<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rating:</th>
<th>Teen And Up Audiences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Archive Warning:</td>
<td>No Archive Warnings Apply</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Category:</td>
<td>Gen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fandom:</td>
<td>Treasure Planet (2002)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Relationship:</td>
<td>Jim Hawkins &amp; John Silver, Jim Hawkins &amp; Sarah Hawkins, Jim Hawkins &amp; Everyone, minor Amelia/Delbert Doppler, Sarah Hawkins &amp; Delbert Doppler</td>
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<tr>
<td>Character:</td>
<td>Jim Hawkins, Silver, Morph (Disney), Sarah Hawkins, Delbert Doppler, Captain Amelia, B.E.N. (Disney: Treasure Planet)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Additional Tags:</td>
<td>Friendship, Family, Platonic Relationships, Charting your own course is hard, Getting over a lifelong obsession is hard, But Jim and Silver have what it takes, with maybe a little help from each other, Progress is not linear, aroaceJim, Families of Choice, Fluff, Drama, Jim and Silver are both really bad at staying out of trouble, Morph is the best pet ever, Cheesy postcards</td>
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<tr>
<td>Stats:</td>
<td>Published: 2017-09-15 Updated: 2017-11-06 Chapters: 2/11 Words: 35625</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Correspondence**

by [Neofelis_Solis](http://archiveofourown.org/users/Neofelis_Solis)

**Summary**

Silver may be far more accustomed to playing the villain, but sometimes all it takes to save the day (and maybe save yourself along the way) are a few cheesy postcards and a whole lot of stamps.
Hello! I've been working on this project for a while and I've finally gotten up the nerve to post chapter one!

First of all, there are two things I think are important to know:

Important Note: This takes place in between Jim and Sarah reuniting at the docks and the reopening of the Benbow. So we are starting about two months after Jim returned to Montressor and Silver escaped the Legacy.

Important Note 2: There are numerous different ways to do math. It's amazing, what they teach you in school is far from the only method to get to the right answer. I highly recommend the Ancient Egyptian method for long division, it is infinitely superior. Though their fractions are a nightmare.

Silver was on a small, frigid planet in the Gegnuirian System, keeping his head low as he traveled through the busy streets. His catboat (won off a drunk Acnonian in a game of poker) had run into trouble, forcing him to land and make repairs at the nearest planet. Not knowing anything about the frozen little rock he'd landed on, he'd gone straight to the first town he had found. It was apparently a resort town, buzzing with tourists of a wide variety of cold-tolerant species. Silver usually tried to stick to rough, seedy little towns where an old cyborg spacer didn't stand out, but no one seemed the least bit concerned about him here either. They were too busy having fun, with children attacking one another with snowballs, young couples snuggling up together with mugs of hot beverages, and teenagers trying to concoct the most dangerous games possible using the thick purple snowdrifts and steep hillsides.

Silver looked over at a pack of teenagers who were playing on some sort of spinning contraption. It had metal bars that they tried to cling to as it spun faster and faster, until finally they lost their grip and flew off into the snow. Most of them were thick-furred mastonds or round blubbery balugs, but as Silver watched, a human teenager went flying into the snow. He was bundled up in enough coats to make him look round as the balugs, but the impact had pushed back his hood, making his species clear.

He didn't look like Jim very much. Where Jim had been pale and sharp, this human was dark and rounded, but there was something similar anyway. Something in his laughter and the spark in his eyes that said loud and clear that he wasn't going to back down from any challenge. Sure enough, he jumped back on the spinning metal frame, clinging tightly as he tried to last longer than the mastond clinging to the other side.

Silver smiled softly and turned away. He missed the lad. Silver was over a century old (not even middle aged by ursine standards, but still) and he'd only spent a few months with the human cabin boy under his metaphorical wing, but still... he missed him. He missed Jim's bull-headedness and cleverness and the easy friendship they'd built. It had been a long time since Silver had been able to call anyone his friend except for little Morphy. Morph was sweet and dependable and had meant the world to Silver, but it wasn't as though Silver could really have a conversation with him. With Jim
around there had been long stretches of comfortable silence, but also times when they started talking and didn't stop for hours, the usual silence of the galley filled with tales of boyhood adventures and plans for a new solar surfer and sarcastic jokes. And of course Silver couldn't help but share his best tales of adventure and silly jokes, and Jim had hung on them, laughing or rolling his eyes or asking impatiently "so then what happened?"

It had been nice.

Silver tried to push his silly sentimental thoughts away as he made his way into a store just for the chance to warm up a little bit.

As he entered, he instinctively glanced over at where Morph used to always hover, ready to warn his little companion not to cause trouble. But of course, Morphy wasn't there. Silver was still trying to adjust to Morph's absence, training himself not to reach for him or talk to him when he was no longer hovering over his shoulder like he always used to. It was harder than missing Jim, since he'd grown comfortable around Jim, but Morph was the one who had wiggled himself into the fabric of Silver's life for the past few decades. He was constantly looking around the little blob, only to remember that he would never see him again.

Morph was better off with Jim, Silver was sure of that, and the pup could use someone to keep an eye on him, he kept reminding himself of that.

But still, there were many days when Silver wished he hadn't left both of them behind.

Silver shook the thoughts away and began wandering around, pretending to look at the silly merchandise. Plush dolls with little snowsurfer boards, glass globes with mountain scenes and fake purple "snow" inside, plates with images of the town on them, the sort meant for hanging on a wall instead of holding food.

But then he paused by a stack of postcards. They were simple paper ones, not the fancy hologram kind, and cheep and cheesy, but they made him think. He bet Jim would get a laugh out of the one with a young mastond riding a snowsurfer wearing a little hat with muscine ears on it while fireworks went off in the sky above her.

Silver had to be careful. He was a wanted criminal, and it wasn't safe for him to be anywhere near Montressor. But maybe with enough postage and no return address, he could send Jim a little postcard to let him know that he was still safe.

But as he picked up the card, he hesitated.

What if Jim had come to regret his decision to let Silver go? He was planning on building an honest future for himself, so perhaps after the rush of his adventure wore off, he would be embarrassed to have aided the escape of a mutineer and pirate. Silver wasn't planning on staying on this planet for any longer than he had to, but this postcard would still give the authorities a clue to his whereabouts that he didn't want them to have.

But then he shook his head. That was the pirate captain in him talking, not the man who'd befriended Jim Hawkins. The more he thought about it, the more unlikely it seemed that Jim would have turned on him in his absence. Silver had saved his life, given him money to rebuild his family's inn, and left Morph with him. Jim knew that Silver truly cared about him, and that was what mattered to Jim. He didn't care terribly about rules, but he did care about whether someone was a good person, and Jim had brought the good in Silver kicking and screaming to the surface.

His decision was sealed when brief memory flicked across his mind. The lad had rarely spoken about
his father, but one time he had let a little slip:

_He just left. Walked out the door and never came back, couldn't even bother to say goodbye or send a letter. He's probably forgotten that I even exist._

Silver shook his head and walked to the counter, knowing that there was no way he wasn't going to find a way to send this silly postcard to Jim.

He bought the card and asked the amorphous ball of fuzz running the register how best to send it to someone in a different system. She/he/it didn't know, but directed him to a post office that handled shipping a lot of souvenirs off-world and would know what to do.

The android at the post office directed him to buy a special envelope and enough postage stamps to paper his metal arm, but they got it sorted as best they could. Silver realized rather late that he didn't actually know the proper address for Jim. He remembered the name of his town, and of course he remembered the Benbow, but he didn't know if it had been rebuilt well enough for Jim and his mother to live there yet, or even if they would rebuild it with the same name. He settled for filling in as much information as he could, hoping that the post on Montressor could figure it out.

And then when he thought he was done, the android pointed out that he hadn't written anything on the postcard.

Silver realized that he didn't know what to say. He didn't want to give too much information about his current situation, because even if he trusted Jim, there was the possibility that the postcard could fall into the wrong hands. And he couldn't give Jim a return address, so it wasn't like he could ask the lad how he was doing.

In the end he settled for one quickly scrawled line before he shoved the postcard in the massive inter-system envelope and slunk out of the post office before the police officer who'd wandered in could notice his cyborg eye. That was the hard part about being a criminal with distinctive features.

He walked back toward the repair yard, tricorn hat tilted to keep the purple snow out of his eyes. The wind had picked up and the temperature was dropping, but he walked with a lighter heart than he had before.

He hoped the postcard made it to Jim and gave him a little smile.

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Jim could feel a familiar and very unpleasant glower on his face. It had been a common expression for him before his trip to Treasure Planet, but he thought he'd left it behind. Yet it was slipping back on more and more of these days. He didn't like it. He knew his mother didn't like it. B.E.N. would sometimes scream if he turned a corner and ran into Jim while he was wearing it. Morph had taken to imitating it and making little growling noises, and Jim didn't know whether Morph was being funny or trying to ask him why he was upset or both, but he didn't like seeing a miniature version of that expression any more than he liked looking in the mirror and seeing it.

And yet, here he was, stalking home (well, to Delbert's house) with that glower firmly in place.

Jim had returned from his adventure on the Legacy full of confidence and big dreams, and he wasn't going to give up on those dreams easily, but Montressor had never been a great place for him, and all his troubles were coming back to haunt him.

Amelia had promised that she would personally recommend him to the Royal Interstellar Academy, but first he had to finish high school, and pull his grades up. And well... he'd failed his past year of
school. He'd known that was coming, and even his mother had accepted it as inevitable when they had compared his grades to the amount of time left in the school year. That was one reason he'd been able to leave immediately to search for Treasure Planet, he'd dropped out a month before the end of the school year. It would have been useless to stay, he would have failed anyway. And with their livelihood burned to the ground, if the trip to Treasure Planet hadn't panned out, Jim would probably have had to drop school entirely and get a job unless they were willing to live on Doppler's charity for a few years.

But thanks to Silver, they had enough money to rebuild the Inn (once they sold the jewels, which was more involved than Jim had expected it to be, at least if they wanted to make sure they were getting the best price for them). So Jim was back in school, working to bring his grades high enough to get into the Academy.

But it was hard. The reason Jim had failed his grade was because he'd basically stopped going to school two years ago. He'd gone just enough to know when there would be tests, pilfered some books so he could study outside the classroom, then promptly left them to gather dust. He'd scraped by the year before last that way, but just barely. So now if he actually wanted to get good enough grades to get into the Academy, then he really needed to catch up and study hard instead of coasting by on an ounce of study and three pounds of luck.

And he'd been determined to do it, but now, a couple months into the year, he was miserable. There were some classes that were easy to catch up in, like history and astronomy, but there were others like mathematics and science where he was really terribly lost. (And his stupid standard language teacher would fail papers because of misplaced commas, which was so frustrating.)

He had to spend pretty much all of his time studying right now and he was still getting pretty unpleasant marks, even if he wasn't currently failing anything but math.

And on top of that, he had to deal with the people. All the old bullies that had harassed him before hadn't changed over the break. None of the "good kids" would come within ten feet of him. When he'd built up the nerve and shoved down his pride enough to ask one of the top students for help in chemistry, she'd basically fled. He'd also made the mistake of talking about his adventure a little bit when he'd returned. Delbert had been too excited to publish anything formal analyzing the map before they'd left, and with the planet gone, they didn't really have any proof that the whole thing had even existed. The scientific community was giving Delbert nothing but trouble, and Jim's classmates had decided that Jim was making the whole thing up to hide the "fact" that he'd been sent to juvenile hall over the school break. Or if you asked the more creative ones, he'd been sent to a volcanic prison planet and forced to dig holes all day or whatever other weird punishment they could think of. It was infuriating to have no way to fight the snide remarks and outright mockery even though he was telling the truth and they were completely wrong. And since everyone still saw him as "capital T" Trouble, the teachers never stood up for him, assuming that he started whatever fights he got into.

Which led to today. He'd stayed after class to ask his math teacher for help, which after so long of trying to tell himself that he could handle everything on his own, was one of the hardest things in the universe for him. But all the old salamander had said was: "Look, from your grades so far, we could talk all day and you'll still fail tomorrow's test, and I don't have time for this." And then he'd rushed off, leaving Jim trembling with anger masking shame.

And then Gruuk, the nasty Mudokkian bully of the sophomore class had caught up to him on the way out.

The bruises on the underside of his jaw and along his ribs and arms reminded him that he probably still didn't know how to pick his fights, but he'd been so angry that he couldn't just let Gruuk's taunts
He ducked his head as he walked home, hoping that the police androids weren't going to follow him, glaring with their little black camera-eyes like they had taken to doing lately. He didn't think he could handle that today too.

Maybe he should have taken Silver's offer and run away from all this. Maybe he was an idiot for thinking that he could rebuild the mess of a life he'd left behind on this awful planet. And if he failed again he'd break his mother's heart and let down Captain Amelia, and he just…

He just wanted to go home.

But there were only two places that had ever really felt like home to Jim, and one was a pile of ashes and the other was flying off on another mission, but lacking the one person who'd truly made it a home for an angry young cabin boy with a smart mouth.

So he settled for going to Delbert's house, glowering all the way.

Sarah Hawkins was worried. While Jim and Delbert had been gone, she'd gotten work at a local pub as a cook and waitress, but when Jim had returned with a handful of precious gems and pure gold coins, she'd switched to part time so she had more time to work on rebuilding the Benbow. But now she was thinking that maybe she shouldn't have gone part time, because instead of working on plans for rebuilding her inn, she was pacing around waiting for her son to get home, hoping that he'd had a good day. She'd convinced him to ask his math teacher for advice before the big test tomorrow, and she really hoped Mr. Sssssmoid had been helpful.

Jim was getting discouraged. He was more stubborn than anyone else Sarah had ever known, but he had a weakness. It wasn't his temper or his recklessness or anything else most people thought, it was his insecurity. He hid it well under his tough shell, but it was the entire reason that the shell existed. He'd struggled in school for years not because he wasn't smart enough, but because he had stopped believing that he could make something of it. A hopelessness had built inside him and it had been destroying him.

And then he came back from his trip a few inches taller and shining with confidence, and Sarah had believed that the change she'd hoped and prayed for had finally come. That now that Jim had found his confidence again, he would be safe from the pitfalls of his past.

But the light that had shone from her son that day on the docks was dimming. He was trying so hard to dig himself out of the hole he'd spent years digging himself into, but it was so hard and his confidence was growing more cracks every day.

Sarah was terrified that the strain would break him, and he would give up, sacrificing the amazing second chance he'd been given.

But Jim was observant. He could read the fear in her eyes, and that broke him more every time he saw it, and seeing him breaking increased her fear, and the horrible cycle of it was killing both of them. He needed her to believe in him with her whole heart, but she'd seen the beginning of this spiral before and she couldn't ignore it, and even though she really did believe that he could do it, that little shard of doubt was enough to stab both their hearts.

Jim needed to catch a break. If he could just do well on this next test, it might be enough. He just needed a few little victories here and there, something to hold onto so that he knew he could handle
his schoolwork just like he'd handled everything his wild adventure had thrown at him.

*Please, please,* she prayed to a deity she didn't believe in, *please let him catch a break. Let this have been a good day. Let his teacher have helped him. Please.*

And then Jim walked through the door, and one look told Sarah that her prayers had not been answered. Without a word, he began storming off toward the staircase, trying to hide a new bruise with one hand.

"Jim-"

Jim whipped around. "Look, here are the answers to your questions. No, Mr. Ssssssmoid didn't help me. Yes, I got in a fight, but Gruuk started it. No, I'm not hungry."

Oh Jim.

He was headed off again when Sarah remembered the most unusual part of her day.

"Jim, wait, you got a letter."

Jim turned, the darkness that had settled in his eyes dispersed somewhat by his confusion.

"Who would write to me?"

"I don't know," Sarah replied, handing over the envelope. "There wasn't a return address, and I didn't open it."

Jim frowned, looking at the massive interstellar shipping envelope. It was very strange. Whoever had written the address hadn't seemed to really know where Jim was. It was written as:

*To James "Jim" Hawkins (Fifteen year old human, light yellow skin, brown hair, blue eyes) of Bellweather, Montressor. Maybe at the Benbow Inn, maybe staying with Delbert Dopplar. His mother is Sarah. He likes solar surfing.*

Honestly, it was sort of bizarre, and Jim looked just as confused as Sarah had been. But he ripped open the envelope anyway.

It looked like a postcard, but Sarah couldn't see it clearly from where she was and she didn't want Jim to get mad at her for "snooping" on his mail (not that he'd gotten mail before, at least not since her parents had died so he'd stopped getting birthday cards).

But Sarah found that she was actually glad that she couldn't see the card, because it meant that she was looking at Jim's face.

His expression shifted from confusion to shock to something akin to awe, and then it became such a jumble that Sarah couldn't read it anymore. His eyes were getting shiny like he might cry, but he looked happy, joyful even as he tried to suppress the things his face was doing, even covering his mouth, a certain disbelief still in his eyes.

"Jim?" Sarah asked, taking a step forward, but hesitating, not wanting to intrude if it would threaten whatever had happened to make Jim smile, seemingly for the first time in weeks.

Jim looked up at her, emotions still swirling across his face.

"It's from Silver," he said, voice full of shock and... hope.
Sarah knew about Silver.

Jim had told her the story of his adventure, still bubbling with excitement and wonder at all that had happened to him. It had lasted long into the night, Sarah unwilling to stop him once he started. After so many years of trying to find the perfect words to reach across the heartbroken void between her and her son, and failing miserably every time, suddenly he was the one reaching out and it was like they had traveled a decade back in time.

Maybe it was because Jim finally had something he was proud to talk about, or maybe Sarah had finally learned to take the time to listen properly after months of missing her son, or maybe it was something else entirely, but suddenly Jim wasn't the reclusive teenager, and Sarah wasn't the nagging, overworked disciplinarian, and they were just... talking. With Jim doing most of the talking of course, but for once when Sarah spoke it seemed to encourage him, rather than make him shut her out.

And so he'd told her about Silver. Hesitantly at times, but with growing confidence, he'd told her how Silver had befriended him, comforted him, inspired him, then betrayed him, threatened him, tried to manipulate him, only to sacrifice it all to save him. She even knew about their tearful goodbye and how Jim had given Silver his freedom, and Silver had given Jim everything he had left, the pocket full of treasure and his beloved pet.

She knew, and she even thought that she understood, but she never would have expected that the good pirate would write to Jim. It seemed like a dangerous risk for a criminal, but then, from Jim's stories, it sounded like Jim had wormed his way into the old cyborg's heart just as much as Silver had wormed into Jim's.

And so Sarah beamed. She probably should, but she'd found that she really didn't care that her son's dearest friend (and perhaps father figure?) was a pirate and a criminal. Not when he had apparently been so important in bringing back Jim's confidence, his fire, the light that just shone from his very being if someone loved him enough to pay attention to it.

And now it looked like Silver was doing it again.

"That's wonderful, Jim! Is he doing well?"

Jim shrugged, but his expression had settled into a sort of shy giddiness, like he was trying not to let himself get too excited, still instinctively trying to shield himself from good things for fear of the pain that came when they were taken away from him.

"He didn't really say much of anything, it's just..." Jim trailed off, then seemingly on impulse thrust the letter at her.

Sarah took it. It was a cheesy little postcard with a picture of a mastond on some sort of snow-surfer, and when she flipped it over, there was only one line written in a rushed, messy script.

*Stick to it, no matter the squalls.*

Sarah smiled up (and it was so strange that she had to look slightly up to meet her son's eyes these days) at Jim.

He was beaming.

He'd had a horrible day, and his teacher hadn't helped him (and Sarah was going to be prying more information about that out of Jim later, she wasn't afraid to march down to that school to raise hell if she had to), but Sarah's prayer had been answered.
Jim had caught a break, and one he desperately needed. Just a little scrap of proof that someone other
than his mother believed in him and saw him as someone worthwhile.

Sarah handed the card back to him, not knowing what to say, so saying nothing, just smiling back at
him.

Jim looked at the letter again for a moment, then blew a long breath out.

"Well, I'm going to be in my room studying. Can you make sure B.E.N. and Morph don't barge in?"

"Of course," Sarah replied. "And are you sure you aren't hungry? I'm planning to make something
for myself soon, maybe some perdim-roast sandwiches?"

Jim nodded. "Yeah, that sounds good, I'll have a couple."

And then he turned away, but just as suddenly turned back and darted forward to give Sarah a quick
hug.

"Thanks, Mom," he said as he walked away, this time actually making it up the stairs.

Sarah smiled as she watched him go.

