

Counting the Stars

*Four minutes to impact.*

The crew's voices trip over themselves in my ears, in a static-filled hysteria flashing in rhythm with the red lights and blaring alarms. Beneath me, the *Achilles* shudders and groans and I fight against the sway, struggling towards the control room. It lurches again, and I yelp as it slams me into the side of the hall. The lights flicker, the momentary darkness sending a spiral of fear down my spine. "Orion! Open the do—" The door creaks jerkily open, and I stumble, unsteady on my feet, into the back of Orion's chair. He turns to place metal hands against my elbows to steady me.

"Are you alright, Captain?" he says, voice dry and metallic.

I nod apologetically, leaning against the armrest once I get my footing again. I'm staring between the controls and Orion's emotionless face. A million questions filter through me and for a minute, I almost spit them out in a string of consciousness. Instead, I swallow them down, but the taste of my desperation stays behind. "You can't fix this." I barely recognize my voice. It's dull, lifeless.

Orion blinks pupil-less eyes at me, and for a minute, his lips purse. The display of emotion is enough to terrify me. "The ship sustained heavy damage during our entry to Mars' atmosphere and the parachute tore when I deployed it in attempt to slow our descent. It is in your best interests as well as my own that you find and collect Miss Alfaro and Mister Drechsler, Captain."

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His hand snaps out and catches my wrist when the *Achilles* jerks beneath us. We're plunged into darkness, leaving only the emergency lights circling the room, and the glowing white pits of Orion's eyes.

"Adelita, Noah, can you hear me?" I wait, but only static responds. Dropping my hand with a curse, I turn away from Orion. "How long do I have?"

His hand drops from my wrist and navigates the control panel. "You'll have exactly three minutes and fifty-eight seconds if you leave this instant."

I nod, turning quick on my heel and stumbling to the airlock only to pause. My hand hovers over the scanner. "What are our chances?"

Orion's fingers halt. His voice is quiet, "I will get the three of you off this ship."

"You are part of my crew as well. The four of us will survive. Is that understood?"

He gives me the ghost of a smile. "Yes, Captain."

*We meet the fourth member of our crew on a crisp October day, eight months before launch. Adelita's shout of Noah's name brings me from my daze. She pushes away from me, throwing her arms to wave at him as he speeds up to park on the other side of the parking lot. "Hey!" Her voice carries across the parking lot, through the red and gold leaves hanging wistfully from the trees surrounding the Jet Propulsion Laboratory. Adelita drags me across the parking lot to Noah, who fixes his glasses and meets us halfway between our parking spots. Immediately, Adelita attempts to fling an arm around his shoulders, but he evades and falls into step at my side instead. Despite the separation, their heckling of each other continues as we walk towards the building.*

*Once we enter the building, we're led down the hall by a tall woman with brown hair pulled into a tight bun, sharp green eyes and even sharper heels who introduces herself as Erin. She explains that the work on the android that will help us on our mission is finally complete. "He's one of the new Constellation models," she says, a sing-song tilt to her voice that suggests we're supposed to be impressed, but it's hard to be impressed about something that not been formally announced yet. "The line is especially for space exploration," she explains, "he'll be quite helpful on your Mars mission." She flashes a smile that's all teeth.*

*"Does he have a name?" asks Adelita, swinging her arms as she walks, eyes bright like a child on Christmas.*

*Erin flashes another quick smile. "You'll be free to introduce yourself to him when you see him."*

*Adelita glances at me, eyes wide and I dig my nails into my palm, focusing on the little pinpricks of pain and holding in the laughter that bubbles in my throat. Noah breaks away to walk at the woman's side, talking with his hands as he explores some of the finer details of our new crew member. Adelita reaches over, shakes my arm.*

*"I'm so excited," she says, and I think she's beautiful in the artificial light with that wide smile and unrestrained joy. This time, I do laugh, leaning to bump our shoulders together.*

*"For the android or for the mission?" I ask because it's a combination of the two that sends the sparks of excitement rushing through my veins. The launch is eight months away, and this puts us closer to counting the stars from the vast red surface of Mars instead of here on Earth.*

*Adelita smirks, picks up her hand and pokes me straight in the cheek. "Both," she declares, pressing a quick kiss to my cheek before pulling me into the room after Noah and Erin.*

