

Day 1

I should be melancholy. Yesterday was the greatest day of my life after all. Years of work and preparation finally paid off in the biggest achievement one could ever hope for. The view from the desk I now sit behind can't help but reek with the stretch of mediocrity. The famed fleet commander Harald, captain of captains, having traversed the stars, now a governor to petty disputes and crop yield projections. A leader of men turned simply to the guy in charge. Not the life I would have chosen if any of us truly have a say in the matter.

And yet, I feel fine. Content even. If anything, I should be worried that my skills on ship won't translate to being skilled on land. Though I suppose everyone has that same worry. It's taken eleven generations to reach this planet. No one alive has even spoken to a person who's breathed air that wasn't recycled. I might not turn out to be the leader everyone hopes of me, but there's a good chance we'll all be terrible at this colonization business.

Though, the biggest problem I'm facing, at this particular moment, is that I need to bring to order the first official meeting of captains since landing on our new home. They can't begin without me, which I admit is selfishly convenient, but I can't leave my office without Sigmond. He is the ship's, and by default the fleet's, chief of security. Since major crime is a rarity in the fleet, his role mostly consists as being my voice in most official affairs. Or the 'King's Hand' as he would joke. For fleet meetings, he insisted on some form of decorum, at least until he felt everything had settled down. Knowing Sigmond, we'll be doing this escort routine for the rest of our lives.

We all wear the same baseline set of clothes but don't really consider them uniforms. It's just a necessity of space travel to adopt a minimalist ideal, especially in terms of things we use on a daily basis. Some crew members learn the art of tailoring to customize their clothes, but necessity, once again, prevents any alterations from becoming too outlandish. So, when Sigmond finally arrived with his typical gray top and gray pants, I forgot momentarily that this meeting was a special occasion. Once we relearn how to harvest food, perhaps we can relearn how to bring some color back into human civilization.

I didn't spring from my chair as Sigmond entered, remaining fully seated as if we hadn't anywhere to go. It's important for the people in your life to learn that your world does not start and stop on their whims or tardiness. I continued to cup the palm sized ball I use to keep my hands busy and sternly reminded him that he was late.

"I know," Sigmond said between heavy breaths, as if he ran here. "Thorsdottir stopped me."

My expression and voice only became more exacerbated, figuring she should already be at the meeting. Thorsdottir wasn't a captain but knew more about the local microorganisms than anyone in the fleet. Though it was a mute point, because we had no fuel to get us anywhere else, she should still be there to tell everyone we can go outside without the environment suits. Or, at least, answer questions from the captains who don't understand how disease and immunization

worked. To be fair to them, no one has been infected with a disease in over two hundred years. The possibility of a plague was a scary prospect that Thorsdottir was meant to ease.

“She was on her way there when she stopped me,” Sigmond explained. “She told me to tell you that she wasn’t stepping into the meeting hall until you got there. We already know we can breathe the air, so disease will be the captains’ most immediate concern. She, and I’m quoting, ‘doesn’t want to get gangbanged by every captain in the fleet with stupid questions.’ End quote.”

I put the ball down in its cupped holder and placed both hands on the side of my head. Thorsdottir has a reputation for speaking her mind, but that didn’t make the trouble she stirred up any less stressful. The ships of the fleet were no strangers to the friction of interacting and I could see matters like this only getting worse as the various ships now had solid ground to separate them. The only relief I could bring myself was to table the matter and tell Sigmond we should go.

One of the advantages of being the captain of captains was that the meeting hall was established on my ship. Not only did it force all the other captains to come to me, but it also meant I could just walk down the corridor and I was there. While in space, trips between ships were common as the means of production needed to be shared, so it wasn’t too much trouble to set meetings when it was appropriate. If someone couldn’t make it, there was always the comlink. Meaning, that if they couldn’t make it, they better have a damn good reason.

