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WHY ON EARTH

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AN ALIEN INVASION ANTHOLOGY

Edited by ROSIE THOR
and VANIA STOYANOVA

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CONTENTS

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

PROLOGUE: NO STRANGERS TO LOVE ☹ XX

By Vania Stoyanova and Rosiee Thor

ONE LAST SHOT BEFORE THE END
OF THE WORLD ☹ XX

By Julian Winters

USERNAME: IM AN ACTUAL HUMAN ☹ XX

By Eric Smith

SKILL ISSUE ☹ XX

By Laura Pohl

Λ TIME FOR ALL THINGS ☹ XX

By Alex Brown

RED CARPET BLUES ☹ XX

By Rebecca Kim Wells

IMPACT CRATER ☹ XX

By Maya Gittelman

Λ TASTE OF COUNTRY ☹ XX

By M.K. England

PARTS OF Λ SYSTEM ☹ XX

By S.J. Whitby

THE ROAD LESS TRAVELED
(BECAUSE THERE'S Λ DETOUR SIGN) ☹ XX

By Emily Lloyd-Jones

LOOK UP ☹ XX

By Beth Revis





PROLOGUE: NO STRANGERS TO LOVE

BY VANIA STOYANOVA AND
ГОСИЕ ТИОР

CHIP: *In a world filled with uncertainty, one group of teenagers will shake the world to its core. Humanity's greatest fear becomes a reality when the skies part to reveal an ancient truth and a force not known before as it descends among the humans.*

No one could have seen their arrival coming.

The world—

No, the United States—

No . . . California. California would never be the same after today.

IONA: CHIP, can you please stop narrating our secret mission?

DEXIN: Yeah, let's not put it all on the comms. If Mom gets a hold of this transcript, I don't want them to know I was part of this.

CHIP: Too late. You'll have to manually delete the files later.

DEXIN: UGH. It's so much work.

IONA: Just do it, Dex. And then get back to the bridge.

Iona pulled her gaze from the text scrolling along her optical lens to refocus on the task at hand The ship's AI, CHIP, was right. They'd be in for a load of hurt if Dexin's mother—or any of their parents, for that matter—got wind of their flawless but entirely unsanctioned operation. They'd set the engines to full-burn to cut the travel time in half just to avoid that unsavory possibility. But none of that would matter if they didn't get where they were going, and for that, Iona needed the whole crew: the pilot, Moysah, with their steady hands on the steering controls; Vidra, the navigator, who was rechecking the trajectory once more; Eames in the medic bay stressing about having enough supplies; Solles, their engineer, who never faced a problem they couldn't solve; and Dexin . . . well, Dexin was probably in his cabin watching videos of fuzzy Terran creatures getting scared by legumes, a genre of Terran entertainment Iona could not and would not understand.

"Report?" Iona barked, eyes flicking across the nav screen. It unfurled before her, every minute detail about the ship and its six passengers.

"We aren't there yet," came Moysah's curt reply. "Just like

we weren't there five minutes ago last time you asked.”

Had it really only been five minutes? The sardonic smile on Moysah's face chastened Iona some. Even seated in the pilot's chair, their long, lanky limbs draped over the armrests without a care in the world, Moysah had an imposing look to them. They were the tallest of them all, pushing seven feet—always looking over their heads so, as they liked to joke, they saw things before anyone else in their crew did. Maybe that was what made them the best pilot in their class. Or, rather, they were the best pilot without a strong sense of self-preservation. No one with an ounce of sense would've signed on for Iona's death wish of a mission. That was just fine by Iona. She had enough sense for the lot of them.

“Do we have an ETA, at least?” she asked through her teeth.

Vidra, seated just behind Moysah, opened her mouth to reply, but the pilot beat her to it.

“We'll get there when we get there. Take a load off, Captain. Watch a Terran movie or something.”

“Watch a Terran movie? What use would that be?”

Moysah pivoted in the pilot's chair and shrugged. “Research.”

Iona narrowed her large eyes, recalling the last of the earthly films Dexin had made them watch in preparation for their mission—*Galaxy Quest*, in which a group of misguided aliens faced disastrous consequences after assuming a work of Terran fiction was fact. Iona, however, didn't have time for such frivolous research when there was more important work to be

done for this mission.

“Or you could argue with CHIP some more,” Moysah muttered.

Before she could rebuff Moysah’s suggestion, a new message from one of her crew crossed the optical screen of her communication center.

