

e. marie robertson

nothing larger
than these
stars

iona duology, book 1



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*For my wonderful husband John, who is always exactly what I need
and doesn't mind me spending all this time in outer space with people
who don't exist.*

1

THEN: IONA

I STEP OFF THE skiff, breathe in the dusty air, and immediately wonder if I've made a terrible mistake. The planet's landscape is sandy and barren, the lone settlement situated on a flat plain ringed by high treeless rock ridges on three sides. Although there's a spectacular old-looking multistory structure in the center of the main plaza, the rest of the town visible from the landing pads is merely a handful of personality-free modular builds crouching along the edge of the central square. The sky is hazy despite the absence of clouds, and the light from the planet's small distant sun is so flat and weak that the midday air is slightly chilly. Only a couple of figures traverse the square, squinting against the blowing sand. A lone worker peers at me curiously from the doorway of a metal shack beside the landing pad.

Am I crazy to have come here? This place couldn't be more different than Home World.

Home World, the Company's flagship planet—verdant, bustling, crowded, familiar. I was born there, and twenty-four days ago, I left it forever.

But I'm forgetting: going somewhere utterly *not* Home World was the point.

The skiff pilot strolls down the ramp behind me. She favors the worker with a wave, which is returned, then turns her attention to me.

“Ready to become an Ionian?” she asks. We made some small talk on the fourteen-hour flight from Meridian Station. Her name is Reban; she's a Stationer and can't imagine living on dirt.

I resettle my pack against my shoulder and take a deep breath.

“I guess.”

I remain rooted to the ramp, staring into the distance, my anxiety percolating. She points to one of the modular buildings along the square. “That’s Resident Services; that’s where you start. I already transmitted your data, so they’re expecting you. You’ll be set in no time.”

I nod, still looking out toward the small collection of buildings perched on the beige sand and fight the urge to slump in despair.

“You on-planet long?” I ask. “We could grab a bite to eat, check this place out a little.” I have no idea if we have anything in common at all, but right now I’m painfully aware that she’s the only person I know on this planet. Actually, she’s the only person I know in the entire sector.

Her expression becomes empathetic.

“I’m on a short turn-around. Another time though, for sure.” She says it in that jovial way that suggests *another time* is not something I should hold my breath waiting for, and convivially pats me on the shoulder. “Look, you’re going to be fine. Iona’s a good place. Go on. Dive in.”

She gives me a small push in the direction of the square. I manage to produce a half-hearted smile. I take a few steps away from the skiff, then stop and look over my shoulder at her. She’s already walking toward the control shack.

“Thanks,” I say.

“Welcome,” she responds, not looking at me.

The worker comes out of the shack and hands her a holo. As Reban focuses on its contents, he turns my way, smiles, and nods encouragingly. That small acknowledgement helps bolster my spirits. I turn and walk toward the low-slung set of buildings, at least feeling resolute if not entirely confident.

This is what I wanted. This is what I chose.

Maybe if I say it enough, I’ll believe it.

Resident Services is a single large room containing a desk, a few chairs and two terminals, augmented by another smaller room off to the side. It has high wide windows at the rear that bring in as much of the recalcitrant sun’s light as possible,

and the back door opens onto a porch or patio of some kind. In the distance, I can see another collection of sand-colored buildings squatting at the base of the ridge.

I'm barely in the door when a cheerful voice calls out, "You must be Faith. Welcome to Iona!"

The owner of the voice is about my age, mid-twenties, with pepper-dark skin and a kind expression. "I'm Wenda," she says, leaving her terminal and coming forward. I have a horrifying moment of realization that I'm about to be hugged. I try not to be too stiff when she wraps her arms around me; apparently sensitive to my discomfort, she makes it a brief squeeze instead of a full body embrace and pats my arm approvingly.

"We got your data," she says. "Fanny's running up your stat chip now."

"That I am," says a gravelly voice from the other side of the room, and for the first time I notice the hefty forty-something woman behind the second terminal. A holo display floats in front of her, casting a sparkling green reflection across her short fuchsia hair and pale face. She's scrolling through the results with one hand and occasionally taking a pull off a silver flask held tight in the other. "General maintenance and repair, are you? That'll make Pauly a happy man indeed."

