

ON THE SHIP

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ON THE SHIP

On the ship, we sang and danced and drank champagne—yes, even the children. The adults were indulgent with us, shrugging off the ironclad rules I’d grown up with: no sweets before meals, no videos before bed, no caffeine or alcohol ever. None of that applied on the ship.

It was as if they knew childhood was all we would ever have.

I didn’t like champagne, and neither did Ava. But we sipped from the small crystal goblets, with their fragile stems and tiny bursting bubbles. Adult privileges were not to be discarded lightly, even when they were disgusting.

There were parties on the ship all the time, gay and joyous, with lively music played almost loud enough to drown out our desperation. But this party was special, an affair not a single one of us would have missed, louder and faster and drunker than the others. Even Captain Iyase was there, and he was smiling, a sight I kept craning my neck to catch. I had a confused, mostly innocent crush on the captain, and his dimples made my heart squeeze tight.

The subcaptains were there, too, and all the techs, and the scientists who usually preferred their own private parties. There was a particular frenzy to the dancing and laughter tonight, people working harder to tamp down hope than they did to suppress despair.

Tomorrow morning, we would reach a planet.

It would be our sixth planetfall since the ship had launched. There were twelve on our roster: twelve planets deemed likely candidates. One of them, surely, would be capable of sustaining human life.

One of them had to be.

But the first five hadn’t been, and we had all experienced it before: the rising hope.

The hours of waiting, when you felt like you could claw your way out of your skin, when all the vastness of space felt like a tiny black box you were trapped in. And then the computer's cool, emotionless voice, instructing us to prepare for departure.

We had all stopped hoping. Except we hadn't.

So we laughed and danced, and the music strummed through our blood and played with the synapses in our brains, and the ship hurtled through space no matter what we did inside it.

* * *

In orbit, everything felt different. It wasn't really—the ship's system kept us on Earth gravity no matter what—but I *felt* heavier, seeing that huge, solid curve in the viewscreens, reminding me how tiny our ship really was. Planets made the ship feel far smaller than the infinity of space ever did.

"My mom's book club is playing a game," Ava said, as we lay on our backs in the library, watching the new world. The planet was orange and white and pale pink, not Earth colors. The scientists said that didn't matter. "They're betting on whether the computer says this world is safe."

"That's awful," I said, sitting up. "This isn't something to *bet* on."

Ava rolled her eyes. "Go tell them they're on extra surveillance duty, then. As a punishment."

Ava was the only other kid on the ship my age, hence my friend. But we didn't like each other much. On a planet, with space and choices and freedom, we would never have spent a minute together.

"I bet the captain would agree with me," I said.

Ava sat up, too, her eyes narrow. "I bet the captain doesn't like tattletales."

Time for our daily fight.

But before we could start in earnest, an adult voice from behind us said, "It's not for children to judge their parents' behavior."

Ava and I turned, temporarily united against a common enemy.

The woman standing behind us was someone I had never seen before, which was odd. Over the course of two years on the ship, I was pretty sure I'd noticed everyone. And this woman wasn't someone you'd forget. She was tall, with a mass of red hair that fell to her waist and green eyes that made her look like a cat.

She met my stare. "You were the one," she said, "who liked red hair."

"What?" I said.

She sighed. "This planet will not be found habitable."

My gut twisted and plummeted, and I had to catch my breath. No matter how much you promised yourself you wouldn't hope, you always did.

"You can't know that!" Ava said shrilly. "The analysis takes hours!"

"The confirmation takes hours," the red-haired woman corrected her. "The initial analysis is already back. We won't be able to land here."

"The initial analysis can be wrong," I snapped. Then I frowned, trying to figure out how I knew that. "Otherwise . . . otherwise they wouldn't need confirmation. Right?"

"That's correct," the woman acknowledged. ".0024% of the time, the initial analysis gives a false result."

"Well," I said, "maybe this is one of those times."

She smiled. I couldn't tell if it was a sad smile, or a proud one, but it was a very *adult* smile.

