

**A SECOND LIFE
AMONG STARS**

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*In loving memory of
Yasmin
Earth's mightiest Avenger
and my dear friend*

ONE

BAY A24, CAP ESMAY STATION DOCK:
11 MARTIUS, 302.5 SC

The white text on her pad's screen had looked stark against the black background. A single sentence composed of words that bore so much meaning. So much finality.

And yet, she couldn't believe them.

She hadn't felt a rising panic. No breath stuck in her throat, no nausea clenching her stomach, no heart beating its way out of her chest and no tears burning behind her eyes. In fact, in that moment, she couldn't feel *anything*, even though she'd known she should have been feeling *everything*. But how could that bit of digital correspondence—a mere collection of pixels—ever have represented its meaning?

Cap Esmay's commander of colonial security, Justinia Strong, shoves a damp strand of her gray hair behind her ear in frustration. Artificial rain is pouring, fake lightning is flashing and the police line is snapping in the augmented wind. Some of her colonial security officers are trying to save it from flying off into the darkness of night—an event that the press will likely use as a convenient excuse to come closer to *Arcade*.

Arcade, the name Justinia expects to haunt her for the rest of her career. It's the name of the massive colony starship currently docked at bay A24. She's one among many starships that's left Earth carrying new colonists—families, individuals, loved ones...—who have chosen to leave their home behind forever and explore a part of the universe that would take them no less than eighty years to reach. They will have spent the journey in suspension capsules, so that when they finally arrived here on Cap Esmay, they'd wake up knowing that whatever—and whomever—they'd left behind was nearly a century gone. But they themselves hadn't aged a day, ready to begin their lives anew.

Arcade has arrived a ghost ship.

That is the call Justinia had received this morning. It had instantly triggered the memory of ghost nets. Fishing nets that are either abandoned or otherwise lost at sea. Marine life will eventually get stuck in them and die, like bugs stuck in a spider-web. But the net will continue to drift along with the waves, carrying the entangled corpses with it everlastingly. Though a lugubrious concept, it is

what she fears has also happened to *Arcade*. Somewhere *something* had gone terribly wrong and she might be nothing more than a giant, steel coffin now.

When the ship had arrived this morning all sorts of alarms had triggered at dockside command. Their sensors had indicated her primary systems were offline, so she may have traveled sans life support for who knows how long, and that also means the chance of all suspension capsules having remained unpowered since isn't an unlikely scenario. *Arcade's* silent AI—a virtual assistant—hadn't even triggered the wake-up protocol prior to arrival, leaving the ship cold, dark and without a breathable atmosphere in Cap Esmay's dock. Dockside customs quickly called-in local law enforcement, Cap Esmay Colonial Security (CECS), to investigate for official confirmation, but Justinia and her people bear no illusions. They hold little hope for survivors.

“I have the latest from dockside, Sir.”

Justinia barely registers her lieutenant, Adrienne ‘Andee’ Dark, touching her shoulder. She had hardly even heard her over the thundering of the rain and, for a moment, can only make out her silhouette, courtesy of the kaleidoscope of emergency lights flashing behind her. Dockside customs, paramedics and numerous other colonial security officers have made their way to the dock and the best part is they're all Justinia's fun little circus to coordinate. Never has she seen so many of her girls and boys in black simultaneously.

“Are you all right, Sir?” Andee asks, exhaling little white clouds on her every syllable. In her hands she cradles a disposable coffee cup like it’s a sacred idol and she’s trying very hard to look unbothered by the cold seeping into her bones. Like Justinia’s, her uniform is soaked through completely. She’s flicked the collar of her windbreaker up over her chin to shield herself from the wind, but still she’s visibly shivering inside her safety vest like a cartoon turtle. While the vest works great with warding off bullets, sharp objects and melee weapons... water not so much. A long, hot shower is probably the only thing that will ever make either of them feel warm again.

“Peachy,” Justinia replies. “You?”

