

There is a light that never goes out
By Srijani Ganguly

She could see them below, waiting for her. There were about a hundred of them, young and old, who had gathered to welcome the famous Aalo Seehafen to their planet. They had known a month in advance about her arrival, and it seemed like they were well prepared. As the spaceship grew closer to the ground, she began to see banners that said, “Hello, Aalo!” and “Please, don’t box our star”. Her insides tingled at the second one and she got the feeling that this would be an emotionally draining stay.

When the screen to her right beeped, she shifted her focus to the inside of her ship. It was a message she had seen many times before—the Communications Department wasn’t exactly known for its originality—with only the name of the planet changing from time to time.

“Dear citizens of Flug,” this one read, “we applaud your existence on this planet for so many years. But as you know, the contract on your star is over and it is time for it to be returned to us, the Maintenance Department. If you require any assistance in travelling to your next home planet, please contact us and we will arrange a mode of transportation for you. It is to be noted, however, that our Transportation Department is extremely busy and there may be some delay in facilitating such a request. For further enquiries, please contact the Miscellaneous Department.”

After relaying this message, Aalo usually got three kinds of reactions. The first was anger, when the citizens would gang up and try to kill her. It was pointless, for she was immortal and incapable of being wounded. The second reaction, the one Aalo wished most citizens would opt for, was acceptance. These were the people who had already made plans to shift to a nearby solar system, and had stayed back only to say a final goodbye to the star that had helped them grow. The third scenario, the one she despised the most, was when the citizens brought the

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youngest and oldest of their kind to appeal to her emotional side. They were never successful, but it did make her feel very awkward.

These Flughafens seemed to be the third kind. When she set foot on their planet, they rushed to envelop her in hugs. Then they shoved their babies in her face, which was quite a feat because she was 6 ft 7 in and the tallest of Flughafens was 5 ft 4 in. “Please don’t box our star, you’ll be killing us!,” some wailed, while others told her to think of her own home planet. “How would you feel if someone did that to your solar system?” they asked.

She did know how it felt, actually. It was many many years ago. She was still a child then, when her uncle had told them that their star’s contract was up. Her eyes had welled up and she had asked, “Can’t you stop it?”

“No,” her uncle had said, smiling sadly. “Everyone has a purpose in life, Aalo. And this star has fulfilled its destiny. It would be wrong for it to continue.”

“I keep telling you, Aalo,” her brother had said then. “Don’t get too attached to the universe around you. Eventually, everything will die or stop working. What will you do then?”

Her brother, Bhor, was much older, closer to their uncle in age, and often told her things that dampened her spirits. She remembered the time she had asked about their mother, and he had told her, dispassionately, while peeling wakux for their dinner, “Our mother opted to retire from the universe soon after your birth. I don’t think it had anything to do with you, she just felt like her time had come.”

He had proceeded to place the naked wakux in cold water, before adding, “Someday you’ll feel the same way.”

No, I won’t, she had thought. “What happened when she retired? Where did she go?” she had asked.

“I don’t know what happened to her physical form, but I believe that her consciousness merged with the universe,” Bhor had replied, raising his voice above the screams of the wakux who were now drowning in the water.

“Do you like the food, Aalo Seehafen?” the Flughafen president asked her, and she came back to the present. She smiled at him. “Yes, it’s very good. My brother used to make wakux, too, but he used a different preparation.”

“Oh,” the Flughafen said. “I had no idea that it grew in other parts of the universe...”

“It used to,” Aalo replied.

The president looked thoughtfully at her. A few seconds later he lowered his voice and asked, “Is there really nothing you can do?”

“No, I’m sorry... I know it must be hard for you, but I can’t do anything. And I must thank you all for your hospitality, for welcoming me into your home knowing what I’m about to do.”

The Flughafen raised two of his four hands at her in a sign of apology. “I’m sorry about the scenes that greeted you when you landed. I told them not to do that. But they bypassed my orders and did what they pleased. We feel no enmity towards you. Truly.”

She nodded her head. “I understand,” she said.

They proceeded to eat their food in silence for a while, both looking up from their food from time to time to watch the citizens who were dancing at the centre of the room.

“Have you decided where you want to go?” she asked him, staring ahead.

“Yes,” he replied. “It’s a planet that’s two light years away. Most of our population has already settled down there. The people here,” he pointed at the dancefloor, “thought that perhaps they could convince you.”

Aalo didn't say anything, and after a few minutes the president asked her, "So, when are you going to... you know?"

"In two days' time," she answered, looking back at him. "I have to visit the sole citizen of Bahn and relay the department's message to him as well. And then, then I'll go up to your star."

