**bend the fabric of space and time**

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**bend the fabric of space and time**

by aRegularJo

Summary

the laws of love are a lot like the laws of physics. or something.

Notes

So. Hi. :)

I always (always) insist that drabbles are just that. Drabbles. That turn into one-shots. That turn into multichapters. That turn into this.

So here we are. A week after starting "To Mars and Back" as *just* a way to brain-dump funny or silly scenarios, I started plotting this out, and it wouldn't let me go. It's my attempt at filling in the canon, completely, on Johanbeck. I'm not sure it's good. It's neither fluffy nor angsty, and is kind of a new style for me. It's mostly-canon-compliant with TMAB, and definitely-mostly cannon-compliant to the book and movie. It'll be 7-8 parts, and each is titled after a property of science (mostly, physics). I've certainly found it fun to write, and hope you find it fun to read.

See the end of the work for more notes.
Magnetism

Magnetism is a fundamental property in most objects, but is also a force that arises between two objects sharing similar qualities, and allows the items to attract or repel each other. A fundamental property of metals, every material is to some extent influenced by the metals around it. Materials that are magnetic have unfilled electron shells; they are attracted to nearby materials that also have unfilled shells, which are used to create a complete set.

The only way out is in — Junot Diaz

Growing up, Beth Johanssen never put much stock in stories.

(That much should be obvious.)

When she was six and her sister Emily was four, their parents had driven them down to Disneyland. It was far — they lived in Washington State, the rural part, in a ranch house surrounded by pine trees and brooks and basically nothing else, and she remembered that it took two days, remembered the excitement of staying in the motel outside Sacramento, remembered the Twizzlers her parents bribed her with to keep her quiet on the car ride. She did not remember them explaining what Disneyland was to her, except that it was the “most magical place on Earth.” Twenty-odd years later, she could not tell you what she was expecting, but the princesses and the castles were decidedly not it (and Tomorrowland was pretty lame, honestly). On the third day, crashing from all the sugar and overtired from all the sun exposure she never got in the PNW, she finally had snapped at Cinderella, “You’re not a real princess. Your hair is a wig, too.”

Emily had burst out into tears and her mother had given Em some sort of psychobabble about how yes, technically, Cinderella was probably named Jessica and was probably born in Ohio and probably actually wanted to be starring on an NCIS franchise instead of getting her photo taken with four-year-olds (Beth may be embellishing the historical record, here), but that the magic of Disney had transformed her just temporarily into Cinderella for the afternoon. At the same time, her dad pulled Beth aside. “Bethy,” he’d said. “I know that the princesses aren’t your thing. But stories make people feel better. They give them hope. There’s nothing wrong with a good story.”

Even at six, she was skeptical. Intuitively, she simply knew that it was better to know how things actually were, to see the whole truth, that to delude yourself with hope. Hope got you what it got Jessica from Cincinnati: A wig and a job that reminded you, daily, of everything that you had hoped for. Hope was dangerous, flammable, uncontrollable.

Hope wasn’t the smart choice, and Beth was a smart girl.

Eventually this aversion to hope turned into an apathy about love. Put in context, it made sense: Love was definitely the emotion she felt toward her parents and toward her sister, all of whom cared for her but didn’t have the capacity, intellectual or emotional or financial, to support her. She loved them too; she wanted to connect with them. But it was painful: Her father, thoroughly decent in a way that just didn’t happen anymore, ran one of the last American napkin companies; her mother, warm and chatty and a nervous wreck, thought hugs could cure everything; her sister, pretty and blonde and assured of her place in the world, had aspirations of working in social media in Seattle or Portland. The chasm was painful and felt like failure; Beth didn’t like to fail at anything. Love didn’t fix any of those issues. Ergo, love was useless. Simple math.
(Later, she realized that it was only so hard because she loved them so much.)

They moved to a suburb of Seattle when she was ten, and her uncle, an engineer who worked at Amazon, picked up on the fact that she spent most of her days escaping into the Internet and playing Minecraft. He taught her her first code — a simple Java sequence — and suddenly, the world opened up to her. She had friends in high school (mostly nerdy boys in garage bands) and even dated a few, but coding and computers were It. They were what was next. So she graduated early, headed to MIT.

She discovered friends there, real friends, and discovered all the flexible permutations that allowed friends to function as surrogate family. The girls were her drinking buddies and her shoulders to cry on and her Thanksgiving invitations and the guys taught her how to be tough and to give zero fucks and what felt good and that she really really liked sex. She viewed friendship clinically as the best of both worlds: Not only did friends understand her and her addiction to Red Bull and desire to spend all day trying out new hacks, there was also a limit. If necessary, friends could be shed. She could move on. Nobody would be too worse for the wear; everyone at MIT understood that a job offer in Palo Alto or a stock option in Beijing took precedence over friendships. It was very forward-thinking of them. If there was an emptiness — and Beth would thoroughly argue there was not, thankyouverymuch — the excitement of this new life, this full life, more than compensated for it. If she was going to have this talent and this passion, of fucking course she would use it to do extraordinary things. Why the fuck not me became her punky feminist mantra. She was brilliant, and ballsy, and brash, blazing ahead toward a future that she, and she alone, could build and own.

TL;DR: Stories fed delusion. Hope caused pain. Better to drive life in the direction you wanted, and surround yourself with people who accepted that. Keep pushing, keep dreaming, keep accomplishing, and you’d surprise even yourself with the truths (the real truths, not the stories) you would make happen. Instead of putting her stock in stories or hope or love, she put it in herself, and in the power of a good Scotch (or a cry if there was no Scotch), and in the marvelous, magnificent worlds that she could code into creation with her fingers.

ii.

Chris Beck didn’t really get a chance to figure out whether or not he wanted to believe in stories.

(That’s probably a little less obvious.)

There were no stories in the Beck house, except those that kept up appearances (and those weren’t stories. They were true, dammit.). For a reason he could never quite access — loyalty, duty, passivity, a desire to fix things — Chris always went along with this. His father, the unsuccessful son of generations of very successful lawyers and politicians, worked in insurance. He was pretty good at it, actually, but he was mean and small in the way that only a very disappointed rich male could be. He was also banging his secretary (seriously. Chris was pretty confident that he had slept with every. Single. Secretary. He ever had. Even Don Draper didn’t sleep with Peggy.). His mother, while lovely and fun and incandescent in a crowd, was frequently insecure (unsurprising, given the situation with the secretaries), and those insecurities turned brittle with alcohol. There was money, but not nearly as much as the house in Brookline and the private schools made it seem. Grandparents on both sides, fed up with their own children and appalled at the treatment of grandchildren, fluttered in and out with presents and logic, unsure of their authority impose order. Mostly, they brought presents and some stability. But the divorce, when Chris was fourteen and Amy ten, made the situation even worse. Lawyers were expensive, and his parents were proud and petty and equated money with happiness and insisted the other parent could have neither.

He was a naturally bright but bored student, and his grades in any class that had a homework
requirement illuminated that contradiction. His GPA was mediocre for Nobles. Killer SAT scores, though, and a letter from his grandfather (an alum) got him into Dartmouth pretty easily. It did not, however, give him any financial aid. His grandparents — the best people he ever knew, before he met the crew — were slightly embarrassed and offered to help with most of it, but he wanted to do his part. A twisted knee ruled out any basketball money; on a lark, he wrote an essay that landed him an Air Force Reserves scholarship. For fifteen grand annually, he just had to join an ROTC on his campus. His grandfather, who had flown fighter jets in Vietnam (even though he could have dodged the draft, if he wanted to, given family connections and his own medical education at Harvard) cried actual honest-to-god tears. Chris had never seen his grandfather cry — not when he got into Dartmouth, not when he led the basketball team to the state championship junior year — so he figured this must be the right choice.

At school, the extra ROTC class and the weekend of duty monthly counterbalanced the effects of his fraternity and general Dartmouth debauchery. The cynicism and diffidence that had marked his high-school years — really, he had skated by on charm and a killer smile — hardened into swagger and genuine honor and a serious commitment to his studies. He was popular too, his crucible of a broken home forging a personality that was so cocky-but-easygoing that it made up for the fact that he was a serious science nerd who aced Orgo without breaking a sweat (he was smart, even by Dartmouth standards, and nobody really knew it, which was what he preferred). He did not think deeply or optimistically, he simply looked forward.

One early morning at a party, a guy in the frat named David Duffy starting barfing — really heaving it all up — while they were all up on the roof. He tripped and fell two stories into a clutch of shrubbery. Chris found him, carefully checked to make sure he hadn’t broken his neck, held down his tongue and made him vomit. At the hospital, one of the ER doctors told him that without his quick thinking, David probably would have sustained brain damage, and he thought, for the first time in a long time, This feels good.

Two years of being a good Dartmouth frat boy morphed into a streak of serial monogamy that lasted until he arrived at NASA. He enjoyed girls, enjoyed life, knew that nobody really cared about you. You could make others happier — and cause yourself less pain — if you simply focused on helping them. Everyone had damage, everyone had hurt. That didn’t make it interesting. You didn’t need to talk about it.

(Of course, if pressed, he would eventually admit that at least half of his girlfriends had done the breaking-up. Sienna, his girlfriend for the first year and a half of med school, even told him that it was because he was clinical, overly focused on work, and unwilling to let her in. So. There’s that.)

And about his family, it’s not a particularly interesting or surprising ending: After the divorce, his father remarried (not to a secretary) and stopped speaking to any of them, which turned out to be a great thing for him and Amy and his mom. His mother eventually dried up, but it was a literal as well as a metaphorical act. She was puckered, and tired, and sallow. Too much of anything — noise, stress, carbs, emotions — caused her to sit down and flutter a hand over her heart. She loved her children, she just could not be there for them. Thus, they were there for each other. His grandparents, married for sixty-one years, passed away within two months of each other when he was a senior in college. His biggest regret was that his grandfather died before he got his acceptance to the Yale MD/Ph.D. program. In his honor, he joined the Air Force Reserves, too. The day he graduated, he went up onto the roof of his frat house, where David Duffy had nearly died, and drank most of a bottle of whiskey. Experimentally he threw the bottle far away when it was empty. It made a loud noise, then shattered and quickly disappeared into the darkness. Just like me, here, he thought blearily. Time to move on.

iii.
If her uncle was the first man to dramatically change her life (by teaching her to code) and Chris was the third (by being him), Brett Parker was the second, and the link between the two. Formidable and swaggeringly confident with a leonine beard, he was the closest thing Silicon Valley had to a real Tony Stark. When she was twenty years old and newly arrived at Stanford, intent on starting a software company that would eventually be bought out for millions of dollars, he found her at a conference on advanced systems theory after his talk bored her to sleep. He shook her awake, irritated, and the conversation — honestly, she remembered zero details, so she’s not much help here — convinced him that he wanted to hire her. The conversation was much more interesting than his speech, so she accepted, thrilled and intrigued by his desire to design a spacecraft that could take humans to Mars. Fucking Mars. It was insane. She left Stanford four weeks into her Master’s. Her parents flipped, when she told them at Christmas.

She worked with him for more than three years, taking Hermes’s software from an idea to a reality on a tight, nearly impossible deadline from NASA. He was the most magnetic person she ever met — the mind of Jobs with the charisma of a Kennedy. Watching him work a room was like watching a magician saw a woman in half. At least three-fourths of Silicon Valley — male or female, gay or straight — had a crush on him, so Beth wrote off whatever feelings she had for him as his own … stupid irresistible magnetism. But she started noticing that he treated her slightly differently than others: He brought her coffee, laughed at her jokes, displayed weakness, showed appreciation. She would sometimes catch him staring at her, when she was maniacally typing code, or worrying the corner of her mouth with her teeth, or pacing with a Red Bull. “You’re fucking amazing, you know that, right?” he blurted out one night after watching her school three guys, all older than her, when they fucked up a string.

“I know,” she answered, because she did, but heat curdled in her stomach at the look in his eyes. Without warning, he’d lunged forward, capturing her lips in a kiss. She kissed him back, harder. She wasn’t going to let anyone insinuate that she slept her way to the top, so they dated quietly for the next two years and nine months. She was busy leading the Hermes contract, while he was busy leading the entire fucking company, so it wasn’t like they had too much down time. She approached it in the same give-no-fucks, gimlet-eyed manner she approached everything, and it was good. The sex was great, he was an amazing person who made her laugh, and she retained all of her independence. He was considerate, in awe of her talents and potential, appreciative of her needs and desire to do her own thing, and hella rich. It should have been enough. Hell, it should have been everything.

And yet …

The space project made her hungry. She’d always pushed herself, and she’d created a system, whole-cloth, that could propel man to Mars. The astronauts who would utilize her software, though — they would get to have the real adventure. She knew she wouldn’t be of much use with the experiments NASA wanted them to carry out; that her mid-level MIT courses in physics and biology were nothing compared to the brain trust NASA was surely already assembling. But they needed someone to fix their computers. If something went wrong in space, knowing how to do more than simply reboot the computer system would be optimal (Just turn it off and back on, she imagines one astrophysicist saying to another. Hold the button down a little longer.).

Whatever primordial urge that had driven her quest for truth in everything was pushing her farther than she ever anticipated going. And it was fucking exciting.

There was the matter of Brett, though. After two years (and with the Hermes OS complete), they were finally, quietly, an established item. After spending ten hours coding in sweatpants and eating popcorn and Red Bull, she would put on a nice cocktail dress and down canapes and red wine with
his Connections. Definitionally, she loved him: She connected with him deeply, cared about what happened to him, considered his needs when making her own decisions. And he was a good guy. She liked him, she liked being with him. All that together meant she loved him.

At one of those parties, though, wearing a dress that goddamned sparkled and expensive shoes by a designer whose name she could not pronounce, she suddenly tuned into his introduction of her: “This is Beth,” he’d said, swinging an arm around her shoulder and kissing her temple. “She’s my best coder. And my girlfriend.”

And suddenly, without thinking, the phrasing made her sick. She was defined in relation to him. If she stayed her, in Silicon Valley, with him, everything she did would be framed by him. He said he respected her independence, but of course he did: It was amusing, not a threat to him. He loomed large over every aspect of her life. His presence constrained her.

And for a girl like Beth Johanssen, nothing was scarier than that ceiling. It was the same old definition of love, where love was used as a refractive medium to bend you to another’s will: Obligation, duty would trap you and guilt you until you lost your own identity. Your own truth.

(Later, much later, she realized that when she really loved someone, she wouldn’t mind being defined in relation to him. Wife, mother, partner, crewmate were labels she could be proud of. If you really loved someone, and it worked, you didn’t have to lose your identity to be with them, to be a part of them. But she didn’t know that yet.)

So the next day, she called up Bruce at JPL — they were tight — and inquired about whether or not there might be room for the person who got Hermes online in the astronaut program. Vince Kapoor called her up the next day. If she accepted a position at JPL and worked on her physical conditioning, they could fast-track her into the next training group, Group 27. She broke up with Brett and moved to Pasadena the day after that.

iv.

Beck hadn’t really planned on becoming an astronaut, but it was one of those things that afterwards looked like a tumble into inevitability. When he started medical school he wanted to cure cancer, like every good smartass doctor. But while there were bitchy little shits of challenges still in the research about cancer, most of the big, good questions were already solved. But add space to the equation and suddenly it’s a party. Plus, there’s just something badass about space (Watney and Martinez understood this innately, as well). One of his pros has a connection to NASA and with the Air Force thing, boom! Everything into place. Per usual, he did not think things through. He moved forward.

So he cannibalized the order of everything in his program, finished the MD entirely first, and started his research phase as he started his three-year residency at MD Anderson. Once the oncology residency was done, he joined up with Group 26 and arranged to finish the research phase of his cellular microbiology Ph.D. at NASA over the next two years, flying back and forth to Yale.

Houston was bland to the point of offending his New England sensibilities, but he eventually cultivated a great group of guy friends, astronauts and not, who were down for everything Texas had to offer: barbecuing, paragliding, jet-skiing, hiking (he carefully did not think about the psychology behind being an adrenaline junkie.). He started to get into triathlons, and all his friends’ wives — he was at the point where all his friends have wives — had Great Girls to set him up with. He accepted their dates and enjoyed himself, but honestly, between NASA training and his Ph.D. research, he was a little busy. Things got dropped by the third date.

(“You are such a catch,” Marissa Martinez exclaimed the first time he met her, at a Group 26 get-
to-know-you barbecue, as she squeezed his arm muscle. “Seriously, Rick hasn’t knocked me up yet. Say the word and I will leave him.” He adored the Martinezes.)

Astronaut training was no joke (not that he was expecting easy; he never expected easy). General training was eighteen months with the other seven members of your group, and "general" training involved a lot of dates with the Vomit Comet and underwater EVA simulators. Since Ares I launched three months into training, there were a lot of interviews and appearances, and he quickly figured out that NASA was using these to figure out who might be the best representative, who could go to Mars and come back ready to withstand the interviews and testimony and scrutiny. He knew he was naturally adept at this: a smile and a quip and people stopped asking questions.

(Annie Montrose, at one point, suggested the one thing he could do to improve his impeccable public image was to get a girlfriend or wife. “Or boyfriend. But you need something to humanize you. You’re like a car commercial. No flaws, but no interesting angles either.” He laughed. She hadn’t meant it as a joke.)

Martinez became his closest buddy in training, and while it was technically possible one or both could be selected for Ares II, neither had any illusions: Henderson from Group 24 had been second-in-line to pilot Ares I, and NASA wanted Beck to finish his PhD before sticking him on Hermes for more than a year. He finagled two trips to SpaceX as part of that research, though, and to work on his EVA skills. EVAs were fucking exhilarating, and specialization gave him an edge for Ares III. Getting recruited for SpaceX means six more months of prep, straight out of Basic; the people who minded this most were the wives of his buddies who wanted to set him up.

His first launch was terrifying; he nearly threw up into his helmet as the g’s hit him. But the six weeks were phenomenal. After a lifetime of studiously disengaging with his life as a survival tactic, space awakened passions and emotions he’d purposefully deadened a long time ago. Doing somersaults in zero gravity when nobody was watching was fun. Sleeping while zipped into a standing sleeping bag was fun. Using an MMU on an EVA was fun. He initially diagnosed this emotion as joy; toward the end of the trip, he realized a second word fit better: contentment. He felt content in space. He’d found a purpose. For the first time he could remember, he was at home.

When he returned home, Group 27 was beginning Basic, and Group 26 was given orders to take them out for dinner and “whatever the hell else you think of” as part of orientation. “Just don’t make any of them quit,” Andrew, in charge of the training programs, warned. “And don’t get arrested.”

“Who, us?” Martinez fluttered his eyelashes, and Chris laughed.

They tell the new group to meet at Jack’s, a local barbecue hole-in-the-wall that sold pitchers for under fifteen bucks, and secretly agreed to arrive early, for solidarity and to get a jump on the boozing. Even this savvy, though, couldn’t beat Watney, who approached them, beers in hand, when they entered in a pack.

“You guys look like the Jets,” Watney cracked. “All you need is letter jackets.”

Martinez cocked his head. “You see I’m brown, bro? I’m a Shark.”

Watney shrugged, unflappable. “By the end they all end up friends, right?”

And with that, Beck’s been replaced as Martinez’s best bro.

(They’re still close. More than close. Their kids grow up together. But still.)

The rest of the group, with one exception, arrived exactly on time, because astronauts were chosen in
part because of their respect for authority. Nobody in the group surprised Beck: An Asian woman with a Ph.D. in stats; two ex-military, one male and one female; a funny black guy; a serious black guy; and the token doctor, a Samoan guy four inches taller and forty pounds heavier than Beck. By the second pitcher, Martinez took a mental headcount. “You all are missing one, right?” he asked. “The girl — I’ve seen her around NASA. Spiky.”

“That’s Johanssen,” Ropati said. “I think she said she was going to take a nap after training.” Everyone in Group 27 made an *Ah, OK* face.

“Does that mean something?” Beck asked.

Han shrugged. “You ever try to wake up a rock? A real rock, not a metaphorical rock or a large person or whatever. An actual, honest-to-god rock.”

“You mean like, in the ground?” Beck checked, faux-seriously. “Like, a hard rock?”

“In the ground,” she confirmed, the joke flying right over her head. Beck hoped at that moment they wouldn’t be on the same Ares mission. “That’s what waking up Johanssen is like.”

“She’s lovely before her fourth cup of coffee. Peachy, really,” Watney said.

“Spreading lies about me again, Watney?” she cracked from somewhere behind Beck.

“They all turned. It was quite the entrance.

He did not fall in love with her at first sight. In fact, he didn’t even remember what she wore that night (it was jeans, a marled grey T-shirt, a dark blue blazer, and boots. If interrogated, though, he probably would have guessed that anyways.). But he remembered that smirk. Her rangey posture and roving eyes. The way she announced herself. How she grabbed Watney’s beer and dove into the conversation. Eventually, she turned to him, a triumphant grin still on her face after her latest dig at Watney. “I’m Beth,” she smiled. “Johanssen. Nice to meet you.”

“Chris Beck,” he managed. He decided he’d like to get to know her.

**v.**

Astronaut training was not exactly what Beth expected.

For one, she had to be up at 5:30 every morning.

For a *group run.*

Other than that, it was disorienting in all sorts of ways. The amount of physical activity she had to undertake was draining. The lack of computer time — her sustenance since adolescence — was dizzying. The things she had to learn, the harsh Houston sun, the nonstop schedule — these things were new and raw and challenging in a way she hadn’t faced in years, not since she’d found her purpose in programming and stopped having to try and force herself to connect in ways that just didn’t make sense to her. For the first time since the breakup, she wanted to code, music blasting, from Brett’s bed. Preferably without pants.

She was suddenly very not-good at things anymore, which was something she hated. But she still wanted this, wanted space, so, so badly. It didn’t make sense to her.

There was also the forced extroversion — ostensibly, it was to help them all prepare for spending more than a year in the same 4,000 square feet with the same five people. But she was not used to
having so little agency over her relationships and her time; she was used to gently wiggling people to
an equilibrium that gave her enough breathing room to generate a functional level of affection for
someone else. The only saving grace was the knowledge that she chose this.

The dinner with Group 26 was one of those mandatory activities. She understood why it was so
important to get to know the more-seasoned astronauts (if she made Ares III — which she was
feeling confident about — chances were several from Group 26 would make the list as well), but she
couldn’t say she was looking forward to a sticky dive bar with tasteless pitchers of beer. So when
they’d had a spare two hours before the mandatory activity, she’d seized the opportunity to be alone.
She’d flopped on the bed in her eggshell-colored apartment.

And promptly woke up. Almost three hours later.

“Fuck,” she hissed, because NASA did not take kindly to tardiness, and hadn’t taken kindly to what
Annie Montrose, in their first media training, had termed her “hacker chick/good girl dichotomy.”
(Brett had always referred to it as her “wide-eyed smartass tendency.” Stop thinking about Brett, she
scolded herself. It had been three years.) Why the hell hadn’t Watney at least messaged her? Of all
the people in Group 27, she got along with him the best. She checked her phone. Dammit, he had.
An hour ago. She threw on some clothes, jumped in the car, and peeled off.

It was a tiny joint, and they weren’t hard to spot: There was something about astronauts that drew the
eye to them. Even the nerdiest, the most academically decorated, were not unattractive, and had a
confidence and dynamism that made others say I want to be a part of that. Watney was making fun
of her caffeine addiction, which was a perfect jumping-in point, and she managed to slide into the
group, perfectly confident and badass.

“Take your own beer,” Watney groused as she grabbed his. The group — fourteen in total — was
slightly too big for just one conversation, and she started talking to the subsection Watney was with:
Giles from their group, a guy named Martinez from the other group, and a fortyish woman named
Strumpf from Group 26. Finally, though, she turned to the guy next to her. Wow. He was pretty, with
a bit of a smirky, cooler-than-thou frat boy vibe (though he had to have a serious nerd/overachiever
streak, if he was in NASA). And great lips, which was not something she ever really considered.
Okay, then.


“Dr. Chris Beck,” he said, proffering a hand with a smile.

“Oh, we’re using titles now?” she quipped. “I didn’t realize NASA was this formal.”

“Clearly you’re new around here then,” he smiled. “If you ever run into Teddy Sanders, he is only to
be addressed as Your Excellency.”

"Oh yeah? What about Vincent?” She’d met him a couple times — with his calm vibe and thoughtful
approach, she'd liked him immediately.

"Zen Master," Chris said, without missing a beat.

"Can I get Interplanetary Hacker Extraordinaire?"

"You've been to other planets already?” He raised an eyebrow.

"Touché.”

"The way your Group tells it, it should be something more like World's Best Sleeper or Chief
"Caffeinator," he replied.

"They're so dead," she exclaimed, blushing involuntarily. He kind of had that effect on people, she'd noticed already.

"You wanna know something?" He asked, his voice dropping into a suggestive whisper.

"Whaddaya got?" She arched an eyebrow.

He leaned forward, his chin practically on her shoulder. Her breath stilled as he drew near. "Besides Watney, they're all terrified of you, for reasons escaping my understanding. You seem pretty cool, actually. But I think you could take them, if you want. I'd back you up in a fight."

She threw back her head and laughed, overjoyed at his words. Watney, who had a sixth sense for gossip, leans forward. "Secrets, secrets are no fun," he chanted, like a ten-year-old. "Spill, Johanssen."

She turned toward him. "Are you scared of me?" she asked, leaning in menacingly.

"Absolutely," he affirmed, and Beth laughed, delighted. "You're a weird one."

Another round of pitchers and platters of barbecue soaking cornbread arrived then, the rib meat practically dropping off the bone. Everyone dug in, no plates necessary. Ten minutes into sucking sauce off her fingernails, Beth realized something: For the first time since arriving in Houston, she was enjoying herself.

The whole group stayed out for several hours, but eventually Han went home to her husband, Joyce to his four dogs, and the rest petered away to their various commitments and responsibilities. It's rounding midnight, when Chris asked Martinez, "Where's Marissa? You not heading out?"

"Nah, she’s in Philly visiting her sister. Mercida’s muy loco," he shuddered. "Very happy she didn’t come here for their girls’ weekend."

"You guys want to hit up another bar?" Watney suggested, even though he's been on every 5:30 am group run with her this week.

Beck shrugged. "I’m down."

"Me too," she added quickly. She didn’t want this night to end.

"You don’t have a Dungeons and Dragons cosplay to catch?" Watney asked innocently.

"Not unless you have some plants to watch grow. We’re going to Gilligan’s," she stood, swaying slightly. There had been a lot of beer pitchers. "Also," she points at him. "I challenge you to Duck Hunt."

Because they didn’t trust themselves to drive, they ubered to the next bar, where they spent another hour playing the vintage games at Gilligan’s, from Duck Hunt to Dance Dance Revolution. As Martinez and Watney faced off to several classic Backstreet Boys songs (cheered on by female admirers, naturally — and they were playing that crowd), though, she suddenly needed air and a break. She’d forgotten she was an introvert, she surmised. "Want to step outside?" she asked Chris. "It’s too hot in here."

"Sure," he said, leading her outside and sitting on a concrete parking block. “So. Why’d you join NASA?” It was, more than anything, simply polite conversation.
She sighed, and sat next to him, kicking her legs out in front of her. *Computers* and *Brett* and *My dad* and *Cinderella and her bad wig* were all possible starting points, but they seemed convoluted and overwhelming to her brain, fuzzed as it was from alcohol and exhaustion and emotion. Instead she said simply, “I wanted to see the world from an entirely different perspective. Plus it’s fucking space, you know?”

“Yeah,” he breathed, and she could tell he really did know. He changed tones abruptly, his whole body language shifting as well, becoming more upbeat but more guarded. “I was just in it for the space ice cream, actually. You know the foil-packed stuff they gave you as a kid? Yeah, turns out NASA doesn’t even stock that. So don’t ask.”


He chuckled, too. “Nah. When I was a kid I wanted to be a firefighter. This is entirely unexpected, I promise. Just … it was what came next, I guess.”

She nodded. She got that. They chatted for a while, mostly about Houston-area grocery stores. He was nice, and easy to talk to, and tried to help her find the SpaceX station floating above them. The night sky loomed large and clear, unfathomable in its vastness. She swallowed. She could be out there in just a few short years.

Around two, the owner manhandled Watney and Martinez out the door, pissed as shit. “Fuckin’ astronauts,” he grumbled. “Don’t you guys have to be up at 4:30 to run?” he asked Beck, still crouched over the parking beam with her.

“Just the blonder one,” he said, pointing at Watney. “And her, of course.” He swung the finger around toward her. They didn't tomorrow (it was Saturday and the run was at right) but she didn't say anything.

“Good luck,” the guy sniffed, retreating into the bar to close up.

“Beck! Beck, man, you fucking missed it!” Watney yelled, bolstered and boisterous from the massive quantities of alcohol he’d consumed. “I killed Martinez. Killed. He could not have been more dead than if he’d dropped off fifteen stories, had a brain aneurysm, and got stabbed at the same time. Dead.” His tone was wheezing and gleeful.

“We should get them home,” Chris said, his bones popping as he stood. He extended a hand. “Ready?”

She took it gratefully. “Yeah,” she replied. As he pulled her upright, she realized she might have meant that a couple of ways. “Yeah. I am.” She smiled.

His hand curled under her fingers, like a prayer, for just a second too long. His eyes darkened momentarily, and she willed herself not to flinch or move too much. Casual. “Good,” he finally said with a smirk, before turning, yelling something to his boys and swinging an arm around both of them.

She smiled at the trio, a stab of affection for all of them hitting them in her heart. These dorks were just fun to be around. She realized she wouldn’t mind spending a year and a half in space with them. Even though she prized her space and two-hour catnaps. It was a bizarre realization.

And Chris … There was nothing romantic, there. NASA had a strict anti-fraternization policy, which
she was completely on board with. You could be selected at any time for a mission, and you had no
say over who else was on the crew. It made perfect sense, especially to someone who dated her boss
in the past. No, she told herself, she was just … glad he was also around NASA. The ordeal felt a
little less lonely. No, she re-pinpointed the emotion. It felt a little more like a real home.

(And, who knew. Maybe they’d hook up in five years. She bet it would be hot.)

Either way, she suspected he would be a significant part of her story.
Thermodynamism

Chapter Notes

First off, thanks SO much for the fantastic response to the first chapter! I'm so glad everyone like it.

Second, I'm really sorry this one is so long. Each chapter is broken down pretty deliberately, and this one got super long. It'll be the only one of this length.

Third, this chapter is brought to you by the meddling, Earthbound spouses of Ares III. You're welcome.

Fourth — if you make it to the end, please let me know what you think.

When two initially isolated systems in separate but nearby regions of space, each in thermodynamic equilibrium with itself but not necessarily with each other, are then allowed to interact, they will eventually reach a mutual equilibrium. In this thermodynamic process, the sum of the entropies (energy) of the two systems is greater than either's initial entropies.

The first time we made love it felt like dropping my keys on the table after a long trip — Lena Dunham

vi.

For the 565 days after they first met until Ares III mission training officially began, Beth Johanssen was an ever-growing presence of Chris Beck’s life. If he was in the training facilities for the day, he might grab a few minutes with her in the caf; if Group 27 was over in the biomed labs, she would seek him out for a quick hey and to make fun of his experiments. They inevitably ended up near each other at various all-corps meetings and presentations. And after the night at Gilligan’s, Martinez put her and Watney on the guest list for his wife’s monthly dinner parties, so he saw her socially at least every third Saturday (and really more frequently than that, because the Martinezes knew how to party). In April, she sought him out to wish him good luck on his upcoming SpaceX trip. “You’ll miss my birthday party, though,” she smirked after he said thank you .

“Be lucky you’re not in space for that,” he warned. “Space birthday cake is disgusting.” He’d had it on SpaceX for Henry’s birthday.

She smiled. “Still want it one day, though,” she responded lightly. So he raided the NASA databases, found the exact date of her birthday, and took a photo of himself on an EVA that day. With the photo-editing skills she probably possessed at age five, he painstakingly typed You are (almost) out of this world! over it. Under the photo, he typed, Happy birthday. Here’s to celebrating one up here soon . She’d emailed back Best birthday card ever!!!!, along with a photo of her and her group and a huge chocolate cake.

After his return they started drifting toward each other at extracurricular functions too — she was fun to talk to, easy to hang out with, and had a snarky sense of humor. Whatever the event, they’d
inevitably drift to the side, grab an abandoned bottle of tequila from the bar, and make fun of everyone else. Or they’d hike a couple hundred yards ahead of the group. Or hang out on the pier of the lake as it got cold and everyone else headed to the cabin. She didn’t seem to trust many people, but she was more open around him, and he liked that and liked her.

Ares II returned in November to muted fanfare (Mars was passe, apparently, he realized glumly), and Annie planned a goodwill gala to show off the returners and raise money for the NASA Spouses’ Fund, which supported STEM programs in Houston schools or something (Marissa Martinez, of course, was active in it). Marissa set both him and Watney up with friends of hers, though reminded them both that, “I don’t have an endless supply of single friends.”

“As long as they don’t have any illusions,” Mark quipped. “My middle name is Love ‘Em and Leave ‘Em, you know.”

“How have you never been divorced?” Martinez asked.

“Talent,” he shrugged.

Tilly, a first-year associate at Marissa’s law firm, was young, about twenty-seven, and in a slinky silver dress. She was perfect date material, asked a lot of questions about SpaceX and his research and his triathlons. Watney, who pretended every drink he brought over from the open bar was “on him,” kept them well hydrated. Beck tried to focus on Tilly, to listen to her stories about her year teaching in Peru, to ask her questions about her work on immigration. He was distracted though, as he kept an eye out for Johanssen.

Per usual she was one of the later arrivals — alone and in a blue leopard-printed dress — and Watney cat-called to both embarrass her and get her attention. He watched her greet Watney and Ava, then quickly turned when he heard Tilly’s voice. “You were saying? Sorry,” he responded.

“I was just wondering if you’d traveled anywhere fun recently.”

“Mostly work travel,” he smiled. “Hitting up labs, going to conferences. And, you know, the occasional trip to space. I’m heading back to SpaceX in February.”

“That’s tough,” she replied. “No offense, but you kind of look like you could use a vacation.”

“None taken,” he assured her. “Right now … I’m pretty focused on making the Mars expedition, actually. After that, I’m going to the beach for a month.”

“So, in four years?” she raised an eyebrow.

He demurred flirtatiously with an eyebrow waggle. “That’s one way of looking at it.”

She laughed, then sighed. He knew this would go nowhere; luckily, so did she (he thought). “Let’s go talk to Mark and Ava.”

An hour later, after more circulating and even some dancing, he spotted Beth alone on the deck overlooking JSC. He grabbed a bottle of champagne and two flutes and headed her way. “Hey,” he said, approaching. Her arms were folded over the railing, her black heels dangling from her fingertips.

“Hey,” she turned, her smile broadening when she saw his haul. “Oh my god. You’re the best.”

“Of course,” he replied, pouring her a glass. “Cheers. To Ares II.” They clinked.
“And hopefully Ares III,” she said, taking a long draw.

“That too."

“So Tilly’s really great,” she started, very genuinely. “Where the hell did you find her?”

“Marissa. Where else?”

Beth laughed. “This is what, the third friend she’s set you up with?”

“That’s since you started. We’re talking more like … eight.”

“You’re such a heartbreaker, Dr. Beck,” she teased. “Must be tough being that handsome.”

He raised his hands in self-defense. “I’m not trying to be,” he protested. “It’s not like I have actual time to date anyone at NASA. You know this. Your schedule’s just as bad as mine.”

“Please. It’s worse. You no longer have to get up at 5:30 for a group run ,” she retorted. “Anyways, plenty of people in NASA have relationships. Practically all of them. That’s an excuse.”

“So what’s yours?”

She rolled her eyes. “I don’t have an excuse, because I’m not defensive. I have reasons.”

“Sound pretty defensive right now-ow,” he sing-songed.

“Not at all,” she said, and looked him straight in the eye, because she’s Beth. “I was in a relationship. Three years. It was pretty serious, he was great, I thought I loved him, and I realized I … didn’t want it. The relationship, I mean. And if I didn’t want that, with him, if I didn’t feel I could be myself and I was still not happy … Then it’s not going to work with anyone.” She laughed, lightly.

Oh . That … was interesting information (and information, he knew, he probably shouldn’t be interested in). He took a moment to try and figure out what to do or say, and his freeze discombobulated her, shook her honesty into self-deprecation. She laughed again, much more self-consciously, and the moment was broken. “I don’t know why I tell you things like this. Anyways. Not an excuse. A fact. And I’m not breaking the hearts of every first-year associate in Houston while I’m at it.”

“That’s the other thing,” he recovered with a chuckle, and looked around quickly. “So young !” He was relieved, to be back on sturdier emotional footing with a coworker he (let’s be honest) barely knew.

“She’s twenty-eight. She’s a year older than me.” She shook his head at his hopelessness, and they moved further away from the topic.

“Yeah, but you play video games popular with teenaged boys in 1984. That makes you at least sixty, mentally.”

“Jerk,” she laughed.

They stood out there for at least another hour — at one point, he loaned her his suit jacket because she started to freeze — talking about everything and nothing. As they headed in (him carrying her shoes, and he knew what that looked like), Marissa greeted them. “There you are!” she said. “Where’ve you been?”

“I needed air and Beck kept me company,” Beth explained, sliding his jacket off and trading it for
“Well, the principal of Twinbrook Middle School was looking for you — he was wondering if you could come talk to the eighth-grade girls about coding.”

“Of course. Excuse me,” Beth said, handing her champagne flute back to Chris and heading over toward him.

Marissa’s eyes flicked between her retreating back and him, holding the two glasses and his jacket like a putz, and her fist flashed out and punched his bicep. “You’re an idiot,” she informed him, unimpressed. “And I’m not setting you up with any more of my friends.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he protested weakly.

To her credit, Marissa didn’t say anything else (and didn’t try setting him up again, which was its own blessing).

vii.

Despite her incredibly junior status (like, she was basically the middle schooler who walked onto Varsity and was waiting for a coach to tell her to go home) Beth wasn’t too worried about being selected for Ares III. They needed a systems engineer on board in case the giant computer failed and — I’m sorry, did you actually fucking design said giant computer? Nope? Alright then. So yeah, she wasn’t too concerned.

Mostly, it was a concern for the astronauts whom she’d become close to. Martinez was likely on board no matter what, but Watney and Beck were up in the air. Beck was a decently safe choice (he was one of five physicians among the fifty-three eligible NASA, JAXA, ESA, and ISRO astronauts, and the only one who also specialized in EVAs) no matter what the mission’s … well, whatever the mission’s mission was.

But Watney, the fucking botanist-slash-mechanical engineer, was a wildcard. If there was a strong plant or soil component, sure, he’d go. Lord knows someone needed to try and grow ferns or potatoes in the Martian soil at some point. But if it was more atmospheric or physical in nature, he probably would get held till a later mission.

Group 27 was scheduled for evac and emergency drills the day that Teddy Sanders would make the announcement, but the instructors let them partially undress and watch the announcement. After Teddy thanked about sixty-two dignitaries, he said, “I’m pleased to announce that Ares III will be the first mission commanded by a woman, Naval Captain Melissa Lewis. In addition to a decorated career of service to country and science on U.S. submarines in the Arctic, Commander Lewis also has a Ph.D. in geology from CalTech. A seasoned member of Astronaut Group 25, she had made four trips to SpaceX, for a total of six months in orbit, and also speaks widely on the issue of girls in science. For these reasons, as well as her personal qualities of leadership, honor, and duty above all, Commander Lewis is the perfect person to lead a mission focused on understanding the recent geologic and sedimentologic history of our nearest neighbor.”

Geologic and sedimentologic! Dirt and soil. Watney had a fighting chance. She was fucking stoked. Across the room, Han (whose specialty was geology, like the Commander’s, and therefore unneeded) winced in disappointment, and Ropati put his arm around Giles, who was an
atmosphericist and military (useless and no longer an edge, respectively). She and Watney surreptitiously fist-bumped.

“I don’t understand,” her mother said (much later), and Beth sighed, propping her feet up on the breakroom table. The space was empty, thank the fucking gods. “Your specialty isn’t rocks or dirt. How are you so confident?”

“My specialty is the ship, Mom. I designed the operating system; if something happens, I’m absolutely the best person to get the computer back online. Isn’t that who you want fixing the ship if something goes wrong four months into the mission?”

“It’s who NASA wants fixing the mission, I’m sure. I don’t want my daughter fixing it, period.”

“Well, we’ll just see,” she placated, because that was valid. “But I’m feeling pretty good. I just got my first interview request today. I’m meeting with Mitch Henderson and Commander Lewis tomorrow and the shrinks the next day.” She shifted. “Anyways. What else is new?”

“Not too much. Emily and Tommy visited last weekend. I think he’s going to propose soon. If you go to Mars you’ll miss your sister’s wedding.”

“Well, tell him to propose soon, then; I wouldn’t leave until June of 2035.” Watney and Beck entered, and she gave them a small wave and an eyeroll — can you believe this conversation?

“Have you talked to Brett lately?” her mother asked suddenly. “I liked him, quite a bit, you know.”

“No in ...more than three years,” she said, trying to be patient, and also cognizant that Watney was probably listening. “I know you liked him.”

“I saw on the Internet he’s dating a supermodel now. A supermodel, Beth.”

“I saw that too,” she struggled to keep her tone neutral.

“You know, Beth, he really cared —”

“Mom, I know he did, but remember: I broke up with him, OK? If he wants to date a supermodel now, that’s great. Truly.” Yup, Watney’s ears definitely perked up at that. “I gotta go. I’ll talk to you soon. Bye.”

“OK, who did you break up with that is now dating a supermodel?” Watney blurted out, almost as if he couldn’t help himself, as she flopped into a chair next to Beck.

