

THE
LITTLE
TIME
ALLOTTED
US

LAURA PAQUETTE

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Dedication

To memere and pepere, Aunt Kathy and Uncle Ralph.
I know you'd be proud, but I still wish I could see your face when I handed you
the book.

Part I

Let me forget you, and everything is true.

The Earth is the flat center of the multiverse,
the prison of my mind has a marvelous view,
and love is not a curse.

I will not remake you as muse;
you are not a caricature,
a pile of bones to pin up and display as I choose.
But what were you here for?

My love, if I forget you, I'm finally free.
Good and evil are mere words untethered from reality,
I grant the world no guarantees.
I am the monster I was meant to be.

This weakness of memory is my sentence.
Though my bones are dust, my casket has rust,
though the tired stars burned through their light,
I will love you—the only true repentance.

“Amnesia” Aidan Riley, 436 Dìqiú Hòu

Khair's First Death

SHE WAS DROWNING.

She didn't know who she was or why she felt suspended, weightless in a liquid so dense she couldn't move, but that came second to the drowning bit. With each breath, tasteless, knotty fluid flooded her mouth and stung her eyes.

A lock clicked.

"Don't free her," a young woman said.

Her breathing sped. She swallowed more icy slush, sucked in more with each breath, but didn't drown. It must be oxygenated, but not nearly enough. If she controlled her breathing, the heterogenous jelly stung a little less in her dry sinuses, but her eyelids drooped and sound faded. She couldn't thrash or escape, but she kept her breathing ragged—better to be panicked and awake than return to the endless night.

What was out there?

Her prison grated against the floor without any vertigo inside. A ship? Spaceship or seaborne. Either way, something was wrong. Otherwise, there was nothing in her world but the pressing darkness so total it took on an amorphous off-black color that shined in the corners.

"Look at her heart-rate, she's suffering." The man sounded old enough to remember the first intergalactic flight back when they drank recycled urine and couldn't travel at lightspeed, but deferent somehow. Not a family then, military, corporation?

"It's a dream." The woman's voice softened. "Remember her as best you can and let her rest."

The ship shook like a child's present.

Where were her weapons? She should probably ask who she was, but that wouldn't matter if she suffocated or got vaporized. She had to bust out and hope she was in fighting condition: her mind's voice was middle-aged, steady enough under pressure but that could make her anything from a mom to a manager so depending on how deep into that middle age thing she was, she might pop a hip or something. If not, she'd capture the woman for leverage, break a few fingers, maybe kill—

She screamed but there was no sound, though thick bubbles popped centimeters from her face. Pain seared from the base of her skull into her brain, so intense that if she had known her name, she would have forgotten it again.

What makes your life more valuable than hers?

That robotic voice in her head must have been what electrocuted her. The watcher's presence felt like a knife between her ribs; every thought irritated the wound.

My bad. She did not mean that whatsoever, but she wanted to send something instead of just being laid out for this stalker. ***Let me out safely and I won't hurt anyone.***

No answer.

No? I'm supposed to be best buds with the people that stole my memories and locked me up so I can't even move, can barely breathe?

They didn't do that; it was me and my organization. Observe, listen, and hold off the assumptions. Your ship is breaking up in the atmosphere, if they release you, you don't have time to be wrong.

"Look, she's awake," the man said. "And Taivan said—"

"He had a concussion, he wasn't thinking clearly," the woman said.

The man said nothing, and her heart pounded.

Something beeped outside.

"I'm sorry, Jiao," the man said.

Her cave exploded with static white light. Too much, too close. Passing shadows would have overwhelmed her as she regained her body, rejoined society, and became human again.

This body of hers was not in fighting condition. Despite appearing healthy, she was in a hospital gown, trapped in a doctube filled with snot colored plasma,

metallic anklets on both feet, with no piercings, scars, or tattoos to indicate who she was. Chunky gunk receded into sidebars. The door opened. There was no difference in temperature or humidity as the goop slopped off, but this air had enough oxygen.

