

## The Reprieve

"I'm dying, Marjorie," the composer said.

"George is not dying. He has the best doctors." said the lyricist. It was like she was speaking to herself.

Outside the penthouse, several of London's best-known theaters were partially visible. All had given birth to at least one of Taylor/Holst's theatrical successes. Some productions had spawned films. Some films had launched theme parks.

"I need to write my masterpiece before I check out." His name was George Holst.

"Stick with the formula, George," Marjorie urged, tossing her luxurious hair over her shoulder, now grey. "Everything we do is a masterpiece. How about that?" She picked up a large Sotheby's brochure that detailed Luna IV, a temporary residence on the moon for anyone who could afford it, although wealthy, frustrated artists were the target. She flipped through the photographs. "You can't be serious about this," she said.

"Why not? I need to write my legacy, and I need inspiration," he said.

Marjorie touched his wristwatch, her gift to him after *Wonderland* became the second best-selling show of all time. "Take a look at the Patek you have on. And this top-floor dream." She spread her arms wide, and then cuddled up next to him, like a fond sister. "Your legacy? How about thirteen Grammys and four Tonys?"

"In whatever time I have left, I need to start writing my masterpiece. My great grandfather wrote symphonies. I write forgettable show tunes." He put his hand in a mock prayer position and looked at a portrait on the wall. "Forgive me grandfather," he quipped. The maestro, Gustav Holst looked off into the distance in the rendering. It was painted in 1919, shortly after the great man finished *The Planets* to world acclaim.

“You're one better than your great grandfather. You are George Holst, the most successful commercial composer of all time. What more could you possibly want?” She reached over and toyed with an orange still dangling from a fruit tree whose branches reached out from the indoor greenhouse.

“I am going to go live on the moon for a few months and write my symphony.”

She picked up the brochure and read the words in a dreamy voice. *‘We invite discerning Visualists to come experience the most inspiring address in the universe.’* She placed the heavy document on the Corinova couch. “This is for people who write checks to the Louvre to have their art shown in a special annex. This isn’t you.”

“Well, the next time I want to know who I am I’ll ring you up Marjorie.”

“Shall I send my decorator to the moon to spruce the place up for you, Geo-Geo?” Marjorie asked.

“Only if he’s my type.” George sneered.

“I need you to remember that we still have deadlines to meet. The Korvets need 3 more songs before we open in less than 60 days.”

“Then leave me alone. That’s how I write. Alone.” He pointed toward the door.

“Well, we are late on this one,” she said, rising up from the couch.

No one spoke.

“Sometimes I wish you had a husband--or wife--who could put you to bed when you have these crazy ideas. The Moon? Really, Geo-Geo.” She shook her head as she walked over to the kitchen and took a glass of water. “But you never answered my question.”

“What’s that?”

“Why?”

“Why what?”

She pointed toward the ceiling, the moon and stars.

George threw his head back on the couch and closed his eyes. “I spoke with Dr. Kiehly yesterday and it’s looking like I’ll have to do the bone marrow thing. The chemo is not moving the needle. Time is running out.”

“Everyone’s time is running out, George. That’s why you need to stay on this planet as long as you can. Comprendre, mon cherie?” She took steps toward her writing partner.

“I was hoping that the chemo would work and I’d be done. But, my IgA numbers are at 7,000 and rising. ”

“What should they be?” Margaret asked anxiously.

“Less than a hundred in healthy people.”

“What do you think mine are?” She snapped to attention, then tapped twice on her watch and dictated a message. “Kenzie, be a doll and set up an annual with Dr. Rogers pour moi.” She ended the recording. “Done,” she said to no one. She walked over to the couch and whispered in George's ear.

“You can go to the Moon, Geo-Geo dear, but you owe me, the producers, and the talent two songs or we can kiss goodbye our chance to capture the Triple Crown this year.”

“Is winning all you think about?”

“At this point in our career, George, winning is for losers. I *vant* total world dominance.” she said in a mock-Dracula voice. “We already have a 2037 Tony, Emmy, and Academy Award. Now we just need a Grammy, and *The Korvets* is our ticket.”

“Too bad the script was written in a laboratory,” George said flatly.

Marjorie put out her hands like she was conducting a symphony in an open air theater. “*The Korvets* tells the story of five Korean War veterans whose intertwined families mirror their connections to one another during the war. It has love, sex, betrayal, history, and kittens--exactly what everyone wants to see at the theater.” She came back to earth and reached into her Hermes bag. “And this one is next.” She held out a single handwritten page.

George glanced at the paper and threw it on the couch. “What’s this?” The paper floated to the floor.

“Our next production. I want to create an offshoot of *Wonderland*.” Up went her conductor's hands again. “Working title is *Secrets of Alice*.”

George sank deeper into the couch. “That so?” he asked.

George remembered the years before their first show, *Sin/derella*, became a global sensation and changed the way he wrote music forever. In those days, he lived with his best friend Angus in London. They'd go to the pubs and he'd tell the young lads (and an occasional lass) that he was a composer and aspiring playwright, promising that he would write them into his scripts. At the time he ate little, ran ten kilometers every morning, and went to bed drunk on the music he had written that day.

“What are you going to do up there all alone anyway, George, sick as are?”

George rested an elbow on the back of the couch and looked squarely into her eyes.

“I’m going to write real music, Marjorie. Before I no longer can.”

Marjorie gathered her purse. “Same old George,” she said, shaking her head on her way out.

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George sat alone in the Moon Transport's passenger chamber. The shades on the windows were locked in a down position to help accustom civilians to the unimaginable speed they were traveling. The first officer, a woman from the famed Ghana Space Academy, assured him that she would raise the shades nine minutes into weightlessness. He checked his IgA numbers with a click on his forearm and found that they had again risen slightly overnight. He reached for one of his vials of medication and let a tablet dissolve under his tongue. An hour later he felt no better.

