

Stargazing

Cold. Wet. Sweat? Heart pumping. Dry throat. Jaw wide open. So wide it hurts. Fast breathing. No sound escapes her throat. Unknown place. Heaving. Cramping. Claspings. Muscles on overdrive. Fractions of thoughts overlapping, racing, breaking against her skull.

This is a familiar sensation. She's been here before. A single clear thought emerges, cutting through the din like a bell's ring in a storm.

Breathe.

Catra tries to inhale deeply. It's forced. It's difficult. It's staggered. She manages. Something soft on her legs. Blanket? Yeah, just the blanket.

Breathe.

The second breath is easier to draw. The third even more so. She unclasps her hands from the sheets.

Breathe.

Catra feels herself calming down. The heartbeat pulsating through her ears quiets down into an echo.

As her breath steadies, she feels her fingers aching. She had clasped at the sheets too violently. Her hands are now relaxed, and she moves them away. A quick rub relieves the tension while she takes a look around.

She recognizes the room she's in. The same familiar empty walls, the same familiar metallic ceiling. She wonders why she didn't see it earlier. It's the same place she spent the last couple of days in - the room on the First One's ship Adora came to

get her with.

The room is dark, as always. It doesn't have any windows, and even if it had any, there isn't anything around that would illuminate it in the depths of space they were travelling through. The only light source is a few small blinking lights strewn along the walls. They cut through the darkness, pulsating their red and blue indications in regular intervals, silently whispering their secrets into the dark. The lights tell their tales in a language meant for mechanics and technicians. A language she doesn't speak.

Adora isn't there, Catra notices. Usually, she'd be snoring on the left side of the bed. Or sitting against the wall to the left, pretending to "just have closed her eyes to think".

Usually, whatever that's supposed to be, Catra catches herself thinking.

It's only been a handful of days. That's not enough for "usually" to be a thing. And yet the sight and smell of Adora lying asleep next to her feels so familiar as if they hadn't spent a single day apart in their entire lives. Each time she wakes up and sees Adora asleep next to her, her arms and legs spread all over like the graceless mess she's always been, she *knows* that she isn't dreaming anymore. That the nightmares were over. That the nightmares were just... nightmares.

Which doesn't make any sense. If anything, the part where Adora rescues her from the clutches of Prime should be the dream. Not the horrid tortures she has endured. Not the horrid tortures she keeps enduring in her nightmares. Not the unyielding hands pushing her into the green liquid to repeatedly drown her every other night. No, still being tortured makes way more sense to be the real thing. Adora snoring next to her should be the dream. Laying next to her and watching her sleep should be the dream.

The idea that all of this is some fucked up mind game of Prime's has entered her thoughts several times. But then she sees Adora next to her, either snoring as if she doesn't have a single care in the world or thrashing around as if fighting some battles in her dreams. Like a puppy would after an exciting day in the park. A big, blonde, dorky puppy. Whenever she sees this, somewhere deep inside, Catra

knows that this is the real thing.

Catra feels drops of cold sweat running down her back. Right now, she's glad Adora isn't around. She doesn't want to be seen. Not like this, weak, out of control, vulnerable. She hates it when she gets like this. Whatever "this" is. She hates that she needs more than a single moment to collect herself. So Catra is relieved she's able to get a grip by herself without anybody witnessing her needing to get a grip.

And yet, somehow, she is also disappointed. If Adora had seen her like this, she'd try and talk to her about it. Then Catra wouldn't have to bring it up herself. That makes it easier to talk about it. She sure *didn't* want to talk about it, but somehow she also *did*, and something told her that she *should*. Or maybe wanted to? Which was silly. Very silly. There's no use in talking about these kinds of things. You get a grip, you stop being a whiny little bitch, and you get on with it. You don't strike up a conversation just about a silly bad dream you had. Besides, Adora has done enough already. No need to burden her with more of your own garbage. Your own garbage is supposed to be your own.

The cold sets in quickly. She must've sweat a lot. Her fur feels heavy and damp. Damn those nightmares. Full of green shit and Horde Prime preaching his bullshit. And him reaching, and taking, and doing as he pleases. His cold sterile fingers on her shoulder, on her back, around her neck. Chantings, chantings, hundreds of tiny green eyes blinking through the darkness. Catra shudders. *The nightmares are over*, she assures herself. *It was just a dream*, she tries to comfort herself. *This time*, a tiny voice in the back of her head whispers. *This time, it was just a dream*. Catra shudders again.