“You really can’t help yourself, can you?” Chris asked, and she smiled at his defense. He was frequently all cute and chivalrous; normally that annoyed her, but Chris’s natural charm made it endearing.

“Nope. Spill everything.”

She shrugged. If they all ended up in space together for a year it would probably come out. “You know of Brett Parker?”

“Yeah?” they answered. She shrugged and danced her head back and forth in a “well ...” gesture. Watney got it first. “Oh my god.”

“What?” Beck asked.
“You dated Brett Parker?”

“You worked for Brett Parker!”

“For three years, basically,” she answered both questions at once.

“That’s … Oh.” Realization dawned on Beck’s face, and she raised her eyebrows in affirmation of the unasked question. Watney looked between them, then decided he’d rather not know.

“You are officially a lot cooler than I thought you were. Also, he’s like fifteen years older than you, you minx!”

“I was twenty-one,” she handwaved Watney’s comment. Now that she was twenty-seven and he was forty-two, he seemed older, in retrospect.

“I am so telling Martinez. Could you hook us up with one of the Condor cars?”

“No,” she said, with a firm headshake. “Anyways, shrink interviews. You guys excited?”

“Sure,” Beck shrugged.

“Beck! Be more excited,” she shoved him. “Now Watney has a better chance of coming along.”

The guys exchanged a look. “Yeah, about that … the mission directive is great for Watney, but Rapani is a doctor and a mineralist, so if that’s what they’re looking for, he’s basically got the job.”

“What?” she asked blankly. “No. You’ve been in space, you’ve completed a lot more advanced EVA training, you’re … You’re coming.” The idea of her, Watney, and Martinez hurtling away from Earth without him was unfathomable. “Besides,” she whispered conspiratorially, “we like you better, and psychological compatibility plays a part.”

He laughed, not entirely convinced. “We’ll see.”

“We can just stow him away otherwise,” Watney reassured her. “Anyways, we need to get to kickball league.”

“Lame,” she snorted. “I can’t believe you three signed up for that. You sound like frat boys.”

“It ends at a bar,” Watney pointed out. “And I’m guessing we’ll see you there anyways.”

“You will,” she assured him.

“It’ll be OK,” Chris said, putting his hands on her shoulders and giving them a quick squeeze as he scootched past her. She mindlessly patted his hand. This interaction wasn’t unusual or anything particularly special: While Beth hated people in her space — side effect of being a Type-A introvert, she presumed — Beck was frequently in it, a half-step behind her or an inch closer than she would normally allow or with some angle or corner or plane of his body on hers, and she barely noticed.

“Why are you reassuring her?” Watney asked.

Beck paused, taken aback, as he hadn’t even realized he’d done so. “I have no idea,” he shrugged.

“See you guys later,” she said as they left. She slumped back in her chair, contemplating her discomfort. Holding Watney or Beck would be a totally rational, bloodless decision by NASA, and she was no stranger to shedding friendships or leaving people behind (she probably shouldn’t phrase
it that way to NASA). She should be OK with either decision.

And yet she was not.

Especially about Beck.

Hmm.

(When she finally got the call from Commander Lewis informing her she’d been selected, and who else would be on the mission, Commander Lewis was worried about her friendships with the rest of the crew. “Your friendship won’t intervene, I presume?” Her heart leapt. “Absolutely not,” she swore. “Totally professional.” They gathered for the first time as a crew six hours later for the press conference, and Beck picked her up and spun her before she and Watney and Martinez fake-punched each other multiple times. “Totally professional my ass,” Lewis said dryly. In retrospect it was the perfect start to the mission.)

For the announcement, they were gathered in a green room just to the left of the podium where Annie and then Teddy spoke. Beth peeked out, like a small child on Christmas morning. “You ready?” Beck asked from behind her shoulder.

She grinned at him, so hard that she felt like all her teeth must be showing and her heart might fall out of her mouth at anytime. “So ready,” she effused. “Fucking Space. It’s going to be an adventure.”

His head dropped, and he gave her that pursed-lipped, private smile she was pretty sure nobody else got. “One word for it,” he agreed, and her stomach dropped.

The pieces flew together.

Beth was not the most emotionally adept person out there, but Beth was brilliant, and Beth knew systems and patterns. And she suddenly figured this one out.

He had a crush on her.

( Remember, she was not the most emotionally adept person out there. Just brilliant, and knowledgeable about systems and patterns .)

Fuck.

Fuck .

vii.

The rules about fraternization were straightforward.

Don’t.

He was not actually worried about breaking this rule. While yes, he could admit to himself that he had a crush on Beth — she made him laugh and was ridiculously smart and hella hot and had a killer smile and alternatingly goofy and intense and was always entertaining and sure, he would like to kiss her, probably a lot, probably do more than kiss her, of course he had a crush on Beth — he had absolutely zero plans of fraternizing with her. For one, he took his role seriously, as well as hers, and wasn’t going to do anything that would compromise their mission or their crew. But more
importantly, he had zero illusions about relationships. They ended.

No, he was more concerned that their friendship was beginning to take on the appearance of fraternization. They became attuned to one another in a way that even he had to admit was fast and freakish. He knew the hoodie was worn out of practicality because she was always freezing (though the anarchist-hacker-chick vibe was a nice perk), knew to call (not text) if she was running late in the morning since she was usually still asleep, and convinced her to stop spiking her coffee with energy drinks. She ordered drinks for him at bars because she thought his taste in beer was lacking, saved him crosswords out of flight magazines, and stole fries liberally off his plate. When they were hanging out extra-curricularly, Watney or Martinez or even the whole team was always there, but he stood too close to her and she looked to him first when gauging others’ reactions. The whole team was bonding with remarkable ease, but the casual synchronicity with which he and Beth quickly learned to operate, even though their specialties should have dictated that they rarely worked together — what he’s trying to say is, they were very close friends. Good colleagues.

So yeah, he understood why it didn’t take Lewis too long to get suspicious.

(And don’t worry, he eventually found the level of self-delusion he employed during this time hilarious, too.)

It came to a head early in training, after he and Beth had a totally platonic water fight in the NBL pool — don’t ask, it was — Commander Lewis pulled the four guys aside and told them, in way too many words, not to hit on Johanssen, or else they’d be ejected into space. Watney (who, really, should have caught on to something earlier, given how much time he spent with them) put everything Lewis had put together, together.

And then he grinned.

Well, fuck, Beck thought.

“What was that all about?” Vogel asked as she walked away.

“Beck’s got a crush,” Mark cackled.

Beck threw a chip at him, like a punk fourth-grader. Sure, he did, but it didn’t matter, for a number of reasons, but protesting too much or explaining too much was not going to be useful. So he settled on, “I don’t know what you’re talking about,” which was also a bad response, and he knew it.

“You know, I bet NASA would approve a space-sex study. I’ve always wondered what it would be like to fuck in 0 g’s.” Martinez snarked.

“It would be difficult to build the requisite speed and force truly passionate lovemaking required, I would think.” Vogel too? “We can surely calculate this.”

He was about to throw something at Vogel too, but Beth returned, and the matter was dropped.

It stayed dropped, for more than a year (comments from Watney and Martinez excepted). Sometimes he would catch Commander Lewis observing them closely, but she never said anything, and they never crossed any lines. Instead he goaded her into running on the weekends, while she found all the best restaurants and knew the best movies. He tried (it was hopeless) to teach her how to cook; she kicked his ass at tennis and video games. They carpooled and grocery shopped together and went in on a baby gift for David Martinez together. They both learned, almost by osmosis, each other’s histories and families: His dad, her parents; his grandparents, her ex. David Duffy, Amy, Emily, Sienna, all made appearances as well. He forgot to not tell her things. They became a constant — to
each other, to the team, as a team.

While during the 2033 holidays they’d all been allowed to leave Houston for more than a week, they only received a Christmas Day break the following year. Various permutations of everyone’s families — his sister and mother; Beth’s parents and sister and brother-in-law; Commander Lewis’s parents and siblings; Vogel’s wife and elderly mother and five (!) children; Martinez’s mother-in-law and sister-in-law and nieces; Watney’s parents — came for Christmas, lulled out of their homes by the fact that, this time the following year, their loved ones would all be on the *Hermes*. By the 31st, though, only immediate family remained, and Commander Lewis invited everyone over for a dinner on New Year’s Eve.

Watney lost a game of *rock paper scissors lizard Spock*, and became the designated driver for Beck and Johanssen. “You know, Vogel’s oldest is only fourteen, but she’s German, so that’s basically like seventeen over here. She’s highly responsible. I think she’s going to drive us back; I hope that’s OK,” Watney told them as they approached the house, gift bottles of wine in hand.

“You understand that, as an astronaut, you’re supposed to be an upstanding citizen,” Beth informed him in response. “At least pretend, you know?” The door swung open, and Robert — a software consultant — greeted them.

The dinner was in full force when they got inside, Vogel’s kids all running around chattering in German. He couldn't keep them straight, but one climbed into his lap as he was talking with Robert, Vogel, and Helena.

“Felix, do not bother Dr. Beck,” his mother scolded in English.

“’S alright,” he said, brushing back Felix’s blondish hair as the preschooler settled in for a nap.

“You are good with him,” Helena said approvingly (or he thought it was approvingly. He could never tell with the German accents).

He shrugged. “The doctor thing.”

“No. More than that,” Helena decided. Alright, then. “You have children?”

“Helena, please,” Vogel started, but if the men of the Ares III crew did one thing consistently, it was to attract smart and stubborn women.

“I am serious! Mark Watney, I understand why he is not married. He is — what do you say — a fun uncle. He wanders and is happiest independently in groups. So he I understand. You I do not.”

“I'm independent,” he protested with a smile.

Helena smirked. “Please. You are always with Johannsen,” she pronounced it the Old World way, with a *jyo*-sound. “I do not know if you are in love with her, but you are certainly not independent.”

“Oh ho ho,” Vogel outright chortled. “This is my cue. Godspeed, Beck.”

“You're leaving?” His voice squeaked involuntarily. The kid stirred.

“It is, ah, plausible deniability.” He pointed his beer bottle at Robert, who also started chuckled. Beck felt betrayed by the brotherhood. “In case Commander Lewis asks.” He said something to his wife *auf Deutsch* (*Er verschleißt seine Augen vor der Wahrheit*, or something), and Helena gave a hearty, delighted laugh.
“Vogel’s a traitor,” he decided, sitting. Robert, amused, leaned forward and rested his chin on folded knuckles.

“Well, first off,” he said with a level voice. “There is nothing happening between Johanssen and I. And there won’t be. You can tell your wife that.”

“I don’t tell my wife anything,” Robert retorted, and Chris understood that he meant that in two ways. He smiled.

“Second,” he said, carefully trying to formulate a thought that was personal but unrevealing, “I do think I have always been pretty independent. I moved for school, for work, several times. I fly all over for work. I’m going to space for a year. It’s a lot. I don’t think it’s fair to ask someone to move that many times, to follow me around and put up with late nights in the lab.” What he meant (but does not know he meant) is I don’t trust someone to make that investment in me.

Helena snorted. “Who the hell said that love was fair?” She shakes her head, merry at his juvenile understanding of the world. “You think I am crazy about Alex being here, in Houston, leaving me alone with his mother and our five children and ten chickens and a big creaky German farmhouse? No.”

“See? That’s exactly what I’m saying,” Felix shifted in his lap, and he unconsciously rocked the kid back to sleep.

“No. You are saying not to try. I am saying that even though it is unfair, it doesn’t matter. I love him, yes, but he’s also my partner. At the end of the day, I support him, and he supports me. It is not ideal, but he still knows what I am going through, and tries to understand, and he is a … Zeuge to my life.”

“Zeuge?”

“You know, he is the one who sees, who knows … He is the one, in the courts, that says what has happened.”

“Oh. A witness?”

“Yes. He is my witness. At the end of the day, he knows what I have done. He has helped me raise my children. He has seen me struggle, he has seen me have joy. He has been my partner, and I his. So, yes, sometimes it is un-ideal and inconvenient, but those things do not matter.”

“That’s true,” Robert said thoughtfully. “Yes, I’m not crazy about Melissa being in space for a year. But I’m proud of what she has accomplished, and I can’t wait to hear her stories. But whether or not you get married is a totally personal choice, of course.” He elbowed Helena, who looked unrepentant.

Felix, thankfully, woke up then and started to cry, effectively breaking up the conversation. But he couldn’t shake what they’d said. It was nothing new, exactly, but still … It forced feelings to the forefront of his mind.

He needed a beer, he decided.

He wandered toward the kitchen, and heard David mewling, and Beth’s voice. He slowed.

Apparently, Marissa had cornered her for the same conversation he had just had.

“That’s true,” Robert said thoughtfully. “Yes, I’m not crazy about Melissa being in space for a year. But I’m proud of what she has accomplished, and I can’t wait to hear her stories. But whether or not you get married is a totally personal choice, of course.” He elbowed Helena, who looked unrepentant.

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“Of course there’s nothing going on between us. First, we also arrived with Watney, so get your mind out of the gutter. Second, we’re friends, and that’s it. Third, even if there were something going
on between us, we’re going to Mars in six months, and neither of us are thinking about anything but that. Fourth, Commander Lewis would kill us. And fifth, we’re both on the same page about relationships. Neither of us want one, or plan on getting married. He — it’s his story and his thing, so I’m not going to get into his reasons — but I’ve had serious relationships in the past, and it’s absolutely not something I’m interested in compromising my identity for ever again. This is a choice I’m actively making. I’m happy with how things are, in my life. He is too.”

He leaned against the wall. He was relieved to learn that they were on the same page, because everything she said was absolutely correct.

Except, he realized, he no longer wanted any of that to be true. He wanted whatever-the-hell Helena had just described (he was still unsure what that was, exactly). He wanted it with her.

(He already had most of it with her.)

And they were about to be locked in a box together for a year.

He would have some convincing to do, but quite some time to do it.

And so he smiled.

viii.

Once she’d sysoped the Hohmann transfer and docked with the Hermes, Beth could barely wait to unbuckle and start floating. They had an entire week in 0 g’s, until the last supply shuttle had departed and the drum could start spinning, and she wanted to turn at least one hundred somersaults in that time. There was an order to it, of course (there’s an order to everything); she exited third, as always, behind Commander Lewis and Chris. Even so, she was the first stripped out of her suit, and she did three experimental spins as everyone else finished. Watney, who was handling video and photos for earthlings, grabbed a camera and snapped a photo of her.

“First mission photo!” he crowed.

“Don’t make yourself sick,” Lewis cautioned, shelving her helmet. “We have seven more days in microgravity.”

“Yeah, and we all had money on Watney being the first one to get motion sickness,” Martinez added.

“I did not. I had my money on Johanssen,” Watney retorted.

“And I on you, Martinez,” Vogel said, and Chris laughed.

“Alright, everyone, let’s focus. We have a briefing with Houston at 1600. Let’s get to Section C and see our bunks, then unload the supplies on this shuttle. We might be on Hermes, but the mission has only started,” Lewis refocused them (everybody had started somersaulting to test out their new superpowers).

One of the four sectionals of the rotating drum was dedicated to personal space, split neatly into six equally-sized, incredibly small, rooms, as well as a private comms linkup for emergencies, two locker rooms for grooming, a kitchenette for nighttime emergencies, storage, a sick bay, and a laundry room (fun fact: laundry in space was mostly microwaved and air-blasted into cleanliness). Her quarters was between Watney’s and the laundry room, and beyond spartan: A narrow twin bed (that eventually
would feel even narrower), a tiny nightstand, a tall and skinny dresser, a space for a sleeping bag to velcroed to the wall for microgravity days, and a single chair (why? there wasn’t a desk) that matched those in the Rec. The door slid in and out of the wall, like the Jack’n’Jill bathrooms she had shared with Emily as kids. There was a waist-high banked window, with heat shields darkening the panes, and she could see Europe floating beneath her.

She drank it all in. None of her assigned clothing or scant personal items were there yet — they would arrive on tomorrow’s shipment — so there was not much she could do in terms of unpacking. She came, she saw, she … Hell, she decided, she was going to do it. Now or never. She floated to the bed and launched herself high to touch the ceiling. She then used her hands to swim back down to the bed, and jumped off again. She laughed.

There was a knock on the open doorframe, and Chris started, “Hey, Johanssen —,” and then laughed, startled when he saw her. “Wow, you really weren’t kidding about taking advantage of the microgravity.”

“Don’t say you never did this on SpaceX,” she said, fluttering her hands downward to launch up again. She was barely getting any air off the jump, but it was fantastic.

“I didn’t, actually,” he crossed his arms. “We didn’t have private bunks.”

She tried to stop floating, and got a good look at him. She wondered, briefly, if he still had that crush from all those months ago. She had been worried it would be a problem during training, and then — nothing.

Which, really, she was incredibly grateful for. He had become her best friend, over the last two years. A part of that, she was sure, was simply psychological preparation for space: They necessarily had become more insular, had put various relationships into hibernation until they returned. That created a void, and somehow she had filled that void for Beck (And he for her, she would suppose.).

But it was more than that, she thought. She called him when there was a mouse in her apartment, and helped him pick out birthday gifts for his sister. He dragged her on a couch-buying excursion and fixed her broken sink. The regular physical closeness had abated, a bit, after they officially came under the watchful eye of Commander Lewis … but he was always there. Like he was now.

Anyways. She made a decision. “Come jump,” she invited, beckoning with a hand. He hesitated. “Come on. We have the entire mission to be astronauts. We have two minutes to jump on top of a bed as we float over … Russia.” Wow. Hermes moved fast.

“Fine, but if Lewis catches us it’s all your fault.” He floated onto the bed and pushed off, too.

“Deal.”

“So … you ready? Still feeling excited?”

She rolled her eyes. “Of course, Doctor.” The whole crew did that to Beck, when he got overly protective or smug (usually both at once). It typically happened during a health lecture or one of his Did-you-know-I-went-to-space kicks. “You know, now that we’re all up here, it’s all the same playing field, right? Chances are if one of us dies all of us die, SpaceX trips or no.”

“Except for my EVA walks,” he pointed out, and her stomach turned.

“Fine, Star Lord, except for that,” she said carefully. She floated to where they were eye-to-eye. That was nice. “The point — you don’t need to be my Space Sacajawea.”
He nodded. “OK. Space Woody then,” he decided.

“What?” she asked, momentarily flustered (she did not get flustered). She put her fingertips on the ceiling to steady herself, and he helped catch her by putting a hand around her elbow as a brace.

“Woody. Like Toy Story.” He smirked. “Mind out of the gutter, Beth.”

“Shut up,” she replied. Not her most graceful retort. “I get to be Buzz?” His hand lingered on her elbow.

“Or Cowgirl Jessie,” he suggested. The ship floated him to within a few inches of her.

Her stomach curled. The lack of gravity was getting to her. “I want to be Buzz.”

He smirked, then pushed away from her. “Settled then, Space Pardner,” he said in a twang, and she briefly wondered how gone his crush actually was (there was a moment, right then). But he began maneuvering himself toward the door. “Come on. Commander Lewis’ll want help sorting the supplies.”

She paused briefly. There definitely might’ve been a moment, where he almost kissed her.

She didn’t think she would’ve minded.

Watney was dead.

Mark was dead.

He called it.

It was true. It didn’t make it easier.

They’d made it through Thanksgiving, and the funeral — memorial — and the grief wasn’t abating. Lewis, not incorrectly, thought work was the best way to pass the time until they made it back to Earth, and they’d all quietly retreated into busyness.

He’d always coped by following the rules, by doing what was necessary to maintain a sense of normality, and by caring for others instead of himself, and this was no different. He prescribed Lewis and Beth sleep aids, but neither took them. He and Vogel and Martinez played poker until their fingers went raw. He ran on the treadmill. He did Watney’s experiments in the Micrograv Lab. He comforted Beth during her two crying jags, figuring helping her not drown might at least help him.

Nothing worked this time.

Ship lights were still auto-dimmed at ten p.m. nightly, but he rarely fell asleep before one. About six weeks after Watney died, he was en route to the kitchenette to grab some dried cereal when he noticed that Beth’s door was open a crack, and her eyes, wide and unblinking and deadened, shone in the dark as she stared at her computer’s screen, headphones in and hoodie hood flipped on. He slid the door open a crack and stepped in, mindful that others were (hopefully) sleeping. “Hey,” he whispered. “You still up?”

“Clearly,” she said, though not sarcastically.

“Whatcha watching?”

“Rashomon,” she replied.
It was one of her favorite movies, he knew; she’d dragged him to see it at a film festival at the Drafthouse in Austin. “Seriously? That’s not some light bedtime viewing.”

“I wanted to watch it,” she said, her voice carefully neutral. Her eyes arc up to him, not challenging him, just checking him checking her.

He nodded, feeling useless. “Well, I’m going to the galley for a snack. Do you want anything?”

“I’m good, thanks,” she said, and he exited with another nod, unsure of himself.

He grabbed the cereal and almost headed back to his room, but turned around with a mental fuck it. He grabbed a mug, filled it with hot water, and dunked a green tea bag in it. Beth rarely drank anything without caffeine, but when she’d had a sore throat months ago, she’d downed this stuff. He rapped softly on her door with one knuckle, and then slid it open again.

This time, she pulled her headphones out, startled. “Hey.”

“I brought you tea,” he held up the mug.

Something seemed to crack, and she nodded. “Thanks,” she said, shifting to a sitting position and scooting to the far corner of the bed to make space. He sat carefully, passing the mug to her and balancing the bowl of dry cereal on the thigh closest to her. “You want to finish the movie with me?”

“Sure. Whose story is it at?”

“The woodcutter’s,” she said. “It’s almost done, I hope that’s alright.” She hesitated, then placed the computer between them farther down the bed. Unexpectedly, though, she leaned on his chest. He wrapped an arm carefully around her, pressed his lips, closed and pursed, to her head (not a kiss, he told himself, just a … sign of non-crewmate-like affection). She sagged further against him.

“Of course,” he muttered against her hair. Whatever comfort he was offering her she was repaying back exponentially.

She hit ENTER to start the movie again, then settled back against him, sipping her tea occasionally. She started to list into sleep; he carefully extracted the mug before she spilled the dregs. When the movie ended (not one of his favorites, of all the crazy-old movies she’d forced him to see) he quietly shut the laptop. She didn’t move. He decided he should probably head back, and made a move to carefully extract himself.

She shifted in her sleep, though, and murmured, “Stay. Chris, please.” He rarely denied a request from her, so he stilled. As if to make her point, she draped an arm around his stomach.

Well then.

Their limbs and hair and breath tangled, he slept better than he had in a long time that night (and when she pressed a kiss to where his ‘14’ tattoo was — on his left pec, right above his heart — he pretended not to notice).

He slipped out the next morning, placing a soft kiss on her forehead, because there was nothing he’d like less than for Commander Lewis to walk in and (rightly) assume their relationship was severely compromised. He didn’t quite avoid her for the rest of the day, but he didn’t go out of the way (like he normally did), to find her and talk to her and comfort her over Watney. He didn’t trust himself. She had been open and expressive in a way that he didn’t want to attach hope or expectation too — too many terrible things had gone wrong in the last month, and he simply couldn’t handle this going south too — and he was unsure what he would do or say around her.
Hiding in his room, then, was his best option that night.

She found him there, though. Shortly after lights out, he heard a soft, nearly imperceptible knock, and she slid the door open a touch. “Chris?” she whispered.

“Beth?” he straightened, setting his tablet down.

She slid the door open wider, then snuck in and shut it. He noticed that she was wearing the blue sweatshirt he thought he’d left in the lab. Her eyes were wide, her lips pursed, and he realized she was as nervous as he was. He waited. “So about last night,” she started, as she paced a tiny, Beth-in-space-sized circle. She started to gesture uselessly. “I … You make a lot of things just … easier, sometimes. You always have, you know it. That’s why we’re … friends,” the word trails off, the full magnitude of what they were dwarfing her word choice. “And it turns out, sleeping is one of those things. So … This is totally inappropriate, and you’re going to tell me to go take that sleep aid you prescribed, but —”

“Can you sleep here tonight?” he cut in, to make it easier, and she stopped, startled. “You make a lot of things easier for me, too,” he admitted.

She bit her lip and nodded slowly, processing, then sat down two feet from him on his bed, one leg tucked under the other thigh. “So … Whatcha working on?” she asked carefully, pummeling her fists into the excess material of her (his) sweatshirt.

He laughed, because the situation crossed the line from “whack” to “absurd.” “You come in here to ask to sleep next to me for purely selfish reasons, and you sit over there and make conversation?” He teased.

She laughed too, and suddenly they were back to Chris and Beth, and things were easy, even in the midst of them being hard and awful. She fell against him. “Be less of a perfect human furnace in freezing cold space if you don't want taken advantage of,” she muttered.

“How you need,” he said, moving a hand through her hair. “You know that.”

“I do,” she agreed easily. Her legs swung to thread through his. “Chris?”

“Yeah?”

“I …” Her voice broke. “I really miss him.” He felt a tear drop onto his tee.

“Me too, babe,” he said, tucking her head under his chin, the term of endearment coming naturally. “Me too.”

“I hear his last scream, all the time.”

“For me it's when the biomonitor started shrieking.”

She nodded against him, and they were quiet for a long time. “Remember the first night me and you and Mark and Martinez met, at that barbecue? And then they got that entire bar cheering during their DDR tournament. I just … I can't believe he’s dead.”

They chatted for a while, mindlessly swapping memories and some tears (but more laughs). Eventually they both started to drift off, so he repositioned them horizontally, negotiating where limbs needed to go (it's a tiny fucking bunk). She was pliant and warm as she molded to him; when they finally settled, noses millimeters apart, her eyes flew open again. She stared at him, then leans forward and kisses him — close-mouthed, but sure. Like most things she does, there was nothing
tentative about it.

She pulled back. Looked at him.

Putting a hand on her cheek, he leaned forward again. Her mouth opened, her hand drifted to his hip to pull him closer.

That night was the last time either of them asked to share a bed.

Years later, the days and weeks post-Mars — after they left Watney, before they found out he was alive, certainly before they started the Rich Purnell maneuver — could only be described as a long, confusing, blurry nightmare. She couldn't remember what she ate, what experiments she did, what jokes Martinez told. What she said for Watney’s memorial (that at least is filmed).

The only thing she could remember, really, was Chris. He probably had an exact date that they … started, with a precise and romantic explanation for when they crossed the line, but to her, he was just a constant. She was beyond broken-hearted as she went through the stages of grief, but Chris was there. She thought she made it probably four weeks before they started spending the night together.

It was comforting. Being with him, alone, was the only place she felt anchored, like herself. After lights out, he would sneak into her room (his was next to Commander Lewis’s — enough said), frequently with some tea, and they would just talk, and watch movies, and work, and read. Sometimes they would cry (a lot, even) but eventually that subsided into laughter. After a long, stressful day of ship maintenance and experiments and living her mourning, it was just nice to be herself.

And of course, there was a lot of making out.

She knew there was a heavy layer of attraction there (for God’s sakes, he looked like him; she wasn’t exactly feeling the urge to indulge herself by hooking up with Vogel; and this had probably been coming since before they even arrived on Mars) but it was complicated, trying to mentally parse the reasons she wanted this, and hard, to justify enjoying something (the laughter, the conversation, the way he would pin her into a kiss in 0g when nobody was around, the looks from across the Rec) so much while also being so sad. And because of that, they’d kept it (relatively) chaste.

It wasn't until she was sitting on the chair, her foot perched on the edge of the bed, shaving her leg in his T-shirt and a hoodie as he (shirtless; she had his shirt) read a biography on his tablet, that she realized: the last time she was remotely this relaxed, in this state, with a guy, was years ago when she was all but living with Brett.

And it was relatively recent (a few weeks, really), but by definition, she was living with Chris: they shared a bed, a kitchen, a bathroom. They spent nearly all their free time together. He brought her tea; she cut his hair. Whenever they were in the same room, she realized, they orbited each other. It was hard to tell exactly when they had melded into a relationship, but she was pretty sure they had.

And she absolutely did not mind any of this.

She carefully wiped the razor clear of gel with a tissue, and deposited everything in a wet trash chute (every week or so, the wet trash was burned off into space). She crawled next to him on the bed, angling her body sideways next to his, and tickled the inside of his elbow to signal she wanted his attention. He flopped the tablet down, turned to her.

“What … are … we?” she asked, careful and skeptical — partly out of self-preservation, partly
because she wasn’t sure about whether or not she wanted to know the answer.

His head kicked back a little, not expecting the question. “Not the time to joke that we’re astronauts with insomnia?” he checked, lightening the mood.

“No,” she informed him with a head-shake and a tiny smile, because he was an imp.

“I think we’re a lot of things,” he finally said. “First, I think we’re … real. We’re not — or I’m not — just sad or bored or … touch-starved. I was actually planning on asking you out when we got off the mission. Like, that was my plan since before we launched. I had no idea what you would say, but that was the plan: woo you with my considerable charms during spaceflight, take you to a movie after.”

“I would’ve said yes,” she said, because it was true, even though she didn’t realized it until that moment.

He smiled, then leaned over and kissed her. “So, first, we’re … that. Second, we’re crewmates. I think for both of us that still comes before basically anything else. It’s critical to ensuring that we don’t lose anyone else on this mission. And this … is technically breaking about sixty-three NASA regulations.”

“I agree,” she said, moving him along. They both cared deeply about doing their jobs well, that didn’t need to be dwelled upon.

“Third … At least for me, you’re my best friend. So, you’re the person I’d rather spend all my free time with, even if it’s watching you shave your legs in my shirt. Actually, I’m a fan of you doing anything in my shirt,” he smirked. She elbowed him at that crack. “And life is short. If we learned anything up here, we learned that. So … I want to keep doing this,” he gestured as if to say just hanging out.

“OK.”

“But, I think most importantly, we’re stuck in space for the time being. So, yes, this is not just fooling around in space to pass the time. But … I think we should just happen on our own terms, until we have some space. Or less actual space. But, you know, you kissed me first. So you tell me.”

In response, she climbed over his lap, pulling him into a deep kiss. He responded, lifting her up more fully and suddenly being everywhere — ghosting her ribs and trailing a hand along her spine and hot on her neck and hard on her hip. She shimmied out of her (his) shirt, and reached down for him.

They’d made out earlier in the evening — that’s how she’d ended up with her shirt — but this felt entirely more intentional and serious. Something had shifted

“Beth,” he groaned as she found him with her hand. “Come on. If we don’t stop …”

She pulled back, and looked at him. “I think we’re ready,” she informed him.

He responded with a grin — part wolfish, mostly ecstatic — and flipped them so she had the pillows, the kissed a hot line down her sternum, swirled his tongue in her bellybutton (the man was gifted, she would give him that), then pulled off her underwear and worked her with her fingers and mouth. She tried to focus on keeping quiet-ish, but he made it damn hard. Once he brought her close to the edge, she pulled him up, lifting her legs to brace herself with her feet, and he sank into her.

It was good sex — not great, because first-time sex should never be the best sex with that partner — but had enough laughter and conversation that it felt like them, felt like chemistry. Mostly, she felt like she was home. As she lightly traced the ‘14’ on his bare chest afterwards, she realized that, no
matter how many awful things had happened on this trip, one good and sure thing had emerged from Ares III.

xi.

Secret dating on a small ship was hard enough, but NASA seemed determined to fuck with them with every new news dispatch. The bombshell that Watney was alive — that they had left him there — upended the modicum of balance they’d realized in the last four months. He and Beth weathered the news well enough (though he was beginning to suspect Lewis was suspicious), but every briefing sent them into another tailspin.

And then he sent them the letters.

That night, like always, he waited until ten minutes after lights out, then slipped into her quarters after a soft knock, a travel mug of tea in his hands. She was on top of the blankets, one leggings-clad limb stretched out, the other folded like a crane’s, her smaller tablet balanced on her knee. “Hey,” he said with a soft smile. He took a second to drink her in, then bumped a kiss on her temple and handed her the tea before climbing onto the foot of the bed.

“Hey,” she replied, as he lifted her calf and scooted to sit perpendicular to her. He began haphazardly massaging the arch in her foot, and she put the other leg in his lap. “It was good. To read messages from Watney. Even though he called me a nerd, like, multiple times, and then threatened to give me a wedgie.”

“It’s amazing he hasn’t lost his sense of humor,” Chris agreed, pinching and stretching her big toe slightly to draw out tension. He sought for and found her dorsalis pedis pulse, a reminder that she was here. With him. Alive.

“What did yours say?”

His hand stilled over her foot. “He told me to tell you how I feel about you.” She smiled, with a pleased murmur, and warmth bloomed at the noise.

“He’s going to be so smug, isn’t he?” she asked, with a small laugh. She wriggled her feet (her freezing feet) deeper into his hands.

“Yeah,” he agreed, resuming the massage. “He’s right though.”

“What do you mean?”

“I haven’t told you how I feel.”

She cocked her head, confused. “OK, what the hell are you —”

“— I love you,” he interrupted, quietly but decisively. Then he smiled. He hadn’t said that in … well, in a long time. And never so freely. “Just so you know.”

She stopped, stunned. It wasn’t quite the reaction he was hoping for, but it was Beth, so what else could he expect, really? She opened, then closed, her mouth, and set her tablet next to the mug.

She climbed into his lap.

Rested her haunches on the tops of his knees, lightly.

Smoothed out the wrinkle that had involuntarily appeared on his forehead. Pressed her fingers into
his cheekbones, memorizing him as she stared directly into his eyes.

Searched.

Kissed him lightly, as a reassurance and a benediction.

Pulled back.

“Why do you love me?” she asked, her voice low and husky. Cautious.

He squinted, then smiled, and wrapped his hands under her shirt and around her waist.

“Because you’re an amazing programmer, a terrible cook, a great crewmate and friend, a good listener, and look cute when you’re being difficult to wake up in the mornings. Because you made me drink better beer and stopped spiking your coffee with more caffeine. Because you care more than anyone I’ve ever met, and because you’ve let me in. I could’ve made it through this entire experience alone, but you’ve made me realize that I absolutely don’t want to. And I think it’s the same for you,” he looked at her carefully.

She buried her head in his neck, temporarily overwhelmed. That was OK — he just scratched a nonsensical pattern into her back as she processed. But then she started kissing his neck, made it up to his face, kissed his mouth hard.

“I love you too,” she decided with a nod, kissing him again.

And suddenly, space felt infinitely less lonely.
Gravity

Chapter Notes

Hi all! Wow, the reception last time was amazing — and incredibly intimidating. It made this chapter (which was already kicking my ass) even tougher, so I'm very sorry for the delay! I meant to get this up last week, but the first and last sections just kept demanding rewrites.

I've given up on making promises that the lengths will get shorter — these things just keep unspurling like this. I hope this is interesting, even though it might take a while to get through!

The first vignette has a portion that is completely inspired by Master of None. If you're not watching that show, you should!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Gravity

.Gravity is the force that attracts a body toward another body with a greater mass. Every object exerts some gravitational force on every other object with mass. Gravity is constant. Without gravity, the universe would be incredibly uncomplicated.

>You have to pick the places you don’t walk away from — Joan Didion

xii.

Eventually, they’re found out.

Of course they’re eventually found out.

Personally, Beth was impressed that they made it past the gravity assist. They’d participated in some very non-crewmate-appropriate behavior over the last six months, and Commander Lewis had apparently been primed to notice signs of affection since training. If the rest of the crew was surprised, it honestly had to be some willful ignorance.

(Because details are everything, non-crewmate-like affection over those six months included: making out in Airlock 3 and not checking the lab first, so they’d had to duck — ridiculously hard in micrograv — to avoid Vogel; Martinez walking in on him giving her a shoulder rub in the lab; having overly intertwined reactions to the news that Mark was alive; spending most of the night sitting in the gym and staring at Earth while they waited to find out whether Beth would have to eat them; prepping breakfast for each other; Beck blowing her kisses from EVAs).

“Seriously, bro,” Martinez griped as the three of them packed up Chris’s stuff. Moving had been a bit
of a dance, and they’d cleared out Watney’s overheated room to serve as their overflow storage (doing so — even just to fold his stuff into duffels and toss into Martinez’s old room — had brought prickly, hot tears to her eyes, which she’d quickly shut down) until they got him back. “When did this start? You’re both holding out. I haven’t been laid in —”


Martinez grinned, and turned to Beck, a fist up and ready to be bumped. “Later, buddy.”

“Hey, I’m actually getting laid, and don’t want that to stop anytime soon, so nope. Not later,” Beck responded quickly, hands up in surrender. “Anyways, since when? I have no idea.”

“OK, that’s bullshit,” she cut in. She wasn’t a fan of him giving away the goods on their sex life (which was pretty fantastic, thankyouverymuch), but she knew that he absolutely had a date when their relationship started. “At least tell me, so I don’t feel like an ass when you show up with something perfect and romantic on our 100-day anniversary or something dumb.”

“Oh that passed. You missed it,” he teased. “We’re almost to 200 days.”

“See? Sorry I didn’t get you a present,” she stuck her tongue out in response. “No, seriously. What day?”

“Mission Day 196,” he admitted. She calculated: He was definitely going by the first time they had sex. OK, then. That was reassuringly non-sentimental.

“We’re on Mission Day 386! You’ve officially been shacking up for half the mission!”

“We’ve got skills,” she shrugged. “I think this is it.” She zipped a final duffel.

“Yeah, I think so,” Chris said. “Martinez, you got everything you need?”

“Yup,” he said. “Except details.”

They stashed the bag into Watney’s room, then went into hers — shit, theirs, now. She flopped down on the bed, her feet still planted on the floor. “You need any help?” she asked as he stacked his stuff in the corner, to be dealt with later.

He flopped next to her and kissed her briefly. “Nope, I think I’m good.”

Her eyes angled uneasily to the wide-open door, and she sighed. Logically, she knew that nothing was different from yesterday; what they were doing (what were they doing?) could technically have technically passed the “moving in together” milestone three previous times (launch, when they started sleeping together, when they started fucking). And she was OK with that. She was pretty sure she wouldn’t know how to deal with all the extra space had he been ordered to sleep exclusively in his own narrow bed. And not having to sneak around and worry about getting caught — huge relief.

But officially sharing a bunk, even on the orders of their Commander, made her feel … locked in, in a way that being stuck on the ship for the last year didn’t make her feel. If it was out, it couldn’t be compartmentalized; as much as she cared for (hell, loved) him and craved him and his support, it was a new and different and uncertain dimension. This bunk, the final frontier, she mentally intoned, her voice dropping deep in her head.

(Really, though, the bedroom-sharing was only the most immediate concern, she recognized. Chris, Mark, the mission — between everything, she questioning almost everything about herself that she’d once taken for granted, like her commitment to her work and to her independence and sense of
right and wrong and yes and no and want and need. Space — and its attendant vacuum of time, of perspective, of fixed points in every sense of the word — was really beginning to fuck with her. And it was so, so exhausting.)

Next to her, he stared at her staring at the door. “You OK?” he checked, propping himself up on an elbow.

She flicked her eyes back to him. “Yeah.”

“Because it kinda looks like you’re freaking out.”

She twisted onto her side and placed a hand on his chest before pecking him in reassurance. “Just making sure Martinez isn’t lurking behind the door making kissy-face sounds,” she sat up, and searched for her laptop. “Come on. I’m behind on my systems checks.” He sat up and grabbed his own tablet, settled shoulder-to-shoulder next to her. “What are you reading?” she asked, glancing over to see a PDF with 8-point font.

“Peer editing a paper on reversing mitochondrial oxidative stress as it relates to cell death in mice,” he replied, eyes already scanning.

She snorted. “Seriously?”

“What?” he said, confused.

“Did you get anything fun on your new data stick during the gravity assist?”

“The Red Sox’s entire playoff run from last fall,” he said smugly. “Including the AL Championship Series where we beat the Yankees.”

“Watching that one with Martinez?”

“Oooooh, yeah, Marissa told him they won to keep up morale,” he grinned, highlighting some of the text and typing in a quick note. “You want any tea?”

She grinned, close-lipped, at him. “No,” she smiled, content. “I’m good.”

They sat in comfortable silence, and she quelled an overwhelming desire to shut the door and tune out everything else in the universe. Her head eventually lolled onto his shoulder. Martinez popped his head in for some G-rated shit-talking — “Remember, in space, three of us can hear you scream” — and Vogel very formally wished them a good night, which she had to laugh at, a bit. Lewis carefully avoided them. Eventually the lights flickered twice, a reminder from Houston that they were ten minutes away from powering down entirely, and she slid the bunk door shut. She slumped against it with an overdramatic sigh and a smirk: “Alone at last.”

He bedroom-eyed her from across the room, then demurred, “I should unpack,” without making a move to get up.

She lifted one shoulder. The nice thing about a space station was that it could never get very messy — there was rarely enough stuff — so it wasn’t a huge deal. Not that either of them were particularly neat, especially in real life. “Tomorrow. Let’s just go to bed.”

They negotiated the tiny space carefully, fumbling for how best to maneuver around one another and dancing around each other to grab sweats and put clothes away. Once done she paused at the domesticity. “Are we just going to go to sleep?” she checked uncertainly. They usually spent an hour or so quietly together, but they’d gotten that already.
He shrugged. “I guess … Unless you want to …?” his question was unasked.

She tilted her head side to side and debated if she wanted to fool around. “I’m tired,” she finally decided, ambivalently but not negatively. He nodded, and she curled up into his embrace, kissed the spot where his tattoo was, right above his heart (it had become her ritual weeks ago), and shut her eyes. He dropped a kiss on her forehead and his breathing evened out quickly.

Only she couldn’t sleep. After an eternity of her quietly twitching and shifting, he opened his eyes again and sighed, “OK, Beth, what is it? Come on.” He propped his chin on her head briefly before pulling away to look at her.

