

I sat alone on the bench beneath the illuminated Platform 19 sign. At this hour the only other echoing footsteps in Union Station belonged to security, who had already told me multiple times that there was no train scheduled to arrive at eleven p.m. I checked my watch again: 10:57. I reread the invitation in my hand.

It had been printed on pure gold stationary. I found it on the bottom of the usual stack of circulations that poked their way through the slit in my door every afternoon around four thirty. The modest envelope had shown no sign of fantastic qualities, and it had been addressed appropriately:

To Ms. Elaine Evans
1501 N Park Ave
Chicago, IL 60610

However, upon peeling back the purple wax seal all sense of modesty was disregarded. Sparks flew up in every direction. Not flames, but delicate twinkles that shimmered and burned in the air around me. Astounded, I cautiously removed the single card inside. The gold stationary showed a blurry reflection of my red hair and lingering sparks behind its purple ink that read:

*Ms. Elaine Evans,
You have been exuberantly requested to grace
Sir Isaak von Etteldwyer of Northern Jupiter
With your presence at his Celebration of Birth
on April 15th
Please meet accompanying guests at
23:00 at Union Station, Platform 19
on April 14th*

*This invitation will serve as your ticket.
Baggage and RSVP are unnecessary.*

I laughed upon reading the invitation. I did not know a Sir Isaak von Etteldwyer of Northern Jupiter (and I was fairly certain no place existed in the United States, or anywhere else on Earth for that matter). I interpreted the invitation as some sort of joke and threw it in the garbage bin.

It took three full days for the invitation to resurface. And I mean that quite literally. It was the afternoon of April 13th when I arrived home from work and found the very same invitation propped up on my kitchen table. The gold stationary was blinding in the sunset. Confused and at this point a bit frightened, I hastily threw the invitation away again and emptied my waste basket into the alley dumpster. The next morning, I awoke to the invitation again propped up on my kitchen table. It was at that point I decided not to ignore it.

10:58. If a train would be arriving, I would hear it by now. The wind always arrives first.

10:59. From behind, I heard two security guards laughing, unaware that their mocking had a sensitive audience. I stood. *This is stupid*, I thought. *Absolutely ridiculous*. I looked down at the invitation and threw it out of sight, turning toward the gated entrance and laughing security guards.

"I'm afraid you're going to need this, Miss Evans." A firm hand grasped my shoulder. Shocked by the sudden voice, I turned quickly and lost my balance. The same firm hand caught me under the arm. "Sir Isaak has a fairly strict invitation policy."

To this day, I am fairly certain that what I saw was some sort of dream. In front of me, there on Platform 19, stood a brilliantly tall man. I say *man*, but he towered above me at nearly eight feet and fashioned a velvet emerald suit that clashed horrifically with his pale violet skin. He had long pointed ears. One of which fell low, nearly tickling the bottom of his dark brown goatee, and the other stuck straight up, twitching and turning with every sound. These ears, along with his nose, lip, and eyebrows, were all pierced with various gold and silver hoops. He smiled widely at me, offering the gold invitation back into my hands. I took it, unable to speak.

"There you go, my dear. Now, shall we?" He bowed low, crossing his impossibly thin legs into some sort of a curtsy and holding an arm outstretched. Behind the giant violet man was a matte black passenger train. Though it looked modern, steam of vibrant gold billowed out from underneath each cart. It filled the station with the unmistakable smell of lavender and marijuana. I inhaled deeply.

"Am I allowed to say no?" I asked, not taking a step back. I couldn't hear the security guards laughing anymore.

"My dear, why would you want to?" Somehow the man smiled more widely. "Take my hand." And with that, as if I were under hypnosis, he led me across the platform to the door of the first cart.

