

STARGAZER I
Chapter 12: The Hellacious Mess Culminates

by Zoe Yost

Rosan had never felt more unprepared for calisthenics than he did when he slogged out of bed at 7:38. Sayonara had not yet risen, and Rosan glanced at him as he creaked down the ladder. He was lying with his face toward the wall.

Though he had no appetite, Rosan cooked sausages and stuffed down two bananas. He had finished eating when Sayonara finally got up, with only ten minutes to dress and eat before leaving. He said nothing as he ate a few bites of sausage, then mechanically gathered up his presentation supplies and set them by the door.

When they walked out of calisthenics two hours later, Rosan felt flimsier than a balloon man. He was relieved and terrified when they met Raina in the hall—the former because she distracted him from Sayonara, the latter because he knew how miserably unfit they both were to present.

Raina seemed rested and sunny as usual. “Good morning!” she said, her smile fading when she saw the bluish circles under their eyes. “You didn’t stress too much about the project last night...I hope?”

To Rosan’s surprise, he could answer this honestly. “I didn’t, actually. I thought about it less than expected.”

“So did I,” muttered Sayonara.

Raina looked skeptical. “Glad to hear it. Shall we rendezvous in Key-Tech at 10:30? That’ll give us an hour together before the program starts.”

“Sure,” Rosan replied, thankful not to be spending that time alone with his roommate. “Could we meet outside the hall where we’ll be presenting, then find a nearby empty room?”

“Yeah, makes sense. I’ll be seeing Shelly before then, and will let her know.”

Back in their room, Rosan frittered away the remaining time before the meeting, trying to avoid Sayonara and succeeding remarkably well, considering they lived in a two-room apartment. When the time came, they marched to Key-Tech, laden with poster boards, and waited silently for Raina and Beshelda. A gush of relief chilled Rosan’s forehead when they appeared in the hall, chatting as though nothing was amiss.

“So, shall we run it?” asked Beshelda, once they’d settled into a room.

“Actually,” said Raina, “why don’t we peek into the hall first? That way we’ll know where to lean our boards.”

“Good idea,” said Beshelda. “I’ll take a flashlight in case the lights aren’t on.”

This precaution proved superfluous. Sayonara and Beshelda walked out in front, observing the stage layout and discussing board placement.

“Wow, this place is big,” said Rosan. “Hope the mics work.”

He started to follow the other two, but suddenly Raina took his arm and held him back.

“Are you two all right?” she whispered, glancing toward Sayonara. “You’re both so tense, I could strum the air like harp strings. Did something happen?”

Rosan blushed and hesitated. “Well...yes. But I don’t know what.”

Raina squeezed his arm. “Don’t worry, I’m sure it’ll pass. Friends step on each other’s toes all the time, then get over it. You’ll be just fine.”

Rosan knew this was more than a toe-stepping, but had no time to brood. Beshelda and Sayonara were returning.

“We’re thinking we could stand in a row,” said Beshelda, “with the schematics set up on the tables at the back of the stage. We should be able to point to them easily that way.”

“Sounds sensible to me,” Raina answered. “Also, let’s stand in speaker order, left to right. No need to overcomplicate things.”

“All right. Should we run it now?” Rosan asked, as they left the hall.

“Mmm...” Raina sounded dubious. “We can go over transitions, but I can’t help feeling like we’ll blow our wad if we run the whole thing. It’s going to take a huge amount of energy to get through it even once. I think we’d be better off trying to keep the calm confidence we had when we ran it yesterday, and then just triple the speed.”

“Just,” Sayonara muttered.

“*Keep the calm confidence?!*” Rosan wanted to screech. Instead, he said, “If you think so.”

For the next half hour, they practiced the transitions, starting at a normal rate and stepping up the speed until their words were on the brink of unintelligibility. Once Rosan had rehearsed his conclusion for the third time, Raina clapped for him, stood up, and marched on sudden inspiration to the head of the table.

“There, our speed rehearsals are done now,” she said, breathing markedly deeper than usual. “We’re as prepared as we’re going to be. Now, I want you all to repeat these words after me, as slowly and calmly as you can: *we’re going to do great. Your turn!*”

Rosan had never imagined how hard it could be to say something optimistic. “We’re—going—to—do—great,” he finally managed, along with Beshelda. Whether Sayonara was speaking or just moving his lips, he wasn’t sure.

“Oh, excellent!” Raina made a visible effort to look uplifted. “Now, another one: *everyone’s going to love it.*”

“Everyone’s—going—to—love—it,” Rosan and Beshelda repeated mechanically. Again, Sayonara moved his lips, but all Rosan could hear from his direction was a gagging noise.

