II

Sunny’s first few weeks aboard the SS *Nashville* were ones of struggle, adaptation, and a fair amount of feeling out of place.

As to the first two, we’ll get to them in due time. But it was hardly surprising that she felt like she didn’t belong aboard the ship. Among the five occupants, she was the only one who was not either raised, built, or trained to be out here in the stars. With the exception of questions relating to their cargo capacity, of which there were precisely zero because of just how comparatively simple of a job that it was, any and all matters that occurred aboard the ship were almost entirely out of her wheelhouse.

She knew about as much about being an astronaut as she did being a soldier, or a pilot, or an android. And that meant that her usefulness beyond being an extra set of hands aboard the ship was shockingly limited—something that she was reminded of more and more every day that she was aboard this rig.

“Well good mornin’ fuckers!” Lo entered the central rotunda of the Crew’s Quarters with quantifiably more aplomb than normal, “Did *you guys* sleep okay?”

“Good morning, Lolo.” Sunny naively smiled at the skinny matchstick winding up for the first strike of the day, “How about yo—”

“Don’t.” Catherine muttered under her breath, “Just… don’t.”

“Ohhhh come on Cathy!” Lolo held her arms out dramatically, “It’s not every night that I get to *grind* against a cute, tight little redhead and not have to worry about taking her out for breakfast in the morning.”

“Y… R-Red—”

“Good morning, Lourdes.” The soft delivery of the ship’s resident android belied an understated venom towards being referred to as a ‘cute and tight little redhead’, “You’re not scheduled to work until third shift—you should really try to get some sleep.”

“Listen, it’s half your fault that I can’t get no sleep anyway, Ashe.”

Lo threw herself down on the couch and shimmied towards the center, grabbing at the spread that had been printed out for them. Reaching over the bowl of eggs to lay an outstretched palm on two pieces of toast, Lo grabbed both of them and the butter as she reeled her arm back in. She shoved the first piece in her mouth raw, lubricating the other slice with a pad of yellow margarine and a knife.

“Been staring at that ass ever since we launched—I didn’t think we’d get to make this ship rock until at least a few more months.”

Lo licked her lips as Ashe and Cathy rolled their eyes, all the while poor Sunny could only look on in a mixture of…

Well gosh, she wasn’t quite sure what she was feeling.

“You do realize that Ashe is a therapy droid, right?” Catherine cocked a brown eyebrow as she bit into her jellied biscuit, “As in, she probably thought that some pity sex might be your only chance at being at least *somewhat* normal?”

“Oh-ho; pity sex, huh?”

Lolo leaned in to lay her head on Cathy’s broad shoulder, tracing wanting little circles on the central table as she adopted a put-upon pair of puppy dog eyes.

“Y’know… that didn’t stop your big ass from squeezing into my cot last trip out.”

“Oh grow the fuck *up*.” Catherine shoved the smaller woman aside, silencing her with a forkful of gelatinous eggs, “At least pretend like you got some manners.”

Life out in space—especially as a career Import/Export pilot—leant itself to some strange customs. Despite the fact that, biologically, Catherine and Lo were only a little older than Sunny, they had probably been doing this sort of thing since before she had been born. With cryo sleep and FTL travel taken into account, it wasn’t hard to guess that their sum total experience of being out in space might have been twenty years, despite barely *looking* a few days over thirty.

So it made *sense* that Catherine and Lolo might have… you know… hooked up once or twice. Sunny had only been away from her boyfriend for a few months now and she was already starting to feel… y’know… lonely.

“Uh-oh, I think we’re giving the new girl ideas.” Lolo managed through a mouthful of breakfast, “Sorry Sunny, you’re still a little too green for my sheets.”

“Stooo*ooooo*ooop harassin’ poor Sunny.” Catherine pointed her spork at the offending woman, “She ain’t got nowhere to go. Literally. You could at least not act like a sexed up spacer.”