Thank you, she spoke in her mind, not sure if it was for the god she didn't believe in or the cyborg
she had never met.

Probably both.

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Delbert had been home for a couple of hours, working on a little paper on the topic of nebular
emission line ratios of star forming galaxies to take his mind off of all the trouble he was
encountering while he tried to convince the scientific community of the validity of Treasure Planet.
Even if the treasure was gone, it was still something that needed to be examined because of the
nature of the planet itself. There had been evidence of an advanced but ancient civilization there,
who had built the planet, possibly from scratch. His discussions with B.E.N. had confirmed his
suspicions that Captain Flint had not in fact built the planet and its extraordinary portals, but rather
the pirate had merely found them and figured out how to use them to his own advantage. And then in
his greed, he had booby trapped the planet to explode, destroying all of that technology, that history,
perhaps the final remains of a magnificent culture, all so that no one else could ever steal his heaps of
petty gold. It disgusted Delbert, it infuriated him, it-

It was something that he was trying not to think about for a while so he could regain his head before
tackling the problem again.

Don't think about that, Delbert reminded himself. Think of redshifts and star formation rates and-

"AAAAAAAAAAAAAGH!" Delbert screamed as something swooped in on him out of nowhere,
throwing something onto his desk with a heavy thump.

"It's making sense!" Jim shouted in Delbert's face, "It actually seems to be making sense, and that's
freaking me out, can you check and see if I'm doing this right or if I've gone crazy?"

Delbert breathed heavily and blinked down at the mathematics textbook and flock of papers now
scattered over his formerly neat desk.
"O-of course," Delbert replied, grabbing papers and trying to sort them out.

To be honest, he was a little nervous about doing anything connected to Jim's homework, since the last time he'd tried to help, his fumbled explanations and inability to think of mathematics at the high school level as anything but basic facts of life meant that he had ended up confusing and frustrating Jim instead of helping him. Throwing in a few astrophysical analogies probably hadn't helped matters. Nor the fact that he mostly did this sort of basic math using his slide-sphere calculator or a digital calculator, while Jim's teacher wanted them to do everything by hand (or claw or tentacle or whatever appendage they might have that could hold a pencil).

But Jim was asking, and he seemed very excited and hopeful, so Delbert would do his best to help.

But as he began looking over Jim's work on a page of practice problems, his heart dropped. He knew what Jim was supposed to be doing from his bungled attempts to teach Jim before, and this... this was not it. But Jim was so confident that he was on the right track, and the answers he was getting looked reasonable for each problem. Delbert frowned and began calculating the answers for the problems properly with his slide-sphere... and the answers matched Jim's.

"Jim, walk me through what you are doing here."

Jim nodded and launched into working on another problem, explaining as he went.

It rapidly became clear that not only was Jim not doing each problem the way his textbook had showed, but he was handling the fundamentals differently. For every piece of multiplication or division, he had paired columns of doubling numbers instead of the usual a x b = c, but the columns served their purpose. It required more work, but Delbert realized that they eliminated the need to memorize whole multiplication or division tables, the only thing that was needed was basic addition and the ability to multiply by two, even for the division problems.

In fact, as Delbert watched, he realized that Jim's entire methodology, though labor intense and initially confusing to Delbert, had a strong internal structure to it, and several benefits. It dodged some of the things that had given Jim trouble, including much of the rote memorization intrinsic to the standard approach to mathematics used on Montressor and in most of the galactic empire.

In fact, it reminded him somewhat of the style of mathematics used in the Cygian Alpha system, where they had stopped not long before reaching Treasure Planet in order to resupply and repair some damaged solar sails. Delbert had meant to keep an eye on Jim, since Sarah was entrusting the boy into his care, but just like every time they put into a port, he'd rapidly lost track of Jim. Back then he had been grateful that at least that time when the boy turned back up it was alongside the ship's cook. He'd thought "oh good, this time there was some sort of responsible adult keeping an eye on Jim," not yet realizing that the cyborg was in fact a ruthless pirate. (Though Jim still argued that the pirate had a good heart and Delbert and Amelia both suspected that Jim had helped his former mentor to escape before they reached the spaceport, but Delbert was not about to go diving into that mess.)

Circumstances and bad company aside, Delbert would have thought it unlikely that the boy would have gotten into any discussions that would aid in his understanding of mathematics on their brief stop, but he'd learned that the unexpected was what one should expect with Jim. Except that by that logic then the unexpected became the expected and the expected became the unexpected which really meant-

"Doc!"

"Sorry Jim, I was just thinking-" He cut himself off, realizing that any mention of their trip to
Treasure Planet was bound to get both of them very thoroughly distracted. Delbert still struggled interacting with Jim in most circumstances, but they could easily talk all day about their grand adventure. "Your methods are most unusual, but they do seem to work. Let me just…"

He quickly made up some more problems in the line of the practice problems, and began calculating the answers using first the normal methods, then Jim's.

Sure enough, Jim's system took about four times longer, but it reached the correct answer consistently. And perhaps with practice Jim could do it more quickly than Delbert, who was just learning it.

"Yes, yes, you do seem to have found a system that will get you the correct answer. If this works for you, use it! But it is lengthy, so if this is a timed test you should make sure that you can do this quickly."

Jim's face lit up and he swooped the papers and book off the desk.

"Thank you! I'll go practice more, thanks Doc!"

And then he ran off again up the stairs.

Delbert smiled. He was glad to see that Jim was getting a handle on his mathematics, Sarah would be so pleased.

Then he felt a little twinge of guilt. He had always viewed Jim through the lens of how his actions would effect Sarah, and it was a habit he was trying to break. Jim was becoming his own man, and his quick thinking and courage had saved Delbert and everyone else's lives on Treasure Planet. He deserved to be treated as "Jim Hawkins" rather than just "Sarah's son."

But it was a hard habit to break because Sarah was Delbert's oldest and dearest friend. Back in middle school when she had been Sarah Benbow, the innkeeper's daughter, she had stopped a pack of boys from picking on him and walked him home and listened patiently through all of his awkward fumbling and stuttering and inability to find the right word and still invited him to come sit with her at lunch. From there it had just grown, and by high school they had been so inseparable that Delbert sometimes found himself busing tables at the inn because Sarah's father, Joshua Benbow, had a habit of forgetting that Delbert wasn't actually his child to give chores to.

But Delbert had never had the easy connection with Jim that he'd had with Sarah. When he was a little boy, Jim seemed to get worried that Delbert was trying to take his father's place, and he would give Delbert a hard time, exacerbating Delbert's tendency to be especially awkward around children. Then after Leland Hawkins had left, Jim was hostile to everyone, and Delbert was a bundle of social awkwardness who always seemed to say the wrong thing to Jim, when Jim had even bothered to talk to him.

So he'd spent a lot of time on the outside looking in as Jim's escalating stunts kept Sarah up all night fretting. He couldn't count the number of times he had looked at Jim and thought "Sarah deserves better than you, you ungrateful little hellion," even though he'd never actually said anything to that effect out loud.

But he'd misjudged Jim. His first sign had been the way Jim had promised to make Sarah proud when they were deciding to go to Treasure Planet. Delbert had been impressed, and he'd planned to use the trip as an opportunity to bond better with Jim, but well... they'd both ended up rather distracted from each other. Delbert had ended up spending most of his time in the Captain's quarters, first to study the map in safety, then in order to spend as much time as possible with the brilliant,
quick-witted Captain herself. And meanwhile Jim had been busy scrubbing the deck and befriending pirates.

But now that they were back home and Jim and Sarah and Delbert were all living together until the Benbow was rebuilt (which had turned out to be a rather involved process before ground could even be broken), and Delbert was doing his best to treat Jim as the competent young man he had become. And perhaps along the way they could build the sort of honorary uncle/nephew relationship Delbert had planned on when he first held the squirming little bundle that had been Sarah's newborn baby.

(He wasn't going to bring it up, but he had in fact been the first person to hold Jim other than Sarah, since Leland had been working on a merchant ship when Jim was born and Delbert had rushed back from college to help Sarah.)

But still, he couldn't help wandering over to the kitchen to share the good news with Sarah.

He paused in the doorway, taking a moment to watch the scene within.

Sarah had spent the day trying to teach B.E.N. how to cook, in order to keep the robot distracted while Jim studied. Morph buzzed around them, chittering happily and stealing little bites of whatever they were making.

"Now we need to add a third melegnic of hyrani oil, and remember, it always has to be oil from the cupboard, not motor oil from the garage!"

"Ay ay, Captain Sarah!" B.E.N. chirped excitedly, pulling an armful of bottles out of the cupboard and scattering them across the counter as he began searching for the right one. "Hyrani, hyrani."

Sarah shook her head slightly as she watched him, but she was smiling.

Delbert may have misjudged Jim, but he still believed that the boy was gosh-darned lucky that his mother was one of the most patient people Delbert had ever met.

Morph noticed him and flew over, chittering, which drew Sarah's attention.

"Do you need a snack Delbert?" She asked. "We're trying to make cookies, but I could whip up a snack for you if you're getting hungry."

Once an innkeeper, always an innkeeper; Sarah always wanted to make sure that everyone was fed and happy.

"Jim seems to have figured out how to handle his mathematics work. He just came down to show it to me and all of his latest problems had the correct answer."

Sarah's eyes lit up.

"Oh Delbert, that's wonderful! Oh thank goodness. He's been having so much trouble with that class even though he works so hard, I'm so glad he's figuring it out!"

"One word of warning," Delbert added, holding up a hand. "The way he is getting his answers is entirely different from the way his teacher has been explaining it. He's practically concocted his own version of mathematics, possibly with some Cygian influence, but there are many ways to approach math and this one appears to be sound. But if the teacher gives him any trouble over it, you let me know. I've learned my lesson about trying to trade on my 'fame' as an astrophysicist, but I can certainly go head to head with a high school teacher on the subject of mathematics!"
Sarah smiled, shaking her head a little, similar to how she had just been looking at B.E.N.. "Leave it to Jim to do everything the hard way. Why learn to do what the teacher says when you can invent your own mathematics!" She laughed. "But thank you Delbert, I really appreciate it. It sounds like his teacher is a bit fussy, so I may need to take you up on that offer."

"I will be happy to do it," Delbert replied with a teasing little bow.

Sarah laughed again and Delbert felt a warmth rising inside.

This house had been so quiet, so empty since his parents had passed away, and Delbert hadn't even realized it until he'd suddenly found himself coming home to a house filled with, well... family. Sarah, who (aside from a brief, slightly embarrassing crush he'd had in late middle school) had always been like a sister to him, and Jim who was becoming more like a nephew to him, and B.E.N. who was like the weird second cousin once removed who showed up out of the blue and-

"I found the hyrani oil!" B.E.N. announced.

"Good, now measure carefully, over the sink, yes, that's perfect." Sarah turned back to Delbert. "Would you like to join us? The dough is almost done, but you can help us roll it out and lay out the cookie sheets and add the toppings."

Delbert thought about the paper he'd been working on, but it was really just a little side project anyway, it could wait.

"You know, I think I shall."

"Perfect!" Sarah replied, just as B.E.N. let out a yelp.

"Morph! I'd just gotten that measured perfectly!"

The pink blob had apparently disguised itself as the third melegnic cup and swallowed the oil B.E.N. had poured in, only to find that straight cooking oil really wasn't very good. It was coughing and hacking, exploding into a bunch of little blebs with each cough as it tried to get the oil out of its system.

"And that's the other reason why we measure over the sink," Sarah muttered. "Morph, just be patient for a few minutes and we'll have real food for you to eat."

"Yeah, don't sabotage the cooking," B.E.N. said, shaking his finger and trying to sound stern.

Morph just turned into a miniature version of B.E.N., shaking a finger back and parroting "Sabotage, sabotage."

Sarah rolled her eyes and turned to Delbert.

"It's always an adventure around here."

"You know I've developed a taste for adventure," Delbert replied, setting to work on finding the cookie sheets.

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It was well past midnight when Jim finally decided to call an end to his studying and actually go to sleep. His mother had stopped by hours ago to try to get him to sleep, her hair still wet from having to wash out the flour she'd been covered in when she had brought Jim a plate of cookies. Jim had
been concerned when he learned that B.E.N. and Doppler were involved in making them (thus explaining all the flour), but they had tasted delicious anyway.

Jim was pretty sure that his mom and Delbert were both long asleep, and B.E.N. had taken to powering down at night so he didn't disturb anyone (aka: everyone), which meant that it was just him and Morph, who was floating around sleepily, periodically going over to sniff the postcard on Jim's desk. He could clearly smell something of his old master on it, judging from the way he had churred and rubbed himself against it in much the same way as he had snuggled against Silver's cheek. And he was looking like he just might fall asleep on it.

With everyone asleep in the house and the late hour decreasing the amount of noise from the town around them, it was very quiet. But it was a sort of deep, peaceful quiet that reminded Jim of night cycles when the Legacy was far from any star, leaving them to drift silently through the darkness of space, a speck in an endless ocean. Jim remembered spending many "nights" like this out on the Legacy's bowsprit, just staring out into the vastness of it, the winds of the etherium swirling around him.

So he couldn't resist walking over to his window, picking up the postcard as he left his desk and scooping up Morph with it. The blob chittered happily as Jim opened the window and climbed half outside so he could see the stars.

It was different here on Montressor, with a thick atmosphere between them and the lighter but purer air of the etherium. The stars weren't as bright, and they seemed to flicker and twinkle instead of shinning steadily as Jim had seen from the deck of the Legacy.

But still, it felt good to see them. Each tiny spark of light represented a whole system, or even an entirely different galaxy. Jim searched until he found the constellation of Aurigna, then traced down from Capella to find Zeta Aurigae. That was where Amelia was now, with the Legacy of course, on a chartered trip to transport a few retired navy officers and a hold full of zerrion bars to Cerulata. When she got back in a few weeks, she and Delbert supposedly had a date scheduled, and Delbert had been periodically freaking out over that. He'd tried asking for advice one morning at breakfast, but Mom hadn't dated anyone since Leland, Jim had never dated (and still had no interest in it anyway), and B.E.N.'s bizarre story about his lost love, Lupé, was probably a good instruction manual of what not to do if you wanted a date to go well.

Jim remembered when he was little and he would look out at the stars at night, trying to find the one his father was traveling to. And then, after his father left for good, he'd scoured the skies as though it could give him some clue as to which tiny speck of light was closest to his father.

And now he looked up, wondering if one of those specks was shinning sunlight on a certain cyborg.

He smiled and looked back down at the card. It was dark, but Jim had stared at it so much already in between working on his math practice that he could probably have pictured it perfectly even without the light slipping out from his room. Morph cooed and babbled sleepily, slithering between Jim's fingers and around the edges of the postcard.

"Can you read, Morph?" Jim asked softly. He never knew exactly how much Morph understood. Sometimes the little blob was startlingly perceptive, but other times he seemed oblivious to what was going on around him, especially when things got serious.

Morph turned his eyes on Jim and chittered in a way that probably meant that either he couldn't read or didn't know what Jim was talking about.

"It says: stick to it, no matter the squalls."
And suddenly Morph shifted, transforming into a miniature version of Silver, just as he was that night on the Legacy, right after Jim's world had crumbled once and right before it would crumble again.

"Stick to it, no matter the squalls," the little Silver said, imitating the words Jim had just spoken, but with the tone of the original, even gesturing with a little pipe. Jim hadn't remembered Morph being there, but he must have been hiding somewhere, watching them. Maybe that time he had sensed the seriousness of the situation, and held back to let Silver help Jim.

"Do you miss him?" Jim asked softly.

The miniature Silver dissolved into a familiar little ball of goo, nodding and churring sadly.

"M-miss him," the little morph echoed.

Jim reached out and scooped Morph in against his chest, running his thumb over the spot behind Morph's "head."

"Me too," Jim confessed. The words came easily in the dark and silence with only Morph there to hear him. "I really, really miss him."

Morph nuzzled up against the skin of Jim's neck, making a soft little noise like a sad purr. Jim didn't know how long Silver and Morph had traveled together, but he knew it had been a long time. He could see how hard it had been for Silver to ask Morph to stay with Jim, but also how easy it was for Morph to accept. Morph adored Silver, but somewhere along the line he'd become just as attached to Jim.

Jim had sort of figured that Morph just got attached to people easily, at least until the time he'd been gone for a couple days by accident. An old friend of his mother's had taken ill so they'd gone to visit her and help out for the day, only her house was in the next town over and they'd gotten snowed in. They'd ended up staying for another day and night before making their way carefully back to Bellweather.

When they'd arrived home, Morph had flown at Jim so fast he'd basically splattered across Jim's chest and refused to let go. Delbert had reported that Morph had caused nothing but trouble since the night Jim hadn't come home. He'd tormented Delbert whenever the doctor had tried to comfort him, knocking things over and turning into puddles so Delbert would trip.

But for the next few days, Morph had been a perfect angel. He'd spent as much time as possible on Jim's shoulder, never causing any trouble at all. Delbert had laughingly suggested that giving Morph a fright like that every once in a while would be good for him.

Delbert hadn't understood the furious glare that Jim had leveled at him, or why Morph's good behavior had broken Jim's heart.

But Jim understood it. He remembered the little eight year old boy who had looked out at the stars, crying and begging through his tears:

"Please come back. I promise, I'll never cause any trouble again. I'll be the perfect kid. I'll eat everything I'm supposed to and go to bed when you say to and I won't bother you when you're tired after work. I promise, I'll be so good you'll never want to leave again. Just please come home."

Jim remembered, and so he hadn't scolded Morph when he started pulling his old tricks again (even when that meant the little squit woke him up at the crack of dawn on the weekends). He made sure to never leave Morph if he could help it. And when he left, he always promised Morph that he would
be back soon and let him know how long he would be gone.

Because Morph made friends easily, but he formed close bonds much more sparingly, and they were just as important to Morph as Jim's relationships with his Mom and Silver were to him.

"I know he misses you," Jim told Morph softly. He glanced down at the postcard in his hands. "And maybe he misses me a little too."

Jim still didn't quite know what he'd done to earn Morph's love, just as he didn't know how he'd earned Silver's. But he clung to them.

Because that was the thing, the reason why Silver's belief in him and Morph's devotion meant so much: he'd had to earn them.

His mother had every reason to want to believe in him, even if it was just to cling to the hope that her son wasn't a complete failure, and he'd convinced himself that was all it was. Now he could see that his mother really did believe in him, and just wanted to help him, but back then he couldn't. He'd given up on himself, so he couldn't imagine why anyone else hadn't.

But Silver had no investment in him, no reason to try to puff him up with flattery. And at first, he clearly hadn't liked Jim at all. So when he'd earned Silver's trust, then his friendship, and then that powerful belief that rang through Silver's words, that was all real. And all just because of who Jim was at that moment.

And even though his voyage had done a lot for Jim to prove his own worth to himself, it was still so hard sometimes not to think that it was all some fluke, and he would never really amount to anything worthwhile.

But still…

*Stick to it, no matter the squalls.*

Jim smiled and turned his gaze up to the stars again.

"Wherever you are, you better be taking care of yourself," Jim said, "I don't know if we'll ever get to see you again, but you have people who care about you back here you know. Don't let us down now. You can rattle the stars too."

Jim bit his lip and slipped back inside, but left the window open to let in the warm night air.

He'd have to figure out someplace safe to put the postcard, but for tonight, he set it on his bedside table, under the soft glow of the overly complicated alarm clock the Doc had given him to use while he stayed at the Doppler mansion.

Then he climbed onto his mattress, using it to reach the hammock he'd strung up between the bedposts. He poured Morph onto his usual spot and then climbed in after him.

Morph slid up against the crook of Jim's neck and promptly fell asleep, making high pitched, wheezing little snores that were soothing in their familiarity, even if they probably should have been annoying. He'd had worse bunkmates, though, that was for sure.

Jim let his eyes slip closed, listening to Morph's snores and the ticking of the clock and the little creaks and pops that came with an old house like this.

He was still nervous for the test tomorrow, and everything else he would have to deal with next, but
for the first time in weeks, he felt like everything was going to work out. It wouldn't be easy, but he could fix the mess he'd made and earn a place in the Royal Interstellar Academy and then maybe someday he would be the captain of his own ship.

I'm sticking to it, Silver. Just you wait and see.

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It was about a month after he sent the first postcard that Silver gave in and sent another.

It was silly and sentimental and not befitting a feared pirate captain, but still, here he was, picking up supplies at a buzzing spaceport, and sending out a postcard like a wet-eared rigger writing letters home to mommy.

