

Counting Stars

“Aelin?” My voice was soft, just as soft as the wind that was blowing through the opened window.

“Yes?” She answered, yet she kept her face set on the road in front of us, always such a responsible driver.

“Nobody knows how many stars there are in space,” I said. I had been thinking about that a lot. It sounds obvious at first, which is probably why Aelin answered with “I mean, it’s impossible to count them, so that kind of makes sense,” but I thought that the more you thought about it, the scarier it would get. What if nobody could ever know? What if all of it just stayed a mystery? “Don’t you think it’s scary?” I asked.

Aelin now turned her head, but only for a short second, as if to check whether I was being serious or not. “What? Space?” she asked next, so she obviously wasn’t happy with the look on my face. By *happy* I mean she couldn’t quite figure out what I was thinking and, as I now know, Aelin always likes to know what other people are thinking. That’s also probably why she started studying psychology.

“Yes, I mean nobody knows what exactly is out there...”, I said. That statement had been a bad move on my behalf, since the only thing I was going to get in return was a sarcastic answer.

“Oh, but we do know, there are planets and suns, moons, black holes, galaxies...”. There it was. She would’ve probably gone on, naming every single object she knew was flying around somewhere in space, but I cut her off. “That’s not what I meant. I meant that nobody knows if there’s an answer out there.” Oh, God, why was I talking like this? Because you are philosophy student. Aelin is not. As I said, psychology is her thing. They sound very similar, but if you ever listened to any of our conversations, you’d know that they are not. I know you know that anyway, but I... I myself like to forget sometimes. Luckily, I have my own not-so-little-pocket-soon-to-be therapist to remind me of it.

“Why would you look for an answer?” Despite being a psychology student, Aelin was somewhat emotionally dense, so I decided that I was in the mood to continue this banter with me being a metaphorical wannabe poet and Aelin being the sarcastic little whizz that she is. No, I don’t swear because I think it’s hilarious to replace swear words with similarly sounding but completely innocent, vanilla-cake-pop, fluffy-cotton-candy things that would barely count as a word anywhere else.

“Isn’t that what we always do? Look for an answer, try to find out what’s best in every situation to somehow manage to achieve our goals?” If this were a theatre play, I would now look into the distance dramatically and Aelin would express her undying love for me with something cheesy like “You are my answer”. But this is not Shakespeare or Jane Austen but a midnight car ride with two best friends in matching buttoned up sweatshirts and two empty Happy Meals laying on the middle console. “And you think the stars can tell you that?”

Oh yeah, I was not only talking to myself right now and the person on the other side of this conversation, aka Aelin, was now looking at me with two raised eyebrows, waiting for an answer. I took a deep breath and then responded: “No I don’t think they can, but everybody can hope, right? I hope that somebody is looking at the stars as well, maybe thinking about the same stuff I’m thinking about.”

I didn’t think what I was saying made much sense. In fact, I think nobody could make sense of what I was saying. But this was not “nobody”. This was Aelin and she always understood me better than anybody else.

“Well, then that person must think about this a lot if they really think about all the things you think about. You’ve got surprisingly a lot in that little head of yours”.

Aelin now wore a smirk. Not the cocky smirk that would make anybody gag whenever a very arrogant wannabe playboy throws it their way, but the Aelin-smirk. The Aelin-smirk was special because not everybody could always appreciate it. Yes, I did count myself lucky in that case. The Aelin-smirk comforts me. It may look mocking but, in those situations, I know that Aelin feels the exact same way as I do, just like right now.

“It comforts you? Believing that somebody else is going through the same things as you, feeling all of the emotions you’re feeling right now?” As always, Aelin brought her point across perfectly. Well, more like my point. “Yes, it does. Doesn’t it comfort you, too?”

Aelin took a deep breath, one of her blond strands falling in front of her eye. She hastily pulled it behind her ear. “You know I enjoy living in the moment and try not to overthink every single one of my steps. It confuses the hell out of me the fact that you always have so many thoughts. But, for once, when it’s about the future, I wish I thought the same as you: the more possible situations you think through, the more you’re prepared for every single outcome. It really amazes me, you know.”

She was looking straight at me, which made my throat become dry. May I recap that moment when I said that this wasn’t Jane Austen?

“We’ve been through everything together, and we’re going to get through this as well. I’ll stay by your side. No matter what.”

“This is our exit.” My voice was barely a whisper. If I was completely honest, I didn’t know whether I’d manage to not ruin my mascara. “This is the way, right?” Aelin sighed, pointing in the direction of a street hemmed with maple trees. Yes, that was it. This was the place where I had made so many memories and spent so many hours of my childhood. I could feel a teardrop forming in my eye, threatening to roll down my cheek. “Yes, just...”

“Just follow the maple trees, I know Emery,” Aelin cut me off. Her smile was soft, she knew I was getting emotional. Then again, it wasn’t hard to tell. My voice got whinier and was by now probably more of a sobbing. I guess this is the part of the story where I actually start to explain why we were on a road trip in the middle of the night. My parents had died.

Plane crash, no survivors. It’s cruel, really, knowing how much they always loved space, the galaxy, the sky and it also being the sky that sealed their fates to death. But the reason why Aelin and I were in our hometown was different, well, at least a bit. My parents owned a planetarium. Nothing big and fancy like those you see in the big cities. Just a small one, cozy in a way. They owned it and they loved it. So did I, and so does Aelin. We spent a big part of our childhood there, looking at the different constellations and planets.

Aelin parked the car. “Emery? We’re there. Do you wanna go alone first or...?”

“No... please, come with me.” We got out of the car and started walking towards the entrance. I took out the key, but my hand trembled so badly. “Aelin... uhm... can you...” I was holding out the key, silently, asking her to open the door.

As we entered the planetarium, the light went on and I found myself in the small walk-in closet where the guests would usually keep their coats while watching the play. I say *play* like the place was some kind of theater where the stars are the actors. Then it would be a very chaotic play full of delays and special effects but, in the end, it would be worth it. Imperfect, yet perfect in its own way.

We had reached the performance space: red velvet seats and, in the middle, the projector. I was definitely crying now, but it’s ok. It’s dark in here anyway. Aelin walks up to the projector and, for a few minutes, she shuffles around there. And then the room lit up. Well, not really, but now the stars were beamed onto the walls.

Aelin sat in a chair, our favorite spot and pat the space next to her. “Gosh, this is so terribly cheesy. I can’t believe it,” she mumbled to herself as I sat next to her. “What is?” Now I was the one raising an eyebrow – it probably looked hilarious with all of my smeared makeup. “You know, we can’t possibly count all the stars, but let’s start with these, shall we?”

And so we did, we counted them, the hours passing by and the clouds turning purple already, but we didn't care. We just sat there, counting stars.