

The Day The World Went Away

The unmarked, invisibly armored car wove through the untended backroads of the Appalachian Mountains, a quiet, primordial range that even with the world permanently monitored and watched, still held secrets deep within its breast. Nyx sat in the rear of the vehicle, the autonomous pilot in the 'driver's seat' carrying her deep into her quiet refuge. Not a place chosen for her, but for her most precious love. Her little star. She sent Aurelia away, into a secretive safehouse Nix kept just in case the apocalypse started without notice. It was far from the city, far from any city, and covered by enough of the dense dark forests that it was almost completely invisible to the world.

The dirt road grumbled and clanked against the car's suspension as Nyx leaned her elbow against the windowsill. She stared outward into the forest, into the deep dense woods, alone with her thoughts, and the silence. She closed her eyes, surrendering herself to a short sleep.

She heard the distant giggles of her daughter as she faded out.

A moment later, she shifted awake, feeling the car come to a gentle stop. She looked around, gathering her bearings before opening the door, stepping out towards the old cabin. It was simple in construction, the exterior no different than the century-plus year old homes that long past coal miners used throughout the valley. She gently closed the door, walking up to the door. Before she could even knock, a new GT-5 opened it for her. They knew she was coming, but the two girls inside didn't. She nodded at the android as it stepped aside, Nyx walking inside. The illusion didn't last long upon entrance, the modest exterior shielding a well built and fantastically comfortable interior. It was built like an old American Craftsman home, warm colored paint and inviting wooden tones all sat within, yet still obscuring the reinforced steel and concrete shell making the place apocalypse proof. Her brother's paranoia combined with his appreciation for "simpler things". Internet connectivity was limited, it was well stocked with sources of entertainment from decades gone by, from vinyl records, to old gaming systems, to a small library stocked well enough that even Nyx could feel herself pulled towards it. A stack of picture books lay scattered across the coffee table, one left open face down as if abandoned mid-story. Off in the corner, next to the desecrated corpse of its victim, a pillow fort constructed from couch cushions and pillows, with a blanket draped across the top. There was a little stuffed goat plushie standing guard at the entrance, Aurelia's little Goatie at his tireless vigil. In the middle of the room, a half finished jigsaw puzzle lay as the centerpiece. The box showed a wondrous land of cotton candy clouds and peppermint sidewalks, but the puzzle itself only showed the edges.

Nyx smiled, any possible worry about Aurelia's life away from her, from her home smothered in a warm blanket. She felt that pull again, a desire to just stay

within it all, to forget everything and live here for the rest of time. The pull was broken when she heard a sign of life, taking her from her moment of solace in the fortified home. She blinked hard, wiping away the beginnings of tears as she stepped inward.

"-have to mix it up super well," Spoke a woman's voice.

"Okay!" The little goat's excitement almost instantly knocked off ten tons of stress from Nyx's shoulders.

"Lemme help you-" The woman spoke again. Nyx could hear the quiet clatter of something, like a wooden spoon resting against the side of a glass bowl. Nyx walked further in, through the doorway leading into the kitchen. It was warmly lit, tones of navy walls mixed with wood cabinets and pantries, an electric stove, and an ivory white fridge. It smelled like heaven, the aroma of vanilla and sugar drifting through the air as she stepped closer. Nyx's smile reached the corners of her eyes as she folded her arms over her chest and leaned against the doorframe, spectating the scene without interrupting. Jessica was teaching the eager little goat girl how to make cupcakes, and they were in the process of pouring them into the mould.

"Almost..."

"Oops!" Auri exclaimed as a dribble of batter missed the paper liner and hit the pan.

Jess giggled, continuing on with Aurelia's help. "Don't worry, it's normal. It's super hard to get all of it in the pan." Once the trays were all filled up, she set the large glass bowl back on to the counter.

Nyx felt like she was mere moments from crying, flashbacks of such an idyllic scene played out through her dreams, brought back to reality before her now. She raised a hand up, and gently rapped her knuckle against the wooden doorframe.

Jessica looked up first, towards Nyx. Her first expression was curiosity, then instant shock as she snatched a wooden spoon up like she was about to use it as a weapon before stopping just as fast. "WH- Jeeeeezus Christ Nyx you scared the- Scared me half to death!" She said, quickly course correcting the inevitable swear.

Aurelia whipped around at the cause of the commotion, before her face lit up like fireworks. "MAMAAAAAAAA!" The little goat squealed, *launching* herself off the stool set at the base of the counter and wrapping her mother's legs in her arms so hard that she couldn't even move them if she wanted to.

