

## The Cosmic Killer

I open the metal electrical box on the wall just beside the airlock, the little door on it smashes to the floor. I don't care. I know I'm pressed for time. I look into the box at a menagerie of cables and flickering lights. I may be a scientist, but I am in no way an astronaut or electrician. I look up to my left at Sienna. She remains trapped in the airlock. For someone who is trapped she is incredibly calm. Her freckled face and long red locks smile at me through the window in the door and she nods her head. I adjust my ear piece and crank my neck.

"Okay Vivian, I have the box open, what now?" I say into my headset.

"You're going to -" she begins.

*"5 minutes until ejection"* says a voice overhead.

"Ignore that, we'll be finished here before the 5 minutes is up." Vivian says over the comms.

I look again at Sienna, sweat dripping down my forehead now. She's still so calm she smiles wide at me again and mouths 'its okay' and turns her attention to the box within the airlock. I look back at the box in front of me.

"Maybe someone else should do this" I comment nervously.

"Breathe Dr. Thatcher, I know its all new to you, but its important you learn how to dock the ship with us for our trips down to the Kepler planet. You'll be a pro in no time." Sienna says this time over the group headset. She places a reassuring hand on the glass between us and her eyes soften at me briefly before she continues.

"Okay eyes on the box. I want you to turn the module node knob down to 4 and switch the threshold back in drive. Okay perfect. Now Sienna match the diagnostics. Perfect. Okay theres two things left."

*"1 minute until ejection"* says the voice.

Sienna's head shoots up from her work and looks towards the ceiling as if she's looking for the omniscient voice above us. Her smile has faded. "Vivian, what's going on with the ejection sequence?" I could hear the panic in her voice, her eyes dart at me then to the floor. I think she's trying not to scare me, but its too late.

Captain Lyra enters the hall behind me, eyes wide. "Dr. Thatcher, whats going on?"

"The ejection sequence it's sped up randomly, can we stop it?" She turns around and runs away, not a word said to me. "Captain? Captain!"

I hear Vivian over the headset talking to me. “Hudson! It’s okay, go back to the box, hurry. Take the wire cutters out and I need you to cut the green and yellow wires.”

I reach into the tool box on the floor and lift up the wire cutters and SNIP.

*“20 seconds until ejection.”*

Sienna smashes up against my window, both hands flat on the glass. She’s screaming and crying.

“HUDSON HELP ME GET ME OUT OF HERE!”

She smashes the window again and AGAIN. I’m dripping with sweat.

“Vivian. Anyone. Help. I don’t know what to do, I dunno-“ My words trail off as I search frantically around me for a solution.

“I can’t get in, someone’s tampering with the system. Im locked out. Somethings really wrong.” Vivian frantically adds over the headset.

*10..*

Sienna begins choking and holding her throat. “Hudson hurry, the air is being sucked out.” She coughs and leans on the glass, her breath fogging it up.

*9...*

My eyes notice another metal box on the other side, it reads: AIRLOCK OVERRIDE.

*8...*

I burst the box open and yank the handle.

*7...*

The airlock doors try to open, as they do the air pressure becomes so intense. The doors close on Sienna right as she jumps in them. I suddenly can’t breathe and my body flings into the corner of the airlock door. I groan because of the brutal impact.

*6...*

“HUDSON GRAB ME, HELP!” Sienna screams at me, her head and one arm snaking through the opening. I reach for her hand and start to pull her.

5...

“CMON!” I strain as I pull as hard as I can against the air sucking us both into space.

4...

“Hudson, We can’t both make it. LET GO.” She screams as she tries to rid herself of my hand, but I refuse to let go.

“NO” I scream back at her, as I wedge my foot behind a post and pull half her body through.

3...

“I can’t be saved. Please just promise me you’ll tell them *it’s from the bridge.*” She confesses.

“What?!” I scream over my shoulder, my attention focused on saving her life.

2...