“But I *am* a sexed up spacer.” Lolo winked at the younger woman, “Maybe Christmas. If you’re good.”

Once Sunny chuckled politely, Catherine let up. She and Sunny went back to enjoying their breakfast (in and of as much as they could anyway, given the house special) while their pilot joined them for a quick meal. Ostensibly, she would head back to bed while Sunny and Catherine’s shift began. But in just the few weeks that Sunny had been working with Lolo, she had found it more likely that she’d just follow the two of them, plus Ashe, while they did their shift work. And in any other job, that might have been labeled as a distraction. But given just how little there was to do throughout the “day”, Sunny was almost grateful for the distraction.

“You know, it’s not good for you to eat before going right back to sleep.” Ashe piqued from her end of the table, eyes planted squarely on her tablet as she said it, “Your body’s not going to digest your food properly.”

“What, am I gonna have the hot poops?”

“Maybe. But a more likely scenario is that you’ll start putting on weight.” Ashe put her chin in one hand as she glanced over the olive-skinned spacer stuffing her face with bacon and eggs, “If you eat like you did on our last outing, we might have to roll you out the cargo bay with the payload by the time our trip is done.”

“Eh. We got artificial gravity and shit.” Lo shrugged her shoulders, “Besides, I’ve got plenty of ideas as to how you and me could burn a few calories.”

“Ewwwww.”

“Grow *up*.”

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Most of Sunny’s job aboard the ship was largely just reading off numbers—making sure the engines were at a normal temperature, moderating their speed, checking the built-in scale inside the trailer so that she could make sure that the cargo was still all there.

And all of that could be done in, like, an hour.

Sure, she had to do it two or three times a day, but most of the time Sunny and Catherine spent their days in the Rec Area. Playing pool while old movies played in the background or just sitting on the couch, killing time. She didn’t have any access to her socials out here, and it wasn’t like there were any games to play—other than the antiques like the aforementioned billiards table or something called foosball. On a larger ship there might have at least been a lap pool or a sauna, but all those onboard the *Nashville* could count on for fun were the old monitor built into the wall, the data files inside of it, and what were essentially just distractions.

Well, that and snack.

Sunny had never been much of a comfort eater. Her family hadn’t grown up poor enough that they couldn’t afford nutritious food for her to eat, but she hadn’t grown up so rich that she could have gotten fat off of it. Sunny had spent her entire teenaged and then adult life at more or less the size that she was when she boarded—thin, but not skeletal, with modest curves and a slender build.

But coming up on two months aboard the *Nashville* and that was beginning to change.

It wasn’t anything that, she felt, anyone else could really notice. It wasn’t as though she had gained twenty kilos in just the short amount of time that she had been aboard. But the sedentary lifestyle of working on a mostly automated ship, one that offered very little to do other than just veg out on the couch or have a snack printed for them in the kitchen, was almost entirely different to the one that she had left behind back on Earth.

She used to walk to work, only taking the bus when it rained. She didn’t go to the gym *frequently* but she’d had a membership. The variety of meals that she could partake in when she went out with her friends or (now ex-) boyfriend had always been in her control.

But now that she was a crew member of the SS *Nashville,* neither of those factors were there anymore. Her meals were pre-selected depending on the corresponding day back on Earth and the easiness with which the printer could handle them (today, incidentally, was one of three Meatloaf days). She got virtually no exercise throughout her day anymore—it had gotten to the point where she had started to watch some movies standing up just as an alternative to sitting on the couch with Catherine.

Considering that the gravity was artificial, even; not quite as strong as what she had become used to back on Earth. There were some parts of this ship where there just wasn’t any gravity at all—and while it had been fun to float around in the Cargo Bay for a while, she couldn’t help but feel so… *blah*.

Chubby and blah.

It was five kilograms at the most. Her face was rounder, mostly. Her coveralls weren’t any tighter, and she could still fit into her lounge clothes just fine. But it was *knowing* that the extra weight was there. The little additional ridge of softness along her stomach, the way her thighs seemed to touch more when she sat down. It was all so demoralizing.