The empty walls echo the sound of her breathing right back at her. They close in on her, all high and mighty. They mock her, they do as they please. The sterile dots of light chant in repeating patterns, at their own pace, paying her no heed. Why should they? They were indicator lights. Doing what they were programmed to do. And yet they push in on her like she's the nail sticking out that needs to be hammered into submission. She's not welcome here.

She can't tell whether her thoughts echo across her own skull or the blank walls. Have the walls become her head? Catra needs to get out. She needs a distraction.

Maybe even assurance that the cursed black fingers won't grab her neck the next second when she isn't watching. Fuck it, she could use being in the same room as Adora right now. Everything's fine when Adora's around. So she gets up.

The corridors outside her room are dark and silent too. *The others must be sleeping*, Catra figures, hearing no noises nor voices. She takes extra quiet steps, following the tiny guiding lights on the floors. Catra is always light-footed and rarely makes any noise when walking, but she puts in extra effort now. Everybody on this ship deserves at least that much, having rescued her from the clutches of Prime at their own peril and all that. But more importantly, she doesn't really want to see any of them now. Nor to be seen by any of them.

Passing the empty restroom, she concludes that the only other place Adora would be is the main deck. Catra finds her there, sitting on the floor and staring outside. Adora's seemingly lost in thought, surrounded by a choir of blinking indicator lights and the computer screens around the windows. Catra doesn't want to startle her, so Catra whispers, "Adora?", hoping it is loud enough for her to notice.

It is. Adora turns her head.

"Oh, hey, Catra. I couldn't sleep, so I came here to look at the stars."

"Oh, okay," Catra whispers, rubbing her elbow.

Adora's eyes narrow as she gives Catra an inspecting look. Catra stands still by the entrance, her head lowered, her tail motionless on the ground. No snark, no quips, no witty remarks come from her.

"Are you... okay?" Adora asks hesitantly.

A "no" instantly shoots up inside Catra, but it immediately gets stuck in her throat. She notices herself tense up. Adora's piercing blue eyes shine across the room like searchlights, directed straight at her. They see through her as if her skin is made of glass. *Adora only asked to be nice*, Catra is certain. *She knows already*. Despite her clothes, Catra feels naked.

"Yeah," she lies.

The two women stare at each other, frozen in place.

Get a grip, Catra reminds herself and lets go of her elbow.

“Is stargazing a princesses-only kind of thing? Or can a simple girl join in?”

“Sure,” Adora replies and turns her glance back towards the starry horizon. She seems mesmerised by the starry sight. But Catra recognises the faint wrinkle on Adora’s forehead, betraying the worry she’s trying to hide.

Catra tiptoes over to Adora’s right and sits down next to her, careful to leave what she feels is an appropriate distance between them. Fighting the urge to cling onto her, Catra hugs her own knees. The metallic floor below her is cold. Sometimes Catra thinks she can feel it vibrate as the engines propel them through the voids of space. That night, the floor underneath her feels steady.

Adora keeps looking at the innumerable stars. “I don’t think I’ll ever get used to this,” she says with awe.

Catra inspects her expression, but it remains unchanged, firmly directed towards the glistening stars outside.

“What are you talking about?” Catra asks.

“All these stars. It’s *incredible*.”

Catra takes a good look herself.

“I guess it’s pretty, yeah,” she says, unimpressed. Despite her genuine try, all Catra sees is a bunch of black darkness and a lot of shiny points. Some are blinking, others aren’t. Not much different from the indicator lights, or the guiding lights through the corridors. Except for the colours - the stars don’t blink in blues, reds, or greens. Fucking *greens*. Perhaps she just can’t focus enough with all the annoying thoughts in her head popping up all the time uninvited?

Maybe I’ll figure it out later.

Or maybe Adora’s just weird.

Or maybe I'm just weird.

Or broken, a tiny voice whispers in the back of her head.

The room is filled with the ship's low humming, which does nothing to alleviate Catra's agonising over how to break the silence between them.

"Bow says we're travelling at incredible speed," Adora finally continues to Catra's relief. "He says that at this speed, we could fly a circle around Etheria in a couple of seconds. And that we could fly from Salineas to Brightmoon faster than Glimmer could teleport us."

"I bet Sparkles didn't like that fact."