"Uh, yes," I say. "Who's Pauly?"

"He's our general coordinator and a gigantic asshole," the woman replies, not taking her eyes off the display.

"Fanny!" Wenda admonishes playfully.

"WHO'S AN ASSHOLE?" The loudest speaking voice I've ever heard booms out of the side room. A few seconds later, a short, wide man with buzz-cut hair and an enormous smile fills the doorway.

"You are, Pauly," Fanny says without missing a beat.

Pauly beams at her and is on the verge of a reply when he notices me.

"YOU'RE THE NEW RESIDENT!" he shouts, striding forward. "It's a PLEASURE to MEET you. What's your NAME?"

"Faith," I say. "Faith Feathergrass."

“I’m Pauly MacFarland. Have you met everyone?” he asks, reducing the volume of his voice to a few decibels below air traffic as he comes closer. “I see you’re acquainted with Wenda, since she’s still latched onto you. The drunk in the corner is my sister Fanny.”

Wenda self-consciously drops her hand from my arm, where it had remained since my sort-of hug. Fanny sticks out her tongue at Pauly and pulls a face that suddenly makes the family resemblance obvious. I laugh despite myself.

“Be fair. I’m not drunk *yet*,” Fanny clarifies. She takes another swig from the flask, then holds it out in my direction. “Here, have some ‘welcome’ hooch. We don’t throw parties for new arrivals or any kind of crap like that, so this is gonna be it for celebrations.”

I’m a breath away from declining. All the weird compulsions and terrors I’ve felt every moment since the accident are still hovering in the back of my mind. I don’t know these people yet, much less trust them. But if I really want to fly under the radar, I should at least try to fit in.

One little gesture. I can do this. And hell, maybe it will help calm me down a little.

I take a quick look at Pauly and Wenda, then cross to Fanny’s terminal, take the flask, and throw back a mouthful of the burning, stinging alcohol. It’s like being punched in the throat. I finally recover from the resulting coughing fit and wipe away the tears occluding my vision to find all three of them grinning at me. Fanny in particular looks delighted.

“Looks like we got a natural,” she rasps, reclaiming her flask. “Wenda will take you on a tour and show you to your pod. And dear gods of light, make sure to stop by General Supply and pick up some normal clothes so you don’t look quite so much like a space tourist.”

“Come on,” Wenda says, tugging at the sleeve of my slick brown Company-issued jacket. “Let’s get you settled.”

After a run through General Supply for more Iona-appropriate clothing and other basics, Wenda gives me what passes for the grand tour. It takes less than

ten minutes for her to point out Clinical Aid, Security, the Machining Shop, and Storage. Finally, she shows me the fancy structure I noticed from the landing pads.

“This is the Preservation Theater,” she says in a credible official tour guide voice. “It was the first building constructed on Iona, almost fifty years ago. It originally held residences and important services for the team that founded this community. It’s been repurposed and is now the center of recreation and learning on Iona. Any time there’s an all-hands meeting, it will be in the theater’s main auditorium.”

“It’s beautiful.” I run my hand over an elaborate carving on the door. “Where did the wood come from? Clearly not here.”

Wenda laughs. “Definitely not here. Each of the founders contributed a bit from their worlds of origin, so as to represent everyone. They knew there weren’t really any raw materials here, and they wanted to make a statement—maybe about doing the impossible with teamwork, or something like that. But only the decorative carving above the archways and inside is organic wood. Most of the building was 3D-printed after they got here. The material holds up to the elements a bit better than the real thing.”

I’m finally ready to ask the question I really want answered.

“So there’s no Company money supporting Iona?”

Wenda shrugs.

“It depends on what you mean by ‘Company money’. They’re customers, like every other Enterprise that sends mining and supply ships out this way. There are only a couple of service planets in this sector, so if you need something out here, Iona’s where you have to land no matter who sponsors the mission. But if you’re asking if the Company owns any of what you see here, or directly pays for any of our citizens’ support or has anybody here on their payroll, the answer is no.”

You need to go somewhere the Company doesn’t own everything you see. I hear my friend Von’s voice in my head, the night I decided to leave. It feels so distant, yet that was less than two months ago. The accident itself was almost two years ago, and somehow feels like it happened yesterday.

