

THE STAR COUNTER
California, 1917

The party sounded as if encyclopedias were arguing with each other. A year ago, these seething astronomers who dissected the universe would have greatly impressed Marion James. By now she knew that their debates were really about sniffing each other's tails to see who ranked higher. She edged to a window and leaned against the cold pane. Condensation was heavy on it. Her boss, Professor Devereaux, hoping to join the inner circle, had hosted the conference's party in his home halfway up the mountain to the observatory. Marion believed his ideas were second-rate. So did those to whom he bent his head submissively. She stroked the moisture-beaded glass. Out there, she thought, the great, cold dark would absorb this bunch and their theories without a burp. I will slip away soon. No one will miss me.

Before she could exit, a man was ejected from the roiling mass. He was a tall, dark-bearded man she recognized from newspaper photos—Baskins, a professor of politics who praised the Russian revolutionaries who deposed the tsar last year and whose book argued that the United States ought to depose its capitalist tsars. Baskins elbowed into all the university's intellectual gatherings. He reminded Marion of an undercooked vegetable—a hairy broccoli stalk because of his beard—as he searched anxiously for an opening back into the grinding crowd.

“Hello, Professor Baskins,” Marion said.

Baskins' eyes glittered at the pleasant sound of his own name. Or was it at the sight of Marion's trim figure? She wore no rouge or lipstick and was adorned only with a necklace of two overlapping, silver stars. "You know me then?" Baskins said.

"I do."

"So one person here reads! This gang knows nothing of politics." Marion nodded politely, taking it to mean no one had heard of Baskins. Few of these astronomers would have read his vitriolic letters to the editor. "Noses to their microscopes, telescopes and kaleidoscopes for all I know. Bright bunch, but blind to the big picture! Eh? Oh, they do *research*." He squinched his nose at the word, which made Marion laugh, for Professor Devereaux's research often included closing his office door to read *The Saturday Evening Post*. "They do *pure* science—as though they're not part of stinking humanity. Do scientists think the government pays for *pure research*? Pah! It's so they'll discover the next poison gas and faster aeroplanes. Even astronomers might come in handy someday, do you see? Flunkies of the state. Dreamers playing with themselves. Real change only comes through politics, my dear."

"Communism."

"Yes, big bad communism. I see you pay attention to the large picture."

Marion smiled. "Indeed I do, Professor."

"There's a war! Europe is ablaze! Men are dying by the tens of thousands!"

"I'm sure they've heard."

Baskins sighed. "Have they? I wonder. Where's their outrage? Nibbling *paté* and cheese!" He lowered his voice to make her lean to him. This gambit to create intimacy

amused her. Was the great Baskins angling for a little fish like Marion James? Still, she liked his sturdy shoulders and energy. Ah, she thought, the biological tug.

He asked, “So what do you do? Are you a *wife* to one of these?”

“No, I belong to myself. I count stars for a living.”

“You do, do you?” he grinned. “An odd occupation.”

“I’m Professor Devereaux’s assistant. I’m what’s called a ‘computer.’ Many astronomers have them. Shapley has a basement full of us.”

Baskins laughed. “Sounds like a harem. Capitalist exploitation.”

“Rather less exotic than a harem,” Marion said. “I maneuver a telescope and take and study sky photographs.”

“Have you got to the end, eh? The universe, I mean. How many stars are there?”

“Now, Mr. Baskins—”

“Yes, yes. Too many to count. Infinite, *et cetera*. So why bother?”

“Perhaps for the same reason you report the world’s infinite misery and injustice.”

“Touché” He patted her arm, his hand lingering.

“In any case, I count only eclipsing binary stars. Do you know what they are?”

“No, I do not,” he announced proudly.

She held out her twin star necklace and let it dangle. “Eclipsing binaries are two stars that orbit each other. As one star passes behind the other, the two appear to become one—hence eclipse.”

“Hmm. But how awful to affix such a lovely face to a numbing eyepiece!”

