

# PLANETSTUCK

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**Sam J. Miller's books have been called "must reads" and "bests of the year" by *USA Today*, *Entertainment Weekly*, NPR, and *O: The Oprah Magazine*, among others. He is the Nebula-Award-winning author of *Blackfish City*, which has been translated into six languages and won the John W. Campbell Memorial Award. Sam's short stories have been nominated for the World Fantasy, Theodore Sturgeon, and Locus Awards, and reprinted in dozens of anthologies. He's also the last in a long line of butchers. He lives in New York City, and at <https://samjmilller.com>. Sam's latest tale reveals what it means to be . . .**

## PLANETSTUCK

Llopa gave me leave for the first time in basically forever, so I hopped twenty-six gates across three systems to Menelik Station intending to spend a solid solar day in its legendary mile-square waterslide labyrinth—laughing through an endless looping rush of water as warm as blood, through tubes that at their thickest were six slim inches of clear myco-plastic between me and the vacuum of space. Mapp said I could have made it in three gates if I didn't stick to toll-less hops, but I liked saving the currency and I liked the wandering even more, the zigzag path across the stars that took me through strange hubs and space palaces and stations run by cults or companies and others populated exclusively by embodied software constructs.

*Anyway*, all my plans for wholesome waterslide fun got whisked away when I walked into the Menelik Bathhouse in the hopes of a quick de-stress tryst, and instead got to talking to two burly ex-soldiers who'd just made out like bandits on a bomb-buying mission. They were adorable and bearded and the only thing they loved more than explosives was each other. And showing a guy a good time.

So I spent the first twenty-four hours of my leave in bed, sleeping and skylarking with two beautiful strangers and ordering expensive meals on the tab of a scrappy corporation of two. Deck and Pell were independent arms dealers from a star system I'd never heard of. Which isn't saying much—there are ninety million human settlements across the twelve gate-connected galaxies, more taking root every day, and even a pleasure boy as gregarious and hardworking as me can't be expected to know all of them.

Which is to say I get distracted easily. So just trust I'll get to the point of this story as soon as personally possible.

Spooned in between them after our sixth or seventh go-round, I was drifting in and out of sleep when I heard:

“What planet are you from?”

It was Dekk, the rarer, rough-around-the-edges one, who clearly came from one of those chaotic semi-feral stations where piracy was governance and formal education absent.

“Shhh,” said Pell, who was polished and classy everywhere but in the sack. “You know that’s not a polite question to ask.”

“It’s okay,” I murmured, kissing Dekk’s apologetic face. There was a ton of bad blood between the space-station-based systemists and the planetside colonies, but there in that bed it all felt very abstract and absurd. “How did you know I was from a planet?”

He shrugged. “It’s in the . . . I don’t know, the oomph of you. The heft of bone and muscle. For all the supplements and gravity compensation that the off-planet systems have, you can just tell. Can’t you?”

I could. I’d never paid much attention to it, but, yeah. Scanning back through the innumerable bodies I’d been intimate with for both business and pleasure, there was a subtle something there. “And you’re both stationers.”

“We are,” Pell said. “And so are you, now. Right? You’ve come unstuck.”

“Yeah you are!” Dekk said, smiling now, persisting adorably in impoliteness. “But for real—what planet?”

“You’ve never heard of it,” I said, grinning, and grabbed hold of both of them, one in each hand, to decisively change the subject.

But all through that next epic session, my mind was elsewhere.

The smell of rain in blue pine forests. Wolfsong. Wild, unpredictable wind. Sunset between the ancient terraform engines, massive machines that had long since served their purpose but remained as memorials to the first arrivals, and habitats for transplanted birds.

My brother weeping. Watching me go.

Dekk could tell he’d shaken something loose. Dekk felt bad. So when we were all spent and sweating and exhausted, he made me the sweetest offer ever:

“Wanna blow stuff up?”

Which is how I found myself on the bridge of a scuttle hopper retrofitted into a slick little bomber, working the stick on their big purchase: a brand-new lock-and-load torpedo launcher. Dekk pressed a button and the cargo bay doors opened up and three giant mycotic statues shot out into the vacuum—a dinosaur, a dragon, a statue of a man who’d been the head of an enemy army six wars ago and fifty systems away—cheap corny kids’ stuff that child warriors use for target practice across the inhabited universe—and I locked on like a pro and marveled at how easy—and how pleasurable—the launcher made it to make things explode.

“Pity the poor fucks who fuck with you!” I said, and we blew up a bunch more stuff before they had to plan their next buying run and I had to check in with my *other* boss, so we went our separate ways. With a surprising amount of sadness on my part, and theirs too if Dekk’s unstudied face was any indication.

Like most unstuck sex workers, I served two masters. Llopa was my manager—less enlightened systems would have called her my pimp—she vetted my clients and monitored my safety and promoted my “product” throughout her prodigious network, all for an actually super reasonable percentage—but only about a third of my income came from the sex work itself.

For the rest, there was Molybdita. My intelligence handler.

Because of course every sex worker with half a brain was also peddling information. Especially—if you’ll forgive the brag—the higher end ones like me, who met the most *fascinating* people, *important* people with more money than sense, more access than acumen. Molybdita paid me a small flat fee for every scrap I brought her, and the real

money came in after she'd fenced it. Not so long ago I'd gotten a quarter vibe just for telling her the name of the man who'd paid me to punish him in an Amhara Monastery cell . . . and then received six hundred vibes seven solar days later, when his corporate competitors deduced from his presence in that sector that it was the next space for product roll-out, and they rushed their rival commodity to market a week before his, neutralized millions he'd spent on target-space research, made a billion.