“Great! Now, just one more.” Sayonara looked ready to axe the table. “*We’ve done an awesome job.*”

“We’ve—done—an—oh, Raina, I can’t,” Rosan moaned. “I know it’s supposed to be centering, but it’s honestly not helping me. Maybe we could take a brief walk instead?”

“Please,” barked Sayonara.

Raina dropped her mask of cheerfulness. “Okay. I’m not surprised it was a flop. Just thought we might as well try everything. Why don’t we hide the boards behind one of the museum ads while we walk? Someone might want to use this room.”

“Yeah, good idea,” Rosan replied, ashamed that he had sunk her ship but unable to really regret it.

Having packed up, they stuffed the boards behind the first ad they came to in the hall and trudged out onto the green.

“It’s 11:06, so we should have almost twenty minutes,” Beshelda said, looking at her comm. “No point in getting there too early, since they have seats reserved for us.”

As they wandered about, Rosan yawned obsessively, but never could get enough air. *You're going to be fine. You worked hard to prepare, you have some decent ideas, and you even have the stage layout planned. Besides, it's just a presentation. If you fail out of the Academy because of it, that might be the best thing that's ever happened to you. Possibly.*

Possibly or not, he wished he had not thought it. "What time is it?" he asked awhile later.

Beshelda checked her comm. "We should be getting back," she replied. "It's 11:22."

"Ooh." Sayonara pivoted and began speed-walking toward Key-Tech.

"Whoa, now, don't panic!" Raina exclaimed, tripping as she tried to catch him.

Don't touch his arm! Rosan thought in horror. *It might do him in!*

Fortunately, Raina didn't. "We know where our boards are," she said comfortingly. "We only need to pick them up."

Sayonara's voice was acid. "*Do we know which ad we left them behind?*"

Raina looked blank. She glanced at Rosan and Beshelda. "Good point. Let's run."

The distance to Key-Tech was short, but it was enough to put them completely out of breath. Rosan tried to subdue his gasping as they searched behind every ad on the left side of the hall, getting more harried with each failure.

At last, Sayonara found them. "What time is it?" he asked, looking dangerous.

"11:25," Beshelda answered. "That actually didn't take long."

"Felt like hours." Rosan rubbed his forehead. "We've all got our scripts, right? Let's go in."

When they opened the door, Raina boggled at the nearly full 300-capacity hall. "Good gracious, did they invite the entire school?"

A bowling ball dented Rosan's belly. "Looks like it."

Holding the boards next to their legs to avoid attracting attention, they filed down and sank into the first row.

"Good luck!" whispered Yoshito, whose group was on the second row.

"Thanks, you too," Rosan and Raina whispered back, as the other two stared about, looking for the source of the sound.

At 11:29, Rosan was just heaving his last set of deep breaths when "*Schak!*" assaulted the air next to him, along with a notable quantity of spit.

"What?" Rosan whispered.

"They moved the tables," hissed Sayonara.

Rosan was relieved it wasn't worse, but nonetheless knocked the elbow on his other side. "Raina! They moved the tables. We'll have to hold the boards for each other."

Raina didn't look pleased, but also didn't panic. "Well, worse things have happened. Thank you for noticing."

Rosan was about to confess that he *hadn't* noticed, but was interrupted by Professor Keylan. "Good morning, my fine fellow humans!" boomed his sunny voice over the loudspeakers. "As I am every year, I am delighted to see so many first-year, second-year, and third-year students, as well as teachers and visitors, in the audience today. The first-year tech presentations are always exciting, inspiring, and often mind-blowing, and,

having worked with today's presenters for these last two quarters, I can tell you with absolute certainty that you're in for a treat.

"As you know from your programs, first up will be Bora Verdanowitz, Justine Trevala, Rhonwen T'Arra, and Nadenka Silviso, presenting on..."

His voice faded into a drone in Rosan's ringing ears. *Programs? What programs? What else have we missed? Oh dear, I should be listening! It would be prudent to know when we're going onstage...*

"...and, eighth but still greath (pardon my abuse of Verseta), Raina Forbeson, Beshelda Parks, Rosan Eglian, and Sayonara Vandella, unveiling their plans for a hypersonic submersible."

Last? Last?! By Hesaldor, why did he have to put us last? Why couldn't Yoshito and his bunch close the program? They're raring to go, and might actually present decently!

It was not to be. Bora, Justine, Rhonwen, and Nadenka were walking onto the stage, looking shy but confident and—worst of all—impeccably prepared. To add insult to injury, the presentation following theirs seemed even more cohesive, engaging, and elegantly paced.

So the trend continued. Beshelda started picking her nails as the third group went up. Rosan's leg began twitching during the fourth. Sayonara was clutching his stomach by the end of the fifth. When, after a few decades, they were finally next in line, Raina was the only one who appeared remotely calm.