*The room is cold, the vent in the corner of the room roaring, and brightly lit, as though a thousand spotlights are pointing towards the two men standing by the desk at the far end of it. One of them talks with his hands, swinging around a manila folder like it's a baseball bat and the other stands rigid and silent in a gray long-sleeved shirt stained up to the elbows in grease. The man with the folder stops when the door shuts and tosses the folder to the desk, marching towards us.*

*"Hey! You're the crew of the Achilles, yeah?" His smile is dog-like, lopsided and energetic and his blonde hair tumbles about his ears, a waterfall of curls.*

*Nodding, I step forward to meet him. His hand clasps mine, and his grip is firm. "Captain Robin Summers," I report, and his eyes light up. "This is Adelita Alfaro and Noah Drechsler." Adelita waves and rocks forward to shake his hand, a broad grin on her face. Noah's more subdued, introducing himself carefully.*

*"Yeah, yeah! I've heard of you guys. Top of your class, eh?" He looks at Erin for confirmation, and she nods, giving us a look that's almost maternal. Gentle and prideful. "I'm Max. It's nice to meet you guys. C'mon over and you can meet Orion."*

*The android turns at the sound of his name. He looks strikingly human, so much so that it takes me by surprise. His hair is a deep, midnight black, slicked back and short around the ears. He has youthful facial features, somewhere in his late twenties but without any signs of age. He's clean shaven and stands straight as a rod. The only thing out of the ordinary is his eyes. They're pupil-less and white, two endless pits of bright light. It's unnerving, the constant gaze that only vanishes for the milliseconds in which he blinks. On his shirt is a Star Trek pin that I'm assuming Max equipped for the laugh. When Orion greets us, his voice rumbles out, tired and robotic, but not unfriendly. "Crew of the Achilles, my name is Orion, and I'll be assisting you on your*

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*mission to Mars this coming July. Can I answer any questions about myself or the mission?"*

*Beside him, Max grins like a new father.*

*Adelita shakes his hand. "It's so nice to meet you! Let's save the questions for the nine months we're aboard the Achilles. We'll need something to talk about." She throws in a charismatic wink.*

*Orion dips his head once before he turns his head to me and I shake the offered hand. "Welcome to the crew, Orion." He nods but doesn't smile.*

*Three minutes to impact.*

The *Achilles* is a small ship with only a community room and connected kitchen, bedrooms, control room and other necessities. It feels huge with the timer ticking down in my head. My palms are clammy, and my breath wheezes harshly in and out of my lips as I move through connecting corridors. It sways and jolts beneath me, sending me stumbling into the walls on either side of me. Before launch, I had been told that I'd have to make hard decisions, that sometimes these things didn't work out, that crashes happen, that loss of life was a possibility. In those moments, I had always assumed it would never happen to us, but that was where we were always wrong. Orion's words echo dully in my head, but they're hardly palpable. Instead, they slip through my hands like sand.

I know we're not getting off this ship alive. I know I'll never hear my mother lamenting over her dying plants or my aunt preaching that 'they' isn't grammatically correct. That Noah won't be seeing his sisters and their stick figure drawings, that Adelita's father won't have a chance to call her 'his son' anymore. I know we're going to die here, in the ship we've memorized every corner of throughout the past nine months. I can call forth every interaction

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we've had in each of the rooms. I can remember playing chess with Orion, not having a chance and losing within five minutes and I can remember kissing Adelita after spending the last few hours going over the mission with Noah. I remember everything and nothing as I fight the tears welling in my eyes. I've never believed in much of anything, even after growing up with church-going parents and cheesy vintage-looking house signs that announce, 'bless this home and all who enter,' but now I'm hoping Adelita and I can at least find each other in another life.

Adelita and I find each other, and there's no time before she's crashing into me. Her arms fit around my shoulders, her face falling into my neck. She pulls back, and our lips crash together, a magnetic sort of electricity coaxing us together as if we'd never been apart. It tastes like salt and regret. I wish time would stop and let us have this moment, allow us to curl in on each other once more before the inevitable. I don't say anything when we part, listening to Adelita's gasping breaths, warm against my lips. She closes her eyes, leaning her brow against mine. "I love you," she says, and another terrible groan from the *Achilles* steals my response from my lips.

