let us go then, you and I, when the evening is spread out against the sky
by M_Leigh

Summary

"It is very difficult to hate machines, but – it turns out – very easy to trust them." Elizabeth and David, in the years that follow.

Notes

I wrote this in a crazy haze, because the ending of this movie was Begging for All the Fanfiction. And you guys, it was SO MUCH FUN. I don't know what that says about me, because this is very dark and strange. But I hope you enjoy it.

Let us go then, you and I,
When the evening is spread out against the sky
Like a patient etherized upon a table;
Let us go, through certain half-deserted streets,
The muttering retreats
Of restless nights in one-night cheap hotels
And sawdust restaurants with oyster-shells:

Streets that follow like a tedious argument
Of insidious intent
To lead you to an overwhelming question...
Oh, do not ask, "What is it?"
Let us go and make our visit.

-- T. S. Eliot, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock"

It is very difficult to hate machines, but – it turns out – very easy to trust them. Elizabeth has spent her life trusting machines without thinking about them at all, and it occurs to her now that she should perhaps have been more conscious of this, although she does not know what would have changed as a result. The realization is simultaneously banal and profound: it is about assumptions. The refrigerator will continue to keep your food cold, the light will always turn on when you flip the switch, the computer will store all of your files for you and draw them out whenever you ask, in exactly the same condition you last left them.

She is on a ship, now, that she does not understand; she is inside a machine with another machine, a machine with eyes, a machine that is always watching, a machine that can think. David cannot feel but he can think. He has, she thinks, some kind of subjectivity. It is easy to hate people, and difficult to trust them. David is not a person. He is a machine.

Elizabeth thinks: I hate him; I do not trust him. But that is not quite right. She does not hate him; there is not enough of him to hate. But she does not trust him, either; there is enough behind those clear blue eyes (and what are they made of? If she touched them, would they give?) to make that possible, to make that easy. She will not let him have any of her. She does not want to know what he would do with it. She will remain steadfastly her own.

His body is propped up in the back of the control room. She folded his hands over each other and straightened his legs out in front of his torso. It seemed wrong to leave that body (those circuits) in a heap, not when it still twitches every once in a while. It twitches, she’s hypothesized, when David has forgotten that his head’s no longer attached to the rest of him. The first few days it was constantly moving around behind her, not real movements, nothing productive – it couldn’t get up and walk around – just reflexive jerks, this way or that. This has lessened as the weeks have passed. He is learning. There is something strangely human about this, this phantom limb of his body that has been wrenched away from him. She has taken to looking to his face when she hears his body move – this is part of the reason she keeps it up here, in the control room, and not off in storage somewhere – and she honestly cannot tell whether she can see some ghost of pain there when he realizes he can do nothing now but look, and listen, and speak. She feels a pang for him, sometimes, for his condition; and whenever she does it is followed with a streak of burning white rage at the core of her, when she remembers what he has done.

She turns away from him at these moments and looks, instead, at the endless abyss of the universe before them. They have a very long way to go.

There are two cryostasis pods in this ship, down in the hold. One of them is broken – it was
not an accident that did this but some kind of violence. Elizabeth can recognize the signs. But the other, David has informed her, is in functional working order.

“It may take us longer to reach life than I had originally anticipated,” he tells her.

“If you’re trying to get me in one of those, you’re fooling yourself,” she says. “Besides, you couldn’t wake me up.”

He doesn’t suggest she try to repair him. She has yet to be surprised by his capacity for reticence. He thinks much more than he speaks.

She is not a pilot; before the Prometheus mission she had never been in space. She needs his help to run the ship, especially since it is marked with strange signs she cannot understand. She has never considered herself brilliant but she feels it is not too arrogant to think of herself as very intelligent, and she knows the rudimentary fundamentals of more ancient languages than most other people on Earth. But David has the inevitable advantage of a mechanical mind (if it can be called a mind at all) and he spent two years studying while she was asleep. He can understand the engineers’ language and their writing; she cannot.

When they started out from the planet where the rest of them will remain forever, he had told her what to do to start up the navigation system. They’d taken a much smaller ship than the destroyer where they had found the last engineer, but the fact remained that they were a larger race than humankind, and the ship they’d liberated was not cramped. The navigation system on the destroyer must have been enormous; here it was a sizable but contained explosion of blue light.

After all that she had seen, she was glad that she still had some capacity for the appreciation of beauty. This was a marvelous thing. This was the entire known world. She reached out and touched one of the far-away planets that had spun back around toward her seat at the console. It detached and rested in the center of her palm. The light could feel her touch. She did not know why this should surprise or move her so; they had comparable technology on Earth. But it was not like this. This was purer, more perfect. It had been hibernating for millennia.

She wanted to ask David whether he had known what it would do, but as she turned to look at him where she’d propped him up on the other seat, wires and filaments dangling out from his severed neck, she remembered that he’d known the other ship was headed for Earth. He must have seen something like this.

She did not have to ask, anyway, because she could see the expression on his face as he looked at the universe orbiting before them. It made her blood run cold and her heart pound. Behind them, she could hear his body spasm violently.

When he turned to look at her there was nothing unusual in his eyes. “Dr. Shaw,” he said. “Shall we begin?”

She is kept awake at night sometimes by the memory of this. What she saw in him when he looked at the planets and stars alight before them had been too close to a soul for her liking. And it had gone. She does not like it – not the feeling and not the absence of it, after. She wants him to be consistent, so she knows how to think about him, how to feel about him. But this, she knows, is something she cannot reasonably ask and expect to receive. It is not a matter of choice; it is not an option. He is not programmed to have a soul; Weyland said as much himself. He is subjective and soulless. Elizabeth repeats this to herself when she thinks she is on the verge of forgetting it. Both components are equally important; she cannot forget either without grave risk to herself.