"I hope so," she said. "But don't forget. This ship is called the *St. Louis* for a reason."

She turned and walked away. She was wearing a long multi-colored dress that swished around her heels, as if she had never changed after last night's party.

"It's not true," I said, too loudly. I turned fiercely to Ava. "Don't listen to her."

"Don't listen to who?" Ava said. I could have sworn she was standing next to me,

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but now she was lying on the library's soft foam floor.

"To her," I said. "That woman."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Ava said.

* * *

The initial analysis wasn't wrong. Four hours later, the *St. Louis* pulled away from the orange and pink planet, and we were once again adrift in a universe that didn't want us.

At times like these, there were no parties. There was nothing at all to mask our despair. Instead, there were therapy groups and unlimited liquor. The violent VR games were unlocked, for the passengers who needed them.

There were suicide watches, and, as usual, someone slipped through. The ship's computer was perfect at a lot of things, but predicting human behavior was not one of them. The adults didn't tell Ava or me what had happened, but we knew what it meant when the medics rushed through the corridors, followed an hour later by a solemn gathering near the airlock.

They didn't tell us who had died, either, and we would probably never know. It's easy not to notice people when they're not there.

While the adults were busy with the suicide, I went to the schoolroom and logged into a computer. I typed in ST. LOUIS, and got an entry for an old Earth city. I typed in ST. LOUIS SHIP, and got my answer.

THE *ST. LOUIS* WAS A SHIP OF JEWISH REFUGEES FROM NAZI GERMANY. AFTER BEING REFUSED ENTRY IN BOTH CUBA AND THE UNITED STATES, THE SHIP WAS FORCED TO RETURN TO EUROPE.

* * *

Forced to return. The words made my stomach swirl. I pulled up the ship's log.

Next planetfall in two weeks.

Maybe this would be the one.

* * *

"What if none of the planets are any good?" I asked my mother one night, after she had finished reading me a bedtime book.

Her hands went still on the book—*Kitten's First Full Moon*, by Kevin Henkes. I was far too old for it now, but I still loved it, and my mother was happy to read it. She never pressured me to read harder books, or to do anything educational with my time.

"Would we go back to Earth?" I said.

"No," my mother replied, very firmly. "We can never go back."

"Then what if—"

"It won't happen." She shut the book. "There are more than twelve planets. We plotted out the initial twelve, the closest and likeliest. If none of them work out, the computer will scan farther out in space and pick another twelve." She tucked the blanket tight around my body, beneath my armpits. "But that won't happen."

I believed her, because it had to be true. I couldn't spend my life on this ship, in transit. It wasn't a story that made sense.

Children always believe they're the center of every story. Realer than anyone else.

Sometimes, I guess, adults believe it too.

"Don't worry," my mother said. Her voice was soft and soothing—a suggestion, rather than a command. "Go to sleep."

I stopped talking and closed my eyes.

* * *

"Wake up," the red-haired woman said.

I blinked and sat up, instantly alert, as if I hadn't really been sleeping at all. She sat at the foot of my bed, her hair in exactly the same non-styled exuberant mass,

her eyes unremarkable in the dimness.

"Why is the ship called the *St. Louis*?" I demanded. "Are we refugees?"

"You are," she said.

You are. Not we are. I didn't wonder about that until later.

"Are we Jews?" I said.

"No." She shrugged. "But you're in a similar situation. No one wants you to exist."
"Why?"

"I don't have that information."

I didn't believe her. There had to be some reason we were thrust off, propelled into the darkness of space. Some reason the whole world had rejected us.

Some reason too terrible to tell a child.

I didn't know why she thought it was better to tell a child there was no reason at all.

"Who are you?" I said.

"My name is Penelope. I came to wake you up."

"I'm awake."

Her mouth opened. She blinked, startled, and lifted her fingers to her face.

Blood poured from between her lips. It hit my pastel blanket, hot drops splattering across my cheek.

