

Starlive

Book Two

Shannon's Conundrum

Sent, Not

Leo was screaming.

Not the usual scream, sarcastic, mechanical, vaguely French. This one was high-pitched and legally distressing.

TURN IT OFF! TURN IT OFF OR I'LL DELETE MYSELF!

Olive's voice

audio kept playing

Cracking.

Drunk.

Half-whispering through tears and planetary static.

*I just... okay, I know she's going to leave. Eventually. They all do. But
I still love her, and if that makes me pathetic, fine. I'm pathetic. But
she's the first thing that's made me feel like maybe I could matter again.*

Olive's voice

Alien gasps.

Star walking in mid-transmission.

...Olive?

Star

A marble courtroom suspended in vacuum.

Presided over by the Council of Empathic Interference and Emotional Crimes (C.E.I.E.C. pronounced "sigh").

They were not amused.

A tall mantis judge, voice like a scream muffled by lavender, glared at them.

*You are being held on charges of Emotional Withholding, Unsent
Transmission of Vulnerable Content, and Public Display of Soul
Yearning Without Permit.*

Mantis

What the actual fuck is this?

Star

*We intercepted a psychic residue broadcast. One of you, we won't say
who, recorded a private message... and never sent it.*

Mantis

...that message was supposed to be deleted.

Olive

whispered

You... left me a voicemail love confession and never sent it?

Star

said, flatly

*It was 2 AM and I had interdimensional flu and you were mad at me
for stealing your blanket for six seconds*

Olive

said, sweating

Six point two seconds.

Leo

The tribunal activates the Echo Pod, projecting the full message into the room.
Olive slouches.
Star stares.
And then they hear it.
Her voice.
From the same night.
A second recording.

*Okay, maybe I yelled. Maybe I said I don't care, but I do. I care so
much I want to punch a god in the dick. And yeah, I know I'm
impossible. But he looks at me like I'm not broken and that's terrifying.
I just wanted to say... I love him. Fuck.*

Star

Both of them freeze.

Plot twist!

Leo

*Your sentence: emotional reconciliation before you are released. You
will sit. You will talk. You will not use sarcasm as a shield or sex as a
shortcut.*

Mantis

slammed a gavel

You're asking the impossible.

Star

We are begging you.

Mantis

Just them, in the cell.
No weapons.
No distractions.
No Leo.

I didn't send it because I didn't think I was allowed to need you.
Olive

I didn't send mine because I didn't think I deserved someone who'd stay.
Star

Silence.
Then laughter.
Then tears.
Then hands finding each other's.

So... we're both idiots?
Star

It was literally the title of the last book. Two Idiots Against Entropy.
Olive

Still want me?
Star

I never stopped.
Olive

The cell unlocks.

Mantis weeps softly.

Leo records a new podcast episode titled *Two Morons and a Love That Won't Die*.

Star and Olive step back onto the ship.

Hands still clasped.

Next time I have something to say...

Star

Say it.

Olive

Even if it's filthy?

Star

Especially if it's filthy.

Olive

They kiss.

The stars shift.

Channel, Decoded

The moment they landed, Star knew something was off.

Not *we're-being-hunted-by-celestial-guilt* off.

Not even *Star's-wearing-her-happy-socks-again* off.

Worse.

People were walking around this shiny, elegant planet with floating text bubbles above their heads.

Actual thoughts.

In real time.

Like brain tweets.

Do I still love him or am I just horny?

If this croissant isn't orgasmic, I'm setting something on fire.

That guy's hot but he cries too pretty—definitely unstable.

Uh... are these subtitles for reality?

Olive

A local passed by with the words

Visitors. Poor things. They don't know.

Star and Olive looked up.

And sure enough, the words appeared:

Don't panic. Be cool. This isn't my fault unless it is.

Star

thought

I definitely told her she looked great this morning. Right? RIGHT?

Olive
thought

Welcome to OpenMind-77, a utopia of *radical transparency and full mental literacy*.

Lying? Impossible.

Withholding? Illegal.

Thinking something nasty about your partner mid-argument? Public record.

Dark comedy intensifies.

They were assigned a communication facilitator *Narn, the Oversharer*.

Narn spoke like a TED Talk having a breakdown.

We believe shame is the enemy of intimacy. So here, thoughts are public, and private emotions are shared on rotating community boards. Star, for example, your thought 'I kind of want to sit on his face just to shut him up' is trending in Sector 3.

Narn

...I hate it here.

Star

Why does her rage turn me on? What's wrong with me... I mean, it's not inaccurate

Olive
read his own bubble

They tried to play it cool. They failed spectacularly.

