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For Alice, my writing soulmate from day one

CHAPTER 1

Dorian's expression was tense but determined as the spaceship shook.

"Don't worry," he said. "We are *not* going to crash-land."

Hugo was not reassured. He held on to Ada with his eyes tightly shut as Dorian flailed around with the ship's controls. He was twisting dials and flicking switches frantically.

They were travelling to Dorian's home planet, Hydrox, for the school holidays. Dorian and Ada were students at an academy for children from important families across the galaxy, and their friend Hugo worked on campus repairing watches. Hugo had started getting nervous when Dorian had announced that he would be piloting

the four-seater spaceship all by himself. Dorian had a habit of exaggerating his own skills beyond what was true.

Most of the journey had been fine, as the spaceship had just sailed in a straight line. For three weeks, the three of them had sat around playing card games while listening to cheesy radio plays on the gramophone. But as soon as they'd entered Hydrox's orbit, the ship needed to be piloted again, and Dorian had started to struggle.

"Have you done this before?" Hugo asked Dorian, gritting his teeth. The spaceship was making a clicking, whirring noise, as if something inside its clockwork engine was complaining loudly.

Hydrox curved out before them, clear blue water stretching as far as Hugo could see. But the stunning view kept jolting and stuttering as the ship fell through the atmosphere.

Dorian tapped the controls again. "Actually ..." he said, "this might be a good time to mention that I've only got my provisional pilot's licence. I haven't ever done a landing from

space before. Plus, Ada's weight is unbalancing the ship."

Ada exploded in growls, red sparks of anger shooting out of her. "That's just rude, Dorian!" Ada complained. "I thought you had invited me for a fun holiday with your family, not to fly me to *my death*!"

Dorian looked sheepish but kept flicking buttons. It was very clear that he had no idea what he was doing. Hugo leaned forward to help as the spaceship twisted into a tumble-turn. He didn't know how to fly a spaceship, but since he was an android made out of clockwork, he did know how cogs and gears worked. Hugo had been studying the spaceship's controls for the whole journey. He felt sure that Dorian was pressing completely the wrong things.

Hugo pulled a latch in the ceiling, making a rudder unfold from the bottom of the ship. The ship stopped rocking, and they began gliding towards Hydrox.

"Oh," Dorian said. His green antennae drooped as he watched Hugo work. Dorian sprawled back in his chair, letting Hugo lean over him to unwind a thin chain from a reel.

Hugo looked up into the skylight to see a silk parachute unfurl from the roof of the ship. It caught the weight of the spaceship, which stopped falling towards the ocean and began floating in the wind, drifting downwards.

Ada stopped spitting lava and peered out of the window.

"It's quite beautiful," she said, surprised. "Is this really *your* planet, Dorian?"

Dorian looked offended, puffing out his chest. "My dear girl!" he replied. "Of course it is!"

Dorian gazed proudly out of the window as Hugo directed the spaceship to land carefully on the water. "My family have ruled this planet for generations," Dorian explained. "My father is the king, and his mother was queen before that. I'll inherit the throne one day."

Dorian's species lived mostly underwater, since Hydrox was an ocean planet with no land. They had green skin, gills and antennae. Dorian could breathe air too, but he preferred being underwater.

Outside, a crab climbed over the windscreen and tapped curiously at the glass with its claws.

"Thank you for that expert landing, Hugo," Ada said. "I dread to think where we'd be without you."

Dorian grinned and added, "I say that about Hugo every day."

He leaned in to whisper to Hugo, "Seriously, my fellow, I had no idea what I was doing. We'd be as flat as a pancake right now if you hadn't stepped in. I'm dreadfully sorry. I should have hired a pilot for the trip really, but I wanted to impress you by doing it myself."

Hugo was pleased. Making himself useful was the least he could do for Dorian and Ada. He hadn't known them for very long and still felt surprised when they wanted to spend time with him. It had been a huge shock when Dorian had invited Hugo home to Hydrox for the holidays, but a delightful one.

Like all androids, Hugo had been created as a servant for the rich biological people to order around. But he'd been left behind at the academy when his old master had graduated. Life on his own had been difficult at first, but Hugo had survived by starting a watchmaking business.

He was no longer a servant, but most people still saw him as an object.

Dorian and Ada were the only biological people that Hugo had ever met who treated him like a real person. They were both very rich, with titles of nobility, but that didn't change how they treated Hugo. He would do anything for them.

"Well!" Dorian said, and clapped his hands together. "Shall we disembark?"

