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The Commuter Between Stars

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Introduction

The Commuter Between Stars is not a book about conquest or catastrophe. It is about the itinerary that repeats until it becomes a kind of prayer, the ritual of launch-check-dock, the way a body learns the gait of artificial gravity and the etiquette of corridors too narrow for ego. When we imagine space, we often imagine spectacle; here, we imagine schedule. The cosmos has its storms and its astonishments, but for most of its inhabitants—human, machine, or something in between—life arrives in shifts. This novel looks sideways at wonder and finds, beside it, the work that keeps wonder running.

At its center are two travelers whose clocks refuse to agree. One is a pilot whose career is measured in flights, maintenance cycles, and certifications that expire. The other is an immortal diplomat whose tenure stretches past treaties, languages, and fashions, returning to the same jumpseat in the same ship across centuries that pass like layovers the pilot never quite experiences in full. Between them thrum the old questions of friendship and fidelity: what does it mean to be known by someone who cannot run out of time, and what does it mean to be seen by someone for whom each ride is both the same and entirely new?

This is a book of bureaucracies as much as it is a book of stars. Clearances degrade faster than metal. Stamps lose their authority while the ink is still drying. A policy written to tame a problem becomes the problem itself. Paperwork here is a second gravity, and the pilot—a practitioner of checklists, a devotee of margins—learns to navigate both vacuums at once. The diplomat, custodian of agreements that outlive nations, carries continuity like a burden and a promise, an archive dressed as a person.

The tone you will find is quiet, even when the hull groans. It is poetic and introspective not to be obscure, but to make room for small things: the sweat-shadow from a headset's foam, the stale sweetness of recirculated coffee, the constellations of scuffs on a deck where boots have braked a thousand times. Conversations matter here, and so do silences—the efficient, professional ones, and the unwieldy silences between two people who have spent too long in proximity to call it chance. If there is grandeur, it tends to appear at the periphery of a routine: a starfield glittering behind a checklist, a nebula glimpsed while waiting on a form.

The structure follows the rhythm of commuting: departures and arrivals that resemble each other until, by accumulation, they do not. Between chapters, centuries slip. The pilot sometimes travels asleep and wakes to a world that speaks a cousin of their language. The diplomat arrives already briefed on who has forgotten whom. Memory

in these pages behaves like cargo—declared, weighed, sometimes jettisoned to make the mass balance come out right. What we keep and what we shed becomes a choice, then a habit, then a story we tell about ourselves.

You will not find here a manual for engines or a treatise on warp. The science keeps its promises enough for the fiction to keep its own. What matters is how a checklist can be a love letter to the future, how a signature can be a kind of oath, how a commute can teach a person the contours of their patience and the shape of their duty. The ship's systems are scaffolding; the people inside them are the building.

If you have ever worked a job until its motions felt like muscle memory, if you have ever fallen into a friendship by accident and then discovered it had become a map, if bureaucracy has ever taught you both humility and defiance, then there is a seat for you here. The pilot will show you the window; the diplomat will show you the file. Between them runs a thread that strains, knots, is spliced, and—if we are lucky—holds. What endures when calendars go soft around the edges is the question we will keep asking, commute after commute, until the answer reveals itself in the ordinary light of arrival.

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CHAPTER ONE: The First Fare

The dock at Port Kepler-7 smelled of ozone and recycled air, a metallic tang that clung to the back of the throat like the promise of a long shift. Mara Vell checked the seal on her flight suit one last time, the hiss of pressurization a familiar lullaby after a decade of night-watch launches. She had flown the same route three hundred and twelve times, each departure a carbon copy of the last, yet today felt different because the manifest listed a name she had never seen before: Ambassador Lysandra of the Concord. The paperwork fluttered in her gloved hand, a thin sheaf of clearances that would expire before the ship even left the gravity well.

She stepped onto the gangway, the magnetic plates humming beneath her boots, and entered the cabin of the *Commuter's Grace*. The interior was modest—two rows of jumpseats, a narrow galley, a wall of blinking diagnostics that never seemed to sleep. Mara took her place at the pilot's console, her fingers dancing over the tactile keys as she ran the pre-flight checklist. Each item was a ritual: fuel levels, coolant pressure, navigational beacons, the ever-present reminder to verify the diplomatic pouch's integrity. She muttered the numbers under her breath, a habit that kept the void from feeling too empty.