My spatial awareness quivers as memories threaten to swallow me. I physically shake myself to bring myself fully back to the present.

“Are you okay?” Wenda asks. I’ve already figured out that she notices everything. I won’t be able to keep this from her for long.

“Yeah, just a headache. Too much activity, not enough food. And even one swallow of that hooch was brutal.” I attempt a wan smile in her direction.

“Understandable,” she says, although I can’t tell if she believes me or not. “A snack and a nap are in order. Let’s get you to your new home. You’re assigned to Charis’ residential pod. That’s my pod too; in fact, it looks like Fanny made us roommates. You must have impressed her.”

She pauses. “I hope that’s okay.”

She looks genuinely worried that I might object. Am I already off on a bad foot with these people?

I make a concerted effort to smile and look ... well, normal.

“That’s absolutely okay,” I say. “Let’s go. Food and a nap sound good.”



The first flashback happens a week later.

Wenda asks the simple question of what it was like to grow up on Home World, and I suddenly go from sitting comfortably in my hammock with a mug of tea in my hands to sprawled on the floor sobbing and gasping and unable to breathe. In that smallest of moments, I hear the roar of the transpo bearing down on me and Arden, feel the impact shake my bones, then topple as the world swings out from under me. I relive the terror and trauma of coming to in Clinical Aid without any sign of him, the agony of months of rehab, and the gut-wrenching shock of walking into our home after my long convalescence and finding literally no sign of him, as though our two years together hadn’t even happened. The rage and hurt and confusion I so successfully shoved to the deepest part of my consciousness explode to the surface like an erupting geyser.

I hear myself, far outside myself, cry out “I can’t do this!” I feel Wenda near me but carefully not touching me, attempting to soothe me with her voice and her presence. Slowly, I come back to where I am: on Iona, in my pod, on the floor covered in tea. I’ve crab-walked across our small room and have huddled against the wall, my arms crossed in front of my face in a defensive posture. My worried roommate hovers a few feet away. She’s on the floor with me, holding her hands out to me and chanting “you’re here, you’re here” over and over, as if trying to bring me back to reality through sheer force of will.

“I’m okay,” I lie, struggling to control my shivering body. Wenda, who still looks a little traumatized, helps me stand and get back into the hammock.

“I think we should take you to Clinical Aid,” she says. My back stiffens and a rush of cold comes over my body. I clench my hands together in my lap, hoping Wenda can’t see how much they’re shaking.

“No, I ... I don’t need that. I just need a minute. I’m fine.”

Wenda studies me, her expression shifting from concerned to adamant. “You are not fine. You have two choices. You can come with me to Clinical Aid, or you can tell me the whole story. And really, you only have one choice, because after you tell me the story, I’m taking you to Clinical Aid anyway.”

I was so determined not to let anyone here into my past. But Wenda’s my roommate and could one day become a friend. At least one person on Iona should know what they’ve gotten into by letting me come here.

I take a deep breath.

“I used to work for the Company,” I say, “but then they tried to kill me.”

2

BEFORE: HOME WORLD™

THE DAY MY LIFE upended began with whales.

I grew up in the Northern Coastal Zone where whales were, at least back then, a regular sight. One of my favorite childhood memories was watching them breach the ocean's surface far in the distance, almost as if inviting me to come out and play. But Arden grew up on Thane, in an ecology more like a planet-sized swamp. It was famous for 1,000 different kinds of mold but had no seas capable of supporting anything remotely like a whale. When I heard a pod was passing just off the Southern Coastal Zone, I insisted we make it a day trip and go see them.

The small sea glider we boarded was called *Gabriella*, according to a lovingly hand-painted sign at her bow. We left the pier when the sun reached its zenith. Arden laughed as the glider lurched across the wave crests, spraying salty water over the 40 or so passengers standing on its open octagonal deck.

"Remember to hang on tight," shouted the guide from the front of the craft. "It can get a little bumpy out here."

I made a show of slapping my hands down firmly on the railing in front of me, but I had my sea legs and felt at home. The sunlight glittered on the waves as we skimmed rapidly across them, making our shadows dance on the sea beneath the glider's clear plexi floor.