“Oh, not numbing!” The true sensation never left Marion. The mountaintop observatory was bitingly cold, the distant valley lights dim. As she ascended in the

tramway over the snow covered meadows folded among sharp peaks of treeless stone, she felt herself relax and swell with energy at the same time. Only a few birds—ravens or vultures perhaps—ventured so high this late in the year. The air hurt to breathe, so dry it sucked moisture from your lungs, a pain she found exquisitely pleasurable. Aside from a maintenance man, it was deserted. Open to the night air to prevent fogging, the dome was nearly silent—the low hum of its machinery absorbed by the great emptiness that flowed like a quiet delta into space. Out there, like phosphorescent plankton on a night sea were the stars. Not infinite. Assuredly not, yet far beyond counting. She could glance into that vast ocean and pick out Kruger 60 or 61 Cygni. Not just identify but *know* them—their colors and ways. To her, they were not an anonymous proletariat. Ross 614, only thirteen light years away, begged to be touched. Some of its light ended its long journey in Marion's eyes. Many a star she watched had in fact long ago exploded to bits; the light from that supernova might not reach earth until long after Marion and the planet became dust. Or it might reach earth tomorrow. But at the moment she watched, it quivered with life. She never tired of that tension and mystery. This man who saw the big picture thought it was numbing to gaze into the deep pit of time. That was everything. *This* was nothing.

How badly Baskins needed to have his little light noticed. Her mind shrugged. Well, she would let him be counted before she slipped away. It was a partly cloudy night anyway. If it did not clear, she would study old photographs. Algol was always interesting. She had ideas about it that Dr. Devereaux dismissed.

“The communists,” Baskins was saying, “can end this war. We will transform the world if people focus on setting things in order politically. Just give us twenty years to erase two thousand years of stupidity.”

Marion said, “Such as wasting resources counting eclipsing binary stars?”

“Absolute capitalist indulgence!” He smiled, and she liked that he mocked himself. “Seriously, we do need science and art—”

“I’m so glad. But how can we know where we ought to go *to*, before we know where we came *from*?”

He sighed. “The past is the past, my dear. It dissolves—pfft! Nineteen hundred years after Jesus, we are supposed to live by rules meant for primitive desert tribes? Absurd! The old lies should be swept away for good. Chemistry buried alchemy. Evolution buried the seven-day creation. Capitalism is dead—let’s bury it and get on. The past has little to offer but failure and delusions.”

Marion smiled demurely. “That may be true for human history, but that is merely the hour’s news, Professor Baskins. I read the past from billions of years ago, not hundreds. News of greater cataclysms than you can imagine reaches earth every day. I’m a kind of reporter, you see. Today’s war is horrible up close, but not even the echo of a hint of a whisper of a dream in my world. The gravity of two circling stars would tear the earth apart were we within a billion miles. Destructions of solar systems like ours amount to a mere spurt of a match. Most men do not grasp the possibilities of destruction.”

“Such horrible visions for such lovely eyes.” He studied her more closely.

“This war has been raging for fifteen billion years. Let the communists end that and I will enroll.”

“Well, I don’t deny what you say.” He peered a moment at the window as if to glimpse the night sky, impossible from the bright room. “But all you describe is up there—far, far up there. This is all the world we have.”

That old delusion from men who must feel big! Better, far better, to understand your smallness. “You are wrong,” she said. “This is not all the world we have.”

“How passionate you are! Why do you submit to mere counting of stars?”

“‘Counting’ means more than one-two-three, Professor Baskins.” Their chat had distracted him from the tail-sniffing crowd, and she sensed his seduction dance was about to begin. She felt let down. Was he so quick to toss aside his starving masses and war dead and her super novae? Did he expect her to believe that if she allowed him to put their little body parts together, the cosmos would be reordered? He might be pleasant for such sport, but she did not desire it now.

Marion was not a good girl in the modern age of 1917. She had embraced lovers and recovered afterward. That was the rhythm of the universe. After great destruction, gravity drew the pieces together until a new explosion shattered you. Her last affair had ended months ago. Reuben, a Spanish astronomer on exchange, wanted her to be his wife in Spain. She agreed provided she could work as his partner. He said that would be impossible for a woman there. She asked him to remain in the United States, which he said was not possible. She replied, “Then I am not possible.”

The party’s host and hostess approached. Nora Devereaux was down-to-earth, amusing and unconventional, everything Professor Devereaux was not. Nora rolled her eyes and nodded toward the din. “You’d think brilliant people would swill less gin.”

Professor Devereaux grimaced. “Hush, Nora!”

Nora said, "When I think of the sum of brain cells dying tonight, I fear we commit a crime against humanity!"

Professor Devereaux said, "Baskins, my wife is the household anarchist, a role not unlike yours at the university. I see you have met my little computer, Marion."

"Ah, is it 'Marion'?" Baskins exclaimed. "Lovely."