Nyx reached down to pet her little white furred head, before kneeling down to snatch her up in a hug. "Bonjour my little star-" She said quietly, not realizing just how close she was to crying that very second until she finally spoke. She planted a kiss on her forehead, hard enough like she was making sure she was still real. "I missed you."

"I missed you too Mama! Auntie Jess said you were gonna come by soon but I asked her how soon and she just said soon again so I didn't think she actually knew and then I got scared you weren't gonna come but then we started making cupcakes

and Auntie Jess said I get to lick the spoon-!" She bleated out without a single iota of punctuation or breathing.

"Hey, easy little goat! Don't forget to breathe!" Jess interjected with a smile on her face.

As if she really did forget, Aurelia took one great big inhale like she claimed all the air in the world as hers... Before firing away again. "Where were you why did you take so long to come back are you okay where's Uncle Nix does June miss me-!"

Jessica was beginning a giggle fit, and Nyx just silenced the little one again by hugging her tight to her chest again in a desperate attempt to slow her down. Through the muffled words, Nyx could see her backside, her little fluffy tail flicking back and forth at a quarter the speed of light.

"I'm okay Aurelia, I've just been super busy at work, and Miss Jess wanted to go on vacation. Nix is busy too, but he says he misses you a bunch- June too."

"Good! I miss them too! Can we go see them! I wanna show them my pillow fort! Did you see my pillow fort?"

"Of course I did-" Nyx said, mussing up her hair. She finally let her go and Aurelia happily trounced back to her stool, pointing at the scene of her and Jessica's baking adventures. "Whatcha makin'?"

"CUPCAKES!" She shouted happily. She looked back to Jessica, still bouncing up and down in place. "When are they ready? Are they gonna be done soon? Did we make enough for Mama?"

"Paaaaaatiience lil' bit. They have to bake first, remember? Here- Stand back while I put them in the oven okay? It's really hot, so don't touch any of it."

Aurelia happily nodded, leaping out of Jessica's way and watching her open the pre-heated oven.

Nyx continued to take in the scene of her little girl bouncing eagerly, looking down at her. She had an apron on, covered in flour with splotches of batter and other ingredients barely present here and there. The rest of her clothing was mostly clean, except for a little splatter that escaped on to her shoe. As she looked her over, she noticed that the cuff of her pants was running a bit short. Glancing up, she noticed the wrists on her sweater were the same, just a touch higher up her forearms than normal. "Hey Jess?"

"Hmm?" She said, shutting the oven door and turning around, slipping the oven mitts loose from her hands and hanging them up beneath the cabinets.

"Did Aurelia's clothes shrink?"

"Oh-! Yeahhhhh I think I screwed up with the washing machine... Sorry about that."

Nyx giggled quietly, waving her off gently. "Don't worry about it... She's growing anyway, so none of her clothes were ever gonna last that long."

Jessica grinned. "Well good, because I was gonna get in a fist fight with the dryer if it did it again."

Nyx chuckled.

Aurelia had crouched down, staring into the oven's window like she was seeking the secrets of the universe. "...Are they done yet?"

The tall goat woman couldn't stifle the snicker, accidentally snorting as she covered her snout with the back of her hand.

"Auri they've been in there for like *thirty seconds!*" Jess affirmed, leaning her back against the countertop and watching the girl. "It'll take 20 minutes," She said, grabbing a plastic timer off the countertop and dialing it in, giving a *whoops* look at Nyx quietly, realizing she almost forgot to set it. She set it back on the top, the clockwork inside quietly tick-tick-ticking away.

Nyx grinned at her, like they'd both keep it a secret.

"That's forEVERRRRRRRRR!" Auri moaned, craning her head to the sky like a desperate plea to the gods.

"You can still lick the spoon though." The blonde and blue haired woman conceded, taking the wooden implement from the mixing bowl.

Aurelia's attention was snatched away from the oven door, taking the spoon as it was handed to her.

"We'll still have to decorate them too before we can eat 'em. Gotta put all the icing on them to make them all pretty."

It almost seemed like Aurelia didn't hear her, still licking the spoon clean.

Jessica chuckled and shook her head, before looking at Nyx. "Can I getcha something? Coffee, tea... Somethin' strong?"

"No thank you, I'm... Actually, tea, thank you."

"Comin' right up doc." She said, flicking on a tea kettle and pulling out a little box of pre-mixed teabags. "Y'know, I never would've thought your brother would have a place like this. I'd expect a guy like him to buy out a missile silo in the middle of Kansas and turn it into his own personal army base."

"Oh, don't worry. He has a few of those too, but this is for more... Well-" Nyx gestured around a bit. "Comfortable times. He uses it as a vacation home more often than not, but still keeps it stocked up in case he needs to drag anyone else with him."