“*Tell them. Tell them it was C-*,”

1..

The airlock doors slam shut, cutting Siennas body right in two, spewing blood and guts all over me and the hall. I drop to the floor with the air pressure change. Her head and arms go limp while the rest of her is carried away into space. I lay on the floor with her dead remains on top of me, when captain Lyra comes running back in with a team of helpers.

“Oh My God, What happened?” She looks at me terrified.

I turn and throw up all over the floor.

---

## TWO DAYS EARLIER

I look down at Miss Wren’s hands typing away on her I-Pad as the buggy whirs on through the reflective corridor. I swear she never stops working. Thousands miles from home on a space ship headed for earths doppelgänger planet the Kepler-22B and my assistant Clover can still manage

to find something to spreadsheet. Clover has been my assistant and right hand girl for 5 years now, so she knows me quite well.

She's a pretty young girl with brown wispy hairs that drape her freckled face. The tips kiss her square black glasses and hide her seductive grey eyes. I was lucky enough to find her little genius after one of my advanced theory classes at Harvard. She sat scribbling for hours in my lecture hall after a class I taught on intergalactic ecosystems. She was trying her hardest to disprove my theory I had left on the board as a riddle for the students. She actually was able to solve it. I was thoroughly impressed with her resilience and snatched her up for my trials before anyone else could.

We make a great little team we do; travelling the world and now travelling the universe. We're implementing my water collection program for new life bearing planets.

Clover smiled politely as the tour guide hanging off the side of the buggy gestured to another research classroom we passed on our welcome. Although she smiled widely I seriously doubt she listened to a word the man was saying about the station, she's way too wired in on our project on her little pad to pay any attention.

“And on your left you can see the state of the art skeleton printing lab we use in our animal procreation projects. This was commissioned by our lovely Captain Vesper who has just recently joined our fleet. We are all really grateful for her contributions to the Starlight Oasis as we were running on fumes before she got here. Her company donated a massive amount of funds to the human relocation project, it's why you're able to be here”.

Along the walls in every hallway we drove down were tv screens displaying status updates about the space station:

Population Onboard: 9,983

Air Capacity: Normal

Water Stores: Low (Ration)

Livestock: Good

Trajectory: An image showing us on course for Kepler 22B

Earth Survivors: 5,600,223,456

The numbers of earth survivors was dropping every second, we knew this was going to happen though. Humans are a selfish species who polluted the earth, destroyed the ozone layer and fried themselves in the sun. Luckily some of us got out and have been inhabiting in commercial stations like this one all over space. Our biggest issue now is finding a water source other than earth. That's where I come in.

We slowed as we approached the end of the hallway. A motionless short black woman with big loopy curls stood smiling from ear to ear seemingly waiting to greet us.

“Speak of the devil.” praised the tour guide to the Captain.

“That’s enough now Alan. Back to work”, hummed the Captain.

Captain Lyra Vesper stood very regal, hands folded neatly into each other like a waiter at a fine dining restaurant. Her smile never wavered it was almost eerie how perky she seemed. Her jet blue uniform was perfectly clean and straight, clearly a person who recognized the benefits of order. Which isn’t always a good thing in my books. Overly orderly can quickly turn into power hungry narcissism. Either way she was happy to see us.

“Yes ma’am”, cheered the young tour guide as he skipped away through another glistening doorway.

Captain Vesper turned to us for the first time. “Good morning folks. Welcome aboard the Starlight Oasis. You must be the famous scientist Hudson Thatcher.” She extended her left hand bumping awkwardly into my right. I glanced down at her dominant hand shoved deep into her pocket, *curious*.

“Front and centre Ma’am” I chirped. “And this is my lovely assistant-“

“Nice to meet you both.” Clover and I, shared a look of shock as Captain Vesper’s focus remained only on me. We began to follow her as she walked backwards and guided us into a control room of some kind. Workers all sporting Vesper’s jet blue uniform all click clacked away on computer screens spread out in every direction, their eyes glued to the screens.

