

Moving Target
Luke Swiatek

Received message from TOM on: 03 APR 2147 09:23:07

Hey Anna, I know you're strapped in the shuttle and won't have the chance to read this until later, but I just wanted to let you know I'm thinking about you. Not in like a weird way or anything, but you're my friend, of course I'd think about you on such a big day! You better message me all the time about what the moon is like, I want DAILY reports... just kidding, but it is super cool.

P.S. My Granny says she's praying for you, so I know you'll be safe. She always did like you!

Message to TOM:

Awwwww you're so sweet Tom! Granny's prayers must have worked, everything went off without a hitch. You really didn't need to worry, there hasn't been a launch issue in over 50 years, and we've basically never had one in space, at least not in our own solar system. In a weird way, lightspeed travel kinda simplifies things.

Honestly it's a little underwhelming up here, you're probably having more fun than I am. The moon looks better from Earth; from here it's just a big gray rock. I'm not cleared for the surface anyway, I'm just one tech of many keeping the good ol' USS Callister in the air. Hopefully I'll get to go on my OWN mission far away one day, but for now, this will do!

Message sent on: 03 APR 2147 16:45:58

Expected delivery time: 03 APR 2147 16:45:59

Received message from TOM on: 04 APR 2147 09:33:19

Yeahhhh don't try to downplay being in literal space. I'm over here switching my major for a third time and you're orbiting a heavenly body. I promise you that another hazy house party isn't more exciting.

I still just can't believe you're really up there. I guess I should've seen this coming when you destroyed me on every calculus test in Mr. Legette's class... but then again, who expects their seat neighbor to become an astronaut? That's not on me!

When are you coming back? I need to take little Miss Martian out for lunch. You know, just to make sure you didn't get brainwashed or bodyswapped by aliens up there or anything.

Message to TOM:

Wow, putting your whole planet first and operating as the front line of defense against a possible alien invasion? You're so brave Tom. As an official representative of the U.S. government, I must commend you for performing your civic duty. I suppose I can't say no then. Of course, you did say Martian when technically I'd be a Lunarian, so really maybe I should say no just for that reason anyway.

The mission is over in just a few days, but after that I need to debrief and reacclimate. Unfortunately they won't let me drive all the way home to Cornelius for just a social visit, so unless YOU plan on taking an 8 hour drive down I-95, I think I'll have to take a raincheck on that lunch :(

Message sent on: 04 APR 2147 10:07:12

Expected delivery time: 04 APR 2147 10:07:13

Received message from TOM on: 06 APR 2147 14:52:58

Hey sorry for the delayed response, I had to move around my schedule... but good news, this ugly mug is going to be waiting to see you when you land! I got some time off work, I just told Jim I'm basically going to meet Princess Leia, and he's a huge nerd so it worked. I hope the cafeteria at ASF has more than freeze-dried ice cream so I can buy you something nice, eh? Ew, actually, I bet you guys call it a "canteen" or something dumb don't you?

Anyway, I'll see you soon. I can't wait to hear all about it, really.

Message to TOM:

That's amazing!!! I'll be down tomorrow. Looking forward to seeing you :)

Message sent on: 06 APR 2147 15:33:40

Expected delivery time: 06 APR 2147 15:33:41

Message to TOM:

I just logged back into my Astrocomm for the first time since my last mission... omg, we were so adorable flirting like that. Go back and reread it, you really were a little nervous weren't you? I wasn't sure you'd ever officially ask me to be your girlfriend, but I'm glad you did. It's more satisfying being up here knowing that there's someone to come home to, you know?

We just got to Saturn, and unlike the moon, it is GORGEOUS up close. I can't put it in words, and pictures don't convey it either, so you'll just have to believe me when I say it's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen. I wish you were up here with me so you could see too.

Let me know how the first day of classes go too. Love ya!

Message sent on: 17 SEP 2147 09:07:57

Expected delivery time: 17 SEP 2147 10:30:39

Received message from TOM on: 17 SEP 2147 14:36:28

Oh shut up, as if you're some sort of female Casanova over here. I think you could name more stars than humans at this point.

First day has been really encouraging so far, I think it's a much better fit for me. Obviously tough to know just from syllabus day, but it just all seemed to speak to me. You think they'll take a horticulturist up there?

In other good news, I spoke to my advisor and it turns out I've only got one year left until I can graduate. Apparently being a failed English AND Actuarial Science major means you really rack up just about every pre-requisite you can imagine, so all I have left are the major-specific courses. Thank goodness.