Inside was a gaudy gold spiral staircase, carpeted in red velvet. It led upwards toward a second level. I climbed, the violet man following close behind. The top landing opened to a grand lounge. Dark velvet chairs and couches were spread throughout, crystal chandeliers hung every few meters across the ceiling, the carpet was decorated with vibrant depictions of the cosmos, and the air was dusted with a sparkling purple haze. But the grandness or luxury was not what had me in awe as I reached the top of the stairs. It was the individuals crowding the lounge. To my right stood a woman dressed in a bright red ball gown. Her hair was dreadlocked and cascaded down her back in a hundred shades of blue. When she turned, I saw she had no eyes. Clear glass orbs spun madly in her sockets, purple and white veins tucked neatly behind. She smiled and winked at me before dancing away, holding tight to a wine glass. To my left sat a black and white adolescent giraffe. She was desperately thin and wore no clothes (as I'm sure no company catered to the needs of large hooved mammals); she had, however, applied vibrant red lipstick and wore a matching wig. She spoke loudly to an impossibly old man sitting on the adjacent sofa. He was also completely nude, covered in blotchy freckles, and had a magenta beard that fell to the floor in a dusty heap. This repeated all around the lounge. A lion was playing jazz piano at the stage to my right, his mane combed back, tail poking out from a pair of purple suit pants. There was an octopus dressed in black tie serving cocktails at a bar positioned in the back of the room, and from there every creature

imaginable and unimaginable were dancing, laughing, smoking from long pipes, and drinking from sparkling crystal glasses. I suddenly felt very underdressed and of the wrong species.

“Ladies and Gentlemen,” the violet man’s voice bellowed from behind me, “I am so honored to announce the arrival of Ms. Elaine Evans, our exclusive Human guest.” The entire lounge burst into applause. The chandeliers spun, giving off millions of twinkling diamonds that hung in the air, and the crowd of mismatched humans, aliens, and animals raised their glasses, smiling at me. I felt my cheeks burn, and I didn’t know whether to smile or cry. “Miss Evans,” the violet man whispered in my ear so no one else could hear, “I have to speak with the Conductor for a moment, then I’ll brief you on our journey. As a human I’m sure you’re very anxious.” He squeezed my shoulder affectionately and disappeared back down the staircase.

I’m sure I looked absolutely ridiculous standing there in my maroon corduroy overalls, green boots, bright blue glasses, and tangled red hair. I shifted on the balls of my feet, surveying the lounge once again. This time the food caught my eyes. A tall man with vibrant red skin (he looked to be the same species as the violet man who escorted me onto the train) was weaving through the crowd serving...yes, there was no mistaking it, brain. He leaned over, offering the silver tray to the woman with the glass eyes. She gasped in eagerness, taking a piece and smiling while she chewed. My stomach churned. Where the hell was I? The train lurched forward, and everyone steadied their glasses. The man serving refreshments had swapped his tray of brain for a tray of sparkling drinks. He made his way to me, smiling wide to reveal razor-sharp teeth covered with gold and silver caps. He leaned down and forward, holding the tray at my eye level.

“Champagne, Miss Evans?”

“Call me Elaine please,” I said before I could stop myself. “And yes, thank you.” I figured I could comprehend the situation more clearly with a little alcohol. Which turned out to be very true. But this was not normal champagne. I took a long sip and was overwhelmed by the taste of honeysuckle. It felt milky in my throat and as soon as I swallowed, I felt as though I was floating. I checked to be sure my feet were still on the floor.

“Elaine! Come join us!” It was the woman with the glass eyes. She waved me over to a velvet upholstered corner booth where she sat giggling with men who looked not of this world. Then again, she didn’t look of this world either. I sat, being sure to leave a foot or so between myself and the man sitting to the right of the glass eyed woman.

“My name is Xahni,” she said, reaching across the man to shake my hand. I took it, but instead of shaking it she brought it to her lips and kissed my knuckles. “I’ve never met a human.” She winked and sipped her honeysuckle drink. Never met a human?

“And what, I mean, I’m sorry if it’s rude to ask, but what are you?” Feeling impossibly stupid I took another sip of my drink while trying to maintain eye contact with Xahni.

“Oh, my Sun, it’s not rude at all! I forgot how little humans know about the universe. I’m sorry, this must be so strange for you.” Xahni grasped my hand again, squeezing it tightly. “I’m an Angel. A Venusette Angel.”