“This is one of our many control rooms as you can see. Our team is very busy working on calculating trajectories for the final mission to emigrate to Kepler-22B. Gripping stuff. I need to introduce you to our navigational team who will be coordinating the docking of the voyager ship you are boarding to Kepler-22B. The Oasis’s crew has been keeping close contact with the explorer ship and they are all very eager to meet the new scientist joining their quarantine.”

“Quarantine?” I puzzled.

“Yes, the explorer squad is in daily contact with the potentially toxic elements on Kepler-22B, before we can determine the new planet is safe for the rest of the citizens on board the Oasis, we keep them sanctioned off until further notice. Surely, the commissioner briefed you on your living conditions?” assumed Lyra.

I looked down at Miss Wren who nodded in agreement with Lyra. She clearly was the only one paying attention during my meeting with the commissioner a few months ago.

“Yes of course, my mistake” I close mouth grinned and elbowed Clover as a sign of thanks.

The Captain's eyes darted over to glance at Clover then back to me as she continued on walking us through the station. "The official docking is happening tomorrow morning so we have a boarding room prepared for you for tonight. I would like to get the press conference over with, of you're all set? They are ready for us now."

"Straight to business. My kinda gal. Help me out here clover." I handed Clover my brown fedora and brown suit jacket. A lint roller appeared from somewhere deep within her Mary Poppins bag and licked my knit blazer clean of all the fluffs from my tweed coat. I straightened my tie and spritzed some breath freshener down my chords.

"Guide me to the wolves, Captain Vesper".

"Please call me Lyra", she declared as she pushed through the double doors behind her.

---

I felt as though I was in the white house with how wild it was in this tiny conference room. Who knew so many reporters and journalists made it on the shortlist for space travel. I had to be looking at a bustling crowd of over 30 men and women jumping at the chance to speak to me. It's nothing we weren't used to travelling back home on earth, but I did not expect it up here.

Clover grabbed a seat behind me, her purple kitten heels crossed over her ankles as she prepared to jot down everything I was about to say. She never missed a beat. Lyra stepped up to the podium first and calmed the chatter.

"Hush, hush. Good evening everyone, kindly take your seats. Shhh. Joelle, join us please. Thank you. I know we are all eager to get started." She began as the room silenced.

"I have here beside me, Dr. Hudson Thatcher, a top professor from Harvard and his colleague." Her voice dropped at the end of that sentence. "Dr. Thatcher is a 52 year old renowned environmental scientist with strong *roots* in new planet exploration". The crowd laughed collectively at her poorly timed dad joke, their expressions seeming rehearsed.

"Don't let his striking blue eyes and brown locks fool you, he was very hard and very expensive to obtain", she makes a face and more laughs. "He will be joining our talented exploration crew on the voyager, making daily trips to Kepler 22B and restoring our water source so please give a warm welcome to our new colleague Dr. Thatcher."

Clapping ensues as Captain Vesper tip toed down the stage stairs and pulled a reporter from the crowd. A tall burly looking gentleman is tugged into the aisle and she begins to whisper to him as I start my address.

“Thank you kindly, Lyra. I am so grateful for this opportunity to join you all on your voyage to sustainability. I am hopeful that my research on water extraction from outer planets will help us get your water levels back to normal. I cannot provide a guarantee, but I will try my best to get clean water up to your tanks.”

Clover stands beside me and speaks into the mic, “so let’s open it up for some questions before Dr. Thatcher starts to bore us all with the science behind his research” the crowd laughs and we share a smile. “Yes, right here down in front”

“Hello professor, I’m with the Intergalactic Times, and I was just wondering how you plan on preserving plant life on Kepler 22B while taking its resources?”

“Very smart question, Miss?”

“Travers”

“Well, Miss Travers, I promised Clover I wouldn’t bore the crowd haha, so in short it is definitely a hard process to maintain the health of the planet whilst regaining ours, but we do have some restorative methods in place.”

