

"Pilot? What's going on?" Arcturus's voice crackled through the radio.

The windows of the scouting ship went black with ichor. *Shit*. She'd just barely been able to make it inside before the swarming ichor beasts could breach the hull. In her free hand, she held a small capsule containing an iridescent bone-like structure. Seems they didn't take too kindly to her sampling.

The creature's forms were hard to make out—even as they had begun chasing her. They didn't seem to hold any real shape, more so just tumbling, crackling balls of liquid. Primitive limbs seemed to sprout out of nowhere to slam on the reinforced glass. If it were not for the impending danger, she might have thought their shimmering skins were as beautiful as flying through the stars themselves.

"Monsters. Started chasing me as soon as I broke off this spike. I can't see out the windows."

The ichor beasts chittered loudly. She was almost thankful for the noise to drown out her thrumming heartbeat. She's been through worse. No mortal monster would keep her grounded.

"Oh Aeons," Arcturus whimpered, "I knew this was a terrible idea, how—"

"They can't get through. This ship has held me through worse. I'm gonna try and get off the ground, okay?"

"Are you serious?! Jeez, okay, okay, alright. I'll guide you out." Arcturus was practically wheezing.

Pilot secured the capsule in a storage drawer and strapped herself into the cockpit. Even one-handed, starting up this ship felt as natural as waking up in the morning. Scout-111 had protected her before, it'd do it again. Pilot turned the ignition, flipped the gravity switches, and kicked it into gear. The ship hissed and slowly lifted off the ground. From outside, the ichor beasts seemed to creep away slightly.

"Alright baby, let's get home," Pilot murmured, "Arc, am I clear to ascend?"

"You're clear, I've got eyes on you."

She angled upward and hit the acceleration hard. Sparkling ichor flung off the front window as the beasts were ripped away from the force. They clanked against the hull of the ship as they flew, earning a small smirk underneath Pilot's closed helm.

She continued darting upward until she reached the stratosphere of the ichor-struck planet.

"Whew, see? Easy!" She barked into the radio.

"...Yeah, just stay aware, okay? Expeditions from Skire have reported sightings of those supersized ones. They've been smacking ships right out of the sky."

Pilot began typing in the coordinates of the station to her navigator, "All the way up here? Are you sure they weren't just shit fliers?"

"This is serious! You saw the planet before the fracturing," Arcturus trailed off momentarily, before continuing their train of thought, "I saw pictures of the beast that ravaged Skire... Uto didn't even compare."

"Yeah, yeah, I know... Kinda reminded me of a spacewurm."

"...Spacewurms aren't real."

Pilot snickered, "Are too. I've seen one."

"You are so annoying," Arcturus groaned, but Pilot could still tell he was smiling through the crackling radio, "Just come home, alright?"

"Aye aye. I'll keep an eye out for any kaijus on my way up."

Pilot confirmed the coordinates and re-adjusted their position before punching the acceleration again.

The flight wasn't a long one, but it required much more navigation than Pilot was used to in clear space. It wasn't an issue, of course, but it was clear these airship-fliers coming out of the new Skire had no respect for air traffic rules. It looked like they had transformed trading vessels into scouting ships. Crude, but she admired the dedication.

She took her time flying over the suspended chunks of land. Seeing the planet like this made her throat feel dry. She'd still been in recovery while The Fracturing had occurred, so she didn't even really get to see it before the world broke like Arcturus had said. She couldn't even look out the window at all.

For a while, she had been convinced that whatever that *thing* was that she encountered on that scouting mission had somehow gotten into the planet and was eating it from the inside. She was almost thankful it was something else.

The continent still looked about the same as she remembered, albeit broken up. If anything, it was the lack of oceans that disturbed her most. As far as she knew, Meteor Lake still existed, but her heart still tugged at the sight. Arcturus had emerged from the ocean, coming from a seemingly long line of 'leviathans'. Even though he had run off to Halo's Pierce to escape that life, it didn't escape her that he looked somber every time he gazed down at the broken planet.

With a sigh, she continued flying far above the rock. She passed over the fractured pieces of the glass desert, onto Stonewing, over Meteor Lake, and finally Uto. Though a little disheveled, the settlements still looked as lively as ever, even at this height. Freight skyships still buzzed through from city to city, carrying what she assumed to be aid and supplies. She couldn't imagine the devastation The Fracturing had had on infrastructure between cities. She certainly knew Halo's Pierce was feeling the blow. They had stocked supplies for emergencies such as this, but with a near complete pause on supply movement into the stations, things were getting rough. She knew they had started sending a few of the less-immortal folks back down to Skire. Considering her... predicament, maybe it was only a matter of time before they sent her back down too.

Something made a soft clinking noise behind her, snapping her from her thoughts. She peeked behind her shoulder, scanning the bay back and forth. Maybe it was just turbulence messing with the cargo? She turned forward again, only to see a shadow of movement out of the corner of her eye.

Pilot froze for a moment, furrowing her brow. Right behind the box of fuel ampules, something was crawling around. She stalled the ship and unfastened herself from the chair. She eyed the shadow as she crept toward it, watching as it jerked sporadically. Arming herself with a rarely-used broom, she began to move the wooden crate with its bristle-y end.

She let out an absurd shriek as something that looked like an ichor-covered, oversized bug sprang out from its hiding place, only to scurry behind a crate on the opposite end of the room. Pilot's heart thudded in her chest as she stared wide-eyed at the creature's new hiding spot. *How the hell did one of them get in?* She swore that the doors had sealed behind her long before the swarm of beasts had reached her ship.

