Catching Eurydice

*There’s this story about a guy, and he’s pushing a really heavy rock up a hill.*

She shook her head, “No. It wasn’t making headlines any longer. The news dropped the story when the big agencies all lost interest.”

“It was earlier than me, by quite a few years actually. I was only just cleared for immigration, and it would not have looked so good for me to show so much interest in a fleet mishap. Looking for a job as pilot. I didn’t need suspicion, and I did need my shipping license. I was in a hurry, you know.”

Amaya didn’t.

Semyon took his hand off the wheel. A panel began to tick as he drifted out of the shipping lane. The smooth grain and steel accents that shone from the steering column were cool to the touch. He leaned back in the seat, enjoying the creak of broken in leather.

The ship embraced him, held him close to its heart, nourished him with oxygen and nitrogen as it parted the thick cloth of deep space outside the cabin. He enjoyed the sensation, not being able to distinguish who was the captive lover. Captain or craft.

“Captain?”

Amaya had been waiting for a response. She wasn’t sure if he was still listening. She could see the back of his chair, the shocking white hair, liver-spotted skin of his neck barely visible over the antique upholstery.

Those rare signs of aging held her gaze, “There never has been any 'official' inquiry after the fact, is all I mean.”

“What’s past is past, it’s history now, I’m no bleeding heart,” he took hold of the listing wheel. Stars stopped sliding off the screen and settled in the firmament. A single bright point in the center of the screen grew brighter.

She took a moment to understand the old phrase, “Nor I, Captain. I spent quite a few… a couple years in the fleet before I met Bakar and went civy, before shipping started to sound like a good move. All I meant by it is, history proves that the biggest accidents often aren’t so accidental. The Santa Maria’s engine failure happening when it did. Where it did.”

His neck tightened, “If history is so interesting, why not-“

But the words died in his mouth. He wasn’t cruel enough. It wasn’t yet time. It never was.

“It looked like sabotage really and, well… they… actually… it was quite a while back… it’s an old conversation… back before I was even…” she looked to the twirling machinery at the bottom of the ladder, denoting the relative ship-time, “Your right Sir. Not good deck conversation. This is all off the record, right? Sir?”

Semyon relaxed a bit, he was glad she had dropped the topic, his leg had begun to ache again, “The ‘Sir’ is always unnecessary, Amaya. As far as I am concerned small talk is off the record. Be easy, eh? Three months in transit now and I’m still Captain Sir? Call me Semyon. Be a little more familiar. You… You and Bakar, should relax.”

“Three months? We were really cooking past Mars Central.”

He leaned forward, his hand gripping his knee, “We certainly made good time. I know a man who runs a decent lodge in New Prague. Know him pretty well, it’s full of… civies, as you say, but still nice. They have a pretty wonderful music festival this time of year, I’ll put in a word for you, Amaya. Better accommodations than you would perhaps expect out in the.... what did you call it last week?”

“*Inon ere ez*... The middle of nowhere, sir—Semyon, somewhere boring. It's a very old saying,” she balked at the suggestion of lodging for her *and* Bakar.

“To me, it doesn’t sound so bad,” he set the ship to pilot itself for a while and watched the screen viewing the back of the ship. Watched large meteors flow away from him like strange fish down a primordial stream. Roving bodies, miniature antique worlds haphazardly wandering the outer Solar System.

Amaya didn’t feel like she should try to hide her relationship with Bakar from Semyon, it wasn’t a very large ship and it would have been a wasted effort. There was still a tension she couldn’t place… It was awkward having Semyon speak of their plans. His paternal demeanor had grown on her in the months they had traveled together and, it was just strange.... when he was so much the older captain.

Semyon gently turned the wheel to correct their course, imagining the gyroscopes at the ship's heart twisting, spinning away, keeping them true to the shipping lane. Homeward bound.

*But the rock kept falling back down on him.*

The ship hurtled. It careened. Caromed across the night skies of the inner planets. It saw the sun dim from fiery inferno, to faraway candle, down the dark corridor of inner system space. A narrow path set aside as a transit lane between the few bright pockets of light and life in an increasingly crowded solar system. Jupiter rose from the darkness to their left like the husk of a forgotten god, despairingly huge. It lingered in the mind. The idea of erosion. Three hundred mile per hour winds. Continent sized bursts of lightning jumping between colossal storms.

