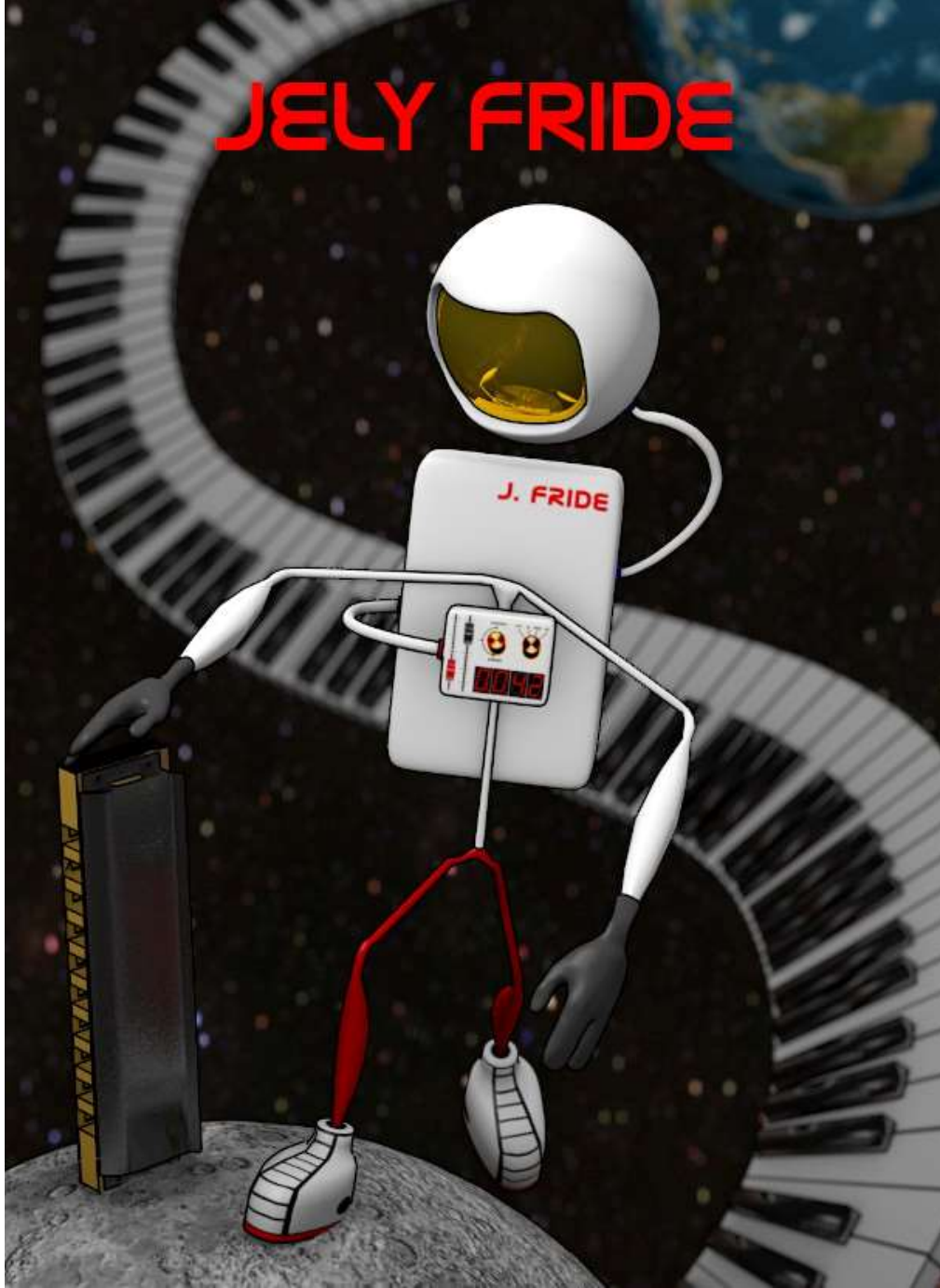


JELY FRIDE



Jely Fride

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

I'm a space travelling piano player from the future. I do stuff and stuff happens to me and I write it down and send it back in time for you to read about.

LICENSE BLOCK

This book is open source, copyleft protected, GNU licensed, or something like that. Not sure how that works with a book but basically you can freely copy it, modify it, make derivative works (I'd really like to read an evil Jely Fride storyline) whatever you want. The only thing you have to do is credit the original- this book, and your work has to be open-sourced the same way.

This author hasn't been born yet, and given the possibility of multiverses and such, may never actually be born. I'm a potentially non-existent piano player from a maybe future. So not sure how I'd even collect on payment. For all intents and purposes this book was written by no one and is in the public domain. But seriously- the evil Jely thing would be great- somebody get on that.

PREWORD

This is not literature. Don't expect too much and you might enjoy some of it. If you find grammar, spelling, formatting, continuity errors, gaping plot holes, or generally unreadable nonsense in this novel, it's not the writing, you're just unfamiliar with the literary traditions of the 25th century. This is brilliantly composed and flawlessly edited- in the context of 25th century literary traditions, even though again, this is not literature.

FOREFACE

The universe has a mean streak like you don't want to know. Unless you have business there, it's best to stay out of the universe entirely. If you have to exist, life is best when you're safely gravitationally bound to your favorite slice of planet, enjoying a fresh breath of whatever you breathe. The further you go from there, the further the universe goes out of its way to remind you that you don't belong. But it's nothing personal, it's just physics.

My passion demands that I venture out into the universe, otherwise I wouldn't go anywhere near that place. I'm a piano player. I bring my music to folks who like to hear me play. I love music so much that I wanted the whole universe to have an opportunity to hear mine. Fortunately for me, most of the universe has a tin ear and doesn't know I'm not that great of a musician.

I've spent some time contemplating my own statistical chances of survival in space, but

I'm not a statistician so I consider my thoughts on the subject unqualified and not worth dwelling on. I do take precautions. I'm not suicidal. For instance- I never travel into space without a spaceship. I don't always use the buddy system but when I travel alone I bring several good books and that's just as good.

Okay, so I really don't take precautions at all. I guess I figure space is as space does and spending too much time trying to be safe in it is a bit like training really, really, hard to fight in a titan-class cave-bear boxing league- you cannot train at all and do just as well. Space has a knack for defying every preparation and destroying every attempt life makes to exist in it.

Acceptance is really the only path through space. It isn't safe and it usually ends up in horrifying, traumatic death- but it is usually quick. If you don't want to die, stay on your own planet and wait to die there.

My travels have taught me a few tricks for keeping out of the most easily preventable scenarios of demise. Knowing how to navigate complex gravitational fields of twisted dark matter is a valuable skill. A broad understanding of life-support, communications, and propulsion systems is essential. Respect for the power of nature and the fragility of life are the best tools for improving your odds in outer space. Of course, I possess none of these. I only have a basic competency in space technology, abstract misunderstandings of natural forces and phenomena, and little respect for anything. I do have an undeniable streak of luck though. I leave 'luck' open for qualification between the good

kind and the bad kind. I still wonder if a few of my survival miracles might have involved less net suffering if I'd had the good sense to just die. The problem is I usually don't get a choice. Things just happen. It's crossed my mind that the universe is keeping me alive despite my constant, oblivious attempts at self-destruction, possibly for some sinister purpose.

I don't take too much time out of my day to ponder maliciously motivated existentialism, though I do like the sound of the phrase. I love playing piano, and it would take a lot worse odds than surviving in space to keep me from it. Space called me, if I hadn't answered I would be a bitter husk of an Earthbound spaceman. I already feel more like a tourist than a native when I visit my home planet. I guess I always felt that way. 'Spaceman' is a breed that crosses the boundaries of gender, species, and physics. Space calls, you answer. From Earth, from Mercury, from the Libra Galaxy, you answer.

Deep down I know I'd have found my way out into space even if the piano had never been invented. Space called to me through music, so I followed it, and just grooved with the verse.

At least that's what I like to tell myself. It's a lot more poetic than admitting that I left Earth to blindly chase after a woman I had no business with in the first place.

CHAPTER ONE

Lazy Susan's

By the time I left Earth I'd been around long enough to be confident, but too long to be cocky. I had no serious ties and a music career that at least kept me out of the soylent lines. I got paid to play piano whenever, wherever, and however I wanted. At least that's what I liked to tell myself while I was playing piano whenever, wherever, and however I could just to scrape by.

I had a decent little life going on Earth, at least from the standpoint of physics, biology, and debatably- psychology. Earth is easy. Most of the traditions that beckon a man into the final frontier were never my bag- adventure, glory, curiosity, wealth, intelligence, competence. The lure that dragged me out into cold, dark, infinite space was a woman. Specifically, a woman from the Moon. I met her at a little bar in a big city called New Sydney.

Back then small bars were all I played. Earth doesn't have a huge market for solo, acoustic entertainers- what with all the digital cyber-raves and anti-gravity dance clubs. Most entertainers are more about sex and noise than music. There are plenty of exceptions of course. My favorite barbershop-jazz-yodeling quartet is from Earth. I should qualify their status as my favorite by clarifying that they are, in fact, the only yodeling barbershop-jazz-yodeling quartet, ever. A few old-school musicians like me still roam the planet in search of work, but the expectations of hyper-techno-entertainment and

the new breed of digitally enhanced cyber-rock stars make analog showmanship a tough sell.

For all the hip coolness my current intergalactic fame is based on, back on Earth I was mostly considered old-fashioned, even obsolete. Fortunately for me, oldies piano rock is still in style, or at least tolerated, in a few backwards corners of the planet. The ancient Earth classics were my bread and butter. I played my own versions of classics by Stevie Wonder, Elton John, Tori Amos, Ray Charles, Tom Waits, Andrew W. K., and of course the wise and just W.A. Yankovic. These well-respected musical prophets of old were still given some reverence and I shaved an easy if unromantic living on nostalgia for their compositions. At the time I was gigging pretty steadily, but I knew eventually I'd run out of bars for people to get bored with me. I had too much ambition for Earth, or not enough of the right brand of ambition. Either way, I wanted to start a fire like the one the late William Martin Joel so adamantly proclaimed his innocence of.

~~~ ***ONE.1*** ~~~

I'd booked enough regular gigs in New Sydney to make it my home base. I wouldn't say I was a local celebrity, but people knew me. Not very many people knew me, but the few that did know me qualified as people.

New Sydney is a biggish city with ancient roots. It was once a prominent port city on the southern gulf of the North American continent, near the regional capital Bloody

Shank. It was once known as Old New New Orleans, but after a brief occupation by Australia and Canada in World War 4.5b the city was completely obliterated. It was then rebuilt into a 1/12 scale replica of the city and obliterated again in the production of a sci-fi action film. The film's success led to the site being rebuilt into a full-scale model that served as a tourist attraction called *Sydney Quantum Plastics Presents: Old New New Old New Orleans*. This lavish theme park eventually grew into the proud city of New Sydney.

I was booked at Lazy Susan's Hotbox on the eve of the quadrennial Moon Ball. The Moon Ball was a solar system wide celebration of the reacquisition of Earth's moon after a mad scientist tried to steal it about a hundred years ago. He rigged it with a big rocket and a steering wheel and made a pretty good run before he got caught. Each year the traditional celebration is ornamented by a giant moon skewered on a pole that drops slowly, reaching the bottom just at midnight. This is said to honor the brave men and women who reeled the moon back in, to celebrate gravity, and to remind other would-be mad scientists of how the thief was eventually executed.

It was a clear, beautiful night with a moon so full it was overflowing. Susan's had a giant skylight and arrays of mirrors that kept the dance floor lit with the warm, even glow of the moon for as long as it would hang in the sky. I was supposed to play some oldies and MC the countdown to midnight. It should have been a simple gig. Around nine o'clock I played an

hour long set to warm up and then took an hour off to drink and mingle, but mostly drink. Ferrar, the bartender, manager, part-owner, and occasional bouncer, was an old friend and a member of my sparse but dedicated fanbase. She was busily mixing several drinks behind the bar, including my extra-dirty martini. She fumbled a glass and turned to stare at the entrance. "Moonies" She mumbled distastefully. She flung several drinks across the bar like a poker dealer. The drinks halted and sloshed in the relative vicinity of their intended patrons, retaining a respectable quantity of their original contents. "Moonies indeed." Remarked a male guest, the opposite of distastefully, but not exactly tastefully. He raised his glass to me in a traditional male salute to the presence of attractive females. I turned to look, and then confirmed his salute with an overly enthusiastic thumbs-up to signify that I too was a male and that I had also noticed the presence of the aforementioned females.

I had never seen a Moonie in person. They were tall and pale with almost grey skin but somehow still exuded warmth and light. Moonie women in particular were praised as graceful beyond any explanation. It really is impossible to explain how a person born and raised on the moon, which has only a sixth Earth's gravity, could even stand or walk on Earth, let alone be graceful in it, so why bother-just don't think about it too much.

A dozen high-fashioned Moonies glided through the bar. They moved with such unimaginable linearity that I had to check the

floor to make sure it hadn't iced over underneath me and they had skated in. They floated towards a few tables in the corner. They were mostly women with two or three excessively lucky dudes who served as their escorts and prevented the group from exceeding legal standards of babe-density. A particularly stunning young Moonie woman was clearly central to the group. Everyone else seemed to orbit around her. She was astonishing. Her hair was wild and blonde as a solar flare. She had porcelain skin and eyes that glowed like they'd soaked up the shine from the moon and sweetened it with electric honey. Her entourage buzzed in attendance. It was clear she was something special to them, and it could well have been for looks alone. All the Moonies were angelic, but she was an empress of angels. I stared at her unabashedly until one of the Moonie men gave me notice- he stood in my eyeline glaring. I glanced around, futilely pretending that I hadn't been staring and gave him an awkward thumbs up for some reason.

As soon as he looked away, I was back at her, soaking in her radiation like a leaf. I could hear someone faintly calling my name - momentarily in my mind it was her voice calling...

"Jely. Hey, Jely." I'd never heard my name pronounced with such clarity and breathy lust.

"JELY!" Abruptly the voice changed into Ferrar's familiar contralto. As usual a mercilessly stiff smack on the top of my head followed my unacceptably slow response time.

"What?" I snapped.

"You want to do your job, or you want to stare at my customers all night?" She asked maliciously. I hate it when people call playing piano my 'job'.

"I want to stare at your customers all night." I turned my attention back to antisocial voyeurism. The Moonie queen was obscured by one of the men leaning over her. He whispered something in her ear. She passed her fingers absently over his collar. I was grounded by the display of familiarity. After a moment I remembered that I was a hopeless, cynical bachelor and that historically, gawking at beautiful women has never provided lasting solace to cynical bachelors.

"Alright..." I said. With substantial effort I removed myself from the bar stool and took up my post on the piano bench. I introduced myself again to the tiny audience over a loose progression of unenthusiastic pokes and jabs at the piano keys that barely passed for chords.

"Hello ladies and germs - my name is Jely Fride and I'm here to entro-tain you all on this lovely Moon Drop Ball Eve with some of your favorite old Earth tunes." A round of applause came from the Moonie table.

"I'd like to thank Susan's for having me back to host this shindig. And I'd like to thank you all for coming out to celebrate with us on this festive occasion. I know I'd miss the moon if a mad scientist ever made off with it- so let's all raise our glasses to the brave men and women who kicked that guy's ass before he got away

with it. Everyone be sure to tip your bartenders and piano players. Thanks a lot and enjoy the show!" After a few claps and an obligatory shouted request for Freebird, I was jamming.

~~~ *ONE.2* ~~~

Something in the air told me this was a good night to play some prehistoric Randy Newman and really take it out there. I funk'd up a few old standards and filled time with uninspired renditions of songs written before my great grandparents were conceived. I was having a good night but it's tough to really get into a set when it's all other people's songs. In the past I'd tried to work my original tunes into my sets every way I could think of. My best compositions had only ever received applause for the sheer fact that they were over.

The only inspiration in the room was from a pair of gleaming eyes that I caught glimpses of every few songs. Her crushing gaze was hell on my concentration. When our eyes met it was more of a marriage than an introduction. I melted right into my bench and had to look away for fear of losing the beat entirely.

By the second half of my set a few more folks had rolled in. They kept Ferrar busy at the bar. I wanted to see the crowd dance, so I cranked up the drum machine- yeah, yeah, I know- shut up- it's easier than dealing with a band. Every musician wants people to dance to their music, it's the best way to be sure they're really feeling it. There wouldn't be anyone on

the dance floor until all the bar stools and tables were occupied. Bars follow the same basic rules as atomic physics. Electron and bar patron interactions only occur when all stable positions are occupied. Of course, alcohol and other intoxicants can serve as catalysts, and maybe the fact that it was Moon Drop Ball Eve gave the bar's physics a little kick in the pants too.

After a few false starts a small pack of regulars made a move to the dance floor. They swayed in an awkward bunch to the best rendition of Ben Harper's *Burn One Down* ever played on a piano. Before long two of the Moonie queen's lesser satellites roamed onto the floor. Their thin bodies twisted and flexed in the smoky bar light. They danced with abandon, whipping and curling to my syncopated rhythms with uninhibited feminine grace. The dance floor gained momentum and by the second half of my set everyone was having a blast, drinking and grooving all over the bar.

I'd never seen Susan's so wild. The cherry on top was that the moon goddess herself finally got up and started dancing. She got up during *Gettin' Grown*, it's a tough jam to ignore. I had a great view from the stage, and it was becoming obvious that she was making an effort to keep a line of sight between us. She was a little taller than the other girls and with a thicker base. Her moves were more solid too. She didn't just flap around quite like the other girls. Her moves had bounce.

I always had trouble with lyrics and distraction doesn't help. I think a few of the lyrics were replaced by 'come on, get down',

'uh-huh, yeahs' and similarly unoriginal adlibs. She was moving. In the course of human history there has never been anything sexier than a woman being sexy to music, especially when you're the one making the music. It's a singular phenomenon you either understand you or you don't. Through millennia upon millennia of human existence, only we few rockers and rollers know what it means to move a woman with music. For the uninitiated, essentially it improves your chances of getting some. There's actually a lot more to it but that's a deep enough explanation for most purposes.

I devoured every photon of light reflecting off her heavenly body as she spun, dipped, popped and locked all over the dance floor. Processing so many photons with such intensity made my brain do a tightrope walk between playing the beat and enjoying what it was doing to her. I've never had great balance... Oops, crap.

Just like that I missed a note, a really important one. I sliced a chord really wrong. It felt like an artery. We few rockers and rollers also know what slicing that chord feels like. It's not a good feeling. I recovered well though. The really stupid thing is that I kept looking at her for a microsecond too long after the hit. I was too damn obvious. Was I drooling? Yep, that's drool, but we'll just call it 'rock juice'. *Get a hold of yourself Jely!* When I looked back at her she was smiling. A wide, beaming grin, like I had come home from war. Oops, crap, lost the beat again.

I have a little piano playing robot in my head, and it provides what limited musical discipline I have. I battled that piano robot for glimpses of her. The robot was getting pissed and it wouldn't let me look anymore after I had dropped the beat twice. The piano robot in my head is a harsh mistress. When I finally allowed myself a glance she was giggling and tossing coy glances at me as her ladies in waiting tossed lines of gossip back and forth among themselves. She's totally into me, right? Yeah, for sure, that's what that means- I think.

About a quarter to midnight, I went back into overly enthusiastic host mode. A few additions to the crowd had drizzled in over the past hour, presumably people that had been kicked out of other bars since I was by no means the premier entertainer in the area. For once, Lazy Susan's Hotbox accumulated enough warm bodies to justify the name. I turned on the house lights and invited everyone to come up near the stage for a sing-along before the ball dropped. In general, I think of sing-alongs the same way I think about outbreaks of hemorrhagic fever, but I was drunk enough to let myself enjoy the musical carnage. More importantly, the Moonies had moved closer to the stage, and I had a great view of my favorite eyes in the room. She was drinking a dirty martini. So was I. Two people drinking martinis in a bar, what were the odds? It felt like fate.

After the song everyone settled in for the big countdown. Most of the Moonie girls had found a willing lad in the bar to hang onto. Everyone was getting paired off for the

obligatory Moon Drop kiss. It was a well-loved tradition, despite the fact that it made no sense in context of the supposed origins of the celebration, but what the hell.

I rambled on about how great and wonderful everything and everybody was, as is the solemn duty of any overly enthusiastic host. Through my semi-coherent discourse on the virtues of tipping entertainers and servers, I couldn't help but notice that my moon goddess was unpaired. It was hard not to notice because she owned the only eyes in the room not gazing longingly into someone else's. I had her full and passionate attention.

Her look propagated inside me like Martian nano-pox or another science-fiction sounding variation on a terrible disease. She took hold of every cell in my body, bending them to her will- even cells that weren't really evolved with bending in mind. I fought to remember why I was on-stage in the first place. I fought to remember-, something about the moon- falling? Something happens at midnight. Right, the countdown!

~~~ ***ONE.3*** ~~~

I looked down and noticed the big, cartoonishly obvious analog clock I had mounted on the piano to remind me about the countdown. It was 11:59 with less than 20 seconds before midnight. I started the countdown anyway and ran through a little fast to catch up. Her tractor beam eyes dragged me back to her each time I dared sweep the room.

Blinking became laborious. My mouth and diaphragm went on independently.

"Sevente! Sixtiffifffoouuurteen!!!" I struggled until I caught up with the clock.

At thirteen, the earth's crust shifted.

The distance between the stage and my Moonie admirer shrank unnaturally. Her expression was absolute serenity, though the light dancing behind her eyes belied a ripe and bursting desire. She slid through the air like a cloud. No question, she was moving towards me, or maybe I was moving towards her. Movings were happening.

"Ten... niiiine... eighty" I mindlessly continued the countdown, but the buoyancy of the moment lifted me onto my feet. I stepped down from the stage, somehow keeping my feet under me but not without a few very ungraceful corrections. The hormones, liquor, long-term existential malaise, and a new short-circuiting infatuation overwhelmed a mind already only loosely connected to reality and the ground. Time slowed to a crawl as we drew nearer.

"Fieeee..."

The obligatory midnight kissing ritual I so often scoff at took on a life of its own. A kiss was alive inside some invisible womb, only needing the touch of lips in order to be born. I had lips, and so did she. The fact that we both had lips couldn't be coincidence, it had to be fate. My soul accepted the preordination of the approaching kiss without hesitation.

"three..."

We were inches apart and still on approach. As I counted down to two, time

stopped and ceased to be a factor in the universe. I never made it to one. The fundamental effects of gravity, electromagnetism, and nuclear forces held matter in place, but time itself had gone on vacation and didn't even tell its own mother when it would be back.

In the dilated time-space our atoms collided. Our lips pressed together, and the kiss came screaming into the world. The world wasn't ready for that kiss. The physics helpdesk staff sent an outage alert and started pinging time's phone to figure out what the hell just happened.

Our eyes were closed but her aura was like a hologram etched on the back of my eyelids. I could sense her from her toenails to the tips of her hair. Our newborn kiss grew up rapidly. It hit its teens and became an open-mouthed torrent of passion. Our arms found their way around each other and we were wrapped so tight there wasn't a nanometer of space between us.

Time finally found out what we'd been up to and arrested us for our temporal transgression. She stopped and pulled back in surprise. Time accelerated back to full speed like a bullet. The warm glow from her eyes brightened into a beam of astonishment. Before I had time to embarrass myself with whatever foolishness was about to spill from my mouth, I was saved by the crack of a Moonie fist right into my vagus nerve.

Time stopped again but this time it had to go out for some very unpleasant business, which is a lot different than when it goes on a

nice holiday. When time returned it was very unhappy with me for being the cause of all its recent comings and goings. I was horizontal and spread out across the floor like a vaguely man-shaped puddle. My head felt unsettlingly warm and bright, but that was just the shock. The warmth soon turned into the all too familiar pain of traumatic impact and associated periods of unconsciousness.

I blinked myself back into the world, flashing still-frames of several angrily bloodshot eyes hovering over me, beaming down with indignant rage.

I started pulling myself up off the floor with great effort. I shook as much dust out of my head as would come loose, but a good portion of it had already become sediment and left me with a dull, throbbing delirium. Words in a foreign but universal rage-language were outside my comprehension for the moment. The anger of the tone was enough to get the point across. Apparently, the kiss hadn't gone over well with the male Moonies, who apparently felt they had some say in the matter. I looked around for support from my co-conspirator, but her entourage had shuffled her off to a safe distance. She made a shallow effort to control the group but seemed to put most of her effort into appearing girlishly shocked by the whole situation.

From the rising fervor of the Moonie male's speech, I guessed the uppercut was just foreplay. Just as I was settling in for a good old-fashioned testosterone fueled beating, Ferrar stepped in to rescue me with her honed

diplomatic technique. When that failed, she used Shodokan. Very violent things happened very rapidly, and the floor became increasingly littered with would-be brawlers.

"Stay down you moon-faced moron."

Ferrar said as she kicked a Moonie behind the knees and locked his arm in a maneuver that could have subdued an unruly Klingon sumo-wrestler. Ferrar was more bouncer than woman, and more woman than you'd want to be in a cage-fight with. I got the impression she was taking out some repressed sexual aggression on these poor boys, but I wasn't going to step in on their behalf. She got in a few purely gratuitous strikes before she felt they'd been duly served. The would-be combatants scrambled for sanctuary away from the dance floor and licked their wounds. I cranked my neck around to see if my head had come loose, it had, but only a little. Ferrar gave me a summary once-over.

"Everything still glued on, ya putz?" She asked.

"Everything that was when I got here.

Thanks." I was dazed but knew enough to be grateful.

"Watch yourself, Jely." Ferrar nodded in the direction of the seething Moonie boys before continuing. The boys were issuing complaints to a duo of men in smart black suits who had been doing an outstanding job of not being noticed but were still working overtime on it. It seemed the moon troop had professional backup.

Fortunately, they were too professional to get involved in the scuffle. The beautiful Moonie woman approached the men. She issued stiff

instructions and the group began to assemble for departure. Ferrar slapped me lightly to refocus my attention.

"And what the hell are you doing making-out on the clock anyway you stupid git? Get the hell back up there and play that piano before I finish what those Moonies started." She held her fist up and bopped me on the nose with a stiff knuckle.

I looked over to the Moonie entourage and caught a last glance from my mystery woman. As she turned away her smile caught me like the last ray of sunset. I only had a second to enjoy the image before she was whisked away in a blur of bodies.

"Oh god, I didn't get her number." My body pulled me off the floor in a pathetic attempt to stumble after her, but Ferrar's stony grip anchored me.

"How stupid are you? What are you going to do besides get your ass handed to you by some cranked-up moon monkeys?" Ferrar barked. She had a point, and her hands were really close to my throat.

"But I've got to see her again. Did you see that? See, us? She kissed me!" I stammered.

"Yeah. I saw." Ferrar interrupted harshly, unimpressed. She plucked my Adams-apple for effect. "Now get on stage before I break your hands." Breaking hands is a touchy subject for any musician. To remind me that Ferrar rarely exaggerated her physical threats, she grabbed my palm and closed it into a fist, then applied pressure.

There's a part of the human brain that allows us to make complex judgments to balance, and if necessary, temporarily subdue our desires. It's ugly, but it's a powerful tool. I don't like to use mine much so as a result it's prone to faulty startups. There's another part of the human brain, a pretty powerful part of it in fact, that allows us to make quick judgments based on the experience and memory of pain. This part of the brain is useful when the other parts stop working or won't cooperate.

Ferrar knew me pretty well. She helped me click back to the real world by supplying the requisite level of pain to dislocate clingy, childish longings for love and happiness. I promptly laid fresh traps of self-denial and guilt to stave off another infection of longing. Ferrar added a healthy clunk to the cranium for good measure. Gears whirled and turned back into proper timing and my higher brain functions came back online.

I sulked for a moment at the raw injustice, then glanced up at the stage and saw the lonely piano. I decided a piano without a player was the only injustice I could do anything about at the moment. I hobbled to the stage to a slow pluck of applause from the few patrons who had taken note of the ruckus.

I climbed back into the cockpit and played out the night in a haze. I finished up with understated style. I was out of phase with the world but that's the best way to play music. The four people left in the bar by last call were very impressed and actually stayed around to

introduce themselves. All four of them introduced themselves several times each.

One patron thanked me for my professional service, and another complimented my rockin' drum solo, which I gratefully accepted, though I had not played drums in years. One guy didn't like the fact that I had accepted an undeserved drum solo compliment and began to pontificate about earning what you have in life so you don't end up playing piano in dead-end bars. He wasn't wrong, he was just an asshole.

The night ended much like so very many of the nights before it, and I thought most likely, very many after. That thought was troubling and led me back to the singularly defining moment of the night- that impossible kiss. However impossible it might have been, it definitely happened.

After I'd packed up and stowed my stage gear in Lazy Susan's modest green room, I walked out of the bar alone. There isn't a whole lot for a bachelor to do in the wee hours after a worldwide party, especially when you were only half-invited in the first place. There were lots of after-after-parties going on. There were lots of people still getting stupid drunk and acting foolish. There were plenty of people getting laid, or at least making valiant efforts to increase their odds. There was no place for a pitiful lovesick piano-man with his mind stuck on a woman he'd never even properly met, and no place to quiet the ringing in his head from the uppercuts he received in the process of not meeting her.

There had to be somewhere I could go to distract myself, Sydney's a busy city. There were plenty of breakfast buffets, a twenty-four-hour four-star holo-arcade, and I could probably find a drive-thru opium den if I looked hard enough. Of all the places I could go to make myself feel marginally less pitiful, I chose the one that would make most people think I was even more pitiful- a strip club.

CHAPTER TWO

The Bowl n' Strip

Genius comprises many dimensions. Complex, intelligent systems combine information in unpredictable ways. Some beings exhibit elements of genius in the form of physical understanding of the universe, some in communication and empathy, some in creative expression. Though there are many forms of genius they generally involve the combination of knowledge and experience in novel and unique ways. One distinguished entrepreneurial genius in Sydney combined the wholesome fun of the sport of bowling with the base allure of gyrating women willing to disrobe for adequate compensation. That guy should win the Nobel prize in some dirty category. I doubted there was anything that could wipe the image of that radiant moon goddess from my thoughts but bowling a game with a well-proportioned young woman would be a nice start. I found a cabbie without a fare and gave him one.

When I told the cabbie to take me to the Bowl'n Strip he offered several recommendations including girls and drink specials. He also knew how they staggered oiling the lanes and recommended bowling on an odd numbered lane for the best lane grip. The cabbie was encyclopedic. He knew who was working, who was dancing in the center lane every half hour, and which women were world-class bowlers. I was about to guess that they had

him on the payroll when he mentioned he was on the payroll. Genius.

When we arrived, I tipped the cabbie generously and thanked him for the insider information. The Bowl'n Strip signage was about as classy as you'd expect. A projection of a bowling ball wearing sunglasses perpetually rolled down an endless lane straddled by women with proportions that would take the whistle out of a cartoon wolf.

Once inside I was glad to find the lanes relatively vacant. I assumed anyone with a remotely enviable social life would be somewhere else doing something enviable. The few patrons in the place were on the order of my own level of pathetic loserdom. I felt right at home.

I rented shoes and set up shop on lane 13 because it was the furthest from any other occupied lane. I tapped the scoring computer and requested a ball labeled 16lbs that only weighs 12, it was the default option. I ordered a martini and finalized my order by pressing a nipple shaped button on the console labeled 'Do It'. The computer moaned a confirmation.

I stood and faced the ball-return as the 16 pound 'overcompensated' ball levitated into my fingers. Before I could line up on the lane for a warm-up stroke a luscious, dancing bowler enveloped me in a gust of breathy bowling smack-talk.

"Looking for some competition, sweetie? Or do you just like playing with yourself?"

"I'm usually a solo act but I'm always down for a duet with a- gorgeous... blue... damn-

you're fine, and blue..." My attempt at a flirty comeback fell on its face as I took in the full aesthetic impact of my challenger. She was very blue, but 'fine' didn't even begin to describe her merciless hotness.

The Bowl'n Strip had a few perky incentives to hone your skills. Out bowl one of the girls and get a free lap dance. Bowl a 300 and you'll earn a 10 pin salute, aka- The Big Lebowski. The legendary 10 pin salute, as illustrated on the front signage, is when 10 girls straddle a lane and you get to bowl yourself down it. I couldn't bowl a 300 to save my fingers, but the pot-of-gold at the end of that rainbow made the dream worth chasing.

My beautiful challenger had deep blue skin and piercing bioluminescent green eyes. Her tone and texture was like a fine mist of cobalt infused silk floating beneath a thin diamond lacquer. She wore some kind of frilly, puffy skirt and a skintight top that I could probably describe better if I had any knowledge of women's fashion. I didn't need any prerequisite knowledge to appreciate that whatever she was wearing was working.

Hundreds of years ago the first human space colonists began to develop unique characteristics to cope with the demands of their new environments. Most of the changes were trivial; pigmentation, exaggerated proportions, anomalous hair loss and/or growth, circumstantial cannibalism- the usual. Over time the physical variations had lost their novelty, but not their allure. I'd seen more than a few variations of human physiology, but nothing like

her. She was not the familiar, glowing, undulating beauty of the moon, but the shocking, wildly exotic beauty of some crazy thing that whips out of deep space and careens around the solar system in unpredictable orbits.

~~~ *TWO.1* ~~~

Her name was Aquari. Aquari sounds like a blueish name so it fit pretty well. It sounded like a stage name but then again people tend to think the same thing about my name. Plus, I met her in a strip club so I have no idea why I would assume that was her real name.

“Tell you what, sugar, you look like you need some motivation, so if you get one strike, I’ll give you a free lap dance.”

“Sounds good, and if you get a strike and I’ll give you a free lap dance too.” I punctuated my atrocious banter with a wink that she probably thought the result of nerve damage. She shook her head and sighed in something between humor and sympathy. She had thrown down the gauntlet and I accepted the challenge.

She winked back graciously, sauntered towards me, and cocked a hip seductively. Her index finger swam gently around her waistline, then hooked an impossibly silky piece of luminescent fabric. The e-string panties flashed to indicate they’d detected an RF chip in my wallet that attested I wasn’t completely broke. I nodded to approve the transaction. Her panties flashed again and sounded a clinking noise to indicate they’d digitally taken some of my money. She smiled, gave herself a playful spank,

and turned her attention to the ball-return. She effortlessly hoisted a 16lb ball that actually weighed 16lbs and got down to business.

Her long, smooth stroke echoed as it sailed down the lane. "I'll pass on that lap-dance" She mocked just a millisecond before the pins exploded in an inevitable strike. She had outstanding form and perfect follow-through, a real pro.

"You don't know what you're missing." I said as I tried to mimic a dancer's hip shake, which looked more like I had an itch in my drawers. I stepped up to bowl. With a mild spasm I launched a crater-maker that bounced twice before cleaning the gutter. I clearly wasn't on my best game, but it was hard to tell because my best game was 130, which is a lie, because my best game was really 112.

"You don't bowl much do you?" Aquari asked conversationally.

"I don't, but this place has inspired me to beef up my game."

"Doesn't look like you have much game to beef up."

"Well let's just say bowling isn't my best game." I wasn't trying to be slick. I hoped the loose double meaning would make it seem like I wasn't trying.

"Sure, hun." She was unconvinced. "You want a drink, loosen up those arms? You're a little stiff."

I didn't really want a drink, so of course I nodded an affirmative. "Sounds good, surprise me."

She launched another devastating stroke and turned towards the bar. She wasn't even looking when the supersonic ball slammed into the pins like a particle accelerator, knocking one clear into the next lane. It was hard not to be impressed. I focused my mind on the lane and swung a wide arc and let fly what I was sure would be a redeeming strike. I nicked two pins. When the ball floated back from the return I lobbed it down the lane and barely caught another pin. The pin must have been napping because it had plenty of time to get out of the way. The auto-score console marked my 3, which looked pretty diminutive next to her bold X's.

Aquari returned with a dirty martini. Before I could thank her, she swung another ball towards the pins and brought down 8, then picked up the spare with no discernable effort.

"So, what brings you here on Moon Drop Eve? You don't have a party to be at?" She really got to the crux of things. I like that in a woman with blue skin. I was a little embarrassed. Then I realized that she must hear all kinds of bullshit, so I went with the unimpressive truth.

"I played a gig at Lazy Susan's tonight. I sort of kissed a pretty lady at midnight and then her friends kicked my ass for it. Now I'm depressed and lonely so I figured I'd come here for some- uh- distraction, I guess." If my honesty had caught her off guard, she rebounded too quickly to notice. She snorted and laughed genuinely. She smiled the smile that means I

said something right, which is the last thing I ever expect to say.

"Well, you came to the right place, handsome. I'll take good care of you."

I bowled a quick 5 and had a few moments to be pleased with myself before she answered with another savage strike.

"I think you might be a few pins short for the salute, but if you pick it up you could still break into double digits." She consoled, mockingly.

"No worries, I didn't come for the salute, besides I can barely handle one woman- uh- in bowling." That said, I would have given it the old college try.

Aquari leaned in closer and whispered in a breathy feminine voice. "Play your cards right and you might get to handle one woman-bare-ly." She winked and shook her hips seductively.

Her wordplay wasn't nearly as solid as her bowling, but I was in no position to complain. She planted a firm foot and pivoted, brushing her lean but shapely rump across me with intent. Three steps later she sent the ball in a sliding curve into the terrified pins, which parted neatly giving her a 4th strike to my 8 total pins.

The bowling idea helped more than I thought it would. Aquari was my kind of girl, easy going, hardworking, and a damn talented bowler. She was the kind of girl I could be happy to spend time with but probably wouldn't become obsessed over. My guidance counselor always told me I should date strippers.

She was totally hot, but not in the undefinable, ethereal way that shorts out neurons. Her blue tint and green eyes were alluring, but not disorienting. It was just what I needed, sexy and sensible, but with exotic flair. What was I so upset about in the first place?