“Sorry!” she exclaimed. “I was trying to be quiet.”

“You were quiet, you were just fidgety,” he pointed out. “It’s a 38-inch-wide bed. If you can’t sleep I don’t sleep.”

“I really am sorry,” she insisted, feeling defensive and petulant and defeated and funk-y. “I’m just … adjusting.”

“On multiple levels,” he observed wryly. “Seriously what’s going on? Nobody was mad. And you agreed to partake in a space mutiny so it’s not like you care all that much about rule following.”

She flopped back and wiped her hands across her forehead. “It’s just … This doesn’t change anything, does it? I liked us.”

“Ah ha. You are freaking out.” It was said not condescendingly, but rather to bring levity.

“No,” she said, then rolled her eyes in assent. “Yes. Fine. A little.”

“Well … Does it make you feel better if I point out we’ve spent nearly 200 nights together, and still have another 500 left on the ship, so even if I or you wanted something to change, nothing could actually change for the next year and a half?”

“No, it does,” she said with a sigh. “You could also point out that it was a practical decision by the Commander. That would help, too.” The latter part was said with a smirk — somewhere, she knew on one level that she was being ridiculous. Hell, she should be relieved that they weren’t in trouble, that they didn’t have to sneak around.

“This of it this way,” he suggested, pulling her closer to him, “this takes some of the pressure we were feeling off. Commander Lewis isn’t going to eject me into space for hitting on you.”

“That is true,” she laughed, again secretly delighted they were on the same page.

“Also, it has to be killing the overachiever in you that my commitment-phobic ass is handling this better than you are,” he needled.

She laughed, hard, because it was true (and she hadn’t thought of that one), and smacked him in the abs with a pillow from behind her head. He groaned, and she rolled over to face him and her doubts.

“What if something happens?” she asked, bluntly but evenly voicing the fears that had been itching at her. There were now stakes around something she’d found too precious to define, and stakes meant something to lose. “Not, like, a space thing — an us thing. You just said, we have 500 more days of space. What if something happens?” She knew — from experience and from science, because NASA ran thirty-eight compatibility tests on the whole group — that fighting with Chris would probably be rare. They’d been matched too perfectly, conditioned too well, especially during
space travel. But there was no room to move, and no room for error. And at the same time, Chris had close-to-zero experience with actual relationships, those not on his terms, and she wasn’t sure he comprehended the boredom and the possibilities for dissemblance that lie ahead. She’d always needed so much space before, especially with Brett.

“Something probably will,” he pointed out gently. “We’re stuck on a deteriorating spaceship for more than a year.”

“Great, and then what? What happens when something happens?” She liked this — she liked this so much — but with everything going on, it was fragile. She couldn’t help but wonder if they’d broken a magic spell.

*(She knew that nothing good lasted forever. And she knew that she was frequently the bearer of her own destruction. So sue her for being skittish.)*

“I don’t know. What would you have said yesterday?”

“I don’t know, but today this is … out there and … established. That’s why I’m asking. And don’t just say that it’ll work out because you can … doctor it away, the way I know you like to.” He did that, all the time. Hell, she suspected that his desire to fix things was a factor in how they started. “Stuff could happen. Stuff will happen.”

“Hey. I know,” he replied. “Call me a sap, but you know what? I’ll take that risk. If we’ve learned anything, it’s that life is short, right? So let’s just … be here. I have no idea what you’re thinking about that could happen, but I like my odds better with you, generally. And if something, God forbid, goes wrong, I will go sleep on the couch in the Rec and incur the Commander’s wrath.”

“It’s going to get hard,” she said, her voice fading as she tries to emphasize that she means personally in addition to the mission. “With the rest of the crew knowing, it’ll just be harder.”

“Yes,” he agreed. “But I’d rather face it with you. Even if … that actually makes things harder. Because you make it easier. Remember?”

She nodded, because she did, and he made things easier for her, too. And there wasn’t anything else they could do but acknowledge that a storm was probably coming, affirm that they wanted to face it together. Her gut was telling her to flee (independence); her heart was telling her to stay (love); her brain was pointing out to both she had no option (commander). “I do,” she said, leaning forward to kiss him lightly. “And yeah, you’re a sap.”

They make out languorously for a few minutes — she really was going to enjoy this aspect of bunking together — until whatever need they’re both feeling is satiated (and she yawns in his mouth). As they settle back together, he muttered, “Want me to tell you a bedtime story?” into her ear, his lips and scruff and self right on her neck.

“Mmmm. I never really saw the point growing up.”

“It’ll be a true story.”

“Fine,” she yawned again.

“Once upon a time there was a wise, young, very handsome, knight —”

“— This is true?”

“— Keep listening. There was a wise young knight who decided to go far, far away from his home
on a big ship and become a pirate. And in his pirate class was a beautiful lady-co-pirate who
loooovved to wear hoodies. And even though their ship-captain made it clear that no pirates could
hang out for non-pirate-related activities, they still became friends. And she ordered him better beers
and he made her stop poisoning her coffee —”

“— It’s a perfectly legal substance,” she laughed drowsily.

“And then they started off on their big adventure together, and he realized there was nobody else in
the universe he would rather go adventuring with. And when things went terribly, horrifically wrong,
he realized that there was nobody else he’d rather do anything else with. So when she took
advantage of his fragile emotional state —”

“This is quite the story,” she interrupted with a snort.

“— When she took advantage of his fragile emotional state, he was very happy. So they snuck
around for a while, but when they got caught, they moved in together.”

“And let me guess, they lived happily ever after?”

“Eh. They could still die at any minute, and the room was actually super-tiny, which he suspected
would get pretty frustrating. But they were happy right now, and that was great, when you really
thought about it.”

It wasn’t a bad story, she thought, as she fell asleep.

xiii.

After the weeks of prep and waiting and wondering and dreading, Mission Day 687 happened
incredibly quickly. Watney was on Mars, then he was hurtling through space on what amounted to
little more than a trashcan-bomb, and then he was on the ship with them. Grabbing him out of thin
(very thin) air would be the easy part, a fact which Beck had known (and planned intensively for)
ahead of time but still felt like an entirely new challenge. But the change Watney’s rescue sparked
was broader: On the way back to Mars, various, aspects of their months living on Hermes —
relationships, experiments, plans — had long unspooled into stasis. With Watney’s return, the pace
felt quicker, more intentional; emotions and plans that had been germinating suddenly coalesced into
definitiveness, centrifugal force spinning them make into a coherent gravitational body. Their steps
had pep. They had a center again. They had purpose.

They were going home.

(And while he was pretty occupied by doctoring, he really really could not wait to get back to their
room, because he suspected the sex would literally be life-affirming today.)

He knocked briefly on the open doorframe to the med lab, and said, “Don’t get up,” to Watney.

“Couldn’t if I wanted to,” he wheezed back. Despite Commander Lewis’s valiant attempt at cleaning
him up, he still was in pretty terrible shape — a sweatshirt of Beth’s, while short in the torso, hung
limply off his frame. “Vogel would punch me.”

“The Commander’s orders were strict,” the German retorted crisply.

“Those were my orders first. Now, though, I need to review some tests with him,” Beck replied with
a smile. “Give us a minute?”
Vogel lingered for a bit, then very thickly said, “I am very glad that you are returned,” to Watney before exiting.

“OK, now, we need to talk about what your body’s been through —”

“Forget that. Was it my letter?”

“What?”

“My letter. Where I told you to go after the girl. I told you to wait, though, you sneaky bastard.”

“Oh,” he shrugged. “Your letter was too late. We … That had already happened.” It was strange, really, to discuss the relationship head-on with a crew member — normally, either jokes glanced off it (Martinez), or it was simply treated as a non-factor (Lewis and Vogel) (which it wasn’t).

“Niiice,” Mark replied, one long i sound short of sounding lecherous. “And let it be known that, while I normally would want to know exactly how sex works in .8 g’s, but your girlfriend scares the bejeezus outta me, so I'll stay classy.”

“I appreciate that, because she scares me too,” Beck said, suddenly realizing it was the first time, directly or indirectly, that had referred to her as his girlfriend.

“So what's next? You guys turn into a NASA supercouple, have a couple genius, bossy Beck babies?”

Whoa. “Whoa, bro. We're stuck on Hermes, saving and rehabbing your ass, for seven months. Let’s make it back to Earth.” The rehabbing alone would be quite an extensive process.

( It wasn’t a bad image, he realized, though the fact that he didn’t freak out freaked him out.)

“If you don’t make that official — and make me best man —”

“Do you want Johanssen to eject you into space? After NASA spent all this money saving you?”

“Where else does this go?” Watney answered sleepily as Beck changed out his IV.

“Right now this,” he emphasized Watney’s general sickly appearance, “is my priority. You’ve got, in no particular order three broken ribs, a case of shingles, a possible case of rickets — which makes me concerned about your kidneys and spleen, by the way — scurvy, anemia, and you’re about fifty pounds lighter than you were last time we saw you. I’m pretty concerned about refeeding syndrome, not to mention the stress on your heart, not to mention electrolyte disease. I’m also pretty positive you’re going to get bronchitis at some point. You’re on a potassium-rich IV for the next three days. Once your markers stabilize we’ll talk about foods to reintroduce.”

“No food? At all? It’s been literally months of potatoes.”

“You can have some chicken or beef broth.”

He drew a few more samples, ran a few more tests, waited until Watney drifted into sleep and the Commander came to order him to get some rest ( he left her staring at Watney, and wished there was a prescription for guilt complexes ), before he wove through the Knuckle back into the sleeping quarters.

He’d barely made it in when — oomph. The version of Beth he liked the best (excitable, warm, assertive, all over) enveloped him on a tight embrace and a deep kiss, knocking him back into the
“Hey,” he said, eyes warm, when she finally pulled back.

“We did it,” she replied, jumping into his arms and linking her ankles around his waist. “I can’t believe we actually fucking did it. I’m so proud of you. Oh god … that was the most insane hour.” He walked her to the bed and deposited her gently, then started kissing every free part of her skin. She braced her hands against him, though, giving him pause. “Just … how is he?”

He rolled to the side and curved around her. “It’s not great,” he said frankly, switching to doctor mode. “He’s got broken bones, rotting teeth, basically every vitamin deficiency under the sun — literally — and a couple really nasty infections in some wounds.”

“What his recovery going to look like? Just curious.”

“It’s going to be pretty brutal. And a little gross. He’s going to need us.” The mood sufficiently (momentarily) killed, they discussed Watney a little bit more. Then, out of the blue: “How would you describe me?”

Cringling her eyes in surprise, she said, “Medium build, brown hair, pouty lips, blue eyes —”

“No, I mean, like, as a person.”

“Doctor, astronaut, crewmate, gifted at ora —”

“No,” he said, not quite sure if she was being deliberately dense (he didn’t think so; Beth didn’t play games). “Like. In relation to you. If you were describing me to your sister.” It was an imperfect analogy; since email was routed via NASA (though NASA swore they didn’t read any personal mail), neither had mentioned it to anyone on Earth.


“Watney referred to you as my girlfriend and I wondered if that was acceptable terminology.”

“Ah. I mean … it’s approximately appropriate. But we’re still stranded on the mission, and it’s both less than and more than what we are, I think — I mean, we haven’t been on a date — and … I mean I guess if you want to call me that, sure. Like, it’s so not ‘crewmates who are fucking,’ but until we get off the ship … Why bother? You were the one who kind of came up with that in the first place, you know.”

“I do. I do know. That’s why I asked.” He leaned back, stretching out his spine. “I think we should go on a vacation.”

She laughed, amused. “Sure, you want to go to the gym? Or the labs? The bridge?”

“No, I mean … when we get back. Let’s just go to a beach. Anywhere. I don’t care. Once we’re out of JSC, let’s just … go.”

“Oh,” she replied thoughtfully, about thirty-six emotions flitting across her face. Finally, she said, “Yeah. That’d be nice, I think. Maybe Nevis. Or Bonair? Someplace deserted.”

“I’ve never been to either.”

“I just want to leave the country, really,” she leaned down next to him. “So does this mean … You want things to change? Even if they can’t change for 210 more days?”
“I mean … Yeah. I do. Don’t you?” The future was so incredibly hazy, and this, with Beth, was the only real constant he could make out.

“Chris. Sure. I mean, yes. But I have no idea what … Nothing makes sense here, besides you and this. But once we have our feet back under us — my point is, I have no idea what that might look like. And while I love you, and I want this … I don't exactly trust myself.”

“On … What?” She had barely dated anyone during their years in Houston, so he didn't see this as a cheating thing.

Her honesty blazed into him. “Chris, I spent three years with Brett. And literally woke up one day and realized I no longer wanted to be with him, and I broke up with him the next morning. I … This is entirely different and I … Couldn’t live with myself if I did to you, too.” It was an unromantic confession, just direct. Like Beth.

“Then don’t,” he suggested ( did he just half-ass a marriage proposal? Surely you were supposed to know when you were doing that.).

“I’m .... independent. You know that. That’s important, and frankly, it’s not going to change. We have a bubble here, and things are … easy and hard in such fundamentally different ways. Sure, space is a challenge, but this ship is literally a closed system. Nothing goes in or out. No energy is lost. On Earth? When stuff piles up? I’m not sure how much it’ll matter how much we love each other, when we’ve got bills and boring days and two careers and … all of it,” she admitted. “ So I don’t trust myself. Like I just said.”

He processed, slowly. It wasn’t entirely surprising — hell, one of their first real conversations was about how she didn’t want to be in a relationship. Independence was part of her ethos, was part of what made her quintessentially Beth, and he didn’t ever want her to lose herself. And he knew she was simply being realistic — but somehow, the mission, the two of them, had turned him into a bit of a romantic. She asked why, and he asked why not, and neither was the wrong question.

But it was somehow … disheartening. ( He didn’t know he had hopes that were up, but he did and apparently, they were. ) So, he knew he needed to tread lightly. “Well, I trust you. But I don’t think we have to make any decisions now. I don’t know what I want to do post- this, either,” he kissed her knuckles, “but if something’s working now — and the fact that we haven’t killed each other or gotten to a point where we’re seriously disciplined by Commander Lewis for not being able to work together — after a year of living on top of each other, with no outlets, under an incredible amount of psychological and physical stress — I don’t see why we would throw that all out just because the environment changes.”

“I know. I have thought about it.”

“And I'm not scared of you hurting me.”

“I can be scared of hurting you.” She burrowed into him, no longer able to quite look him in the eye. “I love you. I want this. Please don’t doubt that. But let’s get off this damned ship before making any major decisions.”

Valid. He just had one more point he needed to raise: “OK. Though, you know, when you and Brett were together — he was your boss, and almost forty, and you were twenty-one. That's not this,” he pointed out. “You're almost thirty-one. You don't think maybe you grew or changed in those ten years?”

“I -- yes, and I'd like to be wrong. But …” She shrugged. “It happened so fast.” The last part came
out meekly, like a memory.

“He also seems a little smug on TV. Just saying. And that's not me.”

She laughed then, delightedly and without any irony. “Chris, you're a doctor, astronaut and Air Force captain. You're way more impressive than he is, and you're not exactly a magazine ad for modesty.”

He laughed too. “So, a vacation.” The conversation was making him edgy in a way he didn't like. While he didn't want this to end, her points made a little too much sense. He’d prefer to move away from the topic.

(Later he'd realize that the fact that a break-off or the Rec couch was never broached was a great sign. But that took a bit longer.)

“A vacation,” she agreed, leaning against him. “Beach, sun, sand, you, me. That’s it.”

He thought about Beth in a swimsuit, sand raw against finally-warm skin. He wondered if her toes were always tiny rectangular ice cubes or if that was a space thing. He was about to find out.

And really, that was enough for now.

xiv.

Beth really couldn’t help it — after five years of friendship, three years of crewmateship, and more than a year of a relationship, she was pretty attuned to Chris, to his tells and noises and hell, simply to his goddamn presence. So when he and Vogel were four hours into an EVA to scour rust off solar panels and she heard a noise — “Beck, everyone OK?” she asked. She and Lewis were monitoring the walk from the cockpit, and Watney and Martinez were floating in the 0g in the bridge behind them, turning somersaults to pass the time.

“What?” Commander Lewis asked, glancing up from her station. She hadn’t heard what Beth had heard.

“I don’t know,” she said at the same time Chris said, “My helmet is filling —” and then the comms broke out.

“Chris?” she exclaimed before she could help herself.


“No shit,” Beth muttered, toggling to biomonitor data as Lewis asked, “Vogel, what's going on?”

“I can see water in Dr. Beck’s helmet,” he replied. “It’s currently up to his chin. He’s fine, but it shorted out his comms. We are going to Airlock 3.”

“Martinez, take over my seat,” Lewis said. “Watney, come with me. CAPCOM, Martinez and Johanssen will be liaising.”

“Can I —”
“No,” Lewis said sharply to her. “Johanssen, your role during an EVA is to monitor systems and comms.” She realized that, duh (also, fuck), NASA could hear everything.

She drilled data up. “CAPCOM, looks like the ventilator in Dr. Beck’s suit is entirely offline,” she said steadily. “That is likely the source of the water leak.”

Two minutes later, CAPCOM crinkled back. “You should return Dr. Beck to safety.”

No shit. “He’s walking up the hull now,” she said. It was a slow journey back in — nearly fifteen minutes — since they’d basically been as far away as possible on an EVA. She kept refreshing the data over and over again.

Martinez, out of the corner of his mouth, said, “He’s almost to the airlock, and NASA’s too far away to notice anything. I’ll cover. The Commander won’t yell at you if you go.”

She could have kissed him. “Thank you,” she said, dropping her headset and unbuckling into the 0 g’s. By the time she got there, he and Vogel were already inside, cycling the airlock. Lewis rolled her eyes but didn’t say anything.

Through the portal, she could see that the water was up to his eyes, was filling his nose and mouth. As Watney wrenched open the portal door, Beck and Vogel began to unscrew his helmet. “Careful — we need the water to look at,” Lewis instructed, floating in in a hurry. She could see Chris’s mouth gaping, open-close-open-close, as he gasped for air, trapped in the damn thing.

“Of course,” Vogel barely responded.

“Lean over,” Watney advised. “So the water doesn’t escape.”

They managed to unclasp and twist off the final buckle, yanking what had turned into a goldfish bowl away from his head. He sucked in a great wheezing breath as he finally got normal spaceship air, and the rattling noise made Beth’s heart twist and tear. He coughed a few times, expectorating additional water from his mouth. Shit.

Watney dipped a finger into the bowl. “Tastes metallic,” he said after a second. “It’s not your wetbag. Let’s get the rest of the suit off to take a look.”

Beth finally moved, to peel off his skullcap and help unfasten his gloves. “Hey,” he said softly.

“Hi,” she said back, not trusting her voice. She unfastened the glove, left it float away, and he squeezed her hand briefly. She shut her eyes, overwhelmed at the fact that he was there and alive.

“I’m OK,” he said.

“I know,” she replied, but it was more to herself and not him.

They stripped him to the athletic shorts and sweat-wicking tee he wore under the suit, and dragged the main body of the suit and the helmet out of the hallway into and down the chute toward the labs, where there was slightly more room. “We need photos, for NASA,” Lewis cautioned. Beth grabbed a camera and started documenting, to keep herself busy. Chris noticed her hands shaking, and stuck his tongue out at her for levity. Click. NASA could deal with that one.

Watney sifted nimbly through exposed parts of the suit, judging each piece’s structural integrity. Martinez materialized, a printout of biostats in hand. “Specs confirm it was a filter,” he announced, handing the report to Commander Lewis.
“How many EVAs have you done this mish?” Watney asked.

“I think this was eighteen,” he said. “And we promised to retire ‘mish.’”

“Twenty-one. It was your twenty-first,” Beth corrected, slightly annoyed that he could be so blase about EVAs.

Watney carefully deconstructed the PLSS, the life-sustaining backpack on the EMU. After he looked at each part, he floated it toward Vogel, who collected them. Finally he said, “It’s this filter. Look at that mineralization. It was designed to be replaced every mission, and the most spacewalks anyone has done in a mission was Hobson’s six on Ares I. It wasn’t designed to handle this many.”

“Can you fix it?” Chris asked.

“Sure. I had a similar issue with dirt in the water reclaimer on Mars,” he shrugged. “It’ll take twenty minutes. You could finish today.”

“Whoa,” Beth said as Chris nodded at Watney’s words. “This is broken. It’s unoperational, and this is going to be a huge incident report for NASA.”

“This entire mission is a huge incident report for NASA,” Chris pointed out.

“They’re not going to just let Watney wash this out and let you put the suit back on,” she pointed out. “Fuck, they got pissed at him for everything he did on Mars, and that was to stay alive. That’s the only reason they forgave him — exceptional circumstances.”

“These are exceptional circumstances too! The ship is rusting and if it’s not fixed Hermes has a serious issue getting back to Earth,” Chris argued.

“Johanssen’s right,” Lewis cut in. “We need to do a little more research and talk to CAPCOM. And today’s walk is aborted. The rust build-up isn’t that bad. Once we get the clear from NASA we’ll determine how to proceed.”

“I can go out alone,” Vogel volunteered.

“Or I can just wear one of the backup EMUs. The one fitted for Martinez should be OK. At the very least, we can rejigger the PLSS for my own suit.”

“We’re not rejiggering anything right now,” Lewis said. “Or cowboy-ing a spacewalk. Let’s talk to NASA first. We go slow on this one.”

“We could take the PLSS from the EMU fitted for Martinez and stick it on, too,” Beck mused, almost like he was just rubber-ducking the problem.

But it scared her. “Why the hell do you want to go back out today so badly?” she demanded, the rest of the crew mentally melting away.

“Well if it’s going to happen anyways — which it probably is — I’d rather not deal with NASA bullshit and just fix the ship,” he replied, annoyance flaring.

“NASA’s going to weigh in,” Lewis said mildly. “And I’m not repeating myself again. Johanssen, why don’t you finish compiling the EVA report and biomonitor data and send it back to NASA? And get the gravitational drum going again, please.”

“Sure,” she said, floating away.
“I’m going to take a shower, Beck announced.

“Watney, can you reassemble the suit, please? Photograph everything.”

“Sure thing. And don’t worry, Beck and Jojo, we’ll all stay in the Rec in case you need to yell it out.”

“Watney,” Lewis reprimanded, but none of the other four made a move to leave.

Cheeks hot and as pissed as she’d ever been in the half-decade of knowing all of them, she quickly went through the motions, logging the stats and returning gravity to the ship. Then she returned to the crew quarters which, as she suspected, were deserted.

Their room was empty too, and she flopped backwards on the bed, knowing and dreading they needed to work this out sooner rather than later. He returned a few minutes later — long shower — and was somewhat surprised to see her. “Hey,” he said.

“Hi,” she replied, sitting up. Then, “First —” she rush-hugged him tightly, as he stood there wrapped in a NASA-issued bathrobe. Surprised, he wrapped his arms around her, and she sagged into him, just holding him there. “I’m really glad you’re not dead,” she whispered.

“I wasn’t going to die,” he placated, and it infuriated her enough to step back.

“You don’t know that,” she said sharply, as she realized how stupid it was to start an argument with him before he was even dressed. She tossed him his sweatshirt from the pile on their dresser, then started maniacally cleaning everything, since there were Clothes. All. Over.

He rolled his eyes, then got dressed. “OK, you have something to say,” he said, putting his hands on his hips. “I’m listening.”

“No, you’re not,” she pointed out. “You’re standing incredibly defensively.”

He flopped on the bed, hands carefully at his sides. “Better?”

“Yes,” she said, pacing two steps back and forth as she struggled to articulate her fury. Finally, she said, “I get that we’re all in danger of dying at any minute, and that accidents happen. But — especially if you want to keep this,” she gestured between them, “going after the mission, you cannot voluntarily put yourself in extreme danger and expect me not to get really, really pissed.” She knew he was a whip-smart adrenaline-junkie ex-frat boy, that all of things things meant he was domineering and usually got his own way — even within the crew, since everyone’s self-interests were generally the same, he generally didn’t need to compromise. She’d known that for years. She knew that in his personal life, when things got slippery, he had the tendency to bolt. To move. To break up. To redefine the terms so that he could win. It was the one of the many flip sides of his learned behavior to not let anyone close.

It was frustrating as fuck to date (or whatever they were doing, since they had yet to go on a date). And he thought she was stubborn.

(And, really, he perpetually came from a perspective that he had the upper hand in the relationship — first to realize he had feelings for her, first to suggest sticking it out post-mission, got to be the one disappointed that she wasn’t entirely gung-ho about planning out a life together on Earth. Even when she’d made plenty of the moves, and he clearly had no idea of the consequences and compromise that a real relationship would entail.)
“Beth, I’m the EVA guy! The mission went to hell the minute we left Watney on Mars. There aren’t going to be any safe spacewalks, and the ship is deteriorating. If this was Earth, and we … you know, kept dating, maybe moved in together, would you get this upset if I went rock-climbing one weekend? Cause I gotta say, I’m kind of looking forward to getting back to that.”

“If you decided to use equipment that Watney duct-taped together, just for the hell of it, then yes I would!” she half-yelled. “You want this to work? You can’t make stupid and stupidly unilateral decisions. You can’t ask me to take a huge leap of faith with you without committing to taking my perspective into consideration.” She took a deep breath. “I want you to do the EVA. There is actually nobody I trust more to fix the ship that’s going to get me home. But you can’t be unsafe about it, and you can’t just … dismiss my concerns. They’re legitimate. I’m not asking you to not do something you love, and I’m not being a nag. I’m just asking that you don’t do anything needlessly unsafe, that you have a baseline consideration about whether something is good for us, and not just whether you want to do it.”

He paused. “I’m sorry. I hadn’t thought of it that way.”

“I know,” she couldn’t help herself.

“Hey. If we’re going to talk about compromising with each other, could you maybe not try and keep score here?”

“Fair enough,” she dug her toe into the cool flooring. “I’m sorry.” It was one of her bad habits, too.

“OK,” he ran a hand through his hair, which was getting long enough to annoy the shit out of Lewis. “So. We’ll talk to NASA, get their take. You know it probably means either borrowing a suit that doesn’t fit or hacking something, right?”

“I do. If Watney and NASA think those are the best path forward and are safe, I’m OK with it. Really.”

He wrapped her in another hug, this one borne out of affection and not deep need. “You think they really are giving us a lot of time in the quarters to fight it out?”

“Oh yeah,” she laughed.

“Want to take advantage of it?” he suggested, swinging her onto the bed.

She laughed, and kissed him. “Hell yes.”

xv.

The gravity drum turned, the ion engines burned, and their Hermes days slipped past them. They conducted experiments, cooed over photos of Beth’s newborn nephew, conducted 0-g relay races, and watched Earth grow from a nickel-sized blue speck to a plate and then a beach ball. Commander Lewis used the phrase “when I get home.” Martinez speculated about how quickly he could get Marissa pregnant again — he pestered Beck repeatedly about whether the “little guys” might be affected (they’d all had sperm banked, for that very outcome, before the mission, so there was no reason to ask). Vogel started teaching them all German. Watney debated how much to sell the movie rights to his life for. He started growing his hair long out of rebellion. A post-mission future was gradually sharpening into focus.

At the same time, everyone’s defenses lowered. Except in the most serious or joking of
circumstances, they all used a first-name basis. Melissa laughed more. Wake-up times were relaxed; on “weekends,” everyone was fine with Johanssen staying in bed until ten (even better: they didn’t care that she made Chris stay with her). Professional failsafes faded to the softness of old flannel: If the crew was watching a movie at night, she would put her head in his lap; in the morning, before things really got moving, he’d rest his hands on her hips and steal a kiss in the kitchen. They’d lost the energy to be anything but themselves. Whatever was between them had mellowed into something really, really nice. Things between them were frequently hard, just as she predicted, but they didn’t feel like work. He got better at compromising; she got better at relaxing, and somehow … things kept working. Watney fixed the bedrooms, and they turned Beck’s room into storage.

“Hey,” he said one night, knocking lightly on the doorframe to their room. She was snuggled into the crook of the bed, legs curled under her and tablet in lap. “Where’d you go after dinner? Vogel got Guardians of the Galaxy II in his data dump today and we watched it. Watney’s still down there doing Groot impressions, if you want to catch it.”

“Sorry,” she said. “I … got something really cool in my email today, too.”

“What’s up?” he asked, plopping down beside her.

She shut her laptop and turned toward him, eyes big and sparkling. “It was … a job offer, actually.”

“Really? From who?”

“The NSA. They were impressed with the Rich Purnell stunt and want to bring me in-house.”

“Does NASA know that your space mutiny is leading to employment?”

“They have access to my emails, so probably. I’d essentially be a hacker, but for the good guys. And I’d be in charge of making sure that all our systems were safe from cyberterrorism. And they’re willing to pay me a real salary to do it, not their typical governmental fire-sale salary.”

“Well you are the best hacker in the universe,” he joked. “That’s awesome, though. Is it based in D.C.?” It was hard to fathom, but they’d be home in under a hundred days. He definitely didn't want to go back to NASA — he thought a university lab sounded peaceful, though maybe too peaceful — but he hadn't really taken any of the offers he'd received seriously. He’d also kind of assumed she was planning on going toward Silicon Valley (he hadn’t really put it together until recently, but she had made serious money during her three years as Brett Parker’s muse/chief coder), and had begun making quiet entreaties to UCSF and other Northern California research centers.

“Yeah. I was kind of leaning toward finding something in California since my family is all on the West Coast and I’ve always lived there but … I really like this. I didn't think a job could excite me after Ares III, but this one does.”

“You should take it.”

She nodded, lips pursed. “What are your thoughts about maybe looking in D.C. too?”

His heart, against his better and more practiced instincts, leapt. They hadn’t discussed this since they agreed not to discuss it. “You mean, for after our vacation?”

“Yeah,” she looked at him seriously but nervously. “I … I still don’t know what will happen after we land, or what I want, really. I can’t make any promises because I really have no idea how we work outside of NASA. Can we even make conversation without Martinez and Watney and Vogel always mocking us in the background, you know? And we’ll see how much I’ve changed since twenty-four, I guess. But I … do want to try and make this work. I really do. Post-Hermes. If you’re into that.”
“This is an incredibly appealing offer — ‘hey, move to an entirely new city with me, if you wanna, I guess, whatever’” he teased.

“Shut up. I’m trying, here, OK?”

“I know.”

“Thank you. And I mean, if you find a great job in Houston or Chicago or New Haven, that’s fine, I’m not going to create a double standard here and we could try long-distance because, hey, maybe we do need space. But I just wanted to … check.”

He hugged her tightly. “You want this job in D.C., I’ll find something that works there.”

“You sure?” she asked, her voice muffled in his neck. The pang of hopefulness in her voice made him positive he was making the right choice. He had literally followed her across the universe and that wasn’t going to stop now.

“Yes. There are a million research labs there. And I don’t think I’d like sleeping a thousand miles away from you. I’d have as much trouble as you do falling asleep.”

They pulled apart, and she worried her lip with her teeth. “That sounds awfully codependent.”

After five years of knowing her he knew that was a trigger word. “I like interdependent, really,” he said blandly. “Or gravitational. I like being in your orbit. We can be a binary star system.”

“That was unbelievably cheesy.”

“I’m alright with that,” he said with a smile. “What changed your mind on planning for Earth?”

She searched his eyes for answers, and seemingly came up short. “Time, I guess. We’re so close. And at this point … After this long up here, returning to civilian life and just picking up where we were and getting normal jobs is just … kind of daunting, you know? I still don’t know what I want, but I know what I don’t want. And that’s … to lose you. To lose this. And I love you, and I trust you, and I’m just going to … trust that.” He smiled at her, no words necessary, and curled two fingers around her ring finger gently.

She cleared her throat. “So, I like stuff really neat. You can’t really tell on Hermes because it’s so tiny that we have to keep it clean, but, like, shoes under the coffee table drive me nuts. Toothpaste gunk in the sink gives me rage. That kind of thing.”

“Well, it’s more likely that I’d sign up for another mission to Mars than eat anything you cook. So we’ll deal.” The dumb smile wouldn’t wipe from his face.

“Oh, and I hate doing dishes, so it’s not like we’re going to be able to trade. It won’t be like, you cook and I do dishes. You’ll probably end up doing both. Or we’ll order takeout.”

“If you’re expecting a guy to do a bunch of handiwork, like installing a new storm door or retiling a kitchen, I’ll just let you know that my limit on Earth is changing lightbulbs.”

“That’s not true. You fixed my sink once in Houston.”

“I was trying to impress you. No more.”

“Ah. We should keep Watney close then. He’s pretty good at repairs.”

“That’s not a bad idea. Though I draw the line at, like, having him move into our basement or
something. That’s creepy.”

“Deal.”

“Deal.”

It would be overwrought to say, “And that was the beginning of the rest of their lives,” and that wasn’t his style, at all, at this point.

But it was, and he thought it.

And it made him pretty damned happy.

xvi.

Watney came up with the idea of Space Christmas, unsurprisingly. His rationale was straightforward: Since they were landing on December 21st and would spend actual Christmas in a hospital surrounded by family and doctors and, most likely, journalists, it would be one last time to be together — a private goodbye before the public hoopla.

They needed the boost. No matter how excited they all were about what was ahead — book deals for Lewis and Watney; an NIH gig for Chris; a universitaet appointment for Vogel; a demand for a new baby for Martinez — and how eager they were to get off the godforsaken Hermes, a sort of melancholic torpor had begun to take over. Nobody else, Beth felt, would ever understand her as deeply as these five did. Chris would sometimes catch her staring out the window at Earth, so close and so large that they could almost touch it. “You OK?” he’d ask, putting his hands on her shoulders. She’d put one hand over his and lean back into his chest. “Yeah,” she’d say, without moving. They’d stay there a while, getting lost in tracking the continents and lives and highs and lows below them.

(At one point, Commander Lewis even cornered her in the labs, and congratulated her on Chris obtaining a position in D.C. as well. The Commander had even said, “Off the record, I’m very happy for you.” It almost made her feel worse. Things were clearly coming to a close.)

Hence, Space Christmas. Gifts were mandatory.

It was an excellent distraction, making them lighter and goofier than they’d been since the early days of 0 g somersaults and filmed pranks. She and Vogel hung twinkle lights in the Rec, and Martinez molded an angel for the top of the fake tree out of pipettes, a plastic cone, wires, foil, and paper. Chris practiced the hacking skills she’d imparted to make sure that holiday music was constantly piping through the ship. Watney fashioned faux-mistletoe out of a few ferns he’d grown, and placed it in areas that she and Beck frequented (like their bunk). Vogel conscripted her into helping him cook because he was worried about her ability to feed herself, and since she loved the German dearly, she couldn’t say no. While the official rules included No Stealing From the Ship Or Else, duct tape and gauze and slides started to go missing almost immediately.

Collusion, like stealing, was officially banned; she and Beck flouted that immediately. He helped her decorate old casing into wrapping paper, and she helped hot-glue the papier-mache tree ornaments he decided to make for everyone (she has taken spare parts and extra wiring to create light-boxes that flashed six constellations — everyone’s favorites — continuously). They snuck them by the tree together, self-satisfied with their incredible creativity.

But she wanted to get him something, too. Something separate from the group gifts, something that
said I love you and I can’t wait to move to D.C. with you and You make things easier and Thanks for letting me steal your best sweatshirts all at once. She was stumped, until Watney, in charge of media, handed her a folder one day as free time started. “I can’t send these back to NASA, so here you go. Files deleted.”

She opened, then shut, the file. “You’re amazing.”

“Thanks for coming back for me,” he replied, floating away.

They started transfer loads, and lost gravity for the last time. Experiments and additional food went back. Equipment that needed to be repaired headed home. She had to sysop the transit ships’ landings and departures, but had little to do once they were released, and would watch them sink toward Earth until she could no longer see them.

Finally, it was Space Christmas.

They prepped turkey, re-roasting in brown sugar and garnishing with the last of the tube cheese, and potatoes, which Mark wouldn't touch. Martinez released the wine from its vacuum seals, and they drank out of sippy cups as Vogel walked them through German drinking songs line-by-line. Commander Lewis made one last speech, and then it was present time. Watney gave them plants; Lewis letters to open at home (Watney called her out on that being a cop-out); Vogel, tessellated and stained microscope slides arranged to form an old-school rocket ship; Martinez, replicas of his pipette-angel tree toppers for their own trees next year. Afterwards, they lingered around the table, finishing the pouch wine as conversation faded into quiet companionship. Finally, an incredibly tipsy Melissa said, “Well, I for one need to get some sleep before tomorrow,” and then delicately high-stepped up the ladder. The last shipment — personal items, clothes, all remaining food and equipment — was headed back the next day. They’d be heading home themselves in thirty-two hours. “Again. It’s been an honor.”

Martinez, Vogel, and then Watney eventually followed suit. She wasn’t particularly inclined to go to bed, though — no gravity meant sleeping bags, which meant she slept four feet from Chris, which was now just utterly weird — and she still needed to give him his gift. “Do you want to head to bed?” he asked as they hovered around the table.

“Actually — I have something to give you,” she said. “It’s hidden in the cockpit though.”

He laughed. “I have something for you, in the med bay.”

Of course he did, because he was him. “Meet back here in five?” she smiled.

By the time she returned, Beck had dimmed the lights, and Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas was piping quietly through the Rec. She floated toward him, gift behind her back. “Hey,” she drew nearer and pulled him down into a kiss. The motion propelled them backwards.

“Hey,” he kissed her again, spinning her around to take advantage of the no gravity. “We didn’t Gift of the Magi this, did we?”

“No, because that would mean you would cut the man bun,” she tugged the ponytail, which Lewis had deemed ‘offensive.’

“Touche,” he replied. “Alright, want to exchange gifts?” He plopped a large, soft package in her hands. She gave him a squarer and flatter and smaller gift in return.

She tore off the paper, letting the excess paper drift away. Blue fabric spilled out. “Your sweatshirt! I thought you packed it,” she exclaimed.
“All yours now,” he said. “When we’re back. Or whenever.”

She kissed him briefly. “Thank you. But you have to put it on once a week after I wash it so it still smells like you.”

“Deal,” he agreed amicably. “My turn?”

“Go for it,” she said nervously.

He turned the package over and carefully unpeeled the gift (of course he would be one of those present people), then smiled when he saw it. “Where did you get this?”

“Watney gave it to me,” she said, staring at the photo, which she’d framed with microscope slides: the two of them a few weeks ago, standing in front of the bay windows, far too close for crewmates and staring into each other eyes with stupid smiles. Earth, big and blue and brilliant, was behind them. “He deleted it so NASA won’t see.”

“He’s a good friend,” Chris smiled. “This is great. We can put it in the new apartment.”

The corners of her eyes involuntarily crinkled. No matter how wary and worried she was, the thought of them having a place with a door that locked, where they could put photos up, made her happy. No other word for it. (There was, though: contentment). “We should get one with a fireplace.”

“A balcony where we can sit outside without EMUs.”

“Kitchen with a drawer full of takeout menus.”

“Queen-sized bed.”

She stared down at Canada, then back to him. “Can you believe that we’ll be back there in two days?” It was strange, she thought, to know so clearly that her life was about to change.

(Sometimes, like in two days, you know; the most important days, you did not. You just walked into a bar and met your future.)

“Absolutely not,” he said. “Did your parents make it to Houston?”

“They arrived today with Emily and Tom and baby Riley,” she nodded. She was excited to meet her nephew. “Amy and your mom?” While they had gotten videochatting capabilities about three weeks ago, neither of them had told their families about their relationship yet. They figured the news that they’d been in a relationship for nearly two years and were moving to D.C. together was news that should be relayed in person.

“Yesterday,” he said. “By the way, Amy mentioned all the families are getting dinner tomorrow. Let’s hope my mother doesn’t say or do something terrible.” He wrapped an arm around her. “You scared? I’m a little scared.” He meant about their parents meeting, but she took it to the deeper meaning.

“Fuck yeah,” she sighed, leaning her head against his shoulder. Silent Night — potentially the most appropriate song choice of all — picked up in the background. “You think it’s changed a lot, down there?”

“President’s still the same,” he shrugged. “At least there’s that.”
“Still. It’s a whole new world.”

“We conquered Mars. We conquered space. This’ll be easy.”


“Still. Of all the incredibly attractive computer geniuses NASA could’ve stuck me in a spaceship with for thirty months, I’m pretty glad it was you.”

“Sap,” she replied.

“Bed? It’s a busy day tomorrow.”

“Can we just stay out here for a little bit longer?”

“Sure,” he said. “But we gotta go home sometime.”

It meant many things.

“I know,” she said. Sweden floated below them. He linked his arms around her, put his chin on her shoulder. And they waited.

Twenty-nine hours later, flight suits and EMUs on, they piled into the EAV spacecraft — her between Martinez and Watney, like always; him next to Vogel on the other end. It would be a six-hour trip, and they were scheduled to land in a remote area about 200 miles away from Houston. Two helicopters and medics would be waiting. Annie Montrose had briefed them on the extensive media attention.

She just wanted to curl up in a bathtub, with Chris, and sleep for six weeks.

It was an uneventful trip down — a few jokes, but mostly, they focused on communicating with Houston and keeping the shuttle flying. As they entered the atmosphere, 3 g’s steadily built, and she gripped the arms of her couch as she sysoped the landing.

They kept moving faster, faster. “T-minus four minutes until touchdown,” Martinez reported. “Houston, we’re in the atmosphere.” To everyone else, he asked, “You ready?”

“Does it matter?” Watney remarked.

“Nope, bro,” Martinez replied.

Landing was jarring, much harder, she thought, than it had been on Mars (of course, that was over two years ago, now, so she wasn’t quite sure she remembered it).

“We’re home,” Lewis breathed. She sounded like she could hardly believe it (Beth got that).