Nora said, "You have not asked her name? Beast!"

Baskins bowed. "Mrs. Devereaux, noble minds dispense with trivialities."

"Unless it's a man's name," Nora said.

"Come along, Baskins." Professor Devereaux grasped his arm. "That science journal editor you asked to meet is here. He may let you scribble something for him." To Marion, he smiled woodenly. "Do persuade Nora to be respectable, eh?" The men soon entered the swirling suits and dresses.

Nora feigned dramatic collapse against the wall. "Respectable! Ugh!"

"It's a smashing party. All the big names came."

"So says Herr Professor." Nora patted her cheeks and straightened. "Was that Baskins man terribly boring?"

"Not until the end—like all men."

"Naughty girl! But true. One day John will evaporate from lack of excitement."

"Before the communist revolution cornered me, I was about to slip away. I hope you won't mind."

"Oh, I do object! You cannot deny me one of my three pleasures of the evening. There's that Danish astronomer with the darling accent and the young rogue from

Harvard who makes my legs go weak, and you, Marion, in whom I relive my youth. Make me laugh.”

Marion could not reply to this worst of all requests, so Nora took her hand in her hot, damp one. “Let’s escape together!” They flung on coats, scarves, boots and gloves, and Nora led Marion into the December night. Darkness swam around them like a living creature. Light from the house windows faintly illuminated gravel paths among the withered flowerbeds and trees. The ground sloped away toward the town in the valley, although it could not be seen. The higher peaks loomed over them, and the clouds had thinned. No moonrise yet. It was decent viewing. From here she could not see the observatory, but she knew it would be biting cold and clear up there. Here the temperature hovered just below freezing, and a few inches of snow had fallen.

Nora strode to a bench overlooking the meadow and brushed away the dry snow. Marion sat beside her, hands in lap. She glanced up. There was Algol and Rigel. “Is it still Reuben?” Nora asked. One night at dinner last spring, Professor Devereaux had announced, “Reuben and Marion threw each other over. And a damned good job, or I’d have lost a trained computer.” Nora had called on Marion and taken her to a Chinese teahouse and consoled her. She had been kind and heartfelt, and Marion adored her for it. They were fast friends.

“Reuben? I don’t recall any Reuben.”

“You seem sad.”

“Do I?”

“Yes.”

“Perhaps you do not see me at my happiest.”

“Ah! When is that?” Nora leaned conspiratorially closer. “You tell, then I’ll tell my happiest time.”

“Oh, you mustn’t sit out here with me. All those people—”

“Hush! No silly politeness. We know each other too well. You tell me this instant or I’ll stamp my foot like a spoiled child!”

The muted voices from the house were cut by a bray ending in a sputtering wheeze. One of the great ones! The women laughed. Marion could not clearly see Nora’s face by the distant house light, but she knew it. Nora was perhaps thirty-two to Marion’s twenty-three. Wrinkles had not yet raked her face, and her chin was still sharp and delicate. Marion said, “Wandering among the stars is as near to bliss as I’ve known.”

“Hmm.” Nora scanned the sky.

“Our pain is worthless before their magnitude.”

“You *are* gloomy. Let’s go farther off,” Nora took Marion’s hand and tugged her up. Raucous laughter burst from the house. “There’s a deer path through the field. We’ll feel our way.” As they stepped gingerly into the snow and dead grasses, the sky opened. “We shall walk among your stars,” Nora declared. “They are a field of daisies.”

“Snowflakes,” Marion said.

“Or days. No, years!” Nora declared. “My years winking at me.”

“Would you be afraid to lie down, Nora? We’d have a better field of vision.”

“I afraid?” Instantly, Nora dropped into the snow and withered grasses, stretched on her back and crossed her ankles. “Ah! Yes!” Marion lay beside her. The view tripled in size. Sharp, stony peaks rose on three sides over them, pointing higher. As always, Marion instantly felt herself moving through space, pinned to the front edge of the planet.

Their eyes roamed the heavens. Nora sighed. “It *is* lovely. Do you think watching stars makes Dr. Devereaux as happy as it does you?”

Marion replied, “That word does not seem to apply to him.”

Nora choked a laugh. “Wicked little thing! How true! When we first married, I felt omitted, like one of his unseen planets obscured by its star. I had some tiny effect on him but was invisible. You know, he’s never taken me outside to stargaze. When he talks about his work, it’s always a chart or graph.”

“It is easier to understand that way.”