“Venusette Angel?” The honeysuckle drink was giving me the confidence to ask the necessary questions.

“Oh right, one planet mindset. I’m sorry. I’m an Angel from Venus.” She must have thought this was enough of an explanation because she quickly returned to her glass and turned to the men chattering around her. I tried not to stare, but these were the strangest men I’d ever seen. They had pale grey skin that showed deep red and purple veins just below the surface. Their eyes were completely black, the size of mason jar lids. Each one had different colored hair; the one sitting closest to me had a white mohawk that stood two feet in the air. He wore a long, torn t-shirt that ended just below his knotted knees. His fingers resembled those of a gecko.

“Do you like the Honeysuckle Milk?” The man to my right spoke in a smooth French accent. He smiled and pointed to my empty glass.

“Honeysuckle milk? Is that what this is? Wow. I’ve had honeysuckle before, but it never made me feel like this.”

“I should hope not. This is Honeysuckle Milk from the Eastern Jupierian fields. The soil is rich in ancient star fragments, pre-Solar War XIX. Which is what gives the milk its, ah,” he smiled flirtatiously, “other worldly sensations.” He placed a hand on my thigh. I stood quickly and clumsily, nearly falling backwards out of the booth. Xahni watched with concern as someone caught me from behind.

“Miss Evans, I’m sorry to have kept you waiting.” The violet man had returned, helping me steady myself. “There was a misunderstanding about the evening’s timeline. I hope Xahni hasn’t been overwhelming you with questions?” He winked toward the Angel.

“Rikki, I promised! It’s not every day you meet a live human. I can behave when I need to!” Xahni giggled and smiled at the violet man.

“If you’d follow me, Miss Evans. We don’t have much time to brief you before the evening’s events begin.” Rikki offered me his elbow. I took it, staying close to his side as we weaved through the crowd. The haze had gotten thicker since my arrival, and the carpet was now littered with diamonds. I snagged a second glass of Honeysuckle Milk just as Rikki escorted me out the back door of the lounge. Through the door was a second lounge, but this one was much smaller and completely empty. There were only two armchairs, both black velvet with gold trim. Between them was a round end table which supported two crystal glasses, a pitcher of what I’m assuming was more Honeysuckle Milk Champagne, and a platter of assorted brain cuts and colorful mushrooms. I sat across from Rikki and drank deeply from my glass.

“Eat, Miss Evans. You must be starving.” Rikki placed a red mushroom and a slice of brain on a napkin and handed it to me. Not wanting to be rude, I took it. The brain was chilled. I could feel the condensation on my palm. I didn’t want to ask what type of brain it was. I eyed the mushroom curiously. It smelled like red velvet cake. I took a bite off the stem. “I should warn you, humans tend to have a stronger reaction to hallucinogens than most other species. I wouldn’t eat that whole mushroom.” I gagged and swallowed hard.

“Hallucinogens? What type of mushrooms are these?” I put the napkin down on the table and took a big swing of Honeysuckle Milk, as if it would reverse the effects of what I just ate.

“Velvet Redds, from Sir Isaak’s hometown. They are a specialty and go excellently with the Honeysuckle Milk Champagne and chilled brain,” Rikki took a large slice of brain in his mouth and

chewed joyfully. I watched, horrified. But the effects of the Honeysuckle Milk and now the mushroom were quickly dulling all sense of concern.

“So, Miss Evans. I’m sure you have a lot of questions for me, but I’m afraid I won’t have enough time to answer all of them. Is there perhaps one question that is bothering you most?”

“If we are on a train, where are we going?” The question came out before I could think. There were way more important questions I should have asked. Rikki smiled and set his glass down on the table.

“Nowhere, my dear. Sir Isaak enjoys the illusion of travel. We have no physical destination.” He laughed under his breath and turned around in his chair to raise a dark window shade. I was again in awe. Beyond the window of the train was nothing but space. Millions and millions of stars shone in colors I had never seen before, hurricanes of multicolored gas could be seen in the distance, and large meteors rolled alongside the rail cart.