He thought back to the launch party in Las Vegas two nights prior. With all the space tourism based there, the city promoters were billing it as 'The City of Stars,' but everyone called it 'Launch Vegas.'

The guests donned costumes as if they were cast members from sexy space films. George gave a joint press conference with the Director of Ghana Interorbital Systems Corp., who had flown in for the event. The assembled media jostled for position around him.

A writer for the journal *Musicologist* asked him how he thought his instruments might sound in space.

"Like an eighty-year-old man on his honeymoon."

"What do you plan to eat?" asked an attractive journalist from the Universal Media Group.

"Ubereats. But if their GPS doesn't work, I might lose a few pounds."

But the question from a tall woman with an illuminated pen caught his attention.

“Mr. Holst, Caroline Huber from *Healthy Planet*. May I ask a medical question?” she asked. “There are several university platforms on the Earth-facing side of the Moon, but you’ll be on the far side, which is a world away. If you experience any serious medical issues, what will you do?”

The party grew quiet, like when an opposing pitcher shuts down an enthusiastic home crowd. How much did they know?

“Never felt better in my life,” George replied, raising his fists in a boxing stance. “But thank you for asking.”

“But Mr. Holst, the gravity changes and potential radiation transmission can be seriously harmful...”

“Never let gravity get you down, I say! I hear that levitating is very Zen, and very easy in space.” George closed his eyes and turned his palms up in a yoga position and the crowd chuckled.

“May we count on any interviews while you are on the Moon, Mr. Holst?” Carolyn Huber pressed.

“Of course.” George’s voice was calm, but his body felt tense. Interviews, press, awards. It was a part of the job that had nothing to do with why he was heading to this quiet, artistic oasis.

The director ended the press conference and the party continued. Stunning models were riding fake rockets suspended from the ceiling, with dry ice spitting out of mock engines. The guests sipped kombucha cocktails with ice cubes formed like meteors.

Well-wishers now swarmed toward George and he found himself migrating to the corner near the restrooms. A man came out of the bathroom and caught George’s eye.

“*Mon* on the Moon,” the man said in his Scottish way. He placed his hand on George's shoulder.

“What better way to say piss off to a crowd than standing near the pisser?” George said.

They both looked at the approaching guests vying to get a word with the great composer.

“How are you Angus?” George asked. “You come all this way from your fancy university lecture hall to see me off?”

“How could I miss my old pal Mozfart’ goin’ into orbit?”

They stood touching shoulders and George could feel the presence of his friend’s powerful build. Back in their college days at St. Andrews, George would challenge any Mick in a pub to arm wrestle Angus for twenty quid. It was a lucrative business.

“Where’s Glenn or maybe Jen this week?” Angus asked.

George made a fly-away motion with his hand.

“No *teem* for anyone but yourself, huh George? Just like the old days, except now no one can *poot* up *witcha*.”

“I have no time for myself. Which is why I’m going 385,000 kilometers away.”

“Your docs okay with all this, Georgie?”

George waved the question away, downed his drink, and looked out over the party. “Let’s get the fuck out of here, Angs.”

George and Angus took a back stairway out and soon found themselves at the *Dirty Ranchers Bar & Thrill* near the Old Strip. They sat at the bar, which also served as a stage for the dancers and ordered glasses of gin. On a low balcony behind them, a

transvestite in a cowboy hat was strumming country, keeping time with her foot on a bass drum adorned with her stage name, *'Cowgirl in the Band.'*

"I heard you got temporary naming rights for this Luna IV geo-quadrant you'll be living in," Angus said above the music. "What *cha* choose, Georgie?"

"Imogen," George answered.

"Marjorie come up with that one?"

"She was my grandmother. Everything I know about music came from her. She was my favorite person in the universe."

A pair of rubber-tipped heels were bouncing on the bar close to where they sat.

"So you are going to try and converse with your dead grandma in space or some sheet like that?"

George continued. "I'm actually going to complete her father's--my great-grandfather's--orchestral suite, *The Planets*. Gustav Holst got as far as Neptune because Pluto wasn't discovered until four years before his death, and by that time he was too sick to compose anything."

"Do you even know where Pluto is, Georgie?"

"You're the professor of astrophysics. You tell me, and I'll write the music."

"That I will, mate." Angus took a swallow of gin. "Georgie, I've got to tell ya. I've looked hard at the construction of the geo-dorm you'll be stayin' in. I'm a bit concerned about radiation."

"I'm dying anyway, Angs. I just need to stay alive until I complete the movement."

The dancer in front of them was looking directly at the pair of old roommates.



“Complete what, baby?” she asked as she bent down to capture George’s bitcoin transfer on her belt. The name ‘Stevie’ was tattooed on her ankle.

“I’m going to compose an opus on the Moon,” George said.

“Ooh, can I come?” She had green hair that smelled like apples. “I know astrology.”

“Solo mission,” George said, staring into the black hole of her cleavage.

“Sounds lonely.” Stevie tilted her head. “How long are you going for, spaceboy?”

Her words found a quiet place in George’s head. He hadn’t thought of all that time alone.

Stevie noticed George’s English threads and honed in. “I could tell you about the constellations and what they mean. When were you born?”

“April 28th.”

“Ah, Taurus. The bull. Hard worker, thorough, and loves the good things in life. Stubborn as hell. Am I close?”

“Well, he is often full of bull,” Angus smiled. “Do you know who this guy is? This is George Holst.”

Stevie gave a blank stare.

“The composer,” Angus offered.

The transvestite singer seemed ready to finish her set as the bar began to clear out. “Who wants to hear one more?” she asked in a baritone voice.

Stevie cupped her hands. “Play something by George Holst!”

There was a pause. “Who the fuck is George Holst?” came the amplified reply.

“Nobody,” George yelled back.

Stevie kept dancing near the two men. She checked her digital belt for the amount George had transferred to her and smiled.

Angus locked eyes with Stevie and threw a thumb George's way. "I studied astrophysics for six years, but Mozart' here gets to go to the Moon before I do. Go figure." He downed his drink.