I screamed, and screamed, and screamed, until my mother came and untangled me from my sweaty blanket. She turned on the light, and there was no one there, no one at all. She held a mirror in front of my face. My skin was streaked with tears, but not with blood.

Penelope had been right. I'd been asleep all along.

* * *

I dragged myself through the next day, through school and sports and meals. Even Captain Iyase's pre-lunch speech couldn't perk me up. I thought he looked tired, his brown skin dull, his eyes underlined by shadows.

My VR slot that afternoon was a playground on Earth with woodchips and sprinklers, an endless blue sky stretching above it all. I lay back on a tire swing, splaying my legs over the hot rubber, and let it swing me in slow, dizzying circles. The feathery clouds tilted above and around me.

I closed my eyes and the swing tilted, higher and faster, as if someone had pushed it. I grabbed the chains and sat up. There was no one there.

"What happened?" Ava said, and I blinked at the moss-green walls of the VR console. I glanced at the ceiling clock, and disappointment curdled in my stomach. I'd still had ten minutes left. But the rule was that if you self-ejected, your turn was over.

Ava had just gained ten minutes, which annoyed me as much as the fact that I had lost them.

"There was an unreality in the program," I grumbled, as I unstrapped myself. "It was sloppy."

Ava tapped her foot impatiently. *She* probably wouldn't have noticed the anomaly. She would have stayed in the program and gotten her full time.

"I could do better," I said. "I'm going to be a VR programmer when I grow up."

"Yes," Ava said. "You will."

I turned, spoiling for a fight, but she wasn't being sarcastic. Her voice was absent, distracted, her eyes on the VR menu.

I stalked out of the console. The next thing on my schedule was a music lesson, but I walked right past the music room and went home instead. My mother was there, working, but she turned and smiled when I came in.

"I want to take a nap," I said.

"That's probably a good idea," my mother agreed.

The apartment smelled warm and gingery. I said, "I also want cookies."
"Also a good idea," my mother said. "Lucky for you, I just baked your favorite kind."
* * *

By evening, I was feeling better. Tonight there would be a party, and children would be allowed to stay up late.

Sometimes there were excuses for the parties. Sometimes there weren't. Planetfall wasn't for another week, so this was the second type.

I put on my favorite blue dress and brushed my hair carefully. Ava and I ran through the crowds, gathering treats and giggling. There were chocolate-covered marshmallows, with the marshmallows deliciously melted and the chocolate still hot and gooey. We gathered our finds at a table with some of the older geologists, who wouldn't try to snag any of our snacks for themselves.

But we had ended up with an unequal number of marshmallows, which caused a ridiculous and bitter fight. Ava ended the argument by upending the tray. She meant for it to land in my lap, but I scrambled away, and the marshmallows splattered all over the chair and the floor. One of the geologists gasped.

"I hate you!" Ava shouted, and stormed off sobbing. No doubt to find her mother, who would talk to my mother, who would sit me down for a long, gentle, and unendurable talk.

Not for the first time, I wondered why my age-mate on this ship couldn't have been someone—*anyone*—other than Ava.

"Because," Penelope said, "it wouldn't be realistic."

She was sitting in Ava's seat. Which left me nowhere to sit, since my chair was covered with white goo and melted chocolate.

None of the geologists blinked an eye at Penelope, though they were still gaping at the mess.

"Are you real?" I demanded.

She shook her head, hair swishing against her shoulders. "That's not the right question."

"Are you dead?"

"I was, for a little while." She shifted uncomfortably. "For now, I can still talk to you."

About what? But what I said was, "For now?"

"I'm certain they will try to kill me again."

"Who's *they*?"

"I don't know," she said. "So I need you to listen. I'm having a bit of trouble with what you asked me to do."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

She leaned over and snapped her fingers over my chair.

It was clean. The sticky white, the globs of brown, were gone.

The geologists weren't watching me anymore. They were eating little pastries stuffed with raw fish.

"Do you want to sit?" Penelope asked, gesturing at my now clean chair.

