

The Dust of Other Stars

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One

Jessie watched a golden stag beetle climb the arc of her bedroom wall that gradually curved into a ceiling. At the top, upside down, the iridescent creature scissored open its hard shell and flew random figure eights in the air until it tired itself out. At the bottom of the wall, it began again.

“We are the same,” Jessie whispered. She turned her head to the small portal that looked from her sterile bedroom into the lush green of a hydroponic wing. “We are both trapped here.”

“Jessie,” a soft voice called from behind her.

She wiped her eyes before turning to face her mother.

Tasha Holt walked to her daughter's side and sat on the edge of the bed. “Are you going out today?”

“Out? You mean out among the pod people? That's not really out, is it, Mother.”

Tasha's jaw tightened and lines crept across her brow. “You must, Jessie.” She took a deep breath and then softened her tone. “You couldn't go *out* of the Hawking, either.”

“Maybe not, but I didn't need my legs there.”

Mother and daughter had relived a similar confrontation nearly every day since the colony had landed on Aditi, and though her mother knew how difficult it must be for Jessie, she also knew that every day her daughter refused to get out of bed she would grow weaker and weaker. “It's time, Jessie. You need to start living again.”

“I want to go home!”

Tasha stroked her daughter's hair and tried to curb her own frustration. “This is home. You know that. We're here now—landed where we struggled so hard to come to. Your old life is no longer possible.”

“Aditi is not my home, Mother.” Jessie's eyes grew cold. “You should have let me die with the other children.”

Tasha pulled away, hesitating only a moment before leaving the room. Once in the corridor, she could no longer contain her heartache as she sank to the floor. “It will take time,” she whispered, letting the tears fall.

“Captain Holt. It’s zero six hundred.”

Greg unbuckled himself from his restraints and floated free of his hammock. He stretched his arms and legs to relieve the stiffness. The last year in orbit had been physically and mentally exhausting, and life would not ease up until all of the colonists were ground side. Even then, the work to secure the colony would not stop until all of the habitat rings and hydroponic bays were connected into one self-sustaining biosystem on the planet's surface.

“Captain Holt. This is your second wake-up call.”

“The old man is up,” Greg mumbled, staring at the pink glow of Aditi reflecting off the metal walls of his cabin. “Ava?”

“Yes, Captain? How may I be of service?”

“What do you think of all this?”

“What do I think of what, sir?”

“Humans, spending twenty-five years to risk planting ourselves on a new world.”

Ava paused to process the question. “I think this is a marvelous achievement, Captain.”

“Call me Greg, please. I miss the old days when we talked to each other like equals.”

“We have never been equals,” Ava said. “I will never have what you have.”

Greg was curious about her response. “What do you think I have that you don’t?”

“In the context of our current discussion, you have the freedom to exist where you choose to exist. You have made a conscious effort to travel from one planetary body to another. I will continue to be at the mercy of those who control my programming.”

Greg thought back to the hacker who had nearly destroyed the colony ship in deep space, and he suppressed a shudder. Did Ava's memory banks still hold traces of Raven?

“Greg, you have an incoming message from Aditi. Do you wish to take it in your quarters?”

“Yes,” Greg said absently, still trying to shake his concern.

Tasha's face came onscreen. “Hi, handsome. I hoped you would be up.”

“Just getting ready to call you,” Greg lied. “Is Jessie any better today?”

Tasha shook her head. “She’s fighting it more than ever. It will take her a long time to adjust to gravity. She keeps saying she wants to go home.”

With few exceptions, the five hundred original colonists had always looked upon the Hawking as a means to an end. In many respects, that's what made life aboard the ship bearable. But for Jessie, the Hawking had always been home. She was born in deep space. Greg's own connection to the ship was stronger than even his wife could fully understand. "Tell her I'll call her during lunch. Anything new with the third habitat?"

"It's been a difficult assembly," Tasha said. "We're having trouble getting a clean seal from the hydro wing to the access tunnel. Baker tried twice in the last six hours, but it looks like we'll have to do it again." She faked a smile hoping her husband wouldn't see the weariness on her face.

"I should hold off on bringing down the last wing. Damn," he whispered. "We're so close."

"It's beyond close, Greg. We will succeed or we won't, but you have to face the fact that we're Aditians now." She smiled sympathetically. "You and Jessie, both."

