

blooming beating hearts
Sam Wilson

It's a week's journey from Hestion to the refueling station, they told me, but that's nothing compared to the long haul across the Yawn. A year and a half out to the Goldhart system, another year spent jumping between planets and moons there, and finally, a year and a half back. Four long years in all, three of which we'll spend cooped up on the *Starlight Queen* together. It might be a big ship, Captain Tremaine assured me, but after a while it can never be big enough.

Yet despite all the forewarning, not a week later I was moving my boxes into a mid-deck crew cabin, stacking suitcases on top of crates of books, memorabilia, things I knew I was never going to use but threw in all the same. It was already a small space, but filled with my things, it felt even smaller. The bed was set into the wall, and the shelves around it quickly filled with the bits and bobs of my life that I'd decided I would bring with me. Except for the shelf above the bed. There, in a careful row, I placed potted plant after potted plant, each one a carefully selected, Hestion-originated specimen. Each one chosen so that that it might make a mark.

Out there in the big empty spaces between the stars, it's surprising what good a little green can do. It's called the Yawn for a reason; you're in the depths of it for years on end, so long that after a time, you can't help but feel like it's swallowing you. There's no reference for where you are, or where you're going, even when in reality you're ripping through the dark at a near-unimaginable speed. It's a lot to handle. It would make anyone feel alone.

So we use green—plants, grass, growth—to center us. We grow our little gardens, cultivating and tending and imagining we're anywhere but where we are. They make it a bit easier to take the mind off the existential crisis of the journey. In the beginning, on those first trips between systems, it was informal; someone would bring a potted snake plant, or succulent, or dracaena, and keep it on a shelf in their room. Over time, crews came to rely on those spots of life, and the ships adapted to fit their needs. They built greenhouses, hired gardeners. They fought to bring life to the cold, dark void, to build the hearts of the ships around little pockets of green, little fountains of vibrancy.

Our garden back on Hestion was a wild thing; for all the beds and trellises my parents built to contain it, the plants had a habit of cascading out, always growing beyond their constraints. My parents did not mind so much, not really. After all, they did good trade selling cuttings of local variants to the passing Yawn trawlers, bags of thick Hestion soil, cultivated seeds. They knew the garden was never one to stay in place.

"A plant will do what it wants," I remember my mother saying once, her hands busy at work pushing through the spills of ruddy wisteria flowers that tumbled off and around one of the many wooden arches she kept along the garden path. Those blooms had a habit of overtaking whatever she placed them on, but now she shifted them off to the side, exposing part of the arch. "Wind that up there, Nellie," she said to me, and I took the long tendrils of morning glory that I had in

my hand and began to feed them up the trellised slats. “See, we’ll have to watch these two,” she told me as I worked the vines in my hand higher. “We’ll have to remind them that there’s space for each of them on here. They’ll grow how they will, of course, but it’s our job to help guide them.”

I always used to imagine that it worked like that on the ships, too. They would come in to dock on Hestion from all over; it was a small planet, but well-placed to receive ships making the long haul in from the Yawn toward our star, Tandau. Hestion was usually their first time touching down on solid earth in at least a year, and crews would stay upward of a week in order to recuperate. Their gardeners would find their way to my parents’ place to make conversation and look for some local cuttings, and I would imagine them taking those plants back to ships that were just as overgrown as the space my parents cultivated. I heard all the stories of their journeys, the thrills and intrigues and romances. I was raised on these tales as much as I was raised on the cultivation of verdancy. My parents and I knew that eventually, I would have to take my leave of Hestion; I was set on it. My mother had already prepared a clipping of the wisteria for me when I told them I wanted to crew a ship. It sat on the shelf in my room now, alongside all the others.

The *Starlight Queen* was to be my first deployment, under the captainship of Cavo Tremaine. She had run cargo through the Tandau system for decades. By the time I was born she had already been visiting my parents on and off for years. She still referred to me as Nellie right up until she hired me on to the trawler as their resident gardener. I knew much of the crew, but almost nothing of the ship itself. And now I held its heart in my hands.

