

EMPATHY FARM

I can tell that this voyage has reached a critical mass of fuckedness (*fuck•ID•niss, archaic, n.*) because I have a meeting with Boreas Ground Control in two minutes to discuss our spike in incident reports, and instead of getting prepared for this meeting, I am on comms with Gomez, and he is telling me that a maintenance issue is now my urgent problem. For six years, I have been blessed with his ability to get handed a problem in any department and make it go away. No longer so.

“We’ll need you here so we can begin acting as soon as possible,” he tells me. “Central cargo hull, entrance Celtic.”

“Deescalate this to priority Axon and you could begin right away,” I try.

Aboard U.F.S. craft, there are two categories of maintenance issues: priorities and emergencies, also called A-B’s and 1-2’s. Priority Axon, priority Bartholomew, priority Celtic, emergency 1, and emergency 2 can all be acted on without notifying the on-board mission commander—me. Emergency 0 requires the notification of the commander but can be acted on immediately, because inaction could cause catastrophic failure. Priority Serpentine requires approval from the commander before action is taken, because action could cause catastrophic failure.

“Palmer entered this as priority Axon, sir. I escalated this to priority Serpentine, sir. You need to see this sooner rather than later.”

I rap my knuckles against my desk, then escalate it to a final bang of my fist on the oak wood. I key my comms over to my second in command. "Jason."

"Sir."

"Can you handle Boreas Ground Control solo?"

He considers very briefly. "I don't think it's a good look, but yes, send me your notes and I'll handle it."

I key back to Gomez. "I'll be down in two."

My name is James Alexander Bachman, Colonel, on-board commanding officer of *Starwell II*.

When I arrive at central cargo, Acting Specialist Gomez is holding out a tablet for me. I grab it and look at the screen. What I see is a light grey square on a dark grey background. Cutting halfway through the light grey square is a line.

I look up at the support pillar, which even in this very tall room is thick enough to be a cube. The sides are all plastered. I look back down at the tablet, then the support again, then at Gomez. "This pillar?"

"All ten of the pillars, sir."

My guts twist. I ask, "What's our time frame?"

Gomez cracks a knuckle, wobbles his head. "We're lucky in that we found this during the smoothest part of our journey. If we have a problem, it shouldn't be until we get to turbulence nearer Boreas. Forty one days until then, sir."

"How long to fix these?"

Gomez is silent.

I look to the other personnel standing nearby him who are not eager to chime in or make eye contact. I single one out.

"You. How long?"

He gives a dispirited laugh. "On-planet, it could take a week to fix one in the best case."

"Report to your superior for a lashing and two weeks solitary."

"I—"

"Five lashings."

He leaves.

"You. How long to fix one of these, here in space where we currently find ourselves?"

The man's voice rasps but he does not hesitate to answer because he has some sort of a brain in him. "With the tools we have aboard, we estimate we could fix the supports at a rate of two every twenty days, commander sir."

"One hundred days."

"Yes, sir."

"Odds of failure on this project?"

"It's never been done before, sir."

"Give me a number."

He begins thinking aloud which is not what I asked of him, but I worry it's the best I'll get at the moment. "Collapse of any one support would result in catastrophic mission failure. It would be a race against time for any rescue crews to arrive soon enough to save anyone who happened to be on a portion of the ship that could remain sealed. As I said, we've never done this before—"

"Report to your superior. One week solitary."

He nods and dashes away, well aware of how lightly he's gotten off.

"Gomez?"

"If we stop in the water and dedicate all hands to this, ninety five percent odds we can do the entire project without failure. If we don't act and hit the turbulence as we currently are, I'd give us south of fifty getting to Boreas."

He is bullshitting the numbers, but I take his point about the importance of acting on this.

I take a deep breath, in, out, staring up at the beam. "Who let it get to this? Are these fractures spontaneous or did we leave port this way? Have we left port like this more than once?"

Gomez: "The layers of plastering suggest we've left port with at least some fracturing for the last four years."