If anything, having these meetings in person would be more difficult now. Each ship landed on a different part of the planet, and would become more independent as they started to produce all their own resources. The planet we landed on, which still didn’t have an official name, was supposedly smaller than Earth; but, it was still a big round rock with gravity, mountains, and weather, making it a hassle to fly around. I doubt all the captains would have made this meeting if it wasn’t the first. Adding to the problem, is that this routine will get so much worse as they adjust to their various solar schedules.

As we approached the meeting hall’s entrance, we were ambushed by Thorsdottir and Lucas from an adjacent corridor. Thorsdottir was obviously avoiding any passerbys, only showing herself because I had arrived. And Lucas... well I don’t know why Lucas was there. Knowing him, probably failing to flirt with Thorsdottir. Besides having a job as our helmsman, being persistently bad with women was the only other thing he was known for. My eyes went slightly narrow in his direction as I suddenly realized Lucas needed a new line of work.

Lucas noticed my gaze and stepped back a little. Since he was the shortest person present, it only made him look that much smaller. Thorsdottir, however, never stepped back from anything. She always placed her boldness forward as if there was no other way to carry it. I often commented how it was that trait that made her the center of any room and why no one even seemed to notice how she was the only person in the entire fleet with curly black hair. Well, it was more of a dark brown, but it looked black in most given lighting situations.

Everyone in the fleet had different shades of blonde. Myself being a light brown shade while Lucas’ was more chrome than the ship’s hull. It wasn’t a mystery to where her hair color

came from, one of her parents, it was just unusual since the rest of the human race was blonde in one way or another. The only other exception to the rule was poor Sigmond who went bald shortly after hitting puberty.

Thorsdottir gave an expression of confidence that signaled she was ready to face the contest ahead of us. The hex being it was the face she always made, so I wasn't quite sure about her mindset. I asked if her appearance matched her mood, just to check.

"Of course I'm ready," she responded. "I just didn't want to get poked by all the unearned egos one too many times. If that happens, there will be violence."

I heard Sigmond suppress a chuckle and I turned my head to give him a look as this was neither the time nor place for that. The only reply he gave was a smirk that suggested I should loosen up. My own expression was likely taunt and flushed, as if I had blood pressure issues. This was followed by a long exhale as I quickly counted to ten. Then telling everyone, except Lucas, to follow me into the meeting hall.

Reactions of heads turning their attention to the door were abound apart from just one of the captains. This wasn't our first meeting as a collective construct, so they knew better than to jump me with questions or whining. Letting me at least get to my seat at the head of the long oval table. I didn't even have to look up to know Dahlia, Captain of the Corpse Eater, was sitting on the other end, her fingers interlaced and resting just below her nose. I've never been able to tell if she does that to look callous, or if she's still mad I beat her out for the title of captain of captains. Either way, I made sure not to make eye contact.

I called the meeting to order and gave some vague congratulations on our successful landing. I stop short of giving a speech, starting the meeting by everyone giving me a general status report. Beginning on my right each captain gave the same basic statement that everything is nominal. Dahlia responded by slowly removing one hand from the interlaced position, giving a thumbs up, and returned the hand to its cradle. I could swear the silence made the room's oxygen content drop.

Shortly after, Elias, captain of the Clear Glass, stood from his seat to give his report. I already knew what he was going to say. It would not be quick, nor painless. I rubbed my temple and tried not to openly sigh. I failed.

"I want to remind everyone that my ship is still in orbit," Elias began, as if we all didn't already know his ship's current purpose. "In fact, it took me great pains just to be here as atmospheric entry is a burden on our shuttles. How they're able to complete the task at all is more of a happy fluke than thoughtful purposeful design. We've been working around the clock since getting into orbit and we're only eight percent complete with building the satellite network."

"How long until the merged database is online?" Sigmond asked.

Both Elias and myself turned to look at him as he leaned against the wall, making faces as if we didn't expect the interruption. The subject wasn't entirely out of his range of responsibilities, but I didn't see how it would be a priority. I have to remember to ask him later.