Stevie shrugged.

Angus turned toward his friend. "I am going to teach you everything I know about Pluto, starting now."

Angus began to describe how Pluto might have been born and gave details about its atmosphere, orbit, moons, landscape, and the debate around its status as a planet. George dropped his head in pretend sleep.

"George, you don't give a shit about physics, and your idea is to let a slinky brochure from Sothebys teach it to you. Radiation is real brootha."

"Slinky" he repeated, staring at Stevie's legs.

Angus sighed. "Okay, hear this Georgie. The radiation on the Moon is nothing humans are used to and there are factors that can't always be foreseen. Not to mention the low gravity. Are your Docs really okay with all of this?"

George tapped his bulging stomach, bloated from the by-product liquid his body could not seem to expunge. "Maybe I'll lose some weight up there and get sexy again."

Stevie wiggled down a pole with a little wave. Her long green hair touched the small of her back. It looked like fresh, sweet grass and he wished he could take a bit of it with him, way up there to wherever the hell he was going.

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Sitting in the passenger cabin of the Ghana Transport, the Dirty Ranchers Bar & Thrill now was a thousand years ago.

“Everything alright back there?” the Commander asked over a Soundwave. Her name was Zuhra.

“Where’s the Moon?” It was all he could think to say.

“If you want to see where we’re going, come up to the bridge for a visit.”

“On my way,” George said, but he remained in his seat, feeling the nausea that had nothing to do with travel. It was the infant cry of the disease coming from the depths of his body.

The electronic shades covering the windows lit up in succession and opened in sequence around the perimeter of the fuselage. He peered out at the chasm of darkness dotted with flickering stars. It felt like the transport was not moving at all. There were no grids of Iowa soybean fields to track their progress, and no filtered sunset to give a sense of the day passing. He felt like he was heading nowhere.

He looked around the cabin. He felt like a hitchhiker who had thrown all his possessions in the back of a bus and jumped aboard. Mostly he had brought along orchestral instruments, including a full set of timpani and an upright Steinway piano. Over there were the violins, violas, and a hollow-bodied jazz guitar leaning awkwardly against the oval-shaped cabin.

The last and vital climax song for The Korvets, *Back to You*, was not coming easily and Marjorie was getting anxious. The weight of the unfinished piece hung over him, pulling him back to Earth, now completely out of view. He looked over at his bag of prescription medications, good for 120 days if he remembered which one to take and

when. He had long ago given up researching each medication for side effects and effectiveness. He just took what he was supposed to take while continuing to write what he was supposed to write.

A buzz from the Nocular on his seat indicated that Marjorie was trying to Holo into the cabin. George declined.

“On my way now,” George yelled as he shut off the keyboard and made his way to the bridge.

His gravitation certification gave him a basic understanding of how to navigate a confined space. He reached the bridge through a narrow tube and strapped himself into a seat diagonally behind Zuhra. Her hands danced along the Transport’s controls.

“We’re passing the shipping lanes,” she said, pointing vaguely to the right. George could make out what appeared to be blue lasers in the far distance creating a roadway path from Earth to the Moon.

“Where do you go after you drop me off?” asked George.

“Water deliveries to the Four Universities on the Moon's near side. There is a distribution center where I park and launch this thing. We are actually towing eighty tons of water right now.”

No one spoke. The huge grey rock, Earth's famous satellite and his new home, was in full view as they headed toward its southern pole. The sight was colossal.

“So, Zuhra. I’m curious. Do you have a favorite show of mine?” George fished. Her eyes never left where she was going.

“A drill can be powered by the jet fuel created by the separation of hydrogen and oxygen, but it needs to be housed and controlled,” she murmured to herself.

“Excuse me?” George leaned forward like a child in the back of the family sedan.

“Oh, it’s something I’ve been working on. What did you say?”

“I asked you if you had a favorite show of mine?”

“Show?” She paused. “Oh yes. When I was little my parents took me to *Antarctica*. It was great!”

“*Antarctica* was great. Still is. But I didn’t write it.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. I’ve actually never been one for musicals. My mind has always been up in space. I don’t watch movies much.”

“Shows,” George corrected and his words drifted off.

“So, what were you just saying about a drill?” he asked.

“For the past few years, I’ve been focused on designing a drill to access the Moon’s water source, but with one-sixth of the gravity of Earth, controlling the thing is an engineering nightmare.”

“I thought there was a company already collecting water on the Moon.”

“Yes, my design lost the contest, the contract, and then the job,” she said with a surprise grin.

“Winning that contest would have made you rich.”

“Rich?” she said, and this time she turned toward him. “I’m rich just driving this taxi. All I want is to use my ideas and experience to help make further advances in the field.” A voice came over her communicator. “Excuse me,” Zuhra said to George, holding a finger to her ear. “Yes, I understand. I’ll have the calculations for you within the sector. I believe I’ve come up with a solution. *The* solution.” She nodded her head. The Transport vessel was inching toward its destination. Things appeared to be getting darker in places, lighter in others. Zuhra clicked off the communication.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Holst, you were saying?”

“George,” he said. “Call me George.” He watched Zuhra hands move over the controls in rapid succession, elegant human tools.

“I used to be like you,” he said, but he was not sure if she heard.

“I heard you are coming up here to write music. Feeling inspired?” She looked into his eyes with a wide grin. Her skin shone against the soft light of the controls.

“Haven’t started yet.”

“Well, it will come. I get my best ideas when I’m up here--free of all distractions.” She threw a thumb over her shoulder toward earth.

“I live in the distractions,” said George.

The Transport approached the Aitken basin, a crater that Angus claimed was one of the largest in the solar system, full of huge depressions, chaotic ice caverns, and seas of grey, flat surface.

Several hours passed with Zuhra quietly guiding the Transport, occasionally murmuring calculations or dictating notes. Eventually, a few man-made structures began to appear. She headed for the second largest in the quadrant, Luna IV, now renamed *Imogen*. The Transport hovered over the structure before sitting down on it like a hen laying an egg. In the distance, the rounded mountains known as the Highlands were visible as a grey outline on the horizon.

