

Prologue: Inhandra

Author: Jake-Rabbit (<https://jake-rabbit.sofurry.com/> Twitter: @DamnDirtyFurry
<http://damndirtyfurry.tumblr.com/>)

Long after the rest of the day shift had clocked out and left for a shower and food, there was at least one murine still working on the day's project; a black and white rodent female who didn't quite know the meaning of the phrase "take a break." Mumbled curses and the occasional thrown tool marked an increasing sense of frustration and fatigue.

The end of her shift clearly never really meant a stop to work for Inhandra; the Mus female was usually still hard at work late into the evening hours; fueled by caffeine and an inborn drive to work hard. Her ink-furred face hid a growing sense of fatigue well, and she would have still been working on a new electrical distribution panel had her stomach not reminded her that it was probably in her best interest to put down work for the day and take care of herself for a change.

From a crouched position she stood up, and felt the protests of every single muscle in her back, accustomed to being hunched over for most of the day. She had been pulling late shifts all week in preparation for the new Fold systems to be brought online for the first time, and while everything was on schedule, as the ranking engineer on the ship, she bore a not inconsequential responsibility for making sure the test went off without a hitch.

No pressure, really. Not like the entire command structure was watching. Just most of it.

Responsibility like that is a weight upon one's shoulders; a mental burden to carry, and she could feel it start to crawl its way up her spine as she put her tools back into place, carefully accounting for each in their restraining straps. By the time she was packed up, her lower back was protesting loudly, her shoulders ached, and head throbbed from being hunched over a junction interchange all day long. While a meal with the rest of the day crew was tempting, a nagging need for some alone time was needed.

Resolute that dinner in her cabin, and a few hours luxurious sleep in zero-g to let her back relax was the evening's plans, she began to make her way out of the maze that was the distribution facility. The pungent scent of ozone was thick in that room, and she knew it would be stuck in her nostrils for at least a day, and stuck in her fur for much longer.

She eventually emerged from the bowels of the ship, and dropped off her tools in the workshop, pausing only a moment to review the next day's shift assignments before heading towards the commissary. Her work overalls stuck to her in the most inconvenient ways, and it was in the middle of a particularly unladylike adjustment to her chest that Major Ito came up beside her. His timing could not have made her feel less classy, even for a wrench rat.

“Everything still on track for tomorrow?” he asked her, sipping a cup of tea.

Ito was a large Urs male, and even with being easily over six feet tall, he had a knack for moving quietly and sneaking up on you. Black fur with a light tan shock around his neck and chest, large frame equally full of muscles and fat from too much alcohol, attentive eyes set into a bear-like face, and two decades of service aboard starships which had trained him to walk lightly and enjoy scaring the piss out of servicemen. It helped that Urs towered over most of the other members of the commonwealth, as did their ancestors.

“Mmmhmn.” Inhandra replied, smoothly moving her hand from her breast, and up along her neck, casually feigning like that was where it was headed all along. “My team finished the new conduits this afternoon, and all that’s left is a backup plasma junction, which they’ll have done tomorrow morning, easy. Final test later that morning, and it’ll be ready for your brass before they’ve managed to even see their second cup of tea.”

Ito smiled widely and took another sip. “Good! You know they’ll be up all our asses starting first thing tomorrow morning, so I look forwards to telling them that our chief already has everything ready to go, and we’re just waiting on them.”

“Mmmhmm. But for now, I’ll let the night crew finish up the prep work. I’ll be back first thing in the morning, after I’ve had some sleep.” Inhandra then looked up at Ito, smiling. “Your job for tonight is to get them so drunk they aren’t up our asses at the crack of dawn, you know.”

Ito nodded to her and cracked a smile himself. “Mmmn. Hard work.” Another sip was taken from his ever-present mug. “You might want to wait to hit the sack until after we do our fold to the staging area outside Earth. The Admiral wants this to be ‘a symbolic gesture to our forebears and recognition of a past civilization to which we owe so much’ or some utter nonsense like that, so he wanted it performed outside Earth. It’s a long jump, and the wellgate there is...unstable at best. It’ll be enough to make you feel like you’re put together backwards for a moment.”