She saw him scrunch his face for a second, as if he was about to cry, but he recovered and shook his head instead. "You'll have an interesting time at Bahn, I'm sure," he told her and attempted to laugh.

The next day, Aalo landed on a small brown planet. There was no wind, no vegetation as far as she could see. But up ahead, she saw a small house. She walked up to it, wondering how the Bahnhof survived in this place. She knocked twice on the door and heard a strange sound come in from the inside. Did he have a pet?

The door opened then, and she saw the lone Bahnhof for the first time. He was so very unlike his neighbours. Nearly 6 ft 2 in tall and soft green in colour where they were red, he almost looked like a resident of her own former planet.

"You seem confused. Why?" he asked Aalo, and then gestured her to come inside.

She spied a huge ball of green fur in the corner, and deduced that it was the source of the sound she had heard before. It was bouncing in the same spot now. She dragged her eyes from it and then looked at the Bahnhof again.

"You look a lot like my kind, except for your colouring and your height. I mean, I don't..." she said, but he interrupted her.

"It's okay," he said and laughed. "You're right, I have Seehafen blood in me. My father was from your planet and my mother was from Flug. When he married her it caused quite the

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scandal. They decided to settle down here, in desolation, but they visited Flug many times over the years. They were quite happy, I think.”

He paused, and then began again. “The very next day after mother died, father decided to follow suit and he retired. I travelled for a long time after their deaths, and then one day, I found Beyraal in a remote corner of the universe,” he said and walked over to the furball.

He picked Beyraal up and smoothed the top of his head. “I decided to come back then. After all, this is my home. Sorry, *was*,” he said.

Aalo found herself unable to speak, and then she remembered the purpose of her visit. She cleared her throat and began, “Dear citizen of Bahn, we applaud your existence on this planet for so many years. But as you know, the contract on your star is over and it is time for it to be returned to us. If you require any assistance in travelling to your next home planet, please contact us and we will arrange a mode of transportation for you. It is to be noted, however, that our Transportation Department is extremely busy and there may be some delay in facilitating such a request. For further enquiries, please contact the Miscellaneous Department.”

When she finished, she saw that the Bahnhof was straining to control his mirth. A second later, he burst out laughing. “Do you say that to everyone? How do they react?” he asked.

“They certainly don’t react like this, they don’t laugh at me,” she answered, feeling a smile threatening to spread across her own face.

“Are you hungry?” he suddenly asked her. “Or, have my neighbours overfed you in an effort to delay the inevitable?”

“I wouldn’t mind some food,” she said, chuckling. “And you’re right, they did try to stuff me with all sorts of dishes.”

The Bahnhof smiled and placed Beyraal back on the ground. “Come,” he told her, walking towards what she presumed was the kitchen. The green furball hopped along with them.

“Can I ask you something?” she asked, as he chopped some yoltec.

He nodded, bending down to feed a piece to Beyraal.

“You don’t seem that... sad about this situation. Where are you going to go?” she said.

“Beyraal and I are going on an adventure after you leave. We haven’t decided where to go yet, but we’ll figure it out. As to your first question... well, it is what it is. It’s out of my hands, so I’m not going to worry about it,” he said.

There was another question at the tip of her tongue then, but she bit it down. It would be against protocol. Don’t interfere, she told herself. But she did, anyway. After the meal, when she was readying to leave for the star, she asked him if he wanted a lift.

“What about my own spaceship?” he asked her. They were standing at the doorstep.

“You could just leave it here,” she suggested.

“Okay,” he answered.

He didn’t take much time to pack his belongings, only placing his clothes and Beyraal’s bowl and toys in a bag. Aalo, in the meantime, decided to befriend the pet. She slowly walked up to him and extended her right hand in a friendly gesture. “Hello, Beyraal,” she said, and the furball hopped into her arms. She combed her hands through his soft fur and bent her head. She closed her eyes and breathed his scent in, and it instantly made her feel warm and happy.

“You’re a good boy,” Aalo spoke into his fur.

When the three of them were inside her spaceship, Aalo suddenly realised that she had never asked the Bahnhof his name. Fearing that it was too late to ask for such basic information, she discreetly went through the records on the screen in front of her and found his name - Orko

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Bahnhof. She cursed herself for being so careless; she should have gone through his background information before she even visited him. But her mind had been preoccupied with the Flughafens' plight back then.

“Are we going up to the star right now?” Orko spoke up suddenly, and Aalo quickly brought up the route ahead of them on the screen.

“Yes,” she said. “I can drop you off to a nearby solar system after that. You're not in a hurry, are you, Orko?”

He smiled. “So you do know my name!” he said, and then added, “No, I've got all the time in the universe. And, frankly, I'm intrigued by how you're going to box the star.”