"...He ever done that? Taken anyone else here with him?"

"I... Don't think so, no," Nyx had to think for a second, of anyone who would accompany her brother like this.

"Aww, bummer. Kinda surprised a guy like him doesn't have someone."

Nyx chuffed, looking out the kitchen window into the serenity of the woods beyond them. "Mhmm... He's comfortable in solace though. He can let go easier than I can."

"Well, good. You should learn from him." Jess said as if issuing a command, pointing a finger at the woman who was technically her boss, but right now was just her friend.

She rolled her eyes, still smiling. "Believe me, I've tried and so has he."

Jessica looked back down to the girl who had already helped herself to scooping out more of the batter from the walls of the mixing bowl, speaking again. "Her English has gotten *really* good. Maybe not... Half a year ago she only spoke French. Now she's reading, writing, speaking English just fine."

"She's at the perfect age to learn it all, lil spongy brain." Nyx affirmed.

"She really is a little star huh?"

Nyx smiled with teeth again. "Yeah... She really really is."

Aurelia looked up, satisfied with her pure sugar mix consumption and rushed over to Nyx. "Mama come look at my pillow fort! Auntie Jess helped me build it and it's so cool! Did you see it?"

"I did, I even saw Goatie standing guard."

"Oh-! I forgot about him!" She exclaimed, dashing past her and into the main living space.

Nyx smiled at Jessica one more time, quietly marveling at how adorable her little goat was.

Jessica returned the look, shooing her away while she made tea.

She conceded, turning to follow the trail the little sugar-powered comet left behind. The little goat was kneeling down at the entrance of her mighty fortress, taking her plushie up in her hands.

"Did any monsters come by? Did you fight them off?" She said, staring intently at the goat while it gave a debrief that only she could hear. "Good. At ease, General Goatie," She sat the plushie back down at the side of the entrance, turning back to face her mother.

"Has Goatie found himself in the army?" She mused.

"Mhm! He stands guard to make sure no bad guys or monsters get in!"

Nyx nodded, glancing back to the high-powered android next to the door doing just the same. She only now noticed that it too, was defaced. Little marker scribbles on its torso and legs, and stickers placed on the jaw of its helmet. Nevertheless, it stood guard, adamant that it would protect its princess. Her brother had affirmed to her that the level of defense surrounding the place would be staggering, and almost entirely invisible. At least two Skyspear deployment platforms were aimed there at all times, squads of GT-2s ready in an instant. She shook the thoughts away, not wanting to dwell on military fortifications and billion dollar launch platforms. Instead, she shifted her focus to the fortress her daughter had made. She knelt down beside her, staring into the entrance.

The blanket making up its roof was a deep blue, speckled with glow in the dark stars and constellations. At the base of it, a little LED pop up lantern acted like a campfire. At one corner, a few more picture books scattered about, although at least slightly organized. One of them was open to what looked like a diagram of a supernova. Right beside it was a crystalline purple handheld, a reproduction of some classic device that Nix himself was no doubt attached to. Above it, Aurelia had taped a drawing to the wall, dimly illuminated by the lantern's warm yellow shine. Finally, in the other corner, a nest made from small pillows and blankets.

"C'moooooon!" Aurelia begged her, already shuffling inside.

"Okay okay- Give me a moment-" Nyx said, carefully crawling inside. Her six foot frame slipped through carefully. It was just big enough for both of them, with just enough room for Aurelia to splay out while Nyx sat with her legs curled up against herself as she sat against the pillow nest.

Aurelia pulled the lantern in a bit, illuminating Nyx and her corner a bit better while the little one grabbed the open picture book and showed it to her. "Uncle Nix got me a bunch of books to read... This one's about space and stars and planets..."

"I see that, have you learned anything?"

"Yeah! When stars get super old they explode! They explode in a super huge boom! And then... Then they do something weird..."

"Oh?"

"Yeah, if the star was *super duper duper* big, it turns into a *black hole*-" Aurelia said with such reverence. "That sucks in everything around it and never lets it go.."

"Wow, that's unbelievable huh?"

"Yeah... But it's a little sad."

"How so?"

"What if the star didn't wanna explode? What if it wanted to have all its little planets and keep them nice and warm?"

Nyx pursed her lips hard at the warmth of her daughter's innocence, wrapping her arm around her shoulder and pulling her in close with her book. "Well, maybe it's not like that. Did you know that when stars go supernova like that, they throw out *all* the stuff they were made of across the galaxy? Allll its bits and pieces going everywhere, until after a super long time- Like millions or billions of years- All that stuff gathers up into bigger and bigger stuff... It can turn into planets, or even other stars."