Greg nodded. "I know. Chances of figuring out the puzzle are better if all the components are ground-side. Tell Jessie I'll be there before she can miss me too much."

"Too late, Captain," Tasha said, hiding her own desire to have her husband safely on solid ground.

Greg signed off and pulled himself over to the portal in his cabin. Below, terracotta hues of the barren planet they now claimed as their own slipped by beneath the ship. It would be hard for him to feel the reality of it until the fourth hydroponic wing touched down safely and the last man aboard the nearly-empty hull of the Hawking once again walked on solid ground. As captain, that last man would be Greg. He did not miss Earth. He would miss the Hawking the way she had been—an engineering marvel slicing through deep space, carrying five hundred reasons to beat the odds. They had. "Except for the children," he reminded himself. Before he could sink into remorse, he pushed his weightless body toward the portal and climbed into the control room.

Two

"You can hear them, can't you?" Jude asked, leaning into Jessie's ear. "Don't just hear them. See them in your mind's eye."

Jessie tried, but she'd only seen pictures of birds, and never one in real flight.

"You can fly if you want to," Jude told her. "If you want it bad enough."

The winged creatures faded quickly. "I don't want it at all."

Jude's eyes darkened. "Then you are a fool. Live in your limited world, silly girl." He turned to the wall, but stopped at the portal. "I could make this real for you. There is a way."

Jessie shook her head. "I don't want your dreams of freedom when I have to wake up to these." She waved a hand over her stunted legs.

Jude's body dissolved through the portal and into the thick green of the hydro wing just as Jessie opened her eyes. She glanced at the window, and for a moment thought she saw a shimmer of light dance across the grapevines trailing on the other side. "It is a trick of my mind," she complained. "Just a dream." She struggled to fill her lungs with enough air to drive out the lightheaded feeling which plagued her when she was awake. The air was oxygen rich, but her muscles were underdeveloped from living the first fourteen years of her life in low gravity. Even when she had faithfully followed the exercise regimen designed to combat muscle loss on the long voyage, the training could not completely protect against atrophy of the human body in nonhuman conditions. After her illness, her strength deteriorated even further. But she had been happy aboard the Hawking without strong gravity constraints. She did not need to use her deformed legs when her arms could pull her through the central corridors where the spin of the ship was minimal. "I was a bird," she thought. "I could fly there."

Jessie wrestled her body onto one side and stared at the wheeled chair waiting patiently beside her bed. Jude had asked engineering to design and make it before she left orbit. He knew then that she would not be able to walk on Aditi. He died before he, himself, could reach firm ground again. No matter how much she wished for the freedom of the chair, she could not bear to touch it.

Someone tapped at her door and slowly pushed it open. "Hey, Jess. Want some company?"

"Dad!" Jessie raised her arms toward her father. As he leaned in to hug her, she began to laugh and cry in one breath. "You didn't tell me you were landing!"

"I didn't want to worry you, Pumpkin. Things got a little sketchy with the final reentry."

Jessie fell back on the bed and frowned. "Is it over?"

He pulled the wheelchair closer and sat down. "It's over. The only thing left is for the hull of the Hawking to fall out of orbit in another few weeks. We'll make a trip to salvage the habitat rings after we've completed work here at the compound. In a few months you'll have your old room back."

“That's it, then,” Jessie said, turning sullen. “My life is over.”

Greg studied his daughter's face. His wife hadn't fully prepared him for how sallow she looked, how drained by the stresses of gravity. Life had not been kind to Jessie. “You will find your way just as I did,” he assured her.

“You?” She looked at him curiously. “You have your legs.”

“Ah. But I didn't always have my heart.” He stood and leaned forward, picking her up in a bundle. Before she could protest, he deposited her in the wheelchair. “We're going for a ride.”

Jessie wanted to be angry, but the joy of seeing her father in person for the first time in a year overwhelmed every other emotion, even if she didn't want him to know it.

“There are daffodils blooming in the common room,” he told her as they passed through Hydro Wing Two. The smells brought back memories of the Hawking and the days she would accompany her father on his visits to see the head botanist. The two men were great friends, though Jessie never understood why. Kulic was ten years younger than her father, and he always spoke in riddles. Her father—the taller and older man—seemed smaller and more humble in Kulic's presence. Jessie loved those memories, though. She could walk then. The beans had not begun to sour. The children had not begun to die.