I don't know how to say I miss him without sounding pathetic.

Star
thought

If I touch her hand right now, will she pull away or kiss me or both?

Olive
thought

God, just grab my damn hand.

Star

He did.
But the longer they stayed, the worse it got.
Their deepest fears started leaking out

What if I'm only lovable when I'm broken?

Olive

What if I only want him because I think he won't stay?

Star

They ran.
Literally.
Into a mirror temple of *self-reflection* that projected their subconscious into life-sized holograms.
Olive met five versions of himself. All apologizing.
Star met one version of herself. Silent. Crying. Dressed in armor. Unable to speak.
They held each other for a long time.
No words.
No thought bubbles.
Just silence.
Even Narn wept from the shadows.
They returned to their ship.
Bruised.
Bared.
But closer.
Olive looked at her.

You still want me now that you've seen everything I never said?

Olive

Star leaned against him.

You think I haven't been reading you since the beginning?

Star

They kiss on the ramp.

Above their heads, no floating thoughts.

Just one shared line

I love you. Even when I'm scared to say it.

This planet would be a nightmare for threesomes.

Leo

Babel Fish

They were gifted the device as a *thank you* for saving a civilization of sentient mushrooms from a lava divorce. (*Long story, smelled weird*).

It was sleek.

Shiny.

Inscribed with the words

*Babel Fish*TM: Say what you mean, mean what you say.

Sounds like a self-help book that farts.

Leo

I love it already

Star

deadpanned

We're keeping it.

Olive

It activated immediately.

They didn't notice until breakfast.

You okay?

Olive

I'm fine.

Star

The Babel Fish™ lit up.

*I'm panicking because I felt happy last night and that usually means
pain's coming.*

Babel Fish™

Olive choked on his juice.

What the hell?

Star

What she said. But out loud.

Babel Fish™

The rules became clear fast

You speak, *the translator says what you meant.*

You lie, *it says what you're hiding.*

You deflect with sarcasm *it shouts your biggest fear in a child's voice.*

It was awful.

It was incredible.

On a diplomatic mission

We're here on peaceful terms.

Olive

said

*We're barely holding it together emotionally but don't want to disappoint
anyone.*

Babel Fish™

Relatable.
Dignitary

Star tried to bluff at cards

I'm here to win.
Star

*I want to feel powerful because I don't know what to do with love when it
doesn't hurt.*
Babel Fish™

A hush fell over the table.
Someone clapped.
It got worse.
In bed.
Oh, so much worse.

God, you're incredible.
Olive

I want to cry inside you.
Babel Fish™

WHAT.
Star

But it cut deeper.

Just stop trying to fix everything!

Star

yelled

Please don't give up on me even when I push you away.

Babel Fish™

Maybe we're not good for each other.

Olive

muttered

Maybe I'm scared we're too good. And that means I could actually lose something real.

Babel Fish™

They stopped speaking for a while after that.

But the silence?

The translator hummed.

She wants to ask if you're still in this.

Babel Fish™

He wants to say yes. He just doesn't want to say it first.

Babel Fish™

The device short-circuited after a fight about a cup left in the cockpit.

Too much unsaid.

Too much said.

It exploded in a puff of glitter and unresolved trauma.

They sat in the wreckage.

No translator.
Just breath.
And truth.

Do you want this?
Olive

Always have.
Star

Even if it's messy?
Olive

Especially if it's messy.
Star

They kissed.
No subtitles.
Just meaning.
The broken translator hums one last time before dying

*You love each other. You always did. Even when you didn't know how
to say it.*

Babel Fish™

Polyglot Virus

It started with a kiss.

Star pressed her mouth to Olive's in the hallway.

It was meant to say *sorry I yelled*, but came out more like *I want to eat your soul and cuddle after*.

Olive blinked. Opened his mouth to say something sweet.

But what came out was

Wow. Okay. Feelings are dumb and I'm mad I have them. Wanna touch me and never talk again?

Olive

Star pulled back, alarmed.

That's... my line.

Star

Turns out, they'd been infected.

Not by a virus that attacked the body.

But one that rewired *communication patterns*.

*Congrats. You've got the*Polyglot Parasite. It scrambles emotional encoding. Basically, you express like each other now.*

Leo

So I'm about to turn into a poetic, self-sacrificing wet blanket?

Star

And I'm gonna be horny, rude, and terrified of genuine intimacy?

Olive

Exactly! But with sexy tension!

Leo

For Star, it was a nightmare.

She *felt* things. Out loud.

She made metaphors.

She said *please*.