But how subjective? And soulless? The questions niggle at her traumatized mind and it is
easier to contemplate them obsessively than to seriously consider what has happened to her. Someday she will do that, but not yet. Not now. Now, she will think about David. David is the only company she has left, after all. (And it is a way, too, of thinking about the rest of it – about Charlie, about the probability that she will never communicate with or see another human being again, about the fact that the engineers had wanted to destroy them, to destroy her – without thinking about it. It is all these questions wrapped up in one.)

She asks him, one day – though there are no days here, only the endless night of the universe – what he had done with all his time on those two years of travel from Earth to the planet where Prometheus had landed.

“I studied, Dr. Shaw,” he tells her. She had thought it would become less unsettling to speak to a dismembered head as time passed and she grew used to him; it has been two months and nothing of the sort has happened yet.

“What else?” She does not know, exactly, why she is so certain there was something else, something besides the work. It bothers her that she should be so certain. Why would she ask this question? Why would she wonder? Because there is always something other than the work – to a human. (Even she and Charlie were always more than their work. They had other things. Or maybe that is not quite right – maybe only she had something else. And what was that, exactly? She had Charlie himself. She had music – there is no music on this ship. She had the feeling of the wilderness around her. That, too, is gone. She is nothing but the work now, and the work has been reduced to a single question, and a need to survive.)

“I became very adept at basketball,” he adds after a few moments, and she almost laughs at the thought of his head floating around a basketball court – or perhaps being used as the ball.

“Oh,” she says. “And you watched my dreams,” she adds, more for herself than for him to remember.

“Yes,” he agrees peaceably. “I watched all of your dreams,” he amends, “but yours most frequently.”

“What?”

She suspects that he would be shrugging if he still had his body – although he never really shrugged, before. His movements were very deliberate.

“Most people dream the most banal dreams,” he says. “They can become very repetitive very quickly.”

“But not mine?” she says. She has always had dark dreams. She has always had a dark soul.

“Your dreams were very inventive,” he says, without explaining.

“That seems like not very much, for two years,” she adds after a long stretch of silence. In front of them the sky is full of burning stars and endless darkness. David’s blue eyes reflect the light of the cabin like small mirrors or bright stones.

“I also watched a film,” he offers. She thinks the hesitancy she hears in his voice is all in her mind; the tone has not changed so much, really.

“Which one?”

“It is an old film,” he says. “I do not think you would know it.”
“Probably not.” Her father was a scientist; they did not have much time for old films, or films of any kind. She read Darwin at the age of nine: that was her childhood. “I suppose it made an impression, for you to remember it.”

There is a long pause. “I watched it… several times,” he says, and that pause is not imagined.

She hums a little. “Children do that, you know,” she says. “Watch the same film over and over again.”

“Why?” he asks. She cannot tell whether he genuinely wants to know or whether he just wants to see what she will say. She does not like that she feels she has to formulate her wonderings around his wants. She is still not entirely convinced that he has any.

“I don’t know,” she tells him, which is the truth. There are many things she does not know.

“You had no siblings.”

“Neither do you.”

He is silent nothing for a long time. “It was very easy for you to leave,” he says finally. “To sacrifice all those years.”

She should tell him that he’s wrong, but the thing of it is that it was easy. She never thought twice: she had thought she was going home. She knows better now. The idea of home is annihilated for her now. She has thrown herself into a great void and she will fall and keep falling until something lurches into her path. She has no illusions about this.

It was Charlie who had made a fuss of visiting every place he loved before they left, of eating every kind of food he knew he wouldn’t get on the ship; that had all been Charlie, even though he was in his way also more eager to go than she was. She had laughed at him for his particularities – fondly, but still. It wasn’t even that she was so certain they’d be back. She just hadn’t cared.

She looks over at David, who is looking out of the ship and not over at her. This makes it easier for her to answer him, somehow. “Yes,” she says. “It was easy.”

She runs a lot, up and down the long corridors of the ship. She doesn’t initially leave David in the control room while she’s not there, out of suspicion, out of paranoia, out of something. She turns his face toward the wall so he can’t watch her – it seems very important, at the beginning, that he not be able to see her while she is doing this. There is something uncomfortably revealing about her in this state, when she is sweaty and unwound and angry – she is often angry when she runs.

After a while, though, she leaves him in the control room, looking out at the stars. She doesn’t know whether or not he likes this better because she doesn’t ask. He shouldn’t, by all rights, like anything more than anything else. But it seems gratuitously cruel to her, somehow, to leave him in an empty room with nothing to look at. She does not know whether it makes any sense to consider him and cruelty in the same thought but she cannot help it. She is not, by nature, cruel.

Sometimes, of course, when this kind of thinking goes too far, she remembers everything that he has done, and she hates him for it with so much of her soul that she deliberately leaves him in a
dark room for hours and hours on end. But that happens less and less as the weeks and months pass. It seems so trivial, somehow, to continue in that way. The hatred is so tiring. And now she has spent so much more time with him in this decapitated, bifurcated state than before. The things he has done – the thing he has done – is not ancient history; there has been so little incident in Elizabeth’s life since Charlie’s death and the destruction of everything else she had worked for that she cannot think of it that way. But as time passes she has begun to feel like that long tragic history is not her own but belongs to some other Elizabeth Shaw who is dead now, whose body lies prone beneath the wreck of the Prometheus and the destroyer.

She has also begun to suspect that she will never have anyone else to talk to ever again.

It comes to her, too, that she feels a weird kind of guilt about running around him, that perhaps this was partially the cause of her not wanting him to see her. His body has stopped moving almost entirely, now; he has grown used to his confinement. They are both of them confined, in more ways than one, but although the muscles in her stomach are still knitting back together, although she will always bear that ugly scar (his fault) across her belly, her body is her own. She can sweat. (She can bleed.) There is enough water from Vickers’ ship that she can do this as much as she wants (for two years) without feeling guilty. This is the one small freedom that is left for her.

Initially she worried about David’s programming, his power source. He had eaten with them – but there was nowhere for his food to go, now. She had not wanted to ask him about it, but he sensed her question anyway, somehow.

