

Never to Sleep

“How can I convince you not to do this?” she asked into the receiver at her cheek. She grimaced at the whining sound of her voice, but by the time a response came from the other end of the call, the thought had passed. If she had to whine, so be it.

“I’ll be fine. I promise. Seriously, what’s the worst that could happen?” a voice came through the speaker in her ear.

“Dammit, Jason, I’m not kidding. This isn’t some stupid joke.”

“And I’m not joking around.” His voice was stern and cold, a distant relation to the usual lightness she enjoyed so much.

Tanya could never handle someone being angry with her, and though she had no memory of Jason ever being upset towards her, let alone truly angry, she doubted he would be any different. Ever since she was little, making someone angry always gave her the feeling of having a twisted knot somewhere between her stomach and throat, the strange sort of discomfort that had no real focal point. For half a second she expected the sensation to settle in, start turning at her insides, but it failed to arrive, and she pushed on with renewed determination. “How many security protocols did break just to find this guy in the computer alone?” She felt tired from having argued with him for so long.

His voice was quiet, “A few.”

“And you still think it’s a good idea to try finding him in person? My guess is that his lab and quarters are in restricted sections of the ship for a reason...”

“Look, can we just talk about something else for right now.” He sounded defeated, something she immediately realized was even worse than just angry. She opened her mouth,

begging her brain to give her anything to say that would make things better, erase the past half hour. Before she could speak he asked, “What are you up to today?”

Tanya took a deep breath, a pause before the dive, and decided to at least try, “You mean what are normal people doing while you’re going off to bother some old man?”

To her relief, a quick laugh made its way over the call, crackling pleasantly in the speaker, bouncing into her ear. “He’s not just some old man, his files said he use to be the Head of Engineering for the entire ship... and to answer your question... yes.”

Hearing the tone she knew so well return to his voice, Tanya pushed her concerns to the back of her mind and said, “I’m meeting Shannon in the Plaza for lunch.” As she spoke, she came to a stop at a heavy metal door, pushed it, and stepped out onto the Garden-Plaza. Emerging from the white-grey of one of the aft passages, her eyes adjusted to the brighter light, soaking in the countless colors of the trees and the flowers laced along the walkways and in between shops. High above, the cold silver of the dome ceiling glimmered with artificial light. She was on the second floor of a four-tiered garden, stairs and fountains flowing from one level to the next. Everywhere, people went about their business, some eating, some shopping, some simply taking a walk. Nowhere was there an indication of the dark emptiness of space, pinpricked by dots of distant stars, pressing in from every direction beyond the spaceship’s walls. In the Garden-Plaza there was only life, nothing else.

“How is Shannon?” the voice in her ear continued. “I feel like I haven’t seen her in forever.”

Tasting the less processed, slightly warmer air, “She’s good, I think. I haven’t seen her in a while either. She got a job with Michael and Hannah’s mom in Air Processing about a month ago. I don’t think they are giving her much time off.” Continuing forward along one of the

shrub-lined walkways, and readjusting the headset tightly looped over her ear, Tanya could almost feel her earlier concerns bubbling in the background. She had never been particularly good at letting things go, a fact Jason was fully aware of, and as a result she often decided, why even try. Now, more than usual, she fought the impulse to say what she wanted. Suddenly, giving up, “Seriously, Jason, you’re actually going through with this?” she asked, going back to the original topic.

“Yes,” he said, sounding exasperated, but not surprised. Then, after a slight hesitation, “Come on, Tanya, for once we get an assignment from Kettenburg that I actually find interesting, finally something that’s not math or engineering. I can’t just throw that away.”

“How is following the directions throwing it away?”

“I’m still following some of the directions... We’re supposed to interview someone who still remembers Earth, right? I’m still doing that. I looked it up, this Dr. Kasanov is in his eighties, that means he was at least fifteen when the fleet left, late twenties when the *Atlas* was built! Just think of the stuff he saw, the stuff he lived through...”