A locking sound in the cockpit triggered a series of green lights. It disconnected from the cockpit and settled down onto the Moon-based structure with a grinding sound that descended in volume. Green lights again signaled the successful connection.

“Welcome home,” Zuhra said, unseen. “Someone will arrive within the next few sectors to assist you with getting installed and oriented. You can call the system control anytime and I can be here in a few hours.”

"A few hours," he repeated, mostly to himself. His voice seemed to travel nowhere in the dead air. He inched wormlike through the chamber and it closed behind him.

"Happy writing," Zuhra said, over the intercom.

He watched the Transport rise only a few meters off the surface and disappear into the blackness.

As the vessel became a dot on the moonscape, the utter and complete silence hit him like a crashing cymbal.

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George passed an Earth month on Imogen.

"There are no days per say on the moon," Angus had said back at the *Dirty Ranchers*. "Time is measured in sectors. Two sectors is roughly a week."

Sometime during the fourth sector, George gave a press tour of his new home in the sky. The holograms of the journalists he had met at the launch party -- all joining from different locations around the globe -- now appeared on the small platform in the geo-dorm.

"Imogen consists of three buildings, two of which are in the distance over there," George began, pointing toward some dark abandoned buildings outside in the moonscape. "I live here in this geo-dorm. I spend most of my time in the center space, which I call the Sonata." The journalists were looking at a round space in the center of a spider shaped building. "From here, six glass passageways lead to different

chambers. Over there is my music chamber." George led the tour down the glass alleyway toward a room brimming with instruments.

"Is that a recording device?" asked one of the journalists.

"That it is." George walked over to the piano and struck a few notes. The digitized recorder started to blink. "It is activated by sound. It records everything I am even *thinking* about." George pointed toward a daybed that was squeezed between the instruments. "I tend to sleep here quite a bit."

He gave a tour of the sleeping chamber and a garden space controlled remotely by a team of horticulturalists back at Atlantic Destinations which fed the kitchen.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I must conclude the tour. I need to get back to my music."

Each day, George listened to his great-grandfather's masterpiece, *The Planets*, over and over and over on the geo-dorm inter-Soundwave, focusing on one movement at a time to better understand each distinct structure. The piece known as Jupiter, with its central and relaxing melody, was his favorite companion. His increasing nausea was his least.

Outside the geo-dorm, the other structures in the area were mere outlines on the darkened landscape. Only the occasional reflection of a meteor far off would allow him to mark their close proximity. Behind them, the low rounded mountains of the Moon's Highlands looked like a gathering of bald men. The stars were awesome--awesome--and their timelessness reminded him that he had better get to work on something greater than himself.

The power source for his quarters was nothing like what George expected. The geo-dorm had an underbelly, accessible through a hatch, that was only notable for what



was not there. No wires or cylinders crowded the space. Instead, there were eleven small boxes, each marked 'Divisional,' connected through coils to a tank that bobbed gently in the weightless environment. A second tank was bolted to the floor.

Angus had told him that one of the tanks contains fresh water and would be filled by maintenance from time to time. The divisionals separated the hydrogen from the oxygen and fed the final mix into the other tank. "It's basically rocket fuel," Angus had said at the bar.

Every few days George would see Zuhra and a maintenance worker towing a teardrop-shaped container and watch her connect her vessel to the underbelly of the Sonata. It was like they were filling an oil tank at any home in America. As for Zuhra, George could only admire her intensity as she guided her vessel. Her beauty was untouchable, like a portrait in a museum, and her passion for her work reminded him of himself, a long time ago.

If it were not for the constant hologram requests for meetings with Marjorie, weekly doctor appointments, and the promised press interviews, he might have been able to at least begin composing. But going into the studio and coming out with absolutely nothing made him want to avoid the music chamber entirely, and so he found himself avoiding the space. For a reason he could not say, he found himself reading a Bible and enjoying its stories as if they were fables.

It became clear that Marjorie did not think that his song '*Back to You*' was working. She agreed with the Amazon producers that the use of Japanese kane bells wasn't American enough and seemed trite.

"Trite?" he had sneered.

“How are you feeling?” she said, like a visiting nurse. “I’m really not trying to bother you, but we are under a deadline, dear. Can you give it a fresh go-go, *pour moi*, Geo-Geo?”

“The characters met in Asia, and the piece reflects the Orient. I don’t know what to tell you.”

“Tell me that you will give me a Taylor/Holst-caliber song in three days so that the show can open on time, the producers are happy, and George can enjoy his time in outer space.” Her hands flickered, making her look like an alien as she spoke, and her face started to blur and become distorted. He checked the connection. It was 100%.

“And then you will leave me alone?”

“You are already alone,” she said. “Sorry. That came out wrong.” They stared at one another and spoke in a language that had no words.

“‘*Back to You*’ is written, Marjorie,” he said, his finger on the end-call button. “It’s the right piece. Deal with it. Go worry about something else.”

He gazed out at a palm tree that he noticed swaying in the wind outside.

“We are a partnership. That’s why we are called Taylor/ Holst,” she said.

“Taylor/Holst, the great and magnificent Taylor/Holst. Pay no attention to the man behind the curtain,” he said to no one. His body heaved a great cough and he started to feel himself reeling. “The palm tree sways and sways...” he said.

“Why the hell are you talking about palm trees, Geo-Geo?”

“...sways and prays.” He ended the call and laughed, then laughed some more.

George stared outside at the bald-men mountains. He tried to remember when Zuhra had last come. The palm tree in the distance had a branch that dangled a bulb

that contained the entire Earth. There were nine billion people inside that bulb. He hoped it would not drop and that the people would not fall out and get hurt.

There were no ambulances to help them!

He also did not have enough food to serve an entire planet of splattered humans on the moon's surface.