*Falling in love with Adelita is easy. It's a response to her smile. It's small and pretty and dazzling, one side tugging further upwards than the other, just enough to crinkle her eyes. It's the opposite of my I-don't-hate-you-I-just-have-a-resting-bitch-face smile. The one that doesn't curl enough at the edges but is polite enough to pass for genuine. It's in response to the stardust in her laugh. I swear I've memorized everything about her: the cursive 'carpe diem' on her hip, the way her soft brown curls look like a halo when she lays on her back. Under the dull school lights, her eyes are a deep, shimmery hazel, but out in the sun I know they're brighter than all*

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*the stars in the night sky. They're like a sunset meeting a grassy meadow, I think, and, for a moment I want to paint that meadow. Or maybe it's her I want to paint.*

*She tells me she loves that day, beneath those lights in a too hot college building. We're both twenty, and she's got stardust in her eyes, we're sitting in a dorm room, and it's three in the morning, and I can't even remember what we were doing before she said it. It feels like the stuff of movies, a pretty girl taking my face in her hands and telling me she's in love with me. I know she'd hate it if she knew the comparison in my head, they're the kind of movies she hates to cry over but loves to make fun of. I've seen her do both and each time, I can't help but laugh as she tries to pretend she's not emotionally invested.*

*I want to marry her at that moment, and every moment following. I should have asked her then.*

*Two minutes to impact.*

Noah finds us when the lights come back, dull and flickering. He's solemn, and his glasses are askew, Adelita fixes them silently. He helps me off the floor, and his hands shake. The three of us don't say a word for a long moment, and then Adelita grins.

"Hey, do you remember the first time we got drunk together?"

I snort, wiping my nose. "We lost you first."

"You were close behind her," Noah replies, jabbing my ribs and walking down the hall. He tugs up his helmet, and his scruffy blonde hair vanishes beneath it.

"They put up a valiant fight." Adelita's hand knots through mine like the wedding band I'll never get to buy her. I'm almost in tears again, but I hold it in as we follow Noah back towards Orion and the waiting control room. Adelita's hand stays in mine, and her shoulders lean

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into me. Noah's still talking in front of us, but I can barely hear him over my thoughts. They're turbulent things that tumble and crash, ricocheting through my head. A thousand memories surface with them, and I wonder if this is life flashing before my eyes.

*Noah invites Adelita and me to meet his sisters in the December two years before we're scheduled to leave Earth. Snow litters the ground, and a snowman sits in the front yard, welcoming us to the Drechsler household. A fluffy scarf flutters around his neck, a half-eaten carrot sticks out as a nose, and his eyes are divots in the snow rather than coal. A crinkled top hat is askew on his smushed, oval head and Adelita wanders over to fix it. By the car, I watch as the snowflakes pile into the creases of her messy bun. The front door of the one-story ranch swings open and from inside wafts loud Christmas music, crackling on a record player and loud, childish laughter.*

*Noah steps out onto the porch in a bright blue Christmas sweater, adorned with a white tree with flashing lights in red, yellow, green and blue. He doesn't look pleased to be wearing it and stuffs his hands into his pockets after flipping off Adelita and her loud laughter.*

*"Noah, where are your shoes!" I call over to him, gesturing hopelessly to his socks and the slosh he's dangerously close to stepping into. I think they have reindeer on them, but I can't tell from where I am.*

*"Shut up and get inside, it's cold."*

*"Go inside. We'll be there in a second!" Adelita calls over her shoulder as she hurries on back to the car to help me with the gifts. "Or~, you could help us bring in the gifts." I glance towards her, see the mischief in her eyes and tilt my head around her to warn Noah.*

*I'm too late to save him. He huffs and steps off the stair and straight into the snow with a loud exclamation. "God— Fuck—" He looks up, one foot in the air and face pulled into a grimace. Giggling, Adelita waves her fingers at him and sweeps up the bag with Noah's gift. I shake my head at her back as she moves up the walkway to join our friend.*

*Once we're both inside, we are greeted with the warm scent of pine needles and vanilla and Adelita's soft cooing from where she's holding her hand out to Noah's small black cat, Nox. The cat is looking back at her with a neutral expression.*