After answering a few questions, I watched the burly man slip back into the crowd and raise his hand.

“Im sorry, yes you sir right there.” I pointed at him as he shimmed his way to the front of the crowd. He was dark and slim, and the way he moved was like a slippery snake. The look in his eyes gave me the chills, like he knew something about our fate that we all didn’t.

“Hello Mr. Thatcher, I have a question for you. What ever happened to your dead physics student and that plutonium explosion?” He blurted. My expression dropped and I opened my mouth to mutter a response.

“How careless would you say you are? Can we even trust you? Are you going to murder one of our astronauts too?” His voice raised now. In a blur the crowd got rowdy and started pushing towards me. Someone grabbed my arm and pulled me off the stage and out a back door.



Clover and I sat across from each other at a small glass breakfast table riddled with fruits I didn’t recognize. We were placed in a giant room with a living room, kitchen, a bathroom, and two bedrooms. It looked incredibly modern with all the square edged furniture and white appliances. Everything had a touch screen with flashing lights and funny buttons on it. All stuff I’d struggle to learn to use without Clover.

“Coffee?” Clover had gotten up and messed with some machine.

“No, I’ll be up all night. My nerves are going anyways because of that whole fiasco.”

“Fridge, do you have any alcohol?” she spoke in its direction as if it would reply back.

“Aperol, whisky, chardonnay, scotch, gin, rum, and Sauvignon Blanc are available immediately Miss.” the fridge chimed back to my surprise.

“Now you’re talking, the usual please”, I grinned.

“One scotch on the rocks coming up”, Clover brought me a glass and sat down again cross legged with her I-Pad for a few moments of silence, and then she put her feet flat on the floor and looked up.

“Hudson?”

“Mhm” I agreed, my eyes didn’t leave the Intergalactic Times newspaper I was reading. The front page article was written by that eager reporter Miss Travers, and it was actually not that bad.

“Whatever did happen with that student that burned? Chris Hayes, I think it was? He was one of your students. I remember reading the tribute to him in the alumni paper, but it really didn’t go into much detail. The news didn’t say much either, it was all hush hush.”

I get up and go to the fridge and pour myself another glass of scotch and lean myself against the glowing white counter top and look at her. I almost admire her for a second, trying my hardest to avoid this conversation as I always do. She holds my gaze, and gives me the puppy dog eyes.

“Clove, you know I’d never hurt a fly and you know how much I love my students. I would never *purposefully* injure one of them.” I laugh.

“But, seriously Hudson, why have you never mentioned it?” She pushed.

I got up and traversed the room to her, in a slow stride. She stood now with her bum perched on the edge of the breakfast table holding her cup of tea. I carefully lifted her fingers, shifted the cup from her hands and placed it on the table beside her. I grabbed hold of both her hands and leaned in closer to her.

“There’s really not much to say, an accident happened, I dealt with it, and I moved on. People are dramatic.”



She wrapped her arms around my neck and leaned her weight back. I placed my hands on the small of her back.

“That’s really all you’re gonna give me.” she flirted, batting her long lashes at me.

I brushed a singular hair from her face and tucked it behind her ear. “Yes, now let’s go to bed Clo, big day tomorrow.”

“I’ll let you get away with it... for now.” She teased as she grabbed my hand and pulled me to bed.



The next morning we made our way to the bridge to meet the navigation team. We were supposed to meet them yesterday after the press conference, but for obvious reasons it seemed better to wait to meet the team today. Our kiss up Alan guided us along in another buggy to the front of the ship, he was off on another tangent. We took a different route today through the station. We passed by a huge glass atrium that looked like an indoor park. There were huge trees spanning high as I could see, real green grass full of flowers. Children played on swing sets and mothers pushed strollers along. It was almost normal. Something we were trying so hard to get back to. Looking at the families reminded me of what I was here to preserve. I wanted this for them, I wanted those children to be able to see a blue sky again. I tuned back in from my daydream.