She floated toward the ceiling and bounced off to test over-eager muscles. Her hamstring cramped. How long was she imprisoned?

Nope, no time for introspection. Red lights flickered, and a shelf ripped loose from the wall, scattering edged surgical tools that bobbed in midair.

The man, unarmed and wearing an antiquated bubble suit with tinted mask, hit a button on his wrist-control link to electronic equipment, networks, and other wrist-cons. Her anklets magnetized to the ground. She bent her knees to soften the landing, but her heels bruised.

She raised her hands slowly, trying not to get distracted by the long windows around the beige infirmary, where the ship's ginormous wings blocked any view of space. Fire burned over the wings. Was that supposed to happen? They weren't smoking, but maybe there was no smoke in space?

Whoever she had been, she certainly wasn't a scientist.

"Give me your wrist-con," she said to the man, Sergeant Batu from his name plate. "I'll fly out on a life-pod, and you'll never see me again."

"You're not leaving," Jiao said.

Batu was average height and gaunt, leaned on his back foot—she could wrestle the wrist-con off him and use its map to find the life-pods.

Pain swelled in her head, burst, scattered down to her toes. She buckled and fell. When it stopped, the digitalized voice didn't say why she got zapped, but it clearly only appreciated its own violence.

She stood and measured herself against Jiao, an admiral by the golden rank on her chest. They were about the same height but she had fifteen kilos on Jiao, with broader shoulders and arms visibly muscled even at rest.

The admiral was far too young for her rank and looked like she forgot how to sleep. Still, she was beautiful: silky black hair pasted in a military grade bun, delicate features set in a frown, wearing a sleek pilot's suit that showed off a sinewy frame, a classic Mustang Dragoon 2587 strapped in a shoulder holster under her right armpit.

A prism buzzed in her head when she looked at the pistol. All the pain originated from one place so it was probably hardware, something a bribed doc could slice out. Otherwise, it'd be a race between her pummeling Jiao, and Jiao drawing her revolver.

She bet on herself. Jiao was a lefty, a slight advantage. But the spring and coil of her muscles promised power and the flesh on her knuckles was new, hiding scars. If she picked her moment—

Heat flashed. She blinked. Found herself on streaked sanitized tiles, elbow scratched, gown torn, heart racing as if to escape a black hole's event horizon.

You just died. Next time, it'll be permanent. Do not attack anyone.

Tears welled in the corner of her eyes, but she blinked them back and tried to even out her breathing. Her chest throbbed.

She could mimic Hannibal's double envelopment in three-dimensional space or instill Temujin's discipline to prevent a weeklong feigned retreat from becoming a real loss. But whoever was in her mind could kill her at any time, and there was absolutely nothing she could do about it.

She understood Jiao's gun. So, she tried to clear her mind of violent escapes, though she couldn't scrub them all, and looked the admiral in the eye. Daring her. Jiao could kill her, but she'd have to shoot a kneeling woman with green glob in her hair.

Jiao stared back, eyes hardening, lips pursed, thumb stroking her pistol. The admiral flipped the holster open.

She should probably beg, but if the shuttering, overheated cabin was any indication, they were goners anyway.

"You're needed at your post, Admiral," Batu said.

Jiao's hand didn't move.

"Shoot me or don't, you'll regret it either way." Her voice wasn't nearly as authoritative as Jiao's but flecks of slime clung in her throat. Pretty badass last words, though. She was probably too old to care, but with hair shaved on both sides and short on top, clearly, she was the type of old that didn't realize it was old.

The original quotation was better, but you're welcome. I can help if—

Definitely doesn't make us even.

“Cuff her and keep her close,” Jiao said. “Don’t bother finding a rebreather. There’s no time, and she’s not worth your life.”

Maybe not. All she knew about herself was that her memories lay in a gray fog that should clear with sunrise, and if her memory was wiped she had accepted it as a stay of execution.

She drummed over her heart. “Mercy, I’ve no defense against such wit.”

