

Lavender Sky

“It takes me by surprise, sometimes.”

“Whatcha talking about?”

“The sunrise here. It’s so different.” Aaron gestured out, hand waving toward the red grass around them and the twin moons that could barely be seen across the horizon as the sky lit up in a vibrant splash of lavender.

Dern nodded, and leaned comfortably against the sturdy wooden fence behind him. His tail lashed against the crossbar. The wood used for the posts had been imported and was sturdier than anything native to the planet. Mostly soft wood grew here, and a lot of trees that were technically tall grasses, no good for building with. The fence had worn smooth in the decades it had sat here on the edge of the property. Thick weeds with orange brambles wound their way up and across the fence posts, no matter how often the two men came out to pull them, and they snagged at Dern’s tail.

The sun rose, slow and steady, ambling its way into the sky like the draft-horses that they bred. There was no need for speed in any sense of the word. The horses ambled along, happily without purpose; the people did as well. The chill of night-time fled fast, and the air prickled coolly against their exposed skin. This was the dry season, so there was no dew on the ground, and Aaron’s lips felt strange with the thick balm he’d picked up from the general goods in town. The atmosphere was just another one of the differences he’d had to become accustomed to since he arrived.

Tearing his eyes away from the sky, Aaron shifted and gestured with one hand, fingers splayed. Dern grunted, turned as well, and passed the hammer over. The trip to the moon market tomorrow weighed heavily on both of their minds. They’d be leaving things unattended save for the ranch hands, and while they considered the crew trustworthy there was nothing like the peace of mind that came from repairing your borders by your own hand. In the back of his mind, however, Aaron appreciated that his biggest concern in life was an impending trip that he was actually very excited to make.

Aaron and Dern worked in near silence for most of the morning, making their way from one minor repair to the next. Eventually the midday sirens sounded and the two men began making their way back to the main house. Dern headed off with a nod to put the tools in the shed, and Aaron kept going. He held his nose as he walked past the feed barn, still unused to the strong odor the red grass gave off as it dried. There were ranch hands making their way to the house as well, and as they waved Aaron nodded at them, though he kept his distance. It was never fun to spend your down time around the boss, in his experience, and they deserved their entire break without having to pretend to find him interesting.

Aaron wasn't really sure yet what it was about him that caused this, but everyone he'd met on Ortellus so far had been overly friendly. He figured that during his first few months he really gave off those new transplant vibes, and that everyone was eager and friendly when it came to helping newcomers, but it hadn't stopped. It had been particularly bad yesterday, when he'd gone to the store for the protective lip balm and had left Dern at home.

The bell to the shop had tinkled inoffensively, signaling a new customer to Fain, the older woman who owned the store. She was back to working the register, she had told Aaron the first day he arrived, because she had sent her children off to the University to get a good education, and maybe find a spouse. She had elbowed him in the side and winked at that, her whiskers twitching as she stared into his eyes, unblinking.

Fain had walked out of the back room yesterday, humming to herself and dusting flour from her hands onto her ever-present apron, though her ears perked up as she noticed Aaron. "Oh, my favorite customer," she greeted, pulling Aaron in for a tight hug. He had been wanting to buy some snacks for the trip to the moon, but it wasn't long before Fain was *tsking* about the way the dry season affected his un-furred skin and pressing balms and lotions into his hands. She had implored him to come back next weekend when her children came home, adding that they could show him the town. Aaron had held himself off from telling her that the town was about three ranches, a diner, her store, a handful of different religious organizations, a school, and a library. He'd become perfectly acquainted with all of it after ten minutes on Ortellus.

The hounding hadn't gotten better when he left, stopping at the diner on his way back home. Aaron had run into three different women, old enough to be his mother, who asked if he had any plans for the ice-cream social being held by the intra-religious council. When he'd said that he thought he'd be going with Dern they all looked intrigued, though he was met with three separate scowls when it became clear that it was because neither of them had taken enough of a break to find a date.

"You'll both work yourselves into an early grave," Mai-Ra, one of the women, growled. She walked tall still, not allowing her age to stoop her posture or slow her gait. She always wore a long red cape and had one eye, the other scratched out long ago in battle. She was one of the few non-natives living here, and so she and Aaron always made a point to stop and say hello when they saw one another. Mai-Ra was the one he'd gone to for skin-care advice in this climate as well, because even though she came from a desert world, she had smooth dark skin, and not fur like the natives here. After the scolding, though, Aaron had just shrugged helplessly and scurried back to the old work truck he always drove when he came to town.