“I am programmed,” he said one day, seemingly out of nowhere, “to run for a very long time. Even considering certain, ah, circumstances.” He did not look at her when he said this, did not glance her way until after he had finished speaking, as if to gauge her reaction.

By now, of course, she has learned to recognize every minute movement of David’s head and gaze and what each might, reasonably, mean, or at least signify. She has no idea what goes on in his – mind? Brain? His head, she supposes, with a kind of sick twist of humor.

She comes into the control room sticky and smelling of exertion, and can see some of the small muscles in his head shift, twitch when he hears her. His eyes flick over to her when she sits down in her seat. Usually she gets clean first. She doesn’t know why she came back here.

“Sorry,” she says. She is polite to a fault. Her father taught her always to be firm, but polite. He was very clear on both counts. “I reek.”

“It’s no trouble, Dr. Shaw,” David says. “I’ve lost my sense of smell, ever since my unfortunate… incident. So as you can imagine, I’m not bothered.”

He smiles at her a little, that strange empty smile she has grown to recognize but that still gives her a chill, every time she sees it.

The rank scent of her sweat seems worse, after that.

She does not know what ultimately makes her change her mind, once six months have gone by and they are still in the middle of their long journey to what she hopes will be civilization: it could be that she is finally sick of looking at his head disconnected from his body, or seeing his body
disconnected from his head; it could be the fact that he really is more useful put together; it could be that six months is too long to go without anything happening, without anything to do. And then, it could be none of these things. It could be something much more dangerous and inexplicable. But she does not let herself think of this.

“What would it take,” she asks him, after considering the question for a long time (but not, she thinks, long enough), “to repair you?”

She is not entirely certain how it is possible for him to go more still than he is usually, but he manages it.

“Fully? Resources we do not, regrettably, possess on this vessel.”

“How about partially, then?”

He wets his lips with his tongue. She is certain she has never seen him make this gesture before; it is terrifyingly human. She does not know what she is doing or why she is doing it.

“If you are, hypothetically, suggesting that the task be embarked upon, I believe I could instruct you effectively enough to return my corpus to a reasonable modicum of working order.”

She thinks about this, and realizes as she does that she is running her tongue across her lips. “I’m not very good with machines,” she says.

“That should pose no significant difficulty, Dr. Shaw,” he replies. He sounds exactly the same as he always does. Her stomach hurts.

He has her take his body out of the space suit and lay it down along the floor of the largest room of the ship, facedown. She places his head above it and props it up so it’s facing the ceiling with a couple of rolled up blankets. They have a few instruments – pliers and more delicate things, for the wires, but nothing to solder with. Elizabeth has no idea what might or might not be necessary.

“Now, Dr. Shaw,” he says once she’s crouched down next to him. “If you wouldn’t mind lifting up the shirt to mid-back, please.”

She looks at him.

“There’s a cache of repair tools embedded there,” he explains after a moment of silence.

She reaches out and tugs the grey shirt free of the waistband of the pants and pushes it up to the bottom of the wings of the shoulder blades. It is, as backs go, a near-perfect specimen. She supposes she should not be surprised, and she’s not, really. There is nothing to suggest a cache of anything, though: it all looks like perfect and unmarred skin, all the way from the broad span of the ribs down to the sinuous curve at the bottom of his spine.

“If you press on the left side, around where you would normally find the kidney,” he says in his regular equanimous tone, “you should have it.”

She presses tentatively at the skin where the kidney should be. It feels exactly like human skin except that it is neither warm nor cold; it simply is.

“A little farther down,” David says pleasantly. She wishes he could not watch her doing this; it bothers her that his head is facing upward.

She slides her hand down and presses again, and feels something click a little, but it doesn’t
“Press harder, Dr. Shaw,” David says, and she does, reflexively, and something shifts and snaps out.

There is a cavity in his back, now. The skin had looked seamless, but in her hands there is a little box. She opens it and sees a whole host of coiled wires and very delicate metal instruments, along with some other things she doesn’t recognize at all.

“Very good,” David says. “Now, if you could turn me over again, please.”

She does. The body’s much bigger than she is and it’s awkward to maneuver it, especially with him watching her like that.

“No,” he intones, sounding not unlike a rather dry professor, “take out the red wire.”

It all must be programmed into him, all of these pathways of repair, and he never mentioned it—not until she did. She wonders at that, a little, before becoming so absorbed in the work that she has little thought for anything else. It is a long and difficult task. The number of things that must be reconnected is extraordinary. She wonders how he could possibly have stayed—have stayed—himself? That is not quite right—without all of these pathways intact. It is not right, and it makes her skin crawl when she thinks about it for too long. But then, nothing about her life is right, anymore.

She keeps reattaching the wires.

She realizes, at a certain point, that she has stopped being aware of him, specifically of his gaze, which she realizes has been trained directly on her for—it must have been hours, or maybe she is simply losing track of time. There is no time out here anyway, no time but the ever-present mark of two years warning her of what is to come, driving her on. She does not look up to meet his eyes but she does not forget, again, that he is watching her. She can feel him watching her as a physical sensation. Her back is becoming stiff and her legs are cramping. She is almost done.

The last thing to do is to fold the soft parts of him back under the torn skin and to sew the skin back together as carefully and tightly as possible. He has remained utterly still throughout the entire process. She threads a needle from the repair kit with a tough clear thread made of something she doesn’t recognize and sets about stitching him up. When she pushes the needle through his skin the first time she feels his hand twitch against her shoe; she starts and shifts her foot. She had not realized they were touching. But that is all.

He says nothing as she makes her way across his throat and she has a surreal vision, suddenly, of viciously stapling his neck together. Her stomach twinges in angry sympathy. When she has finished the front he shifts without her having to ask, very carefully so as not to detach the head again, and the sight of it, of his moving body, of him as a coherent whole, shocks her viscerally in ways she did not expect. Her hands, she finds, are shaking. He glances up at her and says, very calmly, “It’s all right.”

