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## STAR EATER

by: Amanda Akers

No two stars tasted alike.

Some were sweet, filled with syrup and sugar, their juices formed my lips. Others were bitter, covered in eons of uncertainty, breaking apart with cracks that glowed with gaseous fire. Even more were salty, stuffing themselves into my cheeks with an aftertaste that built in my chest and left my breath stained with hunger. Many tended to be gummy, they stuck to my teeth, snapping my mouth shut, until they were nothing more than a pile of dust spilling over in my gut. The ones I liked the best were the ones that tasted like the cosmos they were born into, saturated with yellows and oranges, exhaling light. They dissolved into my tongue, spread through my body with a heat that suffocated my insides, bursting with a spectrum that colored my bones with hints of nebulas and dying my tissues shades of Jupiter's storm. My addiction replaced my veins with constellations. I plucked them from the sky and became something not even I could reach.

With every star I ate, a life passed through me. I could see, through human eyes, all their vulnerabilities, their good days, their bad, but most of all I could see their wishes. They left an imprint on the stars they wished upon. Sometimes, it made them lighter, others it made them sink from one galaxy to the next, but what always changed for the better was how bright they shone. When a wishing star was ready, the rays around it would shimmer in golds and blues with diamonds twirling in their light. Just like the way the North Star's eyes shone when she would listen to my stories.

They were all I could think about. It wasn't the taste that kept my mouth watering. It was the way I felt myself getting lost in the lives of people I had only hoped to envision myself as. Once I ate a star a man wished upon, asking to survive a walk between two buildings in midair. He called it "tightrope walking." His idea was madness. People told him he was a lunatic. But the way he asked, and how much he yearned for it, made me desperate to try it. So, I walked along the tiniest string of constellations I could find, my arms outstretched for balance with the Moon shining onto my back, and became one too.

I ate them because I could. I ate them to feel their fire on my lips and the way they swallowed up my insides with their heat. I ate them to see what the North Star saw when she gave away smiles while looking down at Earth and to become something that her eyes were drawn to. My hunger was constant. It was all I knew. And the way it swapped words with my desires crawled over my skin until I could feel them digging themselves into my ears, calling out to me, lightyears away. It was all I could think about. Even when I ate mounds of stars and licked their dust from under my nails, I never felt full.

I remember myself jumping through cosmic dust, from one constellation to the next, searching for the best wishing star that side of the galaxy. I found myself inches away from the

North Star. She was sitting cross legged in her favorite spot with stardust in her hair and new born stars at her fingertips. I gazed at the star burning in the center of her chest. It was crammed with wishes that only she could see that were piled high onto one another. They tumbled inside her, making her chest shine with blues and oranges that faded into a shade of white that shimmered with heat. My sights were set on the small star to the right of her and the way it made my mouth water. I picked it out from the sky like I had so many times before. It was plump with hues of faded yellows, and it shone like magic when I held it up to my lips. When I bit into its skin, it crackled against my tongue. Its center was plump with a fiery orange, full of a life that was meant for me. And when I swallowed, I could feel my stomach burst with an explosion of purples and golds.

“Are you eating my stars again, Nova?” North asked from behind me.

I turned around. She always hated when I ate her stars. “Only this one,” I told her as I lifted the half-eaten star to show her.

“Pity. I liked that one the most,” she pouted at me.

“Is that so?”

“I even named it.”

I took another bite, savoring the saturation of yellows and oranges for all that they were worth. “Was it delicious? Because that’s what I would’ve called it.”

“It was Betelgeuse.”

“There’s already a star named that.”

“I know that. But that one was better. Go over to Orion and eat his, so that I can have one all my own.”

Betelgeuse is one of the brightest star in the sky and the biggest, too. It pulsates a bright red that's cram packed with wishes. Even just a taste might've sent me plummeting into Earth's oceans.

“Orion won't let me near his stars. Just eating one would be catastrophic to him. How would he hold up his club if his shoulder was gone? All he'd have left to brag about would be his belt and how he used to be able to walk on water when he dreamt that he was a man.” I glided over to her, shifting through stars and bits of comets.