“Our destination is a spiritual one which we hope to arrive at once the celebration begins.” Rikki continued to speak as if space exploration via passenger train was completely normal. “Sir Isaak takes his birth celebrations very seriously, and as you are his Human guest, I am obligated to warn you that you too shall be honored.” He saw the confused expression on my face. “However, that is the most that I am allowed to divulge. You see, Sir Isaak also values the elements of illusion and surprise—” there were three sharp knocks on the private lounge doors and Rikki fell silent.

A very large sable rabbit opened the door and poked his head in. He smiled to me but spoke to Rikki. “I’m so sorry to interrupt, but Sir Isaak is ready.”

“Brilliant.” Isaak smiled brightly. “Thank you, Abraham.”

“It’s time, my dear. Deep breath, you’ll do just fine.” Rikki lead me back into the main lounge.

I stayed a few strides behind him as we entered. The lounge looked very different. The furniture had been rearranged to face the stage. The chandeliers had been turned low, bathing everything in a deep amber light. Diamonds still covered the floor. Mismatched silhouettes occupied each armchair, and on the stage stood a large ruby oak table. Every guest’s eyes were fixed on what rested on the table. Lying on the table was a five-foot-long, four foot wide, flesh chrysalis. Through the thin skin barrier, I could make out the pattern of monarch butterfly wings as large as umbrellas. And human feet. It was pulsating. Thick red veins ran from the top of the chrysalis to the base, curving through blemishes, bruises and scars. It wiggled slowly, methodically. I heard guests chewing on squeaky brains as they watched. The chandeliers around the stage slowly brightened, and from the shadows, the lion began to play a moody ballad.

“Sir Isaak is a very unique breed of Jupierian, Miss Evans.” Rikki leaned close to whisper in my ear. His voice was barely audible over the piano’s crescendo. “He goes through yearly birthing cycles. Each year, on the nine hundredth day, Sir Isaak begins chrysalis formation. And on day one thousand, he emerges, reborn.” He nodded toward the chrysalis, which was now twitching and writhing on top of the table. Everyone stopped chewing. The chandeliers began to spin. The lion leaned deeper into his melody. And then the chrysalis began to split. It was not the beauty and grace with which a butterfly was born. Amniotic fluid leaked through the thin gap forming along the side. It pooled around the chrysalis and dripped off the table. The crowd cheered. The blood came next,

bubbling out through the veins which had erupted under pressure. The lounge smelled strongly of female discharge and urine. The guests cheered louder yet. The chrysalis pulsed quicker, pumping more amniotic fluid, blood, and urine out across the surface of the table. Rikki stepped out from behind me into the light of the spinning chandeliers.

“Ladies and Gentlemen, Sir Isaak von Etteldwyer!” Rikki’s voice bellowed above the music and cheers. Out of the chrysalis stood a towering man. Covered in glistening fluid, he had his back turned to his audience. Dripping down his back lay a pair of giant monarch wings. He stood for a moment, perfectly still for dramatic effect. And as the lion struck his final note, Sir Isaak flashed his wings, nearly eight feet wide. He turned, displaying his naked body to the audience as they cheered louder. His skin was a pale shade of pear-green. He was hairless except for long white eyelashes that framed perfectly wide opal eyes. His arms rose in gratitude, and he smiled brilliantly for a few moments. The smell of the amniotic fluid was giving me a headache.

“Ha! Ha, ha! My wonderful guests! My precious children of the universe! Have you enjoyed yourself?” Sir Isaak’s voice was sweet and rich, like church bells. The crowd cheered in response. “I hope you’ve enjoyed the appetizers. Honeysuckle Milk and brain really do wonders for the nervous system.” The guests laughed. “But where is my main course? Where is my gift?” Sir Isaak searched the crowd hungrily. Rikki stepped forward.

“Sir Isaak, may I present your gift and main course, Miss Elaine Evans.”