It was a ridiculously beautiful day, with a sky so blue and pure it looked like a painted backdrop. I wondered briefly if the cloudless expanse was engineered or simply looked this way because the Company hadn't put much effort into

atmospheric safety recalibration here. People at the beach were more than willing to trade off a little short-term radiation exposure for the rare experience of bright sunshine. It was a dramatic difference from the murky green-blue atmosphere above Central City.

“Is it always so rough, Faith? What have you gotten me into?” Arden shouted, his words whipped away by the wind. His face was lit with excitement, but he was white-knuckling the stability railing. I leaned into him, laughing.

“You were a pilot; you’ve been in worse. Why would a little bumpy water spook you?”

“I’m in control as a pilot, I can count on myself to ... oh wow! Is that them?”

He released the railing to point at a churning in the water. Almost simultaneously, the glider slowed and began to climb. Soon, we were at a standstill, hovering over the sea with a perfect view of a pod of blue whales swimming below. One broke the surface and sent a plume of water high into the air from its blowhole, drawing impressed oohs and ahhs from everyone aboard.

Arden was no exception. “They’re incredible,” he said, his voice hoarse with wonder. “I’ve never seen anything like them.”

The guide began his spiel. “How about these natural wonders? There aren’t many left, but the numbers are improving. The Company seeded this pod with some genetic diversity to help strengthen it, so we hope whales will soon be much more common than they are today. Is everyone ready for a closer look?”

A chorus of yesses filled the air, and the glider lowered toward the surface. But instead of a smooth descent, it halted, then dropped a few feet suddenly. Some people lost their balance, and everyone on deck was startled.

“Sorry, folks, that’s not supposed to happen,” the guide reassured us as he began pecking away at the control panel. “Some kind of wayfinding glitch we’ve been wrestling with recently. I’ll get it right in a second, just hang on.”

Arden’s eyebrows knitted together with concern. He was clearly on the verge of saying something to the guide. I elbowed him in the side.

“This probably happens all the time, it’s an old glider and probably hasn’t had a firmware update since it was built. It’s nothing,” I said. His features relaxed a little, and just as he started to respond, the glider let out a rippling gurgle that sounded for all the world like a belch, then resumed its slow downward trajectory. It settled gently a few feet above the surface, parallel to the pod of whales.

“See?” I said. Arden smiled.

“Right as usual,” he said. “But I could still check ...”

“No. You’re here to relax. Relax or I’ll smack you.”

“Yes, boss. Will do.” He offered me a mock salute and a crooked grin, then turned his gaze to the water. We spent the next hour drifting alongside the whales, listening to the guide’s conservation lecture, and cheering every fluke and fin that broke the surface like sports enthusiasts rooting for the home team.

The whale-watching tour ended just before sunset. It was full-on dark by the time we boarded the Long Range conveyance back to Center City, and officially “late” when we caught the Local to our neighborhood. It wasn’t crowded; only a couple of tired-looking shift workers and an elderly man with a small dog on his lap.

We settled into seats near the back of the dimly lit transpo. The low rumble it made as it tracked along the street was oddly relaxing.

“That was a good day out,” Arden said, tucking a stray strand of my wild brown hair behind my ear before draping his arm around my shoulders. “Thank you for taking me to see whales.”

“I’m glad I could convince you to come. You’ve been putting in a lot of work hours this month. It was time for a break.”

A flash of tension interrupted the ease in his manner. His shoulders hunched forward, and his forehead crinkled.

“I’m probably working too hard,” he confessed, “but there’s just so much to get done.”

Suddenly the transpo jerked to a halt, almost pitching everyone out of their seats.

“What now,” muttered one of the workers.

Her companion rolled his eyes. “Third time this week.”

Arden’s posture straightened as he laser-focused on the pair. I knew what was coming and put my hand on his arm to try to dissuade him, but to no avail.

“Are there always problems with this route?” he asked. Both the workers nodded in unison and the woman turned to face us.

“Yeah, it’s a real pain. Sometimes it just stops, like now. Sometimes it goes off-route, and sometimes it goes slower than I can walk.”

“How long has this been happening?”

The woman conferred with her friend.

“Two or three weeks at least,” she replied.

“I know the Transport Hub Lead,” Arden said. “I’ll get him to look into it.”

“He won’t listen,” muttered the man, staring down at his worn rust-colored work boots. “He’s not from Home World, ya know. People who aren’t from here don’t understand how important this is.”