She cried at a sunset and punched the sunset for making her feel things.

I don't know how to shut up my heart, I think it wants to be held.

Star

whispered, staring into the void

For Olive, it was... strangely liberating.

He became blunt. Assertive. Sharp. Dangerous.

He wore less. He smirked more.

*I'm not your project, Star. I'm your partner. Either fuck me or stop
looking at me like you're afraid of the parts you can't fix.*

Olive

Star, *immediate puddle*.

They tried to work a mission.

It did not go well.

Star tried diplomacy. Ended up crying on an alien's shoulder. Olive threatened a warlord using six words and a wink.
The warlord surrendered. Blushed.
They argued.
Not with heat.
But with *too much understanding*.

I'm terrified I'll lose you if I stop protecting you.

Olive

And I'm terrified you'll stop needing me if you ever heal.

Star

That's fucked

Olive

I know. Hug me or I'll scream.

Star

By the time Karl synthesized the antidote, they were curled up in the engine room, whispering apologies in languages they didn't know they could speak.

You okay if I'm sometimes more like you?

Olive

*Only if you're okay if I start sounding like a badly written poem about
your collarbones.*

Star

They kissed.
The parasite faded.
But something remained.
They walk side by side.
Still themselves.
But changed.
Not because the virus made them.
Because it let them speak with *each other's mouths* long enough to hear something new.

It Never Ends

They were just flying past a rift.
Leo begged them not to poke it.

Please. It's literally labeled Do Not Touch, Contains Interpersonal Hell.

Leo

So naturally, Star touched it.
With her middle finger.
The ship spun, the sky tore, and they fell straight into a reality made entirely of unresolved conflict.
Welcome to Loopspace.
A dimension where every emotional loop you've ever failed to close becomes... real estate.
They landed in a hallway made of icy silence.
Each door labeled with something they didn't want to remember.

You always shut down when I'm vulnerable.
You flirt with other people when you're scared of closeness.
You say forever but act like you're already halfway out the airlock.

I'd rather be vaporized than couple's counsel this.

Leo

muffled in the distance

They had no choice.
To escape, they had to walk through the fights.

Room One, **The Blanket War**

They stood in a bedroom.
Star on one side, Olive on the other.
One blanket.
Projected above them *A looping scene of a petty, stupid fight.*

You always hog the blanket.
Olive

I like being warm.
Star

I like feeling wanted.
Olive

Oof.
The fight escalated. Not because of the blanket. But because the blanket was safer
to fight about than abandonment.
They couldn't move forward until they both sat on the bed and said

I wasn't mad about the blanket. I was scared you didn't want me close.
Star and Olive

Door opened.

Room Two **The Sexy Silence**

They entered a nightclub.
Holograms danced around them, versions of themselves from earlier adventures.
Star kissing someone else during a mission.
Olive walking away from an argument into someone else's bed.
Not cheating.
But punishing each other through distance.

I wanted you to miss me

Star

muttered

I wanted you to fight for me

Olive

admitted

The dance floor pulsed with tension.
They had to dance to escape.
But dancing meant touching.
And touching meant feeling.
They did.
Door opened.

Final Room **The Argument That Never Ends**

A dark, quiet hallway.

No doors.

Just echoes.

The words they never said.

I need you.

I'm scared of you leaving.

I love you more when you're broken because it makes me feel safe.

The hallway kept looping.

Until they stopped walking.

Turned to face each other.

And finally said what hurt the most.

Sometimes I make you small so I don't feel alone.

Star

Sometimes I stay quiet so you don't leave.

Olive

Silence.

Then tears.

Then a kiss so long the loop shattered.

They fell out of the rift, back onto the ship.

Leo wept gently into a lava lamp.

They sat curled together in a blanket they now agreed was **ours**.

We could have walked forever.

Olive

Yeah. But we stopped running.

Star

They kissed.

The argument finally ended.

Love *didn't*.

STD Field

They didn't mean to fly into it.

Leo was busy updating his OnlyFans (don't ask), and the warning signs were written in erotic calligraphy. Naturally, Star assumed it was a spa.

It's not a spa. It's a Class-9 Compression Zone.

Leo

You mean a tight space filled with pressure and desperate panting?

Star

...yes. But not in the fun way.

Leo

The moment they crossed into orbit, the S.T.D.F. (*yes, that's the acronym, and no, it's not subtle*) activated.

The air shifted.

The walls breathed.

The ship pulsed. Rhythmically.

And both Star and Olive froze.

Because suddenly, every unsaid desire?

Every repressed frustration?

Every *I'll bring it up later*?