"We've been going through space at this speed for *days*, Catra. And yet we're still nowhere near home! I've been looking out the window for hours. *Hours*, Catra! But the stars remain where they were. We're not getting anywhere near close to them."

Home. That single word leaves a cold sting between Catra's lungs.

Adora uses that word so carefree.

"Entrapta says that stars are these huge spheres of hot gas. Like, *really* huge. Hundreds and thousands of times larger than entire Etheria."

"How'd she figure that?"

"She found some data on it on Darla's storage systems."

"But they all look so tiny."

"I know, right?" Adora beams.

Adora has this irritating glimmer in her eye again that she gets when she's looking at something she thinks is wonderful. Back in the day, Catra would've rolled her eyes at it. At this moment, however, Catra's stomach drops at the sight of it. She can't believe it's still there. After all this time, it still remains a part of her? After all this, some parts of the Adora she knew as a kid are still there, alive and well?

Maybe I didn't manage to destroy just about everything.

Please let it be so.

Memories of days long gone come flooding in. The same shiny look five-year-old Adora gives her from below, on the ground, after Catra shows her how to climb that tree. Adora seeing a waterfall for the first time. Adora tasting wild berries Catra finds in the Whispering Woods. Adora -

Catra turns her head back towards the stars, hoping Adora doesn't notice the sting in her eye. She really doesn't want to have to explain tears right now. She probably wouldn't even know how to. Is that a happy tear? She hadn't expected to see Adora like this, nor that it would hit her this deep. Or is it born from grief? Memories of the distant past weigh heavy on her these days. Especially memories of those rare carefree moments from their childhood - they feel like promises life has made and didn't keep. Probably never even intended to keep. Promises she was robbed of.

You robbed yourself of, a tiny voice in her head says.

"But apparently they're so insanely huge," Adora continues. "And hot. And even more insanely far away."

"Huh," is all Catra can add. She gives it another honest try. She looks and looks at the stars, but she just can't see anything of the hugeness Adora is talking about. It's just blackness and a ton of small shiny points to her.

"And yet there they are. Just... sitting there. Just doing their own thing. Not a single worry in their lives. They've been there all along. They haven't even noticed an entire planet being locked away in a different dimension. All they do is just exist and shine. That's all they do, all day long. Just being stars, and just shining away. Like nothing else matters, or has mattered, or will matter."

"So they never change?" Catra frowns.

"That's what it looks like."

"Then why do you keep staring at them? Haven't you seen what's to be seen?"

"I don't know. I can't look away. They seem so... grand. So... beyond me, beyond it all. And that makes me feel small. In a good way! Nothing I do, nothing we do, matters to them. They're just out there. Millions of miles away, shining on. If we died tomorrow, they'd keep shining. If we lived for another hundred years, they'd keep shining. They don't care! We don't matter to them. They're just... being them. And somehow being this little small nothing in the face of all these infinite huge stars makes me feel... grand again? Does that make any sense?"

"Not really, no."

"It's like they're... at peace. Beyond it all. Gigantic and calm. Whatever happens, however things turn out, they're at peace with it. They don't bother, and it doesn't bother them. And that gives me peace of mind as well, somehow. Like I'm part of it all? A tiny part in a huge huge world? All the things I'm scared of and worry about, whatever happens, however it ends - these stars are gonna keep doing their thing. Just... doing their thing. It makes me feel like everything's gonna be okay somehow, however it turns out, you know?"

Catra doesn't know. But something else concerns her more.

"You're scared?"

Adora looks at her fearlessly with a courageous smirk, but Catra can see the exhaustion behind her eyes.

"Yes, Catra, I'm scared. All the time," she whispers. "All the time. Sometimes I'm so scared I can't think straight. Like when Prime took you and Glimmer. Or when he presented you to me, chipped and obeying his commands, speaking through you, willing to make you jump off the ledge, to hurt you." Her voice cracks. "I thought I was gonna lose my mind back there, Catra."

Catra doesn't move a muscle. Her throat is dry. She's helpless to do anything but stare at Adora, as useless as the faint deep humming of the engines or the occasional beeps coming from the computers that fill the silence.

Adora clears her throat and sighs. "We keep losing things we hold dear. We keep losing people, friends, family, our homes, our livelihoods. Every time I have to

make a decision I fear I made the wrong one.” Her voice is low and tired. Every word she says sounds like it takes tremendous effort.

