and they'll tell you – she's become one of their grandmothers. I think she may have entered the world at age sixty.

"Is he organizing the entire thing alone?"

"You've lived among royals long enough to know it takes a committee to get anything done around here. He's just the only one who's come down to the kitchen." Amalia adjusted the heat coming from the stove, and looked me in the eye for the first time since I'd gotten there. She sounded warm, and nearly looked it too. But there was tension in her eyes, seeping out through the wrinkles surrounding them. "You've got a little tuft of black hair poking out from under that wig of yours." She busied herself tucking a stray hair out of my face.

"Amalia, are you okay?"

"Of course, now what did you come all the way down here for?"

"Amalia, did he say something to you..." I sighed, internally cursing the bugs crawling along the rafters, listening. "What I mean to say is, has someone said something, which, if it were said to me or my mother, may have legal consequences? Depending on interpretation, of course."

"Hmm..." Amalia stared into the pot. "I suppose it could be described as such, legally speaking. You know how lawyers can be. But never mind all that, you didn't come down here for legal questions did you? What did you come down here for in the first place?"

I pretended not to be bothered by the change in topic. "You know me and my legal questions. My hypotheticals. No, I came down here to ask about the dinner you all have been asked to prepare. How long has this been planned? I'm only just now hearing about it."

"You and me both, child." Amalia looked me in the eye. I blinked first. "I hadn't heard anything from anyone before I walked in this morning."

"Are you cooking all of it? You and your team?"

"I'm cooking everything for the number I've been given. Twenty people." She looked back down at the pot. "I've been so busy, I haven't gotten the chance to check with the maid who's supposed to be putting the room together. I suppose I should check with her at some point." She paused, staring off at nothing in particular. "It wouldn't look very good if we had too many chairs."

"I see." I said. And I thought I did. "I suppose that's all I wanted to ask you about."

"Where are you headed next? To the maid?"

"No, I don't think that'll be necessary..." I was fairly certain she wasn't worried about extra chairs. And if it wasn't the chairs, then it must be the food – extra food from somewhere else. From someone else. I

didn't need to talk with anymore people, and probably shouldn't risk it, with the bugs listening. If Amalia was worried, that was enough evidence to convince me that something was amiss. "I'll see you soon, Amalia."

"Not too soon. If you keep giving my people breaks, I'll never get this done!" She laughed, but the it didn't quite make it to her eyes.

"Oh, thanks for reminding me," I said, grinning. "By royal decree, you have to take a break when your team gets back."

"By royal decree... child, it would just ruin me if you ever became queen." She was looking down at the pot again, so she didn't see the grin leave my face. She likely didn't yet know that the king had died. I gave her a quick hug, too quick, in hindsight, and then Fredrick followed me as I left the kitchen.

"Marie!" Men have rarely had their voices described as shrill, but an exception should be made for this one. I looked behind me, having made it almost to my quarters, and saw the son of a senator from the Northern Lunar Nation. My betrothed.

He had dark hair and seemed handsome until he spoke – at which point the slight whine in his voice that hung on every syllable took off and away all of the nice aspects of his appearance.

"Edmund, what are you doing here?" I had turned my head and acknowledged him, yes, but that didn't mean I had to stop moving towards my quarters. I couldn't think of a polite excuse to escape this conversation, but I could get away with putting a time limit on it, in the form of my closed bedroom door.

"Well, my family is on tour, you know, one of those agricultural clubs my father likes to speak to, we have lobby groups and that sort of thing in my country. He gets many donations for his campaign from that club, so when they move, well, so does he, and I thought, I could go there, and see a lot of livestock, important work of course, or I could visit you."

"Just for a visit?"

"Well, yes, I'm sorry if you are at all busy. I asked around yesterday, before I got here, of course, and there didn't seem to be anything. But now I get here, and there are all these vans parked along the

street, if you've noticed, I had to walk quite a bit to get to the gate. I don't suppose you know what they're all there for?"

"I hadn't noticed the vans..." I let out a small breath. So he didn't know about the king's death. He was just being a busy body.