At last, the announcement came. "And now, to wrap up this amazing session, I am *jubilant* to welcome to the stage Rosan, Raina, Sayonara, and Beshelda. Take it away!"

Rosan nearly keeled over as he stood up. *Pick up the board, now one step, another step. No, don't grab Sayonara and cling to him like a lifebuoy. Drat, I'm supposed to lead the way onstage. Or—wait, maybe—*

"Agh!" Raina bounced off of Sayonara, who was trying to take his place in line. "You're on the right!" she whispered, sounding irritated for the first time since Rosan had met her.

"Stage right or house right?" Sayonara hissed.

Raina hesitated for a moment, then hissed back, "House!"

Eyes flashing, Sayonara took the place he'd initially gone for.

Rats! Rosan *did* have to lead. He trudged onstage, watching his feet with a tyrannical gaze, and the group found its planned location as best it could, without the tables. Once they settled in, Rosan knew they were standing off center.

"Good day, everyone!" Raina grinned, shrieking the mic. "As you know, I'm Raina, this is Beshelda, that is Sayonara, and that is Rosan, and we will be telling you all about our plans for a hypersonic submarine!"

How could that sound so graceless now, when it sounded fine earlier? Rosan was already envisioning their fail grade when Sayonara elbowed him.

"Board," he mouthed, glaring belligerently at the one Rosan was holding. Rosan handed it over. Promptly, Sayonara shoved his board at Rosan. Balancing it precariously against his legs, Rosan squared his shoulders and tried to appear as though the scuffle was entirely expected and intentional.

As clumsily as an albatross landing on rocks, Raina lobbed the baton at Beshelda, whose soft voice burred off in an incessant, nearly inaudible stream of information, which she punctuated by pointing to spots on the main schematic. After four minutes, she both finished her speech and ran completely out of breath, half-fainting on Raina's shoulder. Sayonara went off like an AK-47, pelting his listeners with syllables clear and hard enough to warrant a seizure warning.

Looking at the clock, Rosan underwent a moment of vertigo. It was 1:04—they were already over the limit. Sayonara seemed to have noticed it too, for words were exploding from his mouth with even greater velocity.

Rosan glanced at Professor Keylan, expecting him to call time, but the latter did not. His eyes, glazed and motionless as a statue's, were fixed on the board to which Sayonara was pointing.

When his turn came, Rosan was trembling. Clutching his script with both hands, he began to follow it, his voice quavering despite its volume, and he pushed inexorably through his description of the force field, which also happened to be the longest segment of the presentation. His hands and arms were visibly shaking when, at 1:11, he made the closing remarks.

After his voice faltered away, no one applauded. The room stared, as though in a stupor. At last, Sayonara picked up the board that was propped against his roommate's legs and led the way off, slipping his hand under Rosan's arm when he failed to move.

Numbly, Rosan followed him, barely able to walk even with his support. Raina was the only one left onstage when, so late they had given up on hearing it, applause began trickling through the crowd. Slowly, it gathered force until it was as noisy as it had been for the other presentations. Yet, it was unmistakably different. If an ovation can sound incredulous, this one did.

When they got back to their seats, Yoshito tapped Rosan's shoulder. "Guys, that was nuts! You all are brilliant!"

"Yeah!" said Abiline. "You should patent your ideas!"

Rosan turned around timorously, afraid they were mocking. "Really?"

"Of course!" said Jack. "Wait till Professor Keylan grades it. I'm sure he'll say the same."

Yeah, wait till he grades it, Rosan thought sickly. "Thanks. I'm glad someone thought so."

To avoid unnecessary interactions, Paregforvan waited until most of the spectators and students had cleared out, then they creaked to their feet like zombies.

"Well, that went," Raina yawned, stretching her arms over her head. "At least Professor Keylan didn't stop us. It probably helped that we were last."

"Last or not, I wouldn't have interrupted," came the dreaded voice from behind them. *Wallop!* went Rosan's bowling ball again.

"I can tell you put a lot of time into that," Keylan said after a pause, looking dazed and—yes—incredulous. "Whose idea was this? And the force field, who came up with that?"

Rosan felt like crying. "Me," he squeaked, so faintly only his roommate heard him.

"It was him." Sayonara pointed with what felt to Rosan like abject callousness.

Keylan peered at the miserable, bleary-eyed student for a long moment. "Ah. Rosan." Then, with a nod to the whole group, he turned and wandered away.

Once he was out of earshot, Raina grumbled, "All right, let's go. I've had all the warm, fuzzy congratulations I can stand."

"Me too," said Beshelda dully. "Since we don't have a seminar this afternoon, I think I'll go catch a nap."

"Good plan." Rosan could barely hold up his head, nor did he want to.