“The same, I suppose.” Andee straightens her shoulders in an attempt to force herself to stop shaking—a command more easily thought than executed—and snuffles her runny nose. “Though I wish we could turn this weather off.”

Cap Esmay is a space station constructed at the very edge of human occupied space. It’s the size of a small country, but even so it’s one of the smallest colonies. From the inside the station looks, smells and feels just like Earth. It has replicated the same gravity, atmosphere, flora, fauna...even the weather. There’s snow during winter, light breezes in spring, humid days in summer and rain in autumn. But why anyone ever decided the weather simulation shouldn’t be regulated in cases of emergency—

like a possible ghost ship sitting in an area with little to no shelter, perhaps?—remains a mystery to Justinia.

“You can put in a request?” Justinia suggests. “If you’re lucky it might be granted later this month.”

The lieutenant smiles, but not from amusement.

“What did dockside tell you?” Justinia asks in reply to her earlier statement.

The lieutenant removes her pad from her duty belt with an audible *click*. Its screen lights up but it doesn’t seem to react to her touch. The display is wet, her gloves are wet and her bare fingers turn out to be too damp too. The touch-based device cannot make heads nor tails of its owner’s commands. Andee sighs heavily and reattaches it to her belt.

“Never mind that. Their most relevant statement was that there is very little they can do to power *Arcade* back up from here. They also mentioned a starship this size will take a couple days to warm up without the aid of internal heating.”

That sounds more dire than Justinia had expected. Or rather *hoped*. “Ghost ship” is an ancient term. The time of space travel being a mortal risk is long gone—these situations simply never occur anymore.

Until now.

Any minute that passes is one too many to spend sitting on their hands, especially not knowing for sure whether the suspension capsules have really given out or not.

“I reckon,” continues Andee, “*Arcade*’s inner temperature will reach minus forty Celsius in most areas

soon. In light of our tight time frame, I feel you must consider putting two of our officers onboard in full observation gear, restart the ship from the bridge using a thumper and get visual confirmation on the capsules.” She takes a sip from her coffee. It’s simple pleasures like this that will hopefully make the rain tolerable to some extent. To Andee, that is. Justinia won’t go near the stuff, but she likes the smell and the memories that come with it.

“Is dockside set up for a power transfer like that?” Justinia asks after she’s lowered the cup.

“It will be enough to activate primary functions to a certain extent,” Andee replies.

Justinia considers this, not warming to the lieutenant’s suggestion...literally. “Maybe. How are we on oxygen?”

“None. Dockside was unable to bring life support back online—said all they can do for the moment is open the vents and pump the ship full of air by hand.” She shoves her free hand into the arm hole of her vest in a vain attempt to warm it. “Which will take much longer than us boarding and reactivating it from inside.”

It’s obvious her lieutenant’s preference towards this course of action is strong, but Justinia skeptically ticks off her fingers. “No breathable atmosphere, lethal temperature...”

“No lights,” Andee adds; Justinia holds up another finger. “But the ship is under the influence of the station’s gravitational field, so at least we will not have to float our way through.”

Justinia chews on this. “Transports and elevators? Actually wait, don’t answer that. Let me guess: offline?”

Andee smiles that amused lopsided smile of hers. “You are correct, Sir. If CECS are to board, it will have to be done the old fashioned way.”

Justinia bites her lip, folding her fingers back. “What do you think, lieutenant?”

She straightens, losing the smile. “I strongly suggest we do not wait this out and recommend sending in officers Izita and Ashe. They have some experience with—”

Their eyes whip to the glimmer of yellow in the black sky. The police line has come loose and is now erratically riding the wind. Some patrol officers are struggling to hold back the mass of casual onlookers and press, who seem determined to get a good cover shot. It won’t be long before they’ll break through to get it, for whatever good that’ll do.

Justinia sighs and fixes her eyes back on her lieutenant. “You’ve got your story straight?”

Andee nods. “Of course.”