"Yes, like I said, I checked your calendar, and there was a lot of nothing... honesty, Marie, one would think you don't get out much. Of course, I don't think that, but people do talk."

"I just don't put a lot of things on a calendar." And it was true. I did do things, but 'visit the public gardens alone' or 'go with Amalia while she buys new oven mitts' didn't really require setting day and hour in the digital system for all the world to see. Another of the late king's security measures – strongly encourage everyone to keep digital logs accessible to other members of the royal family, her allies, and the castle staff. Thankfully, this measure was a suggestion rather than a rule, albeit a strong one. "But I am a bit busy today, so I really can't..." We'd reached my quarters. I gestured to my door, as if it was about to start making excuses on my behalf.

"Oh, I'm sorry to have bothered you then, but if you need any help with anything... Well, we are engaged now, you know, so just say the word..."

"Yes, of course..." I trailed off, trying to figure out how to end the conversation politely. Pointing out that we were only betrothed, not engaged, didn't seem like the best option. "I really don't need anything, though, thank you." He frowned, and I felt a twinge of sympathy. Was that not polite enough? Against my own wishes, I continued. "How long will you be in town, maybe we can plan a lunch sometime?"

He brightened. "Oh, I'll be in town a couple more days, what does your calendar look like tomorrow?"

"It'll be quite empty." And it would be.

He brightened. "Sound good, I'll contact you tomorrow, say 11:30?"

"Sure."

"And also, just wanted to tell you, you look lovely today. Did you do something to your hair?"

My hand flew to my bangs. Had the wig slipped? "I don't think..."

"That purple dye doesn't suit everyone, but it always looks good on you."

"I... thank you. I'll see you later, then."

Satisfied with that answer, he turned and left me standing in the doorway to my quarters to go find some other soul to talk at. I took the purple wig off as he rounded the corner. Fredrick, on the other hand, stayed right by my side, standing with one hand on the half open door.

"What now, ma'am?" He asked.

"Now you can leave me be, for the moment," I said, trying to keep a smile on my face despite the sinking feeling in my stomach.

"What are you going to do this afternoon, if I may ask?" I thought for a moment.

"I can get ready for tonight's events on my own. If anyone asks, tell them I am getting ready."

He nodded, slowly. "Is there anything else I can do for you in the meantime, ma'am?"

I gave him a quick hug. Too quick, in hindsight. "No, you've done so much for me already. I'll see you soon."

I closed the door and dragged a duffel bag from underneath my bed.

Chapter 3: Flight Path

It took two tugs to get the duffel bag out from under my bed, its contents already making it nearly as tall as the space between the furniture and the floor. Everyone in the castle was prepared for some sort of emergency that would require evacuation. Mine had the same supplies as everyone else's – a few weeks of dried rations, a few changes of clothes, a minimal amount of soap, some basic tools, a compass, a water filter. I decided to just take it all rather than sort through what I would need and what I wouldn't.

My immediate family was less than day's journey away, on the construction site of the new transportation station, one of many manufactured Einstein-Rosen bridges turning the vastness of space into a highway of checkpoints. I just had to make it to them, then we would figure out what to do about the king's will – if my claim to the throne would be legitimate, if someone would try to poison me over it, and what to do if both those things were true.

I looked around the room, deciding what else I should take with me. Ideally, I would be back here by tomorrow and not even need the supplies already packed, let alone anything else, but if the king's unusual will sparked any kind of uproar it could be quite a while before saw this room again. I packed my journal, it was small enough that I could justify that. I packed some currency. I took a small jewelry box out from under my bed and dumped that in as well. Lunar currency was not worth much outside of orbit.

I had a few changes of clothes in my bag, but I opened my closet door anyway, if not chose anything than just to memorize it along with the rest of the room. Most of it was impractical for anything but a dinner party. I found and took out a scarf knit by a great aunt, a gift for my last birthday. I told myself that I'd be back here in a couple of days, and that there was no reason to pack keepsakes. I told myself this as I shoved the scarf under some dried rations and tested the zipper to make sure it would close.

I changed into simple, dark clothing, and cleaned the makeup off my face. I shoved the wig into a jacket pocket. I did one more check over the contents of my bag and my appearance in the mirror, grabbed my keys, and left the room before I could change my mind.

