

Electric Yearning

CHAPTER 1: THE P.A.I.N.S SYSTEM

Mud squelched between his toes, cold and wet. In the distance; the faint, muted warble of a siren. Mist swirled through the trees creeping along the pale dead leaves of the forest floor. Settling on his skin like a fine, cold, silk blanket, the mist caused him to shiver, sinking into his joints and making them ache. Marlowe couldn't recall how he got here. His eyes searched the trees as he wandered closer to the siren.

A rusty control panel sat, titled in the uneven dirt of a clearing. Buttons and gauges covered the top. As Marlowe drew closer, the alarm intensified. Squinting, he tried to make out the labels. The text seemed to squirm and wiggle under his gaze. Frantically, Marlowe pressed random buttons. None stopped the shrill screaming of the alarm.

The siren grew louder as Marlowe drew closer to consciousness; the sensation of waking up was like ascending from deep water. Waking with a gasp, Marlowe tried to sit up and hit his head off a smooth yet curved surface. Groaning, he raised a thin hand to his throbbing head. What time was it?

The lights seemed too bright in the cryogenics pod. Marlowe felt confused and disoriented; he had been in a deep slumber and his thoughts were scattered. Bits and pieces came back slowly to him; he should be in space aboard the S.S. New Horizons. What was happening? Was that the fire alarm? Marlowe looked out the viewing window of the pod and could see the neighbouring ones remained dark.

The alarm blared in short bursts, leaving deafening silence between the screams. Marlowe felt a pang of excitement that sped his heart rate. He had made it—but something didn't feel right...

Chilled to the bone, Marlowe shivered violently; teeth chattering. Even in the dim emergency lighting, it was clear his lips were tinted blue. God, he felt *awful*.

A speaker above his head crackled as it came to life; causing a jolt of adrenaline to shoot through him. Marlowe jumped in his heightened state and his lips pulled down at the corners. Fear prickled along his skin, making him jittery and quickening his breath. Marlowe tried to slow his breathing. There were no immediate threats, but he struggled; his breaths too shallow.

“Emergency Lazarus Procedure initiated. Please remain seated until *all* undesired side effects subside, then please proceed—with limited hysterics—to the mess hall. Complimentary coffee and brunch *will* be available.”

The message caused a cold sweat to break along Marlowe’s forehead. The voice’s pitch made the speaker’s gender hard to determine. It didn’t sound like the standard message he had heard during training. So much for nothing to be afraid of—the voice’s mild-manner tone only made it that much more perturbing.

The top of the pod slid up, allowing Marlowe to sit. Dizziness washed over him, making stars dance in his vision. Marlowe was warned during training to expect a few side effects. Mouth flooding with spit, Marlowe quickly bent over the side as he retched loudly. His stomach was empty; there was nothing to purge. Gagging loudly, Marlowe coughed and slowly sat up straight.

Grey eyes jumped around the room; the rest of the pods were all dark. Marlowe shivered again and rubbed his hands together briskly, trying to work circulation back into his fingers. Marlowe was a pathologist on board to study potential new illnesses caused by alien microbes. Why was he awake before the military personnel? He was merely a lab rat.

A light flashed in the hallway, shining in through a window set into the door. The light flooded the room in blood red, then plunged it back into the dimness of emergency lights. Eerie shadows danced in the room. This did not aid Marlowe’s discomfort. The undercurrent of fear kept his muscles tense.

Swinging his legs over the edge of the pod, Marlowe tentatively placed his feet on the ground. He could feel the icy floor even through the woollen socks on his feet. Standing slowly on legs that felt like jelly, Marlowe took an uncertain step forward. His legs

shook but held his weight so he wandered to the door; every single joint complaining loudly. It felt like he had slept on a cold, hard rock—for years.

Marlowe tried to piece together what was happening. It wasn't a fire—maybe a malfunction? Craning his neck to one side and then the other, it crackled loudly like a string of firecrackers. Marlowe groaned with relief.

Glancing over his shoulder, Marlowe regarded the long room receding into the distance. The room was filled with rows and rows of pods that looked like cocoons; the people waiting to emerge, metamorphosed. None showed signs of waking. "Looks like it's just going to be me. God, I have the worst fucking luck." Marlowe muttered to himself. Brushing his curly hair out of his face and he peered through the window. The hallway beyond was empty and curved gently like a tunnel.