He didn't even know if his first letter had reached Jim yet, or how Jim would react to them, and he probably never would. For all he knew, it would annoy Jim if some silly sentimental pirate kept sending him cheesy postcards and nagging messages.

But well…

He could stand to annoy the lad a little more.

So he sealed up the interstellar shipping envelope and smiled as he slipped it in the slot before he allowed himself to disappear again into the crowd.

Chapter End Notes

I hope you enjoyed chapter 1! Chapter 2 is almost complete, but I'm probably going to hold off on posting it until I finish chapter 3, so I can make any edits needed. I have the whole thing charted out, so I know what I am doing (mostly), but I'm afraid that I will probably take forever to update (because I am a medical student with absolutely 0% free time). But this project is one of my stress reliefs and honestly quite close to my heart so I'm working on it whenever I can.

Please feel free to comment, ask me questions, etc. As in, you will honestly make my day if you do. I'm really shy about posting this honestly, because I rarely share my writings, so if someone likes it I'll probably be giddy all day long. XD
Chapter Notes

At long last, it's here! I wish I could say that future chapters will be produced faster, but I'm afraid that the whole med student with 0% free time situation prevents me from making any promises about timing whatsoever. But I'm doing my best. And hopefully future months won't be as evil as this last October was for me.

So, things worth knowing before reading chapter 2:
-Silver's original name was John (in keeping with Treasure Island lore, naturally, but since it was never used in the TP movie I thought I'd point it out for clarity's sake; though I have made Long his original family name instead of a title/nickname thingie/whatever it is supposed to be in Treasure Island). This should explain itself in the fic, but for REASONS I wanted to make sure this was extra-clear.
-I take accuracy to the movie very seriously when making this story (I changed a line in a panic because I realized it conflicted with a detail about Doppler's buggy that is visible on screen for less than a second), but I did make one little tweak to the amount of control Jim has over the speed of his solar surfer. In the movie it appears to only have an "on" and "off" mode, but I gave it some speed control to help make the solar surfing scenes as exciting and dynamic in written form as they are in visual form. I thought long and hard over whether to do this, but in the end I decided that even though it is a slight deviation from the literal canon of the movie, it helped keep the solar surfing scene better in the spirit of the movie. And you can picture it as a modification that Jim has made since his return to Treasure Planet, since this it is not specified one way or the other.
-This should go without saying, but basically anything Jim and/or Silver do should count as a "don't try this at home" thing. Don't jump out of windows, don't start fights with four armed mobsters, you get the idea. ;)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Sarah and Jim were walking back to the Doppler Manor in charged silence. Morph was bubbling fretfully along between them, occasionally cooing unhappily over Jim's new black eye.

"I might as well just come down to pick you up from school every day at the rate you're getting sent to the principal's office," Sarah muttered.

"Hey, the last few times have just been because my teacher doesn't like how I do my math, that doesn't count."

Sarah signed, but he had a point. She sort of wished that Jim would just learn how to do his math the normal way, but so long as it was working (and it was definitely working, his math grades were now some of his highest), that wasn't a fight she was about to take up. She'd had to call in Delbert to argue with Mr. Sssssmoid several more times, but he'd won every time. Jim actually seemed to enjoy watching the astrophysicist getting all worked up as he fought Mr. Sssssssmoid over what really amounted to the philosophy of math rather than actual math itself. Sarah worried that at some point they would draw the line and force Jim to give up his strange methods, but Delbert had actually become rather fascinated with Jim's systems and he could get quite passionate in their defense.
Delbert had sworn in one of his rants that if they stopped giving Jim credit for his "innovative" methods, then he would never let them hear the end of it. And Sarah honestly believed that he would in fact come down to that school every single day to yell if it came to that, and she didn't think that the school was really willing to risk that.

But of course today it hadn't been about his weird math, it had been about his big mouth and bull head.

"They were insulting you," Jim grumbled.

"I don't care if they called me a flatulent procyran fillibat," Sarah retorted. "That doesn't matter to me. But it matters to me if you are getting detentions and black eyes."

"And Doppler," Jim continued, "And Amelia. And B.E.N.. And Morph."

"They were just trying to bait you, Jim," Sarah sighed. "And you gave them what they wanted."

Jim didn't reply with anything more than turning up the dial on his sulkiness. Morph noticed and helpfully turned into a dark cloud hovering over his head.

Jim held the door open for Sarah as they reached Delbert's home, then headed for the staircase, but Sarah grabbed his shoulder to stop him.

"Wait, Jim..." Sarah trailed off, taking the moment to hang up her bonnet and to think. A massive interstellar envelope had arrived for Jim today with the same almost comical rendition of their address making her quite certain who it was from, even though it had been a little over a month since the first postcard had arrived.

Part of her wanted to wait a little, not wanting to reward Jim today when he'd gotten into a big enough fight to land himself in detention for the first time this school year. But it wasn't right to keep it from him either.

"A letter came for you today."

Instantly Jim's face lit up, any attempt at looking remorseful for his bad behavior thrown out the window.

Sarah shook her head but she led him to the kitchen where she'd left the letter. She gave it to him, but with a stern "we are not done talking" look.

Jim ripped into it with excitement and pulled out another postcard. This one had a picture of what looked to be an "orcus galacticus," those space whales that Delbert had taken a series of terrible photos of on the trip to Treasure Planet. Honestly, the picture on the card was just as bad, but Sarah assumed whoever had made it was aiming for "artistic" rather than "I have no clue how to use this camera." The effect was about the same though. Jim was beaming when he flipped the postcard over.

But as he read the writing on the back, his expression shifted from joy to shock to a sort of... righteous fury.

"I don't believe this!" Jim raged, throwing his hands up and whipping around as though he wanted to storm off but couldn't decide where to storm. "Unbelievable, this is absolutely unbelievable!"

Sarah felt a jolt in her gut as she made an abrupt shift from annoyed to worried. What could Silver have sent that would make Jim so mad? If that pirate was going to do something that would undo all
the good he had done for Jim then Sarah was going to track him down and-

"Look at this!" Jim demanded, throwing the postcard down on the table.

It landed space-whale side up, so Sarah picked it up and flipped it over.

It was written in the same messy scrawl as the last time, this time comprising all of two sentences:

You had better be keeping yourself outta trouble, Jimbo. Mind that you pick your fights and don't you give your mother any grief.

"You two are on different ends of the galaxy and you're still managing to gang up on me!" Jim ranted. "You've never met and you're teaming up against me! How is that fair?"

And what could Sarah do but burst out laughing? Jim glared at her, but she was his mother; she was immune to that glare. She'd seen the prototypes too often leveled over a plate of healthy food to take them too seriously now. So she let herself laugh at the situation and Jim and her own self-satisfaction.

When she was done, she held the postcard back out to Jim with an impish grin on her face.

"That man knows you, Jim."

Jim growled, "give me that," and snatched the postcard away, but Sarah could tell that he wasn't really as mad as he was pretending to be.

He stomped out of the room, heavy boots making each step louder, muttering under his breath, "Unfair, unbelievable, across the galaxy" while Morph swirled around his head, gleefully mimicking his fussing.

Sarah grinned.

She was growing to like Silver more and more. They were probably halfway across the galaxy from each other, and they had never met, but they had something very important in common. And that made Sarah quite certain that if they ever did meet, they would get along splendidly.

Sarah turned her attention to fixing lunch as the sound of Jim's stomping faded away, leaving nothing but the happy tune of a victrola she had left playing before she'd had to get Jim from school.

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"Morph, this is the four-seventeenths wrench," Jim said, holding the wrench in front of the chittering pink blob. "Four-seventeenths wrench."

Morph transformed to imitate the wrench, and Jim put them side by side. It looked like Morph had managed a perfect match this time.

"Alright! Nicely done!" Jim praised as he pulled out a solaris seed cracker and tossed it in the air. Morph rapidly transformed back into his usual shape to catch and eat the cracker.

Jim gave him a minute to eat while he turned his attention back to his solar surfer. It had been one of their few possessions to survive the fire at the Benbow, if only because the police had impounded it just a few hours before Billy Bones had led the pirates straight to their door.

Jim had strange luck sometimes.
But whatever the reason, he was glad it had survived. Riding it and working on it were some of the only things that could really calm him down when the world was driving him crazy. His mother didn't really get why "playing with death," as she called it, was so important to him, but so long as he kept out of restricted areas (aka: didn't get in trouble with the law) she didn't put up a fuss. She could see how he would start climbing the walls and crawling out of his skin if he hadn't been out on his surfer in a while, and she still held a certain pride in his ability to make the surfers himself. And now of course, if she gave him an official "Mom disapproves" look when he went out, he could remind her how his solar surfer building and riding skills had saved his life on Treasure Planet.

It was hard to argue with that.

Jim hid the wrench he had been working with and turned to Morph.

"Morph, four-seventeenth's wrench."

Morph blinked, churred, and transformed into a wrench floating in midair.

Jim pulled the real wrench back out and compared the two, but without the real one there for reference, Morph hadn't gotten the size quite right. Jim frowned. He'd gotten really excited about the idea of training Morph to form different tools on command, in case he wanted to make any modifications or repairs when they were out flying. But Morph was having trouble getting the sizes right from memory.

But suddenly Jim had a thought. He put down the real wrench and set Morph against the bolt he was tightening. Sure enough, Morph quickly shifted to match the size of the bolt, then settled into being solid, so Jim could turn it.

"Morph, that is perfect!" Jim exclaimed. He was such an idiot, he didn't need to train Morph to match every size of tool, he just had to train him to know what each tool was and then he could adapt to the task at hand.

Morph transformed back to his normal form, happily repeating "perfect!" and wagging his pink blobby "tail." Jim pulled out three crackers and held them out. Morph let out an excited squeak and splattered onto Jim's hand to snatch them all up.

For a moment, he watched as Morph tumbled over himself, blissfully devouring his treat. Then he turned and picked up the postcard sitting beside him. When he'd gotten upstairs, he'd shoved it in the drawer where he was currently hiding the first postcard. But he'd caved a few minutes later and pulled it back out. Annoyed as he was at Silver for unwittingly teaming up against him with his Mom, and for very wittingly nagging him from across the galaxy, he couldn't help but feel a certain excitement.

One postcard was one thing, but two... that made Jim wonder if this was going to become a regular thing. And that felt strange to think about, because... it wasn't like Jim had friends before his trip (at least not since his old school friends got sick of him when he was nine and moody and angry at everything). And even now, it was just B.E.N. and Morph and his mother, when she wasn't nagging him at least. Not the most impressive collection.

People didn't usually really like him, or want him around, or miss him when he was gone.

But if Silver was writing him, and planning to keep writing, then maybe that meant that he missed Jim as much as Jim missed Silver. It had been so long since Jim had had a friend, he'd almost forgotten how much it hurt when they got tired of him and moved on.
But Silver wasn't moving on.

And really he was the first person who hadn't, other than Jim's mom.

"Jim! Could you come down here!"

*What did I do this time?* Jim thought as he hurriedly closed the open panel of his surfer, hid the postcard, and headed out the door. It couldn't have been anything too bad, since he was still 'Jim' instead of 'James Pleiades Hawkins.' But he couldn't even think of what it might be. Unless this was still about the fight from this morning, but after Silver's letter she hadn't seemed as angry. Jim supposed it must be nice for her to have someone else scold him for a change.

Jim ran down to find his mother waiting for him at the bottom of the staircase.

"Jim," she said softly. "We're running low on a lot of groceries and B.E.N. volunteered to go pick up more. Can you go with him? I'm meeting with the woman from the construction firm in half an hour, so I can't go with him right now."

"Yeah, sure," Jim replied, happy to discover that he wasn't in trouble this time. That was always nice. And a trip to the market wouldn't be bad, even if he'd been planning on taking his solar surfer out.

Because one thing was certain: B.E.N. was not allowed to go shopping alone. He had no clue how to haggle. At all. And he had less ability to say no to pushy sales-people than even Doppler.

Fortunately, if there was one time when it was good to be a kid with a bad attitude and oversized stubborn streak from a poor family, it was at the market. Jim's mother had started sending him to the market on his own when he was ten, because he could hold his ground against any trader there, even Hassigawa, who might well be over two thousand years old. He'd once stood in front of her glaring for a full twenty minutes straight, while she glared right back with those rheumy eyes. People had started taking bets around them.

Jim had won.

So he whistled for Morph and took the money his mother gave him, and left with B.E.N..

The trip to the market took about twenty minutes at a fast walk, and it passed amiably as Jim half-listened to B.E.N.'s chatter (apparently B.E.N. had been reading up on psychology, which was bound to be trouble) and periodically asked Morph to turn into different tools and gave him crackers when he got it right. He was probably going to spoil Morph's dinner at this rate, but Jim had never really understood what the problem was with that anyway. So long as everyone got fed, what did it matter how or when?

The market was buzzing with more activity than Jim would have expected, but it wasn't uncomfortably crowded yet.

He began reading off the shopping list to B.E.N., glancing at the carts and stands they were passing. Most of the food seemed to be set up deeper in, and around them were things like furniture and knick-knacks and bonnets.

Jim trailed off halfway through the list as he noticed something on one of the shelves of a cart.

He grabbed B.E.N. and walked over.

It was a sturdy looking chest, a little smaller than the one Billy Bones had used to house the Map,
and with a keyhole instead of a combination. Exactly what Jim had just been thinking that he needed.

Captain Amelia had returned a couple weeks ago, and she was now staying at the Doppler mansion as well. (Which had been a hilarious conversation, with Doppler fumbling and offering to let her stay in his room when he'd meant to say in his house. As usual Amelia was unfussed, though she did insist on having her own room.)

On the one hand it was nice, since Doppler was over the moon and his mother had been getting along well with Amelia. But on the other hand, it made it all the more urgent that Jim figure out somewhere safe to hide Silver's letters.

He'd burned the envelopes (after cutting out his "address" from the first one, because it was too amusing to get rid of), since while they didn't have a return address, they did have red inked stamp marks from various shipping centers they had passed through to get here. Jim couldn't really figure them out, but he was sure that if he (or anyone else) took them to a post office, they could be decoded, so the envelopes had to go. But he couldn't bear to burn the postcards, though he worried that those could be traced as well. The one with the mastodon didn't have a name, but it seemed distinctive enough to be traced if someone tried, and if Silver was going to keep sending them, he might end up sending something more obvious.

Between Amelia, Doppler, B.E.N., and the weekly visit from Doppler's cranky, suction-cup coated housemaid, there were too many people hanging around that Jim didn't trust with anything connected to Silver's location. Amelia was still seething over Silver's escape. She seemed to take the entire mutiny as a personal offense, and she'd meant it when she'd said that she would see the pirates all hang.

But as much as Jim respected Amelia, he was not going to let her catch Silver if there was anything he could do about it.

So this little locking chest would be perfect... if it weren't for the fact that it would cost money. Jim didn't want to spend a penny of his little bit of pirate treasure on anything but the necessities for him and his mother and rebuilding the Benbow. A handful of jewels was a very different thing than the loot of a thousand worlds; they couldn't afford to be wasteful. Especially since they still hadn't finished getting the last of it appraised and sold. It was adding up to be pretty substantial, but they still didn't know exactly what rebuilding the Benbow would cost either.

But Jim really didn't have anything else to his name. And with how hard he'd been working to catch back up in school, he hadn't had a lot of time to pick up odd jobs to earn a little spending money like he had occasionally done before if there had been a book he wanted or when he'd needed a new jacket and wanted the more expensive black leather one.

Jim frowned, wondering if he could figure out how to build something secure instead of buying it. But with Amelia hanging around and two letters now to protect, he didn't know that he wanted to waste the time it would take to learn how to make something that could act as a proper lock.

His hand went to his earring.

It was actual gold, not of great quality, but enough to buy this chest. It had actually been his father's. A spacer's earring. Some considered it a superstition, but it wasn't uncommon for spacers to wear one or more earrings as a sort of insurance. If something terrible were to happen, they would always have emergency funds right there on their ears.

Leland almost certainly hadn't meant to leave it behind, but it had eventually turned up behind a dresser, half hidden in a crack in the floorboards. So Jim had started wearing it for the same reason as
the spacers: as a little emergency fund if there was ever anything important he would need it for. (And also because he'd liked the look of it.)

Jim supposed that now that the Benbow had burned, this was the only thing they had left that had once belonged to Leland Hawkins. His father had only taken a rucksack full of the important stuff, so he'd left behind a lot of things he'd deemed as worthless as his wife and son: some clothes, some books, some tools, all of the little hand drawn cards and lumpy clay statues Jim had made him for birthdays and the like. They'd kept most of it, out of practicality rather than sentimentality. When funds were already tight, why waste a perfectly good tool or book or a shirt that Jim would be able to grow into? (Though of course, Jim had ripped up all the "best dad in the galaxy" cards.)

But now it was just the earring left.

It was fitting in a way.

"Ma'am," Jim said to the worm-like woman running the cart as he picked up the chest. "I'd like to buy this."

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After buying the chest (and a fountain pen he could give Delbert as a tiny little thank-you-for-letting-us-stay-at-your-house-present, since he'd managed to haggle some), everything had gone smoothly at the market. Jim reined in B.E.N. and haggled with Hassigawa and kept Morph from eating anything they hadn't paid for, and all in all, it was a good, uneventful trip.

Until Gruuk showed up right as they were trying to leave.

"Well, if it isn't the crazy patrol," Gruuk laughed.

Jim grit his teeth but kept walking. He'd already gotten scolded for fighting from the principal and his mother and Silver today, and he wanted to get home while there was still enough daylight for him to take out his solar surfer. If he was lucky, Gruuk had gotten her fill of trouble for the day too, and she'd let it go.

Jim really should know better than to hope he'd be lucky.

"Hey, Hawkins, I'm talking to you," Gruuk growled. "I wasn't done!"

And then she ran up fast enough that Jim couldn't react before Gruuk had pushed him over.

Everything he was carrying fell as he tried to catch himself, the chest clattering against the stones and fruits rolling away.

Morph squealed in alarm and B.E.N. was shouting "Jimmy!" but Jim ignored them as he leapt up to stand between the bully and the food he'd just bought. He wouldn't put it past her to try to destroy it, and Jim was not about to let her. (Though at six and a half feet tall with tough scaly skin and arm muscles thick as Jim's head, she always had an annoying advantage.)

"Go away, Gruuk," Jim growled. He was rather pleased when Morph appeared at his shoulder, growling and snapping sharp little teeth, even if he knew that Morph would run and hide if he got hit, if not before. But Gruuk didn't know that yet.

"Why did you push Jimmy?!" B.E.N. asked, voice full of alarm and confusion.

Jim glanced over to check if B.E.N.’s primary memory circuit had gotten loose again. After all, B.E.N. had been part of the most notorious pirate crew ever; you'd think he would be more used to
violence. But no, his eyes were blue, not green; he had his mind wired as correctly as it ever was.

Gruuk looked at B.E.N. like he was an idiot. (Which he was sometimes, but Jim still didn't like her looking at B.E.N. that way.)

"I was talking to him and he walked away," Gruuk purred, all venomous sweetness. "It was very rude."

"But when you push him like that he could get hurt!" B.E.N. exclaimed. "And it spilled all the food!"

"That's the point, metalhead!"

"It isn't nice to push people like that!"

"Well why don't I show you some niceness right in your stupid face!" Gruuk snapped, smacking one fist against the other hand for emphasis.

She was always so eloquent.

"B.E.N., stop it, she's just a bully, she won't listen," Jim said as he edged over to try to get in a position where he could intersect Gruuk if she went for either B.E.N. or the food. "It's six inches of skull and half an inch of brain in there."

"A bully?!"

"Is this thing for real?" Gruuk asked Jim, momentarily distracted from her anger by her disbelief.

And then B.E.N. did the craziest thing Jim had ever seen him do, which was itself an impressive feat. He literally jumped on Gruuk, locking onto her with both his arms and legs in what Jim recognized as a "B.E.N. hug."

"What the-"

"I've been reading about bullies!" B.E.N. announced. "And my book says that bullies are insecure, so they are mean to other people to feel powerful! But you don't need to do that, I'm sure you are a wonderful person on the inside!"

The utter disbelief in the expression on Gruuk's face would have been hilarious if Jim hadn't been afraid that she was going to literally tear B.E.N.'s limbs off.

But as he took a closer look, he realized that B.E.N.'s fullbody hug had actually managed to pin Gruuk's arms in such a way that she couldn't break free. Jim had seen a four-armed Yemdor catch a Mudokkian in a hold like that, each pair of tentacles wrapped tight around the joints of the Mudokkian's arms. And somehow B.E.N. had lucked into holding Gruuk the same way.