*Noah's father sticks his head out of the kitchen, smiling when he sees us. He tells us that Noah's talked a lot about us and Adelita grins, going over to shake his hand. At that moment, two six-year-old girls come sprinting back down the hall. One of them, her blonde pigtails swinging, launches herself at Noah, who shoves a present back at me to catch her in time. Noah's father chuckles as the other twin rocks onto her heels with a wide innocent grin, and Noah narrows his eyes at the child in his arms.*

*"This is Avery." He settles a hand on the girl nearest to him and then nods at the one in Noah's arms. "And that's Amelia."*

*"Sledding!" declares Amelia, throwing her arms up.*

*Noah blinks, huffs and glances at Adelita and me. "Do you guys mind? I promised them we could go sledding and they got it into their heads that—"*

*"Would I mind!?" Adelita is already moving towards us again. "Find your shoes, Noah! We're going sledding!" She grabs my arm. "Robin, come on, we gotta go sledding, we can't let them down!"*

*I laugh, glancing at the gifts in my arms and then helplessly at Noah's father. I know there's no arguing with Adelita and the pleading green eyes of the twins. That's how we find*

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*ourselves at the top of the hill in Noah's backyard. He's fussing over his sisters, checking that they've zipped up their coats, and their gloves are snug on their hands, that the two-person sled on the fresh layer of snow fits the two of them. "Just hold on, okay?" he tells them as he kneels at their side, patting the woolen hat on Amelia's head. Amelia grins and wraps her arms around Avery's back.*

*"Ready!"*

*One minute to impact.*

Orion looks up when we come in, and he stands in time for Adelita to throw her arms around him. He pauses, then settles around her, his hands pressed into her shoulder blades. I watch, and my shoulders tremble. Noah draws me closer, and I press my face into his chest. "What chance do we have?" he asks, and his voice rumbles in his chest. I lean heavier against him.

Orion doesn't let go of Adelita, rubs a soft circle into her shoulders. "We can fire the rockets," he says, "but I don't know if it'll work."

Adelita picks herself out of his arms and grins, curling her fingers into a fist, and bumping it against his shoulder. "It'll work!" Her optimism splices through me, and Noah's arms tighten once before he lets go and goes to Orion. Adelita takes his place, nuzzles her nose into my short hair. "It'll work, love." Her lips graze my ear, and I don't have the strength to tell her that I don't think it will. Instead, I smile, and it trembles on my lips. Still, I lean up to kiss her, slowly as if that would be enough to preserve the time we have left. When we part, her helmet goes on, and mine follows.

*When I come out to my parents, I'm a sophomore in high school, anxious and acne-ridden. They've been trying to understand since that day that gender is a spectrum. My mother catches on faster than my father, quickly transitioning to 'Robin' and gender-neutral pronouns. For at least a year after, my mother tells me, he still uses a name that's not Robin, the name he picked at my birth. However, by the time I tell them I'm going on the mission to Mars in 2050, my father is calling me Robin, and only Robin. Despite the bumps in our relationship and the arguments that have broken out over the years, my parents and I are close. My mother and I used to spend our weekends out at the park or walking the dog up and down the neighborhood, and my father and I watched movies until we both fell asleep on the couch, prompting my mother to come and wake us.*

*I think it's when I bring Adelita home for spring break that my mother warms up to the idea of having a gay child. She and Adelita are joking together within the first hour, leaving me on the counter with a cup of hot chocolate, watching Adelita give her baking tips. That night, while we lay in the dark, Adelita says, "I think it went well, I like her."*

*I remember pressing closer, tracing my fingertips up her arm. "She liked you too," I murmur into her neck, and I feel her responding laugh.*

*My father holds me back before we leave and tells me that I need to marry Adelita because he's never seen me smile as wide as I do around her. Before we go to launch, he hugs me and says: "I'm so proud of you, Robin."*

*Thirty seconds to impact.*

I remember the pictures we looked at before launch, the ones Adelita printed out and threw onto the table, the ones I used as references to paint the butterscotch of the Martian noon

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and the velvet purple sunsets. If I close my eyes, Noah and Orion's words fade away, and I can almost imagine us on the surface. The sun an eerie eye watching us trudge through the dust, collecting the rocks and the dirt from the cracks beneath our feet. I can imagine Orion standing tall even as the temperatures plunge and we hurry back towards the safety of the *Achilles*. I can almost taste the spaghetti we saved in celebration for surviving the landing. I can imagine us laughing, Adelita stealing Noah's glasses and Orion watching with something akin to amusement.