"Specialist Gomez, I want you to put anyone who might be responsible in cryo until we sort this out, on grounds of treason."

"It will be done, sir."

I step up and whisper into his ear. "*Anyone* responsible. Ganymede Contingency." This means I've approved the use of his real rank instead of playing U.F.S. Specialist. "Throw your weight around liberally."

He nods.

I step back. "Get prepared to begin on repairs, but don't lower our sails quite yet."

Gomez: "Yes, sir."

"Dismissed, all of you."

They flee.

I reach up to my comms and key the head of surveillance. "Katherine."

"Commander Bachman."

"Can you pull video of anyone performing inspection or maintenance of the support pillar located in central cargo over the last four years?"

I hear typing, and then, "Done."

"I'll be up in two."

As I walk, I key Jason. "How did the meeting go?"

"Not well, sir. Commander Nguyen wasn't interested in a word that wasn't from you."

"Well, it's about to get worse when they hear the latest."

"Sir?"

"Deep fractures in all ten supports aboard the ship."

Silence.

"Yeah. We're going to play it safe and glide in the water for a bit. I'll have more details to come."

"Understood, sir."

When I am arriving at the door to surveillance HQ, the ship's emergency lights come on. I have only seen this before in drills. I enter into Katherine's realm and count myself lucky to be somewhere that might be able to provide answers and resolution as to who is being executed.

Surveillance HQ is arranged similarly to mission control on-planet. Katherine sits at the back center, typing furiously and glancing between her quad monitors. "Commander," she says in greeting as I approach from behind.

"What happened?"

She grabs one of the monitors and pushes it up on its arm to face me. On it are eight stills of work being done on the support. "These people knew about the fractures as they were developing and submitted false reports. Likely more personnel involved from the other supports. Working on a full list of names."

“Send that to me when you have it.”

“Yes, sir.”

“What happened to set off the emergency lights?”

Her typing becomes even more furious, and then comes to a dead stop. She pushes up another monitor for me and then leans back in her chair. “We’ve been boarded.”

“WHAT?”

She sneers and shrugs at the same time, then gestures helplessly at the monitor.

There are two feeds being shown, both appearing to be live camera footage. The first shows the exterior of *Starwell II*, and a leech-like object clinging to the side of it, hardly visible against the blackness of space. The second shows an interior hallway, where two non-human creatures stand near a circular hole in a wall. The creatures are in the vicinity of eight feet tall, and have slimy yellow skin. We—humans—have observed alien life from lightyears afar, but never conceived of contact being possible. FTL has only been achieved between stellar bodies where a station has already been established on each side. The two aliens in the hall are both holding rifles. I look down at Katherine’s other monitors and realize that there are many more breaches than just the one that she’s highlighted for me.

“They haven’t broken the airlock,” Katherine mentions. She reaches across her desk, grabs a microphone by the cord, pulls it over, and offers it to me. “Do you want to make first contact?”

I shake my head and faint.

When I awaken I find that Jason and Gomez are also here in surveillance. Katherine briefs me on how much further the situation has deteriorated. Peaceful speech was attempted but the aliens advanced and fired their rifles, which by some yet-undetermined means render the target unconscious. We retaliated with less-than-lethals which had some effect, but their weaponry proved superior, and we have escalated to using lethals and sectioning off all divisions of the ship. They are currently outside the door to several HQ’s, including surveillance, though they seem to be holding for the moment. I see that Jason, Gomez, and Katherine are all in the possession of shotguns, and I request one as well. Gomez hands me his and

walks off to retrieve another for himself. Before he's gone five steps, the HQ door is blasted open.

I have no memory of this incident resolving. I strongly believe I was hit with one of their rifles.

When I awaken this time, I am not aboard *Starwell II*. I am also not in the Christian afterlife of Hell, nor am I in Valhalla, unless one of the two was very poorly described to me. I wonder whether I am dead at all. I do not care to be scientific about it and try to kill myself. On the marginal chance that I am not dead already, then I don't wish to become so.