EAMES: What if this goes wrong? It can go wrong, you know. It can totally go wrong.

SOLLES: Oh my stars, Eames. Calmness, please. Many calculations were made.

EAMES: What if the Terrans hate us? They usually do, you know.

DEXIN: *Usually?* What do you mean, *usually?*

EAMES: Like in that movie you made us watch.

SOLLES: Specificity is needed. Dexin has made us watch many films.

DEXIN: Eames, buddy. Those aren’t real. Besides, the Terrans have never noticed our presence before. Why should this be any different?

CHIP: They thought they were unstoppable, their mission foolproof, but little did they know there was a grand flaw in their plan.

IONA: CHIP! There’s no flaw. We go in, snatch Axariam, and get out.

EAMES: Maybe CHIP is right. We’re screwed.

SOLLES: Your pessimism is unhelpful, Eames.

CHIP: It was warranted, though. Little did the young Trevvals know what troubles awaited them on the planet below.

IONA: Shut it, CHIP. You, too, Eames.

“So, you’re really not worried?” Moysah asked.

Iona fixed her pilot with a withering stare. “You have time to read the comm log but not enough to back me up?”

“Seems like you had it handled without me.” Moysah shrugged, returning their attention to the nav screen. “Besides, I’ve got a landing to prepare for.”

Iona opened her mouth to argue further, but then Moysah’s words caught up to her. “Landing? Does that mean—”

“Yes, your captainship. If Vidra’s calculations are correct, we’re almost there.”

Vidra nodded in confirmation.

“See?” Moysah inclined their head toward the navigator. “Your brother’s rescue is imminent, assuming nothing goes wrong.”

Iona groaned. “You’re starting to sound like Solles.”

“Better Solles than CHIP.”

Speaking of the troublesome AI, CHIP was still at it in the comm log, not exactly discouraged by Eames.

CHIP: They had not a care for the mistakes they’d made already.

EAMES: What mistakes? CHIP, WHAT MISTAKES?!

CHIP: They had failed to reach the target of their rescue mission to prepare him for extraction.

EAMES: Max doesn't know we're coming?

IONA: Max . . . What an Earth name to go by. It's Axariam.

EAMES: Do you think he just slapped on an M to sound Terran??

DEXIN: I read an interview where he calls it his "stage name."

SOLLES: Is it his first stage or his second stage? How many stages are there?

DEXIN: It's not even his final form!

EAMES: Okay . . . but the question still stands. You couldn't reach him to let him know we're coming to help?

IONA: Have you seen what conditions he lives in? The Terrans have made him one of their idols.

DEXIN: They call them "stars" or "celebrities."

IONA: Nevertheless, he's closely monitored and guarded at all times.

"Did you ever consider Max might not want to come home?" Moysah's voice pulled Iona from her comm port again.

Iona bristled at the use of her brother's Terran name. She was the only one who still used his Trevval name—Axariam—but that would all change once he returned. "No, I didn't." Why would Iona consider that? He was her brother, and he belonged back home. Surely, he hadn't meant to stay on Earth as long as he had. What was it now, five earth years?

"Maybe you should." Moysah's skin tinged blue as they turned their face away, back toward the nav screen. "Not everyone can be like you."

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Iona lurched forward, her safety belt preventing her from standing in her indignation, though her voice rose in volume significantly. “My brother was about to graduate—with honors—before he was taken.”

SOLLES: I thought his mission failed.

EAMES: I heard he ran away

IONA: Stop eavesdropping. This conversation doesn’t concern you.

DEXIN: Then stop screaming. We can hear you through the walls.

SOLLES: I fail to understand your assertion, Captain. If Max did not complete his mission, how was he able to graduate with honors?

Ignoring the chat, as Moysah was wont to do, the pilot’s attention remained on their maps as they spoke. “Max is a smart guy. Which is why I think it’s unlikely he failed his mission.”

“What are you implying?” Iona asked.

“You know Max better than anyone, right? Why do you think he hasn’t made an escape?”

Iona didn’t have a reply. The truth was, she *thought* she’d known her brother. Before, he was on track to become one of the youngest captains the Trevvals had seen in a decade. He was good. Better than Iona, she was loath to admit. Their parents were so happy. Iona would give anything to see her parents’ faces awash with that same pride for her own accomplishments. But Axariam . . . he hadn’t cared about things like that.