That thought jars me out of my reverie, and I breathe out sharply. Through the front window, I can see the endless expanse of red. Soon, it will swallow us up as if we'd never been here at all. Noah counts down, terrible numbers that have Adelita pressing closer to me as the *Achilles* groans and Orion fires the landing rockets, to slow us down.

I know it won't work and I wonder what it'll feel like to die.

*Fifteen seconds to impact.*

"Just hold on," Noah is saying to Adelita. His voice is tired and flat, and I can hear the failure in it, see the mirror of it in the strange slump to Orion's figure. I step to the android, and my hand settles on his. His fingers curl into mine as if on instinct.

"I'm sorry, Captain."

I smile, then lean down to wrap my arms around his shoulders. "It was an honor to have you on my crew."

His arms jerk up around me, and his fingers dig into my suit. "It was my pleasure." I think I hear a crackle of static in his voice, but I don't say a word. I squeeze him back, and

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Adelita meets me in the middle and leans our helmets together. I wish I could kiss her one last time, taste the lingering laughter on her lips. I tell her “I love you” and the words hurt, catching on the sob in my throat. Noah holds the both of us against his chest, and I pretend we’re back in the bar the day before launch.

*The neon bar sign flashes. The letters light up one by one and reflect in our glass bottles. Beside me, Adelita throws her feet up onto the table, quaking it, so the bottles knock together, and Noah leans back, away from the war zone with narrowed eyes. Adelita laughs, and I hear it at a distance. She reaches across, for either Noah’s support in her prior statement or his beer bottle; she doesn’t get either. Instead, he slaps at her hand, a sharp sound that startles me. I remember the vivid colors and Adelita’s arm around my shoulders, Noah’s stolen glasses slipping down her nose as she laughs at his unheard responses, half indignant, half defeat. I remember our words blurring together in an alcoholic dream, nothing truly mattering except for the starlit excitement rustling beneath our veins. The mission didn’t matter, only the toast we made at the start of the night, the added mission statement no one asked us for. That, I remember vividly. I remember the golden liquid sloshing in brown bottles, the clink of glass, our misplaced laughter and overlapping words: “Don’t fucking die.”*

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The wreckage smolders, sending great pillars of smoke upwards. Flames lick carefully at the damaged metal, curling protectively around the openings as dust batters against crooked doors. Even with the storm picking up, a terrifying goddess gathering dust in her arms, the landscape is silent. Within the twisted metal lies another wreckage. The human skin has torn away, metal and sparking wires tumbling free. There’s no blood or gore, at least not from this

member of the *Achilles*' crew. He lies, bent and numb, against the captain's chair. His head is bowed forward, the left side of his face battered and detached. The metal work strains as he shifts, rolling what's left of his jaw. It's for the best that he doesn't feel pain. Otherwise, he might have screamed. Instead, he too is silent as the storm screams against the flames, desperate to cover up the bodies before the silent survivor can see them.

It doesn't get there in time. Orion, one eye flickering on and off, stares at where the bones stick out at odd angles and blood runs out in rivulets around still fingers. He made himself forget that humans are so breakable, that their bodies break like the space suits that lay strewn around them like shattered white strands of memory. Orion moves, barely listening to the groaning of his metal joints, and crawls his way to the captain's side. He's glad he can't cry, glad because he knows he would. He lifts their head into his lap, stares down at the silver bone of his thumb as it trails across their cheek through the broken window of their helmet, wiping away the blood from the gash at their hairline. Something twists when he meets their gaze, sightless and pale. He wonders if that's how Robin saw his eyes. Distant, unfocused, terrifying.

He closes their eyes with fingers that would have trembled were he human. "Goodbye, Captain." He does the same for the other two, his friends. The images etch into his brain, and the twisted necks and shattered spines replace the happy smiles and roaring laughter in his memory. It's so hard to reclaim the charismatic wink Adelita shot him when they met when all he can see is the blood dripping from her nose and the awkward angle in which her torso is bent. He finds Noah last. He holds him a little tighter, wishing he could fix the shattered lenses of his glasses, wishes Noah would wake and smile. The smile that made him want to smile back. But there's only the blood and the silence.

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He counts the seconds he has left like they're the stars. He loses track and is forced to start over as the dust collects at his broken ankles and finds a home in the cogs of his brain.