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Shedding Stars

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Author Bio

Meghan Joyce '20 is aiming to complete an English major with a writing concentration as well as a Biology minor. She enjoys listening to alternative and classic rock, reading anything and everything, over analyzing films, shotgunning coffee, spending time with friends and family, and, of course, writing.

Shedding Stars

Brown danced against black, polluted dust staining space. Sludge, the exact color and consistency of a fresh hairball, tumbled down and collided with a neighboring star, dampening its already dull shine. Long ago, when land had power and space was but a dream, those stars lived. They painted stories, inspired worship, offered sight. Now, they were gone or, at the very least, corpses wasting their closing breaths. And yet, sludge trickled on. There was work to be done.

On the station's waste level, no one noticed any desecration, their thoughts drifting to more pressing issues such as breakfast and expiring shifts. Just after the last bit of ooze toppled into oblivion, a siren blared over the intercom announcing the completed task. Workers, accustomed to the sound, gathered their supplies, clocked their hours, and proceeded to the lift. Levels blurred: waste, electrical, engineering. Catcher. This is our stop, dear reader. This is where it begins.

Approximately 5,568 people inhabited the Artemis 4, over a thirtieth of its residents being Catchers. The level was, therefore, the smallest, containing a single kitchen and common area. Every surface, including the ceiling and floor, were coated in an aluminum-like substance, glossy in appearance yet brittle in texture. Officially, it was an insulating mechanism and lauded as such, Mayall Corp advertises promoting "rooms equipped with specialized heating technology." Pretty words spent on discount wallpaper.

The level also housed Catcher chambers, the sole area with a respectable budget. Each chamber housed six control panels, energy storage, collection tubes, and a cleansing hall, each lined with a heat-resistant alloy. At the center, six foot high cylinders housed remnants of the previous day's efforts, light wisps tickling their prison. The haul was acceptable, a few dwarfs and a giant, enough to power the ship for a few more days. Command seemed uneasy; understandable, considering that no one had caught a sun in weeks, and Mayall demanded an additional three to reach quota. Hopefully the gods would grant good fortune.

A series of six hallways adjoined a single chamber. The walls were coated in the same aluminum substance found in the other rooms, though mustard numbers were carved above the doors. Room 3-08 stood identical among its brethren. Inside, there was but a table, bed, and bathroom, a synthetic aroma saturating the air.

Then fluorescence eclipsed starlight, leaving the room an inflamed red save for three black numbers pulsing against the ceiling. A guttural shriek accompanied the light until, finally, a groan escaped under a pile of sheets. The shrieking ceased, replaced with a mechanical voice.

"Catcher MS-35. Time: 730 hours. Location: 3,084 miles outside Eridanus system. Arrival: 30 minutes. Acknowledge to receive schedule."

Another groan echoed the first as the walls returned to their normal platinum, fresh light spilling through the window. A head, then two arms, then a

body emerged from under the sheets and stretched upwards, trying to chase away lingering fatigue. The body belonged to one Myra Saros, a brunette breaking in her twenties. She stood to her full height, though that's not saying much, and walked over to the bathroom, grabbing her uniform along the way. Draped in a baggy shirt and pants--the manufacturer maintained a firm "no exchange" policy--Myra's mind diverted from her routine, lingering on the day's assignments. She clutched the still-warm assignment sheet between her fingers, eyes and mind memorizing every event, including the one she'd rather ignore.

It's not that she didn't like service. Well, she didn't, but not for lack of trying. Back home, with exports including milk, sugar, and suffocation, attendance was required during the four threaded days. Mayall Corp professed a mandatory service policy, and if Myra understood anything, it was that any mandatory event was automatically a chore.

Myra glanced at the mirror. Her hair hung limp at her too-thin shoulders as azure eyes met azure. She was scraggly in ways right and wrong, yet she couldn't hide a budding smile seeing herself in uniform. Because yes, the rooms were cramped and the food was often stale and her colleagues wrung her age like a leash, but damn it, Myra loved her job.

After all, how many people have cradled a star?

Myra spent a minute on her hair before racing to the kitchen. The schedule mentioned hard boiled eggs, a delicacy she could not afford to miss. Thankfully, the line was short, and within a few minutes Myra sat victorious, her trophy adorned atop a plastic throne. She grabbed a butter knife, aligning its sharp edge an inch or so from the egg's center. Then she sliced the knife into the egg's flesh, discarding everything but the yolk. Pressing her thumb and index finger around the golden morsel, Myra cushioned the delicate yoke, ensuring its protection. In a way, she admired her food. Between her fingers was life, unborn but once overflowing with potential. She placed the yolk on the tray's lower right corner and continued her meal, eating egg whites and an apple then downing a water bottle. When breakfast ended, she stacked her tray above another

The yolk remained untouched.