Even while wearing his best 'I'm busy, please don't stop me' look, Aaron had been forced to suffer through several more stages of this before arriving at home. He had grown altogether more ready to visit the moon markets to get away from it all, worry slipping completely from his mind. While he was one of the handful of aliens on this part of Ortellus, the moon markets were full of other species and travelers, so while they were more exotic Aaron seemed barely out of place there. Mentioning this to Dern had made the other man laugh, which was a rare occurrence. He'd just shaken his head when Aaron asked what was funny, though.

Lark song filled the air as a breeze carried the song through the ranch, and Dern caught back up to Aaron as he crested the hill, claspng him on the arm briefly. He grunted once and handed Aaron a cold drink from Dern's secret stash, and he took it gratefully. It was Coke, from Earth, in a glass bottle. Aaron had no clue how much it cost to ship, but it was Dern's private vice, and was one thing the otherwise thrifty man was willing to spend money on. It worked out in Aaron's favor that it was his favorite as well, and Dern had always been willing to share with him.

“Do you think they’ll have anything from home at the market?” This was a non sequitur, spoken aloud to quiet and empty air as Aaron leaned back against the tree that he and Dern had sat under to eat their lunch. Time had passed lazily, and as the heat rose with the sun the two men had had a silent conversation with their eyes before agreeing, without speaking a single word, to skive off for the afternoon.

Aaron patted the sweat from his brow with the lower hem of his t-shirt and looked at Dern, who remained unflappable as always. He couldn’t tell if the other man sweated through the thick fur that covered his body, and he was always afraid to ask in case it would come across as rude.

After a long moment, Dern shrugged. “Not sure. Would be neat, though.”

Aaron nodded and smiled. His bright white teeth cut straight through his face like lightning through the dark, and he held half of his sandwich up.

“I’m kind of bored with this. Want it?”

Wordlessly, Dern held out a hand. He smiled as Aaron handed it over, and his pupils widened from their thin black slits, slowly growing rounder. In response, Dern tossed his apple over, or whatever the local equivalent was called. It was shaped like an apple, though it was maroon, and tasted more like a strawberry.

The two of them passed the afternoon in silence, Aaron whittling, or trying to, and Dern reading a book Aaron had loaned him. It was *The Gods Themselves* by Isaac Asimov, an early science fiction classic. Aaron had been nervous to admit that classic science fiction was his favorite genre, being that he was currently co-owner of a ranch on an alien planet, millions of light-years from his home, but Dern hadn’t judged. He seemed really into the book, specifically the middle part about aliens. He had talked for hours about that yesterday while they rolled wire for the new chicken coops. Aaron didn’t think he’d heard the man say that many words since he’d first arrived, but he hadn’t wanted to interrupt once. Something about the slow and measured way that Dern

spoke was hypnotizing, and Aaron felt that he could listen to him speak until the eventual heat-death of the universe.

“We should head in.”

It was Aaron’s turn to nod silently, and he stood slowly, stretching, and twisting life back into his locked-up limbs. He waved goodbye to all the ranch hands as they left, each one calling out a goodbye in turn. Dern and Aaron headed amicably back to the main house to finish preparing for their trip in the morning.

The sun came up again, as it has for eons, and with it the birds began to sing. Aaron rose quickly, glad for the chance to sleep in a little bit. He wasn’t shocked to find Dern already freshly groomed and ready to go, packing up the leftovers from the ranch hands’ breakfast. He had oatmeal with apple slices ready as well, and Aaron felt his eyes sting a little with the faint hint of joyful tears that Dern had remembered how sick Aaron got during spaceflight and had made him something easy to digest.

The morning passed in a similar comfortable silence to the previous afternoon. Aaron enjoyed being able to just exist in Dern’s presence, finding the quiet comforting in a way he’d never experienced before. As he sat to eat, Dern passed behind him and settled a warm hand on Aaron’s shoulder. His sharp claws were retracted, but Aaron could feel the prickle of them ghost against his skin through his thin shirt. Dern gently set a book on the table, clearing his throat.

“S our science fiction. Really old stuff, now, since we stopped writing it for a while after the wars. Anyway.”

He leaned over and wiped at an invisible speck on the table, though his other hand remained firmly on Aaron’s shoulder. “You read Ortellan well enough now, I was thinking you could handle some fiction. Might keep you from filching my newspapers every morning, too,” Dern added, though his pupils were so round they almost eclipsed his irises completely, and Aaron knew that he was joking.

The moment was gone in a flash as one of the ranch hands, Merrin, burst through the back door. “Just grabbing some water!” he called into the main house. The two men relaxed again, but the moment had passed. Dern went off to double check the house, and Aaron ate and brought down his luggage. The drive to the shuttle bay was similarly quiet, but Aaron was more than content. He spent the trip in peaceful contemplation on what the markets had in store for him.