She cannot look away from those blue eyes. She wants to rip his head off his body again. She wants him to have no ragged, sewn-up scar across his throat that will never heal. She wants the skin to be smooth as it was once, a very long time ago. Was he different then? She feels different now. There are no mirrors on this ship. She is afraid she has begun to forget what she looks like.

“That’s all right,” she tells him.

He does not say anything, just keeps looking at her. She flexes her hands open and closed a
few times, until they are no longer shaking, and resumes her task.

“Your father taught you to mend things,” he says, and two things occur to her: first, that there is a curious upward lilt to his voice that she thinks denotes this as a question; second, that he is trying to distract her. From what? From – her fear? Or maybe her sorrow? Her hands are no longer shaking. That does not mean she is not full of sorrow.

“Did you see that in one of my dreams, too?” she asks without meeting his gaze.

“No,” he says, and she does not think he is lying. “I guessed.”

She wets her lips; they have dried out. She has not drunk enough during all of this. “Yes,” she says. “We were often far away from – from people, from shops. We had to fend for ourselves.”

“How old were you when he died?”

She does glance up at him, at that. “I thought you saw all that in my head.”

“I made an estimate of your age. People do not often include that kind of specific information in their dreams. Additionally there is the matter of unconscious distortion.”

She has no idea why she smiles a little at this. “David,” she says, and her voice is a little more tremulous than she would perhaps like, “I think you may be something of a prig.”

There is a long pause.

“I was programmed to be specific,” he says, and he almost sounds as though he is musing. “I may have developed the particular quality to which you refer in the aftermath of my programming, however.”

He is lying on his stomach now, as she sews together the back of his neck, and his voice is muffled by the blankets. She smiles again, a little.

“Maybe,” she says.

“You have not answered my question,” he says a moment later.

“I was twelve,” she tells him. He says nothing after that, not until she is almost finished, and pauses before putting in the last several stitches.

“How old are you, David?” she asks.

“Four,” he replies without hesitation.

“Four,” she repeats. He is not looking at her; he is looking directly in front of him. She rests her free hand on his shoulder for balance while she puts the last stitches into his neck and ties off the thread.

She leans back and rolls her neck back and forth. The sounds of her bones cracking seem inordinately loud. He is still not looking at her but she is watching him, now. He blinks once, twice, and makes both his hands into fists before letting them relax again. She scoots backward a little and tries to stand up. Her legs are numb and she stumbles a little but a hand darts out to steady her, closed tightly just above her knee. David is sitting up, watching her.

“Thank you,” she says. He says nothing.
He is not the same as he was before – physically, that is. It’s not entirely consistent: he’s less precise, generally, but sometimes it’s almost unnoticeable and sometimes it’s clear. Sometimes, it just makes him seem more at ease, more casual – more human; and then there are moments where he is so clearly a malfunctioning machine. The change does nothing, that is, to resolve her persistent difficulty in how to think about him.

Now that he has his legs back he disappears from the control room for long periods of time. Elizabeth doesn’t follow him; she doesn’t want to know what he’s doing. There’s not, really, so much to see, and nothing at all to do. But she understands; she does. She can’t imagine what she would do in his place. She can’t imagine being in his place at all.

Still, he sits with her in the control room most of the time, staring out at the vast reaches of space that slide by them. The engineers’ ship doesn’t seem to move any faster than the Prometheus did, he’s told her, but she wouldn’t be able to tell the difference. She slept on the first journey. She wouldn’t have thought she would ever get bored of this, of the universe, but it’s remarkable how similar stars look when you’ve done nothing for months but watch them go by. The novelty of her position has not worn off entirely: every once in a while, she looks up and realizes that she is seeing things that no human has ever seen, that each star has a history that stretches back millennia that she will never know, that there may well be planets orbiting any of these near and far-away points of light that are brimming with life. This fills her with a kind of violent joy and an almost crippling sadness. She is a scientist, first of all; she cannot help her wonder at the unknowability of things. And she is also a person who wants to know.

And she is lonely, out here in the deep black of space.

It is different, to have David sitting next to her and not just his head propped up on the seat. He is bigger than her; she somehow forgot that when she was carting his head around with her. She remembers now. He was built to be optimally useful, of course. His shoulders are broad and strong, even now. His coordination could use a bit of work, but that is the scar he will bear from this. He has been to the wars now, she thinks idly, even though she knows he has done no such thing.

The long line of stitches that wraps around his neck where his head was severed from his body does not become any less apparent as the weeks go by. It will never heal.

She wonders, sometimes, what he is thinking about when he looks out at the stars. She has still not been convinced, not entirely, that he is capable of emotion – not in the way, certainly, that she herself is; he could not possibly understand the enormity of her grief – but he is certainly capable of thought. What form it takes, exactly, it would be impossible for her to imagine. But it is there.

Her grief is a strange thing: it is simultaneously such a burden and so ephemeral. She has experienced a great trauma, of course – she thinks she is probably suffering, even still, from some sort of post-traumatic shock. Because it is horrible and indescribable, her grief; and yet – and yet, and yet. With every day that passes she dissociates further from that other Elizabeth Shaw. She is peeling herself slowly away from the person to whom these injustices have been dealt. She half-expects to look down one day and see a deep, bloody furrow driven down her chest, perpendicular to her other scar. If she were an insect of some kind, or a snake, her skin would harden and calcify and die and she would crawl out of it born anew. She would like that: she would like being able to hurl that discarded exoskeleton out into the cosmos. But that is not what humans do. Only her mind can go
farther and farther away from everything; her body is trapped here. And it will remain the same broken body until she dies.

She falls asleep in the control room, sometimes; it’s a habit she’s developed. It doesn’t occur to her that, since David can move now, he might wake her up.

She is not, then, expecting his hand on her shoulder or his voice in her ear. She startles, violently, and he removes his hand. She can’t remember what he said, only that he said it. She’s shaking – she was having some kind of dream that she can’t remember.