And I'm afraid I CAN'T believe you in regards to Saturn. You know I completely trust you, but how can it be the most beautiful thing you've seen when you look in the mirror every day?

Love you too ;)

Message to TOM:

Sorry if there are any typos in this message, I can't see... my eyes are still rolled all the way back in my skull from how cheesy that line was. You're lucky you're about a billion miles away or I would've smacked you.

I must admit, we have a LOT more need for actuaries than gardeners right now... but you never know, maybe we'll try and establish a colony at some point. Someone's gonna have to grow the food then, right?

Message sent on: 17 SEP 2147 14:38:52

Expected delivery time: 17 SEP 2147 16:01:34

Received message from TOM on: 18 SEP 2147 08:22:01

Morning! Sorry I didn't see your message from yesterday, I had a crazy day. I'm sure yours was way crazier.

This delay kinda sucks right? I mean even when you're not working, it takes an hour for my messages to reach you and another hour for yours to come back, so it's not like we can really have a quick conversation. It always feels a bit like ships passing in the night, no?

I guess it could be worse though! And any time talking to you is better than none.

Message to TOM:

Yeah it's not great, not gonna lie... but I mean you know what you signed up for right? Luckily it's just for a short time, our missions are never longer than a week or two typically.

Message sent on: 18 SEP 2147 10:21:58

Expected delivery time: 18 SEP 2147 11:44:40

Received message from TOM on: 31 JUL 2148 16:47:09

Hey... I just wanted to apologize for this morning. I said some things I didn't mean. I truly am happy for you. Getting to pilot your own craft is a huge deal, and for you to get that opportunity so early in your career is just insane. I couldn't be prouder, and I'd never want you to stand in the way of your dream.

I can understand all of that and still be upset though, even if admittedly I should be better at not taking it out on you. Having to wait a month for each message to reach you just blows, there's no way around it. I think I'd be okay not seeing you in person for a few months, if we could at least talk. But that long of a gap just is going to feel so impersonal, we can't really properly respond to each other. It's frustrating. I guess I just miss you in advance. Sue me.

Don't forget I love you. Come home soon.

Message to TOM:

Tom, somehow you manage to infuriate and endear me at the same time.

I get it, I do. I mean if you're feeling that way at home surrounded by all our friends and family with even Scumbles to keep you company, how do you think I feel once I get up there, a millions of miles away in a cold vacuum? It's even worse for me, but like I said, this is what we chose.

The U.S.S. Callister will be the first ship to ever make it all the way to Farout, and I'm going to get to take my own personal vessel down to the surface (okay, along with about 20 other people in their pods, but still). There's no way in a million years I could pass this up. If I get to do this, I could die happy tomorrow.

Maybe you're right to an extent though. Our original plan of sending a message every day like a journal entry to each other might not make sense. Then eventually we'll be a month behind on the other person's messages and be cross-responding to them from the future... too confusing.

Let's just send each other one message whenever we receive one. I know it'll take more than a month each way, but maybe it'll be fun. It's like we're pen pals back when they still had horses and stuff, waiting for a letter. That's almost romantic right? Basically Romeo and Juliet!

Message sent on: 31 JUL 2148 17:43:12

Expected delivery time: 31 JUL 2148 17:43:13

Received message from TOM on: 13 SEP 2148 08:10:55

Lot to unpack there hon, not the least of which is you comparing us to Romeo and Juliet. I know you fancy STEM majors may not have paid as much attention in English class as I did, but SURELY you don't think that was a good love story with an ending we should aspire to!

But anyway if that's what you want, fine. I'm not going to pretend I prefer it though. I can never get enough of you, I'd rather hear everything that's going on instead of getting a summary covering multiple months.

I know this message won't even reach you until you stop moving since you're traveling away at the same speed as this communication, but I guess you'll get it eventually.

This doesn't change anything for us though. I still love you to the ends of the earth. And come to think of it, I suppose in this case I must add the disclaimer that I love you well BEYOND the ends of the earth too. Nothing is going to change that, even if we're both feeling a little ornery right now.

When you come home, I have an important question I want to ask you. Stay safe for me until then.

Message to TOM:

Just got your message, we've been here just for a few days, but it's a surreal experience. We haven't gone down to the surface yet, but we should be soon. We were originally going to all touch down pretty close by, but they've changed it up a bit and we'll be splitting up to get more diverse views. I'm giddier than a kid on Christmas Eve, I can't lie.