Inhandra’s nearest ear perked in interest, and she quickly rubbed behind it to put it back down. “Oh! Thanks, uh....thanks for the heads up.”

“Anytime, Inny. Good night.” Ito nodded to her and, with a long sigh, plodded down the hallway to the officer’s quarters, no doubt to rub elbows with the assembled dignitaries. Urs or not, a night with one’s superiors meant trying to affect your best faked smile while drinking just enough to keep up with the Admiral, and not manage to make an ass of oneself. It was an art that Inhandra was convinced Ito could teach a class on, however.

The ship had been, for the past two weeks, an unholy and unbearable mess of diplomats, admirals, their staff...mistresses....both Inhandra and Ito hated the whole affair, but as the first independent fold-capable ship in the system, there was legitimate reason for fanfare; after this,

there was no more reason to send out seed ships to build wellgates in nearby systems. They didn't have to flirt with the laws of relativity anymore, or rely on the dodgy FTL drives that their ancestors had had so much trouble with. She cast her eyes out a portal, looking at one of the rings that surrounded the ship. They blocked any sort of view of the stars. Soon, those would be gone, too, much as the steam engines that clouded the skies gave way to electrics.

She made a quick pass by the commissary, greedily grabbing a sandwich on her way through, and a bottle of water to wash it down with, gripping both tightly to push her way through the enlisted gathering about the latest newscasts from home. When she let up her grip on the sandwich's wrapper, she could clearly make out her fingerprints on the wrapper, her hand coated in black soot from working all day. Inhandra's fur was a blessing and a curse; a blessing in that the black covering her right forearm hid just how filthy she'd get, and a curse in that the left one, being clad in white, was almost always a dingy grey from being stained with coolant, grease, singed hairs, or the occasional welding burn. Leaving a palm print on the back of some overly eager seaman's head made it worth it sometimes, though.

Today, her left paw was relatively clean, so that got the task of shoving the sandwich into her mouth as she walked down the halls towards her cabin. By the time she reached her quarters, she was polishing off the end of it; clearly more hungry than she'd given herself credit for.

Inhandra unlocked the powered door and stepped in. The lights came on by themselves, and the two small portals in the walls turned from opaque to clear, letting in a deep scarlet light from the red dwarf in the system they were in. The subtle rhythm of running water filled the room, part of the constant vigil a white noise generator kept up to drown out the hum of the engines from her sensitive Mus ears.

"Eve, warm up the shower, and put on some music. Something calm. I don't care what. I just want to relax." Inny dug through the many pockets on her work overalls and emptied them into a crude clay bowl, little fingerprints glazed into the salmon colored surface. Inhandra's fingers lightly brushed over the fingerprints, her mind wandering to home.

"Yes ma'am. I assume you'll be turning in for the night?" A calm, smooth female voice came from all around.

Eve was Inhandra's name for the main computer system that controlled her cabin, and all her personal electronics. While Eve was just a singular, portable instance of an operating system that ran on the ship's mainframe, users could take and customize that instance to their liking, and then use it on any device in any location, as it followed them via their personal devices. Inhandra had a thing for the soothing tones of old torch singers, so Eve had been customized with a soft, lulling alto voice.

“Yes! Go ahead and set my alarms for tomorrow morning, 0500. I’ll need to be up early.” Inhandra closed the door behind her and started to unfasten her overalls, tugging at the stubborn zippers impatiently, eager to get out of the clothing she’d been in all day and get in the shower. When your species had sensitive noses to begin with, being able to relax and clean off was less a luxury and more a requirement.

“Done. I will wake you at 0500.”

Inhandra flopped onto her bed and lifted a leg up, untying her boots and shucking them off, flinging them against the side of the bulkhead with a dull metallic ring. Nimble fingers unfastened the sides of her overalls and coaxed them down, guiding the suit off her form until she stood up, clad in sheer pink underwear and a white tee. Stretching out her back made her spine pop, a pained expression crossing her face as her hands moved to rub at it before she shuffled towards the shower.

Inhandra was in remarkably good shape; a childhood living as a navy brat and tomboy assured that she had quite a bit of muscle underneath her pelt, though her mother’s genetics ensured that she had just enough curvature in her hips to often bruise them on bulkheads, and enough up top to make it an oftentimes deadly sport of junior enlisted to try and catch a peek, a game which which Inhandra was immensely attuned to, and would dole out some of the worst assignments in the division as punishment. In a perverse way, it was a badge of honor to be cleaning the head under her watch.