“Then could you go over there and keep the emotions in check? They might *just* yield to someone carrying crowns on her shoulders.”

Despite having been the spokesperson on many occasions, the thought of appearing on some local network immediately has Andee fall back into the old habit of aiming her eyes down at the ground—hiding them. But as Justinia expects, the young lieutenant also replies with a solid “Yessir.”

“Just give them something for the evening news so they don’t start making up their own stories.” As the lieutenant turns to go, Justinia adds, “Then meet me at the mobile command center and we’ll board *Arcade* together.”

“Hang on. You are saying we as in us two?” Andee asks, dipping her chin in surprise and pointing a finger between them.

They are execs; their job is to make sure the troopers can do *their* jobs without hinder. Even still, both Andee and she had climbed their way up from the bottom and don’t mind getting their own hands and feet dirty every so often.

“That’s right,” Justinia answers. “I don’t know about you, but I can’t see myself ordering someone else to do it for us. Something tells me this case is going to stick for a very long time.”

“Any one of them would do it, though. Without hesitation,” Andee comments. It’s of no surprise to Justinia she runs to the defense of their officers immediately. As colonial security lieutenant she serves as the glue between commander and officers—a task she handles very well. Her leadership has proven her to be the perfect candidate to become Justinia’s replacement someday, but right now Justinia isn’t quite ready yet to pass on the baton and climb out of the trenches to settle behind a desk permanently. Even though she’s well past the typical age to do so.

“I know they would,” Justinia confirms, taking the coffee cup from her lieutenant’s hand. “But *I* won’t.”

Andee nods her acknowledgement, smiling smartly at her commander's earlier approval, and spins on her heel. She marches over to the increasingly large crowd of people standing just outside the mooring quay, duty belt rocking on her hips with the urgency in her stride. Justinia already feels sorry for whatever reporters are planning to trick her into revealing more information than she intends to. They won't succeed and all they have to do to realize that, is sparing her one single glance.

Even soaking wet Andee Dark is what the average person would call a striking woman. Her black, form-fitting uniform emphasizes her tall, athletic, firm and well-defined physique. While not excessively bulky, she's built herself a polished silhouette. In contrast her thick, dark brown hair—currently pulled back into a messy low bun; leaving a few loose strands to fall across her face—allows for a delicate feminine touch to her otherwise imposing image. But there is one thing that has always thrown a spanner in the works.

Her eyes don't align quite right.

This “defect” is instantly noticeable. One of her eyes always orients as it should, but the other will sluggishly turn inward towards her nose—leaving her looking permanently cross-eyed. Although it doesn't affect her sight, there have been other ways in which it's become an obstacle for her.

Even so, Justinia can't help but smile to herself as she watches her protégé address the nearest camera crews with her back straight as a line—showing off all of that

impressive one-ninety—and her gloved hands neatly folded before her, telling them her memorized story. The well-spoken lieutenant will have chosen every word she utters into those cameras with great care, and she'll deliver them with the articulate, even and distant ease of someone who's had to give voice to the bad news over and over this entire evening.

Arcade has arrived a ghost ship.

Around fifteen minutes later Justinia looks up as the doors of the mobile command center swing open and the vehicle kneels from Andee's added weight. The lieutenant quickly thumbs the mechanism for the doors to close, shielding them from the rain. They're parked just outside the airlock between Cap Esmay's dock and *Arcade's* emergency access. Their MCC isn't much bigger than a van and serves mostly as their storage truck. Rows and rows of equipment line the walls, minus one of each, because Justinia has already hauled herself into her observation gear: a sealed suit with several layers of armor plating and a thick bodysuit underneath that will keep her from freezing over instantly once inside the ship. It's also equipped with its own supply of oxygen *and* it has its own plumbing. She passes on the latter, preferring to hold it in until the more conventional method becomes available again.

Andee dumps her soaked safety vest on the ground with a heavy *thud*, and once again she snuffles her nose.