I love you too, you know that. Don't give me cliffhangers like that though, just ask me now! Now I have to wait a few more months to know what's on your mind because you're feeling vague, that's not cool, you know how impatient I am.

I almost hit "Send" before adding this paragraph, but I just can't get over being here. I'm about to set foot where no one ever has before. Maybe no one ever will again. It's dangerous, it's adventurous, it's novel, it's terrifying, it's thrilling. I could die the second my foot hits the ground. Or I could plant the flag that they make a statue of someday. What could be more fulfilling than this????

Message sent on: 13 SEP 2148 08:46:38

Expected delivery time: 26 OCT 2148 23:14:21

Received message from TOM on: 09 DEC 2148 21:30:08

I mean, yes that is so awesome. I can't wait to hear about it. At the same time though, there's a lot more to life than your job, no matter how cool it is. I know it's not just a job to you of course, maybe I shouldn't say that, but I just mean like... other things matter to you too right? I'm really enjoying my job and I still don't think planting begonias would make a top 10 "Most Fulfilling" list for me. I know what would be #1 though.

And no, I have to ask you in person! Don't worry, it's nothing bad. Hopefully.

I still love you astronomically. And no, I'm NOT apologizing for the laziest pun ever. Spend a few months with that comedy gold rattling around in your brain.

Message to TOM:

Keeping me in the dark on two topics now? Fine, be that way :P Either way, I'm not fighting with you about this right now. We can talk more when I'm back.

You might be shocked to hear but we still haven't gone down yet. I know we were supposed to be on our way back home now, it's been a weird few months. We're getting these weird interference patterns, we've been trying to investigate and decipher them the whole time. We've been sending a live feed back to HQ for their help, but of course with the same timing delay we're just now getting information back from them.

I expect they'll advise us to touch down soon though, we didn't come this far just to orbit. There's politics at play as well, it's hard to justify future missions like this if all we do is record some waveforms and come right back. Captain is thinking about letting us split up and search for the source, which would be a fun task to add onto the usual whole "on a new planet" kinda thing.

Next time you message me, hopefully I'll have an update with more answers than questions!

Message sent on: 09 DEC 2148 22:17:03

Expected delivery time: 22 JAN 2149 12:44:46

Message to TOM:

tom everything went wrong and im not sure what happening and I already sent distress to ship but i dont know and im jsut worried if this will be my last time i want to send before i cant anymore. but i think thigns have been really wurd or off between us and i know that a lot of that is my fault and i dont want it tot bethat way but what can i do i ts the circumstance but i guess i probalby should jsut say sorry for everything but i know that when i come

Message sent on: 11 DEC 2148 11:34:42

Expected delivery time: 24 JAN 2149 02:02:25

Message to TOM:

Hey Tom. long time, no talk... at least for you.

There's so much to say, and I don't know how to say it. I'm still not even entirely sure what happened. We did go down towards the surface, and lucky me, I think I found the thing that was messing up all of our equipment. There was this strange, shimmering, amorphous anomaly, just hovering in the air, about a mile or two off the surface. If most of space just looks like jet black water, a lake at midnight, then this looked like someone had spilled a bit of oil on the surface. I only even noticed it because I happened to maneuver such that it came between me and the Sun. I couldn't tell how big it was, depth is hard to judge out here with nothing for reference, but certainly many orders of magnitude larger than my little pod.

I was not close enough to the Callister to radio, but I was able to send a quick message to them stating that I thought I had found our problem and was investigating closer. However, as I neared it, I noticed I was accelerating more than expected. Too late, I realized there was some sort of event horizon I had crossed over, and that I was being pulled in. I immediately activated my distress signal, so they should have been able to track my trajectory, but there was no way they could intercede fast enough. There wasn't anything I could do to escape at that point, so all I could do was wait for a moment as I was pulled in.

At the very end, I blacked out. I'm not sure for how long; the system clocks say it was only a few hours, but all of the electronics were on the fritz, so I'm not confident in that estimate. Still, believing it is the only option I really have.

When I woke up, I couldn't believe what I was seeing. I was near a planet I'd never seen before, and the Sun looked to be a slightly different color than usual. When I checked my map, I realized I wasn't near Farout anymore. I wasn't even in our SOLAR SYSTEM. I'm all the way in Alpha Canis Minoris, which isn't even the closest solar system to us. 11 light years away. It's impossible, and yet here I am, with every sense telling me it's really happening.