Four pin shattering strikes later I was behind Aquari by 220 pins. There were far less attractive things to be behind than hers. By the time her extra frames came up she didn't even bother. Instead, she dropped the ball in the return and sat beside me on a gaudy, plush couch that would have been out of place in any other bowling alley.

~~~ ***TWO.2*** ~~~

It was almost 4:00 in the morning, I was more than moderately drunk and having an unexpectedly good time. Aquari was enjoying my company more than my initial payment warranted. Maybe she liked me, or maybe she was prowling for supplemental income, I wasn't savvy enough to tell. As a rule, I don't pay for sex outright- mostly for lack of funds, but it sounds better to add that it does feel a bit empty. I was beginning to wonder how flexible that rule might become under my full powers of drunken, rationalization and horniness.

The auto-score console finally timed out the game and finalized our scores as they stood. The overhead display flashed my miserable 55 with shameless glee.

"We don't see too many 55's here, most men are insecure enough to at least try to win."

Aquari poked fun at me but huddled close and caressed my scalp with long, sharp fingernails.

"I've never been insecure enough to try anything."

She bent a little frown, then laughed casually. "You're kind of cute. Weird, but cute." It was a filet mignon to my starving ego. She might have been on the clock, but she was clearly enjoying her work.

"Thanks, and you're kind of- insanely gorgeous and awesome." I scanned her vertically. She accepted it as a compliment and shifted her body to accent her curves.

"So, what's next, cutie? You want to bowl another game, or did you have something else in mind?" My mind instantly filled with thoughts of her driving me out of it.

"Can I buy you a drink?" I asked nervously. As much as I was sure she liked me, I was still unsure if we were talking business or pleasure.

"Not here, but my shift is up in a few minutes." Aquari smiled with enthusiasm.

I'd crossed the line a few times already that night, but that had been due to a lack of bowling skill. The ethical line between stripping and prostitution wouldn't be crossed at the Bowl'n Strip, it was a legitimate business. That should have been a good incentive to stay, or to call it a night, but against my better judgment I took whatever hint she was giving me and invited her to join me for breakfast. She suggested a 24-hour diner that boasted the best, and only, martini buffet in Sydney.

By the time we showed up at the buffet the staff was at least as hammered as most of the patrons. A semi-conscious hostess gurgled something that sounded like 'Seat yourself', and we did.

We finished off more than a few martini's each. She was a real trooper, couldn't have weighed more than a buck-o-five but she took her liquor like a heavyweight champ. By 6:00 in the morning I was hammered nine kinds of stupid, and she was luxuriously inebriated.

She asked me where my place was. That was the question I'd been hoping for and fearing. My heart pounded at the door of my brain, which was slow to answer. The two vital organs argued the implications of what I was considering. I wasn't sure who was on what side, so I tried to stay out of the conflict until the victor was decided.

Who cares? It's not like anyone would find out. Wait, that's not a valid argument. How much is it anyway? No, I don't need it- I'm better than that. Better than what? Better than her? That's totally arrogant. No, I didn't mean it like that. I just don't pay for that. Damn, she's so hot. Who broaches the topic? She's a good person, she just had an unorthodox line of work, that's all. Who am I to judge. It's society's fault anyway. She's just making a living. Even so I shouldn't contribute to- c'mon, get a hold of yourself Jely. She's a-

"I'm not a hooker, dumbass. If- that's what you're thinking." She said forcefully, injecting herself into my thoughts like a telepathic syringe.

"Oh, no! That's not what I- I was just- You're just so- and I'm just a- well you know." I couldn't let her know she was right on the money, that would be insulting. Insulting a woman is definitely not how you play your cards right.

"It's okay sugar. I didn't think you were the type, you seem kind of naive." She said.

Okay... I've never had a big machismo problem but that bit me in a weird way. Play your cards right. Play your cards *right*. Okay. If naive got me here, maybe naive is the card to play.

"I just don't get out much anymore. Not like this I mean. I get out plenty, not like I'm a shut-in or anything, but I never... you know with... professionals... I mean..." Blubbing nonsense wasn't part of the game plan, but it worked.

"Shut up." That was her last word on the subject. She kissed me tenderly. She took my arm and led me out of the door of the buffet. We hailed a cab. She was all over me like a wet t-shirt before I even told the cabbie where to take us. By the time we got to the door of my apartment she was already pulling at my clothes and her blue tint was deepening to a flush purple.

I unlocked the door. She asked me to wait while she freshened up. She sashayed up the tiny spiral staircase leading to the miniscule compartment my landlord called a bedroom loft. I sat on the couch and tried emphatically not to reflect on the whole of the night's occurrences.

She re-emerged, twisting herself down the spiral of the stairs with sultry intent. She was a lavender goddess, wearing only panties and a requisitioned t-shirt. She sauntered down the last steps and inched towards me with superbly controlled grace. She straddled me and began swerving like a charmed cobra. Her eyes flashed with unbridled desire. She kissed me forcefully. Something in the kiss rang vaguely in my mind like a phone call that you know you shouldn't answer. I decided I wasn't home for that call.

She cupped herself over me and took off the t-shirt like a candy bar unwrapping itself. Exquisitely smooth, powdery blue, perfectly symmetrical, apple sized breasts danced out from under the shirt and paraded proudly over my face. She leaned low and kissed me, light and smooth. Something clicked in my head. Thoughts of a silhouette in soft moonlight- she steps into the light, tall, glowing... Ah c'mon, not now...

She kissed me again even more gently and let her lips linger. She touched my lips ever so softly with her fingers and brushed her hair over me as she sat up. She backed off slowly, hesitantly. Then she pulled back completely and looked at me hard. What did I do, or not do? I hadn't even said anything. How did I screw this one up?

"She is a classic beauty isn't she."
Aquari said almost remorsefully. Had I said something out loud? Hang on, I have to read over those last paragraphs and look for quotes...
Nothing. What?

"What?" I sputtered. "Why would you say that? Who's beautiful? I mean you are! " I was transparently befuddled. Aquari looked at me like I was an open book to her. She shook her head and looked a little put off, but mostly just sympathetic. She was moved. Her eyes consoled as if I had just poured my heart out to her about my paralyzing crush on a perfect stranger. Had I? No, definitely not. I was over that nonsense. I was with a beautiful blue vixen who was totally into me, plus she kicks ass at bowling. I'd never had it so good.

"Her. Whoever she is, she is beautiful. You don't even know her name, do you?" She said, effortlessly crippling me.

A melancholy boy who'd been dumped by his first girlfriend kicked a can down the street inside my guts. It took every ounce of dignity I could pretend to have to keep that kid from kicking the can straight out of my mouth. I stifled the moaning rhapsody of unrequited love that threatened to spill out of me. How had I turned such a sexy scene into such a melodramatic debacle?

"I just met her tonight, or rather didn't meet her. We just danced and kissed. Well, she danced, I watched, then we kissed. I didn't get her name." And with that simple admission I'd ruined everything. Up until that moment I had a faded prayer of salvaging the situation and might have actually gotten some. All I had to do was shut up, but I couldn't even do that. Story of my life.

"Sugar, I understand, I do. She's a knockout, and a Moonie taboot." Aquari had

morphed from a sultry, stunning blue dream woman into a sympathetic, understanding blue friend and confidant. Her face was a warm shower of sweetness and sympathy. It suddenly occurred to me that I hadn't said anything about her being a Moonie.

"How'd you know she's a Moonie?" I wondered aloud, subconsciously anticipating that the explanation might have something to do with the fact that Aquari was blue.

"You didn't notice I'm blue, sweetie? I'm Neptunian; we're a bit telepathic. And you're pretty transparent as it is. That head of yours is so full of that girl you can't even hold a thought. You were doing pretty good earlier but she was always in the back of your mind. She is something, I'd totally do her."

"It's just a stupid crush." I defended futilely. "I really wish you couldn't see what's in my head- wait, can you really see everything I'm thinking?" I'd never met a telepath and I was suddenly consumed by all the embarrassing thoughts I might have been thinking.

"Not everything, it's more of a feeling- hard to explain, but anyway. You got a sweet disposition. It was creepily endearing how you had that little dilemma about sleeping with a hooker." She punctuated with a glare. "I don't want to be with a guy whose mind is on someone else. Sorry hun, you blew it."

I didn't want to believe she knew all that, but there it was. I had never been putty in a woman's hands quite like that. She nailed me. I was completely, utterly, helplessly owned.

"I'm really sorry. You have no idea how sorry I am." I muttered. I wasn't even sure how sorry I was, or what particular combination of things I was or should be sorry for.

"Don't sweat sweetheart, it's not the first time. I've had to cut a party short many times. I read minds, remember? Aw, don't feel bad. You're a decent guy." She pinched my cheek like we were relatives now. She stood up. "Tell you what, if you ever get over this girl, come back and look me up. I'll keep a lane open for you at the strip." She sounded jokingly serious, but she was seriously about to leave.

"No, wait, don't go-" She put her finger over my lips.

"Hush, you. Look, when it comes to women, you've got to get to it or get over it. If the prospect of a night with me can't get you past her you'd better go give it your best shot. From what I could sense, she's probably a Moonie tourist. She'll probably be headed back on the lunar shuttle tomorrow. There won't be another passenger launch for a month." She considered me for a moment before adding "Go get 'em, tiger."

She slugged me softly and curled a cool smile. I offered her a ride, but she said she'd take a cab. I stumbled over myself walking her to the door. She kissed me on the cheek and pulled the door closed as she left, my hand still on the knob.

I barely had time to settle into the throbbing pangs of lonely regret before a much sharper pang struck. The door connected solidly with my face as it burst back open. Among the

flashes of black and red, a cloudy blue oval smiled coyly at me. She'd come back. Oh, thank the good lord!

"Hey- sorry, forgot my clothes." She said, sidestepping me as I blinked myself back into reality. "I'll be a second."

She swished up the stairs and did some things in the opposite order than I would have preferred, then swished back down before I'd finished blinking.

"Sorry again." She puckered for a cordial but unaffectionate kiss and suddenly stopped. "No sir." She said sternly.

How could she have known I was thinking something dirty? I didn't even know what I was thinking. She melted back to casual, then to coy, then winked and slid through the door and pulled it shut again, my hand still on the knob, where it'd been the whole time.

Again, I barely felt the door connect with my face as it burst open. Unfortunately, I also didn't feel much of the kiss that followed. Just as the flashes of red and black and cloudy blue began to resemble the full experience of Aquari's passionate goodbye kiss, it was all over.

She took my hands, physically removing me from the doorknob, and kissed one like she was healing a boo-boo.

"Don't hang on doors, Jely." She said as if it was profound advice, which it probably was. She kissed me again, then shoved me back and laughed. Then she was gone.

CHAPTER THREE

Good Friends And Bad Liars

I didn't sleep at all that night. It was daylight when Aquari left. I decided I couldn't afford sleep. In retrospect, sleep deprivation may have been the influence that I would have liked to attribute to blind passion. My basic reasoning skills were definitely impaired. Hindsight is always twenty-something. I needed breakfast and a lobotomy, preferably in that order.

I found breakfast. It was hiding in a little corner café. After 3 waffles my blood sugar rose and I thought the lobotomy might not be the best idea. I sat at a tiny booth, oddly entranced by the curvy carafe of blueberry juice I had ordered but couldn't bring myself to pour into a glass. I caught myself licking the condensation just as the waitress returned with the bill and also caught me licking the condensation. Her quizzically amused smile brought me back to a brief moment of lucidity, which quickly faded back to a cloudy haze of reality.

I had gigs booked. I had commitments. My career was at stake, but my career sucked. What good is a career in music if you can't chase women? I had a woman to chase and I had a space-shuttle to catch. Maybe that was my commitment.

The worst kind of dilemma is one where you know the outcome and you still feel the need to go through the motions of having the

dilemma in the first place. Especially when you know damn good and well that the outcome is the worst choice you could possibly make. I tortured myself for the appropriate length of time and settled in for the consequences. I decided to take a spontaneous trip to the moon. I was going to the moon if for nothing else than to go there, and at the very least to find out that Moonie girl's name so as to accurately title the musical composition our encounter would inevitably inspire.

The first order of business was to figure out how to get to the moon. Fortunately, the physics, engineering and economics of space travel had already been quite well established so I didn't have to break any ground there. I just had to get a ride.

Aquari was right. I had about four hours to figure out how to get onto the last flight to the moon for a month. Commercial moon flights can sell out years in advance. On the other hand I could still get that lobotomy, there was always work for the lobotomized and it was a time-tested panacea for misguided romanticism.

No, a lobotomy would be the easy way out. I needed to get on that shuttle. I had an ace in the hole, Ferrah, but I still owed her four shows that month and she'd recently saved me from the exact brand of trouble I was trying to get back into. Not to mention she was exceptionally capable at violence, and one of my very few devoted fans. She was an admirer of my work and had genuine wishes for my success, and that was the angle I could play.

Ferrar could pull favors here and there with the flight controllers union. Lazy Susan's hosts the flight controllers union's quarterly gatherings and offers intense discretion for the occasion. The union throws a bash like a fight club on extacy. They offered me a gig once, but I declined when I found out I'd have to sign a medical waiver and NDA. Ferrar keeps mum and the flight controllers get to let off a little sado-masochistic steam, everybody wins, except the circus baboons- they usually have to be euthanized afterwards.

I caught a minibus to Ferrar's apartment and mentally ran through my stock of standard lies, optional lies, alternative lies and emergency lies. Ferrar was familiar with most of my arsenal, but I thought a new combination of old lies might have a chance.

Ferrar answered the door in a robe. She looked rough but still had decidedly feminine beauty about her, and on Ferrar rough was soothing because she could get much worse from there. Ferrar was a tough woman, but actually quite attractive in her own way, as long as she wasn't covered in someone else's blood. I recognized a live bootleg recording of me sitting in with a local band on the stereo, an excellent omen. The song playing was one I wrote about the importance of honesty in love and friendship. Omens are what you make of them.

"What are you doing here?" She wasn't upset, just surprised. I put on my best friend-reluctantly-asking-for-advice demeanor and dove in head first.

"I just needed to talk to you. I'd really need your opinion on something- musical. I need sort of a musical consultant. Like someone I can get advice from about music." I can milk a turnip when I'm desperate.

"Go on." She beckoned. I'd captured her imagination. Houston, we have liftoff.

"I have this opportunity, you see. I got asked to play a gig, it's not a lot of money or anything, but I really think it could get me heard by the right people." In one breath I'd sold out my music and lied to a friend and fan, all in pursuit of a woman I hadn't actually met. I was on a roll.

"Oh that's so radical! Jely, baby of course- wait- what are you buttering me up for?" Ferrar began to calculate. "Does this, by any chance, mean you have to bail on your gigs at Suzie's?" She asked, already well aware of the answer.

"Yeah, it does, and I'm not sure for how long. I'm really sorry." I'd given her a nibble and she bit gingerly. The big whopper was going to be tougher for her to swallow. I knew I was tossing up a hail Mary in the middle of a hurricane, but I had nothing to lose, except my career, a good friend, and likely several pints of blood and associated medical costs. Ferrar's sudden blissful acceptance and enthusiasm made my lies feel all the more noxious.

"Okay Jely, I know you'll make it up to me. We've got to get your music heard by the right people! Now tell me everything. Where is it, who are you playing for? This is so exciting! When are the gigs?" She was all too gracious

about it. She had nothing but my best interest in mind. I swallowed hard, opened the bombay doors and braced myself.

"That's the trick. It's tomorrow night, and I need a favor to get there, a big, huge, humongous, best-friend-in-the-whole-world kind of favor." I embellished with wild flailing hand gestures. Her face recoiled in suspicion. I was afraid I'd overdone it.

Ferrar was excited but she wasn't remotely stupid. I don't think too many people have ever gotten one over on her, and certainly none without suffering extreme consequences. She cocked her head and raised an eyebrow, demanding that I fess up.

"It's on the moon. I need a ride to the moon. It's a pickup gig, last minute. A ritzy hotel lounge, some intergalactic record company rented out a whole floor for some convention. The place will be crawling with A&R guys! I can feel it finally coming together for me! They had an old jazz guy that played the lounge on weekends but he got sick and they said if I could get to the moon they'd let me play. See! It's like, just out of nowhere- Wham! Opportunity strikes, or knocks, like a ninja mailman, with an awesome package- of- uh- opportunity! All I gotta to do is be there to sign for it." I panted as the last of the deluge of misinformation fell to a trickle. "All I need is a ticket, I can do the rest. I can do it, Ferrar. I'm gonna rock those fools!"

Ferrar absorbed it. She considered me sternly, but her face had softened and I knew I'd penetrated the first line of defenses. I waited for the lie to put down roots. It was an eternity

watching her decide whether or not she was going to cough it up, swallow it whole, or just slap me around a little for good measure.

The cold intellect behind her friendly eyes rigorously calculated the odds that I was full of crap. She hadn't been wrong too many times in the past, but the odds ran just a little in my favor that day. After a process as slow as mighty Thor picking out a new hammer to beat me with. She smiled a genuine smile. I was in.

She nodded graciously and turned to a fixture on the wall. With a few taps of a communications panel and a quick, stern conversation with a slightly indignant but otherwise malleable flight controller on the other end of the line, Ferrar called in the favor and my passage was secure. The flight controller offered Ferrar little rebuff, and even let slip an inappropriate inside joke about some recent celebratory event that I was grateful I didn't have any knowledge of.

Her contact procured a passenger voucher for the economy human transport section and had it electronically transferred to us right there. A tiny built-in printer wheezed and spit up a ticket with an official insignia, complete with encrypted barcode.

I was just that easy. I should have known from the fact that she never even asked what hotel I was playing at or what record labels might be there, that she may not have bought my lies at face value. I was too pleased with myself to care, or more likely too self-absorbed to notice. I had a ticket to the moon and I was that

much closer to finding the woman that haunted me.

I thanked Ferrar with such forceful enthusiasm that she had to terminate a hug by hurting me a little. She was generously dismissive about the Susie's gigs I would miss and acted like the ticket was a tab she'd picked up for lunch.

A small war raged inside me between a faction that felt wonderful about my deceitful success, and a faction that thought I should feel terrible for it. I'm very much anti-war, so the conflict took the form of a deep, unsettling nausea. I promised Ferrar a thousand gigs at Suzie's. I even swore to play for the flight controller's party someday, which was only a small lie in context.

On my way out the door Ferrar took me by the arm and held me at the threshold. Her grip steadily tightened. Her face morphed from congenial to threatening, but her friendly tone never faltered.

"Listen sweetheart. You know I'm just giving you the benefit of the doubt here, right?" She said, "I really hope you're going to the moon to play for some big-wigs. If you do, I know you'll knock 'em dead. I know you love your music, but I also know you're a complete dumbass." Her grip clamped and twisted with clean jujitsu smoothness. "If I find out you just bullshitted me for some half-Moonie tramp, you'll wish we'd never met."

"Half-Moonie?" I blurted.

Ah man, why did I say that out loud? Ferrar glazed over for an instant. Manifest rage

flickered across her face like heat lightning but quickly subsided. A still calm washed over her and for an instant she held herself with angelic stillness, or possibly demonic stillness, one can never be sure about that level of stillness.

"Get the hell out of here before you miss that flight. Come back famous!" She said, "...Or don't come back." She added with a quantum of kelvin scale coldness. She released me, spun me around and pushed me out the door.

I tripped over myself trying not to look like I felt like I was escaping. I looked back and caught an informed smirk from Ferrar before she closed the door. I closed my hand and felt the little slip of paper that held the digital voucher for my future. I didn't look back again. I walked out to the street and hailed a cab to the launch port and beyond.

In the cab I took the opportunity to take stock of my situation. I was in a cab. I was headed to the launch port to catch a flight that was headed to the moon. I had the clothes on my back, the money in my pocket and the brain in my head, however useless it might be.

~~~ **THREE.1** ~~~

I had recently become a big fat liar. I'm a performer by trade, but I'm a musician, not an actor or politician. Blatant lies left a bad taste in my mouth and I'd just heaved up a big smelly fish. Still, somehow given the circumstances I felt that lying was the right thing to do. Even if it wasn't the right thing to do, it was the thing I

just did, so I'd better make something right out of it.

Despite having fabricated a monstrous tale with no basis in fact, there was some grain of truth flavoring the seafood buffet. I'd convinced myself that I was going to the moon for a grand opportunity, something of cosmic significance. Something beyond women, beyond music, I was going beyond. That part felt pretty good.

On the drive to the station, the spirit of adventure found me and took hold. I draped that spirit loosely around the sleep-deprived delirium that already enveloped me. I was embarking on a path to places unknown, at least they were unknown to me. The moon was an alien land. Though very few aliens lived there and from the brochures most of it looked like a shopping mall.

My rapture ceased when the first towers of the launch port intruded into view. Tensor supported towers loomed unsteadily overhead. I'd only passed by the Sydney port a few times and I'd never dared to go inside any launch port for fear of never finding my way out. It was mega-freaking enormous.

The port was built around a monolithic magnetic cannon. Magnetic propulsion was the preferred method for launching large vessels to trans-orbital velocities. Vast fields of capacitors fed by solar converters waited for weeks to accumulate enough charge to launch a single commercial vessel. The phallic central fixture was nearly a hundred meters wide and extended to obscene heights.

Smaller launch ports catering to smaller vessels could be fired several times a day, but the Sydney Moon Ferry was a massive ship. It was hidden inside the enormous launch tube, but the abundant signage and advertisement depicted it as a giant turnip-shaped pod. It inspired awe and confidence in people who trusted things that were large and shaped like familiar vegetables. I'm no scientist, but I do know that turnips do not grow in space, ergo- I do not trust turnip shaped spacecraft. The emerging coconut-shaped ship profiles seemed much more space-worthy because I really like pina coladas and I saw astronauts drinking them in a commercial once.

I wasn't looking forward to the prospect of sitting inside the hull of a big steel vegetable and trusting in giant electromagnets to pump the precise amount of flux required to propel a metal object into space without tearing it or its contents apart. The physics was beyond me. I remembered something about force being mass times acceleration. In this case mass and acceleration were numbers I just wasn't prepared to multiply.

Surprisingly, security was relatively lax in the spaceport. I guess they figured anyone that wants to go out into space is already pretty crazy so how are you supposed to profile anyone? If someone's really okay with risking death by explosive decompression then there's not much you can do to stop them. Maybe it's better for everyone if we just get them off the planet for a while. Later I found out that security isn't really

lax by intention, it's just incompetent and underfunded.

I had no baggage to check and no time to kill so I followed the signs pointing the way to the economy human transport boarding section. I recognized immediately that the average econoclass passenger is not a wealthy tourist. I kept my eyes peeled for Moonies but I didn't expect that she would be in the econoclass. Precautions were taken against the upper class passengers laying eyes on the econorabble, let alone mingling with them. I would have to endure the moon flight with this motley ensemble before I could even begin to look for my mysterious princess.

~~~ **THREE.2** ~~~

Half-Moonie. The thought rang in my head but didn't mean much to me. That would explain her build. Her mixed lineage just made her even more intriguing. Human beings have been mixing and matching since the stone-age, it's a pretty good genetic health policy. Of course human beings have also been xenophobic as hell since the stone-age. Maybe she only dates other Moonies, or other half-Moonies. Maybe she only dates borderline stalker non-Moonies who throw away their lives over a meaningless kiss. Maybe I was making the biggest mistake of my life, or maybe it would only be the biggest mistake of my life until I made another huge mistake, if I survived long enough to make any more mistakes.

"Now pre-boarding passengers with special needs and environmental considerations." The intercom crackled in a shrill digitized female-ish voice.

The econoclass was cut off from the rest of the passengers by a tall divider but I could see a few objects bob past. Most were human or humanoid heads, and the occasional antennae, mandible and body parts that might have been tentacles or appendages that were just really happy to see someone. The pre-boarding herd advanced to the front of the boarding ramp, some attended by various robotic apparatus that hissed, buzzed, bubbled, and frothed, presumably providing the 'special needs and environments' the intercom mentioned.

"Now boarding VIP class and 1st class sections 1 through 6"

A herd of mostly well-adorned passengers animated and made a disorderly procession to the boarding gate. Through the chaotic and colorful movement my eyes unconsciously focused on a point in space, a point obscured by several heads. The heads parted and revealed a woman with striking features, blazing eyes, shimmering hair, and soft, subtle lips. My half-Moonie goddess.

Her backlit profile accented the combined structure of an earth born and a moon born woman. Pronounced cheek-bones and a sultry neckline stood in stark contrast to the other ladies in her entourage. The other Moonies had generic, sedate features, with expressions akin to dolls. Her face had a defined landscape.

A thin, slightly upturned nose sat like an ornament beneath and between her energetic almond eyes. She turned ever so gracefully in my direction. Our eyes met again for the first time. It took a few moments but something in her eyes registered a superbly contained shock of recognition. She shook her head and her lips tightened as if fighting a smile. Her smile finally broke free and she laughed and shot me a wink that would have knocked the wind out of 50 conjoined Hugh Hefner clones.

The air between us disappeared and I choked and coughed in what felt like a sudden vacuum. Without breaking eye contact with me she casually leaned over and whispered something to one of her smartly black suited attendants. The man, who was still doing an impressive job of being unnoticeable, looked dead at me and nodded obediently before they both turned and strolled back into the torrent of VIP passengers. Before I even realized how dumbfounded my expression must have been, I lost her again in the crowd. When I refocused all I could see was a wisp of her hair dissolving beyond a sea of shoulders and backs of heads. I winked back probably a full minute too late and got a very stern look from a tall, elderly greenish woman with neon-pink hair who quickly ushered several smaller green people forward towards the boarding ramp.

However awkward, that glimpse was a second wind. It felt like providence, even though seeing her there wasn't improbable at all. The boarding circus continued to whirl around me in cinematic stop-motion. I was the only object

moving fluidly and indivisibly through space and time, everything else existed in jagged, quantum moments of perception.

A pleasant blankness of mind returned and nothing really mattered outside the images, memories, and fleeting moments of her. I slowly, lovingly, turned the pages of a very slim photo album in my head while the rest of my body stood slack jawed and wobbling in the crowd.

The perception of oneness with the universe in my mind didn't stop other minds from going about their usual business. Minds with sinister motives probably noted the strange, distracted man, alone in econoclass, staring blissfully into nothing. It took me several bumps and jostles to come back to a recognizable state of awareness. I was no longer waiting in a boarding line, I was skating on a river of hope into an eternal sunset. The river of hope was a little muddy and full of unfriendly peasants, but the eternal sunset was still nice.

Passive jubilation ran through my veins as I glided onto the ship and into a tiny, cruelly straight-backed chair. In my elated state, even the crudeness of the launch harness seemed an engaging puzzle and a thoughtful precaution. I entangled myself properly in the web of nylon and steel like I was donning on a delightfully complicated bathrobe. My fellow travelers regarded me as a simpleton and generally ignored my childlike smiles and sighs. A few were noticeably annoyed and sent me clear looks of disdain, which I regarded as a triumphant exercise of their free will.

I tried to tone it down, but I was the world's happiest fool and the notion of shame had become a foreign concept. I was about as content as I'd ever been. Imagined futures and possibilities clouded every rational doubt. Devoted infatuation obscured all reason.

It didn't escape me that I was head over heels for a woman I still knew nothing about. It didn't escape me that what I was doing didn't make a whole lot of sense on any level. Most importantly it didn't escape me that I'd just boarded a ship that was about to be hurled into space by big 'ole magnets and a metric assload of electricity. None of it escaped me, but it didn't have to because I wasn't paying it any attention. The lunatics don't bother with escape when they're running the asylum.

CHAPTER FOUR

From The Earth To The Moon

Space really is the final frontier. Once you go there, or achieve even a layman's understanding of what it is and what it's all about, it's pretty apparent that it's the only real frontier there ever was. On scale, discovering a new continent is just kids exploring their backyard.

Every sentient species has to take that step into space, where the big kids play and the big toys can turn planets into soup. The human race had been out in space for centuries by the time I came around, but it didn't really get into gear until about a hundred years ago.

It always struck me as a testament to human stubbornness and stupidity that even in my day, over 500 years after the first moon landing and 499 years after the confirmation of technological life beyond Earth, humans still occasionally fight wars over territory and resources. Space has such infinite territory and resources that it should preclude any competition, but it doesn't. Turns out the grass is always greener on somebody else's planet, even if the grass is dichroic purple, fatally toxic, and seasonally releases clouds of spores that impregnate your eye-sockets with carnivorous fetuses.

Human beings possess knowledge of the vastness of space and the incalculable

minuteness of Earth in the grandest scales of the universe, yet we still sometimes call each other ‘American’, ‘African’, ‘European’, ‘Pianist’, and other such pejoratives. I never understood that. Human beings as individuals and small groups have achieved monumental feats of thought, science, philosophy, and art. Ironically, as a collective we’re monumentally stupid, violent, prejudiced, and just plain mean. The entire human race has a massive ego that rides on the shoulders of the tiny minority that actually bothers to think about the universe. I’m not sure if I qualify as part of that minority, but I am sure that I’m human. To avoid discussion I’ll just say I’m probably one of the moronic majority and move on. Sitting with the majority is usually more comfortable than the alternative anyway. Sitting in the launch chair squashed shoulder-to-shoulder with the majority like so much ham was not comfortable, but the alternative to that was just plain boring.

~~~ ***FOUR.1*** ~~~

I passively monitored the captain’s voice on the intercom during the countdown. The magnetic coils charged with a whine that somehow seemed to come from inside my head. The distortions of sound were probably something akin to sitting inside a reactor core during meltdown.

The last countdown I could recall ended in a kiss, followed by a righteous beating. This countdown ended with the same mind melting loss of conscious control, but with an added

dimension of shattering fear that my molecules might instantaneously lose cohesion as well. In case you're wondering; I did not mess myself, though I would have if my sphincter hadn't desperately sealed itself shut to avoid the involuntary passage of any vital organs.

At the end of the count the ship lurched and hurtled through the launch coils with neck snapping acceleration that some number-junkie jackass calculated to be just within the margins of survivability. The acceleration peaked and dropped, then a frozen moment later the boosters engaged and added even more violence to the terror. 'Escape velocity' is such a gentle phrase. It really should be called 'pant-shitting near-death terror extruded through a white-hot razor-orifice of pain-throttle-nightmare infection-atrocity with a side of evil cottage-cheese appendicitis-flatulence' or something else that hurts to say as much as it is to do.

When the shuttle's acceleration finally flatlined, a gravo-something field generator kicked in and restored normal gravity to the upper levels, but the economy class passengers were left weightless. Unsecured baggage flew about with mindless Newtonian glee, occasionally colliding with helpless passengers. By the look of things most of the people in econoclass felt about like I did. By the smell of things a few had lost more bodily control than I had. The undulating globules of vomit and other fluids floating around the cabin added yet another layer to the extreme discomfort of the situation.

The joyous buzz I'd enjoyed before launch had taken a beating and was fading fast. I was still free from apprehension about the insanity of my course of action, but I was no longer enjoying my surroundings with the disposition of a curious child.

An absolute saint of a flight attendant must have read the terror printed loudly on my face. She offered me a pair of yellow pills. The pills may have been for motion-sickness or sleep, but I didn't ask. I took them, vaguely hoping they were a drug meant for euthanizing elephants that had been mislabeled at the pharmacy. I'm still not sure what those pills were but I applied the placebo effect to the best of my mental capacity and forced myself into the respite of unconsciousness.

For 8 hours, or perhaps 8 days or eons, I sat restrained in my chair, dead to the world. It wasn't a bad flight, but if it had been I wouldn't have noticed. When I awoke we were orbiting the moon. A small port window across the aisle was my only hope to view the surface, but the portal was filled with absolute blackness. Of course the moon was on the other side of the ship and I'd have to wait to get a glimpse. Until then I'd just have to trust that the pilot had found the right moon.

The economy passengers around me had experienced a less relaxing flight and were beginning to grow noisy and restless. Tense excitement buzzed through the air but was startled back to awkward patience by the activation of orbital maneuvering thrusters. The

ship jarred a few times as the pilots wrangled us onto a landing vector.

The landing was much gentler. With one-sixth the gravity and no atmosphere; the moon is like a big cushiony landing pad. At least that's how I like to think of it so I don't worry about the fact that it's actually a humongous boulder whipping around the Earth at reckless speeds and one minor miscalculation could result in catastrophic impact and an unpleasant, though very brief death.

We descended and decelerated gradually. With no more than a light tap we made contact with the surface. Telescoping arms secured the ship. The hums and thunks of the innards of the ship's mechanics subsided one by one. We'd landed safely. My emergency stash of pituitary joy spontaneously flooded into my bloodstream and again I felt the state of bliss that I had left on Earth. I was on the moon.

The captain's voice called out the deboarding order and the econoclass waited in growing frustration as the other classes took priority. Once econoclass was finally called, the cattle were close to a stampede. The dock became a sloppy river of dull eyed economy passengers heaving itself through the tiny portals. I waited patiently in my chair for the fuss to die down and I was the final passenger to egress.

The captain and flight attendants had long ago expended their supply of 'Thank you' and 'Enjoy your trip' on the more expensive seats. I got a wave and a gentle push through the threshold of the ship and onto the moon. The

landing dock opened out into an enormous glass atrium. It was bright and clear and as I turned my head to look up into the window to the universe.

~~~ *FOUR.2* ~~~

I saw the big blue green marble that I came from like I had never seen it before. Earth. It looked like a nice place. Layers of cotton and lace clouds spread in waves across continents that I couldn't even remember the names of. Oceans, land, and life were still at that distance. The unruly surface of the Earth condensed to a perfect spherical jewel of liquid sapphire, frozen as it lapped against emerald wool grown on plates of ancient stone.

Those gathered in the atrium were as transfixed by the sight as I was. Looking at the Earth from outside its warmth and protection is a life altering experience, not that my day hadn't already been chok full of life altering experiences. Some people find religion in the spectacle, some feel only a fierce loneliness and homesickness, some can't get past the sheer beauty and wonder, some just vomit for whatever reason.

Looking up at my home planet I discovered a feeling that I have yet to name, define, or even confirm outside the experience of my own consciousness. I saw holistic, surreal, singular beauty. I saw the incalculable impossibility of life and existence in the infinitely vast, cold black universe.

I'd like to say I experienced the overlook effect reported by early astronauts, but more than anything I saw a planet, just one little planet- unique as each snowflake, but as common as any snowflake. In the moment that some feel their greatest connection to Earth, I just saw a page in a travel brochure- a nice page in a really nice travel brochure, but just one page. The next page might reveal a world of orange oceans, violet land, and hexagonal, chromatic cloud formations. I saw my home planet as a snapshot of the infinite universe. It didn't make me long for my home, it made me long for infinity. If you understand that feeling, you might be a spaceman, or spacewoman, in either case we should hang out.

~~~ ***FOUR.3*** ~~~

There was a small squad of lunar immigration officers at each of the four atrium exits checking passenger's identification. After most of the passengers made their way through the lines, I broke through my existential revelry and made my way to the nearest exit. I subconsciously patted my back pocket to test for the presence of a wallet and ID. Strange autonomic responses reclaimed parts of my awareness.

Something in the subconscious wallet-patting exercise had gone horribly wrong. My nerves sent scattered reports of disturbing sensory inputs, or lack thereof, to my brain. Somewhere in the crossed signals I finally deduced that there was only an empty pocket

where my wallet should be. The implications seeped into my awareness one drop at a time until I was petrified. I had no identification, no money, no contacts, and all of these realizations were coming on the heels of the nearly religious awakening that I was a free-wheeling spaceman embarking on a new life of adventure. Suddenly I was a free-wheeling spaceman embarking on a new life of adventure without my wallet, which is a completely different prospect.

I slowed my steps and tried not to look panicked. I committed my gaze back up into the glow of Earth to avoid any eye contact. I tried to look as if I was immersed in contemplation about the universe, but I was futilely trying to figure out what the hell I was supposed to do next. I could feel the immigration officers scanning me, finding me more and more alone in the atrium but I refused to acknowledge that I wasn't simply lost in the spectacle.

When I commit, I commit like a method actor so I just stared up at Earth, but none of the desperately needed ideas were coming, which was just increasing my intense commitment to ignore the officers and stare into space. I felt movement in my direction and a calm voice saying "Sir".

It occurred to me that I could just keep staring and maybe they'd think I'd had a catatonic breakdown, which wouldn't be far from the truth. Even if that worked I was still unidentified, and unidentified is not a good label anywhere, least of all in a place where outside is an airless wasteland.

"Sir, may I see your identification." The officer was firm but polite and his practiced confidence and authoritarian tone subconsciously forced me to turn in his direction.

"It's just so beautiful isn't it?" I sputtered. It was beautiful, but I was just buying time, to what end I still didn't know.

"Yes sir, it sure is, but would you mind if I saw your ID? We're on duty until we clear out the atrium of passengers and I'd like to get back to my wife and kids." He was so understanding and sincere, how could I lie to a man like this? Like this...

"It's cool, I'm on duty too. I'll stick around to clean up, you can take off." As the words fell out of my mouth I tried to pull them back in but it was too late.

Commitment was my only ally now. Unfortunately I was committed to the most idiotic an obvious lie I could have possibly told, but when you've only got one ally you stick with them.

I looked back at the Earth to avoid watching the officers reaction or to avoid any tell that might give me away, as if the lie hadn't done that already. I looked sincerely up at the Earth, still not homesick but afraid that might be the last time I see anything outside of a holding cell for a very long time. It seemed even more beautiful towering above me, clean of the fecal cyclone that was swirling around me.

I felt a flash of indignation at whatever schmuck probably picked my pocket, then I realized I bore 99% of the responsibility for my

debacle and I let go of the indignation. I couldn't gauge the silence, it wasn't telling me anything. I could feel the authority person was still standing there, but I was fixed on the Earth so I couldn't tell if he was staring up in awe with me or leveling a taser at my ribs. I looked back.

"Sir you're going to have to come with us." The man said plainly and now very unsympathetically. Every officer in the atrium was now within 20 feet of me and had a hand on a taser holster. I am not a very good liar, not because I don't lie well, I'm gifted in that regard. I'm a bad liar because I tell bad lies, but I tell them well.

"Anybody want an autograph? I'm gonna be famous." At least I still had my sense of humor. They didn't, or maybe I just wasn't very funny. About nine large men moved in on me and efficiently relieved me of the use of my legs.

Several large authority people held my arms and more-or-less lifted me off the ground while others searched me roughly. They couldn't find any personal identification so in lieu of an ID I was given a hefty pair of restraints, but not right away. I didn't resist but they hadn't had any fun in a while so I enjoyed several obligatory knees in my spine before I was properly restrained with my hands behind my back and no longer posed an imminent threat to the small army.

I tried to keep it light and asked one of them if they knew any shiatsu but they helped me remember that those kinds of comments just aren't appropriate in situations like that. I might

have said something about 'rent-a-cops' but I didn't mean it in a disrespectful way, just a casual reference. I learned a lot from those guys, god bless 'em. You have to admire people who so thoroughly enjoy their work.

I finally made it out of the atrium but I never got to see any of the ritzy surface attractions that most travellers come to the moon to see. The shuttle port's atrium was the last part of the moon's surface facilities I would see for a good long time. However, I did have the opportunity to learn a lot about what's under the moon. The first thing I learned is that there are a lot of tunnels and tubes under there.

~~~ **FOUR.4** ~~~

The security office was near the lowest level so I got a pretty good canvas of the place on the way. I was tossed in the back of an official looking vehicle that seemed perfectly engineered to zip around through lunar tunnels at breakneck speeds, because that's what it was engineered to do.

The tunnels under the moon are very long and tubular. Most of the tubes look a lot like tunnels, and to me the tunnels tended to resemble tubes. If I had to get specific I'd say the tunnels had flatter floors than tubes, and tubes tended to be smaller than tunnels. A tube might have been originally formed by lava when the moon was doing more interesting things by itself, and a tunnel might have been dug by people when they ran out of tubes. I don't really want to split hairs about what constitutes a

tunnel versus a tube so I'll just call them all tubes, but sometimes I might forget and start calling them tunnels again.

There are plenty of large-ish open spaces, some natural caverns, some man-made, but they are all connected by tubes. Most tubes were more than 2-3 meters wide, but some bigger tubes were more than 10 meters wide. I assumed the big tubes had been built that large to accommodate the equipment needed to excavate other tubes. Everything that went anywhere under the moon went by way of tubes. Pedestrian tubes, vehicle tubes, ventilation tubes, and probably tubes for food and mail. I imagine banks on the moon used systems of tubes in their drive throughs. I'm willing to bet some people on the moon had pet hamsters and their cages had little tubes. Suffice to say, the place was a tube superstore with a year-round blue-light special on tunnels, er- tubes, whatever.

There's a lot more going on under the moon they tell you about. There were people everywhere. It was dizzying. Everyone thinks the moon is just a big surface resort but it also has huge residential, commercial and industrial areas underground.

The moon is essentially a big legal question mark in many ways. There are a lot of people who can use money to turn question marks into more money, so big money comes to the moon from a variety of directions. Volatile research, mining, unregulated low-gravity manufacturing, service industries of a truly unsavory nature. It was all right under the

pocked surface of the crisp glowing orb people on Earth stare at sometimes when the internet goes out.

~~~ *FOUR.5* ~~~

We finally arrived at the end of a tube with an imposing gate. After a brief radio authentication the gate opened to allow our official looking vehicle into a garage that contained several other similarly official looking vehicles. A pair of waiting officers kindly pulled me out of the vehicle without even asking if I needed help pulling myself out. They marched me through a door and down a hallway. On the wall in the hallway was a proud mural of an official looking insignia that probably made a lot of people feel very secure and protected when they weren't being marched past it in restraints. The security station was small but well staffed, or at least amply staffed. No one seemed to be doing that much and my entrance hardly went without notice. I wasn't intentionally paraded, but the close quarters made my procession through the security area quite a scene. Most of the staff were obviously Moonies with a few earthborn here and there. I only saw the main booking office and a small holding area before I was shoved through a cartoonishly undersized door into a room with a single bare bulb hanging too low over a steel table. I was pushed into another cruelly straight-backed chair at the table, opposite two much more comfortable looking chairs. One Moonie and one earthborn officer sat down.

“Comfortable?” The Moonie officer mocked cordiality.

I looked over my shoulder and tried to figure out why my wrists hurt. They’d caught on the chair and were twisting my wrists into painful angles. I shifted to relieve the stress.

“Honestly, I’ve had worse gigs. I accidentally got booked at an S&M club once.” I offered, trying to lighten the mood.

The earthborn officer lit a cigarette and then rudely flicked it into my face. I emphasize rudely because there is a polite way to flick a lit cigarette into someone’s face and that wasn’t it. The cigarette fell to the table. I wanted it. I wanted to smoke tobacco so I could regain some control over my own destiny. I figured taking up smoking and developing respiratory disease was the closest thing to self-determination I had any hope of at the moment.

I leaned down and lapped the cigarette into my lips with my tongue, burning my face a little and leaving some drool on the table. I maneuvered the cigarette into smoking position and puffed hard a few times, trying to save the cherry and spare myself from asking for a light. After a brief moment of disbelief the officers began to enjoy the spectacle and laughed heartily.

"What is wrong with you?" The earthborn officer asked as he wiped his face. They were beside themselves with amusement.

“How should I know?” I garbled through the cigarette, which I couldn’t ash or handle so I just let the smoke rise up into my eyes. I blinked madly as tears swelled through

searing ducts, but I wasn't giving up that cigarette.

"Are you just crazy? You come up from Earth, got no work-pass, no ID, nothing. Then told security you're on staff? Impersonating an officer- that's 5 years right there. Seriously- what are you doing?" The earthborn officer's question was painfully rhetorical. The Moonie maintained a slightly more serious demeanor but it was clearly just a game to them. This couldn't be standard interrogation procedure, then again I wasn't your standard perp. The fact that no one ever takes me seriously had almost always been a negative, but at that moment it was the closest thing I had to a redeeming quality.

"I'm not doing anything, swear. Look- my name's Jely Fride, I'm just a piano player. You can look me up earthside. I think my wallet was stolen- I kind of knocked off hard for the flight. I was joking when I imper- er- didn't impersonate anybody. I make jokes a lot- and when I'm freaking out." I babbled through the cigarette, but held onto it like a champ.

"I don't buy it. I think he's a saboteur- some kind of Earth-purist. Looks like a religious militant to me, Hamm" The Moonie nodded to the other officer while he coughed up a laugh trying to stay deadpan.

"Maybe he's an industrial spy. Probably highly trained in hand-to-hand combat, good thing he's restrained!" The earthborn, Hamm apparently, chimed in enthusiastically. He was really cracking himself up. He went on in snorting laughter. "You think he's got a sub-dermal wire? Did we have him checked for

signals? CROW'S IN THE WEB!!! SWARM! SWARM!" He made a gesture as if talking into an earpiece, which really sold the gag. "I bet we're about to be over-run by industrial ninja spies. Shit Birgess, what did we get ourselves into? This guy means business!" Hamm said, establishing the full comic implication of name.

Just as I was getting frustrated enough to start yelling, the Moonie officer, Birgess, raised a hand and assumed a light calm. Hamm, the earthborn, saw the hand and his chuckling immediately crashed into an awkward but still threatening composure.

"Look man, I'm nobody- just-" I sputtered.

"We already know you are nobody, Mr. Fride. The question remains; what is your nobody doing *here*?"

The door knocked and opened from the outside. I noted there was no handle on the inside, which made the room seem that much more severe. Hamm walked over, comically checked his six and chuckled to himself, playing it up as if on high alert for the impending attack from some private army. The door opened a crack and a hand extended through it, passing a thin digi-folder. Hamm took it and tossed it in front of Birgess, who opened it and began scanning over the flashing images and text, most of which clearly had something to do with me. He looked intently down into the folder, seeming to absorb the information rapidly, but I think he was faking. I've faked reading a lot too so I can tell.

"So Mr. Fride..." You're here on what-business? pleasure?" Birgess thumbed at the folder's touch-screen as he spoke. The digi-folder must have had my whole bio in there. I wondered what it said about my music, then I wondered if there was anything more distracting than vanity.

There was an expectant pause. I wasn't sure if he was done. I went ahead.

"Well, I-" I started.

"You've come to strap a rocket and a steering wheel on the moon and make off with it? You're an evil genius?" Hamm interrupted, making a howling good show of it. Birgess composed him again with a raised hand and waited for my response.

"I just came to-" I began again.

"Did you think you wouldn't need an ID? You're such a famous rock star?" Hamm interrupted again, another hand, another pause. Birgess's eyes told me to proceed.

"I-"

"Do you even know anyone on the moon? Are you meeting anyone here?" Birgess interrupted this time, adding a nanosecond smirk. They had their act down, I had to give them that. He cocked his head, expecting me to try again.