They unbuckled. Full gravity hit them and they stumbled clumsily around in the tight space. She knocked into Vogel before they realized they could remove their helmets. Everything felt heavy, disorienting. Lewis flipped off her comms briefly. “Team, it’s been an honor,” she said as they assembled. Beck was right in front of her, and he squeezed her gloved hand lightly.

“You ready?” she asked. She was not.

“Ready as we’ll ever be,” he replied.
Lewis opened the hatch. The light streamed in, temporarily blinding them.

It was a whole new world.

Chapter End Notes

You made it? Yay! Please let me know what you think.
Hi guys! Thanks so much for the encouragement and kinds words over the last month. I'm sorry this chapter took so long, and I hope it's worth it. This officially pushes the story into "totally made up" territory, which was interesting. Let me know what you think! Merry Christmas.

PS — Who else was irritated that there are NO deleted scenes on the iTunes release?

An object in motion tends to stay in motion.

nobody, not even the rain, has such small hands — ee cummings

They’d been warned by the Ares I and Ares II crews that, despite the Hermes’ state-of-the-art artificial gravity, which had provided them a briskly serviceable .8 g’s, reacclimating to Earth was going to be a bitch. Twelve hours after reentry, Chris Beck wanted to tell them: *You have no fucking clue*.

His back was killing him, the effect of his spine lengthening in space and now contracting on Earth. His heart rate and blood pressure were dangerously low. Walking hurt, because his leg muscles were undertaxed, and his bones had lost density, due to the extended spaceflight. He knew all of these side effects — hell, he’d been monitoring all of them for months now — but living them was an absolute bitch.

The weight of the return to Earth was literally crushing him.

After emerging from the probe into the bright disorienting light (*how was it that they’d traveled inside Venus’ orbit, closer to the sun than anyone in history, and never seen sunlight this persistent?*) they’d been whisked almost immediately into a brief physical examination (mostly to make sure they weren’t going to die within the next twenty minutes), followed by a briefer press conference (mostly so Annie Musgroves could show an alive Mark Watney to the world).

His Beth-dar — his ability to simply know where she was, at any moment, which had functioned perfectly on the Hermes — wasn’t used to this amount of interference, and he found himself whipping his head around constantly to figure out where she was. She’d catch his eye, smile, and suddenly everything would be alright. At the press conference, he’d sat next to her; he subtly took her hand under the table and she’d squeezed it in response. But just when they had a moment to breathe it was straight back to Houston to a cordoned-off floor at the Texas Medical Center, where
they would be spending the next week-plus before being granted outpatient status for, per Chris’s estimation based on their medical conditions, at least a month.

(The crowds, everywhere they went, had been unbelievable. There was at least a football field’s worth of reporters in every direction thronging TMC when they landed on the roof. He thought that this must be what Beth’s beloved Beatles had felt like.)

The blur continued through reunions with their families in the TMC cafeteria, where Martinez actually tongued Marissa in full view of NASA and thirty news cameras; Vogel’s kids knocked him down en masse; and Amy took one look at him and declared: “Something is different.” Always perceptive, that one. Beth had head-waved him over to re-meet her parents (as “and you remember the flight surgeon, Chris,” not “So this is the guy I’ve been sleeping with for two years,”) and her dad chortled, “Two and a half years on a spaceship, you two must’ve gotten to know each other pretty well!”

“One word for it,” he managed, trying not to trigger a mental image of Beth naked.

After a dinner made up of everything they missed in space — fresh vegetables, real bread, sushi, dairy-based ice cream — they’d been sent to bed. The truly intense physical rehab, and the media circus, would start tomorrow.

Only he couldn’t sleep. While he once loved space, had derived peace and purpose from it, he’d been incredibly restless for far too long; stuck up on Hermes, he couldn’t wait to get back down to Earth. Whatever contentment it brought him had long ago edged into impatience — other things brought him joy now. Losing Watney and gaining Beth had only made him more eager to return home, soon. Beth’s caution and skepticism had always seemed a bit overblown to him. He’d been ready for new clothes and full gravity and to simply move on with life, with his life and his work, with his life with Beth, in a way that wasn’t possible in the closed ecosystem of the Hermes.

But here, now, everything was fundamentally weird: Walking around outside without a helmet on was weird. Seeing so many other people was weird. Tripping regularly was weird. Not being in the universe’s tiniest sliver of a room with Beth was weird. Nothing was a bad-weird, but he felt lacking, somewhere, somehow.

As if on cue (though, really, it was always her cue; he was rarely not thinking about her in some way), she popped her head around the doorframe, IV pole in hand, and said, “Hey.”

“Hey,” he replied with a smile, sliding up to a seated position. Ow ow ow. “Is your back killing you?”

“I kind of want to cry,” she admitted, flicking all the blinds shut. The hell?

“You know, much as I would love to get reacclimated to sex in full gravity, I’m pretty sure whatever you have in mind would spike the heart-rate monitors and get a nurse in here,” he smirked.

“Shut up, you perv,” she said, crawling into the bed with him and carefully positioning the IV so none of their cords tangled. They both winced at the physical contact. “Did you not just hear me say that I was in so much pain I wanted to cry? No, I’m closing the blinds so no passing CNA takes a photo and sells it to some tabloid site.”

“Or just tells NASA.”

“Or that,” she agreed. “I’m not staying all night, for the record. Just … I thought I’d swing by. I’ll wake up before rounds and head back to my room.”
“Yeah right,” he snorted. “Why do you think we ended up adopting your room?”

“Because your room was next to Lewis’s, and you were pursuing me,” she said, eyebrow flirtily raised to challenge him.

“And if we’d relied on you to wake up before lights-on to sneak back into your own room, Lewis would’ve had us made three nights in.” She socked him gently in the solar plexus, and he winced. “Bone-crushing pain, Beth. Bone-crushing pain.”

“So my sister thinks you’re dreamy,” she told him, matter-of-factly ignoring his whine. “Watch out for her at Thanksgiving.”

“Isn’t she married with a baby?”

“An adorable baby, and she’s been in love with her husband since she was 16, and she will still probably hit on you.”

“Everything OK with your family?” he checked. She’d been worried and ambivalent about seeing them again. They make it hard to feel great about my accomplishments because I always feel like I’m disappointing them by not being something else, something they want, she’d confessed. He wondered how much of it was simply Beth being pushed out of her comfort zone to a place where she simply wasn’t the best. It was an edge she did not like to live on.

“I … think so. I think they were so happy I was back they forgot to nag. A little awkward, for sure,” she shifted closer to him. “What about yours?”

“Mom was Mom,” he shrugged. While Beth could pinpoint the frustrations in her relationship with her parents — they had dramatically different outlooks on life; they didn’t understand where her yearning and hardness and wanderlust came from; they all felt ill-equipped to handle it — the general disconnect with his mother was harder to verbalize. Whatever he felt toward her, it wasn’t like she had the emotional capacity to have intentionally inflicted pain, or to repair it now. She was just not there, and feeling any particular way about that wouldn’t help anyone. He had made peace with it, long ago, but there was just … a void. “It was good to see Amy again, though. She’s onto me.”

“Onto you?” Beth asked, amused and sleepy.

“She’s going to figure us out before I tell her,” he translated, then looked down. Beth was zonked out. “Nerd,” he scoffed at her sleeping form.

Gingerly, he fell asleep, too.

(*Even though she was crushing his ribs, it was much easier to fall asleep next to her.*)

“Hey, Chris — whoa,” Amy’s soft voice cut through the dim morning light. “I knew I was onto something,” she cackled.

“Ames? What the fuck are you doing here?” he whispered back, because Beth was still sleeping. Of course she was.

“I was going to take you down for breakfast and grab some of TMC’s finest coffee before you started all your tests today. We should talk,” Amy smirked, dark-brown spiral curls bobbing in amusement. “But this is better. She’s great. So much better than that bimbo parade you had going during med school.”

“Breakfast sounds good,” he managed. “Just — I’ll meet you down there in five? Believe me, you
don’t want this to be your first … actual introduction with her.”

“Sounds good,” Amy flounced out.

He checked the clock — it was nearly seven, and he could definitely hear nurses in the hallway. He shook Beth’s shoulder. “Hey. Beth. Babe. Beth.”

“The fuck?” Beth gasped, practically jumping out of bed before the pain sent her reeling back into the fetal position. “Owwww. Why did we ever come back to Earth?”

“We were going to run out of food up there,” he said, “But I told you, relying on you to wake up was not a good plan,” he smirked. “Come on. It’s almost seven. Amy already walked in on us. You should get back to your room.”

“Your sister? Mrghmph,” she groaned, coherent enough to put together that that was bad, but she yanked a pillow over her face and stilled. Unsure if he’d lost her again, he poked her. She sat up and rubbed at her face. “Fuck.”

“It’s fine. Honestly, I think you guys’ll get along really well. Just … you should go, if you don’t want to explain to a nurse why you’re in here in my sweatshirt.”

“I don’t, and it’s my sweatshirt now,” she sighed, carefully standing up. “Why the fuck is she here this early?”

“She wanted to get breakfast. Becks are natural early risers.”

“What the hell am I getting myself into?” She rolled her eyes, then kissed him briefly to apologize for the joke. “I’ll see you later, yeah?”

“Yeah,” he replied. They both peeked out of the door, and she made a dash for her room as he headed to the elevator.

He found Amy sitting in a far-away booth in the cafeteria, half-heartedly swirling a teabag in a mug. “The space-scruff look is good on you. And the man bun’s very trendy again. Makes you look less like a swimsuit mannequin,” she said, rising to hug him. “I got you food. And coffee.”

He looked at the fruit salad and croissant, and took a swig of the coffee, velvetier than anything he’d had in the last two and a half years. “This is amazing,” he said in gratitude, inhaling the aroma.

“You’re going to be easy to please for a while. Here, try the overripe hospital melon,” she waved it under his nose, and he takes a bite. It’s watery and mealy and so fucking amazing. “I promise, real fruit tastes even better.”

“You’re mean, but I’m starving, and I’m choosing to be the bigger person,” he replied, taking another sip of the coffee. “So what’s up? Why’d you come crashing into my hospital room at 6:45 in the morning?”

“It can’t simply be because maybe I’ve missed you while you were up in space shacking up with your crewmate? I want some details on that, by the way. Do I finally get a new sister?” she mocked.

“Ames.”

“Seriously. You had the puppy-dog eyes for her during training, but when did all that start?”

“Almost two years ago,” he scratched his five o’clock shadow. “Yeah, two years in January, I
“Guess.” He mentally converted Mission Day 196 to real time. Their anniversary would be … January 19th? Jesus.

“Wow. Are you sure it’s not just …”

He was. “I got the job in D.C. because she got a job in D.C. We’re moving there together.”

“You moving in together?”

“We’ve been sharing a bunk for the last eighteen months. Figured a 1200-square-foot townhouse would be a cakewalk.” He pointed out with a grin, thrilled to finally be sharing the news. He was with Beth Johanssen. Period.

“Wow.”

“Yeah. She’s great.”

“I just … never ever saw you settling down with anyone, honestly,” she said, resting her chin on two knuckles, still a little flabbergasted. Amy had lived with a boyfriend in Hawaii for seven years, but when push came to shove, she’d moved to San Francisco. “You’re kind of … aloof.”

“If it doesn’t work with her, I’m not,” he said simply, because it was true. He knew he had no general desire to be with someone; he had a specific need to be with Beth. He didn’t believe in soulmates or fairy tales, and he wasn’t going to chase romance. This was it.


“Thanks,” he smiled. “Anyways, what’s new down here?”

She shifted, and her entire demeanor did too. “About six months ago I got a call from Danielle.”

“Who?” he asked, genuinely mystified.

She threw a toothpick at him. “Our stepmother, dumbass. We went to her wedding.”

“Yeah, I was high the entire time,” he pointed out, because he’d been seventeen and he’d spent most of that year high. He tried to think of the last time he’d seen either his father or his stepmother. They’d come to dinner the night he’d graduated Dartmouth — that was probably it. His dad had slipped him a hundred-dollar bill and joked that it would go a long way toward tuition at Yale, then made a crack about Chris’s “trust fund” (really, an Air Force scholarship and some money from his maternal grandparents) covering the rest.

It had been nearly fifteen years.

“Anyways. She and Dad apparently didn’t know you were an astronaut, let alone on Mars, until Watney’s funeral. They thought you were a doctor.”

“Memorial. And I am a doctor.”

“Sure. So she called and …”

“You’re now reconciled?” he said sarcastically. “He’s great. He’s truly changed; he’s very apologetic.”

“Not really, hell no, absolutely not, and … kind of. He’s dying, actually, Chris.”
“What?”

“He’s got Stage IV cancer. Lungs. It’s spread to his brain and liver. He’s maybe got six months.”

Oh. Oh. “Oh.”

“Anyways, I went out to see him — he’s in Nyack now. There wasn’t any absolution, or I don’t know if you want to see him, but if you do … You should do it now.” Her wide blue eyes, so similar to his own, searched his face.

He was an oncologist by training (Barely, Beth would be quick to point out). Normally he’d want to see scans and talk to doctors and offer a second opinion. He’d done that when his tri buddy Joshua’s wife Mindy had had a bad breast-tissue biopsy. He could do all those things. He could go visit.

But he shrugged instead. His dad was a chapter, and that chapter was closed. There was no redemption, no neat ending, no last-minute deathbed confession that could repair years of disinterest and selfishness and regret and neglect. “I don’t think I will. But thanks for letting me know.”

Amy nodded, unsurprised. He knew she knew he would choose this option. He moved forward — he always simply moved forward, because he had never been conditioned to do anything else — and she knew that about him and knew enough not to be disappointed or judgmental about his decision. He felt a sudden surge of affection for his sister, who despite being, at a minimum, a thousand miles away for the last sixteen years, still knew him. She’d been his first partner; they’d be forever linked by the shorthand of their shitty shared childhood. “You’re welcome,” she said. “When do you need to report to physicals?”

He checked the clock. “About now,” he admitted.

She stood. “Alright. I want to really meet Beth soon, you hear me? Properly.”

“I promise,” he agreed, and she headed toward the atrium while he grabbed an elevator.

He found the team in a small break room on their floor, waiting to start their physical exams. This is the chapter I care about now, he told himself, and caught Beth’s eye for a private smile.

And he moved forward.

(For the record: yes, he eventually realized this was a bad idea.)

xviii.

Over the course of their six-week recovery, debrief, and media frenzy, they (or, more frequently, one of the Martinezes) nearly let it slip to NASA several times that they had gotten together:

1. During Beth’s first full physical, the NASA doc casually asked, “how did you get that UTI?” “What?” She replied dumbly. She’d had the UTI, of course (side effect of going from almost no sex for years to sex four or five times a week, in space), but Chris had quietly taken care — oh. God, her boyfriend was a dumbass sometimes. “Dr. Beck has a scrip for penicillin in your record for a UTI. March of 2036?” the doc had responded, still not hip to any malarky. “Hygiene is really hard in space,” Beth had said, earnest and deadpan and wide-eyed. Later, she had chided Beck, “You break medical and NASA regulations by sleeping with me, you agree to a space mutiny, but you’re ethical enough to put the actual medical issue in my records? Seriously?” He had grinned sheepishly in response.

2. When chronicling the ship’s ailments with Mitch, Martinez mentioned that the heating and
cooling system had broken in his room, though Watney had fixed it on the loop back. “Where did you sleep for those seven months?” Mitch had asked. “Oh, in Beck’s bunk,” Martinez had answered automatically. “Where did Beck sleep?” They had all paused. “I crashed in the med bay,” Beck had finally said.

3. When CNN’s Mark Watney Report started filming one-on-one interviews with them the week after they got home, one of the anchors jokingly asked Martinez if anyone got up to any “hanky-panky” during their two years in space. “Wellllll,” he’d started, then caught Beth’s murderous look, “No — everyone besides Watney, the poor sucker, has a partner,” he covered quickly, slightly thrown off by the question. Watching from the side (they’d been shot one after another, and Beth was next), Vincent, incredibly confused, had asked her, “Who are you seeing?” She hadn’t responded for a second, then finally replied, “You know I value my privacy, Dr. Kapoor. I’d prefer not to talk about it.”

4. As soon as Watney was in reasonable enough shape to attend a reception, NASA had thrown him one. When Marissa entered, she’d made a beeline for Chris, exclaiming, “Have you and Beth started apartment hunting in D.C. yet???” before she noticed that he was standing next to Teddy Sanders. “I mean … have you started looking for one apartment in D.C. that you will live in, and has Beth started looking for another apartment in the same city but far away from each other, because you two are coincidentally moving to the same city,” she had recovered lamely. After Teddy (who had simply crinkled his eyes and shook his head, as he realized he did not want to know) left, Chris had hissed, “You know, I thought it was neat that you still had game even though you locked Rick down before you took trigonometry, but it turns out you have none.” She had raised her hands in a meek defense.

5. Once they all (with the exception of Watney) were released to outpatient status, Chris accidentally invited the Ares III Mission Control team over to their place (really, it was to his condo, which he’d just put on the market — she had rented while in Houston) for dinner as a thank you, without realizing that her coat was in the closet and her toothbrush was by the sink and the photos that Watney had given them were on the desk. (That one was the biggest one and the closest call, so the Martinezes were slightly off the hook for their numerous fuckups). There were other tells, too, if anyone from NASA was looking — she finally told her family, and he wanted to make a good impression on them, and her mother ate Chris up, so suddenly the two of them were everywhere together and her mother was bringing extra blankets for his room. Amy picked her up from physio one day for mani-pedis. Emily, whenever she and Tommy came to visit, deposited baby Riley with Chris and loudly declared that it was “for practice.” Plenty of tells.

Truthfully, they weren’t sure how NASA would react at this point: the entire organization was mostly just happy they were all home safely, and had kindly agreed not to court-martial anyone for the Rich Purnell maneuver. They had both told Vincent that they were retiring from the corps, and he had taken it well. Until they officially quit, though, they were subject to NASA’s regulations, and any demerits they incurred could potentially affect their service bonus, as well as their general good relationships with the NASA team. They’d be free in a matter of days, and it simply didn’t seem worth it.

(Let’s be clear: All of those were excuses. They just didn’t want any press or attention.)

When they, with the exception of Watney, were finally allowed to travel again, Annie booked them on their first flights, to New York for the in-person talk show circuit (they were twelve days from their second, better flights to Costa Rica, where they’d booked two weeks in a deserted resort). They both felt vaguely guilty for NASA renting two rooms when they’d only used one, but they’d also hijacked a spaceship, and suddenly overpaying for four nights at the Mandarin didn’t seem so bad.

The illicit thing was kind of fun, too, Beth thought as they packed up their room on the last day. She’d been so concerned about everything changing that she was pleasantly surprised by how much
had not. She had expected to be more fearful. She had expected that her feelings for him, assaulted by so many new variables in their noisy messy world, would become more complex. She had expected to lose herself in the definition of girlfriend, to feel trapped again, to feel like fleeing. None of those things happened. Life was short, life was long, life was fast, and life was extraordinary.

(She was realizing that she could be many things, and want many things, and do many things, and feel many things, and still be herself, and this this, this them, would still be itself, too. Frequently it made things better, sometimes it made things worse, most of the time it was just a fact.)

Being back was still fundamentally disorienting — there was simply too much time and space, and a feeling that they were gripping marble with their fingernails came and went in panicky waves, and sleep came hard for her while Chris had hazy nightmares — but the motions of him and her felt familiar, even in this place, like she was exercising long-dormant muscles. They’d snuck out for a day of hiking and a weekend trip to Austin in Houston; in New York, they went to late dinners at tucked-in restaurants and he dragged her out on jogs in the morning. When they walked down the street they could get lost in the anonymity of winter coats and caps and stand too close together, shoulders and hips and occasionally noses and mouths bumping up against each other. They spent an hour in the bathtub after filming The Chat Box splitting a bottle of champagne. And when those feelings of nausea set in, when she began to feel withdrawn, she could just look at him, and she would snap back to Doing OK.

“It’s like you forgot we were friends for two years first,” Chris snorted, amused, after she voiced her surprise that things had gone smoothly while they were packing. He reached around her to grab cords and phones and tablets to make sure they were charged, and handed hers to her as she refolded the clothes he’d basically tossed into his bag. “We used to go hiking and to Austin and to dinner all the time.”

She rolled her eyes in acquiescence. “It’s just nice to know we can actually, you know …”

“Date?” he smirked.

“Well, yes,” she said, handing him his bag. “I was worried I would need you too much,” she explained, working it out to herself a half-second before she verbalized it. “But mostly, I just flat-out like being with you.” Earth Chris was a looser and more confident character than Space Chris (not having the threat of dying hanging over you did that to a guy.). “Also, you definitely weren’t this funny before Ares III.” Earth Chris — at least this Earth Chris — was funny.

“I’ve always been hilarious,” he assured her, swinging her weekender over his shoulder. “Do you have everything?”

“Yeah,” she said, palming a ten onto the dresser for the cleaning crew. She felt slightly guilty that nobody would get paid for checking in on the immaculate room, so she set another ten down. “And no, you were not. You were serious. And cocky. And a smartass. And fun. But not funny.”

“Well, you scared your Group. And you were a bit of a pain in the ass, frankly.” She didn’t disagree. She wasn’t entirely comfortable how much they had changed each other, but it had happened.

(Not change for one another. Just change one another — smoothing edges, unwinding knots, buffing up the dulled corners, filling in gaps. That was important.)

“You’re one to talk,” she retorted out of habit as she pulled the door open and let him through with all the luggage. He paused in the hallway, extended an arm to wrap around her. “You need help with anything?” she checked.
“I’m good.”

“Hey guys.”

They jumped.

(They knew that voice.)

(Obviously.)

They turned.

“Nice to see you.” Annie said conversationally, looking immaculate in an eggshell dress that Beth guessed cost a paycheck. “You know, if you’re going to share a room, the least you could do was tell us so we don’t pay a grand for a second.” There really was not getting around this: they were coming out of the same room; his arm was around her; he had her bag.

“Hi Annie,” Chris said, dragging the words out in a long exhale.

“I’m not mad,” Annie said, and indeed she looked more expressive (one could even say delighted) than Beth had ever seen her — typically, the older woman was monochrome, with emotion and well-coiffed hair and expensive dresses blending into one stunning, impersonal facade. “In fact, Dr. Beck, I believe I told you to date more.” She smirked. “This certainly does make you more interesting.”

“You did call me, what was it? A Ken doll,” he agreed, clearly remembering something.

“We don’t want this becoming a thing,” Beth said quickly but carefully, looking back and forth between Chris and Annie. “I hope we can trust you to keep this in confidence. We’re a week away from being out of the corps.”

Annie’s brow wrinkled. “How long has this been going on?”

“A while,” Chris finally said as Beth fidgeted.

“Since the Hermes?” she pressed. “You two totally hooked up in space. The rest of crew knew, didn’t they?” When they froze, she continued, “I’m guessing … a year? Longer? I’m not going to tell anyone, if that’s what you want. I have enough good press to get a job offer in the mid-six-figures. But you want my advice? Just be yourselves. Don’t be secretive. That just makes people think you have something to hide.” She walked past them. “Congratulations, by the way,” she called over her shoulder.

They stopped. Stared at each other. “That was weird, right?” Chris checked.

“Yeah, but I think … she just threw us a solid.” Beth chewed over Annie’s advice. “What happens after next week?”

“Uh … We go to Costa Rica and live out the rest of our lives?”

“I mean…” she wiggled under his confused gaze, “I have, what, a million followers across different social-media platforms? You have at least half that. Mark’ll have more than ten million when he goes online again, even if it’s just to post photos of his plants growing. Are we supposed to never post a photo? That doesn’t make sense.” It’s another form of the tiny cage they lived in on the Hermes.

“Maybe … we take her advice. Nothing too crazy, but not hiding anything.”

“Maybe … starting now.” She extended her hand.
They were, by definition and habit and personality, not huge public displayers of affection (of course, the only public they’d had for two years was their crew). When they were alone was one thing, and there was a low-key physicality, sure, but they had hardly floated around *Hermes* with limbs wrapped around each other making out. Beth might’ve vomited if they had. Walking around as Ares III crew members holding hands would be the opposite of that. She found she cared a lot less than she thought she would.

He took her hand. “Starting now,” he agreed, running his thumb along hers to find the pulse nestled in the meat of her palm. She took a deep breath, steeled her stomach, and nodded.

The crew was a bit surprised when they showed up in the lobby five minutes later still hand-in-hand: Melissa’s eyes widened a little; Martinez made a catcall out of necessity; and Alex was confused until Martinez spelled it out for him. “But it is not news. I do not understand,” the German said with a headshake.

“So, you’re … fully public?” Melissa checked, a cagey eye toward Annie.

“Yeah,” Chris said, with a shrug. “We figured why not.”

“I figured why not,” she corrected.

“I listen to her.”

“How long you think it’ll be, you know, under the radar?” Melissa asked.

They turned to Annie, who had tuned out to all their intra-crewmate nonsense. “Oh, not very long at all,” she assured them after a beat.

Annie was right: They’ve one last TV appearance, filmed that evening with a silver-haired Jimmy Fallon (“You were my first celebrity crush,” Melissa admitted, starry-eyed and beet-faced, which made Beth practically shriek in laughter.). “We’re going to play the Newlywed Game, but as a team,” Fallon explained as he prepped them. “Are you guys old enough to remember that?”

“It is questions, right?” Alex asked. “To see how well you know one another.”

“Right,” Fallon said briskly. “And listen, since you all were, you know, stuck up in space together for a few years, it might get, it might get a little personal. So just prepare yourselves.”

They exchanged dubious looks.

Twenty minutes later, stagger-seated in director’s chairs directly across from Fallon, she clutched a whiteboard tightly. Quiz-show music blared and lights flashed around them, and the audience clapped and cheered from thirty feet away. It was claustrophobically hot under the lights. “If he had to repopulate Mars with any woman on Earth, who would Chris Beck choose?” Fallon drawled, tapping the big yellow card against his index finger.

Martinez’s eyes widened, Vogel chortled, and Melissa pursed her lips. They all exchanged tiny glances, milked the deliberation for all it was worth to mask genuine confusion.

Chris twisted to find her, tilted his eyes toward her. She raised her eyebrows at him. He twisted the right corner of his lip. She nodded.

The nod rippled through their friends, and everyone turned decisively to their whiteboards.

“Turn it over — I sense some collusion,” Fallon insisted, scooting forward in anticipation of what
they’d just wordlessly agreed to.

Everyone flipped obediently: Melissa had written Beth, Chris had written Beth obviously, and Martinez and Alex had written Johanssen (Martinez with a big heart around her name). She had written Blue Ivy.

“Really?” Chris demanded with a laugh.

“She’s one of your freebies!” she retorted, clearly a girlfriend play-acting sassiness for the audience and the camera and the Internet video this would become. “You wouldn’t go for that?” she laughed.

“No. No I would not go for that,” he laughed in return, affecting the attitude of the put-upon boyfriend. It wasn’t them (it was a role) but it worked well. The audience whooped.

“Oh my god!” Fallon squeal-wheezed, his hands over his mouth. He stamped his feet a bit. “Does NASA allow this? Do they know?”

“Do now,” Beth said carelessly, raising her arms in a shrug. It felt good, to have a give-no-fucks attitude again.

She’d spent so much of the last three years worrying.

Fallon moved on to the next question — “Which crew member is most likely to sing in the shower?” (Vogel obviously) — and Chris caught her eye with a tiny smile.

Life was short. Life was long. Life was fast.

Life was extraordinary.

And they were gonna go with it.

xix.

The flat, tropical humidity of Costa Rica was as forceful and foreign as Mars’ barren clime, and smacked Chris in the face as soon as they stepped out of the airport. Next to him, Beth recoiled a bit, raising her hand to her brow line. “It’s hot,” she said simply. He knew that tone, though: Beth might have become habituated into running and an intense workout regimen due to Ares III, but she still, for the most part, hated the outdoors (it was really easy to forget that on a spaceship).

“Yeah,” he said, “The resort said they were sending a van.”

“Do you see it?”

“What’s on the logo again?” He asked, craning his neck above the throng. “Like a peacock?”

“It's a quetzal.”

“Yeah, I have no idea what that means,” he replied.

“Over there. Let’s go,” she said, pointing as she suppressed an eye roll.

They'd had plenty of mundane conversations on Hermes, usually peppered liberally with mission-speak, but that was one of the most jarring things about their return to Earth: how much of their conversation was simply life-negotiation. Did they book the tickets; had his sister called; what should they buy at the grocery store; what did the doctor say about her blood pressure that day; was the thermostat set too high? It wasn't bad, at all, but almost weirder than the whole not-being-in-space
anymore thing. They were both perfectly capable of sharing small spaces on *Hermes* because they were well-trained and could compartmentalize the mission as wholly separate from their reality. But in reality, he was unused to sharing his space, and she was kind of bad at it. She had been more right than he expected (he wasn’t going to say that).

“Beck, party of two?” She asked the driver of the van.

“Yes yes!” He said, recognizing the name. “Come in. You, ah, you know Mark Watney?”

Busted. “Yeah,” he smiled tightly, climbing in.

“We are all praying,” he said. “How is he, ah, how is he now?”

“He's good,” Beth replied. “He's out of the hospital. With his family.”

“How you like being back on Earth?”

“It's good,” Beth said. “A relief. We're happy to be here.”

“How far to the resort?” Chris asked.

“Forty-five minutes, sir.”

He grinned. *Vacation.* “What do you want to do first?” he asked Beth.

“Sleep,” she said with a little laugh, like it should be obvious.

Point taken. “And then what, though? I was thinking we could do the canopy tour.”

“Sure,” she shrugged. “Maybe after the beach.”

“Sounds good. We could go snorkeling, too.” There was also a volcano hike he thought they’d like.

“Chris,” she patted his hand, “this is a vacation. To decompress. After we spent thirty months working nonstop doing a job that constantly put our lives in danger. I'm gonna want to fucking sleep in.”

The driver laughed at them.

They checked in, dropped their bags in their room. Despite her earlier desire to sleep, Beth suggested they check out the beach, and she changed into jean shorts and laceless Converse and a T-shirt over a bikini she’d purchased in Houston. She was still self-conscious about the amount of weight and muscle tone she’d lost in space, and he was still unused to seeing her wearing only one layer of (non-NASA issued, to boot) clothing. He took a second to admire her slim legs and ass, then pulled on a polo shirt and swim trunks. They headed, hand-in-hand, to the resort’s private beach.

It was completely deserted, the tawny sand warm from sun earlier in the day. Shells, driftwood, and seaweed littered the seam of the tide, and the waves’ breaking thundered louder than Chris ever remembered. The water stretched until it bled into the horizon.

“It’s so big,” Beth breathed, her grip going slack before her hand slipped out of his. She folded her arms across her chest.

“Yeah, but just remember, it stretches a couple thousand miles. Then it hits Europe and Africa. We traveled millions of miles beyond that.”

(He’s reminded of a picture book from when he was a kid. Up close, they’re on a beach. Zoom out, and they’re in a country. Zoom out more, they’re on a continent. Further, they’re a speck by a mountain range. Even further, and they’re a blip you can’t even see from Mars. Pull back more, and the whole solar system disappears into the inky expanse of space. Perspectives twisted and changed and were contextualized. Did you know the Milky Way had 100 billion planets?)

“Well, together, we’re double the size,” he volunteered, and she directed a small smile to the sand. “You know, this is the first time we’ve ever been alone.”

“We’ve been alone in the condo in Houston over the last month. Plenty of times,” she said, her eyebrows scrunching. She was always very careful to call it the condo, never their condo. He hoped this would change in DC.

“Yeah but if we didn't show up to TMC or JSC the next morning someone would call. Here …. Nothing.”

“You know, for a doctor, you’re really being comforting right now,” she said, half serious and half smirky. “Hearing that there’s nobody here and that for the first time in more than two and a half years we’re completely alone.”

“It’s a little liberating, though, right?” Two years of dating, and they could finally be themselves.

“It’s … weird to have all this space,” she said carefully — not critically, just honest.

“Yeah,” he agreed, and he got it. There was so much time, and space, now that they were back on Earth. Beth was still unused to loud noises or big crowds (not that she’d ever really liked those), and Houston had been wearing on her. He hoped this would help her bounce back.

“You are right,” she said, slipping her hand into his as she squinted into the sun. “You do make it easier.” He squeezed her palm, and she smiled at him. “Come on,” she coaxed, drifting to the water and kicking it up. She laughed. “It’s so cold!”

Like the humidity, it felt like an entirely new sensation, a dormant part of his brain reawakening. He took off his shirt and tossed it above the tide line, and she followed suit and shimmied out of her shorts, chucking her Chucks behind her as well. As soon as they were both stripped down to their suits, he pushed her sideways into an oncoming wave, skewering them both with saltwater.

She shrieked with laughter. “You are so dead, Christopher Beck,” she called, pushing a wall of water at him. “So dead!”

They spent a solid five minutes splashing each other, reacclimating to all the sensations — heat, water, humidity, salt, relief, release — they’d been denied in space. Eventually, he just leaned forward and kissed her, hard, feeling like all the life was being poured back into his body.

She pulled back eventually. “Room,” she demanded.

“You know, it is deserted here,” he said, running a thumb under the ridge of her breast.

“Yeah, fuck no,” she said, sloshing toward the shore and grabbing his hand insistently before kissing him again. They’d dealt with paparazzi in New York and she had not been a fan. “Room.”

Forty-five minutes later, she curved into his side, warm and supple and sated. “A few vacation rules,” she murmured, wrapping a leg around his thigh, her eyes big and inches from his face. “One,
only one crazy-adventure task a day. And no repeats. I’m only doing a canopy tour once. I’m only hiking one volcano. Two, I will not wake up to see a sunrise. I saw ten a day the last month on the Hermes. They actually all do look the same. Three, at least three hours of dedicated lounge time a day. Four, sex at least once a day. And five, there is no such thing as too many meals.”

He pressed her back into the bed and began dragging his teeth down her sternum. “Can I combine the last two rules?” he asked innocently, and she pushed her hips up to meet him.

And thus they began their vacation. The wide-openness of their options was a bit unsettling, for sure. They hadn’t been allowed to choose what they wanted to do for months, and he caught Beth staring into space or keeping her body awake at night out of sheer will more than once. Despite her rules, Beth still woke up by eight every morning (old habits died hard) and got plenty competitive during their thirty-mile bike ride. But there was plenty of fresh food, and new books, and warm sand rough against Beth’s shoulders and thighs, and bad puns and inane banter and secret smiles. It felt like their first days of friendship again, but infinitely better.

And on night six, Beth shook him awake, hard, out of one of his nightmares. Again.

Honestly, if you asked (he wouldn't tell you otherwise), he got them regularly. Pretty regularly, in fact. It was usually nothing too complicated, nothing that a quick perusal of a Psych 101 textbook couldn’t accurately diagnose. They left Watney on Mars; they left him on Mars; they left Beth on Mars. All the one-in-a-million shots they took to rescue Mark failed at some point in some of these dreams. He might get untethered during an EVA, or Hermes couldn't dock the EAV, or Beth had to eat them all. Sometimes he was left in a wide-open, empty room on Earth; sometimes he was falling; sometimes he was drowning. The scenarios and locations varied; the consistent, cliched theme was that he couldn't save someone.

“Are you OK?” she asked, one arm tucked behind her head and the other splayed on his chest. “You’re all clammy.” She stroked his brow.

“Yeah,” he replied, shaking the vestiges of the nightmare off. “Did I wake you?”

“Yes, but that doesn’t matter, really,” she peered at him closely. “Are you OK? You’ve been having nightmares every few days. That’s not normal.”

“I’m fine,” he shifted.

“You want to talk about it?”

“There’s nothing to say. We’ve all been having a little trouble adjusting.”

“Yeah, but you haven’t, really, not the way I have. Except for this,” she ran a hand down his arm. “What's the dream?”

“This time? I go back to Shake Shack, and the burger isn't how I remember it.”

“Chris,” she said, and he was surprised that her eyes were wet, “you spend all your time taking care of other people. Sometimes, it borders on pathological, but most of the time, it's because you’re a good fucking guy. Please … let me take care of you. Just this time, OK? I promise I’ll go back to being the moody hot mess … probably tomorrow.” She ran the arch of her foot along the underside of his calf. “Let me in, please.”

He smiled softly, and pulled her closer. “It’s not, like Alien chasing me or anything. This time, I was on an EVA, and you were in a … capsule, I guess, it wasn’t NASA-designed. It was entirely clear, like a bubble. And you were floating back down to Earth.”
“Was I … trapped?” she asked. “Like, in danger?”

“No,” he swallowed. “I was pounding on the glass walls, and you couldn’t hear me. But you weren’t … struggling. You floated one way, and I floated the other.”

She kissed him, sure as she was the first time. “I’m not floating in any other direction,” she assured him. “I’m here. This makes sense.”

There was fear in her eyes, though; for him or for her or for them, he couldn’t tell. “I know,” he said, but there was doubt in his voice too.

“Hey,” she said softly, cautiously, putting a hand on his palm. “I know I’m … I’m not sure of anything. I’m still not, and I know that worries you. But I’ve always been sure of you, OK? Maybe not me, maybe not always us … But going back to that honky-tonk, I’ve always been sure of you.”

“What does that even mean?” he asked. He was sick of her not being “sure” about something that to him felt like fact.

“It means … it means you can trust me. I’m not going to think any differently about you; I’m not going to leave because you have nightmares or anything else. I know you. The great, the good, the stuff you don’t like but is secretly still kind of endearing, the annoying, the kind-of awful, the downright objectively shitty. I know you, and I love you. I want to give us some space to figure stuff out on Earth, when we have jobs and a dirty apartment, but I want this. I want you. I want us,” her voice was plaintive, but steady. She licked her lips and repeated, “Let me in, please. OK?”

“OK,” he whispered back. He was struck, as he sometimes was, at how thoroughly they were simply entwined. If one of them died, the other would be the only one to remember this particular conversation, that particular declaration. She carried his heart with her, and vice versa. It was exactly what he had wanted; it was more than he could have fucking hoped for; it was absolutely fucking terrifying.

(This is what Helena Vogel meant by Zeuges.)

She absently scratched at his tattoo. The darkness, the sleepiness, made the room a tent where honesty was less intimidating (honesty to yourself was hard enough; let alone to someone you loved, whom you wanted to think and believe and know the best of you). “You know I’m still having trouble sleeping. That crowds are still making me anxious.”

“I know,” he repeated. “I know.” The symptoms and scars of Mars were complicating their attempts to move on happily, to declare themselves openly, to commit transparently. But she was right: Their casual exchanges of intimacy, their swapping of secrets, was where and how and why they had started. If they could reclaim that, if they could be each other’s guards against the stealthy harshness of Earth, they would be OK.

If not …

He gripped her waist tighter.

She sighed. “I don’t like it, either. I hope we can get to the point where we’re not … haunted by space anymore. Where a conversation is just a conversation. Where we just sleep through the night. Where we’re just on a vacation and not trying to emotionally recover from the last two and a half years.”

He got that. “We will soon, I think,” he murmured, suddenly feeling soothed and sure. “We made it to Mars and back twice. We’re tougher than a couple nightmares and a couple nights having trouble
“Let’s make a pact, to not be scared of what’s going to happen and what’s happening. I’m so sick of being scared and worried. Fuck this shit. You talk to me when you have nightmares, and I’ll tell you when I’m having trouble sleeping. Fuck Mars. It doesn’t control us.”

“Deal,” he muttered, wrapping her in his arms. He fell asleep, finally.

The next morning, she wasn’t in bed when he woke up, for probably the second time ever. He caught the open door to the balcony out of the corner of his eye, and headed out there softly. She was sitting, folded cranelike with one leg under her and her chin on the other knee, in the chair, looking out at the trees and beach and water. “Hey,” he said. “You’re up … ridiculously early. Well, for you. Did you get body-snatched by a Martian?”

“Shut up,” she rolled her eyes, but smiled. It seemed more contemplative, more peaceful, than the other dozen times he caught her staring into space. She patted the arm of the second chair, then looked at him with concern. “You slept well. After, I mean …”

“Yeah,” he said, bumping a kiss against her forehead as he flopped next to her. “You?”

“Yeah,” she sighed, staring out at the trees again. “It’s just … It’s beautiful here.”

“Costa Rica, or Earth?” he smiled.

“Both, obviously,” she replied. She looked happier and more content than he’d seen her, probably ever. “I just … It’s easy to forget that, with how fast everything is going. It’s really fucking beautiful.”

He smiled, staring at her. The same sort of ‘it’ll be alright’ peace washed over him too. “Yeah,” he said. “It is.”

A storm had passed.

She'd gotten him through it. They'd gotten through it together.

There was only one choice to make (her). (And it was not really a choice.)

Things felt infinitely easier.

xx.

After 30 months in an unrelentingly suffocating box where time stood still, the first two months back on Earth went by at what felt like light-speed (and yes, she fully appreciated the irony of the comparison). They spent slightly more than a month in Houston as they waited for the all-clear from NASA docs — two weeks in the hospital, two as outpatients, two as NASA’s dancing monkeys (Mark had it rougher, spending more than a month as an inpatient who could only leave when Annie Montrose deemed him healthy enough to speak to press or donors, and then another two months as resident inpatient dancing monkey.). Then it was their eighteen days in Costa Rica, before going back to Houston to finalize the sale of Chris’s condo. She had to report at the NSA on March 3rd, so they had twelve days to pack or ship everything in the now-sold condo (mostly, they transferred stuff from a Texas storage facility to one in Maryland). The crew — or really, Mark and the Martinezes; the Commander and Vogel had left already — had pulled an all-nighter helping them pack and then taken them to the airport. It was crazy, and exhausting (and so hard to say goodbye to them), but she felt more empowered and kickass than she had in years. It surprised her how quickly, in most moments, she’d shaken off space.
She suspected it was due to Chris (fine, she knew it).