The hallways were busy.

A blessing in disguise, because no one could get a good enough look at me as they hurried around each other to question my appearance or my duffel bag.

To get to the garage I had to pass through a small hallway filled with space travel memorabilia – a cousin's pet project. I passed posters and small models of Sputnik, Apollo, and Swan Song. I hurried through without looking at the displays. Swan Song had disappeared before I'd been born, but I'd heard the stories. A transporter malfunction no one had been able to explain, with no evidence of sabotage. I have to use those transports today, although I planned to stick to the larger portals, not the small kind which had swallowed the Swan Song crew.

I made it to the end and stumbled into a dark room. Typically, the garage door was open, but with all the activity at the castle and no scheduled departures, the door had been closed for security reasons.

Of course, my access key would open it – but not quietly.

I loaded my duffel bag into my vehicle. Roughly the shape of a large motorcycle encased in a glass bubble, it was not comfortable for long distances. I would be driving leaning forward, barely able to change positions, let alone stretch or stand up. It would have to do – it was the only thing I was able to pilot alone.

I left the vehicle door open and went to open the garage door. I hit the button with my access key, then ran back as the door creaked open. It was painfully slow and painfully loud. As it opened wide enough for me to exit, someone who had been working outside, shovel still in one hand, rushed around to see what was going on.

At the last minute I grabbed the purple wig out of my jacket and slapped it on top of my head, so that the gardener would recognize me. If he started telling people a vehicle was stolen right out of the garage I wouldn't even make it out of orbit.

I flew out of the garage, over the garden, and into the mid-morning traffic. The lunar colony was surrounded by a large energy field, to keep in the heat and oxygen we all needed. I fell in line behind the dozens of vehicles waiting above the tree tops to go through the nearest exit point.

The barrier was not visible, other than a slight haze, but the point at which the trees and grass ended and barren rock began was obvious. Each city across the lunar landscape was a small bubble of green dotting an ocean of harsh grey, with small roads and a few wires and robots in between.

I flipped through a few talk radio channels as I waited, to give my hands something to do. There were five people in front of me now.

There was generally no security at the access points, just an archway large enough for vehicles to pass through one at a time. However, it would be simple enough for someone to shut down the entry just long enough to stop my departure. It was done often enough for lesser reasons – maintenance, weather, measuring traffic flow.

There were three people ahead of me now. The advertisement on the radio ended and news briefing began. They talked about sports, they talked about a missing rover on one of Jupiter's moons. They didn't talk about the king's death. I started to relax a little bit – if the public didn't know that I was queen yet, my leaving the castle wouldn't seem so unusual.

There was one person ahead of me now. They stopped in front of the barrier, instead of simply slowing down to a crawl like the rest of them.

I looked around, waiting to see who had stopped them. There were a dozen more people behind me now, and I could see through my mirror that the man behind me was just as confused – and irritated – about the lack of movement as I was. As I wondered whether it would be wise to honk my horn at them, and draw attention to myself, they started to back up.

I backed up as much as I could without hitting the person behind me. The person in front of me turned their vehicle around and started back in the opposite direction, giving me a small wave of apology as they passed.

No one had stopped them; they were just lost.

Once out of the city, I directed my vehicle upwards toward the sky. Outside of the energy field surrounding my home, and the extra light it emitted, the sky was dark. Not so dark that I could see the stars, however. Those were all but washed out by the blinking lights of satellites and the dozen or so transportation stations that littered the space around Earth and her moon.

Bright blue disks in orbit around almost every planet and moon, the transport stations linked the solar system together, and our solar system to the ones beyond. We humans couldn't take credit for the technology, it had been introduced to us by its creator from another system centuries ago. But we'd taken full advantage of the technology, once we'd understood it well enough to reverse engineer it, and now it was possible to get anywhere in the solar system in less than an hour.

My radio fell into static as I left the moon's orbit, and my sound system began to search for something else to transmit. It settled on the radio communications from the main transport, the closest and easily the largest. "We apologize... the delay... folks." The man's voice struggled under a heavy dose of static. "We've been ordered by... close the... temporarily... we will... shortly... The Lunar... due to the... requested... will be temporary..."