When the hatch sealed, a soft chime announced the arrival of the passenger. The door hissed open, and a figure glided in, moving with a grace that seemed to defy the ship's artificial gravity. Lysandra was tall, her skin a faint luminescent blue that caught the recessed lighting, her hair woven with threads of silver that shifted like moonlight on water. She wore a robe of layered fabric that rustled softly, each fold emblazoned with the sigil of a dozen extinct nations. Despite her otherworldly appearance, her eyes held a weary familiarity, as if she had seen this very cabin a thousand times.

"Good day, Pilot Vell," she said, her voice resonant yet gentle, carrying an accent that sounded like a blend of old Terran dialects and something Mara could not place. "I trust the vessel is ready for transit?"

Mara managed a smile, feeling the usual flutter of nerves that accompanied any new face in the cockpit. "All systems nominal, Ambassador. We'll be breaking dock in ten minutes. If you'd like to secure yourself, the jumpseat is to your left."

Lysandra inclined her head, a small, appreciative gesture. She settled into the seat, adjusting the restraints with a practiced ease that suggested she had done this countless times before. As she settled, a small data slate slipped from her robe and floated lazily toward the floor. Mara caught it reflexively, noting the emblem etched into its surface—a stylized hourglass encircled by stars.

“Thank you,” Lysandra said, taking the slate back. “I keep a record of each journey. It helps... maintain continuity.”

Mara glanced at the slate, then back at the diplomat’s calm expression. “Continuity? You mean the paperwork?”

Lysandra’s lips twitched. “In a sense. The agreements I carry outlive the languages that wrote them. They need tending, like a garden that never stops growing.”

The thought made Mara chuckle, a short sound that surprised her. “I tend to think of my job as keeping the ship from falling apart. You sound like you’re tending a cosmos.”

“The two are not so different,” Lysandra replied, her gaze drifting to the viewport where the sprawling arms of the Kepler nebula began to unfurl. “Both require attention to detail, and both can be... monotonous if you let them be.”

Mara felt a flicker of irritation at the notion of monotony, but she pushed it aside. The ship shuddered softly as the docking clamps released, and a low thrum built in the hull as the ion drives spooled up. Stars outside the viewport stretched into lines, then blurred as the *Commuter’s Grace* slipped into the slipstream. The sensation was always the same—a gentle pressure against the chest, a reminder that they were leaving the familiar pull of a world behind.

As the ship accelerated, Lysandra turned her attention to the console, her fingers lightly touching the readouts. “You have a very tidy system here,” she observed. “Everything labeled, every cycle logged. I imagine it must be comforting.”

Mara shrugged, though she felt a pang of pride. “It keeps mistakes down. When you’re hauling cargo or diplomats, you can’t afford surprises.”

“And yet,” Lysandra said, her tone turning contemplative, “surprises are what make the journey worthwhile. A sudden solar flare, an unexpected comet, a message from a civilization we thought lost—those are the moments that break the rhythm.”

Mara glanced at the diplomat, noting the way her eyes seemed to hold galaxies within them. “I suppose you’ve seen a lot of those.”

“I have,” Lysandra said softly. “More than most can remember. And yet, each time I return to this seat, I feel as though I am meeting you for the first time.”

The statement hung in the air, delicate as a soap bubble. Mara tried to parse it—was it politeness, or something deeper? She decided to answer with honesty rather than flair.

“I don’t know what it’s like to live centuries, but I do know that every launch feels new because I’m the one in the seat. The ship changes, the crew changes, even the regulations change. But the act of flying... it stays.”

Lysandra nodded, as if confirming a suspicion. “Exactly. The constancy of the act provides a framework for the variable. It is why I keep returning to the same pilot, the same ship, even as the world outside shifts like sand.”

Mara felt a warmth spread through her chest, not from the ship’s engines but from the notion that someone saw value in her routine. She glanced at the clock embedded in the console—a digital readout that ticked forward in seconds, minutes, hours. “We’ll be at the next waypoint in about three hours. If you’d like, I can show you the nebula up close. It’s... spectacular when the filters are off.”