“You okay?”

Perhaps it was a consequence of her being so new to the crew. Maybe she looked like a sad lost puppy. But Ashe had done her best to stick to Sunny as best as she could, from literally her first steps out of her cryo pod to right there in the Rec Area as she placed a gentle hand on Sunny’s back.

“Wh—yeah, sorry, I…”

“You looked like you were all the way back on Earth there, Sunny.” Catherine said from her reclined position on the couch, adopting a more gentle tone after she and Sunny had been ripping this disaster movie to shreds, “You feelin’ a little homesick? Watching these old movies can do that to ya.”

“I, uh… I don’t… maybe.” Sunny managed, her hand drifting self-consciously to lay over her stomach as she sat up from being perched over the arm rest, “What’d I miss?”

“Not much. Just some very incorrect assumptions about Mayan culture.” Ashe said with a little smile before her eyes darted to the popcorn bowl, “Oh! Looks like we’re out. I’ll go get some more.”

Sunny didn’t have it in her to tell the android no. And she was so quick about getting up, grabbing the bowl and printing more kernels. She was so efficient at that sort of thing, making sure that everyone got what they needed…

Or at least, what she thought they needed. In truth, the last thing that Sunny felt like she wanted was to find herself at the bottom of another bowl of popcorn so soon after their lunch break.

“She only says “we” because it’s supposed to make us feel more comfortable, y’know.” Catherine discussed, decidedly nonplussed, from her horizontal position, “Works too. Imagine if she was all like ‘I will get you more popcorn’. So creepy.”

Picking up a piece that had fallen onto her impressive chest, Catherine popped it into her mouth.

“Still, I reckon that’s more for us.” She shrugged, “Ashe not needin’ to eat only really comes back to bite me in the butt when I can’t bribe her with plugging custom recipes into the Rations unit like I can with Lo.”

Sunny reclined back into her seat as she heard the dispensary whirring to life, printing hundreds of kernels to be placed in the microwave. All but assured to be *almost* as buttery and salty as the popcorn that she remembered back on Earth…

“Can you believe people used to have to, like, go to movie theaters to get popcorn?” Catherine snorted derisively at the archaic idea, “No thanks.”

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For what little consolation there was to be had in the prospect of getting soft out here in space, it was clear that Sunny was not the only one feeling the ill-effects of not getting any exercise and being tempted by the almost unlimited supply of edible filament and flavors.

Two months wasn’t long enough for there to be a big, dramatic change in size. Not for Sunny, and not for anyone either up here in Space or back on Earth.

But two months was more than enough time for the small changes to start becoming more noticeable.

The most prominent changes were probably Lourdes’s, who had always been on the smaller side. She wasn’t quite what one would call skinny, but she definitely had a more athletic build than Sunny or Catherine, probably more than their captain did. Sunny had first begun to notice it when she spotted Lo in the shower—one of the rare instances where they were both off-duty after a day of work around the *Nash*.

It wasn’t that Lourdes was getting any bigger, not yet at least. But her once toned and defined muscles were beginning to soften just ever so slightly, rounding out in a way that they hadn’t before. Even her abs, which had always been some kind of vaunted Six-Pack city, were beginning to look a little more like… well, not a keg. But they definitely weren’t as cut as they used to be. There was still the definition there, but it was becoming harder and harder to see.

The change in Eva’s appearance was even more subtle than her pilot’s had been. She didn’t have the muscle mass that Lo’s did—hell, she didn’t have the muscle mass that Catherine had underneath all that corn fed heft—so any changes to her body were going to be less readily apparent.

But they were there all the same.