Jiao didn’t even roll her eyes. “Hurry, Batu. You’ll be safest if you buckle up in the Haven within two minutes.”

“What about the life-pods?” A ship this big would have them, and they were much safer than the Haven emergency shelter.

“Taivan used them up to absorb missiles once our shield went down.” Batu waved her down a bland hall. He might be strolling through an absent neighbor’s pasture for his haste, while the craft shuddered, gravity lapsed, and condensation dripped down the walls.

Fat help seatbelts would be when they blew up. “You have anything to drink?”

He stopped at a custodian’s locker stuffed with everything from hammers, flysuits, comm parts, and a candy wrapper. “Do you need to drink?”

“Need isn’t the point.” But based on her tight bladder, she still had human requirements. She didn’t feel modified beyond some chip in her head turning her to a shock toy, could walk and talk and trust her senses.

How do you know? To know anything with certainty, we first have to doubt everything we know.

When she burned, she wouldn’t ask the flames if they were real. ***I know I’ll be an alcoholic by the end of your next sentence.***

You act as if that’s an accomplishment. And whether the sensations you view exist or are mental perceptions, you—

I’m about to sing off key, then learn to throat sing off two keys, and I’ll only get more annoying from there.

“We’ll drink on the ground.” Batu found handcuffs with a short chain that connected to the ankles. “May I?”

“Nope, not my style.” She winced, shocked on a lower voltage, and held out her hands. “But I’m adaptable. Just don’t tie my ankles.”

He double cuffed her wrists with the ankle bracelets. Was all this necessary? Her mind had been executed, so she'd been mediocre at best and incompetent enough to get caught. But hey, she had abs so not too shabby for forty-something. Maybe thirty-nine.

Batu led her to a narrow, waist high tunnel. She squeezed into it. The hot, thinly-carpeted floor blistered her knees and palms as she crawled. She pushed out, breathing heavily as she tried to expel hot air, and landed in the Haven's circular room with padded walls. Air conditioning blasted over an obnoxiously peaceful symphony. There was nothing but a window roof and a medkit with emergency rations, but the ship's walls were thickest here.

She claimed the medkit and lathered aloe on her knees. "Why's Jiao more concerned with me than blowing up? Did I kill her family or something?"

Batu's shoulders tensed, face inscrutable behind his dark helmet. "No."

"Am I her mom?"

He laughed.

Fine, she was only about fifteen years older than Jiao, darker skinned and with a vastly different face, but it's not like she knew the father. Or if this was her unaltered face.

"Then what did I do? This is pretty extreme. Maybe it was a mistake, and it was supposed to be Jiao? She's not one of us." Taivan and Batu were Mongolian names, and she was Mongolian too if she recognized that. Jiao wasn't.

"Yes, she is."

"So, either I committed genocide, a stunningly impressive assassination, or I annoyed the wrong people."

"Sit down!" Jiao's voice blasted over the ship's intercom.

One vote for annoying.

Batu sat against the wall, metal straps unclipping to hug him. She tried to follow, but fell on her ass. The floor tilted and she slid until a seatbelt clamped around her.

"How many people could I have possibly killed? Millions? Billions?" No reaction. "It couldn't be trillions? Shiiiiiiit. Logistically, that's impressive, but... shit. How'm I still alive?"

She couldn't remember anyone she'd killed. So, her seething stomach worried about the super-heated cabin and not dead strangers.

What are trillions of people compared to your glorious self?

Who did this cheap chip of silicon think it was, prattling along, its ode to its own goodness hammering her head? ***Yet you make me seem the zenith of humility.***

"I don't think I did that," she said to Batu. "I must have just lost. A POW."

The last historical event she remembered was a Mongolian uprising against the People's Republic of Greater China. She didn't know who won. Jiao could be PRGC, but Batu wasn't a prisoner. Maybe Batu was a collaborator, and she was a nationalist.