He hadn't cared about much of anything.

SOLLES: How did your brother end up in Monica—

CHIP: Santa Monica. Los Angeles, to be exact. Previous flight logs took him to Toronto, Beijing, and Dull.

DEXIN: Wait . . . *Dull?*

VIDRA: It is a location in Scotland.

EAMES: Another city?

VIDRA: City is a generous term.

CHIP: The mission was destined for Perth but missed the mark by approximately fifty kilometers.

IONA: How is this important?

CHIP: It isn't! I simply aim to add much-needed dimensional flavor to your conversation.

DEXIN: You're calling us dull?

CHIP: No, I'm calling the landing site of Max's third mission Dull, which is its name.

IONA: Whatever. The point is, he has always come back. This time won't be an exception. I'll make sure of that.

EAMES: So, do you think he's being held captive or something?

SOLLES: Or maybe he's been brainwashed.

EAMES: Did you see their last interview with that person, umm . . .

SOLLES: Mr. Fair? Vanity Fair?

EAMES: The one where he was strapped down to that machine? Forced to spill his secrets?

SOLLES: It is so cruel.

EAMES: I like the one where they forced him to contend with a horde of small beasts.

IONA: You did not just say you like seeing my brother tortured by the Terrans, Eames.

EAMES: The beasts are so cute, though

VIDRA: They looked very soft. I wonder if we'll meet any during our mission.

DEXIN: Everybody shut up and look at your feeds.

IONA: A new missive?

DEXIN: Max is on television again!

“Vidra—”

“On it!” Vidra said, her voice squeaky as she pulled up the video feed Dexin had shared with all of them, displaying it on the large screen in place of her navigation charts.

Humans with their painted faces and bold features paraded through the screen in colorful garb. Iona had to admit that while they looked so different—and small compared to herself and her fellow Trevvals—the Terrans had a certain intrigue about them. A human with voluminous golden hair and a glittery blue dress stood on a carpet of vibrant red. In her hand, she held some sort of tool with a long handle inscribed with metallic Terran letters. Perhaps it was a weapon.

“I’m Trixie Pierce, coming to you live from the red carpet in Santa Monica, where later this evening a star-studded guest list will take in the cinematic wonder of *Midnight Eyes*.

Leading man, Max Spencer, is here with us via satellite to share some juicy details in advance of tonight's premiere." A second box came into frame next to the woman with what appeared to be a Terran man, though Iona would recognize her brother anywhere, even with his cloaking device on. "Max, curious minds want to know. What's been your experience with this project and working with the director? Coming from music to movies, this must have been quite the adventure."

"I won't lie. It hasn't been easy." Iona's heart seemed to stop in her chest as the voice of her brother speaking the Terran English language filled her ears.

EAMES: What's wrong with this face?

DEXIN: The magic of contour and botox!

SOLLES: Is that some other kind of torture?

DEXIN: In a way . . .

Axariam—or Max, Iona could deign to call him in his disguise—and the Terran laughed together. Iona's ears filled with a roaring anger, her heart beating a warrior cry in her chest. She would save him. She had to save him.

"Everything you've heard . . . it's all true. He really puts his actors to work. It's rough, but honestly? We wouldn't want it any other way. He pushes us. Makes us dig into ourselves . . ."

EAMES: Surely this is a cry for help.

SOLLES: If he is being asked to dig into himself, why can't we see his wounds?

DEXIN: I told you, contour!

“Well, there you have it folks! Don’t miss the enigmatic Max Spencer in *Midnight Eyes* this weekend. Here’s the trailer now.”

The screen flashed away from them to show an overhead view of misty pine trees as low orchestral notes played in the background, then it cut to a forest path. Words in gold curling letters appeared over it all.

When the beast is inside you . . .

There was the sound of heavy footfalls and breathing, a shot of a large paw print in the mud, and then . . . Max. Shirtless and covered in a sheen of sweat, his eyes darted around. The letters returned, snaking up around his shoulders.

There’s nowhere to run.

A chill scurried down Iona’s back. She’d never seen that look on her brother’s face before. It was pure panic, unmitigated fear. They’d also done something to the lower half of his torso—made it look fuller and strangely lumpy. Perhaps it was a result of the torture, though Iona had never seen another Trevval with such symptoms.

“We’ll bring you home. I promise,” she whispered to her brother on the screen, now standing in front of a roaring waterfall, still only half-clothed.