“Here.” Justinia holds out a towel to her drenched lieutenant, as well as a medical inhaler filling containing a precautionary cold remedy. Because CECS officers constantly have to deal with foreign bodies—which is a fancy way of saying they get bit, spat and bled at a lot—they carry a refillable inhaler on their person at all times, plus several types of fillings with antibacterial and antiviral sprays to suck up on the go. The one with a cold remedy doesn’t seem like a frivolous luxury right now, with most of their day spent in wet clothes and cold wind and all.

“Thanks, Justice,” Andee says.

Justinia still warms at the sound of her age-old nickname. While she had thought her parents couldn’t have blessed her with a better suiting name, her friends had seen the opportunity to kick it up a notch. Truth and law—the lyrics to her life.

Andee towels her dripping face and hair down and then inserts the filling into her inhaler, puts the end into her mouth, presses the release and takes a deep breath. Her face screws up as if she’s sucked on something sour.

“Is that mint?” she proclaims, coughing a few times for good measure.

“It was the only flavor they had left when I hopped by yesterday,” Justinia explains.

Andee clicks her tongue in disgust, mumbling, “I do not understand why they still make them like that.” She disposes of the spent filling, slips the inhaler back onto her belt and also begins the methodical process of putting on

her OBS suit, like Justinia already has. She buckles the armored breastplate's straps to her shoulders, fastens the vambraces and snaps the gauntlets home—then flexes her fingers to test her fine motor skill. Moving around in the suit often feels heavy and restrictive at first.

The air makes a hissing noise as Andee dons her helmet and it seals itself tightly, switching her over to the suit's own air supply. The helmet covers her entire head, save for the clear visor through which Justinia can see the lieutenant's eyes and the bridge of her nose. She resembles a doctor wearing a face mask, freshly scrubbed for surgery.

Justinia likewise slips on her headgear. The cushioning on the inside presses in on her forehead and cheeks snugly as it locks into place and automatically begins booting up—cycling through its various visual modes. Night-vision, thermal, X-ray...and then back to normal. The system asks her to calibrate its interface by following a bright red dot darting from one side of her vision to another. The process takes no longer than five seconds for a frequent user, but she remembers a much more junior Andee putting a similar helmet on for the first time. She'd been unable to get it calibrated. The helmet's engineers had kept many things in mind, but an axis deviation in the user's eyes wasn't something they'd taken into account. Justinia had made sure the woman got her own custom helmet with updated software afterward. Therefore Andee's is the only one on the shelf with initials carved into the side for recognition.

With her own—unengraved—helmet sealed and ready Justinia has finished gearing up completely. She turns to Andee who seems to be struggling with syncing her wrist gauntlet’s interface to her personal pad. Had the lieutenant been any other person, Justinia would have taken her trembling hand in hers and squeezed her reassurance into it. Instead she tries to convey a comforting smile with just her deep brown eyes and the wonderful onset wrinkles accompanying them, since that’s the only part of her face Andee will be able to see through the visor.

“There’s no shame in being scared,” she utters into the helmet’s mic. “I am too.”

“It is difficult to imagine everyone in there might be gone.” The hollowness in Andee’s voice is accentuated by the faint distortion of the in-helmet comm.

“Dead,” Justinia corrects firmly. “They won’t be gone, they’ll be dead. Best not to beat about the bush; it will make it easier for you to process this.”

She nods solemnly. “Of course, Sir.”

Justinia jerks her chin approvingly in accordance; then they exit the MCC and brave the rainstorm to the inside of *Arcade*’s airlock. She opens a channel to the dockside customs crew with a movement of her eyes.

“This is Colonial Security Commander Strong. You may cycle the airlock when ready.”

The door seals behind them and the air explodes, making Justinia wince. The light on the door that’s connected to *Arcade* begins to blink—switching between

white and blue. Once it remains a steady blue it'll be safe to board.

A certain regret is beginning to build at the retort she gave her young protégé earlier, but she's learned from experience the reality of their situation simply won't land otherwise.