He’s saying her name, she realizes, her actual name. When was the last time she heard her name? Elizabeth. She’s sweating. She reaches up to touch her damp brow and her fingers are shaking, almost too violently for her to manage it. David’s still saying her name. Does he sound worried? She can’t tell. She’s hyperventilating, too. What was she dreaming about? It was important – she should remember –

“Elizabeth,” David says, and reaches out to hold her shoulder again. His face is very close to hers but she can’t see it properly, can’t make sense of it as a face; it’s all in pieces in her mind, some sort of deformed Cubist rendering of what he normally looks like.

“You were having a nightmare,” he says.

“What was it about?” she asks him, suddenly urgent. He can see her dreams. Maybe he remembers better than she can. “What was I dreaming about?”

“I don’t know,” he says.

“But you can see it, can’t you?” she asks. She is so afraid. She doesn’t know what she’s afraid of. Was she running? Was she running from something? She can’t remember. Oh, god; she can’t remember.

“Elizabeth,” he says. Both his hands are resting on her shoulders now. She doesn’t remember that happening. One of them is twitching badly. Some sort of glitch. She tries to steady her breathing but she can’t, she can’t make herself calm, she’s so afraid.

“Please,” she says. She doesn’t know what she’s asking for. She has no idea. She wants it to stop. She wants to be her cool rational self again. That self is not gone, entirely; the cognizant part of her mind is looking at her and wondering why she’s acting like this. But that does not mean that she can stop her shaking or her terror.

“You were having a nightmare,” David says. “Elizabeth? You were having a nightmare.”

She shakes her head and covers her face with her hands. It’s wet. Is she crying? She must be crying. Or she was crying. Her face is wet.

“What were you dreaming about?” he asks. She shakes her head while she tries to speak.

“I can’t remember,” she finally manages.
He moves his hands from her shoulders and she is briefly, horrifically panicked until one of them presses against the space between her shoulder blades and pushes her torso down, gently but firmly, so that her head is in-between her knees. Her arms are dangling down by her legs. He doesn’t move his hand again, from where it’s resting on her back, and her breathing slows down eventually, and evens out.

She comes back to herself after a while; she doesn’t know how long. She can see David crouched in front of her – specifically, she can see the hand that’s not on her back where it dangles between his knees, still twitching violently. She raises her head slowly to look at his face.

For one moment, something like electricity races through her: he is terrified. No: he looks terrified. But it is just a moment – and then he looks so much like he always has that she does not know whether to trust herself, to trust what she has seen. His hand, she notices vaguely, has stopped twitching so much.

“I don’t think I can walk,” she croaks, and he stands up, righting her as he goes. She doesn’t have enough time to say anything else before he’s gotten one arm under her knees and the other under her shoulders, and then he’s picked her up and is walking quite calmly back to the living quarters.

He deposits her in her bunk and fetches her a glass of water without her having to ask. She drinks it too quickly and spills some down her front but she doesn’t care; it is too good.

“You should get some rest, Dr. Shaw,” he says from where he’s standing next to her, once she’s finished the water.

She nods, dazed, until she remembers that this means sleeping, and she knows suddenly that she cannot do that, not yet, not now; she cannot go back into that place.

“No,” she manages, “no, no – I can’t – not –”

He looks suspended, somehow, between one thing and the other – he looks as though he doesn’t know what to do. That’s novel. He doesn’t look like that very often.

She wishes she could listen to something, to some kind of music. But there is no music here; the only sounds are her rattled breathing and the low hum of the ship in flight.

“Have I got a fever?” she asks. She feels feverish. She feels like she’s burning up.

He blinks at her, owlish.

“Have I got a fever?” she repeats. “Do I feel hot?”

He reaches out one of his hands – the steadier one – to feel her forehead. She is still unsettled by the non-temperature of his skin.

“Mild,” he says. “It could be a simple reaction to your… episode.”

“Don’t let me get a fever,” she says nonsensically. She’s very tired. She can barely keep her eyes open. But she can’t sleep – she can’t let herself sleep; not yet, not yet. “David? Don’t let me get sick.”

He doesn’t say anything.

“David?” she slurs. Everything is hazy. She can’t keep her eyes open. She’s tired.
“Of course, Dr. Shaw,” he says.

“Good,” she mumbles.

When she wakes up she is fully herself, and everything is clear and logical again. Her eyes flicker open, lashes sticking together, and she is somehow startled and not startled at all to see David sitting next to her. He’s brought a chair in from somewhere; there isn’t usually one in here. He’s watching her with no expression whatsoever on his face. She swallows her spittle and wets her lips.

“Feeling better?” he asks, and smiles a little, blandly. She notices that both of his hands are still, now. She closes her eyes tight to avoid looking at him.

* *

She starts – well – hearing things. Not things; music. Not music, even – just long, unbroken notes, full-bodied sounds for the most part, pulsing out of the æther while she runs. The first time she stops dead and turns around, heart pounding. But the sound is not coming from anywhere, from anything that she can see. She keeps running, hesitant, waiting for something to burst out of somewhere.

When she gets back to the control room David isn’t there, so she goes looking for him and finds him in the kitchen. He doesn’t eat, himself, even now that his body is whole again; she remembers seeing the ripped esophagus inside of him that she could not repair. The damage has done nothing to his voice, but there is nowhere, now, for anything to go. She’s not sure where it went in the first place, or whether it was necessary. Perhaps that was simply another thing meant to make them more comfortable around him, to make him seem more human. He deals with her food, though, now that he’s put back together. She doesn’t quite know why, and hasn’t asked.

The sound has stopped by the time she reaches him and she begins to think she imagined it. She doesn’t want to admit this to him; she doesn’t like what it might suggest. So she just stands in the doorway, panting and sweaty, and says nothing. He turns around to look at her with his usual, damningly polite expression, one eyebrow raised a little as if in question.

“Did you need me for something, Dr. Shaw?” he asks.

“No,” she says, and goes.