That first week I spent most of my time in the greenhouse, trying to familiarize myself with the life of the ship. The *Starlight Queen*’s previous gardener was a man named Arlo Voss, and he cultivated a garden that, while beautiful, was alien to me. He had collected growths from all over, on decades of journeys, and yet he worked them together into a smooth balance of color and vibrancy. Small smatterings of pastel flowers clung to the bushes, and curling vines crawled across the scaffolding on the walls. The thick-leafed, deep-tinged vegetation of Hestion felt heavy and cumbersome in comparison to his legacy of a garden. Voss had disembarked a few weeks prior, and in his absence, his plants had become ragged around the edges. I managed them well enough, encouraging growth where it was needed and pruning back stems that overreached, but I could not bring myself to interrupt what he had left behind.

Much of the crew would pass through the garden as I worked, taking a moment to sit with that greenery, and in that first week between Hestion and the refueling station, I quickly began to realize exactly how important the garden was. In the morning, our medic Orla would come to spend some time in contemplation and meditation—she was often there before me. The engineer, Josef, and the cargo manager, Tap, were married, and they would have their lunches together on a bench beneath our willow tree. The cook, Nadine, would come in after dinner and set up a record player that she kept in a suitcase. It was an archaic thing, she told me, but she’d never found a speaker that played a song as well as it. The navigator

was named Moth and only a bit older than me; they would spend most of the day on the bridge, but on occasion I would find them leaning over my shoulder as I pruned or cleaned. They all had a familiarity with the space, a space that had gotten them through trip after trip, and Arlo's handprint was placed so clearly on this garden that I was not sure if there would ever be room for another. So I tended the growths, watered the plants, but kept my contributions—my little Hestion clippings—in my room, where they belonged.

Everyone seemed to spend time with the greenhouse, but we were still a few days out from the fueling station before I saw Captain Tremaine there. We had interacted during meals and crew meetings, but I spent all my time managing the plants, and she did not seem to make use of the space. I was pruning back the twisting stems of a hydrangea when the greenhouse door hissed open. She stood still in the doorway, hands clasped behind her back, a heavy coat sweeping down to her ankles, every bit the authority of the ship. She glanced around the room appraisingly before finally looking at me.

"It looks as beautiful as ever, Westcott."

"Thank—" I stood up, brushing dirt from my knees. "Thank you, Captain."

She passed me a slight smile, then looked back to the plants. "How are you finding the work?"

"I'm enjoying it, ma'am. Voss created a beautiful space."

"Indeed, he did." She turned toward me. "You brought some plants from Hestion, yes?"

"I did, yes. A couple of favorites."

"Where are they?"

I hesitated. "I'm still trying to find the right place for them, Captain."

"I see." She smiled, glancing around the room, then turned back toward the door. "Might I suggest, Westcott, starting with putting them *here*."

I know my face reddened, but she could not see. "Yes, of course, Captain."

She chuckled. "Keep up the good work." And the door hissed closed behind her again.

After Tremaine's suggestion, I did move the plants. I tried placing them around the garden, testing locations for me to replant them, but nothing felt *right*. It was always too much of a blot, too heavy, and so I ended up leaving them, still in their pots, on a shelf next to the toolshed. And they sat there still a few days later when we finally docked at fueling station TANDAU-48. It was on the outskirts of the Tandau system itself, far beyond Hestion. It was not a busy station, either, a lone hunk of metal floating on the edge of the Yawn. A single other ship was docked there as we arrived, another long-haul freighter already well into its refueling process.

Fueling up for a trip across the Yawn is no easy task. Even before the fuel is transferred, the engines must be completely flushed, cleaned, and prepared. The synthetic energies that will power the ship on its long flight are carefully installed, and the engines are reprimed to calibrate with them. The process might be entirely automated, but that does not make it short. For a quicker trip, a ship might stop

over at the station for a day. For one like ours, it would easily take three. Most popular fueling stations included onboard opportunities for long-haul crews to stretch their legs, entertain themselves, and spend some money. TANDAUI-48 was not one of those, and, on top of that, the station had long since passed the need for a human crew. The bots that manned it now would not make for great company.