DEXIN: Apparently, Terrans like movies about abs.

SOLLES: What’s “abs?”

CHIP: Abs refer to the appealing feature in Terrans when their abdominal muscles are well defined, akin to rocks or a

sextet of canned beverages bound together with plastic.

“I can’t believe *this* is my job,” Moysah groaned. “Can we get back to the mission?”

Iona would have liked nothing more, but the image on the screen had changed once more. Max swung a tool over his head, slamming it down to split a piece of wood in half.

“At least they gave him a weapon.” Iona’s chest felt tight as she forced out the words. “I just wish he wasn’t alone in all this.”

“Wish granted, apparently.”

Moysah pointed to the screen, which now depicted Max beside another shirtless Terran. This one had hair growing out of their torso and long hair pulled into a knot behind their head.

SOLLES: What are they doing now?

CHIP: This is when two humans have a meeting of the lips. Also known as kissing.

IONA: That’s disgusting.

EAMES: I don’t know. Maybe it’s nice . . .

DEXIN: Do you think we should try it?

EAMES: Ew! Not with you!

Moysah, apparently fed up with waiting on Iona’s permission, switched the screen back over to the navigation control panel.

“We’re getting close now. Entering orbit soon,” Vidra said. Her eyes were glued to the nav screen, but her fingers worried over a small metal device in her lap. Nervous as always, but Iona would rather her navigator be nervous than distracted like the others.

IONA: Focus up, everyone. It's time.

EAMES: Time for what?

IONA: Are you joking?

CHIP: Better not be. Everyone knows I'm the funny one.

IONA: The plan is simple. Moysah will land stealthily in the mountains of Hollywood. From there, we'll make our way to the movie premiere, and when we get there, Dexin and I will make our way inside once Eames and Solles have created a diversion. Meanwhile, Moysah and Vidra will prep the transporters to teleport us back to the ship quickly. We rendezvous at the ship with my brother in tow and leave Earth forever.

CHIP: This plan lacks many details.

IONA: This is the condensed version, CHIP! And besides, *you* are not part of this plan. You're staying on the ship.

CHIP: I may not inhabit a body like the rest of you, but you cannot leave me behind. I will be with each and every one of you via your communication ports whether you like it or not.

IONA: I do not.

DEXIN: Hey, CHIP. *I* appreciate you, buddy.

CHIP: And I, you. Buddy.

EAMES: Are you two going to have a meeting of the lips?

CHIP: That would be quite impossible. I do not have a mouth.

DEXIN: Let me tell you, you're missing out.

SOLLES: Just a moment, why are Eames and I the distraction? Isn't Dexin better suited?

DEXIN: I'm better suited for a lot of things, but unlike CHIP, I can't be in two places at once.

IONA: I need Dexin with me. He's the most knowledgeable about Terran customs.

EAMES: Solles just wants to see the abs up close.

SOLLES: I do not!

EAMES: Well, I do.

DEXIN: Hey, you could've prepared for this like I did. Then maybe you'd be going with the boss.

SOLLES: Are you really calling watching hundreds of hours of *The Big Bang Theory* "preparation?"

DEXIN: How else would I know that it is customary to announce your presence at someone's residence by knocking and calling their name three times?

IONA: You have your assignments, and they're final.

DEXIN: Hey, I'm good. I'm just worried about you, Captain.

IONA: Why?

DEXIN: You don't exactly have the Terran lingo down.

Iona narrowed her eyes and made a gruff involuntary sound in the back of her throat.

"Hey, Dexin's right." Moysah eyed her up and down. "You're not exactly a California vibe."

Iona adopted her best impression of a Terran, a mishmash of the various clips Dexin had shown her over the years. "I've toooooooally got dis!"

DEXIN: I heard that, and it was terrible.

CHIP: No amount of Hollywood coaching would help the Captain. She was a seven-foot-tall alien, with eyes too wide for Terran standards and skin that changed color with the temperature, about to enter unprepared into the height of human society. Glitz and glam clashed with her very spirit.

DEXIN: A scathingly accurate description, CHIP.

IONA: Okay, well at least we have our tech to help us blend in.

SOLLES: Speaking of which . . .

EAMES: Don't tell us there's a problem with the cloaking devices.

SOLLES: I would not characterize it as a "problem."

VIDRA: Oh, good. I don't think I could handle being gawked at by a bunch of Terrans.