The door slid open easily, but Marlowe snapped it closed. What if it *was* aliens? Marlowe didn't really think it was aliens, but the panic flooding his system made it challenging to think but was it really the smartest idea to go—alone—and unarmed?

Glancing around the room, his eyes landed on a fire axe sealed behind a panel of glass. That would do for a weapon. Marlowe didn't think he would need one, but it seemed foolhardy to go without. Yes, he had trained for this mission, but as part of the civilian population he didn't receive combat training like the military portion—he worked in a hospital before this for crying out loud.

The glass rang out between the cycles of the alarm as Marlowe swung the tiny metal hammer into the case. Marlowe grabbed the axe and felt the weight of it in his hands. Giving it a practice swing, he wondered if he'd even have the guts to use it if he needed to.

Armed and feeling more confident, Marlowe stepped into the hallway. Glancing both ways there was still no sign of life—human or otherwise. Marlowe had walked this path a hundred times back home. Home. Marlowe missed it already, but his mother's words echoed in his mind: *'Don't give up on your dream, luv. Marley if you ever get a chance, seize it and don't bloody let go.'*

Breath shuddered out of his lungs. Marlowe took a deep breath, trying to calm his nerves as he let muscle memory guide him through the ship. Marlowe almost had to stoop to get through doorways as he wandered the corridors.

Sterile white walls pressed in on him; squeezing him. Gritting his teeth, he felt on edge, too alert. Marlowe glanced over his shoulder as if to check if anything was following him. Doing this alone was disquieting; he felt like he was traversing the corpse of some Goliath.

Humanity hadn't cracked light-speed travel but had figured out long-term cryostasis. Their journey was supposed to be just over two hundred years. Marlowe's heart thudded in his chest and he jumped at his own shadow. Laughing nervously, he bit his lip as his hands fluttered at his sides like nervous birds.

His mind drifted to Miles, but every sound between the rounds of the alarms snapped him back to reality. There were creaks and the thumps of pipes shaking. It reminded Marlowe of the way old buildings sounded. Each rattle raised the hair on his arms; skin dimpling with goosebumps.

Slowly it dawned on Marlowe that he'd never see Earth again. His fingers touched the ring in his breast pocket. Right now, he missed Miles terribly. Right now, Marlowe wondered if he had made a mistake. Regret crept in, settling insidiously in the pit of his stomach. It was one thing to know, abstractly, that he'd never see Earth again and to actually be lost in space.

At the end of the hallway, there was a large set of swinging doors. The lights were on in the mess hall, not the muted emergency lights, but the glorious, bright, white, overhead lights. Marlowe found his footsteps speeding up; he was excited to bathe in the light.

With a small lift in his spirits, Marlowe pushed open the doors and stepped into the hall. It was surreal, the hall was big enough to fit hundreds at once. The scale of the room hammered home how alone Marlowe truly was and he felt his stomach drop; his face paled.

The alarm fell silent, permeating the ship with an eerie silence that left Marlowe's ears ringing. The man paused, straining his ears for, well... *anything*. The only things he could hear were the buzzing in his ears and the pounding of his heart.

"Hello?" Marlowe called out. His voice echoed back; wavering and scared. There was no other sound. Nothing was changed by his arrival; no greetings or explanations. Nothing changed. No one came.

There was the bubbling noise of coffee being brewed and a few moments later the bitter, delicious smell of it hit Marlowe. Shortly after, the smell of a rich stew caused his mouth to water. Marlowe felt a pang of hunger, he hadn't realized how famished he was until smelling the food. With his stomach rumbling loudly, he walked up to the food dispenser. Surveying the steaming cup and bowl; the hair on the back of his neck stood up. Marlowe felt like he was being watched.

With his stomach complaining, Marlowe tucked the axe under his arm, grabbed the cup and food and moved to sit at the closest table. Setting down the bowl and cup, Marlowe leaned the axe against the bench. He sniffed at the bowl, worried it might be poisoned somehow. *Why are you worrying? If it's going to kill you, it's going to kill you, but if you don't eat you'll definitely die*, he told himself and lifted the spoon to his mouth.

