

ETHAN & YURI FOREVER

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FRONT COVER IMAGE: Millennium Force, Cedar Point Amusement Park, Sandusky, Ohio; photo by Coasterman 1234 (Wikipedia, Creative Commons). BACK COVER IMAGE (and black and white image on page 59): Comet C/2020 F3 (NEOWISE); photo by Dbot 3000 (Wikipedia, Creative Commons).

ETHAN & YURI FOREVER

for Steve

Shortly after Ethan and Yuri move in, a sinkhole appears in the front room. They hire someone to fill it, but are told it'll only open again; they'll have to live with it.

One evening, after some drinks, they sit with their legs dangling over the edge. Luminescent creatures, blind and many-legged, lurk along the hole's walls. How far down does it go? When they throw parties, they show guests the room. It becomes a fun spot, though there are close calls.

Years pass; the parties stop. They close off the room, making the sinkhole off-limits. Now they don't even mention it.

Ethan and Yuri are fishing when they hook something big. The canoe swerves and starts to dip. They pull with all their might.

‘We can’t let it get away!’ shouts Yuri.

‘I won’t!’ shouts Ethan.

But the canoe keeps dipping; soon they’ll be pulled under.

‘We have to let it go!’ shouts Ethan.

‘You first!’

‘No, you!’

Neither wants to be the first to let go. Finally, as cold water reaches their knees, Yuri says, ‘Let’s do it together!’

‘On three!’ says Ethan.

‘One ... two ... *three!*’

The canoe shudders, the line free. The two face each other, in uncharted waters.

Ethan is the ace on the Red side; Yuri's the best of the Blue.

When the two armadas clash over Earth's pockmarked remains, Ethan and Yuri lead their respective charges. Yuri brings down the Red Mothership. Ethan takes out the Blue. They spin through space, switching from fighter mode to robot mode in the blink of an eye, blasting their opponents to bits.

Soon it's down to them. Their battle becomes a dance – they fire, lunge, feint, strike. Their mecha crumble until, locked in a bitter embrace, they fall to earth, trailing flames, and crash on a barren beach.

Emerging from the wreckage, they face off. They remove their helmets and blink in wonder.

So beautiful, they both think.

'What now?' says Ethan.

'I'm not sure,' says Yuri.

Nothing in their training has prepared them for this moment. They must improvise.

Yuri and Ethan are at the station when they notice the train larvae. They dangle from the platform roofs, spinning in the breeze, suspended from silver threads. Yuri is overcome with joy. 'They're so cute,' she says. 'Look at their tiny wheels spinning. I want one.' Ethan frowns. 'I don't think that's actually allowed,' he says, but one little train has dropped down and clutched Yuri's shoulder. Though Ethan is against the idea, they bring the train home.

They keep the train in the living room, where it crawls all over the place. Yuri feeds it old batteries; it grows amazingly fast. It leaves little copper cubes wherever it goes. Sometimes it tests its horn all night long. Ethan can hardly sleep. He wonders, How can Yuri sleep through that racket? They reach a point where the train's too big to stay in the house. They move it to the backyard, which isn't much of a backyard to begin with. By now it's almost fully grown. Ethan expects it to crawl away, solving all their problems, but it stays stock-still, looking glossy. It seems to have entered a pupa phase.

Late one night, Ethan hears an announcement. He hurries outside, but the doors have already closed. As the train pulls away, he sees Yuri looking out the door window, waving. Ethan stands on the platform and watches until the red lights vanish. There are no further announcements.

Shortly after Ethan and Yuri move out and separate, the new owners of their house call Yuri. They're distraught. Strange things are happening; shouting and crashing sounds rattle the basement at all hours. Would Yuri and Ethan please come over and check it out? They hadn't realized they'd bought a haunted house.

Yuri calls Ethan, and they agree, reluctantly, to meet one Saturday afternoon at their old house. After arriving in separate cars, they go down to the basement, where they see younger versions of themselves fighting away.

'Stop,' says Yuri.

The spirits face them. Ethan feels a chill. So this is what they'd looked like.

'You don't have to fight,' says Yuri. She takes Ethan's hand. 'See? We've stopped. Everything's okay now.'

'Is that how you feel?' whispers Ethan.

'Shh,' hisses Yuri. 'Don't take away their hope.'