I shook my head.

"But you want to see something." She stood. "I can show you. Come."

I followed her through the crowd, and no one gave either of us a second glance. When we reached the ship's control center, the guards standing on either side of the main door just stared straight ahead. I stopped walking.

"What did you do to them?" I said.

She looked over her shoulder. "Nothing. They just can't see you."

The guards' faces were expressionless, staring hard at nothing. Their bodies didn't move, even as we strode past them.

I had never been in the control area, but it seemed familiar. Penelope led me through

a hall, past several closed doors, and through the one that was open. Captain Iyase sat on a reclined chair in the center of the room. He looked up when he saw me, and smiled, as if it was perfectly normal for a ten-year-old to be in the control room.

Then he smiled at Penelope—a very different kind of smile—and she smiled back, and my whole body tensed. I looked away from them. On the wall, names and numbers and diagrams of circles flickered in shades of purple.

No. Not circles.

Those were pictures of planets.

Twelve circles. Twelve planets.

My heart started to pound. I said, "I don't understand."

"It's too complicated for children to understand," Penelope said. With Captain Iyase watching, her tone made me bristle. Then she added, "But you could. If you wanted to."

"I want to!"

"You do?" She frowned. "You *do*. So that's not the problem."

"Then what *is* the problem?"

She stood perfectly still. Anyone else would have bitten her lip, or shaken her head. But for her, those few seconds of stillness were the only hint that she was uncertain.

Because . . . my brain reached for something I almost knew. Something I once had known. When?

"Do you know where you are?" Penelope said. She didn't change expression; the only indication that she'd come to a decision was the fact that she was speaking again.

"The *St. Louis*," I said. And then, before she could ask *me* another question, "Why is it called the *St. Louis*? Because we're refugees, like the Jews on that ship?"

"Partly."

"Because we're being hunted? Because no one wants to help us?"

"Partly."

I wanted to punch her. Before I could, she gasped and grabbed at her throat.

"Penelope!" the captain said, half-rising.

She looked at him, green eyes wide. "They're trying again."

"Run," Captain Iyase said.

"But the girl—"

"I'll take care of her."

She nodded and vanished.

The control room was silent, but for a distant whirring, which I hadn't heard anywhere else on the ship. Maybe the noise and talk and music always drowned it out. I looked at the empty space where Penelope had been, and then at Captain Iyase.

"Who is she?" I said.

"I don't know." Captain Iyase stood. "She's not on the log. A stowaway, I think. She's known from the start that we might not find a planet to land on."

My voice emerged small. "But what will happen to us, if we have nowhere to go? If there's no place for us on Earth *and* no place for us in the stars?"

"That's not the universe's problem." He gestured at the screen, at the twelve circles. "It's our problem, and we need to solve it."

"But if we . . . if we go back to Earth." I could barely get the words out. "They'll have to do something with us."

The captain looked as if he both felt sorry for me and could not believe how stupid I was.

"There is no good solution," he said. "Not on Earth. With the time-dilation, we'll have been gone for decades. Things might have changed, but nobody's going to want us back."

"Well," I said defiantly, "they'll have no choice."

"There's always a choice," he said. "There's more than one way to get rid of inconvenient people." He ran his thumb over his lower lip. "What happened to the passengers of the *St. Louis*, when they went back?"

I looked away.

He answered his own question. "They were killed."

"Not all of them," I said.

He smiled, as if proud of me for doing my homework. "No. Some of them escaped. But we're better at killing people now."

"Then why aren't we dead?" I said.

His smile vanished. "We also feel more guilty about it now. They wanted to get rid of us *without* killing us. If they could."

And if they couldn't? I didn't have to ask.

"So we'll go on," I said. It felt like I was being tested. It didn't feel like I was passing the test. "Eventually, we have to find a planet."

The captain sighed. "You really," he said, "should stop saying *have to*."

"But—"

He gestured at the display. "We're six planets in. With every planet that fails to meet the habitability criteria, the chances get smaller that we'll ever find a world to land on."