"Woahhhhhh..." Aurelia's mind was blown. "How did *you* know that?"

"Uncle Nix loves telling everyone stuff about space. It's his favorite thing."

"I wanna learn more about space stuff... So it's like... The star blows up and then shares all of its stuff with everyone else?"

"Kinda, yeah! It's a thing that happens no matter what, but it's what makes the whole universe keep going."

"Aww, that's a nice thing to do. I like sharing. I shared all my stuff with Auntie Jess."

Nyx petted her head again, humming happily. "Good... That's sweet." She sat there attentively while Aurelia read from the book. Her reading skills were already impressive, scarcely stumbling over a word as she read aloud to Nyx under the warm glow of the lantern's light.

A minute later, Jessica quietly slid a white porcelain mug to the entrance with a tea tag hanging out the side of it. "Don't mind me, cleaning the kitchen. You two enjoy the fort."

"Thanks Jess," Nyx said, taking the mug in her hands, delighting in the warmth. She sipped from it idly while Aurelia continued, going on about nebulae, quasars, the Big Bang, and black holes.

"-And the edge of a black hole, called an Event Horizon... Is the point of no return where everything that falls into it never comes back out," Aurelia read. "And at the center of the black hole is the singularity, where everything inside it collapses into a single point." She finished. She looked up at her mom, amazement on her face. "That sounds *weiiiiird*... What's inside it?"

"The singularity?"

"Mhmm!"

"Well, that's just it. We don't know. Light can't make its way back out, and if there's no light, then we can't see it. A singularity is a point where we don't know what lies beyond it."

"Never ever?"

"Nope. The only way to know is to see it for yourself... But that's not a good idea."

"Yeah! The book says this thing called Spaghet... Spetti..." There it was, the first word she couldn't quite say.

Nyx chuckled, waiting patiently. "You can do it, break the word apart, sound it out."

"Spa...ghett...if-i-cation... Spaghetti... Wait- Black holes make spaghetti?"

Jessica's laugh could be heard from the other room. Nyx herself stifled her giggles. "Well- Not quite. It's just a silly name that astronomers gave it because... Well, it turns everything into super long strings- A lot like spaghetti."

"Woah.... I wonder what planet spaghetti tastes like..."

"Probably not very good. It's mostly rocks and lava."

She thought about it for a second, before agreeing. Space pasta would indeed not taste very good. Nyx quietly sipped her tea, listening as Aurelia flipped to the next page and continued. Her reading voice softened into that careful, rhythmic cadence that made it apparent she was concentrating hard. She watched the little girl's eyes move across the page, barely stumbling as she read aloud from the complex book. It

was impressive to read this well at her age. She read along with her, but felt her eyes fall heavy to the sound of her daughter's voice. Slowly, as the pages waned on, they fell shut without her realizing. Aurelia turned another page, still reading, unaware of her mother's head gently tipping to the side and back into the pillow. The warmth of the tent, the swaddling pillows and blankets of the nest, and the feeling of a small body pressed trustingly against her side pushed her into the best rest she's had in years. The glow in the dark stars in the blanket-ceiling glimmered faintly.

"Mamaaaa..." Aurelia whispered. "Mamaaaaaaaaaa..." She went again, gently rustling her arm. Nyx stirred, groaning quietly in her cocoon. "Maaaaaama!" She went again, this time a touch more loud.

Nyx's eyes fluttered open, blinking awake in the dim lantern light. The disorientation on her face showed she fell into a deeper sleep than she intended, before Aurelia's excited face took her back to her happy reality.

"Mama the cupcakes are done!" She whisper yelled. "Auntie said twenty minutes and twenty minutes is DONE and we have to put icing on them and sprinkles and I picked BLUE and you have to come right now or she's gonna eat 'em all c'mon c'mon c'MON!" She said, repeatedly tugging at her arm.

Nyx laughed, low and warm, letting Aurelia drag her upright. "Okay okay... Lead the way lil star..."

Aurelia quickly scurried out from the tent, leaving Nyx to crawl out after her with much less grace. She looked at the valiant goat plushie watching ever faithfully at the entrance. "...Thank you General," She murmured before getting to her feet, rubbing at her eyes. She could hear little Auri already fussing with the icing in the kitchen beyond. A comfortable smile draped over her face, locking this moment in time forever inside her head.