Catra sinks further into her knees. The idea of a scared Adora weighs heavy on her. How much did she contribute to that, Catra wonders? But Adora gives her the faint smile of someone who has accepted a burden as their own and turns back towards the starry horizon like it’s nothing.

“Do you sometimes wish things were different?” Catra mumbles.

Adora looks at her again, surprised. “Yes, Catra. I do. All the time. Don’t you?”

“Yeah. I do too.”

Adora gives her a patient, expecting look, but Catra’s lips remain shut.

“The truth is, Catra, I’m tired,” Adora continues with another sigh. “I’m tired of fighting. And of battle. And of war. Usually, I don’t get to be tired. There’s too much to be done to get to feel tired. But here, on this ship, with nothing else to do all day, it catches up with me. I’m just so tired of it all. Even just the thought of it. And yet it waits for me as soon as we arrive.”

“I get that. I’m tired too.”

“I can imagine.”

Adora lays down and crosses her hands on her belly, staring at the ceiling. Catra does the same, but she also uses the opportunity to close the distance to Adora, careful not to actually touch her.

The ceiling was full of blinking indicator lights too, sparkling in red, green, and blue in their perfectly regular patterns. They are busy, working. Blindly fulfilling their purpose, talking in unspoken languages.

“Catra?”

“Hm?”

“Can I ask you something?”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“Do you ever think about the future?”

Catra thinks for a moment.

“Not really, no. I’m usually too busy with getting by.”

As Adora keeps watching the ceiling, Catra senses that she’s waiting to be asked the same question in return. So she gives it a try.

“Do you?”

“Recently, I have, yeah.”

“So, what were you thinking about?”

“I don’t know. It was nothing... specific. There is so much to think about. So much to take care of and to be done. There’s all the rebuilding we need to do. And reorganising. I gotta make sure everybody’s safe. And accounted for. And that there is enough food available for everyone. And that it gets distributed efficiently enough. And that there is enough shelter. And medicine. And healers.”

Catra shrinks again. This time, she knows exactly how much she has contributed towards Adora’s concerns. She hopes Adora won’t bring it up right now. Or ever, for that matter.

“But after that,” Adora continues, “after that... I have no idea. There is so much we could do. So much to choose from. So much! Rest? Travel? Explore? Visit other planets? Like the one the Star Siblings came from? See other stars? Honestly, I wouldn’t know how or what to pick!”

Catra thinks about it, perhaps even for the first time in this way. A life after war? After military and battle? After the Horde? There has never been an ‘after the Horde’ in her past plans. A life after violence? Maybe even... Safe? That... that actually sounds nice. It’s a really nice thought to have. It warms her like the campfires in the Whispering Woods used to during survival trainings.

“I don’t think I’ve ever thought about an ‘after’ before,” replies Catra. “At least not

in a good way.”

“Wanna give it a try?”

“Hm, I don’t think so,” Catra replies after considering it for a second. The urge to keep her actual wishes and dreams concealed remains insurmountable. What remains unsaid can’t be taken from you. Or used against you.

“Come on, it’ll be fun! What do you wanna do? Where do you wanna go?” Adora turns towards her, radiating with giddy excitement.

Catra gives in, remembering how fuzzy the previous train of thought of the future has made her feel. She lets her mind wander. No more fighting. No battling. No strategy meetings. No conquering. No violence. She feels lighter once more. Like a heavy rock she didn’t know she carried has just been lifted off her back. Freedom. Warm summers. Tranquillity. Birds chirping. A place on her own, maybe? No, *definitely*. No more sharing bunk beds with twenty other soldiers in a room. Ever. And no more sharing her shower and toilet with others. *Privacy*.

What else? Enjoying morning coffee and breakfast without hiding from anybody who’s bellowing orders? Without bellowing orders herself? The thought makes her feel even lighter. Heck, why not skip breakfast altogether and sleep in until noon!

What would she even do all day? Go for walks? Chat with the neighbours? Plant stuff in her garden? Hang on, a garden? Where did that come from? But why not, a garden sounds nice and peaceful and joyous. Watching things grow instead of being destroyed is a mesmerisingly attractive prospect. A Catra growing and raising plants, instead of a Catra burning down forests? What an idea!

Maybe she’d go for a stroll through town, saying ‘hi’ and ‘bye’ to everyone she knows with a little smile and wave? Maybe not that, she doesn’t really know anyone outside of the Horde yet.

But they know me, the tiny voice in the back of her head says, and her heart sinks.