Her father had instilled a sense of self-ownership of her health and fitness in her; she recalled many a morning spent trying to keep up with him on his morning jog, or even taking part in the myriad of ways he had to keep in shape while home. Once, when she was five, her mother had discovered her challenging the local boys to a pull-up contest on the playground jungle gym. Which, of course, she won - but her mother insisted on buying her daughter an ever increasing array of dresses and skirts after that.

Somehow, a picture of a six year old Inhandra, dressed in a bright yellow frilly sundress, hair done in curls, and wearing a scowl that could sour milk had somehow made it onto the ship, and been posted in the mess hall. Inhandra blamed dad. But she still loved him, anyways.

A soft ballad played throughout her quarters, a modern take on an old Mus love song. It reflected the aspirations of a new generation, the way they looked forwards to a new reality, but still were at least respectful of the past. Instead of crooning about feeling the red sands of Kaicha Beach between your toes, they instead turned to Earth.

I’ll take you on a ride, across the reddened stars....

She stuck a paw into the shower to test the water, the melody catching her muse, rendering her unable to help but swing her hips and lightly mouth the words. It was a song that

was special to her, a reminder of a time when she was, for a moment, completely and utterly in love.

A trip through to the past...

Her black hair spilled back down over her shoulders as she took off her cap and pulled the pins holding her hair in place; working around heavy machinery meant you had to give some concessions to fashion, at the very least. Tired fingers hooked upon the hem of her shirt and guided it upwards, peeling the damp cotton from her torso, revealing more of the rodent's spotted hide, and her black-furred, fulsome chest. The shirt was quickly discarded into the hamper, and she leaned forwards to study herself in the mirror, hips still subtly moving to the rhythm.

*Back to where we began, a trip back in time
Back to where we met, that fateful time.*

Her eyes lidded, memories of her time spent on Earth Station One coursing through her mind. Dextrous hands caressed a winding path down her sides and towards her hips, slipping underneath the pink waistband there, and urging them down. Her fur rose in place as cool air soon coursed across her naked body, the sensation making her ears blush. For a girl with black fur across her face, it was the only way she could show red.

*Across the years, through all our fears..
She took my soul, she took my hand...*

Inhandra arched her back, stretching out and letting tension work its way out of her spine. She turned and stepped into the shower, the sensation of water working its way down into her fur and touching bare skin making her shiver and gasp. The cascading jets picked up speed to better work under her pelt, and she helped it along, applying just a touch of a weak shampoo, just enough to strip the excess oil and dirt, and leave behind a pleasant scent.

*We gazed upon the monument of lovers innumerable
And knew that all we have is each other*

Inhandra's thoughts turned towards the weeks she spent aboard the station, how she'd met the man that was to be her mate there. Her hands began to linger as her thoughts did, thumbing about against her nipples at first as the water jets splashed against her chest, and then tucking between her legs as the water switched to a gentle massage across her entire body.

Thoughts of walking the beaches on the southern continents..memories of nights spent in the deserts...she shivered again, arching her back and resting a paw against the smooth metal of the shower to brace herself, grateful that she had private quarters this trip.

*I can't tell you why, I can only tell you when.
When they all fell apart, when we fell together.*

The water jets turned off, and the the shower stall started a drying cycle, jets of warm air coursing over her, computer controlled to keep the amount of fluffing of her fur to a minimum. Her paws kept their stations, the one between her legs moving back and forth, fingers disappearing, though her eyes lightly watered up as her mind went to less pleasant events.

*I can't tell you why, I can only tell you when.
When I fell in love with you, on a journey to the past.*

The jets turned off and the door to the shower opened back up, sending a cold rush of air in, and snapping Inhandra out of her wandering thoughts. She let out an exasperated sigh and stepped out, brushing out the rest of her fur, and giving her teeth a quick polish. She walked on her tiptoes out into the main living room, until she could rest her feet on a soft rug she had brought with her. Looking out the port, the ship was passing the system's star in preparation for the fold. At a glance, she probably had ten minutes before the ship was far enough outside the sun's immediate influence.

