I

Sunny hadn’t felt this sick since they broke the stratosphere.

Straight out of cryo sleep, and she was back to hugging the toilet; her long auburn hair dangling over the threshold and getting splashed by absolutely nothing other stomach bile and saliva. After a week in cryo sleep, her body had eaten up the meager breakfast that she’d had before launch. She had been instructed to eat light, but maybe a bigger portion of bacon and eggs would have tasted better than the nothing that was getting dragged out of her by the severe nausea.

“Don’t worry, Miss O’Neil.” The voice attached to the hand rubbing circular motions into her back hummed, “Space Sickness is a perfectly natural side-effect to first-time passengers. Or even second, sometimes *third*-time passengers.”

Sunny would have thrown out a “thanks” if she felt like she could manage it. The haggard, raspy gasps that she choked out after violently throwing up the empty cavity where her breakfast felt like it should have been were about as close to a response as she was capable of giving at the moment. The pressure being applied to her back should have helped, but it felt like nothing would. Nothing short of literally throwing up her stomach.

“We have plenty of measures that will help you regain your equilibrium, from ear drops to pills to patches.” The voice said in that same soothing, almost medicated tone, “Would you like for me to—”

“*Gawdd yus.”*

Another violent wretch as absolutely nothing came out of her. Sunny’s face was streaked with hot wet tears as they rolled down her cheeks. Her sergeants back on Earth had warned her that the Chunder was a frequent side-effect, but there was no way that they could have prepared her for the severity of it. As the applied pressure from the android’s palms left the space between her shoulder blades, she almost called out for her to come back—she hadn’t realized how good it felt until it was gone.

“Alright, ooookay… you’re doing fine.”

After a few more moments, Sunny felt the back of her hair be lifted up. Two cold fingers pressed patches against the base of her ears, sending an immediate wave of very slight relief through her now throbbing head and scalding throat. As she gasped, shellshocked after her ordeal, into the metal toilet all Sunny could do was to thank God that it was over.

“Feel better?”

“Suh… *so* much better…” she panted, “I… I don’t know what happened… I-I…”

“It’s ooookay.” The voice repeated with a sympathetic pat on Sunny’s back, “Like I said, it’s a *very* common side-effect. Is this your first time?”

Sunny striped an arm across her mouth, wiping away the debris of her body’s attempts at blowing chunks. Her teeth were still gritty, and the pressure on the back of her eyes had yet to recede.

“Yeah… I… never gotten higher than the clouds before signing up for this mission.” She flashed a weak, still-tingling smile, “They really weren’t kidding…”

“It’s possible that you might also be experiencing Cryosickness.” The soft white face of the onboard Medic practically glowed through the tears and the harsh fluorescent lighting of the *Nashville’s* infirmary, “Do you think you’re able to walk over to the sickbed by yourself?”

“I… I think so…”

Her knees were knocking together. Like a calf trying to stand on for the first time. She supposed that she *was* a bit like a calf here—in that she was a “baby” astronaut, still puking her guts up before her first mission was even half an hour in.

But she *was* able to make the walk over.

“Good job.” The medic said, “Okay, let’s get you down on your side here so that I can administer those ear drops—and while we’re doing that, the autodoc will tell me if you’re suffering from cryosickness. Does that sound okay?”

“Puh… peachy…” Sunny grimaced, feeling absolutely green around the gills as she struggled to lay on one side…

— — —

It wasn’t until about three hours later that Sunny was able to walk out of the infirmary, where she had been left alone to recuperate before eventually falling into a deep and dreamless slumber.

The upside of waking up outside of her coveralls was that she hadn’t vomited all over one of her only clean set of clothes, but the downside was that she had needed to take a shower before she was decent. The crew’s quarters were just down the hallway, and poor Sunny had to make the trek naked.

Luckily the crew of the *Nashville* had been otherwise occupied in the central rotunda, gathered around the circular dining table while they played cards. They hadn’t noticed the lanky, naked brunette make a mad dash down the hallway clutching a ball of soiled sleep clothes over her privates any more than they could have heard her turn on one of the showers. Once Sunny emerged, her hair dark and damp even after drying off to the best of her ability, she begrudgingly put on one of the ugly green coveralls that had been laid out for her on the only untouched bed in the cabin.