“That doesn't stop you from eating mine.” The star in my hand warmed my palm as I rubbed my thumb around its crumbling core. I looked her up and down, only now regretting that I didn't stare at her long enough.

I laughed as I said, “Yours just taste the best.” That didn't satisfy her. I sat down in front of her and asked, “Don't you ever get tired of staying in the same spot?” I had never known her to leave her spot in the sky just above Earth, who slept below her with clouds covering his eyes while blues and greens composed the shadows on his face.

Her eyes flickered from the space her Betelgeuse used to be to me. A small string of constellations covered the area on the side of her left eye that reminded me of the one that centered my chest. “If I didn't, you wouldn't be able to find me anymore.”

I crammed the last bite in while watching the way her eyes followed the crumbs that spilled onto my chest. “Do you like it when I'm near you?”

A smile took over her lips. “Do you know what you are?” Her question shook me. It brought me back to the time Oblivion, the black hole, and I spoke. He called me a “chaos bringer” for the eruption of light I brought whenever I ate.

I pulled my knees to my chest and ducked my head away from her eyes. “A Star Eater. I eat all day and never feel satisfied. Then I eat some more and wait for a new batch of stars to be born. This is who I am and all that I’ll ever be.” I outstretched my left arm and felt the constant heat and intensity of a single star within my reach. When I touched it with my finger, it started to break. Bits of light fell from it, creating a rainfall of tiny stars that crashed into the sky beneath me.

“You’re a Wish Granter. When you eat those stars, all those wishes come true.”

“They do?” I didn’t notice it at the time, but the more I look back on it, the more I can feel a stream of tears pooling around my eyes.

She nodded with starlight in her dimples. “What’s your wish, Nova?”

There were so many ways to say it: to not feel hungry any more, to have a purpose, to live an actual life, but all that I could manage was, “To be human.”

She came closer and interlocked her fingers with my left hand. With her free hand, she lifted my head up so that I could see the gleam in her eyes. Her fingers held me there as she kissed my forehead, burning her heat into skin. It didn’t hurt. She never hurt. But it’s a feeling that I’ve never forgotten.

“Maybe you’ll get your wish.”

That was two-hundred forty-three days ago, or one day on Venus. I’ve counted them all to make sure that I’ll never forget them. Not a single one. That night, I fell asleep in the deepest part of the Big Dipper and woke up on a hill overlooking a river with a city behind me. It was incredible. Streams of colors went from one building to the next. It was still dark, and the fireflies shone as scattered specks of echoing light that reminded me of home. The grass beneath

me was cool, damp with dew, and when I spread my hands out over it the way I used to over the velvet touch of Ursa Major, I could feel every blade glide against my palms.

I ran down every street that crisscrossed in between buildings with spectrums of art on their outsides and white lights within, sometimes going beyond the city to be swallowed by Earth's deep blues and get lost in his evergreens. I inspected every store. The bakery where chocolate melted on my tongue and seeped through my teeth, the pet shop where I met a bird who used the same words humans do and tried to dance to their songs instead of its own, even down to the streets where I realized I was doing the same thing. I was putting on clothes, trying to cascade through a life I was only borrowing, getting a taste of everything I could before I was brought back home. But that never happened. I waited a day, then a week, a month, and now I've come close to a year on Earth and still nothing has changed.

A good part of my time is lost at the planetarium where I work as a janitor. Instead of cleaning, I mostly listen to the scientists and their phenomena. When they talked about how many moons Jupiter has and all the asteroids that hang around him from his size and gravity, I shook my head and laughed. Jupiter is a collector. When he finds something that he likes, he keeps it close to him just like the way Saturn does with her rings. And when they spoke about not knowing every name to Jupiter's moons, pride radiated from me in the form of a smile as I swept up a pile of paper into my dustpan, listing them all in my head.