And he had an agenda.

"Now you listen to me: you are a worthwhile person, deserving of love! You are a worthwhile person deserving of love!"

"Get off of me!" Gruuk shouted, spinning around to try to dislodge the stubborn robot, while Jim started laughing.

"You are a worthwhile person deserving of love!" B.E.N. insisted. "Now why don't you tell me ten
things you like about yourself?"

"I like that I'm not a lunatic like you!" Gruuk shouted.

"Good, that's one! Nine more to go!" B.E.N. crowed.

Gruuk let out a frustrated growl and began spinning around to try to dislodge B.E.N. But the little robot was very stubborn when it came to hugs (as Jim knew from more personal experience than he really needed) and he wasn't going anywhere.

"Alright, that's good, let out your anger. Let it go! Let it gooooooo!"

"Let me go!"

"Now take a deep cleansing breath. Breath so deep you can feel it in all of your chakras!"

And suddenly Morph swooped over to join the fun, parroting "All your chakras! All your chakras!"

By this point Jim was just standing there laughing. But since it looked like B.E.N. had the situation under control for now (in his own weird way), he realized this would be the perfect opportunity to pick up all the spilled food. He hurriedly began packing up everything, pulling the keys from around his neck so he could put the most fragile of their purchases in the little chest.

"Jim?"

Jim whipped around, still on high alert, but this time it was Doppler, driving his little buggy, Captain Amelia sitting beside him. After some serious overthinking and a lot of stumbling, Doppler had asked her to go on a picnic with him. Amelia was always hard to read, but Doppler seemed happy, so Jim supposed it had gone well.

"Okay now you still have nine things you like about yourself left to go!" B.E.N.'s voice rang out, and Delbert and Amelia looked around the wall of the buggy to try to see what was going on.

Time to crash their party before they figured out what was going on here.

"Hold this," Jim ordered Doppler as he shoved food at him.

"Jim, wha-"

"YOU ARE A WORTHWHILE PERSON DESERVING OF LOVE!"

Jim ignored both Doppler and B.E.N. as he got the last of the food and supplies in the buggy (trying to hide his little chest under the food to avoid questions).

"Scooch over!" He said as he pushed Doppler into Amelia's space to clear enough room for him to sit. But there wasn't really enough room for four people in Delbert's buggy, and Jim had a bad feeling about who was going to be doubling up.

Still, he couldn't abandon B.E.N., so he ran back to the scene of the "fight."

"B.E.N., we have to go now," Jim said, "Give Gruuk a goodbye hug and let's go."

Gruuk's eyes had literally turned red as she glared at Jim, but B.E.N. beamed and gave her a last squeeze that knocked the air out of her lungs.

"I have to go, but think about the rest of the list, okay?"
Jim grabbed B.E.N. and pretty much carried him to the buggy before hurling both of them inside and flicking Delilhla's reins (even though Doppler was still holding them).

The buggy took off, and Jim settled back in his seat with the best innocent smile he could come up with on his face.

"Accruing yet more trouble for the day, Mr. Hawkins?" Amelia asked while Delbert stuttered.


As Silver had said after their misadventure during the resupply stop on Argentus 1: it's only trouble if you get caught.

Amelia and Doppler both gave him unimpressed looks, but Jim didn't have much time to worry about that because B.E.N. had realized that he was sitting on Jim's lap and it was a perfect opportunity to cuddle.

B.E.N.'s arms wrapped tightly around Jim's neck, cutting off his windpipe.

"Thank you for going to the market with me, Jimmy! It was so much fun!"

"Fun! Fun! Fun!" Morph imitated, popping around Jim's head, oblivious as B.E.N. was to the fact that Jim currently couldn't breath.

Jim tried to pull B.E.N. off, but B.E.N. was being stubborn. Jim jammed his thumb in the spot in B.E.N.'s shoulder where a pneumatic hose passed, cutting off the strength of one arm so he could breath again.

"B.E.N.," Jim gasped. "What did we say about neck hugs?"

"Oh, right, sorry!"

B.E.N. shifted his grip so he was hugging Jim around the chest instead.

"You are the best friend ever, Jimmy!"

Jim patted his shoulder.

"Thanks, B.E.N."

Amelia was smirking, but Delbert seemed more interested in the fact that she was leaning slightly against him now that they were sitting shoulder to shoulder. Which meant that he wasn't actually looking at the road.

"Doc, if we don't turn left soon we're going to end up across a canyon from your house," Jim reminded him.

"Oh, yes, yes, left turn! No, Delilah, we are not going to the orchard, come on. Actually did you know that the city council has been proposing a bridge between Kepler Ridge and the southern end of Bellweather Plateau? It has been under discussion for almost a decade, but there have been concerns about..."

Jim tuned out Doppler's nervous babbling and ignored B.E.N.'s cuddling, and settled back for the ride home.

He didn't know that this counted as "picking his fights," but somehow he had managed to avoid any
real trouble. For now at least.

But that was what mattered, right?

Jim figured that Silver would be unimpressed with that argument, but hey, Jim would count it as a
win. After all, he was fifteen, not "old and wise" like Silver claimed to be. Old, Jim would give him,
but wise... well, sometimes.

Definitely not all of the time.

Jim hoped he was staying out of trouble.

Silver was in trouble now.

The worst part was that this was entirely his fault. He knew better than to open his big mouth and
start a fight like that if he didn't have good odds; he'd learned that a century ago as a smart mouthed
teenager.

He knew better, and yet here he was, running for his life through the busy port streets like he was still
fifteen and getting in over his head with the local gangs back on Arktos. Only this time his father
wouldn't be there to fight off the guy following him and then give Silver (or John, as he'd been called
back then) the tongue lashing of a lifetime and a beating that left him with a sore bum for the next
week.

If you could count it as a conversation, then it had been the last conversation Silver had ever had
with his father.

Heavens, it had been a long time since he'd thought about that.

But he wasn't fifteen anymore and he had a peg leg and a heavy metal arm that threw off his center
of balance and while he was mostly used to both, they still made running a lot more work than it had
been when he was a pup.

Still, Silver was running pellmell down a steep hill, pushing innocent bystanders aside (in as much as
anyone who was out and about at this time of the night in this part of town could be assumed to be
"innocent."). He wasn't far from his little catboat, but he knew that several of the crime lord's cronies
that had taken off after him were species that were built for speed in a way ursids simply were not.

He knew better than this.

Silver had almost made it to the bottom of the hill, only a couple blocks away from the docks when a
low slung figure leapt from the shadows, tackling him to the ground.

They tumbled together down the rest of the hill as Silver desperately tried to keep his bearings and
get his mechanical arm between himself and the long teeth snapping at his face. Claws dug into the
flesh of his organic shoulder and he knew that this tumble would leave him with some nasty bruising,
but he kept his head and he managed to throw his attacker off the moment they stopped rolling.

It was a thanos, six legged, with a long jaw full of razor sharp teeth, her red eyes blazing. Her ink-
black skin was mottled with glowing tattoos and her long ears were weighted down with piercings,
making her appear more like a pirate than a mobster, though the line between the two could become
a little blurred in port towns like this. She reared up on her hind legs, using the front four to pull
scimitars from her belt and bandoleer. She didn't appear to have any guns, perhaps due to the belief
in some systems that they were the weapons of cowards.

Silver on the other hand, considered guns to be the weapons of survivors.

He whipped out his pistol as quickly as he could, but she moved so fast. She ducked low to miss his first shot, darted in, and grabbed his arm with her top two arms, sending his second shot wild. Her lower arms lashed forward with their swords, but Silver used her grip on his arm against her, bringing it up and out to smash against her face and knock her backward.

She didn't lose her footing entirely, but she stumbled enough for Silver to pull his arm free and make a shot. Unfortunately, the laser blast only grazed her ribs and one arm. This enragd her, and she dropped the scimitar in the arm that was hit, but she lunged again before he could fire another shot.

Silver went down again, flat on his back, the thanos managing to get a deep slice across his chest (he was unfortunately familiar enough with the sensation of a sword meeting bone to recognize it instantly) and a weaker one on his face, though that one was mostly blocked by his metal parts.

The flares of pain made Silver let out a roar that was more animal than ursid, but he managed to grab the thin wrists of two arms in his massive metal hand and the uninjured one on her other side in his organic one. She clawed at him with her wounded hand and her long-taloned feet, but though she was taller than him and well muscled, she was still lighter than him. Silver pressed this advantage, rolling over to crush her under his bulk while he got his feet under himself.

He pulled himself upright and hurled the thanos with all his might into a nearby wall.

She seemed dazed by the impact, so Silver took the risk to turn and run. She wasn't the only one after him. He couldn't afford to stay here a moment longer if he hoped to get back to his boat.

The run down to the docks only took moments, but they dragged longer in his mind as his body screamed at him to do something about his wounds, or at least the blood pouring into his mechanical eye and blocking his vision.

But he ignored it all and made it to his boat. He didn't waste time untying her, he just cut the ropes and leapt in, tossing a coin to the harbormaster who guarded the ships, because they never forgot the face of someone who had stiffed them.

He had the catboat rocketing out above the surface of the sea before anyone caught up, but he'd heard voices behind him that he was quite certain were from someone in pursuit, so he knew to keep his eyes open. He spotted a boat that looked suspicious, but in the dark of the night and with all the craggily rocks sticking out of the water, it was easy to hide.

Once Silver was sure that he wasn't being (successfully) followed, he turned his catboat skyward and headed for the etherium.

In the safety of open space, Silver finally allowed himself to deal with the mess he'd made. He stripped off his torn and blood-soaked shirt, cleaning his wounds with alcohol to keep them from getting infected and stitching up the deeper ones as best he could. The slash across his chest was a nasty piece of work, but then the stabs in his gut from her claws were the sort of thing that tended to get infected. He scrubbed at his mechanical eye to get the worst of the blood off, but he would need to give it a more thorough cleaning later. His cyborg parts were biomechanical, so water or blood wouldn't break them, but blood would make the gears gummy for weeks.

Silver groaned and sat himself down on the deck, feeling every one of his hundred and thirteen years and then some.
He pulled his coat over to himself and began rifling through the pockets to see if there was anything broken or ruined.

Of course there was.

His spyglass must have taken a bad hit during the tumble down the cobblestone hill. The glass was shattered, the brass casing dented. Something similar had happened to his pocketwatch. That was going to make navigation difficult. He would need to replace those before he left the system. And then there was a postcard he'd grabbed this morning, with a picture of a baby flufferon, all cuteness except for the fact that it was glaring fiercely at the camera. It had reminded him of Jim.

Now there was blood splashed across its face.

The lad might not have been the image of untarnished childhood innocence, but that didn’t mean that he wasn't innocent compared to Silver. He deserved better than to open a letter and find it covered in Silver's own fool blood.

Silver sighed, tossing the useless junk to the side. He left the bloodstained shirt and coat to be another day's problem and staggered into the little cabin that served as his kitchen and bedroom. He would be fine in a few weeks, but his life was going to be rather unpleasent until then, and he'd have some new scars added to his already substantial collection.

He groaned at his own stupidity as he sunk onto his cot, trying to find a position to sleep in that aggravated as few of his wounds as possible. (It was possible that he might have cracked a bit of bone off his hip on the way down. It was smarting something fierce.)

His last postcard to Jim had been to remind the pup to pick his fights, and here he was, paying the price for not heeding his own advice. He could imagine the unimpressed glare the little scrap would have given him if he were here. That was one of the things about Jim that should have been annoying but had turned out to be endearing: he had a different glare custom made for every occasion.

But it was for the best that Jim wasn't here. And Morph. The little blob had always been so upset when Silver was hurt. He would drive Silver crazy sometimes, buzzing unhappily around his head for days, unwilling to leave his side while he was hurt.

What he wouldn't give to have Morphy here to annoy him now.

But it was for the best that Morph wasn't here.

Hopefully Morph was happy with Jim now on Montressor, safe from Silver's mistakes and the enemies he made with them.

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"Mr. Hawkins, would you please control that blob," Amelia snapped as she shooed the morph away from her plate. It had disguised itself as a roll so that it could eat off of her plate, then caused a royal mess flying about when it got caught. (How such a diminutive packet of protoplasma could eat so much continued to baffle Amelia.)

"Morph, get over here, leave Amelia alone."

The morph floated over to Mr. Hawkins and began "attacking" him, tugging on his braid and flying into him then bouncing off again and again.
"Alright, alright, I get it. You want to play. Just let me finish eating, you goof," the boy told it, grabbing it several times as it continued slipping through his fingers.

It flew on top of his hands and turned into a miniature version of Mr. Hawkins himself, parroting "You goof, you goof."

Mr. Hawkins laughed and brought his head down to bump his forehead against the morph, who shifted back into its usual pink form to nuzzle against his forehead in much the same way that Amelia had seen it do with its former master, the despicable Mr. Silver.

"You know I love Morph, but we do need to teach him some better manners before we reopen the Benbow," Mrs. Hawkins told her son. "I found another one of his little nests today. He had seven cufflinks, a bunch of spare change, and one of the good candlesticks hidden away in this one."

"So that is why I couldn't find my good cufflinks!" Delbert exclaimed.

"Bad Morph!" B.E.N. said, shaking a finger at Morph.

Morph replied by blowing B.E.N. a giant raspberry before it returned to oozing affectionately over Mr. Hawkins’ head.

Amelia raised an eyebrow.

"Poor manners indeed."

"I'm trying to get him to stop. He just really likes shiny things," the Hawkins boy explained as he pulled something small and mechanical out of his pocket, "and he doesn't understand that it's stealing."

Amelia wondered whether some of the creature's less than stellar behavior could be attributed to the bad influence of its former owner, but she elected to keep silent on the matter for now. Bringing up the topic of the escaped mutineer was a sure way to incite her own rancor, and Mr. Hawkins would become defensive. And while Amelia felt that at some point she really needed to sit her former cabin boy down and talk some sense into him, she felt no need to disrupt a perfectly delightful meal for it.

Meals at the Doppler Manor had proven very different than what Amelia would have expected. Meals at the Smollette estate had always been a very formal affair. Her and her sisters had been expected to display impeccable etiquette at all times, and even meals for just the family had been held in the large dinning hall. Conversational topics had been strictly regulated by her parents, and Amelia always found that she had little to say about any of the approved topics.

But here, meals were held in a little room right off the kitchen, with no dress code, no specific rules, and, in Amelia's opinion, far better food than her parent's professional chefs had provided. Her parents had designed meals to "educate their palettes." Sarah Hawkins designed meals to ensure that everyone left the table stuffed and happy. Amelia was already dreading the loss of her when she rebuilt her inn, for cooking was one of those rare skills that Amelia had yet to master.

Of course, Amelia might be gone as well by that time.

For once in her life, Amelia's own future seemed unclear even to her.

But instead of dwelling on that matter, Amelia allowed her attention to return to the present, in which Mr. Hawkins was tossing some sort of windup, handmade toy onto the ground. It was little more than a polished metal ball with lots of small bent wire legs sticking out, but it rolled and jumped around on its own. This seemed enough to entrance the little morph, which took off in pursuit.
"I'll work on getting him to stop stealing things," the boy promised. "And some better table manners."

"It amuses me that you say that as you have both elbows firmly planted on the table," Delbert commented.

The boy looked up in confusion.

"I-it's considered impolite to have your elbows on the table," Delbert explained, "from an etiquette standpoint."

Jim raised his eyebrows, but dropped his elbows from the table (which the robot beside him immediately imitated).

"Anything else?"

"Proper etiquette," Amelia commented, "is an infinite void, with no detail too minute to remain unaddressed. What utensil to use for what task, every detail of posture, symbolism associated with how you lay your utensils on your plate, et cetera, et cetera, ad nauseum."

Delbert straightened his posture and began taking smaller, dignified bites, to emphasize the point.

Mr. Hawkins looked at her, seemingly a little amused.

"A bunch of strict rules? Sounds like your kind of thing."

"I encourage decorum and efficiency, not the aggrandizement of triviality."

Mr. Hawkins smiled but turned his attention back to Delbert, who was still making a show of eating with perfect manners, and a spark of mischief appeared in the boy's eyes.

A moment later, a chunk of fried zutato flew across the table and hit Delbert in the chest.

"Hey!" Delbert exclaimed.

Mr. Hawkins grinned impishly, spinning his fork between his fingers. "Sorry Doc, I couldn't resist."

"Jim," Mrs. Hawkins scolded.

He turned to her, clearly ready to make more disingenuous apologies, when a chunk of zutato flew back across the table to strike the boy's chest.

Clearly shocked, Jim's head whipped back to Delbert.

"Force equals mass times acceleration, with arc of flight following a parabolic progression defined by the initial force and acceleration due to gravity." Delbert proclaimed proudly, spinning his own fork (and nearly dropping it). "It's simple math really."

The boy's face split in a wide smile as he laughed, picking up another zutato chunk and preparing to return fire.

"Put that down, young man, there will be no food fights at my table," Sarah said forcefully to her son before turning her gaze on Delbert. "That means you too."

Delbert meekly put a chunk of zutato back on his plate, glancing embarrassedly at Amelia. But Amelia understood that he had been attempting to bond better with young Mr. Hawkins, in part out
of guilt for having failed to keep a better eye on him during the voyage. And from what she could
tell, the boy really did seem to have a lamentable paucity of positive role models in his life,
particularly of the male variety.

Perhaps she should have assigned Arrow to attend to Mr. Hawkins, rather than the cook. But Arrow
had enough duties as it was, and she hadn't wanted to saddle her dearest friend with the sullen and
defiant adolescent Mr. Hawkins had appeared to be at the onset of their voyage.

Arrow.

Amelia set her fork down, her appetite abandoning her as she was overcome by a sudden rush of
grief.

It was unfortunate timing, but Amelia was not the sort to allow herself to be hindered by petty
emotions.

Yet try as she might to push it away, the sick misery in her chest refused to abate.

Her upbringing, followed by her tenure in the military, had trained Amelia to hide any emotions that
were not practical for the current situation. So she kept her face composed, and given how lulls of
silence were comfortably commonplace at Doppler Manor dinners, she should have been able to ride
out this wave of grief and resume as if nothing had happened.

However, the universe elected to demolish that plan with the sledgehammer known as B.E.N..

B.E.N. had taken to studying his psychology books at the dinner table, seemingly in eager imitation
of Mr. Hawkins, who frequently had to study through his meals. Usually it seemed a benign
endeavor (if futile considering how little his actual socialization protocols had improved), but it
occasionally resulted in unfortunate questions, usually at the most unfortunate of times.

"Hey, Amelia, what did they do for Mr. Arrow's funeral? I reached a chapter on funerary customs!"

Silence descended on the room as the four organic people all froze.

"There has not been a funeral yet," Amelia said crisply. "It is traditional on his homeplanet to wait at
least a standard year to conduct any funerals for which the b-body was not recovered. In case the
subject is not actually deceased."

While she had maintained a rather level tone but for one stuttered word, it was apparent that all of the
non-robotic beings in the room had picked up her distress. Delbert and Mrs. Hawkins looked at her
worriedly. Mr. Hawkins grabbed B.E.N.'s face with one hand to force his mouth shut just as the
robot made to attempt a followup comment, then glared him into continued silence.

Even the little morph reappeared, making unhappy burbling noises and offering its little mechanical
ball to Amelia like a present.

Sympathy.

Amelia was largely unused to such a thing, and she found it most unwelcome at this moment, well
intentioned as it was.

She shoed the morph away gently and turned to Mrs. Hawkins.

"The meal was delightful as ever, Mrs. Hawkins," she said as she stood. "Thank you."
She walked out of the room, unhurried, head held high, and headed out the back door.

There was a little garden in the back of the estate, just a small thing wedged between the back of the manor and a great wall designed to prevent anyone from falling over the edge of the cliff on which the manor sat. It provided a less than ideal view, but a view nonetheless, of the stars.

The stars she had traveled for most of her adult life, always with one loyal companion at her side.

Amelia had met Arrow in her first week at the Academy. She had been impertinent and hotheaded, while he was unflappable and even-keeled, but they connected over their shared obsession with perfection. He had been perhaps the only one of their classmates who could stand Amelia's temper and impatience, and they became an inseparable team. He was the only one in whom she had confided her own concerns, her doubts, her troubles with her family. And in turn, he had offered her honesty, loyalty, and the chance to stay with his own family over school breaks.