Alan jabbered on, “The ship was made from materials from NASA’s first space station the Skylab. My personal favourite is the hallways, they are just so efficient and vibrant. The -”

I chuckled under my breath, he wasn’t wrong. Vibrant was definitely a word you could use to describe the hallways, arguably the whole space station. I was getting antsy about the Captain, I decided it was time to press him where I could.

“Alan, do you take requests?” I suggested.

“Of course, I know everything about the ship. I have lived here my whole life and took 4 courses on space history. Ask away.” He beamed.

“Captain Lyra. How long has she been here?”

“Oh only about 2 weeks. It’s a funny story. The last Captain resigned rather suddenly, the whole community was shocked. But, Captain Vesper thankfully was able to help out.”

Clover and I locked eyes, then she shot her head down and started to type even faster. We couldn’t miss this.

“Wow. We didn’t hear anything about it”, I replied.

“They didn’t publicize it much, I’m not surprised you didn’t hear about it. I think they wanted to keep it hush hush for his privacy. It was really kind of Captain Vesper to be ready to jump in so quickly and fill in the position. We are so grateful.”

There was something trained and robotic about his responses and the fake smile. Almost as if his subconscious was in full control. I didn’t know what Clover and I were getting ourselves into, but we were holding on for the ride.

“What happened to the old Captain? Is he still onboard the space station?” I inquired.

“He’s around here somewhere. Now that he’s in retirement he mostly spends his time in the nicer quarters on the other side of the ship. It’s unlikely you’d bump into him over here, this is mostly crew dormitories and control and navigation for the Oasis” he replied.

It might be beneficial for Clover and I to try to get in touch with the old captain. I'm curious to hear what he thinks about Lyra and to get the real story. If Clover and I are going to make the Oasis our new home then I need to know what’s really going on here. We’ve been looking for somewhere to settle and with my job I’m constantly moving. This opportunity salvaging water from the Kepler could create a real stable career for me, and I want that for us.

“Alright, this is the final stop on our tour today folks” he laughed as we pulled up to a big silver door labeled BRIDGE - ACCESS RESTRICTED. Two guards stood on either side of the door, dressed in black attire and holding some pretty impressive guns. We hopped off the buggy and made our way towards the door, Alan flashed an ID card that was clipped to his shirt and explained who we were. The guards let us pass.

This was probably the cleanest and most organized room on the ship. Higher ranking officials bustled about on I-Pads hard at work. A larger group stood by the front of the room looking up at a big screen above them. They seemed to be on a conference call with some astronauts, I assumed these were the people I was to meet. Captain Lyra stood in the middle of the group laughing and chatting, until she caught my eye and split from the herd to say hello.

“Good morning Doctor. You sleep okay?” She flashed her eerie pearls.

“Yes we both slept comfortably, thank you.” I looked down at Clover. “ So, what is on the agenda today, Captain?”

“Please call me Lyra. Welcome to the red room, the heart of the Oasis. This is main navigation and steering for the space station. Although we are mostly stationary when doing docking with

the voyager. Everything in the ship is controlled and monitored here 24/7. Only the most important people have access to the bridge. Today, that includes you, our newest guest.”

She handed me two ALL ACCESS lanyards for Clover and I to wear.

“Alan is going to brief you on your day I’ve got some work to do, goodbye now”

I’d prefer Allan guide us anyways, he was quirky and more friendly than she was. Plus he could give me more information than she could, about herself. I saw Clover’s shoulders lose tension as Alan came over, I bet she preferred our nerdy tour guide over the captain any day.

He clapped his hands together and he faced us and began, “Okay so a rundown of today. Firstly, we are going to touch base with our astronauts about their mission yesterday to Kepler-22B and see if there are any updates on their findings. Then we will initiate docking and you both will join the squad on the Voyager! We will keep in virtual contact with you as you do your research over the next year until the Quarantine is lifted. Very exciting stuff!”