Wave after wave of energy blew like wind across the ship’s hull. Scoured the seals.

They began the long circle that would take them safely across the immense gravity well. The speed at which the planet’s iconic bands were passing paid testimony to the immense power churning at the heart of the ship.

*And then there’s this other story about how a famous thief stole from the Gods themselves.*

In the early days of deep space travel the emphasis on speed had outweighed all other considerations, health over the long term, personnel safety, environmental impact, effect on indigenous populations, everything fell by the wayside once the space race started again. The new furnaces of progress took fire, pulled mankind further from earth than even the most starry-eyed futurists had dreamed. Expansionism became more than a political gambit; it was the beat to which the whole of mankind marched, and once the technology was perfected humanity spread like a brushfire.

*But the people eventually realized why the Gods had chosen to hide certain things.*

Semyon pulled at the corner of his seat beneath the felt cushion and found a beaten tag displaying the brand of the chair. *Hello*, he thought, *you’ve come a long way from..*. *Nebraska. Haven’t you?* He stuck it in his pocket, this little piece of Earth. Not his home. Not his language. But still…

Still fellow traveler, beaten a bit. Frayed and smooth to the touch by long service, many captains before him, who didn’t pull the tag, dig under the leather seat a bit to find this little epitaph.

He thought back to the sterile fleet vessels of his youth, their sharp corners and subtle sloping floors leading to the control decks, the exposed innards of the ships always getting in the way, falling out of compartments when left untended. So very different from the soft, carefully accented womb he traveled in now. There were no tags hanging from the chairs of military ships. Whole fleets would be fabricated in the same factory. Serial numbers swimming under the acrid smell of freshly pressed metal. All of the pomp of machinery to make something nearly indestructible. Cold and timelessly shimmering.

As it often did when he was lost in thought, Semyon's right hand found the line between flesh and metal above his knee. He ran the hand back and forth, feeling that odd sensation that was not quite pain. The prosthesis was not perfect, the false nerves still translated the touch as a dull ache. The leg, a reminder of his time with the fleet, was a constant memorial; a token, testament, terrible malignancy. A carefully chosen constant in a life where little remained set for long.

*Terrible Malignancy*, thought Semyon, *that’s what it comes to, cancer, tiny imperfections made obvious* *by the passage of time. Small things, the littlest things catch us. Telomerase in our blood, the lining of our jeans. Everything unravels. Nothing stands still. What was it in the schools?*

*... And now doth time waste me?*

Amaya was still standing below him in the command module; he reached forward to bring up his display, “I have some final checks to run on the cargo, Amaya. You should check in with Bakar and let him know about that inn. We should be arriving within a few hours once we cycle the engine. If you’d please make sure he’s watching the engine when I cycle up to burn to New Prague when you head back.”

“Sure, S- Semyon.”

She smiled as she turned, partially at the dismissal which she had been waiting for, and also at the archaic *if you pleases*. Amaya was glad to retreat down the connective passage back towards where Bakar was likely not performing his function as the engineer for their tripartite crew. She liked Semyon, his old way of speaking was strange, even somewhat beautiful to her, it reminded her of… something warm, the sensation of a prickly beard under her fingers. Sad music somewhere. That sense of nostalgia she could never quite place, could not quite attach to a face. His leg disgusted her, though, made her feel uncomfortable. It made her feel like a comedian who stumbling across a funeral procession.

She floated back along the central corridor which served as the ship’s spine, pushing off the walls. The living quarters were housed in two habitats that circled the ship on separate wheel structures. She slowed as she passed B Hab, where she and Bakar where quartered, and moved on to the third module which currently held a cadre of compartments full of grain and wildlife. *Freeze-dried pigeons,* she thought, *some genetically precise cow the colonists can graze on glowing wheat, or whatever passes for wheat in their climate controlled domes. Different every year to account for mutation. Everything’s tailor made. No chances for famine, drought. Everything’s grown to company specification.*

She had read the dossier for the cargo lift before agreeing to come along. As far as Amaya was concerned, this would be her last deep delivery. She could vaguely remember serving in the fleet some time ago. According to her documentation, she was open for retirement again at the end of this run.