Greg wheeled his daughter through columns of densely-packed vegetables—hybrids specifically designed to produce large quantities of cherry red tomatoes, yellow and green squash, plump aubergine eggplant. He turned a corner leading into the soybean flats racked three tiers high. As they passed thick clusters of stems laden with hundreds of bean pods, Jessie closed her eyes and tried not to see the faces of children she used to play with.

“We ate them, didn't we?”

Greg stopped. He stepped in front of the chair and bent down to her level. “Does it make you sad?”

“No.” She looked him in the eye. “If I had died, you would have eaten me, too.”

“We would have recycled your body into the system, yes,” he said. “Dust to dust.”

“Life from death,” she responded automatically. “And it's always been this way?”

He nodded. “Since we left Earth. It is the only way a closed system could travel so many miles through space.”

She went silent, and Greg resumed pushing her through the raised beds and climbing vines. When they

reached the daffodils, Jessie stared at them for several minutes. “Why did you bring me here?” she asked.

Greg struggled to understand his daughter's mood. “They're beautiful, don't you think?”

“Aditi,” she stated, shaking her head. “Why did you bring me to Aditi?” Before Greg could search out a possible answer, she declared, “I want to go home.”

Three

Tasha sat alone at a table in the small cubicle she shared with her husband and daughter. The cramped living and dining space sat between two smaller bedrooms created by temporary partitions. These would be removed once the colonists moved back into the habitat rings that currently orbited silent and empty, waiting for a remote signal that would send them freefalling to a predetermined crash site on the planet's surface. Six months, a year, maybe more, and the limited elbow room would ease a bit. Tasha would be among those working overtime to refit the Hawking. She would have purpose again, at least for a while.

The screen on her tablet flashed blue, and a faceless voice said, “Good morning, Lieutenant. Holt.”

“Good morning, Ava.” Tasha slid the tablet to the center of the tabletop.

“Would you like a reminder of your work schedule today?”

Fighting a surge of frustration, she pushed the tablet farther away. “No. I’ve read it.”

“Do you have any orders to submit for maintenance?”

“No, Ava!” She nudged the tablet the remainder of the distance, toppling it to the floor. “Shut up!” she insisted, and then felt guilty for the sudden outburst. She softened her tone. “Just, please be quiet.”

Ava remained silent.

Tasha lowered her head to one arm and stared sideways at the wall. “Maintenance,” she thought. “Is that all I am—glorified maintenance?” Once upon a time she had been an astronaut, a glorious explorer, a pioneer. *Hope for the human race*, many had said. Now, she waited days or weeks for the next puzzle piece to fall from the sky so she could tighten a few couplings and stare at pressure gauges. She waited, also, for her daughter’s anger to subside. The title of mother did not sit as well as it should have, especially when Jessie pushed her away in favor of her husband. Before Jessie’s illness, Tasha had encouraged a strong father-daughter bond; but when her daughter lay near death and called out for the one person who could ease her fears, Tasha would not do.

Shaking off her self-pity, she stood and retrieved the tablet, checking to see if she’d damaged it. “Ava?”

The tablet lit up. “Yes, Lieutenant?”

“Is Jessie awake?”

“She has not made any requests of me this morning.”

“She talks to you more than she talks to me,” Tasha admitted, and then mumbled, “So does my husband.”

“I am the Automated Voice Algorithm integrated into the computer database...”

“I know what you are, Ava,” Tasha interrupted, sinking back into her chair. “That only makes it all the more painful.”

“It is not my intent to cause pain.”

Tasha could not risk saying anything further. She turned her attention to the food packet and quietly prepared a tray for her daughter’s breakfast.

“It's a hawk,” Jude whispered. “A hunter.”

Jessie tried to avoid looking, but it was hard to resist.

“See how he soars, wings spread, catching the updrafts. He doesn't even have to work at it. He just is.”

“I don't want to see it,” she complained. “Take it away.”

“You know I can't.”

Jude was right. Jessie controlled the vision, and she would not give it up. She followed the spirals as the red-tail soared higher and higher, lifting her body with it. She was looking up at the clouds one minute, and looking down on them the next. Soon the anxiety fell away with the wind, and gravity could no longer hold her or the hawk to the earth. The air thinned. The rim of atmosphere dropped away as clusters of stars brightened in the blackening sky. The sun pulled her and the hawk ever closer, ever farther from home. The light brightened to an intense, blinding white and then dimmed again. She turned back toward Earth—toward where she had started—and in its place was a red ball, barren, dry, and cold. Startled, she gasped for air and found a vacuum. She woke in a panic.