It was comforting to now see a group of children sitting on some rocks having a party. The largest child was dancing and kept waving at George.

George waved back. *Hi kid.*

But then looky here in the low starry horizon; a French pianist was sitting at her instrument with her hands barely touching the keyboard. Her face was tilted toward him with a single sparkling eye, like Taurus Eldebron. Her name was...Felice.

At the edge of Felice's piano, where it disappeared into a swirl of color, what a sight there was! An entire circus troupe was headed for its next performance, the wheels of its caravan squeaking from the weight of its splendid members. Here, a shy magician peers at him. There, the magician's assistant disappears into a whiff of cosmic smoke. Over there, a child trapeze artist swings above a safety net made of silver. A pair of leopards ride on an elephant's back.

A call came over the Nocular. A press interview and George accepted, raising a pointer finger to ask the child outside to wait for him. Caroline Huber, the tall reporter from *Healthy Planet* with the illuminated pen, appeared on the Nocular.

"How's the food?" she began after a few pleasantries.

"I'm just not hungry, okay?"

Pause.

"What are you doing for exercise?"

“My heart rate is, I don’t know. Why’re you asking?”

Pause.

“How are you coping with the loneliness?”

“Well, there’s a fantastic circus here, so I’m okay. I’ll be joining them for a performance on Pluto, where I plan to write the music.” George gazed into the Nocular.

The children were waiting for him to come outside and play.

Someone was whispering to the reporter in the background. “*We need to end this now. End it. Cut!*”

The oxygen was getting thicker, so George decided only to inhale through clenched teeth. He would opt to treat it like a snack, like pretzels from a bowl, and only take a little at a time. That’s the best way to eat pretzels so you do not eat too much. He would have preferred vanilla ice cream. *The Planets* movement known as Mars marched through the Soundwave system at a military pace.

“Good luck, soldiers!” George said, and the children laughed.

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Twelve sectors had passed. It felt like no time at all.

*The Korvets* opened to abysmal reviews and there was already talk of closing the show.

“This is fixable,” Marjorie insisted, her hologram barging in on an emergency signal. She read to George from a visible blackboard.

*“The only positive thing this reviewer can say about the newest Taylor/Holst disaster is that it starts a half hour before all the other shows in the district, so maybe you’ll miss it...”*

“And Jen Steinberg is a friend!” Marjorie exclaimed. “That piece of shit owes us her career!”

George watched the circus caravan passing as she spoke. Tonight’s show was for all the stars in the galaxy.

He had mastered the art of vomiting with no gravity.

“Our viewers want to know what it’s like to wake up every morning to a plethora of stars,” the writer from *Musicologist* asked during a twice re-scheduled interview.

“Can you tell us what you are seeing?”

A circus. A palm tree. A magician. A piano player named Felice.

“Hi Marjorie, nice to see you again.” Hadn't they just had a meeting last sector, month, or year?

“We can save this with a small rewrite. *It’s what we do*,” Marjorie said, her voice booming through every parlor in the geo-dorm.

He had developed sores in his mouth and it was difficult for him to speak.

“Get this done and we move on to *Secrets of Alice*, which is going to be our best collaboration ever,” she insisted.

Felice, up at her piano in the stars, sang in the key of Ab minor.

*“Pluto, my son, why do you run...?”*

“Like old times. Okay, Geo-Geo?”

The music of his great-grandfather’s Saturn movement now thundered its repetitive chords through the parlors, portraying the destiny of old age.

Maybe he should go for a walk on the moon and think. He grabbed a jacket and headed for the door. But first, a nap.

He returned to his music chamber and lay down on the daybed, then became sick. It was interesting to see the flakes from his throat float through the room. The music of Neptune streamed, a female chorus, timeless.

George looked out at the moonscape. He caught the eye of one of the children playing by the rocks and motioned for them all to come inside. It took some time--how long, he really could not say--but finally someone came into his sleeping chamber. It was not a child, though. The person wheezed with an asthmatic cough. A hand was placed on his forehead. The music of Neptune continued.

George looked up and saw a man sitting at the piano.

“How long has it been since you have eaten, George?” the man asked.

George had an arm over his eyes and peered at his visitor. He shrugged. Nausea didn’t like food and hadn’t for...for how long?

The man smiled gently at him. He had the look of a professor, wearing spectacles from another time. His face had fewer features than it did pure blue light.

“We Holsts come from a long line of musicians,” he said. “We translate feeling into sound, thoughts into melody. *It’s what we do.*” He stood up. The effect of gravity did not seem to faze him.

“Water,” George said.

“Stevie, can you please bring my dear boy some water?”

The dancer from the Dirty Ranchers approached, her green hair brilliant against the backdrop of stars. “Taurus people think they want to be alone, until they don’t.” She tilted his head up, and he drank some water from a bottle, staring into her eyes. “Music

medicine,” she said. A few drops spilled on his chin. When he went to wipe it away he noticed that tufts of his white hair had fallen onto his chest.

“I’m going to be sick,” George said. He leaned over and released what he could from his empty stomach. He called for ice.

"Someone, bring him ice!" Stevie cried.

“On its way,” a familiar voice said, entering the room.

"Mozfart'," the voice said, approaching him.

Angus placed a spoonful of ice on George’s lips. It felt like cool novocaine on his open mouth sores. It was good to see him. Next to him was an elegant woman.

“Really now, Geo-Geo. Is all of this necessary?” Marjorie said. “We have a show to do and instead you give us this production.” She opened her arms toward the stars like they were a poor stage set.

The great composer Gustav Holst sat down at the piano and began to assemble a slow melody.

Outside by the rocks, the children sat listening to the melody. The tallest child mimicked the steps of a soldier. The palm tree began to sway. The circus continued its slow, squeaky jaunt. The leopards stared down from the backs of the elephants.

“Shall we start?” Gustav asked all who were present in the music parlor. He switched on the digital recorder, which was now a reel-to-reel, fitfully moving in stops and starts.