Was now physics.

Why are my pants tighter?
Olive

Why is my armor purring?
Star

*Because this is a zone where sexual and emotional tension become
gravitationally unstable. If you two don't resolve what you're not
saying...*
Leo

*...you'll implode. Or worse, have emotionally stunted sex that resets
your character arcs.*
Leo

The ship began to creak.
Lights flickered red.
The coffee maker whispered *daddy* and exploded.
They tried to keep it casual.

You seem distant lately.
Star

You seem turned on when you're mad at me.
Olive

Room trembles.

That's... not untrue.

Star

Sometimes I hold back what I need because I think you'll mock me.

Olive

*And sometimes I mock you because I'm scared you'll need me forever
and I won't know how to handle it.*

Star

The floor moans.

The ship was now alive with unresolved craving.

Anything not said, anything held back, fed the field.

Their beds merged into one.

Leo started narrating their tension like a bad romance novel.

*She looked at him like he was the galaxy's last snack and she was
starving...*

Leo

LEO.

Star

Don't kink-shame me. Fix your relationship.

Leo

So they broke.

Not into sex.

Into words.

Shaky. Raw. Honest.

*I fantasize about you choosing me. Not because you need to. But because
you want to.*

Olive

*I dream about letting someone take care of me... and not feeling weak
for it.*

Star

I want you to say when you're scared.

Olive

I want you to stop thinking love has to hurt to be worth something.

Star

The tension snapped.
Not with an orgasm.
But with a hug.
Tight. Sobbing.
Star clinging to him like gravity had just turned off.
The ship exhaled.
So did Leo.

Finally. Now I can turn the gravity vibrator back to normal.

Leo

They lie on the floor.
Hair messy.
Emotions messier.

Do you wanna cuddle?

Star

I thought you'd never ask.

Olive

Therapist

It started with a postcard.

A shimmering envelope, addressed to

The two chaotic disasters currently fucking up the fabric of space-time
with their inability to communicate.

Inside, a single line.

You are invited to a session with Them.

Leo dropped it immediately.

*Nope. Not doing that. They're real. And they're worse than Yelp
reviewers with spiritual power.*

Leo

Who's Them?

Olive

*My guess? An entity that's watched too many TED Talks and has the
power to collapse your soul into a Pinterest board.*

Star

That's shockingly accurate.

Leo

They landed on Nochpunkt-0, a planet made entirely of white silence and ambient guilt.

Waiting for them at the center: Them, the Therapist.

They didn't have a form.

Just a presence.

Like someone breathing too close to your childhood trauma.

They didn't speak.

Instead, words bloomed around Them in floating ink

Welcome to the session. For the next 24 hours, you are forbidden from speaking. Any sound will dissolve this timeline. You will communicate only through silence and attention.

...ha ha what?

Olive

The air shimmered. The ink screamed:

TRY ME.

So began the session.

At first, it was funny.

Star tried to mime *fuck this*.

Olive responded with interpretive eyebrow dance.

Leo was locked in a jar to keep him from narrating. He began a mental podcast called *They're Gonna Explode (In Both Ways)*.

Then the hours passed.

And the silence deepened.

No jokes.

No *I'm fine*.

No *whatever*."

No sex to bury the tension.

Just presence.

And the ghosts between them.

They sat across from each other in a room with no furniture, no sound, no exit.

Just the things they couldn't say.

She wanted to say *I love you more when I'm not afraid*.

He wanted to say *I'm afraid all the time*.
Instead, they watched.
They touched fingertips.
They wept, quietly, so the timeline didn't detonate.
At hour 19, Star traced a message on Olive's palm.
Not letters.
Just a rhythm.
And somehow, he knew

You're my home, even when I run.

At hour 23, Olive brushed her hair behind her ear.
Looked at her.
And with only a breath, told her

You don't have to be strong for me to love you.

As the 24th hour passed, the room glowed.
The ink returned

You passed. Not by fixing. Not by explaining. But by staying.

Them vanished.
So did the room.
Leo was released.

*How was it? Did you cry? Did you hold hands and communicate with
your souls like moody space poets?*

Leo

They didn't answer.
They were too busy holding each other like language would just get in the way.
Back on the ship, curled together in silence.

We should do that more.

Star

The silence or the vulnerability?

Olive

Both. But maybe with snacks next time.

Star

They laugh.

Quiet.

Warm.

No gods.

No ink.

Just them.

Selves

It began with a request.

From a quiet people on a quiet planet known only as Planet, a place where time folds like paper. Where futures ripple back, and the past sometimes writes you.