"Darkness is always the start and always the end, for light cannot form nor die without its intervention. People, in their blindness, forget that neither force is inherently good or evil. The world must begin with one and create the other, as it is in this way the first god grew, molded in shadow. The inky sky birthed him, a being coated in celestial essence. His fingers bled planets, his mouth breathed life, his mind opened to all. He did not know how he came to be. Rather, he understood who he was, and upon his creation a name echoed into silent eternity: Batu, the sky weaver. Despite his beauty, solitude wheedled its way into Batu's soul and, in his folly, the god wished for a fellow wanderer, someone to stay forever at his side. Alas, such a thing was beyond even Batu's power. Despair burrowed further into Batu's soul until the pain brought forth the world's first tears, staining the night gray. Pitying the fledgling god, the sky consumed Batu's tears, and once the last drop was drunk, a new god was born. She was different than her counterpart, skin the color of molten silver, melded on limbs destined to dance amongst the cosmos. Only her eyes were the same: a universal reflection.

And as those identical eyes met, a moonlit string weaved itself along the gods' wrists, tethering their destinies forevermore. Batu clung to his partner, naming her Lueda, the light stitcher. Together, they weaved the cosmos into a quilt stitched in their love, but eons unraveled the patterned cloth. There was a prophecy, you see, understood since Batu's existence, foretelling a child swaddled in stardust and born from false hands, destined to usurp the sky weaver. There was one possibility: Batu's own child. Knowing her children's executions were assured, Lueda fled from her lover. She still loved him, yes, but she could not ignore new life stirring. It was this love that betrayed her. The string, that lustrous string, trailed behind her every step, as did Batu. What they said is unknown. Perhaps Batu promised mercy. Or perhaps he did not. It is known Lueda flung herself into the abyss to save her unborn children. Their location is lost even to the most ancient orders, but it is through our faith these gods live on, their sacrifice mirroring our degeneracy."

The priest fell silent, lusting after his patrons' enthusiasm. The loyalists, those "true believers" perched in the front rows, jammed their hands together, as if each clap elevated their heavenly standing, while everyone else offered a polite applause. Myra's smile twisted into a poorly drawn caricature as she greeted fellow Catchers.

"Hello, yes, yes, today's service *was* beautiful, I wish we didn't have to leave; oh, I hadn't heard Lira has a tricep burn, I hope she feels better; we should really catch up soon," Myra droned. Planting her eyes on the shimmering floor she fled from the niceties towards reality. Chamber Three was empty except for Alde, Myra's boss and occasional ally, who greeted her with his rehearsed mutterings.

"Same service every day. Bunch of bullshit. Lueda's womb. That's what that prune loves. Lueda's fucking womb. I swear..."

"You swear you'll stuff the priest in Lueda's womb if he mentions it again. C'mon, Alde, you could at least change it up every once in a while."

Myra received a curt nod in return. She wasn't surprised. Alde was a quiet man. Maybe a little odd for some but not for Myra, who found his honesty endearing.

"Approaching species E-793. Within 1000 feet. Get started early. Good?"

Myra returned Alde's words with her own curt nod as she grasped the control panel. The star edged closer and closer into the view, its scarlet rays like blood streaked on glass. Myra positioned the excavator, aligning it just outside the star's core. Then she sliced the tool into the star, clearing everything but the core. From Myra's seat the core resembled a cinnamon jawbreaker, its sweet coating masking an overpowering flavor. She was ready for a taste. A few button pushes converted the excavator from "clearing" to "handle" mode, two mechanized hands cupping the splitting star.

...Splitting? Yes. Two fissures bred three, five, seven, more and more, ethereal light stained the sky twilight, named and nameless colors painted an eternally black canvas, sparks whizzed and shouted and sang and jeered a celebration reserved for celestial observers. Yet, the metal hands did not break. Myra and Alde were still, save for their lips miming a prayer.

Oh Lueda, stitcher of skies, eternal mother, in your name we pray.

Oh Batu, weaver of skies, first of your kin, in your name we pray.

Oh children, lost to shadow, bestow protection like your mother before you, in your memory we pray.

The fourth recitation harkened its first breath.

CRACK

Scarlet mist blanketed the creature as star fragments embedded in skin, shimmering in the darkness. Its body morphed and stretched under a sculptor's touch, creation blurred by indecision. Finally, it chose. Skin hardened into starlit scales and the body shrank. Two limbs extended towards lidless eyes, appreciating its handiwork and smoothing imperfections. Satisfied, its eyes found Myra's, galactic meeting azure.

And, for a moment, the stars flourished.