It happens intermittently, and always when she’s running. It is definitely in her head, unless David is deliberately fucking with her, but while she has not categorically ruled that out as a possibility in general she has an instinctual sense that he has nothing to do with this. This is all her; this is her mind finally giving way. She has been cooped up in this quasi-solitary confinement for too long. It was, she supposes, bound to happen eventually.

She notices nothing else unusual about her perception of things, but then, she can’t really say how she would be able to tell. But the music – it is not exactly music, not songs, but it is musical; it has feeling behind it – continues. It is a comfort to her, in a way. It is like the pulse of her own heart, blown out to the size of space. It still surprises her sometimes, though. She is never quite expecting it – it is not constant or consistent enough for that.

One day, the sound has two tones. She stops running and listens. She wishes she knew something, anything, about how music works, really works; she has always loved it but never really
known anything about it. She was always too preoccupied with the larger questions at hand. Those larger questions seem increasingly to belong to the past self she has almost managed to shake off entirely (but not quite, not yet). So she cannot say what the notes are or what the combination signifies but she knows that it is beautiful, and sad, and that she is going mad alone in the middle of the cold dark universe.

She becomes aware, eventually, of his presence, though she could not say how. She turns to look at him where he stands, some distance behind her, in a doorway. He’s not exactly hidden but there is something covert about the way he is holding himself. He was trying not to be seen.

She doesn’t know what to say to him. *I can hear the music of the spheres*, she thinks, and almost giggles, hysterical. She closes her eyes and draws a breath.

“Dr. Shaw?” he says, and he sounds much more hesitant than he ever does. She does not know what he could see on her face. She opens her eyes.

“David,” she says. He watches her silently. The sounds have gone.

“I hear music,” she tells him. What she does not say: *I am going mad*.

His eyes flick around, as though looking for something that might be emitting sound, even though she knows he has heard nothing.

“I hear sounds in my head,” she whispers. He gazes steadily at her but something about him seems troubled, still. Perturbed, maybe. It gives her a pleasant little buzz to think of him being concerned for her sanity. Somebody had better be.

“There is no music, Dr. Shaw,” he says.

“I know,” she tells him, almost gently. “I know there isn’t.”

*They have almost arrived at their destination. It has been so many, many months. She has seven months left – or is it six? – on what they have with them. She has entirely forgotten what regular food tastes like. It seems like something imagined.*

She cares much less, now, about the potentiality of speaking to the beings who created the engineers, than she does about the possibility of food and water stores, of looking at another living thing and communicating with it. Living in a cage in the darkness has pruned her of her existential desires. She is less than she once was. She is a body in need of sustenance. These are her primary concerns.

She has not allowed herself to think about their arrival much and has been remarkably successful in keeping her fantasies to an almost non-existent minimum. She does not want to be disappointed. They have no idea what they might find, not really. David, for his part, has said nothing whatsoever about the fact that they have almost reached their destination.

She watches him often, now. She wonders what he thinks about the possibility of finding what they are looking for. Maybe they will be technologically advanced; maybe they will be able to fix him properly. But something in her rebels at that; she does not like the idea of anybody reaching
inside of him and prodding around, messing with his wires. She put the stitches in his neck herself. She can trust that memory. She appreciates proof, now, of things having happened; without it she wavers. The scar on her belly has become a great comfort to her. It tells her, Yes. You did that. That was done to you. There is no malice or resentment in these thoughts, anymore; they simply are. There is so little emotion left in her to attach to memories. But she likes the knowing of them.

As the days count down (seven, there are seven days left and then all this might be over, this long nightmare might finally be finished) he becomes – he becomes agitated? He is nervous. Yes, she thinks he is nervous. There is not much point, anymore, in agonizing over whether his nerves are authentic. She doesn’t entirely believe in them but she functions as though she does because it is easier.

She thinks he probably thinks he is being very subtle about this, but she is no fool. She is nervous, too. When they are two days out, sitting in the control room together, she watches him for a long time without his noticing (at least, she thinks without his noticing). He is visibly tense. It is fascinating and unsettling and bizarre. She is just as tense herself but her mind feels weirdly calm: she has sublimated all of her anxiety into her body.

“What are you afraid of?” she asks him.

He turns to look at her, inscrutable as always, and then turns back to the view of the stars. “I am not capable of feeling fear, Dr. Shaw,” he says.

“All right,” she says, and knows that her tone of voice more than conveys her doubt.

She catches him looking at her a little while later, but he looks away when she catches his eye. It reminds her suddenly, violently, of the way lonely children behave around strangers, of their hunger to know tapered by their fear of being seen.

She wants to tell him, I will not let them touch you. I will not let them near you. Something fierce and almost maternal has exploded in her chest. But she is being silly: David will be the one who has to talk to them (if they are there at all). And she cannot promise any kind of protection against beings she knows nothing about. But nothing about the mother instinct is rational. And she is an animal, in her way. She is subject to the rages and terrors of her blood.

The planet, when it comes into their sight two days later, is a uniform shade of dark grey. They maneuver the ship down close to the ground and fly over it, watching for any signs of life. There is nothing for a long time, until they see a compound not too unlike the one on the planet they came from. Elizabeth’s breath is coming shallow and fast, rattling around in her lungs. They set the ship down some distance away and pull on their suits. David’s is frayed and torn but she doubts it will matter. She cannot wait to get out of here. She is, she knows now, desperate.

She wants to shriek with joy at the first steps off of the ship, even though the landscape is dead and dull and not remotely fit for habitation. She cannot help but run toward the buildings – can they be called buildings? – and she does not know what she expects to find there but she expects something; she cannot but expect something.

They are empty, each one. Not only of people but of things. If they were ever lived in it was long enough ago that no traces remain. She and David wander through them all, the strange empty spaces that look almost naturally formed, although they are just too ordered for that. But there is nothing there. The planet has died.