I wasn't taking the bait. I just stared at them, puffing on the remnants of the cigarette until I started tasting filter and spat it out onto my lap, then had to jump around in my chair to keep the cherry from burning through my pants. I bounced on my cuffed hands a couple of times and I squeaked a little at the pain. A long

uncomfortable silence rolled on. At least it was uncomfortable for me, I was pretty sure Birgess and Hamm were loving it. After a few moment Birgess rose and closed the digifolder.

"You're planning your escape, aren't you?" Hamm chuckled. I just glared at him, then he hardened and glared at me much more dangerously and I looked away.

"Well if you won't talk to us. We'll let you think about it out in holding- I bet you'll get along with the Moonie supremacist gangs." Birgess said without looking at me. He stood.

"Oh they love soft earthborn like you. I bet they'll call you puddin'." Hamm said.

"Wait! Wait! I just came for a- uh, that is- I was gonna- I don't know-" I burst, finally stopping myself because I didn't really know what I was going to say in the first place. I didn't think the truth would help me much, but I didn't have any good lies either, all I had was babble.

"You came for what Mr. Fride? What?" Birgess strolled over to me, leaning in, smiling inches from my face.

I was already confused and getting pretty scared. The puddin' thing kind of hit a nerve. The heavy silence returned and I aimlessly spat half-syllables until I found the word "Shuttle?" but for some reason it came out as a question. As soon as I said it Hamm jumped in within timing like a professional improv comic.

"The shuttle? You were gonna hijack it? You're on the run? Need to get to Mars? Maybe

trying to get out past the Kuiper Belt to make the deep space hop to Proxima?"

I was losing steam and they were just getting started. It was a private game show for them. It was a classic playground-verbal-assault strategy. I'd never get a word in edgewise.

"I'm-"

"You're what? A terrorist?" Hamm was on top of it before I finished the syllable but I jumped right back in it. I was going to prove a point.

"No! I'm-"

"You're not getting anywhere with this crap. Gonna say you're on staff? You want to try that one again?" Birgess was on top of every word.

"I'm just a- uh- uh" I cut myself off that time, expecting them to cut me off. I was starting to lose any semblance of composure.

Birgess and Hamm accidentally jumped in at the same time. Their rhythm was off. Birgess trailed off but Hamm cut loose with some quick rant about how I was a bio-weapon, probably incubating some deadly virus. As soon as he let up I wound my Broca's area up to ramming speed.

"I'm just a piano player, man! I came to find a Moonie chick I made out with at a show! And fuck you and your mama!" Wait, how did that last part get in there?

The words just hung in the air like a ringing bell. It got really quiet and I had just a few milliseconds to savor that expensive victory before the stunned faces of Hamm and Birgess turned bright red. Hamm kicked the chair out

from under me and the scene segued into a montage of swinging fists, a brief but dedicated beating. Then everything dissolved into a long, forgiving unconsciousness, which seemed safer than being conscious since that's what got me made unconscious in the first place.

CHAPTER FIVE

Get Out Of Jail 'Free'

Not unpredictably, I awoke in a small, dark, empty cell. I was pretty sure I was alone because I wasn't being beaten and it was very quiet, except the raging pain screaming in my head. My fragmented mind was at war with itself over which part of my brain hurt most. I could barely move and I was still cuffed. I groaned and cursed as I writhed on my belly in agony. Damn consciousness. I rolled onto my side and opened my eyes, if for no other reason than a brief distraction from pain. My eyelids were not cooperating so I just laid there and suffered.

The soft whisper of finely woven fabric stretching against smooth skin interrupted my misery. As a testament to my exhaustion I didn't even care enough to look up and find out what was going on with the fabric and the skin. Someone very near me smelled very much like a perfumed woman, and I was pretty sure it wasn't me. Whoever she was gently cleared her throat for my attention. I still didn't care enough to look but I forced a grunt in response, which led to a rack of painful coughing.

"You have got to be the dumbest person alive." A confident and articulate alto recited a phrase I'd heard variations of my whole life. She seeped an alien familiarity, like a woman I fell in love with in another life on a planet where females devour males after mating. Hostile, demanding currents atomized into vapors of

desire and seduction under each of her breaths. It was the kind of voice that narrates sensual dreams and erotic nightmares.

"Are you just going to lay there? *Jely Fride*? Or is there someone you should be looking for?" She said my name with deliberate condescension, as if *Jely Fride* was an intrinsically amusing name. I didn't appreciate that. I may be stupid but that's no reason to make fun of my name.

"Do I know you?" I said as defiantly as one can while curled up on the floor in handcuffs. I had very little to lose at that point, and that's always a good time to be obtuse.

"Well you ought to. I'm certain you flew to the moon to find me." Her tone was one of someone familiar with playful cruelty.

I am stupid. The pain softened a little and I cranked an eye open. I pulled myself to my knees and turned to her. Her. She was standing less than an arm's length from me.

She was shrouded in a misty halo that was probably a combination of poor air filtration, sodium vapor lighting, an undiagnosed concussion, and there being a beautiful woman standing there. Nanometer thick fabric had been bio-welded over her torso in the shape of a seductive garment, that or it was just a really tight, sexy dress.

She sauntered towards me a step, bent purposefully, and pressed her body into my face as she leaned over me and roughly unlocked the cuffs. Then she backed up a step and licked her teeth thoughtfully as she gazed at me. Her every touch and movement had the fluid grace of a

satin sheet in a light breeze. My heartbeat spun up to a thrumming vibration in my chest. My diaphragm could only afford to offer tiny maintenance breaths to keep me alive while the rest of my body tried to cope with the onslaught of endorphins.

"You've come all this way and you've got nothing to say to me?" Her doe eyes swelled in manufactured disappointment. Then she looked down and saw some of the dried blood my face had left on her dress, she brushed at it with open disdain and glowered at me accusingly.

"Hey- wuh- so what's your name?" I said timidly. I was surprised at my sudden coherence.

She checked her fingernails as if disappointed in the question. She put a hand on her hip and looked at me and scoffed.

"You mean to tell me you came all this way, and you don't even know who I am. You can't be that dumb." Her face keened and she looked at me inquisitively. "What *is* wrong with you, *Jely Fride*?"

People keep asking me that as if I have an explanation prepared. I recognize that it's a reasonable question but I honestly don't know the answer and I was getting tired of being asked in unfunny contexts. Plus she said my name condescendingly again. She may be unstoppably fine, and a little scary, and I may have a black hole crush on her, but that thing with my name had to stop. I got a little indignant with her.

"So you *knew* that I was coming here or something? Who are you? And why haven't I

kissed you again yet?" My mouth was really taking me out on a limb. I didn't say that - my mouth did, I swear. There should be some way to distinguish that. Maybe I should get a light implanted in my forehead that indicates when my brain is and isn't speaking. Though when I finally thought about it, my mouth did have a point. No point in not kissing now, but that could also be the concussion talking.

She was intrigued and caught a little off guard. I lurched upwards, attempting to stand in the most debonaire way my beaten body could muster. One leg forgot how to use its foot and she had to help me back up but I finally stood erect enough to look her in the eye. I'd made my point; I am a man- and I like this woman so much that I flew all the way to the moon and got beat up just for another kiss... apparently. So I slowly leaned in to kiss her- or my face sort of fell towards hers, but kissing eventually happened.

That kiss wasn't as cosmic as the one back on Earth, but it lasted longer and the beating had come before instead of after, I guess that's an improvement. Unfortunately the beating had made my face a much more delicate and tender place than I remembered. I did my dead level best not to bleed on her and she seemed to enjoy the enthusiasm. She really was something. After a few precious moments we parted gently. A sincere smile grew over her face as her eyes slowly opened. Sincerity appeared a little foreign to her but made her all the more beautiful and exotic.

"You're a genuine lunatic." She correctly observed.

"Doesn't lunatic mean something about the moon?" Even I was surprised I knew that.

"Yeah- " She laughed. "It does. You're a real smooth operator Mr. Fride. I might have to keep you around... just for fun." She shook her head at me in amusement and stepped around to check me out. "You're pretty bruised, but not broken. I'll get you fixed up. Mmmhmm..." She paused for a moment. "A musician, huh? You have any friends on the moon, family, any connections?" She asked.

"Just you, and I hung out with some cops earlier." I tried to wink but it hurt so I just winced and I think my eye dripped something. Not sure why that comment deserved a wink anyway.

"Mmmhmm... This could actually work." She mused enigmatically.

She circled me one last time in consideration and as she came around in front of me she nodded in approval. She had come to some kind of conclusion about me like a judge at a state fair. I was still caught up in scanning, categorizing and archiving every curve of her architecture. She was built like a Stradivarius and tuned up by the devil himself. Her legs almost purred when they moved. A significant thought suddenly occurred to me.

"Hey, I still don't know your name." At that point it was as much a demand as a question. I was trying to regain some masculine confidence but she held all the cards and I felt more like cattle than a human being.

"My name is Alora Meloohn des Luna."
She enunciated it like a poem. "You can call me Alora, for now."

"For now?" I asked. She ignored the question. She was very elusive and seemed to have everything all worked out. A few breaths of fresh agitation infiltrated my puppy-love gas mask. I was having trouble not thinking about how that dress wrapped around things, but a decent part of me was still attuned to the fact that I was in a cell, and bleeding in several places. She knew a lot more about me than I did about her, but not in a scary but kinda hot overzealous groupie way. She wasn't about to start singing my songs to me. I was walking a monofilament line with Alora between deep fascination and being deeply creeped out. She began to stroke my hair and attentively grazed my parts to assess damage.

"Would it matter if I asked you what's going on here?" I was still trying to appear as if I was manly-ly deluded enough to pretend I was in charge of the situation.

"If you ask very, very nicely." She cooed. She was toying with me. I like to play games, but I don't like to be handcuffed unless I'm sure I'll get a turn.

"Okay- so... what's going on here, uh baby?" I asked with waning clarity of what demeanor I even wanted to be going for. She again looked slightly disappointed in me. She struck me as the kind of woman for whom people go to great lengths not to disappoint. She was clearly unfamiliar with the sensation.

"Well you kissed me at a bar and got your ass kicked for it." She told me as if I'd forgotten.

"I know that much, and you kissed me back, for the record."

"Fair enough, but I'm permanently in a better position to get what I want. So, if the perception had been that I kissed you then you might have been spared the ass-kicking." Whew, she was sharp. I was still sorting out that last sentence as she continued. "The next day I saw you boarding my shuttle in econoclass." She said *her* shuttle with such casual authority that I wasn't completely sure if she didn't literally own it. I was pretty sure that wasn't possible, but she made it seem like a reasonable question.

"And then I got my wallet stolen and arrested. I got all that, but how are you here now and how do you know my name? I mean, not that I'm complaining." I tossed in a weak flirt to soften my open exasperation.

"I had your wallet taken after you popped those pills I sent for you." I froze, as if I was going anywhere anyway. That should have explained a lot but I wasn't in good condition for deductive reasoning so I waited for her to continue.

"I knew when I saw you that you must be coming to try to find me, men do that, so I thought I'd give you a hand." She really did have everything worked out. That would be great if I had any reason to trust her, or just to not be scared of her.

"So you helped me by drugging me and getting me thrown in jail? Thanks." I tried not to

sound too condescending but it was getting difficult.

"You got yourself thrown in. They might have been nicer if you hadn't impersonated an officer." She accused accurately. "And then fuck your mama to a cop-brilliant, really."

"I wasn't imperson- ah. And I didn't mea- ah." I gave up before she even had to cut me off.

"It's not like I poisoned you, sissy, I sent you some pills for the flight, you took them, win-win. I had someone bring me your wallet so I could find out what you're all about. Plus I knew with no ID, you'd be easy to find. I couldn't have you falling in with the wrong crowd before I had a chance to speak to you."

Considering the fact that she had me drugged, robbed, and incarcerated for her curiosity and convenience, who did she think was the wrong crowd? I didn't expect any straight answers out of her. I gave up, I'd come here for this woman completely blind, and I'd get what I deserved for it, whatever that turned out to be.

"Alright, so you got me. What happens now?" I spun the question to show that I was ready if not willing. She smiled the satisfied smile of someone who'd just added another win to her record of always getting her way. She leaned over and kissed me. I painfully pulled myself together, put my arms around her and grabbed back with both hands. I picked her up by what turned out to be the most perfectly symmetrical, round, and firm buttocks I'd ever

had the pleasure of grabbing with both hands. She kissed me harder.

Okay, that worked, but I was still in a cell. I needed to work on that. She squeezed her body against me with the pressure and purred until a bruise made me fight back a groan. She relaxed and gave me another soft kiss.

"Let's get you cleaned up. I've got plans." She whispered and bit my earlobe with about twice as much force as is appropriate for sexyness.

It's weird, for the most part I'm happy to be part of beautiful women's plans. Even this was no exception because I was pretty sure I would enjoy some parts of it. The problem was that I was pretty sure her plan involved something in addition to sex, and not the usual commitment stuff. I was worried about pain, possibly emotional pain, but more immediately I was worried about physical pain. She didn't seem that concerned about the pain I was currently in, so I didn't expect she'd be worried about it in the future. That worried me.

She flipped out an expensive looking communicator and poked a few digits before raising it to speak very firmly to someone, who answered immediately.

"Carl. Yes. He's okay, but I don't appreciate you damaging my things. No excuses Carl. You're lucky he's not broken or I'd take it out of your ass. That's right, for a while anyway. Just get it done and I'll consider it forgiven." She closed the communicator and looked back at me. "You're all set, Carl's coming to get you. We'll meet up later. I've got some business to attend to

right now." She paused and stared with knowing eyes. "Mmmmm, don't worry Jely, you'll love it here. I'll make sure." She gave me a sloppy kiss before opening the cell door.

She stood in the door and held out her hand. I took it and kissed it as if by command even though I'm not usually the hand-kissing type. I stepped closer and took the door handle, trying to keep the door open. She stepped out and closed the door behind her, pulling my hand, arm, eventually my face forward enough to smack into the bars. She giggled.

I heard the lock slide into place and thought about how nice Aquari was, and her beautiful blue boobs, and that the only whooping I took to kiss her was in bowling.

CHAPTER SIX

Why All The Fighting?

Before not long enough, two pairs of heavy feet clomped in the direction of my cell. Two of the feet belonged to a man named Carl Birgess, who had recently beat me while I was in restraints, and then been given orders not to beat me anymore by a woman I had recently chased to the moon. The remaining feet belonged to Hamm. I really hoped his first name turned out to be Honey. They stood glaring at me through the cell bars. Hamm appeared amused as ever. Birgess looked as if he'd been reamed out by his boss, which I'm pretty sure he had.

"We're supposed to be gentle with you this time." Birgess said matter of factly. "Try not to fall down or anything." It came across clearly as; *Try not to give us an excuse to hurt you.* That was an improvement because at least they felt they needed an excuse.

"I don't know, you sure he's not gonna use any of those special-ops moves on us?" Hamm just didn't quit. Dead horses would run away from him.

"I used up all my best moves on your mama." I sneered back, testing the *supposed to be gentle* clause of our new arrangement.

Birgess couldn't contain a laugh. Hamm shook the cell bars and growled, but Birgess calmed him before he got them open. Either I would get away with being a smart ass, or they would be punished for beating me. It was a win-

win, sort of. It was more like a draw but I'd been losing hard all day so either way it was a big step up for me.

They opened the cell and collected me like loose gravel. I thanked them sarcastically for the hospitality and complained that the cleaning staff's efforts were not befitting the five-star accommodations and offered my services as an entertainer.

I was led back through the holding rooms and out a side door. They were clearly making an effort to avoid my exit being seen by any of the other officers the way I'd been led in.

~~~ *SIX.1* ~~~

Once again I was in the back of a security vehicle, zipping through sublunar tubes and tunnels. We careened crazily around tight interconnecting roundabouts. Strange architectural protrusions in the tunnel walls blurred as we whipped through tube after crazy tube. I got a whole new appreciation for how massive the lunar underground really was.

Long before the first moon colonies were developed, scientists predicted that building underground had more advantages than you could count. Thermal stability, protection from radiation, simplified pressure vessel construction techniques, and a really cool cave dwelling vibe that struck a chord with human beings post-tree-dwelling ancestry.

Shortly after scientists started considering scientific advantages, less scrupulous folks began considering other

advantages, including privacy from telescopes on Earth, which could otherwise have seen the true extent of some of their more dubious facilities.

Once a stable cavern was found or a tunnel dug, they sprayed a dense sealant on the surface of the walls to maintain pressure and heat. The seals are pretty durable, but kinetic firearms are forbidden as a reasonable precaution.

After sealing the tunnels the rest was relatively easy, though I guess easy relative to sealing out the instant death of the void doesn't really mean easy. Underground ice reservoirs provided water for drinking and electrolysis of oxygen, and virtually unlimited solar energy from the surface provided ample power.

Biomechanical recycling reclaims 100% of stuff you don't even want to think about. The moon doesn't have to import any necessities from Earth. As a whole the moon is a net exporter of raw materials and finished goods. The economy is a powerhouse.

The biggest problem on the moon, as with most isolated places where rich people shovel money around, is corruption. Back on Earth there were conspiracy theories and urban legends about large-scale mafia wars, countless civilian casualties, and extreme violations of human rights. They were all unconfirmed. The surface resorts are kept squeaky clean and deny all such scandalous accusations.

What is known is that a corporate sponsored rewrite of the original lunar charter dictated that the surface resorts may claim

ownership of the property directly under their property. Some clever legal mind decided what they own includes oxygen. Even more clever legal minds decided that a person without oxygen is dead- ergo any person living under the moon that is not dead must be property of the resorts. The surface and sublunar territories were strictly segregated and the well secured passages between them controlled by those with powerful economic interests in keeping them that way.

I was a little nervous that having spent so much time underground might already have made me someone's property, though I was fairly certain they'd have to argue that point with Alora more than me.

~~~ *SIX.2* ~~~

Birgess and Hamm were unsettlingly quiet and cordial during the ride, only speaking to point out a few landmarks. I'm sure they were just trying to ensure that I reported reasonable treatment. I wasn't in the mood to test my luck again so I passively enjoyed the ride and focused on becoming one with the craziness of the situation.

Being in a marked security vehicle we didn't have to slow down much so I took note when we decelerated before a series of construction warnings. A crisply attentive looking bunch of workers were gathered around a roadblock. They motioned for us to speak to them. A faint fear pricked me. Something about the workers seemed too organized for a construction crew, and rather than attending to

whatever was causing the obstruction they all seemed focused on our vehicle. They were all earthborn, except for the foreman. Birgess hit a toggle and the side window slid down. He asked the foreman what the problem was.

As the foreman leaned in to answer I saw Hamm's face go blank. He recognized the foreman, and not as a friend. He was a thin, leathery man with a patchy white beard and a tightly bound ponytail. He wasn't large but was extremely imposing in his own way. At first glance one might guess he liked to read articles in torture magazines about how to inflict the maximum amount of pain while minimizing potential losses of consciousness.

The foreman smiled just as a few of the 'workers' rolled a maintenance vehicle into our path, fully blocking the tunnel. I whipped around in time to see another piece of industrial machinery roll to a stop behind us.

"Officers- Birgess, Hamm. Good to see you this evening. Would you mind stepping out of the vehicle for a moment." The foreman played up the apparent role reversal. It's not everyday you see a civilian instructing authority people to get out of their authority vehicle, but Birgess and Hamm weren't ordinary officers, and these were clearly not ordinary crewmen. I was the only ordinary person involved and that fact made me feel extraordinarily unsafe.

Birgess glanced at Hamm and then back at me. His eyes tried to communicate something nonverbally, but I didn't understand anything except the part where he nonverbally gave up on trying to communicate with me nonverbally.

Birgess spun back to the door and slammed it open, knocking the foreman back several feet. He was back on his footing in an instant. Birgess sprang out of the car only to be swarmed by four of the crewmen. I heard the smash of glass and turned to see Hamm's lower torso following the upper as he was pulled headlong out of the vehicle.

Birgess was putting up a mighty effort against the ambush, dipping and moving with incredible speed and timing. He jabbed one opponent to stun him, then hammered another, then returned to the original opponent to complete the takedown.

Hamm was equally impressive. With a surge of primal strength he grappled several limbs at once, rolling and twisting bones like a heartbroken crocodile until free from any hold and back on his feet. Hamm and Birgess found one another and worked back-to-back, fending off strikes and returning low kicks and whipping fists and elbows. They were superbly trained in close combat, but the crewmen weren't just anonymous ninjas, they were doing damage. We were outnumbered three to one, although that would be counting me as a combatant. I didn't plan on doing much beyond cowering in the back seat until it was over. Though I didn't really plan that, I just did. Birgess sidestepped a front-kick and used the momentum to smash a crewman's head against the side of our vehicle.

"Enough! Do it!" Someone shouted. The workmen backed off for an instant and each pulled out a thin, flexible visor of some kind and wrapped it around their eyes and ears.

A radiated energy overwhelmed my senses as if a pulse of pure sound had superheated the air into gelatinous rainbow plasma. The sensation was like x-ray vision plus heat vision minus normal spacetime causality. It was weird- fast but frozen in time. Like the conductor of reality sneezed in my face on purpose. In the swirling convolution of perception, I could sense the source of the crazy as if it were the center of the known universe. I wanted to reach out and touch it, but something else in the distortion caught my attention. Past the ghostly apparitions that I assumed to be Birgess, Hamm, and the crewmen assailants, I sensed another presence. A motionless figure in the distance seemed to be aware of me being aware of it. The figure looked to be slightly beyond the effect of whatever insanity field was being generated whatever thing was generating the insanity field. I waved at the figure and gestured toward the apparent source of the insanity and opened my hands to ask 'wtf is that thing?'. The figure straightened and stepped sideways, maintaining its distance but apparently trying to get a bead on the thing I had pointed to.

Without warning it was over. Reality rebooted past the psychedelic interlude. Everything went back to normal, except Birgess and Hamm were completely subdued, sitting on the ground with their hands bound.

The foreman held a small blue box in the air, then pocketed it. Birgess watched with cold intensity and Hamm wheezed with unhinged rage.

“You just declared fucking war.”

Birgess seethed.

“We’re just having some fun, c’mon... ya pussy’s.” The foreman panted, still exhausted from the melee. He didn't look like he was enjoying himself any more than Birgess, but his insistence that he did made him all the more threatening.

“There's a pact, Louis. What the hell are you doing?” Birgess was infuriated. Hamm was too breathless to speak, which was probably the safest thing for all of us.

“Oh the frakin’ pact, everybody whines about the pact until they need to break it. It’s business, Carl. Contracts are fluid, like the blood they’re written in. Real question is- what are you two doing?” He stopped, looking through the front window of the vehicle into the back seat where I rocked in the fetal position.

“What is that?” Louis pointed at me, my heart stopped, skipped enough beats to dangerously lower my blood pressure and then kicked in just before I passed out, which was unfortunate. I slumped over, not trying to hide, just physically incapable of holding myself upright against the weight of terror.

“He's a dooper we caught trying to smuggle in some GMO strains. Take him, he's yours.” Birgess lied; for me, or for himself, I couldn't discern. I may be a dooper, but I leave smuggling to people a lot smarter and/or dumber than me. Whatever Birgess' intentions I wasn't going to argue, he may not be on my side but at least I knew what side he was on. Actually, I didn't know, but I knew him for just about four

hours longer than I had known the other dangerous men in the equation. Also, Alora never told this Louis guy not to hurt me so I figured Birgess and Hamm were the closest thing to allies I could have.

"Looks like a dooper, don't know about a smuggler though..." He said absently as he waved to his men to do something that I knew I wasn't going to enjoy.

I felt a draft and suddenly felt myself being pulled from the vehicle, which I hadn't previously realized was a hatchback. I didn't struggle. They lined us up on our knees, with Birgess and Hamm on either side of me. Louis stood menacingly before us and tapped the business end of a taser against our heads.

"Carl? What are you doing with some dooper on this end? Ritzy area to be dumping trash."

Birgess came right back in the same beat.

"He's connected back on the ground, we're taking him back to a safe-house so we can get him topside and back to Earth."

"Ooooh- connected, huh? What kind of pull you got little dooper?" Louis waited for my answer. I was dumbstruck. I couldn't take any cues from Birgess without being obvious. I had no idea what answer, if any, might help us out of this. I stammered the only thing I thought anyone might take remotely seriously, which to my amazement, turned out to be the truth.

"I know Alora." I looked back into Louis' face. He didn't react with fear, or anger, or even surprise, which surprised me. I glanced

at Birgess. He was unreadable. Not knowing if I had said the right thing was worse than not knowing what to say.

"Everyone knows Alora." Louis said. He was reading me like a map with big red X's all over it. I was clearly supposed to say something else. I was all out of truth, so I went with a reasonable alternative.

"She wants me, for- piano- smuggling. I play- and smuggle pianos, with dope- GMO dope. Wish I had some right now." I managed to work some honesty in there at the end, but the rest was sufficiently vague. Louis looked somehow satisfied and disappointed with my answer but turned back to Birgess.

"Birgess, you were going to give us one of Alora's toys? I'm flattered." Louis faked choking up. "That's a bond of trust, brother!" Louis laughed expressively, nearly catching himself with the taser in the process. He sneered at me dismissively then turned back to Birgess.

"You expect me to believe that you were going to give up your charge." Pointing at my face. "Just because we got the drop on you? That doesn't sound like the Birgess I know. You're losing your edge." He stepped behind Hamm and gripped his head between his hands and began to squeeze.

Hamm growled. The other men looked on and laughed as Birgess gnashed his teeth. I tried to keep my stomach from spinning.

"What's it gonna be, Carl? Think I can squeeze anything useful out of Hamm's head? Hamm! Can you hear me or am I squeezing your head too hard?" Roars of laughter from the crew.

"Fru-ughk. Y-u." More laughter as Hamm nose began to bleed and his eyes bulged from his sockets. Louis released his vice press more from exhaustion than mercy. He walked a menacing circle around us.

"What's it gonna take Carl? What's it gonna take this time for you to give it up? What's this little puke is all about."

Louis turned his turbulent fury to me. "What are you? A tech-spy or something? You're too pussy to be an operative. Fess up, weasel." He spat and slammed the butt of the taser into my temple.

"I'm just a piano player, man." I whimpered. That was the truth. Man, Oh man, all I wanted was to play a grand piano with the top wide-open right about then, especially if it was full of smuggled dope. I thought I was about to get whacked by some deranged asshole and all I could think about was black and white keys sliding under my fingers. I won't tell you I was a big champ about all this. I lied enough that day so I might as well come clean now. I wet my pants. Yep. Not sure if I cried because it's a haze now, but urination leaves a calling card.

With Louis' attention on me Hamm had found a moment. I didn't even see him attack but Louis suddenly went sideways and Hamm tumbled on top, hands still bound, flopping like a deranged walrus. Hamm headbutted Louis like a forge hammer and stunned him, then dove to chomp onto Louis' thigh with inhuman bite force, gnashing madly at the cloth and flesh as Louis shrieked and clubbed Hamm with his fists overhand.

Louis' men quickly intervened, but it took one of them holding Hamm's nose to suffocation to release his bite.

"Jesus fucking fuck! FUUUUUUCK!"

Louis articulated. He struggled to stand, his leg bleeding far more than you'd expect from a human bite. He righted himself but was clearly in intense pain from the bite. He reached into his pocket and felt something that apparently enraged him even more. He froze, then shook slightly, then pulled the formerly box shaped blue thing out of his pocket. It looked like a blue wad of bubblegum with sharp edges.

"Fuuuuuuck, fuck... you fuck." Louis was between rage and despair. "Carl... your boy fucked up real bad this time. Gonna have to put him down."

Louis circled back behind Hamm.

Birgess stared into Louis' eyes with a hatred that could have brought down a Cyborg-Bull in mid-charge, but Louis' sadism was too thick for any hate-rays to penetrate. He cracked the taser on and off a few times and rammed it straight into the base of Hamm's skull. Hamm's shriek curdled the air and died with unutterable anguish as Louis forced Hamm's head to the ground with the charged taser. His glare never left Birgess as he stepped on Hamm's back to restrain his flailing. The crewmen howled at first, then watched with hardening intensity as Louis' intention became absolute.

He maintained the connection until Hamm's convulsions were clearly involuntary. He finally released, Hamm shook a few more

times before his body lay motionless, dead. I vomited.

~~~ *SIX.3* ~~~

As I spat and coughed on my chuck, I noticed Louis notice something behind our vehicle. He looked concerned. Birgess also took notice and observed in calculating silence. There was a commotion behind the vehicles. Two of the crewmen ran towards it. Confused yells and the sound of scuffling crescendoed and then fell back to an eerie silence.

Louis was at a loss whether he should go inspect or remain on guard. He looked questioningly at his remaining men, who looked questioningly back at him. No one returned from behind the vehicle.

Louis was beside himself. He motioned for a man to guard us and gestured for the others to follow him. They all drew tasers and more primitive tools of violence. They crept toward the back corners of the vehicle. A slurred voice sprang from the shadowy wall of the tunnel just beyond the passenger side.

"You gosssum shange misser? I goh casha rideome."

The crewman grabbed at something that moved in the shadows. As he reached, he suddenly collapsed backwards as if his legs had been sucked out from under him.

"Sssssory 'bowat missser."

A drunken vagrant wobbled out into the dim light. He tripped over the crewman's flailing legs and stumbled forward into another

crewman. As he straightened up, he accidentally slung his elbow into the crewman's groin. He spun to recover balance and put his heel into the back of another crewman's knee. The crewman collapsed neatly under his own weight just before the vagrant fell back onto him with an elbow directly into his face. The drunken vagrant tumbled to the side then flopped himself upright, looking almost amused.

Two of the other crewmen made a run at the drunk from opposite sides. A third leapt over our vehicle and attempted to tackle him. The drunk stumbled, fell against the vehicle and barely tipped the crewman's leg in mid-leap, sending him barreling into the ground headfirst. The two men besides Louis who were still standing stepped carefully over their writhing comrades and approached the vagrant with renewed caution.

The drunk wobbled contently, squinting to figure out what was happening. As soon as one of the crewmen stepped in range the drunk swung a bottle to his mouth and cracked him solidly in the jaw with the thick glass. The other crewman lunged into the vagrant, who slipped and fell sideways, avoiding the lunge and coming down with his weight on the crewman's outstretched leg, twisting it painfully as he straightened himself up after the fall.

As the drunk haphazardly gathered himself and tried to stand amongst the fallen crewmen he weaved and lost his balance several times, each time making shockingly violent contact. As the majority of the crewmen were subdued the vagrant's movements took on a

slightly more coherent pattern. Through the violent drunken ballet I saw the vagrant slip a tiny sliver of metal into some of the men's neck near the collar bone. It seemed like there would be a lot of blood if he were cutting into them, but there was none. As the sliver entered the body they simply stopped moving as if paralyzed. Louis, Birgess, and I all stared in amazement.

The vagrant finally rose. He staggered towards us, blathering incomprehensible strings of syllables into the air and waving his hands frantically.

Louis' astonishment gave way to rage and he marched straight towards the vagrant with a taser at the ready. In a flash Birgess was up, he'd freed his hands somehow. He rushed Louis from behind, punching him in the kidney. Birgess reached for Louis' wrist, cranked it up at the elbow and buried the taser in Louis' neck before he'd even taken it out of his hand. The taser cracked to life. Louis bucked as the electric current raced through his nervous system. Birgess was not going to let up.

The vagrant straightened and stepped neatly towards Birgess and took his wrist away from Louis' neck. Louis collapsed to the ground. The vagrant shut off the taser and removed it from Birgess' hand without a fight. He backed away, removing the charge cells from the taser and tossing them over his shoulder.

"Shouldn't an officer of the law offer this man some kind of due process before you electrocute him?" The previously drunk man said clearly and articulately, which made it

apparent he'd been faking his inebriation- like a boss I might add.

Birgess couldn't fully conceal his fear of the vagrant, which just seemed to make Birgess angrier. He grumbled as he rose to his feet.

"Disorderly conduct, public insobriety, interfering with security operations, 10 years easy, and that's without resisting arrest." Birgess recited.

"Am I under arrest, officer?" The vagrant asked rhetorically.

"About time somebody... took... you assholes down..." Birgess said with failing confidence as he surveyed the carnage around him.

The vagrant had brutally incapacitated more than a half dozen men with such masterful subtlety as it seemed like an series of accidents, but it could not have been. He stood before us tall and still, with immense dignity, at least he seemed that way to me, to Birgess he was still a threat. Might have been a threat to me too but in context I just wasn't feeling it. For once being the most fearless person between, us I queried the man's name.

"Aaah- dude?" I asked.

"Hello there, my name is Percy. Who might you be?" His tone was downright gentile.

"I'm from- bah- Jely Fride... from Earth..."

"From Earth you say." He looked thoughtfully at me and he allowed a small smile to pass over his face before resuming his imposingly stoic expression. "And what might a

Jely Fride from Earth be doing in the middle of this kind of trouble?"

I looked at Birgess then back to Percy. "Not super clear on all that. I got arrested... for my ID- but they- uh might be letting me go."

Percy examined Birgess then looked back at me.

"This far?" He posed the question to Birgess but continued to observe me with unsettling curiosity. Birgess was looking down at Hamm's limp body with growing frustration and anger, his impotence in the face of this drunken master was not sitting well. He stood up and faced Percy with as challenging posture as he could maintain.

"Who the hell are you to be asking me questions? Hamm's down... and this fucker's gonna pay." Birgess marched towards Louis, still unconscious, and pulled a knife from his belt. Percy stepped between them and held his ground.

"I'm afraid I want to ask him a few questions too, and that will require him to be alive. Please." He held up his hand and motioned for Birgess to sheath his weapon. Birgess held it for a long moment and looked hard at Percy, who remained calm and collected, almost friendly.

"For today." Birgess said under his breath but loud enough to hear. Birgess sheathed the knife and went back to Hamm. He turned Hamm over with some difficulty. Hamm's face was frozen in pain and was flattened and cut by laying face first on the hard ground. Birgess

checked him summarily and laid him back down with less ceremony than I would have expected.

Birgess was upset but in him it translated directly into anger. He shook with rage at the murder of his friend and partner. Despite their recent cruelty, Birgess' human pain moved me and I all but felt sympathy for him. Percy gave him a few moments of respect. He regarded Birgess' badge for a moment, a half-sneer rolling over his face.

"What was the oath you swore for that?"

Percy asked.

"What the hell is it to you?" Birgess was seething.

Percy perched on his feet and looked ready to pounce. For a tense moment I thought Percy might attack. Birgess was a skilled fighter but this strange man had just demonstrated a mastery of combat that bordered on supernatural. Birgess was too smart not to recognize that fact and stood down to indicate he was done fighting. Percy immediately stood down as well, seemingly genuinely grateful that he wouldn't have to hurt anyone else. I stood down too, but no one noticed because- yeah. "It's the fuckin' moon- everybody's fucked somehow." Birgess spat.

"Not everyone." Percy mulled, almost himself, but not hiding his cold disdain for Birgess' answer. Percy shifted his attention back to me with a suddenly conversational demeanor.

"Well, Jely Fride from Earth you really should steer clear of the law around here. They get the job done, but it's a dirty job even on good days many have conflicting loyalties. Even

the honest ones can get pretty rough... Not that there are many of those." He looked at Birgess. "As for you, officer Birgess. You must know I'm giving you the benefit of the doubt, out of respect for the badge." He looked scathingly at Birgess.

Percy removed the barricade that blocked the road. "This tunnel will be cleared and reopened. No need to call it in. These men will be gone before anyone arrives." Percy politely informed Birgess.

Percy knelt beside Louis. He patted down the unconscious man and pulled the chewed box from Louis pocket and gazed at it with a mixture of awe and disgust.

He gave Birgess another hard look, then smiled broadly at me and bowed slightly before slipping the box into his pocket. He scooped Louis up and threw him over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes, then turned and walked calmly towards the back of our vehicle.

Just before Percy disappeared into the tunnel, he snapped his fingers and instantly, several other vagrants boiled up from the shadows. With ninja spec-ops silence and efficiency they pulled the crewmen from the ground and hauled them off, some carrying two full grown men over their shoulders. I mean, it is the moon though- I keep forgetting there's low gravity here, I mean I'm not forgetting I just never mention it because it goes without saying, right? Yeah- that closes all the holes...

As quickly as the squad of ninja-moon-vagrants appeared, they dissolved back into

shadows. From the darkness I heard Percy's voice.

“Good luck Mr. Fride. I think we will meet again.”

What's that supposed to mean? I felt more and more like a pawn ever since I got off that ship. Except at least a pawn only gets used as a pawn by one side, what kind of pawn gets moved around by two or three different sides? At least up until then I was making bad decisions and getting myself into trouble. Since I got to the moon, I hadn't had the luxury of making many of my own bad decisions and the people making decisions for me didn't seem to have my best interests at heart. I had to get back to making my own bad decisions or I was going to end up dead even sooner than my own decisions would make me.

"We're getting out of here. Help me get him in the runner." Birgess barked, overcompensating a bit for his recently crushed authority. Handling a corpse was yet another decision I wouldn't have made for myself but Birgess didn't seem like he was in the mood for an argument.

I knelt down at Hamms feet and prepared to move his body, but as I lifted, nothing happened except for a shooting pain in my back. I looked at Birgess for answers, but the rage in his eyes indicated that I'd better try harder. With Herculean effort I was able to lift his feet a little off the ground. Birgess grunted and strained as he pulled Hamms arms and shoulders off the ground and mostly dragged his upper torso so it was propped against the door of

the vehicle. Together we scooped and rolled Hamm in a heap into the passenger's side.

I looked at Birgess as if for an explanation as to why Hamm weighed a literal goddamn ton, but Birgess was dismissive.

"Get in the back." Birgess said. I briefly considered making a run for it but decided that even if Birgess wasn't obviously in way better shape, and even if I had somewhere to run to, Birgess would probably just run me over in the vehicle to let off some steam.

Not a word passed between us until we were well back on the road and back at cruising speeds.

"Who was that guy?" I asked Birgess.

"Which one?" Birgess replied. I guess I meant Percy but come to think of it I didn't know what any of that was all about.

"All of them, what was- all that?"

"Louis is an old friend." He said bitterly. "Those were his men."

"And Percy?" Birgess heaved a sigh.

"Bad news. You ever see him again... tell me. Tell *me*, understand?" I nodded sheepishly.

"How did he fight like- who does that?" I asked.

"Shut up! Don't say another word. Just shut up and sit there until I tell you what to do." Birgess exploded at me. I took the less than subtle hint and shut up and sat there. I was never that great at doing as I was told but suddenly I had become as obedient as a trained dog - not my style at all. At present I wasn't concerned with style in the least, merely surviving until my

next date with a grand piano, which to my surprise and eventual but temporary delight, I was being escorted to right then and there.

CHAPTER SEVEN

House des Luna

The house we finally arrived at was nothing short of an underground palace. A castle in a cavern. It was a massive freestanding building, completely detached from the subsurface lunar walls. It stood in the center of a well-lit cavern. A tangled weave of thick luminescent wires crisscrossed the ceiling of the cavern providing enough light to sustain the lush lawn and garden that surrounded the estate. The house itself was a meta-post-futurist masterpiece with grand columns and arches, a glass turret with a balcony, floor-to-ceiling windows and towering double front doors. I made up the term meta-post-futurist because I don't know any real architectural terms that could describe the odd structure, and that one seemed to set the mood appropriately.

The mansion in the cavern seemed out of place but very accommodating and comfortable. Given my recent ordeal I was not in the best position to appreciate the residence or contemplate the skill and ingenuity of the builders. The feature that interested me most was that it seemed big enough for me to have some reasonable expectation of finding a place to be left alone in it. Birgess stopped right in front of the main entrance but left the vehicle running.

"Go inside, don't touch anything, and wait until somebody tells you to do something else. I got business."

Birgess was composed for a man who just saw his friend murdered, but the calm on him was more dangerous than most peoples rage. As soon as I was clear from the vehicle he sped off down the drive and out the tunnel.

I stood at the door of the strange underground palace. To whom it belonged I wasn't sure, but I assumed I'd be seeing Alora there soon enough. That should have been a positive thought. Unfortunately the glory and intrigue of flying to the moon to find an exotic mystery woman had all but faded and I was glad just to be alone and unmolested, for the moment.

I had become distracted somewhere between being robbed, arrested, beaten, interrogated, beaten unconscious, released under guard, manhandled, briefly subjected to some kind of insanity field generator, then witnessing a murder. The palace that stood before me seemed less real than the scattered memories of the past few hours.

I decided to go right in and find someone's expensive liquor to plaster myself with. I knocked on the door and waited out of habit more than actual etiquette or respect for anyone's privacy or property. After about 20 seconds I turned the handle and the door opened right up.

The foyer was sparsely decorated except for a huge, hand carved archway and a low hanging, brightly ornamented chandelier. The entrance split three ways. Ahead was a cavernous living area, on the left a museum-like sitting room which connected to the living room, and to the right a dining room connecting to a

kitchen by way of a revolving door for some reason. I didn't spend much time admiring the massive dining room area before I saw the dark wood and shiny brass rail of a wet bar some thoughtful person had built into the wall.

The bar was heavily stocked with the absolute finest spirits in the solar system. I chose a Martian brand of gin that was distilled at the highest accessible point on Olympus Mons, according to the label. I'm sure that added some character to the gin but it still smelled like gin so I put it in a mixing glass with some ice, dry vermouth and about 30 olives.

The resulting mixture was a Martiantini, straight up, real dirty. I sipped my drink and gazed about the cavernous living area, hoping to spot a bag of fine imported marijuana and some fine imported tobacco leaves to roll it up in, or a giant bong, or at that point I'd probably have smoked a pine cone. No such luck.

After a few sips, followed by gulps, followed by another Martiantini, I wandered into the living room. My eyes caught the shape of something blessedly familiar in the corner nearest the sitting room. I began to scan the contours of the familiar something. It registered slowly as a beloved apparatus and the recognition caused a little robot that lives in my brain to power-up.

My brain robot stays pretty quiet most of the time but when it's online it can take control of nearly every facet of my existence. The robot gained motor control over my body and moved me towards the beautiful thing. It took every ounce of my remaining initiative to

maintain the grip on my Martiantini. My brain robot scanned and processed as we moved. When the initialization program was complete, the piano robot confirmed had identified a piano and it wanted to play.

It was a grand. A ten-foot grand, one of the most beautiful I'd ever seen, and the lid was wide-open. A Borgendorfer Stellar Grand with a player mechanism and a liquid helium cooled superconducting soundboard that levitated inside the body above electromagnetic coils. The electromagnetic coils were hand-wound into sculptured busts of ancient icons of pianomandom; Beethoven, Rachmaninov, Professor Longhair, Rowlf the Dog. It was a triumph of science and craftsmanship. My lifetime social standing skyrocketed just being in the same room with such a rare and absurdly expensive instrument.

The piano robot's desire to play trumped my curiosity about the inner workings of such a device and sat me squarely in front of the keyboard. I opened the key-cover and stroked the keys, absorbing their texture before I dared to depress a key and strike a note.

The anticipation fluxed in the air like a first kiss. When you sit down at a piano for the first time, it's like popping the cork on a bottle of vintage wine; you have to let it breathe. You can hear the notes in your mind. Some reluctance keeps you from instantly crashing into a rhapsody. It's the delayed gratification of making yourself wait for the instant gratification of hearing the notes ring by the command of your lightest touch.

I slowly sank my index finger into middle C. The note rang pure and clean through the entire house. I could hear as much sound from the kitchen as the piano in front of me. The sound came from and went everywhere.

The nanogram-balanced hammer action of the piano was engineered to tolerances that rivaled most particle accelerators. With a tickle or a stroke I could cut and cauterize a note, or coax a swelling tide of sustain from a light trill. The piano robot in my brain smiled for the first time ever. I didn't even know my piano robot had a mouth.

I played slowly, reverently, accenting rolling chords with sparse single note melodies. Arpeggios crashed like waves and the higher notes rose into the air like sea mist, filling the space with sweet and salty sonic aromas. By the time I'd become accustomed to the nearly weightless keys it seemed the piano was reading my mind. The keys moved my fingers and I was one with each genetically simulated cell of ivory on the board. Cause and effect became indistinguishable in the vibrations.

Starting with a warm impromptu sonata I slowly wiggled in enough swing triplets to flip the tune into cool bop jazz. When the tension of the notes wound into a spring, I stomped into a wild ragtime, recklessly hammering octaves with my right to accent the arrogant walking stride of my left.

I occupied the briefest of heavens, soaring effortlessly in the boundary where sound becomes music. It is the point where sound is imagined, bursts into reality as a phrase then

decays back into the unknown as echoes. There was no audience and no recording. Each flare of sound was gone in the instant it arrived. It was perfect impermanence, no past or future, the absence of anything but the eternal present of sound.

After the rag died down to a lounge groove I stopped for an instant. The air suffered from postpartum depression so I filled the musical void with staccato runs and trills to find the playable limits of the engineering masterpiece.

There were no limits, none that my clumsy fingers could find. The piano was ready for whatever speed, whatever gentle grace, whatever bouncing cacophony I could imagine. The keys were feathers and my fingers were a gentle breeze. I must have played for hours. My Martiantini stood lonely and neglected on the edge of the instrument.