Understand: I'm no idiot. Getting people killed is bad for business, and just generally a shit move. So I always scrub whatever I've got before I sell it. Dekk and Pell knew the drill, had been around rent boys enough—even helped me compose the cleaned-up version and agreed (after some cajoling) to take a 30 percent cut of whatever I made. I have lines I won't cross. Lots of pleasure workers don't—and stars know they make a lot more money that way—and, I don't know, maybe it's dumb, but I actually tend to kind of care about the people who buy my body, provided they treat it with respect, which honestly almost of all them do.

Molybdita said that was the planetstuck part of me. Sentimental, still rooted in outdated notions of familial piety, accountability to abstract notions of "clan" and "tribe" and "country" that had evolved as a survival strategy millennia ago, and had been left behind the day we first learned to spawn wormholes and keep them open and use them to spread beyond the shitty little doomed rock we started from.

She was right, of course. She almost always was. I'd left my planet behind a decade before, but I carried it with me wherever I went.

Mapp gave me a ten-hop toll-less gate path to her, but I was feeling melancholy and tapped "fifty" into the tab so I could meander my way there.

On the way, I let myself remember Uqbar. Dekk had shaken it loose, but I wasn't mad. I spent so much time trying to keep those memories locked away that when they burst free it was almost a relief to let them run riot for a little while.

The green smell of stripped bark—my brother whittling a wooden stick to a point. Dirt-grown onions sizzling in fat.

Sweet smoke on the wind—mycotecture towers burning—a gate port under attack—another one of the periodic anti-offworld convulsions that my planet and most planets got gripped by from time to time.

I passed through stations where dance parties and amputee orgies and tense diplomatic negotiations were in full swing, and I barely saw any of it. And, *yeah*, that's basic hopper etiquette, you're usually passing through somebody's house or yard or town square every time you step from one gate to another, but also, like most hop addicts I'm super hooked on the gleeful eavesdrop thrill of it, the seeing so many wild ways of being, and I should have known right then and there that I was in a bad space and making dumb decisions already if I couldn't let myself bask in it.

Two hours later I'd made all fifty hops and arrived by Molybdita's side, six thousand light-years from Menelik, in a bar trying hard to be seedy, but achieving only sad. Stinking of station liquor, brewed in vats from spoiled fruit. Archaeology thumped from unseen mycospeakers: the ancient songs of fallen planets, lapsed civilizations, genocided troubadours. A pile of fresh gates was stacked in the entrance hall, awaiting installation along the wall: flat panels with an electrified rectangle propping open a wormhole, each one paired to a unique mate somewhere in the portalverse.

Molybdita didn't say a word while I delivered the cleaned-up version of the intel. The one that wouldn't get Dekk or Pell killed. That a company military out of Sector 6-Ж-57.333 was using freelance arms dealers to acquire new explosive deployment mechanisms; that the collapse of a munitions empire in the Lesser Magellanics was leaking wild weird new lethal products that could make a big difference in a couple hundred low-level belligerent engagements.

I waited. This was big intel, the kind I'd only come across once before—and the

payments from *that* little discovery let me take six months off of sex work and live large in some of the most magnificent accommodations in the Universe—but Molybdita stayed silent. And because she terrified me, I let the silence fester.

A short, chubby woman, system-born-and-bred, forever draped in patchwork—a uniquely systemist school of fashion that embodied the plurality and scrappy upcycling spirit of the unstuck by stitching every garment out of many others. Molybdita probably had thousands of intelligence assets like myself—and even more buyers, representing every drug syndicate and trade federation and ideological cooperative and rebel religion you could think of, most of whom were mortal enemies, any of whom would gladly have killed her to keep her from helping their enemies—but she feared no one. Had, in fact, eradicated innumerable idiots who dared to make a move on her, in ways she made sure ended up on the chatter streams.

“What aren’t you telling me?” she said at last.

“That’s it, boss,” I said, smiling like I did when I was lying to a john. Because, sure, she could torture the truth out of me, but I figured she reserved that for much more extreme cases.

“Good,” she said, and slid a shot along the bar. I sat on the next stool, noting its warmth.

“You’re stacking asset meetings today,” I said. “Who was just sitting here?”

Molybdita laughed. “Nothing gets by you.”

“I’d be a disappointment to you if it did.”

“Anti-off-worlder,” she said. “Preacher. Drinking problem. Creepy guy.”

“What’s he doing out in the portalverse if he’s so proudly planetstuck?”

“He’s part of Zero Alliance—some kind of coalition of anti-off-worlders, coordinating tactics and supporting local movements. Dude is pretty deep in debt, so he comes to see me when they’ve got something planned.”

*Some kind of coalition* was her playing dumb. I did not doubt for a second that she knew its exact size and scope and ambitions, had read its manifestoes and meeting minutes and memorized its membership.

“Fascinating,” I said, hating him instinctively, whoever he was, flagging the bartender down for another shot—holding eye contact a beat too long, from hustler force of habit and because they were hot as hell.

And then.

I looked down.

At the bar, where this anti-off-worlder asshole had tossed a handful of coins as a tip. Jerk move, was all I thought at first—systemists didn’t use coins, they were strictly a willful archaism of the stuck, useless outside their planet or planetary empire of origin. Tipping with coins was like leaving garbage.

And then I saw it. One coin. Wafer-thin, blue-grey metal, stamped with a familiar winged fox.

An uqbari tlön. Like the one sewn into the flap of my satchel, that I touch from time to time when the loneliness is so sharp and so cold it’s like the vacuum of space has filled up my veins, because that coin is the actual and entire last piece of my home I have left.

I picked this one up. Looked closer. Died inside.