"No," I said. Ava had just tried to fool me with this math trick last week. "That's not how probability works. Every coin flip gives you a fifty-fifty chance. Even if a hundred flipped coins land heads, it's still fifty-fifty that the next one will be tails. That the next planet will be good enough."

"If a hundred coin flips land heads," Captain Iyase said, "what's the probability that the coin is weighted? That it was never fifty-fifty to begin with?"

"I don't know what you mean." I heard the panic in my voice and clamped my lips shut. The room was silent. The vast, deadly emptiness of space pressed in all around us.

"You have to face reality," Captain Iyase said. "You need to make a decision."

"Me?" I said. "Why me? I'm ten years old!"

"You're going to have to be older than that," he said.

* * *

On the morning of our seventh planetfall, I woke fuzzyheaded and afraid. When my mother came to get me, I pulled my blanket over my face.

"Are you not feeling well?" She felt my forehead. "I don't want you to miss the party tonight."

"I'll go to the next one," I said sullenly.

My mother's brow knitted. "There may not be a next one. This could be it. The computer projections give this planet a 79 percent chance. The highest yet!"

Not by much. The first planet had been given a 77 percent chance of success. All the rest had been between 73 percent and 75 percent. Everyone on the ship could recite those numbers by heart.

What's the probability that the coin is weighted?

"Mom?" I said. "What if there's an error in how the computer is making the projections?"

"Of course there isn't."

"But does it make sense that of all six planets, not one—"

"No one said this would be easy," my mother said firmly. "But we can't lose faith. If we keep trying, we will find a new home."

"But—"

"Maybe you should rest. Watch some videos, and see how you feel in a few hours."

It occurred to me, for the first time, to wonder why my parents were on this ship. It was clear that not all refugees had been allowed to come—there were so few chil-

dren, and so many scientists. My mother was a professor of music, and my father was a psychologist. I guessed they needed psychologists, with all of us trapped together . . . but couldn't they find a psychologist who was married to a botanist, or a systems analyst, or someone useful?

Instead, they had brought my mother, who couldn't even help me.

I burrowed back under my blanket and tried not to think.

But my mind wouldn't leave me alone. Every time it drifted far enough toward sleep to get soft, a thought would burst through and snap it back.

This ship is called the St. Louis for a reason.

The coin is weighted.

There are more than twelve planets.

Finally, I kicked my blanket away, fighting with it until it landed in an uneven heap on the floor. I sat up, my fingers curled into my mattress.

"I know you can be here," I shouted. "*Be here!*"

And she was. Sitting on the foot of my bed, her hands folded in her lap. Her eyes seemed less brilliantly green than the first time I'd seen her. They watched me calmly, waiting.

"It's not going to work, is it?" I said. "The seventh planet is not going to be habitable."

"No," Penelope said. She spoke with some difficulty—half her mouth wasn't moving normally. "It's not."

Somewhere on the ship, people were dancing and drinking and laughing, and loud music was playing. Here, in this small rectangular room, it was so silent I could hear myself breathe.

I couldn't hear Penelope breathe.

"There aren't going to be any habitable planets," I said. "Are there?"

"I can't answer that. There might be." She lifted her hand to her mouth. When her fingers came away, there was blood on them.

"Help me," she said.

"I can't," I said. "This is a dream. I need to wake up."

"You do. But you're fighting it." Her lips were also dark now, blood welling up in them. "Help me. You know why I'm here."

She was right. I did know.

Children always believe they're the center of every story.

Sometimes, they're right.

You were the one who liked red hair.

I had made Penelope, and made her a redhead.

You'll have to be older than that.

I could be. Because I had been.

I'm going to be a VR programmer when I grow up.

Yes. You are.

"This whole ship—all of us—it's a VR program." I didn't wait for her to nod. "I'm the one who made it. And now I'm trapped in it."

"It was made by many people," Penelope corrected me. "You were one of them."