Dorian climbed out of the spaceship first. There was a welcome party of courtiers waiting for him, standing on a platform floating on the water. It was woven out of tightly plaited seaweed tendrils.

"Welcome home, Duke Dorian Luther," a short man said. All of the courtiers had the same green skin and antennae as Dorian. They were dressed in smart turquoise suits that were edged with silver embroidery.

"Your landing has … improved," the man added. Dorian took Hugo's hand to steady him as he climbed out onto the seaweed platform. He kept hold of it even after Hugo had regained his balance.

Dorian said, "All down to my friend Hugo here."

There was a pause as the courtiers took in Hugo's clockwork parts. It didn't seem as if they'd met an android before.

Hugo felt very self-conscious. His metal casing was decorated with tattoos of plants, which suddenly felt very silly and inelegant. He folded his arms over his chest to try to hide them.

"Welcome, Hugo," one of the courtiers said at last.

Hugo gave the courtiers a small bow, unsure if it was the correct way to greet them. Greetings changed from planet to planet, but a bow didn't seem like it would offend anyone.

Above them, the spaceship's parachute was dancing in the fresh sea-salt wind. Hugo could see a silver crest woven into its fabric – the same crest that was sewn onto the turquoise suits of Dorian's courtiers. Was that his family crest, Hugo wondered? He looked down at his own chest, which was stamped with the symbol of the factory where he'd been built. Somehow, that wasn't the same.

"Thank you for meeting us," Dorian said as the spaceship behind them shuddered from side to side. Ada must be standing up inside it.

Dorian coughed and added, "Lady Adedeneumdora de Winters is also joining us for the summer." He looked down at the platform. "But, I say, I'm not sure this is going to hold her weight."

Hugo found himself grinning. He knew what was coming.

When Ada stepped out of the spaceship, everyone gasped in unison. The platform sank a bit under her weight, water lapping over the surface. One of the startled courtiers shouted with surprise and fell backwards onto his bottom.

"What in the galaxy?!" the courtier said. He gaped up at Ada, his antennae waving nervously.

When Hugo giggled, Dorian squeezed his hand and winked at him.

Ada gave the courtiers a elegant, regal wave. She spun slightly so they could get a proper look at her. Ada was more an island than a person. She was made out of rock and lava – a living, walking hillock. Her eyes and mouth

were cracks, and her limbs were made of sharp, pebbled rocks.

It had taken Hugo a long time to get used to Ada, even though the academy was full of aliens from all over the galaxy. There were all sorts – from sentient gas clouds to aquatic ocean people like Dorian. But Ada was especially rare. Her species only reproduced once in a thousand years and lived for millennia. They grew by building layers of rock on the outside of their bodies, getting bigger and bigger, until they had grown to a vast size.

One day, Ada would grow into a full-sized planet. But right now she was just a few centuries old, so she was only the size of a small building. She hadn't been allowed to get any bigger until she finished her studies. Ada had finally graduated just before they'd left for the summer. Dorian was hugely jealous, because he still had a whole semester of school left.

Ada had spent the whole long trip to Hydrox crammed into Dorian's tiny family spaceship, talking about how much magma she was going to release when she had space to fill. She was really excited about it.

At night, Dorian and Hugo had stretched out on top of Ada's back to sleep, in a small crevice she'd made for them. There wasn't the space for them to lie down anywhere else. In the mornings, Hugo's cogs had seized up from lying in one position for so long.

"Hello, ladies and gentlemen," Ada said in a voice as booming as an avalanche. She smiled and revealed the hot, flowing magma rolling around her insides. "What a wonderful welcome!"

Dorian's courtiers were still gaping at Ada, trying to recover from their surprise. But Ada was used to the attention. Hugo thought she probably enjoyed it.

Dorian looked as proud as anything, clearly thrilled to be bringing home two of the most shocking people he could find – a servant-class android and a living volcano. Hugo felt embarrassed at all the fuss. Ada let off a showy and needless spark of red-hot lava, which trickled down her granite exterior. One of the courtiers fainted.

CHAPTER 2

"Welcome to my home!" Dorian said to Hugo and Ada as they walked along the seaweed platform. It kept swaying as Ada moved.

Dorian was still holding Hugo's hand, and pulled him along with him. Hugo was probably walking too slowly, because he kept stopping to gape at their surroundings.

A long network of seaweed platforms covered the surface of the ocean. They connected small clusters of buildings to make up a floating village that stretched out to the horizon.

"This is my hometown," Dorian said. "There are cities like this all across the planet."

"Milord, we have much to tell you," a courtier began to say to Dorian as he carried their