It still hasn't for herself.

Like so many ships did before, *Arcade* left Earth carrying hundreds of resolute passengers and crew. Colony starships are incredibly expensive to board because the founder won't get much profit out of launching a ship that will only ever make one journey with no return. The ship will be severely outdated once it's arrived on the other side of human space, hence the ships are made completely recyclable and the material is sold to the destination colony prior to departure. Neither crew nor passengers will return to where they came from either. Not by their choice, but because suspension is a parlor trick you can pull on your body only once without serious consequence.

The people spending years saving up for these leaps are usually explorers, curious about what the rest of the galaxy looks like; eager to leave the easier embrace of Mother Earth to test themselves in the unforgiving void of space. Others are escaping something, looking to start over nearly a century later and quadrillions of miles away.

Justinia cranes her neck to look up at the woman standing beside her. The image of a small, chubby kid with tears forming in her crossed eyes flashes in her mind.

She files the memory away quickly and focuses on the blinking light again. Slowly the wheezing sound of repressurizing air abates and the light turns a steady blue.

Andee meets her eyes with an inquisitive, visored gaze. Justinia nods in reply and takes the first step aboard as the doors separate.

Let's find out if you're truly a ghost ship. And if so: why?

TWO

*ARCADE, CAP ESMAY STATION DOCK:
11 MARTIUS, 302.5 SC*

The air is freezing cold. Frost spreads inward from the edges of Justinia's visor before her helmet automatically initiates its defrosters. The HUD floating in the top right of her vision indicates the inside of her suit is a comfortable nineteen degrees Celsius, but mentally she feels as though she's wading through ice water. Naked.

Andee uses her wrist gauntlet's interface to scan their surroundings. The structure is briefly basked in a triangle of light when the scan light passes, but other than that brief moment, there's no illumination provided from anywhere else—it's pitch black. *Arcade's* emergency lighting is failing and the ambient light woven into the

plates of their OBS suits is too dim. It's only meant for them to find *each other* anyway, not to light up claustrophobic corridors like a Christmas tree.

Justinia cycles her visor to night-vision and the contours of the ship become visible, although ghostly and extremely desaturated. A light mist creeps at her ankles and she can almost feel it slithering over her shins like a ghost hand.

"Mind your step," she mumbles to Andee. "The floor is probably slippery. Even with specially made footgear."

Ordinarily, when a colony starship arrives, she will have gone through wake-up procedures. First the silent-AI will turn life-support back online fully: the temperature will rise, oxygen will course and once it's become a livable area again, the crew is roused from suspension. They, in turn, wake the passengers and everybody gets checked out and treated for waking sickness—a possible after effect from years spent in suspension. While it isn't pretty, it's treatable.

Next all passengers will retrieve their belongings, leave the ship in an orderly fashion and then they'll be on their way. A process as old as time itself that no passenger of *Arcade* might ever go through.

"We should head for the bridge, Sir," says Andee, her voice smoothed with professional distance, an excellent approach to masking her emotions. "After bringing the ship's primary systems back online we should spare the silent-AI's main control station a quick glance. By my

estimation we will have more than enough air left in our tanks to inspect the suspension chambers afterward.”

“Right you are, lieutenant,” Justinia replies while Andee unfolds her gloved right hand. From it a swarm of tiny, little drones ascends and scatters across the corridors. Justinia glances at the top left of her HUD, where the drones are hastily assembling a map of *Arcade*’s layout. It was deemed a fool’s errand to archive every map of every colony starship that leaves Earth with so much time passing between departure and arrival. They could get lost so easily during the transfer from Earth to space that it was elected to have boarding parties assemble a map on the go instead.

Andee leads the way and Justinia falls in step behind her. As they round the next corner the corridors become increasingly narrow. The walls, floor and ceiling are still frozen over in this part of the ship. Some icicles have formed now that the temperature is slowly rising, but the cloud of mist is ever present, giving it a winter wonderland-ey feeling. Except more creepy.