The obvious conclusion is that I found some kind of wormhole, entered it, and miraculously survived the journey. If I'm right, this could be the greatest scientific discovery since... ever? I don't know if that's hyperbolic, but it's thrilling to think of. I was

honestly pretty scared at first when I woke up, but shockingly everything seems to be in working condition, including me.

Normally I'd be able to retrace my steps and see exactly where I came from, but the interference has mangled some of the flight data. Still, I can assume the other end of this wormhole is somewhere around this planet I'm near, so I can search around it and find my way home. I should be able to use the field of interference as a sort of homing beacon to locate it. With any luck, this thing works like the two-way street you see in movies, and I'm back in our solar system in no time flat.

P.S. - You probably got my last message to you from our solar system. I hope it didn't scare you too much. I thought those might be my last few seconds alive, and I had a lot I wanted to say that I didn't even get to. I typed up until the last possible second and then hit send. I almost hope you didn't get it. It might be better for me to have disappeared than for you to have to have that be your last memory of me, at least for now.

Message sent on: 11 DEC 2148 15:29:01

Expected delivery time: 07 MAY 2160 07:46:21

Message to TOM:

I didn't really think about this when I sent my previous message, I was kind of (understandably) wrapped up in the whole situation... but you're going to be 37 or 38 years old by the time you get this. I'm not really talking to you anymore, I'm sending letters to a future version of you. I know you won't be able to respond to me, and obviously this message isn't going to reach you in any reasonable time to actually explain anything. I look forward to us BOTH receiving this message like a time capsule someday and having a good laugh about it.

Not really much point in me messaging from this anymore, so I guess, hello future Tom and Anna, goodbye forever from "past" Anna!

Message sent on: 11 DEC 2148 19:18:52

Expected delivery time: 07 MAY 2160 11:36:12

Message to TOM:

Okay, I know I said that I wasn't going to send another message, but it's just me out here. I figured it might help to have some kind of a journal for my sanity.

So we seem to have hit a bit of a snag. Namely, I can't find the other end of the wormhole, and it's been a week. My electronics have worked perfectly, which ironically is a bad sign, since flickering would be my first clue that I'm near another anomaly.

I honestly didn't expect this, but now I'm having to reckon with how many assumptions were built into my initial outlook.

What if the "portal" thing I went through only goes one way, and there's nothing on the other side for me to return through?

What if it exists, but there's no aura around it, and I'll need to manually spot that tiny oily spot in the middle of an ocean with my bare eyes? Or what if it's near a different planet altogether, or not near a planet at all?

What if I find it and go through, but the return journey is rougher than the initial one and I don't make it?

What if my distress signal and messages to you were never sent at all? (For that matter, I have no clue if these will deliver either; obviously we've never tested this equipment over even 1/100th of the distance).

Those are the coldly rational questions moving forward. There are worse ones I don't want to consider, though. Like... what if my clock is wrong? What if the reason I'm 11 light years away is because I've been GONE for 11 light years, hurtling through space until I somehow woke up along with the rest of the ship? I don't think that's right, I don't feel or look any older, but I can't rule anything out.

I'm not panicking, though. I am a professional, and I know how important maintaining your cool is in a stressful situation. I could easily make a short-sighted decision that jeopardizes everything. I WILL stay the course, I WILL find that darn wormhole, and I WILL be back. I can't allow myself to believe anything else.

Message sent on: 18 DEC 2148 11:47:36

Expected delivery time: 14 MAY 2160 04:04:56

Message to TOM:

It's not feasible for me to keep flying down by the surface. These pods were meant to go back, explore for a little while, and return. I don't have the fuel for these repeated missions down; I'm down to about 15% remaining.

I've decided I'm going to put myself into the lowest orbit I can find, wait until there's some sort of disturbance, and THEN investigate closer to the surface. This should allow me to expend no fuel at all and still cover a lot of ground. Now I just hope I can detect something from up here.

As stressful as the situation is, it's kinda of boring in its own way. Not that the outcome doesn't matter -- jeez, far from it -- but there's just nothing to DO anymore now that I'm not even piloting. All I have time to do is sit here and think.

And honestly, more than anything else, I'm ANGRY. Angry that they let us explore something so unknown, angry that I was so reckless myself, angry that I do this at all. Angry that you and I left things on such bad terms. Angrier that you probably are sitting there loving me anyway in that stupidly sweet way you always do, worrying about me and not caring if I said anything insensitive.