I am lying in a field of grass. The sky above is blue. It is broad daylight and lightly cloudy. I can see stars, one of which is a sun, but I *can* see other stars besides the locally relevant one. I have not set foot on a planet, moon, asteroid, or similar since graduating from basic ten years ago. One could imagine it a comfort to be back on solid ground, but I am terrified. I feel as though I am an aeroplane without an engine. A sailboat with a sawed off mast. I am stranded, grounded, all but immobile.

I sit up. Look around. There are trees here, but I do not know the type of them. They have hanging flexible branches like weeping willows, but they connect from tree to tree, like an immense bird's nest, or else a spider web. The branches billow in the breeze.

I am wearing clothes, but I do not recognize them. They are loose-fitting light-blue pants and an oversized light-brown t-shirt.

I stand. There is a singular trail leading out of this clearing. A dirt path with no hanging branches in the way. I bite.

I have been walking for about an hour in this place when it occurs to me that there are no birds, no chirping insects. There are trees, there is the grass, and there is a wind that causes the flora to make a rustling sound when it picks up.

When I arrive at something, what I arrive at is an idyllic farm. I stand at one side of a large paddock, and across the way, I can squint and see a pair of silos, four barns, and a water tower. I walk around the paddock fence. It is the afternoon, and it is occurring to me that I am hungry.

When I near the farm, I hear a sheep baa, and chickens cluck.

I wander around. There is a brown horse in one barn, three white sheep in another, many chickens in the next, and the last barn is filled with machinery and tools. I am dumbfounded. There is no house here, no office, no pavilion, no chairs or benches, and no road or path that leads away from this farm besides the footpath that I arrived by. I know that this is strange. I have never set foot on a farm before, if this is a farm. But I know that this is strange.

There is no food, anyways. I scour the barns bottom to top looking for a pantry or a refrigerator. The animals make their sounds at me. In the barn of tools, I do find a lighter, and with it, a plan comes to me as though the plan and the lighter were attached. I will make a campfire. I will wait until night for anyone to come. And when night falls, if no one has arrived, I am eating one of the chickens.

After procuring a saw and an axe, I head off only a short ways into the woods before I am able to find an already-fallen tree. From it, by evening, I have a very respectable pile of firewood. There is no fire pit on the farm, but there is a patch of dirt, about ten feet in diameter, in the otherwise grassy paddock. With the logs and some dry hay from the silo, I manage to get something started before it has gotten dark.

I sit on one of the logs and stare at the fire. Occasionally I glance up at the barns. Occasionally I glance down at my hands. They are worn red and raw in some places from the work of turning the fallen tree into logs. I rub the raw parts of my palm with my thumb, but I cannot feel it. I am strongly preoccupied with hunger.

I give it an hour into the night, and have resolved with certainty that if nobody is visiting this farm, then nobody will miss one of the chickens. I stand and walk to the chicken barn. As I walk, I look around. I have grown more skeptical of this place, not less. I know exceedingly little about farms, and so I find this farm trying, because it seems incorrect, but not in any way that I could put a name to. It feels made up. It feels made up by me.

I enter the chicken barn and am struck with anxiety like I have not felt since I was a teenager. I press on, hands shaking from hunger. The chickens run from me, but I am able to corner

one and grab it by the neck. As soon as I grab it, someone is choking me, and my anxiety ascends to panic at being caught here. I point an elbow as I whirl around to push off my assailant, but when I turn, there is nobody else in the barn. I look around skeptically. There are the chickens. There is no one here who could have grabbed me. The only door is on the far side of the barn, and I do not believe anyone could have cleared the distance in the time it took me to whirl around. I am delirious from hunger, I tell myself.

I chase after the chickens again. Again, I chase one into a corner and grab it, this time by the body. As I do I can feel, physically, like someone is choking me, but I turn, still holding the chicken, and there is nobody. Perhaps the hunger is more severe than I had realized. I don't know how long I was asleep for, out in the clearing in the woods. I carry the chicken out of the barn, feeling like invisible giants are jabbing me with their fingers as I walk, making me stumble, making me double over in pain. I am terrified, but I am committed to resolving one thing, by making food for myself.