Much more creepy.

Only the eeriest part, Justinia decides, is the sound. Or rather the total absence of it. A starship’s supposed to be brimming with low rumbling and obnoxious electronic peeps, yet this ship is devoid of any noise other than the crinkling of their suits, scraping of armor plates during the occasional tight fit and her own breathing bouncing through her helmet. She’s beginning to get an idea of what claustrophobia feels like.

“I didn’t give you time to answer my question before,” Justinia says to Andee’s back in an attempt to break the prolonged silence.

“Which question?” she asks without turning.

“About what you’re thinking.”

She halts, bracing a hand against the wall. “I am thinking nothing good can come out of this. I mean, look at this place.” She waves her free hand at the bulkheads around them. “We might as well be recovery. I fear the best we can hope to do is to give these people a proper burial and find out how we can prevent this from ever happening again.” She pushes off the wall and continues her stride.

Colonial security serves as Cap Esmay’s law enforcement. First and foremost they protect the lives of their colonists, but Andee is right of course—there probably won’t be much “protecting” they can do for *these* colonists.

Not anymore.

They’ve been walking for about twenty minutes when they’ve followed their makeshift map to the bridge, stumbling upon an expected dead end.

“Elevator is out,” Andee states unsurprised. “We will have to climb.”

A design that’s remained on starships since their beginning is a crawl space: an elaborate network of tunnels that connects each deck of the ship. They’re rarely used because starships have become so large it’s near

impossible to get anywhere without the use of automated transports and elevators, but they're always erected just in case.

Andee points. "Up there."

Justinia follows the gesture to a panel near the ceiling, plastered in yellow warning decals. "Can you reach that?"

Andee drops her hand to her side and looks at her dryly from behind her visor. "I am not *that* tall."

Justinia shrugs. "Could've fooled me."

The lieutenant rolls her eyes and crouches, presses her back to the wall beneath the panel and spreads her knees, saying, "Step on."

Justinia feels her brows crease. "Step on your legs?"

"Yes," Andee replies. "That is the better way."

Justinia places her foot on Andee's thigh, who then places a hand behind Justinia's knee to steady her. Then Justinia puts her other foot on the opposite leg, standing steady and within easy reach of the panel.

"You're right. This *is* a better way," she says amazed. "Why did they put these so high up anyway?"

It had been a rhetorical question, but the lieutenant answers anyway.

"They are only ever meant to be used in zero-G. We are not supposed to be needing them with the ship ashore."

"We're not supposed to be needing them at all," Justinia rectifies and searches the edges for a mechanism. She presses the releases on either side expecting the panel to fall away, but it seems to be frozen stuck.

“Use your gloves’ outer defrosters,” Andee says, effort creeping into her voice. The position she’s standing in can’t be comfortable. Especially with the added weight of Justinia’s OBS suit.

Justinia presses a button on her gauntlet and wraps her hands around the mechanisms to melt it free, and a moment later the panel falls away. Jumping off she finds her dusty footprints imprinted on the soft parts of her lieutenant’s armored legs.

“And now how do we get in there?” Justinia asks, estimating the edge of the duct is still about two and a half meters up. “I prefer you below me. I need you to catch my frail, old body in case I slip.” She’s over a head shorter than the lieutenant, so if someone *does* drop, she finds the odds of Andee rescuing her more likely than the other way around.

Andee presses her back against the wall again, tapping her shoulder.

“What do you plan on doing?” Justinia asks warily.

“Step on and find out.”

“I hate it when you say that.” She places her foot where Andee has indicated and finds herself launched inside like a spring trap, followed by a very unbecoming and inappropriate shrill sound coming from her own throat. Instinct tells her to duck and crawl forward as she takes hold of the edge, scraping both the breast- and backplates of her OBS suit against the walls of the small space. There isn’t enough room to turn or to even look over her shoulder, but she hears Andee’s running steps echoing