“Um, we’re still working on the communication grid,” Elias said, slightly unnerved. “The fleet will have to keep relaying messages from ship to ship for the next—,” Elias stopped and looked up as if he was reading the projection chart directly from memory, “—three days.”

I made a comment about line of sight now being an issue for communications. Our ships were purposely designed to be independent for prolonged periods of time if we were ever separated or lost to unforgiving space. With each section of this planet now claimed by a different ship, I will have to promote cooperation instead of only reaching out when they need something. I made mental notes of the faces who didn’t seem to mind being on their own versus those who seemed concerned over it. The only exception was Dahlia who didn’t betray an expression either way.

Side note, I noticed Sigmond and Thorsdottir bump hands after the response to his question. We have been friends for a lifetime, so it wasn’t incredibly odd. It just stood out because it made me feel they both had motives for knowing the grid’s progress. I trusted both of them with my life on a daily basis, so I made the conscious decision to ignore it and move on.

We had spent too much time on introductions, so I ended Elias’s commentary for him and proceeded with the agenda. The last couple of captains checked in without such a fuss and I was finally able to get the meeting moving along. Behind schedule, but at least we didn’t have a planet to rush off to.

After the pleasantries had passed, the meeting felt like a boiling pot that I struggled to keep a lid on. Everyone had concerns but most were non-immediate or overlapped. I knew it was the uncertainty that caused the rise in tension, but some were handling it better than others. Viggo, Captain of the Pale Horn, made the mistake of waving a finger at Thorsdottir. Thankfully, Sigmond was there to remind her it might not be the best idea to leap across the table and choke a captain.

“I’ve repeatedly stated it’s perfectly safe outside,” Thorsdottir stated. “Our foreparents have been sending probes here for over a hundred years. We’ve been slowly acclimating, tweaking our ship’s environments, for almost as long.”

“You can’t be sure that you didn’t miss something,” Viggo rebutted, clearly laying any possible mistakes at Thorsdottir’s feet.

“Yes! I can be sure,” she said, clearly upset as her face reddened. “In fact... I’ll be the first to step outside.”

Sigmond made a face of concern and disapproval, motioning to get her attention that she promptly ignored. I felt my features portray a similar concern. Not because she would be exposed to the outside world, but because she would have to stay out there until people were satisfied it was safe. What caused me to interiorly curse was that I couldn’t protest the idea, even as Sigmond made a glance in my direction to do so. It was the only way to make the captains happy enough to move on to the next important phase of our colonization.

I openly agreed that Thorsdottir will be sent outside once all the supplies she’ll need are ready. Viggo started to argue another point and I sternly told him to return to his seat. He continued to badger his words and I felt my blood spike sharply. This caused me to slam my fist

on the table, rattling everyone into silence. I wasn't known for losing my temper, so, when it happened, people took cautious notice.

Viggo sat down and shut his mouth. If he knew what was good for him, it would stay that way until I calmed down. So, for a few days at least. I must have been more visibly upset than I realized because my pair of friends gave me haunting looks. Once it passed, Thorsdottir had a half smile of acceptance. Sigmond could only be described as worried. I had no choice but to hold off any comfort until later as the meeting continued.

"I think we need to address the issue you're avoiding," Dahlia spoke, cutting through the silence with her low-pitched voice.

I had a sneaking suspicion of what she was on about, but gave a face as if I didn't. I furthered this by asking her to please bring whatever subject she wished to address to the table. I needed to make sure that she was the inciter to any controversy. Dahlia had a long standing habit of twisting a person's words along with their arms.

"The Earthers," she said plainly. "It's time for them to be awakened."

My response was a sigh and scratching my chin as if I was thinking. I wasn't thinking of a decision as much as I was reaching for an excuse. This fleet has transported a dozen people, kept in stasis, directly from Earth to our new home. Waking up a group of people who have been asleep for eleven generations might introduce a destabilizing factor in a situation that is already unstable. Especially if that group is revered by certain factions in the fleet. I told Dahlia that I hadn't made up my mind yet.