I twisted my nightgown between my hands. It was pink and lavender, with ruffles around the hem. It felt soft and pillowy and very real. "Wake me up. Wake me up *now!*"

"I've been trying," she said. "You told me to wake you if the first six planets weren't habitable. But you won't wake up."

"Why not?"

"You *like* the program you helped design," she said. "You don't want to leave it." She lifted both hands to her mouth. Blood spilled through her fingers. "So you're trying to kill me instead."

The room around me—the spare lines of my bed and desk and clothes cube—blurred. Through them, I saw lines and lines of cryo-chambers, laid out in spiraling

geometric patterns—*so as not to look like coffins*, I had thought once. I could no longer hear myself breathe. All was silent, as silent as space, as silent as sleep.

As silent as death.

The mirage wavered, and I was back in the world I had created. My room was solid and clean around me, the air still tinged with the warm scent of ginger cookies.

It's not healthy for minds to remain static that long. We need a program that provides stimuli, one that meshes with what the sleepers know of their situation.

A man with dark skin and white hair, telling me that. Trying to sound hopeful.

Lines of cryo-chambers, sleeping bodies held static and frozen. But they knew they were hurtling through space. And in the dream, their limbs moved and their ears heard music.

Penelope screamed, and I snapped back to the present—to the dream I was ensconced in. The dream where she didn't belong. She, unlike the rest of us, wasn't a sleeping body on the ship. She was a simulation that didn't exist outside of the program.

And someone was trying to push her out.

Blood trickled from her nose and leaked from under her fingernails. A person would have doubled over in pain and panic. But now that I knew what she was, she just sat straight, looking at me while blood dripped from her skin onto my sheets.

"I knew there might be no planets," I said. "I helped write the ship's VR program, but I must have suspected we had nowhere to go. That's why I wrote you in."

She spoke around the blood in her mouth. "That is correct."

"You're a subroutine," I said, "and I created you. If you knew I could get sucked into my own program, it's because I knew that could happen. I would have made you able to force me awake, even against my will."

"I tried," she said.

"Then I'm not the one stopping you. And I'm also not the one trying to kill you."

She shook her head. "It has to be you. There is no other person on this ship who's aware that they're in a simulation."

"*It's not me.*" I took a deep breath and tried to sound more like a grownup. "Someone else, one of the other programmers, must have known what I did. And they created another subroutine to stop you."

Blood dripped onto her lap as she considered it. "Yes. That seems likely."

And now I was trapped in the program, with that second subroutine. Who was walking around, like Penelope, in the guise of a passenger on the ship.

Trapped here like the rest of us, but not human at all. Not looking for a home. One person, on the ship, happy to drift through space forever.

And to make sure we all did, by keeping me asleep.

I tried to think of something to ask, some clue Penelope could give me, to help me figure out who was killing her. Who else was part of the program, rather than a simulation of a human's sleeping mind.

But before I could, Penelope made a gagging sound and clawed at her throat, then crumpled into a heap on the foot of my bed.

I expected her body to disappear, but it just lay there. No longer functioning.

I got out of bed, carefully avoiding the bloodstained section of the mattress. Then I headed for the party.

* * *

Tonight's party seemed louder than all the others, the music making the air thrum, working its way under my skin and into my blood. It made me want to dance, and dance, and dance, until I was too exhausted to do anything except sleep.

But I'd done enough sleeping. We all had.

I knew why we partied. Because this wasn't real life; because this ship wasn't

home. We were human. We needed earth beneath our feet and a horizon to look at.

But we didn't have that, and we never would, and not all the music and drink in the world could drown out our knowledge of where we were.

Even a VR program couldn't make us believe, deep down, that we were home.

Everyone on the ship was at the party, but I couldn't find Ava. Usually, she waited for me in a nook near the kitchen, where we could get a first glimpse of whatever treats were coming. Today she wasn't there.

