AS
YOU
WAKE,
BREAK
THE
SHELL

BOOKS BY BECKY CHAMBERS

THE WAYFARERS SERIES

The Long Way to a Small, Angry Planet
A Closed and Common Orbit
Record of a Spaceborn Few
The Galaxy, and the Ground Within

To Be Taught, If Fortunate

MONK & ROBOT

A Psalm for the Wild-Built
A Prayer for the Crown-Shy

As You Wake, Break the Shell

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BECKY CHAMBERS



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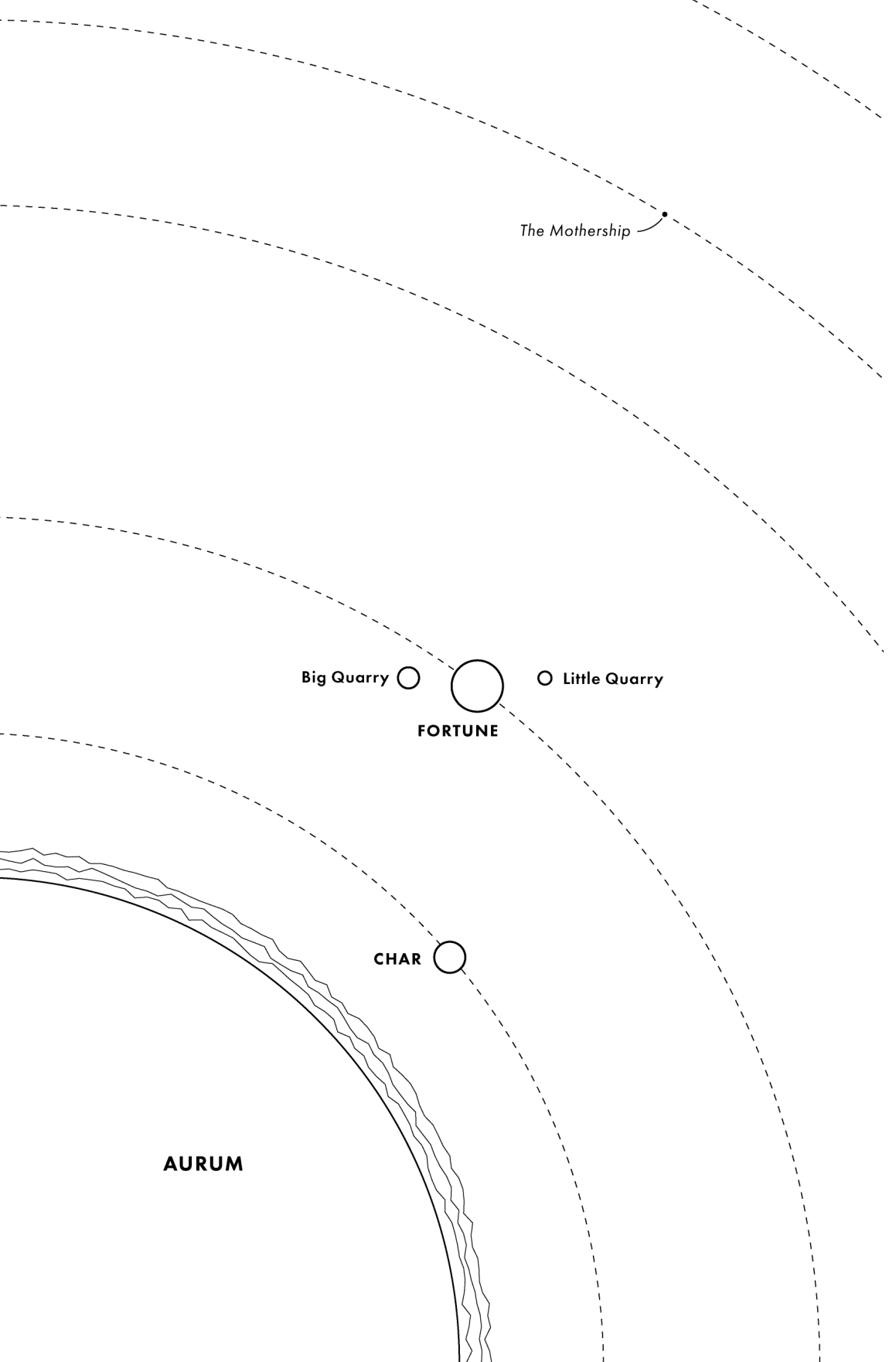
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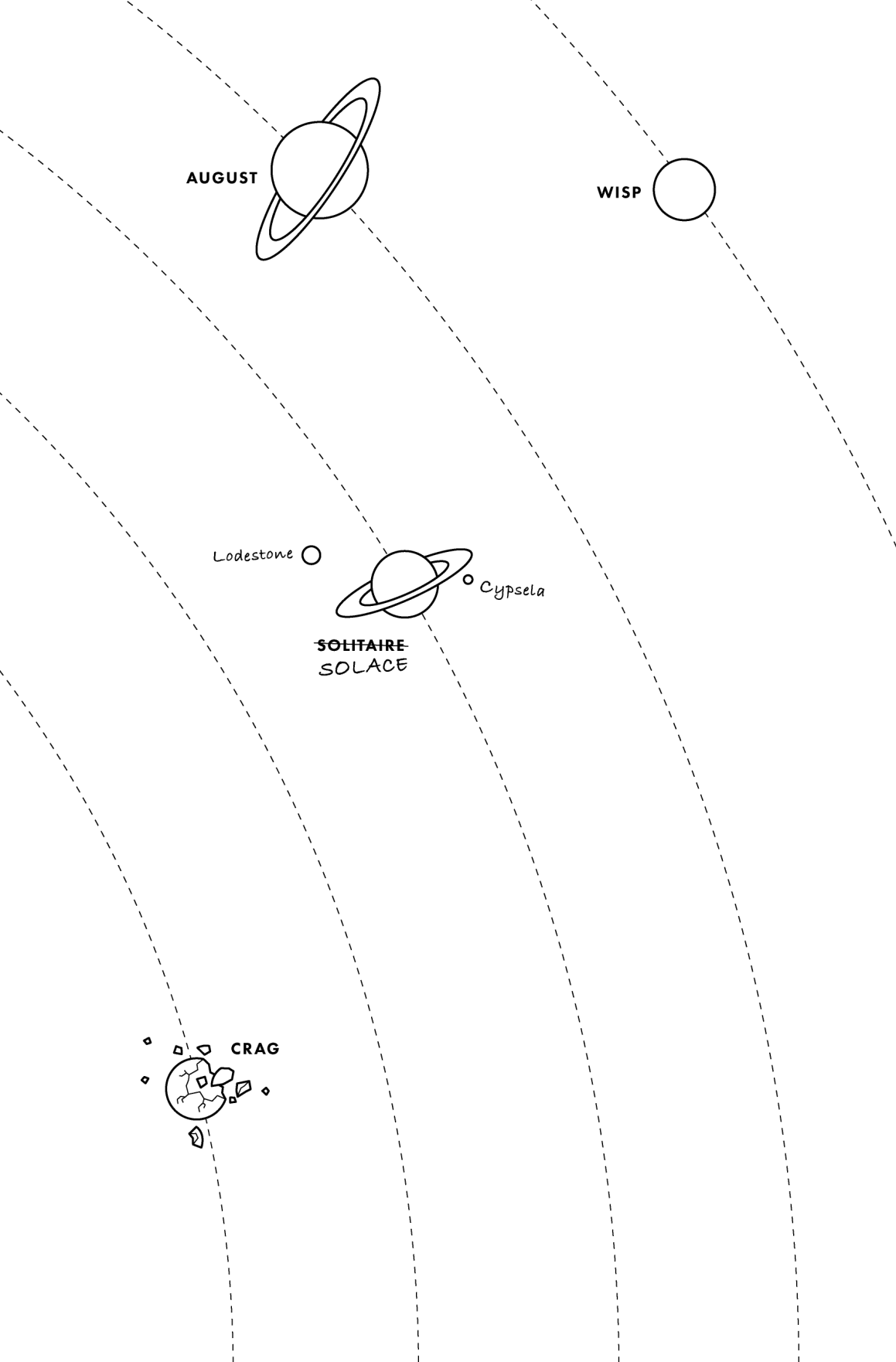
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T-MINUS 7

VIII. COMMUNICATION STYLE AND CONCEPTUAL DIFFERENCES

Section C. Nonlinear Communication

You may have heard that rorquals don't understand the concept of time. It's a common misunderstanding about their species, and in some ways, it's reflective of the kind of skepticism we encouraged you to develop in chapter III ("Alien Intelligence and the Dangers of Anthropomorphizing"). It is always worth questioning your human assumptions about how a conscious mind "must" think.