"For generations, we've had a standing order to wake them up once when we arrived on this planet," Dahlia said, being completely factual and utterly inconvenient. "Well, we've arrived."

I began to make several points to the fact. Mostly it was just a series of delaying tactics as to give reason to my uncertainty. That we should make sure everything is ready before starting the process of releasing them from their stasis. Besides, they've been asleep for hundreds of years, they can wait a few more days.

Dahlia sat back in her chair without much more to fight about. I had given her a vague timeline in which the Earthers will be awakened, both of us knowing I wasn't going to be able to put off the subject forever. The only thing that troubled me was that this was literally the only time she has brought up the subject of the Earthers in a captain's meeting. It crossed my mind that she might be trying to undermine me. I know she wanted my position, but, now that I have it, there's not much she can do about it.

The rest of the meeting continued by ironing out a few minor issues. Consolidating inventory reports and decentralizing the security force. At least that's what I recall from the last hour or so. I admittedly tuned some of it out. The only thing I remember for sure was Dahlia staring in my direction. Honestly, the act wasn't anything new for her but it didn't make it any less unnerving. I somehow had the feeling there was still something on her mind.

There were several sighs of relief, including mine, when the meeting was finally concluded. I didn't get up from my chair or utter any harsh words, but made several statements

that could be understood as though I was throwing them off my ship. They all left one by one out of the room to return to their respective ships. Thorsdottir made Viggo nervous as he crossed her path, the raven haired woman obviously stabbing him with her eyes. The only one not to leave was Dahlia, as she still sat on her end with her fingers still interlaced.

The only other people to remain were Thorsdottir and Sigmond, likely staying to make fun of me for how I handled the meeting. I was slightly grateful to Dahlia as the friendly bashing couldn't begin until she left. Not waiting for an invitation, she stood from her seat and walked closer to me. Hovering on the edge of my personal space level of close. She then looked at me, over to my two friends, then back over to me.

I looked over past Dahlia and ordered the pair to leave. They were the closest people to me in the known universe, but I still had to order them around in front of others. A captain, especially the captain of captains, must be a leader first and foremost. Not just for appearances, but it forever should be my state of mind. It crossed said mind that it might be why I only have two real friends.

Dahlia sat lightly against the edge of the table and looked up as if she was searching for words. I would let her make the first move as I looked up at her and felt a slight pain in my neck. I somehow always forget how tall she is until her stretched legs flex to bring her gaze well above mine. Her personal file says she's one hundred ninety-one centimeters, but I swear the boots she always wears adds a good dozen to that measurement. Her height is easy to forget if she's sitting or living on a ship parked on another continent. In the moment, however, she was anything but forgettable. Which might be what she wants.

After several moments where she was clearly considering her words, she said, "I think we make a good team."

I'm known for controlled facial features and, even as a child, was never prone to emotional outbursts. But I don't think even a statue could have maintained a straight face to her comment. Of all the possible statements I was predicting in my mind, that one wasn't even on the list. Dahlia glanced in my direction and grinned at my surprised reaction. Then I swear there was a hint of blush in her cheeks, not being sure what she was playing at.

"Or it might be more accurate to say I think we *can* make a good team," Dahlia clarified. "That bit about waking the Earthers. It's already on the minds of most of the fleet. If I didn't ask, someone else would have. And if not at this meeting, then at the next. At least this way you can get out in front of it before the issue reaches critical mass."

I made a statement of feigned understanding, showing that I didn't completely believe her. It was important to make her come to me, to further force the issue to find out if she was genuine or not. If she gave up too easily or started changing her reasoning, then I would know if she was being dishonest. I never knew Dahlia to be particularly well versed in the art of lying, but she was ambitious. She might be willing to commit one sin to feed the other.

"I know the Earthers are a bunch of unknowns and we just landed on an entire planet of unknowns, but most aren't going to see it that way. There's a cult of personality around them with those eager to see who they are and what they're like."