Yes, they know her. She has been the face and the cause of too much destruction

and damage. There's no way she is going to be forgiven and forgotten. There's no way Etherians would tolerate her presence. And even if they didn't just lock her up for eternity somewhere, there's no way she would encounter smiley happy faces on the streets. They would look at her with fear and hate. Maybe even disgust. In fact, *probably* even disgust. They would have the same expressions carved on their faces as the cadets in the Horde. Strolling through town, waving and smiling? Not an option. She had made her bed, now she must lie in it.

And you'd deserve it, the tiny voice says. *You've earned it*.

"Somewhere far away, I guess," Catra finally answers truthfully. "Far away from swords and boots and tanks." *Somewhere where nobody would know me nor what I did* - she keeps that last thought to herself.

"That sounds nice. I think I'd like that too."

I don't think I can take you there with me, Adora. You don't deserve more of the mess I made.

"Although Brightmoon would be nice as well. I would get to see Bow and Glimmer every day, and the other princesses too when they came to visit. But exploring Etheria and other places sounds like a lot of fun too! There is so much we could go and see and do together!"

Catra wants to tell Adora that she hopes her wishes come true and that they have tons of fun on their adventures, but Adora doesn't give her a chance to do so.

"All I know," Adora whispers, "is that I can't stand the thought of a future without you in it. Whatever I do, wherever I am after this war is over, I want you there with me." She makes that last sentence sound like something between a statement and a plea as if she hasn't decided what it was herself.

To Catra, this sounds surreal. Did she just hear that right? Her chest tightens and her shoulders tense up, but her tail gives her away as it flicks outwards, grazing Adora's thigh. Oh why, oh why didn't she place it on the other side when she had laid down? Away from Adora? Frightened about what to expect, Catra slowly turns her head left and is met with Adora's warm gaze and soft smile.

This scares her even more.

Adora slowly extends her right arm towards Catra, her palm open, and rests it close to Catra's hand, all the while looking straight into her widening eyes. The invitation is too sweet for pride and reservation to have a chance to kick in; Catra has come to the main deck looking for Adora, starving for her presence, but now Adora's offering so much more than she's hoped to find that night. Before she realises what exactly she's doing, Catra places her hand into Adora's, who immediately clasps it firmly.

"It's been too long, Catra. I don't want us to be apart again," she whispers. "Ever. I was so scared I would lose you for real back there, Catra. So fucking scared." Adora's voice cracks as starlight shimmers in her watery eyes.

Catra has many thoughts. The problem is that none of these thoughts is a complete one. They race and overlap, fight each other for dominance, shouting over each other, resulting in no more than noise and flickers of half-constructed images.

She sees Adora's chest rise and fall as she breathes. How many breaths were that now since she finished speaking? Four? Five? Too many! Fuck! Fuck! Anything is better than silence! Anything!

"Since when did you start cursing?" she clumsily tries, making sure not to let go of Adora's hand. She doesn't have the slightest intention to do so, but she wants to make sure nonetheless. *Extra sure*. She can't have her slip away.

Again, a tiny voice in the back of her head adds.

Adora smiles faintly. "I guess I picked it up from Glimmer."

Crisis averted.

"I see," Catra says. A few wordless seconds later, Catra decides to double down on her 'words are better than no words' strategy.

"As long as you don't start sparkling someday."

Adora chuckles, and Catra feels like the funniest comedian in the entire universe.

“She’s a good one,” Catra adds earnestly.

“You mean Glimmer?”

“Yeah, Sparkles. She seems like a good person. And a good friend.”

“Yes, she is. After all that’s been said and done, she’s a great friend. And a great person.”

“I think she loves you guys a whole ton. Back on Prime’s ship, she wouldn’t shut up about you.”

“I think so too. I’m sure both Bow and I love her too.”

“Yeah,” Catra says absent-mindedly. *Back on Prime’s ship.* The words echo through her skull.

A dark pit opens in her stomach and spreads towards her head like black flames devouring everything in their path. It crawls towards her arms and toes.

Back on Prime’s ship. These words were enough to project the long white corridors before her eyes. A choir of clones’ steady footsteps resound behind her. And in front of her. And from her sides. A firm hand clutches her shoulder. The pool of burning green liquid marches towards her.

They’re not here. You’re lying on the floor. You’re just imagining things.

Her breathing becomes faster. She shifts her eyes away from the mechanic blinking lights onto the stars outside. The endless void between them extends towards her. It threatens to engulf her as she rapidly shrinks and falls. She closes her eyes. She keeps falling.

