

A Trip to Remember

It was quiet in the pod. Almost silent, except for the low ambient hum of the ship.

‘Tuck,’ The small girl inhaled deeply in response, stretching out across the bed. ‘Are you awake?’ Tucker let out a moan and rolled over, her eyes squinting in the harsh artificial light.

‘What time is it?’

‘Uh... Like 2:30ish? Codex lifted her arm, checking her wristband. ‘Yeah, about 2:30.’ Now, this wasn’t the first time her slightly unhinged friend had woken her up at such an ungodly hour, but she had never really gotten used to it. By this point, Tucker didn’t even need to ask what was going on, it was going to be explained regardless. ‘We’re about to pass it.’ This certainly got her attention. It had been a few weeks since the ship had passed anything interesting. The nebula was quite a sight but since then, there had been nothing but distant stars and the occasional asteroid. However, this was something the two had been anticipating for months. *Mors Gigantis*. The only visible black hole on the voyage and the first one they’d ever seen in person.

They reached the viewing deck rather quickly; Tucker having only slipped on a hoodie over her sleep garments. There were several viewing decks across the whole ship, but they would always go to the same one on deck 39. Technically, it was a restricted area. Due to a smaller-than-usual passenger count for the voyage, they closed off several decks to save energy. Being the furthest away from the entertainment areas and sleeping pods, deck 39 was one of them. Of course, the main doors to these decks were always locked but as the saying goes: Where there’s a will, there’s a way. In this context, the way was apparently a conveniently large vent. Typically, closing off a deck would include shutting off all main energy drains such as heating and oxygen. This wasn’t too much of an issue as, due to safety reasons, if a passenger is detected in a closed off room, all life functions will reinitiate. A crew member would be alerted, of course, but Codex had figured out how to cut the coms systems in the first week. No alerts, no disturbances.

‘Well, where is it?’ Tucker asked, watching Codex fling her beaten utility bag across the room, sliding across the sleek black floor and stopping just short of the window. The glass spanned the length of the whole wall, giving an impressive view of the vast expanse of space outside.

‘I said we’re *about* to pass it.’ Codex looked at her wristband again. ‘Hey, Trinity, when are we passing the black hole?’ After a moment, a soft automated voice replied.

‘We will be passing by the North face of Mors Gigantis in approximately thirty-nine minutes.’

‘Well, there you go,’ Codex grinned, she knelt down beside her bag and started rummaging. ‘Just put the sheets down there.’ Tucker had carried a few blankets from their sleeping pods, she carefully placed them beside the bag where she had been instructed. ‘Now,’ Codex had emptied nearly the entire contents of her bag onto the floor in a search for something. Finally, she yanked out a small packet. ‘I have tonight’s entertainment!’

‘Isn’t the black hole the entertainment?’ Tuck asked, settling down onto the floor.

‘Well, yes but this is going to make it one thousand times better.’ She continued to empty a few colourful paper squares into her hand. ‘I think two each should do, last time was a bit too chilled out.’

‘Did you get them from Bracket again? How did he even get them on the ship?’ Tucker eyed the swirling galaxy pattern on the squares that fluttered into her hand.

‘Who knows, there’s no way he’d agree to a voyage this long without it though. It’s a new sheet too. Says it’s the best trip he’s ever had.’ The two looked at each other, cracking wide smiles. Codex gave her signature ‘bottoms up’ head jerk and threw the tabs into her mouth. Tucker, on the other hand, placed them carefully onto her tongue as usual. They then settled down into the little nest they had made and began to wait.

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‘How long now?’ Tucker sighed.

‘Another 10 minutes or so, I think we should be able to see it though.’ Codex shuffled towards the glass and pressed her face against it to try to see towards the front of the ship. After a few moments of silence, Tucker appeared beside her.

‘Is that it?’

‘Where?’ Tucker pointed to something in the distance. It looked like someone had cut out a chunk of the stars. Like an area of a game that hadn’t been loaded into the world.

‘Oh shit, yeah that’s it!’ They pressed their faces harder into the glass, trying to get a better view of the distortion. ‘Bit small, isn’t it?’

‘Because it’s far away?’ Tucker received a small shove from that comment. As she fell back, something else caught her eye. There wasn’t a lot to see, just stars scattered across the darkness. Something about them seemed different. Brighter. She turned her attention fully to the stars. The more she watched, the more vivid they became. They were so incredibly bright and lively that it seemed like they were almost vibrating. She had never seen stars do that before. The light got more intense and she couldn’t take her eyes off them. Then suddenly, they were dim. Tucker blinked. They started to glow again. Brighter, brighter, dim. Brighter, brighter, dim. It felt almost rhythmic. ‘Code,’ She whispered with wide eyes, nudging her friend. ‘The stars... They’re pulsing.’ Codex turned and squinted through the glass.

‘Fuck... It’s like they’re little hearts or something.’ As she said that, the space around the stars started to ripple with each pulse. It was like energy being released into the universe. ‘If stars are little hearts, do you think suns are like... really big hearts?’