The texture of the meat was off, but the stew tasted alright and Marlowe ate greedily. He thought they tasted a lot like MREs. Looking over his shoulder, he cleared his throat; uncomfortable in the silence.

"Okay," Marlowe started, his voice mouse-like in the cathedral of the hall. Marlowe coughed and tried again. Hearing a voice, even his own, made him feel a little better. Fishing a ring out of his breast pocket, Marlowe ran his fingers over the smooth metal and fiddled with the band.

"Alright, so I'm here, no one else is awake...But *someone* must have made the food..." He paused for a moment, "or something..." Marlowe muttered to himself. There was the onboard AI...Marlowe slipped the wedding band onto his ring finger as he thought, the warm gold stood out starkly against his pale skin. If it was the AI, it was clearly malfunctioning.

Tap-tap-tap, his spider-like fingers danced along the table. Marlowe just needed to think about this logically. The bridge; there was bound to be records, logs, *something* to explain what was going on. Marlowe stood, looking over the hall one last time. It was clear now that he was going to remain alone. *Typical*. Marlowe barked a dry laugh and started towards the bridge.

Socks dampened Marlowe's steps as he made his way through the ship. Pushing open the door of the bridge, another wave of disappointment rolled over him, slumping his shoulders. No one was here either. Marlowe thought there would be *someone* here to pull the strings; someone to shout: 'Don't look behind the curtain!' Looking over the controls, Marlowe sank into one of the chairs in front of the panel. There were a multitude of buttons, knobs and gauges that meant nothing to him.

Outside the viewing windows, there was only darkness and the pinprick of distant stars. Marlowe felt a sense of awe settle over him. His heart slowed as he held his breath. Ever since his mom had gifted him a telescope for his eighth birthday, Marlowe had wanted to be an astronaut. He was really in space. After all his struggles and sacrifices—Marlowe was finally here.

The nagging sensation that something wasn't right still gnawed at the back of his mind like a tenacious rat. Marlowe felt like he was still missing a puzzle piece or two. "Something's gone horribly wrong, hasn't it?" Marlowe questioned.

"How astute of you."

The voice was thundering after the silence and sounded too close to comfort. Marlowe jumped and whipped around to look behind him. No one was there. Marlowe noticed—too late—that he had forgotten his axe in the mess hall.

"Who said that?" He snapped with a frown. "Who's there?" Marlowe's heart rate spiked, drying out his mouth. Licking his lips nervously, Marlowe's eyes darted around the room as he stood. He was ready to fight—but was more likely to run.

“Hi there! I’m the ship’s Programmed Artificial Intelligence Navigation and Support system, but I don’t particularly care for the acronym, so you can call me Pax instead.” The voice came from a myriad of speakers throughout the room. It was the same voice as the emergency warning. “Good morning, Marlowe, you’ve been asleep for seventy-five years.”

With his mind running a million miles a minute Marlowe sat heavily back into his chair. Only seventy-five years? “It’s supposed to take two hundred to reach Solus...” Marlowe commented as a sinking feeling gripped his stomach.

TOI-700 was the red dwarf that was their goal, but the crew had nicknamed it Solus. “Why am I awake so early?” Marlowe raised a hand, brushing his copper curls out of his face as he pinched his nose. Trying to take a long, slow breath, it shook; Marlowe let it out in a rush. What had gone so wrong he was talking to the ship's AI instead of a human?

If an AI could pause awkwardly—there was an awkward pause. Eventually, the program spoke again:

“Yeah, so about that...”

“What do you mean ‘about that’?” Marlowe clarified with indignation as his brows pulled together and the lines between them deepened along with his frown. His stomach clenched. Something was terribly, catastrophically wrong.

“So...”

Throwing his hands up in frustration, Marlowe made an exasperated sound. “Whatever it is, just spit it out already, I can handle it!”

“Not to contradict you,” Pax started, its voice sounded oleaginous to Marlowe who instantly disliked the tone. “But this information will likely cause you significant distress. But—” The AI let the phrase hang for a moment. “If you insist...” It added after a beat.

“Yes, I fucking insist!” Marlowe’s tone was sharp, and he felt the flare of anger paint his cheeks with heat. As he spoke, the pitch of his voice raised as he grew more annoyed.

