

Project Arcturus

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At 4:57 in the afternoon Meghan Walrath stood in her closet

with her face pressed into a pillow, screaming. She was flushed and damp from field hockey, standing between a row of collared shirts and short spring dresses in the dark.

Outside the closet and across her bedroom was a white wicker wastebasket. Inside it a pregnancy test with two blue lines. The test and the box it came in were at the bottom of the wastebasket, tightly wrapped in many rounds of toilet paper, beneath papers and chip bags and gum and balled up notebook paper.

Her parents weren't home but Meghan was screaming into a pillow in her closet anyway. She was a polite girl.

Thursday. Tomorrow was Homecoming. Meghan was nominated for Queen, and Bobby Ericson was in the running for King. The other candidates: Evan Kneeley, captain of the soccer team; Silas Borden, star quarterback; Cassie Bates, head of Bobcat Cheer; Nicole Saunders, class president and projected valedictorian.

Bobby was short and wiry and wore crewneck sweatshirts and sweatpants in clashing colors. He walked between classes with Stargate figurines in hand, making the vehicles spin and dive with adept noises of explosion and acceleration. His glasses were so strong they turned his eyes to specks. His mom was in a wheelchair.

The whole school knew about Bobby's mission to make Meghan his girlfriend, which Bobby called Project Arcturus. It was named after something from Stargate.

"Project Arcturus was an endeavor to harvest energy from the universe itself, by an advanced race known as the Ancients," Evan Kneeley read to Meghan from his phone. They were in homeroom, the day after Bobby announced his mission in AP Chemistry. The rumors said he had stood on top of his desk to do so, until Mrs. Van Deusen threatened detention.

“The project ultimately failed, killing several Ancients in the process,” Evan read.

It was in the leaves, four and a half weeks ago. A party in the woods, in an undeveloped industrial park everyone called The G-Spot. There was a keg and red plastic cups and a big bonfire and a boom box powered by D batteries. Randy Dean handed Meghan a fourth cup of beer and she went with him into the trees.

“Do you have a condom?” she asked. Randy’s face was framed in orange-lit trees. He grunted. “I’ll just pull out,” he said, and grunted again. It started to feel good and Meghan stopped worrying a little but then Randy jerked around and came in the groove between her hip and thigh. She touched herself as she pulled her jeans back up, trying to assess the origin of the wetness between her legs. Yellow leaves stuck in her hair.

Randy was her boyfriend, though he had never asked. Randy assumed and Meghan did not object. He was a fullback, and in some ways much better than her last boyfriend, who dumped her at the end of summer just before he went back to college even though he swore he was going to marry Meghan after she graduated. Randy took her to the diner every Friday and always paid. He also handled Bobby pretty well.

Bobby loved Michael Crichton and Stargate in equal measure. He was famous for reproducing the cries of velociraptors and Tyrannosaurus rex, especially when the lunch line was moving slow. Especially when it was Subway day. When Bobby came across Randy in the hallway, Bobby would squat, inhale, and lean forward with a complex and carnivorous roar, his eyes closing and his arms flying back behind him. The boys had math together on Tuesdays and Thursdays. Bobby greeted and bade farewell to Randy with a roar. Randy roared back, or made a weak squawking noise, or gave a salute.

Still, Meghan did not want to tell Randy what happened. She did

not want to have something part-Randy inside of her. She screamed again into the pillow, making her throat sore. She took a breath and came out of the closet. She put her pillow back on the bed among several other pillows and thought she'd like to watch some TV.

Meghan wasn't sure why Bobby chose her. She was one of the popular girls, but only recently, and only because of Randy. She was more of a jock, and her best friend Anne Peters was in band. Anne said it was because Meghan was nice, and no one was truly nice to Bobby.

"And you're pretty," Anne said, loading fries into her mouth in the senior courtyard. It was early September then. The leaves were still green. "You're probably the first pretty girl to treat him like a human."

"I passed him a beaker in Bio last week," Meghan said. "I'm pretty sure that's the only interaction with him I've ever had."

"Did you smile?"

"I don't know. Maybe?"