Lysandra’s smile widened, revealing a hint of teeth that gleamed like polished ivory. “I would like that very much. Thank you, Pilot Vell.”

Mara turned her attention back to the controls, adjusting the ship’s trajectory to sweep closer to the glowing clouds of gas and dust. The nebula painted the viewport in shades of violet and emerald, tendrils of light reaching out like fingers seeking contact. For a moment, the usual hum of the drives faded into the background, replaced by the silent spectacle outside.

She found herself speaking more freely, the words flowing as easily as the starlight. “My first solo flight was a supply run to Titan Outpost. I was nineteen, terrified I’d forget a step in the checklist. I ended up looping around a moon twice because I misread a bearing. The commander laughed, but he let me try again.”

Lysandra listened, her head tilted slightly, as if storing the anecdote for future reference. “And did you succeed on the second attempt?”

“I did,” Mara said, a grin breaking through her fatigue. “I landed with only a fraction of the usual fuel reserve. The commander said I had ‘earned my wings’—though I think he was just glad I didn’t blow up the landing pad.”

The diplomat laughed, a soft, melodic sound that seemed to harmonize with the ship’s low vibration. “I have seen many pilots earn their wings, and many lose them in the same breath. It is a delicate balance, this trade of skill and trust.”

Mara felt the truth of those words settle onto her shoulders like a second skin. She had always thought of her job as a series of tasks—checklists, fuel burns, course corrections—but Lysandra’s perspective reframed it as a relationship, a quiet contract between pilot and passenger, ship and stars.

The voyage continued, the *Commuter's Grace* gliding deeper into the nebula's heart. Mara monitored the readouts, making micro-adjustments, while Lysandra occasionally tapped her slate, noting something Mara could not see. The silence between them was not empty; it was filled with the shared understanding that they were both custodians of something larger than themselves—a pilot who kept the machine running, a diplomat who kept the agreements alive.

When the nebula began to thin and the distant glow of a new star system appeared on the horizon, Lysandra straightened in her seat. "We are approaching the jump point for the Concord hub," she announced. "Thank you for the tour, Pilot Vell. Your skill made the passage pleasant."

Mara felt a flush of pride, tempered by the usual humility that came with completing a routine task. "It's my job, Ambassador. Safe travels."

As the ship aligned with the jump point, the familiar surge of anticipation built in Mara's chest. She ran through the final checks—drive status, navigation lock, clearance confirmation—each step a well-worn note in a song she had sung a thousand times. The diplomat remained still, her expression serene, as if she were already halfway through the centuries that lay ahead.

The *Commuter's Grace* shuddered as the jump drive engaged, a brief compression of spacetime that made the stars outside smear into streaks of light. Then, with a soft pop that was more felt than heard, the ship slipped into the slipstream, leaving the nebula behind.

When the vibration subsided and the view cleared, they were no longer amid the colorful clouds but drifting toward a glittering orbital station that pulsed with the soft lights of countless docked vessels. Lysandra rose from her seat, smoothing her robes with a motion that seemed both familiar and alien.

"Until our next fare, Pilot Vell," she said, her voice carrying a note of genuine warmth. "May your checklists always be clear, and your skies ever open."

Mara watched her depart down the gangway, the diplomat's steps light despite the weight of centuries she bore. As the hatch sealed behind Lysandra, Mara allowed herself a moment to look out at the station, at the swirl of ships arriving and departing, each with its own story, its own cargo, its own passenger.

She turned back to the console, the checklist glowing softly in the dim light. The next entry read: *Post-jump systems verification*. She tapped the first item, feeling the familiar click under her fingertip. The routine would continue, as it always had, but now there was a new thread woven into it—a passenger who remembered each

journey, and a pilot who, for the first time in a long while, felt that her work was being seen, not just performed.

The ship hummed, the stars outside wheeled slowly, and Mara Vell settled into the rhythm of the commute, ready for the next fare, the next checkpoint, the next quiet moment where duty and companionship met in the narrow corridor between stars.

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