~~~ *SEVEN.1* ~~~

The piano had become the focus of my world. The piano robot didn't relinquish an ounce of control until we noticed my Martiantini rise into the air and tip itself into the rosy lips of the radiant woman who had been quietly listening to the concert for an indeterminate amount of time. My fingers went limp. The last reverberations of the last notes shattered into heavy crystalline silence.

"I thought you might like it." Alora said softly. She had changed into a slender blue gown

with a dangerously low neckline. The fabric seemed so smooth and delicate that silk thread could scratch it as a diamond would scratch glass.

Her breasts danced just below the cut of the dress. With every breath they rose evenly and smoothly, exposing soft pink rims of flesh that fell back beneath the fabric as she exhaled. Her long blonde hair framed her generous bust. A few renegade strands curled under the fabric of her gown, inviting the eyes to follow.

"Oh don't stop. I was enjoying it." She said. When a beautiful woman asks me to play piano I always oblige, even when I should be asking far more important questions, or running away.

I ripped into a simple, upbeat jazz melody and comped some happy chords along with it. Alora turned to listen, presenting her profile to me. I tried to trace the curves and grooves of her frame in musical notation. I was doing pretty well until I made it down to her hips, then my musical vocabulary fell flat.

She circled behind me and wrapped her arms around my chest and caressed me. I improvised verse after verse over the only chord progression I could keep in my head in the midst of the onslaught of sensual smells and touches. It was a progression from C major to C major, resolving back to the tonic.

She kissed the back of my neck and my ears until the pounding of my heart grew too loud to hear what I was playing. The piano robot gave up the fight and finally turned control over to his roommate, the occasionally

overwhelmingly influential sexual appetite robot. I turned on the bench to face her, planning my next move like a leopard, then I realized I wasn't a leopard but more of a turtle on its back. She kissed me, leaning in with her weight. She straddled me on the bench, gently pinning one of my hands down on the keys, causing a dissonant blurb of sound.

She was so sexy, I'd never encountered such a commanding seductress. I'm no stranger to seduction. I mean, I don't have much personal experience, but I've seen a lot of movies about it and imagined it a lot. This was something entirely different. It didn't take more than a few seconds of her gyrating flesh pressed against me before I abandoned all and gave in to her entirely.

To spare those readers who don't enjoy this sort of thing, and in protest to those that enjoy it too much- I will forgo excessive graphic details of the ensuing love fest. Suffice to say, it was outstanding, a little bit intimidating, I got confused a few times, but it was outstanding nonetheless. I had the time of my life, and I'm assuming she had no complaints- other than the ones she mentioned during the love making. I learned a few things, some of them a little scary but also very enlightening.

If there was a drug that even approached the feelings I experienced that night I would buy a coffin full of it and have myself buried alive. I finally slept that night. I slept like a corpse buried in the sex drug I made up for that thing about being buried in a coffin full of a sex drug. I'd been drained of all sexual desire and

ambition, temporarily I hoped. If I dreamt at all that night it was of some totally innocuous scene of birds or leaves or something. Every bit of my ego had been satisfied and my id had nothing left to sort out through dreams.

~~~ *SEVEN.2* ~~~

When I awoke I was looking up into the eyes that had beckoned me to another world. Her cheeks were limp and her adorable sleepy smile could have given a million puppies a run for their money. Strange thoughts came and went from my mind as I looked into her angelic face. Thoughts like; *I'm a prisoner. I witnessed a murdered. Danger, Will Robinson! Danger!* None of the thoughts stuck or seemed more than non sequitur strings of silly irrelevant concepts.

Every time some casual logic bubbled to the surface she wiped my mind clean with a casual stir or a flick of her hair. I had a Teflon brain but something was cooking in there and it was making the prospect of what would probably be incredible morning sex seem a little awkward. What am I doing here, and who really is this woman?

I was well rested and more sober than I'd been in weeks. My head cleared slowly and very unpleasantly. Conscious thought and reason began to sort through the events leading to my current whereabouts and whoabouts. A portion of my brain was still soaking in the magic sensuality of the woman blinking in a waking daze before me. The rest had to work overtime

to cope with the unimaginable scenario of my life for the past 48 hours or so.

It takes my brain until about noon to sync up with my mouth. Three hours after that I'm spent and fall out of phase again. I looked around for a clock and didn't see one.

"Who the hell are you, really?" My mouth said. Her face flushed a little and her eyes narrowed. She blinked a few more times for good measure, then sat up.

"Excuse me?" She sneered irritably, then fought an involuntary yawn. It was adorable. "Who the hell am I?" She demanded. My brain was lecturing my mouth on survival etiquette when it cut loose again.

"What the hell is going on? Where the hell am I." I blurted. She stared, incredulous.

"Are you serious? You little shit- I'm the inexplicably generous woman that pulled your ass out of jail and screwed your brains out last night. What is wrong with you?" She vented. For once I knew what was wrong with me.

"You got me put *in* jail. damnit!"

"I never should have told you that- you're unbelievably ungrateful I rocked your world last night and all you have to say is-"

"I rocked *your* world last night... uh sweetheart, or- well there was a lot of rocking both ways, but that's beside the point! Tell me what is going on in this crazy moon house! Why am I here? You know I saw a guy get killed last night? I- I think. I- No- No, stop seducing me. What the hell is any of this about?" I waited for some kind of sign, acceptance, anger, denial,

something. She looked at me like I was a statue that had inexplicably come to life and begun reciting Shakespeare backwards.

Her apparent confusion dissolved into coy sympathy.

"You've been traumatized sweetie. Let mama take care of y--"

"No- I mean- yes I have, but that's not- Don't call yourself mama, it's weird enough... What is going on?"

She completed her transformation into an innocent but curious choir-girl mending an awkwardly cool skate-punk kid's skinned knee.

"You know what this is?" She giggled excitedly, as if the answer would heal anything from skinned knees to cancer.

"What?"

"It's our first fight. A lover's quarrel... Mmmmmhmm..." She closed her eyes and hummed as she pressed her face into my shoulder, then cocked her head and pinched my nose.

"I'll let you win this one, but I get the next two." She smirked and squinted and gave me an eskimo kiss. She was trying to be cute, she didn't have to try. Her cuteness field was a fog but I had a searchlight for finding out what the hell was going on.

"What. The hell. Is going on?" I asked, absurdly dodging another barrage of eskimo kisses. She suddenly got serious. I got scared. Her eyes keened.

"You came here for me, right?" She spoke with purpose.

"Right." I responded obediently.

"You want me, right?"

"R- rr- alright..." I stuttered.

"Well, then we're getting married and you're going to live here with me, right?" She meant business. My blood froze. My ligaments stiffened and my eyes got so big I could see behind my head.

"What? Wait- what? WHAT!?"

She smiled at my exhaustive line of questioning and morphed back into the tender choir-girl again. Her adeptness at changing form like that was terrifying. Plus my brain was still working on sorting out the mountain of insane happenings from earlier when it was hit with this whopper.

"Did you say-" I asked, though I was confident that she had.

"Let me explain something to you." She said. I felt I was due some explaining so I shut up and listened.

"I'm Alora Meloohn des Luna. Let's just say I'm the biggest thing to happen to the moon since Apollo. All you need to know is I get what I want, and I want you. I'm rich, gorgeous, powerful, everyone knows me, and *everyone* does what I say." She emphasized everyone by poking me in the sternum with two fingers.

I couldn't really disagree on any particular point, but it was weird to hear it like that. I wasn't sure how to deal with people who can flatter themselves so matter-of-factly.

"There was a murder- dude's dead. And you had me mugged and arrested. Does any of this seem off to you at all?"

"Not to me, but then again, I'm me."
She didn't have any misconceptions about herself, I had to give her that. That explains why she'd have me wrapped up with a bow and delivered to her, but it didn't explain lots of other things.

"Hamm was murdered last night. We were attacked, And the drunken master dude Percy? What the hell even was that?." I asked, somewhere between demanding and begging.

"Well, you weren't really talkative last night so I can't put a finger on it - Percy you said?" She was being deliberately evasive and sexy, a dangerous combination. I knew she knew plenty but I'd come to the conclusion that she was a brick wall. A brick wall that just informed me that we'd just become engaged.

"I- I can't do married!" I was all over the place, words just weren't providing the necessary data transfer rate but they were all I had. She looked thoughtful if not sympathetic.

"Well you think it over sweetheart- I know you'll make the right decision." She hardened for a fraction of a second to show me the wrong decision could be very disadvantageous for me in some unexplained way. She kissed me and started to get out of bed.

"Where are you going?"

"It's not our honeymoon yet sweet, we can't lay around in bed all day. I've got work to do, and you've got to... you know- be you."

"What the hell do you even do?"

"No need to swear at me... I told you. I'm Alora Meloohn des Luna. That is my job. You should be grateful I'm so good at it." She

was jokingly serious and I took it as the only answer I would get. "You stay in bed and get some more sleep. I'll be back this evening." She squeezed into some pants from a drawer and gave me a quick tail show before she kissed me again and sashayed out the bedroom. I stared after her. By the time I decided I should run after and ask more futile questions, the front door had already open and shut and there was just the fading sound of a luxury vehicle cruising off at reckless speeds. Once again I was alone in the mansion. The piano robot woke up and reminded me about the Borgendorfer Piano waiting downstairs.

"Okay then, robot, let's go." If I'm going to be a kept man I might as well enjoy the keep.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Fire in the Cavern, Run Boy, Run

The elegant piano was a lot less thrilling than before, knowing better what it cost me to play it. I sat down and struck a high F# and let it ring. For a few minutes I played one note at a time, letting each ring out until the sustain finally fell off. I listened for the sympathetic vibrations of the room. I figured something around there had to be sympathetic, even if it was just physics.

In the lower octaves, G or A could make the coffee table vibrate. The lowest Ab made a plant on the other side of the room sway slightly. I could also make the chandelier chatter if I slammed the highest B while mashing the soft pedal. The real study of acoustics is beyond me but the application of a little layman's knowledge is always fun.

After exhausting the simple gratification of making inanimate objects move without touching them, I went about playing piano. I started to noodle, then stopped. Musical noodling encourages deep thought and I thought it might be a little early for that. I decided I'd better sing while I play because that leaves less room for contemplation. I decided I'd better sing something without very thoughtful lyrics, very loudly. I performed a few of my own compositions. I trusted my subconscious to sort through the recent happenings and get back to

me after the show. Also, it's important to keep the piano robot happy. It has a tendency to make me do really odd things when ignored, and it's just not smart to ignore a robot that lives in your head, even if it is just a metaphor.

I played most of the songs I remembered at least twice, then started making up the ones I couldn't remember. Finally, art began to imitate life, and I started singing the blues. It began with something about the Moonie blues, and ended 144 bars later with a weeping, stomping, shrieking call-and-response of "Why!? Baby, Why!?!?" Then I just started crying in earnest.

It was overwhelming. Traveling to another world, marriage, a super-hot, super-rich, increasingly scary woman, a magnificent piano. It sounds exciting as a list, except that it was actually happening, and to me, and the list should have included mortal fear. I had no intention of getting married until I had a record deal, or financial stability, or at least a less panic inducing fiancée.

Alora was undoubtedly the richest, most beautiful, and most fascinating woman that would ever even consider marrying me, let alone force me. But marriage was simply not an option, especially because of the forcing part, except the forcing part made the option less optional. Also I have no desire to marry a woman who employs people who beat me up. I never thought that would be a romantic consideration. Though I did continue to date a woman after she refused to pay people not to beat me up once.

After I finished crying and took on a more stably defeated mindset, I took it upon myself to explore my little kingdom. I was sure a mental breakdown was inevitable but I had to find some way to pass the time until someone intruded and wreaked more havoc in my life. I started with a mission to count bathrooms.. A long hallway split and led to a half-dozen other rooms, including a reverse-centaur unicorn themed bathroom that was just plain upsetting. It killed the bathroom counting idea so I just wandered. Some of the rooms had closets the size of smaller rooms, and one of the closets had a littler door in it. I didn't open that door for fear of discovering that all the closets were actually rooms in another universe- and our universe was really the closet of some other universe. Something about that notion made me think I needed to eat something. I found the kitchen, and to my delight found it well-stocked.

~~~ 8.1 ~~~

I requisitioned a roast beef sandwich sitting right on the top shelf of the refrigerator. It was real beef- cow, bovine, mammal, actual, factual, previously alive meat. Not synthetic, not flavored soy, not even soylent, real beef. That was rare anywhere, but seemed unthinkable on the moon. It was the most delicious thing I'd eaten since I left Earth, also the only thing I'd eaten. I wondered if someone actually raised cows on the moon or if they shipped them up here from Earth. I wondered if they shipped

them up here alive or butchered. Then I wondered if it might be better to wonder about those things after I finished the sandwich. I savored it until the last bite, which was really just a bit of crust and a dab of sauce so it barely felt like a whole bite.

After the rejuvenating roast beef experience I took another long wander and found myself back in the main living room. I wasn't even looking at much, just passively witnessing my vision. Pretty sure there was a lifesize gold statue of a lady with a whip but I was so stunned I didn't really process it until later and then I couldn't find it again when I realized that's what I'd seen.

I decided I needed to be outdoors and mindlessly meandered towards what my brain told me was outside. My brain apparently forgot that I was deep under anything anyone would call 'outside', and about 300,000km from anything my brain actually remembered as 'outside'. The blank cavern wall that confronted me when I opened the door to the 'outside' brought home a fresh wave of reality for me to drown in.

With no horizon to look over, the massive lawn and garden seemed unusually confined. Walking through the front garden occupied a good hour. Poking the hybrid venus fly traps, catching a few bugs to slide into the mouths of the grateful pitcher plants. The garden was exotic in the extreme, a solid half of the flora was carnivorous. It was a fitting garden for the abode of a woman like Alora, or more appropriately- fitting for her captive fiancée.

So was I supposed to be some sort of trophy husband? Never saw that one coming. Why me? And I don't mean that in the self-pitying sense, I mean objectively- why me? I was just a poor, unrecognized musician with no connections. Was I really just that good looking? I'm going with yes- I am that good looking. Art and beauty are subjective, why the hell not? I never considered myself trophy level attractive, but if a rich, powerful, moon goddess wanted me for a trophy husband I guess it just had to be my good looks, and also charm and talent. I'm not sure I could read that out loud with a straight face, but since this is text I'm sticking to it. Whatever the reason for the marriage, I was going to have to refuse, or rather resist, so no sense in flattering myself too much over it. I guess a little bit more couldn't hurt- damn, I'm a real chick magnet- like freaking planetary magnetic field level chick magnet over here. Okay. I'm done now.

I spent a good while in the garden thinking. I pensively prodded the snapping lilies, deliberately enraged the engorging gourds to full bloat and then popped them with a stick. Once I had taunted or fought with most of the more entertaining plantlife I made my way around the back of the house. The cavern was longer than wide so the sides of the house only had about 20 feet of lawn on either side. The back of the cavern was enclosed, the only entrance or exit was through the front. I was sure that Alora left me here with no vehicle for a reason. The front entrance most likely had security measures to ensure I stayed put. I didn't have any real escape

plans brewing, or the wherewithal to brew any, but my situation led me to passively consider possible outs.

The back lawn was bordered on all sides by an orchard of neptunian nectarines and other fruits with colors clear off the visual electromagnetic spectrum. It occurred to me that I could be rather content here. A part of me wouldn't mind at all just hanging around this place for the rest of my life. Between the piano, the stockpiles of liquor and food, the lush flora, and my gorgeous wife-to-be it wasn't a completely raw deal. A lot of people are a lot worse off.

The part of me that just didn't like to be told what to do had a habit of ruining things for the parts of me that just wanted to be at peace in peaceful surroundings. But for once all of the sensible parts of my brain were in agreement with my rebellious tendencies, and everyone agreed this gilded cage thing wasn't for us.

A bulge in the ground beneath the trees at the back end of the cavern caught my attention. It was too symmetrical to be a natural feature- that and I was under the surface of the moon so what exactly constitutes a 'natural' feature anyway? The bulge dipped behind a psychedelic plum tree and cut off at the back wall of the cavern. The bulge was at least 10 feet in diameter. sizable enough to be of interest to someone looking around for convenient back doors. On closer inspection of the area there was some kind of fixture, nearly flush with the ground. It was a big round cover that I was pretty confident had a tube on the other side.

Judging from the exterior dimensions you could probably fit a small vehicle through there. It couldn't be for sewage unless the mansion was built to handle the needs of a small city with dysentery. It had to be some sort of cargo tube. I suppose Alora had some dealing which she wouldn't want subject to public view and this tube was likely built for that purpose. Perhaps it was something else I hadn't thought of but for my ends a cargo tube would do nicely. So until I found out otherwise, I'd call it a cargo tube. I didn't think I could budge the cover myself, or if it was even meant to open from this side. The bulge also tapered towards the house, which gave me hope there might be a more accessible entrance inside. I set out on a mission to find the accessible end of the tube and maybe use it to get myself out of this trouble, or into more, either way that seemed to be what I was going to do anyway so I just did.

Back in the house I tried to imagine the path of the tube from the bulge taper. I was assuming it was straight, among other baseless assumptions. The assumed path seemed to go towards the kitchen, which was convenient because I was thinking of heading there soon anyway.

The kitchen had several pantries and two utility closets but none of them had any features that screamed tube-entrance. Seems like a tube big enough to do anything interesting with would be easy to find. Then again if someone wanted to hide a tube like that they probably wouldn't do it half-ass. After tapping on walls pretending I knew what a hollow one

would sound like, lifting every visible utility panel and peering into banks of wires, conduit and small water, air, or champagne lines for all I knew, I admitted to myself that I was not secret agent man and went for another roast beef sandwich.

Halfway through making the sandwich it occurred to me that I was by no means limited to cold cuts. I had a full kitchen and no commitments outside those I hadn't made to a woman I was already pretty determined to escape from. I fired up the stove-top grill and heated up several large skillets. I dug through the huge refrigerator and took out all the foods I couldn't readily identify. With a ludicrously oversized carving knife I chopped up a few of the less offensive smelling vegetables and threw them in a skillet.

A bottle of 180 proof liquor near the stove caught my eye. I unscrewed the cap and tried my hand at the art of flambé. As fun as that was, the smouldering lumps of charcoal left in the skillet told me I had a long way to go before I could claim competence, let alone mastery of that particular culinary technique. I dumped the charred contents into the industrial sized sink and went about chopping more vegetables with the enthusiasm of a deranged Samurai chef.

I had no idea how much fun cooking was when you had no one's palate or health to consider. I took a swig of the flambé jet fuel and immediately regretted it. I shook wildly and spat out what my throat had refused to swallow, the fumes from which ignited on the grill and I was pretty sure they took my eyebrows off.

After a brief repentance and several tall glasses of orange juice I had my wits back. The smell of my own singed flesh reminded me that I hadn't had a steak in a while. I hadn't checked the freezer. It wasn't beyond reason to hope it contained a few nice cuts of Venusian Kobe beef or something else that might actually exist.

I opened the door to the walk-in-freezer and thought I'd found Narnia. I'd played in smaller bars, though not as cold unless you count the audience. Rows of shelves were stocked with delicacies. A shelf along the back wall mainly held items wrapped in butcher paper, which my keen deductive skills suggested might contain meat. I perused the shelf and examined the labels which read like the menu of a 5 star steakhouse orbiting a 5 star planet in a quinary star-system. They had every cut of every animal except human, hopefully.

I cradled one of the larger packages and unwrapped it like I was Johnathan Swift meeting his first born child. It kind of looked like it could be related to me. It was a beautifully marbled, symmetrical cut of meat so tender I could almost pull off a chunk with my fingers.

From the kitchen I heard an unsettlingly deep *whump* that sounded like the ignition of high-proof liquor someone might have spilled a little, or a lot of, near a hot grill. I dropped the meat baby on the floor. Staring down in horror at the broken bundle of joy, the tide of tears was only stemmed by the solid *clunk* of a steel latch and the sound of the interior fans cutting on to lower the pressure in the freezer.

"Oh shit." The utterance hardly captured the flash of realization that the freezer door had shut tight. I ran to the door and pulled madly at the handle. Locked. Why, oh why, after so many people in so many stories have been locked in freezers, do they not put an inside safety release on these damn things? They probably do, but in the stories it's because it would prevent those stories from being written, and there have been some great frozen love scenes with people who believe their last minutes might be spent huddled together in a freezer.

It wasn't going to be one of those stories because I forgot to lock myself in with anyone I wanted to spend my last minutes huddled with. What's worse was I couldn't even cook the meat baby. Even worse than that- the sounds coming from the other side of the door did not sound unlike a kitchen that had caught on fire because some idiot was playing flambé chef.

I would probably be okay unless or until the fire burned out the refrigeration equipment. Hey, at least I wouldn't freeze to death - and I knew my meat baby would be well cooked, along with my own stringy, tasteless carcass. But hey, I finally found a solution to my marriage problem. And at least I've done this entirely to myself, so that's sort of regaining some control in context. My optimism wasn't fooling anybody, not even the fool that got me into this. So- what to do with the last few minutes of my life?

Once again I wished nothing more than to play a piano, any piano would do. I had no piano, I didn't even have a harmonica, I really

should start carrying one for these occasions. What I did have was a lot of meat. And a latent desire to bang on something rhythmically. Naturally I concluded my last act in life would be to create and play a set of meat drums. It might have been fear of death, or the onset of hypothermia, or a bit of oxygen deprivation, but right then and there it seemed like making a drum set out of meat was the best idea I'd ever had. So I set about doing it right there, in the perfect place for it- a meat locker being consumed by flames.

The kick and snare were easy, there was a nearly whole lamb carcass which folded nicely into a ball and leaned up against a shelf. The neck flap made a neat slapping sound that I thought would pass for a snare, and you could kind of 'roll' by flipping your hand quickly in the neck hole. The kick mechanism was a paddle of wood I propped up against the lamb and smacked with my foot to make a wet, carnal thunk. Tom-toms weren't too much trouble, just a few sturdy rib-eyes of varying thicknesses laid on a shelf behind the trap set. The noise outside was getting harder to ignore, crashing sounds and the crackling of flames were getting dangerously loud. I had no choice but to proceed with the meat drum construction. I would have plenty of time to worry about my impending demise while I performed the world's first meat drum solo.

Cymbals would be a challenge. I wished I could gather some pans from the kitchen but the fact that I couldn't was part of the reason I was building this novel instrument in the first

place. A sharp crack and boom from behind the door told me I'd better work fast on the cymbal situation. Most of the metal in the room was occupied in the shelving trade and those just made tinny clinking sounds which wouldn't do. I had to settle for a meat-hook for a hi-hat, though it sounded more like a triangle.

My project planning was interrupted by a series of pops, then a thick gurgling sound followed by the hiss of something that was supposed to be sealed and pressurized, becoming not so. The texture of the air changed dramatically as the compressor blew out, and the cold air that was blowing into my coffin shut off. I tried to ignore the immanence of my death and concentrate on the last productive minutes I had left. Cymbals- I need cymbals. While scanning the slowly warming room for anything roughly cymbal shaped or any loose form of sheet metal, my eyes found something round against the wall behind a shelf in the back of the room.

Obscured by a rack of soon-to-be well-done meats, I saw a roundish, metalish thing which seemed to be jammed behind the rack. With no hesitation I heaved the rack from the wall, which to my horror fell squarely into my meat drum set, crushing it into a sad pile of carnage. Shit. Then I got really mad. In my temper tantrum I tore back another shelf just for the satisfaction of breaking something, which didn't feel very satisfying. I finally collapsed onto the floor and accepted my doom.

Laying on the floor, waiting to be self-immolated by my own stupidity, I once again

just wished I could play piano. I thought briefly of the tragic demise of the Stellar Class Borgendorfer, which would soon become part of my grand funeral pyre. That tragedy of the destruction of such a fine instrument was too much for me to consider, so I went back to the slightly more tolerable tragedy of my own untimely death. I wallowed, sulked, then screamed, begged, then went back to wallowing and sulking because it required less effort than screaming and begging.

During my dramatic death scene performance, my eyes again found the round metal thing which had been hiding behind the shelf. If it weren't for that round metal thing on the wall I could at least be playing my drum solo on a meat drum set right now. Stupid round metal cover with it's stupid hinges and latches and stupid handle. Who the hell would put a round metal covering behind a shelf anyway - just as a cruel joke on the off chance some guy would trap himself in here and try to build a meat drum set as he waited to die. Sadistic bastards. Wait, there's a handle?

Sure enough, there was a handle. Clearly the metal covering was covering something significant. I waded through the debris created by my last desperate attempts to entertain myself in this life. A bent handle protruded from the side of what was then clearly a huge circular steel door. I turned it, and by some miracle, it turned.

The door swung out with expensively engineered precision. The opening revealed absolute darkness that seemed to leap out into

the cooler, but actually the overhead lights cut off just as I was opening it. The fear of what lay in wait for me beyond the opening was instead all around me, driving me into the unknown blackness. The cool rush of fresh, unburnt air from within was incentive enough. I groped around in the dark and put my leg through the opening into a tunnel, which from the feel of it was much larger than the opening would have suggested. At the time it was all I had so I pulled myself through and blindly shuffled away from all the impending burning.

The tube was tall and wide. I couldn't feel the roof above me and even with arms outstretched I couldn't touch both sides. I zig-zagged to try to feel out any distinguishing features on the tube surface but there were none. It smelled sterile, not musty or dank as one expects in a dark tunnel- if one has any preconceptions of dark tunnels, which I wasn't aware I had until then. I couldn't even feel any rivets or seams along the wall with which to parse distance. After about 20 feet or maybe 1000, I had lost all spatial reference. I tried to focus on not getting turned around and end up back at the entrance.

I had no light, nothing. My natural Macgyver instinct was neutered by the fact that I had nothing with which to Macgyver a solution. Solutions had never been my claim to fame anyway. The fact that I had narrowly escaped certain death was overshadowed by my realization that death was still very much on the table. At least a moment before I had the benefit

of knowing how I would die, if you call that a benefit.

I clicked my tongue and whistled in an attempt to echolocate a soundscape of my surroundings. I quickly remembered I wasn't a bat or a dolphin and all I could ascertain was that clicking and whistling sounds kind of cool with that cavernous reverb. The sound echoed around me. By precise analysis of the reflected waves I confirmed I was definitely still in a tunnel like environment. Once again my abstract understanding of acoustics was not helping much. As I had few options, I kept moving forward.

After a while for no particular reason I guessed that I was clear of the mansion cavern. Of course that deduction was as useless as it was baseless since I had no means of boring upwards through a tunnel that was probably made of some absurdly resilient alloy of some combination of absurdly expensive metals- or nano-plastic or whatever. I don't even know what the tubes in a bathroom are made of, let alone giant moon plumbing. Whatever it was made of, the more important question was where it went. This particular tunnel led to my unavoidable destiny and/or death, so for all intents and purposes the tube was made out of fate.

Each step felt like the one before, no features, no variations, nothing useful to help identify my surroundings. Then suddenly something did help me identify that my surroundings had changed. The floor under my feet sloped downward at a harsh angle that I was

not prepared for. My lack of preparation caused me to tumble headfirst down into the slope of the tunnel. I also identified the sound and the associated sensations of my head and other flailing body parts impacting the tunnel at velocities which were much more unpleasant to my body than to the tunnel, though honestly I didn't ask so I don't know how the tunnel really felt about it. The tunnel didn't groan or curse as much as I did so I could only assume it made out okay. I cannot recall the feeling of my tumbling, flailing body ever coming to rest at any point, but due to the presence of the remaining pages of this story we can both safely assume that it stopped falling at some point.

CHAPTER NINE

Are you Awake?

As you and I correctly assumed, my body did eventually come to a stop, way, way down the tunnel. I have no memory of how far I fell, when I graciously lost consciousness, or what anyone did to me while I was unconscious. What I do know is that I awoke days later in a makeshift hospital bed. Actually it wasn't so much a makeshift hospital bed as it was a makeshift bed, actually a couch. It was a couch in an achingly small, but well kept apartment. I call it a makeshift hospital bed now because I did end up healing nicely on it over the next week or so, and I soiled it extensively. I made out with no broken bones or irreparable organ damage, brain notwithstanding, but nothing I really needed.

The couch I ended up on turned out to be in the home of a small, very modest Moonie family. The patriarch of the family had found what was left of me, limp and battered, on a garbage conveyor headed for an incinerator. He told me I looked like I had been robbed and left for dead, but people have told me that on good days too.

For all I knew I might have walked there, or crawled. My head had been so smacked up that it was two days before I had the epiphany that I was a piano player and I was on the moon. Then I remembered why. I was beginning to resent my frequent loss of

consciousness because each time I regained it I was forced to deal with the events that led to it all over again. Trauma aside, it was just a lot to keep track of.

Surprisingly, the week I spent half-awake on that couch was one of the more pleasant I'd had in recent memory. The couch belonged to a kind family whose last name I'll withhold for their privacy. Though if you lived under the moon you probably already know this whole story so I guess it's more because it's a funny sounding last name and they're nice people so I'll just use first names.

The father's name was Dakota, and he was a warm and kind man. He saved my life and his family allowed me their couch and den for my recovery, which was about a third of the square footage of their tiny apartment. His wife's name was Dolores, a teacher. She was a pleasantly round and jovial woman with a rich, though unidentifiable accent.

They had two adorable children, Dakota Jr. and Ashrah, probably about 6 and 9 at the time. Every day my bandages were changed and I was well fed by Dolores' moonstyle cooking. Piles of mashed hydroponic potatoes, stuffed zucchini the size of my arm, and gritty little snacks called moon pies that tasted like some of the ingredients might actually include regolith. Dakota ran a small hydroponics market on weekdays, but he was better known as a reverend. At first I was apprehensive about his apparent religious devotion, but I would soon find out he was a faith leader unlike I'd ever known or even heard of.

Around my fourth or fifth consecutive day of not being knocked unconscious I found enough of my faculties to try to get some of the back story of my situation from Dolores. She pleasantly relayed the story of her husband dragging in a stray and the family taking me in and caring for me. She gave me a meticulously detailed account, right up to and including the part where I had asked her about my situation.

Dolores seemed entirely normal, and for being so normal, was somehow completely abnormal to me. She was a truly amiable and open-minded person. She was happy, and her disposition wasn't a presentation of happiness, it was just her being happy. She was unapologetically enthusiastic about life. She seemed positively delighted to have my company and behaved as if I was no burden whatsoever. The effort of speaking to such a pleasant and sincere woman as Dolores was more than I could keep up for very long. I passed out on the couch and didn't come around again until the next morning.

~~~ *NINE.1* ~~~

"Are you awake, mister?" An awkwardly tallish Moonie boy beamed down at me with bright Moonie eyes. I blinked back into consciousness.

"Yeah, little man, I'm up. Hey."

"Hi! I'm Junior!" We stared at each other for a moment. He had fantastically curious eyes and smiled with unabashed enthusiasm.

"What time is it?" I inquired, as if I had somewhere to go.

"It's morning time, mama's makin' eggfoam and taytos. Hungry?"

"Usually." I said absently. Then my stomach announced how acutely hungry I was. Junior laughed at the bodily noise- his awkward chuckle sounded like a parachute deploying- weirdest laugh I ever heard. "Excuse me... Hey- sorry to take up your couch for so long." I offered. He didn't seem the least bit put off by my presence, but treated me as if I was the most interesting thing that had ever been on the couch.

"Why do you sleep so much?" I checked myself for visible signs of trauma. I wasn't that bad off all together, nothing broken, only a few cuts, and all nicely bandaged.

"I supposed I've been tired. I had a long trip to get here." I didn't see the point of giving the kid all the humiliating details.

"You're from the Earth." He said as a statement of fact.

"You are right."

"Whatcha doin' moonside?"

"Well, that's a very strange story. Let's just say I came to visit a friend." I said. A vague explanation, but honest enough.

"Are you friends with mama and papa?" I thought about it for a second. I barely knew them but they had treated me as more of a friend than anyone in recent memory- well, except Ferrah, but I was a pretty bad friend to her recently and she'd probably kill me if she knew

how bad a friend I'd been so I was trying not to remember all that.

"Yeah, I think they're my friends. And you know what- so are you, little dude."

"You haven't told me your name." He said.

"Oh right, my name is Jely Fride."

"Okay Mr. Jely Fride, now we can be friends." He was satisfied that we were well acquainted. "Say, since you're my friend, you'll help me take the trash out?" I couldn't help but chuckle at the request- the kid was good natured, but still savvy. In any case I was happy for the opportunity to offer some small service to this caring family.

"Sure thing." I sprung off the couch full of energy, completely forgetting that the last time I had used my legs was several days before I'd been chewed up by a tunnel. I wobbled noticeably and Junior didn't hesitate to grab one of my flailing arms to try to steady me. He was remarkably tall for a six year old, though admittedly I didn't have a real frame of reference for Moonie growth patterns. I tested my equilibrium. After a few false starts I stood on my own, leaning slightly on the end of the edge of the couch for support.

"Okay, wait here." Junior said. He ran into the kitchen and emerged with two bags of garbage, he handed me the smaller one and dashed to open the front door, returning quickly to offer a shoulder for assurance, which I accepted gratefully.

I was excited just to be moving around and to see what lay beyond the front door of the

little apartment under the moon. I moved more slowly than I remembered having to move before. I was careful where I put each foot so I could be sure the next would have ground under it. Junior stayed at my pace and allowed me to lean on him whenever I needed.

What an unbelievably good kid. The last six year old I met kicked me in the groin and tried to steal my wallet, which isn't at all out of the ordinary in New Sydney. Dakota Junior had spirit. I smiled at the thought of him growing up to play a mean piano. Then I frowned at the thought of him growing up to be anything like me. Maybe he should play bass.

"Why are you making faces?" I was not mentally aware enough to realize that my expressions were readable and could be interpreted as strange if not creepy.

"I was just thinking how nice you and your family are to help me out like this. Hey, do you like music?"

"Yes sir, I do. I play a snare in drumline for papa's church." A drumline in church. Now that I had to see.

"That's amazing! There just aren't enough good snare drummers out there. We should jam sometime."

"Yeah! Do you play a drum too?" Gavin was elated at my enthusiasm for his instrument.

"I play a piano, but I know lots of drummers that play lots of drums." I also knew the interstellar market for drummers was being overrun by insectoid aliens with superior rhythm and the advantage of six or more appendages,

but I thought I should spare him that knowledge for the time being.

"You think you might want to play drums when you grow up?" I always had a soft spot for musical kids, even awkward and unpleasant ones, and this kid was anything but. Unfortunately in music it seems that one's skill is often inversely proportional to one's unpleasantness of disposition. There were exceptions though. I hoped Dakota Junior would be one.

"I'll play drums when I grow up, but I want to be a minister like papa, he plays the bass." A bass playing preacher too. I'd never had the urge to go to church before but it already seemed like I was going to have to join this congregation.

"He plays bass in church?"

"Of course! It's the Church of Harmony Soul! We play music all the time! You should come!" He was absolutely right, I really should.

"I believe I'd like that, thanks dude."

We deposited the bags through a portal onto a conveyor and turned back down the corridor towards the family's home.

The corridor was narrow and dark, typically claustrophobic for a small apartment complex, except of course there was no sky outside. The hall was a smooth tunnel that gave one the feeling of being an ant wandering through an abandoned anthill. When we re-entered the apartment the contrast was stark. The apartment was framed up just like a familiar apartment layout on Earth; 90 degree angles everywhere, rectangular door frames, flat

ceilings. The builders used the natural features of the moon where structurally necessary, but the interior construction was meant to recall the boxy legacy of wood-framed Earth domiciles. Apparently the abandoned anthill feeling becomes a pathology if you don't integrate enough rectangles into your daily routine. Something about humans and straight lines. The noticeable exception on the moon was the absence of exterior windows, for obvious reasons. Actually it had one window in the bathroom, which gave one a clear view of a tunnel wall two feet away, but was useful for incidental ventilation. It was a world away from the mansion I had so recently burned down, but I would prefer that spartan apartment any day.

A call from the kitchen area signaled breakfast was ready. I quietly enjoyed a hearty meal of potatoes and syntheeggs, and observed the inner workings of this inexplicably functional family. The children fired off several intrusively but adorably childlike questions about my life on Earth, why my name was Jely, and if I'd ever seen a centaur, which apparently even adults on the moon think are plausible Earth crypids. But the parents shushed the kids and spared me the awkward answers.

"Alright kiddos, time for school."

Dolores announced after we'd all devoured breakfast.

Without so much as a groan the kids orderly deposited their dishes in the sink and planted a dutiful kiss on each parent and before they dashed out the door, trailed by Dolores. The sudden exit happened while I was polishing off

the last two bites of potatoes. I was left alone with the family patriarch, who eyed me intensely. Up until just then I had enjoyed their hospitality with no real challenge as to why I was there. Seemed like that was about to change.

"Jely Fride." Dakota stated cordially, but apparently requesting confirmation.

I nodded. "Dakota... reverend?" I didn't need confirmation but it seemed polite.

"Right you are." He was suddenly treating me as a man who he had just met on the street, kind, but hesitant and unfamiliar. I knew Dakota and his family were generous and caring, but I was not surprised that it was tempered with some reserved suspicion. Dakota shifted and cocked his head, perhaps judging me for the first time since he had found me on the conveyor.

"Jely. I am-" He stopped himself.

Dakota was uncomfortable with the implications of whatever he wanted to say to me. I was prepared to answer anything he would ask. As far as I knew I had nothing to hide from him. Maybe he was trying to tell me I had overstayed my welcome. I decided to beat him to it.

"Dakota, you and your family have been cooler to me than- pretty much anyone, definitely on the moon. I'm very grateful. I don't want to impose any more than I already have." I said.

"I'm not asking you to leave." Dakota said. That was a relief, but left the question of what he did want. Again I decided to preempt whatever might be on Dakotas mind.

"Then I'd be happy to help out somehow. Chores or whatever- I can do chores.

I can't really pay any rent, yet, but-" I was grasping at straws and I wasn't sure why. I wanted to offer some assurance about myself but I was floundering because I'm unfamiliar with being much besides a disappointment.

"No, no, Jely. Please let me finish." He cleared his throat. "I have to ask you something and I want the honest truth, no matter what it is or what you think of it." Dakota didn't seem a man you would want to lie to but he had surely been lied to before, so he was taking great care.

"I have nothing to hide, er- I don't think." I said. Dakota seemed a little relieved but he thought something of me which was clouding his ability to trust me. "What is it?"

"Are you affiliated with, or known to any of the great houses?" He asked.

"I went to a pretty great house- I think, for a house on the moon." I offered, unsure of what he was asking, but fairly sure from his reaction that I misunderstood.

"No- the houses are families..." Dakota was trying to decide if I was playing dumb, or just being. He seemed to lean towards the latter. "Family... enterprises." The last word smouldered. Even I could tell what he meant.

"Like the mafia?" I was stunned, he thought I was a mob guy? Even if he thought it, he had still saved my life despite it. I wanted to be candid and forthcoming but this was a tricky one. I let it fly.

"No, man! I'm not a... well. I sort of accidentally got a little. Okay- I associated, once, or a few times, for me anyway, but it was only one night. I'm not an 'associate' or

anything... I mean I-" Dakotas eyes were wide in alarm. I continued my gibberish in a desperate race to explain myself before he could assume anything. He held up a hand.

"Which house do you owe loyalty to?"

He was deadly serious, not angry, but he had become very icy.

"None! No loyalty- that I know of... I don't even know what that means. Look, I'm not in a gang thing or anything. I just got mixed up with a woman." Some threads started to weave together in my head as I spoke. "I think she's in a gang or something, probably the den mother, or empress don or something, weird stuff, man. I really don't know what's going on but I got robbed and arrested, then kidnapped and ambushed and then they took me to a house and I started a fire and my meat drums broke before I even got to jam. Then I fell in a tunnel-hole and I don't know why everybody seems to know who I am. I just came here to find a girl but now I find out she's-kind of- evilish. So really, please don't think- I've never hurt anybody- on purpose, physically... I should have stayed on Earth. Stupid... I'm just stupid..." I trailed off in a mumble. I stared at the table and waited for a reaction. None came directly so I scanned Dakotas face sheepishly. He was staring at me with a cocky smile. He seemed disarmed but no more enlightened about me.

"You want to run that by me again, Jely?" He spoke consolingly. "I get the impression you've been through a lot. Just take it slow. Can I get you a cup of coffee?"

I accepted the offer and started at the beginning. I recounted my story all the way to the present. With such an enthralled audience as Dakota I couldn't help but add some storytelling flair to the events. I may have returned a few punches in the story which I never had a chance to in real life. I don't think Dakota was fooled but he allowed it without objection.

By the point in the story where I arrived on the moon Dakota was openly enjoying himself, laughing and shaking his head at each turn of events. I didn't know then but Dakota knew the backstory of many of the characters in my tale much better than I. Dakota noticeably displayed some distaste at the mention of Birgess and Hamm. He was reverent about Hamm's murder but clearly not mournful. As I explained my situation with Alora he became very interested and asked me if I could give him any details about the house I'd been brought to, including possible security in the area.

"I don't remember anything - besides it doesn't matter - I accidentally locked myself in the freezer and set fire to the place."

"You mean to tell me you burnt down the House Des Luna?" He was amazed and even betrayed a hint of delight. I was disappointed because I was about to get to the part about the meat drums and I was really looking forward to telling someone about that.

"Uh, I guess so. I didn't really stick around. I found a tunnel and, well, I fell in it and then I woke up on your couch."

When the yarn finally spun out Dakota sat back in his chair. He pulled out a vapor pen,

took a long draw and exhaled a mushroom cloud. He shook his head in disbelief and chuckled to himself. He mumbled to himself a few times and looked back at me.

"So you don't even know whose house you burnt down?" Dakota said with the tiniest accusatory inflection. I took mild offense.

"No! I mean- I know it was Alora's place- but it's not like I did it on purpose! It was an accident and I almost died! I am sorry about it, but I don't want Alora to find me because she'll probably kill me, or marry me, and I'm not big on either."

"Please, calm down, Jely. I'm not accusing you of anything. Sounds like you just fell for the wrong Moonie."

"No shit."

"Do you think they assume you're dead now? Perished in the fire?" Dakota asked.

"I don't know, hadn't really thought about it. I suppose it would be hard to tell if any of the burnt meat in that freezer was a man, or me."

"You can be guaranteed that no legitimate forensics are going to be performed on that *crime scene*" He enunciated 'crime scene' with explicit irony.

After a silent spell Dakota seemed to have digested my story and made his judgments about me. The ruling must have been more or less favorable because he offered me a spare vapor pen, which I accepted. He regarded me with fascination as I awkwardly puffed on the apparatus, which miraculously turned out to be filled with hash oil. I huffed a few long drags

and let the pharmaceutical grade wave of relaxation wash over me.

I was still so cripplingly ignorant of what I had gotten myself into that I didn't even know what questions to ask. Then I recalled something Dakota said a moment ago.

"What exactly is the House des Luna, or what *was* it?" I asked.

Dakota looked at me with a mixture of amusement and pity. "Jely, I think there is a little story you need to hear."