Despite that, I could feel excitement burning through me. This was my first time seeing anything like a fueling station. I made my way to the bridge just before we began the docking procedures; I wouldn't be much help with anything else, and I wanted to see the process as best I could. Through the thick-plated bridge window, we could watch as the fibrous cables and arms of TANDAUI-48 extended out to connect with our ship. We were pulled in closer and closer, whirs and clicks echoing through the hull, until finally we settled next to the station's boarding arms.

Just then, the radio crackled, and a voice came through, hazed in a slight staticky fog. "Hailing, hailing—is this the *Starlight Queen*?"

Tremaine paused, and then opened up a channel herself. "This is Captain Tremaine speaking. Who am I speaking to?"

There was a pause, and then the voice came back, louder, more animated. "Cavo Tremaine, it has been *far* too long! This is Captain Nora Winteko of the *Breacher's Rose*. We're docked just across from you."

Tremaine's eyes widened, and then she began to laugh. "Nora, my god. I hardly recognize her. You've retrofitted."

"A few years back—Cavo, look, we're here for another day. You should come over and see the changes."

Moth turned around in their chair and glanced at the captain. Tremaine rolled her eyes in response. "It would be nice to stretch our legs. I'll come over once we've docked, and we can catch up."

Moth snickered as they turned back to their controls. The docking procedures were nearly complete—with a couple more heavy, reverberating thuds, we locked into place. Tremaine stood and gestured us toward the airlock, where a few other members of the crew were gathered. The door was hissing and clicking, aligning itself securely, until a light flickered green to signal the connection's completion. Captain Tremaine flipped a switch, and the door cycled open.

We were greeted on the other side by a bot—a tall, slender tower of burnished white metal. It tracked along on a few wheels, disguised in a flared base. At the top, tucked in an open space in the otherwise smooth metal, a few lights blinked at us, almost watching.

"Hello, Captain Tremaine of the *Starlight Queen*. Welcome to TANDAUI-48."

Tremaine nodded, somewhat awkwardly. "Are we ready to begin fueling?"

"Nearly so. As soon as we have finished securing your ship, we will begin."

Tremaine paused. "Thank you."

The bot turned and wheeled away. Tremaine called after it. "We're going to pay a visit to the *Breacher's Rose*—I believe they're docked here as well?"

The bot spoke without stopping its smooth glide. "That is correct, Captain Tremaine. The *Breacher's Rose* is docked in Bay C."

We watched it whir away. “Never could get a handle on those things,” Tremaine muttered. She turned back to the gathered crew. “You’re welcome to explore the station, even if it’s populated by bots. We’ll be here for a few days yet. Nadine, when’s dinner?”

Nadine leaned up against the wall of the ship’s corridor, stubby cigarette between her fingers. “Two hours. And don’t be late.”

“You heard her, crew. Now, break.”

Of the seven of us, only Moth, Captain Tremaine, and I ventured onto TANDAUI-48. It was my first time, but for the others, it was one refueling station of many, and a long-dead one at that. Captain Tremaine walked off toward the *Breacher’s Rose*, but Moth pointed me toward the main hall of the station.

“Come on.” They started walking, hands tucked into their back pockets. “Let’s let Tremaine *catch up*.”

“Do you all know Nora . . . Winteko?”

Moth laughed. “Know *of* her, sure. She and Tremaine were real close, a while before I joined the crew. Looks like they might be getting close again.”

My expression must have betrayed my ignorance. Moth waited for a second, then sighed. “They’re fucking.”

“Ah. *Oh*.”

“But we’ve got more important things to do. We’ve got a ship to explore.”