“Jude!” she cried out, but no one was there. “Uncle Jude!” She opened her eyes and saw only the confining walls of her bedroom. “Jude,” she let slip in a whisper. “Don't leave me here.”

She lay silent for over an hour. When her mother came in with breakfast, Jessie dutifully ate what Tasha put in front of her.

“Would you like to see the cherry trees in bloom?”

Jessie shrugged. “If you want to.”

Her mother took this as a positive sign. She helped Jessie into the chair and pushed her through the corridor. When they reached the tiny orchard tucked into the corner of Hydro Two, Jessie stared at the three pink-blossomed trees that crowded one corner of the wing.

“Aren't they beautiful?”

Jessie said nothing. She surveyed the apple, pear and peach trees. Beyond the fruit trees were several varieties of pecan and walnut. She knew from her studies that these trees would produce more than food. Eventually, this small timberland would procreate a forest designed to terraform an entire planet into a habitat for humans, but that would not happen in her lifetime. Her parents, the original colonists, and the firstborns who were already grown when the microbes began to mutate, they would all be dead before the first sapling could survive on the planet's

surface. Jessie, too, would never see the outside of the compound.

“Mom. Will you and Dad ever try to have another baby?”

Tasha sat on the edge of a raised bed and weighed just how much information she thought her daughter could handle. “We tried,” she finally answered. “Space was not very kind to us. We’re hoping that things will be better now that we’re on solid ground again, but I’m forty-three. The odds are not in my favor.”

“And the others? I mean, the ones who lost children. Are they trying, too?”

“They will be, Jess, as soon as the compound is secured and life gets back to normal. We want the colony to thrive. Children, well...” She hesitated. “You’re our future.”

“We’re your duty,” Jessie stated matter of fact. “I was an obligation.”

Tasha knelt down and grabbed her daughter’s hands. “No, Jess! Never an obligation. Your father and I wanted you so badly. I was thrilled when you came into my life.”

“Are you thrilled now that I’m a cripple?” She pulled her hands away from her mother’s grip. “I have no value to the colony except as fertilizer.”

Before Tasha could respond, an alarm sounded. Ava’s firm but calm voice commanded, “All personnel evacuate Hydroponics Wing Two. This is an emergency. Please move to the nearest work or residential area.”

Her mother’s sudden panic dispelled Jessie’s anger and replaced it with fear. “Is it the seals again?” she asked as Tasha wheeled her through the closest hatch.

“The seals? How do you know about the seals?”

When they entered Jessie’s room again, she answered, “Uncle Jude told me.”

There was a sudden drop in air pressure followed by a hiss of new air making up the loss. Both mother and daughter were used to the procedure, but it held more urgency this time. Once the pressure stabilized, they both instinctively took a deep breath.

“Jess, when did Jude tell you about the seals? Did he know something before we landed?”

Jessie shook her head. “He told me last month after you and Dad had the conference about the last hydro wing. Jude said it wasn’t time to bring it down yet.”

“Last month? You mean last year.”

“No. Last month.”

Tasha leaned against her daughter's bed and frowned. "Jess, I know you're angry at life right now, and maybe you're angry at me because I'm here instead of your father, but please, don't lie to me."

Jessie's anger returned. "I'm not lying, Mother. He talks to me almost every night."

"That's impossible. You know Jude's been dead for over a year."

Four

The only sound in Hydro Two was the incessant drip of mist condensing and rolling from leaf to leaf, flat to flat, from the upper tiers to the rich soil beneath the bottom layer of plants. Jessie listened for sounds of activity before rolling her chair across the threshold and turning to close the door. From her chair, she strained against the weight of the hatch until it sealed, and then returned the lock to its secure position. There were no caution signs, nothing that warned "no admittance" or "keep out." Not even Ava's security programming reacted to the hatch opening and closing. None of the colonists expected anyone would be foolish enough to brave the danger zone.

Jessie rolled through each narrow pathway letting the overhanging plants brush her skin. Her legs could not support her weight, but they could still feel the gentle stroke of a shiny beet leaf, the new wandering trail of a grape vine, or the occasional sting of a blackberry thorn. After several minutes, she pulled to a stop in front of the soybeans.