“He’ll listen to me,” Arden said, half-smiling. “I’ll make sure.”

“Well okay,” said the woman, her eyebrows arched in pure skepticism. “I hope that happens.”

As she turned back to her friend with a shrug, the transpo jerked forward and began to trundle along its route again. The two got off at the next stop.

“So, you *know* the Transport Hub Lead,” I said, as the transpo pulled away from the stop and the pair disappeared around a corner. “What was that all about?”

“I didn’t want to sound like I was bragging by saying I *am* the Transport Hub Lead.”

“Or get your head bitten off for things you can’t control?”

“To tell you the truth, we can control this, and I’ll look into it. My guess is it’s a glitch in the routing software. But right now, I just want to get home, turn out the lights, crawl into bed and ...” He pulled me closer and waggled his eyebrows in a cartoonish leer.

“... get a decent night’s sleep for once?” I quipped.

His mouth quirked up in a sly smile.

“Eventually, yes,” he said, “but first things first.”

But it wasn’t to be—the decent night’s sleep or anything else.

We’d just made it back to our pod when news of the Transport Hub meltdown came through. The Stream filled with reports of multiple major disasters. Large public short-ranges suffered wayfinding failure and plowed off roads into buildings and barriers. Long-ranges headed for Coastal and Mountain Zones shut down their enviros and suffocated their full complement of passengers, all the while still hurtling to their destinations. Private vehicles spun out of control into fiery crashes.

Arden’s holo blew up with emergency messages. The single thing that connected all the conveyances across Home World was the Transport Hub’s code repository. The Transportation team had responded as soon as the first major malfunction came to light, only to find they’d been locked out of the repository’s primary codebase. No one, including Arden, could log into the Hub remotely.

We kept watching the Stream as Arden sent out frantic communiques and instructions to his team. Nothing anyone tried had any impact. The number of incidents, injuries, and deaths kept ticking upward at an astonishing rate as reports of critical malfunctions came in from every sector. It was nearly impossible to believe something so unexpected and deadly could happen in our beautiful, organized, efficient, carefully controlled society.

“I have to get into the Hub to stop this,” Arden finally said, shoving his holo into his pocket. He pulled on his jacket, grabbed his pack and headed to the door. “The team’s assembling onsite. I have no idea what time I’ll be home.” With private and public transpos failing, his only option was to walk, meaning the trip to the Hub alone would take nearly an hour.

“Good luck,” I said. He kissed me on the forehead, then departed. I watched him hurry through our garden and away from our pod.

I followed the Stream as long as I could stand it. Presenters interspersed new details of death and disaster with speculation about the cause. Some were convinced the problems were the results of sabotage by a competing Enterprise, possibly Kinsing Industries or the Glamis Collective. Others suggested incompetence by the Hub team; Arden's official head shot came on view more than once. All the hypotheses shared a central theme, however: rogue code. The only disagreement was whether it was simply code gone wrong, or code maliciously inserted and designed to destroy.

I knew it didn't work that way. Crafting enterprise-wide code had been part of my job early on. But it wasn't something you could explain simply, and certainly not sexy enough for the Stream's talking heads to give time to.

When the death toll topped 5,000, I couldn't take it any longer. I shut off the Stream and went out to the garden to sit in silence under the stars.

Arden made it home in the wee hours of the morning. I was still up, shifting between staring at the wall and checking the Stream, trying to keep my feelings of uselessness at bay. His face was lined with frustration, his eyes red. He looked exhausted—and worse, like a man defeated. I hugged him tight, pulled his holo from his hand and tossed it onto the sofa, then led him out into the garden to our favorite bench. I sat down, but Arden couldn't be still. He paced in front of me wordlessly, his frustration clear.

"Sit," I finally said.

He dropped down on the bench next to me and deflated.

I took his hand, rested my head on his shoulder. He leaned against me in turn.

After several minutes of silence, he murmured, "It's time to stop this. I can't let any more people die."

I thought I knew where this was going; self-reproach was a specialty of Arden's. "You're doing what you can," I said, giving his hand a reassuring squeeze. "Don't blame yourself."

He sighed, his breath catching in his throat.