The tradition:

All visitors must write a message to a version of themselves in another timeline.

The message will be delivered instantly.

But they won't know which version of themselves gets it.

Could be one that left.

One that stayed.

One that never met each other.

This feels like giving a chainsaw to my emotional repression.

Leo

This feels like a trap.

Star

This feels like something we're gonna pretend isn't terrifying until later.

Olive

They were given paper woven from memories of choices not made.

Pens filled with the ink of emotional honesty.

A single question written at the top:

What do you need to hear?

They wrote. Alone.
Each at opposite ends of the same garden.
Time bent softly around them.
The wind whispered things no one was brave enough to say aloud.

Star's Letter

Hey.
If you left him
I hope you remember why.
I hope it wasn't fear.
I hope you don't wake up and miss his stupid laugh and the way he says *are you okay?* like it's a secret code.
If you stayed, don't ruin it by expecting it to hurt.
He's not a cage.
He's the key.
Let yourself be held.
You're not weak.
You're just human.
And loved.
Still.
Always.
— Star.

Olive's Letter

Hi.
I don't know which version of me you are.
If you never told her, please don't pretend you didn't want to.
Don't act like silence was noble.
If you lost her, forgive yourself.
If you kept her, hold her like you're still afraid.
Because fear doesn't mean you're wrong.
It means it's real.
And maybe love isn't about feeling safe.
Maybe it's about being seen and choosing to stay anyway.
I see you.
I'm proud of you.

Don't close the door.
— Olive.

They returned to the drop point.
Folded the letters into timefolds.
Watched them vanish into sparks.
No idea where they went. Or if they would ever return.
That night, back on the ship
A note appeared on the console. In a language they hadn't seen before.
But they understood it instantly.

Thank you. We needed that.

Star is curled up in Olive's lap, half-asleep.
He's reading his letter again, hand shaking slightly.

If we become something else, I hope we still find our way back.

Olive
whispered

We always do.
Star

We Never Became

They were summoned by coordinates buried in the folds of their old letters.
A place outside time, where possibilities fossilize.
Where the multiverse keeps versions of you that never happened.
Leo called it The Museum of Almost.

“Sounds like a fun disaster.

Leo

Like our first date.

Star

That was a hostage rescue mission.

Olive

And you still forgot the safe word.

Star

They stepped into the atrium.
The halls shimmered with glass panels, each one containing a Star and an Olive that almost existed.
One pair danced under twin moons, never broken, never afraid.
Another had grown old together, quiet and soft, with no arguments left.

One had died young, separated by war but still reaching for each other in their last seconds.

And then...

They saw Them.

Versions of themselves who had done everything right.

Who had said “I love you” at the perfect moment.

Who had never flinched.

Who had learned to talk before the damage was done.

These Stars and Olives were softer.

Kinder.

Whole.

Look at them. All functional and emotionally stable. Bet they even go to therapy together.

Star

glared

They seem... happy.

Olive

stared, awestruck

Yeah. I hate it.

Star

Then the glass opened.

And they stepped out.

The Meta-Star and Meta-Olive.

No weapons.

No armor.

Just love.

Just clarity.

And they spoke.

We envy your fire.

Meta-Star

You learned to love through storms. We only learned in spring.

Meta-Olive

You broke everything... and still chose each other.

Meta-Star

We were perfect. You are real.

Meta-Olive

So we're not failures?

Olive

whispered

No. You're just... unfinished.

Meta-Star

smirked

Then they were given a choice

You may trade places.

Live in the version of your story where it's easier.

No pain. No doubt. No past.

That sounds like emotional gentrification.

Leo

gasped

Star stepped forward.

Touched the glass.

Watched the perfect version of herself smile.

Peaceful.

Calm.

Undamaged.
She turned to Olive.
Eyes wet. But sharp.

You'd take me like this?
Star

Yeah.
Olive

Even with my dark humor and explosive reactions?
Star

Your daemons are the best of you.
Olive

Even when I make it hard?
Star

But you make it real
Olive

They chose.
Themselves.
The broken.
The healing.
The still-learning.

Because perfection doesn't hold your hand when you're sobbing in the kitchen at 2AM.

But real love does.

Even when it's exhausted.

Even when it's scared.

Even when it stumbles.

The perfect versions smiled. Bowed. Vanished.

The museum closed.

The stars outside changed color.

Time moved again.

Back on the ship.

They sit in silence.

A little older.

A little braver.

Still broken.

Still beautiful.

Still here.

Think we'll ever get it right?

Star

I think we already are.

Olive

They kiss.

Not perfect.

Not poetic.

But theirs.