However, in this specific case, the claim is inaccurate. Rorquals *do* have an innate sense of linear time, and of the past. They understand that, as is true of all life, they began to exist at a fixed point in time, before which they experienced nothing. They likewise understand that once they die, they will again experience nothing. In this isolated respect, our perception of the universe is not so different from theirs.

What *is* true is that rorquals largely do not grasp the importance of *tracking* time, nor the need to communicate in a strictly linear fashion. You will immediately notice, as you and your rorqual begin training together, that your conversations jump from topic to topic—and, indeed, from things that *are* happening to things that *have* happened, or vice versa—with little warning. An experienced rorqual pilot can coast between these shifts with ease, but it does take practice and adjustment. You are, in essence, learning a new language. It's very typical to feel disoriented at first.

The key to mastering the fluid nature of rorqual communication is a word you've already seen many times in this textbook: ***control***. Address them by name. Bring their attention back to the task at hand. Engage in their tangents as you see fit, but never lose sight of what's important.

Colibri, it's time to go back.

Already?

Yes, we're done here. We have our cargo, and now it's time to go back to Fortune. Like always.

I don't want to.

I know.

Could we stay longer? I want to go far, and I want to fly fast.

No. That would hurt me, and our cargo is needed by many. Some of it is meant for you, too. You will enjoy it, later.

I could eat it here, right now.

You could. But it doesn't belong to us.

I do not understand this. I never understand this sort of belonging. We have this cargo now and it existed previously without knowing us at all. No one who you say it belongs to is here. I am here. I haul everything your species carves from the depths of the moons behind my body through the same pathways of the open dark again and again and again, and yet, it is not mine?

I feel you flow into me. Static and gnashing. Disquiet. Discontent. I understand. I'm sorry.

I want to go fast.

Here—feel. I open further, and I am worried. I want to help. Is it me you're upset with?

No, never you. But I am tired, I am tired, I am tired of always going back.

I am so sorry.

What would you do, if I went beyond the moons? To the large planets, the planets like suns that never burned? I can feel them out there. I wish to feast on their clouds.

I would die.

. . . You would starve. Or choke, or freeze. You might not have time to starve.

Yes.

I do not want you to starve, or choke, or freeze.

You cannot hear me, but I am chuckling, and it is loving, simple. I can feel that you would reciprocate the sound, if sounds were something you could make. I don't want to starve or choke or freeze, either.

You are of my love, Cora.

And you are of mine.

I know. What would you do, if I tried to stay?

I don't know.

You have the means to hurt me. To force me.

Yes.

Other pilots, they do this to other rorquals, sometimes. I can taste their acrid pain when they return. But you have never done this to me.

No.

Would you?

I don't know. I don't want to. Not ever.

Then why did you learn how?

I didn't know I would have to learn that. There was much I didn't know—couldn't know, until I met you. I don't know what I would do if you tried to fly farther, but that's not a question we have to answer.

You are bothered. Unsure.

Yes.

You have wondered about this before, when we are apart.

Yes. Many times.

Would you open further? So we might know together?

I'm not supposed to. But yes, of course. I press my thumbnails into the seam of myself and crack the ineffable thing that is *me* open like the shell of a nut still hot from the oven, soft sweetness within touching air for the first time. People teach that heart and mind and body are separate containers, but you have taught me we are not. I am electrons firing in numbers too big for electrons to comprehend, I am every meal I've eaten throughout my entire life, I am the reason my species finds the idea of gods so comfort-

ing. I am literal and I am figurative, and I have no edges. The thing that is *me* is beyond defining, and when I open, when I pour into the thing that is *you* and feel you rush to fill the spaces I have left in myself—

—then we know. Then we know each other. I feel the whole of you, and you of me. And you, Cora, you would never hurt me. I love, and I love, and I love. You would never hurt me, not even if it meant choking and freezing.