I fiddled with the dial to improve the signal but it was no use. I had missed the message, other than a few words that sounded relevant to me: words like 'ordered' and 'Lunar'. I looked over at the main bridge, the one I'd planned to use, now noticing the number of large vehicles parked in front of it, and the line forming behind them. The next closest transport was suffering the same fate. The only one that wasn't, yet, was the smallest of the bunch and further than the rest. It led to Ceres, which had little in the way of entertainment for tourists or interest for politicians, and thus suffered very little traffic.

It was also the station that had malfunctioned once, decades ago, causing the disappearance of the Swan Song crew. Hundreds, if not thousands, of ships had passed through since with out issue. I tried to remember this second fact and not the first as I glanced over the other stations and their halted traffic, once, then twice. I took a deep breath and accelerated towards the Ceres transport.

As I passed through the blue light and onto the other side, I was hit by the beauty of a starry sky not diminished by the light of ships, satellites, and bright blue portals.

I was also hit by a frozen object, roughly the size of goat.

Chapter 4: Flight Path

My spaceship spun around twice before I was able to regain control of it. The first thing I noticed once I could see straight again was that I was neither freezing to death, nor asphyxiating. The crash had not been a death sentence, at least not an immediate one. I looked down at my dashboard to see what damage my instruments were picking up, only to find a mostly blank screen and a small spiderweb of cracks along the glass. I groaned loudly, giving myself a moment to complain to an audience of no one before acknowledging that this was not the worst outcome. It could have easily been my ribs that shattered rather than the digital display.

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I looked around for any other stray, high-speed space objects before continuing to drive. I'd been knocked away from the portal, towards the small outpost attached to it. Surrounded by an energy field like the ones on the moon, this man made island held a small building for the transport operator, a small space for her ship, and little else. There were a few thick cables running out of the portal onto the roof of the building. If I'd flown just a few feet further, I would have hit them.

It was very difficult to transmit information through the portals. Wireless signals were completely lost, and transmitting with a wire had only slightly better results. Thus, most stations nowadays, in attempt to avoid as many opportunities for failure as possible, had gone back to a simpler method – the telegram.

I angled my cycle downwards and drove by the operator's booth, both to get a look inside and also to make sure I was near help if my vehicle suddenly decided that our crash had been too much for it. I expected to see an operator without much to do. Telegrams were so short, most people didn't bother with them unless it was quite urgent. To my dismay, not only was the operator hard at work, but there were two of them hurrying about like ants.

Having no idea what message warranted that much urgency and no choice but to assume the worst, I didn't linger. I made my way to another station, this one, thankfully, a bit larger and more sophisticated than the last. This one would take me to Neptune, where I would use one more transport to get to Pluto.

Neptune's sky was a busy and bright as Ceres's had been dark and empty. Man made islands dotted the area in front of me, displaying casinos, bars, and other attractions to tourists escaping their everyday lives. They competed with each other for the attention of passersby with lights and flashing signs; it was an all out war to see who could be the most gaudy, and the loser was everyone trying to navigate the spaces between them. If that wasn't distracting enough, there was also an area of the station I'd exited that was under construction, blanketed in reflective tape and floating cones.

It was because of all these lights and moving objects that I didn't see the vehicle pulling up next to me until they were about a foot away. A large tube came out of the top of it and onto mine, connecting us so that we could speak. "That's a terrible dent, are you okay?" asked the woman driving. She had brown hair the color and texture of a mouse, and the ears and teeth to match. Her voice was kind, and carried a slight American southern accent.

"Yes, I'm okay. I was hit by a rock or something back there."

"Well, I know it's confusing with all the traffic cones and mess, but I'll lead you down to the station and we'll check out the damage. That doesn't quite look safe to drive." She gave me a quick nod, declaring the conversation finished, then drove slowly down to the energy field surrounding the station's operating booth.

I couldn't see the dent very well from the inside of my vehicle. All I knew is that nothing was leaking out of the side or into the driver's seat, which left plenty of room for a myriad of other, fatal problems. After a moment of hesitation, I followed her down to the station.