SOLLES: However . . . I have not been granted enough time to fully develop the cloaking devices you requested, Captain.

IONA: What do you mean, Solles? Our whole operation falls apart without disguises.

SOLLES: Rest assured, the Terrans will only see you as one of their own. However, it is best to avoid getting wet.

IONA: Dare I ask, why?

SOLLES: The cloaking technology I was able to create is not as sophisticated as official tech like what Max has, unfortunately. It may become faulty if you submerge yourself or the device in water or other liquids.

DEXIN: So as long as none of us goes for a swim, we're good?

That should be easy enough.

CHIP: The planet Earth is 71 percent water.

VIDRA: But Santa Monica is part of the continent.

IONA: Okay, so we'll all avoid water, and the cloaking devices will work as intended. No one will be able to tell the difference between us and your average Terran.

Moysah let out a loud cough, jolting Iona away from the chat log.

“What?”

“It's just . . . you can use a cloaking device to disguise your body, but I don't know how you're going to disguise that stick up your—”

“I will remind you that I am your captain, Moysah,” Iona growled.

“See? This is my point.”

“Your job is to get us where we're going, not to critique my personality.”

Moysah shrugged. “As your best friend, I think it's a little bit my job.”

Iona bristled with pent-up energy. Between her brother's hostage situation and the long hours spent cooped up on the ship, she was eager to get to work. Waiting wasn't in her blood. She wanted to get to Earth, and she wanted to get there quickly—she'd even doubled the engine output so they could do it in a day. But Moysah wasn't the right outlet for her anger. No, she was saving all that for the Terrans who took her brother.

“Whatever. Would you just fly?” she said, looking back at the chat. Moysah still hadn’t joined. “And plug in, won’t you? Once we land, these are the only things keeping us linked. I don’t want to lose touch.”

Moysah ignored her.

The chat log pinged.

MOYSAH: Attention, crew! We are in orbit. Landing in T-5 Earth minutes.

IONA: See? Was that so hard?

DEXIN: Hard like Max’s abs!

MOYSAH: Our clock starts now. We have 12 Earth hours to get in and get out.

IONA: We just need two.

VIDRA: Local time in Santa Monica is 1200 hours.

DEXIN: That’s a lot of hours.

VIDRA: It means it’s midday.

DEXIN: Just so you know, most Terrans call that “noon.”

EAMES: If we miss curfew, you know we’ll be in so much trouble. Maybe even grounded for the rest of the solar cycle.

IONA: That won’t happen. And besides, it would be worth it to have Axariam home.

SOLLES: Wear your cloaking devices at all times and remember to avoid bodies of water. The consequences of being discovered by the humans will be disastrous not only for our safety but for all Trevvals. We have no way of knowing how they’ll react. The historical implications would—

DEXIN: Yes, we get it.

IONA: We won't fail.

CHIP: Famous last words.

IONA: Can we turn you off?

DEXIN: NO! I mean . . . As your Communications Director on this mission . . . No. That also would be disastrous.

EAMES: Are you sure you and CHIP don't have something going on?

DEXIN: We turn CHIP off, and we lose all access to our portal back. It's that simple. And more importantly, we can't risk losing communication with each other when we get to the surface.

MOYSAH: Whatever would we do without your constant chit-chat?

DEXIN: Your sarcasm is uncalled for.

MOYSAH: I think you'll find it is, in fact, called for.

IONA: Everybody shut up. But please, once we land, tone down the dramatics. Only communicate as needed. There will be enough going on without the stream of consciousness clogging up the feed.

DEXIN: Good thing I'll be going with you. I can regale you with my every thought in person!

EAMES: Bet you regret not making Dexin the distraction now, huh?

IONA: What did I just say about clogging up the feed?

VIDRA: To be fair, you only said it mattered once we land

IONA: Well, it matters now, too. Got it?

SOLLES: Yes, Captain!

VIDRA: Copy!

EAMES: Sure.

DEXIN: Yeehaw!

IONA: Does that mean you understand?

DEXIN: It is a traditional Terran exclamation of excitement and horsemanship.

IONA: . . . So *does* that mean you understand?

DEXIN: Ugh, yes. You're no fun.

IONA: CHIP, that means you, too.

CHIP: Their trusty, bodiless sidekick was ready to guide the heroes through their treacherous journey to rescue their friend. On the mountainous horizon, there was triumph in the air!