Smiled at Molybdita—a different dishonest one, this time. One I used much more rarely than the one I wielded when deceiving tricks. This smile said *I am panicking and I’ve got to get out of here immediately and I can’t let you know how scared I am.*

“Debit this from whatever you get from that intel,” I said, pocketing it, getting up, making myself swallow my shot in a slow leisurely unpanicked everything-is-fine sip.

She waved without looking up from her screen, doubtless already lining up her next session.

Pleasure worker 101: never run the odds. When you're a newbie pro and all you can think of is every way an encounter can go wrong, you're gonna be tempted to do the math. How likely *is* this guy to murder me? Hurt me bad in ways I can't come back from? Give me an infection I never heard of, whose only treatment is sixty thousand gate hops away and Mapp sure as shit won't know how to chart you a course to *that* unregistered clinic?

So I already knew how to resist the urge, to keep myself from wondering *what are the chances, the infinitesimal odds that this coin and I should cross paths in the vastness of untold hundreds of millions of grungy bars?*

Here's the story I should have told you at the top, and would have if it didn't hurt so much.

Which, wow, that's super dumb. Losing everything, what a boring banal story. Probably every sixty seconds a planet or a people or a whole system gets swallowed up by oblivion. Homeworlds vanish. Continents are death-rayed; nation-states get nuked; castes collapse from viruses tagged to their specific ethnomicrobiome.

This story isn't special just because it's mine.

Anti-offworld sentiment was at a low simmer when I left Uqbar, same as it is on almost every planet. Nationalism is endemic among the stuck—as is its shadow self, xenophobia—but it rarely progresses past low grumbles, occasional violence. *We do all the work of growing food and producing goods; when the people of Planet Zero expanded to the stars and seeded the asteroids and planets and moons with all the teeming plant and animal and human life of their dying rock they meant for we who steward that life to live free, as we had at home, not become slaves to cushy elites in outer-space pleasure palaces.* Easy to say, guaranteed to get a crowd riled up and maybe sway an election, but only the most deranged ideologues could deny that the economic and cultural benefits of portal connectivity are as essential to the planet-stuck as they are to the systemists.

And yet. The last few times I talked to my brother Drommeda, stuff was spiking. Previously rational people becoming less so. Portal protests shutting down entire cities. I paid it no mind, not even when he said he was scared for him and mom and the two dads we had left.

Not even when he asked me to help him hop away, host or sponsor him if he couldn't get a student visa or refugee status.

But because I was young—and enjoying my first taste of freedom, my days an endless delirious string of new systems, dazzling sights, abundant sexual partners—and because I was an idiot—I told him we'd talk about it the next time we talked. "Give me a week to figure something out," I'd said, when all I intended to figure out was a way to tell him no.

After we got off the ansible, though, I moved past my first flush of resentment at the thought of my precious solitude being transgressed upon. And I *did* ask around. I *did* start to make arrangements.

But when I rang him up a week later, the call could not go through. *Ansible Hub Unavailable*, it said, an error message I'd never seen before.

Ansible calls go through gates. They send data through a dizzying series of relay portals to connect speakers across systems and galaxies. Knowing that Uqbar's ansible hub had gone down started a sick terrified churning in my stomach.

I kept the route to Uqbar pinned to my Mapp. Called it up from time to time. Just to see. I never intended to make the trip again, but it was comforting to know exactly how easy it would be to get back. It's an isolated system, and the trip was rarely less than sixty hops.

But when I called it up then, the hop counter said N/A.

I imagined the Northern Continent finally declaring nuclear war—the next system

over triggering our star into controlled supernova with a cobalt ion stream—the geostorm to end all geostorms that every terraformed planet lived in fear of.

But none of that explained N/A. N/A meant there were no gates left.

News trickled out through the portalverse in the days that followed. The anti-off-worlders had reached critical mass. Bubbled beneath the surface until they'd infiltrated every institution, rallied millions to their crazy death cult. They'd identified every gate on Uqbar—the public and the private, the ones that went to the stars and the ones that went one city over—and they destroyed them. Then they destroyed the orbiting ones, and the ansible hub.

Cut themselves off completely.

Cut *me* off completely.

Understand: Uqbar was one of the most distant settled planets. Nothing anywhere around it. Grief-stricken expats formed groups, pooled resources, commissioned studies, sent near-light microprobes complete with telescoping nanogates that could be opened upon arrival at Uqbar—but it would take four hundred years for the fastest to get there.

I'd never see my home again. Never talk to my brother. And every day—a dozen times a day—I ask Mapp for the fastest route to Uqbar. Praying I'll see something other than N/A.

Like I said: banal. Boring. Hideous tragedies happen by the hundred thousand, every second of every day. I'd built a wall around mine, which had just been breached.

I kept the coin clenched in my palm, as I hopped my way back to Menelik. Went straight for Dekk and Pell's ship—which was still there, though they were not.

So I went to the bar. Knowing it was dumb. Drinking when you're shivering so hard from fear and hope and grief and rage is rarely a good idea.

Six drinks in, I finally opened my hand, and held the coin up to the light. To confirm it hadn't changed.

It hadn't. It was real. Even though it was impossible.

I left Uqbar in the year 157, by planetary reckoning. Place got cut off in PR 159.

But the coin I held was dated PR 168.

And, sure, someone could have fabbed it. Easy enough to do so, with incredibly sophisticated printers on every station. But why bother? Uqbar was small change, an impoverished nothing planet whose vanishing made not even the tiniest mark upon the broader portalverse, and left behind only a couple of hundred homeless little wretches like me, scattered across the stars. Bigger better worlds than mine had gone dark. Systems shattered by war. Empires imploded. A fake coin from one of them could command massive currency, or induce a wealthy refugee to do absolutely anything.