I come back to the fire. I grab the axe, but cannot coordinate holding the chicken down and chopping its head off, possibly an effect of my fatigue conspiring with my inexperience. I toss the axe aside, grab the chicken by the head and body, and snap its neck. I scream and collapse to the ground as I feel the utter void of my life being ended: in one second was hunger and anxiety and phantom pains, and in the next, there is no hunger, no anxiety, no pain, no thought, no presence. I am gone. Some aspect of me has gone, anyways, forever. But also I am still here, on my side on the ground, screaming at the top of my lungs as I stare blankly past the fire.

I spend the night shaking and crying and staring at nothing. There is only a brief break from this where I look at the dead body of the chicken, whose death I felt as my death, whose hunger and pain and fear was my hunger and pain and fear.

As morning comes, my body fills again with sensations of hunger and thirst, though there is still a corner that is void, a corner of my own self that is there, but that I can no longer go to.

I try vainly to sleep, and am unsurprised when I cannot.

I sit up. I sit staring at the fire for a while longer, shaking. Eventually I stand and go to get water from the faucet at the base of the water tower. When I turn the water on, the water flows. I drink for a long time. I return to the campfire. I pick up the chicken, almost hopeful to feel pain as I do, but there is no sensation. Not from it, not from myself. I pluck its feathers and cook the bird with the fire. Its meat looks like roasted chicken when it is done, but although I recognize it, I do not feel I am looking at food, at something that my body would accept. I eat anyways, greedily, grease falling down my chin and soaking my fingers. When I am done, I wipe the grease off on my shirt, and go to take a walk around the paddock.

As I walk, I can still feel my body trembling. Worse, I can still feel hunger and thirst exactly as strongly as I felt it before I ate and drank. Even after coming all the way around the paddock back to the barns, I am starving.

I take off my greasy shirt, and wash my hands and face more thoroughly under the water faucet. I set the shirt inside the tool barn, planning to search for detergent or spare clothes later. In the meantime, I retrieve a bucket and go to the silos. In one silo is grain, tiny yellow pellets. I fill the bucket. I walk to the chicken barn. I toss the grain around to them, and they peck it off the ground. I can feel my hunger easing already. I curse this cruel godforsaken place under my breath. I go to the hay silo and grab armfuls of the stuff, hugging it against my bare chest. If it is pricking me, I cannot feel anything. I put hay into a long trough for the sheep and a round basin for the horse. When they have all been fed, I am no longer hungry.

I carry water to troughs for each of them by the bucketful, and my thirst is soon sated. I ask God to damn this place and rescue me, return me to my life aboard *Starwell II*, deliver me back to my role as commander.

I walk back around the outside of the paddock, back up the forest trail, back to the clearing where I first arrived. I stand with my hands clasped behind my back, staring up at the starry daytime sky, longing.

My longing is not answered, and I eventually head back to the farm. On the walk back, I rub my knuckles against my ribs, against my sternum. I do not feel pain from it. I stop on the trail,

pull down my pants, and toy with myself. I am able to become erect, though it seems perfunctory, as I do not feel pleasure either. I pull up my pants and keep walking.

I feel utterly trapped in this place. I have been all around the farm now, and have still seen no sign of a road to an outside world. Coming up to the barns, I look at the water tower, and see that there is indeed a ladder to the top. I climb up, above the barns, and then above the strange spiderweb of willows. On my hands and knees atop the water tower, I look around and around, and it is nothing different to what I had expected. The willows continue to the horizon in every direction at a basically uniform height. There is not a single structure or landmark as far as the eye can see. I climb back down.

I have a longing to run. I have been cooped up here.

I take off my pants, electing to run in my underwear if no one else is around to give a damn. I do a lap around the outside of the paddock, knowing that my physical training has laxed since basic, and it will be an accomplishment if I can get around the entire fence without slowing to a walk.