Her clothes fit a little differently than they had before. Not so much that she would have needed new coveralls, but enough that it was impossible for Sunny not to notice on the rare occasion that she was out of uniform, usually when they wound up meeting around the table for Eva’s Midnight Meal and Sunny’s breakfast. The way her belt cinched just a bit tighter around Eva’s waist when she buckled it; how her shirt stretched just ever so slightly across her chest when she pulled it down over her head; how her pants sagged just fractionally lower on her hips when she sat down… It all added up, slowly but surely.

The changes in Catherine’s appearance were, predictably, the most dramatic.

She had always been the biggest of them—not just in height, but in weight as well. It wasn’t that she was obese by any stretch of the imagination, but she was definitely carrying more weight than either Eva or Lourdes were. That much was true at the beginning of their trek and it was still true some weeks after they’d been awakened to guide the ship back to Earth.

When they had first embarked on their journey, Catherine had been dieting and working out religiously in an attempt to make the maximum weight requirement before liftoff. From what Sunny had gathered, she’d apparently managed to drop a few kilos. But now that the incentive to lose weight had been removed, Catherine had started eating whatever she wanted again whenever she wanted it, and the results were starting to show.

The once snug fit of her clothes was beginning to loosen, and her face was rounder than it had been before, softened by a layer of newly acquired fat. Even her arms and legs seemed thicker than they used to be, although that could have just been the result of the extra padding that came with being heavier.

All told, she probably hadn’t gained more than five or ten kilos since they’d left Earth orbit behind them. But with her “prominent” physique even before liftoff, it was enough to make a noticeable difference in her appearance—especially when compared side-by-side with her smaller crewmates

“Come on… come… fucking… *on…*”

Catherine muttered to herself as she wrestled with her jumpsuit. She had always worn hers little tighter than the rest of the crew, but now her coveralls were bordering on uncomfortably so. She yanked at the zipper, trying to get it past her stomach, but it was no use. The zipper broke apart at the teeth as the fabric tore along the seam. She groaned in frustration and stepped out of the suit, leaving it pooled around her feet.

"I hate these gotdang things.” Catherine’s country accent was multiplied threefold whenever she got huffy, “Stupid, cheap… fuckin’—UGH!”

Sunny did her best to mind her own business. After all, they had all put on a little weight since launch. It was just hard for her to sit awkwardly on her cot, trying to get dressed herself, while Catherine hopped around the Crew’s Quarters before tearing her coveralls along the tummy…

“Oh shit, did Cathy split her covers?” Lo popped her head out of the bathroom, toothbrush hanging out of her mouth, “All them extra helpings at dinner time comin’ back on ya, Cat?”

“Shut the *fuck* up Lourdes.” Catherine, huffy and red faced, pointed a finger at her longtime companion, “I ain’t in the mood for it.”

“Shit, alright then.” Lo held up her hands in retreat, “Sorry for being *invested* in my *friend’s growing developments.”*

“I will fuckin’ throw you out the air lock.” Catherine raised her eyebrows, “I’ll make it look like an accident, Lolo, I mean it.”

“Cwist, foine.” The shorter woman pushed the button on the toothbrush once again and started running it along her teeth, “Jufft—sppt—wear a t-shirt or something today. Eva won’t mind.”

“Shouldn’t have to fuckin’ print these things…” Catherine groused, crossing her beefy arms underneath her heavy chest, “Ugh… Sunny, you go on ahead hun, I gotta plug in some measurements into the fabricator.”

“O-Oh, uh… sure thing.”

Sunny had already been mostly dressed, already finished with putting on her own jumpsuit, but she had still stopped when Catherine spoke. It wasn’t that she was particularly modest—she just didn’t want to be caught staring at her friend’s… well, developments.

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“Good morning, Ms. O’Neil.”

As always, Ashe was there to greet Sunny as she entered the bridge.

In the close quarters of the SS *Nashville* Sunny wound up working with everyone at some point. Next month she would be moved to 2nd shift to work with Lo, and presumably after that she’d be put on 3rd shift so that their captain could work one of the other shifts. But regardless of what time it was, Ashe was always a second (or third) set of hands available just in case things got a little rough.