*It's real*, I told myself, more drunk on hope than the shots of liquor I kept lining up and pounding down. *This tlön has got to be real.*

*Which means it's true. The thing I pray for ceaselessly.*

*There's a gate. A secret portal survived, somewhere on Uqbar. A wormhole in a basement or attic or closet, well-hidden from the maniacs that conquered my planet.*

And then I was up, walking the halls of Menelik Station, drunker than I'd ever been before and suddenly desperate to be sober.

This should have been good news. So why was I panicking? Where had this fear come from, higher and tighter in my chest than I'd felt in ages?

And then I was down. Face pressed to cold steel in the docking bay, outside the hatch that connected to Dekk and Pell's ship. Busy traffic thrummed all around me, but no one so much as gave me a second glance. What they saw wasn't strange: one more homeless bum begging for a ride somewhere; another messed-up soldier who couldn't handle shore leave. I left a video on the ship's access cam, one that Sober Me

would almost certainly find unspeakably embarrassing.

And then I was out.

And I was back. Ten years old—two-year-old Drommeda on my shoulders, crying from terror, his tiny hands clenched furiously to mine—as I waded into the warm still sea of a world with no moon. Until his toes touched the surface of the water, and his fear became joyous laughter.

And I was back. Thirteen years old—desiring something other than the girl who'd been allotted me by the mate-match AI—watching my friend Li smile in sheepish happiness at the girl whose hand he held—wishing I could make him smile like that—hating the old settler mentality: *it's everyone's responsibility to make as many babies as possible; tough luck if that's not what you want for your life*. And I was back—and I was sixteen—and I was leaving forever and nobody knew it—and I came home for the last time, a plan in place to sneak out while they were all asleep, and dad was cooking dinner, onions frying in fat, and the smell was so good I almost scrapped my plans. I loved my home, even as I hated it.

And then I was up. Moving. Hopping. Buying eye drops and breath mints and a gallon jug of electrolyte sobriety soda even though the stuff tasted nasty and what it did to the inside of my head was probably worse than being drunk. Making my way back to Molybdita.

Who was sitting right where I'd left her. Somehow only three hours had passed, by portalverse reckoning—still pinned to the same twenty-four-hour solar cycle as the long-lost Planet Zero. Weird how your whole world can collapse so swiftly, and no one else even notices.

"Well," she said. "This is unscheduled."

"Sorry," I said, with the slight stutter of manufactured neurotransmitters.

"No need. Got something else for me?"

"Actually, I could use something from you," I said, and I sat, on the same stool, and I knew I needed to choose my words carefully because the last thing I wanted was to be in Molybdita's debt, but the soda was having its way with me. "The guy who was here before me. The preacher. The creep. I need to talk to him."

She nodded. I wondered how much she knew. Usually everything. She'd have done her research on me—would know, although we'd never discussed it, that I was Uqbari. But she would never in a million years have recognized the coin—and if the guy was hopping to planets no one was supposed to be able to access, he'd have kept it a secret. So she probably—but not definitely—didn't know where he'd been.

"Here," she said, and pinged me a Mapp tracker.

I blinked in surprise. She encouraged her assets to associate, mostly because she valued the stories they'd swap—the gossip about her brutality, the hustlers and drug dealers and down-on-their-luck diplomats she'd rubbed out for exceedingly minor transgressions.

But still. This was not the kind of intel Molybdita gave away willy-nilly.

"You need me to find something out for you."

She tilted her drink at me, saluting my acumen. "He's returned to their raggedy alliance's little headquarters. And I don't trust them, none of them, not one bit. So I've sent you a registry phreaker, which his ship should respond to like a normal governance relay, and ping back a log of all its recent hops. Beam that back to me. I need to know where he's been."

"To run a registry phreaker I'd need a ship," I said, smiling, because she was smiling, because of course—somehow—she knew.

"Maybe you have a friend who is in," and she scrolled up on her screen to our meeting notes, "a company military out of Sector 6-Ж-57.333. Or the freelance arms dealers who are working for them? Maybe *he* can give you a ride. In one or more senses

of the phrase.”

“If I didn’t love you so much, I’d be afraid of you,” I said, standing.

“Love and fear are both appropriate.”

I bowed, and fled. And took the quick way home—ten hops instead of fifty.

“Thank gods,” Dekk said, four minutes later, when I turned up at their door.

Pell looked like Dekk sounded. “We thought you’d—”

“Disregard whatever I said in that message,” I said, swamping them both in a big glad hug. Jittery from excitement and hope and fear and soda.

“Disregard *I’m letting go of everything, I have to take this chance, what kind of person am I if I don’t?*”

“Yes,” I said. “Disregard that. Sorry I lost my mind a little there—freaked out when I couldn’t find you.” I looked for a way to play off the awkwardness in that stark declaration of need and couldn’t find one.

“Had to hop back to one of our buyers, pitch them what we picked up,” Pell said, “would have given you the access code if we’d have known you’d be back.”

Their gate arrays were fanned out above the bay like stacked screens on extendable arms: dozens of doorways, swapped out as missions shifted, each one paired to a wild wonderful place. These were proprietary corporate and military portals that wouldn’t pop up on Mapp, exciting conflict hot spots and secret sexy soldier spaces—I loved my life. I loved hopping.

And I hated that I had no choice. That my home had been taken off the table.

“Can you help me with something? It would involve running illegal software on your, uh, work ship. And probably pissing off a massive terrorist network? And kinda sorta doing the bidding of a top-tier intelligence syndicate head who definitely has millions of powerful enemies?”

“Of course,” Dekk said, soulful eyes damp with concern for me, and I wanted to hug him forever.

“Yeah, we would have agreed at ‘help me with something.’ The other stuff just sweetens the gig.” Pell was more excited by the risk involved, but I loved that, too.