I had never been anywhere that felt so much like nothing. On Hestion, even the empty places were full of life, and with the limited resources aboard the *Starlight Queen*, we could not afford wasted space. This hall that we now walked through had abandonment in its very air. We had entered into what must have once been a strip of shops. Tall display screens, long since gone dark, greeted us at the entrance. The lights were on, but without the bustle of people moving through the place, their low, electric hum felt like a fly in my ear. The station must have been running on a skeletal remainder of its power—enough to keep the lights on, but none of the frills, none of the embellishments.

Moth pulled a flashlight from their pocket and clicked it on, flashing the beam across one of the dark storefronts that lined the walls. It was all bare counters and empty shelves, devoid of any sign of what was once sold there. They passed the beam over the next, and the next, checking each as we walked by.

“What are you looking for?”

They peered into a glass counter as they responded. “I dunno. Something cool. Something to take. It’s not like anyone else is gonna use any of this.”

They stepped further into the store, and I didn’t follow. I could hear a faint whir, and as I turned, a pillar-bot—maybe the same one that had greeted us, maybe not—rounded the corner at the end of the hall. It must have seen me, but I shrank back as it glided closer.

“Moth—there’s a bot.”

“It’s fine. We’re allowed to explore.”

I watched it approach. If it saw me, it didn't show it, and soon it whirred past, off to some other task. I watched it go.

"This place feels so . . . empty."

"That's what happens when the bots are in charge, I guess." I heard a cabinet clatter open from somewhere in the shop.

"I'm going to look around some more."

"Whatever you want. We got the time. Don't be late, though." Their head popped out from behind a shelf, and they pointed an accusatory finger at me. "You do *not* wanna disappoint Nadine."

I wandered further down the strip, glancing through the shops. A few of them looked to still have something in them; Moth was going to have a good time. I heard some other movement, and turned to watch a squat vacuum bot trundle past. It felt like a place in stasis, really, a place in between dying and dead. I couldn't tell if I was the most comfortable I had ever been, or more out of my element than ever.

And then I heard something chime. I turned to see a shape working its way across the strip. It took me a second to realize it was a bot, like the others, but a much larger one. It was mounted on double-jointed hydraulic legs that stepped almost daintily past, and hanging from the inner joints of each looked to be a small bell. Its body was tall, and a series of arms—maybe six, from what I could see—were set into its sides. A medical bot, of a type that I had seen before. There was one in our hospital on Hestion, and Orla used something similar, if smaller. This one, though, had been painted over with bright flashes of blue, green, pink, yellow. As I watched it walk past, I began to see the patterns; it was painted with the rough shapes of flowers.

I couldn't help but walk up to its lumbering body. As I neared, it stopped and turned its faceplate to me. A few lights blinked, and it spoke. "Welcome. I am MED-327-48, but you can call me Maddie. How can I assist you?"

"H-hello. My name is Nell. Are you—what are you—?"

"It is wonderful to meet you, Nell. Unfortunately, I do not understand your question. How can I assist you?"

I was at a loss. "Where are you going?"

"I am performing additional duties. If you need medical assistance, I am happy to help you."

"I'm all right. Thank you."

"Understood." Maddie turned and started walking again. "I hope you have a wonderful day."

"Maddie—" the bot stopped again. "What are your additional duties?"

"Currently, I am performing maintenance and upkeep on TANDAU-48's greenhouse and garden."

"You're a gardener?"

"I have been assigned to provide maintenance and upkeep to TANDAU-48's greenhouse and garden."

I didn't even hesitate to ask. "Can I see?"

It would not have taken us long to reach the garden had Maddie been made to move. It was only a few corridors away, but the bot's body was built to stay in a surgery center, not navigate hallways, and so I trailed behind as its legs stepped closer, one after the other. Each step sent a bell ringing, too, and so we worked our way through the hallways to the soft music of its chimes.

Maddie was not forthcoming with information. The bot did not regard itself as the gardener onboard, despite having been assigned those duties. Now that I was closer, I could see, clutched in some of those arms, tools of the trade; a watering can, a bucket, a spade, all held against the bot's body.