‘But they’re so big. We’d be able to feel them, wouldn’t we?’ Tucker placed her hands flat on the glass. It started to beat, softly and consistently. It was strangely soothing. Codex was soon transfixed in the same position, closing her eyes and sighing deeply. She pressed her face to the glass.

‘I can hear it,’ Her body slumped in a sense of sheer relief. ‘I can hear it.’ She looked as blissful as she would be resting her head on the chest of a lover.

‘What if,’ Tucker placed a hand on her own chest. ‘We have stars inside us too?’ She could feel it, the warmth. The light shining through her ribs onto the floor as if it were filtering through blinds. Her eyes wandered to Codex, who was still intimately pressed up against the window. A fuzzy golden glow rested on her skin. She must have a star inside her as well. It was a comforting thought. ‘Feel this.’ She took Codex’s hand from the glass and placed it on her chest as well. After receiving no reaction, Tucker yanked off her hoodie, unbuttoning her top slightly and replaced her hand against her bare skin. ‘Try it now.’ Codex let out a low hum and let her fingers flare out.

‘Do you think they’re trapped inside us?’ She asked, seemingly concerned. Tucker hadn’t thought about that. ‘Like all their friends are out there and they’re just stuck in this bone cage?’ The thought made Tucker’s bones feel weird. Could you usually feel your bones? It became increasingly uncomfortable, horribly aware of the way her flesh slid across her ribs. Codex started to glide her fingers across her chest and stopped right between her collarbones. ‘I feel like I could just... unzip you.’

‘What?’ Tucker looked down in confusion.

‘To see the stars, I could just...’ Codex started to drag her finger right down the middle of her chest. To Tucker’s horror, her skin began to split. It peeled to the sides like a jacket, revealing slick red flesh underneath.

‘What the fuck?’ She jerked back and shrieked. ‘Don’t fucking do that!’ Slamming a hand to the gash, she started gasping in heavy, panicked breaths.

‘Calm down, calm down. I was joking, jeez.’ Codex laughed uneasily, taken aback by such an intense reaction. ‘You’re really hitting the roof now, aren’t you?’ Tucker looked down, slowly pulling her hand away. However, the deep cut had disappeared and there was absolutely no trace of any physical harm. She sat back in relief, allowing her heart to slow down despite a lingering sense of unease. ‘Here,’ Codex grabbed a small, grey disc from her bag and dropped it in front of her. ‘Look at this.’ Light beamed up from the disc, creating a hologram of a galaxy. It was filled with deep purples and blues, swirling slowly and gently.

‘Which one is that?’ Tucker mumbled, feeling greatly calmed by the motion.

‘Andromeda. Lovely colours, right?’ She received only a low hum in response. The more Tucker watched, the more the colours started to bleed out into the room. They expanded out like ink dropped into water and rippled around each small disturbance. She reached out and dragged her finger through it, eyeing the blue as it swirled around her hand and continued to fill the air. Her eyes shifted focus to see Codex sitting across from her. Her dark skin tinted a soft purple through the hue of the hologram. It made her look abnormally flawless, almost as if she was animated. Tucker stared at her, wide-eyed as she smiled back.

‘You look so... smooth,’ She whispered, reaching a hand through the galaxy to touch her cheek. As she did so, the tiny stars flew off in all angles and scattered themselves across Codex’s face. ‘God, you feel so fucking smooth.’

‘Well, you know, I moisturize.’ She grinned, allowing Tucker to repeatedly graze her fingers across various parts of her face. She pressed her fingers in slightly harder. As she did so, it looked like Codex’s skin dented slightly under the pressure. ‘Watch this.’ Codex hovered her hand just below the hologram before thrusting it up. In an instant, the galaxy burst upwards, filling the entire ceiling. The sheer speed of it had caused Tucker to fall back, leaving her sprawled across the sheets.

‘How did you do that?’ She gasped, trying to look at absolutely everything at the same time.

‘Magic.’ Codex wiggled her fingers around with a certain dramatic flair to it before joining her friend on the floor. ‘The universe is amazing, isn’t it? I mean, this galaxy is huge but in comparison to everything else, it’s tiny.’

‘Code, how many galaxies do you think there are?’ She watched as violet dripped down from above, bleeding into every corner of the room.

‘Well, there’s a lot of space,’ Codex scrunched her face in thought for a moment. ‘I’d say at least twelve.’

‘Yeah, that makes sense.’

‘Did you know the universe is supposed to be infinitely expanding? Like it just keeps growing all the time in every direction?’

‘I wonder,’ Tucker spread her arms out. ‘What it’s like to be infinite.’ She tried to imagine it. Her arms just growing and growing so that her fingers could touch the furthest corners of the universe. It felt weird, to be stretched so far but never running out of body. So many different sensations all at the same time. Warm on her skin when she passed the giant stars but also freezing as she went into deep space. Going millions of miles per hour, how could she possibly have time to stop and look at everything?

‘I think it would be a lot. Your mind being everywhere at once.’

‘Wouldn’t your mind be *everything* at once. If you’re infinite then you’re everything, right?’ She looked to Codex for reassurance.

‘Alright, let’s say I’m everything. Doesn’t that mean I’m you as well?’