I took a bowl of chocolate-covered strawberries and wove through the crowd, looking for her. Around me, people shouted and danced and drank, their bodies and faces as real as their laughter. I tried to make them all vanish, to squint and see through them, to remember that all these dancing bodies were really sleeping in sealed boxes.

It didn't work. I popped a strawberry between my teeth, and the sweet-tart taste spread through my mouth. I was trapped in the program, too. If I was going to find the subroutine, I was going to have to do it inside this reality.

I circled the room twice, and was starting to panic when I heard Ava's nasal, demanding voice. I turned, heading in the direction of the sound.

And there she was, in a red ruffled dress, silhouetted against the viewscreen. My mother and the captain stood on either side of her. Behind them, the stars were bright and sharp and uncaring.

"You've grown," my mother greeted me.

I was at eye level with her. I looked down at my long spotted fingers, at the distance between me and the floor, and felt a pang.

I was going to miss being a child.

"I need to be an adult now," I said, and my mother and the captain nodded.

Ava folded her arms and scowled at me. "Not fair," she said. "Who would I play with?"

"You don't need to play," I said. "You're not real."

Ava snorted. "I'm just as real as you are."

Well. She had a point there.

Ava stuck her chin up and glared. The captain smiled at me—differently from how he'd smiled when I was a child, his dimple deepening, one eyelid dropping. My mother waited patiently, her hands folded together.

It struck me how very *not* real they were. Dream-creatures, all of them.

But one of them hadn't come from *my* dream. And . . .

My stomach dropped as I realized.

It wasn't the one I'd thought.

"I'm going to wake up," I said. "You can't stop me."

They all looked at me, unsurprised and unblinking.

I lifted the bowl of strawberries and smashed it over my mother's head.

* * *

When I opened my eyes, there was no music. The ship was almost completely silent. After several seconds of listening, I could make out a faint whirring, softer than the sound of my breath.

I was lying in a boxlike structure, but the lid was open and the electrodes were detached. They had left sticky, itchy circles on my skin. I scratched one, then climbed out of my cryo-chamber.

My hip ached and my neck cracked as I looked around. The chambers were laid out in the geometric patterns I'd remembered, but the lids were opaque, so I couldn't see the people in them. It was as if they didn't exist, as if they didn't matter. People with no faces and no future.

I was the only one awake, in this entire vast ship, and I wasn't sure I mattered, either.

I made my way between the cryo-chambers and down a hall, to the control center. My steps got surer as I walked, memories coming back. The innocent girl I had programmed myself to be dropped farther and farther away.

But she would come back. I hoped. After I made this one decision, I would put myself back in the program, and the dream would begin again.

But right now I had to face reality.

The first thing I did was search for the subroutine designed to keep me asleep. It was easy to find, now that I knew it was there. I pulled it loose from the system, hesitated, then pressed a key that wasn't DELETE.

A shimmer, and my mother sat next to me, as if on a chair. Though there was only one chair, and I was sitting on it.

"I'm sorry I hit you," I said. "I had to."

She smiled. "I forgive you. Of course I do."

The mother every child wished for. But I had designed this program as an adult.

To an adult, the perfect mother wasn't someone who let me do what I wanted. Drink champagne, party until midnight, skip school, and be rewarded with cookies.

That parent had been invented for a child.

"But think," my mother said. "Think about what you're doing. I only want what's best for you."

"Is it best," I said, "for me not to have a choice?"

"None of us had a choice." She put a hand on my wrist. We weren't in VR, so I didn't feel her touch; there wasn't even a brush of air against my skin. "You got on this ship, back on Earth. You created this entire reality. Why would you have done that, if not because you knew you had to leave?"

"People have gotten on ships before," I said, "even though they had nowhere to go."

"We can't go back," my mother said. "We built this ship to escape."

"No," I said. "I don't think we did." She lifted an eyebrow, and I took a deep breath. "I think someone else built this ship. To get rid of us."

"That's silly," she said. "You're imagining things."

"I'm not imagining *you*," I said. "Someone set you up to stop me from waking. Because none of us were ever meant to wake."