“Catra?”

You’re not falling. You’re lying on the floor.

“Catra, you’re squeezing me a little too tight there,” Adora says, wriggling her hand in Catra’s.

Her body is not listening to her. No limb obeys her command. She keeps falling

through the floor. The terrible hand on her shoulder is relentlessly pulling her further down, towards the green pool. She wants to scream but has forgotten how. She wants to run, but her legs are not there. Her breathing is fast and shallow.

“Catra? What’s wrong?”

She lets go of Adora’s hand and clutches onto the floor for dear life. A sensation on her cheek startles her, making her twitch and open her eyes wide to find herself staring into two ocean-blue eyes.

“Look at me,” Adora’s soft voice emerges from underneath those blue eyes. “I’ve got you,” Adora says, keeping her gently placed hand on Catra’s cheek. “Just keep looking at me. You’re okay. You’re fine. I’ve got you.”

Catra locks in on those eyes. Those same eyes had looked up at her from the ground when she showed her how to climb a tree. Those same eyes had looked at her in awe while tasting wild berries for the first time. Those same eyes that she had been waking up to see these past few days.

“I’ve got you. Breathe with me. In, and out, and in, and out.” Adora moves her hand up and down in an exaggerated fashion in tandem with her instructions, prompting Catra to take slow, deep breaths.

With everything going on in her head, doing what Adora wants her to seems like the right idea. At least it’s an idea. It’s the only thing resembling a clear thought she has right now. Catra tries to breathe with her, as well as she can. As soon as she remembers how to, that is.

“There you go. You’re doing great. In, and out, and in, and out,” Adora continues, growing quieter as Catra’s breath eventually steadies.

The noises and images subside. Gradually unclenching, Catra begins to feel Adora’s breath on her face and the callouses on Adora’s sword hand against her cheek.

“You back with me now?”

Catra nods silently.

“Okay. Good. You doing okay?”

Catra nods again.

“Do you need anything?”

Catra shakes her head.

“Do you wanna go back to bed?”

Catra shakes her head again.

“Alright,” Adora says calmly and lays back down next to her, looking at the ceiling.

The more Catra gathers herself, the more the exhaustion spreads in her. Every single limb of hers weighs a ton. Her heart is still pumping as if she just finished running a marathon. And finally, the humiliation sets in. Losing control like that. In front of fucking Adora. What the fuck.

She chances a glance at her. Adora has put her arms under her head and lays there with closed eyes. Catra can’t help but wonder what she’s thinking. Or actually, fear what she’s thinking. What does Adora think of her now? Does she think she’s weak? Or sick? Or broken?

Does she know? Did she figure it out? Why isn’t she saying anything?

“Are you... Are you...” Catra stammers. Her voice is hoarse. Her throat hurts.

As Adora opens an eye, curiosity and fear leave Catra to let embarrassment back in.

“I’m sorry,” Catra mumbles.

“Don’t be,” Adora replies. “Nothing to be sorry about having a panic attack.”

Is that what that was?

“What?” Adora adds, noticing Catra’s questioning look. “It’s not the first panic attack I’ve seen. It’s okay, don’t worry about it. No need to apologise for that.”

The ship’s low humming fills the room again, interrupted only by distant infre-

quent beeps from some machinery. The lights on the ceiling keep blinking as if nothing has happened at all. The same regular intervals, the same blue, red, and green lights.

The least she can do is some damage control.

“Are you...” Catra whispers as she slumps back down on the floor, “Can we not talk about this? Ever?”

“I guess,” Adora shrugs, but the wrinkle on her forehead returns with a vengeance. “I mean, I’d like to know what’s going on. I wanted to let you recover first before asking. But I never could get anything out of you unless you wanted me to anyway, so I don’t think I’m gonna push my luck now. I’m too tired for that.”

Catra opens her mouth, unsure what to say.

“But for the record: I am worried about you.”

Ugh. Great. She’s made her worry again. Enough to even say so. As if her worry-wrinkle doesn’t betray her already. Well done, Catra.

“I’m... sorry,” Catra says.

“Don’t worry about it.” Adora turns towards the stars again.

Deep dissatisfaction seizes Catra. This situation is not what she has wanted. At all. She has come here to be in the same room as Adora, but instead, she has made a fool of herself, an embarrassing display, and to top it off, she has made her worry. And Adora won’t even push her on that.