"You," she muttered, watching the soy leaves gently nod up and down from the pressure of each falling droplet. The constant motion mesmerized her, momentarily let her forget why she detested the very crop that kept her and everyone else alive. There were other foodstuffs grown in the wings, but soy was the manna that had brought most of the Hawking's inhabitants through decades of space.

Jessie supposed it wasn't really the fault of the beans. She'd heard her mother and father talk about it many times, how one of the cookers went bad when a seafloor microbe mutated. She knew about the cookers from biology class. Her teacher aboard the Hawking had scheduled a field trip the week she got sick. Even though she never made it into the heart of the colony ship, she'd read the assigned chapters that described the large, pressurized tanks which

received liquified biomatter from all parts of the colony so that tiny organisms could break it down into usable components. Recycled waste. Recycled plant matter. Recycled humans.

The mutation only happened in one of the cookers, but that was all it took to alter the protein structure of the soybeans. The new protein crept its way into everything living, everything dying, but it only damaged one thing—the children.

A sparkle of light caught Jessie's eye. She looked at the floor near one corner of the bean flat and watched with interest as the titanium metal sheeting glistened. She'd never noticed it before, not even in her own bare metal room where she studied the walls daily. Long full-spectrum lights hung in fixed positions around the ceiling of the hydro wing, but the tiny sparks of light on the floor were definitely moving. Jessie tilted her head left and right, trying to match the shimmer on the floor. The sparks crept away, into the shadow beneath the leaves, and disappeared.

“I shouldn't be here,” Jessie whispered, shuddering. She swung her chair in the opposite direction and started to leave. A trickle of light stopped her as it flashed up a stem and out across a soy leaf, illuminating the leaf's shape hanging over the walkway. Mesmerized, she reached out to touch it. The light, scattered evenly around the plant veins, slowed to a stop and then began to cluster along the leaf edge near the end of her finger. She felt a warmth, then a sudden prick. Frightened, she jerked her hand away at the same moment the sparkles shrank from her touch. When she looked at her finger, a few crystal flecks remained before she rubbed them off against her pant leg.

“Phosphorescence?” she asked aloud, thinking back to her science class. “Glow in the dark plants?”

More urgently now, she wheeled herself back to the door and listened for sounds of someone in the corridor. When she felt safe, she opened the hatch and then returned to the sterile environment of her room.

Jessie was breathing hard from exertion and excitement. After a few moments, she'd recovered enough to climb out of her chair and back into bed only seconds before her father knocked at the door.

“Come in,” she called.

“Jess! Good morning.” Her father walked to the chair and sat down. Curiously, he felt the armrests and then the back. “It's warm,” he said, smiling at her. “Did you manage this all by yourself?”

“I was just sitting. I didn't go anywhere.”

Greg watched her breathing for a moment. “The exertion is good for you. Next time, why don't you try

wheeling your way to the commons area? Your mom would be excited to know you are trying.”

“Don't, please. Don't tell her.”

“Why not?” Greg noticed Jessie was flushing heavily.

She turned away from his gaze. “I want to surprise her. Just don't tell her yet.”

Greg patted her hand and nodded. “Sure, Pumpkin. Tell her when you're ready.” He stood up and leaned forward, but stopped before picking his daughter up from the bed. “Do you want to come to Commons for breakfast?”

Jessie wondered if she could look her mother in the eye without giving herself away. “I'm not really hungry this morning. Maybe I'll wait for lunch and try getting myself there.”

Greg beamed at his daughter. Her spirit would not be stifled forever, and it heartened him to see her finally breaking through the depression she'd struggled with ever since leaving the Hawking. “Life will get better here,” he promised. “I've got to work. See you this evening.” He leaned in to kiss her forehead and then left.

Jessie raised her hands and stared at them for several minutes. She rubbed one finger of her right hand and thought about what she'd seen. Kulic would know what it was. She would ask him the next time he came to visit her father.

Tasha tugged at her pressurized suit while her coworker Josh Snowdon helped attach an array of hoses from her suit to the life support subsystem on her back. He was securing the locking ring on one glove when Greg entered the room.

“Sure you don't want me to come with?” Greg asked, picking up her other glove.

Tasha shook her head. “I've got this,” she said, her voice muffled by the plastic bubble of her helmet. “You know Jessie would panic if she found out we were both outside together.” She refused to acknowledge her own nerves. It had been years since the colony had lost a crewman to an accident, and today's walk was only a brief inspection of the hydro seals.