~~~ *NINE.2* ~~~

Over the next hour or two I received a history lesson about the moon that could have shut down the lunar tourism industry, except that industry had enough money to spin news of nuclear armageddon into a heartwarming story of family bonding.

The urban legends about subsurface lunar mafia wars are not legends, they are historical fact. There were land-marked battlefields where militias of opposing gangs laid waste to entire sections of the underground colonies. Dakota spoke of nearly a century of conflict between Earth backed mafias and those backed by moon-born humans. In the beginning the moon-born mafias were only retaliatory. Their intentions, at least in doctrine, were for the benefit of the common moon man. This of course fell away as power accumulated and gained the critical density to protect itself for its

own sake. Corruption followed, as it always does.

In the past twenty years a mixed blood mafia had emerged, siphoning elements from both Earthborn and Moonie gangs and rapidly gaining power through assassination and intrigue. The mixed mafia had spies in both organizations, giving them inside information and creating distrust and disunity in the pure blood gangs. For a few years the violence had eased somewhat. The purebloods were losing ground and retreating to defensive positions and the power of the mixed breeds created a de facto peace among the gangs. The founder of the mixed mafia had been a moon born woman named Alaxae Meloohn, she had boldly adopted the revered surname des Luna to fortify her dominant position of the mixed mafia, plus it sounded cool. It was rumored that her health was failing and many feared an upsurge in violence if her influence could not maintain the tenuous balance.

Alaxae Meloohn's daughter was ambitiously assembling her own power base in anticipation of the struggle. She was barely 30 and she had ordered more hits than most KGB directors, and she looked great in nothing at all. Her daughter's name was Alora. Man, oh man, did I fall for the wrong Moonie, and also burnt down the same wrong Moonie's house.

"You okay there, Jely?"

"Yup... kinda, brings it all together for me." Probably not all of it, but enough to make my head hurt anyway.

"Probably not all of it." Dakota said prophetically under his breath.

"Sorry- did you just say 'Probably not all of it' prophetically under your breath right after I thought it?"

"Well, yes. I said that- is that what you were thinking just now?" Dakota asked awkwardly. I was trying to satisfy myself that Dakota was being regular awkward and not purposefully awkward to confuse me because he really can read minds or something, because that's totally different. I gave him the benefit of the doubt that he was not some kind of mind reader toying with me, but that he was just as confused by the conversation as I.

"What?" I confessed.

"What?" He volunteered

"I don't know."

"Okay then."

That leveled it off for a minute. I hate not being sure if someone can read your mind, better to just get it out in the open.

"So can you uh- read minds or anything?"

"I do not read minds." He seemed certain enough.

"You're certain?"

"Certain enough." He said.

"Okay- I just thought that- 'certain enough' then you said it... seriously, that's twice now. What's the deal?" I was serious. I wasn't going to have this hanging over my head.

"Relax, Jely. What are you talking about?" He sounded legitimately concerned and taken back. I wasn't sure if I was fooled or not. I

think so, but then again if I am being fooled then I'm not really qualified to judge if I'm being fooled. A few more awkward glances and I was satisfied that whatever the case, Dakota wasn't going to tell me. I resigned myself, as usual, to ignorance. I took another long drag from the vapor thing. I decided that maybe I just hadn't been high in a while and I was getting paranoid.

"Sorry about that. I haven't smoked in a long time. Plus I met a psychic stripper recently and, well, you know how that goes." Dakota looked slightly cross at me.

"Not sure about the last part... but anyway." Dakota changed the tone and subject deliberately. "So, my son blurted something that equated to you being a fine pianist, is that true?"

"I prefer piano player, but I'm far from fine. I hear you're a bassist."

"I am not the most talented, but music is a large part of my ministry." He beamed.

"I'm not religious but my music is pretty much the only source of pride and solace. So maybe music is my religion?" I said, sort of joking, then realizing it might not be a joke, then also realizing it might be taken as an offensive joke about religion.

"Mine too! That is an excellent description." He said proudly, unknowingly absolving me of the insult I apparently didn't make. He mused to himself for a moment.

"Have you thought about what's next for you Jely?" Dakota asked, suddenly leaning forward as if he expected my answer to be in a whisper.

“Like the next life, like heaven?” I asked, apprehensive about the prospect of a religious discussion.

“No... no.” He said with mild disappointment. “I mean have you thought about what is next for you in this life.”

I honestly had not, at least not in a while. The question engaged some gears in my brain that had been idle since I arrived at consciousness on the couch in Dakotas apartment. I'd burnt a bridge with Farrar to get to the moon, and I had no ambition to go back to Earth anyway. I burned a bridge with Alora, actually a house, but her allure had faded in light of the fact that she was a totally scary and self-absorbed gang princess. It would still take time for me to integrate the notion of Alora the cold-blooded murderess with the apparently imaginary Alora I infatuated myself with and chased to the moon, but I knew enough to steer clear of both. There is a good chance that she thought I was dead, which afforded me some level of safety, but the fact that I had burned down the house des Luna would make my situation very dangerous should my survival come to anyone's attention.

So what's next for Jely Fride? Seeking a musical career on the moon would bring a lot of unwanted attention my way and clearly violate my status as dead. Unfortunately I had no other marketable skills and no desire to learn any. My total lack of direction was suddenly making me very uneasy.

"I see I've sparked some contemplation in you." Dakota noted. I continued to contemplate for a moment.

"I don't know man, Got any ideas? I'm a piano player, but I can't gig because being dead is the only thing keeping me alive. I couldn't get back to Earth even if I wanted to. Plus I lied to a very violent friend to get here. I'm fully screwed." Saying it out loud made it more concrete, and much more depressing. Dakota looked mercifully at me.

"It just so happens Jely, that my church is in need of a pianist. We can't pay you, but I'm sure we can find you extended room and board for your service, however long you are in need of it."

I never had an aversion to performing pro bono, especially for people who save my life and offer me asylum.

"I've never played much in the way of church music." I think adapting Judas Priest to lounge style was the closest I'd ever come to playing liturgical music.

"We're not your average church."

"I expect not. I'd love to play." With that, I had renewed purpose; a piano and someone to play for. It wasn't everything I'd ever dreamed of but it was by far the best thing going for me in a while.

Before Dakota left for his day-job at the market he provided me with some chord sheets to study and a crappy synthesizer to practice on. Pretty hip tunes really, mostly uptempo inspirational stuff. The lyrics were all over the map. Songs about life, love, friendship, dancing,

dance-fighting, partying after a dance-fight. Some deeper stuff about hard times and gettin' by. It was just music, didn't seem like religious stuff.

~~~ *NINE.3* ~~~

I spent most of the day getting familiar with the music. I'd practiced and marked all the chord-sheets with my own private cheat-notation by the time Dolores and the kids had returned from school. Dakota returned shortly after and went briefly into a bedroom.

I shuffled the pages of music back together and turned to find Dakota standing behind me- donned in a gaudy purple and red robe from head to toe with fluffy trim all around. He'd changed clothes with speed that would have made Superman do a double take. He was dressed him in some righteous duds that could only be described as the most badass vestments in any religion anywhere. He looked like Bootsy Collins graduating from seminary.

"You going to church or a P-Funk reunion?"

"Yes." Dakota said playfully but matter of factly.

"Fair enough. Hey man, these songs, they, don't seem very, well, churchy. You sure you gave me the right chord sheets?"

"You don't like them?" Dakota seemed slightly offended.

"No, no, I mean, yes, I like them a lot, they just don't seem... like church music."

"I think you might find that has more to do with the church than the music. Ready to go?" Dakota asked, smiling broadly.

Was I ready? I hadn't rehearsed with the band, was there a band? I had the chords for less than a day. I had no idea what the tempo or style of the songs was going to be. I would be flying blind. Of course I wasn't ready.

"Of course I'm ready. Are we going now?"

"There is a weekday service in about an hour, I'd like you to come and play for us." I wasn't prepared, but that always seemed the best preparation for me. That and after playing a synth for several hours I needed to tickle some real synthetic ivory.

"Let's roll." I made a strange air piano hand gesture that I'd never made before and immediately decided to never do again.

Dakota shook his head at me and turned to the door.

"I'm off to service! Be back later!"

Dakota called out to his family. They warmly bid him farewell and assured me that I was about to have the time of my life. I didn't doubt it for an instant.

I gathered my chord sheets and followed the pimped preacher out the door and down the tunnels and out into a moderately crowded moon boulevard.

Nearly every person on the street, Moonie and Earthborn, acknowledged Dakota as we walked. He was a celebrity and next to him I was all but invisible. The walk to the church

started as a small disturbance but after about a block it was practically a second-line parade.

The crowd seemed to crescendo around a small opening in the tunnel, barely wide enough to accommodate two people walking shoulder to shoulder. Inside it opened into a large, well lit amphitheater. It bore almost no resemblance to a church at all. It was the most unadorned place of worship I'd ever seen. There were a handful of chairs and a row of pews against the walls, but not nearly enough for the congregation that had already assembled. The church had had few amenities, pretty much just a big room with the seating arranged to suggest a general orientation. There was no defined pulpit, just a kind of afterthought of a stage area with a makeshift platform. No altar, no statue, nothing with candles or incense. There was another small platform with an old bass amp next to an upright piano. Off to one side a giant mural read "Harmony Soul" above an Earth and moon painted the same size, slightly overlapping, both basked in orange-yellow rays pouring from a larger stylized sun overlapping both. The sun, Earth and moon were all within a great circular collage of colorful stars, planets, and other stellar bodies plotted on lines that made them appear as notes on a cosmic web of music. Splatters of color resembling abstract waveforms jutted out of the mural at random angles and crisscrossed the entire hall, walls, floor and ceiling. It was aesthetically and symbolically beautiful, as if the music of the universe coalesced in that space.

As I leaned into the cave to get a better look a hand grabbed my shoulder and spun me around with effortless strength. Dakota was shaking hands with the gathering crowd about ten feet from me, which told me the hand couldn't belong to him. I looked up into the face that belonged to the powerful hands with apprehension. The face looked vaguely familiar. I studied it for a moment before it clicked.

"Percy?"

"Good to see you again Jely."

CHAPTER TEN

Church

Seeing Percy again put me in a mild state of shock. It brought back some of the reality of how I came to my current circumstance. Despite my apprehension, he probably saved my life, so it was good that I would get to thank him and maybe ask him about his insane kung-fu skills and why he used them to intervene in a gang fight. I decided to hold off on any significant questions until after the service. I had enough on my mind I didn't need any new information getting in between me and the chords I was supposed to remember.

"Come on in, Jely." Percy said, and led me to the piano.

"Just play around for a while, then play 'A Quiet Ruse' when Dakota comes into the center." I thought the song was an odd choice for a processional but I didn't object. I absently rested a hand on the tattered wood of the piano and became overwhelmingly aware of the instrument. Suddenly there was nothing in the universe but me and that piano. It wasn't the cosmic elegance of a Borgendorfer but it was an older soul with real personality. That piano had been lonely. It silently begged me to commune with it. I obliged.

I sat down on the rickety stool and began fingering the keys and feeling their comforting, though very non-uniform weight. Nearly every key had its own nuance, like each

key, lever and hammer had been replaced at different times by different repairmen with competing ideas on the proper balance of a piano key.

I tickled out a few jazzy chords and then settled into a more churchy sounding progression over which I improvised a churchy sounding melody. Percy meandered away from the piano as more and more of the congregation entered the room.

"Hey, Percy- is there a band?" I called back to him before he got out of range.

"Not tonight. It's just you. Have fun." Percy smiled and turned away. I watched him as I absently improvised mood music.

A few grungy and inexplicably dangerous looking men gathered around Percy and shook his hand fiercely. He slapped one on the back in a congratulatory manner. They seemed to be sharing some new information with him, information which he absorbed and appreciated. Percy quickly dismissed them as more people wandered in. The grungy men melted into the gathering crowd.

More and more people walked in and greeted each other, slapping backs as goofing around more like a concert than a religious thing, but the growing congregation didn't take much notice of me. I was background music.

When Dakota finally waltzed in I thought he deserved some swing and I couldn't help myself. I put some stank on a few dominant sevenths and even forced some octave hits for the sake of funk. Dakota winked and cocked a finger gun in my direction, then did a little tip-

toe shuffle followed by a 'ride-the-donkey' move. The congregation went bananas. They whooped and hollered like Dakota was James Brown of Nazareth. I felt the wave of charisma rolling through the room and almost tossed up devil-horns with both hands, but then remembered I needed them to keep playing. Dakota took the center of the room and the crowd gave him room. They settled the noise down to a low, anxious rustling. I ripped out the first turnaround from 'A Quiet Ruse' in a slow march. Dakota led the congregation in a strong baritone.

~~~ *TEN.1* ~~~

I don't have the lyrics on hand but 'A Quiet Ruse' was pretty much about the dangers of just tricking people into being decent to each other with mythology. It was a good jam but the message was a little complicated for a hymn. A few congregants held the last note a little high and sharp, but after it rang out the people stayed patiently silent. Dakota scanned the congregation, nodding to a few. Then he bowed his head and closed his eyes in silent meditation for a moment.

"My soul in harmony wishes to speak." Dakota said to the congregation with his head still bowed.

"Sing from the soul." The congregation called back in unison.

"Let us be the music of the universe."  
Dakota called, suddenly lifting his head as if shouting at the ceiling.

"Jam on, brother!", "Sing truth!", "Rock on!" Several members of the group shouted spiritual encouragement to Dakota.

"Sound is life and life is music, and music is the voice of the eternal spirit of love." Dakota called ceremonially to the ceiling before lowering his eyes. "I am blessed to be heard." He settled and began to speak more casually to the congregation.

"My good people, thank you all for coming to service tonight. First off I have a very special announcement. You may have noticed a new face among us. He is a friend and he has great talent and an open heart. He will be known to us as 'Wandering Soul'. He has come here by the grace of the eternal spirit and I look forward to experiencing the music of the universe as it flows through him."

I got a nice round of applause for the introduction, I smiled and waved. 'Wandering Soul', huh? I couldn't help but think it showed superb discretion on Dakota's part not to reveal my name, but 'Wandering Soul'? Could be worse. I once had a host introduce me as 'The guy who got booed off stage last night' so the bar was pretty low.

Dakota continued. "Tonight as always we meet to celebrate the glory of life and the splendor of the cosmos. As I look out I can see in each of your faces the light which living by truth brings. I can see in each eye the universe peering through. It bears witness to itself

through us. We are the eyes and ears of the universe, my brothers and sisters. In each of our lives we give back what was given to us. Life has given us life, and through it we return that grace by showing the eternal spirit the variety and majesty of creation."

Dakotas sermon style was mesmerizing, from the time we left his apartment he had transformed from a mild mannered husband and father into a funkified cosmic hipster preaching love and unity from the moon. He went on in hypnotic cadence with pitch and intonation rising and cresting like a wave, then quietly dropping to a still pool to let the congregation reflect on the significance of each statement. I got so lost in his stage presence that I missed a cue to play the next tune.

"Wanderer? Wanderer! Pssst- that's you..." Dakota waved to get my attention. "If you would, please lead us in 'I Love To Sing The Songs I Sing'."

A little embarrassed for the lapse, I rushed the first three chords but settled into a swing gospel rhythm before the first line of the verse. It was a song about singing, what better topic could there be for a song?. I think it was an old Barry White tune. Possibly the most aptly named song ever. If there was any doubt left that I had wandered into the coolest church in space-time, that tune removed it. At the conclusion of the song I couldn't help but add a trill, a run, and an extended chord flare just because the spirit got me. I looked around, realizing I had stepped out on a limb. The limb held. Generous applause erupted from the congregation and Dakota

beamed at me like a searchlight tuned to the electromagnetic frequency of happiness. Damn, what a cool church.

"Thank you wanderer, your spirit brings joy to our church and to the universe." I nodded awkwardly in recognition. "That is the kind of spirit we try to set free in this church, the spirit of creation!" Raucous applause and a round of hallelujahs ensued. It was a little more enthusiasm than the comment or my musical exposition warranted but I was gracious for the recognition. The congregation was gearing up for something.

"I feel the vibrations of the cosmos in my hands! Is there an instrument in the universe sturdy enough to work the music of infinity?" Dakota grinned wildly at the congregation. Something big was about to happen. I expected Dakotas sermon would be good but nothing could have prepared me for what came next. I'll save you the suspense. What came next was the Space Bass.

It seemed to materialize from among the congregation. The crowd surfed it fluidly into Dakotas upturned palms. I knew immediately what I was looking at. It was the grail of stringed instruments, lost for centuries. The holy relic of Parliament, the original Space Bass of the immortal Bootsy Collins. It was star-shaped and shined with the sweat of 1000 years of the most psycho-funkadelic hands ever grown on human wrists. Stratavarius, eat your heart out. I recognized it right away, it was no replica, it was Bootsy's own Space Bass and I was in the same room with it. Dakota casually twisted the lowest

tuning key with one smooth motion to drop D and the lymph nodes in my neck started resonating.

"Mothers and fathers, brothers and sisters, children, my people. I wish only to show you the peace and joy you possess so that you may show others who are blind to their own!" Wild applause from the congregation, people were leaping into the air, I think someone swooned and passed out. I was enthralled. Someone passed a cable through the crowd and stuck it in the bass's output. A click and a quick buzz from the bass amp next to me indicated that Dakota was amplified and he struck the open D with his thumb like a hammer. THHHURUMPOW! He popped the fifth with his index.

"I feel that the universe has chosen!" A growling run up to the octave and another popped fifth. "Now is the time that space has chosen and you and I will be here to see the fruit of the springtime of the cosmos! We will grow fruit and seed. Our hope will nourish the soil." A top down run into a rotating triplet on A. I couldn't help myself- I slammed a dominant 7th and resolved to a minor, it just seemed the right thing to do.

Dakota's hands roared with a powerhouse six-let in fifths, then landed on a high Bb and walked down to an F. I followed every step of the way, jamming with the sermon. I bounced off his droning whole notes with riotous staccato octaves into rambunctious stride piano.

"We have a duty! We, as living, breathing, loving beings, the witnesses of creation! We have a duty! We must rise to our calling and rise high enough to call to ourselves through the clouds of material reality. Through the fog, through the viscous fluids of our bodies we must- " He held out an Eb, dangling it for me, I leaped with a minor 6th to a major fifth, resolving on the Eb. "We got to! " He moved the Eb up the octave and dangled it- I stomped the diminished 7th. "We got to, got to, got to LIVE!" Dakota howled. Then dead silence. I caught myself before I lept off half-cocked into another progression.

"We got to, got to, got to, live." The congregation repeated rhythmically and reverently. *We got to live-* it sounded like a commandment of self-determination, kind of obvious and simplistic, but what commandment of self-determination isn't? Dakota droned out another Eb, then it rose in the minor scale to the Bb, then down to a D minor, where he noodled for a bit as he spoke in a much lower and solemn tone. I eased out some arpeggios around Dm for color.

"All through life we are confronted with those people who cannot see. These people are not blind, but they have lost their sight. These are the people with whom we must give our love and hope to the most. In them is still hope of the future. Within us lies the knowledge of their hope. Knowledge of hope is knowledge of peace. We know that the true meaning of god is love. We know that the true meaning of justice is mercy. We know that we do not live measure



for measure - but life for life. For all Life! We all must confront those who do not know these truths and with them we must reconcile our mandate to live, with our purpose to share the love of the universe. In this no one can guide you. Life is mystery, life is infinity, life is complexity beyond the reach of light of human reason and so we must reach out with divine light, divine love. We must live, we must shine so that no corner of life exists without the light it craves and deserves. My people. We are not the chosen, we are those who choose. We are not blessed, we bless. We are not holy, but we carry the spirit of life and it is holy. We are not strong, life loans us strength to live and we repay it with life. We are the point that expands to the line, which reaches out to itself to form the circle, which spins into the sphere that grows to infinity and in infinity again condenses the same singular point."

He moved up to an unexpected E, growing slightly in intensity. I can't say I was really following the spiritual message or the music at that point, but spiritual messages and music seem more about energy and so I just tried to align with the charge.

With a violent low G he began bearing down hard on each note, the frets growled under the pressure of his inspired hands. My fingers trembled, anticipating each musical decision.

"We stand alone, together. We each choose our chosen fate as one."

He literally beat the strings with his fists but somehow droned an A over and over and screamed.

"LIFE LOVES LIFE!"

"LIFE LOVES LIFE!" The  
congregation sang in full voice.

I could only guess this was the cue for the tune he had given me called "Alone Together" I waited for a downbeat from Dakota to establish the feel. He gave me a swirling run into the necessary B and took off like a shell from a bluegrass shotgun. The lyrics were as rapid and memorable as an auction transcript, and I don't think anyone knew all of them, but I enjoyed the refrain. "We are all we fear and all we dream to be." The rockabilly tune died off and I wrapped it up with a nicely improvised turnaround.

"This church is unity. I love each of you and I feel your love for each other. Be mindful, my friends. Be complete and complete one another. Live your life in paradox and fall in love with the unknowable mysteries of the universe. Do not seek the answer, be the answer. Do not ponder the question, live the question. Choose life, my friends. Choose mystery. Choose music, and choose life."

~~~ **TEN.2** ~~~

Dakota crouched and kowtowed to everything and nothing. He raised his head, pulled his collar up around his neck ceremonially, then threw himself into the air into a spinning rock kick leap that came a few inches from someone's head and yelled something in the cosmic language of rock exclamations.

He tossed the Space Bass and it spun around him by the strap and it landed solidly back into his rock grip. After one last defiant bass slide, Dakota unclipped the strap and held out the Space Bass by the neck like a trophy. The congregation received the bass, a mass of hands seemed to absorb it back into their midst. The sermon was over, and the air was heavy with soul and funk.

“Thank you all. In the back we’ll have refreshments, and smelling salts for anyone who passed out from my righteous stank, as usual.” The congregation chuckled and slowly became a normal crowd, shuffling about as crowds do.

For being a funkadelic rock and roll reverend of freedom, beauty, truth, and love, Dakota had a nice sense of humor and didn't seem to take any of the music and over-the-top showmanship too seriously. He broke character cleanly and just went back to being a dude.

His sermon came from his transcendental spirit, the music was just a medium for joyful expression of it. I sat at the piano observing the milling congregation, accepting the occasional compliments and greetings that came my way. The surreal air of the room was brought on by my total lack of familiarity with this many people genuinely enjoying each other's company and my music. It was something else. I was hooked on church.

I've never been much for religion- too many rules, not enough reasons. Some of the rules were just common sense, but more were nonsense, so I figured split the difference and just do whatever makes sense with or without

religion. None of the Dakota's speech had felt like a religious sermon, a little spiritual froo-froo maybe but no judgement or dogma, just good feelings and some catchy lyrics. It was spiritual poetry and a fun little party. Seems like that's what most people want out of religion anyway.

Dakota was an entirely different man in my eyes. The simple husband, father, and reverend I had met and who had treated me with such kindness turned out to be a being of superhuman spiritual funk powers that defied any possible explanation, but still perfectly human. As a bass player he was pretty damn good, as a reverend he was outstanding, but as a funkadelic outer-space rockstar he was a revolution. Nothing about him really matched, and yet it all fit together. I just hadn't seen anything like it before so it would take me a while to assimilate. He was a shaman and humanitarian who wasn't afraid to wear sequins on his oversized collar or play a star shaped bass while screaming about love. I'd have to entirely reconsider my definition of bad-ass.

The chaos died down enough to give me a pretty clear path over to Dakota and I took the route. I approached hesitantly, somehow a little star struck. The last time I shook his hand I had no idea it had touched Bootsy's legendary bass, let alone rocked it. The only thing that gave me the courage to approach someone who had held the space bass was the knowledge that I had just jammed with it.

He looked a strange hybrid of a rock star greeting groupies backstage and a reverend gently reassuring his congregation that they are

loved. He met my eyes and must have thought them more than amusing because he doubled over in boisterous laughter. It made me stop midstep. He laughed and laughed and slapped every back within his considerable reach. The contagious laughter spread towards me until everyone was howling, even though clearly unsure of who or what the punchline was.

~~~ **TEN.3** ~~~

"That was incredible, Jely! We needed you and you came to us. Bless this crazy world!" Dakota was effervescent. I was feeling pretty well appreciated and that was the best feeling I'd had in a while. I strained against the force of the smile climbing up from my toes, but it was useless. Dakota was obviously amused by my attempt to resist my own enthusiasm and made a silly-serious face, then laughed. I abandoned composure and threw my energy into getting a few words out.

"The space bass, dude!" I gestured wildly. "Bootsy's! You- dude- oh my god!" I was at a total loss and I was waiting for someone to give me something to say.

"I'll tell you the story of how it found me someday, but first I have to get some introductions out of the way." Dakota said, gently grounding the conversation. The few congregants still gathered around Dakota were all observing me with various degrees of good-natured newbie judgment.

"Jely, this is Samuel MacLinton - our choir director." I shook the extended hand. Samuel was a medium sized, pudgy man, looked a bit like an impeccably manicured mole. He had an air of a musical academic. If it weren't for his comically upturned nose I could imagine him looking down it at me while I played piano. I may have a slight chip on my shoulder about academic music types.

"I'm pleased to meet you Mr. Fride, I haven't heard much of your music but I appreciate you lending your talents to this institution." Samuel was too formal with me. I could almost smell him questioning the necessity of having an 'untrained' accompanist in the church. I might have been jumping to conclusions. I'm defensive around real musicians because I secretly know I'm not and they seem to know too.

Dakota ignored my internal monologue and continued. "I'd like you to help Samuel with the choir, and of course play keyboards in the band. For that you will be working with Joe Rampo. He's got a reputation as a drill sergeant but he's really a sweetheart."

Another hand extended. I took it and began to shake it but the vice grip on the other end held my arm still up to the elbow. Rampo was a powerful, purposeful man and wanted that well understood on first contact. I suppose it was a necessary notification because it's not the first thing you'd imagine about a guy who stood about 4 foot 8 and might have been mistaken for a Moonie child were it not for his gnarled features. He was the kind of guy who was very

dangerous, if only because he wanted so badly for people to think of him as dangerous. The fact that Dakota had introduced him as a 'sweetheart' meant he would probably go to extra pains to prove to me that assessment was way off.

"I may be a sweetheart but I believe in tough love. You had some good licks out there boy but when you play for me you keep that frilly nonsense to yourself, you play when I say play- got it?"

"Got it." You can't argue with that. I didn't want to make Rambo think he had to hurt me physically to get a point across. In truth I'd play whatever the hell I felt like playing but I'd say 'oops' enough to make it not openly insubordinate.

"Good, glad we got off to a good start here. Looking forward to playing with you Jely, see you at rehearsal. Not a minute late." Rambo glanced at Dakota, who gave the universal nonverbal nod for 'I'll make sure he shows up on time' Samuel gave me a polite bow and took his leave of the group, accompanied by Rambo who gave me an upwards nod on the way out.

There were several others lingering around Dakota that seemed intent but not really interested in all the music talk. A little on the gnarly side. There were a half-dozen or so of them, doing a really impressive job of being ambiguously present. They didn't participate in the introductions but were vaguely observant. They all seemed to be more of Percy's stock. Quietly imposing, but still on the other side of intimidating. You still knew they were capable of being somewhere they weren't a split-second

ago, possibly holding a sharp object. They were so similar to Percy's inscrutability that one of them turned out to be Percy, standing there staring at me the whole time apparently.

"Percy, hey- I've been looking forward to-" I said, before the strange intensity of Percy's attention shorted out my speech center. The guy projected a sense of having known me in a past life. Or he was just some kind of lunar djinn maybe, I don't know- it was disconcerting.

"Hello there, Jely. I'm Percival Meloduke, or Percy. I was looking forward to speaking to you too. Dakota told me an interesting story about you this afternoon."

"Oh Percival- nice. And Dakota doesn't know the half of it, wait until I tell you about the meat drums." Percy looked at me about how you'd expect someone to look at you after mentioning meat drums. I don't know what I expected. Nobody cares about the meat drums. I guess I'll just drop it.

"That sounds interesting." He said flatly. "Dakota has asked me to provide your living quarters and necessities, let's go get that taken care of first."

"Yeah! but I wanted to ask about that thing in the tunnel. You have got to show me that thing with the slice and the SMACK! That was wicked!" I waved my hands in a bumbling martial arts pantomime. I remembered Percy's devastating competence in close combat and wanted some details on it.

"Hmmm, I'm not sure what you're talking about, are you sure that was me?" Percy



waved his hand in an odd gesture across my line of sight.

Maybe he was right. Maybe it was someone else. Seemed totally reasonable. No, it was him, definitely.

“No, that was you, dude. You introduced yourself and everything.” I was absolutely sure.

“Are you absolutely sure?” Percy waved his hand over my eyes again.

“Thought I was... maybe not though...” I was momentarily bewildered. Percy waved his hand again. “Stop doing that! What were we talking about? Wait, hey, didn't I see you somewhere earlier?”

“No.”

“Oh, okay then.” Percy seemed like a nice guy, I just met him a second ago but he seemed to know what he was talking about. I must be remembering it wrong or something. I guess I could go back and read that part again but I don't really like reading my own writing and this story got pretty long.

# CHAPTER ELEVEN

## *Seriously Though, Why All The Fighting?*

I walked with Percy in perplexed silence, trying to remember something I wasn't sure I remembered. Along the way he pointed out a few markers that I should remember to find my way around that section of the moon. After walking only a quarter mile from the church I was completely disoriented and had no idea where I was. I guessed I was probably still on the moon, but who could be sure this far under the moon.

As far as human's daily lives are concerned, the Earth mostly consists of roads and buildings, or paths and huts. Somewhere to be and somehow to get there. On the moon it's tunnels and caves.

I haven't looked it up but I'm assuming the lunar colony was planned by studying an ant colony with crippling ADD. They dug until they got bored or distracted, then dug someplace else. In reality the boredom and distractions were swirling constellations of the political and economic whims of powerful people, but from a distance most human endeavors end up looking like a colony species with a terminal disorder.

There were tunnels that went on for miles and dead ended for no apparent reason. There were tunnel loops that came from and went nowhere. There were connecting tunnels that had been dug too close to the surface and

had been destroyed without warning and haphazardly sealed with small mountains of gooey polymer.

My new apartment was nestled deep under the surface of the moon. That's about the most precise address I could give you even if my life depended on it. It was next to a tunnel by a cave in a tunnel in another cave, if that helps. I'd never find my way back, but I figured if I got lost I'd just ask where the church was, go there and wait for someone to take me back to my apartment. Sometimes being resourceful a matter of being honest with yourself about how incompetent and helpless you really you.

My accommodations were small but cozy and furnished well enough. I had my own piano but it was decidedly not a Borgendorfer. I couldn't have been happier. After sudden transitions from spaceship to prison cell to opulent mansion to burning mansion to reverend's couch, I was ready for a little stability and moderation.

### ~~~ *ELEVEN.1* ~~~

Percy sat me down and offered me a strange drink that shouldn't have been the color that it was. I drank it. Then I spilled my guts-figuratively. It wasn't because of the drink, but it might as well have been.

"...so that's pretty much it. I followed a Moonie chick here, got slapped around a lot. It's been one thing after another. I'm just glad to have a place to hang out for a while and play

piano. Do you have a Bowl 'n Strip around here by any chance?" I doubted it but I thought it was worth the ask.

"Maybe on the surface, but it'll be awhile before you can head back up there. Alora probably thinks you are dead and as long as you're not you should try to stay away from anyplace with a significant security presence."

"So they're pretty much everywhere, Earth mafia, Moonie mafia, the- everybody else mafia... and I burnt down the leader's house?" I asked, sort of rhetorically.

"It was more than just the house. The des Luna family is more complex than you want to know. There are connections within and beyond the moon that are tangled by 50 generations of conflict and greed."

"And they have the cops too, they just own everything and everybody?"

"The families have their hands in most institutions, but they do not own the church" Percy said firmly.

"So they're not allowed in church?"

"Of course they are. Some are an integral part of the congregation. The families are everywhere but not everyone of the same blood is cut from the same cloth."

"What do you do for the church, Percy?"

"I cut cloth." Percy winked.

"Tell you what, if you ever start making sense, I'll write a song about you." I'd probably write a song about him anyway. Anyway Meloduke is a really cool last name. Percival

could use some work but I wasn't about to tell him that.

## ~~~ *ELEVEN.2* ~~~

Over the next several days I received a proper introduction to the community surrounding the Church of Harmony Soul. Dakota was the minister, but the community itself had a strong sense of direction. The band had a strong sense of direction too. Mostly because the director had a wicked jab and could throw a baton like a freakin laser beam. Surprisingly I enjoyed working with the choir much more.

Samuel was not at all the academic snob I initially pegged him for. He was an academic, and a snob, but he didn't combine the two. He was playfully cynical, as opposed to cynically cynical.

"Jely? Are you deliberately changing keys or are you just sliding off of the piano bench?" Samuel asked me after a particularly saucy turnaround variation.

"It's called improvisation, boss- I'll try to tone it down for the squares." I got a little chuckle from the choral peanut gallery. The choir was a bunch of people you wouldn't expect to be in a choir. Notably, most of them were people who couldn't sing worth a damn.

The choir was an inclusive group. Anyone was welcome and the only rule was 'make a joyful noise'. What constitutes joy in a noise was open to interpretation. Clearly the

noise itself didn't always have to sound joyful, in fact some of the sounds were distinctly unpleasant, but it also included growling and beatboxing. I liked it. I got to play all over the piano and they even let me play a few experimental compositions and mess around conducting the choir.

Samuel and I got to be chummy enough. He was a little goonie for my tastes but he liked the hell out of my music and I'm a sucker for a compliment. Against all reason Samuel and Rampo were friends too but Rampo never ceased to worry me a little so I just stayed quiet around him. Eventually Rampo and I came to a reasonable understanding.

"Mr. Fride, Shut the hell up and play piano how I say or I will destroy you." Rampo did a great impression of a kill-bot.

"I'd really prefer it if you called me Jely."

"Jely, if I have to repeat myself again, I will destroy you."

"Yessir." It wasn't that I thought he would really destroy me. It's that I'm really lazy and I didn't feel like having to run away if he tried.

Time passes too quickly for me when I'm enjoying myself. I spent so much time in the midst of great confusion and terror that when I finally found myself in pleasant surroundings I lost myself in them. I only played with the choir and the band for a few weeks but it was some of the best times I'd had in music up to that point. It struck me as odd every so often that I was playing for a church, but it wasn't really a

church, they just said it was, but I guess that's what makes anything a church.

Their church was a calling to the people who lived under the surface of the moon. They spent their lives beneath a polished and glittering world of commerce and entertainment but in it they saw only the glitter and polish. They envied no one. They found beauty in the flat grey walls all around them, in sound, in family, in friendship, in work. Dakota and his church were a beacon to those who would find hope in fellowship with seekers of hope.

### ~~~ *ELEVEN.3* ~~~

Dakota preached no specific doctrine of faith. Everything was very abstract. He admitted to his own contradictions and hypocrisy. He said that he was a purveyor of ideas that came from far beyond any one mind and that his own mind and words were limitations that he could never overcome. Every one of Dakota's sermons was different, his goal in them was to make people aware of the world, aware of suffering and compassion, aware of beauty and chaos, aware of good and evil, and just aware of being aware. The choices were always theirs. In the church the only doctrine is that the congregation must sing to the universe with their eyes open. They took that part a bit too literally and should probably have made an overt exception for blinking, but nobody went blind or anything, they just looked a little crazy when they sang.

Percy was right, mafia people did come to church. Everybody and their godparents was somebody's god-something. Apparently Catholicism migrated pretty heavily to the moon back in the 2200's. After the Papal Boxing League had one too many betting scandals they pretty much just broke up and decided to give the whole orthodoxy thing a rest. All they kept were saints, and of course, everybody has to be somebody's god-something. Not everybody who was a god-something was in the mafia, but it made it pretty hard to distinguish.

After a relieving couple of weeks playing piano like a semi-professional and living like a human being, albeit on the moon, I began to think a little more about how this whole situation might be affecting my life and/or music career in the long run. Except for the fact that I still had a life, for which I was grateful, I considered that the overall effects of my current arrangement might be negative. I wasn't really getting the musical exposure I'd hoped for when I left Earth. Of course originally I left for a crazy Moonie chick but since that went south I'll go ahead and retroactively claim saner motives.

With a goal like gaining interplanetary exposure and recognition as a piano-playing singer-songwriter, it didn't seem like hiding out playing for a church under the moon was my best course of action. The real problem was that any other course of action at this point could easily lead to me becoming more dead than I'd like to think about. I'm not completely oblivious, but I know when I'm out of my depth. I was so far out of my depth I needed a deep-sea research



vessel, which they don't keep in stock on the moon, what with no seas and all. I know I know, Sea of Tranquility- well that's a nonsense name, you go hang out there for 10 minutes past your O2 supply and tell me how tranquil it is.

Even in the church I wasn't completely sure whether or not I wasn't not completely invulnerable. There were a lot of Moonies, a lot of earthborn, a lot of mixed folks, and any one of them could be there to make me dead, or tell someone else who would tell someone to make me dead. I didn't like any of it. Except the piano playing, the singing, not paying rent for an apartment, and the wrongly colored drinks that Percy provided me.

Percy seemed to be a lot of people's godfather so I figured that meant he probably knew a lot about the mafia.

### ~~~ *ELEVEN.4* ~~~

“Why doesn't the moonborn mafia just hook up with the earthborn mafia to fight the mixed-mafia?” I inquired of Percy one day over a glass of something that shouldn't have been the color it was.

Percy just blinked at me.

“Sorry, I don't get any of this... Look- I love playing piano for the church and all but I still feel like a cryo-fish out of it's pressure tank here. I'm good with the church stuff but... I see a lot of mafia-looking dudes around here and- you remember I burnt down one of their houses right?”

“You are safe here with us Jely, you are in our care.”

“Yeah, that's kind of my problem. I get that. I love the Church, love the music, really appreciate the apartment and all, but it does seem like I'm- Can I get away with saying 'modestly gilded cage' without seeming ungrateful”

“I don't think you're ungrateful Jely, and honestly I can see how you would feel that way. And at the same time- we have no obligation to provide for you as we do, but we are grateful for your the gift of your talents.”

“Um... I... didn't mean.”

“It's alright, as I said, you are safe here.”

“Is there any way you could elaborate on that for me? For instance, how you know that, and in particular, what I am safe from?”

“I'm afraid not.” Percy said with only the faintest hint of apology.

“I was afraid of you being afraid not.” I was pretty sure Percy wasn't going to give an inch on any of this.