I explained it all. Molybdita—my vanished home—the creepy preacher that might or might not know a way back to it. And then they were in soldier mode, battening down hatches and decoupling brackets and a bunch of other equally baffling stuff.

“You guys do this for every rent boy you spend a lost weekend with?”

“Only the ones as cute as you,” Pell said, spinning up their special military Mapp, a dizzying star map of gates—the regular one that I used only had red circles for toll gates and blue squares for free ones, but theirs had a dozen different colors and innumerable shapes.

“Which is none,” Dekk said.

We were off, queuing up for passage through Menelik’s tertiary vessel portal, following the slow orderly parade of vehicles through it—pausing every sixty seconds when the beacon flipped and control started guiding ships in from the other side—and then we were through.

The system’s hub was small, as regional hot spots go, but since I ship-hopped so rarely it never failed to impress me: to see thousands of gates floating in space, ancient obsidian ones and new cobalt ones, big and small, adorned with the branding of religions and corporations and nation-planets. This hub was a wall, its gates arranged in a flat grid repeating into the distance in all directions. Some hubs were rings or spheres, some were lattices, some were unstructured, gates flung willy-nilly across the ether.

“I suppose this gets very boring for you,” I whispered.

“Never,” they said as one.

Dekk directed us through a rusty steel gate, its surface a hodge-podge of recycled



structures. When we emerged, I saw we were somewhere I knew well: a hub whose gates were arranged in a diamond. And I must have made a noise of disapproval, because Dekk said, "Let me guess. You get a lot of clients out of here."

"Sure do," I said.

This part of space was one of the few systems with strict ethical restrictions on who you could have relations with, based on the gender given to you at your birth. So of course the men from here were super repressed and super into some super freaky stuff.

Molybdita's ping took us through a gate in the hub's upper-left arm, spitting us out into—of course—ugh—orbit above a planet.

It filled their viewscreens, and the starboard side portholes. Green seas; reddish-brown landmasses; the massive mycodome cities of a planet whose terraforming was still underway. The sight spoke to me skeleton-deep, and I hated the tug of it. One more sign of how I was stuck.

We docked at the station; I disembarked. Dekk and Pell wanted to come, but I didn't want to risk scaring the dude. "Run the registry phreaker while I'm gone. Here's Molybdita's dead-drop frequency, and my call sign in her system—beam her the results when you get them."

They saluted, good little soldiers still, and I was briefly paralyzed by the desire to drop everything and cuddle with them until we all died happy in bed of dehydration.

I thought for sure he'd be in the bar, but the easyfind ping Molybdita provided took me to a wide low-ceilinged space on the station, one wall of which was windows—facing away from the planet, out at the familiar star-sea of space. Which was one small mercy.

In roped-off squares, men—all men—punched each other in the face repeatedly. They wore comically puffy gloves and they didn't use kicks, elbows, headbutts, any of the stock-in-trade of every fighting sport known to the portalverse. Just punches. It looked like some bizarre ancient ancestor of the beam fights my brother had been obsessed with around the time I abandoned him forever

*but maybe not forever*

and the thing about portal-hopping is it can take you super far super fast, which facilitates charging forward unprepared, which is one hundred percent what I was doing just then. No plan, no cover narrative, not even the bare minimum backstory I constructed for johns who got sentimental after sex and wanted to know my whole life. Plus the sobriety soda was still simmering inside my head.

He was a nervous-looking little slip of a thing, pleading with a cornerman whose attention was entirely focused on a fighter. Their voices were low but I knew that hunted look in his eyes: somebody begging for a loan, or for more time to pay off money already loaned.

A bell rang. A dozen sparring matches ceased. Fighters returned to corners. The guy Molybdita's broke preacher had been talking to turned to him with an *if-you-don't-get-the-hell-away-from-me* gesture, and preacher man skedadddled to somebody else, who was just as aggressively uninterested. So he took a seat.

This was a training facility. For would-be warriors in the noble struggle against the evil systemists. I could see it in these boys' eyes: the same hate I'd seen back home, the same contempt for anyone who wasn't one of them. The smell of sweat and mycotic leather and burned algae coffee was intoxicating—arousing—and I rolled with my old friend desire and let it be my guide.

"Hey," I said, sitting down beside him. "Sorry, this is super weird, but you work for Molybdita, yeah?"

He turned to me, shocked, twitchy.

"I'm Aran," I said, inclining my head, unsure which signal of greeting he'd favor.

"Broyce," he said, holding out his hand, which, eww. Who still does that. But I took

it, and I shook it, because that too is *Pleasure Worker 101*: sometimes you gotta do stuff that's a little icky.

I set subterfuge aside. I was gonna play this straight. I pulled out the coin, extended it between two fingers. "Where'd you get this?"

Swiftly, like he saw a snake, he clasped my hand in both of his to hide the coin. "Walk with me."

"Sure," I said, following his sad hunched shamble. He paused to touch the sleeves or try to whisper in the ears of a couple other guys on the way out, all of whom ignored or frowned or shrugged or threatened him.

"This way," he said, taking me out a door—into a hallway—and transforming completely.

"I knew it was you," he said, an entirely new man. His posture perfect; his sheepish grin gone. "Saw you on Menelik and said to myself, that's his brother."

My jaw dropped. The word *brother* barely registered, beneath the shock of this transformation.

It had all been an act. The sad broke gambler in the training hall—the creepy alcoholic preacher Molybdita believed she was working with—they weren't real. The best cover stories contain a ton of truth, and by pretending to be a sad useless anti-off-worlder he'd hidden what a dangerous one he was, the better to gather intel and spread deceit. And he'd fooled me, which, no heavy lift there, so does everything—but to have fooled my boss? Who built an empire around her ability to judge and play people? Whatever he was, this guy was not to be underestimated.