‘I guess it would.’ The thought that she was merely a creation of Codex’s imagination was slightly unsettling. Did it mean she wasn’t exactly real? Was she only saying what Codex wanted her to say? No, she had to be real. Logical reasoning whirred around in her head, trying to comfort her anxieties with all the reasons why she couldn’t just be a thought in someone’s head.

‘So, I’m just having a conversation with myself?’

‘Yes?’

‘No wonder you’re such good company.’ This brought out a laugh from both of them and they continued to stare up at the calming scene above. It was quiet for a moment. By this point, the entire room had been filled with blue and purple. Tucker inhaled deeply, feeling a tangy sensation across her tongue. At first, she thought it might

be from the sweets they had been eating earlier. She closed her eyes for a moment and really focused on the flavour. It didn't seem like anything too familiar.

'Does the universe taste weird to you?' This question was followed by the sound of Codex smacking her lips. 'I don't know, it's just a bit-'

'No, no. I get what you mean.' Codex took a breath and seemingly swirled something around in her mouth. 'It's like a... I don't know, like some kind of... uh...'

'Like a bit lemony?'

'No, I'm definitely getting sweeter.'

'Maybe the air tastes different over there?' Tucker shuffled more to the right and started to suck in the air by her friend's face. A sugary sweet taste swept across her tongue. It didn't make a lot of sense, but it was definitely different to what she had tasted just a moment ago. 'Oh yeah, this is much better.'

'Hey!' Codex pushed her back to her side. 'Stop stealing all my air. You have your lemon one.'

'But I don't like the lemon one.'

'Alright, well go try the air over there.' She pointed to a denser cloud of star-filled purple over in the corner. Tucker scoffed reluctantly and, with some difficulty, pushed herself onto her feet. Her limbs felt extraordinarily light. The tiny stars flitted around her field of vision, buzzing around like flies. She tried to gently swat them out of the way but any of the ones she touched stuck to her skin. They tickled like little bugs and she watched them wander across her fingers and into the lines in her palms. She smiled to herself and looked up to show Codex but was confronted with a wall. Her eyes flickered to her hand, then the wall, then her hand again.

'Code.' She called out.

'Yeah?' The voice came from across the room. She turned to see her friend still on the floor, fixated on the ceiling and waving her arms around slowly.

'Why am I over here again?' Codex squinted in thought before shrugging and trying to cup her hands around something. 'Why are you watching that anyway? We're on a ship, there's space outside.' Tucker turned and gestured to the window. Except, to her confusion, there was no space outside. In fact, there was absolutely nothing but black. She blinked. It stayed the same. 'Code.'

'Mhm.' Her friend appeared intensely occupied on whatever she had caught in the hands.

'Code.' Her voice started to weaken, finally drawing Codex's attention.

'What is it?'

'Space is gone.'

'What do you mean space is gone?' She looked at Tucker as if she had gone absolutely mad.

‘Space. It’s gone.’ She pointed a weary finger at the window. Codex sat up and started to speak but abruptly stopped. It was true. It was as if someone had deleted everything outside of the ship. No stars, no light.

‘What the fuck?’ Codex leapt to her feet and stumbled over to the window. She pressed her face against the glass and tried to look to the sides. ‘How can it just be gone?’ The blackness was uncomfortable to look at. Menacing. Its very existence made Tucker feel like it was there to swallow her up. She took a step back and felt the cool metal of the wall against her skin. Had it always been that close? The room started to feel very small, very quickly. It was silent. All the creaks and whirs of the ship had become numb in her ears. Tucker’s heavy breathing was the only thing she could hear and even that was becoming harder. The air felt thick. She looked around as the once calming colours that filled the room had turned into a dense and choking gas. It filled her lungs like a liquid as she began gasping and sputtering. ‘Tuck?’

‘I can’t breathe,’ Tucker choked out, feeling a tightness around her throat. Her arms were crossed tight against her chest. ‘I feel... Compressed’ She was boxed in. Like a rat in a cage. The darkness was going to consume the ship.

‘No, Tuck wait. It’s the black hole! We completely forgot about it.’ Codex slowly approached her friend and tried to put a comforting hand on her shoulder. Tucker flinched away, feeling a deep sense of terror at the thought of anything going near her neck. The black hole. It had consumed all the light, all the stars and all of the ship. No escape. She couldn’t stand it. Her whole body felt like it was being condensed in the crushing weight of the walls. She had to get out. A line of red cut through the thick purple smoke and caught her eye; the airlock. That was it. She stumbled through the haze with arms outstretched. ‘Where are you going? Tuck?’ Codex’s voice felt like it was a thousand miles away, echoed from somewhere deep and hidden. The metal lever was cold, almost electrifying in her hands. ‘Tuck, what are you- ‘

‘I’ll... Get us out...’ Tucker mumbled, desperately fumbling with the hatch. The voice of her friend became almost that of a distant memory. The silence was an unbearable pressure in her ears and she hadn’t even noticed the tears streaming down her face. She felt a firm hand grip her arm but with one final yank, the lever gave way.

Deck 39 was empty once again.