*Captain’s quarters are near the cockpit, three beds… aren’t there five of us?*

On a ship this small, five was plenty. With everything being carefully weighed and measured, the cabin of this convoy was hardly the heaviest part of the *Nashville* right now. But the logistics of sleeping arrangements were still something to be considered, given the length of the return trip and the fact that their cargo couldn’t handle being put into FTL travel.

Sunny understood that she was something of a last-minute addition and that operations like this were usually done on a tight budget, but she *really* hoped that she wouldn’t have to share a twin-sized mattress with a stranger for the entire duration of their trip.

*Not like I’ll be getting much privacy while I’m aboard anyway… this place is a lot smaller than I would have thought it was…*

She had been an ALE pretty much since she’d graduated college, but she hadn’t so much as set foot on a commercial I/E vessel. She’d been aboard plenty of docked government carriers and ships, but even on the ground they had always carried a sort of majesty in their sheer *vastness*. The sort of thing that you’d see in the movies about the War when the plucky private set first foot aboard the USS *Puerto Rico* (or the USS *Vietnam* if you liked stories about an underdog) and that sense of wonder had been what got Sunny interested in the science of it all in the first place…

Honestly, Sunny *knew* that ships came in this size. She’d done the math for this haul personally before deciding that she wanted to come aboard. She’d studied this rig up and down at the behest of the Yeng Corporation. But *calculating* forthe cramped quarters of the *Nashville* and *experiencing* those same cramped quarters were two entirely different things.

*I’d better go introduce myself. Let everyone know that I haven’t thrown my guts up* ***entirely…***

— — —

“Heeyyyyyyyyy, there she is—Sunny with a chance of acid rain!”

“Don’t be a cunt, Lo.”

Four heads rose or turned to face the intruding “spaceflight participant” as she emerged from the starboard hallway. Beneath the flickering yellow of the cheap fluorescent light, a heavy smoke trailed from two sticks sitting in the ashtray. As the crew smiled at her with varying levels of placation, the big blonde woman picked one up and took a drag, letting it hang from her mouth as she stood up from the table to greet Sunny properly.

“Glad to see that you found your way to the showers—and a clean jumpsuit.” She put her hands on her hips and smiled, “We were about to start drawin’ straws to see who was gonna go check on you in there.”

“I woulda just poked her with a stick and called it a day.” The slender Latina woman still seated at the table said, picking up the corner of the bigger girl’s unattended cards, “Earthers always adjust eventually.”

“My, that’s certainly a helpful outlook.” The medic from before said dryly to her own cards, “The poor thing’s first trip out into space and you want her to choke on her own vomit.”

“My name’s Sunday O’Neil.” Sunny extended a hand to the husky gal standing in front of her, “You can call me Sunny… and, uh… I-I didn’t choke on my own… you know… my own vomit.”

“Ignore these two. They’ve got half a brain cell to rub together each, and neither of ‘em likes the other half that much.”

The woman took Sunny’s hand in her own and gave it a quick, efficient shake. It was a rough spun sort of feel, with the hard palms of an engineer that belied the softness in her face, and the long golden locks that cascaded over her broad shoulders. She was taller than Sunny by about a head, and her hips were about as broad as Sunny would be if she took a wide stance.

“My name’s Catherine—Flight Engineer for the *Nashville* six years runnin’.” She said with a thick midwestern drawl, “I was the one on the other end of those letters about how much of what we could hold an’ for how long.”

Sunny never would have guessed. *Catherine* had sounded like such a dainty name. Not that this girl wasn’t pretty, but her grip sold her as anything but dainty.

“That’s Lolo—our pilot.” She pointed to the scrawny Hispanic woman who had picked up her stick from the ashtray for a quick puff, “She’s nice enough when she’s not *lookin’ at my fuckin’ cards!*”

The aforementioned woman rolled her eyes and tossed her hand into the center of the table, caught as could be.