After they graduated first and second in their class, it was into the Navy, where they served together until Amelia's ongoing battle over "following orders" vs. "getting things done" ended with her leaving the Navy. She had been somewhat surprised when Arrow had followed her out the door, and told him that he shouldn't, but Arrow had carried on anyway, never manifesting an ounce of regret over having thrown away a promising career.

They had found employment easily in the public sector, and they had become quite selective about it. They chose assignments that promised excitement, adventure even, the chance to see new stretches of the galaxy.

So of course they had leapt at the prospect of finding Treasure Planet.

What a mistake that had been.

Amelia heard the swoosh of the door opening, and cringed internally. There was no one with whom she felt any inclination to speak to at this moment, at least not within the realm of the living. She cringed again when she recognized the clomp of heavy boots, rather than the sharp clapping of leather-soled house shoes or even the swishing of wide skirts.

It could have been worse, her visitor could have been B.E.N., but at the moment, young Mr. Hawkins was still quite close to the bottom of the list of people Amelia could possibly stand to speak with.

"Captain?" the boy asked hesitantly.

"Is this an urgent matter, Mr. Hawkins?"

"Uh," he mumbled. "Not exactly, but... it is important. Maybe. I mean... there's something I need to tell you."

"Very well," Amelia replied, still not turning to face him. "Proceed."

"You know how I overheard Silver and the pirates talking, when I found out what they were? There was something they said... I put in in the police report, but I haven't gotten the chance to tell you before. So, here it is."

The boy took a deep breath before continuing.

"They were arguing about whether to mutiny then or to wait, and Scroop wanted to... kill all of us right then, but Silver got mad at him. He grabbed him and he was shouting at him, and one of the
things he said was that if Scroop pulled another 'stunt' like he had with Mr. Arrow, then Scroop would 'be joining him.' This was the day after the black hole. So maybe... I don't know, it was probably still my fault, but Scoop may have done something or not done something or-

"No. It was not your fault."

Amelia turned so she could look down at the boy, who was hunched over, like he wanted to curl up under a rock.

"From my position at the wheel, I could see the lines. I saw all of them secured before I left the helm to pass on my praise to you. When it was reported that Mr. Arrow was lost, I believed that I had been mistaken in my assessment. After all, the rope was clearly absent when I next looked. But in light of the crew's nature, I have wondered myself whether there could have been a more nefarious cause of Mr. Arrow's demise, but I was unsure."

Amelia shook her head slightly.

"I wondered if I was just desperate to believe that my dearest friend was felled by something more fitting to his august nature. It is rather more agreeable, I suppose, to think him slain by pirates, rather than lost to a cabin boy's mistake."

It was still her fault in the end, whether her mistake had been when she didn't trust her gut and demand a different crew before they launched or when she had assigned the important duty of checking the safety lines to a fifteen-year-old boy on his first voyage.

But there was no uncertainty in her mind any longer as to which mistake had cost Arrow's life.

"However, this is the proof I needed to be sure of my theory. It makes perfect sense for those repulsive brutes to take advantage of the chaos to eliminate the threat Mr. Arrow posed. The alternative does not align with the accumulated facts."

She fixed him with a level gaze. "Mr. Arrow's death was not your fault, Mr. Hawkins."

The boy let out a deep breath, his shoulders straightening subtly.

"Silver told me that. After it happened, that night. I thought he was just trying to be nice, make me feel better, but... I think he was telling the truth. He wanted to tell me the truth."

"Yet he didn't. The promise of treasure was more important for him than telling you the truth and warning you of the danger you were in every day on the deck amongst those picaroons."

Amelia saw the flash in the boy's eyes, ready to defend his unscrupulous former mentor.

Let him try.

It was not the ideal time, but perhaps the ideal time would never come. Now, with the news of how much damage those mutineers had done, Amelia was ready to force some sense into the boy's thick head, even if it was now more prone than ever to devolve into a shouting match.

The boy's eyes blazed for a moment, but instead of snapping back, Mr. Hawkins looked away.

Amelia wondered if her words had gotten through to him, but when he turned back, it was with a determined yet enigmatic expression.

"It wasn't your fault either. And it wasn't Doppler's fault for hiring them. Mr. Arrow's death is
Scroop's fault. No one else's."

Amelia was startled, but she gave him a wane smile.

"The first rule of leadership, Mr. Hawkins: I was in charge, ergo everything is my fault."

"Not this time," the boy said, staring determinedly back at her. "This one is all on Scroop."

Amelia found a small, genuine smile tugging the edges of her lips.

"Thank you, Mr. Hawkins."

They stood in silence for a moment, apparently devoid of anything else worth saying.

Amelia turned back to the stars.

"You are dismissed, Mr. Hawkins."

There was a slight chuckle in his voice as the boy replied, "thank you, ma'am."

Amelia stood in the quiet, with only the noises of the night bugs and the boy's heavy footsteps for a moment, but then she decided that there was one thing she wished to hear.

"Mr. Hawkins."

"Yes, Captain?"

"Mr. Scroop... how did you say he died?"

There was a slight scuffing of boots before the boy replied. "He attacked me. B.E.N. reversed the artificial gravity by mistake so we fell up the mast. I caught the flag, Scroop jumped at me, and I jumped over him and kicked him into the etherium. He floated off. When B.E.N. fixed the gravity, he was already too far away. I guess he died floating out there, or he could have gotten blown up along with the planet if he was close enough."

It would be unprofessional to show the satisfaction she felt knowing that Scroop had suffered and died, even if she would have rather dealt with him herself. In most cases, Amelia believed in allowing lawful justice to occur through the official channels, but in this one instance, she would have been quite pleased to make an exception.

"Thank you for the clarification, Mr. Hawkins, that is all."

"Yes, Captain."

She heard the door open, and the boy's soft mumbling as he assured B.E.N. that everything was fine but he should really leave Amelia alone for a while. (Amelia had the sinking feeling that she was going to be receiving another batch of burnt, misshapen, apology cookies from the robot, who's culinary skills did not yet match up to his frequent need for apologies.)

Then the door closed again, and Amelia was finally alone with her thoughts.

Though only momentarily.

The door opened again, and Amelia braced herself to be annoyed, but this time it was Delbert.

"Hello," he said cautiously. "Umm, would you like me to stay or go?"
Amelia smiled slightly, appreciating that he knew to give her the choice, and accept whatever answer she gave.

"Come here."

The door closed and Delbert walked up, slowing as he approached, as though he might stop a little behind her as Mr. Hawkins had. Amelia gestured for him to continue until he was standing next to her.

He had come to her cabin to offer what comfort he could after Mr. Arrow's death, in his awkward, sincere way. He had stayed, even as she swung wildly between fury and misery. Anger was safer, it didn't show weakness. But her true feelings that night had been overwhelmingly dominated by despair. She remembered the awkward arm he had put around her shoulders as she cried. How she had known that she would be embarrassed in the morning for having allowed it, but nevertheless allowed it due to the comfort it provided. When she apologized for her behavior, and offered him his leave, he refused. Said that he understood how hard it was. Admitted to crying himself into a ball of tears and snot when his parents died, and how he didn't think he'd fare much better if something were to happen to his own dearest friend, Sarah.

But tonight, Amelia didn't need such assurances. Yet she found the doctor's company quite welcome.

She pointed to a star.

"Tell me everything you know about that star."

Delbert seemed startled, but he obeyed.

"That is zerugana alpha. It is a neutronium star, extremely dense, almost equivalent to a black hole. Its gravitational force is quite extraordinary, approximately ten-thousand standard units, which means that..."

Amelia allowed Delbert's words to wash over her, a steady comfort of impassioned science. He seemed to understand, for when he expended the worthwhile information concerning the first star, he simply moved on to describing its nearest neighbor, not looking at Amelia directly, but simply standing close enough to be a solid presence without being intrusive.

Amelia leaned her shoulder lightly against his, and though he stumbled a little on his next words, he made no comment, but pressed lightly back.

"I wish to state for the record that I grant my provisional approval," Arrow said as he shut the door behind Dr. Doppler, who had just left the cabin to gather some astrological data on the local stars.

Amelia turned her gaze on Arrow. "Approval for what?"

"For Dr. Doppler as a potential romantic prospect for you."

"I beg your pardon!" Amelia retorted, halfway to a growl.

Arrow smiled serenely.

"Your demeanor around him has subtly changed. And perhaps I am misreading it, but nevertheless, should you acquire an interest in pursuing a romantic relationship with Dr. Doppler, I offer my provisional approval."
"And what would be the provisions?" Amelia asked, humoring this frankly peculiar line of discussion. She had not engaged in any sort of courtship in quite some time. Despite their impeccable military credentials, none of her former suitors had proved tolerable for an extended length of time.

She had entertained the notion that she had always chosen people as prideful and stubborn as she was, and that could have contributed to the failure of those relationships. And while Dr. Doppler did not appreciate being pushed around, he was also willing to admit to mistakes, which honestly caught her slightly off guard. In an unexpectedly agreeable sort of way. A way that brought down her guard and had allowed her to admit to a few misconceptions she had held, thus allowing them to move past their rocky introductions and form a rather pleasant friendship.

But she had certainly not considered the possibility of extending their relationship beyond the realm of friendship.

"He has proven himself intelligent, respectful, honest, and even humorous at times. But I do not believe that you could be with someone who lacks a certain level of courage, and this trip has yet to illuminate that aspect of Dr. Doppler. He is inexperienced with combat or crisis, so I do not expect him to be perfectly composed. But he must prove that he will not yield to utter panic in the face of adversity. If he proves able to rise above his natural fears, then he will receive my full recommendation."

Amelia took this in, but she still felt a little unsettled by the turn of the conversation.

"Arri, do you believe me to be lonesome or otherwise in need of romantic companionship? Because I can assure you that I am not."

"Of course not, Amelia. I certainly did not intend to imply that you require a romantic companion, simply that I have found Dr. Doppler to be a potentially acceptable one should you choose to pursue that course of action."

Amelia walked toward the window. "Very well. But this still seems unlike you."

"How so?"

"First of all, you have never granted even marginal approval to anyone I have ever courted."

"And how many of those suitors proved worthwhile in the end?" Arrow asked, his voice still awash in undiluted serenity.

Amelia did not answer.

Arrow smiled.

"If there is nothing you require, I believe I should return to my post on deck. One of the stars we are passing by, the red giant Pellucid, has been producing dramatic flares. I ought to be on hand in case they start battering the ship and necessitate a course adjustment."

Amelia nodded. "Very well, I shall join you shortly. And if you would check to see if Mr. Silver has returned with the longboat as well, that would be appreciated. I granted him permission to use it for the education of his cabin boy today, but it would be best if they were back aboard should a change of course be required."

"Of course, Captain."
Amelia closed her eyes for a moment, focusing on the flow of Dr. Doppler's words and the solid feeling of his arm against hers.

Perhaps Arrow had been right in this regard. That had been one of his annoying tendencies, the predilection for being right constantly.

Amelia still felt lost. She was now without the one person in the galaxy whom she had always been able to rely upon. She was unsure how best to attend to her growing affection for Delbert in conjunction with her eternal love of sailing. However, that particular love had also come into contention with her current revulsion at the prospect of traversing the etherium without a crew she knew the could depend upon. Finding a suitable replacement first mate was a particularly daunting and distressing task which had set her back significantly. The one she had utilized on her brief voyage to Cerulata had been utterly unsuitable.

It would take considerable contemplation and discussion in order to settle out the best course to chart for her own future, but for now, Amelia was content to take her time and enjoy the benefits of her current situation.

And so she focused her gaze on the stars, listening to Delbert's descriptions and interjecting snippets of her own personal experience with the local stars.

They remained out in the gardens for hours in that way, eventually returning to the house, hand in hand.

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Captain Amelia was trying to kill him, Jim decided as he counted down the final minutes of another school day that felt like it had lasted a year. She could have just offered to set him up with a ship, her own or someone else's, and then he'd have a job out sailing the etherium. Sure it would be hard work, but Jim had taken to sailing, he could make it work.

But no, she offered him a recommendation letter to the Royal Interstellar Academy. And as much as he hated school, that was too good an offer to pass up.

The Academy... it wasn't unlike finding Treasure Planet. It would be more work, but it would guarantee him a life where he could call his own shots and wouldn't have to worry too much about money. When someone came from the Royal Interstellar Academy, employers found job openings, banks made loans, investors invested. Jim could captain his own ship or join the navy or build solar surfers or anything really.

And unlike normal school, it sounded like it might actually be fun. According to Amelia, the "naval arts" program had its students out on real ships every day, and the mechanical program had a ridiculous amount of funding, so it just let the students play with experimental ether capacitors and saturnian solar fibers and build stuff from pure victorium. (Just thinking about the stuff he could build with real supplies instead of junkyard scraps was enough to keep him up at night with excitement.)

But first, he needed to finish school in this stupid place.

Jim could easily understand why more than two-thirds of the kids who'd been in his class as a six-year old had already dropped out. If you weren't planning to leave Bellweather, you didn't have a lot of options other than working in the mines, and why would you need to learn all of this stuff if you
were just going to haul rocks around? And if you didn't need to know any of this, why spend most of your day sitting in a giant room with a thousand other kids, from the little six-year olds in the first rows to the teenagers in the back, doing practice problems while the teachers walked up and down the aisles lecturing to each grade in turn? It was so crowded and claustrophobic and loud that it was hard to even think, much less learn.

So, in short, Amelia was trying to kill him. Or at least torture him a little. Maybe in punishment for helping Silver escape, since Jim was pretty sure that she had figured that out. She had passed out again shortly after Silver had disappeared from the deck, and Jim had used the distraction to slip away himself, since he'd figured that there wasn't actually anything he could do to help. When Amelia had regained herself, she'd charged down to the longboat bay with a rifle at the ready. But Silver was already gone, and Jim, hearing her approach, had hidden away in the shadows. So she couldn't prove anything.

Jim stared down at his latest worksheet, trying to ignore the usual clamor around him as he waited for the bell to ring. He'd already finished the worksheet (using his own style of math, which his teacher still hated, but it worked so Jim was sticking to it), so he was just doodling the circle-and-line pattern from the Map on a piece of scrap paper. (Last time he'd tried doodling improvements he could make to his solar surfer, but his teacher had confiscated it. Even though Jim was already done with his work. Well if Ssssssmoid wanted to confiscate this, let him. And let him try to figure out what the patterns really meant.)

Finally the bell rang to indicate the end of the day, and Jim shoved his stuff in a rucksack as fast as he could.

Time to get out of here before he got into any trouble.

Unfortunately, trouble was already looking for him.

Gregory Heinzfeild climbed over the desk behind Jim and dropped down right beside him (and way inside Jim's personal space, just to annoy him). The massive crowd of students meant that Jim was stuck in a line of people waiting to get to the main aisles, and he didn't have a lot of escape options.

It wasn't as bad as it could have been. Gregory wasn't much of a "beat you up" sort of bully like Gruuk. He was just really, really annoying. He was the one who had come up to Jim at the beginning of the school year to ask about his disappearance over the summer. And then spread it around the whole school that Jim had not only gone to Juvie over the summer, but he'd decided to make up a hilarious story about finding Treasure Planet and fighting pirates to cover it up.

(Jim couldn't believe that he'd been such an idiot, he should have known from the start that no one would believe him. But then, for a few months, he'd actually had people listen to him when he had something to say, like when Silver had made Meltdown check on a concerning noise Jim had heard in the engines, or when Captain Amelia had started whipping out guns without question after he barged in shouting about how the whole crew were actually pirates.)

No one enjoyed mocking Jim about his "crazy story" more than Gregory and his crew, even now as a lot of the other kids were at least getting bored of it. And if he taunted Jim into throwing a punch when a teacher was around to get him into trouble, then that was all the better in Gregory's book.

"Hey Hawkins, tell Susie about Treasure Planet!"

Jim grit his teeth and stared determinedly at the head of the kid in front of him, willing the line of students to move faster.
He was not going to get into a fight today. He was going to get home with plenty of time to ride his solar surfer and still finish the history paper that he'd been procrastinating on, and he was not going to make his mother leave work to pick him from the principal's office again this week.

"Come on, what about that pirate that tried to kill you, what was his name?"

Jim tried his best to ignore Gregory, in part to keep from retorting and in part because thinking about Scroop too much was a good way to ensure that he'd have nightmares. They were starting to become less frequent, but he still usually dreamed at least once a week of Scroop slitting his throat or falling into a blazing inferno with no one to save him. Fortunately, he was usually silent even when he had a nightmare, so he only woke up Morph when he jerked awake clutching at his (not bleeding, thank heavens it isn't bleeding) throat or flailing wildly for handholds that he didn't need because he was safe in his hammock above the bed in Delbert's house.

(Jim wondered if Silver'd had nightmares sometimes too, because Morph hadn't seemed too startled by Jim's. He just snuggled against Jim's neck and made sympathetic little cooing noises until Jim calmed down enough to try sleeping again.)

"Come on, tell me!" One of the girls from the pack giggled, leaning over the desk from the row above Jim's, where the rest of Gregory's pack was standing and watching.

Jim kept his eyes forward and his mouth shut.

"Ooh, tell her about the magic portals!" Gregory teased, wiggling his fingers into Jim's peripheral vision (on both sides of his head, he would have smacked Gregory's hands away if he didn't know that Gregory would pretend to be seriously injured just to get Jim in detention again). "You could open doors to anywhere in the galaxy."

"Like juvie," said one of the members of the peanut gallery, pretending to disguise his words as a cough.

Jim took a step as the line creeped forward. There was a big window at the end of the row, open as usual to try an get some fresh air into the overstuffed classroom. The blue sky visible above the heads of his classmates seemed to glow with the promise of a wonderful afternoon flight. All Jim had to do was keep his mouth shut and his head down.

Which was really not his strong suit, but he was working on it.

"That sounds exciting," Susie giggled. "I would have loved to see that. Such a shame it blew up."

"Yeah, such a shame that it all blew up," another one echoed. "All the gold and jewels gone. All the proof gone."

Not all the gold and jewels, Jim thought, remembering the dozens of different plans for a new Benbow sitting on a desk in Doppler's house.

Jim noticed that some kids from the row in front of his were watching the little show, giggling.

He knew it didn't really matter, but it was still really frustrating to be the laughingstock of Bellweather just because no one would believe what had actually happened.

Finally the line moved enough for Jim to reach the side aisles that led down toward the front of the amphitheater style classroom. He shifted his rucksack into one hand.

"Come on Hawkins, tell Susie and ... uh... wait what are you…"
Gregory trailed off as Jim walked straight to the tall, open window and hopped calmly onto the window frame.

They were pretty high off the ground back here, at least a story or two up, but of course, Jim had lots of experience with jumps and falls.

(High on the list of things he could never tell his mother was just how high he flew on his first solar surfer, when she wasn't looking of course, before he actually really knew how to fly it.)

And so he jumped.

He heard screams from behind him, but the wind whipping at his face and the brief feeling of weightlessness were even more satisfying.

He hit the ground, letting his legs fold and catching himself with one hand before he jumped back to his feet.

Jim looked back up at the shocked faces of Gregory's pack, who had all rushed to the window. (Susie was practically halfway out of it, looking panicked.)

Jim gave them a mocking salute before he turned and walked away from the school, headed for the grove of trees that should give him a little more peaceful path back into town. Unless any of the crew felt like following him out the window, he would be long gone before Gregory and the others were even out the door.

And to think that his mom said he "went looking for trouble." After all the trouble he went through in a day just to stay out of trouble.

It was not his fault that trouble seemed to find him. From being put next to Dorian Ratcliffe on his first day of school to having Billy Bones crash land on his doorstep, trouble just had a bad habit of ending up around Jim.

Which might explain why his peaceful walk through the old purp grove managed to lead him straight into a very ticked off Gruuk.

Fortunately, he spotted her before she saw him, and he ducked behind a tree trunk. What was she even doing here? Jim had noticed that she hadn't come back after lunch, so he figured she was just skipping the rest of the day (which Jim had been so tempted to do as well, but he was being good and not skipping school anymore no matter how much he wanted to).

He peeked around the trunk to see Gruuk angrily rip a branch right off of a purp tree and start swinging it around. She was always somewhere on a spectrum between "I kinda sorta hate everything and everyone" and "I want to punch the world in the face, right here, right now," but Jim had never seen her this rip-roaring furious before. She continued beating up the tree with its own branch until the branch snapped.

With a roar like a Dathomirin rancor she threw the broken branch to the side and lunged at another one.