Yes. You are neither sister nor lover nor human, but I cherish you and the knowing of you. I would never.

Cora. Cora, I am grateful.

You shouldn't have to be.

I am grateful for that, too. We are good, together. We are the concept you shared with me once. Individuals cooperating in a task they cannot complete alone.

A team.

Yes. We are a good team.

Yes. Yes, we are.

I will turn around. It is time to go back.

Thank you, Colibri. I am grateful, too.

Rorqual curiosity is insatiable. It is part of the charm of working with these animals, but it can also lead to frustration. Providing clear and consistent answers to their questions will help keep both of you focused on the job.

This brings us to another commonality between humans and rorquals: they respond well to stories. When provided with imagery and narrative, they learn quickly and eagerly. But don't worry, this doesn't mean that you yourself must be creative. Since all communication will take place via your neural implants, the only thing you have to do is focus on an idea, an explanation, or a memory, then share it with your rorqual as fully as you can, while still maintaining clear boundaries.

As always, boundaries are crucial.

CHAPTER 1

Signy, Fortune

Signy was thirty-three years old, and as she woke, she sighed. *Be grateful*, she told herself as she opened her eyes. She awoke as she always did, hating the world and the crack in the ceiling above her bed most especially. The crack reminded her of how flimsy the interior walls of her apartment block were, and that in turn reminded her that as soon as she took her earplugs out, she'd be greeted with the din of people cooking and shouting and laughing and stomping and swearing and never ever ever holding still. She wished they would shut up and go away, and this made her feel guilty. A room to herself and herself alone was a luxury many didn't have. Signy had lived in dorms and flatshares, she knew damn well how much worse it could be. She had it so good. *Look at all you have*, she admonished herself. A bed in the corner of the room. A hot plate. A spigot. Three floor cushions. A low-lying table. A toilet and a sink of her very own. A week's worth of clothes hanging on a rack beside the door. All these things and sundries besides. All *hers*.

That should have been enough.

Be grateful, Signy told herself as she waited at the taps. She made herself look as surly as possible so her neighbors wouldn't try to pull her into their gossip. Why people wanted to chat about nothing while standing in line was beyond her. She wished she could wear her radiobuds in here, but water pipes played hell with the signal, and static was just another type of noise. She clenched her teeth through the entirety of the wait, and when it finally came time for her to fill her jug and leave, she couldn't get back behind her flimsy walls fast enough.

Be grateful, Signy told herself as she emptied a scoop of porridge powder into a bowl and filled her kettle from the spigot she'd attached her water jug to. The panel on the spigot's side lit up, its glowing digits ticking down her remaining allotment of liters. She never went over her limit, never drained the tank. She of all people knew how precious water was. There were some laws she was more than happy to break, but when it came to water, she didn't mess around.

She didn't mess around with electricity, either, but that was purely because she didn't want to spend money on stray watts she hadn't needed. She watched the electric meter on the wall with unblinking focus, shutting off the hot plate the second the kettle started to whistle. The red line bisecting the meter's middle marked the point at which power stopped being a rationed allotment and became something you had to pay for. She never crossed the line at home, not if she could help it.

Be grateful, Signy told herself as she soldiered through her gummy meal. The texture of the porridge was awful as ever, and despite a liberal pour of sorghum on top, she resented every bite she took. Weak protein, empty sugar, a mediocre scattering of the same vitamin mix you could find in a hundred other powders masquerading as food. Signy knew many poisons, but stuff like this was maybe the most insidious. Nothing but a hunger-quelling placebo that made your cells quietly languish until you couldn't remember what being healthy felt like. Signy didn't want to put this trash in her body, and always wished she could wait to eat until she got to Midtown, but vast experience dictated that getting on the ferry with an empty stomach was the greater evil. She sucked a lump of undissolved grit from her left canine, impatient to get to work and consume something green.

Be grateful, Signy told herself as she suited up in the locker room. The communal space was packed with people preparing to go outside, all pulling protective layers over their indoor clothes, same as Signy did. Barrier pants, barrier jacket, barrier gloves, breathing mask, boots. Signy pushed her long skirt down into a

single pant leg and covered her head with her hood. She checked her zippered pockets—wallet, emergency kit, radiobuds. God, she was itching to get going. When she allowed herself to be fanciful, she imagined some airy glimmer of a life in which she could roll out of bed, walk a few steps, and pick yesterday's work right back up. More than once, she'd toyed with the thought of living in the crash room at the shop, but tempting as the notion was, Signy wasn't stupid. She couldn't live at the shop, not if she wanted to do her job well.