She turned to look at him, dozing in the tiny airplane seat next to her, and smiled involuntarily. He still did that to her. He’d cut his hair finally, acquiescing in the face of everyone’s very valid “You’re back to being a real person now” arguments, and looked like the Boy Scout-slash-future senator she’d fallen in love with. She’d miss the man bun though. Good times.

She leaned back again, stared out the window at the dry brown post-winter hills of Tennessee. When she truly thought about it it still amazed her, how big Earth was even though it seemed so small, how dramatically her perception had been altered by space. Staring down at all of it made her dizzy, like how staring at Monets sometime made her cross-eyed. There was too much to focus on and she wasn’t sure where to look first anymore. Chris had his nightmares — probably from channeling all his waking energy on making sure she was doing OK — and she had this … ribbon of uncertainty ghosting her decisions.

But even though thinking too hard about the wideness of her freedoms now freaked her out, she was no longer trepidatious, no longer anxious, about what was to come. Most of the time, the two of them were doing great. They’d be in D.C. soon, and it felt like she was going off to college again: a fresh start, but with the strange and prickly realization that she could no longer be the person she was once, but without knowing who she was yet.

And within that contradiction, she knew it was time to start thinking — really start thinking — about what came next. Unsurprisingly, she was dreading that (though everything she’d dreaded so far had turned out to be not-so-concerning). She’d convinced Chris to view their time on Hermes in a suspended state, to reserve making decisions about what came next until they were out of the bubble and settled (though really, wasn’t settling together a decision in and of itself?). And now they were about to settle. Which meant those decisions and conversations, which she’d put off until they’d traded the pressures of life-or-death situations for the pressures of mundane ones, were now just around the corner.

She wasn’t sure if Chris had realized it yet, but he definitely wanted kids (seriously, how had they not discussed that at all on the Hermes? They had two years with very little external stimulation. They were all kinds of dumb.). She wasn’t sure if she did — she wasn’t sure what exactly she would do with them — but the idea of kids-with-Chris had a sort of appeal she couldn’t quite articulate.

They’d always been part of a crew, and it had been awesome. Kids would be like a little crew again, a tiny troupe for grand adventures. And surely they couldn’t be any more slobby than Martinez and Watney.

But she wanted other things, and she thought she wanted them more: She wanted to spend time with Chris, traveling and sleeping in and eating takeout in bed and christening the kitchen; she wanted to code for hours in a hoodie and no pants; she wanted to kick ass at her job and redesign the American cybersecurity landscape; she wanted to (one day) go back to Silicon Valley and run a company. They both thrived on being workaholics, and that wasn’t a bad thing. Parenting would be an adventure, sure, but it mostly sounded like an exhausting one. Actual adventures and dreams would enervate, ambitions would adjust to more scalable proportions, and they’d start justifying quitting things they loved (triathlons, coding, rock climbing, gaming) as “better for the kids.”

She had been to Mars, and understood completely how far humans and human ingenuity could go, how much they could accomplish and still be fundamentally the same. But she wasn’t sure the same extended to the tiny, lived moments of life; how far one’s sense of self could bend and grow and evolve without breaking. But she did want to figure it out. She didn’t want her identity or independence to be a trump card, but she couldn’t figure out how to reconcile everything she wanted.
Chris stirred, then woke, beside her; he groaned and asked, “Mmm. We there yet?”

“Not even close. I think we’re somewhere around Nashville.” She reached out and ruffled his hair. “You sleep OK?”

“Yeah. Did you nap? You didn’t sleep at all last night.”

She quelled her irritation at his doctory ways. His solution to everything was Sleep More. “I never sleep before flights. I didn’t sleep at all before launch.”

“Still.”

“I’m fine. I’ve actually been checking out apartments and houses online.”

He followed her redirect. “Anything interesting?”

“Mmm. I want to see them in person first, you know?”

“Makes sense. So I had an idea.” His voice lifted, excited.

“Yeah?”

“When was the last time you were in D.C.?”

“Um, I don’t know. I’ve been out of the country for the last three years. Oh wait, I’ve been off this planet.”

“Smartass. I’m serious.”

“Probably college. At least a decade. Why?”

“I haven’t been since medical school, either. I think we should make a D.C. bucket list. We’ll have something to look forward too once the where-are-we-living insanity dies down.”

“I like it. Do we have to include the Air and Space Museum, though?”

“Uh, yes. Obviously. We should learn more about the history of space exploration. I’ve heard it’s fascinating.”

She laughed. “Let’s do it. Let’s make a list.”

It’s a short list, and silly, and focused mostly on touristy things: cherry blossoms; the White House; Mount Vernon. Chris adds Shenandoah Weekend and she adds Visit Kramerbooks. Pretty quickly, though, they’ve exhausted their incredibly limited knowledge of the city they’re about to call home. She looks at the twelve items: “Do we really know where the hell we’re moving?”

“Probably not,” he laughed. He scratched out Have fun and make new memories onto the list. She smiled at his cornballness. What she told him in space, what she told him in Costa Rica, still held: She had faith in him. She knew him. All the other stuff — extra (important extra. But extra). She added some very specific, borderline raunchy activities of her own, and he laughed.

“I have a question,” she said finally, surprising herself again. He always fucking did that to her.

“Yeah?”
“Now that we’re … free, I guess is the best term … What do you want?”

“What do I want?” his brow furrowed.

“Yes. Job, house, the future … I made us put those conversations off, and when we did so … I realized we didn’t talk about them. At all. Ever. Which seems kind of problematic. Now that we’re, you know, in the future.”

“Oh. Yeah. I mean … It’s clearly weighing on you, so you first. What do you want?”

“I want to be good at my job, the same way I was … there.” She was hesitant to say in space, because they hadn’t been recognized anywhere, thank God. “I want to travel, more. I’ve never really gone anywhere.”

“Except Mars,” he pointed out, his voice low for the same reason she avoided saying In space.

“Yeah, but I have like … three passport stamps. And one is from Costa Rica,” she said. She’d always been working, been studying, been blasting off into space. She’d been so busy she’d never really recognized how awesome what she had was. “So I want to travel. I want to code, again, which I guess I’m gonna get through work.” She paused. “I want to buy, not rent. Buy. Something permanent.” Lord knows, between the service bonus and the fact that they’d been paid but had no expenses for two years and her savings from her Valley days and Chris’ modest inheritance and money from his condo sale, they were perfectly set up to buy. She hoped that conveyed how serious she was about this (still nervous, but serious). “What about you?”

“Same things, I guess,” he said. “I want hobbies again. Enough space in our place so that people can visit.”

“Marissa already said they’re coming up to help paint,” she pointed out.

“Well there ya go.”

“Ladies and gentlemen, we’re beginning our descent into Clinton International Airport. Please make sure to buckle your seatbelts and retract tray tables.”

The landing went smoothly (though after re-entering Earth’s atmosphere, most plane rides would be cake), and they wound quickly out of the gate, out of the terminal, to the luggage chute. They were only recognized three times, and took a couple of photos, accepted congratulations on their relationship, promised to pass along good wishes to Mark. And suddenly they stood in front of the sliding doors, to the outside world, to the real world, to the rest of their lives.

She reached over, wove her fingers through his.

She was ready. For whatever came next.

(Turns out, it was a lot.)
Hi all,

Hope everyone had a happy New Year! Around the time I posted the last chapter, a ton of amazing Yuletide Johanbeck came out, so I think this might’ve gotten lost in the shuffle (that, or the length has finally done you in! Also understandable). But I hope you enjoy this chapter! Please leave me a note if you do. We're rounding home plate, and officially in Totally Fake territory. I hope to have the entire piece completed by the Oscars (famous last words).

Heliocentrism

Chapter Notes

Heliocentrism is the theory that the planets and solar system revolve around the sun — i.e., something other than the Earth. It put the center of the universe outside of Earth itself and into another body. Nicolas Copernicus’ discovery shook the scientific, religious, and cultural communities to their core. But once this new way of understanding things was accepted, the recalibrated perspective led to dramatic jumps in scientific progress.

“The really important kind of freedom involves attention, and awareness, and discipline, and effort, and being able truly to care about other people and to sacrifice for them, over and over, in myriad petty little unsexy ways, every day.” — David Foster Wallace

xxi.

“This one?”

“It's two bedrooms. We want a third for an office, right?”

“This one?”

“We’re both working in Maryland, and it’s in Alexandria. Won’t we spend forever commuting?”

“This one?”

Instead of responding, she simply made a face and swiped right. Alright then.

Buying a condo in Houston had been a relatively straightforward undertaking: Would his stuff fit, was it close enough to JSC, and on the off chance a chick came over, did it look respectable? Now, though, with the only chick that would ever matter, buying a condo or townhouse in D.C. became an infinitely more fraught undertaking.

There was location — Fort Meade and the NIH were basically in opposite directions, despite both being in Maryland, and they wanted to live in the city. There was size — they both wanted enough space so the Martinezes or his sister or Mark or her parents could come visit, and space was hard to come by in said city. And finally, there was the fact that they had spent two years working furiously to keep a spaceship from falling out of the sky. They didn’t want to have to do a lot of renovations or repairs. They just wanted to come home and sit on a couch.
“This one?” he finally asked, double-tapping a 10-bedroom mansion in McLean for the hell of it.

Instead of laughing, though, she flopped into the fetal position on the couch in their corporate rental (the NSA had arranged it; after Mark made a joke, they had searched it for surveillance devices. Just in case). “Chris, we’re never going to find a place,” she whined. “At this rate we could just fly down from the Hermes every day.”

“Helluva commute,” he said. “Way longer than Alexandria.” She shifted and pulled her head into his lap to pout, and he carded his fingers through her hair. “Come on. Let’s go get pizza.” She popped up, pouty mood insta-erased, and he laughed. “When are you not going to be excited about the fact that we can walk to the pizza place?”

“I don’t know. Maybe a year?” She padded toward the closet to grab a coat, kicking his discarded shoes along the way. “Ugh, babe? Can you remember to put your shoes in the closet?”

He suppressed a groan. This was probably the fourteenth iteration of what he’d dubbed The Toothpaste Cap Argument: Beth had neater-than-thou tendencies, which he’d known about and matched on the Hermes, but now that he suddenly had stuff again, he had errant jackets and tablets and toothpaste caps to leave everywhere, apparently. The argument was balanced out by what he called the Are You Seriously Going to Eat That Debate, because when left to her own devices, Beth ate junk food and only junk food, which was stupid- unhealthy.

“Sorry,” he called. Actually — “On second thought, can you bring those out? I need shoes.”

She emerged and deposited them at his feet. “You’re shameless,” she informed him.

“But charming and adorable.”

“Those mean the same thing, Casanova. Let’s go.”

They ambled out of the rental, hand in hand, into what Chris privately referred to as The New Normal. It was surprising, when he thought about it, how fully they had settled in, how they’d snapped into this life like a rubber band being released from a teasing overextension. Sure, he still had those nightmares and she still had trouble falling asleep, but both had abated somewhat in the new environment. And while some days he had step back, awed and appreciative, to remind himself This is your life now; more frequently, he had to chant: You were on Mars. You spent thirty months on a spaceship. You were an astronaut. It was strange, to know that portion of his life was irretrievably over. When he heard airplanes shriek overhead he looked up, half-thinking that it was the Hermes flying by with him living some other life inside it. It took everything in him not to wave. This is your life now.

Dinner — the pizza-restaurant manager was beginning to recognize them as regulars — was mostly a work affair; they kept flipping through various listings. Finally after the thirtieth or fortieth right-swipe he stilled her hand. “Let’s just ask the realtor about neighborhoods on Saturday. That’s her job. No more houses. How’s work?” It was strange, to have to ask her about it. And it turned out, people who weren’t on the Hermes bitched about their coworkers plenty.

“Fine,” she shrugged, stabbing a mushroom pretty violently to liberate it from the cheese. “You know I can’t really talk about it.” They hadn’t thought through one aspect of Beth’s new job: Her crazy-ass security clearance. It would be marginally easier if they were married, but … that wasn’t something they were going to think about for a while.

( Though it was all he had been thinking about lately )
“How ‘bout you? How’s Awful Aaron?” she asked, further deconstructing her pizza into a pile of vegetables, meats, and cheeses.

“Yesterday he admitted he didn’t know he was supposed to wash the test tubes with soap,” Chris said frankly, and she dissolved into giggles. “He sucks. He’s the actual worst.”

On Saturday morning Marci the realtor, with very little debate and in a tone that was scarily reminiscent of Commander Lewis’s, informed them north Capitol Hill was their best (and only) bet: Beth could commute 30 minutes by car; he could jump on the subway and make it to the NIH in half an hour; most of the properties were townhomes. While the first required way too much work and the second had bedrooms the size of the Hermes quarters, the third, a stately 120-year-old corner townhouse with three stories and tons of windows and a separate basement apartment on an especially residential block, immediately piqued his interest. When Beth stepped out of the car, she nearly gasped, lifting her hand to shield her eyes.

“How’s it?” Beth asked after they wandered around the five bedrooms, living room, library, and rec room. She was staring at the crown molding (Marci had just explained what that meant to them) and tapping the inlaid burners off and on. “I’m not saying I don’t like it. It’s gorgeous. I was just picturing something more ... modern.” He understood the adjective as a coded excuse; everything in the home was trendy and technologically advanced, and decorated in a clean, open-plan style that seemed very much like her tastes: exposed brick walls and skylights and granite and chrome and bamboo, with a warm, casual vibe and a classic exterior. It must have undergone serious work recently; it didn’t seem a century old inside.

She appreciatively swept a hand over the countertop, where the burners had cooled immediately, letting her fingers linger. She really liked the place, he could tell. He did too. The house was big, sure, but it wasn’t ostentatious — nothing built before World War I could be, really; it wasn’t like it had a home theatre and a wine cellar. It was just gracious and well-maintained, with the balcony and fireplace and drawer for takeout menus they’d dreamed of. He could see them in it.

“The interior was fully renovated three years ago. The exterior is also in excellent condition. It’s not an all-glass condo, but all the features of this home are very in-demand,” Marci said, confirming his suspicions.

“It’s so much space,” Beth countered, turning specifically to him and tuning out Marci, whom she no longer had any use for. “It’s 3000 square feet, plus a basement apartment. That’s almost the size of the Hermes. For just us. No labs! It’s huge.”

“You did say that you wanted more space,” he reminded her, cautiously. “Just consider it … room to grow.” Discussing kids would’ve been getting way, way too far ahead of themselves on the Hermes — hell, they’d only managed to establish that they were going to move in together on Earth after a year and a half of space-dating — but now, back on Earth, he liked the idea. A lot, actually. He wanted a full life with her (he always had, really; he just has never fully comprehended how vast the possibilities could be), and after watching Martinez with David for the past two months, he got the parenting thing on a much more fundamental level. He was pretty sure they were wildly underprepared for kids, and that was terrifying … But he could see a preschool-aged daughter giving him Beth’s unimpressed look, or a son riding on his shoulders during hikes in Great Falls. He could see her helping a couple of kids designing robots to duke it out, and himself coaching basketball and soccer teams. Together, they could do it.

She tried to laugh off his comment. “I know you think I’m eating tons of junk food now, but seriously how fat do you think I’m going to get? Chris, five bedrooms. What the hell are we going to put in them? Do you want to adopt an entire flight crew or open up a school for plucky orphans?”
“We’ll take one, we’ll need one for guests, we wanted an office, that’s three. We could use one for exercise equipment.” They’d buy a treadmill eventually. “The other … hell, do you want a gaming room? A crafting room? It doesn’t have to be anything, but if it’s there it can be whatever we want it to be.”

He had no idea, honestly, where she stood on the kids question. His best guess was that she was hedged against it, but not definitively opposed. She adored her nephew and regularly kidnapped David Martinez to spoil him, too. She had helped Vogel’s kids pull pranks on their dad when they were all based in Houston. But he also didn’t think she needed kids, that her fulfillment depended upon motherhood, that having kids rose to the level of desire. And if he knew Beth — and he did — he could see where that meant they had a poor ROI and weren’t worth it.

She turned to Marci. “When do we have to make a decision?”

“Obviously not at this minute,” Marci smiled. “And I have a few other houses that I can show you. But I can say this is a popular listing. It’s not going to be on the market for long.”

“She’s check out the other houses,” he suggested. “We don’t have to make any decisions.”

“Sounds good,” she said carefully, taking one last hard look around the entryway before they left.

The next three places were perfectly nice; not great, but nice. Beth was getting a little tetchy and he was feeling defeated, so they peeled off from Marci to discuss the options. They wandered through a square park about a block from the third house, Beth stopping to pet three dogs as they passed them. A few blocks beyond the park, they reached Barracks Row, a street of small shops and restaurants. “Want coffee?” Beth suggested, nudging his elbow with hers. They grabbed coffees and sat outside — the first tentative tentacles of spring were beginning to brush over the city, and if they kept their jackets on they were good on the patio.

“This place is really nice,” he remarked, cradling his flat white. God he’d missed espresso.

“Yeah, the entire neighborhood is,” Beth replied. “It’ll be good to live around here.” She took a sip of her nitro coffee. “So. You really liked the third one best.”

“So did you,” he pointed out.


“You hate my cleaning,” he corrected, but with a smile. “We can afford it,” he said gently, tapping all five fingers to make his point. “We can also keep looking, no problem. It’s whether or not we want that house.”

“You think we need that much space?” she asked, gauging his reaction. The tone was half-curious, half a challenge, and her voice lowered as if she were unsure of herself.

The question caught him by surprise (it really shouldn’t have), and he leaned back. He folded his arms across the chest. “I mean … Sure,” he shrugged. “It feels like a lot, sure, but … we’re adaptable. That’s just who we are. And I like the house. A lot. We don’t know what the future holds, so why not?” He was trying, very hard, not to freak her out, but also not be a jerk. He would be perfectly happy to just evaluate the house on a yes/no basis, no big discussion about the future and what it meant. But he also knew that was probably a little unfair.

She pinched her nose with her fingers. “OK. What do you want it to look like? If you could control it.”
He hated certainty as much as she loved it, so he hedged. “You. I’m yours. For as long as you’ll have me. Everything else … is negotiable — we can figure it out together when we feel ready. But yeah, as a start? I like the house.” He shrugged as if to say *Sue me*.

“Because it has room to grow?” she repeated.

“I think that’s a nice component, yeah,” he admitted. “If we stay in D.C., the space … gives us options.”

“And you have no current opinion on those options?”

He sighed. He did, but … “Have I ever told you when I fell for you?”

She straightened, surprised at the turn. “The moment you met me, I assume,” she smirked.

“Nope,” he smiled. “Don’t get me wrong, I’m pretty sure I walked out of that bar with a crush,” he said frankly. He’d *definitely* figured she’d be significant, sure. She had been … just unbelievably attractive, with the punky Audrey Hepburn eyes and the dry wit and the knowing smirk that let you know that she was in on the joke, and she’d been on the joke first. She still gut-punched him when he wasn’t expecting it to.

“You had a crush for a while,” she teased.

“Yeah, at least I *realized* it, unlike you,” he shot back with a smile. It was an old-hat debate. “But no, the moment where I was like, ‘Fuck it, I’m going to ask her out even though it’s going to royally piss off NASA.’”

She paused. “No?”

“It was right before launch — that New Year’s party at the Lewis’. I got cornered by Helena Vogel, who basically called bullshit on our friendship. She told me — in front of Robert, which was terrifying because I was pretty sure I was going to get kicked off the mission, with five months till launch — that I was in love with you. And I gave her some shit — I don’t know what I said, maybe that it was selfish of me to be in a relationship given my job? I can’t remember. Anyways, she put me in my place. Hard. She said when you really loved someone, that didn’t matter. It was unfair sometimes, it was selfish sometimes. But at the end of the day, the person that you’re with — I don’t think it’s a soulmate, she didn’t use that term, I think it was the German word for *witness*, actually — they’re there. They know about the shitty stuff, and the great stuff, and the petty stuff, and the amazing stuff, and just the … everyday stuff. And that’s what I want. With you. I don’t know what that looks like. Hell, I don’t *care* what that looks like. But that’s what I want.”

“And you like the house?”

“And I like the house.”

She studied him. “I do too,” she said. “Hell. Let's get it.”

His grin widened. “Yeah?”

She laughed, like she couldn't believe it, then matched his grin. “Yeah.”

He leaned forward and kissed her. She knotted a hand in his shirt to give it a little extra pressure, and smiled into the kiss.

*(Dimly it clicked that this sideways approach — glancing off the topic of kids — to solving conflict*
would potentially be problematic. But their time on the Hermes, the fleet of NASA psychiatrists, had conditioned them into a strange sort of timidity when it came to arguing. Any disagreement was to be mediated by Commander Lewis, and decisions were bloodless: feelings weren't meant to be taken into account, just the way consequences would affect the success of the mission. Hell, they weren't even supposed to have feelings. The directive had worked well for his blend of ambition and cockiness and conflict-aversion. They'd done it for the greater good, and sublimated their own desires. It was just really damn hard to figure out the greater good now, in this, how to be considerate and selfless and even sacrificial but also honest and compassionately proactive. They both tended to shun conflict, in different ways, and at some point a fester turned into an infection.

( In other news, relationships were hard )

“You sure?” He checked, those subconscious feelings compelling him to ask. It couldn't stop a smile though. “We can keep looking.” She preferred, by her own admission, to go at it alone, and this house and its room for growth was potentially as terrifying as a launch. (Or, perhaps more accurately, as a tattoo needle). He hoped she got that she was more important than any house or whatever they could fill it with. He didn't want this if it would make her unhappy, if it would cause her to bend so far as to break. He hoped she was saying yes because she wanted the house and wanted to be with him and would consider the possibilities, not because she was steeling her stomach and jumping for his sake. They were both astronauts for a reason — they had a tendency toward the self-sacrificial.

“Yeah. Yeah I am,” she said, and she stared straight at him with a luminous movie-star smile. She sort of palmed her eye like she couldn't believe what was happening, and he was reminded of how she looked when they'd decided to hijack the Hermes. She meant it; she just took a while to get there sometimes, but she never changed her mind on a decision. “We should call Marissa. There's going to be a lot more painting to do than she thought.”

He leaned forward and kissed her again (side note: the one thing he would miss about never going to space again was kissing in 0g. Not sex — that had been as hard as Vogel predicted — but the kissing, because the spinning during a kiss in 0g was the closest physical approximation for how she made him feel in any amount of gravity.)

“I love you,” she said when they broke apart, linking her hands with his. They said it rarely, and it made him smile even wider.

“I love you too,” he replied genuinely.

They were gonna do it. They were actually fucking doing it.

This is your life now.

xxii.

Twenty-five instances that made Beth Johanssen realize that she was fully committed to a future with Chris Beck, point. blank. period.

1. Their first purchase (after the house) was a king-sized bed. They stopped going to bed at the same time — Beck’s chrono-typical inclination to go to sleep early, and her own bent toward night-owlishness eventually re-emerged, and she’d stay up and work or code while he dozed. Some nights they ended up curled up tight like they were on the Hermes; other nights, they ended up at polar opposite sides of the bed. Most nights, there was just one point of connection: His arm thrown across her waist, or her foot wrapped around his calf. No matter what, the sight of him made her smile when she woke up. And she liked that they didn’t need
to clutch onto each other when sleeping.

2. When the Martinezes came up to help paint and brought Mark because Marissa couldn’t inhale paint fumes (Martinez had knocked her up by February, they had announced proudly. Chris and Mark gave Rick serious shit about not wasting any time, and Rick countered by boasting of his super space-sperm), Chris bought chalk paint for the backsplash because she liked it, even though he thought it was impractical and would get dirty. He then streaked paint on her nose after she stuck his tongue out at him.

3. They babysat David Martinez one night as a thank-you to Martinez and Marissa (Watney had pulled the Astronaut Card while they were out to dinner the previous night and scored a date). Chris galloped the kid around the living room and they all played Twister, which devolved into a tickle fight. Afterwards the three of them lay sprawled on the floor, David passed out in between them. Exhausted and satiated from the shrieking and the giggling and the tickling, she looked over at him, then reached out and ruffled his hair. He brought a hand up to hers and brought her fingers to his lips to kiss them, and it was really nice.

4. They both cared a lot more about decor than they had anticipated, so there were many arguments about couches and sofas and paintings (he thought Red Sox memorabilia was sufficient, and it was not). Once the living room was finally furnished, they put the photo Watney had given them on the mantel, centered among photos of the crew.

5. She started to buy toothpaste with the attached cap. It cut down on a lot of arguments.

6. When he forgot his keys before heading out to work one day, she didn’t mind swinging by the NIH to pick him up after she finished at Fort Meade. They toured his new lab and grabbed Korean barbecue wings before heading home.

7. It only took them three weeks to fully christen the townhouse. It was really fucking fun. And despite the enormity of the house, which she’d spent so much time stressing over, it never felt big when they were together. Like a gas, they expanded to fill the space.

8. He woke up early to work out with his triathlon club. She started to grab an 8 p.m. session at the boxing gym on Fort Meade. They still found plenty of time to talk, and things to talk about.

9. He brought her tea in bed (still).

10. She kicked his ass at Mario Kart, which he was fine with, because she was drinking fruit-only smoothies for breakfast without complaint. They grocery-shopped together, and he feinted at learning to cook. Mostly they ate spaghetti sitting on the floor in front of their coffee table, because they hadn’t purchased an actual table yet, and these nights usually ended with sex on the couch.

11. Despite the fact that junk food basically gave him an aneurysm, he still bought Oreos and Twizzlers for her when he went grocery shopping alone. He usually forgot something important like toilet paper, but he remembered those.

12. At some point Chris reconnected with a friend from Yale who was now a radiologist at Georgetown, and he and his wife invited them out to dinner. When Chris introduced her as “my girlfriend, Beth,” she smiled and extended a hand, then asked for stories about his med school days. After the dessert came and as Chris told the story of a prank war with Martinez and Watney, she listed her head against his shoulder, and he draped an arm around her. His friends were really nice, she thought as they walked home that evening.

13. He took off work when she had a root canal (side effect of three years with no real dental checkups) and watched Mr. Robot for the first time with her (he really got into the third-season twist where Allsafe gets blown up) and held back her hair when the anesthesia made her nauseous. She spent the afternoon dozing with her head in his lap.

14. Two weeks later when he got food poisoning from grocery-store sushi, she called out and returned the favor. He called her the best nurse he’d ever seen when she managed to reheat the Campbell’s. It was a total lie, but she rolled her eyes and smiled.

15. He went on his first business trip (three nights to a conference at Baylor, where he was presenting his preliminary findings on the effects of Mars on Watney) and the house was weird and lonely without him. She turned on all the lights, triple-locked the doors, and coded through
her insomnia. When he came back (at 11 p.m. on a Friday) she decided to meet him at the airport just because it was better than waiting an hour.

16. Once he came back, she started falling asleep more easily.

17. She put photos of him and them in her office at the NSA. A three-star general said that they were a cute couple and that his wife thought Chris was dreamy.

18. Her doctor asked if she wanted a new IUD when the device’s five-year-efficacy period ended, and after a second she asked for Depo shots every three months instead.

19. Her 32nd birthday rolled around in May, and he gave her three gifts, two for the years he couldn’t give her anything particularly nice, because space, and one for the actual birthday. Thus she got September tickets to Barcelona and Budapest; new computer shit she hadn’t realized he even knew the names for; and a Australian shepherd puppy, whom she named Ada Lovelace. They called her Aidy. She fell in love with her immediately.

20. Chris took the early-morning walk for Aidy. She fell more in love with him, immediately.

21. She started thinking of a birthday present, and landed on something awesome. She’d never be able to top it, but it would be worth it.

22. When giving her mother a video tour and introduction to Aidy via phone, her mom asked, “When you get married, are you going to change your name? I tend to think it’s better for kids, but Beth Beck sounds a little weird.” Automatically she responded, “Yeah, I know what you mean. No clue,” then thought What the fuck? Then she thought, She is right though. It sounds kind of ridiculous.

23. On a hot summer night when she couldn’t sleep and the windows were open to let a breeze in, she had a realization as she mentally fixed code and worked through how best to surprise him for his birthday and added ‘vet appointment’ to her to-do list. She rolled over and poked Chris awake. “Mmmmmph?” he asked. “You know how I said that I needed to be back on Earth and have fixed points again, before I could definitively know what I wanted?” “Yeah?” he asked sleepily, and Aidy keened from her dog bed in the corner. “That was stupid,” she replied. “I should’ve realized … you’re one of the fixed points. You’re the strongest fixed point, actually. And you have been … probably since training.”

24. He smiled sleepily (and just then, she realized that smile would be making her feel that way for the rest of his life) and tugged her closer. “You realized this three months after we spent our life savings on a house together?” he murmured, more amused than anything else. “That was … based on a consistent response to a tested hypothesis,” she said, curving against him. “And I wanted this result. I was pretty sure this was the result, because all the data came back positive. But this is fact. I was worried about how many choices there would be on Earth. But you and this … It’s not a choice. It’s just fact.” He pressed a kiss to her temple. “I love you,” he said.

25. She settled against him. “I love you too. Though for the record, Beth Beck sounds like a sorority girl. We’re going to have to work on that one when we get married.”

xxiii.


“Yeah,” Chris grinned, trailing a hand along the shiny silver chrome of the ‘67 Corvette Sting Ray. It had been Beth’s surprise for his birthday earlier in the month: “Just like the Apollo astronauts had ,” she’d said when he unwrapped the keys and saw the car, even though he got the connection immediately. “Aidy is perfect so I had to try and match her somehow.” He crossed his arms with pride. And also smugness.

Because while he loved the car, Watney was, if possible, even more into it.

“You know, Johanssen, the movie deal to my life made me a very rich guy. And you’re still legally
single. You can still come with me.” He was touching everything on the car, outlining the rims with his index finger, and Chris didn’t have the heart to tell him to stop. “I will buy you all the lame old-timey video games and movie-theatre candy you want.”

“Mmm, tempting,” she demurred with an eye-roll, coming up next to Chris and snaking her arms around his waist as he watched Watney flip out. He automatically looped an arm around her shoulder. She was dressed incongruously for the weather — shorts and bare feet and a white t-shirt, all draped in her house hoodie — and was rangey and relaxed in a way he hadn’t seen since the very early days in Houston. Aidy flapped at her ankles. “We just signed the deed for this house though, and it’d be a mess to try and get my money back from him,” she said, tipping her chin onto his shoulder and smirking at him. “Otherwise, totally.”

Chris laughed, kissed her quickly, and turned to Watney. “Four months too late, man,” he deadpanned.

“Armstrong had this car! Grissom had this car!”

“Shepherd too,” Beth smiled, disentangling herself and putting her hands on her hips. “Different colors, though. So at least there’s that.”

Watney was in D.C. to receive the Congressional Space Medal of Honor, the highest award that NASA could hand out, for his extreme bravery and valor (“What, we get excluded for a little space mutiny?” Martinez had faux-groused when it was announced). There would be a ceremony at the White House in a week’s time; the Smithsonian, seizing an opportunity, had fast-tracked an exhibit opening for their new Ares III experience (apparently, there was a “grow your own potatoes” interactive game), and they were all invited to that, too. While the Commander, Vogel, and the Martinezes would be flying in for both ceremonies, Watney had taken the opportunity to be their first houseguest; predictably, he’d arrived early and been noncommittal an exit timeframe. Neither of them really minded. They’d take an alive Watney eating their food over every other version of Watney any day.

They’d settled, over the summer, into an easy grace. Life was busy — he was working on a major paper examining the effects of microgravity on microRNA growth and leading a stem-cell regen project based on some of the data he’d collected in space; she was integrating systems and building impossibly high firewalls and untangling years of messy code; in their spare time they had to build furniture — but it was boring, in the nicest way possible. The universe was no longer trying to kill them, NASA was no longer trying to sell their likenesses to toy companies, and the public was no longer recognizing them at restaurants and baseball games. They bickered about stupid stuff and watched way too much Netflix and began to develop patterns and hobbies separate from one another. Their lives were three-dimensional. It was a little strange to not be around the crew constantly, was still hard and weird at times, but he’d gained a future, a real future, and stability. He liked that far more than the excitement and the adrenaline NASA had once brought.

“Can we drive it to a bar? Let’s drive it to a bar.”

“It only fits two,” Chris pointed out.

“I have some work to do, actually,” Beth excused herself. “You guys should go have Guy Time.”

“You sure?” Chris checked, startled.

“Yes. I’ll join up for dinner. You need to have some fun; go out with Mark.”

“I have fun!”
She laughed. “Chris, your leisure activities are running ten milers and peer-reviewing journal articles. And the Sox when it’s baseball season. Go have a beer with Mark.”

He turned to Mark. “It’s like she thinks playing Atari games and reading mystery novels are so cool.”

“Always being the nerdiest among us, she is,” Watney replied solemnly.

“It’s like you two were never separated,” Beth threw back, gathering Aidy into her arms and laughing as she walked back into the house. “I’ll message about dinner.”

Chris turned back to Mark. “There’s no way in hell we’re driving this car, by the way. We can walk.”

Mark’s face fell. “One time, after you left me on Mars —”

“Not gonna work. I like this car too much.”

Twenty minutes later they were settled into Turnkey, a divey place the Hill types (and therefore the journalists) tended to avoid. Mark had the latest (and by that, Chris meant from that morning; they had an active group chat going and he and Beth were pretty up-to-date on the gestation of Rick’s spawn) on Marissa’s pregnancy, and their top name contenders for Little Girl Martinez: “It’s going to be Daisy, or Nina, or Lucy. Martinez thinks Daisy sounds a little too much like Daisy Duck, you know, but Marissa loves it.” The bartender, at the other end of the bar, did a double-take: Mark, and by extension Chris, had been recognized.

“Nina’s pretty,” Chris offered, signaling the guy over.

“I’ll tell him you liked it. Want me to hold it for you guys? Speaking of: Why haven’t you invited me to be your best man yet? I am after all the reason you got together.”

“OK, you have to stop saying that, because it’s not true.”

“I’m going to drop it into my next magazine profile: Mark Watney, Renaissance Man. Repairer of rovers, grower of greens, maker of matches. You owe your Yente.” He started humming **Matchmaker Matchmaker**, sweeping his hands around to conduct an imaginary orchestra.

“Well, you know I had pre-space friends, right, who could be in my wedding?” he replied, ordering a beer. Mark snorted. Fair. “Also since we’re not engaged, that sounds a little premature.”

“Can I ask why you’re not?” Mark asked bluntly. The waiter brought their beers and indicated on the house. Watney flashed him a winning Martian smile. “Rick is going ballistic — he bet by her birthday and then Fourth of July and then your birthday and now he owes Alex two hundred bucks. And I mean, come on. It’s time. Man up.”

“In the past six months, we moved in together, started new jobs, bought a house, decorated the house, got a dog, and got a new car. We’re actually moving pretty fast, Oprah.”

“Bullshit. You’ve been together for almost five years. You’ve been living together for more than two.”

“I know you’re still suffering from the long-term effects of being stranded on Mars, but we have not been together for five years.”

“I said together, not dating, dumbass.”
He hesitated. “It’ll happen. I’m not rushing. She’s mentioned, a couple of times, ‘When we get married…’. So, soon. I’m looking at rings.” He’d been to a couple of stores, searched online. He didn’t think she would go for something particularly large or even a diamond, so he was on the prowl for something smaller, probably vintage, with a ruby or garnet. Unsurprisingly they were damn hard to find.

Watney wrinkled his nose. “Skip it. A ring? That’s so not her style.”

He didn’t entirely disagree, but — “It’s tradition.”

He flat-out laughed, slapping the table. “Because Johannsen’s always cared about doing the traditional thing.” He tapped his watch and instructed it, “Message Bro-res 3.”

“*That’s* your name for a group chat?” he groaned. “Seriously, how did you get any dates before you were named Person of the Universe?”

“I was *TIME* ’s Person of the Year, and *Vanity Fair* named me Most Famous Man in the Universe,” he corrected. Into his wrist, he said, “Guys: Chris is waiting to propose until he finds the perfect ring. That’s crap, right? Tell him Johanssen doesn’t care about that shit.”

The message beeped across his phone into the group chat he had with Alex and Rick, which apparently was unfortunately called Bro-res 3 in Mark’s phone. Immediately more messages scrolled:


“What’s their latest bet?” he asked Mark.

“Double or nothing by Labor Day. Last bet,” Mark replied.

***Vogel*: While I agree that Beth is not in great need of a ring, she is also not in need of a partner. She is with you — still — because she wants to be. I think she would appreciate the gesture. I think. Take some time, find a ring. Perhaps a month.

***Martinez*: COLLUSION! He typed, erased, and typed another message: *Lewis doesn’t have an engagement ring. Johanssen won’t want-slash-need one.* He paused again. *Marissa says that, because she is carrying my child for me, I have to report that she thinks that yes, dumbass, you need to get her a ring. Pause, type, pause. Also she says that she called it at that gala for Ares II, and that I can confirm that. And yes, I can confirm that.*

“What is he talking about?” Watney asked.

“Marissa is basically psychic.”

“We knew that already.” He spoke back into his wrist: “Guys, you know what? I think he’s scared.”

“I am not!” he protested before quickly typing, “I am not! Though thank you all for your not-at-all-self-serving advice.”

***Vogel*: Why don’t you ask her?

***Martinez*: Marissa says that’s a good idea.
He shook his head. *What? No! Doesn’t that ruin the surprise?*

“Who the fuck do you think you’re proposing to, Bossy Beck?” Watney shook his head. “This is *Johnassen*. She’s not a normal girl. Like, at all. She’s weird as hell.”

“You’re going where with this?”

“It’s a good weird! Well, it’s still pretty weird, but it’s your type of weird. Clearly.”

**Vogel:** *She is clearly committed to you, and there is no doubt what her answer will be. It will not be a surprise. So simply ask for her input.*

“Exactly,” Watney smirked. “Dude. I have, like, zero insight into the human condition. I’ve spent most of the last four years *not* around humans. But it sounds like you’re trying to plan some perfect proposal to some random imaginary-bot girlfriend, and not the *real life girlfriend you actually have*. When the fuck has the Johanssen we all know and you love cared about a ring, and when the fuck has she cared about shit like a wedding?

**Martinez:** *I completely agree. And ask today, or tomorrow. Remember, today is the first day of the rest of your life.*

He typed. Thanks, Hallmark. He paused. Also, you’re all assholes.

**Martinez:** *Just wait till the bach, bro! VEGAS BABY*. He followed it with sixty-five emojis, most of them semi-sexual.

Watney’s face contorted in faux-jealousy. “Hey! That’s my thing to plan; I’m the best man,” he said to Beck, letting the message chain die. He grinned. “See? Problem solved. Ask her about the ring, ask her to marry you however she wants, get married, and have five bossy nerdy kids, at least two of whom are named Mark.”

He inhaled. “I’m not sure about that last part, actually.”

Mark’s eyebrows wrinkled. “You don’t want kids?”

“No, I do. I think. I’m pretty sure I do, actually,” he took a sip. “I just don’t know if she does.”

He sighed. “Well, god, you should talk to her about that one too. You’re lucky you’re so pretty because, boy, you are *dumb*.”

They finished their drinks, and Beth joined them for dinner, and they showed Mark the sites and walked Aidy around the Hill and stayed up way too late sipping the good whisky Vincent Kapoor had sent them upon the purchase of their house. After Watney retired upstairs, he let Beth, draped across the couch with her head in his lap, doze for a bit before shaking her awake.

“It’s good to have him around,” Beth said, her voice still froggy from sleep, as she washed her face. He changed in the bedroom, not really listening to her ramble. “Don’t get me wrong, there were times on that trip home I could have ejected any of you — including you, hot stuff — into space, but I’ve kind of missed the crazy Martian. It’ll be cool to have everyone crashing here, too. More than everyone, actually, since Robert and Marissa —”

Half-changed and jittery as fuck, he swung into the bathroom door, bracing himself with the doorframe, a wild look on his face. “This probably shouldn’t — at least I hope it shouldn’t — come as a surprise, but I would like to ask you to marry me. Soon, actually, if that’s OK with you. But — long story — Martinez and Watney and Vogel think you would find a ring dumb, and since I would
really really like for you to say yes, I don’t want to fuck this up. So I thought I would … check.”

God, that was a pathetic last line. He was usually in a lot better control of his shit.

She stared at him, wide-eyed and stunned. “OK, first, we need to make a house rule that you can’t start serious discussions about our future shirtless. Because that’s … highly distracting. To say the least.” She kept gesturing erratically, pushing downwards like she was trying to mentally calm them both down.

He nodded. She had a good point. “OK,” he said, then padded back into the bedroom to grab one of their combined nineteen NASA sweatshirts. When he turned back, she was in the bedroom, chin dipped and a smile beginning to bloom on her face. She was glowing.

He really liked that.

She started to approach him, and he sat back on the bed, the undersides of his knees knocking against the comforter. “First off,” she smirked, “I do not think that Mark Watney should ever be your go-to guy for romantic advice, even though this whole Martian thing means he’s probably had more partners in the last six months than the rest of us have had, combined, in our lifetimes.”

She straddled him, the rounds of her ass gently resting on his lap, and snaked her arms around him. “Second — yes, it is not a surprise. I would love to marry you, whenever and however and wherever. That … that’s been clear, for a while, I hope. So no, not a surprise. Third, I do not care how you ask. I could honestly go down to some courthouse tomorrow and just sign some papers and be done with it. But I think you want some … romance and to be the guy and whatever, and that’s cool, man. I don’t need a ring, either — honestly, it might interfere with work, so if you get one, nothing crazy, OK? — but if you ask with a ring or without a ring or with a bread twist-tie or a Ring Pop, I’ll say yes. If you want the ring, on one knee, the whole shabang … Yes. Of course yes. Always yes. Alright? Just no baseball games or flash mobs or anything insane. That’s it.” She held his face in both her hands and kissed him — intensely, but without tongue. “You got it? I’m marrying you, you silly, silly man.”