“Look Percy, I really, really, do appreciate what you and Dakota and the whole church have done for me. I know you're good, charitable people, doing what you think is right. Still, it's just hard not to think you're holding out on me- maybe just a little bit.”

“I am holding out on you- a lot, actually.” Percy said deliberately.

“Okay- well, then you'll let me know when you decide to let me know... whatever, right?”

“You'll be in the loop.” Percy sipped his drink through a wry smile that reminded me how little I would probably understand of the information he was withholding. I suppose in a warped sense it was comforting, though it was the kind of comforting that's only comforting if you don't know what's going on. Like a ghost telling you that everything will be fine, but only because now you know ghosts are actually a thing and you're about to find out what it's like to be one.

~~~ *ELEVEN.5* ~~~

During a combined choir and band rehearsal, at which Dakota himself was present, I missed less than 6 chords and felt downright good about myself as a musician.

“Hey ham-fingers, you only missed almost half a dozen chords out there, better than usual”

“Awww... thanks, Rampo!” I risked hugging the little gnome, who reciprocally bruised my ribcage in earnest good-will. Rampo shoved me a few feet and I stumbled back. I smiled stupidly and laughed, but my back hit something charged with some kind of current. Suddenly my legs, hips and spine convulsed in a pattern which resembled break-dancing. I spun on a foot and involuntarily robot-danced at Dakota, who had accidentally poked me with the Space Bass.

Dakota observed my moves with mild astonishment. As I finally halted in a *boo-ya*

pose – he nodded approvingly. With a cocky glance he smacked one hand behind his head and one on his hip, then combined pop-locking, snake charming, and samurai swordplay in a merciless demonstration of dance supremacy. He then backed up the serving with a high-step-stomping crunk that would have been unachievable in Earth's gravity. He landed and couched in a *boo-ya* pose that made my *boo-ya* pose look like a *please-call-someone-I-think-I-hurt-myself* pose. Dakota straightened himself into a classic power stance before finally relaxing back to a non-rock posture.

“I'm sorry, Jely. It was unfair of me to serve you like that.” Dakota apologized sincerely. It took an embarrassingly long exercise in pointing and blinking stupidly before I could even vaguely assemble what had just happened.

“Did we just dance-fight?” I stammered.

“Wielding the Space Bass is a heavy responsibility, it has.... unpredictable effects on people. I should have been more careful.” Dakota bowed formally. “Thank you for sharing your musical genius to our humble congregation.”

“Genius? pshaw... Besides, I owe you one- or a few dozen.” I accepted the over-the-top compliment with usual awkward grace. I normally love over-the-top compliments, but sometimes you want more high quantity, low quality musical praise, but the last thing I wanted was to seem ungrateful.

“But- I know it's a shame that you are stuck here with us. We are trying to make your

burden as comfortable as possible.” Dakota smiled brightly.

“Nah, man, I didn’t mean anything like that...” I replied, attempting to repair what I thought might be a horrible rift in the fabric of me-not-being-a-jerk to these nice people who saved my life.

“Jellious Friedman. Relax, my friend. You are a talented entertainer and you deserve your stage and an audience full of enthusiastic young women. As it happened, fate has placed you within a small sanctuary within a dangerous maelstrom. I am merely the caretaker of that sanctuary, which is itself a victim of these unbalanced and violent forces. So you might say, we’re in the same boat- don’t sweat it, dog.” Dakota smiled warmly, then pulled me through a complicated handshake.

Dakota seemed to comment extensively on exactly what I was thinking despite my deliberately avoiding saying it out loud. I know I’m bad at not telegraphing everything I think, but when people read it that clearly that often and that explicitly it seems like- hey wait...

“Did I ever tell you my full name?” I demanded lightly.

“It’s easy to guess.” Dakota replied.

“It’s really not though.” I said.

“What else would Jely Fride be short for?”

Dakota smiled and winked knowingly.

“Uh... something else, or just not short at all?” I said. He really shouldn’t have known my full name, that did not make sense. But in a testament to how nonsensical my life had become it didn’t bother me that much. I just

casually added another tick to the Dakota-might-be-an-actual-telepath file and mentally moved on.

He nodded at Rampo, then turned back to talk to Samuel, or more likely to telepathically laugh about how easy it is to read my mind. Seriously, it's not cool for people to do that. Aquari was blue, that made sense- I think...

"We'll see you back for the service tomorrow, go get some rest." Dakota suggested.

"Okay- I uh- okay then." I was so amazed how politely I was told to leave that I almost missed the fact that I was definitely just told to leave.

~~~ *ELEVEN.6* ~~~

Walking alone at night on Earth can be a peaceful and serene, if occasionally dangerous, experience. Ambient light from the stars and the moon provide enough light to subtly define your surroundings, but not enough to intrude on the mind's internal reflections.

Even in the darkest wilderness there is enough visibility to confirm that your feet are attached to a familiar surface. Under the surface of the moon, such confidence is a forgotten luxury. There is no light under the moon except what someone brought here. Most of the light that was brought here were cheaply manufactured LED's and cold cathode fluorescents that were installed with a lowest bidding contractor's attention to detail.

Sometimes walking down a dim tunnel you may realize that a single LED circuit is the only device separating you from a darkness so thick and impenetrable that it could easily be a solution from which any nightmare could precipitate and become corporeal by the power of fear.

The tunnels ran so deep and twisted that foot traffic in some remote corridors was occasional at best. To be trapped in utter darkness meant you might never find your way back to the light. There were no guarantees that anyone will be along with a flashlight until the next maintenance cycle, which is more of a local punchline than a real event. I started carrying a flashlight everywhere I went, but since I always forgot to bring it with me, I just stopped carrying it.

It was night, I could tell because the lights that did work were dimmed to a minimum setting and a little red. Day and night are artificial constructs under the moon; timers, dimmers and switches all synchronized to remind the sub lunar dwellers of their circadian roots. The low light was enough that I could avoid walking directly into walls but little more.

The gentle monochromatic curves of the tunnel walls were hypnotic. I knew that I was supposed to turn left after the third smallish tunnel, before the two bigger tunnels. I knew if I hit the tunnel cul-de-sac I'd gone too far. I thought I'd passed two smallish tunnels but the third seemed less smallish than I remembered. If I hit the cul-de-sac again I'd probably be walking in circles for an hour before I figured

out the tunnel I'd come in on. I decided to take the less smallish tunnel because it seemed to be headed in a direction that was slightly less wrong than any direction the other tunnels were headed.

Halfway through the tunnel a light flickered. I stopped and turned to the failing LED.

"It's just you and me, little light, nobody else here. I won't tell anybody if you want to knock off early, just let me get through here first."

The light flickered what I assumed was a confirmation. I proceeded carefully, as if my deliberate caution might inspire camaraderie between the LED light and myself. I waved at the light as I passed, it blinked a reply, which might have translated to. "Suck it."

The light fizzed and blew out, singeing the air with an acrid musk. My eyes struggled to adjust to the low light, which was now low that it was not there at all. The strange phosphene colors of fading eyesight washed away and left me with a blank frame. I reached for where the light fixture had been in my visual memory, I felt around and found the socket. Stupidly, I tested the socket with my finger and found the cause of the LED's failure. It was overvolted. Judging from the smell of singed flesh and the numb tingling from my fingers to my teeth it was probably overvolted by a pretty stupid number of volts.

The fresh charge of current produced a flurry of those interesting chromatic fields that occasionally put on a private show behind your

eyelids. They faded back into blackness about the same time the numbness in my teeth wore off and became actual pain. I sat down in the dark. I was denied any objective sensory input, which allowed me to focus fully on my new and inspiring dental agony.

Time dilated. Seconds and minutes condensed and evaporated, compressed and expanded until units of time seemed arbitrary measures. The pain in my teeth faded. I briefly considered trying the socket again if for no other reason than to give me a sensation to occupy myself with. It also occurred to me that another jolt of electricity might give me superpowers that would allow me to fight crime and impress women. After I fought off that impulse, it occurred to me that I was boned.

The absorbing darkness that covered me was beginning to cut through my long suffering adult façade. The frightened child that lurks underneath was beginning to suspect that the grown ups didn't know what to do either. So what good were they? If being a grown up couldn't get me out of there, I figured I might as well act like a child. I cried.

Crying helped less than I'd expected, but being a grown up had clearly not gotten me anywhere. The only thing that had ever gotten me anywhere in life was playing piano, so that's what I decided to do.

I was blind. If there had been a vicious monster 2 feet in front of me I could not have seen it. If there had been a 10 foot Grand piano 2 feet in front of me I could not have seen it either.

Given the choice of things being there that I cannot see – I went with the piano.

I cracked my knuckles and extended my arms to where a piano would be if I were about to play it. I cocked my fingers for C triad with an octave bass.

The little piano playing robot in my head asked me what I was doing. I told him that I was going to imagine a piano for him to play. He asked if that meant I had finally cracked. I told the robot no, but it probably wouldn't be long. It agreed to play for me.

The piano I imagined had several rocket engines, a cloaking device, a holodeck, a bar, and a penthouse containing a ladies volleyball court and teams. Even with those amenities, my imaginary piano was still not a Bosendorfer. It had no keys, pedals, hammers, or strings, and it was not made out of matter. The sound it made was a compilation of piano sounds that my piano robot had acquired over the years, it sounded piano-like, but only just so.

~~~ *ELEVEN.7* ~~~

After several renditions of songs I had never been able to play properly on a real piano, I slumped over the imaginary keys and stabbed out slow chord progressions that were more mechanical than musical.

Somewhere in the mellow mournful progressions I identified a drone note. It was the same note I'd heard back in the tunnel when

Louis attacked Birgess and Hamm but this time it was sustained enough to really absorb.

It was a dissonant note, so awkwardly pitched that it could not have existed in any scale. I ran through several scales and modes on my imaginary piano, testing for the tone. It was nowhere on any keyboard I'd ever played, nowhere in my memory at all. That note could not exist, it was not between pitches, it was not even a pitch. It was not a frequency, or the interference of frequencies, it was a transverse wave superimposed onto itself in every phase, it was overunity and singularity expressed in sound.

I physically reached out for the sound, it seemed to fall between my fingers like water. I cupped my hands as a basin, the liquid sound swirled and climbed and spilled over the edges like a quantum superfluid, it could not be contained.

The sound grew, gained amplitude. It became more tangible. I was aware of it by a sense that straddled vision, hearing and thought. The swelling sound somehow compelled my mind to recreate the world that I should have been able to see. The walls of the tunnel became outlines, then filled in with textures – not reflections of light, but vibrations of matter and energy beyond sound, beyond any normal perception.

I could see, I could hear, but there was no light and no sound, it was my mind, directly deciphering the unidentifiable tone into familiar meanings of substance. I turned to look around- and found I did not have to turn. I could see

beyond my angle of view, beyond my periphery, even past the bend of the tunnel.

It was pure reality. It was the hologram of everything that is real. It was everything that could be sensed and more; whole, unfiltered, uncondensed, an uncollapsed wave function. It was overwhelming and enveloping.

I pushed forward through the emerging fields of unified perception. I found the ground beneath me, or rather found an intangible plane that somehow separated my feet from whatever the moon was made of. I raised myself up and took steps, each time a leg left the ground I had to double check my position until I was finally confident that the new manifestations of matter could be trusted implicitly.

The sound that had become the world had a direction. The density of the field increased along a precise vector. Unfortunately, that vector led straight into a tunnel wall. I stumbled along the edge of the tunnel, trying to sense through the walls and achieve some navigational ability through the convoluted capillaries of the tunnel.

Through layered transparencies of tunnels I could sense the source. I could trace a path through unobstructed space towards it. It was not far. My pace quickened as my spatial confidence grew, crossing through tunnels and passing forks that would have caused me immeasurable distress in any other mode of perception.

I was drawn to the source. If a moth had a measurable consciousness this would be what it felt like when it was drawn towards a light.

Overwhelming peace combined with impending doom, spun and twisted until it was a tether so thick it could wick away your entire identity and your will. It pulled me. The unified fields became intolerably dense around a singularity- a point within a point. Shockwaves of woven lightning rippled and inverted within and around it. For all its fury and serenity it could have been a generations long war and an age of peace in a world inside a drop of rain. I reached in, drawn by the unreal tone, to touch the sound.

The tip of my finger made contact with a rippling heat, like a sound wave had become a writhing, incandescent wire. I touched it. I felt no pain with the contact- it felt almost alive. I wrapped the filament around my finger and felt a mild resistance. I was inexplicably compelled to pull against it. I tugged gently. The glowing thread came free and was instantly extinguished. It fell through my finger and vanished. The bizarre ethereal projections of reality melted around me like a fire in a wax museum. The world I remembered was reincarnated. Light and matter painted itself over an invisible canvas, woven from nothing only an instant before the paint touched it. Grey walls rematerialized. Lights and fixtures reappeared.

Scuffling sounds ensued as smokey humanoid figures jostled and grappled all around me in the condensing reality. The smokey forms became dense liquids, then crystallized into human beings.

Dozens of men were engaged in a life-and-death battle, some had already fallen. I could not tell if there were sides, what side had

what advantage, or if it was just a free-for-all. Some seemed to be recovering from a state of confusion, but they quickly oriented and dove into the fray. It might have been over a minute before any of the fighters even noticed my presence.

A man in a black overcoat swinging a really sweet electric morning-star noticed me first. He was an impressive specimen with a look of hardened, impenetrable rage. I could not read in his eyes whether he perceived me as a friend or enemy, or if it really mattered to him either way. He marched towards me with such effortless calm that I was trapped between terror and amazement. With unbelievable conservation of motion he raised the morning-star, which cracked with an electrical discharge. Just as the weapon reached maximum velocity, I determined that this was not a friend. Unfortunately, that was still way too late for me to do anything about it.

The spiked ball sailed towards me. A tendril of electricity jumped from the weapon and reached for my nose. I flinched. I saw the tip of a spike of the ball in slow-motion macro photography as it grazed my eyebrow.

He reeled back from the near miss. The ball orbited the stick several times as the man reeled back for a second swing. I tried to scoot backwards and met a wall. The ball swung on an unavoidable collision course towards my sternum. My body knew instinctively that it could not physically twist, bend, or contort in any position that would prevent what was about

to happen to it, so somehow I relaxed a bit in the instant.

I thought about how much I loved playing piano, then I regretted not being back on Earth bowling with Aquari, or perhaps receiving a richly deserved beating from Ferrah. Then I remembered a guy with a morning star that was about to end my life.

I thought about how it was going to feel, if the pain would be greater or less due to the voltage, or if I would notice at all or have any relevant frame of reference if I did. I was still thinking about that when Percy came up from behind the man, deftly disarmed him, and blasted a knee into his groin that made the morning-star look merciful. Percy smiled at me with what appeared to be gratitude and amazement. I gave him a bizarrely enthusiastic thumbs-up that still perplexes me to this day. Then I vomited and probably urinated.

Percy turned with graceful purpose and waded back into the dwindling melee. By that time more than half the combatants were on the ground, most seemed unnaturally incapacitated; wide eyed and aware, but frozen in contorted positions. A chrome sliver of some kind of flexible metal seemed to be affixed to their collar bone. I saw a suited man writhing, reaching for a nearby weapon when Percy swooped by and applied what I would later find out was called a 'paralytic shiv' with violent surgical precision. He also removed a thin patch of material affixed to the man's temples that was the same color as the weird box containing the sound that shouldn't be.

As the last of the battle wound down, I realized that the vanquished were nearly all suited in black overcoats, and those who still stood were robed as vagrants, very similarly to Percy.

My eyes wandered over the tunnel, looking but not really seeing. My brain's data processing department was already backed up by all the crazy information I'd been force fed over the past few weeks, but this new feed generated a priority interrupt.

This was a new scale of violence. Percy and his men had just taken down a dozen of some kind of mafia dudes. It appeared that the battle had not gone well, as if any battle ever really 'goes well' in the grand scheme. Several of Percy's men tended to seriously wounded vagrants and Mafia alike. At least two of the mafiosos were dead, and probably a half dozen of Percy's men. Judging from how expertly I had just seen Percy and his men fight I could not imagine how they had taken such losses.

I turned my attention back to the apparent source of my transformed perception. It was a little blue box, innocuous as any little blue box, until you remember that boxes are usually hollow, and hollow things sometimes contain unimaginable horrors.

"It's a reality encryption matrix projector." Percy appeared and sat beside me as if he had materialized from a shadow on the wall.

"What the hell does it do?" I asked, allowing my interest in the strange device to override my horror at the situation.

“What did you experience, just now?”

Percy asked.

“What, like the meathead that just tried to hit me with a medieval atom smasher?” I blurted. Percy smiled patiently, or impatiently, or condescendingly, I couldn’t tell.

“What else?”

“Well the whole world just melted into an acid trip around me, that was a little odd, then I found this thing. Then the guy tried to hit me with the thing- then you were there.”

“How were you able to locate it, and deactivate it?” Percy’s question was almost desperate.

“I just pulled the-” I hesitated as I looked at the box. It had no wires, no buttons, no switches, no obvious openings or interface of any kind – it was just a box. “I guess I don’t know, I just followed it, then I yanked on something and it stopped.”

“I see.” Percy picked up the box and folded it under his robe. He considered me severely for a long, uncomfortable moment. I started to ask something, then thought better of it. I waited for him to speak.

“Weren’t you going home to get some rest?” Percy said, seeming to force himself into a conversational tone.

“Really? That’s all you got for me? Nothing about what the hell all this is-” I stopped as I saw one of the fallen being dragged away into the darkness. It occurred to me that man was likely someone Percy knew very well and would never speak to again. As inhumanly calm as Percy was at such a time I could sense

his pain and loss. I decided it was not the time to pester him with questions.

“I got lost. I’ve been wandering around in the dark a while.”

“I see.” Percy said, becoming a bit more absent.

Percy gestured to one of his men and he approached us. With a silent nod he directed the man to escort me away.

I’d already learned that protesting Percy is fruitless even under normal circumstances. I had a boatload of questions for him, but I had an ocean of doubt that he’d answer any. Also I’ll take any fair opportunity to get the hell away from a scene of recent mass violence, apparently.

~~~ *ELEVEN.8* ~~~

I arrived back at my apartment under escort, which was the only way I ever found the right apartment. Once securely inside I flopped heavily onto the couch and closed my eyes to invite sleep. Sleep was slow to RSVP, and so I opened my eyes and sat up.

On a whim I opened my door and poked my head outside. My escort had become a guard, who looked at me squarely. I waved.

“Hey, man.”

The guy nodded reluctantly.

“Do you need someone to help finding your apartment too?” I asked him for no reason.

It might have been a photon bouncing off at a weird angle, but I could swear the guy

almost smiled. Whatever his disposition, I felt it safe to assume he was not sitting there as an invitation for more wandering. I was being subtly instructed to stay put. I miss a lot of subtlety, but in this case the subtlety was a large physically imposing guy obviously capable of violence. I stayed put.

Sleep eventually found my party and crashed it for being so impatient about the RSVP. Given the events of my waking life over the past several weeks I found my dreams were comfortingly commonplace, something about a blue chick and bowling. When I finally woke I was still in the apartment, in the same place I remembered going to sleep in, with no new injuries. At this point waking up normally deserves mention.

Before I had a chance to recount the disconcerting events of late, someone knocked at the door, probably a prelude to more disconcerting events. I rose and answered. Dakota stood at the door, carrying a star shaped leather strapped case that could only contain the Space Bass.

“Hello there, Jely.” Dakotas voice rang with a familiar goodwill, but was noticeably tempered with a reserve I hadn’t heard from him since he first asked me about my involvement with the mafia families.

“Dakota, whatsup? Kinda hoping I could talk to you. Have you talked to Percy recently, like since last night?”

“Yes, I have. Would you walk with me to the church?” Dakota asked.

“That’s the only way I’d be able to find it.” I joked, Dakota laughed with unexpected humor.

“Jely- You’re- You are a very special person.” The fact that Dakota stumbled over even a single word was disconcerting, but it made the ‘special’ seem like a genuine compliment instead of the other implication.

“Thanks, you too.”

Dakota nodded and turned to lead. The man who had been guarding the door to my apartment stood mechanically and walked just in front of Dakota, relentlessly scanning the tunnels ahead. I stepped up beside Dakota to avoid the feeling that I was a puppy on a leash, but even in lock step the feeling was pervasive.

“So I guess if I asked about him you’d probably say he was for my protection.” I indicated the guard, whose focus was impenetrable even when being talked about right behind his back.

“Probably” Dakota said absently. I could have predicted Dakota’s next 2 or 3 replies, but I pressed on.

“So should I ask about him anyway, or about what happened last night?”

“I can’t answer that question.” Dakota’s evasion was becoming more difficult to calculate.

“You can’t answer the question that I should ask- or the question that I asked about asking about?” I confused myself with the phrasing, but Dakota understood well enough. He turned to me with a look of earnest

frustration, which dissolved quickly in his native compassion. He took a deep breath.

“You saw something last night I would not have chosen for you to see. However; to say that now is to admit that if the choice had been mine I would have made it incorrectly.” Despite the convolutions of the statement I knew he was not trying to deceive me, not that he’d have to try that hard if he did want to. Dakota was putting his trust in me, something he seemed reluctant to do. The realization stung, but I could understand why someone like Dakota might have trouble trusting someone like me, and especially me specifically.

Dakota was waiting for me to say something stupid, the pressure of his silent trust kept me silent. He smiled.

“What you saw last night was a very small battle in a much larger war, one that has enveloped our world in horror and tragedy as long as anyone can remember.”

“The mafia... but I thought you said there was a balance.”

“There *was* a balance.” Dakota eyed me with something that bordered on accusation, but held short of the line. Dakota was fighting what must have been a very low-level instinct to blame me for something heinous. The feeling of incrimination crawled into my mind like a hungry brain beetle. I felt it feasting on what little sustenance I have to offer a neurovore as we walked.

~~~ ***ELEVEN.9*** ~~~

We arrived at the church. Dakota opened the door for me and I walked in, still deeply pensive. The guard stayed outside. The door closed and Dakota turned to me.

“The real power of the House des Luna was not in the structure you burned down, but with that fire the power of that house has been irreparably compromised.” Dakota’s words sunk in. An icy current swirled through the lining of my intestines.

“Are you saying I started a new mafia war?” The rack of guilt and self-loathing in my voice cut Dakota. His eyes snapped wide with an emotion I didn’t think he should have much experience with- shame.

“Jely- forgive me- my distrust, my fear, my blindness. You are not the cause of this. I- have been too... Jely, you deserve to know your place in this. It would be cruel even if you were just an innocent victim, but you are also a pawn.”

“I mean- that’s kind of on me. Evidently I came here to be Alora’s pawn, so whatever. It’s not like I’m your pawn or anything.”

Dakota’s eyes became crystal and he took a heavy breath. “I’m afraid you are now.”

I took a step back. “Dude, I seriously didn’t mean to start anything with anybody.”

Dakota forced himself to relax. His charisma was so powerful that even though he may have just threatened me, his relaxation moved into me by convection. Dakota sat down on the last pew. He stared forward at the mural on the church wall as if getting ready to dive

into it and never return. I waited with a silence I didn't even know I was capable of.

"What I told you before about the mafia wars on the moon was an abridged history to say the least, and certainly stopped short of explaining their relevance to current events." Dakota was still conditioned to wait for me to say something stupid, but I didn't, so after a moment he proceeded.

"I have never been a combatant, for any side, but I am deeply involved. I have brokered, I have mediated, and I have betrayed, in all these things I have made grave errors in judgment, so I no longer trust my own judgment, not completely."

"I think I probably do." I said honestly.

"And for my sake, I am grateful for your trust, it is what I require, though it may yet turn out to be misplaced."

"Look- far as I can tell you helped me for no reason at all besides being cool. I'd be dead probably if it weren't for you and your family. You took a complete stranger into your home, you trusted me with your family. I trust you Dakota, you're the only person on the moon that I can say that to." Hearing this, Dakota's eyes closed and he winced as if in agony.

"I wish we could have met some other way." He said. "You have become involved in a very old, very dangerous game. As I told you before, when the moon was first colonized, it was just organized criminals, then factions of Earth born and Moon born fought for control. Pure blood houses rose and fell like bamboo and even after the lineage of pure blood became a

meaningless claim, the houses still fought to accumulate power. The emergence of the mixed blood mafia and the birth of the House des Luna was Alaxae Meloohn's attempt to tame the factions and bring organization to the warring houses, for the benefit of all. Alora, saw the unification as a threat to her ascension as the next leader of the House des Luna. Alora created her own power base. She displaced and forced her mother out of power by uniting the remaining separatist factions against those who sought unification.

Alora turned to the pure blood houses, and renounced her mixed lineage. Her power and viciousness held her opponents down. The fact that Alaxae has not been heard from in over a year has weakened the mixed bloods. Alora claimed her mother has been convalescing under her care in the House des Luna. With that lie and her ruthless ambition Alora has achieved a brief unity, though it is fragile and turbulent and is only a dressing on a festering infection. With the House des Luna in ashes, Alaxae is no longer a specter of hope or danger to either side. The peace is broken.

I suspect she went to Earth looking for someone precisely like you- a seducible pure blood Earth born man, with no connection to any other house, that she could wed. Finding a pure-blood Moonie with no connections or would be next to impossible so it had to be an Earth born with no ambition to power.

With such a marriage she is symbolically renouncing her mixed lineage. With a pure blood marriage, and handing her



mother over to the pure bloods, she would satisfy the demands of the leaders of enough houses that she could lead unobstructed.”

Dakota stopped for a moment to consider how much of this I had absorbed.

“I killed a lady in that fire?” I asked, less horrified at the prospect than I’d have given myself credit for.

“No Jely. Alaxae is far away and in good health. She saw her daughters malevolent designs long ago solicited the Church to help her- first to stop Alora, then when that became impossible, to escape before Alora could kill her. But that truth is even more dangerous than the lie that she died in the fire, or was being held there in the first place. There is great controversy on that matter, but regardless; Alora’s weakness has been exposed. Now her fury and desperation will plunge the moon into a new darkness, unless we can do something.”

“We? Like you and Percy? You’re like- the Church Mafia or something?” That was the probably the stupid thing he’d been waiting for me to say.

“No Jely, there is no Church Mafia.”

Dakota couldn’t hide his disappointment. I tried to follow up by at least demonstrating a vague understanding of the severe absurdity of the Mafia situation.

“So before- the pure-blood Earth-born mafia fought the pure-blood moon-born mafia. Then there was a mixed blood mafia and it won for a while. Now both the pure blood mafias joined up to fight together against the mixed-blood mafia?”

“That’s the most ridiculously simplistic summation I’ve ever heard of our plague, and yet- yes, that is essentially correct.” Dakota credited.

“That’s even stupider than it sounds when I say it. That’s- ludicrous- I can’t even... wait- I actually suggested that exact thing to Percy earlier... If the fact that I suggested it doesn’t prove how ridiculous it is I don’t know what does.

“Yes, it is, but so is most of human history.” Dakota mused, seeming to sink into himself. “Your music, your passion, it gives you great strength Jely, but not power. Power is fearful. Strength is its own temple, but power exists only to grow and consume. It feeds on everything it can, and finally itself. If you stop accumulating power, even for a moment, it will feed on you. I pray that you remain strong but never know what it is to have power.” Dakota’s philosophy was probably more profound than I was in the mood to give it credit for. As much as I sympathized with the moon’s downtrodden, I happened to be from Earth. I wanted to be gracious, but I also didn’t want to die or be trapped underground for the rest of my life.

“Look Dakota, I know you’re being honest here, or as honest as you can, or- I don’t mean that you’re not being honest- Look, you know I’d do anything to repay what you’ve done for me, but, I don’t want to get in the middle of a mafia war. I never- shit- I came to the moon for a chick. How am I gonna get out of here? I’m just a piano player, man. I can’t just stay here forever hiding from Alora’s goons.” I spilled a

little more of my caged selfishness than I meant to.

“I know that, but right now if you try to leave the moon, or go to the surface, or venture far from our protection, you will be discovered. I am not sure that Alora would harm you, but Percy has taken the charge of your protection, it is his decision.

“Sorry- but- well, isn’t Percy sort of in with the- or a Mafia or something. Can he get me out of here, I’ll dress up like a lady or hide in a crate or whatever. I’m not proud.” I tossed up the suggestion like a hail mary.

“Why would you ask if Percy was with the families?” Dakota's reply probably gave away more than he intended, but it was lost on me.

“Because he’s like- a ghost-ninja or something? And I still think I met him before you introduced me. I’m willing to bet he’s got psychic powers.” The shadow of a wry smile passed over Dakota’s face before he could catch himself.

“I trust Percy implicitly, but I do not know the specifics of his activities. He and I are friends in the church and in spirit, any other connection we might have is purely a manifestation of parallel motives.”

“Why doesn’t that sound like full disclosure?”

“Because it is not mine to disclose, and that is all I can tell you.” Dakota paused heavily. “I need something from you, Jely. Something I really don’t understand at all, except that it is needed.”

“You got it, just ask.” I said with transparent uncertainty.

“It is unfair to offer a choice when there truly is none. You must help me.” Dakota said with growing severity. “But I believe you would help if I could ask.”

“O-kay... I will, or try. I'm not usually the best candidate to help- anybody, ever really.”

“You are the only candidate, and you will help. You will forever be my friend Jely, and forever a part of our church.” Dakota stood. He grabbed my arm, pulled me up, and gave me a big hug. “Choir rehearsal starts in 1 hour. Perhaps you can warm up.” Dakota pointed to the piano. “I'd like to sit and listen for a moment, but I'll have to go very soon.”

As transparent as Dakota's misdirection was, I needed to play. I had exhausted my entire supply of anxiety and confusion and just needed to forget there was a universe outside of music. So I walked over sat down at the piano.

“You wanna jam?” I mimed slapping a bass string with my thumb.

“I want to hear the sounds only you can find, you have a singular gift for that.” Dakota's flattery was all I needed. I started playing.

I just flowed, no melody, no chords, just pushing keys in patterns that made my hands happy and at least didn't offend my ears. I dumped about a bathtub full of exhaustion onto those keys and they soaked it right up, dried it out, and made it into a sweet musical potpourri that tickled my ear-nostrils.

From the corner of my eye I saw Dakota stand. He paused there for a moment. I heard a

familiar melody and I looked down at the keyboard to see what my fingers were doing, they were busy so I left them alone. When I looked up Dakota was gone. I was alone, playing piano. Playing piano alone is one of my top three favorite things to do alone.

~~~ *ELEVEN.11* ~~~

I played with the piano like we were kids in a sandbox. I played with my knuckles, slapped rhythms on the wood, stomped the sustain pedal and plowed through all 88 keys up and down like I was skidding on wet grass.

Notes rang and clashed like an army of bells assaulting a defensive line of cymbals. I kept hammering the keys trying to achieve a perfect dissonance I imagined would cause some kind of rupture in space-time. I was completely nuts- my life had gone off the rails and I needed to express that in music.

Through the musical angst I heard a tone that wasn't supposed to be there. Not like the tone I remembered from the tunnel, but not unlike it either. I knew it was the same because it wasn't supposed to be what it was. I remembered what happened the last time I heard that tone. I closed my eyes and immediately began searching for it through the emerging maelstrom of dissociated reality.

Again the world collapsed into abstracts that I could only vaguely recognize as manifestations of other senses. Sight, smell, touch, everything was again unified and askew.

The source was close, very close. It was under one of the pews. I walked to it, almost forgetting that the perception of the pews represented tangible things that I could not walk through.

Again the point, and the energy. This time it was more peaceful, just a point within a point, sitting there, making a sound that could not be.

I touched it, prodded, then curled and tugged the thread again. The world re-rendered itself as it had been before. I was in the church, kneeling beside a pew, touching a little blue box. I picked up the box and shook it by my ear as if it was a Christmas present.

A hand reached out and took the box gently. Percy leaned over to me and smiled as if he had just found out that chocolate exists. "That is truly amazing, Jely." Percy beamed.

"What? This thing again? Did you put this here?"

"Yes, I wanted to be sure you would find it again." Percy explained.

"Reality encryption thing right? I never got much of the story on all that."

"It won't matter what I tell you now, Jely." Percy started to stand, I stood to attempt to look him in the eyes, which was a formidable experience.

"Percy, I know you're super bad-ass and all, and you've been really cool to me, but I need someone to tell me what's going on before I freak out" Percy sat back down, patiently, but not ignoring my impatience. I sat beside him.

"What do you experience when the device is active?" Percy asked.

“No, man, I’m sorry- not until you tell me why you were fighting the mafia, you’re with the church. Is the mafia after the church?”

“You seem to know its location instantly, what does it feel like?” Percy turned the box over in his hands.

“What’s going on, man? Please.” I begged.

Percy sighed heavily, relenting against his better judgment.

“I fight, I train others to fight, I plan, I give instructions. We live in a world with no atmosphere, we cannot shoot or explode or gas our enemies without destroying ourselves. We fight up close. Advanced weapons have never offered a definitive advantage, until this.” His hand hovered over the box as if it radiated heat. “It distorts reality such that only those wearing active decoders can function. Everyone else is left without any perceivable connection to the world, blind, all senses severed or distorted– or, nearly everyone.” Percy eyed me up and down.

“You can’t see when the box is running?” I asked.

“I cannot see, or sense anything. I am helpless. I have no reasonable explanation as to why you should be able to function at all when the field is active- it is a genuine miracle, and a timely one at that.” Percy was pleased, but conflicted.

“So the regular mafia uses these against the church mafia- I mean, your fighters?” I halted, still unsure if I could offend Percy through my ignorance.

“We fight only to protect, never to gain power over others. Our strength was once great, and it was growing. The mafia took notice. They found a safe house we were using for training. They executed my most capable captains. Now we are mobile, working in small groups and never meeting in the same place twice. They still attack us relentlessly. Before you disabled this one we only knew the effects. We’ve never possessed our own.”

“Can you find something to disable it?” I asked, a second too slow to realize that I was the something they found to disable it, and even slower to realize what my unexplainable ability meant to Percy.

“We have an opportunity. Alora will move against her enemies soon. War and destruction will again engulf our world. A cusp approaches and I endeavor to act rightly, but I must act and-” Percy became sullen. “You saved my life, and my men. Do you know that?”

“Uh... sort of? But I didn’t really know what I was doing. You saved my life when you did know what you were doing. Twice, I think...” Was it twice?

“Yes, these are challenging times. Know that I eternally beg your forgiveness for what I am about to do.” Percy hardened as he spoke.

“Then is there any way I can talk you out of whatever you’re about to-“ I never finished that sentence, because the answer was ‘No’.

Percy raised his palm to my temple. Everything stopped.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Fried What?

My face hurt. Also my leg had a cramp. I remembered what the wet feeling around my groin meant. I was in a dark tunnel or cave or something. Whatever it was- the predominant feature was darkness. Pretty little lights kept darted about and flickering across my eyeline in interesting flight paths. My leg still had a cramp. The lights turned out to be related to my face hurting because they weren't lights at all, they were pain. I finally remembered how to open my eyes. It turned out I really was in a dark tunnel, which was somehow even darker than it was before I opened my eyes.

The ground was right where I expected it to be, on top of my face. I rolled over, the ground dove underneath to catch me from falling into the ceiling. I stood erect with shocking speed- wait, nope, that's not what I did at all. I hadn't stood up, I just flailed. Close though. I decided sitting was a better short-term goal. It worked. I sat up, but my leg still had a cramp.

I discovered I had pockets and went excavating. It was mostly urine, and a plastic bag with a thing in it. I pulled it out. The thing in the plastic bag was a harmonica. Urine, and a harmonica in a plastic bag, it all made perfect sense; after all you don't want urine on a harmonica.

Do I play harmonica? I guess I must. With that kind of foresight I- wait, Urine, harmonica, bag... that doesn't really make sense

at all. When did I piss myself? Do I do that a lot? Who am I addressing these concerns to? Should that have been whom?

I was not myself, that much was clear. I knew that for certain because I didn't know who myself was, meaning I couldn't possibly be who he thought myself was without us both ceasing to exist entirely. Fortunately no one else was around so there were no immediate demands on my briefly vacant identity. Still, I wished I had one- wait- *the harmonica*.

I pulled the harmonica out of the bag nimbly to avoid contamination with the urine. It was in the key of Bb. I knew what that meant- it meant I couldn't jam with crappy guitar players unless they had a capo. I had no idea how I knew that.

I sat for a long time. I puffed on the harp. Then I blew, drew, blow bent, draw bent, over drew, over bent, glissando'd... I could play a chromatic scale on a diatonic harp. I knew that that meant too- I was a freaking bad-ass harmonica player. I totally wail on this thing!

I cranked blues out of that Bb beauty like a freight train on a bender. I was seriously, amazingly good. I played harmonica until my pants dried, then kept on playing until I got hungry and had to face the fact that I had no idea where I was, who I was, or what my meal prospects were in the foreseeable future. To avoid the cataclysmic breakdown of such a harsh realization, I grounded myself with the only fact I could prove to myself empirically. I could freaking wail on that harp. So I played until I

passed out again, hoping I would wake up in more desirable circumstances.

It worked at first. I dreamed I was also a badass piano player, or at least a semi-competent one, and that felt pretty good. I was also a hopeless moron that had done something incredibly stupid for a woman I had completely misinterpreted as not being a sociopath. I was glad it was only a dream.

~~~ *TWELVE.1* ~~~

I woke up. Everything was pretty much the same; harmonica, tunnel, stale odors. Everything would have been exactly the same except for the new things. The new things were a sandwich, a bottle of water, a blanket, and a neat-o little basket with soap and hand sanitizer in an excessively cool spray dispenser. I enjoyed spraying the sanitizer in the air for well over a minute before I realized I had not gotten any on myself and I was really, really nasty and really could have used a spritzing.

There was also a little pamphlet, which I used as a napkin because it was written in a language that I didn't feel like trying to read, even though I was pretty sure it was the only language I knew how to read.

Things were going well for myself, who I decided to call 'The One' because it made me feel special. I was also feeling good about sandwiches and water appearing out of nowhere. I thought that was a good sign, though I didn't think too hard about it.

I eventually finished my meal, tidied up my tunnel, and resumed playing harmonica-very, very well I might add. Did I mention I'm a ridiculously awesome harmonica player?

I heard a person walking and knew immediately that it was definitely not me. It was someone else. It was someone new; possibly dangerous or possibly bearing more and different varieties of sandwiches. It was all a fresh and exhilarating rush. To commemorate the exciting moment I played 'Flight of the Bumblebee' with astonishing grace and precision. The person making the waking noises stopped and watched me strangely.

I blasted the harp into overdrive, twirling out of Bumblebee into Yakety Sax followed by a quadruple time medley of Yngwie Malmsteen guitar solos. Then I pulled a deep, deep draw bend and growled on the reeds, finally delivering an outro bluesier than BB King crying at his own funeral.

The person clapped, they were impressed. I was too. They dropped a coin at my feet, smiled, and walked off. I had learned something about myself through the encounter. I learned that I was a street musician. I was glad for the musician part but the street part was not something I remembered being a lifelong dream, not that I remembered having any lifelong dreams, or a life for that matter.

~~~ *TWELVE.2* ~~~

I didn't leave that tunnel for a good while, might have been a few days, didn't bother to count. I was a homeless street person, or more appropriately a tunnel person. Either way I was pretty sure I didn't have many commitments. Every so often a person would come by and listen to me play harmonica –awesomely. They usually leave a coin or a token for some unfamiliar good or service and then keep walking. A few times a person would come and give me a sandwich and a glass of water- it was the same person every time. I smiled and thanked them each time and after a few times I finally spoke to them.

“Hey, little dude.” I said to the little dude.

“Hey Je- uh, hey Mister.” He stuttered.

“What's your name?” I asked.

“Sorry... Mister. Not s'posed to- talk to you now.”

“Cuz I'm a stranger huh, yeah, that's probably smart.” I wasn't sure if that sounded creepy or not, but he laughed a bizarre laugh that sounded like a huge flag flapping in high wind. He smiled at me with an enthusiasm I hadn't encountered since I realized I was an incredible harmonica player.

“I'll ask if I can play drums with you sometime.” The little sandwich bringing dude skipped off. I didn't see him again. I figured whoever asked if he could play drums with a stranger had said 'no'. I felt that was unfortunate- because I thought my astounding harmonica virtuosity deserved a little percussive accent. I also recognized it as good parenting

because I was a textbook stranger, even to myself. That fact was beginning to bother me more and more.

I wasn't ready to become obsessed with who I was or what I was doing in a tunnel, but I knew that was coming. I wanted to enjoy the ride. I decided the best thing to do would be to expand the venue of my harmonica skills beyond the confines of the tunnel.

I started walking.

### ~~~ *TWELVE.3* ~~~

Wherever I was, I was either under something or in it. Things were grey everywhere. Everything was a tunnel or a tube or a cavern- no sky. I walked for a long time. The population of the tunnels seemed sparse, so I smiled at everyone I saw. It seemed like networking was a good course since it could either help me find out who I was, or at least help me start becoming someone if it turned out I never was.

I eventually found groups of people, none of whom knew me personally.

"Do you recognize me?" I asked a tallish elderly woman in a sad but expensive yellow dress.

"Yes, you're a degenerate male prostitute." She said casually. "How much?"

I produced my harmonica and quickly riffed up an enchanting melody to show that I was, in fact, not a male prostitute, but a brilliant

master of the most enigmatic reed instrument ever created.

She smiled curtly “Nah.”

### ~~~ *TWELVE.4* ~~~

I wandered around for a while longer and found the tunnels under whatever I was under held a sprawling civilization of generally unhelpful people. I finally found out what I was under when I stumbled into a very tall pale-skinned man wearing a t-shirt that read *One giant **heap** for mankind*. I told him his shirt was funny. He hit me.

“Only Moonies can laugh at that.” He growled.

“Why?” I asked, partially a specific inquiry and partially a general existential plea.

“Because it’s our moon!” He said as he hit me several more times.

I learned several more facts from that experience; I was on, or evidently *in* the moon, I was not from the moon, and hitting is not okay. I also decided that for the time being my mouth was better applied to my stunning mastery of the harmonica than speaking to strangers. If I had ever been anybody, someone would remember me from what a great harmonica player I was. If not, they would start to.