With a sigh, Iona turned to Vidra and Moysah in turn. "Ready?" she asked.

"Everything is in order," Vidra said.

"On your signal." Moysah, laser-focused, didn't take their eyes off the nav screen.

IONA: Everyone strap in.

EAMES: Done!

SOLLES: Here we go

MOYSAH: Initiating landing sequence.

DEXIN: Are you ready to roll???

IONA: Is that a Terran turn of phrase?

Dexin didn't reply. Instead, a rhythmic electronic sequence

sounded from the main console as Moysah's navigation maps disappeared, replaced by a video of a gangly Terran with a shock of red hair moving in a strange pattern of gyration. His lips moved, and a deep melodic tone escaped as he sang: "*We're no strangers to love . . .*"

MOYSAH: Dexin, I will strangle you with my bare hands.

IONA: Turn it off. Now.

DEXIN: Oh, come on!

IONA: Seriously, what is this?

CHIP: Dexin has just engaged in a traditional Terran custom called Rick Rolling. Ha-ha. Good one, Dexin.

DEXIN: Thank you. See? CHIP understands me.

IONA: And I wish you and CHIP a very happy life together. But can you make it stop?

DEXIN: CHIP would never give me up.

CHIP: Quite correct.

DEXIN: CHIP would never let me down.

MOYSAH: Speaking of letting people down . . .

DEXIN: CHIP would never run around and desert me.

MOYSAH: Shut up, Dexin. We're in trouble.

Iona's head snapped up. "What kind of trouble?"

"That kind." Vidra pointed a spindly finger at a blinking red light in the corner of the screen.

Moysah groaned. "Something's wrong, but I can't tell what because of Dexin's stupid video."

IONA: Dexin, make it stop. NOW.

DEXIN: Okay, okay. Let me just . . .

But whatever Dexin was going to do, it wasn't fast enough. Iona didn't need the nav screen when she could just look out the window. The planet was coming at them fast. Too fast.

IONA: Escape pods, now!!

CHIP: Warning! Warning!

MOYSAH: We know!

IONA: A little late, CHIP.

Vidra was already halfway to the escape pods by the time Iona wrestled herself free of her restraints. Grabbing Moysah by the hand, Iona wrenched her friend from the pilot's seat and pushed her down the hallway. She saw a flash of movement as the others barreled their way toward safety.

"Go!" Iona shouted.

Moysah clung to Iona's hand. "Not without you." Her friend looked at her with pleading eyes, face contorted in a pained expression. "There are six escape pods—one for each of us."

Iona felt a twinge below her ribs. It felt wrong to part from Moysah now. There was a nebulous sense of *something* she ought to say, but Iona had never been good at such things. Instead, she squeezed Moysah's hand, hoping the pilot understood better than she did how much they mattered to her. Iona didn't have the time to linger on such thoughts now, though. None of them did. Someone had to get the ship to ground safely, or they'd have no way to leave Earth once they got there. She held her ground, prying Moysah's fingers from around her wrist.

“I’m the captain, Moysah. I go down with the ship.”

Before Moysah could so much as open her mouth to argue, Iona shoved her into the closest pod and slammed her fist down on the door’s controls. She would see them again. She had to believe that.

CHIP: The crew went their separate ways, never to see each other again.

IONA: CHIP, I swear I will reboot you when all this is over.

CHIP: You wouldn’t dare!

IONA: Get me safely to the ground, and I’ll reconsider.

With a speed she wasn’t certain she was capable of, Iona launched herself into the pilot’s seat, fingers flying over the controls. In the corner of the screen, a bulletin flashed green six times. One for each of the escape pods.

IONA: Turn on the gravity regulator so we don’t die on impact.

CHIP: It is done. However, the impact is not my main concern.

IONA: What is?

CHIP: The engines are too hot. No matter how hard we hit the ground, there will be an explosion.

IONA: Too hot? Why?

CHIP: The engines have been running for too long at full power.

IONA: What idiot set them that high?

CHIP: You did, Captain.

IONA: No—

CHIP: You requested we get to Earth in the fastest way possible.

Iona swore under her breath. In her haste to get to her brother, she'd forgotten to think about the consequences. CHIP was right. This was all her fault.

IONA: Can you run a cooling protocol?

CHIP: Unfortunately, I am unable to do so.

Iona swept her gaze over the nav screen, but she barely knew what she was looking at. Vidra was the expert, not her. But then something caught her eye out the window . . . something big and blue.