"Sorry," he said, with a chuckle, one firm manly hand on my shoulder. Military, I realized. A leader of warriors. A boss. "Breathe."

"You," breathe, "know my brother."

Not a question. A baffling, impossible statement.

"Everybody on Uqbar knows Drommeda Jangr," he said.

Tears came—unwanted, unstoppable. He was alive. *Uqbar* was alive—accessible—somehow. A gate really had survived. Maybe more than one. Until mere hours ago, I had been too weak—too torpid, too defeated—to even hope for such a thing. Now it was a fact.

"How . . ."

"He's Public Enemy Number One. The biggest fucking pain in my ass on the planet. I've been trying to kill him for years, to be perfectly frank."

" . . . how . . ."

"Not everyone is happy with what we've accomplished, since taking ourselves off-line and re-dedicating ourselves to the values that made humanity so powerful we could break time and space with wormholes in the first place. There is a small but persistent resistance movement, of which your brother is the lead. Doomed, of course, but quite charismatic. Secret pictures of him hang in many homes."

Broyce smiled at my speechlessness. At the pain I couldn't hide: to think of my brother, alone, abandoned, afraid, becoming something great, fighting a doomed noble fight while I frolicked from bed to bed across the entire portal-verse. The little boy afraid of the sea, fearless in the face of a government made up of monsters.

I wondered if he thought of me. If I was an inspiration or an embarrassment.

"Do you want to go home, Aran?"

I nodded. I *did* want to go home. Stars help me I did. Some part of me had always been planetstuck. Some part of me would always be weeping, remembering the smell of my father frying onions.

And this guy—this slick manipulator—was my only way back. I wondered if he walked around with a whole pocketful of coins from planets they'd conquered, just in

case someone came along who might be from one of them.

"You must know I hate everything you stand for," I said.

"Of course," he said. "But I also know how homesick you are, Aran. How badly you want to get home—to see your family again. They mostly stay out of politics, but we still keep tabs on all of them. Just in case. Your mom. Your dads. You miss them enough to follow me here, right? I'm offering you a way to come home."

"And all I have to do for you . . ."

He laughed, like, aren't you a smart lad. But I wasn't one of his lads. "All you have to do for us is be an olive branch. A gesture, to your brother, that we are kind and we are forgiving. And that if he agrees to personally abandon the struggle, we'll give him a blanket amnesty for all the political and property crimes he's been accused of."

"If he's as committed to the cause as you say he is, he'd hate me just for asking that of him."

"We're not asking you to sign in blood. You don't have to ever say a word to him on the subject. We'll deliver the offer—and we'll deliver you—and that will be that."

I didn't trust him. I couldn't. And trying to play him was a scary proposition. I had no idea how skilled he was, how savage. The station corridor we walked was long and flimsy, breaking off into forks and crossroads and six-way intersections—from one branching arm of it I heard the rhythmic roar of soldiers drilling.

"What's your home planet?" I asked.

"Tsai Khaldun," he said, chin rising with pride. "Settled as a rich man's personal hunting preserve, with a staff of animal tenders who eventually overthrew him and founded a workers' cooperative. I grew up in the lowlands of the Axa Delta. Six hundred islands, each with its own genetically distinct population of wild horses. Summer mornings the smell of clover was so strong it would make you drunk. Marvelous place."

"And is it," what was the word he had used? "offline?"

"It is."

"Completely? Or is there a secret gate somewhere so hypocrites like you can come and go as you please, enjoying the freedom of motion you pretend you hate?"

"Completely," he said, and was this real? this flash of sadness, the tremor in the voice and the wetness of the eyes? "Tsai Khaldun was one of the first planets where an anti-offworlder tendency evolved. My father was a leader in that movement—fled persecution with our whole family when I was only ten. When the movement succeeded . . . well. That's what it means to believe in something. To be prepared to sacrifice everything for it. Even the very thing you believe in. My father—and others—learned lessons there. Like ensuring that it's possible for persecuted refugees to return, and to share lessons and tactics with the broader alliance. Hence the existence of secret gates, on future planets of our involvement."

"How many planets have you guys conquered?"

"We don't keep track," he said, and they definitely did, "and we don't conquer. We support the people who live there, who want to preserve their way of life. What makes them special."

I could smell the sea. I could hear my brother's voice.

"How quickly can we get there?"

Broyce pulled out a bizarre hacked Mapp interface, like three devices sutured together with tubules and piping. Branded with a blue oval, and the words *Zero Alliance* inside it. "Six hops. Each one closely guarded, of course. Passing through our most sensitive facilities."

"How do I know you won't kidnap me, lock me up, use me as . . . less consensual leverage? Threaten to hurt me if Drommeda doesn't turn himself in?"

He gave a slight head tilt, like that was the first he'd thought of it—which it definitely wasn't. "The long answer is, if you want to bring a weapon or something, to not

feel completely helpless, that's fine. But the short answer is . . . you can't. You won't know what you're walking into, what we might have arrayed against you, and so on. I recognize that might make this a deal breaker, and of course I respect your decision either way."

The offer was absurd. No sane person would accept it. But Broyce believed I was as desperate to return to my vanished homeworld as he was, and that my vision would be as clouded as his would.

I was terrified. I had traveled untold trillions of miles in the years since I'd left my home, and this was the first time I had even the slightest glimmer of hope of finding my way back there. And that glimmer involved trusting someone I had every reason to despise.

But I could do this.

I had to do this.

Right?

"I have to make some arrangements," I said. "And find myself a good weapon. Can I meet you back at the fight facility in an hour?"

"Meet me at my ship," he said, smiling like anyone anywhere who'd just won an argument. He tapped his Mapp to mine to send me the coordinates.