They stand in the largest room, looking around at the unmarked walls, and she remembers, suddenly and vividly, calling Charlie up to the cave in Scotland to see the last of their discoveries.
But in the memory she does not see from her own eyes; she is looking at herself calling to him. She can see it all clearly; she remembers it perfectly. But it does not belong to her anymore.

“Come on,” she says, and turns to go back to the ship.

David says nothing the entire time and stays silent on the way back. She leaves him to close the ship behind him and takes her helmet off with her shaking hands as calmly as she is able. But she cannot take the suit off before she breaks, and so she leaves that on as she walks further into the deep dark places of the ship, which she knows so intimately now that she does not even really need the light to see them, and once she has gone as far as she can she presses herself into a corner and lets her knees buckle, as they have been crying out to do for the past many minutes.

She presses her gloved hands against her mouth to try to smother the sound of her hysterical sobbing and presses her head into the walls as hard as she can, body rocking back and forth of its own accord.

She does not know how much time passes before she feels his hands on her shoulders, pulling her away from the walls – is she hurting herself with her convulsions? she cannot tell – and back against the broad spread of his own chest. He is still wearing his suit, too; he has not bothered to take it off. She leans back against him and does not try to contain her panic.

“I’m going to die out here,” she tells him, sobbing, and says it over and over again, as though that might take some of the horror out of it. It does not.

He curls one arm around her stomach and moves some of her damp hair away from her face with the other. Later she’ll reflect that there was something very precise about this, as though he had seen this somewhere before, as though he had perhaps been programmed to comfort in this way. But for now she just lets him cradle her like that and weeps. She is going to die. She is going to die.

She closes her eyes. David’s gloved hand strokes rhythmically at her hair. She is going to die, and there was no point to any of it.

* *

She begins to sleep more. She is trying to get back, in her dreams, to something else, to something she remembers from another place. But even her dreams are full of the same long, dark, curving corridors she sees every day of her waking life. She is running, and running, and running. And David is watching.

She has five months left. If she were on Earth and she had cancer or some other terminal illness, if she were given a death sentence by a doctor, five months, she could go out into the world for those five months; she could see things she had always wanted to see and read books she had always wanted to read and listen to her favorite albums over and over again. She could salvage something. But here there is only the darkness. Here there is nothing.

She tries to drown herself in the makeshift bath she put together at the beginning of the journey, more than a year-and-a-half ago now. She gets in and fills it up as high as it goes and weights herself down with heavy electrical objects made of metal. She lets the air go out of her and watches with detached fascination as everything begins to flicker and darken – and then, when it has almost gone entirely black, realizes suddenly that she can’t breathe, she can’t breathe, she has to
move! To get out of here! But none of her limbs will move. She tries to scream but there is no air in her lungs and she inhales a huge volume of water instead, chokes on it. This has taken a very long time and no time at all. What a strange, awful death she will claim for herself. She cannot move at all, no matter how hard she tries.

And there it is – the world, again, roaring back to her as she gags on the water and tries to breathe again, without much success. She is lying on the ground and somebody is pushing down on her chest, so hard she’s sure it’s going to break, and then something gives and she chokes it all out, all of the water that was in her, and gasps for breath.

Her hair, she realizes vaguely, has gotten long. It’s sticking to her, all the way down her back.

“Elizabeth,” David is saying, and she thinks it’s urgent, she thinks there’s a current of panic there, but who is she to say? She can trust nothing her ears tell her. Still, she feels almost like giggling. She is giggling. She didn’t mean to. But there it is. I knew you cared, she thinks of saying, but does manage to keep that from coming out.

She opens her mouth to speak and takes a huge gulp of air instead. “Okay,” she manages through a cough. “Okay.” She’s naked and David is crouched next to her with his big strange hand splayed across her chest.

“Thank you,” she whispers, and presses her hand against his with all her meager strength before she passes out.

* *

He has taken to watching her much more closely; he is never very far from her, now. She supposes it’s understandable, although she’s not going to try to kill herself again. It was unpleasant enough the first time. The old Elizabeth Shaw would never have tried that. But she is not the old Elizabeth Shaw anymore.

It happens, ironically, in one of the moments when she isn’t in his line of sight. She’s running and distracted by the music thrumming around her and she slips. She’s not entirely sure what happened but she does know that in the end it’s very simple: her ankle snaps in two.

She doesn’t have the presence of mind to yell anything in particular; she just lets the sound building up inside of her rip out. He’s there very quickly, and she doesn’t need to tell him what’s wrong before he’s seen it, decided what to do, and picked her up to take her down to the room where they’ve put the medical supplies.

They haven’t got any painkillers; she used them all up before. So he has to set the broken bones without any kind of anesthetic and the sound that comes out of her when he first moves them is barely human, so much so that it startles him into staring at her.

“Keep going,” she pants, and grips the table below her even harder.

They actually have plaster and bandages to make a cast, which takes longer than it should because he clearly doesn’t know what he’s doing. Or, well – he does, but he hasn’t done it before.

“Please talk,” she manages to get out. “I need you to – to distract me.”
He pauses. “What do you want to hear?” he asks. He sounds cautious. This should be less bad than – than the thing inside of her, but she’s out of adrenaline now. She was almost high, when that happened. Now she’s just a little girl with a broken bone.

“I don’t care,” she says. “I don’t care.”

“I,” David starts, and stops again. He looks dumbfounded. He doesn’t know what to say, she realizes.

“Tell me the story of Prometheus,” she says, almost slurring from the pain.

“Prometheus was a god,” he begins, and continues plastering her ankle. “He lived on the mountain with the other gods, and he looked down at humanity, which was without fire, and was cold and starving and blind in the darkness.

“So he stole some of his father’s fire and brought it down to them and they had light and heat, and so everything that was to be could be.” His voice is rhythmic and practiced. She wonders whether this is a verbatim reproduction of something he read once. She doesn’t care. She has no one else to listen to.

“And then?” she croaks.