As she floated through the ship the lights clicked on in front of her, anticipating her movement. She let her right hand drag along the wall, luxuriating in the seamlessness, the smoothness of the carpeting that ran the length of the ship. It was small when compared to some of the big freighters that moved people or machinery between colonies, but the big engine could burn at the same speeds as the passenger ships, though the big liners seemed to get slower every year.

As she continued to drift through the core of the ship, Amaya heard regular sounds emanating from the engine room. Bakar was usually catching a nap near the instability monitors. She swiftly forgot about Semyon in the command module, lost in his reverie. As she came into the last few meters of the hall, muffled explosions echoed from the chamber.

Goose-flesh rose on her arms and she felt her hands and feet numb with adrenalin. Sudden and alien panic tugged at the edges of her vision, sharpened her, her heart raced. She flipped mid-drift and propelled herself feet-first into the cabin, ready to jump back up if she detected the slightest touch of fire or the freezing ache of true vacuum.

Her mind was shouting that there should be some sort of alarm in the case of internal fire. She landed in a crouch on a bank of machinery and saw immediately the source of the noise. Bakar had left his personal computer on, and it was playing a song that involved cannon fire as percussion. She pulled the gadget from its dock on the wall and flipped the inlaid power switch. The trumpets died away down the corridor.

He had anchored a sleeping bag to the wall to facilitate his nap.

He opened one wry eye, “It's not… what it looks like,” his hands were two roving bumps hunting for the zipper. Amaya caught them before they could reach the opening and she pulled the sleeping bag from its velcro fastenings, kissing his nose.

“It's not, hmm?”

He found the zipper despite her ministrations and pulled himself free of the bag. It bumped off the plush wall behind him as he stretched out.

Bakar noted the perspiration on her forehead and the timing of her entrance, “So maybe I choose a more placid overture for my notifications.”

“Maybe, you should, I hate that classic stuff,” Amaya was again watching the analog dials whirl and spin describing the nature of the matter currently being coerced into doing decidedly un-matter like things in the extra-solar engine.

“You hate all the music I’ve ever showed you,” he floated up behind and above her, walking along the ceiling. He took a quick glance at the dials which, even upside down, still betrayed all manner of information about the ship's current power draw and output. Familiarity, years, decades of experience made his job simple despite the extreme complexity involved in extra-solar engineering. He looked from the readout to her face, admiring again the smoothness and structure of the bone beneath. She seemed lost in thought, staring at the machinery.

*So sculpted. So obviously crafted in the image of some bygone goddess, an ancient painting that she chose specifically, some beatific martyr*. Her lips perfectly set, no sign of age but for the pause now and then to access chemical memory… *old chemical memory*, when she spoke.

*And her eyes.* Of course, he had been there when she’d gone through that, only a few years ago, it was when they’d met. Decided to keep her eyes original, just a quick retina swipe to stimulate new growth. The same blue eyes he’d been in love with for a while now… for… *a long time*. *A few years now. Long enough.* *Long enough for her to be at least a little impatient*, he conceded*.*

They both had gone through regulation bone density enhancement, and the complementary facial and epidermal reconstruction surgery. Without the follow-up reconstruction the recipient of the density increase ended up looking like a Neanderthal, all angles, chin, and forehead. The top layers of bone, the original tissue, had to be sloughed off with surgery to restore the original facial structure... or improve upon the original, as was often the case.

Wealthy captains, travel executives, particularly affluent businessmen, were renowned for their striking visages, tailored to mimic their favorite pop star. Bakar had one memorable professor whose face had been a near perfect replica of a late 21st Century cult leader named John Lennon.

Amaya noticed Bakar staring at her face and looked into his eyes. He looked back to the panel. *How many times has he had the chance to ask*, she thought, *how many months. Years*?

*But then*, she was amused with herself. Y*ears where? On what planet? I haven't used a twenty four hour day in... a long time now. If I have a measurable age, the only people who know it are the officers who recruited me and...*

Amaya's hand went unconsciously to her face and then there was the sensation of her forehead being kissed.

*Was there another? That prickly sensation under her fingers… The Blues.* She couldn’t remember. Decided it did not matter right now, not with his lips on her forehead. She didn’t like the blues anymore anyway.

Bakar lowered himself from the ceiling so his lips brushed her ear, “I think Semyon is going to--,” but Bakar's whispered thought was cut short by the crackle of the intercom.