Whose ship was this? Scum lines and water residue in swirling cleaning patterns stained its white walls, with no pictures. A military vessel, now without a shield or life-pods. Who was after them?

The intercom stayed dead.

"You were not a great person," Batu said, almost cheerful.

"Then why free me? If I was supposedly a great pilot, I don't live up to the hype."

The medkit flopped to the floor, bouncing so often it barely noticed the growing gravity.

He clutched his seatbelt. "I don't think so."

Pressure built in her ears.

In the window, the pink sky darkened to a blood red and vibrant orange. They were inside a fireball.

Was that doubt thing a hint? Maybe I'm not here? Fire glowed and its bands of different colors wrapped around the ship like flowered garlands. If this was a virtual reality, the simulation would end soon. If not, it'd still end soon. ***Get me out of here and I'll give you an equal favor.***

Why do you want to live, anyway?

There'd been nothing pleasant in her five-minute life: no colors but white and yellow-green until the fireball. She was hungry and stiff and barely dressed, with a taser in the head. ***What's going on? These lunatics wouldn't wake me just to poof out.***

It is absurd. The context makes perfect sense: gravity and pressure and fuel combustion are constant, but you need more—

Thank you for giving me my reason to live. Spite. Didn't seem enough. Not in some flimsy, moral, nonsense way, just not worth the effort.

"So why wake me? What happened?" She meant, "why do I matter to you?"

"Taivan said so," Batu said. "Jiao—Admiral Jun—wouldn't want to. He'd only say it if it was necessary."

Jun Jiao was definitely a PRGC name. Maybe they were PRGC mercenaries and there'd been some imperial schism? She waited for the rest, Taivan's plan to save them for a long, profitable, stress-free life. But Batu was finished. "Who's Taivan?"

"Shut up!" Jiao yelled over the intercom as streaks of blue darted over the glass.

She rested against the trembling wall, though her head pattered against the soft panel. "What's my name and the year?"

"It's 532 Dìqíu Hòu." Half a millennium from Earth, and she'd no knowledge of the last twenty-some years, but beyond that, only her personal history was lost. It would have been easier for the enemy to lobotomize her than to unravel her from history. If they hadn't, they wanted something from her. "You went by Khair."

Your nom de guerre, a mockery meaning 'Love.' Leave that name.

I know my own language, thanks.

She would've sensed the name was a lie, but it wasn't terrible. Certainly better than say, Sorghaghtani, and she'd gone from a captured bride to one of the most influential people in Terran history.

Their trajectory snapped. There was no engine hum, no jolt of air as the wings shifted, just the whoosh of fire.

They spun down. The force pinned everything to the wall, pulled her cheeks back, pulled tears from stinging eyes as sweat gathered in a crease in her gown. Batu hummed, sounded like a choking motor. The light outside was only blue now, not crystal sky, but space waves, dark, ethereal, washing over their craft in time with the blood rushing in her veins.

It was beautiful. The pounding in her stomach waned, the remaining chittering only the nervousness of meeting an old friend after years apart. She

never should've left that dreamless sleep. Khair was ready for this reunion, though the road between was long and potholed.

Batu wretched. She fought a losing battle against nausea while gravity crushed her shoulders and spine.

You're not some avenging spirit, right? Khair was probably dreaming through doctube hibernation, but no harm asking. ***I'm not about to go to hell?***

It hesitated without demurring. *The greatest suffering is to do evil.*

You're one of the people that brought us down, aren't you?

"Batu?" Jiao said over the intercom, earlier arrogance evaporated. "I'm sorry."

Their velocity halved, died.

The ship slammed the ground and wobbled as it skidded.

Khair lurched against the belt, bruised her ribs and bloodied her nose against her knees. Her ears buzzed, barely hearing echoing blasts.

Outside the windows lay solid ground. She laughed, muscles aching as they unclenched, delirious with pain and so dizzy she could barely see, but she kept laughing while she hiccuped and gagged. Then she saw Batu lay limp.

The only thing she felt was warm blood and relief.