I was not sure what I was expecting when we finally reached the garden. I had not even thought there would be one here, on a station so devoid of life, and yet the door hissed open and I was confronted with something at once familiar and otherworldly. The place was blossoming like nothing I had ever seen on a ship. Bushes and flowers tumbled across the paths, trees scraped against the ceiling, and the grasses brushed my knees as I stepped in. It was chaotic, surely, but it was green and vibrant and beating with life. I thought of my mother's hands tilling soil, of flowerbeds under the light of Tandau, of wisteria brushing against my head as I walked beneath it.

Maddie's steps were sure as it entered the room. It meandered its way along one side of the greenhouse, and I mirrored it along the other. The path was so overgrown as to be practically useless, and I found myself instead hopping from patch to patch of open ground.

"Maddie, how long have you been doing this?"

The bot had reached a spigot that jutted up from the ground, and a clawed hand reached out to twist the handle while another positioned the watering can underneath. A sputtering burst of water poured out as it spoke. "I have been performing these additional duties for three years, five months, and twelve days."

"Do you like it?"

"Unfortunately, I do not understand your question."

I wasn't sure what I meant by asking it, either. It was a bot. "I guess . . . do you gain fulfillment doing it? These additional duties."

Maddie was silent for a moment. "The duties are satisfactory."

"Who assigned them to you?"

"Our ship's previous gardener, Adelaide Webber, assigned me to these duties."

"Did they . . . paint you, too?"

Maddie finished filling the watering can. "Adelaide Webber spent much time with me, and made some customization to my body."

"Where are they now?"

The bot turned to look at me. It was silent for a moment. "Adelaide Webber passed away three years, five months, and twelve days ago."

"Oh." I wasn't sure what I had been expecting. "I'm sorry for your loss."

Maddie looked at me for a moment longer. There was a click, and a whir, and then a song started to play, a recording. Someone was strumming a guitar, singing

in a wavering old voice. They stopped, racked with coughs, but then picked back up. The song went for a few seconds more, and then they paused—*come on, Maddie, sing along, you know the words*—and when they resumed, a recording of the bot's voice joined in. Maddie began to walk as the recording played, and stopped on occasion at a clump of plants to tip the watering can over them. The bot was good at it; not too much water, spreading it out evenly. I kept up along the other side of the greenhouse, quiet, listening.

We came together again in a small patch of grass, where a bench sat. It was old and rusted and the wooden planks were rotting through. Maddie watered a patch of delicate lavender, and next to it, I could see a piece of metal hammered into the ground. I crouched down next to it. Carved on the surface, in an unsteady hand, was a message.

This garden belongs to Adelaide Webber and Maddie.

Below that, two marks of faded paint were stamped; a handprint and the splayed grabbing claw of a medical bot.

I didn't really know what I was doing as I left the garden. I told Maddie I'd be back and made my way toward the *Starlight Queen*. Moth had moved on from the shop they were scavenging, and they gave me a cheerful wave as I hurried past.

I had seven plants from Hestion, seven specimens I'd chosen for this voyage. The wisteria, though, the one my mother had given me, was what caught my eye. The small clay pot was familiar in my hands, and I could already feel my chest twinging at the thought of giving it up, but my gut was set.

Maddie had finished its watering by the time I got back. It was tilling the soil in the beds around the bench, but as I picked my way through the garden, it turned to look at me.

"Hello, Nell."

"I have something for you." I held out the pot. "This is a plant from my home—from Hestion. My mother grew it, and I helped tend it, and, I don't know. I want to give you something. For your garden."

Maddie considered me. An arm extended, cradled the pot, and took it from my hands. Its faceplate did not move, but the body spun, placing the pot down on the bench. "Thank you, Nell. This is very considerate." The bot turned away from me, back toward the lavender.

"You have to be careful with it," I said. "If you use it. It likes to overgrow." Maddie said nothing in response.

I stepped back. Whatever good that would do, whatever meaning it had, I wasn't sure. All I knew was that it felt right. I began to pick my way back through the garden, toward the door, when I heard the bells chime.