Things almost never got a little rough—certainly not on any shifts that Sunny was working on.

“I went ahead and plugged in breakfast for you and Catherine…” the auburn-haired android looked behind the smaller woman’s shoulder and into the hallway that lead towards the crew’s quarters, “Is she… not feeling well?”

“She’s fine, Ashe. Just a little… unwell this morning.” Sunny wasn’t quite sure how to explain it without sounding like she was gossiping, “I think she might have eaten a bit too much yesterday.”

The android tilted her head slightly to the side, an unconscious gesture that she had picked up from her human counterparts over the years. It was something that they did when they were trying to process information, and it always struck Sunny as being eerily humanlike. The small furrowing of Ashe’s rust red brow was a show of genuine concern, but it was just a little… *too* animated, if that made sense. Maybe people who were used to working around androids more often were more accustomed towards their gesticulations, but for Sunny, Ashe could still occasionally make her feel a touch uncomfortable.

“If you say so…” Ashe finally said after a long moment, “I can go check on her if you would like? I am programmed for basic medical care after all.”

Sunny considered the offer for a moment before shaking her head.

“No, that won’t be necessary… Thanks though. I think she just needs some rest and maybe a light breakfast this morning. Nothing too heavy. She mentioned wanting oatmeal earlier… Do we have any of that left?”

Ashe nodded solemnly before turning towards the food dispenser built into the wall of the bridge and starting to punch in some commands. As a new meal per Catherine’s request began to slowly come to life in the delivery tray, the hearty breakfast of bacon, eggs, grits, ham, and biscuits that had been printed out before Sunny had even walked up seemed to look at her disappointedly—hell, Ashe almost looked a little disappointed that what she had prepared was apparently going to go to waste…

“It’s not that it’s not good, honest.” Sunny finally said after experiencing second-hand guilt, “Catherine just, uh… I think she might be going on a diet, is all.”

“She usually does when we’re out of FTL—there’s not a lot to do around here to keep you guys in optimal shape…” Ashe sighed, turning her head away from the dispensing breakfast, “I just wish that she would have told me *before* I wasted all of this filament…”

“Lolo’s up?” Sunny suggested with a soft brightness, “You could see if she wants something?”

“That’s true.” Ashe smiled gently, “She’s never been one to let food go to waste either—between the two of them, it’s a wonder how they keep managing to get back into flight shape after each mission.”

That gave Sunny some pause.

“What do you mean?”

Ashe turned back towards her, a look of mild surprise on her face. It wasn’t an emotion that Sunny had ever seen the android wear before, but it was fleeting—gone as quickly as it had come.

“Oh, I just meant that they tend to… overindulge when we’re on these long trips. You know how it is… being cooped up in a ship like this, not a lot of exercise comes their way. Every time, it seems like they wind up putting on some weight before touching down on Earth again.”

There was something in the way that Ashe said it that made Sunny feel a little uneasy—she couldn’t quite put her finger on what it was. There was something foreboding about that sentence, like it was an inevitability. Sure, she’d been dealing with her own recent weight gain just as everyone else on the crew had, but still…

“Are you saying that it’s… common to put on weight out in space?”

“I don’t know about common, but I *do* know that Catherine hasn’t ever gotten off of this ship wearing the same size she did the last time that she left.” Ashe turned back to the now-completed bowl of oatmeal as it steamed in the delivery tray, “Give her a few days; she’ll be back to her normal, chipper self in no time.”

Ashe picked up a spork and placed it in the oatmeal, the singular bowl looking vastly out of place between the spread of other traditional breakfast entrees.

“But in the meantime, there’s no reason for *you* to go without, Sunny.” The android said with a smile and a touch of the smaller woman’s back, “Go on, take a seat—your shift starts in an hour, and the Captain has been getting onto me about letting you two eat outside of the mess hall when she’s not around…”