The maestro left the piano and stood on a small platform. He pointed to the assembled instruments and directed the seating as if it were a dinner party. He then began to conduct with an invisible baton. Marjorie took the timpani, Stevie the string section, and Angus picked up the horns.

The written scores on the music stands stood empty of notes. George attempted to move toward the piano, but Gustav motioned him back.

“Take it in, George.”

No one spoke.

No music played from the instruments, but where the movement Saturn was sounding moments before over the Soundwave, only the silent universe rang in George’s ears.

“Pluto is a child,” Stevie said, breaking the silence. “The little boy ran away from Neptune, his mother. Kind of like George, here!” She picked up the cello and plucked a whimsical bass line.

“Pluto is the wild child,” Angus said. “He is the only moon to break away from its mother.” He chose a clarinet and graced Stevie’s cello notes with a melody that moved in swift and playful octaves.

“But the child had imagination,” Gustav offered from the platform. “He created mountains and plains and even a bluish sky, like Earth’s.” He sat down at the piano, and while the cello continued and the clarinet moved over its bass line, Gustav produced a central, almost cartoonish melody that bounced in irregular tempo like a rubber ball on a playground. He locked eyes with Felice in the sky and she began to work out the melodic details.

Gustav returned to his stand.

The antique reel-to-reel recorder continued its lumpy motion.

“Ice-cream,” George begged, but no one heard. He reached for his scalp and came away with a fistful of hair. He attempted to put it back in place like a head of lettuce at the supermarket. The music continued its pace. The children by the rocks now sat and



listened. The magician in the circus swept away the cosmic dust and the palm tree found its sway.

Marjorie cried out.

“No!” she yelled, banging in irregular tempo on the drums with her mallet. “Stop this nonsense now! Get back to the melody!”

The gathered musicians paid her little mind as she banged out a quick and steady three-quarter beat. “Geo-Geo has no time for this now! He can write this when he retires! We have a song to rewrite, and an arrangement for the choir! Then there’s the actor who has to learn the damn piece in a week! Stop, I tell you! Get back to the main melody!” She raised her mallet and the cymbal sounded a thunderous crash.

As the shrill faded, the music was reduced to almost silence. Gustav picked up a viola and began to make a sound like the cry of a child leaving home, knowing he could never return. It was at first tenuous, then took greater form and a new and more mature melody took shape.

Marjorie raised her mallet, eager to crash the cymbal again, but the stern glance of Gustav Holst made her reconsider.

“If I wanted to write opera for the fucking ages, I would write opera for the fucking ages,” Marjorie said to blank stares. “Taylor/Holst brings music and song and dance and story to all the stages in the world! I have no place in this score!” She threw down her mallets and stormed out of the room.

George gagged on the air and coughed violently. His body was numb. If he unbuckled himself, he could float up to Felice and help her play the piano and work out all those strange chords. The music had moved to Db minor and needed to come back

down, resolve itself, perhaps even die. It worked its way through the universe, following the circus caravan. It knew where it was going.

It was fortunate that the antique reel-to-reel was recording everything.

George needed to sleep, and so he did.

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September 29th, 2038 was the date set for the anticipated performance of *The Planets Plus Pluto*. Only distinguished patrons of the Royal Albert Hall were offered tickets, free of charge, a gift for their generosity over the years. It was a perfectly planned evening except for the rain outside that dampened the night. Winds blowing at eight knots whipped the guests as they filtered in under wide umbrellas.

The famous amphitheater had been likened to the year 1918, when Sir Gustav Holst first premiered his masterpiece at the Queens Hall. Tonight the bulbs in the chandeliers were replaced with antique flax candles that gave off a warm light. For this, the organizers had to make a special donation to the London Fire Brigade.

The concertgoers in their garb were every bit a part of the performance.

Queen Catherine and King William arrived late dressed as a Gatsby-style flapper and gentleman, which the press deemed 'out of period' due to the fact that the roaring decade was actually still two years away from the original 1918 performance. Lady Winston, of that famed family, arrived by coach-and-four, no small feat given the special permits it required.

Many patrons wore ensembles from a special collection issued by Stella McCartney for the occasion, including Russian tunics and prominent belts that were popular during the World War I years.

Valets parked the guests' cars, mostly Excaliburs and Morgans, in a red-roped lot just outside of the hall. The porters and valets rushed to hold oversized umbrellas over the heads of the lucky patrons.

As the last of the audience members found their seats--some visibly drenched--Marjorie Taylor stood alone at the base of the side stairs leading to the grand stage. She had decided to forgo the period costume and instead wore a simple black dress that hugged her body and made her look far younger than her sixty-three years. Her grey mane, filled out with extensions, fell in waves over her left shoulder. Her diamond studs and emerald necklace sparkled. Her speech was well-rehearsed, but as the orchestra, led by none other than Maestro Vladimir Konoska, tuned their instruments, she realized that she had no opening line.

She glanced at her notes. No one had heard much about George Holst since he was found unconscious in his radiation-poisoned geo-dorm nearly a year ago.

In the seventh row of the venue sat the first officer from the Ghana Interstellar Academy who had rescued him. Next to her sat Angus Campbell.

The lights went down and Marjorie was blinded by the spotlight as the audience applauded. She ascended the steps toward the single microphone at the center of the stage.

"I'm so glad that the opening night of *Sin/derella* didn't get washed out with rain like tonight!" The line just came out, and polite laughter moved through the auditorium. "Or I certainly would not be here!" More appreciative laughter.

She allowed for an uncomfortable pause.

“Taylor/Holst belongs to the ages,” she said. “I am insanely proud of the award-winning compositions I have been lucky enough to co-create with the master George Holst. I believe our music has spoken to people young and old for decades, and it will continue to do so as long as theater lives.”

A tiny sparrow had somehow gotten inside, and it began to flutter around the hall. Eyes moved from the bird to the speaker.