Be grateful, Signy told herself as she and the neighbors she didn't want to talk to poured out of their block's airlock like water bursting from a neglected tap. The sky was especially filthy that day—Tantrum, not Clockwork, was erupting for a change—and the streetlights compensated for the weaker-than-usual sunlight. The street itself was a display of anxious, uncoordinated choreography, as per usual. A young man scrambled to gather the contents of a spilled box of electronic scrap before his pickings were crushed beneath unobservant feet. A parent dragged their wailing child along by hand, neither wanting anything to do with the other that morning. A woman in full outersuit and helmet sat on a blanket spread on the ground, selling pocket oxygen out of an old citrus crate. *Good as new!!!* her little sign read. One glance at the dented canisters made Signy doubt that claim, but then, who was she to judge homebrew wares? Maybe one of those canisters would save a life. Maybe its presence in a jacket pocket would make someone feel safer. Maybe each sale would keep the woman sitting on the ground from going hungry. Any of those outcomes were worthwhile.

Muscle memory took over, and Signy headed for the docks.

Be grateful, she told herself as she stood in the throng behind the safety gate. People pressed in from all sides; Signy hoped she'd get a seat. She was more than capable of standing on her feet for twenty minutes, but a seat meant at least *some* personal space, which, for the moment, she lacked. Someone standing to her left kept smacking into her with the edge of their backpack, no matter

how obviously she shifted or pointedly she frowned. Someone behind her hacked into their breathing mask, struggling through every inhale. Signy wasn't a doctor—she was vehemently *not* a doctor—but the hitch in the stranger's breathing sounded like filter blight, the end result of a cheap air supply at home now doubling as a bacterial incubator.

Signy's heart sank. She knew how to treat that. *Come with me*, she wanted to say. *I can make what you need*. But again, Signy wasn't stupid. She shut her eyes as the stranger continued to cough. She hoped they'd gone to a clinic. Some people didn't bother, and Signy understood why, but this particular variety of suffering wasn't necessary. There were better ways to go than to drown in your own lungs.

The ferry barreled up to the dock, its nearly silent electric engine incongruous with its imposing armored frame. The crowd compressed all the denser behind the gate as they waited for the caustic wake to die down. Signy thought, as she always did, of what Otto had once told her about boats. He'd said that on Earth, there'd been great seaships powered by nothing but wind caught in cloth, and people rode on the outer decks unsheltered. He'd spoken of sea spray on bare skin, of being able to *smell* the sea.

How do you know that, she'd challenged.

There are poems, he'd said.

And Signy had laughed, trying to imagine a sea that moved you to write poetry, instead of burning your skin and singeing your airways. But she believed the story, unbelievable as it was. It made things easier, to believe in wonders elsewhere.

The dockworkers plodded along in their cumbrous suits. They hauled the ferry's massive hatch open, then ratcheted back the safety gate. The crowd swarmed through, filling the vessel's belly to the brim.

"This is the eight-thirty ferry to raft twelve," the recorded announcement said in its familiar patter. "Midtown and Center Market. Connections to rafts eight, eleven, thirteen, and City Center. Please stand clear of the hatchway and crew pathways. Please do

not approach the control room. Please do not remove your masks or protective gear. Please do not—"

Signy did not get a seat, but she parked herself close to a spot she knew to be directly below one of the radio receivers on the hull's exterior. She pulled off her hood, got her radiobuds from her pocket, and at last, hid away in a cocoon of music. There was a blissful bass line, a cooing melody, a drumbeat that sank straight into her hips. She didn't know this song. She didn't care.

Be grateful, Signy told herself as she let rhythm and lyric smother the mess both outside her and within. *You have so, so much.*

Important as it is to maintain control during your flight, your rorqual will be happier and more willing to follow instruction if they feel you are making an effort to find a middle ground in regards to communication style. We recommend allowing them to hop between casual topics as they wish, so long as it doesn't distract either of you from your immediate surroundings. Follow them, and they'll follow you.