Inhandra stood in front of the port window, letting the red sun bake into her fur and flesh, warming her up again, a soft, pulsating warmth that she knew she'd miss in the few months ahead. She had a nine month tour to complete, then she could go home again, to feel the twin suns on her naked pelt while walking Kaicha Beach, herself. But she'd have to go back to Earth, a place that held a lot of memories for her.

"Eve, can you set the grav plates to zero tonight?" Inhandra scratched behind an ear, then wandered over towards her locker, crouching down and rifling through it carefully, shifting about the multitude of layers within to get to the bottom. Her hand wrapped about a long, cylindrical toy stashed underneath the combat fatigues and toolsets.

"Certainly. You will have two more nights this month of sleep at low gravity after tonight. Do you want only a half night tonight?" Eve was just following policy, any more than a few nights in a month at zero G, and you'd lose some of your bone mass.

"Sure, one half night will be fine."

Inhandra grasped a handle near the port window and braced herself, feeling the weight of herself give, her entire body relaxing before a short, dizzying sensation of weightlessness took over. She gave a push with just her toes, lifting into the air and doing a slow spin, letting out a pitched giggle of joy. It never got old. Being a kid aboard a starship had its benefits that a younger Inhandra had taken to full advantage.

She pushed off the bulkhead and towards her bed, grasping the blanket and stripping it from the mattress. She performed a slow spin in the air, wrapping the blanket about herself in the process.

The music had long since switched to fare that held little of Inny's attention. Instead, she was focused in on the sensation of that toy tracing out her subtle abdominal muscles on its way downwards, both of her arms tucked down under that warm blanket, only her head and shoulders outside. The other paw started to knead along her inner thigh in anticipation, fingertips just lightly brushing her soft entrance. Her head turned to the side, blue eyes focused in on the passing red giant, the warm light still casting a scarlet glow and soft heat across her quarters.

She urged the toy lower, letting the smooth tip brush and nudge against her furred mound for a few moments, until she aimed it inwards, letting it roll down along her lips, running along the length of them, sending soft thrills of pleasure out until the tip nudged against her backside. She teased it back upward, until the tip rubbed up along the underside of her hood for a moment, and then back down again.

Her eyes remained open, staring out of the port window, watching the large red sun shrink in size as the ship moved away from it. She turned her wrist, and the toy sunk inwards steadily, the smooth tip giving way to subtly ridged textures that slid inside of her easily, making her muzzle open up in a soft gasp, the tension of a long day melting almost immediately, her fingertips pressed to her as her other paw stroked about the apex of sex. She slowly worked the length back and forth, her hips hunching, long, pink tail coiling around one of her legs.

It was nearly enough to just keep up that rhythm. A slow, lazy roll of her hips was all that was needed to move herself around that toy most pleasurably. But she knew that she was on a timeline. Forever beholden to time, though this was the most pleasurable way of being on the clock that she could think of. She kept her eyes open, wanting to watch the movement of the star, knowing what it meant once the star stopped moving in the distance.

Her fingers moved faster, stroking along the pink hood at the apex of her sex as her other paw worked that toy in deeper, twisting it around in her increasingly wet grip, stirring up a pleasurable slow burn. The gentle hum of the engines died off suddenly, and Inhandra pressed her fingers firmly against the hidden clitoris under that hood, rubbing back and forth.

"All hands, this is the XO. Brace for Fold in two minutes."

The loudspeaker was expected, so hearing the XO's voice over it wasn't enough to snap her out of it. It was confirmation of what she already knew. After all, she'd had a hand in designing some of the protocols. The hum of the engines was replaced by a hum of the reactors spinning up to full, the whine of shipwide capacitors sucking down all the energy they could, and the soft moaning and heavy breathing of Inhandra as those fingers moved faster and faster. Urging her steadily into a state of pleasure that made focusing difficult at best.

The back edge of the wellgate came into view; a giant rectangular structure that served to focus all the energy from nearby space into one very concentrated area. The space that the ship currently occupied.

“This is the XO. All hands brace for Fold in one minute. There will be no more announcements.”