Anne nodded slowly, eyebrows lifted and lips pursed, before tilting the fry carton up to her mouth. She played the saxophone and was very matter-of-fact about things.

Meghan felt she was going to coat the walls in puke when she woke Friday morning. The next second she was hungry for multiple breakfasts. She got dressed, had one precarious breakfast, kissed her parents goodbye, and went to school in Randy's truck.

"Be sure to cast your vote for Homecoming King and Queen!" rang Cassie's voice through the loudspeaker. "You have until last period to make YOUR VOICE HEARD! Today's the big game—and we're Gonna. Kill 'em."

Meghan pictured Cassie's sweet face disintegrating into a snarl. Cassie was a flyer. A tiny girl who could whip her body around with great ferocity. Other girls on the squad brought their spirit down a

notch when it was clear the Cats were going to lose, but Cassie never stopped. She stalked up and down the field, whooping and pumping her thin arms, narrowing her eyes at the game and spinning back to the crowd. The more the Cats fell behind the more menacing her smile.

At lunch Meghan and Randy skipped and went to Jumbo Dog. She was starving, but every time she took a bite she felt a lurch in her gut. Randy plowed through four burgers and a chocolate milkshake.

“I kinda wish I got nominated,” he said. He was chewing with his mouth open. They sat at a picnic table, feet on the bench and butts on the table, looking out over the shopping plaza into the valley below. “It’d be cool if we both won, you know?”

“Yeah,” Meghan said, taking minute bites of her burger. He looked a little nostalgic. She put her hand on his knee. “It doesn’t mean anything, though.”

“I know, I know,” Randy said, shaking his head to remove the silly thoughts. “It’s about the game.” They parked on the dirt road behind the shopping plaza and made out for a while. One of the best wrestlers their school had ever seen hung himself in the woods back there two summers ago. Meghan didn’t know why she let Randy take her there.

Back at school, she ran into Bobby on her way to Economics.

“My Queen,” he said, bowing deeply with his hand over his heart. Everyone else in the hall moved around them like water around rocks.

Cassie was a bull ready to stampede. From her seat deep in the bleachers, Meghan saw spittle flying from Cassie’s mouth, the spray catching the stadium lights.

“RED AND WHITE!” Cassie screamed. A cheerleader beside her flinched. “FIGHT FIGHT FIGHT! WITH BOBCAT MIGHT WE WIN TONIGHT!” A triad of girls tossed Cassie up in the air, where she twisted twice and hung in the air before landing back in their arms.

Halftime. The game was tied. The cheerleaders performed, Cassie a weapon out front. Then the dance team and the marching band before Nicole Saunders took to the field. Meghan sat among her teammates. Kristy Billings, the team's wonder-thighed captain, sat next to her. Meghan wished she were Anne.

"Good luck!" Kristy beamed, giving Meghan's hand a squeeze.

"Ladies and gentlemen, girls and boys!" Nicole's voice rang crisp in the air. She looked small but sturdy in the middle of the field, a bright sapling with red and white foliage. "It's the moment we've all been waiting for. The votes are in for Homecoming King and Queen, and as senior class president, I am incredibly thrilled to announce the results. First, let's really hear it for everyone who's been nominated—Evan, Cassie, Bobby, Meghan, Silas, and—jeez—me!"

The stadium erupted in a collective roar. The sound grew as a human-sized bobcat galloped across the field, its nub of a tail moving mechanically from side to side. There was an envelope clutched in its jaw. The cat delivered the envelope to Nicole, then stood upright and performed several backflips to wild applause.

"This year's Homecoming King and Queen..." More drums as Nicole peeled the envelope open slowly. Carefully.

"Bobby Ericson and Megh-a-a-a-n Walrath!"

The marching band launched into "The Stars and Stripes Forever." It almost drowned out the laughter. Meghan felt like puking again. She rose from her seat. Kristy was laughing. Meghan's team was laughing. Everyone was laughing, except for Cassie and Randy, and though Meghan couldn't see her, she knew Anne wasn't either. Meghan wound down the red and white cement steps and onto the field. Cassie's poms sat motionless on her hips, her mouth an unenthused line. Across the field, Randy turned his back, his number 10 facing the crowd like a judge showing the wrong score. Silas Borden was to his left, doubled over and holding his fabled abs.