### ~~~ *TWELVE.5* ~~~

I found a public hydroponic park. It was a gymnasium sized cavern, minimally lit, with various sickly looking plants and uncomfortable places to sit. It had grass you could walk over, about 50 square feet of it, but it was under clear acrylic plate so you couldn't actually walk on it, just over it. There were about a dozen people sitting around staring at plants, urinating behind plants, talking to plants, sleeping under benches. It seemed like a pretty loose crowd.

I found a bench towards the back of the cavern furthest from the entrance. I plopped down and pulled out the harp. I pulled a quick bend into a trill. The sound spun around the room into a balanced and inevitable vortex. I'd picked the room's acoustic sweet spot. The harp roared in the space like I was amped through a 10,000 watt bench grinder. It was so damn hideous it was beautiful.

A few of the natives stirred. I plugged the harp for a moment, testing if I'd offended or entertained. No one threw anything or yelled. I ripped off 12 more bars of blues with a self-indulgent turnaround into a downright arrogant walk down. I looked up again and everyone in the park was staring at me. I kept playing.

After an hour I'd attracted a small crowd, some of whom were not indigenous park dwellers. Everyone who wandered into or around that park had to check out the sound that was blasting out of it. I had a good time playing, but as soon as I piled up enough coins that I was pretty sure I could buy a meal. I set out to find one.



## ~~~ *TWELVE.6* ~~~

Before I could find a meal, a meal found me. I was served a knuckle sandwich. Violent impact was a familiar feeling for some reason, almost nostalgic. I also wondered why the angry black-coated man had picked me as a punching bag, seemingly at random.

“Hey man, stop it!” I mustered a plea under a flurry of gut churning body shots. With the wind knocked out of me my fight or flight reactions took over. I lashed out with a semi-balled fist and clocked my assailant under his jaw. I heard a bone crack. A half second later the report of sharp, penetrating pain from my trembling hand told me the cracked bone belonged to me.

My assailant laughed and pounded my chest overhand in sync with his cadence. “You-punk- ass- little- piece of-“

I squirmed and writhed under the blows, trying to give equal access so that no one region of my sternum would be seen as having been unfairly spared. A fist grazed my cheeks and the attacker stopped for a moment. He blinked mechanically and spoke in a forced monotone.

“Don't- mess- up- his- pretty- face.” He said to my face, as if repeating a command. Then he returned his attention to tenderizing my ribs.

“Hamm! What are you- Holy shit- holy shit- that's him!” Another black-coated man pushed Hamm off me. The two dragged me to my feet. Hamm locked my arms effortlessly.

“Jely. Mother. Fucking. Fride. How the hell are you?” The second man smiled devilishly and then swung a wide backhand that arced straight for my grill. Hamm raised an arm and intercepted. Another small bone cracking sound singed the air, this time it wasn’t mine.

“Don't- mess- up- his- pretty- face.”

Hamm repeated again in monotone, then twitched mechanically. “Oh... sorry... she said not to mess up his face if we found him.”

“Shit! Hamm! Ahhh!” The second man nursed his hand.

“Wuttahellsur... roblem?” I finally found enough wind to sputter a few syllables in my defense.

Birgess produced a small device that generated a menacing electric arc. He clicked it a few times, crackling the crisp blue thread of agony near my nose. “I bet you remember how this works.” Birgess glanced at Hamm, implying a contextual knowledge I clearly did not possess.

“I don’t. I really don’t.” I gasped. The electronic device made contact with my neck. I tasted an unpleasant note of citrus and mercury with the searing shock before I snapped out of consciousness.

## ~~~ *TWELVE.7* ~~~

I awoke in restraints, in an awkwardly folded fetal position. I was piled in the back of a small vehicle that was cruising through the tunnels at breakneck speed, driven by Hamm.

“Slow down!” I yelled for some reason.

The man named Birgess turned around from the passenger seat. He scowled at me.

“Up yours, Jely. You’re lucky we don’t cut your hands off and drop you in the reclamation tanks.” Birgess steamed with a fury that I found difficult to reconcile with the fact that I’d never seen him before.

“What?” I asked intelligently.

Birgess held up the electrical weapon and clicked it to silence me.

“Who are you? What the hell do you want?” My voice shook. A frightened tear swelled from my duct and fell down my cheek. Birgess watched it descend as if he were a seer examining leaves of tea.

“What do I want? I want to kill you, Jely. Unfortunately Alora wants you alive, and pretty.” He cocked his head, waiting for an expected response. I blinked.

“What?” I repeated.

“Play stupid, jerk-off. That’s fine.” Birgess’ weapon crackled to life once again before he turned around to ignore me.

“Look- I don’t know what’s going on. I’m a harmonica player. That’s all- I think. I didn’t do anything- I’m pretty sure.”

Birgess looked at Hamm, then back at me, then at Hamm again.

“You’re fucked, Jely” Birgess said to the air.

“Fucked jely sounds expensive... bet your mom uses- lots...” Wasn’t even sure what I was going for with that, just trying to remain beligerant for the sake of my pride.

Birgess again looked at Hamm, then to me, then to Hamm, this time with a little less confidence.

“Weak... even for you.” He eyed me suspiciously, then casually stabbed the electrodes against the back of my neck. “You think you can take this ‘cuz you see Hamm came back? That it? Hamm's got enough borg-mods to get rebooted- you don't.” He waved the zapper across my eyelid. “Took 36 shop hours to get him back online and he's still glitching. You want to go for a-“

“What are you talking about?! What the fuck is going on?!” I started to come unglued. “What is wrong with you fuckups?” I think I started to cry, but in a very angry, masculine way.

Birgess' eyes registered a failing confidence in whatever he seemed so certain about before. He looked at me, then at Hamm, then back at me.

“This is him. This is Jely Fride. Same little jerk-off from before. It is.” Birgess spoke to Hamm as if here were trying to reassure himself. He ran his eyes over me again. Hamm turned quickly and a uniform grid of green light erupted from his retina and passed over my face.

“Identity confirmed.” Hamm said mechanically as he returned to driving.

Birgess turned back to me, pulled my face close to his. He reeked, I hoped I did too because it would be about the only defense I had.

“Jely Fride.” Birgess spoke the words with excessive articulation.

“Jelly? Fried?” I tried the words on, they didn't seem to fit. He slapped me hard.

“Jely Fride” He said again, tapping the corner of the zapper against my nose with each syllable. He raised his index finger from the trigger pad and slowly pushed it forward towards my eyeball to make me flinch.

Something in my wiring refused to shut my eye. He poked it. My eye stayed wide open and I felt his fingertip press the soft gelatin. I was too pissed off to react, I was inhumanly focused on using my eyeball to assault his fingertip. If you're ever under attack all you have to do is invert reality and you can become the attacker just by being attacked.

His face recoiled in disgust and he looked at Hamm. A long forgotten, dangling neuron in my brain wiggled around and slapped against something connected to something important. Aggression happened.

“Fuck you- gimme that!” I screamed. With what restricted directional force I could muster from my restrained fetal position I dove, or twist-flopped, aiming for the zapper with the only gripping apparatus I had available- my mouth. I clamped onto the zapper's handle and a couple of Birgess' fingers and wrenched it from his hand like a frantic toy poodle. The zapper hit the floor by my head and I lunged for it. I reared up with the zapper in my gob and my tongue just within reach of the trigger pad. I zapped it. I wasn't sure what that would accomplish, but it was something I could do so I did it. The arc fired an inch away from my left eye. It startled and almost blinded me, but I held on. I had just

let a man poke me in the eye without blinking- I was in the zone.

“You’re nuts, man, just give it back.”

Birgess took note of me and changed his tone to that of a man who was still processing how crazy what I just did was.

“Yah fuwe chuts- Naa whaa afuw fuw a yah.” I demanded. I emphasized my carefully phrased point by twist-flopping again and snapping the electrodes. Birgess dodged.

“He’s crazy! Look at him!” Birgess informed Hamm, who looked up casually in the mirror, only moderately impressed.

“Ah! Aah! Whawhefuwk Ka! Whejhe.”

I retorted. Birgess leaned forward in his seat to a safer distance. He reacted to a few more of my threatening zap’s, but eventually relaxed when he realized I was no better off than I was before. I realized the same thing shortly thereafter.

Hamm happily swerved the vehicle and pumped the brakes. I crashed around in the back seat until I lost the weapon and acquired a fresh dressing of agony. I proceeded to moan until I couldn’t think of anything else to do, then I just laid there quietly and suffered.

“Are you completely sure that’s him? He wasn’t- like *that*- before.” Birgess asked.

“It’s him.” Hamm replied confidently, then scanned me in the rearview and nodded. “It’s him or a clone.”

“He acts like he doesn’t even know us.” Birgess said.

“Why would he?” Hamm asked.

“Oh right, you’re a head case too. Well, you two have met, right before you got

rebooted.” Birgess stared off into the window. Hamm glared at me through the mirror, lifting himself up to stare down. The vehicle began to slow.

“He just seems like he’s-“ Birgess noticed the deceleration and Hamm’s increasingly murderous demeanor.

“Hamm- no- it wasn’t him. Just drive.” Birgess pressed. Hamm shook it off. Having no other options and having not said anything in awhile- I decided to speak.

“Guys- be straight with me. Who the hell am I? Did I do something? What the hell’s going on- seriously.” I waited. They tolerated, so I continued. “Look, I woke up in a tunnel. I play harmonica. There were some sandwiches- I didn’t get to jam with the drummer kid. That’s all I got, help me out here.”

Birgess finally read the sincere desperation in my voice. He didn’t respond with pity, but whatever it was, it was just short of cruelty, which was an improvement. He turned and looked down on my contorted despair with an entranced disgust.

“You play piano.” Birgess said authoritatively.

“What? No, I don’t. I play harmonica.”

Birgess’ eyes widened. “Yeah, ya do. You never shut up about it.” He looked at Hamm, who clearly didn’t care one way or the other. He looked back at me. Birgess was equally frustrated with me for not being afraid of him for the right reasons, and with Hamm for not caring. “Your name is Jely Fride, you play piano, you’re supposed to marry Alora, but you

burned down her house. Now you're- forget it.”  
Birgess lost interest. He picked up the fallen  
taser, pressed it against my ribcage and casually  
electrified me. I convulsed briefly and spat up  
something I'd been working at getting up for a  
while. I enjoyed a quantum moment of  
satisfaction for finally hacking it up. Then I  
found unconsciousness.



# CHAPTER THIRTEEN

## *Is It Over Yet?*

I lost unconsciousness. I found a woman lying beside me in bed. She was radiant, like an angel without a halo, or wings, or clothing. Nope- false alarm, that was still the unconsciousness. My bad. I was starting to have a hard time distinguishing consciousness from unconsciousness, and was starting to think the whole consciousness thing was just an existential lost-and-found anyway.

I remembered having senses and that they were the link back to reality. Eyes- the looky things up front- open them. It was hard, really hard, there's got to be something else. Something that doesn't have covers you have to lift- ears! Yes, ears, I love those things! I focused on having ears and remembering how to use them. Listening, that's what you call it. I listened.

"If he talked to anyone- Find them! He wasn't supposed to be connected, straight from Earth- the whole point! If anyone screwed this- find them. This is going to happen my fucking way.." An aggressive feminine voice spat, clearly consumed by unfamiliar frustration. I picked up bits and pieces between the tantrums and dramatic silences, but nothing that filled in any of the primarily blank space where my identity and general understanding of what's going on around me should be. Whoever she

was, she was someone important and she knew it.

After relearning about listening I set out to expand my perception and was able to crank an eyelid open a slit. I heaved my unwieldy eyeballs to direct focus to objects and patterns of interests and soon deduced that I was in a room. I was laying on a bed with a mirror above it. I looked really bad. I looked like I lost a title fight, then got robbed and had a nearly fatal traffic accident on the way home, and then tried to invade Switzerland.

“Go take care of it. I’ll find out what he knows.” Her command was accepted with an affirmative grunts, a door closed. Another door opened.

She slid into the room. I saw her top down in the mirror, she looked up and met my eyes. I tried to move my eyes down, but it was hard and I had a pretty good view as it was. She jumped on the bed and bounced around me like a trampoline, hopping from foot to foot, bouncing on her knees. I couldn’t blame her, it was a very springy bed and it looked like fun. I would have liked her to stop, because she was also very close to putting a foot right in my-

“Hheyywaaaaaaaaaaa... Aaahhhh... Ah. A. ... Uhhhh.” I squealed as she slid her foot under my boxer shorts and grabbed the nape of my scrotum with her toes like a ninja geisha.

“Hey Jely, where ya been?” She asked with a severity that didn’t match the playful bouncing. “I missed you.”

“Uhhhhuuu...” I returned the greeting.

“Don’t give me that....” Her toe-fu grip tightened. Then she winked and her toes relaxed. Then her foot started lightly massaging things.

“What?” It seemed like a fair question. “Who are you?” I asked.

Her face turned to stoney rage in the blink of a hummingbird’s eye, which sounds fast. The massaging stopped. “I’m your fiancé, Jely. We’re getting married. You’re going to make me the happiest woman on the moon.” She kneeled down and curled up beside me. She was liquid seduction and she poured herself all over me.

“Right, the moon- wait, how married are we? I mean- how are we married?”

“Yes.” She coiled herself tighter around me. I wasn’t entirely functional, but the part of me that she was working on was. I really appreciated her enthusiasm but clearly there was something wrong with the picture.

“I’m sorry I don’t know what’s going on, or how I got here, or my name earlier but I’m getting the idea it’s Jelly whatever.” I turned to look her in the eyes as best I could considering my state of disrepair. She considered me quizzically for a long moment.

“You’re not funny.” She said, with something that approached humor but seemed determined never to become it.

“M’am, I don’t know what’s going on.” My sincerity was still intact, but she wasn’t looking for sincere, she was looking for something else. She found it. “Ahhhh shhhhi please- wait.” I pleaded as she started to twist something that isn’t designed to twist.

“You’re seriously fucking with me right now? That’s not smart, hon.” Again she twisted things, then alternated twist and stroke. She made me wish I was less functional than I was, which is a pretty rare wish in human history.

“Dude- m’am- please.” I tried to push her hand away and scoot over but ended up sort of slapping her breast by accident. The tender contact was a shock to my rattled senses. I recoiled. “Sorry- so sorry, my bad miss... Didn’t mean to touch- total accident I swear.” Her inexplicable familiarity with my ‘nads had actually sharpened the instinct to immediately and profusely apologize for unwanted contact.

Her pupils dilated as if she could focus through my soul and tell me the day I would die. She tunneled through me and in an instant she found what she was looking for. It surprised her.

“You don’t know anything.” She stated, still registering the fact. Her touch became gentler, then loose, then she broke contact altogether. “You don’t know- anything?” She seemed to ask herself. She looked down and calculated. Then she roughly grabbed my head and peered into my eyes as if my brain was an aquarium. “So are you brain damaged now or what?” She shook her head and muttered, clearly not expecting an answer. “Fuck it... I’ll make it work.” She committed.

“So... somebody said some stuff- that I burned down a house? Was it yours?” I’m not sure why I thought it was a good idea to bring that up right then, but she didn’t seem phased.

“Do you even remember why you came to the moon?” She chirped, suddenly girlish and playful again.

“I’m afraid not.”

“Awww... It was for me, baby” She said puppyly. She was objectively sexy, but the twisting and hurting had taken a lot out of her enchantment.

“I’m sorry- I don’t remember that.” I said.

“Too bad, we’re still getting married. Sit here and wait. You even think about going anywhere and I’ll sew a zipper in them, savvy?” She gave what she would sew a zipper into a firm squeeze for clarity.

“A zipper!?” I squeaked. That was the scariest thing anyone had and hopefully ever would say to me. She winked. Then she popped out of the bed and out of the room, leaving me alone with my dumbfoundedness and my throbbing tenders.

## ~~~ *THIRTEEN.1* ~~~

From outside the door I heard her speaking to a subordinate. “I don’t know what’s wrong with him but he doesn’t leave that room- and make sure he doesn’t start any fires.” A door shut violently and a powerful vehicle revved and sped off.

As I examined my jewels, Birgess walked in. He leaned in the doorway looking smug. I packed my junk. “Do you mind?”

“You know I almost believe you. Pretty slick.” Birgess clucked his tongue. “Gotta hand it to you, they found the right guy, you’re good. Who got to you first- Louis? The Franklin’s? What house was it, come on.” Birgess assumed whatever game I was playing was over.

“Dude, I’m tired of playing around with you and I’m not tied up anymore so why don’t you just- uhhhh.” I wasn’t sure why I said that out loud. Before I could begin to rephrase the statement, or even finish it, my throat became constricted and my chest got heavy. From the view in the mirror I determined the cause was that Birgess tackled me and was sitting on top of me squeezing my neck with one hand.

“What are you on?” Birgess smacked the top of my head like a bongo. “You wanna get physical with me? You want some payback?”

“Get off! Get off me!” I writhed and flailed but achieved nothing. Birgess continued to smack and taunt until I was too tired to do much more than blubber. “You suck man! You fucking suck!”

“You’re Alora’s bitch. Makes you my bitch too, don’t it.”

“No I’m- doesn’t... shut up. You’re Alora’s bitch too.”

Birgess stopped. “I’m nobody’s bitch.”

“She talks to you like a bitch.” Birgess popped me in the mouth. Then recoiled. I tasted blood, he’d split my lip.

“Shit.” Birgess seethed as saw what he’d done to Alora’s other bitch’s face. He feared

repercussions, and somewhere deep down made him face the fact that he too was Alora's bitch.

"See- bitch." I said triumphantly.

Birgess bongoed my head a few more times as I savored my warped victory. He rose to his feet, kicked me lightly, then kicked me harder.

"You're a sack of shit."

"Better than an asshole in a stupid jacket." I verbally jousting back. Birgess stared, trying to decide if it was worth a come-back, but the comic response window had passed and we both knew it. I cocked my head to feign pride in my unchallenged burn.

"Your lip is bleeding." Birgess said matter of factly.

"Yeah well, it does that when assholes... shut up." I reached up and brushed my lip. Sure enough, my lip was bleeding, and swelling. I plopped down on the bed and fished around in my pocket for my harp, it wasn't there. "You seen a Bb harmonica laying around?"

Birgess presented the harp. "Play it." He tossed it over.

I put it in my mouth and blew a mist of blood into a low reed, it sounded like you'd expect blood spattering through a reed instrument to sound like. I tried to adjust my embouchure to compensate but it was no use, I couldn't blow any less than three reeds at a time with my rapidly fattening lip.

Birgess smiled knowingly. "Follow me." Birgess stepped out of the room. I waited long enough to signify defiance, but then followed after curiosity and encroaching boredom got the best of me.

I stepped out into a well-furnished living room adjacent to a kitchen area. It was a smallish apartment as far as wealth goes, but the intricate relief in the ceiling, wood paneling, and overwhelming wall-drapery denoted the status of the resident. Birgess motioned towards an upright piano with hand carved inlays hiding in a corner of the room.

“Play it.” Birgess kicked the stool a few feet back and then stood expectantly.

“How about you give me a break?” I kept a comfortable distance, which was still uncomfortable.

Birgess produced his old friend the zapper and flashed the arc. “Grind, monkey.”

“Fine.” I relented. I sat down at the piano. It had keys, some were white, others black, there was an obvious pattern to their placement. I thought I’d start at the bottom and work my way up. I assumed that bottom meant low and left meant bottom so I tried the leftmost key. Crunchy- I liked it. I decided to skip the middle and go straight to the top. I tried the rightmost key. Crystalline, it was very nice. I poked more keys. It was a kind of boring, sterile sound compared to a raw emotion of a harp but I could see how a piano might be useful as accompaniment, or maybe a wind-break in a storm- it was a massive instrument. Can’t imagine who would bother to learn to play something you need a forklift to move around, but people are idiots, especially musicians. I looked up at Birgess and nodded my approval. “It’s a fine instrument.” I said sincerely.



Birgess flashed the electric arc again. The sudden violent sound was a painful contrast to the floating vibrations the piano keys produced.

“Play it.” He growled.

“I am, man.” I mashed several adjacent keys, it sounded pretty bad. Why do they put piano keys right next to each other if they sound bad together? Really stupid layout. I guess that’s why I play harmonica.

Birgess slapped my ear, it rang intensely. He leaned over and nearly bit my ear as he spoke. “Play it right.” He buried the zapper in my collar. “Now.”

My knowledge of our equal status as Alora’s bitches didn’t allay my well conditioned fear of that freaking zapper. I put my hands on the keys and prayed that some ancient piano playing spirit would take over my body. I pressed a few keys, equally spaced, careful to avoid keys right next to each other. It sounded-not altogether horrible. I pressed the same keys again, then added 2 more. The extra 2 keys ruined everything. I went back to pressing one at a time and waited for the inevitable mind-bending sting of the zapper.

Birgess let the zapper down. He backed up and sat. I continued to press random keys, pretending I wasn’t relieved

“Look, you’re marrying Alora- it’s a done deal, you’re safe. Just tell me who it was, what they’ve got on you. We can take care of it.” Birgess made difficult work of his sincerity. I continued to press keys, trying to enjoy the notes more than I was not enjoying being at the mercy of bizarre and violent people.

“It has to be something big, they found somebody back on Earth, family, a girlfriend? Who are you protecting?” Birgess asked. Though I wouldn’t call it concern, his interest in serving this particular purpose for my benefit seemed genuine.

“All I know is I play harmonica, I’m on the moon, and evidently I’m marrying a sadist who employs other sadists.” I sank under the weight of the summation. I stopped pressing keys and turned to Birgess. I locked eyes and blinked at him in mediocre defiance.

Birgess waited. I waited. I thought about pressing more keys, but decided I’d rather play harmonica, then remembered I couldn’t do that because this jerk messed up my lip. Birgess stared at me and slowly arrived at a conclusion that had been festering in his mind for some time.

“So you’ve actually got some kind of amnesia.” Birgess said in equal parts revelation and annoyance.

I replied with the most sarcastic long-pause I could muster before finally breaking into juvenility “Duh, genius. Even I figured that out and I’m the one that can’t remember shit.”

“Because of the fire?” Birgess asked.

“If I had to guess I’d say it was more related to electricity than fire.” I nodded at the zapper still in his hand. “Do I look like I’ve had any burn trauma recently?” I actually had to check too, but no- it didn’t look like I had.

“You disappeared for weeks- where were you?” Birgess asked, only half-expecting an answer.

“Your mama's house. Now can you just go ahead and zap me so I can get back to being unconscious?”

Birgess was not amused. Neither was I. I realized I was serious about him zapping me. At that point I didn't have any reason not to assume I wouldn't just wake up not knowing I was someone else in some other bizarre circumstances so why the hell not?

I took a step towards him. He raised the zapper instinctively.

“Seriously, just knock me out. I'm tired of this- do your goon job, goon.”

“Not a good idea, Jely.” Birgess fought his obvious desire to zap me.

“Your mama's not a good idea.” I'm not normally a 'your mama' guy, but Birgess' mama raised a certified jack-ass so she's fair game as far as I'm concerned.

“Careful, boy.” Birgess took a step back. I took a step forward. He sidestepped me. I pushed in. He leveled the zapper and I reached for his wrist and held it. He whipped his arm back but I maintained my grip. We locked up, he was a lot stronger than me, but I was a lot crazier. I pulled his zapper hand into my chest and started to force his thumb down on the trigger. His eyes went wide as he realized what I was doing. His natural aggression was somehow short-circuited by the fact that I was trying to harm myself with his hands. His hand flew up and he lost grip on the zapper. It popped up and he grabbed at it but caught it backwards. I went for the zapper too and lunged, knocking him off balance. We both went down in a flailing

tornado of arms but by some miracle the cascade ended with Birgess holding the zapper by the electrodes and me with a clear reach to the trigger.

Birgess and I flew apart as the electrode snapped. I caught a second-hand shock. It was enough to ring my bell but I stayed conscious and got my feet back under me. Birgess got a direct hit and lay on the floor, convulsing lightly. I picked up the zapper and put it in my pocket in case I needed to go back to the zapping myself unconscious plan.

I heard a vehicle approach. I pulled back the drapes and looked for a window. I was under the moon, so there were no windows. Then why were there so many damn drapes? Some people will put drapes on literally anything. I ran back to the bedroom, searching for an exit. I found a beckoning door and opened it. Turns out it was a beckoning closet.

I ran back to the kitchen and found a utility room I should have seen earlier. The utility room had an exterior door. I opened it and found the exterior, which was the interior of a tunnel, but still qualified as exterior.

The vehicle parked and the engine stopped. I wouldn't make it far before they found Birgess and came after me. I abandoned the idea of escape and hid in a cabinet. In my haste I left the exterior door open. The front door swung open and a flurry of activity ensued as the new arrivals discovered the evidence of the struggle.

"Birgess, get up! Birgess!" Hamm's voice echoed from the living room, the digital

distortion in his voice indicating emotional overload of his borg-mod circuitry. The kitchen utility room door burst open.

“Shit- that little fuck! Birgess! Birgess! He took the tunnel-” Alora’s voice was that of a scorned banshee. Loosely coherent mumblings came from Birgess in the other room.

“Ambushed!? What does that even mean? He’s a goddamn pussy- Get up! Hamm, take this sack of shit and find him- AGAIN! If you don’t bring him back here with a fucking tuxedo on I’ll feed you your fucking taint! Go! You fucking assholes!”

Dull thuds of clumsily placed feet ordered themselves into footsteps as Hamm and Birgess made it past Alora and into the tunnel exit amidst a maelstrom of poorly conceived derogatories and expletives.

Alora fumed audibly, slowly returning to smoother breaths. I heard her sashay in frustration around the living room for a minute, then her feet hit the tile of the kitchen floor. Her footsteps drew nearer until I could see her outline through a slit in the cabinet door. I held my breath.

She sighed and leaned against the cabinet. Her smooth sinuous calves crossed in practiced leisure. A communication device beeped on. She pressed buttons.

“What now?” She waited. “No, that’s impossible... my uncle is a simpleton ...Fine, but Jely doesn’t remember anything. He’s useless to anyone but me anyway. I’ll get him back, find my mother.” The device beeped off.

Alora slammed her fists against the cabinet, which made me cut loose a startled fart. I froze.

She sniffed, it was an ambiguous sniff- it could have been olfactory, or emotional. She growled and slammed her fists again. Several time-dilated moments later she stormed out of the room. The fart crisis was averted. I took a breath for the first time in nearly a minute. I should have waited.

I suffered my funk until I heard a vehicle start up, crank obnoxious techno music, and then speed off with unnecessary acceleration. I burst from the cabinet, gasping and gagging melodramatically until I remembered I didn't have time for that, or an audience, and I'm a musician not a comic- as far as I know. I ran to the front door and opened it and found more tunnel

I didn't have many options. I could stay, or run down one of two unknown tunnels. I'd bought myself some time- but to no end that I could conjure. For some reason it occurred to me to make a sandwich, but ultimately I decided to take the tunnel option, but first I checked the fridge and found a sandwich. I took it for the road. I chose the front door as my exit for no reason whatsoever and ran out of there like a turkey that just learned about thanksgiving.

## ~~~ ***THIRTEEN.2*** ~~~

I ran until I was tired, which was very shortly after I started running. Then I walked until I was tired, which was also an

embarrassingly brief period. Then I shuffled behind a utility box and sat.

I thought about eating the sandwich but realized I wasn't hungry. I wished I'd brought something to drink, and an opiate designed to knock out a biomech tank. I looked back down the dark tunnel. It looked endless. I looked down the other way- equally endless. I focused on orientation so I didn't end up accidentally turning around going back to the apartment. I forced myself to stand up and walk in the direction I was pretty sure I hadn't come from.

I walked, and walked, and walked, and eventually found a crossing tunnel, and another, and another. I sat down again. I realized I'd left my sandwich by the first utility box where I sat down. I pouted and clubbed the ground lightly with my fist to make myself feel better, which it never does. From deep in the tunnel a slow, even, grinding approached, In the distance a small red light grew brighter and/or closer or both. I didn't know what to even hope it was or wasn't, so I just sat there.

Eventually a very large, slow cleaning robot lumbered by on sloppily aligned treads that flapped the ground with a dysfunctional rhumba. It occasionally stopped and scooped up small clumps of trash and debris from the tunnel and deposited it in a large bin that was pretty much its entire frame.

As it approached it turned from its path and scanned me. Determining correctly that I was trash, it made a minimal effort to sweep me up, but abandoned the effort when I stood in protest. A corporate apology flashed across a small holo

display on the robot's torso, followed by advertisement and discount code for some brand's new flavor of self-euthanasia lolly-pops. The robot turned and rolled off. I followed the robot for a moment and soon decided to ride it. I hopped in the half empty bin. The robot announced its displeasure with my decision with a whiny siren and more flashing corporate messages including penalties for hijacking corporate properties, which involved something about forfeiting rights to my DNA. I'd never even read my own DNA so I didn't care. I twisted the siren until it broke off. Then I took a nap.

I woke up still riding the robot, which seems like it would be a really fun way to wake up, but it really wasn't. The robot had continued its cleaning routine and had deposited several layers of rank garbage on top of me. I crawled up and scraped the debris and slime off as best I could and hopped back out of the bin, almost slipping on the tunnel floor. I thanked the robot for the ride. The robot rudely lumbered away, still angrily flashing its now silent protest to my hop-on.

The robot had taken me to a slightly more interesting series of tunnels. These tunnels actually had doors and passages that led to places that were not tunnels. I meandered a little way, wondering if I had a plan or if it would even be a good idea to try to think of one if I hadn't already.

Eventually I found something resembling a bar, which I was pleasantly surprised to find was actually a bar. I'm pretty



sure at that moment I looked exactly like someone you'd expect to go to bars in tunnels, though I guess that's less fair on the moon where the surface is mostly instant death. I was sweaty, beat-up, and smelled like a fart that vomited in its spacesuit.

The bar was tiny, and mostly empty, but seemed about my speed. No one looked at me crossways, except the bartender and one other patron, because they were the only people in the bar. The patron was a stout lady. She looked at me with a shocked familiarity I assumed indicated attraction. I probably should have realized attraction made no sense in my current state. In my defense I was pretty much out of my mind, but somehow my pants were suddenly willing to step in and take the wheel. I turned on whatever my chaos addled brain mistook for mojo and slid into her booth with the smoothness of a misaligned, but self assured hydraulic armature. She shook her head in genuine astonishment.

“Hey there, beautiful. Tell you what, you buy me a drink and I'll tell you how I got beat up.” I said, smiling as innocently as a puppy.

She laughed out loud. She continued laughing until it was clear it wasn't at all a compliment to my charm. She continued laughing, past humorous, past condescending, right up to obnoxious. Then, suddenly, she stopped laughing and punched me in the mouth. She grabbed my hair, pulled my face onto the table and crawled over me- putting her knee on my neck. I saw the bartender and choked a plea

for help but he shrugged and casually wiped the bar, like any good bartender would.

“You’re a comedian now, Jely? Well you can use that in your act- Now you owe me a 2 round trips to the moon, yours for going, mine for coming to get you, and both of ours for going back to Earth, where you will spend the rest of your pathetic life smiling for the drunks and playing piano exclusively at my bar. Got it?” She hissed and spat savagely. I wasn’t sure what most of that meant, but pretty sure it meant she wasn’t into me.

“Why does everybody around here think I play piano?” I begged.

“Stow it. I called around. Nobody’s booked Jely Fride, they never even heard of you. You bullshitted me.” She punched me in the face again, then she punched me harder- it hurt, but I stayed unmercifully conscious. She adjusted her position on my neck to get better leverage and jabbed me a few more times.

She pulled me off the table backwards and spun me to face her. She cocked an uppercut right under my jaw, it lifted me up and sat me right back on the table. She blinked at me. I blinked at her. I adjusted my jaw and found it was louder than I remembered. I sniffed. She considered me.

“You take a punch better than I remember.” She said with a molecule of admiration in a cosmos of disdain.

“I’ve had practice.” I said honestly.

“Looks like.” She observed with a mole of admiration, but probably more for whoever had done the punching than me.

“Lady, please, I have amnesia. I don’t even know if I’m your guy, though I have heard the piano thing a lot so I might be. I don’t remember you and I don’t know why you’re hitting me... except that people just do that a lot.” I pleaded.

She soaked in my admission, moving quickly from disbelief to apathy.

“Fine.” She hit me again. “Doesn’t change anything.” She hit me again and locked my arm behind my back and forced me out of the bar.

“Dude?” I asked the bartender on the way out. He glanced at my captor, then back at me.

“Would you?” He said.

“Nah...” I had to give it to him- I wouldn’t either. This lady was seriously strong and knew more ways to configure my bones than I did. She got me outside into the street and held my arm firmly, though she walked at my side to appear as though we were cordial.

“You make a fuss I’ll put a self-sealing stem bolt through both of them.” She threatened, popping me with a cup check worthy of a Jovian MMA locker room.

“Who even are yooouuuuuwww?” I groaned as my shocked testicles sent tendrils of rolling nausea and pain meandering up through my intestines.

She scanned me for a moment as I held my waist and rocked. She seemed conflicted about my honesty, but not about whether I deserved any mercy. “I’m Ferrah- as if you don’t know, you little weasel.”

“Do you work for Alora or something?”  
I asked.

She stopped and sneered. “Alora- that Moonie bitch you lied to me for? How’d that work out?” She flicked my forehead.

“Not good- so I’m told. I think we’re getting married.”

Ferrar laughed. “Yeah, right.”

“Seriously, pretty sure. Either that or kill me.”

“Well, if she wants you either way she can come work out a deal with me.” Ferrar said, then laughed again.

“I don’t think she loves me, but she’ll probably want me back.” I said earnestly.

That earned me an indignant dope slap. “Oh so you’re that good? In your pathetic wet dreams.”

“No-not- like that. She’s kind of, connected- like to mafia people, or they’re connected to her actually. She’ll send people. It hasn’t been great, believe me- you don’t want that.”

Ferrar frowned epically. “You’re a bad liar-“ She punched me repeatedly. “Should have left it at amnesia. I almost could have bought that. You think I’m that stupid? I knew you were chasing tail up here. I let you get away with it because I thought you *might* have a gig too. You had nothing- you’re a fucking loser, Jely.” She leaned in close and pushed her forehead into my temple. “And you hurt my fucking feelings.” She seethed, meaning it as a cold joke but a soliton of emotion in her tone betrayed her. I had hurt this woman deeply. I knew that tone well

enough to know it was the truth even if I couldn't remember why.

"I'm sorry." I said, sincere though uncertain. Evidently my apology was insufficient, poorly timed, or both.

Ferrar beat me onto the ground, then kicked at me. A few spectators took notice, but most seemed unconcerned or unimpressed. Eventually Ferrar demanded that I get up. I tried once and failed. The resulting flurry of kicks was less than inspirational. I balled up and fended off a few kicks by rolling around and accidentally caught Ferrar's heel and knocked her off balance. She fell and sprung back up in one motion. Her eyes read no quarter. As Ferrar's fury surged and she prepared to rain destruction on me, an even voice spoke from behind her.

"Ma'am. I'll have to insist that you refrain from beating this man any further." The strange, well-spoken vagrant sported an impressively long, intricately braided soul-patch.

At first I thought she hadn't heard, but she was just shifting her stance. She exploded at me with a side kick that would have stunned a bull. The man bumped Ferrar's kick off target and suddenly twirled himself between. Ferrar, her fury refueled by the interference, hurled a wide right hook at the man but he shifted imperceptibly and avoided the haymaker.

"I must insist ma'am. You will leave this man alone now." The man said with dispassionate urgency. Ferrar glared at him, then back at me. She stalked towards me but the man stayed between us. "I'm sorry but there is no

time for this.” From his ratty coverings he produced a tiny forked metal spike and stuck it astride Ferrar’s collar bone. She slumped into his arms, wide eyed in shock.

A cleaning robot passed near us. The man whistled and gestured with two fingers at the robot. The robot suddenly dumped its trash bin, approached us, then turned and offered its trash bin and waited in attendance. The man deposited Ferrah gingerly into the bin and tapped the robot on the back. The robot lumbered off.

“She will be cared for.” The man said, assuming I had some latent concern for a strange woman who just beat the crap out of me. “Why did you run away from Alora?” He asked me.

“Uh... because she’s scary? But- it was kind of an accident- the guy with the zapper-” I blurted before I could get indignant about being asked personal questions about things I didn’t even personally understand by a complete stranger.

He shook his head as if I’d been a pain in his ass for a long time and might continue to be for some time.

“Wait- who are you, how do you know-stuff?” I demanded.

“Once again, I am sorry for this.” The man said cryptically and raised his hand to my eyes. “Go back to your fiancé and get ready for the ceremony. She’ll understand it was an accident and you were frightened and ran. We’ve never met- again.”

### ~~~ *THIRTEEN.3* ~~~

Suddenly I was standing in a tunnel outside of a bar talking to a drunken bum, unsure of how I got there. At that point I couldn't remember the last time I was somewhere I was sure of how I got to.

"Annthoseakinna shicksajus- yano... yannnnn oh. Yaakant lifwidotem, Yakant-yakant- juskahnt. " The intoxicated bum said emphatically, a stream of dribble working its way down his long, braided soul-patch.

"Right on, cool man- thanks." I patted the old drunk on the shoulder and backed away. The drunk seemed slightly offended and stumbled off. He hobbled into the bar for a moment, said something inaudible to the bartender that contained more articulated syllables than I'd have thought him capable of, then he swaggered back off into the dark tunnels.

I needed to get back to Alora. We were getting married. She was going to be upset about what happened with Birgess, but she'd understand it was an accident and I just got scared and cheesed it.

I looked around for a cleaning robot to catch a ride on, but there were none in sight. I went back into the bar.

I presented myself to the bartender. "Can you call the police for me? I think I'm a missing person. My fiancé is looking for me."

The bartender gave me a pitying look and slapped a shot glass onto the bar. He filled it with something clear and knocked it back, then

he filled the same glass again and slid it over to me. It might have been hydrazine but I took the shot. I really appreciated the friendly, though somewhat ominous gesture. The man offered one more pitiful glance before turning to a small console and typing something in quickly.

“They’ll be here soon.” He poured another shot, and another. I lost count after a half-dozen shots but eventually several overlapping images of Birgess and Hamm entered the bar and sat down on either side of me. I wobbled and waved to them.

“Tuhss lossannow fownd ere! Noworse ferware Burgers?” I sputtered gleefully and flung my arms open to the Birgess I thought seemed the most material of the poorly focused and intersecting copies of him. “I shokd yu aneyeran- my bads.”

Birgess slammed the bartender with a hard look. “Thanks for the heads up Vin. Could have given him beer though.” Vin didn’t look up, but smirked to himself.

“And you didn’t see nobody else with him?” Birgess charged. Vin looked up through slitted eyes.

“He said Alora was looking for him so I called.” Vin swallowed something and looked down. “Don’t want no trouble with no house.”

“That’s right.” Birgess confirmed. “You don’t. You don’t talk to nobody.”

“Imaloras bitch!” I chimed in, adding hysterical and inappropriate laughter. “Weerealler bitches!” I flopped my arms around Birgess and Hamm’s shoulders, but the move compromised balance and I’d misjudged the



placement of the real Birgess and Hamm, so I fell over. I continued laughing.

“Yeah, Thanks again, Vin-“ Birgess said sarcastically as he picked me up off the floor. “You know who worked his face over? Alora will want to know.”

“Figured it was you guys.” Vin said.

I was escorted to the door as a sack of potatoes. As I left I caught a sly wink from the bartender. I gave him a smiley thumbs up and he returned an exasperated head shake. Then I vomited.

## ~~~ *THIRTEEN.4* ~~~

I was tossed into the back of yet another vehicle, but there they generally left me alone. I was too inebriated to require restraints and I think Birgess saw that I was beyond the reach of even his unique brand of sadism. I was in high spirits all things considered. I couldn't contain the magnitude of my predicament in a coherent train of thought, so it seemed like I was in less trouble than I was.

Either Birgess got tired of my singing and zapped me, or I just passed out drunk. One way or another I woke up back in the bed with the mirror above it. I rolled over so I could see something other than myself in the mirror, but I was already on the edge of the bed. The floor slammed into my body with a dry slap. I winced as I pushed myself into a better position to roll around in self-pity as the biting hangover and

general post-extended-beating concussive fog descended over me.

After a while thirst drove me to find fluids. I found the bathroom and jammed my head in the sink to suckle at the lime stained tit of the faucet. I overfilled my stomach, projectile vomited the excess back up into the commode, rinsed, and repeated. Thirst and nausea competed frantically until I ran out of steam and collapsed in a sweaty heap on the bathroom floor, retching at the lingering taste of bile. I bobbed in and out of consciousness for a while, oddly comforted by the cool embrace of the tile.

“Good times, huh baby.” Alora’s voice floated into the bathroom.

I was ashamed of my condition. My fear of her made fear of her judgement that much more acute. I reached for a handhold and pulled myself up against the tub.

“Hey- Alora, good to see you, I- I missed you” I said and hooked a glance at her steaming eyes. I looked away, but I felt her silently let go of some of her rage. She took a step towards me and kneeled. She reached towards me and I recoiled, I hid my reaction poorly. I looked into her eyes and saw a small battle behind them suddenly end in truce. She blinked and unset her mouth and allowed her brow to furrow. She reached up again and I held. She touched my cheek apprehensively, but with gentle care.

“You missed me?” She asked in an uncharacteristically subdued tone.

“I missed you, yeah. I’m sorry I left- It was an accident- Birgess freaked out and then,

well I freaked out. But then I calmed down and I thought maybe you'd understand if I came back." I wasn't even sure if I was lying or not, it seemed right, and also wrong, but it was also self-preservation which doesn't have to be right or wrong. I didn't remember her being that understanding, but she was softening, trying to understand. She smiled at me like sunshine breaking through a fast moving cloud, her eyes flashed.

"You came to the moon for me." She cooed.

"Yep, pretty sure I did that." I confirmed.

"So- what, you think you can just come back home and sweet talk me into another night of debaucherous premarital sex, is that what this is?" She asked. I thought about it for a second.

"Another- night? Well... not entirely, but, could it be?" I said and smiled like a nervous freshman. I glanced in the mirror and remembered that I was covered in dried vomit and spittle crust. I grabbed a towel and covered myself.

"Grooohoss..." She giggled.

Alora's gaze warmed into a soothing mist. She partially emerged from a rigid armor I'd thought was an exoskeleton. She reached for me gently. She helped me up and turned on the shower faucet. She wiggled her hips excessively as she stripped my drawers off my legs like a sorority girl squeegeeing a car window at a fundraiser.