I parked next to her vehicle and got out. It wasn't pretty, but it could have been worse. My initial diagnosis of 'not leaking' still held true from this angle.

"Are you alright? Do I need to call a medic?"

"I'm alright..."

"Daisy." She held out a hand. I shook it, without offering my own name.

"Thanks, Daisy. I'll look this over now that I've parked, but I think I'm good to go."

"Good to go? It looks like a mad bull hit this poor thing, and the bull won. Are you sure you're alright? I've got a first aid kit inside if you've got any bruises."

“I’ve got one too,” I replied, wondering how she planned to treat a bruise with a band-aid. “And the cycle still drives fine, my display screen is just out. I’ll get a spare right away, but I can make it to my destination.”

“And where would that be?” I turned around to see a man who looked like he could have straightened out the dent in my vehicle with his bare hands if I’d asked. I didn’t.

“Don’t mind Jacobs, he noses into everyone’s business,” said Daisy, now on the ground looking underneath my vehicle.

“I don’t mind. I’m heading to Pluto. So I just have to make to that station over there...” I gestured to a blue point overhead.

“Actually, or...” Jacobs gave a pointed look to my vehicle and then tapped his ear. It took me a moment.

“Yes, actually! Well... yes to both... yes.”

“Do you want someone to make some repairs?” He made a snipping motion this time.

It would have been so easy to tell this man to take the bugs out of my ship. I had no doubt that he could, or knew someone that did, given some of the customers the local shops and performers served. The king of the southern lunar colony wasn’t the only person who found safety in surveillance, and any people were more irritated by their safety measures than I was. After too long pause, spent trying to come up with excuses I might be able to use when I arrived back home with no bugs, I shook my head.

“Alright, but some people around here don’t like to see a ship in need of repair. Not in their... line of business.” He glanced up at the various signs flashing overhead. Daisy crawled out from under my vehicle.

“Jacobs, what are you on about now, of course she wants it repaired... what is this by the way? It looks like a Seagull model, but...”

“It is, but it’s been modified. It was in bad need of repair when it came into my possession.”

“And now it needs repair again, poor thing.” She patted it like one would an old dog. “Well, I’ve got nothing better to do than help you fix it. What do you say we open it up and see if we can’t get some of those wires reconnected so you can at least see how fast you’re going.”

I opened my mouth, but was spared the need to respond by a pinging sound from inside the booth. Daisy groaned. “Spoke too soon! Let me deal with this telegram real quick.”

“I’ve got to get back to work too,” said Jacob, pointing over his shoulder to a portion of the building with an exposed pipe. “We’re replacing some of the paneling on that wall. But I can stop anytime to help with ... repairs. Just ask. Like I said, the people here...”

“I’m just passing through.”

He glanced at my vehicle again. “Alright, suit yourself.”

I ran my hand over the dented metal. Nothing broken on the outside, just bent. Through the window I could see Daisy working. She looked back at me, once, then frowned slightly and continued her work. I jumped back into my cycle before I’d fully made the decision to do so. If I’d stepped just a bit closer to the window, I might have been able to see where the message was coming from, if it was from the moon, from Ceres, or from somewhere else entirely, but that would have taken an extra few seconds. Daisy might have noticed, then might have asked me if I knew anything about the message or asked for my name. I started up my cycle and was in the sky before Jacobs had even made it back to the building.

I made my way to and through the Pluto transport. It was peaceful on the other side, without all the flashing lights and signs that decorated Neptune. This peaceful scene made it all the more obvious when two spaceships came barreling towards me at top speed from my right, with spinning red lights on top of each.

Chapter 5: Towards the Light

I swerved hard, clipping the telegram wire coming out of the station. It made a terrible rattling sound, and I accelerated before it had stopped rattling around in my skull. What my cycle lacked in comfort and cargo space it made up for with speed.

A part of my monitor that had been dead blinked back to life after all the jostling. The speakers started up again as well, though with so little of the display available to me I had no way of controlling what they were telling me.