Nicole placed a dainty plastic crown on Meghan's head and a

bulkier one on Bobby's. Gave a nervous smile before backing away. Bobby was glowing. He bowed to Meghan, to the crowd. Meghan looked down hundreds of pink throats convulsing with laughter. The turf gave beneath her feet. The wind swung over her cheeks.

"Arcturus! Arcturus!" A slow chant started, then quickened and grew loud. "ARCTURUS! ARCTURUS! ARCTURUS!"

Meghan put her hands on her stomach. The world shimmered. Tears wheeled down her face.

They were moving, hands entwined, across the field to the end zone and over the track and out the side gate. Through the parking lot and back into school. The first stairwell. It wasn't until they reached the door to the roof that Bobby let go of Meghan in order to better karate-kick the door open.

The big gray roof was fenced in by a three-foot extension of the school's façade. Mysterious metal boxes jutted up here and there. Silvered vents sent streams of steam into the sky. A bright purple spray of graffiti: Tom + Jenna 4ever.

Meghan followed Bobby to the edge of the roof. The stadium was visible just past the parking lot. The crowd's voice swelled. The game was on, with or without their King and Queen.

The crowd grew louder. Bobby responded with a velociraptor shriek so strong and piercing it startled Meghan. His eyes scrunched up behind his glasses and his face contorted as he let out another shriek. Another. Then he straightened, looking at Meghan expectantly. He was waiting.

"You'll feel better," he said. A small nod.

The crowd erupted again, this time in an extended peal. Someone was making a run for it from downfield. Maybe Randy. Maybe Silas. Meghan closed her eyes and yelled, her voice held inside the crowd's giant one. Her pitch warbled and she kept yelling, bracing her hands against the brick and leaning forward, pausing and breathing deep and pulling her stomach muscles in to make the big-

gest sound she could manage. Her crown fell off and tumbled down to the sidewalk. Her throat burned. She felt something inside her seize and clench and not let go.

Thirty seconds passed. Meghan needed to breathe. She stood up, slightly hunched. She gulped air.

“I feel better,” she said. A whisper. “I feel better. Thank you.”

She touched Bobby’s cheek and looked into his kind, myopic eyes, then turned and walked across the roof to the stairwell. A tiny war was being fought inside her.

In the bathroom she flushed again and again but the toilet water remained a pleasant pink. The cramps were bad. Like someone was wiggling their fingers around in her guts. She sat there through the messier part, closing her eyes and breathing slow, welcoming the raw red wringing, the cool emptiness. She became so relaxed her thoughts bordered on dreams. She was back on the roof, holding Bobby in her lap like a baby, sunset painting the sky in rainbow sherbet.

She was able to avoid Randy after the game, though she guessed he wasn’t looking for her. She guessed as long as she did nothing, Randy would suddenly not be her boyfriend in the same way he suddenly was back in August. She found Anne and the band in the back parking lot.

“My period’s bad,” Meghan told her.

At Jumbo Dog, Meghan and Anne sat on the same table Meghan and Randy had sat on earlier in the day. The woods behind the shopping plaza were dark and blue-tinged now. Meghan sipped a large chocolate milkshake. Anne ordered an extra-large fry.

“Party at The G-Spot tonight,” Anne said. “You going?”

Meghan saw foamy beer sliding down hundreds of pink throats.

“I think I’ll pass,” she said. “You?”

“If anyone who partied at The G-Spot actually knew what a G-spot was, I’d consider it.” Anne said. She paused. “Gonna hang with

your king instead?”

Meghan smiled, shook her head. The milkshake was delicious, cold and sweet and soothing. A cramp gripped her and let go.

Across town, Meghan’s crown sat chipped and glinting on the school sidewalk. Bobby’s crown was a few miles from its mate, in his room, where shelves upon shelves held Stargate ships and pterodactyls. Little trees and rivers and mountains for creating miniature worlds. Diplodocuses. Iguanodons.

His crown was on the very top shelf. Almost touching the ceiling.

