

Supernova

Charlotte Landherr (2022)

I'm dying. I feel it in the way my heart aches with each slowing beat. I saw it in the way the doctor refused to look me in the eyes after completing my most recent check-up.

I am mortal, it seems.

I suppose *The Diana*, which is hurtling through space, almost at the speed of light, isn't a bad place to die. I've been aboard *The Diana* for three quarters of my life, but unlike most people on the spaceship, I was born on Earth. As revolutionary as *The Diana* is, I'd still prefer to die on the ground.

Sitting in the captain's seat, staring out the window, it's easy to lose myself, to become entangled among the endless cloud-like nebulas, to swim through stars that cast shades of pink and purple and blue. Every day since boarding *The Diana*, this ship of my creation, I've had to remind myself that I didn't get my Doctorate in astrophysics to stare out the window. Now, concentration is more important than ever. The flashing screen on the console signals that, after ninety-nine years of travelling, we're two and a half hours from Planet B. Now, it's a race between my body and *The Diana*.

'We're almost there, Doctor Adams.' Jade steps onto the flight deck, sitting next to me.

'After so long, I'm finally going to touch solid ground.' I try to catch Jade's gaze, but she avoids mine. She knows that I may not make it.

'What's it like, being on a planet?'

'It's been so long. All I remember is feeling trapped, as if I had to escape. Earth was dying, and we had to get away. Planet B should be different. A clean slate.'

She squeezes my hand.

'How is your Black Hole tracking project coming along?' I ask.

'Alright. I managed to locate a big one a few light years away.'

'Good girl.'

Over the years that I've taught her, Jade has become like a granddaughter to me. Of the hundreds of people on *The Diana*, each one who reveres me, only she knows me. I don't care about anyone else, but Jade has never taken death easily.

'Are we on course?' Jade asks, making miniscule adjustments using the control screen.

'What does the radar say?'

I know we're on track. Jade knows it too. Her fiddling with the screens and slight changes to the intended course are futile. Perhaps it's the thought that, for the first time in her life, she'll breathe natural air, see towering trees, and bask in the light of a sun. Or, perhaps, it's the thought that she'll soon be by herself.

'How are you feeling, Jade?'

Her face twitches. 'I'm good. Feeling good, thanks.'

'You're feeling good? About me dying?'

She stares, her eyes wide. 'Oh. No! You're not dying.'

'Jade, it's not like you to lie.'

'You're not dying,' she murmurs, looking down.

'I would like you to take me on one last trip to my lab.'

'Because we're arriving soon? And getting off?'

'No, Jade. In case I don't make it off.'

'You'll make it off. I know you will.'

'I certainly hope so. The ship is on course. Let's go.'

We stand, and Jade slips her arm through mine. Against all instinct, I find myself leaning on her. I open the door and, together, we step from our peaceful sanctuary into the chaotic hallway. Engineers, scientists, doctors, swinging open doors to busy labs, bow as they pass me.

'Can we go this way?' Jade directs me towards the elevator at the end of the hall.

'My lab is on this floor, Jade. You know that.'

She looks down. 'I was thinking we could go down and see the people. Maybe let them know we're arriving soon?'

It is not like Jade to oppose my instructions, or to come up with her own ideas. Perhaps she has organised a surprise. One final thank you from the people to me.

'Very well. Let's make it quick.'

We step into the elevator, and I marvel at the smoothness of its descent. Even after ninety-nine years, the ship is doing its job to perfection. I must admit, my design was impeccable. *The Diana* has served me well.

The elevator door splits in two, revealing what I like to call 'the belly of the ship'. It is one room, taking up the whole bottom floor of the spaceship. I don't like to come down here often because this is where the people are. They are packed in so tight, there's almost no room for me to walk. They scramble out of my way, parents pulling in screaming babies, children scrambling into sleeping pods. It smells of too many bodies. Why must humans

insist on multiplying? Never in my long life have I felt the desire to obtain a mate or children. I have more important things to do, such as saving humanity from inevitable extinction on a dying planet.

Some of the oldest passengers, the ones who boarded the ship as children, stand telling stories to wide-eyed teenagers and disbelieving adults. Their conversations are mind numbing. Often I remind myself that saving humanity means I must save humans. A few of them are singing in the corner. Their voices, though angelic, torture me. What use is singing? A song never achieved anything.

I clear my throat, ready to announce our near arrival.

‘Jade,’ someone calls.

I whip around in the direction of the voice, causing a sharp pain to shoot through my head.

‘Mum?’ Jade asks, looking at the hunched woman who is limping through the crowd.

‘Sweetheart! Is it really you?’ They embrace, and Jade wipes a tear from the woman’s face. ‘Why don’t come to see me anymore?’ the woman asks.

Jade looks at me. ‘I’m not allowed.’

I pull Jade away from her mother, toward the elevator. It’s clear this was Jade’s *real* intention for coming down here. But there is no time for family reunions. I only have hours, possibly minutes to live, and I don’t want to waste any more precious seconds. Jade watches her mother until the elevator doors close.

We ascend to the top floor, and I direct Jade to the door on our right. Its titanium surface is marked with gold letters: ‘Doctor April Adams.’ I press my hand to the sensor, unlocking my private laboratory. The far wall is a long window, and a gateway to the universe. I’ve spent many hours staring, thinking of how the stars I see are the source of the matter I am made of. Soon, my atoms will return to the universe.

With a shaking hand, I grab a small sphere from the bench. It’s something I’ve been working on. A gift. I put it in the pocket of my lab coat, careful not to break it.

I look at the posters hanging on the far wall. The posters are older than the ship, made as part of a research project in my Honour’s year. Each depicts a diagram of a different supernova. Supernovae have always transfixed me. Of all the things in space, they are the brightest, the most brilliant. Not unlike myself.

‘Let’s keep moving, Jade.’

She is mesmerised, gazing at the galaxies passing by. Soon, her atoms will become a part of the universe, too.

I lean on her as we walk out of my lab. She is warm, or maybe I'm cold. We walk past frenetic scientists, making last minute preparations before the expected landing on Planet B. I almost feel sorry to ruin it for them. If only my body hadn't chosen now to shut down. We arrive back on the flight deck, and I fall into my chair as my knees collapse from under me.

'Only half an hour to go,' Jade says, gesturing to the screen.

'Can you see it?' I point to the speck out the window that shines a little brighter than the rest.

'Oh! Is that it? Is that Planet B? I can't believe it.'

Will I make it? Will my body last thirty more minutes? It would be cruel for me to die now, within sight of our destination. I put my fingers to my wrist. My pulse is faint. My head feels as if it is about to split in two. My intestines twist, and I know I'm not going to make it.

'Jade, I want you to know,' I say, my voice hoarse, 'I want you to know you would have made a great captain.'

'What? What do you mean?'

'Jade, I have a present. It's for you, and everyone on this ship.' I take the sphere from my pocket, watching the silver and gold liquids squirl in their compartments.

'Thank you?'

Jade reaches for the sphere.

'You're welcome.'

We're so close to Planet B, but if I, Doctor April Adams, creator of *The Diana*, never get there, why should anyone else? Besides, how would they survive without me? I am their guiding light. I squeeze the glass ball and watch the liquids combine. I let myself go, ready for the explosion.

Even stars must die, it seems.