“No, it’s ...” His voice failed him. “There’s more going on here than you know.”

A spark of panic lit inside me. I remained quiet and focused on my breath, trying to stay calm.

He sat with eyes downcast, his mouth a tense line, unable to look at me. After several minutes of silence, he murmured, “I can’t let any more people die. I have to take responsibility for what I’ve done.”

“Honey, you aren’t making sense. You aren’t responsible for this. And you and your team will get this figured out and make it stop. It’s only a matter of time.”

He stayed quiet, his eyes downcast, his mouth a tense line. He wouldn’t look at me. When he finally spoke, his words ripped into me like shards of glass.

“I’m so sorry, Faith. I’ve kept this a secret for too long. There’s more going on here than you know, and this ... it’s my fault.”

My spark of panic became a small hungry fire.

“I know you feel responsible, but it’s not all for you to shoulder,” I said, as calmly as I could. “You’re battling an unknown, and ...”

His body tensed and I could feel him gathering himself emotionally. When he interrupted me, his voice was no more than a dry croak.

“I appreciate what you’re trying to do, but you don’t understand. I don’t *feel* responsible, I *am* responsible. This is my fault. These accidents are happening because of me, because of *my* work.”

“You’re right, I don’t understand. Unless you’re suggesting that you’re intentionally sabotaging the Transportation Hub code.”

“Not far from it.” He rubbed his face with both hands. “This level of disaster wasn’t intentional, it’s more a failure to anticipate ... I don’t know. This shouldn’t be happening. I’ve never seen it blow up this way in testing. I’m completely baffled.”

“Seen what blow up? What are you talking about?”

Arden pulled his hand through his hair.

“For the last six months, I’ve been working on behalf of the Governing Council. They contacted me for help collecting intelligence on a handful of top tier Company officials suspected of reviving a weapons program that was outlawed more than thirty years ago. I used Hub software updates to distribute snippets of code embedded with the targets’ ID data to track their movements. Those snippets were tested a thousand times, I developed them myself. But in actual practice, they cause all kinds of crazy malfunctions. Every fix I try to deploy makes things worse. The last major revision went out yesterday, while we were at the coast. The result is the mass disaster we’re suffering through now.”

I was speechless. In part I was horrified that Arden had carried this burden of responsibility alone, but also furious that he had kept this from me *for six months*.

We sat in silence for a few minutes, Arden breathing heavily and me hardly breathing at all. When I managed to speak, it was in exasperation.

“Then *this* is all a ruse?” I gestured at everything around me, including us. “Espionage theater, like a bad spy holo?”

“No,” he answered immediately, his tone serious. “Nothing I ever said to you was untrue. I’m the Transport Hub Lead, that’s my job, and I’ve been doing that job. I came to Home World for the first time on the day I met you, specifically to do *that* job. And I love you, Faith. Every single word of that is true. I just left out things I was obligated to keep private.”

I laughed—a short, sharp, pained sound.

“*Obligated* to keep private,” I repeated.

“I had to. To protect myself, the Council, and most of all, to protect you. There are people inside the Company who are dangerous. If they knew what I was doing and thought for an instant that you were involved ...”

His voice trailed off. I wasn’t sure if he expected a response. I didn’t offer one.

Eventually he spoke again, measured and resolute.

“I’ve let the Governing Council know I can’t fulfill the mission. I pulled the last of my code out of the system this evening. I’ll formally resign my position

tomorrow. The Company will likely be glad to have a scapegoat for all these problems and will be delighted to be rid of me, so I'll be leaving Home World."

I absorbed this quietly.

"Where will you go?" I finally asked.

"Wherever the Council sends me. But what's important is that the malfunctioning code has been deleted. Some innovations will be lost, but no more people will die because of me."

I followed a thread in my mind as he spoke, bright dots connecting to one another as things I knew and had heard and seen twisted around each other and formed patterns. When all the pieces finally aligned and became obvious, I was so shocked I gasped aloud and clenched Arden's hand in a grip that nearly broke his fingers.

"It won't matter," I said.

"Of course it won't matter to the families of the people who have already died, but it's the only thing I can ..."

"It won't matter," I interrupted, more emphatically, "because your code isn't the problem. None of this is your fault, but someone wants you to believe it is. *I can prove it.*"