But this time the branch fought back, snapping back instead of pulling off. Instead of ripping the branch from the tree, Gruuk found herself slammed headfirst into the trunk. Dazed by the impact, she fell backward on her rear in the mud.

Jim threw a hand over his mouth to stifle his laugh.
First Gruuk had been defeated by *B.E.N.* of all people, and now she'd gotten her butt kicked by a *tree*.

The words were right there on the tip of his tongue, the jokes he could make about it.

And it really almost felt worth it, just to be able to be the one laughing for once.

(Gruuk would probably beat him up for it, but honestly, Jim didn't always mind fighting her. Some days he was so angry at everything in the world that it was almost satisfying to get in a fight just for the chance to throw some punches. Sure Gruuk always did three times more damage to him than he could do to her, but that wasn't even the point.

Okay... maybe he did go looking for trouble sometimes.)

Jim forced himself to take a breath and keep his mouth shut. He had decided that he was not going to get himself in trouble today, and he was going to stick to that if it killed him.

So he carefully snuck around Gruuk, giving her a wide berth and walking quietly as he could. She didn't seem to be too phased by the tree's attack, since she was now systematically ripping more branches off of it in punishment.

*You go, Gruuk, show that tree who's boss,* Jim laughed to himself.

When he was pretty sure he was far enough away that she wouldn't notice him, Jim broke into a jog. Soon the dappled shadows of the grove abruptly disappeared and Jim was back on the hard dirt roads and sidewalks. He dodged around a couple of buggies and carriages, wove through a few back alleys, and he was making good time, when of course, he ran into *more* trouble.

Seriously, this was just getting ridiculous.

This time trouble took the form of a rock flying toward him. He dodged it and snatched up a stray brick lying in the alley, his eyes snapping to see who had thrown the rock.

It was an older boy, Orlick, who had sometimes thrown rocks at Jim when he was younger and learning to fly his solar surfer in the canyons close to town. Jim hadn't even *seen* Orlick in ages; it just figured that he would choose today to show up out of the blue again. His eyes looked weird and unfocused, and he was slumped back against the wall of the alley, but he was smirking oddly at Jim.

Jim hesitated for a moment, holding the brick. Orlick glanced at it, then raised his eyebrows as though daring Jim to use it.

This was stupid, Jim didn't even know what Orlick's deal was, but he didn't care and he didn't want to deal with it.

He rolled his eyes, dropped the brick, and walked out of the alley.

He hadn't gotten far down the sidewalk before he realized Orlick was following him.

Seriously, why was it that the day he'd promised himself that he wouldn't get in a fight, he was literally tripping over people who apparently wanted to fight with him?

Jim walked faster, getting fed up with the whole thing. If Orlick wanted something from Jim, well then he'd have to catch him first.

He broke into a run as he reached the street, crossing between carriages and leaping up a pile of
crates to reach the rooftops. The broad midline of the roof was easy to run across, the buildings in this row all about the same height with only a little jump between them. Jim laughed, enjoying himself. Maybe he should take this way home more often.

Orlick followed, but he was struggling. His species, the Loppytonians, looked a lot like the frogs from Jim's old book about Earth animals, but ironically enough, they weren't very good at jumping.

Jim grinned and slid down a sloping roof onto the sidewalk and took off running toward the next block. He glanced over his shoulder and saw Orlick roll off the roof and fall in a heap on the sidewalk.

He got back up again though and staggered after Jim.

Orlick had always had a habit of picking on anyone smaller than him, but he wasn't usually this stubborn. It seemed like Jim had ticked him off more by not fighting him than by fighting back.

People were so weird.

Jim reached the next row of buildings and began picking up speed. He leapt and grabbed the pole that held the sign for a cobbler's shop, using it to swing himself up onto the bottom of the roof. He scrambled up the slope of the roof and ran along the center line for a few more buildings before he slid down on the other side into the back alley. He darted through the alley and leapt over a low wrought iron wall and wiggled his way out between two buildings on the other side of the block.

He ran down the sidewalk then across the street, this time using a low wood cart a shopkeeper was pulling as his jumping point up to the roof. The shopkeeper shouted at him, but Jim ignored it as he leapt from rooftop to rooftop. At the end of the row was a taller, rectangular building without an easy roof-slide path to the ground, so he slid down a bright copper gutter pipe instead.

Block after block he traveled this way, Orlick long left in the dust, but Jim was just enjoying himself now. He ran over the rooftops and leapt over little obstacles and jumped on the back of a cart for a block without the owner even noticing.

But then he hit one familiar street and slowed to a walk, swinging his rucksack back over his shoulder.

He ambled casually past the window of the Crown and Quiggle pub where his mom was working. He saw her in the window and gave her a little wave, which she returned with a smile (her hands occupied with trays of food). Jim smiled and ambled on his way.

He turned the corner and took off running again.

Soon he was back to Doppler's neighborhood though, so Jim stopped at the gate to glare at the Kepler Ridge Community gatekeeper until he let him in. (The man hated having to open the gate for a "punk roustabout" like Jim, though he'd let Jim's mother through in an heartbeat with an overly polite bow and smarmy smile.) At least someone was happy to see Jim though. Delilah stuck her head out from the Kepler Community stable as Jim went by, hoping for a treat. Jim would have to bring her a purp later.

And at long last, he walked through the doors, safely home.

"Well," he announced to no one in particular as he shut the door, "I stayed out of trouble!"

He shook his head and went to check the mail slot, which he had done every day since the first letter, just to be safe. Obviously, his efforts hadn't really paid off yet, but maybe the universe would reward
his good behavior today with another letter from Silver.

But a quick glance at the mail was disappointing. Just a few of Doppler's science journals and a letter for Amelia.

Oh well.

"Jimmy!"

Oh no.

B.E.N. rushed across the foyer to wrap Jim in a hug. Jim sighed and accepted it, patting the robot on the head with the hand that wasn't trapped against his side by B.E.N.'s attack-hug. Morph had followed B.E.N. and he rushed to Jim, licking his face and swirling slimily around his neck.

It was good to be home.

"I made cookies!" B.E.N. declared as he jumped back. He proudly held up a misshapen blue lump with candy chips embedded in it, arranged to form a (slightly deranged) smily face.

"Thanks, B.E.N.," Jim said as he cautiously accepted the cookie and gave it a sniff. It smelled normal, so he took a little bite.

And by some strange miracle, it was actually really good.

"Alright, cookies for lunch!"

B.E.N. cheered that Jim liked his cooking and Morph cheered just because everyone else was happy, and Jim laughed and led the way to the kitchen.

Silver growled as he paced the deck of his catboat. There wasn't much room to pace, the downside of having a small boat that he could easily enough pilot himself. He could only make it a few strides before he had to either turn back or duck under the boom of his single sail.

So back and forth he went on one side of the deck until he got fed up with it and ducked under the boom to pace the other side.

He shouldn't be out here pacing anyway. He had set his course so that he could have some sleep, out here in the safety of the open etherium. He should be getting some shuteye while it was safe, to clear his head and help him heal.

He was still feeling the effects of his fight with the thanos gangster a couple weeks ago (one of the puncture holes in his stomach from her claws was a little infected, the slash on his chest had split open again and he'd had to put in a few more stitches, and he was still getting dried blood grit out of his mechanical eye) and now from his more recent scrap with a full dozen drunken dockworkers (a bashed up knee, lots of bruises and shallow cuts, and possibly a fractured rib).

Silver couldn't keep doing this. He didn't know why he kept starting stupid fights like this, but he needed to stop it.

He let out another growl as he ducked under the boom to pace the starboard deck. He was limping from his abused knee; he should stop this and just go to sleep.

But he was wound too tight, too angry at everything and nothing to settle down.
Out of habit, he pulled out his spyglass. Holographic crosshairs appeared through the view and focused in on the star he’d set his sights on, Kerusa. The reading showed its relative size, though Silver had to convert it from terrian magnitude to proper stellar standard units because he’d broken his good glass in the fight with the thanos gangster and this piece of junk was the best he’d gotten his hands on so far.

He pulled out his stolen pocketwatch to check how much time had passed since he’d last checked the star. A quick mental calculation told him that he was approaching Kerusa at exactly the speed he’d been expecting. He could pull out his sextant to check his course alignment again, but he’d already done that twice in the past hour.

Heavens, but he wished Morph was here. To the depths with doing the right thing, Silver was sick and tired of pacing this deck alone.

He wasn't even sure why he was so upset tonight. For the first few months after his escape from the Legacy, he'd felt an odd sense of serenity. Lying low and jumping from system to system after everything had gone wrong was familiar territory to him. It was relaxing in a way. No crew to manage (and keep a mindful eye on to prevent any backstabbing), no desperately chasing after Billy Bones, just Silver and his boat and the calm of the etherium. It was about the closest thing to a vacation that Silver had taken in years.

Sure, there were times when Silver felt something unpleasant tugging at the back of his brain, but it was just the loss of his little companions. It was disappointing to lose them of course. Morph was sweet and loyal and rather helpful when it came to things like breaking out of jail cells and pickpocketing a little spare change. And Jim was bright and clever and so promising with the way he just took to anything he set his mind to learning.

It was a shame to lose them, but it wasn't a problem really. Silver had lost everyone he'd ever held dear. He would be fine, this wasn't anything new.

He didn't think about what else he'd lost that day. There was no point in that, what was done was done. So he didn't think about it.

That was a useful skill that he possessed, the ability to not think about a problem until it went away.

Silver was fine.

He whirled around and stomped down the length of the deck. Then he pulled back his organic fist and punched the wall to his cabin with enough force to let out a resounding bang.

Furiously, Silver pulled his hand to his chest and rubbed the abused knuckles, cursing himself. What was he doing? Getting into fights on every planet he landed on, now picking a fight with his own boat? That was one fight that he didn't even want to win.

(Maybe he wasn't fine.)

He turned and stomped away again.

He reached the prow and turned around to stomp back aft.

Back and forth he paced, eventually ducking back under the boom to pace the other side.

He wasn't going to get any sleep this night cycle.

That was fine, it wouldn't be the first night's sleep he'd missed in his life.
He was fine.
He was fine.
Just fine.

Today was a perfect day for flying for all the reasons that it was a terrible, awful, rotten day for flying.

Montressor on the whole had weird, hard to predict weather, and Bellweather in particular was in a place where there was no such thing as seasons. Snowstorms and heat waves could strike back to back, seemingly at random. But usually, the weather was pretty boring. A flat sort of moderate temperature, maybe with some clouds, though rain was uncommon and snow was rare.

But today was brilliantly sunny, comfortably warm, and ridiculously windy. Jim was having to battle the shifting winds constantly just to stay upright, and he loved it. He was being a "good boy" and staying out of the fun places to fly, so he hadn't had nearly enough good challenges lately. But today the wind had been doing its best throw him bodily out of the sky, and Jim was in heaven.

Of course, right now his stabilization was helped somewhat by the bin of junk strapped to the underside of his surfer. He'd been raiding the junkyard for useful parts, and he'd been just as lucky there as he'd been with the weather. Some of it was normal spare parts for his surfer, some of it would be good for other projects he had in mind, and some of it... well, Jim wasn't sure what he was going to do with it yet, but he knew he would figure out something.

So he was taking a bit of a long route back to Doppler's just to play with the wind. He'd probably just drop off his stuff and fly some more. It was an off day from school, and that literature essay could wait a day. (He'd probably be cursing himself for stalling on it so long when he had to do it at the last minute, but this weather was too good to waste.)

He realized that his wanderings were taking him closer to civilization than he intended when he saw a fence far below with green on the other side. It was a pain to get anything to grow here in Bellweather, so there was only one family that had their entire (oversized) property coated with a thick green moss lawn, and it was the last family Jim should get on the wrong side of: the Ratcliffes.

They owned all the mining operations, so they basically owned the town. And every one of them was a silver-tongued charmer. They were popular and beloved and people who got in their way tended to end up destitute in the streets.

Jim turned to give the massive estate a wide berth. Which also allowed him to dive down a nearby canyon that might provide a little extra excitement to his flight, so it was good for everyone.

But as he flew, he heard voices echoing off the walls of the canyon. Jim frowned and rose out of the canyon, but he skirted the edge so he could peek down and see what was going on without being seen. One of the voices sounded pretty upset, but Dorian Ratcliffe sometimes flew this territory, and there was no faster way to ruin a perfectly good day than a run-in with Dorian.

Sure enough, Jim spotted a pale human on a ridiculously beautiful solar surfer. Even from here, Jim could see how the sails were the shimmering quicksilver color that meant they were laced with portentificus alloys, making them ten times more efficient than Jim's patchwork sail. Jim hated Dorian for lots of legitimate reasons, but Dorian's constant parade of incredibly cool, incredibly expensive solar surfers was another thing that Jim couldn't help but hate him for.
He was about ready to leave, but then he noticed that Dorian wasn't alone. There was a little tapirian boy on a tiny little hoverboard with a training handle on it that made it look like a scooter. The kid was steering his little board along the canyon floor, away from Dorian.

But as Jim watched, Dorian looped easily ahead of the boy, only to swoop down and actually hit the boy's board, on the side so that it was sent spinning with the kid clinging to it for dear life.

Jim actually let out an angry yelp, but it was drowned out by the sound of the kid's fearful shout and Dorian's laughter.

"Come now!" Dorian shouted. "If you want to learn to fly, you have to be better than that!"

"Stop it!" the kid wailed, clearly already crying. "I don't want to do this anymore, I wanna go home!"

Jim had promised his mother this morning that he would stay out of trouble. And messing with the Ratcliffes never ended well.

*Pick your fights and don't give your mother any trouble.*

This was bound to lead to trouble, and it wasn't a smart fight to pick, but as Dorian looped around, readying to dive at the kid again, Jim knew that he wasn't going to do the smart thing.

*Sorry Silver,* Jim thought as he unclipped the box of junkyard treasures from his board and let it fall to the ground a few feet below, *but I'm picking this one.*

Jim dove out of the sky on an interception course as Dorian turned to take another swipe at the kid. At the last second, Jim flipped his surfer up so he hit Dorian's with the broad, somewhat armored underside.

The impact sent them both spinning out in different directions, their surfers way out of control. Jim recovered first and wheeled to face Dorian.

Dorian turned on him, looking furious, which only grew when he recognized Jim.

They'd known each other since primary school. They had been the only human boys in the grade and so the teachers had sat them together on the first day, hoping they would be friends.

Dorian had smiled brightly and asked Jim to join him in a game at recess.

The game turned out to be a contest to see who could make another student cry first without getting in trouble. When Jim had said that it was a mean game, and his Mom had told him to play nice with the other kids, Dorian had called him a baby.

And that was how Jim's first ever recess had ended with his first ever fistfight.

Of course, Dorian had been a sweet-talking little snake even back then, so Jim had ended up getting sent home with a bad note from the teacher and grounded for a week, while nothing happened to Dorian. And years later Jim got the sense that Dorian was still playing a game out of making the town love him while subtly hurting everyone he could.

He had perfect grades, and now private tutors for most of his classes because he was "too far ahead of his classmates." He had perfect manners, so all the parents had cooed over him, talking about what a wonderful little gentleman he was. And apparently, he was considered ridiculously handsome. The only emotion Jim felt when he saw Dorian's face was the overwhelming desire to punch it, but his
"good looks" were a disturbingly common topic of conversation when Dorian was mentioned.

In short, in the eyes of the town, Dorian was everything Jim wasn't, and Jim was everything Dorian wasn't.

If only the town could see what a bully he was when no one who mattered was there to catch him. Of course, as far as Jim had ever seen, Dorian usually tormented people in very subtle ways, not with physical violence. So the fact that he was directly attacking this kid probably meant that he was having a really bad day today, which probably meant that challenging him was an even worse idea than usual.

Not that it would stop Jim.

"Leave that kid alone, Dorian."

The kid in question was looking between the two of them, still clearly scared out of his wits. Jim supposed that he didn't exactly look respectable right now, since he was still covered in grease and grime from the junkyard, his ragged black shirt torn. Of course, Dorian looked like he'd stolen clothes from some sort of royalty, and he held his nose just as high in the air.

"He asked me to teach him how to fly. I'm simply trying to help a young boy learn a new skill." He looked sadly over at the kid. "Unfortunately, he doesn't seem to have a natural talent for it. Such a shame, he was so excited about it."

Suddenly the boy's expression shifted from fear to shame, more tears bubbling from his big eyes.

"That wasn't teaching him, it was just being a jerk! He told you to stop, so stop."

"And let him just give up? Become a quitter who will never accomplish anything because he just gives up whenever it gets hard?" Dorian shook his head. "No, no, no. With his lack of talent and well... emotional tendencies, he really ought to have something going for him. It was worth a try at least."

The boy's sobs grew louder, and the left corner of Dorian's mouth twitched upward just the slightest bit. It was a tell he'd had since he was a kid.

He knew exactly what he was doing.

"Apologize to him," Jim demanded.

"What?"

"For harassing him and insulting him. Apologize."

Dorian looked offended. "For taking the time out of my day to try to teach him to fly? For telling him the truth in nicer ways than his playground friends will when they notice? No. Certainly not. I will not apologize for trying to help him make something of himself."

"That isn't how you teach someone to fly."

"And what would you know of flying?" Dorian laughed, eyes turning sharp. "You aren't trying to tell me that the heap of junk you have there can actually fly? And before you get your knickers in a twist, I'm not insulting your surfer, I'm simply stating the facts."

Dorian's eyes skimmed over the patchwork sail, battered metal body, and Jim's own grease-coated
form, his smile soft and sweet and evil.

"In fact, since clearly it will require the most qualified teacher to undertake the daunting task of trying to train the boy, how about this? If you prove that you're a better flier than me, I'll leave him be and let you try. If you think you and your little surfer can take it."

Jim gave Dorian a smile that was wide and sharp as a viperwolf's.

"Try me."

Dorian didn't need any further encouragement. He let out a bright laugh and bolted straight at Jim.

Jim dodged easily, but Dorian didn't turn around for another swipe at him. Instead he turned the tip of his surfer straight up and rocketed into the sky.

Jim powered his surfer's engines and took off in pursuit.

Higher and higher they rose, the city shrinking beneath them. If Dorian was trying to tap into some sort of fear of heights, then he was going to be very disappointed. They flew higher and higher, a thousand feet, then two thousand, but this was Jim's territory. Though he wondered whether Dorian was planning to fly all the way to the spaceport as they popped through a couple clouds without any sign of slowing down.

Jim was frustrated by the fact that he couldn't seem to catch up with Dorian, but the brat's head start and actual, not-made-out-of-garbage solar surfer wasn't really giving Jim a chance. Jim considered switching off the flux stabilizer, which would get more power to the engines. But that would probably blow out some of the converter crystals, which were really hard to replace because they were sort of expensive and people almost never threw them out unless they were broken.

And, of course, blown converter crystals could really mess up his board while he was a few thousand feet in the air, which he supposed should actually count as the bigger problem.

So Jim just followed Dorian as closely as he could until the other boy suddenly stopped in midair.

Dorian seemed to hover for a second before he flipped over backward, gunned the engine, and rocketed straight toward Jim like a laserbolt.

Jim dodged out of the way, anger lacing through him as Dorian skimmed by, the wind from the near miss as sharp as a slap against Jim's face.

Jim flipped and dived for Dorian, too blinded by fury to really think about what awful things might happen if they actually collided. But Dorian dodged easily and looped around to hurtle back at Jim. He had to shut off his engine and let himself fall out of the sky to get away in time, but Jim did just that. Then he gunned the engine and shot back toward Dorian.

They continued like that, dodging and diving at each other as they fell lower and lower, back toward the ground. Their sailed flicked up and down constantly as they tried to maneuver and still protect the delicate sails. Jim clipped one of the small stabilization sail-fins sticking off of Dorian's board, and Dorian bashed the body of Jim's board a couple times.

Then, suddenly, Dorian stopped and winked at Jim. Then he shut off his engine, pulled in his sail, and went into a tumbling free fall with plenty of spinning and flipping.

And yeah, if Dorian thought that any of this was going to spook Jim, he was just dead wrong.
And so Jim gunned his engine just enough to pick up some speed, then shut it off to free fall as well.

Free falling was one of his favorite parts of flying. He loved the weightless feeling, the sensation in his chest and gut like all his organs were getting tangled up, the way spinning gave him a feeling somehow beyond dizzy, like he was almost immaterial. Like he might dissolve away into the air itself. And yet somehow amid all the disorienting pieces, he was more aware of himself than ever. He knew exactly where he was and where his surfer was and where the ground was, and exactly what he needed to do to catch himself before he hit the ground.