"Sounds good," I said, scrutinizing the info even though I knew exactly where in the shipyard his vessel was, and had in fact docked six ships over and already run a phreaker on it.

A short walk back to the berthing hangar—a long stroll down Bay Eight—to the dock where Dekk and Pell's ship was waiting. My heart hammering louder with every step I took away from him. Avoiding eye contact with all the hot awful brutal broad-shouldered boys who filled the halls. With Broyce I'd been all puffed-chest bravado and easy fearless smile, but that was just another sex worker superpower: looking someone you're scared of in the eye and smiling like you're invincible, like nothing could possibly hurt you, so they won't even try.

Along with my thoughts—with my fear—with my hope—it was another story. I stopped outside their ship to try to think and breathe, but I didn't have much luck with either, and Dekk must have been monitoring the external cams for me because I hadn't been there thirty ticks when the door irised open and there he was, rubbing his hands and giggling.

"We got him, babe," he said, the big bearded grin and the hand on my arm and the affectionate nickname all soothing me inexplicably. He pulled me in, slung an arm around me, walked me to the bridge. "Phreaker gave us a perfect registry of the last thousand hops his ship made—we sent it to Molybdita like you said, and she's mad as hell! Apparently it exposes glaring contradictions in the info he's been feeding her."

"Nice," I said, my heart heavy. None of those hops would tell me where the way home was. The gate to Uqbar would be for human transport only: they'd take no chances on an enemy ship blasting past their defenses and reconnecting my planet to the portalverse.

Pell hopped up when we reached the bridge, bear-hugged us both.

I wanted them. One last time, rushed and desperate, right there on the floor of the bridge, a final gasp of delirious freedom—of the ecstasy that only the unstuck can truly experience—before I grounded myself forever.

But I didn't have time for that. Whatever I was going to do—if I was going to do anything—I had to do it fast. All I had on my side was surprise, and the hope that Broyce didn't already have a plan in place for bizarre situations like this. And every second I gave him was time he could use to figure out a way to put the hurt on me.

He could ansible back to Uqbar—tell the local leadership what he had—start planning my downfall and Drommeda's. To say nothing of the fact that if I vanished

into the ether with him immediately after revealing the extent of his treachery to Molybdita, she'd hunt me down with the same vicious team of torturers. And maybe she'd never find me—space was big—but I'd definitely spend the rest of my life waiting for them to show up.

I stared out the porthole, at his banged-up war trawler monstrosity. A front, a fake, like his handful of sad sack disguises—but also unmistakably him, now that I had seen who that really was: a solid, stagnant thing, rooted and powerful but rotten to the core. I looked around the bridge of Dekk and Pell's rinky-dink little scuttle hopper, honest in its humble hodgepodge magnificence. Bits and pieces of pirate vessels and ghost stations and the weaponry of wars and skirmishes long past.

Drommeda's world wasn't mine. Neither was his struggle. The things that pulled me back to Uqbar were guilt, and entitled greed for something that had been taken away from me, and force of homesick habit.

Idly, from nervousness and fear and sadness, I palmed the locking ball of the torpedo launcher. Shifted the cursor from ship to ship in the viewport, before settling it on Broyce's.

He was a big deal. A general, probably. A leader, definitely—a linchpin of their sick interstellar strategy. I could kill him effortlessly.

Absurd. Idiiotic. Pushing down on that ball was the action of someone strong, fearless, brave, bold—and above all selfless—none of which I was. Pushing down on that ball meant giving up all hope of ever seeing home again.

But I remembered Broyce's big hand on my shoulder. A gesture of command, of control. And it flashed me back to one of my first tricks, back before I had all my survival skills and security protocols. He'd been into bondage; had me hogtied; super normal stuff, happens all the time. But when it started to hurt—when I said the safe word—he didn't move or say a word. Just looked at me. Enjoying the fear on my face. For what felt like forever. Of course I assumed I was about to be tortured to death. And then he'd just untied me, and paid me three times what we'd discussed, but I carried the terror of it around with me to this day.

I couldn't feel that fear again. I couldn't put myself in Broyce's hands and trust he wouldn't hurt me. I wasn't strong enough.

I pushed the ball down halfway. And turned and said, "I'm sorry, guys."

"What," they said, as one, adorably, and my heart ached for the trouble I was about to bring down on them.

"This is gonna get messy."

Dekk grinned. Down for whatever the hell it was. Pell did not. But I couldn't stop.

I slammed my palm down hard. And then did it again. Watched two threads of fire arc across the screen, collide with Broyce's ship, break it in half in a big glorious ball of flame and shrapnel.

Dekk howled joy and Pell cursed, and they both sprang to battle stations. In what seemed like a split second Pell had disengaged the docking clamps and was steering us out, applying full thrusters way too soon—devastating the gate we'd just been docked at and strafing the ships around us when he turned the ship sharply left and then right, a genius chaos move that I found disturbingly stimulating. And Dekk was in the railgun seat, spraying electromagnetic-pulse projectiles that tore gaping holes in everything around us.

I stood there, too stunned to speak or move. The violence of it barely registered. The death I'd caused. The danger I'd put us in. I stared at my hand like it was a live and separate thing, a treasonous servant who had ruined all my hopes and plans because it knew that's exactly what I wanted and didn't dare claim for myself.

Blowing up Broyce had been the right move for Drommeda, but that wasn't really

why I'd done it.

"Okay, so . . . what exactly went down in there?" Dekk asked.

"Let's get out alive first, how about that?" Pell said.

Because of course this was not some sleepy backwater trading station—it was a base for coordinated anti-offworlder military activity. We'd caught them by surprise, but they weren't helpless—they had patrol ships circling the hub at all times, and eleven seconds after I blew up Broyce's ship they were locked on and closing in.

"Where you going?" Dekk said.