Aalo had been intrigued, too, the first time she had witnessed the spectacle with her own eyes. It was her birthday and her uncle, as a treat, had taken her along on a trip. Together they had visited each planet in that particular solar system, all three of them, and then flown towards the star.

“What will happen to it afterwards?” she had asked him, while he had been placing the vacuum machine next to the star, and he had replied saying that after each trip he went back to the Maintenance Department in the Andromeda galaxy and handed over the little red box that contained the star to them. It was then the job of the Energy Department to clean the star, to fix it and update it. It was a very lengthy process, he told her.

“And what about the planets?” she had asked, worriedly, having seen her own home shift from warm and welcoming to cold and dry. Years had passed by, but she hadn't been able to adapt to her new home or planet yet.

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Her uncle had taken his time answering her. “In time, they will be destroyed to make space for newer planets and satellites. I’m sorry, Aalo, but that’s the way of the universe—the old is always replaced by the new,” he had told her.

“And that reminds me, Aalo,” he had added, looking into her eyes. “I wanted to ask you a question... how would you like to do my job?”

“You’re not retiring are you?” she had asked him fearfully.

“No, no,” he had quickly replied. “It’s just... I’m tired of travelling and all I want to do is settle down on a small planet and grow my own garden. I know it sounds stupid-”

“No, I understand,” she had answered. “But why are you asking me? Wouldn’t Bhor be a better fit for this job? He understands how the universe works a lot better than I do.”

“That may be true,” he had said, “that he understands the functioning of the universe a lot better. And that’s why I’ve forwarded his name for the position of the next Installer. He will go to solar systems that are under construction and set up new stars. He won’t have to meet any people, because the planets won’t even be ready for habitation. All he’ll have to do is work on the star... Your mother was an Installer too, did you know that?”

Seeing her shocked expression, he had continued, “I’m sorry I wasn’t a better uncle. I wish I hadn’t gone on so many trips, and that I had told you more about your mother. Bhor distanced himself from her the moment she declared she was going to retire. He is a lot like her...”

“And what about me?” she had asked.

Her uncle had smiled and said, “Why, you are better than all of us. And that’s why I want you to take up my job. The people I meet are lost and in despair, they don’t know what they’ll do

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after their star is boxed. They need someone to calm them, someone, like you, who can give them hope.”

“What’s that?” Orko asked suddenly, pulling Aalo back from her thoughts. It had been days since his star had been boxed, and both of them had conveniently forgotten that Orko and Beyraal had to be dropped off at another solar system. They were on the way to the Maintenance Department now, but it seemed like a detour was in the cards for them.

“They are constructing a new solar system over there,” she replied. “Do you want to see it?”

She had found her brother in seconds upon entering the system. It looked like he was nearly done installing the new star. She pulled up next to him, and then attached a walkway to his spaceship. There was no need to ask for permission; they worked in the same department, after all.

It had been years since she had seen him -- they had last met at their uncle’s retirement party—but he still had the same demeanour. He turned around with a scowl on his face when she entered his spaceship with Orko and Beyraal, but the lines smoothed to a neutral expression upon seeing her.

“And who is that?” he asked, pointing at Orko.

“He is a Bahnhof, I’m giving him a lift,” she replied, earning an eyebrow raise from Bhor.

Later, when Orko and Beyraal were off to a corner of the spaceship from where they could admire the construction of a planet, Bhor asked her, “Is this wise? You know it can’t last. Don’t grow too attached to him-”

But Aalo interrupted him. “I don’t care,” she said. “I know what I’m doing.”

Bhor was about to say something more when Orko called them. He sounded excited, so they gave in and walked over to him. In front of them, through the window, it was a sight that took their breath away. A new, pristine world. Green in parts but mostly blue. There was so much beauty in it, so much potential. And now that it was being lit from all angles by the floating flashlights, it appeared to emit an almost ethereal glow.

They stood silent for a long time before Bhor spoke, still staring ahead. “I remember the first time I had seen a planet being born. Mother had taken me along for one of her trips, and I had been so excited about everything,” he said, turning to look at her.

He paused, trying to frame the next sentence in his head, while Aalo looked intently at him. He had an odd expression on his face, and it took her a second to realise that this is what sadness looked on him. It turned his lips a darker brown and his ears a lighter green.

“Sometimes I envy you,” he finally said, and then turned his attention to the view outside again.

Orko, with Beyraal in his arms, looked quizzically at her and she just shrugged her shoulders in answer. But later, when her brother was checking the controls in preparation for the installation, she sat down next to him and laid her head on his shoulder.

“Do you miss her?” she asked.

“Every day,” came the reply.