“A year ago our friend George Holst was found unconscious in Sotheby’s Luna IV. Lieutenant Zuhra Khuma found him in his geo-dorm and, after multiple attempts, was able to successfully resuscitate him. Lieutenant Khuma is here with us tonight.”

A spotlight found Zuhra, who was dressed in a long white gown with a sunflower-shaped cutout. As the light caught her, Angus could be seen sitting adjacent in a tuxedo, his tie knotted tightly around his broad neck. The audience gave a standing ovation, but she remained seated. She acknowledged the applause with a raised hand.

“Thank you, Ms. Khuma, from all of us.” Marjorie placed a hand over her heart. The sparrow approached the stage, off to the side.

“If George could...could be here tonight, he would be. But unfortunately his doctors advised against it. Knowing George, he probably offered them each a role in a future show in exchange for a doctor’s note.” The audience laughed.

“I’m afraid I’m a poor stand-in,” she smiled in the glow of the spotlight.

“We are all concerned about his illness which has sadly forced him into retirement. I know I am amongst friends, so I will say only that, no matter what, we all wish the best for the legendary. George Holst. His legacy lives on!

“Many of you know that my nickname for George is ‘Geo-Geo.’ All I can say now, from this stage, through you, and to him, is ‘Geo-Geo, you are my hero, my idol, and my friend. We all wish you a speedy recovery.” Marjorie dampened one of her eyes.

“Meanwhile, as leaders in the entertainment business have been saying for centuries, the show must go on.” She lifted her chin and gave a defiant look. “Until such time as George Holst should return on his own terms, I am pleased to announce my new creative partnership with Zachary Hollister, of Sydney, Australia. Zachary is one of the most talented young composers to come around in years. Zachary has been composing since the age of six. His lack of formal training gives way to an explosive musicality that will bring a fresh sound to the modern theater. Our next show, *Secrets of Alice*, is in advanced production, and I am pleased to announce on this stage that 10% of its proceeds will go toward discovering the cure of multiple myeloma, which has so sadly stricken our great friend George.” The applause was polite.

The bird darted across the stage and Marjorie ducked. “Oh my! I appear to be performing a magic show!” she quipped. “For my next act, I will pull a Tony Award out of a hat!”

Barely visible on the side stage, a man dressed in a deep purple tuxedo stepped toward the light. His sapphire earring sparkled in the spotlight, which revealed a treble clef tattoo on the side of his neck.

“Zachary, please join me,” Marjorie beckoned, her hand outstretched.

The young man tripped briefly as he made his way to the center of the stage. “Ladies and gentlemen, may I introduce you to Zachary Hollister.”

A rumbling of voices now rolled through the auditorium. The rear door had been thrown open, causing an unnatural beam of light to pierce down the aisle. Apart from

the patrons in the rear balconies, most heads were now turned toward the man moving down the aisle in a wheelchair.

It was George Holst.

“The magic of the theater...” Marjorie continued, “cannot be stopped by any one man or woman. It lives for eternity through stories and renditions that only grow...”

As George approached the stage, Angus stood up and joined him in the aisle.

“Welcome back, Mozfart’” he whispered. “Nice of you to show up for your own performance.”

“Get me...” George garbled his words. “Get me the fuck up there.”

“Doone” Angus said, and began to wheel him toward the stage.

Marjorie’s words continued to echo. “With time, as the glory of the theater and the parting of the curtains reveal the work of countless artists who together....”

A single voice interrupted her speech.

“Thank you, Marjorie. Thank you very much,” George said loudly and clearly in front of the stage.

“George,” she uttered. “I mean...how on earth?” She caught herself and looked directly into the audience. “Ladies and gentlemen, we have an unexpected guest.”

Zuhra had joined Angus and together with the help of a burly stagehand they lifted George in his wheelchair step by step up to the stage.

Zachary Hollister stood rigid in the middle of the stage, the spotlight revealing his youth.

Angus whispered in George’s ear. “Never one to miss a party, are ya Georgie?”

“Get Gaga off my stage, Angs.”

“The easy way or the hard way?”

He wheeled George into the center spotlight. Marjorie looked like she was caught smoking a cigarette under the bunk.

The two former partners began to whisper away from the microphone.

“Geo-Geo, I had no idea that you would make it, otherwise, I wouldn’t have...”

“Announced your new partnership with some punk from Sydney with Daddy’s Warbucks?”

“George, this partnership is just a temporary model until you get back on...”

“Get off my stage, Marjorie.”

“Are you sure you’re...”

“Get the fuck. Off. My. Stage. Marjorie.”

The words were heard in the back row of the highest balcony.

Marjorie smiled at the audience, then looked down at the man sitting in the wheelchair.

“Ladies and gentlemen, the stage is a place where the unexpected happens, and it just so happens that...”

George rolled his wheelchair against her leg and ran over her shoe.

“Testing,” George began. Marjorie moved aside.

“Testing. This thing work?”

Zuhra and Angus nodded and gestured for George to continue.

“Good evening, everyone. Thank you all for coming to my rather wet premier.”

He was dressed in only sweatpants and a hospital gown.

A few claps could be heard around the auditorium. They were picked up by larger sections of people before moving through the crowd in a wave.

“Approximately one year ago, I took a sojourn on the far side of the Moon. I went with a few instruments and a desire. I arrived at a place I had the honor of naming myself. Imogen, my beloved grandmother, taught me the love of music. Like her father and his father before him, she was a talented composer. She was also a pianist, a teacher, a prolific biographer, and many other things. She was my hero, my mentor, and my inspiration.”

The sparrow glided above the orchestra.

“Ah, I can see that I am not the only one who took flight.”

The audience laughed.

“Like this little bird, who is hopefully holding in his innards, I flew to the Moon and tried my best not to crap all over the people who have enjoyed my music over the years. But it did not take me long to realize that shitting all over the music world is exactly what I have been doing, and I’m afraid I’ve been doing it very well for a long time. None better.”

There were gasps and some looked toward the faces of the Queen and King, but the smiles on the royal couple were broad.