“We are three hours out of New Prague radio contact. I have a bottle of non-recycled for whoever catches the signal first… I am shutting down the heavy engines and going to liquid thrust, buckle in please, turnover in three minutes. You both may wish to pack anything else you need for shore leave, five hours before we reach local space and come full stop.”

Amaya smiled at that. Semyon was so much the old man. He had obviously denied most of the rejuvenating treatments, as far as she knew, and his body had begun to deteriorate accordingly. That white shock of hair. His left leg, the real leg, had real arthritis in it, she suspected, from the way he moved around. This too was almost unheard of, and even stranger was his dismissal of the pain medications or neural blocks that were so cheap and easy to install these days.

Amaya herself retained only about thirty percent of her original body mass, if she took a moment to think about it perhaps she would have remembered the long list of operations and surgeries she had undergone to retain her youth.

She didn’t think about it.

She suspected that Bakar's body contained an even higher percentage of Prop parts. She even wondered, sometimes, when she lay awake in the too-light pull of gravity in B Hab where she and Bakar had separate smaller bunks than Semyon's, that part of his brain may have been replaced in the new neo-cortex survey procedure of which even she was skeptical.

“Real Immortality Today!” the slogans touted. They were always followed up with variations on, “See a sales representative for a pay plan that suites your budget.”

Amaya and Bakar hooked themselves to the sides of the compartment and braced for the increased G’s from the transition to liquid thrust. Bakar’s hand found hers in the glow of the instrument panels as the main cabin lights flickered under the added energy draw as they ignited the huge in-system engines. She looked at his hand in the half-light. Her eyes steady under the flashing lights.

Semyon had noted that the newest rejuvenating programs had pay plans that extended well beyond two-hundred years into the future. Semyon supposed that was faith in your product. At the moment re-growing artificial brain tissue was not on his mind, however.

What captured Semyon's full attention was that somewhere ahead of him in the dark lay New Prague. A gem glistening somewhere around the edge of Jupiter’s radiation belt.

His right hand sought that line, and he felt the strange not-pain that emanated from below his right knee. The contrast between that feeling and the hot ache of the arthritis in his left leg brought his teeth together and he grinned a strange, sad grin at the darkness beyond his false window. He pushed in a button on the edge of his chair and a small readout, extra ersatz amidst the wood inlays and brass work appeared in the air before him, cast on a haze of smoke. The readout displayed the cargo chamber of the ship. Semyon sat staring through the translucent display at the arc of Jupiter’s nearer moons as they passed by. He could see the moon that held the colony now, dim but growing brighter by degrees as they drifted closer. They were still moving at terrible, mind bending speeds, but only crawling on the scale of the massive system of moons surrounding Jupiter.

The clouds of cast off material drifted past the ship now, slag material from the station’s creation. Decrease speed and prepare for landing. A malignancy, *a terrible malignancy*. *What a curse,* thought Semyon, pulling out the seat’s tag again. Reading the back.

No serial numbers. No lingering smell of molten metal. Just a line of words, succinct, describing the city of origin where a human being, not a machine, had tooled the chair into existence. *You and me kid*, he thought, staring through the smoke and glass at the stars.He leaned forward, pocketed the chair's tag, and watched New Prague grow brighter.

*There is another story, about a sailor on a wide sea, who didn’t understand that the bird was sacred until it was dead.*

Bakar knew how Amaya felt. Knew her right hand had grown light, that she was looking at him more and more to make a move. The only move that mattered to her.

He had known for a long time.

He had not yet attempted to explain his aversion to the institution of marriage, as he thought of it, as he couldn't quite remember why he disliked the idea beyond his general distaste for organized religion. He did not lack religion though. No sailor is without a god to call upon in the storm.

*He killed it one day and has suffered since.*

Bakar’s mind, like the monitor he watched, ticked away, moving ever foreword. The ship moved the last few thousands of miles between Earth and New Prague at the slow pace set by liquid fuel.

Bakar’s grasp of time was fading.

Sans History.

The past was losing its form, becoming the suggestion of actions, fading into the vast white slate that was his future, which daily grew toward the horizon. He'd wanted this though, this was the plan. One day he'd stop fearing the night. Sleep would sustain him. There would be no more, *if I die before I wake*, only untroubled rest, and the concrete certainty of waking to an endless tomorrow.