“That’s Captain Nguyen—”

“Evangeline.” The small Asian woman said with a curt nod before taking a sip of black coffee, “Or Captain. Whichever one you think suits best, Ms. O’Neil.”

“And given what you’ve already been through, I can imagine that you know Ashe pretty well by now.” Catherine chuckled as she turned to the one familiar face that Sunny could place, “She told us you’d be down and out for a while.”

“I’m glad to see that you’re feeling better, Miss O’Neil.” The bobbed redhead said with a smile, “I’ll be happy to keep administering medication, should you need it.”

“Okay! That’s… wow, it’s nice to meet all of you.” Sunny smiled, “I guess I should apologize for not making a better first impression.”

“Nah, don’t worry about it.” Catherine said with a less-than-light touch of Sunny’s back, “Come grab a seat. We’ll get you somethin’ to eat. You must be starved.”

Sunny followed suit, the legs of her baggy olive-green jumpsuit swishing as she pressed in front of Catherine’s huskier physique and hunkered into the red pleather wraparound. Settling between Lolo and Catherine on the second from the outside seat, Sunny sat awkwardly as the fifth wheel to what was clearly an already well-oiled machine.

“Hey new girl, you know how to play Poker?” Lolo asked with a nudge, “We’ll deal you in next hand.”

“Sure.”

“*Corinthian* Poker?” the Captain arched an eyebrow without looking up from her hand

“Uh… I can learn?”

“*Uuuuugh…* screw that—she can shuffle.” Lolo laughed, “It’s too complicated to teach a newbie. And it’s better than letting Ashe do it since she bends all of our fucking cards.”

“She’s gonna need her hands to eat, Lo.” Catherine rolled her eyes, picking up her hand after settling back into place, “We’ll show you how to play next round, okay? You get some breakfast in you first.”

“…isn’t it about twenty-one hundred hours?”

“Yeah? What’s the first meal you eat when you wake up back on Earth?” Lolo looked over with an agonized expression, “That’s right, it’s breakfast.”

And so, breakfast it was.

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Sunny’s plate of bacon and eggs looked almost quite literally out of a commercial—to the point where there was a bit of uncanny valley going on.

She’d read about this. She’d even had it a few times, back when she was in college. It was cheaper to do it this way. Because of how space travel worked, all of the food had to be synthesized. Storing individual ingredients would have taken up more space, weighed more per centimeter (and therefore more fuel) and couldn’t make the long trips back outside of FTL. So the food was literally printed using edible filament and flavor enhancers.

The first few times she’d had it, Sunny had been weirded out by how “fake” everything tasted. It wasn’t *bad*, per se. It just… lacked flavor. Everything, from the eggs to the bacon to the grits, was bland and one-note. The texture was also an issue, but not one that couldn’t be overlooked in favor of convenience and shelf life (both literal and figurative). But if her crewmates for the foreseeable future were to be believed, after a while you got used to it—given that this crew had probably been living off of this stuff for years now, they would know better than anyone.

“Don’t ever expect it to taste *good* though.” Catherine chuckled, her fork scraping against the surface of her plate, “Most trips we only have to endure it for a few days between Cryo. Doing this whole two-year trip with nothing but Printed Rations ain’t exactly gonna be a gourmand experience.”

“I’ve had worse.” Lolo said with a shrug, “When I was in the War, we were lucky if we got MREs that didn’t taste like shit. At least these things are *supposed* to have flavor! Our rations in the Marines was just…like… the color beige.”

“And rubbery.” Catherine added with a shudder, “I swear to God, those things were made out of tire rubber and nothin’ else. I was half-expecting one of them mystery meat pouches to be full of condoms.”

“Hey, didn’t stop you from asking for seconds.”

“I ain’t exactly in the business of turnin’ down seconds from meaty condoms.”