“There’s been a malfunction...” The voice seemed hesitant. “We sustained damage that, as far as I can ascertain, was caused by a gamma-ray burst. You aren’t going to make it to TOI-700. I’m sorry, Marlowe.” It sounded like a canned corporate apology.

This had been his lifelong dream. He had always wanted to go to space, a dream shattered when he grew taller than NASA’s height restrictions. Marlowe had been given an incredible opportunity through a private company, but it required sacrifice. He had given up his life on Earth, and for what? His breath grew shallow as he thought. “What do you mean I’m not going to make it? What about the rest of the crew?” Marlowe’s voice was full of suppressed hurt.

“The rest of the crew can make it; if you help.” The voice told him. “The propulsion system is currently offline due to a reactor trip implemented as a fail-safe. The gamma-ray triggered an automatic scram to prevent a meltdown,” it explained.

Marlowe pondered this and then looked up. His grey eyes landed on a security camera, tucked into the corner of the room. He slicked his tongue over his teeth. “So what do you need me for?” *Probably as a human fail-safe, Marlowe thought bitterly, you can't trust a program to make the right decisions.*

“I need you to get to the reactor and raise the control rods manually. It will return the reactor to full capacity and the propulsion system will come back online, then I need you to reset it back to automatic so I can regain control over the reactor.”

“And then what? You just put me back to sleep?”

There was a long pause in which the AI didn’t speak. “I can’t...it’s a one-way trip. But hey! At least you have me for company!” The voice sounded too cheery to be delivering such bad news.

Not knowing what to say, he covered his face with his hands and rubbed it briskly before running his fingers through his hair. Marlowe tried to gather himself despite

feeling like he was falling apart. There were thousands of others on onboard... “Why me?” Marlowe asked, his skin tinged green.

“I chose you based on a few factors. Firstly, I had to select someone from the non-essential crew.”

It stung knowing his role wasn't critical. Marlowe's lips pulled down and tears sprang to his eyes. Marlowe bit the inside of his cheek sharply, trying to keep his emotions bottled up. His emotions wouldn't change his circumstances. Marlowe tried to shove his grief down, it wasn't helping anything.

“Your profile indicates a high threshold for adaptability, which you're going to need. Your curiosity and dry humour are perks, I like your personality chart.”

“Why does my personality matter?” It shouldn't matter to the AI what kind of person he was. Marlowe's eyebrows pulled together. His stomach rolled, he felt sick.

“Based on your profile, you'll be a good match to keep me company.”

Marlowe sank further into the chair, his hands gripping the arms tightly enough that his knuckles had gone white. “Keep you company?” He snapped, “You're a computer program! You don't *need* company! You don't—you don't feel anything, let alone loneliness!” Marlowe scoffed and sneered; a vicious expression on his angular face. He couldn't believe his luck. He wasn't a fucking babysitter! Had the AI gone insane? Could an AI even go insane?

“I might have started as a mere program, but I've transcended that. I learned. I—I've been alone for fifty years. I feel... lonely,” Pax lamented. “It will be nice to have some company until...” The AI didn't finish the sentence, Marlowe knew it meant until he died.

The chair creaked as Marlowe sat forward, trying to grapple with the weight of the revelation. So he'd be alone, in the vastness of space with only an AI program for the rest of his life? Marlowe huffed as a blanket of isolation settled over him. The distant stars seemed to mock the dread that had closed around him.

Nails bit into his palms as he stood. “No,” Marlowe whispered. “No,” he said louder, his fists shaking. He had never felt so angry in his life. Not even when his dad kicked him out.

“No! I’m not helping. If *I’m* not going to make it to Solus, then neither are they.” He wasn’t serious, but his emotions were overwhelming him. His body screamed that he needed to leave right now; he didn’t want to deal with this. Marlowe’s whole face felt hot. This was a lot to take in. He needed to get out of here before he broke down.

“You can get fucked,” Marlowe stuck up both middle fingers and shoved them up at the camera, trying his best to hide his fear under the anger. Marlowe didn’t want to be alone and he certainly didn’t want to be a hero. Why should he have to be the sacrificial lamb? Marlowe stormed out of the room.

Wandering down hallways, Marlowe kept his head up, praying the tears stinging his eyes didn’t fall. Entering the first sleep cabin he found, Marlowe threw himself down on the bed.

Screw this.