It's all so enraging. Be rude back sometimes! Let me feel like MY anger is justified too! Honestly, it's selfish that you don't, it's not healthy to be so sweet and accommodating all the time. I always end up feeling like I'm the one at fault when we argue, even when I'm right, because you're just so darn NICE about it!

I don't even know where this is all coming from. I just hate this. Stuck on this stupid ship in God knows where, with nothing left to do but wait. I don't know, I'm just taking this all out on you, when you don't deserve it. Just like I always do I guess. I'm ending this one before I say anything else worthless.

Message sent on: 21 DEC 2148 03:52:49

Expected delivery time: 16 MAY 2160 20:10:09

Message to TOM:

Merry (very belated) 2148 Christmas Eve from the farthest corner of the galaxy... I had a rare pleasant thought today, but it turned sour before I could even get any real enjoyment from it. I was thinking about how I was the first human ever to reach this place, comfortably, and that I might get the wormhole or even this whole planet named after me. That was exciting for a moment, and goodness knows I could use something to be excited about lately.

But then I thought a little deeper about it. There were a bunch of people who found America before Mr. Vespucci. The ancestors of the Mayans and Aztecs and Vikings, sure, but I bet other wayward explorers accidentally stumbled upon it after taking a wrong turn. But it was named after him because he made it there... and CAME BACK.

I don't know if anything is going to be named after me.

Message sent on: 24 DEC 2148 21:36:21

Expected delivery time: 20 MAY 2160 13:53:41

Message to TOM:

I know every word we've written to each other by heart by now. I've got nothing better to do than read and reread our communications. I bet you didn't think that "I love you astronomically" would be the last thing I'd ever hear from you, did you? Would you have said something else if you could've, if you knew? I know I would've.

I've been reflecting a lot, and I'm not going to write out some grand speech about something that happened more than a decade ago by the time you finally get this, but I just want you to know that I realize everywhere I took you for granted. I know you weren't perfect either, I'm not saying I'm some villain who was oppressing you either, but I just wanted to acknowledge that.

I don't know. This is silly, I don't know if you'll get this ever. I'm going to stop for now.

Message sent on: 26 DEC 2148 16:57:10

Expected delivery time: 22 MAY 2160 09:14:30

Message to TOM:

I figured out what you were going to ask me... you can't be serious right??? I can't believe that. After everything? Or before everything, maybe? I pray I'm wrong, maybe you just wanted to know my favorite flavor of ice cream. The idea that you would still be there waiting for me only makes me feel that much worse.

I don't even have anything else to add for now, I just... I guess I needed to process this out loud. And since you're not here for me to talk to, this is the closest I've got.

Message sent on: 26 DEC 2148 19:01:58

Expected delivery time: 22 MAY 2160 11:19:18

Message to TOM:

Well, I'm no quitter, but I think it's time to wrap things up here. I'm not sad or scared anymore. There's nothing here, nothing for me to find, and no one coming for me within a decade. It's going to be okay. I haven't exactly gone through the five stages of grief in any linear way (and I guess I got over the "denial" phase pretty quickly; scientists don't have time for that). Regardless, it's pretty clear I'm at "acceptance" now.

The little IV drip we have has kept me alive for a while, and it's amazing at recycling nutrients, but even it has limitations. My only option is to enter cryogenic suspension and hope that can keep me alive for longer. Maybe if I happen to drift close enough to the wormhole, the interference will interrupt the process and I'll wake up anyway. Who can say, this is literally uncharted territory, and even then that's the longest of shots... but a full-court, backwards, blindfolded heave is the best odds I have right now. I think this is goodbye.

I don't know if you're reading this. In fact, I hope you aren't. I hope your AstroComm is collecting dust somewhere, forgotten in the dark corner of a closet, in a shoebox you won't open until you move in another decade. I hope it broke years ago and you didn't bother to fix it, since you weren't expecting to hear from me anyway. I hope you chucked it in the ocean in a fit of anger and never bothered to fish it out.

If you ARE reading this... I'm sorry. I never wanted to do this to you. So I'm going to do the only humane thing I can think of: I'm breaking up with you. I'm not giving you a choice and allowing you to hang on thinking it's the noble thing to do. You've wasted too much of your life on me already, and you deserve better. Move on. Please go enjoy your life again... for me. I don't know if you've spent more than a decade clinging to a thread of a possibility, but if you have, then that's the worst thing I've ever done. I take solace now knowing that it won't happen any longer.