When I have made it all the way around, a dread hangs over my head. I am not tired out by the run, and I still feel trapped, claustrophobic, like I have been in solitary confinement. I do another lap at a sprint. Another. Another ten. I become certain that I am dead, before remembering that I now have firsthand knowledge of death's void, and so I cannot give this experience the name of death exactly.

I go put on my pants. As I am putting them on, my eyes wander to the horse barn, and I realize my idiocy.

I open the paddock fence, and then I open the door to the horse's stall. The horse trots out of the stall, and once it has cleared the barn door, it breaks into a gallop into the paddock. There it sprints around and around the field, and my feelings of confinement ebb, and in their place comes a feeling of contentment, relief. I see the horse urinate, and feel another relief from a discomfort that I had not consciously realized was needing me.

I rub my knuckles across my ribs, and still feel nothing.

I look at the horse, and accept that although I, James Alexander Bachman, am not dead, I am also not alive in the

same way that I was before. I am now another phylum of being. I am now an angel, or a ghost, or a ghoul, or some unnamed category of steward, or slave.

I do not go eagerly into my new life, but I do not cut off my nose to spite my face. When I feel hunger, I feed the animals. When I feel thirst, I water them. I learn their longings, sometimes a longing to roam the paddock, other times a longing to return to the shelter of the barn. One day, one of the chickens falls sick, and I do not know what I can do to help it. By sunrise the next day, there is a second void spot in my consciousness. I had sat in the chicken coop all night, watching the bird whose dying pains I could feel every pang of. The chicken at no point disbelieved its sudden terminal illness, from the onset to the terminal breath. When it died, I went over and sat beside it, mourning the loss of the life, by way of the new void torn through myself.

After that day, I no longer trudge through my duties, but attempt to excel at them. When I give the horse a friendly rub, I feel its—her—appreciation, as though I am scratching my own itch.

One day, while I and the horse and the sheep are milling about in the paddock, I feel something new from the horse. I look to her to see what might be causing it, and find that she is looking at me. She walks over, and the nearer she comes, the stronger the feeling grows, and I cannot deny that it is lust, surprised as I am to be feeling it. I ignore her, but her feelings remain, and so they remain with me, and I last a pitifully short time before caving to them, and going behind her, and using my arm to simulate the company of a stallion until she is satisfied, making me satisfied.

As the days go on our sexual engagements continue, and I realize another, parallel feeling within her, and within myself, which is love. This barn is our home, and all of us family.

It is the night of the day when I realized this feeling. I stand in the doorway of the horse barn, my partner having just gone in for the night. Out in the paddock, lit by moonlight, is a tall creature with yellow slime-covered skin.

What the hell, I think: why not. I stand up from leaning against the barn door and walk into the paddock to meet the alien.

We stand face to face. The alien opens its mouth and speaks to me: "What do you think of this way of being?"

"I would never give it up," I tell it.

It shakes its head. "I feel that even now, it has not yet fully sunk in for you. The skill of empathy is hard-earned among your species, it seems. But you are learning."

"Yes."

"You have learned that others feel hurt, and love, and suffering, and elation, that every life is a world unto itself. You had heard all of this before, but now you have learned it."

I nod. Then I realize that even still, I am not considering this alien a life.

They let out a pleased, musical vocalization. "The skill of empathy is hard-earned among your species," they reiterate, "but not impossible."

"Thank you," I tell them earnestly. I lower my posture. "I want to ask what this place is, but I fear that I know, and that it is coming to an end."

The alien nods. "It is not real. But hearten: neither is it real, nor is it impossible. When you awaken, destroy your ship's cargo of weapons, and help us lift your people to the next age of their civilization. An age where weaponry and hate are relics and apocrypha."

I extend a hand. The alien and I shake.

"Would you like more time here? To say goodbye?"

I shake my head. "Thank you, but no. Let's get started on making it real."