So Jim just smiled at Dorian as he tumbled through the air, flipping and twirling his surfer like it was effortless as walking (since at this point it really was). With his more powerful but heavier surfer, Dorian just couldn't compare.

And that seemed to really tick off Dorian.

Before Jim could react, Dorian straightened out and gunned the engine.

He didn't hit head on, but he clipped Jim's board.

That was all it took.

Jim's heart felt like it stopped dead in his chest as he felt his foot slip from the leather strap that held him to the board.

His board spun out in one direction while he spun in the other, tumbling feet over head over feet, the ground and sky seeming to orbit around him.

When he looked back on this moment in a more generous mood, Jim would wonder whether Dorian had intended to knock him all the way off his board. A real solar surfer like Dorian's had metal bands that automatically looped around both feet while still allowing movement, so the same move wouldn't have separated Dorian from his surfer.

But in the moment, Jim didn't care about that. All he knew was that in the next few seconds, either he was going to die or he was going to kill Dorian.

He reached desperately for his surfer, managing to grab it with one hand while the other only met with bruised knuckles. But one hand was enough, and he managed to drag his board back under himself just in time to slam the sail open and stabilize before he and his board splattered across the stone ground.

He'd come within forty feet of dying a horrible death.

He'd had closer calls.

But that didn't stop Jim from gunning straight for Dorian with the engine at full power.

Dorian flipped out of the way and darted down a nearby canyon.

Jim took off after him.

The harsh winds Jim had been riding earlier seemed to have gotten even stronger, and they turned the narrow canyon into a minefield of eddies and whirlwinds, but both boys fought through them with experience. Jim was pretty sure that he was handling it better than Dorian though, even with Dorian's fancy surfer.
Maybe Dorian realized that too, because he suddenly looked back over his shoulder at Jim and shouted:

"Keep up if you can!"

And then he shot ahead like some sort of evil silver bullet, rapidly leaving Jim in the dust.

Jim gunned his engine to go as fast as it could manage, but he was still loosing ground.

Too awash in fury and adrenalin to care about the consequences, Jim popped open a small panel on his board and pulled the cable to shut off the flux stabilizer.

Sure enough, that gave him more speed, but it still wasn't enough to keep up with Dorian's top-of-the-line surfer. Jim growled in frustration.

He kept going as fast as he could, fighting the wild winds and trying to catch up, but Dorian was out of sight now. He'd probably keep following the canyon, and there was a cut-through in the rocks a little farther ahead that could act as a shortcut if Dorian took the long natural loop formed by the main canyon, but Jim couldn't be sure of what-

Jim could see his shadow on the ground below him.

A second shadow was rapidly growing and moving toward his.

He dodged just as Dorian rocketed out of the sky, right through the air where Jim had been a moment before.

Jim swerved back to try to ram Dorian, but he flipped easily away again, laughing.

"I was getting bored waiting for you to catch up! Come now, put in a little effort!"

Jim grit his teeth and powered the engine to chase Dorian, even though it was painfully obvious that his surfer would never be able to keep up with Dorian's at full power.

But Dorian wasn't going at full power this time. Instead he began drifting more slowly, lazily cutting his board side to side through the air, taunting Jim.

Jim managed to cut ahead of him, swerving right in front of him, startling him so that he flinched and pulled up his surfer instinctively to avoid a collision (even though he'd been trying to slam into Jim for most of this flight). Jim swooped toward the rock wall of the cliff, grinding along it until he reached a horizontal spur of rock.

Jim closed his sail, flipped upside down, and flattened his back against the board, watching as the stone whipped by inches from his face.

Once he was clear, he pulled his surfer into a head-over-tail loop to bring it back upright, opening his sail and flashing Dorian another viperwolf smile.

An angry frown wrinkled Dorian's face and he rocketed at Jim, trying to slam him into the cliff wall. Jim dodged, his smile growing as Dorian's surfer hit the wall, leaving scratches along the mirror-finish silver board.

But Dorian reacted quickly, diving so fast that Jim couldn't avoid him in time. Dorian's tail struck the front of Jim's board, forcing him to jump back to avoid the fiery exhaust from Dorian's engine and sending him tumbling end-over-end.
Jim clung to his tumbling surfer, desperate to not let his foot slip from the leather strap again. He managed to catch himself a few feet above the ground, stabilizing and gunning his engine to chase Dorian.

But now Dorian was going faster again, and the strain on Jim's engine without the flux stabilizer was apparently becoming too much.

His surfer made a sound somewhere between shattering glass and a lightning strike and the board bucked, nearly throwing him off as the engine first made an explosive acceleration, then briefly shut off entirely.

He'd blown a converter crystal.

He managed to keep his hold on his surfer and stabilize, but he was now trailing farther and farther behind Dorian, his engine only receiving three-fourths of the power it had before.

Apparently, Dorian was still close enough to have heard the sound of the crystal shattering, because his laughter echoed off the canyon walls, infuriating Jim.

Knowing it was still a stupid thing to do, but too enraged to care, Jim pushed his engine to try to keep on Dorian's tail.

But as they swooped around a turn into another canyon, Jim felt his heart clench.

If Dorian turned right when they reached the next fork, it would lead them straight to the mostly abandoned mine where Jim had gotten arrested several times, including that last time, the day Billy Bones had crashed on his doorstep with a mysterious sea chest and pirates on his tail.

That had been Jim's final warning.

*Turn left*, Jim implored the universe. *Turn left.*

But of course, Dorian turned right, looking over his shoulder to shout back: "Let's see if your pathetic little surfer can handle this!"

It could. Jim knew this mine like he knew his own home, and he could pull tricks in here that Dorian would never manage on his heavier, more powerful surfer.

But if he got caught...

He didn't have much time to make his choice, even on his wounded surfer he would pass the wall in seconds.

It was actually pretty rare for the police to be here. The actual underground portion of the mine was shut down, and the equipment above ground was only occasionally used to process overflow from other mines. So usually, there was no one here, and it was pretty far away from anything else worth patrolling.

More likely than not, it would be fine, and he would finally be able to really show up Dorian and his stupid fancy surfers.

But if it wasn't fine, if he got caught, he'd go to juvenile hall and he'd never be able to go to the Academy, and he'd let down his mother and Amelia and even Doppler who'd spent so much time checking over his homework and fighting with his mathematics teacher and...
He was out of time.

With a shout of frustration, Jim wrenched his surfer into a breakneck turn just before the fence line, forcing it to go back and upward.

He skimmed close enough to the canyon wall that one wrong move would result in the rocks tearing at his surfer or his flesh, and he wasn't sure whether he was doing it to punish or reward himself. All he knew was that it reminded him distinctly of dodging and weaving through the broken pieces of an exploding planet, and that memory was a lot less traumatizing than it probably should be.

He reached the top of the cliff and turned off onto the edge of it, slowing his surfer.

From below he heard the sound of Dorian's laughter.

"Coward!" the brat shouted.

Jim's jaw grit and his fists clenched. He could still go down, show him what a mistake it was to dive right into Jim's home territory.

But he couldn't.

He couldn't let everything that had happened since Billy Bones had crash landed on his doorstep be for nothing. Everything he'd fought for, the respect he'd somehow earned, the dreams he'd suddenly discovered were within his reach.

*Pick your fights.*

*Alright, alright you old scalawag. This time you're right.*

Jim was about to set off and leave Dorian to his games when he heard the all too familiar sound of police sirens.

Startled, he jumped off his surfer, grabbing it so it wouldn't drift away.

He hadn't done anything wrong this time! They couldn't prove that he'd been in restricted flyspace this time because he hadn't been. But Dorian could act as a witness, and he was sure to lie, and...

Jim realized that the sound was coming from below him, in the canyon.

Carefully he shut off his surfer, letting it come to rest on the stone ground. Then he crept on his elbows so he could peek over the edge of the canyon without being seen.

He was greeted with a truly beautiful sight.

Dorian Ratcliffe was getting arrested.

Jim had no illusions that the charges would stick, that this would even amount to a tally mark on Dorian's record, but still, Dorian was snarling at the robocops as they patted him down and grabbed his surfer, looking furious even from this distance. Jim almost wished he had a camera.

He was startled from the little show taking place in the canyon below him when his pocket began wiggling.

Jim stuck his hand in his pocket and scooped out Morph, who dribbled lazily between his fingers.

"Did you really just sleep through all of that?" Jim asked incredulously.
Morph replied with a yawn so massive that it turned his body inside out, his eyes bobbing back up to the surface to blink blearily at Jim.

Jim shook his head and glanced back over the cliff. The robocops were loading Dorian into one of their little hovercarts, which meant they would be on the move again soon. Jim needed to get out of there before he was spotted, because he still didn't trust them not to arrest him just for being this close to his favorite restricted airspace.

Carefully, he backed away from the edge, stood, and started up the hover mode on his surfer. It was weak, but enough to let him pull his board away from the canyon a little before starting it up and flying away.

Figuring that he ought to check on the poor kid Dorian had been harassing, Jim set his course to take him back there as quickly as possible.

Unfortunately, since he had been so absorbed with slipping away quietly, he'd forgotten the fact that he still had the flux stabilizer disconnected, leaving his three remaining converter crystals unprotected from the power surges of the solarian core.

He was only a third of the way back when another converter crystal broke.

Caught off guard, found himself thrown from his surfer. Which wasn't a big deal, since he had only been cruising a few feet above the ground. He allowed himself to roll to a stop before he leapt to his feet to chase after his surfer. With him removed, the main engine had shut off, but the hover feature that was designed to catch it meant that it was free floating with its sail open to catch the wild winds.

Jim managed to catch up to his surfer, but not before the wind had flipped it on its side, the solar sail scraping against the ground. He righted his surfer and checked the damage. There was one tear about the length of his hand and one of the seams between pieces of solar fabric had started to come undone, but he would be able to patch that easily.

Replacing two converter crystals was going to be a much bigger problem. And the other crystals might be damaged too, making them prone to break.

Jim sighed, Morph bubbling fretfully around his head. He could almost hear Silver's taunting voice saying "didn' I tell ye te pick yer fights?" He didn't regret stopping Dorian from bullying that kid, but disconnecting the flux stabilizer had just been stupid. Oh well, "live and learn" and all that.

It wasn't like he could go back and change that now, so Jim settled for reattaching the flux stabilizer. He'd have to run a full diagnostic when he got home, but it wasn't worth opening his whole surfer to look at anything now. If the other crystals were ready to shatter, there wasn't anything he could do about it now, he'd just have to fly carefully.

With that in mind, Jim hopped back on his surfer.

And promptly tumbled right back off.

Jim sat up amid Morph's angry squealing (it was usually a bad sign when Morph shifted from being scared for Jim to being angry at him for doing stupid stuff) and glared at his surfer, which was now hovering/drifting away at a thirty-seven degree angle to the ground.

The second burst converter crystal must have broken the gyroscope.

"It's fine Morph, I'm fine, sorry about that," Jim muttered as he caught the surfer and climbed on much more carefully. His first solar surfers hadn't had the gyro, so he knew how to fly without one,
he just hadn't been expecting it.

Morph gave a little huff and settled on top of Jim's head, sliming his cold body against Jim's scalp in a passive-aggressive way. Jim shivered involuntary but let Morph stay there as he set off again.

He made it back to the canyon where he had run into Dorian and the kid without any more problems. The kid was pretty much where Jim had left him, but sitting all curled up on himself on the ground beside his little hoverboard scooter.

Jim swooped down into the canyon but hopped off his surfer so he could approach the kid slowly.

"Hey, uh... are you okay?"

The kid looked up, wide eyed, but looked down again when he saw it was Jim.

"Yeah, but... my hoverboard isn't working. And I d-don't know how to get out of here."

There was a waver in his voice as he spoke, and he'd clearly been crying. Jim felt awful for him, but he didn't really know what to do. He could go pat him on the shoulder or something, but he didn't know whether he'd just scare the little guy if he got too close either.

Fortunately, Morph was on the job.

The little pink blob swooped over and began licking the boy's cheek, churring comfortingly. The boy giggled and reached up to touch Morph, who pulled his favorite "meeting new people" stunt by bursting into a flock of little blebs only to reform as an imitation of the boy. Naturally, the boy was delighted.

Jim knelt down near him.

"Mind if I take a look at your hoverboard? I might be able to fix it."

"Okay," the boy said softly, some of his cheer slipping away as he looked at his board.

"My name's Jim by the way." Jim said as he grabbed the little hoverboard and gestured for Morph to come over. "Jim Hawkins. And the blob here is Morph. Zadzos head screwdriver, Morph."

Morph transformed into the tool and Jim popped open the hoverboard as the boy replied:

"I'm Ethan Harris. I like your blob."

"I think he likes you too," Jim laughed as Morph flew out of his hand to go play with Ethan again.

Ethan giggled as Morph swirled around his little hands.

Jim turned his attention to the hoverboard. A little poking around revealed a damaged engine, with a few tubes and wires out of alignment, but the big problem was with the battery's housing. It would need replacement, but Jim thought that he had a part for that back home.

"I can't fix it here, but I can go home and fix it."

"My Dad can fix it," Ethan said. "He's good with machines."

"Okay." Jim closed the hoverboard back up. "But this won't take you there. Want me to take you home?"
"Yes please," Ethan said nicely.

"Come on," Jim gestured for the boy to follow him back to his solar surfer.

He could carry the kid back home by holding him in one arm against his hip. He'd have to steer one-handed with no gyro in a strong wind, but he could do that. He'd also have to load the little hoverboard in his box of junkyard scraps that strapped to the bottom of his surfer, but it would work just fine, and the weight would help his surfer's balance.

And, amazingly, for once in this day, or possibly his life, it actually worked out the way it was supposed to.

The kid behaved and even though he was really heavy for someone who only came up to Jim's knees, it wasn't any problem to hold onto him. Nothing else broke on his surfer, and the winds even died down a little. And the kid knew his way around pretty well so he was able to lead the way to his house once Jim got them to town.

Ethan led them to a nice little neighborhood, with nice houses, probably filled with foremen from the mines.

Jim was about to ask Ethan which of the little houses was his, when he saw a tapirian man come running toward them.

"Ethan! Where have you been!"

Jim yelped as Ethan leapt out of his arms, but the kid seemed to know what he was doing because he landed easily and ran over to the man, jumping (about six feet) straight up to hug his father around the neck.

Jim looked away from the scene and focused on stopping his surfer and detaching the box of stuff from the board. He found himself fiddling with the leather strap around his neck, which held the key to his little letter chest hidden under his shirt. He forced himself to stop; he'd been trying to avoid doing stuff like that so he wouldn't draw attention to it.

He pulled out the kid's hoverboard and brought it over to where Ethan was finishing telling his story to his father.

"But then Jim swooped out of the sky and knocked Dorian away from me and told him to apologize but he wouldn't and they got in a fight, but Jim came back for me and he brought me home because I didn't know how."

Ethan's father turned his gaze on Jim with a startling intensity.

"Thank you."

"No problem," Jim said awkwardly. "Here's his hoverboard. The engine's busted up a bit, but it'll be pretty easy to fix. He said you can do it, but if you need a part for the batteries, I have—dang it!"

Jim ran over to grab his drifting solar surfer before it bumped into someone's house. The lack of a gyro was going to be annoying, he'd gotten used to having one. He dragged his surfer back and shut it off so it fell to the ground with a little thump. Ethan wiggled out of his father's arms and ran over to look at the surfer, Morph trailing behind him.

"Sorry. I blew a couple converter crystals and it broke my gyro."
"What's a gyro?" Ethan asked.

"A gyroscope. It..." Jim tried to figure out how best to describe a gyroscope to a little kid. "Close your eyes."

Ethan obeyed, and Jim reached down and picked him up, turning him upside down. The kid started giggling.

"Are you upside down?" Jim asked.

"Yes!" Ethan squealed.

"Are you peeking?"

"No!"

"Then how do you know that you're upside down?"

"I can feel it!"

Jim turned Ethan right-side-up and put him back down. "That's what a gyroscope does. It lets my surfer know if it's right-side-up or not."

Ethan laughed and stumbled a little, looking up at Jim with a big smile. Jim chuckled a little at how easily amused the kid was, but then he remembered that the kid's dad was there, and probably wanted Jim to scram. Even if he somehow didn't know Jim's reputation, between digging around and the dump and the tumble he'd taken off his surfer, Jim knew he stood out like a grease stain on the perfectly manicured moss lawns.

"Anyway, uh, I'll go," Jim muttered, pointing a thumb over his shoulder as if he needed to explain the word "go."

"Wait!" The man said, raising a hand. "Why don't you stay for dinner?"

Jim blinked, so startled that he blurted out: "Why?"

"Because you helped my son, and I'd like to thank you properly," the man said, speaking a little slower than before, like a teacher explaining a point that should be obvious.

"Oh, well thank you, but it's no big deal, and I need to get home before sunset." Jim gestured at the sky and then his surfer. "I don't have a back-up battery, once the sun's down I'm stuck. Actually, with only two converter crystals I'm probably gonna be grounded mid-dusk now."

"I have a few converter crystals in the shed," the man said. "Do you use standard C1 size?"

"Uh, yeah, but-"

"Come on, bring your surfer."

Ethan began jumping in excitement. "Come on, come on! Daddy's shed is awesome!"

"O-okay," Jim agreed, turning on the hover mode so he could easily drag the surfer along beside him.

He was still startled by how nice Ethan's father was being, but he wasn't about to turn down new converter crystals. But really, usually adults in this town hated him. Actually, aside from his mother
and Doppler, it seemed like everyone hated him at first, some people just grew to like him eventually, like Silver and Amelia. Well okay, there had been B.E.N., but well... B.E.N. was B.E.N..

He glanced back at his box of junkyard supplies, but Ethan's father gestured at him to leave it.

"It'll be fine out here, no one will steal anything."

Jim nodded and followed the two tapirians into their house.

"I'm sorry, I haven't properly introduced myself," the man said, sticking out his hand to shake as they walked. "I'm Ron Harris, Ethan's dad."

"Jim Hawkins," Jim replied, shaking the proffered purple hand. He watched the man's face for any sign that he'd just remembered Jim's reputation and wanted him out, but instead Ron just nodded.

"Sarah Hawkins's son, right?"

"Yeah."

Ron nodded again, clearly trying to think of how best to say the next words.

"I used to go to the Benbow for breakfast sometimes. It's such a tragedy that it burned. Are... are you two doing alright? I'm sorry to be so forward but I-"

"It's fine, we're doing fine. Dr. Doppler's letting us stay with him and he's really nice. And we got some money so we're going to rebuild the Benbow."

"Insurance?" Ron clarified, clearly distracted by Ethan, who was playing with Morph again.

"No," Jim said before he could think better of it. "Uh-"

Jim was not going to bring up Treasure Planet. He didn't want to deal with that right now, when for once an adult wasn't treating him like some sort of raving lunatic or dangerous delinquent. But that meant he had to think of a normal, boring, adult-style excuse for the money. One that didn't involve maps to legendary planets and booby-trapped treasure troves and soft-hearted pirates.

"I... I, uh, I got an inheritance. From some relative I didn't even know existed. On my father's side. Apparently I still counted. It's enough for us to rebuild, so we're going to be fine."

"Oh that's good, I'm glad to hear it."

They went out a back door and headed to a nice-sized shed. Inside there were a wide variety of tools and supplies. Ron shuffled in a box and pulled out two long, prism-shaped converter crystals.

"If you want we can pop these in right now."

"Dad's really good at fixing things!" Ethan exclaimed. "He's so smart!"

"I guess I picked it up from you, Ethan," Ron said warmly, running a hand over his son's head like he was ruffling non-existent hair. Ethan giggled.

Jim turned away and lowered the sail on his surfer and shut off the hovering. He began hoisting it up onto the workbench himself, but Ron grabbed it and helped.

He looked at the bottom of Jim's surfer, finding the screws.
"Huh, you have a mix of Zadzos and leaf head screws, so we'll need a couple different..."

Ron started reaching for a row of screwdrivers hanging on the wall, but Jim gave a little whistle, and Morph, knowing what an overturned surfer meant, transformed into a screwdriver for Jim.

"I've got it," Jim said as he began opening his surfer.

Ethan laughed and his father gave Morph an impressed smile.

"Well that's convenient! I've never seen a creature like that before."

Jim shrugged as he popped open the bottom of his solar surfer and gave Morph a tickle to thank him. "According to Amelia he's an "Andulian morpher" but this little guy came from Proteus One."