“But dead! I want to see them twinkle! You know, when he first told me the university had let him hire a computer and I met you, I was wary.”

“Of me?”

“Oh yes. Working together in the dark night, bending over your sky charts. How romantic! I was envious and afraid you might want him.”

Marion laughed. “Not I.”

Nora ripped up a few stems of grass absently and twisted them in her fingers. Marion could feel the snow beginning to melt and dampen her stockings. “After a time, I hoped you *would* want him. You see?” Marion was silent. Nora said, “Do you think me awful?”

Marion took Nora’s hand, two gloves holding each other. This woman had leaped to Marion’s side when she needed her last spring. Marion would do the same. “I have wondered how someone as buoyant as you tolerates being tethered to him. He is joyless.”

Nora moaned as if a blade had been thrust into a festering wound. Marion felt the same exquisite agony and relief when Nora had touched her own misery over Reuben.

“Joyless,” Nora echoed. “Yes. But will John achieve anything *big* from his intense effort? I do admire him. His energy hypnotized me. Like a foolish girl, I expected Lord Byron and found I had married a coal engine. He is deeply disappointed so far. Only great success will redeem him. Will something brilliant emerge from his studies?”

“I’m a computer, with a mere bachelor’s degree. He is the doctor.”

Nora snorted. “I suspect you know if he is a star or an asteroid.”

“He’s very competent, thorough and precise.”

Nora patted her hand. “Do not be kind. *I know*. What I see of him at the dinner table cannot be so different from him at his telescope. He cuts his meat thoroughly and precisely as you say—but he does not savor the taste.” She giggled, “And to tell a tale, he is scarcely different in the bedroom!”

Marion shuddered to think of Dr. Devereaux gripping Nora in bed. She pictured him with a napkin tied around his neck as he climbed atop her. To dispel that image, Marion said, “I think the great leaps will be with the cepheid variables. They resemble the eclipsing binaries he studies but are actually single, pulsing stars. Some think they bend light and will eventually tell us where we are in the universe.”

Nora rolled on her side toward Marion. “Where we are in the universe? Really?”

“Wouldn’t you like to know?”

Nora laughed. “Oh, yes!”

“Since Copernicus took earth out of the center, we have floated aimlessly. We have no street address.”

“It feels just like that.”

“Your stockings will be soaked, Nora. We should rise.”

“What an odd girl you are, Marion. Telling me we’re lost in space and then worrying about wet stockings. Aren’t *you* worried about being lost?”

“Often.”

“Yet you would not allow a husband to smother you, just to be found.”

Marion said, “Some binaries orbit so near that they draw parts of each other into the space between them in streaming flares. We call this tidal distortion. I think that might be worse than being lost.”

“And do stars in such destructive embraces never break loose of each other?”

“*I* have not seen it happen.”

Nora laughed. “Perhaps they do it when no one is looking! They must have secrets. Let me tell you one of mine. You have said what makes you happy. Now I will tell you. I am far happier out here tonight knowing I’m *required* inside than if I came out here any other night of the week. I envy you taking Reuben for a lover, but even more for casting him off rather than being shoved into his pocket. I find myself happiest when—well—”

Marion squeezed her gloved hand. Nora said, “All right, then. I—I have had three lovers since I married. And I plan to have more. There! Tell me, should I have the rugged Dane or the Harvard boy? I am happiest when sneaking off wickedly free. And sneaking back wickedly free. I savor that my husband does not know how far from him I am, that I am hidden from him.” She laughed, but Marion sensed her trembling. “That is my secret. Now, for your next confession. Worst moment.”

Marion bit her lip. She had suspected something like this, had felt an explosion coming in the Deveraux house. But with such volatile goods handed her, Marion felt

obliged to give something equally intimate to be worthy of her friend. There was only one such thing to tell. “My mother died not far from here.”

“Oh!”

“I was eleven. We were in the mountains skiing. One morning she went off on a cross-country run in one of the high meadows. A squall came up, then a huge storm. She never returned. They sent out search parties when the weather relented, but she was never found. I pictured her out there under a pine tree with a broken leg as the cold clawed toward her heart. I heard her calling for me. I skied looking for her until my legs gave out and the authorities took charge of me.”

“How awful!” Nora clutched Marion’s hand. “Awful!”

“Everything in my life was gone. Everything!” She had never said it aloud so nakedly. She thought it would catch in her throat, but she actually felt calm with the words free.

“What about your father?”