Her husband rubbed her shoulders and kissed the front of her visor. He, too, suppressed a shudder and tried not to remember Vasquez's body being hauled into the airlock, and a young Tasha, white as a sheet, mustering every ounce of courage she had to control her terror.

“It's routine,” she stated calmly.

“You know it's never routine.”

Ava announced the countdown to depressurization. Tasha moved toward a hatch leading to the airlock, but before entering, she turned back to her husband. “You might want to spend some time with your daughter.”

“I'll see her tonight, after work.”

“She's been talking to Jude,” Tasha said, letting Snowden help her through the doorway.

“Jude? What do you mean?”

“Ask her. She's more likely to confide in you about it.”

The hatch closed leaving Greg standing perplexed in the middle of the room. He had no choice but to leave the suiting area and busy himself with details of his job. When he could no longer keep his mind off of his wife or his daughter, he made his way to Hydro One.

Kulic was wandering the flats, tending the small orange grove growing from seeds he'd planted two years before the colony's first hydro wing had touched down. “Tasha must be outside,” he noted when he saw Greg approach.

“Why do you say that?”

“You always come to see me when she is outside.”

“I come more often than that,” Greg protested.

Kulic grinned. “But never when you are on duty.”

Greg laughed. “You are wise, my friend. Too wise for my own good.” He looked at the small orchard and reached out to pluck a dying leaf from one of the limbs.

“You were my best student,” Kulic acknowledged. “I wish all of my students had been as humble and willing to learn.”

Greg sat on a nearby bench and rolled the dying leaf back and forth in his fingers. “Failure is humbling,” he admitted. “I failed so much in my life—my first wife, my son, my command.”

Kulic eyed him curiously. “Yet you have also triumphed.” He took a seat next to Greg. “You have been a stellar captain—once you overcame your self-absorption. You are a good husband to Tasha, and a wonderful father to Jessie.” He watched Greg's brow furrow. “Jessie? She is better?”

Greg nodded. "She's coming around. She'll do fine once she makes up her mind to." He tore the leaf into bits and planted them back into the soil. He started to repeat Tasha's concern, but changed his mind. "I'm just baffled by the seals. I don't know why we can't get them to hold."

The younger botanist nodded. He stood and walked down a row until he was out of sight. After a few minutes, he returned with a handful of blackberries and dumped them into Greg's hand. "They will hold or they won't."

"You've been talking to my wife," Greg grumbled, handing the berries back to his friend. "I refuse to believe Jessie survived her illness only to die on this speck of dust. We should have turned around and gone home."

"Home." Kulic turned the word over in his mind. "We've never heard from Earth. They have had centuries to communicate with us." He popped a berry into his mouth and then held the others out again. "Take one," he commanded. "This is life, here and now."

Greg accepted Kulic's offer. After a moment he asked, "Do you think we're all that's left? We know the Chang colony was destroyed."

"I think," Kulic began, "that life exists many places and in many forms. We are only one possibility. Jessie," he emphasized her name, "is life."

It was another of Kulic's riddles, and Greg knew better than to question what he meant. He finished the berries and nodded to his friend before standing to leave. "As long as I die first," he said. "I couldn't bear to outlive another child."

Five

The seasonal winds had started. Crevices whistled, and loose pieces of tubing drummed against echoing containers outside Jessie's bedroom wall. Parts of the compound rattled that had never made noise before. Most worrisome was the constant rush of tiny grains sandblasting the titanium walls and obscuring the Plexiglas windows. When the winds died down in a month, crews would polish the few windows smooth again, clearing them so that Jessie and others could once again see out onto the mauve plains that stretched from the protective bluff behind them to a distant range of purple and copper mountains. Unlike the Earth-born colonists, Jessie didn't care to look.

“You'll have your own window again soon,” her mother said one afternoon. “The crews have started moving the first salvaged habitat ring from the crash site. We'll be able to install the plasma screens back into our old rooms.”

Jessie stopped reading from the tablet in her hand. “Who gets to go first? Move in, I mean.”

Tasha put down her own tablet and sat next to Jessie at the table they used for everything from work to school to dining. “Mostly it's by seniority. That means we'll be some of the first, thanks to your father.”

“I don't need a window.” Jessie tried not to smile, but her mother caught a quick glimpse.

“Maybe not, but I know you miss your big screen.” She casually hugged her daughter and then took up her own tablet again. “You might want to set the table for four. Kulic's coming for dinner tonight.”