The table tittered at that, with even the captain chuckling into her coffee mug. The haze that hung overhead had thickened as the rest of the crew, minus Ashe and Sunny, partook more from the sticks laid out as a party favor. The dueling aromas of their synthetic scented tobacco wafted heavily in the air around them, battling it out for supremacy while poor Sunny tried to choke down the rest of her food.

“So, uh… what’s the plan for this mission?” Sunny asked after the laughter died down, “You know, like… do we have chores, do we—”

“Listen to Sunny over here, talking about what we’re gonna do over the course of this long-ass trip.” Lolo snorted, taking a fat rip off of her stick and butting it out in the ashtray, “Not even one day in space and this one’s looking for chores. I’ll bet you were a *real* good student in school, huh Sunny?”

“Knock it *off* Lo.” Catherine rolled her eyes, “She just wants to know what she’ll be doing around here.”

“Mm—something that I wish was a little more common on this ship.”

The captain raised her eyebrows stoically before taking another sip of coffee, her flat nose widening slightly after a little snort of derision at her pilot’s expense, something that Catherine and Ashe ribbed the smaller woman good-naturedly about.

“The general idea is that we all do a little bit each day.” Catherine summarized helpfully, “Maintenance, checking the readouts every few hours, maintaining course back to Earth—”

“Making sure that the trailer doesn’t fall off.”

“*Definitely* making sure that the trailer doesn’t fall off—literally probably the most important part of the job.” Catherine tittered, “For the most part, there’s not actually a whole lot to *do* if you know what I mean.”

“So… we don’t do like… spacewalks?” Sunny piqued

“Listen, I know that when you tell an Earther that you can’t go FTL, they think that you’re moving real slowly.” Lolo snatched a piece of bacon off of Catherine’s plate and shoved it into her mouth, “But we’re still gonna make it back to Earth in 2 years—that’s like asking if you should stick your head out of the window of a car going a hundred and eighty kilometers an hour.”

Sunny couldn’t help but feel a little let down. Doubly so as the rest of the table laughed politely at the comparison.

“After we all do our daily duties, there’s honestly not a lot to do.” Ashe shrugged, turning on the overhead fan to clear some of the electronic-safe smoke, “Most of the time, we wind up laying around the cabin and watching old movies and TV shows.”

“Now granted, most of the time this isn’t an issue. Because *most* of the time, we’re out of FTL for a week.” Catherine stepped back into the conversation, laying two cards down and picking up two more as they were dealt out by Ashe, “On any other trip, we’d be doin’ all kinds of exciting stuff.”

“Yeah, you lucked out.” Lolo shuffled through her hand contemplatively before throwing a plastic chip into the center of the table, “Nice and boring.”

“Like anything’s ever boring with you around, Lo.”

“Say it to my face, gorgeous.” Lolo grinned, spreading her hand onto the table, “Two pair.”

“Flush.” The captain said calmly, wiping the smirk off of Lolo’s face with nothing more than five cards, “We’ll get everyone’s shifts settled within the next day or so. We’re off-Earth, but we’ll still be operating on a 24-hour format so that we can all keep ourselves regular.”

Captain Evangeline scooped the little stack of chips with one outstretched arm, bringing them in with a surprisingly cocky smile on her face.

“Person with the most credits gets to take 2nd shift.” Her stony exterior cracked, “Good luck crawling out of that hole you’re in, Lo.”

The wiry, Hispanic spacer just grumbled and threw her head down onto the table while Catherine, Ashe, and Sunny giggled at her histrionics.

— — —

“So this is where we all bunk—I’m sure you’ve figured that out already.” Catherine smiled, “This one’s yours.”

The crew’s cabin was just as small as Sunny remembered it being, but with Catherine standing next to her, it somehow felt even smaller.

“Unless of course you don’t *want* the window, in which case you can have *my* bed, that’s the one facing against the wall, and then Lo can have *this* bed—looking out into space makes me hella sick first thing in the morning, and I sure as shit ain’t gonna be takin’ this bed.”

The crew’s cots were laid out military-style, hospital corners underneath a thin blanket and one pillow each. Catherine’s bed, claimed premeditatively, had been adorned with a small cow-patterned horseshoe pillow for her neck. Sunny’s bed, identical to the rest otherwise, didn’t offer much in the form of a view—just a black void dotted with an uncountable number of stars.