I told Dahlia that she wasn't wrong and asked if she had any suggestions.

"What is important but not urgent, you schedule," she said with some enthusiasm. "Tell the other captains you'll awaken them in say, five days. The network should be up and running by then, and you can use that as reasoning for the wait. Plus, Thorsdottir should be done with her camping trip and crews will start venturing outside. If anything goes wrong with either, you'll get at least one free delay before people start protesting."

Dahlia's comments started to sound like a pitch, as if she mentally prepared for this conversation. I asked her if that was the case.

"I didn't have much to do while I waited for the meeting to start. It wasn't like I was going to find anyone to make intelligent conversation," Dahlia said and lightly laughed to herself.

It was then I realized she was mildly flirting with me, using soft laughs and red cheeks to create the impression I had power over her. She was either bad at it, or was purposely trying to manipulate me. The dilemma I currently had was that both of those scenarios were equally possible. I thought that she was being so upfront because I finally earned her respect. Only to suddenly realize that was as likely as Sigmond suddenly growing his hair back.

"I'm just saying that we can work well together," Dahlia returned to her first point. "Taking the shuttle between our ships isn't too difficult, making more inclusive meeting between us entirely possible."

Was she suggesting that we have a stronger working relationship or we should start courting? Dahlia was usually far more direct than this, and it was frustrating to see this side of her. Not that I was really helping matters by deflecting her advances. I furthered this when I curbed her suggestion by commenting that we can just use the comlink.

"The fleet manifest system will grow increasingly outdated as time goes on, so we might as well encourage crew intermingling. Our teamwork could spearhead the effort to keep the fleet from drifting into different factions. Plus, I don't find your company entirely unpleasant."

The last statement made me audibly gulp, knowing it was the closest thing to showing affection Dahlia was capable of. It was a clear sign that she was genuinely trying to court me. Or, to be more accurate, to convince me that I should court her. And she was using our duties as captains to do it. Though, to be fair, it was the correct way to persuade me of anything.

"Just think about it," Dahlia finally said after a noticeable level of silence in the room.

Dahlia walked to the door, making me feel sheepish from my lack of words. Once it automatically opened, we could both see Sigmond and Thorsdottir standing in the hallway. Dahlia turned her head towards me, her eyes gazing up and down my frame, smirked, and then disappeared down the hall. My nosey friends stepped into the conference room before the door even had a chance to close.

Once the door did close, Thorsdottir asked in an annoyed tone, "What the hell was that about?"

I relayed the major points of the conversation. Mostly how Dahlia wanted a closer relationship, further suggesting that she probably just wants to share executive power. I still couldn't shake the thought that she might want something more romantic.

"I think it's a good idea," Sigmond said.

"You do?" Thorsdottir expressed the surprise we were both feeling. Sigmond's response came as unlikely given how he was the least trusting of the three of us.

"I do actually," Sigmond said towards Thorsdottir. Then, turning to me, he said, "I've been saying for the longest time you need to get laid."

Thorsdottir gave a disgusted snort. This was followed by the face she normally made when she wanted out of a conversation and said, "You boys can waste all day discussing pussy if you want, I have the first camping trip in a few hundred years to prepare for."

She turned for the door but I stopped her for a moment. Asking her when she'll be ready to leave. I made a point that we'll want to monitor her condition once she's outside and she should get the proper equipment from medbay to facilitate that. I tried not to sound like an overbearing father as I spoke. The sigh she gave when I was done signaled I had failed in that regard.

"Yes Dad. I'll be ready to head out first thing in the morning," she said, not turning back toward us. Then she left. Once she was through the door, I expressed that she would be ready sooner than I had expected.

"Oh, she's been packed for at least a week," Sigmond revealed. "She figured she would have to do something like this over a month ago and has been preparing for this moment ever since. I was just hoping it wouldn't come to this."