His enthusiasm was refreshing. He walked us closer to the front of the room where everyone was gathering and craning their necks to look up at the live video already underway. I let out a small breath, I always loved working with new colleagues and this was for such a good cause too. To be steps away from a new planet just made my heart skip a beat. I looked down at Miss Wren, and I could tell she was just as excited as I was.

“This is it!” I said as I nudged her. She laughed as she regained her balance from my goofy shove.

“We’ve been waiting so long for this. You deserve it Dr. Thatcher.” She winked.

A conversation began on screen between what seemed to be the commander who actually steered the ship and one of the astronauts. There were four people up on the screen, floating about the white space craft.

Elias Hart, the main astronaut was a tall black man, he was wearing a Star Wars t-shirt and the irony made me chuckle a little.

Vivian Peng, was a beautiful asian woman on his left fiddling with some controls in front of her, she moved almost cat like and smooth with her motions. She had long black straight hair that was floating everywhere around her.

Sienna Raven, a skinny red head with tonnes of freckles floated beside Elias Hart grinning from ear to ear holding a test tube of some kind, eager to show us. She tried to wait patiently, but she looked like a kid who really needed to pee.

There was another man more towards the back not paying much attention to us, he looked a bit more scruffy, with black locks and oval glasses. I recognized him from the news as the only Russian on the Voyager, Micah Nikolaev.

The Star Wars astronaut made his address. “Check. Check. Kepler Voyager to Starlight Oasis. Do you read me Commander?”

“All good, loud and clear Voyager.” the Commander replied with a smile. They seemed like old friends happy to be in touch again.

“Missed you Rob, you ol’ dog you.” He joked.

“Oh we aren’t missing you at all over here, Hart. Already got a replacement on deck for ya.” He chuckled in reply. They really were old pals.

“Oh is that so. You hear that Viv? I’m being replaced. My old parts are getting too rusty for grandpa Rob here.” He looked over his shoulder at Vivian who barely lifted her nose in reply.

“You could use a tune up.” She almost grinned. Vivian Peng reminded me of the Mona Lisa, gorgeous, but very serious. I could tell she was probably a genius as well as the squad comedian.

“Oh shhh.” Elias waved a hand at her to shoo her away, like a brother would a sister. “So let’s see my replacement. Ohhh is this the famous Dr. Hudson Thatcher?” All heads turned around to look at me. I didn’t realize everyone here knew who I was, but I guess Clover and I stood out as the only new people here.

“That’s my name, don’t wear it out.” I grinned. “Very nice to finally meet you Dr. Hart. I’m looking forwards to working with you and talking about your recent discoveries.”

“Well I’m glad you brought that up, because mission specialist Sienna has some news for you all.” He moved to the side as Sienna’s freckled face took up the screen.

“Ahhh, so I have some super amazing news to share with you all. We have pinpointed the location of the potential toxins on Kepler-22B and we can now confirm it is safe for everyone on board. The quarantine is over!” She bubbled.

The crowd around me all began clapping and celebrating. Clover whispered to me her gratefulness that we would be able to transfer from ship to station often, she gets a bit antsy in confined spaces. She chose to push down her claustrophobia to do this adventure with me. There’s really no worse place for someone with claustrophobia than a small space ship, but she didn’t want miss out on all the discoveries we’d make.

“Well that’s great news specialist, and when can we expect a face to face meeting?” asked the Commander.

“Docking is on schedule for 15:55, Commander.”, Vivian stated over her shoulder.

“Copy that. Alright everyone lets get moving. I need docking sequence initiated by 15 hundred hours and I want full diagnostics before their arrival. Grey, make sure the robot arm doesn’t get stuck again.” He pointed to one of the worker bees who said they would get right on it. “Great work squad, cake and champagne will be waiting for you state side.” He smirked.

“Here here”, cheered Elias Hart as he ended the video call.