As they started up the stairs, he waited for the others to go first so that, if he broke down, they wouldn't see. But, Sayonara pushed him into second-to-last place and took the rear in a manner that precluded objection. They tramped to Prism and rode the elevator up in torpid silence, dropping off Beshelda and Raina with half-hearted farewells on the sixth floor. Then, without another word, the remaining two got off at floor seven and entered their room.

Rosan let his script join the myriad of other discarded papers around his desk, then sat down and lay his head on his arms. Two small tears seeped between his eyelids. *I ruined it! Our project was a flop, and it's all my fault. Oh, why didn't we just present on gamma lasers, or something else easy? Then, at least, we could have done well. But no, I had to propose some crazy hypothesis that got everyone thinking way beyond the scope of the assignment. Oh, Rosan, you numpty! Oh...*

Suddenly, he felt something crawling in his hair. Of course, this *would* be the day. He slid one arm from under his head and swatted hard at the spot, hoping to smash whatever it was before it bit him.

But the thing, though alive, was not what he expected.

“Ow!” bellowed Sayonara, jumping back and nursing his hand.

Rosan gawked at him, unable to comprehend what had happened. When he did, shock paralyzed his vocal cords. “I—I—I’m so sorry! I thought you were a spider!”

Sayonara glared at him fiercely, arms akimbo.

“Oh, come on! You know I wouldn’t hit you on purpose! Don’t get all miffed.”

Sayonara maintained his acutely miffed posture. “I was going to ask if you were okay.”

Rosan thudded his head back onto his arms. “Did I answer that?”

Cross silence was Sayonara’s response. Rosan physically jumped when he felt the touch in his hair again.

“It’s done, for better or worse,” came the sour, testy voice a minute later.

Rosan felt profoundly comforted. “Yeah, that’s really great. Thanks for pointing that out.”

An even longer silence. “You can stop thinking about it now,” came the voice again. The fingers slipped under his hair and lightly scratched his neck.

Rosan said nothing, rattled by the dissonance of the voice against the tender touch on his skin. Again he felt the fingernails clawing into his palm; again he saw the petrifying stare. He wished Sayonara would go away.

At last, Sayonara walked back to his desk. “Are you staying here over break again?” he asked frigidly.

Rosan had never been more grateful for the answer. “No, not this time. The government completed the safety renovations on my home port in a timely fashion, for once, so I’ll probably fly back on Sunday.”

Sayonara opened the top drawer of his desk and began digging about.

Rosan eyed the drawer, but couldn’t see inside it. “Are you staying here?”

“Yes.” Sayonara ponderously shut the drawer.

Something inside Rosan squirmed. “What are you planning on doing?”

Sayonara didn’t look at him, instead began stacking the few papers that lay on his desk. “I don’t know.”

Instinct drove Rosan to make suggestions. “Well, I’ve heard there’re lots of museums around, about everything you could imagine, and there’s that Citypark Raina and Beshelda went to. There might also be paths along the Greater Westerly Canal. And there’re the Galaxy Gardens—I only saw the outdoor exhibit from the air, but they have a humungous indoor conservatory.”

Sayonara didn’t answer.

The air felt thick, and Rosan’s lungs strained against it. “Of course, there’re things to do on campus too, if you don’t want to leave it,” he added tentatively. “I haven’t explored Prism, but I’m sure there’s recreation somewhere...”

If his roommate was listening, he wasn't giving any sign.

Rosan sat heavily at his desk. He woke his computer, urged by a devilish craving to check the project scores. Nothing was posted yet, so he deflated a little more and dragged himself out of his chair. "I'm going to follow Beshelda's advice and take a nap. You know where I'll be."

Sayonara was sitting at the kitchen table, eyes fixed on its blank surface. He nodded.

*

*

*

Professor Gindisferne was about to leave his office for the day when a frazzled redhead burst in.

"Goodness, Coreli!" the older man exclaimed. "4:37? Shouldn't you have gone home an hour ago?"

"Yes," Keylan panted, "but it took me ages to finish anything this afternoon. May I sit a moment?"

"Of course." Gindisferne gestured to the chair in front of his desk. "Now, tell me—what has put you in this state? Did one of the third-year chemists vaporize herself?"

Keylan did not laugh. "Did you watch the first-year tech presentations?"

"The first few. I had a class at 12:30." He raised an eyebrow. "Did I miss a good one?"

Keylan wrung his hands. "Shit—yes, you did. It went by like a bullet train, but—"

"But?"

"It—it was brilliant! I can't believe no one's thought up the tech before. He invented a whole new force field, and—"

"Ehm, Coreli, there are two males in that group. Enlighten me as to which you mean."

"Rosan! I've seen a lot of great budding engineers, but to manipulate the numbers and concepts like he did—! I'm telling you, Arthur, that boy is a genius."