"Nell. I have something for you."

Maddie's clawed hand held a few cuttings of lavender out toward me. The flowers looked so fragile against the smooth metal, but the bot gripped them no more than it needed to. "I hope you will accept this gift in return."

I took the cuttings—they tickled against my hand. “Thank you, Maddie. Did Adelaide like these?”

Maddie’s faceplate turned back toward the plants. “Lavender was always her favorite. We grew it around the bench so she could enjoy the plant.”

I stood there for a second and watched it, its swirled mural of a body, its hands clutching gardening tools. “Why do you still do this?”

Maddie didn’t say anything, but started to hum a song, the one I had heard Adelaide playing in the recording. It still knew all the words. It really did have a beautiful voice.

I made it back an hour before Nadine’s dinner curfew, and spent the time preserving Maddie’s lavender as best I could. Moss returned just before the meal was set to start, and Tremaine showed up two hours and five minutes after we had first disembarked the *Starlight Queen*, her coat somewhat hastily thrown on over her shoulders. Nadine was waiting for her, and she sheepishly took her seat with the rest of us, who were struggling to hold back smiles at the look on her face.

“Sorry, Nadine.” I had not yet seen our captain look so cowed.

Nadine stared her down. “You forgot those top buttons, Captain.” She thumped a pot of curry down on the center of the table.

Moth wolf-whistled, and Tremaine shot them a look that was undermined by the obvious fluster still in her cheeks. We served up food and began to eat, and when Nadine finally joined us at the table, Moth reached into their lap and held something up into the air proudly.

“I made a real find on the fueling station today, Nadine.” It was a record, tucked into a plastic envelope like the ones Nadine would sometimes put on in the ship’s garden. I watched the annoyance burn away from the cook’s face as she saw it.

“How did you get your hands on a thing like *that*?” She reached out, and Moth handed it over.

“Flat file in someone’s office, back in the administration wing.” They pulled out two more shapes. “And I found three of them.”

Nadine got out her record player after that, and the dining room was soon full of lilting orchestral melodies. The crew chattered amongst themselves as we continued eating, and I felt myself grow warm inside. It felt good.

I did not eat much, and so I finished sooner than the rest, who were caught up in conversation over the food. I excused myself; as lovely as the room felt, I knew I had some long-overdue work to do. As I stepped away, Tremaine leaned over and caught my arm.

“I have something new for our garden—I’ll bring it by after dinner.” The captain had a bit of a faraway look in her eyes, something I couldn’t quite place. I nodded, and then took my leave for the greenhouse.

The growths of lavender I had gotten from Maddie were still vibrant when I returned. I checked them over and then got to replanting my line of Hestion-born

plants among the beds of the greenhouse. I nestled them between Voss's speckled, blooming flowers and packed them nicely into the earth. The lavender I propagated, using each of the pots I had just emptied for an individual spring. I was working on the final ones when Tremaine entered the garden.

"Captain." She was much less authoritative than the last time I had seen her here, but she still commanded presence. She looked around as she stepped in.

"You've been busy tonight."

"I was given a gift." I gestured over to the lavender. "I wanted to make the most of it."

Tremaine glanced down to her side, where one of my Hestion succulents sat. "I think I can agree with that. And I have another for you." She reached into her coat and pulled out a small packet, along with the delicate bloom of a rose. "Captain Winteko gave me this when I visited. She told me it makes a fine addition to a garden." She handed the packet to me.

I looked at the label. Roses. "Thank you, Captain. I'll find a good place to plant them." She was still holding the flower, and I hesitated before I continued. "I'm assuming you want to keep that one?"

She smiled, more down at the blossom in her hand than at me. "I think I will. Thank you, Westcott."

"Of course, ma'am." Tremaine gave the garden one last glance before she turned and left, and I looked back to my handiwork. The lavender was well-propagated, and the rosebush seeds sat in my palm. I would have to think about where to put them both. I couldn't help but smile down at those speckled purple flowers. They would be all right. They'd come from a good garden.