“Let's get you cleaned up. Hop in.” She ordered playfully. I obeyed. She closed the shower curtain.

“You're not getting in?” I asked before I could help myself.

“Not until you make an honest woman of me, and wash the puke out of your hair, and shave, and then- maybe, or not.” The gentleness fell out of her tone like she was exhausted from the effort of keeping it there. She trailed off as she shut the bathroom door, resuming thoughts of more important business than caring for her battered fiancé.

I showered absently, pondering what I knew of this woman. I was apparently going to spend the rest of my life with her. She was smart, kind of mean, and rich, and scary, and sexy, and scary, but she had a soul in there somewhere- I think I'd just seen it.

Her circumstances dictated her nature, she wasn't evil, just ruthlessly effective. She had to be the way she was to survive the life that had been thrust upon her. At least that sounded good. Of course that ignored the fact that she could have simply abandoned her criminal life and gone and used her family's wealth to care for orphans or something. I don't know, maybe she really couldn't have done that. I don't really get the whole power thing. Seems like power must be addictive, I'll stick to drugs and alcohol, and I'm definitely finding a Total Recall-esq pleasure-planet brain-vacation after all this settles down.

Whatever the case, I did come to the moon for her. I don't remember how, when, or

why exactly, but I'm pretty sure I did. I apparently tricked a very mean and violent woman named Ferrar to do it. I must have had pretty strong feelings for her, or maybe I'm just an impulsive idiot. I had evidence to support either conclusion.

By the time I finished showering I had not resolved much of anything. I was cleaner, but I was still hung-over, bruised up, and pretty much lacking anything resembling a clue. A long lost sandwich passed through my mind, it was sitting in a tunnel, perhaps being molested by some mindless cleaning robot. I decided to honor that lost sandwich by setting out to build another.

### ~~~ *THIRTEEN.5* ~~~

Alora was downstairs in the kitchen sipping a glass of champagne. She poured a second glass and held it up for me.

"Thanks, but- I need something to eat." I took the glass and set it on the counter. She was quietly affronted by the rejection. I motioned to the refrigerator for permission to take inventory.

"Hope you're not planning to use the stove again." Alora commented snidely.

"Can I make a sandwich?"

"As long as you don't burn anything." She slit her gaze. I assumed she was trying to rib me about my alleged arson.

"I don't really remember burning anything. If I did, I don't think I meant to-" I confessed "I'm sorry."

“Do you have any idea what it’s like being me?” Alora’s unpredictable changes in demeanor were startling, she suddenly became the indignant, obstinate girl that matched her youthful beauty.

“No. I don’t.” I replied.

“It’s hard, okay? I have responsibilities. Do you know what that’s like?” She was trying to confide in me, but she had no experience with true confidence.

I shook my head. “Not like you.” I’m not very responsible to begin with, and I had no idea what responsibilities she was referring to, so I thought it an honest reply.

“Well it’s hard okay- you think I want to be like this?” She asked, this time expecting a considerate answer.

“I don’t really know, I don’t really know you that well- at all- I mean I think I like you. But you’re- uh...”

“I’m what?” She challenged.

“Um. Well. I mean- you’re a little violent, and um- I’m not a pacifist exactly, but ass-beating is usually a last resort. Seems like you kind of start off there a lot.”

“I thought you liked it rough.” A coy smirk bloomed on her lips.

“Rough and violent are different things.” I’m actually not that into either, though I definitely know the difference and prefer one to the other.

“Not really.” She said casually at first. Then again her demeanor shifted, this time into a space somewhere between zen rage and passive aggressive. She turned a shoulder coldly.

“You’ll have plenty of time to get to know me. I’m not all bad, just mostly. Now- we’re getting married tomorrow, no sex until our honeymoon. I’ll send a doctor to get you patched up.” She smoothed her dress and ran her fingers through her hair. “I have to go to the rehearsal dinner, see you at the ceremony sweetie.” She grabbed my collar and pulled me in for a forceful kiss. “And Jely. Thanks for coming back to me. I trust you to stay put this time. Seriously- don’t burn anything, I might get rough and or violent.” She turned and stepped purposefully towards the door.

“Doesn’t a groom usually go to the rehearsal dinner... and the rehearsal, and like a dozen other wedding things?” I asked.

“It’s a family affair, hon.” She snapped. “Old family- you’ll be happier staying out of it. I’ll send someone to take care of your tux and get you cleaned up.”

“Can it be someone other than Birgess?” I asked with hope.

She turned, smiling. “I’ll give you Birgess as a wedding present, you can do whatever you want with him.” She winked carnivorously and slid out of the door just as she closed it behind her. An engine revved, loud music played, and a vehicle sped out of earshot.

I was alone again. Not just alone, but acutely lonely. I hadn’t thought about loneliness in a while. I’d been pretty busy. I stood alone in the apartment looking around at the trappings of wealth. It was a little castle of an apartment, probably would end up being my little kingdom. I could use Birgess as my butler, or a taser target

if I felt like it. Trouble was I didn't want a butler, or power, or revenge. Having power over Birgess wouldn't help me control my own life. Not that I wouldn't zap him sometimes just because he's a jerk and I could.

I could run away again, but to what end? I'd probably get caught anyway. How did I end up here? Was I really lonely enough to chase a woman like Alora from the Earth to the Moon? She was enchanting, fascinating, enthralling really, but she was clearly pathological. Hadn't I met anyone worth staying on Earth for? Loneliness sucks, it makes you do stupid things-like get married to sociopaths.

Something else was going on. I didn't have all the facts about the situation and I knew it. I had enough facts to be fairly certain that I was, in fact, Jely Fride, and that he was an unfortunate character. As sad as it was, Alora may have been the best thing that ever happened to Jely Fride. She was a beautiful woman, she cared for him in some self-gratifying, tragically misguided way, and she hooked him up with some seriously phat digs on the moon.

Which is more lonely and pathetic; being in a loveless marriage, or just being plain old loveless? Maybe it wouldn't always be loveless, or maybe she would murder me because I left the toilet seat up. Either way it looked like I was getting married. If I had a choice, I decided I'd choose to go through with it. I didn't think I really had a choice. I basically just discovered Plato's cave is sealed shut so I decided to try and go back to enjoying the shadow puppets. Unfortunately you can never go



back to thinking you're part of the play. You know you're just alone in a cave watching shadows dance.

I didn't really want to marry Alora. I'm not sure if I ever did or just thought I did, or if I knew what I really thought when I thought I knew it. I didn't want to do anything but play harmonica. That was the only thing I knew I was supposed to do- play music, but my lip was still swollen.

# CHAPTER FOURTEEN

## *Love And Power*

I sat down on the couch and stared at the wall. I pulled out the harp and honked and gnawed at it for a while, since I couldn't actually play it, but eventually I put it away. Several minutes, or perhaps hours later, there was a knock at the door. I was certain that anyone who wanted to come in would just come in, so it took a while before I felt rude for not answering the door.

I answered the door. Three men stood at the entrance, seeming to share one massive smile. One was a doctor, one bore a garment bag, and one was clearly some sort of religious minister. The tallest, the minister, nearly sang his greeting and introductions.

"Hello, Mr. Fride! I'm Reverend Dakota, this is Sam MacLinton, and Dr. Rambo. I will be presiding over your wedding tomorrow, Sam will prepare your tuxedo, and Dr. Rambo will see to your cuts and bruises."

"Okay." I stared in detachment at the strange entourage. "Alora sent you?"

"We are servants of the House des Luna." He replied with a bow towards a potted plant on the doorstep.

"What's the House des-" I stopped mid sentence when I looked above the plant and saw the brass plaque reading *des Luna* proudly fixed on the wall. "Right. Well, I could use some company I guess, come on in."

Dakota stepped in gracefully and the other two filed in orderly behind him. The doctor took me by the arm and half-threw me into a chair. He began poking and stretching my face.

“You look like hell.” The ungentle doctor complimented.

I looked over at Dakota. “You’re the minister for the wedding?”

He nodded. The doctor produced a soft paddle that made a humming sound, he began patting my face with it indifferently. I felt unfamiliar sections of my face shift and twist lightly as blood was cleared too rapidly from bruised areas, and inflamed tissue settled to stasis at unnatural rates. Cut skin rejoined by pulling itself together and zipping itself up, creating a sensation of velvety razor worms bobsledding from my lip to my cheeks to my forehead- but in a good way. It was weird, but it was working.

“Do you know Alora?” I addressed the minister, struggling to maintain some semblance of normality.

“Since she was a child.” He replied with conflicted affection.

“Was she always like... now?”

The doctor stopped patting. Dakota sighed heavily and nodded to his associates. The doctor quickly finished up with the humming paddle thing and handed me a small mirror. I looked like I hadn’t been assaulted in months.

“Wow- what was that thing?” The question was ignored by a strange blue scanning laser in Samuel’s hand that ran a grid pattern up

and down my body and then flashed a bulb at me. Samuel smiled and turned the display towards me. It contained an image of me in a downright smashing tuxedo. I was standing beside Alora in a surreal wedding chapel. I nodded in approval. Samuel coughed awkwardly and put the device in his pocket. He and the doctor tapped their brows in a casual salute and dismissed themselves.

Dakota focused on me intensely. "I can see that you're having doubts. I can't blame you. Things are very confusing for you right now. But I need to ask a favor of you."

I wasn't sure what kind of favor a minister would ask of a sinner like me. I raised a curious eyebrow.

"You must go through with the wedding." He said matter of factly. I laughed.

"That's the favor? I don't think I really have a choice, but sure man- I'll go through with it because you asked, not because I'm pretty sure my life depends on it."

Dakota accepted my condescension. "You are correct, you don't have a choice, but that's not the favor. There will likely be an incident at the ceremony tomorrow. You are in a unique position to prevent it from becoming a massacre."

"Massacre!?" I already knew that getting married would be bad news, but I hadn't really considered that my life would be in danger.

"Your life will not be in danger." The Reverend said with uncanny timing. "Though all lives are unique." Dakota leaned forward. "You

are truly a singular being. I'm not sure what the universe has planned for you, but I will ensure it has all the material it needs. I know that if you had all the facts you would be willing to help."

"Okay, so give me the facts." I said.

"I'm afraid I cannot. Your ignorance of these facts is part of why you are still alive."

"So why should I believe any of this?" I asked.

"I am an imposter, I am not truly a servant of the House des Luna, not in any meaningful way. I am a servant of the universe." Dakota said, as if being a servant of the universe was not the refrain of crazy spiritualists throughout history. I smiled kindly at the apparent kook, who did not take offense, but increased his urgency.

"Yeah man, the universe is a harsh mistress." I consoled.

"Alora seeks to manipulate you to secure power, I seek to manipulate you to secure peace. Many have lied to you, myself among them. We have met before. You are my friend."

"Wait, you know me?"

"I do, and I trust you, so much so that I know in asking what I ask of you, peace has already arrived at our doorstep."

"Sure, peace- signed, sealed, delivered... Okay then. What's the favor?" I asked, content to placate.

"Tomorrow you will hear strange sounds, and the world will become very strange around you. You alone can find the source of these sounds, you will be drawn to them. There will be one very near you, and one much further

away. You must ignore the one that is close by, and find the other, quickly.”

I soaked it in. There was a lot about the guy I thought was crazy, but he was sincere. Given the abundance of unpleasant, cruel, and violent craziness in my life at the time, sincere craziness seemed to have a balancing effect.

“So how do I know you’re not just- we’ll you know, manipulating me now.”

“I am.” He stated.

“So what if you're asking me to find one sound thingy, thinking I’ll go for the one you ask me to ignore. Maybe this is like reverse psychology.”

“That is not the way your mind works. I believe you will help me as I’ve asked. Though you do not remember me, and you don’t remember why you trust me, I know you will help me.”

“How do you know that?”

“Because I’ve asked you.”

He paused, smiled, then stood.

“Of course, it goes without saying that you must not reveal our meeting to Alora or any of her people. Thank you, Jely.” The reverend smiled knowingly. I stood and shook his hand as he offered it.

“Wait- what about the- uh. The sound thing- what’s this all about?”

“Life and death.” He said solemnly.

“And peace. Until tomorrow, my friend.”

He stepped out of the door and closed it behind him. I stood in abject confusion for several minutes. Then I turned a bit and spent several more minutes facing another direction,

still confused. I realized I hadn't heard any vehicles arrive or depart. I opened the door to see if I could get a few more answers. Not far down the tunnel I saw a security vehicle with the unmistakable form of Birgess sitting in it. He looked uncharacteristically slack jawed and confused, but clearly displeased to notice me.

Just as I was considering the idea that I'd hallucinated the whole visit, Birgess whooped the siren as a warning.

"Back in the house Jely. Don't try the back tunnel either." Birgess' unmistakable rasp was even more unpleasant amplified over a tinny, piercing bull-horn. Apparently Alora trusted me to stay put because I couldn't leave, which seemed a loose definition of trust.

I slammed the door closed. Once safely behind the door I flipped Birgess the bird. I ran to the utility room and found the exterior door had been welded shut. From outside I heard another siren whoop and a chiding raspy laugh as Birgess mocked my inevitable discovery.

I'd had enough. I found something to throw and threw it. Something broke. Something fell over and it probably broke too. I didn't bother to find out if or what. I threw a few more things and some of them broke, but a few didn't which just made me feel even more weak and powerless, so I stopped.

I made a sandwich and ate half of it. Then I burned the other half of it on the stove. I told myself the ritual was meant to honor the sandwich I left in the tunnel, but it was really just childish retribution for Alora telling me not to burn anything.

A smoke alarm went off and I got scared. I found it and smashed it. I checked the peephole to see if Birgess would respond to the ruckus, but the tunnel was calm.

I rummaged around in the cabinets for alcohol but only found champagne in the refrigerator. I drank half the bottle before I read the label and realized it was sparkling grape juice with no alcoholic content. I threw the bottle and it smashed impressively against the piano, still hiding in the corner. I walked over and apologized to the instrument. I poked a few notes. They sounded wet and grape juicy.

I sat down on the couch and pulled out the harmonica, remembering my recent medical attention. I checked my lip and it seemed fine. So I played the blues until I hyperventilated and passed out.

## ~~~ *FOURTEEN.1* ~~~

I woke up to a malicious pounding at the door. The pounding was apparently a courtesy, because the intruder opened the door and walked in before I was even off the couch.

“Three hours. Get up.” Hamm said.

“Screw you.” I grumbled instinctively while laboriously recalling that I had woken up *in* a nightmare instead of *from* one. Hamm had clearly been given a borg-mod tune up and he was looking convincingly human.

“Don’t talk to me like that- I’m your best man.” Hamm bragged. It barely registered as absurd to me.



Hamm threw a cleanly pressed and wrapped tuxedo over a chair back. He effortlessly lifted the couch and dumped me onto the floor, where I laid in protest until a show of force was impending then I scooted evasively to the bathroom for a shower.

Hamm left me relatively unmolested, save the occasional door pounding and threats to help me get dressed. I showered and shaved, exerting some effort to ignore what I was getting ready to go do. Putting on the tuxedo made it difficult. I tried to fight a wave of depression and self-pity. The suit was nice, but it didn't help. I reminded myself that after weddings come honeymoons, and I hadn't been laid in-well, possibly ever, I couldn't really remember. I certainly hadn't since I woke up in that tunnel in my own puddle, and that was my entire life as far as I could remember. Then I remembered Alora tenderized my tenders last time we laid in a bed together. Too bad I wasn't into BDSM, or that I didn't remember I was. Though that seems like an affinity that would survive amnesia, in which case I would be having a great time, which I wasn't.

I finally made myself presentable and couldn't ignore my fate any longer. I remembered what the minister said. Something about a massacre, strange sounds, and trusting me to help him. In context it was no weirder than the rest of my debacle, but it stood out as something to be aware of, and just one more thing to be terrified of. What I should, might, or would do about any of it seemed immaterial.

Nothing happened as I intended, so I may as well give up on intention altogether.

I stepped out of the room. Hamm scanned me mechanically.

“Check your fly.” Hamm advised. I checked and it was down.

“It’s a fashion statement.”

“I can help you with that.” Hamm deadpanned and made an ambiguous but distressing zipping gesture.

“What is with you people and zippers?”

I turned and zipped quickly. Hamm opened the door and held it. I walked past him and saw a disproportionately long vehicle parked awkwardly in the tunnel. Hamm walked to a door at the rear and opened it for me in mock graciousness. I crawled in and found myself alone in a cavernous interior, plush and ornate with immaculate fixtures including a wet bar and a computer console that looked like it could direct air traffic.

Hamm walked around and climbed into the driver’s seat, about 20 meters away. He started the motor and engaged the vehicle in drive. He turned the wheel and backed up and stopped. He turned the wheel the other direction and moved forward. He repeated this sequence.

I looked around the tunnel and saw there was no way he was turning this thing around. The vehicle continued to jerk as Hamm futilely repeated the attempt.

“Hamm, buddy- the three-point-turn isn’t happening. You’re gonna have to call somebody, you’re stuck.”

Hamm ignored me and kept cutting the wheel and driving back and forth.

“Hamm, seriously, give it up- I don’t mind being late but- Hey Hamm. Hamm!”

Hamm didn’t register a word I’d said. I carefully crawled to the front of the vehicle towards a barrier between the cab and the passenger area. The jarring of the vehicle knocked me off balance a few times but he had a pretty regular rhythm to his jerks so I learned to anticipate them.

As I got closer I could see Hamm had pretty much checked out. He was repeating the movements with mechanical repetition.

“Hamm! Hey, Hamm! Hambone! Ham and Eggs! Hey! Stupid!” I clapped my hands in front of his face but he looked right through me.

He was stuck in a loop. Some kind of borg-mod glitch. I knew about as much about advanced bio-robotic-interfaces as most people, which is to say I wasn’t even sure if they existed.

I figured I’d do the only thing that I had ever done that had fixed anything mechanical. I found something hard and hit him with it. He blinked rapidly, wheezed and clicked a few times. For a second I thought he’d shut down, but he jerked his head unnaturally and recited several error codes that meant nothing to me. After I’d heard a few repetitions of the same codes I gave him another whack. He blinked more naturally and looked back at me. His eyes focused on me.

“Did you hit me?” Hamm accused.

“You were glitching out, man. You keep trying to turn this thing around but you’ve got nowhere to go. We got to call a tow or something.”

“Oh- no- we’re fine, thanks for the debug.”

Hamm opened the driver's door and stepped out. He leaned down and reached under the frame and just dragged the front around towards the tunnel..

Hamm jumped back in the driver’s seat and gunned the throttle. We swerved and swiped the tunnel wall. I clung to fibers on the ridiculously shag carpet as we whipped through a narrow tunnel backwards at breakneck speed. I tried to remind myself that this was one ride where dying in a horrible vehicle collision might not be any worse than arriving safely at my destination. It wasn’t much comfort.

After what seemed like a light year, factoring in relativistic time dilation, we arrived somewhere that warranted stopping. To my utter lack of amazement, it was another tunnel. I egressed the suicide roller coaster as quickly as possible, which was not soon enough to avoid Hamm intercepting me at the door and doing a poor job of straightening my tie and collar. He led me to a well guarded, though otherwise uninspiring door.

Hamm nodded to the captain of the small squad surrounding the entrance to whatever they were guarding. The captain knocked. The door opened and revealed a hallway that was actually another freaking tunnel. As if I wasn’t emasculated enough, the

tale of Thumbelina flashed through my mind. I wondered if there were any giant space swallows that might give me a lift back to the Bowl n' Strip. I should have stayed on my lily pad.

The hallway tunnel led to a door that led to a room. The room was a sparsely furnished dressing room containing a fussy little woman who made me stand in uncomfortable positions while she brushed, vacuumed, rolled, spritzed, and did other stuff at and to my hair and tuxedo.

Once I was deemed presentable, Hamm pushed me back down into the hallway and into a larger room that contained more fussy people. Several guards and attendants swung into action as I entered. I was summarily checked for weapons. As silly as was to think I might have acquired or intended to use a weapon, I refrained from making the observation out loud. Attendants popped-up and disappeared like groundhogs, occasionally asking me questions such as "Do you have any questions?" To which I replied "Is polygamy legal on the moon?". It was a tightly wound crowd, but Hamm laughed.

I heard a piano that sounded somehow familiar. It wasn't the upright from the apartment. Whoever was playing it was doing pretty well. I liked the sound of a piano being played by someone who knows how. It made me feel like things weren't as bad as I was pretty sure they were. I wish I knew how to play piano. I checked my pocket and found no harmonica, it was back at the apartment.

"Keep your hands out of your pockets."  
An attendant chided. He hissed several other imperatives but I was pretty much on autopilot. I

moved when I was led or pushed, stood up and sat down when I was prodded. After a slow swell in ambient chatter and a tangible increase in ambient urgency, someone pushed me out of a door and into an enormous sanctuary full of expectant people.

Everyone stared at me. A bunch of strangers in outrageously expensive clothes blinked and coughed, waiting for me to finish being overwhelmed. It took a while. A repeated, sharp pressure in the small of my back reminded me that someone behind me desperately wanted me to move forward.

I turned and saw Hamm stepping to my side. He took an elbow and applied a crushing pressure then obscured my reaction by feigning a friendly hug. I had to admire Hamm's competence as a puppeteer.

## ~~~ *FOURTEEN.2* ~~~

I took a few steps and soaked in the cavernous sanctuary. It looked like it had been decorated in haste. The only thing that looked like it belonged was a giant mural of the earth, moon, and sun with some musical notes flowing out of it. The space felt familiar and might have felt comforting were it not for the hordes of strangers and the fact that I was there for a wedding I hadn't signed up for.

"Mr. Fride." Said the reverend.

He stood in front of the gathered. He beckoned me with a gesture and I shuffled towards him without protest. He greeted me with

a smile and a handshake. He turned me around to face the crowd. Most of them looked at me like I'd fallen out of the sky, the rest like I'd tunneled up out of the earth. Neither faction seemed to care how I'd gotten there, but they clearly didn't appreciate the fact that I had.

I smiled and waved like a good boy. A few of the elderly women in the front rows offered curt smiles, but that's the best I got. I looked back to the reverend, who grinned with misplaced enthusiasm. He patted me on the shoulder with a closed fist and then stepped back. He nodded to the man behind the piano, who I recognized as the tailor with the neat-o laser thing.

The pianist wrapped up the mood music he'd been playing with a turnaround and began the processional. The anticipation of the crown held a lethal edge. It felt more like an execution than a wedding, and it felt like I wasn't the only one who was feeling that, not to mention this minister guy basically said that would happen. Feels like I haven't reacted appropriately to that information but I'm not sure what options I have besides being even more mortified. He could be full of shit. And I'm pretty sure telling anyone the minister said there would be violence at the wedding would make violence even more likely. And so far he seemed to be the most sincere person I've dealt with since, well- that Ferrah lady was pretty sincere too.

The rear doors of the sanctuary creaked, then swung open majestically. The pressure dropped like a synchronized missed heartbeat. The air seemed to emit light and every iris in the

room closed down to a tiny pinhole. A form swung gently in space as if attached to a string anchored at the geometric center of heaven. Alora swayed and flickered imperceptibly like a flame in still air as she stood in the archway. Light paraded around her hair and over her dress, each photon's wavelength combining to a unity of perfect white light.

The living painting of Alora stepped forward. Her escort took her arm and they marched in step. She approached like a slow wave. She glanced around at the gathered as a queen offering her grace. The man on her arm held a stoic and powerful dignity, but even he seemed a simple beast of burden beside her royalty. As she reached the front she nodded to a few of the most opulently adorned guests. They accepted the rare favor with a subdued, grudging politeness.

She arrived at the altar and dismissed her escort before she finally gave me a look. She smiled at me, but her eyes were so full of self-admiration that I wasn't sure she could even see me. She swung her hair as she turned to the reverend, who produced an enchanting smile only as they made eye contact. She gave him a silent order, and he cleared his throat. The ceremony began.

The reverend said things that rolled right around my head, not even bothering to pass through the hollow space between my ears. Alora attracted my attention from time to time by sniping at me with demanding glares. I wished the piano player would play something. The part where I was supposed to repeat some



meaningfully phrased promises came and went with little incident. Hamm gave me a ring to give to Alora and I put it on her finger, then she put one on mine. After the minister said a few more things, Alora grabbed me by the collar and kissed me, then turned to the crowd to receive their applause like a triumphant bullfighter.

She turned to me and pulled my ear to her mouth. She nearly bit me and savagely licked my ear, which felt way better than it should have.

“Jely, get on the ground and stay down. Don’t move until I tell you it’s over. I’ll need you for later.” She licked her lips as if she tasted honey in the words.

She turned to the crowd and raised a hand for silence. She smiled and cleared her throat. She reached around her neck and unfastened a necklace with a tiny charm on it. She put the charm in her ear.

“Finally.” She breathed as if the word was a poisonous gas.

I looked up at the reverend. He looked at me and smiled.

“Thank you, Jely” He whispered. Then nodded towards the piano player, who quickly opened the lid on the piano and reached inside.

I smelled a sonic flavored strangeness tickle my retina, then a second, identically but uniquely incomprehensible amalgam of sensation. They were weird, familiar tonal constructs that were between music, noise, and a jello-uranium-waterfall. Like sounds you know are coming from inside your own head, but not the one on your neck.

Small flurries of poorly defined motion erupted from the crowd. Soon individual movement became nearly indistinguishable and the crowd morphed into a mash of josseling, interconnected bodies. Pews, walls, light, air, all became one soupy mess swirling about in a boundless ether. The sounds became consuming and washed away other sensations and perceptions. I couldn't understand what was happening.

Confusion and chaos pressurized the air. Images of ghostly bodies flashed in and out like wisps of smoke, most seemed hopelessly lost in space, flailing and screaming as if falling continuously. Many stumbled vainly for orientation. A few figures stood still as statues as if confidently waiting for the strangeness to pass. I found the jagged edges of reality and began to knit together the layout of the disjointed world that had collapsed around me.

My mind condensed the input to a manageable stream like a grand symphony arranged down to the simplest themes and chord progressions. Distance became a tangible asset of space. Matter condensed unsurely into perceivable objects. The surreal horizon lines of my new holistic perception terminated at two points. The sounds formed such perfect lines that they had to be followed to their source, nothing else could be done. Whatever madness had gripped me- it gave me singular purpose; touch the sound. One source was very close, only steps away. The other was much further away, across an ocean of disembodied humanoid ghost-like shapes.

I followed the shortest lines and found one of the points, sitting neatly on the ground surrounded by a twisting toroid of revolving energy. I reached down quickly to touch it. A kinetic interaction of matter occurred that I could not instantly explain. It created an equal and opposite reaction to the one I'd just attempted. An unpleasant force decelerated the matter-energy configuration I remembered as being my face just as I was bending down. Something was in the space that I was trying to move through. It was the piano, I had smacked my face against it trying to get to the sound.

Bizarro sound world pain was different from regular pain. It was like a sharp red light that tasted way too tangy and sort of throbbed, but it was a short distraction. The point's glowing halo captured me. I stared into it and shivered. Something felt empty, rarefied and cold. I felt the horizon lines shift and tilt ever so slightly. I looked to the point on the other side of the sanctuary.

I remembered what the reverend had asked of me. He said to ignore the one closest to me, that would be this one. What was wrong with it? Why go to the other one when this one was so close, and so compelling. He'd asked me for a favor, for help. Who could possibly need my help- I'm helpless. He said it was life and death. There was a lot of chaos for sure, and death does hang out with chaos a lot.

I could have easily touched the nearby point, but I didn't. I wasn't precisely sure why at the time, maybe I did it because I believed it

would help, or maybe that just sounds better than I have no idea.

It did seem fairly novel for someone to just ask me for what they wanted from me. The minister just asked for my help. That was the most control I'd been offered over my own life in as long as the short time I could remember. Alora hadn't told me to do anything with freaky sounds, but she hadn't told me not to. So I figured this was a convenient way to rebel with some plausible deniability if it turned out badly. Also I might just die regardless so why not do whatever?

I walked towards the other source of sonic chaos, stepping over and around constructs that resembled people, pews, and chairs. It was as if I was a spirit among ghosts- the wisps ignored me completely and flailed, or sat, or stumbled.

The other point was surrounded by a wisp. A ghostly form wrapped itself around the point and gripped it tightly with its entire body. I reached out to touch the point through the wisp. It startled and shook, but remained firmly attached. I reached out again and touched the wisp, this time with more force. It jumped in panic and detached itself from the point, then flailed madly in search of it. I reached down and touched it. The point vanished.

For an instant very little changed. The world remained a wash of convoluted abstracts. The wisps that had been still from the beginning suddenly gained purpose, moving among the strange world as if they had again become fully aware of their connection to it. Their ghostly

forms moved very quickly, weaving in and out through the sloshing mist of other ghosts, dancing around and among them, seeming to restrain many along their way.

My attention turned to the other point. I moved towards it. A wisp crossed in front of me, seemed to take notice of me, and stepped aside. I turned back to the point and it had moved. It was hovering, moving as if by levitation. It floated to the front of the sanctuary and stayed. It was held out by one of the wisps. I walked closer to it, the wisp stepped closer to me with the sound, it was inviting me. The commotion had ceased. All of the tangled ghosts were pacified, and the few who still stood waited in an orderly formation behind me. I reached into the toroid and touched the point. It vanished and in its absence the material world coalesced into familiar shapes and textures.

The reverend stood in front of me, holding a strange blue box. He was possessed of a smile that could crack a mountain and eyes beaming with awesome pride. A strangely familiar man approached wearing a similarly enormous smile that seemed somehow held up by the inverted pendulum of his magnificent soul patch.

The sanctuary was filled with restrained or paralyzed wedding guests. The bizarre frozen expressions of those hit with the paralytic collarbone shivs things were priceless. You can tell these people have very little experience knowing they're totally screwed.

Alora sat on a pew in front, eyes transfixed on me, she blinked but otherwise

remained motionless. Without thinking I glared at the reverend, genuinely concerned for my sadistic bride, clearly forgetting for a moment just how sadistic she was.

“Alora!?” I rushed towards her. Her eyes flashed a befuddled relief as I reached out to her. Then I hesitated as I acutely recalled how casually she hit people and realized I wasn’t sure just how immobilized she was. She recognized the hesitation and did not appreciate it. Rage grew behind her eyes and I backed up a step.

“Are you...” I stuttered to her, stopping as she rolled her eyes at me, indicating she was okay and I was stupid for asking since she was clearly unable to speak. I turned to the reverend. “Is she... gonna-”

“Don’t worry, she is completely unharmed, though intensely unhappy.” He glanced at Alora with a cocktail of pity, disappointment, and that anger that you only have towards people you love deeply. “They are all unharmed- thanks to you.” The reverend said, bowing his head lightly towards me.

My overworked, under-intoxicated brain threatened to clock-out, and I promised to pay it double overtime if it would stay on for long enough to find out what had just happened.

The strangely familiar man with a braided soul-patch stepped beside the reverend and bowed formally in a very cool martial art style thing, which I poorly imitated in return. He laughed. He raised his palm to me and raised an eye to nonverbally ask my permission to do something I had no way of predicting. I nodded my approval for the sake of expediency. He

walked towards me and placed the raised palm against my head. I fully expected to turn into a frog, or something more commensurate with the bizarreness of the situation.

“I was a crime what I took from you, but I hope you will now see why I did. I beg your forgiveness, Jely.” He said cryptically as he touched each of his fingers to my forehead in sequence.

### ~~~ *FOURTEEN.3* ~~~

As his hand pulled away from my head, the name Jely Fride exploded with a weight and significance it hadn't had for a long time. It was my name. I was Jely Fride. I was that piano player guy. I'd come to the moon for Alora, who I barely knew even then. I'd been arrested, beaten, kidnapped, trapped, escaped, brain-washed, beaten, re-kidnapped, re-escaped, beaten, married, and now whatever this brain-unwashing thing is.

“You- I- they- you- seriously?... She- and the thing, that freaking thing?! I- can't even- You told me... Dude! Dude? I need to... ..” I exhaled about three times my lung capacity somehow. I decided to stop talking before I said something completely unintelligible. They gave me a long beat to settle into what I already knew, which was a lot compared to a minute ago, but still not much in absolute terms.

“It was our only chance to stop Alora. With the encryption matrix and keys you helped us capture, we were able to suspend the

violence. Then after you disabled their matrix, we were able to capture all the would-be assailants and put an end to this coup.” Percy said.

I looked around at the wide-eyed, motionless creatures that littered the sanctuary. “What happens to them now?”

“Justice, and mercy.” Percy said, then looked very deliberately towards Alora. Alora glared back.

“You’re not going to kill her are you?” I asked cautiously.

Alora rolled her eyes again.

“No, Jely. This is my niece. I’m going to teach her a better way to live, somewhere far, far from the moon.”

On hearing that Alora’s frozen eyes radiated nuclear heat.

“SHE’S YOUR NIECE!?! C’MON!”

## ~~~ ***FOURTEEN.4*** ~~~

Alora agreed to an annulment by blinking twice for yes. Then Dakota and I walked back to his apartment and ate dinner and I passed out on their couch until the universe ended and started again and looped back to when I woke up. Bacon smelled about the same in the new universe so I followed it. I found it in the kitchen with Dolores, Dakota, and Percy.

Dakota held Dolores and smiled at me endlessly.

“Sleep well?” Dolores asked hospitably.



“I did, finally. Thank you.” I said gratefully.

“Thank you, Jely.” Dakota said, pressing his hands together.

“You’re very welcome.” I didn’t think I really deserved gratitude from people I owed so much too, but for once it made sense to me to just shut up and accept it. “I’m very hungry.”

“Let’s eat.” Percy said.

We ate. I got a brief update on the ‘justice and mercy’ being dispensed to the would-be wedding massacerists. A few were turned over to authorities, but most were granted a kind of exile. I had no idea how the church could enforce or maintain it, but I wouldn’t underestimate them. I honestly wouldn’t have blamed them for much harsher reprisals, but I kept that to myself.

“Well Jely, there is much to attend to at the church. Interesting times, but far more hopeful thanks to you.” Dakota was smothering me with gratitude.

“You know it, man. All good.” It was getting harder and harder to be gracious without sounding insincere.

Dolores pushed Dakota towards the door a little to save me from the deluge. She winked at me and silently mouthed “Thank you.” I smiled back. Dakota threw up rock horns, squinted his eyes and bopped his head in a rock prayer as Dolores pushed him out the door, laughing.

Percy pulled out another bottle of that drink that’s a color it shouldn’t be. I cocked my head a bit, wary of drinking before lunch, then realized

it couldn't possibly matter any less. We drank, but not excessively, after all it was before lunch.

"What about the other houses? Won't they just go back to fighting each other and make a bunch of havoc for everyone? And wait, how did I play harmonica like that- can I still do that?" I asked.

"Probably so, and probably not. The houses have been fading for a long time, but something else will inevitably take their place. I will work to scatter and disperse power when it festers, but the hunger will always find a host. You have helped us secure a moment of peace and that is the best anyone can do. And I'm sorry, I cannot explain the harmonica thing, that was an unintended side effect of compartmentalizing your memory of being a pianist." Percy's response was uncharacteristically thorough.

"So you are a straight up psychic-person... then? I was right about that? Is Dakota too? Are you part Neptunian or something?"

"No- Neptunian telepathy is mostly sexual." Percy replied curtly.

"Wait- what?"

"I'm a Lunatic." Percy said, startlingly.

"Uh... wait- what? Again?"

"I find Neptunian telepathy vulgar. I am not a tele-bigot, but I make no apologies for how I feel." Percy said, almost defensively.

"No, the other thing- but let's come back to that. Lunatic- am I supposed to know how that relates to hand-waving brainwash skills?" I asked, barely hanging onto the thread of the conversation.

“Unlikely, let’s just say it is related and leave it at that.” Percy said.

“That’s a little disappointing, but not at all surprising. So um- Neptunian telepathy... what’s that about it being mostl-”

“I shouldn’t have said that.” Percy raised a hand to cut me off. “It was wrong of me.” He said with a surprising intensity of regret.

“No- it’s fine, but is it like when they’re-”

“Please, Jely. Don’t make me feel any more like a tele-bigot than I already do.” Percy looked hurt.

“Shit- sorry, I’ll drop it.” Dammit, wandered into another minefield chasing after exotic women, at least this time more figuratively. Speaking of... “So what happened to Alora? And are we cool with all that? Her being your niece and all?”

Percy snorted a laugh. “You are a fool, Jely. Yes, we are cool. And she will be fine. I think. She is my kin and she may yet use her gifts for good, but we shall see.”

“Gifts- like the Lunatic mind control thing?”

Percy just smiled.

I was just done with the houses and the families and whatever after that. I didn’t even want to hear it. Fine- everybody is related and they all have psychic power, just leave me out of it from now on.

~~~ *FOURTEEN.5* ~~~

A little later Percy and I walked over to meet Ferrah. Percy had gained her respect by being the only human who had ever incapacitated her in a fight, fair or otherwise. Based on that respect Ferrah accepted Percy's explanation of my invaluable heroism and she forgave my deception and promised not to beat me again unless I committed some fresh offense. I still made Percy promise he'd stay physically between us until I heard that from her. I think she still would have hit me if Percy hadn't been standing there, but they would have been non-lethal blows. In gratitude for her understanding and I promised that if I ever made it back to Earth then I'd headline at Lazy Susan's and even play for the flight controller's union if I was in town for it. I wasn't planning on breaking that promise, but I also wasn't planning on going back to Earth until Ferrar had retired or sold Lazy Susans.

Ferrah ended up hiring Birgess and Hamm bouncers back at Lazy Susan's. Last I heard they had become a popular comic duo, entertaining audiences with slapstick and observational humor, and prop comedy courtesy of Hamm's ever-more outrageous borg-mod gags.

Dakota and the church gave me a pretty wild send off. Apparently their version of communion involves a psychedelic drug fueled jam session and naked people dancing, which makes more sense to me than most religious rituals. They asked me to stay and even Rampo

and MacLinton seemed sincere when they said they'd miss playing with me, but I was more than ready to start forming nice, stable, long-term memories of my time on the moon by being somewhere else.

I didn't ask for it explicitly, but the church pulled together and provided everything I needed to start a little solo space piano tour. They renovated an antique space-RV and even installed a tiny recording booth I could stick my head in to get isolated vocals. They also got me a beautiful new stage keyboard that I immediately wrote 'Borgendorfer' on. No meat drums though, probably for the best. And to top it all off they booked a lineup of gigs for me from the Lagrange Zero G Sex Emporium all the way out to the Kuiper Kaleidoscope Lounge.

I did see Alora once more before I left the moon. She was being escorted to a deep space transit departure terminal. I know she saw me, but she couldn't let me see that she cared that I saw her. She still looked powerful and beautiful and defiant, but without the reality of her power, or the fog of my infatuation, she seemed lost and confused. I wanted to speak to her. I wanted her to want to speak to me. I wanted to know I had mattered to her in some way in all this, even if only for an instant. I never got that, but it was probably for the best because why the hell would I even want that from someone who literally abused my testicles?

I'll admit I went a little overboard with the ladies on the first leg of my tour. I had something to prove to myself about how desirable I was and so I took every opportunity.

But somehow every time I lay down with a woman, I ended up thinking about Alora. I didn't really miss her. I wasn't heartbroken, not exactly. I recognized I'd never loved Alora, never even knew her well enough to imagine loving her. But I couldn't get her out of my mind.

Then I played a night at the Blue Bowl on Phobos. It had one of those see-through pools behind the bar with ladies swimming around. None of them were Neptunian but there was enough soft skin and blueness in the joint to jog my memory pretty hard. Suddenly my embarrassed regret for leaving the moon to chase a woman that didn't want me became regretful regret for leaving Earth when there was a fascinating woman there that actually did. The best way to get over an obsession is to get into a new one, so I got started on that.

I made an interplanetary call back to the Bowl n' Strip. I asked to speak to a beautiful blue bowler named Aquari. The manager told me Aquari had quit the Bowl n' Strip to pursue her passion for traditional Neptunian Cantastoria and had been accepted to study at the premier Neptunian Cantastoria Conservatory.

Without much more thought than I'd put into pursuing Alora, I set course for Neptune. About a month later I found out that the Neptunian Cantastoria Conservatory was actually on Ganymede, a Jovian moon that was about A million miles in the opposite direction. So then I set out for Ganymede to find out what Aquari was up to. Spoiler Alert: She got fed up with the conservatory's rigid standards and

started a Bowl N Strip on Io. I eventually caught up with her and I got to play a few gigs there, it was awesome. Also, we finally did it and that was even more awesome. And I finally found out what Percy meant about Neptunian telepathy.

An End

TL;DR

Future piano guy becomes obsessed with a moon lady. Guy stalkily follows her to the moon where she turns out to be kind of a mafia boss. Mafia moon lady decides to forcibly marry piano guy as part of some ambiguously defined plot to consolidate mafia power. Piano guy accidentally burns down her house, runs away, and gets taken in by a moon church. Moon church finds out piano guy has a strange ability to detect a weapons technology that mafia people use. Moon church wipes his memory in a plot to foil the mafia lady's plot using piano guys ability. It more-or-less works.

TO THE READER

So now you know a little bit about what the life of a middling musician might be like if humans in your timeline make space travel a real priority. Don't count on it though, you're not going to get there just waiting for someone to sell you a ticket, though to be fair that's exactly

how I did it, but I'm from the future. It took a global realignment of resources on an unprecedented scale to allow humans to live, work, and play piano in space. As I understand it in most timelines civilization tends to crash spectacularly back to warring city-states where people argue about if humans ever even went to the moon. But I don't really understand multiverse theory very well. I don't even know the rules about sending accounts of the future back through time, but it seems like if it was a problem the interdimensional self-publishing website would have said something.

I figure if this story has an effect on your timeline that leads to this story never being written, then you won't read it so it won't have any effect, unless that's not how any of this works, which it probably isn't. Just try to get humans to cooperate and build more spaceships so something like this story can happen, then someone might send it back in time so you can read it and be motivated to build more spaceships. Circle of life.

I do hope you enjoyed this story. I am grateful for the opportunity to share directly with another mind some of the things I think are important, interesting, or just amusing about human existence. In any case it was fun to write and it got me off the planet for a while. I hope it did the same for you.