Tanya laughed to herself, doing her best to keep the sound from reaching the headset microphone. As upset as she was, she could not stop herself from thinking of the fact that Jason sounded like a little boy on Christmas morning.

Trying to stay serious, “And what about the whole list of names Kettenburg gave us? You don’t think any of them have seen or lived through anything?” She made her way down the nearest set of stairs, and headed towards *Jake’s Café*.

“I tried that. Talked to Felicia and Sam’s grandmother, Miss Jacobson.”

“Really? I saw her name and was thinking of going to see her tomorrow. So what was the problem?” She waved to people here and there as they passed. Generally, she would have had to have stopped and said hi, but was glad the phone call gave her an excuse not to.

Enjoying the open space, Tanya took her time winding her way to a table. Her favorite was empty. It was a small table just outside the café, hidden away next to a pond surrounded by ferns. From there, you could look out and see most of the Garden-Plaza, like a lone observer, hidden away in the foliage.

“Well, just think about it...” he said, “That list of names, unfortunately, has been getting shorter and shorter every year. And class after class, Kettenburg gives the same assignment, with the same list of names. Every person on that list has their story practiced to a science, every word chosen and every pause timed just right for effect...”

“That’s a little cynical, but fine. Still though, I don’t get it. Why can’t you just do the assignment, you know, without the risk of getting arrested...”

“I won’t get arrested...” The speaker was silent for a few moments, a soft electric buzz filling the quiet, then, “The assignment just got me thinking. Sure, Miss Jacobson has this story about her and her mother that was very touching and everything, but she was just a little girl when the fleet left Earth. And she couldn’t say anything more about the *Atlas* being built than stuff you can find in old news clippings.”

“So you’re not the least bit interested in things like why she didn’t sign up for cryo?” Tanya kicked her feet together as a shiver passed through her at the thought of the hundreds of thousands of cryogenic stasis pods hidden away in the furthest recesses of the ship. Sometimes she forgot how every part of the *Atlas* she had ever seen and thought of as home, the hallways she had grown up in, memorizing every last corner, were only a small fraction of the massive

ship, every other square inch filled with countless frozen bodies, sleeping, waiting. As she had been taught to do her entire life, she shrugged off the images and brought her mind back to the present. By now, Shannon was late, but it was okay, it was just a few minutes more Tanya could use to try convincing Jason not to be an idiot. As if that were possible when he's this excited, she thought.

"She has McHerron Syndrome just like every one else who didn't go into cryo," he answered. "Genetic, deathly disposition against being a human popsicle."

Tanya denied the impulse to laugh and continued on, "So your idea is that this guy..."

"Dr. Kasanov."

"Right, him, will have a better story because he was a bit older and no one has asked him before? What would give him anything more to say than anyone actually on the list for the assignment?" Before he could answer, "Are you alright? You sound out of breath."

"No, I'm fine," Jason said, instantly defending himself. "I just might be a bit lost..."

"Where are you?"

"Good question..."

"Where are you trying to get to?" she asked cautiously.

"Well, when I looked it up, the directory said Kasanov's personal office is in Section L... Found the section, just not the office..."

"L?" she asked, surprised. Tanya sat up straight in her chair. "I thought everything past H was nothing but cryo-pods... You said his office and quarters were in restricted areas, not in cryo-pod sections. What the hell Jason! And I thought you weren't going until this afternoon."

A middle-aged man walking by the café jumped at Tanya's sudden outburst. Tanya recognized

the man, but could not remember his name, so decided to ignore the scalding look he cast her direction and turn more towards the pond beside her.

“I went early,” Jason said. “And to be fair, the cryo-sections of the ship are all restricted, so...”

“So... this entire time I’ve been trying to convince you not to go, you’ve already been wandering around in restricted areas?” Though her voice started at nearly a yell, it quickly clawed to a harsh whisper by the end. “You didn’t feel like maybe mentioning that?”

The other end of the call was silent. “Sorry,” he finally said. “You were on a roll, I didn’t want to interrupt.”