"He's so cool!" Ethan enthused.

"Yeah, Morph is the best when he isn't being the worst," Jim teased, giving Morph a playful glare. Morph giggled and turned upside down in the air, as though to say 'how could you ever be annoyed with me? I'm too cute to get annoyed with no matter how much trouble I cause.'

Jim gave Morph an amused smile before he turned his attention back to his damaged surfer.

It didn't look too bad aside from the shattered converter crystals. Jim was pleasantly surprised to find that the gyro itself wasn't damaged, it was just the casing around it crumpling in against it that was stopping it from working. He began patching that up while Ron started pulling blackened shards of converter crystal out. Jim wasn't entirely comfortable with anyone else touching his surfer, but he didn't really know how to say that without being rude to the guy who was giving him new converter crystals, so he kept his mouth shut.

"I want to see, can I see?" Ethan begged, tugging on Jim's pants leg.

Jim obliged and picked him up.

"Wow, that looks complicated."

"Yeah, it kinda is, but the only really important parts are the solarian core," Jim said as he pointed to the core, "which takes in the solar power from the sail and makes it usable, and the engines back here, and see this spring thing here lets the sail pop up and down. And the converter crystals that take the power from the solarian core and put it in the engine."

Ethan nodded, looking down at the surfer's guts as though he was trying to memorize everything Jim had just said.

"This is a really unconventional design," Ron commented. "Where did you get this?"

"I made it," Jim told him, not sure whether to be proud or defensive. He wasn't sure whether 'unconventional' was a compliment or an insult.

"Wow! That is really impressive."

Okay, compliment. Jim still wasn't sure how to react to that, so he settled for looking down at the guts of his surfer and pretending to fix something.

"Thanks. I've been working on it for a while."

Ron attached the new converter crystals and stepped back to let Jim close it back up. Jim had to set
Ethan back down, so the kid ran over to his dad to demand to be picked up by him instead.

"Thank you for those, Mr. Harris," Jim said as he turned on the hovering and pulled his surfer off the workbench. "I really appreciate it."

"Of course, it's the least I could do. Thank you so much for helping my son. I was getting so worried about him..." Ron trailed off, hugging his son tighter to his chest. "Thank you."

Jim shrugged awkwardly. "You're welcome. Glad I could help." He turned to Ethan. "Try to stay out of trouble. And stay away from Dorian, he's not very nice."

Ethan nodded. "Okay. Thank you for saving me."

Jim was saved from replying when Morph flew over to snuggle against Ethan's face.

After Morph said his goodbye Jim pulled his solar surfer outside and hopped on, Morph flying to his shoulder.

"Thank you again!" Ron called while Ethan waved cheerfully. "And if you and your mother need an extra hand with the rebuilding, just let me know!"

"Thanks."

And with that Jim flew away, stopping back in the front yard for a moment to reattach his junkyard box before he took off toward home.

He arrived just a little before sunset, his engine weak from the low light, but still functional.

"Mom!" Jim called as he walked in. "I'm home! When's dinner?"

"In about half-an-hour," Mom said as she rounded the corner, brushing her hands off on her apron. "Did you have a good flight?"

"Yep, the winds were fun to ride today." Jim sighed, "But I should probably try to get some work done on that stupid essay before dinner. I'm probably going to be stuck inside all day tomorrow."

"Well at least you were able to be out there a long time today. Was it worth it?"

Jim thought back to how close he'd come to dying or getting arrested, then the look on Ethan's face when he waved goodbye to Jim.

He nodded.

"Yeah, it was."

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This had been a worthwhile stop, Silver thought as he slunk through the shadows between mildewing buildings.

This dank port town was one of the most decrepit that Silver had ever seen, but his stay here had been surprisingly profitable. The hold of his catboat was now filled with food to last him for months, and some stolen spending money clinked softly in his pocket. He had even managed to procure a better spyglass, which would save him some headaches in future, when he headed out into wilder parts of the etherium, where navigation was difficult. And now, in the safe darkness of night, Silver could slip unseen through the streets and alleyways, melting into the shadows like the monsters he'd
imagined as a young boy looking out his window into the dark of night. Now the dark was like a warm cloak around Silver's shoulders, a comfortable, familiar presence.

It should all have been enough to soothe the keyed up feeling that had been skittering constantly through his veins as of late, like a sparking electric current. Something strange and ambiguous, like the feeling of a storm on the horizon. It had been growing and growing, keeping him from sleep and making his perfectly acceptable little boat feel painfully small.

His good fortune should have been enough to soothe it, but the feeling was still there, just as it always seemed to be now, buzzing at the edge of Silver's consciousness, growing ever harder to ignore.

Still, he was going to ignore it tonight, and get back to his boat before trouble had a chance to catch up with him.

It was a useful skill that he possessed, the ability to not think about a problem until it went away.

Down the twisting dirt roads he wandered, past the corpses of decomposing townhouses, warehouses held together by tarpaper, and the occasional, mostly maintained tavern. The wind was picking up, whipping the garbage on the streets in little whirlwinds. The air was tasting more and more of humidity and electricity. It would be best for Silver to get his boat to the safety of open space before the storm hit.

He was almost back to the half-rotted pile of scrap wood that passed for a dock when he found himself amongst company. He'd turned into a side street, only to find it bathed in an unnatural orange light that crackled out from lamps advertising the presence of another hole-in-the-wall bar. Noise poured out the open door, and a couple of vaguely person-shaped lumps sat slumped against the outer wall. Their eyes turned up to look at him, one set reflecting the orange light like empty mirrors, the other set dull, just shy of pupil-less, and rimmed in red.

Now, if it weren't for those eyes, Silver would have turned around and taken the next street down to the docks. The horrendous excuse for music that was pouring out of the bar seemed to be focused on high pitched shrieks like metal scraping on stone. It was painful enough to make him to shut off his artificial ear, and his remaining organic ear was pressed flat against his skull. A slightly longer walk would be a perfectly good price to pay in order to avoid getting any closer to that monstrous sound.

But Silver had been spotted, and if he turned back now, it would look like he was afraid of those pathetic drunken lumps. And this was not the place, nor the company, nor the night to let slip anything that could be taken as weakness.

(Or anything that could be taken as a challenge. If the pup had taken up Silver's offer to join him, Silver wouldn't have let him on the same side of the planet as this town. There were places in this universe where a mouth smart as Jim's could earn you a snapped neck faster than you could blink, and this was one of them.)

So Silver steeled himself against the awful noise and walked down the alley, head high, shoulders back, his size and strength and mechanical arm on full display.

As he got closer, he saw that the larger lump was a four-armed golm like Mr. Hands from his old crew. Lots of muscles, not a lot of brain cells. Hands had been a rather meek thing on the inside, easy to keep in line with a sharp look or a strong word. But this lump looked like it had a rather worse attitude, glaring at Silver, eyes hazed.

The smart thing to do would be to let his eyes slide past, not challenging it with eye contact.
But the glare it was giving Silver rankled at his already wired up nerves. Silver was used to being respected and feared. It had been a long time since he’d had to bow and prostrate and pussyfoot around someone else playing at being the top dog, at least not without the tangible reward of his lifelong goal in sight (and the satisfaction of a trap already set for those who dared to order him about) to soothe his ruffled pride.

And it should not have felt like yielding to simply look away and carry on with his life, but at this moment, it most certainly did.

So he met that hostile glare with one of his own, his mechanical eye turning to blood red.

The lump moved with shocking speed, lashing out and striking a blow across Silver’s jaw that sent him stumbling back into the wall.

Pain flashed through his nerves and the coppery taste of blood splattered across his tongue, sharp and bitter and charged as a lightning strike.

And for a moment the world seemed to fall silent. The horrific wailing of the music and that awful intangible clawing sensation that haunted him day and night both fell silent, covered entirely by an very different sound.

The hum of battle sang in his veins, like electricity building, pulsing to the beat of his own heart, a battle drum in his ears.

Nonono, come here, the voice of the feline woman on the ground mumbled lazily, sounding distant as the horizon in Silver’s ears.

The golm man grunted and dropped to all sixes, ready to slink back to the sprawled out pile of limbs that formed his current companion.

But Silver found himself laughing as he rubbed blood from his lip with the back of his flesh hand. The nerves in his body sang with anticipation, adrenalin and blood crashing in his veins, and for this precious moment, it was all enough to silence the buzzing in the back of his mind, the thing he had wrapped up, caged up, set aside to die, knowing that no good could come from acknowledging it.

It was a useful skill that he possessed, the ability to not think about a problem until it went away.

But perhaps sometimes, there was a price to be paid to keep it all locked away, a blood sacrifice if you will, or perhaps just the thrill of a fight.

He knew that he would come to regret this moment soon, but a vicious, bloodthirsty joy pulsed through him at the anticipation of a fight, the chance to strike and to punch and to wound, and to feel his own pain and physicality and mortality in return and overcome it all again, just as he’d always done.

And so Silver found his bloodied mouth stretching in a wide, red-stained smile.

"Is that the best ye got, ye mangy clod?"

The muscled mountain turned on him again, fury in his dull eyes, and lunged back across the alley at Silver.

Silver smiled, his mechanical hand clenched into a fist with the power of a broadside cannon strike.

Thunder crashed and lighting sprayed across the horizon as Silver launched himself, flesh and metal
and soul, into the fight.

Seven-year old John growled as he dug through more and more useless rubbish. Hunger clawed at his stomach, and his hands and feet were scraped up from hitting sharp metal scraps as he hunted through the junkyard in search of something edible. His siblings didn't seem to be faring much better, given how many fights had broken out among the Long children that day. John was keeping his distance from them all. The one good thing about the junkyard was that it was big enough to get some space from his siblings. There were almost fifty of them, so there was no getting away when they were back in their broken down home.

(John had heard some of his brothers from the oldest litter whispering that they were going to lose the house soon, but he refused to believe that. It was their home, they couldn't leave it. Pap wouldn’t let them lose it.)

He jerked his head up at the sound of a piercing shriek. Across the hills of trash, John saw that a couple of girls from the litter before his had managed to catch a pybird. Its dying scream had caught everyone’s attention, but John was actually pretty close. He started running toward them, hoping to charm or steal some for himself. But before he reached them, they had ripped their prize in half and swallowed it, scales and all.

John skidded to a stop, blinking back tears as he hit something sharp again.

He hated this. He wanted things to go back to the way they used to be. When Mama had food on the table and the only thing he knew about the junkyard was that it smelled bad. When Pap wasn’t so cold and strict and would actually play with them.

Pybirds circled overhead, unsettled by the scream of their dying kin. John stared at them hungrily. There had been a time when he would have recoiled at the idea of eating one, but that time was gone now.

He was just so hungry.

Angrily he turned back to digging through rubbish, tossing aside twisted metal and stinking soaked paper and broken furniture shards.

But suddenly his luck turned.

John happened to be near the entrance, and as he watched, a litter passed by carrying some sort of noble woman. Possibly put off by the smell of the place, she passed a half-eaten chunk of meat through the lace curtains at one of her servants, who in turn tossed the meat straight through the entranceway of the dump.

John launched himself from the top of the pile of trash as though he had wings. He didn't of course, so he fell back onto the pile, skidding and sliding down the steep sides. He couldn't keep his balance, so he had to use his arms too, running like an animal on all fours down the hill toward the scrap of meat.

He snatched it up mid-run, letting himself tumble to a stop in a ball curled around his precious treasure. Instantly he was ripping into it, tugging meat off the bone and swallowing it as fast as he could before-

John screamed in rage as he felt one set of hands grab him and pry his arms apart while a set of tentacles ripped the food from his grasp.
He pushed off from something, he wasn't even sure what at this point, forcing himself upward to drive his skull into the face of whoever had grabbed him. There was a scream of pain and the hands around John's wrists were suddenly gone. He hit the ground on hands and knees, and immediately leapt toward the scrawny tentacled boy who had stolen his food.

Just before he reached the bug-eyed bundle of tentacles, a strong hand grabbed his ankle and yanked him away, throwing him into a pile of rubbish.

John sat up, his vision bathed red from his fury, and maybe a little actual blood dripping from his forehead.

The thieves stood before him. John didn't know what species the one with the tentacles was, but he was small and looked scared. But the other was an ursid boy like John, at least four years older and substantially larger. He stood protectively in front of Tentacles, fists at the ready and upper lip pulled up in a snarl, twisted already by a long scar across his face.

John hesitated, but the sound of heavy footsteps made them all turn their heads, fearful of an adult scavenger who might attack them for their food.

But it was Pap, followed by Matilda, John's oldest sister.

Matilda didn't even seem to notice him, but Pap stopped, and John felt a rush of joy. With Pap on his side, he was sure to win.

And so he turned back around and threw himself at the older boy.

He was not going to lose the first real meal he'd had in a week to anyone.

The scarfaced ursid met his charge, slamming him to the ground. His skull hit the hard packed dirt and his teeth clacked painfully together, and all he could do was claw blindly at his attacker, his vision swimming with black spots.

A punch struck him in the gut, forcing him to double over. He screamed, swinging punches and trying to bite, but he felt a kick to his side that sent him tumbling away.

Why wasn't Pap helping him yet? He'd been right there, hadn't he?

John struggled to pull himself up on his bleeding hands, looking around for his father.

He was right there.

Standing.

Watching.

Doing nothing.

John was frozen for a moment, ragged breaths heaving at his bruised ribs, but he realized he might still be in danger. His gaze whipped back to the boys he'd been fighting, and he braced himself for another attack.

But instead, the ursid boy was running, holding the tentacled boy, who was of course still holding John's food.

He wasn't running from John, or even from Pap. In fact, he ran right past Pap, out the entrance to the dump and away into the alleys, a couple of John's siblings chasing after him.
Maybe they’d catch him, maybe they wouldn’t, but it didn’t matter. None of them would share with John anyway.

John pulled himself to his feet, swiping blood out of his eyes.

On unsteady feet, he turned to his father.

"Why didn’ ye help me?!" he shrieked, just about ready to throw himself into a fistfight with his own father.

Pap made a sort of "calm down" gesture, like he was patting an invisible puppy on the head.

"Because ye have a bad habit of startin' scraps ye just can't win. Ye need te learn te pick yer fights, lad."

"I know I'm not big enough te fight 'em, but yer here! Why didn' ye help me!?"

"I won't always be here te protect ye."

"Are ye goin' te die now too?!" John shouted, angry tears betraying him and bubbling over his eyes.

His father's expression softened and he gestured John forward. "Come here, John," he said softly.

"No!" John shouted, furious. "I won't!"

"Come here, John," Pap repeated, steel in his tone.

John stomped forward, allowing his father to scoop him up, settling him so that his knees rested on Pap's belly, their eyes level.

"I promise ye, John, I got no plans te die anytime soon. But ye and I both know that don't mean something couldn't happen. And I gotta work most the time, so I can't be here for ye like I'd like. You, me, this family, we can't live in a fairytale. We all havete learn how te fend for ourselves first."

John nodded sadly, not meeting his father's eyes. He was still angry, still felt betrayed by his Pap standing there and letting him get hit, but he didn't know how to say it, so he said nothing.

"Chin up, boyo," Pap murmured. "It'll be alright. Ye'll get the hang of it all. And one day, yer gonna be big and strong, and there won't be many fights ye can't win."

"Okay," John replied, suddenly exhausted. He squeezed a hug around his father's neck before he was set back down. He knew better than to cling to him, no matter how much he wished Pap would just carry him home.

"GATHER UP!" Pap bellowed. In seconds, his children were appearing from the rubbish.

Matilda, the firstborn of the first litter, began counting everyone off and shooing them all to clump up by litter to make it easier to tell if anyone was missing. Matilda had become a sort of half-secret second leader of the Long family, since she was the oldest, biggest, and strongest of the pups. With no close kin, since Mama had been disowned by her family and Pap's had been killed off, they didn't have the usual flock of aunts and uncles to help them. It was just Pap and them now.

John sat down, too tired and hurt to stand around needlessly before the long walk home. His sister Jane sat down beside him. She was the runt of his litter, a head shorter and somehow even scrawnier than the rest of them. She flopped down so her head was resting on his legs instead of the
hard ground.

John felt a flare of annoyance, why should she get something nice when no one would let John rest on them?

He raised a hand, ready to smack her away.

But Jane looked up at him, big cornflower blue eyes filled with misery.

John let his hand drop back to his side.

Maybe he really was weak.

Jane curled tighter, and John found his hand drifting to pet her shoulder. He let it. Jane reached up and took his hand, clinging to it with both of hers as she drifted into a fitful doze.

He let her.

But then finally Matilda had all the pups gathered, so Pap turned to lead the way back toward home.

Jane didn't complain when John dragged her to her feet and gave her a push toward the rest of the pack. Just like the others, she and John walked along, not talking much, eyes down to make sure they didn't step on anything sharp. John was limping from the fight, and once when he stumbled, Jane reached out to steady him.

Jane was too nice. The world was going to really hurt her someday.

They made it home, where a couple of the other kids from the oldest litter had their dinner ready. It was just the usual soup, with almost nothing to it but water, a world away from the thick stews Mama had made. But at least it could trick their stomachs a little. John ate his as quickly as he could, in case one of the bigger kids finished theirs and decided to steal some of his.

After their "dinner," all the kids were too tired to do much else. They settled in corners and on tables, anywhere where there was space. The ones Pap was proudest of that day got to sleep next to him and his warmth.

John looked at everyone bedding down around him. Even though he was tired, he didn't think he could sleep. He felt...

Restless?

Angry?

Hungry?

Something.

There was nowhere in the house to be alone, so John climbed up the ladder into the attic. The rungs were a little too far apart for him, so he had to pull himself up rung by rung. His injured side and cut up hands hurt, and his head was throbbing, but he didn't stop. He'd set his mind, he wasn't going to just give up.

The attic was where a lot of the older pups slept, but John tiptoed past them, careful not to make a sound.

"Where do ye tink yer goin?"
John turned, startled. It was Matthew, one of the boys from the first litter.

"The roof," he answered honestly.

"No yer not. Ye'll fall off and die."

"No I won't!" John shouted back, purposely disturbing everyone in the attic with the threat of a tantrum. "I'll do what I want!"

Around him, growls and snarls erupted. Matthew glared at John from across the dark room while a half-asleep brother started smacking him roughly for causing a disruption. Matthew shoved the brother away with a growl then turned back to John.

"Fine, get yerself killed, see if I care."

And with that, everyone settled back down.

John tiptoed to the window that poked out through the slanting roof. It was already cracked open to let air into the overcrowded attic, so he pushed it open (as little as he could so it wouldn't squeak). Carefully he slipped outside, digging his claws into the grooves of the wood shingles.

Inch by inch, handhold by handhold he climbed, until finally he reached the peak of the roof. He straddled the center line and crawled along it until he found the flattened place where the roof had fallen in a little. It wasn't much, but it was a big enough indent for him to sit comfortably curled up.

And then, finally, he turned his gaze up to the stars.

Hundreds, thousands, millions of worlds floated out there, shining through the smog.

Somewhere out there were better places than here. John knew it, he'd seen glimpses of it on the one voyage they'd taken as a family, even if the voyage had gone very wrong.

There were clouds of swirling pink, purple, and blue hiding flickering schools of silver etherium fish. There were chests of jewels and gold. There were shining comets and solar flares that electrified the sky. There were monsters with a hundred tentacles and a thousand teeth who could eat a ship whole. There were pirates and thieves and monsters and angels.

There was something more out there than junkyard scraps.

John reached out his hand, stubby fingers blotting out the stars like he was grabbing onto the galaxy itself.

"To the strongest go the spoils."

Someday, John was going to be big and strong. He would be the fiercest and the bravest and he'd be able to take everything he wanted, whatever he needed. And he would live like a king instead of digging in the dump for his next meal.

He would grab the galaxy by the throat and take what he wanted because that was the only way to get anything in this universe.

But for now, he was too small, too weak. Just a speck of dust fighting for life in a sea of stars.

So he curled up in his little notch in the roof and closed his eyes.

And there he fell asleep, caught between the noise of animals fighting in the alleys and the
untroubled starlight seeping silently across the etherium.

Chapter End Notes

Annnd I hope you enjoyed! :D Chapter 3: Worth and Obsessions is in the works. No idea on timing, but I'm working on it as much as I can, and I'm keeping a status update in my profile for anyone curious about my progress.

And as always, if you have any comments or questions, I would love to hear/answer them! It really truly does make my day to see that people have read (and hopefully enjoyed) my fic.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!