Once, I heard them claim Earth as their mother. I had to bite my lip to keep myself from blurting out how ridiculous they sounded. Being a part of Earth is not the same as sitting with him. He and I would watch Aurora dance with her hands invading atmospheres and ribbons of soft greens and purples falling from her hair as he would hum to the people who lived inside his head. Every now and then, I catch myself trying to talk to him the way I used to. I say little

things that humans have taught me, “Nice weather we’re having,” “What have you been up to lately,” and “We should talk more.” Sometimes I say things like, “I heard your sister telling Mercury and Sun about how old you look lately,” “How far have you chased Halley’s comet,” and “What’s your favorite constellation to fall asleep by,” just like before. Either way, he never gives me an answer. I’m just one voice rattling against a cluster of billions.

I spend my nights in a coffee shop on the corner of the building where I live. I like it there. The people are sparse and those who do come in usually know what they want and leave right away. And every night, just like tonight, I sit at the counter with a cup of coffee strong enough to keep me awake until morning, my sketch book covered in the faces of people I used to know. I hold my pencil in my hand the same way I would scribble pictures in passing stardust. I take my time defining their eyes and rounding out their cheeks.

Arms drape around my neck followed by a, “You draw her a lot.”

“I draw them all a lot.”

“No, see,” the fingers point to four tiny sketches of the same woman on a single page.

“They’re all the same girl. Does she have a name?”

I take a moment to look at them all. She’s sitting cross legged in a couple, laying down in another, and standing with tiny stars tickling her fingertips in the other. Sometimes she’s laughing, smiling, making funny faces, but I keep redrawing the one with the face from the last time I saw her. “She’s the North Star.”

“And who’s that?” The fingers point to the woman on the other page with long, star streaked hair that almost covers her eyes, and a galaxy bonded in her chest full of spirals of light.

“That’s Andromeda.”

“You’re always drawing outer space things. Maybe it’s time you came back down to Earth where you belong.”

“Would you like me better that way?”

“No, but you might.”

Her name’s Nora. She likes the freckles on my chest that look like a constellation and how I’m young enough to be her boyfriend but my hair is as white as starlight. But her favorite part about me is my name. She claims to have never heard Nova used as someone’s name before, but the way it sounds when it rolls off her tongue makes her think of someone she used to know. What I like about her is the way her dimples stand out when she smiles and how when her hair is put up in a messy bun like tonight with her bangs across her forehead and loose strands framing her face, she can’t help but remind me of North.

“Your drawings are always so good. You should enter them into one of those competitions.”

“No way.” I continue to shade around North’s lips, trying to capture what they looked like when I told her my wish.

“Why not?” There’s a disappointment in her voice that makes me put my pencil down. She’s since moved from hanging off the back of me to sitting in the stool beside me. Her eyes sparkle when she notices that she’s finally caught my attention. But the answer is no. It will always be no. These aren’t just drawings. They’re my friends and I don’t want to share them, but I can’t possibly tell her that. She likes long, drawn out excuses. They get her mind going like short stories and a simple no just won’t cut it.

“Because they’re not done yet.”

“When will they be done?”

“Probably the next time Pluto tells a joke funny enough to make Mercury laugh.”

“But those two are so far away from each other. How will Mercury hear the joke?”

“Pluto will send it in a message with Corvus.”

“Doesn’t Corvus usually deliver bad news?”

“Pluto’s jokes aren’t usually very good.”

This makes her laugh. Not in a way that resembles an outburst of any kind, but in a way that makes her nose crinkle and teeth shine. She holds the back of my neck and pulls me in closer as she whispers a kiss onto my ear.

After she leaves me for the night, I get up from my usual spot at the counter and head for the hill that I came from. It’s on the far end of the city where nobody really goes around this hour, but the sky’s clear for the first time in a long time and I want to see them. I skip across streets, dart through alleys, only stopping to pick up a cat I named Felis who wanders around the city, but never all that far from me. I named him that because the way his irises glitter reminded me of the constellation that has long since vanished from the sky. I carry him to the hill, sketch book in hand, and sit beneath the northern stars to watch. They look quiet from here, but I know they’re anything but. His purring echoes me as I point them all out to him for probably the ninetieth time.