I'm not coming home. I'll always love you. Goodbye Tom.

Message sent on: 31 DEC 2148 23:59:59

Expected delivery time: 27 MAY 2160 16:17:19

6:26 PM

Anna awoke surrounded by fuzzy whiteness everywhere she looked. After so much time in the omnipresent obsidian night that was outer space, it was blinding.

Is this Heaven? she thought. *Do I deserve Heaven anyway?*

As her eyes adjusted and her surroundings came into focus, she realized it wasn't Heaven at all. She was surrounded by four walls and large pieces of equipment, and she herself was hooked up to a machine she didn't recognize.

Kidnapped by aliens? she wondered. *Probably not, this looks like a human hospital. Did the U.S.S. Callister or some other ship finally make the decade-long trip to me? Or has it been hundreds of years, and someone stumbled upon me by accident?*

As Anna tried to process everything, an older woman in a white lab coat came in holding a clipboard. "I just got the notification you're finally awake!" she said with a genuinely chipper demeanor. "We were hoping you would, but I wasn't exactly sure. You were in pretty rough shape."

"What... what happened?" Anna stammered, with her brain still slowly waking up as well.

"Well, they found you," responded the doctor. "It took a little while, but they were able to go in the same way you did, but they marked the path home and were able to return the same way."

"I know this is probably going to be a lot for you to take in. Trust me, they're going to want me to run all sorts of tests on you, but I'm going to make sure we go at your pace. I'll be here when you're ready for me, just hit that button by your right arm. In the meantime though, maybe your visitor there would be a friendlier face to catch you up to speed."

Anna wasn't sure what she meant, but as she sat up a bit and followed the direction of the doctor's gesture, she saw a man sitting slumped in a chair in the corner behind her and to her left, with a hat covering his face so he could sleep.

"She's awake!" the doctor said loudly, causing the man to stir, before she exited closing the door behind her.

As the man sat further upright himself, his hat slipped down onto his lap, and Anna was shocked to see Tom's face staring back at her. His eyes were red and he was clearly older than the last time she'd seen him, but he was still a young man overall.

Anna was hit with a wave of emotions all at once. Relief, love, longing, regret, guilt, sadness, gratitude, and exhaustion rushed through her body, and the only thing she could do was start sobbing.

In an instant, Tom went from rubbing the sleep from his confused eyes to kneeling at Anna's bedside and cradling her in his arms.

"It's okay baby. It's over. I'm here. They brought you back to me, and I'm never letting you go again. You're mine, and you're safe now."

Anna burrowed deeper into his chest and let out everything she held inside without saying a word. Tom absorbed it all, rubbing her back and continuing to coo soft words of affirmation in her ear, assuring her everything would be alright.

Suddenly, a thought struck Anna like lightning, and she pushed Tom away. "When is it?" she gasped out.

"Uh... 6:32? Sunday??" Tom answered quizzically after a quick glance at the clock.

"No... *when*?" Anna repeated.

Tom nodded, understanding a little better now.

"It's March of 2153," he stated calmly. "You've been gone for almost five years. You sent me that panicked last message, and then ASF told me the broad details of what happened. A few years later, they told me they had the information necessary to go find you, and then they called me again when they did."

Anna heard nothing but the first four words. "Do you still have your AstroComm?" she ventured.

Tom blushed a bit, and sheepishly reached into his jacket pocket to pull it out. "I haven't left home without it since your last message. I was always hoping against hope that I'd hear from you... I'd protect this thing with my life."

In one swift motion, Anna snatched the device from Tom's outstretched hand and hurled it on the floor, shattering it instantly. Tom fixed his gaze on the ground for a few seconds, and then swiveled his head back up to face her, truly dumbfounded.

"Trust me," Anna said. "You don't need to know. That was for future Tom anyway."

Tom still had no clue what she was talking about, but he couldn't help but chuckle in bewilderment.

"Okay my love," he purred warmly. "I guess I don't need that anymore when I have the real you right next to me anyway. And you respond a lot faster too."

Now it was Anna's turn to blush a bit, but Tom wasn't quite done. He took her hand in his, carefully avoiding the tubes inserted into her wrist, and locked eyes meaningfully with her before speaking again.

"Let's go make OUR future together," he said with a half-decade full of repressed emotions brimming right beneath the surface.

Anna was too overwhelmed to respond properly. There was only one thing she was able to utter.

"Message received."

Inspiration primarily from Voices of a Distant Star and slightly from Interstellar