A robotic voice began speaking, distorted from damage. "Stop. Marie. Stop. Marie." It repeated half a dozen times. I glanced in my mirror. Those two ships were still behind me. I was faster – barely.

I hit the parts of the touchscreen I could see, hoping to get some sort of extra information. Was it a message to me? Was it from the telegram wire? No – that wouldn't make any sense...

My random hits across the touchscreen did almost nothing. I did manage to find the volume by complete accident – turning the robotic chirp into a bellow.

"MARIE. STOP. MARIE. STOP."

I looked up. I was closer to the station than I thought I'd be. It was much darker than the others, as it was under construction and shut down.

I glanced in my mirror. One ship was still behind me. The other wasn't.

I looked forward again. I was coming up on the station too quickly. If I tried to park next to it, I wouldn't be able to stop fast enough – I'd probably plow right through it. So instead I swung out, towards the half finished teleport, to make a wide loop around the entire structure.

If sound could travel in space, I might have heard the clicking and scraping metal sounds from the construction site, as the machinery began to move.

I scanned the station next to the transport, a large platform surrounded by an energy field. I quickly spotted my parents - the only two who weren't construction workers. They were running. I squinted to see them. They were running towards me.

No – they were running to the main controls.

The transport directly behind me finished its start up process and washed my vision in bright blue light. I was too close. It was unstable, half finished, and drawing me inside. I was too close to it and my parents were too far away.

They had been sending me updates, during the construction process, so I knew as well as they did that the portal did not connect to a consistent location yet. There was nothing on the other side.

I punched the accelerator even though I knew it wasn't strong enough. It wouldn't even slow me down enough to give my parents time to reach the controls and start the shut down process.

They probably couldn't see my face, from their distance and through the bright light of the transport. They probably weren't looking. I forced any panic or anger out of my expression anyway, just in case they were. This was the only thing I had in my control.

With the thrusters of the ship pushing against the transport, I entered the void backwards. There was a flash of light, I blinked, and there was darkness.

Chapter 6: Time to Think

I stared at the point where a portal had just been. I don't know for how long. I no longer had any way to measure time. I no longer needed one.

I squinted through the darkness down at my controls and watched my hands, like they belonged to another person, find and twist the emergency response lever. If everything was working correctly, my ship would start sending out a distress signal and scanning for the nearest habitable planet or spaceship.

Without a control screen and with little confidence in the state of my speakers, I had no idea if it was working.

I stretched my back as best I could in the tight space and tried not to think of caskets and coffins.

My eyes adjusted to the dim light, and I began looking around at my surroundings. I could see only one thing – a dim star just behind me. Good news, if there were habitable planets surrounding it. If there weren't, I wasn't much better off. At least I could see.

I glanced around at the latches that would allow me to manually open my cycle door, even if I was still in the vacuum of space. I had that quick option, at least, should no other solution present itself.

“That'll probably be faster than whatever they were going to poison me with. So I'm still ahead, really.” I said aloud.

A second later I realized how dumb I sounded. There was an obvious third option – stay home and refuse the dinner. Don't get stranded, don't get poisoned. Why had I left in the first place?

“Because Fredrick told you to,” I answered myself. I didn't quite like my answer. I played the conversation I'd had with the family butler over again in my head, as best as I could remember it. He'd told me to be careful, to look into things. At least, that's what I'd assumed. It had all been hypothetical, but that was just because of the bugs, right? There had to have been real danger.

There was a scrapping sound and I jumped.

A second later I realized what had made the sound – I'd bumped my duffel bag on the floor in front of me, and the clasp had moved across a metal panel.

I laughed at myself, slightly. I was in a metal tube the size of a twin bed, floating in the vacuum of space. What was I afraid of now? I kicked the duffel bag, just to hear the sound again. The clasp rattled, making a slightly different noise than I'd heard before. Regardless, I knew it was the bag that had made the noise originally. It couldn't have been anything else.

"It could be those robot bugs," said the most unhelpful part of my brain. "You know they can move."

I shook my head, as if I could dislodge the thought. Of course, even if it was a mechanical bug moving, as they'd been rumored to do from time to time, they couldn't do anything to me. They had legs, but no weapons. And, worst come to worst, I could always just open the door.