The urge to talk begins boiling Catra’s insides. Not just say things, but *talk*. She wants to tell her. She wants to vomit it out like a poison that’s been eating her for too long. *All* of it. She wants to scream her lungs out about how deathly afraid she still is. About how shaken and insecure and broken she feels. About how she’s barely keeping herself together. About how she needs help, a friend, a place to feel safe. She hates herself for not being able to say any of it. She hates herself for having the urge to talk in the first place. She hates herself for being needy and shattered.

Just shut up about it. Your garbage is your own to deal with. Leave Adora out of it. You've humiliated yourself enough for one night.

But I want to. I want her to know.

But then she'll know. She'll know what a mess you are. She'll know that you're broken. Nobody likes a broken toy.

Well, maybe she should know. Maybe she deserves to know.

She doesn't deserve to deal with more of your bullshit.

But she deserves to know. So she can make plans for her future without me in it.

But I want to be in it.

Then she deserves to know what she's signing up for.

You've embarrassed yourself enough for one night.

And I survived. I'll survive a little more.

"Adora...?" Catra breaks the silence.

"Yes?"

"Can we maybe... talk?" Catra asks foot-draggingly while reaching for Adora's hand again.

"Of course -"

Catra makes a quick decision. She really doesn't want Adora to see her face while it's happening, so she moves closer to her and buries her face into her shoulder, interrupting her mid-sentence.

"I'm scared too, Adora. Fucking terrified."

Catra feels Adora freeze up momentarily, but then she gently strokes Catra's palm in her hand while she wraps her other arm around her. With Catra's long hair gone, Adora can hold her back unobstructed.

"I don't want to be," Catra sobs. "I want to be gone. Somewhere far away from all this. Somewhere out of anybody's reach. Somewhere no one can find and catch me and lock me up. Or make me do horrible things. Or do horrible things to me. Somewhere where I'm not hated. Or hunted. Somewhere where I can sleep. Where I don't feel like being drowned from the moment I wake up. And I want to beat the shit out of him and be done with his ass, but these fucking nightmares keep haunting me and messing with my head."

"Did you have a nightmare tonight too?" Adora asks softly after Catra remains quiet for too long.

"Yeah."

"I'm sorry, Catra."

"Don't be, It's not your fault."

Catra puts her right arm around Adora's waist and clings on tightly.

"Just, don't go. Don't leave me. Please," Catra whimpers.

Adora tightens her hold. "I won't. I'm not going anywhere, Catra."

"You promise?"

Adora moves her hand from Catra's lower back to her shoulder blades and places her chin on Catra's head.

"I promise."

"Even if the entire world hates me?"

"Even then. I'm not letting go of you."

"Please," Catra whimpers.

"I promise."

Catra clutches her fingers into Adora's clothes, careful enough not to hurt her. She can feel Adora's chest rising and sinking with every breath she takes. She can feel

her heartbeat against her forehead, pulsating through Adora's neck, and the strong muscular arms enveloping her being gentler and softer than they had any business to be.

They hold each other closely, enveloped by the engine's deep humming and faint starlight. The indicator lights above them sing their ever-repeating song of blinks. Only timid beeping signals arise from the computers in the room as if they're trying not to disturb the passengers.

"How do you do it, Adora?" Catra mutters. "How do you deal with all this fucking fear?"

"Well, usually I don't," Adora admits. "Usually I just keep pushing until it's over and done. Bow calls it the 'head-through-the-wall approach'. But these days, I've been stargazing."

"Huh?"

"I'm serious. Look." Adora turns on her back and points to the window, while making sure to keep holding onto Catra's hand.

"I've been watching the stars. Just look at them. They're all at peace, they're all unconcerned with whatever we've got going on. Whatever happens, they'll shine on. Whatever happens, it'll be ok. They'll be there. They'll be calm. They'll be shining."

Catra looks. And she sees what looked like the same bunch of stars not giving a shit about any of them that had been there since she entered the room.

"Seriously?"

"Yeah, seriously," Adora replies.

Catra looks at the stars again, and then back at Adora with narrowing eyes.

"Is this a prank? Are you pranking me right now?"

"No! I mean it!"

"Well, I don't see it."

"Just give it a minute. Dive into the experience."

Catra snorts. " 'dive into the experience'? "

"What's funny about that?"

"You're such a dork."

"Maybe I am. Sue me."