"Um, away from the people trying to kill us?" Pell said, as bullets started strafing silently past our portholes.

"Okay, but, you're also taking us away from the gates that are our only way out of here, so . . ."

"I know that!"

Pell cut a hard twist and brought the ship about, showing six heavy gun trawlers in the viewport—which broke formation and banked away from the projectiles Dekk now turned on them.

"Damn, Aran, didn't think you had it in you," Pell said.

"I did," Dekk said.

Still I said nothing. Not afraid of death—though it seemed super likely; more ships were declamping from their docks and engaging us—just sitting in the hollow and the hurt like you do when you've learned something huge about yourself and you don't yet know what it means.

Pell cursed, shifting course abruptly away from the hub, where a wall of warships large and small had come together. "Hold on to something," he said, digging into a series of sharp jaggged evasive maneuvers.

"Where we going, buddy?" Dekk said, blasting wildly, unable to lock on but still strafing occasional enemy vessels enough to make them break off.

"Away!"

They both cursed.

I should have been helping. I had to hope that if there was actually anything I could do, they'd tell me to do it. And that I'd be able to obey.

Who knew what I was, now. What I was capable of.

We were small and we were fast and we were scared, so we got out of range quick enough. The problem was, they were still following us. And on the main screen Mapp assured us that in the direction we were going, at top speed, it'd be ten thousand years before we ever saw a human settlement. And that our "travel capacity"—the time until we all starved to death or died of dehydration—was sixteen days.

"We could keep going, hope they all break off, swing around and try to make a break for the hub again?"

"They won't," Pell said. "Not all of them. And even if they did, they'd keep the hub at high alert until they knew we were dead."

"Yeah."

Dekk stood, started disconnecting the torpedo launcher. Pell locked the settings in, went to get a dolly and began loading it up.

"What's . . . happening?"

"We're abandoning ship," Pell said. "We'll hop a gate back."

"Stars," I swore. "I am so sorry I messed this all up for you."

"It's fine," Dekk said. "This is just a flimsy little thing we use for trading gigs. The torpedoes themselves are a dime a dozen, and we can take the launcher with us super easily. It's the only irreplaceable thing here. That, and us three."

Pell shuffled through the gate array. In the rear viewport, thirteen ships fell back out of railgun range.

"Wonder how long before they realize they're following a ghost ship?"

I helped them pack, haphazardly. Twenty minutes and it was all over.

"You wanna say goodbye to it?" Pell asked.

"No," Dekk said. "That's kid stuff."

Dekk was mad as hell but fine with walking away. Pell wasn't. What warrior doesn't come to love their murder toys?

An arm unfurled from the array, extending a gate. Pell pinged it to confirm the other side was clear, then pushed the dolly through. I helped Dekk carry the crate containing the torpedo launcher—a surprisingly compact little creature.

And then we were back. In Menelik. The smell of chlorine and new tile and distant incense. So familiar—so *systemist*—I had to turn away so they wouldn't see my face contort.

I followed them down the deck in a daze. "Don't any of your gates back there . . . shouldn't they, I don't know, not fall into the wrong hands?"

"Ship is rigged to blow up if anybody tries to board, though I don't think they could catch up to us," Pell said, avoiding eye contact. "Tomorrow we'll send a couple of tacticals through to telescope them down, bring them back. Pay Menelik the restock fee, since we broke this rental by leaving its mate stranded."

Wordlessly, we went back to my berth. Each of us exhausted and exhilarated and grief-stricken and scared in our own ways. And of course we had more fun, and the sex was incredible even though—or because?—my room was so much smaller, the bed barely big enough for our three rambunctious bodies—but there was a solemn stricken air to our intercourse now. And Pell was super mad at me, though he tried his hardest not to let it impact the moment. For Dekk's sake, I knew.

"You want to join our company?" little-spoon Dekk said afterward.

"Aran's already got a job, and he probably makes way more money than we could pay him," said big-spoon Pell.

"I'm not talking about him being an employee," Dekk said solemnly.

"Maybe," said middle-spoon me, to spare Pell the ugly task of saying no to the offer of full partnership Dekk had just made. I didn't blame him if he hated me. I'd fucked his whole life up.

When you're a kid you think you can be anything. Every day you live you learn something else you can't do. Can't be. I was no soldier. Blowing stuff up was fun, but choosing to put yourself in a potentially deadly situation? I found out the hard way that wasn't me. I gave up my only shot at getting back to Uqbar rather than submit to the scary unknown.

In the morning they had to head back to their HQ, stow the launcher and debrief the fiasco, find out whether Zero Alliance had been able to ping the scuttle hopper back to them and was gonna try to slaughter them both. Which, probably. Dekk tapped an everfind tag into my Mapp, an unspeakably intimate act, more profound than any commitment ring—a ring wouldn't tell me exactly how to find them no matter where they were in the portalverse. I returned the favor; hugged them hard and for a long long time; said goodbye. Whispered *I'm so sorry* into Pell's ear, but he didn't say or do a thing.

And then I went, at last, to the waterslide labyrinth. Checking in with Molybdita should have been my priority, but I'd been ad-libbing my life for too long and I had learned the hard way that impulsively shifting directions can take you to someplace you can't come back from.

I clanked over the currency for an unlimited pass. Leapt into the ingress pool. Swam toward the first chute. Let it suck me down and into the labyrinth. Within an hour I had become adept at avoiding the middle atrium, where zero-G sometimes stopped you in a massive press of floating bodies and bubbles of water, until a staffer came through to tug you free, because the thing I needed above all else was not to

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slow, not to stop, not to think.

I stayed there for hours, as my muscles began to ache and hunger kindled and grew inside me. Spiraling endlessly through space, a lone body against the void, in water the temperature of tears.