Amaya was right about his body and mind. He had recently had his frontal lobe uploaded onto a shock proof and, if advertising was to be believed, nearly indestructible gel-form replacing the physical tissue.

He had slowed to a crawl then. He knew Amaya wanted marriage. Wanted the wedding, the white dress, the cake the rice and flowers.

*Antiques,* he thought, *more useless than antique spoons*.

Urgency was for military men, Bakar was a tech guy at heart and would prefer to settle down on some fabrication colony and supervise for a few years, somewhere with mountains and plenty of volcanic soil. Start a vineyard, maybe. *And then?* He didn’t know. *Settle down, well maybe.* *Just not yet. Maybe, maybe after the next couple of runs. Start a family on some colonial outpost far enough away from the Earth to avoid any new political nonsense, any rushing. Just settle into the rhythm of the land.*

They were close. Semyon could see the lights of the cities spread across the surface of the moon. Mining the inner moons had been lucrative, and setting up permanent colonies outside of the radiation’s reach naturally followed. The pattern of light across the moon’s surface, the tilt of Jupiter’s face on the aft-facing screen, all of it hummed in him like childhood hymns. Summer Sundays. He brought up the multiple radio signatures coming off the collection of light that was New Prague and dialed in their landing zone. His mouth turned up as he reached for the intercom again, his other hand producing a thin metal box from his pocket.

*Most importantly, though, there is an old story about a famous musician who watched the woman he loved leave his world.*

*So he journeyed to the underworld to save her.*

“What’s that?” she froze, her eyes hard in the dark.

“A kazoo?”

“No… no, it’s a harmonica… that’s…”

“The blues? Yeah, it came back in a big way in the colonies about fifty y-- ….”

The brass speakers made the instrument wail around B Hab. Bakar trailed off. Silenced by something he could not place. He’d never been a fan of the blues, but… This was different. A soulfulness so deep, so broken and lonely... he rolled over on his bunk, turning from the noise,

“You think this is it for our fearless captain?”

They were both dressed for disembarkation. Their necessities packed for a few days of rest before the long haul back. They’d decided to sleep in separate bunks when in transit. A rule Amaya had insisted on after a bad argument a few hauls back. It was easier to focus, with sex somewhere ahead of them, and not between them on the ship.

“He doesn’t look like he could make many more deep runs like this. I’ve got a feeling that he’s been looking forward to this though,” Amaya tapped the wall beside her bunk and the wall shimmered, letting in the light of the city as they descended through the sparse cloud cover.

“Yeah,” Bakar lay his head back, looking past Amaya’s silhouette at the city lights, “I think the old guy’s probably gonna send us back on auto. He’s definitely got something here.”

“You think he’ll stay then? Keep it?”

“I do. I mean… He seems the type, doesn’t he? He reminds me of a character in a story. Coming home to die.”

“I don’t really know the type anymore.”

She moved across the dim chamber to turn down the wall speaker. She lay next to Bakar. The harmonica continued to cry out softly from the speaker as Semyon guided them gently into port with one hand.

She pictured Semyon’s face with a beard.

An easy laugh.

Black hair and a grin.

A love of the blues.

“Are you all right?” Bakar held her gently as she cried. Facing away from him. He had never seen her like this. Never seen her unguarded before in all the years they had been together. She suddenly was filled with a terrible beauty he had never known in her, as she shook. He fancied he could see lines encircling the edges of her eyes.

“No, Bakar. Goodbye, and good luck.”

She rose from the bed as the ship fastened to the dock. She stepped through the doorway, leaving Bakar alone in the bed.

She sprinted through the ship, hearing the exit hatch opening, the ramp extending. Semyon was moving his luggage through the aperture. She caught him at the bottom of the stairs. The docking bay smelled wonderful. The colonies always had people hocking fresh food at the freighter making a haze of cooking smoke perpetually tax the cooling units. A fine mist of condensation was everywhere from the ship’s entry.

He was walking away. Heading for the terminal. That slow gait. That shuffle step. And that glint of steel between the fingers. An unassuming piece of metal and soul.

“Semyon!”

Semyon turned. His leathery face glistening in the misty air.

He opened his arms

Dropped the harmonica

And caught her

*This time, however, she doesn’t fade, doesn’t fall forever, but runs to him from the dark.*

*Eternity meaningless between them.*