

Under a Spacious Sky

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by [SevereAnnoyance](#)

Summary

One of many bad nights after the end of the Dominion War.

This panic attack comes up out of the gloom slowly, creeping up with her racing heart and the crushing weight around her chest, even before the fear or the stark horror or the acid fist around her heart.

Chester's been expecting it. She opens her eyes and looks up into the shadowed familiar shapes of her childhood bedroom, and breathes. There's a part of her now separated, sliced off, from the part that sweats and shivers and leaks hot tears onto the pillow, and it is this part that looks at the soft glow of the old fashioned clock by her bed and decides reaching for medication is not worth it, not this late; she will pay too dear for it in the morning, this is better simply endured. This is not a bad one.

Of course, there is no such thing as a *good* one.

Chester grits her teeth and breathes through it, wave after wave of emotion. She can't really tell if it's grief or fear; all it is is hot and horrible and utterly, utterly overwhelming. The faint eddies of scent from the quiet restaurant far below her—smoked and roasted meat—stir nausea and memory together; the nighttime noises of the city, shuttles and quiet voices, make her flinch even as the feelings slowly begin to ebb. Focus on breathing, ground yourself in the now.

Yeah. The now where most of her crew is *dead*, and she's got a hunk of *wires and polymer* in her face. The now where she knows what a *finger in your fucking eye socket* feels like.

The now full of feelings that make a panic attack look like a picnic.

On medical leave until further notice—she doesn't know if she's ever getting off the beach, she doesn't know if she wants too, horror of horrors, she's wanted it her whole life but she's not even sure what she is, just some exhausted poor shattered thing that feels like it's splintering with every sudden noise. She just wants to be curled up and quiet and let herself hurt, and that's not like her. She grieves that lack of self, she hates herself for it.

Centering in the now doesn't work.

Time to reach out. Ask for help. It repulses her but.

But she promised Mom, and J'tetris, she wouldn't do these things alone anymore, so she messages J'tetris. *Bad night. Lizard's Mouth?*

30 minutes, comes the reply, almost instantly. It makes her think, maybe she's not alone. Bad night for J'tetris, too. J'tetris just doesn't have a habit of wandering off into the wilderness on her bad nights. 24th century medicine has much to recommend it but even that doesn't justify a cavalier attitude toward rattlesnake bites.

She dresses quick and quiet. Not reaching for her uniform still feels wrong, the fabric of her loose shirt and pants too relaxed against her skin. Then she goes quietly out of her room and down the hall—her parents are softly snoring in counterpoint in their room, her grandmother's room at the end of the hall still and quiet—and through the living room whose plush carpets and worn furniture she knows by heart, toes on her shoes and picks up the backpack she keeps there and slips out the door and downstairs into the street-lit restaurant, glowing softly silver and gold where the moon wars with artificial light, so much gentler than it would have been centuries ago. She reaches the front door, goes to open it, and her fingers catch on something. A note, well worn, tucked in the door seam. Her grandmother's writing. *Diane—look in the fridge.*

She does, and finds a little package of bao and croissants, done up in a neat little package with a cold pack, ready to go, and she spends a moment swallowing back tears, because that note has so clearly been there so many nights. Grandmother setting aside food for her, if she has a bad night, and needs to wander.

She takes it, and slips out the door and down the street to the nearby public transit facility. She tries not to look at the other travelers. All Starfleet uniforms at this time of night, returning to their ships or arriving from them.

She should be among them.

She can't stand the idea. She ducks her head. Hopes not to be recognized. She gives coordinates. "Ah, Santa Barbara," says the transporter operator, "lovely place. Forecast's good for a sunrise."

"Oh, good," she says, hoping she sounds more convincing than she feels, and it is such a relief to dematerialize and get away from all of that, and rematerialize suddenly in the great silence of the mountains, her feet on the shattered road that used to bring people up here in the age of gasoline ground cars.

J'tris is not there yet, but she knows where Chester will be going, and Chester finds herself unable to stand still. She sets off in the pale dawn, down the ridge, then left. It smells of dry grass and sage and warm rock; sandstone is rough under her fingers, still warm at almost dawn the next day, crickets shrilling. The sky is like a sparkling blanket overhead, stars in their millions glittering down on her in the deep blue. There is a smudge, a suggestion, of day on the eastern horizon, where this line of mountains juts into the sea.

The only place where the California coast runs east-west instead of north-south, Santa Barbara and its mountains still seethe with life even after all that humanity threw at them during its last world war. She's heard many a lecture on this from her father, and she's inherited his love of it. There are things here that can be found nowhere else in the Federation, and if you go quietly and sit quietly and look, you may see them.

A short scramble carries her up over the ridge, and onto the massive boulder field that overlooks the small town and the ocean below. She is standing staring south, at the lumpen shapes of the Channel Islands across the ocean; diminutive Anacapa, the great bulk of Santa Cruz and the fading, further presences of Santa Rosa and San Miguel, the latter a bare suggestion on the horizon, a darkening against moonlit water.

She sits, and looks up at the round little leaves of the lemonade berry next to her, and just breathes again.

Being here, her fear seems very far away.

She realizes it's chilly. She does have a jacket, but it barely crosses her mind. Now, under a spacious sky, where she and her problems and pain are very very small, and surrounded by it she can almost forget them.

Soft rustling, footsteps. J'tris joins her, sits, rustles briefly in her own pack, and the warmth of a blanket settles over her shoulders. "My moms think you're going to get hypothermia up here," she says softly, and settles in.

Together they sit. Together, they are small and alive, and just for now, which is what matters, the hurt ebbs, the tide going out.

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