He laughed, because of course she was holy fuck he was going to marry Beth Johanssen and then kissed her again. “I’m sorry,” he said. “That was really dumb. I just …”

“What?”

“Before meeting you,” he twined one of his hands in hers, “I honestly never thought I’d ever propose to anyone. So I didn’t really think about it much and … I’m an idiot, basically.”

She laughed throatily. “I’m pretty sure one of our first real conversations in Houston was about how I never planned on getting married. Or even ever get into a relationship again. So … either we’re both idiots —”

“— NASA-certified idiots —”

“Or we changed. Much as we tried not to,” she smiled, rueful. “This works. I like it.”

He kissed her again. “So we’re getting married,” he said, an inescapable grin spreading across his face. He felt … God, he hadn’t had this intense of a flash of happiness since they had decided to go back for Mark.

She laughed, then kissed him again. “I don’t know. Are you asking?”
“Not yet,” he smiled. “But … soon.”

Soon.

xxiv.

Supernerd Beth Johanssen, Not A Real Girl, was going to get married.

To her dreamy American Hero Astronaut Boyfriend.

And she was damned excited about it.

Not excited. That sounded giddy, like first crushes and stomach butterflies and middle-school slow dances and Mrs. Beck doodles in a long-forgotten notebook.

She was damned sure.

After Chris’s adorable inadvertent shirtless proposal (THAT one was going to told, again and again), she practically floated through the next week, through their crew mini-reunion (the boys already knew about his plan, and Commander Lewis guessed as soon as she and Robert got off the plane); though a White House ceremony (so boring she nearly fell asleep) and several interviews; through the mini media shitstorm they set off by their group appearance at the Nationals game. Beyond the insanity (and the terrible photos run by both TMZ and People), it was a wonderful weekend: High spirits and fast conversation and late nights up talking and everyone oohing over the house. She was proud of it, of the paint and the decorations, of what they’d built.

Vogel left midday Sunday, back to the Heimatland. Martinez and Marissa drove off later that evening; off to first drop David at her parents’ and then to a babymoon on Cape May. The Lewises took a 6 A.M. flight out of Clinton. And Watney finally peeled off Tuesday, claiming his plants were probably dying and needed his TLC.

(“If your space plants lasted a year and a half with me, I’m sure they’re fine,” Chris had said, back-slapping a hug, as Watney left, “though if you need to go back so you don’t have to admit I botanied like a pro, that’s cool too.”)

And then suddenly, in the quiet, it was just them.

And something was bugging her.

The week ended with a whimper: On Friday she worked late and went to the gym, and when she got home Chris was drafting a journal article with a baseball game in the background. She had a presentation to design for Monday but she wasn’t really feeling it, so instead she curled up on the couch and half-listened to the game. Occasionally he’d reach out to rub her feet or drop in a non sequitur — “We should pick up more paper towels” “The rDNA from the mice died this week” “This is stupid walk-up music” “Aidy killed another chew-toy” — but mostly they sat in silence. It was nice.

Eventually he reached out to give her another brief footrub. “Oh, Marissa and Rick decided to cut the babymoon short since the beach is way too hot and she’s uncomfortable. He refuses to stay too long with the in-laws so I told them it was OK to crash here tomorrow night before they fly out Sunday. I hope that’s OK.”

“Of course,” she said.

“Maybe we should offer to watch David tomorrow night? Since they’re losing a few nights of the
“Sure,” she replied, more carefully. Then, suddenly — “So — you’re still planning on proposing, right?”

His ears pinkened. He was cooking up something, she could tell. “Uh, yes? Since you did, you know, indicate you would say yes. Pretty emphatically.”

“I meant it emphatically,” she shifted. “Just — where do you stand on kids, exactly?” She knew it was something he’d thought about, but that he’d avoided bringing up, for both reasons good (he tended to let events play out and make the best decisions for the situation at hand) and bad (he didn’t enjoy personal conflict). And she knew she would be the one to eventually bring it up, also for reasons good (she tended to plan a hell of a lot more) and bad (she was compelled to force issues). “Because I know it’s something you’ve thought about and if you haven’t, you should. Because I think you’d be a great father.”

“Well, for the record, I think you’d be a good mother,” he rebutted mildly.

“Maybe,” she shrugged, doubtful. “I mean … I certainly don’t think I would be terrible. I could handle being home with him alone and figure out feeding and clothes and everything. And I’d love a kid if he was here, sure. I don’t think you could not, you know? Biologically. I’m sure I’d give this kid about the average amount of complexes as the rest of the kids in his kindergarten class develop about their mothers.” Her voice trailed off.

“Just no overwhelming desire?” he guessed.

“Yes,” she replied, relieved. “How’d you know?”

“I’ve known you for a while, and I know you pretty well,” he shrugged.

“This is why you didn’t bring it up,” she realized. “So. You want kids?” She surmised.

He paused. “Yeah,” he finally said. “I do.”

She nodded. “Is this … Is this a deal breaker?” Because it was better to know now, she figured, trying very hard to keep an unexpected surge of tears at bay.

“Beth,” he breathed, shocked. “Absolutely not. Of course not.”

“Because I don’t know. I just don’t. And if you do …”

“Beth. I don’t want kids for the sake of kids. It’s never … It’s never been a goal of mine. I’m practically 40. If I just wanted a family, I could’ve done that ten years ago.”

“Priorities change,” she pointed out. “If you really want them, I mean, I think —.”

“Hey. No. If you don’t want them, fine. And yeah. They do. But my priority is you, and this. I’ve said that all along. But we have them because we want them, and because we think it’ll make us stronger. I want to have kids because I want to have them with you. I want to ground them for coding under the covers and correcting their math teachers’ mistakes and rolling their eyes too much. And I want them to love science and play soccer and like to clean their rooms and suck at losing. And … if I’m a parent, I want you to be parenting with you. I didn’t exactly have great examples, and I’ve never changed a diaper, and my favorite thing to read is medical journals. I would suck. And you make things easier.”
It always came back to that, didn’t it?

She swallowed. “And if we don’t? If I don’t want kids?”

He shrugged. “I mean … It’d be hard., at first But we’d travel, we’d paint the kitchen every year, we’d spoil Riley and David and the new kid and we’d pick up crazy hobbies like flying small airplanes.” He shot her a crooked grin. “We spent two years living in a box together and didn’t get sick of each other. I’m not worried about us.”

She smiled and scooted closer to him. “You’re not learning how to fly an airplane.” He’d already almost died too many times. They both had.

“Rick can teach me,” he teased. “Anyways. What do you think? What are you thinking?”

“I … like the idea of building a little crew,” she said slowly. “Not a huge crew. Like, two tops.”

“Well, I would not like to be outnumbered,” he said, half-facetiously. “They might overrun us.”

She shoved him. “Exactly. Especially when I take into account that I have to push each of these hypothetical children out of my body.”

“Oh. Right. Fair,” he said.

She rolled her eyes. Guys had it too easy. “But at the same time, I really like my job. I like that we can pick up and travel if we want, or work for sixteen hours a day, or have sex in the kitchen, or say the word fuck. I like being …”

“Independent?” He smiled. She shrugged. “We can still do those things, with kids. We’ll be different, sure, but we can still travel and work and swear. And we had sex in the kitchen once and it was OK but my back won’t be able to handle that for much longer.”

She smirked, then shifted. “It's a little hard to picture,” she admitted. The thought of driving a minivan, of worrying about school lunches, of sitting on the sidelines of a youth sports league felt dim and awkward and distant. “I’m not opposed. OK’ing this house would have been ridiculous if I was totally opposed, and I switched to the Depo shot instead of an implant this spring. I just don’t feel particularly ready, I don’t feel particularly … excited. You should feel those things, right?”

He raised an eyebrow. “I mean, I’m don’t feel either of those things completely either. And, being and doing something new that you didn’t anticipate when you were at MIT isn’t going to take away from your inherent badassness, or make you anything less than you are,” he frowned. “You went to Mars and that didn’t make you any less of a brilliant computer scientist, it just also made you an astronaut.” He brightened. “Think of it like going to Mars.”

“Like going to Mars?” she repeated, amused.

“Yes. Did you feel 100 percent ready? Hell no. Were you pretty damn scared during launch? Of course. Was it hard? Yes, it was the hardest thing you had done until that point. Did it hurt? Yes. It was grueling, and emotionally wrecking. In the end, was it worth it?”

“Yes,” she finished for him. She curled into his side and he threw an arm around her shoulder.

“It was an adventure. We did it together.” He gave her a patented Dreamy Doctor Chris Beck smile. “I think we can handle a different type of adventure, too.”

She considered that. She liked that conceptualization. She thought about her options, her agency, her
perspective. Throughout her life, she’d been so brilliant, so stubborn, that she’d been allowed to set the tone and the terms of every relationship whenever they scared or repelled her: She interacted only sporadically with her family. She’d lost contact with all but a few exceptionally close friends from MIT. She left Brett. When she got scared or bored or annoyed, she left. Reflexively.

This, though, this was different. Even when it scared her, she always decided to stay. She always would, she knew. Leaving wasn’t an option. It had started as partly-forced — coupling up during the mission had been seriously unprofessional and letting a disagreement swerve into a breakup, even more so — but it had long ago pivoted into conscious choice. She could have left, but she did not. And that was the right choice.

They had long days, and boring days, and bad days, and days when they had practically driven each other nuts. He had plenty of annoying qualities, which should could readily list if asked (he would rather peel his long toenails than clip them; his food was consistently oversalted; he would go an annoyingly long time without checking his phone for messages; he always forgot something at the grocery store), but she knew that on balance she would rather be with him. She slept better after going to bed miffed at him than she did when he was out of town. That was fact. She was positive they’d have some rough weeks or months or even years — statistically, that was inevitable — but they were better together, and that fact mitigated and softened any rough sailing.

It was also fact that on the most important aspects of her life, he didn’t put her on the defensive or in a subordinate position or on a pedestal. He was just supportive; if she decided to start a company in Silicon Valley he would move, no problem (and if he got a dean position at Harvard Med, she’d figure something out somewhere in Cambridge). She had always been sure of him, of their genuine connection on those levels. If anyone could make her reconsider the habits and fears that had ossified into tenets of her identity, it was him. He had been her best friend for years.

Sitting there, considering his frame on their future, she realized that at some point, she had decided that success looked like and felt like something particular, fixed to arbitrary, external markers. She’d never gone full-on anarchist hacker cliche (NEEDLES), but it had been hoodies and energy drinks and late nights glowing blue with code. Being an introvert had meant being by herself. The way she defined ambition and independence looked a lot like loneliness, with a little perspective. Her single-minded drive — which had taken her to Massachusetts, to San Jose, to Houston, to Mars — now felt a lot more like desert wanderings. Singledom and childlessness made sense under these circumstance. She hadn’t been unhappy (it had been pretty fun, actually) but finding Chris, coming together with him and the rest of the crew … Those things had changed her, for the better, mostly, but also for the worse. Of course they did. And good scientists collected new data in the face of a changing environment. Code was updated.

He wasn’t forcing her to compromise, or flat-out change her mind, but he’d shifted her perspective. Kids, she realized, would probably do the same thing: Certain aspects of her personality (like her love of the orderliness and challenge of coding; her bent toward being contrarian; her perfectionist drive; her love of The Beatles; her contentment with quiet) had stayed; others had changed. Through it all, she still felt like Beth.

“OK.”

“OK?”

“I mean, not immediately,” she amended. He still needed to propose; they still needed to figure out marriage. “But, you know, in a year or a few years … Yeah.” She nodded. She’d spanned the solar system with him, and she knew they’d keep traveling together.

A grin, bigger than she’d seen in months, cracked across his face, and he kissed her deeply, quietly.
“OK,” he said.

She was sure.

Trying to plan a surprise proposal, after your friends had psyched you into ruining the surprise, was really damn hard.

It was especially hard when your friends were total jackasses who checked in near-daily on the status of said surprise proposal.

He knew they were doing it mostly to fuck with him — Martinez had once referred to him as a stone-cold bastard, because literally nothing could rile him up (Lord knows Rick and Mark had tried) — and it was definitely doing the trick. The two of them hadn’t managed to make him lose his shit while locked on the Hermes for three years, but the regular barrage of proposal videos and bachelor-party plans was definitely bringing him to that point.

Beth, in an effort to be helpful, only made things worse: She’d reminded him, a couple of times, that a ring really didn’t matter, had said that he better not spend too much on it since she’d rather they plan a nice wedding. She’d also outright suggested that they just do something “small, by the end of the year” (“Neither of us are big-event people, and we don’t want to make a huge deal, so why not just rent a place and let everyone know?”). It was thoughtful, and only added to the ridiculous pressure he was putting on himself.

She had a point, though, so they started planning tentatively, batting around locations and guest lists. There was family, obviously, and the crew (more obviously). There were a couple people from their Groups they’d like to invite, and friends (mostly his) from Houston. They considered a couple of reps from NASA, but tell-alls had begun to trickle out, and it reminded them that NASA had dick-punched them several times on the first trip back from Mars, so they got nixed. They’d both kept fairly large listservs of once-close friends apprised every week or so of their adventures during the thirty-month trip — several Silicon Valley people on her end and tons of MIT friends; his a collection of prep school, frat, Air Force, med school, as well as Houston, guys. Most of them had long faded into acquaintances, but they both had at least ten old friends they genuinely wanted to invite (this list included two ex-boyfriends of Beth’s from college, which raised his eyebrows). And suddenly a small wedding became eighty people. They weren’t exactly wedded (heh) to DC, and Beth was a West Coast girl at heart, so she’d started looking into locations in San Francisco and Santa Barbara that wouldn’t laugh at her Veteran's Day weekend request.

So he really needed to get his act together. There was finding a ring, of course, but he also needed to figure out how to ask. Dinner seemed passe. Trip to the Air and Space Museum seemed cliche. She’d taught him how to code a bit and he considered programming a game for her, but that would be immediately obvious.

He was not great with ideas. Basically, he was waiting for inspiration to strike.

He’d schlepped out to Alexandria to look at an antique ring dealer in a tiny gray store, to see if he had anything that said “Beth.” Predictably, he turned up short, and left defeated. He knew she was calling a venue that day; that he was probably out of time for an involved surprise. He sighed as he exited.

After Hermes, he regularly forgot his phone; it drove Beth nuts. He didn’t really get it; no call was that urgent. But when he saw four missed calls from Amy, two from Beth, and texts that read Hey call me and Chris? and Amy called me, where are you? You should call her back, he realized that
yes, sometimes, calls were that urgent.

He drove home, but stopped at a park a few blocks from the house. He got out, stared at the phone for a while, dialled Amy. “Hey,” he said, the roughness of his voice surprising him. “I’m sorry I didn’t pick up the phone.”

“It’s OK,” she said, her voice a little raw but still somewhat light. She sounded tired, if anything. “But … yeah. Danielle called.”

“How is he?”

“He died, Chris,” Amy said tentatively. “Yesterday. They thought — they thought he was going to have more time, I guess. Like, he took a turn and he died overnight. She said if she had known, she would’ve called both of us.”

“Oh. Ok. God. Did you … Does Mom know?”

“Yes. I told her. I think Aunt Michelle is going to drive her up on Monday. The funeral is Tuesday.”

It was Saturday.

“She and Danielle get along?”

“I mean, it's a funeral. Wine and expensive shit up for grabs and gossiping with old friends from Brookline? Kind of Mom’s scene.” Amy’s relationship with their mom had stopped maturing around Amy’s fourteenth birthday. “Are you coming?”

“Yes,” he rubbed his face with his hand and sighed. “Send me Danielle’s info, I guess.”

“Oh,” she said. “Oh. I told Beth. When I couldn't get a hold of you because you're a loser who doesn't pick up his phone.”

“You did?”

“Yeah. She didn't know?”

He shrugged. “I guess. It's been a bit crazy.”

“Sure,” she said skeptically. “Anyways. You two’ll be up?”

“Yes. I'll let you know when we book tickets. Tuesday?”

“Memorial is on Monday. It’ll be small, I think. For the Becks.”

“Alright. Thanks.”

“Love you.”

“Love you too.”

He walked home, slightly dazed. He would need to pick up the car later. As soon as the key scraped into the door and he pushed the door open, Beth called “Babe?” and appeared in the main hallway. Her eyes were wide and worried.

“Hey,” he said, and his voice gave away that he had talked to Amy, that they both knew the news.
She rushed toward him and hugged him tightly. He sagged into her embrace.

She kissed his neck, right below where it met his jaw. “I am so sorry, Chris,” she said, her lashes fanning wetly against his collarbone.

“Thanks,” he said numbly, tightening his grip on her waist. He had known this would be the outcome of his relationship with his dad — stars burned into black holes disintegrated into quiet matter-sucking dust, after all — but it was still foreign. He had made peace with it long ago, never expected anything between them to be fixed. People disappointed you, and that was a fact. But he still felt stunned, a little.

She pulled back and rested her hands on his shoulders. “Amy — didn’t say what he died of.”

“Uh. Cancer actually,” he said. “He had lung cancer.” Her eyes darkened with confusion and concern. “He was diagnosed when we were on the Hermes. Amy mentioned it after we landed. I … I don't know, I guess I figured there would be more warning.”

“Oh,” she said. “I didn’t know that.” She tried to keep a hard edge of hurt out of her voice, and mostly succeeded. He realized then that not mentioning this to her at all was probably not a good idea.

“Oh,” he said. “I … There was no that there, Beth. He left when I was in seventh grade, when my mom was a barely-functioning alcoholic, and I hardly ever saw him for the next ten years. He didn't know I was in space until Mark got left behind. I accepted everything a long time ago and … Yeah,” he shrugged lamely.

She nodded, still looking a little unsure. “Do you still want to go to the funeral?” she checked.

“I should.”

“That's not the same thing. You don’t have to go.”

“Yeah,” he said. “I do.”

“Ok,” she stepped back. “I'll go book us some flights and start packing. Do you … Need food or anything? Scotch, maybe?”

“No,” he shook his head. “I think — I think I just want to lie down.”

“Sounds good,” she said, then kissed him lightly. “I'm sorry, Chris.”

He kissed her again. “I know. Thanks though.”

He headed upstairs, shucked his pants and shirt, flopped on the bed. At some point he must have passed out, because he woke to Beth laying half on top of him, pressing a gentle kiss onto his spine, right between his scapulae, her hands flat and long against his sides. “Hey,” he said, shifting groggily to see her face. She was still in her leggings and tank from earlier. Light was still streaming in; he estimated it was midafternoon.

“Hey,” she said. “OK, so. We're booked on an 11 am shuttle flight tomorrow, and a return 6 am on Wednesday. I talked to Amy and then Danielle, and we're going to stay at a hotel near the church. I made the reservation. Most of the family stuff, including a dinner tomorrow and a reception after the funeral, is going to be at your grandparents’ old house.”

“I think one of my cousins owns that?” he asked.
“Yeah, that’s what Danielle said. Your cousin Taylor.” Taylor was the oldest Beck cousin, at least two years older than Danielle herself, a professor at Harvard Business School and the former chief of staff at the World Bank (Becks, with the exception of his father, tended to be highly successful). “I emailed Jake and let him know you’ll be out through Wednesday. I can’t take more than Monday and Tuesday off though, since we have the trip to Houston in a few weeks.”

He nodded and sat up. “Thank you,” he said gratefully.

“Chris, of course,” she said, twisting a lock of hair between two fingers. “It’s not a big deal.” She paused. “Do you want to talk, or not talk, or …”

He shrugged, and rolled to a sitting position. “There’s nothing to talk about, really.”

“I’m not sure that’s true,” she said carefully. “But, sure. Not talk it is.”

“I need to call Amy. See if there are any estate things I’m going to need to take care of.”

“I’ll clean, then pack. You want the one suit, I’m guessing?”

He nodded, and she headed out of the room. “Babe,” he called. She turned expectantly. “I really did mean it. I’m not sure how I’d get through the next couple of days without you, so … thank you.”

She softened. “I love you. And we’ll get through this. Together. Alright?”

He wanted to remind her You make things easier , because if there was ever a time for that to be true, it was now. Instead he nodded an “Alright,” and picked up the phone to call his sister.

Chapter End Notes

love it? hate it? Would love to hear!
Happy Valentine's Day! Got this one in under the wire.

I hope people are still reading Johanbeck — it's been quite a while since the movie came out. But if you're there, let me know! I would love to hear from you. Two more chapters left, and (I think) the last one will barely qualify, so I'm hoping to turn these around quickly.

For those who are interested, the conversation Beth has with Melissa in here is strongly inspired by a fantastic essay titled "The Wedding Toast I'll Never Give." Look it up.

Also, they discovered gravitational waves! You really CAN bend the fabric of space and time! How cool is that?

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Combustion

The act of burning; or, a rapid, predictable chemical response to a situation where a stimulant comes into contact with oxygen and produces heat and light. Frequently ignited by a spark, combustion can be difficult to control, and grows into something greater than it once was.

“For one human being to love another, that is perhaps the most difficult of all our tasks, the last test and proof, the work for which all other work is but preparation.” — Rilke

xxvi.

Beth needed a drink.

They'd been in Boston with the Becks for approximately five hours, and she completely understood why Chris had zero desire to go back to the city. She’d known the broad strokes of his family tree for years: father had been the third son and fifth and final child, and his extended family included a senator (his grandmother’s sister); two judges (his uncle and grandfather, the latter long deceased); the lieutenant governor of Connecticut (aunt’s stepchild) and the current mayor of Boston (cousin). There were two board chairmen, a brain surgeon, three published authors, and two Harvard professors among the collected cousins, second cousins, step cousins, and cousins in law. His dad had been the fuckup: bad grades, bad prospects, bad marriage, bad parent. After Chris’s grandparents passed away, the rest of the family had fled from his branch’s problems. But New England WASPs were nothing if well-behaved, and etiquette dictated that one showed up for a family funeral.

The fact that Chris’s last known address was Mars also helped attendance, she presumed. They'd been two of the last to arrive and were basically mobbed — not because Chris was the grieving, abandoned son, cutting a dark Kennedyesque profile in his good suit, but because he'd been on the cover of a dozen magazines and the front page of the *New York Times* in the last year. Everyone seemed perfectly lovely and engaged and interesting, but it felt like such a fraud and it left a sour taste in Beth’s mouth and gave her a headache. Plus, she was still trying, very hard, not to be angry that Chris never even felt a passing need to mention to her that his dad was terminally ill.
Hence, the need for the drink.

“So, dating in space, that has to be against NASA regulations, right?” Chris’s cousin Katie’s husband Tanner, asked her during the pre-dinner cocktail. Chris, who was so much better at both faking it and politicking than she was, at being gracious and thoughtful and selfless, was entertaining the Beck senior leadership — the Senator, the judge, and the Fortune 500 board chair — with tales of their days on Mars. He was smiling, which she was grateful for, collected and laid back and ready with just the right anecdote. He was always good with an audience.

She smiled wanly. She’d had this conversation four times already. “We were millions of miles away from a movie theatre, and we were both incredibly focused on the mission. There wasn’t much dating happening.” He’d “reserved” the Rec for a picnic under the stars and a movie one night, which had been incredibly sweet, but that was their only date until they were out of the hospital, just shy of where Chris had set their second anniversary.

“Still. They’re OK with, you know, personal relationships?”

She nodded, trying not to be rude or snarky, because Relatives. “Well, we never really asked. And by the time we got back, after thirty months in space and the riskiest rescue in the history of scientific exploration, in which Chris and I had to set a bomb and blow up part o, they were mostly just happy we made it home, I think,” she smiled, feeling like she probably wasn’t very successful at not-being-snarky. “Excuse me.”

She wove through the crowd of Becks to the open bar, thoughtfully arranged by a trophy-wife-cousin-in-law (who the fuck rented a bar for a family dinner? Rich people were so confusing.). She asked the white-jacketed waiter for a vodka on the rocks.

“Make that two,” Amy Beck said, coming up from behind her.

She smiled gratefully at her probably-soon-to-be-sister-in-law. “Hey,” she said. “Quite a family turnout.”

“Yeah, would’ve been great to see all of them after my dad split,” Amy said conversationally, not bothering to lower her voice at all. “But, you know. This is great too.” The bartender came back with their drinks, and Amy said, “Thanks. Mind if we just take the bottle, actually?”

“Actually, that’s not —”

“See everyone here? They’re here because my dad died. My deadbeat dad who flaked and whom I hadn’t seen in like, fifteen years before he was dying of cancer. And even then, he wasn’t particularly apologetic about the twenty missed birthdays, or the unanswered emails about my first breakup or the C-minus I got in calc in college, or the times he promised to come to my dance competitions and swim meets and didn’t. That’s why they’re here. For that guy. So, can I have the bottle?” The bartender handed her the rest of the vodka wordlessly. She turned to Beth. “You wanna come with me?”

She didn’t have a choice, so she simply said, “Sure.”

Amy wound them through the crowds, smiling at a couple of relatives, thanking the ones that murmured their Sorry s, and playfully sticking a tongue out at one of the youngest Becks. They slipped out of the caterer-filled kitchen onto a sun porch, then onto the back steps. The sun was still stickily hot, and Beth carefully arranged the folds of her navy A-line dress before sitting down, toeing her heels off and watching them tumble down the steps. I’m not bitter, just so you know, she clarified, dosing her drink with more vodka. “It’s just … Ironic. As defined by Alanis Morrissette,
not Webster."

“It’s OK,” Beth said, taking a sip of her drink. She hadn’t really gotten re-acclimated to alcohol — they’d had so little of it on the Hermes — and it tasted vaguely like ammonia. “It’s been a rough few days for you two.”

“Yeah,” she sighed. “How’s Chris holding up?”

She shrugged, then spoke carefully. “I mean, not great, but not terribly. I think he made his peace with how his dad was years ago, and while he’s a bit shaken, having other people around, with their needs and their demands … he’s good at being what others need, you know? So he’s doing OK.”

Amy nodded. “When we were kids, I think I made it till I was, like, eighteen — he was about to graduate college — before it connected that, duh, he was feeling at least as much hurt as I was over our parents’ drama. But he never mentioned it; just took care of me instead. Sometimes I wish he would be a little less selfish.”

Beth laughed. “I know what you mean.”

“Of course, then he wouldn’t’ve ended up at NASA, and then he wouldn’t’ve met you, and I like you, mostly,” Amy smiled.

“I’ll take a mostly,” she smiled.

“I think you put up with too much of his crap, honestly,” Amy replied. “Someone needs to shut it down. If not you, who?”

“What do you mean?” she asked, grabbing the bottle and topping off her vodka.

Amy raised her eyebrows. “When I called and said my dad had passed away, you asked, ‘From what?’ Either you’re an idiot, or Chris is.”

“He… Yes, he’s the idiot in this situation, but it’s understandable. I think,” she rolled his eyes self-deprecatingly. “And … now is not the time.” She lifted a shoulder. “So your dad. Did you say goodbye to him?”

“That wasn’t really gonna be his style,” Amy shrugged. “I barely remember him, but I think that he’s like Chris in that way — realistic, clear-eyed, in the moment. He wasn’t going to get sentimental and grand-gesture-y even when he was dying, you know? There are no years of unmailed birthday cards or apologetic deathbed letters. Even when he continually fucked things up intentionally, he saw them for how they were. He never pretended he was a great father or got into the coulda-beens. He knew that nothing he could do or say in these last months could change what was.” She took a sip. “It’s almost better that way.”

Beth stared at her. “That sucks. And I’m so, so sorry.” Chris’s reaction seemed almost sensible in that context. And, you know, his entire repressed, crazy-bloodless approach to everything.

“Thanks,” she replied. “My brother’s still an idiot though.”

“He can be that too,” Beth laughed.

Amy added another three fingers of vodka to her glass. “You’re good for him, though,” she sighed. “He always used to be so serious. Like, you’re the most intense person I’ve ever met. But you make him lighter. You’re really good for him.”
She wrapped her arms around her knees, self-conscious. “He’s good for me too. You should have seen me before him.”

“I mean I remember you from his training. All the energy drinks. You were more intense then. Like, give-no-fucks intense. Still fun — I liked you … Well, I had no opinion really, but all of you seemed to have fun, the like two times I saw you — but intense. Observationally, you were intense, in a kind-of-unpredictable way. Like, you’re so tiny, and I was pretty sure you could kick Martinez’s ass if necessary.”

“Well, I could, and I have,” she joked, then took another sip. “There was that, but it was more than that,” she scratched her neck, adjusted the skirt, poured some more vodka. Shrugged. “I was just … single-minded. Independent. Stubborn,” she rolled her eyes. “Chris makes fun of me a little, actually. They’re still my excuses, a lot of the time.” She felt inadequate, incomplete, sometimes, but telling Amy about them felt good.

“Nothing wrong with those things. They’re badass.”

“Well, I could, and I have,” she joked, then took another sip. “There was that, but it was more than that,” she scratched her neck, adjusted the skirt, poured some more vodka. Shrugged. “I was just … single-minded. Independent. Stubborn,” she rolled her eyes. “Chris makes fun of me a little, actually. They’re still my excuses, a lot of the time.” She felt inadequate, incomplete, sometimes, but telling Amy about them felt good.

“Nothing wrong with those things. They’re badass.”

“Yeah, except when they’re crutches. I broke up with my last serious boyfriend after living with him for three years out of the blue. Realized on a Tuesday I didn’t want to be with him, packed up and found a new job on a Wednesday, told him I was leaving and moved from San Jose to Pasadena on a Thursday.”

“Stone cold,” Amy said, approvingly. “Why’d you leave him?”

She squinted and bobbed her head back and forth indecisively. “I mean, I was twenty-four, and pretty impetuous. And he was almost forty and Brett Parker —”

“ The Brett Parker?” Amy’s eyes goggled out.

“Yeah,” she smiled self-deprecatingly. “I was too young, he was too well-known … I don’t know, I no longer wanted it, it didn’t work out. So I left. With Chris … I couldn’t extract like that, even if I tried. I still want the marriage and the kids. Hence I’m here and trying to be the perfect fake-Kennedy girlfriend, even though I’m so pissed at him about this.”

“ Whoa. You’re like, actually pissed? Not like, he-left-the-toilet-seat up, pissed?” Amy was drunk. Beth was feeling tipsy for the first time in more than half a decade.

“Well … yes. This was a big thing! It wasn’t just, ‘Oh, I broke the food processor, and I knew you’d be mad, so I dropped two hundred bucks on a new one.’ This is … This was huge. And we’re … we’re planning a life together, and he’s … he always thinks he’s one step ahead of me on these things, he thinks things through and then just waits for me to come to his conclusion. It’s thoughtless and unilateral and it’s infuriating.” OK, maybe she was drunk too. And what she really meant was heartbreaking. ‘I’m sorry. Your dad died, and Chris’s dad died, and I’m bitching about him like a reality-show housewife.”

“No, this is kind of great,” Amy said, hugely entertained. “Chris has always been perfect. It’s always made me so mad. You see him in there? My uncle is basically trying to convince him to move back to Boston and run for Congress.”

“He won’t,” Beth insisted quickly. God, she hoped not. She was perfectly happy to spend three days here, but she would die, if they lived so close to his relatives. And if Chris ran for office. Just. No.

“Of course he won’t. But this is great. The worst thing he did when we were kids was, you know, get B’s in math class. And not because he couldn’t do it, but because he didn’t turn in his homework.
He still got an 790 on his math SATs. Oh, and he smoked pot. The horror!” She dissolved into giggles. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t be gleeful.” She took a deep breath. “Anyways, the fact that you know these things about Chris — that he lets you know these things about him, because he’s damned good at hiding his flaws under those perfect chiseled abs —”

“— Those are nice abs; I have no complaints about the abs. Or his face. Or the … rest. By the way. One word: gifted.”

“Brother. Ew. Anyways, the fact that you know these things and he lets you know these things and you get irritated at him but love him anyways — that’s rare, you know. Especially with him. He’s so much rather be alone and working than let someone know and notice all those things.”

She was quiet for a second. “I know. The big nerd.”

“You’re extra-good for him,” Amy declared, satisfied. “So. You’re getting married. And having kids?”

“Ha. Yes. He wants to propose, though, like propose propose. And then the kids — I think we’re both scared, a little — but it’s another adventure, you know? We’re a good team. But let’s …. let’s talk about something else,” Beth said. “Like, what the fuck was it like to grow up here?”

Forty-five minutes and most of the bottle of vodka later, the door cracked open behind them, and they both fell back onto the sun porch. Staring up, Beth saw Chris, a half-bemused, half-worried look on his face. “There you are!” she exclaimed.

“There you are,” he replied, then flicked his eyes to Amy. “You know she hasn’t had any liquor in, like, five years?”

“You haven’t either,” she pointed out, because equality. Also, they hadn’t had that much liquor.

“Relax, big brother,” Amy said as Chris gave them each a hand. “We were bonding.”

“Bonding?” he smiled.

“Yes,” Beth said, reaching up to peck him on the lips. “Did you know Danielle and your dad got divorced, he got remarried, he got divorced again, and then they remarried?” Amy had shared that. Amy knew everything. Amy was wise.

“Uh, no,” he said, his face freezing and then darkening and then going carefully neutral, “I did not. Are you two going to be OK for Beck Family Dinner?”

“Beck Family Dinner is intense,” Amy told her frankly, “We should probably get some water first.”

“Maybe some aspirin and bread too?” Chris asked, propelling Beth forward with hands on her shoulders into the kitchen.

“Hey, I’m good, I’m fine,” she protested as he scrounged through the caterers’ plastic bins for extra rolls. He shoved one at her and she nibbled at it, clutching it with two hands like a chipmunk with a large nut.

“Fine, but you’ll be better with bread. Eat,” he instructed, handing a second roll to Amy. “Come on — there are, like, sixty freaking Becks out there. They kind of need you to be, like, astronaut girlfriend out there.”

She scoffed, practically choking on the bread. “No, you need me to be astronaut girlfriend,” she
corrected. “They just expect it.”

He rolled his eyes. “I’m sorry. Drink the water, OK? How are you feeling?”

“Fine,” she replied, slightly irritated. He gave her the puppy-dog face and she felt guilty. “I’m fine. I promise. OK? I’m good for dinner, I promise.” She twisted a lock of his pretty, pretty hair in her fingers. “Are you OK?” She’d abandoned him with the rest of his family for too long and he was in full-on repressed WASP mode.

“She holds her liquor well, Chris,” Amy said, snapping a carrot between her teeth. “You picked well.”

“I’m good,” he told her, ignoring Amy. “Are you —”

“Yes,” she said emphatically, squeezing his hand. “Dinner. Let’s go.” She felt mostly fine; mostly, she felt irritated he was overreacting.

“OK. You stick close to me and to Mom. Keep Mom sober, alright?”

“You are very controlling in Massachusetts,” she remarked mildly, with a giggle. She tripped over her feet quickly, righting herself.

“Hey,” he said, pulling her into a pantry. His mask slipped; his eyes were wide and worried. “This is my dad’s funeral, OK? Please … Just …”

“Hey,” she said, kissing him lightly as she sobered immediately. She tried to make her voice reassuring and even. “I’m fine. I shouldn’t’ve made that crack, that was unnecessary, but I’m fine. I’m a little tipsy, not drunk, and I’m pretty sure most of your relatives are too, because that happy hour has been going on for three hours. I’m sorry, OK? I’m here.” Chris needed her, and it was that simple. It was hard, but it was that simple.

He nodded. “OK.”

“I promise I will tell all the charming stories about how you wooed me with space meal packs and green tea deliveries,” He wrapped her unexpectedly in a hug. “What’s this for?” She murmured, resting her hands on his hips.

“For being here.” He sagged, heavily, into the hug, and she gave them a minute, scratched at the nape of his neck.

“You ready? There are sixty freaking Becks out there. And one perfect Astronaut Girlfriend,” she pulled back with her most reassuring smile.

“You don’t —”

“Chris. Yes, I do. That’s what you need. I’m here.” She kissed him gently, putting her frustrations at him and fear of his family aside. Just like he would do in this situation. He needed her, and he needed her to be as charming and collected as he was just naturally, and she could be that. For him. “I’m sorry for teasing. Let’s go.” She felt that she was trying, and failing, and she really just wanted to do this right. For him.

She stuck to water, he drank beer, and they hit equilibrium of tipsiness. She was conversational with the Senator and kept his mother from drinking too much. She smiled as she told his cousin Laura that the best part about space-dating was 0g kissing (which was true) and discussed the best RPG hacks with his second cousins’ four teenagers. Amy kept everyone in stitches with stories from their
childhoods, seamlessly letting go of whatever bitterness she’d expressed on the steps with the same talent her brother had. Eventually, the Senator (whose name was also Amelia and who was really quite nice, Beth had decided) stood raised a glass. “Charlie Beck was a charming bastard,” she said. “Emphasis on bastard. But he did two great things with himself. Christopher and Amelia, we are so sorry for your loss, but so grateful for you. Please do not doubt that. You’re extraordinary, the both of you. And Christopher, Elizabeth, we’re very happy back on this planet. And Elizabeth, you’re a wonderful addition to the family.”

Chris slipped his hand into hers, and she leaned against his shoulder, willing him strength. “Thank you all,” he said, raising his beer. “I know my dad was … not the easiest guy, for any of us. Mom. Danielle,” he nodded toward both of them, and Beth wondered where the wife of eighteen months (per Amy, her name was Madyson, and she was a tantric yoga instructor) was. “And so it means a great deal to us that you’re here, with us, now.” She tried not to roll her eyes at the discomfiting falseness of the statement: If he wasn’t going to be mad at his family, she would be. Just not now, and not out loud. “And so, to Dad.” He kissed her temple.

They toasted.

xxvii.

Burying your dad — even if he was a deadbeat you hadn’t talked to in years — really sucked.

Beth was quiet and thoughtful the entire three days in Boston, anticipating his every move and (with the exception of her bonding sesh with Amy) running interference with his family perfectly. She told stories about space, talked coding with the weird fourth-generation Becks he had never met before, and kept his mother and Danielle from killing one another (None of them knew where this apparent Madyson was, which, thank god). She stayed a half-step too close to him, tucked herself around him at night, squeezed his hand before he read the Irish Blessing at the funeral, and took his absurd relatives in stride. She was exactly what he needed, when he needed it. He was incredibly grateful.

And, he knew, she was hella pissed at him.

The funeral was Tuesday, and he and Amy and Beth went to a bar after and got ridiculously drunk toasting his dad’s memory. He and Beth went back to the hotel for a round of intense sex and two hours of sleep before the plane ride home; after they landed at Clinton Wednesday morning, she grabbed the car from the lot and went to work, while he went home and slept a bit longer. She came home with groceries and a pizza; the next day he went back to work too. It was nice, to lose himself in the white noise of experiments and people management and paperwork.

Thursday Beth was at her desk, coding and watching TV, when he got home. He cracked the bottle cap off a beer. “How was work?” he asked.

“Good,” she said, staring at the line of code, her tongue pinned between teeth. “What about you? How was the first day back?”

“Fine,” he sighed.

“That’s good,” she said, lost in the code.

He sighed again, and started to make dinner.

Friday she again beat him home, and was at the computer, cross-legged on the chair. “Hey,” she called.

“Hey,” he said, opening a bottle of wine. “How was work?”
“Fine,” she said, engrossed in the computer. She banged on one key repeatedly. “How are you?”

“OK, I guess,” he said, setting two glasses down.

“You OK?” She said, cuing into something in his voice.

“As OK as someone who buried their dad on Tuesday can be,” he shrugged lightly, pouring out two glasses.

“Of course,” she said, confused at the edge in his tone. “I didn’t think you would be OK- OK, you know, OK. I’m sorry, I was doing work. There’s this project … I’m listening.” She shut the laptop and turned to him, pretzeling her forearms on the back of the chair.

“Really? Cause you seem to be, you know, a little pissed. And I can’t really figure out why, since it was my dad who died,” he replied petulantly. Somewhere, in the reptilian part of his brain — the part that encouraged him to go after his coworker while locked on a spaceship; the part that got him on the spaceship in the first place — he knew he was careening into an argument. It felt good, kind of. He rarely did that. Confrontation was more of Beth’s thing.

“Well, yeah, it was your dad who died, but he died of an illness I didn’t know about,” she said, rising to take the bait, though her voice stayed mild. “Yeah, I’m a little … ticked … but it’s fine. Really. I’ll get over it, babe.” It was matter-of-fact; not passive-aggressive.

“Well, that’s big of you, isn’t it?”

She walked over to the table, still more confused than anything else. “The fuck? I don’t know what you want me to say, Chris. Do you want a fight? Because that’s a first.” She took a sip from the glass of wine. He raised his eyebrows, and she pinched the bridge of her nose before taking a breath.

“Sorry. That … That was low. Yes, I was upset about that. But it’s your dad and I know how awful and hard and complicated that was. I’m trying to be supportive, so yes, I’m lying low. I really, really am trying, and I’m so sorry, and so worried, OK?”

“But you’re pissed,” he surmised.

“I mean, of course I am,” she said, running a hand through her hair. “What else can I be? I don’t care that you didn’t want to see him, I really don’t. I don’t know if you believe that, I don’t know how to make you not believe it. He was your dad, and he … He let you down basically every day he walked this earth, and so of course I was never going to try and … I don’t know, guilt you into forgiving him, or whatever you think I was going to do. But yes, I’m hurt that you decided not to tell me. And honestly? I’m trying not to worry that is a pattern. We have, like, two arguments, ever, and this is one of them, and we’ve had it … three times? Four times? You just … you make these decisions, decisions that affect me too, by yourself, and then when I don’t keep up …” She shrugged, genuinely at a loss. “It’s exhausting.”