Marion shook her head. “I never knew him, a wandering comet, I suppose.”

“What did you do?”

Marion clicked her tongue. “Whatever I was told. It did not matter. Orphanages. Day labor. Somehow, miraculously, college. Do not envy my freedom—it comes with pain. I longed for her. I told people I knew she was up in these hills searching for me. That I had to climb back up to find her and rescue her. To stop me running away, the orphanage matron told me she was in heaven, that she was an angel, one of the stars. When I first used a telescope in school, I thought I would see her. Later, I learned that some of the nearer stars were just then receiving the light from that time. The light from

the time before she was lost, from a time Mother and I were happy—say thirteen light years away—is just now reaching Ross 614. If I were near Ross 614, and had a super powerful telescope to detect such faint light and ten other impossible things, I could see my mother and me skiing meadows like these or riding the lift over the pines. The light of those days is out there now.”

“Wouldn’t it be wonderful if you could?”

“We can’t exceed the speed of light to catch it. Or see such faint light and such small objects. The atmosphere dissipates the images--”

Nora said, “Science, science, science.”

“Laws of physics.”

“All laws are broken eventually,” Nora said. “All! And thank God for it! If life were only laws, I would go mad. But I like imagining that our happy moments are flying through the stars! They exist out there.”

They lay quietly, clasping hands tightly as the earth rotated at a thousand miles per hour and the solar system hurtled through the darkness at a million miles per hour. Will all laws be broken? Marion wondered. Should we be thankful for that? Yes, she thought. We should.

Nora said, “So it’s not by chance you found a job here?”

“No.”

“You have searched for—”

“Something. Anything. Something of hers is out there. A ski binding, a boot, a ring. I want something!”

Nora sighed heavily. “And do you often lay down in snow?”

Marion was glad her friend saw it. “I don’t know why she didn’t take me with her that day. I never complained or lagged. It makes me wonder if she planned to go, if life was too hard for her alone in the world. I remember she gave me a long hug and kiss. I would have gone with her if she had to do that. But I’m sure she suffered an accident.” Marion smiled. “Another mystery no telescope will ever solve. A tiny cataclysm.”

They held hands and spotted a streaking meteorite. Marion found Algol. Those binary stars eclipsed nearly every three days. She shuddered to picture the speed and intensity that drove the pair furiously around each other, tearing at each other. To orbit every three days! They were very unevenly matched. One accounted for 92% of the light and the other only 8%. One astronomer thought there was a third star in the system that was not visible and did not eclipse. Marion had looked for signs of it, but Professor Devereaux did not believe it existed. “Just facts,” he chided. “Don’t chase phantoms.” But Marion continued to search for evidence the third star existed. She was sure something was there.

Suddenly Nora gripped Marion hard. “What was that?”

There was a rustling near them, perhaps four feet away. The grass and snow was certainly shifting. Then came a squeak and chitter. “A mouse?”

“A mouse!” Nora gasped, and her panic caught Marion. The women wrapped their dress hems tightly around their legs, scrambled to their feet and ran across the field to the garden. They clutched each other and laughed until their stomachs hurt. A mouse scared them? There was so much more to fear, so much worse. They hugged each other and wiped their eyes. They brushed dried snow off each other’s dresses and patted their hair. Their hems and stockings were wet.

The house door slammed. “Nora!” a voice hissed. Professor Devereaux. Footsteps crunched on the shoveled walkway. “Nora!” he hissed. Nora edged behind Marion. She placed her hands on Marion’s hips and ducked her head behind Marion’s. Marion felt Nora quiver with suppressed laughter.

“Who’s there?” Dr. Devereaux said.

“Marion, sir.”

“What the devil are you doing out here in the cold?”

“I’ve been looking at Algol. I believe it’s going into eclipse.”

“Have you seen my wife?” He edged a few steps nearer, silhouetted by the house lights, puffing vapor and not wanting to wet his shoes.

Nora laid her head against Marion’s back. She whispered, “Don’t tell.”

“I’m sure there is a third, unseen star in the system,” Marion said.

“Oh, for god’s sake, woman! If you see her, tell her our guests wish to speak to her! And if you’re smart, you’ll give Baskins a second look.” He turned and strode back to the house.

After the door closed, Nora continued to press her head to Marion’s back, and slid her arms forward and around Marion’s waist and squeezed gently. She spread her palms flat on Marion’s belly. They felt wonderful, like secrets.

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