“And then his father discovered that he had brought fire to humankind, which was previously only for the gods. And he decreed that he would be punished forever, and chained to the mountain where the eagles could come and rip him apart and eat his organs every day. And every night he would be healed, and in the mornings they would return. And there he remains, to this day.”

She’s panting still, but not as hard. He’s finished, she realizes distantly. Her eyes have slid out of focus; all she can see is the vague haze of the cold white light above her.

He smoothes her hair away from her forehead and rests his hand there for a moment. It isn’t cool but it feels cool against her overheated skin, and she closes her eyes.

She thinks she feels his thumb rubbing gently against her cheek, but she can’t be entirely sure. She’s slipping into sleep: it could be nothing more than the beginning of one of her strange, lonely dreams.

They have nothing that might be substituted in for a crutch, and certainly no crutches, and so she cannot get anywhere without David’s help. He is very obliging, almost comically gentlemanly. They get very good, the two of them, at moving around in tandem.

She misses running. She misses the deep thrum of the sounds she could hear, then, and she doesn’t care that they were not real, that they came from inside of her. She tries to call them back to her now but she cannot. Everything is silent.

David sits next to her bed when she sleeps, now, so that he can help her up whenever she needs to. This should bother her much more than it does. She is too tired to let much of anything bother her now. She has so little life left; it hardly seems worth it.
He has to help her bathe, too, and that is another thing that would, in another time, have bothered her very much. But the cast cannot get wet. It all seems trivial and stupid, in a way – what will she need that ankle for? – but they must keep going, it seems, until the end has been reached.

She can manage the top parts herself, but needs him to pull her trousers off. She does her underwear herself, thank you very much. And then she leans on him to get in the tub, leaving her broken ankle dangling precariously over the edge. He is less gentlemanly in these moments. He watches her without much expression but does not look away; it is what old novels would have called undecorous. But let him look. He is welcome to see her broken body and her long, ugly scar. His eyes linger on it sometimes. She lets her fingers run across it, familiar as the rest of her now. He follows her hand with his gaze.

Later, when she is lying in bed and he is sitting next to her in his chair, she pulls her shirt up and looks at it again. He seems to stiffen; she cannot really tell, anymore, what is him and what is her imagination, and has stopped trying to distinguish between the two.

“Why did you do it?” she asks, and looks up at him. He swallows, and runs his tongue over his lips.

“I asked him,” he says, syllables very precise, very empty, “what he would do to get his answers. And he said, anything.”

She would, she knows, have said the same thing. But she would have meant something quite different.

“He was a fool,” David continues. Elizabeth supposes this is so. They were a pair of fools, the two of them.

She looks down and rubs her fingers across her scar.

“You were a fool, too,” she says.

“Yes,” he agrees. She sees his hands twitch out of the corner of her eye. His wound can’t heal, can’t scar.

She moves her hands away from hers and looks down at it. It is a part of her; it may be the most important, the most real part of her. “Do you want to feel it?” she asks, without looking at him.

He says nothing and does nothing for a long time. And then, slowly, reaches out his steadier hand – still shaking, a little – and carefully runs the pads of his fingers over the grey scar tissue. She can’t feel them at all, except a little at the edges where they brush her unmarred skin.

He draws his hand back and she touches it once more before pulling her shirt down. Neither of them says anything, and eventually she falls asleep.

Her ankle has still not healed and they are running dangerously low on supplies. She spends most of her time in the control room watching the cosmos go by. David has them on track to go somewhere else, but she doesn’t know where, and she knows it will take them longer than the time they have left to get there, because he would have said otherwise. She is trying to reach a kind of
peace with her death before it comes. She does not want to be here anymore. But she does not want to die. She does not know what she wants.

David is never out of her sight. He knows what she does. He will keep going on, indefinitely, even after she has died. He does not want her to go. She cannot be sure of much of anything anymore but she is sure of this: he is going to be lonely.

The days pass. The universe, in front of her, is infinite. She has come to understand it now. She can feel it. It is like a glove turned inside-out in the darkness; it is the velvety inside, the spaceless space around it. It is beautiful and impossibly huge. It is more than she could ever have hoped to know. But she thinks she understands it. She sees it, at least, for what it is.

“Elizabeth,” David says one day very close to the end. “There are… not many supplies left.”

“I know,” she says. He pauses.

“We could put you in cryostasis,” he says baldly. It seems impossible but she had forgotten entirely the presence of that cold shell. It is the one room she closed off and did not reopen, not in all the time that has passed.

She looks at him. He is staring fixedly out at the stars. She knows so little about him, still, after all these many days and months and years. She cannot remember exactly what she said, before. She was categorical in her rejection of his suggestion. But there is nothing else for her now.

She has no proof that he will do what he can to save her. But she has always been gifted with belief in that which she cannot see. And so she chooses to believe that he is trustworthy.

She chooses to believe, she realizes, that there is – something – within him, something that might be a soul. She is not sure is she believes in the soul anymore at all. She is not sure she has one. She is not sure that David has what she has, if she has anything. But there is a spark inside of him. It exists.

He is going to be very lonely.

“All right,” she says.

* *

He carries her to the cryostasis chamber and lays her down inside of it, cast and all, and busies himself with programming it. She looks at the ceiling and listens to her breathing, her heartbeat. He finishes and comes to stand over her, hesitant. She smiles a little up at him. He doesn’t smile back.

“Could you talk to me while it goes?” she asks, and he nods before stepping back.

The two halves of the pod come up and lock above her. For a moment she is full of panic, rank with fear, but she can still see him, distorted, through the contraption, and she can hear his voice. He is speaking but she is not sure what he is saying. It does not really matter. She thinks she can hear something in his voice; she thinks she can hear misery. Or perhaps it is grief. He is going to miss her. It is getting colder; she can feel herself slipping away. She reaches her hand up and splays it against the cool transparent lid for a moment before even that is too much effort and she has to let her
arm fall back down to her side.

*Goodbye,* she thinks, *goodbye, goodbye,* as the world goes dark.

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