“What other decisions have I made?”

“I … Whether or not to get married, this house, if we want kids — you haven’t let me in. Don’t even try to pretend otherwise. You just arrive at something and just … wait, and hope, and assume I’ll get there too. And I know you’re there. It’s frustrating.”

He ran a hand through his hair now, at a loss for words. “I mean … You’re so deliberate, and methodical, and you like to plan and be certain about everything, and you don’t like to talk about stuff that isn’t 100 percent going to happen. So sometimes, yeah, I … get to decisions or go on gut feelings a little more quickly, but I’m not — do you think I’m bullying you here, or something?”
Because *that* was absurd. Nobody forced Beth to do anything. God knows NASA had tried.

“No,” she said quickly, plaintively. “No. Of course not. I love you. I wanted — I want — all of this, and I want it with you. I’m — I’m sure of that. But you always act like you got *there* first, and *there* isn’t even a competition, and you don’t, really, I’m just more … open when I’m thinking through something. It’s the thought process you shut me out of.”

“What are you talking about?” he asked, confused.

“When did you start thinking about whether or not you wanted to get married? When did you start thinking that hey, you might want to have kids? I’m guessing it was probably around the cannibalism scare —”

“Watney’s rescue,” he admitted.

“OK, so you’re just proving my point! You didn’t mention it, *at all*, until some vague allusions to needing more space when we bought the house. *A year later*. And kids. When did you start thinking, ‘Hey those sound cool’?”

He looked down, then back up, and sighed. “Around Christmas, I guess.”

“And you mentioned it … never. I had to bring it up last month. I know that, yes, sometimes you get to a conclusion first. I get that I need time. But you don’t talk to me about it; you don’t let me into your thought process and let me help make your decisions. And I’m *here*, Chris. I am here. I stood strong against a lot of my base instincts, and I know I made the right choice. Because I love you and not only is my life better with you in it than without, but I do want that whole life with you. I want the kids and the house and the sacrifices and the boring days and even the sucky shitty days, like this one, because you make me stronger, and you make me braver, and even when I am *furious* with you I’d rather, you know, be with you than pleasantly happy alone. But *fuck*. You need to let me in.” Her voice was measured and level, but plaintively raw.

But still, it irritated him. “That’s great Beth. *Yes*, I don’t talk about these things, not all the time. You know why? Because you spent two years telling me that you’re scared you might leave me, you’re not sure of yourself in the relationship, that sure, this isn’t some touch-starved space hookup, but *doooooooon’t* mention any plans for Earth, because you didn’t know what was going to happen or how you would feel! You wouldn’t pick a side. You weren’t all in and you made that clear. So — *shocker* — I wasn’t super-jazzed to bring up marriage and babies and stuff yet. Especially when I hadn’t made up my mind on the topics yet.”

“I was — and *am* — all in, but I was on a fucking spaceship, Chris. On a life-and-death mission. And we agreed not to make any big decisions about our future till we were home. *You* suggested that. We got home, we bought a five-bedroom house in four months. I don’t know how more all-in I could be.”

“You don’t think that’s a tiny bit revisionist?” he asked, somewhat pointedly. “There’s a difference between agreeing to put the mission first and not make out in front of Commander Lewis and being committed to each other.”

“Fine. Sure. I was a little hesitant then. But now? That we’re back? I just think if we’re doing the marriage and babies things, we should be making up our minds together.”

“Great. So do I. And I thought we did —”

“— We did, after I—”
But you spent two years making it pretty clear that you didn’t want to talk about those things, so I think I can be forgiven if I’m a little gun-shy —”

“Yeah, when we were stuck on a spaceship,” she repeated with a groan. “God, how many times do I have to say that? But I’m sorry. I guess … I can understand where you’re coming from. I’m trying, I am.”

“Thank you,” he said, with a sigh.

“And you? Can you understand where I’m coming from?”

“Sure,” he agreed. His head really fucking hurt.

She nodded, clearly a little let down by his answer. “Alright,” she said, picking up her wine glass and walking to the stairs.

“That’s it?”

She sighed from halfway up the stairs. “I mean, what else, Chris? I want these things with you — I really, really do. But I want to make those decisions together, and I don’t know how to convince you of that without making you doubt I want them, so I’m going upstairs. I need to pack for Houston. And yeah, I’m pretty frustrated that you don’t see where I’m coming from.”

He leaned against the counter. “Well, truthfully, I kind of think you’re conflating a bunch of stuff, and I kind of think you’re blowing a bunch of that conflated stuff out of proportion, and again: My dad is dead. But you’re angry, so …” He lifted a shoulder, “I’m just trying to get it. I’m trying.”

She stood, stunned. “Alright,” she finally said, dragging herself down two steps. “Well I guess on one hand I’m glad you’re actually saying what you’re thinking.”

“What is that supposed to mean?” he said. He really wished he was the type of guy who got worked up in an argument, but he just wasn’t. And neither was she. There was a strange emotionless chill to it all: Just two astronauts rationally dissecting five years of a partnership until it was just shreds.

“You just — sometimes, you don’t tell me what you’re thinking, is all,” she ran a hand through her hair. “That’s what this entire argument is about.”

“No, this argument is about how I didn’t tell you my dad was dying.”

“No, this argument is about the fact that you didn’t feel you could or should tell me he was dying, which is — that’s exactly what not-talking-to-me is about. You don’t talk to me, I think out of a doctor-y, selfless urge to not be a burden, but you are a burden, that’s what a relationship is supposed to be. You’re my burden,” she took a deep breath, and put up a hand before he could tell her she was splitting hairs. “Look, we’re bad at this, at arguing and … maybe at communicating, I don’t know.” She linked her hands behind her head to form a diamond, bit her lip deeply. She looked so incredibly tiny, swimming there in her sweatshirt.

His brow furrowed. “We’re not bad at communicating, what the hell does that even mean?”

“Chris. Listen to all of this,” she said, her voice rising negligibly for the first time the entire conversation. “I’m apparently flaky, and unfair, and untrustworthy. And you … actually, you’re apparently perfect here, since you’re not bad at communicating.”

“OK, well that’s unfair — “
“I love you and I want this, but we can’t keep planning a future on two parallel tracks. I can’t, Chris.”

“Seriously? We went from you being pissed about my dad — which, I’m sorry — to you pressing pause on everything? And I’m not right to be worried about whether or not you’re all in? You’re clearly not.”

She shook her head. “I am, and I’m not pressing pause. Just … you’re right. Let’s … Stop. This fight, let’s stop this fight. I shouldn’t’ve brought it up in one of the, like, two nights we got to ourselves between Boston and Houston. We had to be with your family all week, and now we have to go be with the crew and NASA and so … time-out, I guess. I just … I do want you to open up and trust me, OK? With stuff like your dad. With stuff like houses and babies. I want those things with you, but I want to think those things through with you more. So yes, I’m hurt when you don’t trust me.” She started back up the stairs. “I need to pack.” This time, she made it all the way up.

He set the wine aside and reached for something harder.

When he headed upstairs two hours later, she was lying on her stomach on the bed, a tablet in front of her. A duffel lay on the chair in the corner. “Hey,” she said softly. “I packed for you. I would say it’s because I’m a total control freak, but …” she shrugged helplessly. “it was honestly habit. You can check it out and re-pack if you want. I’m sure I forgot something.” She’d been handling his packing since … well, she’d double-checked (and repacked) his packing when they boarded the Hermes. ‘Nuff said.

“I’m actually sure you didn’t,” he said. “Thanks.”

“Welcome.”

“So,” he said, sitting down next to her. “I’m sorr —”

“Don’t,” she interrupted, not meanly — almost compassionately. And it was good, because he still wasn’t hundred percent sure what he was apologizing for. “Just — I don’t want to fight.”

“Neither do I,” he said. “We’re both actually pretty terrible at it.”

“It’s a little weird … On the Hermes, we were never really on different sides of things.”

“That’s true. And no matter what, Commander Lewis had the final word.” They’d all just wanted to stay alive, complete the mission.

“So — time-out until after we get back from Houston? I think … I think it actually merits a discussion, and I want to have one, and I don’t think I’m in a place where I can right now.”

“OK,” he said. “So … what do we do? If we’re not fighting but we’re not talking it out.”

She shrugged. “I don’t know. We go to Houston. Hang out with the crew. Help Marisa pick a name. Mock Watney. The usual.” She set the tablet on the floor and angled toward him, reached out and placed a hand on his forearm. “I love you, you know. Just … so that’s clear.”

“I know.”

“OK.”

“I love you too.”
“OK.”

They lay on top of the sheets, her body an S curved along his side, her hand tucked into the crook of his elbow.

It took them a damn long time to fall asleep that night.

xxviii.

“ _There_ you are,” a voice from behind her said wryly. “I thought I’d find you up here. You always liked to hide on this deck.”

Beth turned toward the sound of her commander. “I’m not hiding,” she protested, but without any vehemence.

“Please,” Melissa said, coming to join her at the railing. “They could always force you to come, but they could never force you to schmooze.” She dipped her chin. “You want to talk about what’s wrong?”

She smiled joylessly. They’d been in Houston for six days for what was intended as a weeklong medical check-in — in exchange for the all-expenses-paid trip to Mars, NASA required regular data on their physical well-being, a trade had been understood from the start. But given the still-high levels of support for the Ares III crew, Annie Montrose & Co. had packed in plenty of goodwill photo opportunities. They’d judged a high-school science fair and spoken to a panel of Group 32 cadets and banked interviews and even filmed segments of a promotional video. She’d been patient. She’d smiled. But she was half a gala and one day of evals away from home and unpausing their discussion and she was fucking _tired_.

NASA had offered then all accommodations for the week, obviously, but they’d all demurred (also obviously). She and Chris were staying in the Martinezes’ guest bedroom, with Melissa on the couch in the den and Alex two miles away crashing in s Watney’s extra room. The proximity and their history and the fact that NASA hadn’t sent idiots to Mars meant it was impossible to completely hide the fact that things felt rough and awkward and unsure between them. She knew they had picked up on the tension (otherwise, the ribbing from Watney and the wedding questions from Marissa would’ve been out of control), but it also provided them a cocoon and protection: it both allowed them to practice normality, which helped them be easy with one another again, but also gave them a safe space. The crew’s support was unconditional, and they were smart enough to leave the two of them alone. Among their best friends, they didn’t have to sit together, or go to bed at the same time, or constantly hold hands, or pretend to be anything but themselves. It took some of the pressure off, was comforting to fall back into being a no-PDA-showing sub-unit among the team.

But it was absolutely unsurprising that Melissa had followed her out onto this balcony. She shrugged at her commander’s question, and drew her arms across her chest for warmth. “Who said anything was wrong?” It was sassier than she’d ever been while they were in Mars.

“Two weeks ago you two were all but picking out china patterns, and now? It’s like the day _after_ I warned Beck off of you; he was weirdly distant and overly formal and looked like I had kicked his puppy. Something’s up. So, spill.”

She ducked her head, and sighed. “It’s just been a long few weeks. We’re kind of in a fight. I don’t know. We pressed pause on the fight to come here. Which is why we seem like we’re radiating tension, I guess. I don’t know.”

“What’s the fight about?”
“Well, it started when I got mad that he didn’t tell me his dad was sick, and then it kind of blew up to be … about everything. Like actually everything. Our personalities. Our futures.”

“His dad’s sick?” she asked carefully.

“No. His dad died. Two weeks ago. They weren’t close, for a lot of … He had reasons. Good reasons. But they weren’t close, and then he got sick while we were up there, and he found out the day after we got back. He just … he never said anything. And then I get a … hysterical call from his sister when Chris was out on a vague errand — looking for a ring, I think — as I was calling venues and she said he had died. The funeral was last week, and his relatives are successful and overwhelming and basically emotionally repressed overachieving WASP-bots — it explained some about Chris, honestly — and then we came home and the night before we left it turned into this fight.”

“What were you guys fighting about?”

“I said … I said that I needed him to talk to me. Whether it’s the house or marriage or … kids, he always comes to the table after he’s made up his mind. He decided he wanted to get married more than a year ago, and just never mentioned it until I brought it up. And he doesn’t come to me with uncertainties or maybes or when he’s having doubts or when his dad is dying, and I want to be that person. I can be that person. And part of the issue is he isn’t in the habit of even having a person. But then he pointed out that I like to plan everything out and don’t like getting boxed into things and am kind of an extreme control freak …. and he’s right too! So we started arguing and it just became this big referendum on us, as people. And now, here we are.”

“That’s awful. I’m sorry.”

She shrugged, and stared off again. “Thanks.” She kicked at the railing with her feet. “Anyways. That’s all of it. I love him, and now all I want to do is yell at him and book my own vacation to some beach where I’ll just code inside for ten hours and not wear pants. Clearly, we have some stuff to work out.”

“True,” Melissa said mildly. “But you’re still here, with him. And don’t we all?”

“Yeah, because you and Robert fight incessantly,” she said sardonically. She’d never seen them so much as play-bicker. They were just comfortably, quietly in love, a fluid and low-key model of #relationshipgoals.

“Every couple has their points of tension. He wasn’t exactly thrilled when I decided to accept a yearlong mission to Mars. He had a very valid point. It was a heavy conversation.”

“I didn’t know.”

“Of course not. And you know, we met at a bar in Rota. I’ve been dragging him around for sixteen years to follow my career. He can be patient and flexible and still get fed up.”

“That makes sense,” Beth sighed. “I know we’ll unpause this one; I know we’ll work through this one. We’ve been through so much and … much as you tried to stop it once, there’s love and like and history there. I know he can still be my best friend and my partner in fixing the plumbing and make me furious about the stupid shit. But let’s be realistic: It’s about, fundamentally, who we are and how we solve problems. We can love each other, we can commit the being a team about all this and working on it, but we’ll keep having a version of this argument. We just will. And if we’re serious about …”
“Marriage?” she asked wryly.

“Yes. Marriage. That’s … supposed to be forever. I never thought I’d get married but if I’m going to I would like it to last a while. And I want it to be with him. But neither of us are really going to change as people and just … what’s the point?” her voice trailed off miserably. “It just seems so … bleak, to have this fight every so often for the rest of our lives.” Inevitable, but bleak.

“For the record, I think you’ve both changed a lot,” Melissa said, her voice almost offhand. “For one thing, you’re both a lot easier to get along with. But … you know, I think the secret to getting married, or being halfway successful at it, is just to not get divorced.”

“Gee, thanks, for that pearl of wisdom,” she responded dryly. “You definitely demystified the institution for me.”

“Come on. Think about it: Barring getting sick due to the long-term effects of deep-space travel, you and Chris are both incredibly healthy, and you have access to the best medicine and nutrition and mental-health services. You have a decent shot at living into your 90s. If you got married tomorrow, that about fifty-five or sixty years. And if that happens, you could have twenty-seven bad years — not just a bad week, like you guys have had, but bad years — and still have, on balance, a marriage that was more successful than it was not.”

“That’s some depressing fucking math.”

“Really? I kind of find it uplifting.”

“Really?”

“Of course. It makes the hard days — there are plenty — easier. It kind of … reminds me of the point of it. If we fail at it seven times, the only thing that matters is that we try eight times. We don’t get divorced that day. We keep trying, we keep failing, together. And sometimes it’s about a stupid hope that even if you failed once you won’t do it again in the same way. And sometimes it’s in knowing that even if you failed it’s OK because the other person will forgive you, because you have faith in them and yourself that you’ll keep trying and failing. And so you hope and you try again. Then you fail again — you’re always going to fail again — and it starts over. But eventually, in all that trying, all that failing … all that succeeding, you create a spark. And that spark creates something bigger and greater than yourself and it’s all worth it. Yes, he didn’t love me signing up for all the space missions and we missed each other. But if I hadn’t met him? I never would have gone to space. He made me braver and bolder. It’s bigger than me, than him, than us. And it goes both ways. So yes, even if, in the sixty years an insurance auditor tells me we’d have together, if we have twenty-nine bad years, it’s still worth it. Hell, even if we do have thirty-two bad years … I think it would still be worth it.”

She stared at her commander, wondering if she’d ever possess the same grace and wisdom.

“It’s not very logical,” she said finally, out of habit, defaulting to her standard stubborn response. She should stop that. She could stop that (she told herself).

“Humanity is infinitely more complicated than coding,” Melissa reminded her.

That was true. “So what do I do now?” she asked.

Melissa gave her a patented ‘You’re smarter than this’ look. “You work it out. You both apologize. You say you’re going to do better. You try, honestly. And if it doesn’t work you forgive and you try again the next day.”
She turned back over the railing, staring out at Houston’s industrial skyline. “We’re going to have kids. Provided radiation didn’t burn all of the genetic material away.”

“I’m not exactly surprised. You’ll be good parents.”

“We’ll be clueless parents.”

“You’ll figure it out. You’re resourceful.”

“I’m terrified.”

“That’s probably a good thing.”

“Why … why didn’t you? Have kids, I mean,” she asked. She’d always wondered. The Commander wasn’t gooey, but she was protective and responsible and if Beth could be a parent, Melissa would be a far better one. She respected a personal choice — she certainly had never banked on kids, as she’d told Chris and herself a million times — but if everyone involved was admitting that she had changed due to Chris being her One True Love Forever And Ever, she was curious to know Melissa’s thought process in a similar situation. Melissa’s eyebrows raised, surprised at the question. “I’m sorry —” she backtracked immediately.

“No. Don’t be. I could lie to you about this, but I’m not going to. I was the oldest of six, and so was tired of raising kids by the time I turned eighteen. They didn’t fit in with my Navy career, either. Rob never pushed for them, either, so we never set aside time in our careers or worked them into some sort of plan. When I was thirty-one, I got pregnant, though, and we wondered what exactly we were going to do. All our options — adoption, abortion, you name it — seemed dumb, so we started to plan for a baby. Picked out a name — Noah, for the seas. But then, we lost it — him, Noah — at about four and a half months. A chromosomal abnormality. They hadn’t caught it earlier. And it was just … awful. We cried for a while, and decided to just focus on living our lives, savoring our time in the ways we most wanted, to heal. If we decided we wanted to have kids, we would make that decision later. A decade later,” she lifted one shoulder, “and we’re very happy with the three dogs and our nieces and nephews and travel and our careers.”

She was struck. “I didn’t know that. The miscarriage.”

“Of course you didn’t,” Melissa replied, not meanly. “And, sure, it’s one of those things — sometimes, I imagine I can see that life, where we didn’t lose the baby, as if I’m standing on a coast and looking at an island I know I can’t reach. Some days. And I mourn that life, because I think I would have been happy, in a very different way. I would be a totally different person. But most of the time? I’m in awe of the directions and places I’ve gone. I love those, and value those, too.”

Beth stared at her. “Thank you. I … thank you.” She didn’t know what else to say.

“Oh, of course,” Melissa said, with a hug. “And when you and Chris have kids — I hope you know, I call honorary aunt.”

“Hey.” Chris’s voice cut roughly across their conversation before she could say Of fucking course. “You know, Commander, I’m pretty used to finding Beth out here avoiding people, but you?”

“OK, I don’t avoid people at these things,” she said, teasing exasperation.

He came up to the two of them, settled next to her with his forearms on the railing. “False,” he said, leaning forward so he could see Melissa. “You know, Melissa, this balcony? Is where I realized I might have non-crewmate-like-affection for her. Bet you didn’t know you were standing on a historical site.” Laughing, Beth listed her head against his shoulder. He was always so strong, so
present. He stiffened slightly, surprised at the casual affection after so many days of awkwardness (and, with their former commander present) before relaxing and tossing an arm around her. “I’m serious! Ares II gala. Marissa Martinez busted me.” He nuzzled his nose into her hair briefly, exhalating overwhelming relief.

“You’ll have to see if NASA can spring for a plaque,” Melissa laughed, as Beth straightened, staying in his embrace. “What’s up?”

“Well, you were missed at your own party. But mostly, we’ve put in our dues, and Martinez has suggested we move the party to his backyard.”

“Great,” Beth said quickly. “Let’s go.” She hated these things, this dress, these shoes.

“Seconded,” Melissa said.

She slipped her hand into Chris’s (he gave hers a squeeze) and they snuck back into the air-conditioned ballroom. Somehow, the tension was gone.

Thirty minutes later, the six of them (Marissa, exhausted, had pleaded bed) sat in the Martinezes’ backyard, swapping leftovers unpeeled from aluminum swans and cans of microbrew from Rick’s fridge. She and Chris were wedged into a hammock, resting the food precariously on their hipbones.

Alex squinted up at the horizon — they all did this, periodically, Beth included. “It is so far tonight,” he ruminated. “About … 310 million kilometers.”

“Sometimes I still can’t believe we did that,” Beth remarked.

“Twice, even,” Chris said, “Well. For most of us,” he smirked at Watney. Mark lobbed a lukewarm green bean at them. It hit Beth, rolled down the V of her dress. Chris looked around, realized nobody else could see them, and leaned over, snagging it with his teeth and a wolfish grin. Her mouth went dry, the moisture and heat in her body heading south.

“Yeah, twice was pretty okay,” Rick said, sprawling out in his chair and letting his leg stretch forward. “But you know what they say.”

“What do they say?” Melissa asked.

“Third time’s a charm.”

“What?”

(That was all of them.)

(She and Chris sat up so quickly they nearly fell out of the hammock.)

“Kapoor asked me last week to command the whole schabang,” he said, his voice a little too casual. “I said yes.”

“Marissa’s okay with this?” Chris asked skeptically.

“Well, I did ask her bro,” Rick replied, irritated. “That’s how a marriage works. Pro-tip, for the future.” Even in the dark, she could practically feel Chris roll his eyes.

“That didn’t answer Chris’s question,” Lewis said, with a tiny head shake and pursed lips. “He asked if she was okay with this, not if you asked her.”
“She is,” he said. “She’s not thrilled, sure, but she gets it. Ares V is a thirteen-month trip. The kids’ll be about a year and five when I leave. I think it’s more important I’m around when they’re teenagers, at any rate, and it’s not that long. We’ve been together twenty-five years, man. We spent college, law school, basic training, apart. This is nothing. And I promised it was gonna be the last one.” Next to her, Chris’s grip around her shoulder tightened.

“Well then,” Watney said, after they all processed it. “Congrats. Just don’t fucking leave anyone behind this time, OK? I’d hate to have Marissa kill you for doubling another mission.”

They all laughed, the alarm gone. “Just don’t let me miss a wedding, Johanbeck,” Rick threatened, using a nickname the press had given them after the Fallon appearance.

“You won’t,” Beth promised boldly, her voice a raspy singsong. Chris’s eyes widened; in the cocoon of their hammock she pressed a kiss to his shoulder and avoided his eyes. There was another conversation they needed to have, but she was pretty confident Rick wouldn’t miss the wedding. They weren’t launching for another twenty months.

(*He might miss a birth, she realized, but he wouldn’t miss a wedding*).

From over his shoulder, she saw Melissa’s eyes glitter with a smile.

She smiled back.

xxix.

“So,” Beth said Sunday night, when they were finally back home in D.C. after the week in Houston. “Unpause?”

He looked up, surprised. It had been rough the first couple of days around the crew, raw and awkward around people who clearly knew something was up. But they’d wisely left them alone and slowly the ice thawed; by Thursday at the gala, they’d been fine. “Sure,” he said, his eyebrow raised. He knew he’d been harsh, that he’d gotten mad at her mostly for being herself. And he loved her, loved her more than anyone he’d ever known, and knew that she had a point, about him not opening up. He could be better. Or he could try to be better, at least.

He should probably work on his phrasing.

(She’d kind of surprised him, unsurprisingly.)

“Can you go first?” he asked weakly.

She raised an eyebrow, then gave him a pitying look. She was tucked into the corner of the couch, tiny in a sweatshirt and leggings that reminded him of their time on Hermes. “Uh, yeah. I mean … First, I’d like to apologize. I was mad for a bit, and I didn’t say anything, and then I unloaded a lot of stuff on you when you were grieving.”

“I’m sorry too,” he said quickly. He’d spent plenty of time thinking (and had been plied with enough drinks by Martinez, Vogel, and Watney) to know where he’d screwed up, why it had hurt her. “I should’ve mentioned my dad. We’re in this together, and I should have said something. It was disrespectful of what we have that I didn’t. Next time a deadbeat parent of mine gets cancer, I’ll let you know.”

Her lips curled up involuntarily. “Thank you.” She paused, absently scratched a pen across the notebook in her lap. “I know … I’ve asked for space and time, a lot, and was really worried about what would happen once we left the bubble of the Hermes. And just a lot of that … has never
materialized. It was weird and hard, with the nightmares and the anxiety, but I do think we got stronger throughout it. I’m sorry that my doubts about the world made you feel like they were doubts about you. I thought I’d been doing better, but I guess not. I’m sorry.”

“You — we have. So that was a little unfair. So, sorry on that one too,” he laughed.

“OK. Now that all the apologies are out of the way …” she sighed, then smiled. “Actually, you what? I kind of had this whole list, planned out, to try and explain myself and negotiate an agreement for the future, and you know what? I don’t think we need that.”

“What?”

“Yeah. I … I had this talk with Melissa. It clarified a lot of things.”

“She’s pretty smart.”

“Yeah. And … and we’re going to fight. And we’re going to change some, and we’re going to not change more, and whether or not we recover will depend a lot less to a list of things we’ll do differently and a lot more on us just trying to do better the next day and forgiving each other when we don’t. And just trying to care for each other despite the things and times we’re driving each other crazy. So I just want you to know that I know you, and I love you, and you never have to feel stupid or silly coming and telling me anything, and that I hope you do. And that I know that I can get critical and anxious about details, but I’m going to try not to be a scaredy cat about this kind of crap.”

“Seriously?”

“Yeah. If that’s OK with you,” she said nervously, licking her lips. “I just …. We’re going to disagree, and neither one of us has to be right, which I think might be hard for both of us. I think … It’s more important that we actually forgive, move on, make a decision, than how we get there. You know?” He realized how huge it was for her to approach a problem this way, to concede that she couldn’t always be right or know everything. And she was right, it was huge for him, too.

“You do have a point, though,” he admitted, sliding next to her on the sofa. “I should’ve brought up kids earlier. I just wasn’t sure how you were going to react.”

“And I probably would have freaked out, since I knew you weren’t bringing them up, for a while, and didn’t bring them up either. So. We were both right.”

“Both wrong too,” he pointed out. “So, truth time?” She wanted more honesty; he knew she could handle it; here it would come.

“Always.”

“I’m kind of pissed at my dad, still.”

“Oh Chris,” she said, her voice breaking as she came to her knees to hug him. “I’m so sorry. And, I mean, of course you are. It’s OK.”

“What do you mean?”

“Because … even though your family hasn’t been particularly fair to you, and every lesson they taught you said not to hope, you still do. You still want things to be fair and good and right. You hope even though you tell yourself it’s stupid. And you should be pissed at him. Because he’s your dad and he sucked, but when he was here, there was still something unresolved, and you’re never going to get answers. Besides. You also like to be right, and he never gave you the opportunity to
prove it to him. And that might not have been his style or your style, but you could still want it,” she analyzed, then gave him a small smile at his surprised look. “See? I do know you.”

He gently moved her hand to his mouth and kissed the inside of her wrist. “I know,” he said. “So. How long you think it’ll last?” It felt good, to ask her these questions.

She shrugged. “I mean, based on our experiences with Watney’s near-death, I don’t think it goes away steadily. I think it’ll come and go. You’ll be good most days and then you’ll remember something. We’ll make progress on talking to each other and then we’ll regress. It comes, it goes. You know?” She smiled. “But I think it’ll work out, you know. We can’t choose the family we were born into, and we both haven’t had tons of luck in that department, but the other family? We have a pretty great one around us.”

He was struck then, with the totality and the depth and the finiteness of their connection. He thought of Sagan’s starstuff, of the statistics dictating the chances that a boy from Boston and a girl from rural Washington would end up on the same spaceship hurtling into the unknown, of the faith she placed in him (she of so little faith), of the times she made things easier, the ways in which she made him want to be better. He had never believed in a higher power guiding the creation of the universe — in fact, he was a firm believer in the Mediocrity Principle — but there was nothing mediocre about this or them. She had always despised things that were not firmly grounded in fact, and all of the facts were there.

He remembered something that she had said, when she insisted that she didn’t need an engagement ring (why didn’t he listen to her, more?). He shoved her off his lap (she gave an umph of disgust) and headed to the kitchen. Opening the breadbox, he found what he was looking for, twisted it up until it looked nice.

She was still plenty confused when he returned, looking flustered. When he dropped to one knee, her eyes widened in surprise.

“Beth Johanssen,” he said, trying to keep a quiver out of his voice. “You’ve been my best friend since — well not since we met in that bar, but since pretty shortly after. And I fell in love with you not long after that. We’ve been to Mars, back, and to Mars again, and to Houston and Austin and New York and Costa Rica and now D.C. and sometimes Houston again. And that’s only the beginning of the list of the places I want to go with you, and the things I want to do with you.” A tear loosened itself from her eye, traced a winding path down the ridges of her face. He presented the thing in his palm, hoping she would remember. Her smile told him she did. “A few months ago, when I asked you what you would say, if I asked you to marry me, you said it didn’t matter if I asked with a ring or a twist-tie from a loaf of bread. So,” he held the twist-tie, fashioned into a little bow, between his two fingers. “Will you marry me?”

“God, Chris, yes, of course,” she said, more tears flowing now. Crap, he was crying a bit too. She kissed him deeply before pulling back. “I told you that more than a month ago. Of course. Yes, dammit.”

He shimmied the fake ring onto her fingers. “I can get you a real one, later,” he said. “I’ve been looking. I was planning on designing one, actually.”

“I don’t need an engagement ring, this is perfect,” she said, kissing him again. He searched for every part of her face, swept tears away with fingers, kissed her eyelashes, laughed against her teeth. “This is absolutely perfect.”

And for that brief moment, it was.
Love it? hate it? die from cheese overdose? lemme know.
Relativity

Chapter Notes

So.... this took a while. I'm sorry! Life got in the way, and it was QUITE difficult to wrestle through the way the changes in their relationship changed their perspectives. Hopefully, the length makes up for it. The next (last!) chapter will hopefully come more quickly.

I do want to say a quick thank-you to everyone who has stuck around. Your support has been incredible, and I am deeply grateful. I hope this continues to live up to your praise!

The readings (YUP READINGS) are by Rilke and Sagan, and from "The Little Prince," in case anyone is interested. Obviously, I don't own those either.

Would love to hear your thoughts! xox

Relativity

Nothing is absolute. Time speeds up or slows down based on where you are in the universe. Space and time are but one relativistic continuum. Mass distorts the fabric of spacetime, generating gravity. How fast you perceive yourself moving depends greatly on your frame of reference. Put simply, perspective, and the relations between bodies, matter.

Life moves pretty fast. If you don’t stop and look around for a while, you could miss it. — Ferris Bueller

xxx.

The worst part about wedding planning, Beth decided pretty quickly, was the phone calls.

Exhibit A: her sister.

“Beth Johanssen, real girl. I love it.”

“Please stop, Emily.”

“You’re going to be a vision in white.”

“Damn straight.”

“I can't wait to watch you freak the fuck out about flowers.”

“I will not freak the fuck out about flowers.”

“Seriously. You think coding is hard? Spaceship design? Mars rescues? That's nothing. You're going to cry about seating patterns at 2:30 AM in the bathroom because you're going to feel too stupid to
cry to Chris.”

“I will ban children from the ceremony. That means Riley. No baby in tux, Em. No baby in tux.”

“Oh, my god, and Mom is just going to be awful. I can't wait.”

“I'm hanging up now, goodbye.”

(Emily was wrong, for what it was worth. It was the menu that sent her crying into the bathroom, and it was at 4 AM, not 2:30.)

**Exhibit B: Watney**

“So what's my role, exactly?”

“What do you mean? Your role is to be supportive.” (That was Chris. Mark got both of them for the official announcement.)

“That's bullshit. I count three times I was fundamentally critical to your relationship. First, when you left me on Mars —”

“We're not having attendants, if that's what you're asking,” she interrupted. “It's just going to be us. And the officiant, but we've already picked one.”

“I'll take whatever ceremonial role you want. I can do Maid of Honor, for instance. Just as long as I get tons of scene-stealing possibilities. And also, that there are hot bridesmaids.” Her eyebrow raised; Marisa was positive he was seeing someone and hadn't told them.

“No attendants, Mark,” Chris repeated. David Martinez would have the rings, they'd each have a sister standing next to them, and that would be it.

“What sort of low-key, chill wedding is this?” Mark complained.

“One for us,” Chris said, and his smile made her insides flare with heat.

“Fine, but I am giving an epic toast. Try and stop me.”

“We won't,” Chris promised.

“Also, I call dibs on planning the bachelor party.”

Chris let her take that one.

(Despite her threats Watney led them to a strip club anyways, mostly for the novelty. Chris called from Vegas, feeling guilty. She told him to enjoy himself since the thought of a Martian, a new dad, and the guy who only brought medical journals on a two-year trip to Mars together in a strip club was pretty entertaining. They gorged themselves on crab legs at the buffet and left five minutes later after a dancer recognized them and they realized just how much shit they'd be in with Annie Montrose if photos of the three of them getting lap dances made it onto the Internet.)

**Exhibit C: Martinez.**

“No ring? Well what the fuck is different today from yesterday? You two were getting married then without a ring; you’re getting married now without a ring. Also, bro: A twist-tie ring? That's just cheeseball.”
(For the wedding, Rick somehow salvaged said twist-tie ring and framed it in a shadowbox. For the next fifty-seven years, it had a place of honor in their house. On the eve of the wedding Chris gave her a ring of his grandmother’s, an antique ruby ring that his grandfather had given to her and his mother had been holding onto for years. She wore it until pregnancy swelled her finger, then looped it through a chain to keep close to her heart.)

There were other phone calls, of course, lovely ones — her parents cried, and blabbered on about how they were glad they had never had sons because Chris was just so fundamentally awesome that no actual son could ever compare (honest-to-god, her mother said those things, before saying that he was a vast improvement over Brett, which made her roll her eyes). Amy practically jumped out of the screen to hug them both, and his mother said, quietly, “Your dad would be proud.” Sanders and Kapoor both heard through the grapevine and left them nice, supportive “Don’t worry, we won’t punish you from afar” messages. Once Watney (with permission) snapped, tweeted, and grammed a few not-that-cryptic messages (they both sent missives into the social-media ether as well), the weeklies and websites picked up the story, and the voicemails poured in from all over: Old friends, the rest of their Groups, even the President gave them a call (they picked that one up). The joy and notoriety spilled over into random in-person reactions: An elderly woman stopped her in the Target in Arlington and confided that they were “just the cutest.” The outpouring goodwill — genuine and thorough — from all corners disarmed Beth, made her genuinely appreciative. She tried to tweet back at everyone who left her a “Congrats!” response to her “It’s official!” post, politely declined Annie Montrose’s offer to set up interviews, and responded nicely, not churlishly, to the old friends who came out of the woodwork with inquiries about when the wedding would be.

(Fuck it, engagement made her soft).

The best, though, was the video call to Commander Lewis. She just smiled, lips closed, through the screen, too happy to say any actual words. “This is just wonderful. I knew it. I’m so happy for the two of you.”

“Thank you. So, we’re sorry for violating orders and hooking up on the ship —” Beth started.

“—And we’re especially sorry for that one time we had sex in the storage bay because we wanted to try sex in 0g,” Chris cut in, mostly for levity, and she shoved his shoulder as Melissa’s face melted into horror.

“— Don’t listen to him,” she said quickly. (Also, Vogel had been right: next-to-impossible to get the requisite speed and friction.) “Anyways, we were hoping that — in spite of the hooking up in space and yes, the storage bay sex —”

“— That you would officiate the ceremony,” Chris finished.

Beth bit her lip. “We know it might not look entirely kosher for NASA —”

“Yes. Of course yes. Absolutely yes,” Melissa cut in, breaking into a delighted, unexpected laugh. “Do I … Do I get certified online? I can get certified online.”

“Yeah,” Beth said, laughing too. “We don’t want — nothing big, nothing religious. It’s going to be a simple ceremony and a fun reception. We’re having food trucks, you know? That kind of thing. It’s not going to be overwrought.”

“Just us and eighty of our closest friends having a party,” Chris added. “Led by you.”
“Yes. Of course. I — I would be honored.” She cleared the emotion out of her throat. “So. When and where do I need to be?”

They looked at each other. “That’s .... a great question.”

Because the rest of their phone calls? Were to venues and vendors laughing their asses off at the two of them. They ideally wanted to get married within the next few months (the wedding didn’t matter too much, she kept explaining, which kept leading to people sigh and say *how romantic*. It wasn’t, exactly — more like practical — but she wasn’t into explaining), which should have been do-able since they didn’t want something especially large. But most of those phone conversations were short: “I’m sorry you want to book us when? We can get you on that date … in two years.” A vineyard in Sonoma had actually laughed at her so hard she had to hang up on them.

Melissa shrugged, “You two are decently industrious. You’ll find a spot.”

Industriousness, though, was no match for cluelessness, Beth felt helplessly as they called venue after venue. They burned through every historic house in San Francisco and funky restaurant in D.C., until she finally started dialing their favorite restaurants in Houston. Chris was, she could see from across the room, searching *One Direction Cover Bands*. Christ.

“Weddings? Sure, we do those,” the manager at Luke and Nick’s, a brewery in a converted barn just outside the city, said. The spot — named for the patron saints of brewers — had been one of their favorites when they were “just friends” in Houston. It had a chill, hipster-meets-cowboy vibe, with shiny silver vats of beer lining the entryway, twinkle lights festooning the high, arched beams and all the regular brick-and-chalkboard details that denoted this was a Cool Place For Fun People. They’d spent many long Saturday afternoons sitting at the picnic tables outside with cold mugs between their hands, sipping slowly as they waited for the live music to start at 7 p.m. She liked the beer and the fact that it felt like it was in Austin, her favorite city by far in Texas; Chris liked the chicken nachos and the fact that they hosted a line-dancing club, which he found hilarious. “We only have one more Saturday open this year — we had a cancellation, he enlisted and got shipped off to Japan or something. Or she lied because she got dumped. Anyways. It’s December 21st. That work?”

Her breath caught. “That’s *perfect,*” she emphasized, and Chris tilted his head up. “That’s actually — that’s so great. Are you sure? Yes. We’ll take it.”

Her fiance raised an eyebrow. “Where are we getting married, now?”

She explained, quickly. His grin broadened.

Time sped up, the closer they got to the wedding: Together (thank God Chris was equally as interested in the wedding details as she was — which was to say, interested in throwing a great party and not much else) they sped through music, flowers, food. But one thing had to be purchased by her alone: the dress. When Chris flew to Cologne for a presentation, her sister and mother swarmed in for a dress fitting.

( *Five years ago, she would never have suggested a real wedding, nor invited the two of them to help her pick out a dress. But time had tempered her; she was calmer, more thoughtful and gracious, when it came to matters of family and her family. She wasn’t sure what it was, but there was something to be said about family. She suspected the closer she got to the wedding, the clearer she would be on that point.* )

“I’m just so *bummed* you don’t want something crazy,” Emily pouted, taking a sip of champagne in the pinkest-and-goldest room Beth had ever seen. “It’s your wedding! You get *one*! Take advantage of the opportunity.”
“I’m getting married in a bar,” she pointed out as Emily rolled her eyes. “If there was a train it would get covered in stains.”

“It’s more like a vineyard, just for people who think they’re above the cliche of a vineyard wedding,” Emily countered.

“So says the woman who got married on a beach in Hawaii.” She tugged the tulle of the skirt straight and watched it pile on the ground like a cupcake behind her. Fuck, being short sucked. She threw on another, more casual dress.

“Oh, Beth, I know you want something unique, and that’s fine,” her mother sighed, “But you absolutely cannot have a dress above your knees. You look like you’re going to a sock-hop.”

(Who the fuck still said sock-hop?)

There was still something fundamentally strange, she thought, about shoehorning her self-image into that of A Bride (though it did have a pull on her). There was nothing gooey or frilly or even particularly romantic about her decision to spend the rest of her life with Chris: Like Einstein’s theories, it simply was, underlining every other facet of her life. The center of her universe resided outside of her now; their connection roped every other decision and relationship into its gravitational pull. She was perfectly on board with celebrating this fact with everybody she knew, since it had been a damned long time since she’d had a good party. But the bride thing. “I’m having a hard time picturing this,” she admitted, suddenly feeling overheated. The room, which stank of gardenias, didn’t help. She threw on the next dress on the rack, which was… Grecian-ish, she supposed. It was a lot less snug than the first one, with a deep V and simple lines and an empire waist and a soft skirt that pooled coolly at her ankles. The top twisted into inch-thick braided straps that trailed farther-than-expected down her back, giving it a surprisingly sexy, relaxed look. She felt fun, like a dressed-up version of herself. The attendant twisted a simply silver belt around her waist for some flair.

“Oh, Beth,” her mother exhaled. “I can picture it perfectly.”

Huh. Alright then.

(She did look damn good.)

That night, after dinner with Emily and Mom and after she spent a solid hour coding a video game for David Martinez (he would get to pretend to be his dad and fly a mission to space) and after ten minutes of staring wide-eyed at her ceiling, she realized that there was no way she would be able to sleep without talking to Chris. Dammit. She reached for her cell, and hoped that he was up early in Cologne to hit the gym, because that was something he would do.

But when he picked up, his voice was groggy, though unsurprised. “H’ro?” He said.

“Hey,” she said. “I’m sorry — you were sleeping, weren’t you?”

“Yeah,” he replied with a yawn, a smile in his voice. “But don’t worry; I was expecting this.”