"Where did you get that from? Did you go snorkelling in Salineas or something?"

"It's just an expression, Catra."

"Yeah, no shit. The lamest expression I've heard in years."

"Oh, you can hear with those things? I thought those big ears were just for decoration. And for when we need an extra pair of signalling flags."

"Those big ears are going to give your face a good slap if you keep making fun of them." Catra wiggles them, failing to make them appear threatening, even as a joke.

"And signal a tank battalion to switch manoeuvres in the process?"

"You're just jealous your ears aren't magnificent and fluffy."

"They *are* fluffy," Adora agrees, brushing along Catra's ear.

"Hey, no touching!" Catra grins.

"If your ears are not for touching, then why are they so soft?" Adora keeps stroking her ear.

"To trick princesses into scratching them."

"So you *do* just want them scratched?"

"No, you dork. They lure princesses like you into a false sense of security. And then I kidnap them."

“And then what?”

“And then I take you somewhere secret and far away. Where it will be just the two of us. And your punishment for making fun of my glamorous ears will be that you have to scratch them every day. Actually, three times a day, every day. Until you admit how majestic they are.”

“Oh no, how horrible. Anything but that,” Adora chuckles, pushing her arm under Catra’s head so she can reach behind it to scratch her other ear.

“I missed this, you know?” Adora sighs.

“What, being called a dork?”

“No silly. This. Just the two of us, bantering through the night.”

“Oh. Right. Good thing I asked, I was about to call you a dork every day from now on.”

“How kind of you.”

They giggle. Catra lays her head on Adora’s chest.

“I missed this too. Probably more than I’d ever admit. Don’t tell anyone I said that”, she adds, raising her head. “Actually, they wouldn’t believe you anyway.”

“You’d be surprised what they’re willing to believe.”

“Adora...”

“Don’t worry. Your secret is safe with me.”

Adora reaches over to take Catra’s hand back into hers. Catra feels Adora’s arm move and awaits her hand with her fingers spread out, ensuring they would interlock as Adora’s hand reaches hers. They lay there on the hard cold floor in a soft embrace.

Growing weary of the ceiling’s indicator lights’ rhythmical shouts through the darkness, Catra chances another glance at the stars through the windows in front of them. There they are again, a sea of still, shimmering dots quietly illuminating

the galaxy they are passing through. Unwanting. Uncaring. Unchanging. Silent, unreachable watchers of everything that has been, is, and will be.

Watchers. That's what they are.

Funny. I'm watching the watchers. Catra smirks.

They see me, and I see them. We watch each other.

A sense of belonging spreads through Catra. She, Adora, the stars - they're all the same right now: Watchers. Mere witnesses of time's passing as they drift through the void of space. All of them - in their own way - are nothing but a tiny part of the endless vastness, watching quietly from afar.

What a strange sensation it is to feel related to the pretty little lights on the other side of the window! It tingles in her lower back, and Catra feels big, grand even. Like one of the pretty lights out there. Like part of it all.

As time passes, Catra notices that the stars remain motionless, and strangely, that comforts her. Nothing she does, nothing anybody does, will make them move. Nothing. Not even what has been done already. They don't care about who she has been, or what she has done. To them, the past doesn't matter. And right now, the past doesn't matter to Catra either. Right now, there is only right now. And right now, she's stargazing with Adora. Catra grins.

Nothing she does, nothing anybody does, will make the stars move, she realises anew. The stars do their own thing. Forever. They want nothing from her, nothing with her. They are just what they are, and they let be, whatever *be* is.

That's a new idea - being let *be*. An entirely unfamiliar sensation. Liberating and energising - the mere thought of it tempts her to leap into action and move entire mountains. But somehow, it's also terrifying. The same sort of terrifying as having to find your way through the woods without a compass and map. But in an exciting way. She couldn't help but *be* excited.

If she could, *what* would she be?

Not if. When.

'Be' could be this, Catra imagines.

'Be' could be spending an eternity in Adora's arms. Stargazing together. Feeling safe and wanted.

The thought warms Catra from head to toe. It makes her tail tingle.

'Be' could be that garden.

'Be' could be our garden.

A long-forgotten joy washes over her, rife with giddiness and impatience, shimmering just like the stars outside.

Perhaps stargazing has something to it after all, she thinks and smirks.

As the ship continues its journey through the endless sea of stars, Catra lets Adora's heartbeat and the ship's humming lull her into daydreams of what one day would come to be.