The air outside was cold, but the air was mercifully calm. The cabin rested near the bottom of the valley, so light was thin and the snow lingered on for much longer, leaving the ground with a thin blanket of white while the trees above had long since shed their powder. Nyx and Jessica both sat outside on the back porch, the space a loving reminder of a time very long gone. They both had their tea warming their hands, steam roiling from the mugs.

"Did you come up with that nickname?" Nyx asked.

"Hm?" Jess answered, looking over to the winter coated woman.

"Auri."

"Oh- Yeah, just felt like it fit. You don't mind it do you?"

Nyx waved her hand, smiling as she shook her head. "No no, I think it's cute. I was just wondering."

In the cabin behind them, Nyx's little star was fast asleep in her fortress. The ensuing sugar rush from the cupcakes crashed down upon her like a meteor shower on a family of brontosaurus, resulting in the goat girl curling up in the nest she'd made for herself with a book opened on her lap. The two older women had taken the time to enjoy the serenity outside while they had a chance.

"I'm sorry to have demanded all this from you Jess, I know it was... A bit..." Halfway through her sentence she'd turned to face her, only to be met with a face that just said *'bitch?'*, complete with one eyebrow cocked skyward.

"Nyx she is a *doll*. She's sweet, she's a tiny little genius, and she's so adorable I wanna squish her up into a little ball. At no point has *any* of this been a chore. I feel like I'm the one that should be paying *you* to do this..."

Nyx giggled, rubbing at her cheek.

"Besides, getting a vacation in a place like this? Where I can't hear the city, or cars, or... Anything, really. It's just quiet. True untamed nature all the way out here, even in a time like this. How's the song go? Almost heaven?"

She laughed harder. "I'm convinced Nix chose here specifically *because* of that song." She set her hoof down, having been propped up on her knee before. She stared out into the darkening woods, a deep blue slowly blanketing the house while a twilight of fire stretched above them. She took a breath full of icy mountain air, before sighing with a vapor cloud jetting from her nostrils. "I just... Feel a little bad, having to hide her away like this. I always stressed over bringing a child into the world that... Wasn't good enough for them. And now, it just seems to spiral harder and harder."

Jessica craned her neck a bit, looking to the sky as well. "Fair, but if everyone waited for the perfect time for a kid... There wouldn't *be* any more kids. Just gotta do whatcha can, and pray you don't screw 'em up too bad."

Nyx snickered. "Yeah... That's about what Nix said. Still... I'm astonished at how fast she's learning. Her reading level's probably about twice her age, and her school performance is stellar."

"Oh yeah? How's that going by the way? You said you enrolled her in a fancy private school a few months back."

"I did. It took everything in my power to not helicopter over the place just to make sure she was doing well, but her instructor gives me plenty of updates."

Jess snickered. "*Instructor?* Is she in first grade or an engineering class?"

Nyx rolled her eyes. "It's just what the school calls their... Educational staff. And second grade, I'll have you know. She tested out of the first grade."

"*Man*, at this rate you could retire at sixty and have her take the reins at this rate."

Nyx smiled, though not by much. She looked down a bit, rocking her leg for a moment. "I've entertained the possibility but.. I don't want to feel like I'm raising an heir. I want her to be her own girl, and if that means being... A doctor, a lawyer, a tattoo artist, or a bus driver. I don't care, I'm there for all of it."

"She sure seems to like her space books."

"I blame her uncle for that."

They both laughed, knowing full well how Nix was when he went on a tirade about astronomy.

"I mean- Hey, she probably could bug Nix hard enough for a space ride one day." Jessica said, taking a sip from her mug.

"Sure but... When she's older. Just because space travel got easier doesn't mean it's easy."

"Maybe when she graduates high school then. There's a moon college right?"

Nyx snickered. "Yes there is a moon college. If I'm not mistaken, one of Nix's engineers graduated from there- Actually, she was *born* there. Cute dog girl by the name of Anne."

"There ya go! She's got a future already. A bigshot CEO mom, a spacegoat uncle, and uh... Extra distant coworker-slash-friend that used to be a student there?"

She raised an eyebrow as she really stretched the utility of that last line. "That will be a while from now, Jess. She's only six."

"Yeah but you'll blink and she'll be sixteen."

"And I'll be sixty..." She said with a slightly mournful sigh.

"Hey, nothin' a little botox can't fix," Jessica cheekily remarked.

She rolled her eyes, chuckling again.

"Teasiiiiiiiiing. Seriously though, Nyx. Despite the terrible amount of stress you put yourself under, I know you're gonna keep time for her."

"That's the goal... If for nothing else, do it all for her."

"That's the spirit." Jessica said, gesturing her mug at her.

Nyx stared down at her tea, watching the few shreds of leaves drift around the bottom.