“For me to call?” She leaned back, wrinkled her brow. A drowsy comfort started to spread through her as she settled against the pillows.

“Yes,” he said. “Beth, you went dress shopping with your mom today. I was kind of expecting a call from inside a dressing room where she’d tried to smother you with lace and tulle.”

She laughed, mildly. “No. Nothing that bad,” she said.
“Really?” He asked, and she could hear his eyebrow raise.

“Yes, really,” she protested with a self-effacing whine. “I mean … What I’m doing finally aligns with what she understands and what she believes will make me happy. Space, coding, she’s never understood, never thought success there could make me actually happy, long-term. She’s been proud, I guess, but terrified …. And now, she gets this. And she approves. Plus it helps that she thinks you’re Dreamy Dr. Beck,” she teased.

“Just call me Beck, Chris Beck,” he deadpanned. “So … did you find a dress?”


“I bet you look gorgeous. I can’t wait to see it,” he said sincerely.

“I even got them to sew on a NASA patch on the shoulder. You know, so you’d recognize me.”

“Well, if you wanted to do that, you should just walk down the aisle naked. That’s my favorite look of yours,” he shot back, his mild tone at odds with the racy comment. She laughed, hard, and he smiled, “So what else is new?”

“Nothing,” she sighed, sliding forward until she was lying down. She shifted onto her side. “I miss you.”

“I miss you too,” he said. “Still weird not sharing a twin bed with you sometimes. But I’ll be home the day after tomorrow.”

“How’s the conference? Are you ready for your presentation?” She suddenly realized his big talk was in ten hours, and she felt incredibly guilty.

“Think so. We ran the decks today, and I’m pretty confident in the data and conclusions. A couple people have said they’re excited to hear what I’ve found. And nothing I like talking about more than isotopes present in Mark Watney’s blood.”

“You know it’s sexy when you talk radiation,” she teased, but her heart flared: She loved how much he loved his work, how good he was at it, how committed he was to advancing scientific research. It was, quite literally, a huge part of what had brought them together. “You’ll rock it.”

“You should come next time I have one of these,” he said, “We’ll stick around for an extra weekend. You wanted to travel more.”

“Isn’t your next conference in Buffalo? Not the same,” she replied.

“The next good one,” he said. “I was speaking to Kempner at the UN. Copenhagen, in the springtime, to be on a panel regarding the effects of climate change and increased radiation exposure on disease rates. And I’ll probably do a talk on the analysis of all the medical data. It’ll be out in February.” He’d been working on compiling that for most of the year via Goddard.

“You sure know how to show a girl a good time,” she joked.

“Come on. We’ll go see windmills or something after.”

“Isn’t that Holland, not Denmark?”

“I don’t know. We’re reasonably smart people. We’ll figure it out.”
“It sounds fun,” she said. “Let’s talk about the dates when you get back?”

“Yeah,” he murmured, and she clutched at the phone, content to just feel him through the airwaves. “You know, it’s getting close to six. I need to get up and get moving. And you need to sleep.”

“Yeah,” she said, shifting suddenly, feeling much calmer than she had ten minutes earlier. “Thanks for picking up your phone. I love you.”

(She was struck, in that moment, of just how many things that phrase meant, of just how easily it rolled off her tongue, like she was asking him Please pass the broccoli. It no longer, she realized, felt particularly significant; it, like them, simply was. It was a greeting and an exchange and a benediction and a reassurance and a statement of fact, all in one, as casually elegant as a line of code or a good pair of shoes or a glass of Scotch)

“Anytime, Space Pardner,” he said, and she could practically hear his wink. “Love you too.”

xxxi.

“Remember, we went to Mars,” he said, taking a deep breath.

“Hijacked a spaceship.”

“Have multiple degrees from the best universities.”

“Well I just have the one. From MIT.”

“Yeah but you dropped out of a Master’s program at Stanford to design the Hermes.”

“That is pretty badass. And hey, NSBRI just gave you the Pioneer Award for rehabbing a Martian. That’s also super badass.”

“True.” Only recipient ever under 40, if he was bragging.

“We can do this.”

“Yeah,” he sighed, staring at the gleaming, slick turkey in the pan, waiting to be brined. By them. It was the Monday before Thanksgiving and, since both sets of family were particularly clingy about the three missed holidays, they had become the default host for everyone in the immediate families: Her parents and sister and Tommy and Riley; Amy and the guy she had started dating and his mom. He was actually looking forward to it a lot — Beth was huffing about hosting and her mother’s incessant questions on the wedding and Emily’s insistence that Kraft Mac’n’Cheese be on the menu, but he really liked the idea of all of them carving out this time to be together, even if everyone knew there was little nonbiological collective tissue. Space had a way of making those disappointments and disconnects feel insignificant, and they’d both enjoyed much more comfortable — not close, but not nearly as fraught — relationships with their families since their return. But the upper limit of their combined kitchen skills was pan-roasting pork chops, and he had a sinking feeling about this endeavor.

“You think we could just have my mom do it? She loves cooking. And being right. C’mon.” Her eyes brightened. “What if we cater? Nobody would need to know.”

It wasn’t the worst idea. But — “Everyone would be suspicious if the food was too good,” he pointed out.
“Man I miss Aunt Bridget,” she complained. “She used to handle all this shit when I was a kid. She made this delicious, disgusting dessert too. Muddy pudding.” She nudged his arm with her shoulder. “Who handled your Thanksgivings? We’ve never discussed.”

He laughed. “I mean, it depended on if we spent the holiday with Grandpa Robert and Grandma Ruth — my mom’s parents’ — or if we were with the extended Beck clan. But either way, it was a Hispanic woman named Maria doing the actual cooking.”

She laughed. “You think she's available this weekend?”

“She’s probably up at the Beck homestead, if you want to change your plans,” he suggested. She made a face and he laughed. “Come on, Lady Sorrow,” he said, referencing her high-school hacker handle, which she found ridiculously funny. And so apt, for sixteen-year-old Beth. “Let’s brine this sucker.”

“You know, maybe we should try deep-frying it,” she suggested. “It's basically an experiment Mark would do but it sounds fun.”

“I’ve never had deep-fried turkey, actually,” he replied.

“I don’t think I have either,” she said. “It could be a new tradition.”

“I’ve never really had one of those either,” he admitted.

“A tradition?” she asked, putting her hands on her hips.

“Yeah … Just not the Beck way, I guess,” he shrugged. “Some years it was at the Becks and there were always these crazy rituals. I remember a Beck Cup, for instance. Other years it was my mom’s parents and there was entirely different food. A couple times my dad tried to take us on vacation. Then my grandparents got too old and moved to Florida, so I would generally spend Thanksgiving with friends. After they died I literally could do anything with my time and it wouldn’t matter,” he lifted a shoulder again, an irrepressible tic, nerves a little jangled.

It absolutely wouldn’t be news to Beth, but he had never liked the formal, performative nature of Beck family holidays — they had always made him feel like he did not matter; just the role he played. Smart, impish, a tiny bit rogue, but ultimately the tragically noble son. Sitting at the table had felt like sitting on eggshells. Time with his maternal grandparents was better, of course, but the circle was tiny and time had always felt fragile and fleeting. He’d never felt like he was missing out on something during the holidays, exactly, or cheated out of something magical. Things were what they were, his family’s approach to the season was decidedly less than Rockwellian, and feeling shortchanged wouldn’t change anything, except potentially curdling apathy into anger or despair. So he had never really put forth any effort into caring about the holidays.

(He had a feeling his relationship to holidays would change soon.)

She smiled, gratified he was sharing but concerned at his revelation, and stepped closer to him. “Well,” she said, sliding her arms around his neck, “A — I am really sorry, because even when family sucks it sucks less than feeling alone. But B — you never get to do that again. I’m sorry, but you’re stuck with me.”

“No place I’d rather be stuck,” he said, resting his hands on her hips. “Not even a spaceship.”

“So we’re going to have to make some new traditions,” she informed him. “The new Johanssen-Beck way. We should probably refrain from getting too tied to potatoes, though, since hopefully once everyone’s families chill out we can be more flexible with where we celebrate.” He agreed, but
he didn’t exactly mind being with their families this year — it felt normal, even though it was obligatory and slightly fraught.

“Well, Brussels sprouts for sure,” he said immediately — they were his favorite vegetable.

She wrinkled her nose. “Do you always have to be a doctor?”

“It’s kind of hot right?” he joked. “Actually — I kind of remember a family tradition I didn’t hate.”

“What was it?” she asked with a smile.

“The most New England thing ever, basically,” he said. “So when the Pilgrims hit their lowest point, they only had five kernels of corn a day. Blah blah blah, Sacajawea —”

“— Squanto. Did you pay attention at all in school?”

“— No. Blah, blah, blah, Squanto came along saved them, they were so incredibly grateful, history happened, and the first course of the feast was five kernels of corn.” He wrinkled his nose, unsure if he got the history exactly right. “Anyways — we each got five kernels, and we had to come up with five things we were grateful for that year. I think the last time I did this, it was grateful for Harry Potter and Lindsay Lohan, but …” he shrugged. “That seems like a nice tradition to start, right?”

She smiled. “We do have a lot to be grateful for this year. Even if I might kill my mother on Thanksgiving.”

“Hey,” he said, “We are going to brine the shit out of this turkey. And then deep-fry it. And we will kick Thanksgiving’s ass. Just like we kicked Martian ass.”

“Deal,” she laughed. “I can’t believe we’re hosting this.”

“It’s kind of fun though, right?”

“Yes. But I don’t think we’re going to win any awards for Tastiest Food,” she said mirthfully, biting into one of the apple chunks they’d already chopped. He laughed as she fed him a second.

Little had changed in the way they ran their lives, in the run-up to the wedding. Sure, there were plenty of debates about menus (Beth had had a few breakdowns) as they watched movies at night and endless conference calls over lunch with the Houston-based planner, but it was all noise. On one hand, he couldn’t believe they were getting married in less than a month: he had never envisioned marriage (nor had she) and it seemed like a wondrous and fundamental change. On the other hand, though, he had an itchy feeling of about damn time.

Because in retrospect, every step that had gotten them to this point felt like it had moved so slowly: Meeting, training, astronaut-ing, all felt like it had taken an excessive amount of time. Then there had been so much necessarily to hash out upon their return to Earth, so he had felt ready for what seemed like ages. Their travels in space and their time on the Hermes had fully faded to the texture of a dream: their house, their life, their future, was his entire universe. He didn’t feel happier, exactly — in fact, he had a sneaking suspicion that, with the exception of the actual wedding day and the birth of the agreed-upon two kids, the highest of his highs were firmly behind him — but he was more grounded, in every sense, than he’d felt in years. The boringness of their existence was undercut by how nice it was. He was still running ten miles on weekends and they’d made plans to hike in Iceland in May, but his days of jonesing for a spacewalk or a skydive were a distant, almost humorous memory.

(This is your life now.)
Thus the idea of building traditions intrigued and excited him; him, the guy who, by practice and profession, had only steady reactions to immediate situations. He liked the idea a lot. It was a bridge: They had a shared language of inside jokes and raised eyebrows and posture and touch, but Thanksgiving traditions? That was a rock on which to build a life, a family. Bigger than the two of them, less strange and lonely than their perpetual designation as ex-Martian astronauts. It tied them to a community, transcended their bond, would outlast what they built, was as appealing and awe-inspiring as Mars once was.

He goddamned couldn’t wait.

“So when does your family get here, again?” he asked as he started to pat salt into the bird.

“Wednesday at 3,” she said, handing him the garlic and lemon. “I’m leaving work a couple of hours early. Amy is coming tomorrow night and your mom on Thursday morning, right?”

“Yeah,” he said. “OK, then we need a tradition to start tonight. A before-everyone-gets-here tradition.”

“Hmm,” she said, watching him liberally rub the garlic clove against the turkey’s skin, the way they saw in the video. She grabbed the onions for the seasoning and began to chop them blockily. His eyes misted up. “We should watch a movie. The same movie. A classic. Every year forever and ever.” Her words and tone were teasing but he couldn’t help light up involuntarily.

“ Star Trek? ”

“Uh, no. Don’t try and sneak your favorite movie in as our new family tradition.”

“So no The Sound of Music then, either?” he smirked, and she blushed. She’d cried every time the Commander made them watch it on the Hermes, which she made him swear to secrecy.

“Correct.”

“It also can’t be one of your fancy art-house movies,” he said. “You know. If it’s …”

“Going to eventually be shown to small children? Yeah, I know,” she replied. “Pity — I’d be down with watching Rashomon.” They exchanged a smile at the memory from three years ago.


“While I love them, you don’t, so I’ll veto those two.” She poured the onion crescents over the turkey and sprinkled the extra garlic cloves on top.

“Thank you.”

“I got it,” she said, brightening as she leaned a hip against the counter. “ Lord of the Rings . The first one.”

He smiled. It was one of the few movies the two of them could agree on — there were no world-building slipups, or dumb “futuristic” science, which was what always took him out of the Star Wars movies she loved; it was well-made but not self-serious, which were her requirements; and they had both been Tolkein nerds (her more than him) during their childhoods. And it was absolutely a future family classic. “That’s perfect. Let’s finish this up.”

“I’ll make the popcorn,” she smiled.
(After the movie, they had sex on the couch. He wasn’t sure if that was going to be a yearly tradition, but he definitely would not mind.)

She was absolutely right that their Thanksgiving wouldn’t win any awards for tastiness. Three days later, they had store-bought pie, unevenly chopped Brussels sprouts, mashed potatoes from a box, and a damned good deep-fried turkey, a video of which received more than 10,000 likes on Instagram in the five minutes after Beth posted it. Beth was wearing her favorite blue sweater and black cigarette jeans, and hadn’t killed her mother. He was in a gray turtleneck he knew she liked, and wanted to kill Amy’s new boyfriend, who had a ponytail (“He’s just fun! We’re fun!” Amy had said). His mother was preoccupied with Riley, Beth’s nephew, who was as good a distraction as any.

“You two gonna have one of these?” She asked with a smile.

He squinted into a smirk. “I think so, yeah,” he finally said.

Her lips pursed, pleased. “I’m glad,” she said. Then, haltingly: “You’ll be great at it. You always want your kids to be better and do better than you did, and you’ve done that. I’m … I don’t say it enough, but I’m proud of you, Christopher.”

“Hey guys,” Beth said, entering the living room and circling her arms around his neck. “My mom says the rest of the food is done. You all ready?” she turned, kissed his cheek lightly. “Let’s go.”

They gathered around the table, Beth at one end, him at the other, their perfectly imperfect, awkwardly assembled, biological family falling back into the positions next to them that birth and fate had ascribed them.

(They needed to Skype the crew, their chosen family, soon, that reminded him.)

“So,” Beth said, when everyone had assembled. “Chris and I … As we get closer to the wedding, we’ve started to think about the traditions that we’d like to incorporate … together. And Chris remembered using corn kernels to signify what you’re grateful for, when he was a kid. It’s a tradition that he says the Pilgrims started, but he also said that Sacajawea helped them start it. So. My first kernel is for the fact I am grateful Chris is a doctor, not a history major.” The line got a laugh, and she pushed the kernel across her plate like a bead on an abacus. “The second … I’m grateful that we get to celebrate with all of you, today, that everyone is whole and healthy and reasonably happy on most days that end in y. Third, I’m grateful that I got to go to Mars. Even with everything that happened, it was probably the most exciting three weeks of my life, and it was a once-in-a-lifetime thing. Fourth, I’m more grateful that I came home this year. I think I came home in more ways than one, to tell you the truth. And fifth, Chris … I’m really grateful — and a lot of other feelings — that I get to marry you in three weeks.”

He sent her a secret, shared smile, and the rest of the family took their turns, professing thankfulness for their safe return and the Cubs’ third consecutive World Series championship and Riley and Blue Ivy Carter.

His turn.

He smiled crookedly at their family. “First,” he said, holding up a kernel, “I’m thankful that we’re back home, safe and in one piece. It’s cliche, everyone has said it, but really … I’m glad. Second, I’m thankful for real bread, and fresh vegetables. God, that was a long three years. Third, I’m thankful that Beth and I were able to find this place and restart our lives, and start jobs that are fulfilling and interesting … and firmly Earthbound, obviously. Fourth, uh,” he rolled the corn between his fingers, as he lost his train of thought. “I’m thankful for Aidy. And all of you, but, you know, mostly Aidy.” Everyone giggled. “And fifth, Beth. I’m thankful to start new traditions with
you. You’re ... extraordinary. And I’ve thought that probably since we sat in that parking lot and
waited for Mark and Rick to get kicked out of the bar.” He wanted to say more, but he couldn’t, so
he just nodded.

She pinkened, the heat flaming up her neck the way it had when Lewis had called them out. Her
eyes darted to the side, then locked on his. “I think you’re embellishing the record, there, but you,
Beck, are entirely too good for me,” she finally said, and he could see his mother nod affirmatively.
She raised her wine glass. “Anyways. Happy Thanksgiving, everyone.”

He raised his glass, seeing not just their family right now, in this room, but the years of Thanksgiving
meals and five kernels and pre-holiday movies and more traditions that they’d dream up on the fly.

(He was right, not coincidentally. Besides the birth of their kids and the weddings, the highest of his
highs were well behind him. But six years later, as his one-year-old son slept through the movie on
his shoulder and Beth attempted to make their daughter’s hair “look just like Galadriel’s!” next to
him, he knew that was the right choice.)

xxxii.

“Beth?” Chris’s voice was surprised and, (unsurprisingly) a little drunk as he entered their (fine,
totally his) hotel room. He clapped two hands over his eyes. “I’m not supposed to see you.”

“That’s in the dress, dumbass,” she said, but fondly, from where she was tucked under the blankets.
She crinkled his eyes at his dark silhouette. He’d woken her up. “There’s no rule about seeing me
out of the dress.”

“I’m pretty sure there is a rule about us sleeping in separate rooms the night before the wedding. That
is definitely one of the rules. I read a book about it and everything.”

“There was a rule about hooking up on the Hermes and you were OK violating that for sex and
companionship,” she raised an eyebrow and slid up to sitting (and if her shirt rode up to remind him
she slept without underwear, so what). “I missed you.” She hated that she hated sleeping alone (fine,
she didn’t hate it that much), and if he was in the same hotel, just one floor away from her suite, she
was going to go to his room, her mother’s quaint superstitions about weddings be damned.

He flopped heavily next to her (clearly, drunker than she’d initially judged) and leaned over to her
kiss her, wetly and hotly. “I would’ve missed you too,” he admitted when he pulled back with a soft
grin, before nuzzling her nose and leaning in for another insistent kiss.

She smiled into the kiss. This was exactly why she’d decided to crash in his room. “You have fun
with the boys?” She checked as she tugged him more firmly over her. After the rehearsal dinner,
Mark and Rick and Alex and a couple of his frat brothers and Houston friends had taken him out to a
bar. She’d contemplated protesting her way into the group, because Feminism, but then Melissa
suggested that they watch John Hughes movies and drink more wine and she was absolutely sold. It
had been a fun — crazy-exhausting, but fun, week in Houston; they’d arranged today, via NASA, to
host a mini “Space Camp” for guests, who had the opportunity to bounce in the Gravity Chair and
twist in the Multi-Axis Trainer and lock into the G-Force Simulator (she had the sneaking suspicion
that Annie Montrose had leaked some quotes about the wedding in return for the free Space Camp).
There’d been a rehearsal dinner, with family and the crew and a few others, at the bar where they’d
first met. A movie and wine had been perfect for unwinding. Then she’d tried going to sleep, gotten
bored, and broke into his room instead.
“Mmm. Mark wanted to get back to Mindy.” *That* had been a fun surprise for all of them. “Not as much fun as I’m having right now.” He ghosted a hand under her shirt, pressed a ridge into her breast, and she moaned, biting his pulsepoint in retaliation.

She had them flipped and his pants off five seconds later. Fuck the rules.

Twenty minutes later as she stretched and snuggled into his side, he murmured, “You know what?”

“What?” She asked, sliding an arm across his chest. From the start of their relationship — hell, even their friendship, when he curled his fingers on hers in a parking lot — he had always been more tactile than she had expected from such a reserved guy. Eventually she figured out it was the doctor side of him: He was always (consciously or subconsciously) finding a pulse or checking her breathing or tracing the sinew of her muscle. He stood too close, put a palm at the dip in her back or slid it snugly around the line of her bra strap. It was done for his own reassurance and was cute, not creepy; at this point (and after two years wedged in the same bed), she did it too. It was calming, to feel the steadiness of his breathing, the sureness of his presence.

“I get to marry you tomorrow,” he said, his voice awed and excited.

Her eyes cracked back open. “Yeah? Well I get to marry *you* tomorrow.” Her voice was throaty and intimate and joyous, and she nuzzled her nose into the crook of his neck.

“Do you think it’ll be any different? Being married.”

She laughed throatily. “I hope not.”

He tilted his head. “At all?”

“I mean,” she shifted. “I’m pretty happy with what we’ve got. Do you *really* think marriage ‘changes everything?’” She deepened her tone a bit to mock it.

“No, but I’m open to it changing some things.”

“What do you want changed?” She said, her voice light — this was kind of fun.

“Well, one, I’m excited to introduce you as my wife,” he said huskily, his teeth scraping against her neck (she would chide him for being possessive, but honestly she was excited for the ‘husband’ side of the equation.).

“That’ll be pretty cool,” she said. “But I don’t expect anything to change, really.” And she didn’t really want to. She’d never been in it for the romance of the situation. He hadn’t swept her off her feet. It had just, firmly and factually and fundamentally, become their living, breathing truth: She loved him, loved talking to him, loved fucking him, loved being with him, loved arguing with him. He knew this. She was pretty sure it was one of the things he loved most about her.

The thing she wanted most was to keep feeling these things every day for the rest of her life.

“I know you don’t,” he said, his voice rough. “I’m still gonna hope something does. For the better. Obviously.”

She smiled fondly at him, because she liked that he hoped and shared now, even if she didn’t hope those same hopes. “So what are you vowing tomorrow?” They’d decided to write their own, and she’d struggled. “Because I for one think you should totally swear in front of everyone we know that you will *always* take the early walk with Aidy.”
He laughed. “That was one of the things I rejected, actually. I thought it wasn’t serious enough.”

“Oh really? What else did you reject?”

He laughed with a sigh. “So many things. Let’s see … I thought about promising to get into the habit of always picking up toilet paper, no matter what, since it’s usually the thing I forget. Oh, and I promised to do a better job of picking up my shit around the house. Then I decided that wasn’t something I wanted to include in my vows due to the difficulties I’ve have with keeping it. And I scrapped trying to teach you to cook, or cut back on caffeine.”

“I thought about promising not to nag you about the shoes all over the house, and to start treating bedtimes as house policy and not just friendly suggestions.”

“I have heard it’s best not to start a marriage on a lie,” he deadpanned. “I dunno. I did cut some stuff that seemed too personal.”

“Oh really? Like what?” She asked, tucking her head onto her tricep.

“That I … Tried to come up with a moment where I thought ‘this is it. I’m gonna marry this girl.’ And the story was too cheesy, so …” His voice trailed off. She lifted her head. “Wait, what? You had like, a moment?” She had always enjoyed the suppressed-romantic side of him, but this felt like news.

“Yeah.” So help God, he blushed in the dark. “I didn’t realize that was what it was until, like, four years later, but … yeah.”

“What was it?” And so he told her: Interfering Helena, German words, skeptical Rob, listening to her deny anything was happening between them in the kitchen. At one point, though, she remembered — “Wait, wait, wait. You’ve totally told me this story before.”

“What?”

“Absolutely. When we bought the house. And it definitely didn't end this way, with you deciding to marry me.”

“I like my ending better. I absolutely decided, right then, to marry you.”

“You're ridiculous,” she said. “But if you want to canonize total falsehoods in your wedding vows, go ahead.”

(Sh e had to admit, as a shiver ran up her spine at the word ‘vows’, it was the better end to the story.)

“So I shouldn’t expect anything cheesy from you, is what you’re saying?”

She looked him straight in the eye. “I say that you’re the bravest and kindest person I know, and despite being the world’s most straitlaced doctor, you always know how to make me laugh and not take things too seriously. That whether we’re whispering in a twin bed on the Hermes or figuring out a grocery list in D.C. or on a ten-mile run in Houston, with you is the place I’d most like to be. That when I signed up for the Ares program I thought going to Mars would be the most exciting thing to happen to me, and how glad I am that it wasn’t. That to me, the insane, dramatic, Martian background doesn’t matter at all. That the reason … the reason I love you is because you brought me tea before bed on the Hermes, and always close two fingers over a pulse point just to know I’m there. That we can always roll our eyes about something someone — usually Mark — has done, and we play rocks-paper-scissors face-offs to split chores, and that you loaned me your jacket on a
balcony at a stuffy and lonely party. That I can’t promise you things will always be easy, but that I
can always try. That at one point in my life I couldn't imagine being married, and now I can't imagine
not being married to you. And if that's not love, I don't know what is.” She lifted a shoulder. “That's
what I plan on vowing to you tomorrow.”

He shifted closer, aligning his body from tip to toe to hers, not touching, his gaze clear and
uninhibited and sure. “And I,” he said, “will say that I fell in love with you at that dinner, and after
we went to Austin for that film festival, and on that rooftop at the Ares II gala, and after Helena’s
speech, and when I caught you jumping on the bed our first hour on Hermes , and when we watched
Rashomon , and when Lewis called us out, and when we moved to D.C. And yes, I’ve known since
that first moment. Maybe not the extent, maybe not the depth, but when you walked in, I knew you
were going to change my life. And moving forward, I'll always be the witness to your life, and the
guy that brings you tea — even though now I go to bed at least an hour before you — and your
partner in whatever comes next. I can't make too many finite promises, because we both know life is
short and unexpected. And I’m better with actions than with words. So I’m going to keep showing
you, every day, that I’m worthy of being your husband, your partner, your sounding board, and your
best friend.”

Well, then.

She kissed him chastely; all lip, no tongue.

She wasn’t sure if that was exactly what she would say the next day (she certainly never remembered
it clearly). But that was what, and how, she felt: the certainty that, whether the world stopped turning
or sped up to an interminable pace, this and them was fixed.

They would change, and change each other, and not change, so promises would be moot. But their
connection and dedication — that, she hoped, would be constant.

xxxiv.

(Unsurprisingly, Chris remembered very little of the wedding day. Luckily, there was plenty of
evidence to help him remember.)

FROM HERMES HOOKUP TO WEDDING BELLS

EXCLUSIVE — Beth Johanssen , the sarcastic and spunky Ares III computer programmer whose
poster provided plenty of fantasy fodder for nerdy teenaged boys over the last several years, is set to
tie the knot with her hot astronaut-slash-doctor boyfriend, Chris Beck , TMZ has learned. Besides
their badassery rescuing stranded astronaut Mark Watney from Mars, the two are best known for
disclosing what sources call a “yearslong” against-the-regs relationship during a Jimmy Fallon
interview shortly after their return for a mission that was, oh, 2.5 years long. (For more on that, click
here.)

The wedding’s going down in Houston and is said to be “very small.” It’ll include family and the rest
of the Ares III crew, including everyone’s favorite Martian. Pilot Rick Martinez’s son is set to hold
the rings and Commander Melissa Lewis is rumored to be the officiant. Nothing says “We don’t give
a shit what NASA thinks” like having the ex-boss officially seal the deal on the man-and-wife thing.

We’ve reached out, but no official word from the couple … either on the wedding or the logistics of
space sex. Congrats, you two crazy kids!
Mark Watney @MartianMark

1 year back on Earth, and celebrating @B_Johanssen and @DrChrisBeck! #Congrats #CrazyKids #AndTheGroomTookShots #GoodDay

Beth Johanssen @B_Johanssen

@MartianMark @DrChrisBeck Uhhhh shots? What's the occasion?

Chris Beck @DrChrisBeck

@MartianMark @B_Johanssen Heading to a wedding! You should come.

Mark Watney @MartianMark

@DrChrisBeck @B_Johanssen Better not be potatoes at this shindig.

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ASTRONAUTS WHO FELL IN LOVE IN SPACE TO WED

(Dec. 21) — In a romantic twist, former astronauts Chris Beck and Beth Johanssen wed in Houston this Saturday, exactly one year after they returned from a daring, extended rescue mission.

Tweets from the couple, as well as NASA reps, confirmed the happy news to People. The couple have been dating for three years and got engaged sometime this summer.

“The wedding will be small, only close friends and family,” one source close to the couple confirmed. “It’s in Houston — while they no longer live there, it was where they first met and became friends.”

Johanssen, a child-prodigy coder who is now a programmer for the government, and Beck, a research scientist and doctor, met through NASA training, and initially competed for a spot on the Ares III mission. Once both on the mission, though, “you could always tell there was something between them,” a fellow former candidate, said. “They were incredibly close, and worked seamlessly together.”

The two, along with fellow astronauts Melissa Lewis, Rick Martinez, Alex Vogel, and Mark Watney, blasted off on a ten-month mission to Mars in June of 2035. Once on the Red Planet, though, the mission took a tragic turn when the crew mistakenly left Watney stranded, presumed dead after a catastrophic storm.

NASA quickly realized the error, as well as the fact that the most efficient rescue plan would be to send the astronauts back to Mars to pick up Watney. By the time the crew returned, one fact was undeniable: At some point, the strong friendship had crossed over into love for the two astronauts.

“Neither of them really intended to fall in love,” another former NASA colleague said. “But it was incredibly stressful after they lost Mark, and they kind of grew together. Their friendship and their working relationship was an incredible foundation.” The happy news inadvertently became public when Jimmy Fallon asked Beck with whom he would most like to re-populate Mars, should he have to.

While the private couple moved to D.C. after retiring from NASA — “No more space travel, ever,” Johanssen said wryly in a press conference shortly after their return to Earth — they returned home to Houston for the wedding. Guests were treated to a day of ‘Space Camp’ before the wedding, set
to take place at one of the couple’s favorite restaurants. Their former commander, Lewis, was set to officiate. “There were several homages to NASA as well as the mission that brought them together, from the date to the location,” gushed the first source. “It’s truly a celebration of that connection and those memories. It’s undoubtedly romantic.”

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Mark gave him shit, and Martinez gave him shitty advice, and Vogel practiced his speech. Four shots and some photos later, the guys finally hustled him into the gray sedan and took him to the brewery, where the guests were already congregating. Melissa, in a long, black backless dress, her hair glowing in a chignon, greeted him at the alter. “You ready, Captain Beck?” she asked.

He smiled. “You haven’t called me that in forever.”

She smirked. “Seemed appropriate. Look, here she comes.”

There was one thing that he really, truly remembered about the wedding day: That she took his breath away.

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Vogel cleared his throat and tapped the mic. “This is, I assure you, far more beautiful in its original German. But Chris and Beth have requested the English version, and on this the occasion of their wedding, I will oblige.” He smoothed over the paper, and began to read. “ ‘The point of marriage is not to create a quick commonality by tearing down all boundaries; on the contrary, a good marriage is one in which each partner appoints the other to be the guardian of his solitude, and thus they show each other the greatest possible trust. A merging of two people is an impossibility, and where it seems to exist, it is a hemming-in, a mutual consent that robs one party or both parties of their fullest freedom and development. But once the realization is accepted that even between the closest people infinite distances exist, a marvelous living side-by-side can grow up for them, if they succeed in loving the expanse between them, which gives them the possibility of always seeing each other as a whole and before an immense sky.’ He folded the paper up again. “Congratulations, you two.”

Martinez was up next. “You know, I hadn’t ever really read Sagan before Chris asked me to do this reading. Not really my thing, you know? I’m a pilot. But this … this sums it up. For those of you who are scientists, explorers, like us: You’ll understand.” His voice rang out. “Our ancestors groped in darkness to make sense of their surroundings. Powerless before nature, they invented rituals and myths, some desperate and cruel, others imaginative and benign. As long as there have been humans, we have searched for our place in the cosmos. Where are we? Who are we? We find that we live on an insignificant planet of a humdrum star lost in a galaxy tucked away in some forgotten corner of a universe in which there are far more galaxies than people. We make our world significant by the courage of our questions, and by the depth of our answers. The nitrogen in our DNA, the calcium in our teeth, the iron in our blood, the carbon in our apple pies were made in the interiors of collapsing stars. We are made of starstuff. For small creatures such as we the vastness is bearable only through love.”

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He didn’t remember what, exactly, he ended up promising her in his vows.

(He did remember Melissa dabbing away tears with the back of her hand as she spoke and gave the blessing.)

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By the time they got to Watney’s reading, after the welcome and the first readings and the vows but before the exchange of the rings, everyone was a mess: Melissa had used the “sermon” portion to tell stories about thing they’d done on the Hermes, and how they illustrated the virtues needed for a strong marriage — persistence, trust, faith, a willingness to go the distance, commitment. Beth had made her mother burst into tears. He was a bit of a mess himself. (Beth had had to press a thumb into the ridge of his nose, stop a tear.)

So of course Watney decided to ham it up.

“No, I don’t know what you all know about me, but I’m the guy they left on Mars,” he announced, to scattered chuckles. “When the two of them asked me to do a reading, I knew they weren’t going to give me something too serious. But the fact that they asked me to read about a small child stranded on a far-off planet with only an imaginary fox to talk to . . . I got a little offended. Because it’s not like I ever even had a Wilson-the-volleyball moment, you know? And then I read what they picked, and Christ, it’s pretty perfect for the two of them. So,” he cracked open the book. “Here I go.” He took a breath, and began to read:

“What does that mean—‘tame’?”

“It is an act too often neglected,” said the fox. It means to establish ties.”

“To establish ties’?”

“Just that,” said the fox. “To me, you are still nothing more than a little boy who is just like a hundred thousand other little boys. And I have no need of you. And you, on your part, have no need of me. To you, I am nothing more than a fox like a hundred thousand other foxes. But if you tame me, then we shall need each other. To me, you will be unique in all the world. To you, I shall be unique in all the world…”

So the little prince tamed the fox. And when the hour of his departure drew near—

“Oh,” said the fox, “I shall cry.”

“It is your own fault,” said the little prince. “I never wished you any sort of harm; but you wanted me to tame you…”

“Yes, that is so,” said the fox.

“But now you are going to cry!” said the little prince.

“Yes, that is so,” said the fox.

“Then it has done you no good at all!”

“It has done me good,” said the fox, “because of the color of the wheat fields.” And then he added: “Go and look again at the roses. You will understand now that yours is unique in all the world. Then come back to say goodbye to me, and I will make you a present of a secret.”

The little prince went away, to look again at the roses.

“You are not at all like my rose,” he said. “As yet you are nothing. No one has tamed you, and you have tamed no one. You are like my fox when I first knew him. He was only a fox like a hundred thousand other foxes. But I have made him my friend, and now he is unique in all the world.”

And the roses were very much embarrassed.
“You are beautiful, but you are empty,” he went on. “One could not die for you. To be sure, an ordinary passerby would think that my rose looked just like you—the rose that belongs to me. But in herself alone she is more important than all the hundreds of you other roses: because it is she that I have watered; because it is she that I have put under the glass globe; because it is she that I have sheltered behind the screen; because it is for her that I have killed the caterpillars (except the two or three that we saved to become butterflies); because it is she that I have listened to, when she grumbled, or boasted, or even sometimes when she said nothing. Because she is my rose.”

And he went back to meet the fox.

“Goodbye,” he said.

“Goodbye,” said the fox. “And now here is my secret, a very simple secret: It is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye.”

“What is essential is invisible to the eye,” the little prince repeated, so that he would be sure to remember.

“It is the time you have wasted for your rose that makes your rose so important.”

“It is the time I have wasted for my rose—” said the little prince, so that he would be sure to remember.

“Men have forgotten this truth,” said the fox. “But you must not forget it. You become responsible, forever, for what you have tamed. You are responsible for your rose…”

“I am responsible for my rose,” the little prince repeated, so that he would be sure to remember.

And Watney smiled.

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It was chilly, as they took their photos — outside, in the twilight, as guests drank beers inside. Try as she might, Beth couldn’t stop shivering, in the (gorgeous) dress that exposed her entire scapulae.

The photographer caught the moment where she finally let him wrap his jacket around her, tugging it over her with two hands on the lapels.

He leaned down for a kiss. She grinned wide.

Click .

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“So, my sister. What can I say about her?” Emily said, after plonking her fork against her wine glass. “The first thing you need to know about Beth is that she’s just fearless . Whether it was heading off to MIT when she was 16 or jumping into the astronaut program, she’s the crazy-bold trailblazer who just does not care what you think. It’s intimidated me since I was a kid, but more than anything, I’ve admired her. But I never knew if there was anyone who could ever keep up with her, go toe-to-toe on the stuff that matters most. When I met Chris — well, I should have put two and two together earlier.” The room laughed. “Because if anyone can keep up with Beth, can challenge her, can complement her, it’s him. And, of course Beth would have to go to Mars to fall in love. She’s never been one to settle for the ordinary or the mundane. So here’s to Beth and Chris, a love that’s out of this world, and the hope that a trip to Mars pales in comparison to the rest of life’s adventures.”
“To Chris and Beth!”

“All right, alright, my turn,” Amy stood with a grin. “Thanks, Em, for calming these people down. OK, Beth, I know you’re pretty clear on Chris’s serial-dater past, but I’d like to tell you the story of his very first girlfriend, just so you know how far he’s come.”

“God,” Chris groaned.

“Exactly. This is a fantastic story, and Beth, I refrained from telling you until you were legally tied to him. So Chris was fifteen and I was eleven, and while he had definitely gotten some action at Aidan Monroe’s eighth-grade birthday party, now he was a high-school freshman and he was in the mood for real love. And while he was cute for the freshmen set, he was on the JV basketball team and not exactly cool to the high-school junior, Brittany Evans, who babysat me. Now, when she was over one Sunday, her dad called and said he would be an hour late picking her up — I don’t remember why. Chris, who had just turned 15 at the time, offered to drive her home. He said that our grandfather had taught him how to drive at our summer home in Maine. Did we have a summer home in Maine? Hell no. But it sounded legit, so she said OK. I tagged along in because I hoped he would get in trouble. He’s not entirely idiotic, so he managed to make the car go, and convinced her that was how he drove. But a block from her house, he California-stopped, and a cop caught him. At first he tried to sweet-talk the cop into thinking he was 17 and had forgotten his license, but obviously that wouldn’t fly. So he asks that, before the cop takes him home — and believe me, he got grounded for a month — he was allowed to walk Brittany to her house a block away. The cop says sure, but he has to accompany him. So he gets the girl a police escort on the way home. She thought it was adorable, and gave him a peck on the cheek as a thank-you. Still told all of her friends around school, though. And I think that’s my brother in a nutshell: charming, brave, a little bit stupid, willing to go to great lengths for love. And at the end of the day, a true, incredibly nerdy gentleman. Beth, I never thought he’d meet someone with whom he could actually build a life. I figured it would be all Brittany Evanses. I’m truly grateful that he found you, and cannot wait to see what crazy, stupidly daring adventures you two get into next. I know you’ll land on your feet.”

(Unbeknownst to them, Amy and Emily snapped each others’ speeches. They found them on a gossip blog the next week.)

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Mark Watney @MartianMark

Things we learned tonight: Just because you’re an astronaut doesn’t mean you can moonwalk: tw.co/imfsdsa #ToMarsAndBack

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Things found on the #ToMarsAndBack hashtag on December 21st:

1. A photo of Mark Watney and Rick Martinez doing shots
2. Video clips of Beth Johanssen and Chris Beck dancing to “In My Life” by the Beatles.
3. Melissa Lewis crying
4. Several photobooth photos featuring fake mustaches and planets attached to dowel rods
5. The sisters of the couple doing shots
6. A sleeping Baby Riley Tucker
7. A sleeping Baby Daisy Martinez
8. Melissa Lewis crying
9. Vincent Kapoor hugging Mark Watney and saying, “I always knew we’d get you back!”
10. Melissa Lewis crying
Beth Johanssen and Chris Beck

The New York Times

Beth Johanssen, 32, of Washington, D.C., the daughter of Ben and Jennifer Johanssen, married Dr. Christopher Beck, 39, son of Michelle Beck and also of Washington D.C., December 21 in Houston. Navy Commander Melissa Lewis, who led the two of them on a mission to Mars, officiated the ceremony.

Until February, both were astronauts with NASA’s Ares program, through which they met. Dr. Beck served as a flight surgeon and medical researcher on Ares III mission to Mars. He graduated summa cum laude from Dartmouth, and holds an MD/PhD from Yale School of Medicine, where he won the Norma Bailey Berniker Prize and the MD/PhD Alumni Award Prize. Recently for his research, he was named the winner of the 2038 NSBRI Pioneer Award.

Ms. Johanssen, a gifted computer programmer, holds a degree from MIT and has completed coursework at Stanford. She designed the operating system for the Hermes, the space station that shuttles astronauts for Mars, before joining the Ares III mission as a systems operator.

The two are famously known for their role in rescuing astronaut Mark Watney, stranded on Mars for more than eighteen months. Watney, along with other members of their crew, gave readings at their weddings.

The mother of the bride is a nurse at Greater Seattle Hospice, and her father is retired from his role as a manager at the Cascade Range Napkin Company. The groom’s mother serves on the boards of a number of charities in the Boston area.

This is a first marriage for both.

The party had to stop eventually. Friends lined into a tunnel into the deep, chilly light, sparklers hoisted above them, blinding Chris.

He turned to Beth. “You ready?”

“Oh yeah,” she smiled.

He took her hand, and they ran into the glittering darkness.

Xxxv.

The morning after the wedding, Beth stretched into wakefulness. Turned to face Chris.

Her husband.

Time stretched. Time stopped.

Time sped up again.

Everything looked different.

And so, their world expanded.
End Notes

Oh wait, you made it to the end? Would love to hear your thoughts!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!