IONA: What if we plan for a water landing?

CHIP: That would, indeed, mitigate some of the flammable potential of the impact.

She didn't need telling twice. Iona keyed in new landing coordinates and locked the autopilot.

CHIP: Might I make a suggestion?

IONA: I don't see a way to stop you.

CHIP: Fasten your seatbelt so you do not experience a traumatic and unseemly death.

IONA: Thanks for that mental image

The planet was a smooth globe of green and blue no more. Instead, Iona was plunged into murky atmosphere. Clouds obscured her vision out the window, and the nav screen was a jumble of sequences she did not understand. With an involuntary gasp of air, Iona buckled her seatbelt and closed her

eyes. There was no point in watching what was sure to be a grizzly end.

The ship shuddered beneath her, engines roaring. Iona could hear every click and groan of metal. The temperature rose, her skin certainly transforming with the heat. It was her one saving grace, the thermal layer of skin all Trevvals had. It would make her look utterly strange to the Terrans below, but it would keep her from burning up inside the ship and from succumbing to hypothermia once she was in the water. She might yet survive this.

The impact came before she could brace for it, a force greater and stranger than Iona could have imagined. Her legs felt numb from the shock, her jaw rigid.

CHIP: We have made landing . . . or watering . . .

Iona couldn't do more than sit and stare. At the water around them, at the way her ship rocked back and forth, the way her muscles screamed to move.

CHIP: Captain?

It would take only a thought to write a response, but everything felt like too much. She was alive, but was anyone else?

IONA: Report. What's your status?

She waited . . . and waited . . . and waited . . . It was taking too long. If they were all right, someone would have responded by now. The grim possibility washed over her like a wave, threatening to pull her under. Or maybe that was an actual wave outside the ship. She'd had a plan, and it had failed.

But she couldn't let that stop her. Her brother needed her. She would do this alone if she had to.

CHIP: Communications do not appear to be working. The impact has disrupted my ability to receive their signal, among other things.

IONA: *Among other things?*

CHIP: My ability to interface with the ship has been damaged as well.

IONA: What does that mean?

CHIP: It means we are unable to take off until this issue has been fixed.

IONA: And how do I do that?

CHIP: It is a simple matter of recalibrating me with the Trevval network.

IONA: Where's Solles when you need them?

CHIP: Do not fret, Captain! For I, your trusty AI, will give you step-by-step instructions and companionable affirmations along the way.

IONA: Please don't, I beg of you

CHIP: My ability to comprehend negativity has also been damaged in the crash, it seems. I cannot compute your request.

IONA: Completely hopeless irritating personality . . .

CHIP: Actually, it stands for Cybernetic Helpful Informational Personality!

IONA: I never thought I'd say this, but I miss Dexin. He'd know how to shut you up.

CHIP: I can guide you in that endeavor as well, but first you must procure another piece of Trevval technology for me to sync up with.

IONA: Like my cloaking device or something?

CHIP: Your cloaking device is paired with our ship already; therefore, it is of no use to me.

IONA: What about my brother's?

CHIP: Max's translator or communication port would be acceptable.

IONA: Okay, we'll do that when we pick him up. What about the rest of the crew?

CHIP: The others are still out there, but we cannot make contact. Your crew's vitals are still reading as normal . . . mostly. We may yet see them alive again.

IONA: Isn't that a little optimistic?

CHIP: What the Captain did not know was that hope was not all she had at her disposal. With her trusty sidekick, CHIP, there was nothing the dynamic duo could not overcome.

Iona tore the AI consul from the dashboard.

"Well, that wasn't very nice," said CHIP through her earpiece.

Iona didn't dignify that with a response. Instead, she wrapped the loose wires around her wrist, fashioning ship-CHIP into a bracelet. With any luck, it would look a little like a Terran mobile device—Dexin had called them some kind of fruit watch. When she was done, she turned her attention back to the chat log.

IONA: Seriously . . . anyone else out there?

She had to find the others. She was a captain, after all, and a captain always had a crew.

IONA: Please?

For a moment, silence wrapped around Iona in the shell of the ship as it bobbed along with the Terran sea. No reply came in the chat log. Iona's chest constricted. She should have known better than to hope.

But then, from the warped speakers of the device around her wrist came a familiar electronic beat and lyrics that made her face split into an undignified grin she would later deny most vehemently.

We're no strangers to love . . .