I made a face that must have conveyed a sense of hurt confusion. People in the fleet were born in batches, long periods of tight birth regulations segmented by sprints of excessive breeding. All in the name of population control. Those born in the same period tend to naturally form close relationships. The three of us were close even by those standards, and I felt hurt that she hadn't shared this with me. I must have verbalized this feeling as Sigmond gave me a face suggesting I was being overly sensitive.

"The last year has been crazy busy for you," Sigmond said in his own special brand of consoling. "Especially after you've been crowned God Emperor of the fleet and all that. You have enough to deal with without the petty problems of us mere mortals."

I rubbed my forehead in the headache that was creeping up on me. I knew he was right but that didn't help the feeling I was neglecting something important. I didn't have many friends but I did care about the two that have stuck with me. Nothing was worse than the feeling the two closest people to me were drifting away. Left to carry my heavy head alone. I don't think any of us wanted that. I tried to make myself feel better by suggesting that we should have dinner tonight.

"You've made that suggestion three times in as many months," Sigmond pointed correctly, seemingly having a near flawless memory. "You always end up canceling because of

critical fleet business.” Sigmond looked up and, before he even said anything, I knew he was going to change the subject.

“Speaking of months, this planet has two moons. Does that mean we have to redesign our calendar? I know the days are shorter and I can only assume this planet’s rotation around the sun is different as well.”

My head was now leaning into my palm, the headache reaching critical. Part of me couldn’t believe I had to verbalize that the fleet’s clocks are already set to the new hour system. And that a team has already been convened to sort out everything else. Not bothering to go into detail of how I had to reorganize different mathematical, logistical, and celestial cartography teams into a new group just to decide on how to count the weeks. I then suddenly started to wonder if they understood my request to name one of the new months after me was a joke.

I started to rub my temple so hard it was sure to leave a mark, and it was at that moment Seventeen walked into the room. Most people name their androids something more affectionate, like having a pet. With their serial designations having two digits, a hyphen, followed by a long series of letters and numbers, I simply used that first number as a nickname. Upon hearing my detached nature to my robotic assistant, some worry that it might somehow be offended. Not understanding that machines don’t care what they’re called. In fact, they care for nothing at all.

“I detected the increase in your blood pressure and brought suitable medication to alleviate the stress,” Seventeen commented while carrying two pills in its hand. It walked up to me without permission or command and held out the pills well within my reaching distance. I thought about protesting the need for the medicine, but then Seventeen would begin listing all the reasons I should take it. The androids of the fleet always acted in their users’ best interest, and they would annoy the hell out of you to fulfill that task.

Along with some water on the conference table, I took the pills. As I swallowed, Sigmond took the opportunity to make a comment, “I wish the androids weren’t so androgynous. I kind of like the idea of redesigning them to all look female.”

We’ve had this conversation before. Typically during off hours with what little alcohol the food processors can manage. He would tell us in a slurred voice of his buxom robot fantasies. I would roll my eyes and Thordittor would berate him as both an idiot and a pig. It was true that androids were sexless in every conceivable way, their bodies plain of features and only given humanoid form to serve their functions. The clothes they wore were woven directly into their frame, the only conceit in their design to modesty. But, if they were ever given removable clothes and a luscious female form, everyone would just assume Sigmond was fucking his android.

“It would just be eye candy. I would still prefer the real thing,” Sigmond said in a voice suggesting no one would believe him.

Not believing him, I dismissed him until needed, which would probably be in the morning to oversee Thordittor’s venture outside. He bowed slightly in a less than slight jab at my authority, then turned for the door. He paused with something else to annoy me with.

“Make sure of Dahlia’s intentions before proceeding with any kind of alliance. Or, universe forbid, a relationship. She’s a political animal. The most ambitious of our entire batch. Maybe even of the last several batches. I’m not saying she can’t be trusted. Just don’t trust her,” Sigmond said. Then he left without waiting for a response, giving me one more thing for me to chew on.