“No, no, I like the window.” Sunny smiled awkwardly, setting her singular suitcase of personal affections on top of the bed bunk before sitting gingerly on the edge of it, “I mean… I think I do? It just feels so weird being able to see outside and not feel like I’m going to float away or something.”

Catherine hummed in agreement as she sat down next to Sunny, bedsprings squeaking at the added weight “Yeah that takes some gettin’ used to—believe me when I say that you *will* have dreams about falling out of this thing for at least your first week here. Maybe even longer depending on how bad your space-sickness is. Speaking of which!”

Catherine unzipped her own bag—hers a military-style backpack thrown over her should to contrast Sunny’s very civilian suitcase—and started rummaging through it before coming back up with a small container.

“Here—munch on one’a these every eight hours or so, and it should help keep your stomach from trying to eat itself inside out.” The navigator offered helpfully, “It tastes like shit and it ain’t a miracle cure, but them patches and shit don’t work for me none anyway; let it sit under your tongue for a few minutes and you should be okay.”

“Thanks, I appreciate it.” Sunny smiled, “I really do—it’s just… a lot to take in, you know?”

“Yeah. Yeah I get that. But hey!” Catherine grinned broadly as she slapped Sunny on the back with enough force to make her stumble forward a bit, “You made it this far! That right there is an accomplishment—most folks puke their guts out within five minutes of launch and never wanna come back up again. So congratulations! You are now an honorary astronaut!”

“I… I think you might be overstating things just a little bit.” Sunny chuckled nervously, running the small white bottle back and forth in her hand, “But thank you—I really appreciate you guys making room for me on this trip.”

Catherine just laughed as she stood up from the bed, offering Sunny a hand up in the process.

“Yeah no problem—we all had to go through it at one point or another. Just remember that space ain’t nothin’ like what they show in movies and TV. It ain’t always glamorous, but it does have its moments. And we ain’t so bad either once you get to know us!” Catherine effortlessly hoisted up the smaller woman from the bed with one hand before adding, “Well, most of us anyway. Lo can be a real pain in the ass sometimes, but she means well deep down. As for Eva… well, she’s the boss for a reason. Just try not to get on her bad side and you should be fine.”

“Actually, uh… before you go… I kind of had a question.” Sunny tried not to sound too meek, raising her voice ever so slightly, “So if the Captain’s Quarters are their own room, and there are three beds in here…”

“Yeah?”

“W-Well… there are five of us.” Sunny stated plainly, “Do we like, trade out beds with Ashe because she’ll be on the night shift, or—”

“Ohhhhh! That’s right, we never formally told you.” Catherine pat the smaller woman on the back hard enough to make her jerk forward a little ways, “Ashe is an Android—she’s the one who woke us all up out of cryo sleep.”

“Oh!” Sunny blinked, “I, uh… I didn’t know.”

“Yeah, sorry about that.” Catherine shrugged apologetically, “We should have explained it to you when you woke up, but you took so long getting ready that we all just sorta forgot. Anyway, the short version is that Androids don’t need to sleep, so she’ll be available for first aid stuff during the night shift in case anything happens.”

Sunny nodded slowly as she took in this new information, trying to commit it to memory. It was a lot of new names and faces and concepts all at once, she was almost entirely out of her wheelhouse up here in the vast inky blackness of space.

But that was okay—she had time. Two years, to be exact. Plenty of time to learn everything she needed to know about life on a space station. Two years to get over everything that had happened back on Earth. Two years to really find herself up here with her fellow crew members…

But first things first—

“So, um…” Sunny smiled almost apologetically at the sudden tonal shift in their conversation, “You, uh… you said something about having movies on board?”

“Ohooo, you wanna see the rec area?” Catherine smiled, wrapping one beefy arm around Sunny’s shoulders as she guided the smaller woman out the cabin door, “I think you’n me are gonna get along *just* fine, Sunny…”