I took two deep breaths. I refused to think of that.

So maybe Fredrick hadn't told me to leave, or it wasn't his intent. Amalia had been worried, right? She'd talked about poison! Or rather, she'd talked about food. But what danger could food possess, if not poison? She had been worried about something in the food, hadn't she?

I closed my eyes and tried to remember her face as she'd spoken to me. Had she been worried or just tired? She'd just been yelled at, so she had good reason to be upset before I'd got there.

"No, she was upset for me." I told myself – loudly, as if it were the end of the conversation. My brain had other ideas, and continued to run through my last conversation with Amalia on loop until I wasn't sure if I was remembering it correctly anymore.

There was some comfort in that. Maybe she really had told me to leave, definitively, and I just couldn't remember it correctly.

"And they were closing down the transports!" I pointed out, to myself. "That's weird, right?" I tried to remember the radio broadcast. There had been something in that message about the Lunar governments, hadn't there been? Maybe there had been a bigger plot, involving more than just me. Maybe I'd really needed to flee after all.

There was another scrapping sound, louder this time and from the roof. I plunged my hand into my duffel bag and pulled out a utility knife, with no idea what I would do with it or what I was expecting to have to do with it.

I listened hard. There was a faint tapping noise, coming from one location near the back of the ship.

If this was it, if this was where I was going to die, I wanted to stab one of those little robots. If I'd really misunderstood what was going on, if I hadn't needed to flee at all, it was their fault. I blamed them. They'd killed me.

I twisted around as best I could. It was so cramped. I tightened my grip on the knife. Some rational corner of my mind told me that this little knife wasn't going to go through the metal ceiling anyway. I pulled back my arm.

The ship started beeping, then swung sideways. I was thrown against the glass, and narrowly avoided cutting my left arm with the knife in my right hand.

The ship took off, roughly in the direction of the star. The emergency procedure had locked on to a destination.

Chapter 7: Song Lyrics

The emergency procedure guided the battered ship towards a green planet with two moons. On the one hand, I was glad the emergency procedure had found a planet instead of a ship. I wasn't about to be taken aboard a vessel full of strangers whose language I didn't understand – at least not yet. On the other hand, if there was no one on this planet, or no one who had invented space travel...

I shook my head before I could finish the thought. I wasn't going to die in the vacuum of space today. Things were improving. I should be glad.

The autopilot program swerved slightly, to avoid a passing rock. It was difficult to see the planet clearly now, since it was between me and the star it orbited. After a few seconds of trying to judge how quickly I was moving, I decided I couldn't tell and, even if I could, I should probably stop looking in the direction of the sun.

I decided to stare down at my boots instead as the ship drove itself, and tried not to notice the light metallic clicks I was still hearing from the roof. With no better way to ignore the noise I started singing to myself, some old song from my lunar home. I sung in barely a whisper, not wanting to waste air now that I had hope of landing on a planet.

"And the old wives tale says,

Moon rocks would tell you if they could.

Watch the sky, and I will try,

to help you home, to warmth and food.

And the old wives tale says

Moonlight would tell you if she could.

Go to sleep, and think of me

When you wake before you should.

And the old wives tale says..."

I stopped, unable to remember the third and final verse. I ran through the first two in my head again, but it didn't jog my memory. I hoped it would come to me later – otherwise, I likely wouldn't ever hear the old song again.

The ship swerved again, likely to avoid another bit of debris I hadn't see. This time I definitely heard a scrapping sound from the roof. A bit of loose metal or a bug readjusting it's position? I covered my ears for a while. I don't know how long.

When I looked up again, the green planet filled most of my view. I could see the outlines of continents and oceans. Like Earth, there was snow and ice across the poles, and a desert section in the middle. I saw what looked like a hurricane moving across the equator, and let out a breath of relief when I realized I wasn't heading anywhere near there. My ship turned itself towards the north, towards a green area not too far from the beginning of snow and mountains.

Something began beeping and part of the screen in front of me lit up, veins of light scattering across the broken glass. I couldn't see enough of the message to know what it was trying to tell me. I adjusted how I was sitting, and double checked the lights that indicated that various safety features were still working – not that there would have been anything I could have done about it if they'd been off.