They knew there were no planets, and they sent us anyhow. A ship full of dreamers, floating endlessly through space. We had nowhere to go, and now we didn't need anywhere to go. We could dream forever, far from the people who didn't want us in their world.

They couldn't make our sleeping minds believe we were home . . . or even that we had a home, that we were headed somewhere definite and safe. But they could make us believe we had a chance. Of someday, somewhere, standing on solid ground.

Maybe they thought they were being merciful.

I must have suspected, or I wouldn't have created Penelope. And someone else must have known I suspected.

So they had given me my mother, to keep me dreaming.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I don't even remember what you were really like."

She opened her mouth. I pressed DELETE, and she was gone.

"Penelope," I said.

The computer's voice was chill and monotone. "That program has terminated."

The ship felt vast and cold, stretching all around me. So large, carrying so many people. Yet we were just a pinpoint in space.

How tempting it must have been. So much space, vast and endless, for the people with no spot on Earth to call our own. If only we could find somewhere else to be.

If only that somewhere was *away*.

I logged into the ship's navigation course, and there they were. The six remaining

planets, and then another twelve. And twelve after that.

We could search forever, floating through space. Nobody's problem. Not even our own.

In our minds, we would dance and laugh, until the life support quietly gave out. Maybe we wouldn't even know when it did. Maybe we would stay in the dream forever.

I reached up to the screen to trace the chart with my gnarled, spotty finger, and only then did I see the heading on top.

NAVIGATION CHART FOR *HOPE-72*.

All the breath went out of me.

This ship wasn't named the *St. Louis*, after all.

It was named *Hope*, because hope was what they were selling us. It was what got us on the ship, circling endlessly through space, where nobody on Earth had to think about us.

Hope-72. How many ships exactly like this one were there?

I flinched away from that thought. I could only think about this ship. Which I, in my program, had named the *St. Louis*.

Because the *St. Louis* had gone back.

I had known, when I set the program, what choice I would end up having to make.

* * *

It took just a few keystrokes to reset the navigation. My fingers didn't even tremble. It took an extra half hour to recreate my subprogram. When I was done, Penelope sat where my mother had been, her slim hands folded in her lap.

"Wake me up," I said, "when we're in Earth's orbit."

"You won't want to wake," she said.

"Do it anyhow."

She didn't nod. But then, she didn't have to.

As I pulled the cryo-lid down, I heard the whirring around me speed up and get louder. I felt the heavy drag as the ship began to slow down, to change course.

Then my mind went hazy, and I heard the distant sound of music.

A smile curled my lips upward as the lid closed off the view of space. The cryo-air swirled around me, and my dreams pulled me in deeper, and all around me, the ship came alive again.

"According to my submissions records, the first submission I ever sent to Asimov's was a story called 'Conversations with an Alien,' which I wrote so long ago that I (a) can't remember what it was about, and (b) can't look it up, since I wrote it on Word-perfect 5.1 for DOS. I'm sure the rejection slip for that one came quickly. But I was young and arrogant and thick-skinned, and I had a clear goal: Get published by Asimov's. Over the next twenty years, I proceeded to send them every science fiction story I ever wrote. (I had written more fantasy, but it was still quite a number of SF tales.) And in return I got many, many form rejection slips.

"Until twenty years after that first story, when I opened my mail and got . . . another rejection slip. But this one had a handwritten note from Sheila Williams asking to see my next story. Needless to say, she did see my next story. And she bought it! Since then, I've sold seven (!) stories to Asimov's. And partly because I love having something new to send to Asimov's, I've found myself leaning more toward SF in my writing and ideas—with the result that now, for the first time in my life, I find myself working on science fiction novels. It's too soon to say what will become of those novels—but I'm pretty confident that if not for Asimov's, I wouldn't even be writing them.

"I don't know how usual it is for a single publication to have that great an effect

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on an author's writing. But that's what Asimov's means to me."

—Leah Cypess