The reactors died down, the entire ship at full power. The wellgate was nearing criticality, and all power on the ship was directed towards structural integrity. All of Inhandra's attention was focused on the sensations she was experiencing, trying to time things just right, fingers working furiously over her slippery, pink flesh, pressing and rolling that toy in deep...arching her hips into it, trying to ride that edge only though her body ached quickly, and instinct made her want to finish it.

The wellgate started to glow blue-white, a sort of Cherenkov radiation effect, only done in a well of dark matter and dark energy. She could see it. Her mind knew what it meant, but her usual crushingly technical mind had long since shut down, drowned out by the primal, instinctual urges coursing through her. Her ears were glowing red, themselves...her paw rolling that length within her, working it harder, faster, letting the tip glide along the roof of her vagina, her breathing getting faster, sharper.

A tension welled up in her, her dextrous toes curling and flexing as she made a mental countdown, eyes wide to the vastness of space, mouth silently mouthing the numbers inbetween gasps and moans.

Five...

Her paws were focused in their duty, one furiously rubbing, pinching and pressing against the hood at the apex of her sex. She was dizzy, her head swam.

Four...

The wellgate started to reach criticality. She could see it. Her eyes were watering, her body tense. Her nipples ached first, followed by her entire breast. The blue glow outside turned purple.

Three...

Her paw worked that faux shaft in deeper and faster, twisting and rolling it around, she did anything she could do to make the sensations currently coursing their way down her spine intensify. The wellgate was starting to disappear in turbulence.

Two...

She tilted the angle of that shaft inside her, making it rub firm against the roof of her sex. Her thighs tensed up, fingers working frantically, the motions quicker, more focused. Her groin absolutely ached with tension.

One....

The Wellgate outside seemed to collapse. Inside the ship, Inhandra felt her body explode in orgasm, a feeling of a loss of control, a hyper-focus on her pleasure set in, until the wellgate disappeared and she felt the Fold take over.

Folding did funny things to biological organisms. Ultimately, it was harmless, but for reasons not quite understood, the body and mind knew that they'd suddenly been relocated forty light years away. To most, it felt like standing up too quick, the blood rushing to your head and making you dizzy. To few others, it produced intense nausea. To a very small minority, it felt like taking a hit of a very intense psychoactive all at once. You came out of your own body, you hallucinated, you saw art in your own mind.

Inhandra was in the minority. It was an intense enough feeling when you were simply working, or sitting down for dinner. But she'd stumbled on something a few months back, and tonight she was taking full advantage of it.

Her peak hit just as the ship went into Fold. Her eyes closed as everything outside went black, legs extending out and thighs clenching about her paws. As the rush of endorphins hit her head mid-orgasm, the Fold sickness took hold. She went dizzy, she could see a swirl of colors across her vision, and the intense muscle contractions of her sex seemed to slow down, a slow throb to which she could hear every rush of blood, every clutching sinew of muscle. Her mind jumbled with distorted and disjointed imagery and memories, and her body alternated between numb and on electric fire.

She yelled out loudly, experiencing a peak unlike any other could be. Each one was different, that play of brain chemicals and wild physics unique every time. She snapped her eyes open, watching the red sun blink out of existence. It felt like an eternity, and for a moment she thought she had stopped breathing, stopped living and existing, until the yellow sun of the Sol system popped into view, brighter and closer than the red giant it replaced. She could feel her eyes react, irises becoming pinpoints, and the warmth spilling over her face. She swore she could feel every pulsating wave of energy coming off the star, coursing down her body as if she was conductive. Outside, the hull of the ship crackled with leftover radiation, and Inhandra positively simmered with leftover ecstasy.

Her mind started to come back to reality as both sensations passed. She started to breathe on her own again, and felt her consciousness pour back into her body as water might

pour into a glass. Her hips twitched, fingers stroking softly along her sex, leaving that lengthy toy inside of her, afraid to pull it back out for fear of ruining this mellow. The warmth of the yellow sun warmed her face, and she slowly worked the blanket loose, floating in mid-air, letting that warmth soak into her naked, exhausted body.

“All hands, stand down.”

Certainly, she could not have been more at ease as she slowly drifted to sleep, floating in the middle of her cabin, white and black fur soaked by the warm, young sun outside.