My ship dived to the surface of the planet. The last thing I checked before my vision and thought process were washed out by the white hot heat of atmospheric entry was that my tongue was not between my teeth.

As soon as the light died down and my eyes readjusted, I was watching branches smack the windshield. My cycle was still moving far too quickly compared to the distance to the ground. I tried to take over the controls but it was no good; The emergency procedure was fully in charge. I could do nothing but watch as the metal contraption in whose belly I was trapped pushed through the trees, hit a few trunks, then skidded across a grassy clearing.

It was not a gentle landing.

But it was a landing. I patted my ribs first. No sharp pain – or sharp points of bone. The same could be said for my arms and legs. My ears were ringing, but that was expected and temporary. There was some blood on my hand. It wasn't coming from my hand. I felt around on my face, trying to find a source I couldn't see. My head wasn't bleeding. It was my right arm. I'd scrapped it against the frame of the

vehicle's door. It was sore, now that I was aware of it, but the bleeding was already stopping and there didn't seem to be any further damage.

I looked down at my display, or what was left of it. It had gone completely dark now, with no glass piece larger than a square inch. It looked dangerous to touch at this point so I didn't. I set one hand on the door handle.

Without my display or instruments, there was no way of knowing if the emergency system had found a habitable planet or if it had simply malfunctioned then crashed. Everything looked earth-like outside – there were green trees and the sky was blue, white clouds meandering along without a care. By human standards it looked like a beautiful day. That didn't mean much. I could easily open this door and immediately cook to death in 600 degree Fahrenheit weather. I could asphyxiate in an atmosphere with no oxygen. I could be crushed by an atmosphere ten times the weight of Earth's.

The alternative was staying in this metal box, waiting for my supply of air or water to run out, which ever came first.

I opened the ship door and crawled out.

The first thing I noticed was that I wasn't dying. The second was the terrible humidity. It was horribly sticky – uncomfortable, but not deadly. I took a deep breath. It seemed normal. It smelled normal.

Then I was on the ground and I didn't remember falling. I stared up at the blue sky, a cruelly familiar color.

"What now?" I whispered. I repeated the question, slightly louder this time. I stopped to listen, in case something was listening to me. I wasn't sure if I wanted to hear a response or not.

I started crying. I lay there crying for while. I wasn't sure how much time was passing, and was dimly aware of the fact that it didn't matter. I didn't even feel particularly sad – this just seemed like the inevitable reaction. Of course you're crying now, I thought to myself. That's just what one has to do in this situation. It simply must happen, and then later you will get up and figure out how to survive. You've got no choice in the order or timing of these things.

The tears stopped as abruptly as they'd started.

I sat up, fully alert despite the puffiness in my face and the pressure in my sinuses. I took a deep breath, then another. I stood up and walked around my vehicle – thoroughly destroyed now and useful for little more than shelter from the rain. If it rained on this planet.

"I suppose I can say whatever I want now. No one's listening anymore." I laughed out loud, and it didn't sound quite right, like it was a recording of my voice instead of the real thing. Everything was worse now than when I'd gotten up this morning but there was one, small, microscopic, upside. No one was listening. No one was expecting anything of me. I was no longer betrothed. I was no longer a political target, or a political pawn.

I was climbing on top of my cycle before the thought to do so had fully occurred to me. With only the barest amount of caution around the broken and bent metal, I sat myself on the roof and shoved aside a loose panel. I recognized my quarry instantly, ripped it out, and threw it on the ground.

The electronic bug writhed on the ground before me, legs upturned towards an alien sky. I stomped on it once to crush it to pieces, then a second time simply for pleasure.

I went around to the other side of the ship to drag out my duffel bag. There was a general hum in the air, the kind that insects produce on a summer's day. I listened, then froze with my bag halfway out of the ship. Underneath the sound of insects was something slightly different. It was also a hum, but unlike the rest of the noise it had a sort of tune. The tune continued as I stood there, motionless. It was not a repeating pattern, like a bird might produce. It was a song. It was intelligent.

I wasn't alone.