Ursa Major and Minor, Draco, even Cassiopeia, but no North. I picture her cross legged in her usual spot, probably with Lynx in her lap, reflecting Felis in mine. She’s gotten harder to find lately. And the idea of her falling from the sky or being swallowed by a black hole clumps in my throat. But the first time I did see her on this hill, I realized how much brighter she was from down here. My fingers curl around Felis’ fur the way they curled around countless streams

of blue and magenta cosmic dust. It puts me at ease seeing them. The last time, I felt completely lost and started to forget who was where.

“Is that where you’re from too?” I ask the cat. His eyes close as he tucks his feet under himself, almost smiling at me. “We can be lost together.”

I lick my lips thinking about how many people I could be in a given day. Eating the stars, tasting their wishes. The regret builds in my gut. I lie back and think about how Gemini’s fighting used to put me to sleep and how Venus used to talk enough for Earth and her combined. They all look so far away from me, so still. Minutes toll by as I wait to watch Sun chase away Moon. They were constantly doing that. Both being too shy to speak to the other, except on rather spectacular occasions.

“I gave you the Earth, but your head’s full of stars.”

I shoot up to see Nora standing over me. She comes to sit beside me cross legged with her hands folded on her ankles. She looks up at the sky the way people do when they find something that resembles peace inside themselves. By Moon’s light, her skin starts to shimmer with stars and universes collide in her eyes.

“I thought that this was what you wanted,” she says without taking her eyes off the stars. “To be human like the rest of them.”

A tear falls from the corner of my eye, past the ear that she kissed. “North?”

At first, I’m upset that she’s here and at the fact that she’s always been here. Nora was one of the first people I met on Earth, and when I asked her what her favorite thing to do was she said, “People watching,” I thought it was boring. Why would I want to watch people do things that I could do myself? But now I see it. She’s always watched them. She’s watched them by the

masses. Soaking up their wishes and keeping them inside herself like a locket around her neck. She knew more about people than I could by eating their dreams one by one.

I choke on my words, “Why did you leave your spot to come here? Won’t people miss you?”

She gives me a shrug and says, “Why did you?”

“I’m only here because --”

“You wished it.” She leans in close so that we’re nose to nose with her finger by her lips and whispers, “And yours was mine to grant.”

For a split second, I don’t think about going home, this city, the wish, or how much they all might laugh or cheer when they see what I’m about to do. I take her in my arms, pull her in close and kiss her in a way planets are made. I forget about who we are and where we came from and let the moment orbit around our own gravitation. On her lips, in her mouth, I can taste them all over again. They’re nutty and sweet, fiery and tart, creamy and cool. Our tongues exchange wishes. My own is full of bitterness that sticks to the back of my throat. Hers is fresh and mild with a richness that makes my eyes roll into the back of my head. It meets the bitterness in my throat, softening it into syrup that glazes over my insides as our energies are equally exchanged.

My hand travels from her cheek, down her neck, shoulder, and arm, leaving trails of spiral galaxies that resemble my fingerprints. “I was just about to wish to be with you.”

“But I’m already here.”

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I walk into my apartment full of the sweet scent of sugar and warmth. White lights decorate my ceilings and drape down my walls and around my windows. Felis sits atop a

bookcase full of astronomy books and maps to find my way back home. He likes to be as high up as possible, only walking between my legs.

Nora's in the kitchen, humming to herself as she barely looks over her shoulder to watch me. I sit on one of the stools by the counter. There's a plate full of cookies in the shape of stars sitting in the middle. Some are frosted faded yellows and the rest are light blues except for one. A bright red one lies on top of the pile. I pick it up and bite into it. The cookie crumbles in my mouth. It's slightly buttery and the frosting melts on my tongue with its sugars sticking to my teeth.

"Are you eating my stars again, Nova?"

"Only this one."