George looked offstage at Marjorie, who was hiding her head in her hands. She descended the stairs and walked through the orchestra and stood just below where Angus was on the stage. Shemouthered two words to him. They appeared to be ‘*stop him.*’

“Stop him--what, Marjorie?” George spoke into the microphone. “Ladies and gentlemen, it appears I am making at least one person here uncomfortable.”

Marjorie moved into the darkness.

The now anxious orchestra started to toy with their instruments and atonal sounds began to seep throughout the auditorium.



“But there was no one more uncomfortable than I, gracing the stages of the world with songs as forgetful as the flight plan of our fine feathered friend here.” George pointed toward the displaced bird.

“We all seek success, whatever it is--from serving a cup of coffee to writing a symphony--but, sometimes when we find that success, we do not recognize its face, or in my case, how the song is supposed to go.” He snapped his fingers.

“I ended up losing that song. The musical obsession I grew up with, that passion that made me unable to walk by a piano without stopping to play a few keys, died for me. I don’t blame the stage. I blame the setting. As composers, our job is to translate feeling into sound, thoughts into melody. *It’s what we do*. I lost that, but tonight I hope to bring some of it back for you.”

Applause grew in intensity, and George waited for it to die down. Angus placed a hand on his friend’s shoulder. Zuhra watched as if George were presenting her own dissertation.

“We will all be memories one day. The question is, how long will they last? Most of us will be gone from the collective canon of history after our children pass. Some of us will be lucky enough to have planted a seed, like many great artists throughout history, that will grow into a tree. Its branches will then grow fruit or nuts or flowers, which then create more seeds, and so on and so on. We should all be so lucky.

“One such artist was my own great-grandfather, Gustav Holst, whose creation, *The Planets*, was performed in the old Queens Hall exactly 120 years ago tonight. His orchestral suite comprises seven movements, as he did not write one for Earth, and the planet Pluto would not be discovered for another eleven years by a young astronomer at an observatory in Flagstaff, Arizona.

“With the discovery of the ninth planet in 1930, the orchestral suite became incomplete. It needed to be finished, and I decided that it would be my great honor to do just that. I felt determined and enthralled with anticipation at the challenge of this great musical quest. I was over the Moon, you might say.”

The audience laughed.

“When I went on my adventure to Imogen, I was a very sick man. I had been told that I would have to undergo a painful bone marrow transplant, the results of which were tenuous at best. It was about this time that I met a young woman whose job it was to deliver me safely to Luna IV. Allow me to introduce you to Lieutenant Zuhra Khuma, the woman who saved my life.”

The audience rose to its feet and a spotlight shone again on Zuhra, who took in the applause with a nod and another raised arm.

“Lieutenant Khuma is engaged in a program to harvest water to enable long-term habitation on the Moon. Her name may not be as familiar to you as say mine or Marjorie Taylor’s. That’s because her work is selfless. There are no audiences for engineering advancement in space habitation. There is no opening act for that, no catchy lyric or melody. But in so doing, she deserves the same accolades that are showered on the composers and musicians whose songs are played again and again on the world stage.”

The auditorium grew quiet. The bird had settled down and now sat on the stage.

“So, little bird, you have come into this space and made your way front and center. Where will you go next?” The sparrow flew off and disappeared into the darkness.

“Our little friend is on his own mission,” George said, watching the sparrow flutter into darkness. “As we all are. The question is, which flight path will we take?”

George began to attempt to stand up, and Angus and Zuhra each took an arm and assisted him. Angus adjusted the microphone. The hall was silent.

“When Zuhra rescued me, I had been suffering from acute radiation poisoning. Prior to losing consciousness, apparently, I had been delirious for some time. As a result of a toxic environment, I had no business surviving, with radiation levels that were no one’s fault, I am delighted to report to you tonight that my cancer has...vanished. Miraculously, I am in full remission.”

The audience jumped to their feet to give a standing ovation. George attempted to quiet the crowd before continuing.

“Who knew that I was going to the Moon to get radiation therapy? My only question is whether my insurance will reimburse me for the amount I paid to Sothebys!”

Angus leaned into the microphone. “I *doon’t* think so, Georgie.” The audience laughed. “*Boot* if anyone can arrange it, you can.”

George caught Marjorie’s eye and noticed the tears forming. Watching her shake her head he realized that despite the deadlines, conflicts, and must-haves, she was still his old friend, the bartender at the Cork & Scully who one night so long ago had simply said to him, *I have an idea for a play*.

George continued. “The incredibly talented Marjorie Taylor has long been my partner on a musical journey that took to the skies, and for that I am forever grateful. Marjorie, thank you for all those years, and for letting me share your remarkable talent.”

Marjorie put her hands in prayer position and then saluted her partner.

“Now it is time for the two of us to take different flights. I wish her and Zachary Hollister all the success in the world. Keep your eye on those two.” As the spotlight was

directed at Marjorie, Zachary Hollister stepped into it and they both acknowledged the crowd.

“If their show doesn’t win a Tony, you are all witnesses to the fact that I had nothing to do with it!”

The audience raised their fists in the air and Lady Winston stood up from her seat in joyful applause.

“Don’t be too hard on them, Jen,” George said, looking down at the West End reviewer seated in the front row. The famed critic wagged a scolding finger backed by a playful grin.

The tuning of the instruments stopped, and the Royal Albert Hall again became quiet.

“Ladies and gentlemen, you did not come here to listen to a man in a hospital gown give a retirement speech. You came to experience what I hope you’ll agree is a timeless movement that will be performed in halls like this for centuries to come.”

“Vladimir?” George said, motioning to the maestro. The great conductor raised his baton, and the orchestra came to attention. He nodded to George.

“Ladies and gentlemen, I present *The Planets* in its entirety, including the reprieve entitled Pluto.” He paused and looked up toward the ceiling. “Great-grandfather, I hope you like it.”

The sparrow took flight toward the balcony as Vladimir led the orchestra toward the opening notes.

**The End**