Side-stepping her way toward the cockpit, she reached for the radio on the dash. She held the device to her mouth and pressed the call button.

"Hey Arc, there's something in here."

After a few seconds of silence, there was a crackled "What?" from the other end of the signal.

"The doors were closed, I don't... shit. Did that brief say anything about killing these things?"

"Aeons," Arcturus swore, "Uh, just, um, give me a second."

She could hear pages flipping from the other end of the connection. From behind the crate, the creature scraped against something softly. Pilot held the broom out defensively.

"Can you just... stab it with something? How big is it?"

Pilot hissed, "I don't know—like a small cat maybe? Maybe I can smash it."

"Well don't be rash! What if it touches you?"

"No, no, I've got this," Pilot murmured and set the radio down.

Arcturus babbled something in protest across the line, which Pilot promptly chose to ignore. Raising the broom, she approached the crate, peering over until she saw the iridescent sheen of the bone-like plates on its back. Quickly, she shoved the broom into the crevice between the box and the wall, hitting her target square-on and earning a soft squeak from the creature. She smacked it a few times before it wriggled away, weaving between the piping on the walls before finally emerging out into the open again.

She could see it clearer now—six legs, and an elongated, larva-like body made entirely of coagulating ichor. Its back was covered with plates of the same iridescent white bone that covered the

corpse of the planet. They stared at each other (“stared”, considering this thing didn’t seem to have eyes) for a moment, as if it were an old-timey standoff. Then the creature squeaked and sprung forward, forelimbs outstretched. *Panicking, the broom dropped from her hand, and simultaneously a crackling red scratch seemed to tear through the space between them. It existed for only a moment, like a flash of light, then both it and the ichor beast disappeared.* The only evidence it had ever existed at all were three drops of fallen ichor on the hull.

Pilot realized she was shaking at the same time she realized that her mangled arm was outstretched in front of her, as if gripping something invisible. *What the hell?*

“Pilot? Hello?”

She rotated the arm around to look at the palm, where a small rift was still closing into a four-point star.

“Aeons, Pilot, tell me you’re okay!”

Pilot stuttered, then reached back for the radio, “Yeah, yeah I’m fine, Arc.”

Arcturus breathed out an exasperated sigh, “What the hell were you doing?”

“It just... disappeared.”

“What?”

“That thing, it’s just... gone.”

“...What?”

“I know! I know, I think it was... how did you put it? My ‘Serious Magic Junk’.”

Arcturus paused, “...Like... *your space dust stuff?*”

Pilot groaned and paced slowly in a circle, “I don’t know! It was a flash of light and then it was gone! It was just like—” Her throat felt dry again.

There was a moment of white noise on the other side of the line.

“The problem is taken care of. Let’s just get home.” Pilot sighed and put the radio back in its holder as she crawled back into the cockpit.

Arcturus said something of protest over the radio, but she didn’t listen. The ship kicked back into gear and she aimed for Halo’s Pierce.

There wasn’t much fanfare upon her return. The deck crew were the first to greet her, though it was less of a greeting and more like a nervous shuffling to the side to allow enough space for her (and her arm) to get by. In her hand, she held the capsule with the bone sample securely to her side. The second to greet her was Arcturus, whose back fins were flared out to the sides to match the anxious look on their face. They practically sprinted (or an equivalent of it, at least) up to her, almost knocking her backwards as they threw their arms around her neck.

“Don’t you go radio silent on me after something like that ever again, y’here? One of these days you’ll come back and I’ll be dead from stress!” Arc hissed with their head tucked into the crook of her neck.

“Woah, jeez okay! I’ll try not to have a giant roach attack me next time.”

Arcturus unlatched from her if only to give a momentary stern look before falling into softness again.

“I missed you.”

“We were on the radio the whole time, you nut.” Pilot chuckled.

Arcturus’s helm tipped down in embarrassment, “It’s not the same as... *this*.”

Pilot nudged them on the arm as they walked down the corridor, “Wow, don’t miss me *too* much. Look, I even brought you a souvenir.”

She held out the capsule for Arcturus, who took it gingerly into their hands as if it were going to spring to life and bite them.

“It’s so... shiny.”

“Riveting commentary from Arcturus Levis, everyone.”

"You shut your mouth," They hissed, "I mean I've never seen anything like this... it really does look like someone's bones."

"You'd think it was considering how those things reacted. It was like they had a damn vendetta against me."

They reached Pilot's quarters, which could really be considered a shared room at this point considering Arcturus could rarely ever be found in theirs. Pilot flicked on the string lights and practically threw themselves onto the bed with a sigh. Meanwhile Arcturus went to look at the bone spike under a lamp on the station-issued desk pushed against the opposite wall.

They lingered in silence for a bit before Arcturus scoffed and said, "Come on, you cannot lay in bed with travel stink still on you."

Pilot groaned and lifted their head toward them groggily, "I just had a near-death experience, leave me alone."

"I'm not going to join you if you smell like motor oil and sweat."

Pilot pouted, "You would if you loved me."

Arcturus rolled their eyes and started to take slow, dramatic steps toward the door, "Well, I suppose I have no choice but to leave... back to my own room... alone."

Pilot groaned and rolled to their feet. Arcturus grinned and flared the fins on their back playfully.

"This is cruel, you are cruel to me."

"I'm your maintenance crew, it's my job to keep you shiny and clean."

The fins on Pilot's head perked up, "So you're coming with me?"

Arcturus promptly smacked her on the helm.