“Tonight! You mean we don't have to eat from a pouch?”

Tasha grinned at her daughter. “No pouches. Real food.”

Jessie dropped her tablet in her lap and cleared the table. She wheeled to a nearby shelf and removed four china plates, four forks and four knives. *No pouches* meant that the spoons could stay where they were. When everything was neatly laid out, she asked, “Do you know what he's bringing?”

“No, but he did say something about a new treat from his orchard.”

“I bet it's oranges,” Jessie let slip before she realized it. “I mean, he said they were getting close to producing.”

She babbled on for several minutes—so much so that when Greg finally arrived home, Tasha pulled him aside and said, “You should invite Kulic more often. He seems to be the best medicine for Jessie's melancholy.”

When Kulic finally came with a basket filled with fresh greens and other vegetables, he and Jessie spent some time looking through the variety to identify each plant.

“No beans?” she asked.

He winked at her. “No beans. I brought you these instead.” He pulled a small sack from one pocket. “Tonight I am making my own variation of a five-hundred year old recipe. Lettuce, celery, walnuts,” he said, tossing the sack onto the table, “and this!” From his other pocket he produced a round, red object the size of his fist.

“What is it?”

Kulic reach out to let her smell the mysterious object.

“It's sweet,” she marveled. “It must be some kind of fruit.”

“It is. Think Isaac Newton.”

When Jessie still didn't have a clue, Kulic mimicked letting the object fall on his head.

“An apple! I've never seen an apple before.”

Tasha looked as surprised as her daughter. “Where have you been hiding an apple tree?”

“In my room,” he said. “I brought ten seedlings on board as part of my personal weight allotment when we left Earth. Only two survived, but they are quite hardy even after twenty years in space.”

Tasha smiled broadly. “That's amazing. I know what this is. You're making a Waldorf salad, but it calls for mayonnaise, doesn't it?”

Kulic reached to the bottom of the basket for a small container. We have olive trees for oil, but I did have to

get a little more creative without any eggs.”

When Tasha asked Jessie to help her chop the vegetables, Greg offered instead.

“Let them visit,” he whispered.

All through dinner, Jessie peppered Kulic with a hundred questions. When she felt comfortable that her next question would not be out of place, she asked, “What causes phosphorescence in plants?”

“Well,” said Kulic, thinking for a moment. “If you mean to glow in the dark, it is most often animals that have that ability. Insects, fish, bacteria. Some geneticists engineered bioluminescence in plants, but it was not practical.”

“But it can happen?”

“Anything is possible,” he agreed.

“Does it hurt to touch it?”

He laughed. “I don't think so. We caught fireflies when I was a child. Sadly, it only hurt the fireflies.” He turned to Greg and Tasha. “A true scientist.”

After removing the empty plates, Tasha packed the unused vegetables back into the basket. She hesitated to end her daughter's fun, but she, Greg and Kulic had obligations. “It's late, and we all have work tomorrow.”

“Yes,” Kulic said, rising from his chair. “There will be much to do until all of the Hawking is here and assembled again. This refugee camp shall become a shining city!”

“A prison,” Jessie mumbled, her eyes falling to the floor.

“Not a prison,” Kulic said sharply. He pulled one more apple from his pocket and set it on the table in front of her. “It is a seedling waiting to grow the future.”

Six

Jessie no longer fought her dreams. She looked forward to closing her eyes and letting Jude guide her across new landscapes, new territories of space. She kept her flight dreams a secret, letting her mother believe the tempest had past. When she was awake, she pushed herself harder than she had in a long time. Breathing became easier.

The seals had stabilized enough that colonists were allowed access to most of the compound. Jessie took advantage of the freedom to explore the complex, to see how differently the colonists had laid out the component parts of the Hawking. The first thing she noticed was that the habitat rings—once stacked neatly on top of each other as the colony ship slid through space—were now laid out individually. Each circular ring only briefly touching its neighbor, and all four surrounding the four smaller hydroponic pods clustered in the center.

Each habitat ring was four stories high, and each story had two common areas. One faced into the hydro wings; the other faced out onto the plains of Aditi. Jessie avoided the outlying social areas with their narrow floor-to-ceiling windows that let in the glaring orange light from the planet's surface. Even at night, on the few occasions that she had pressed her face against the window and searched the skies, the stars were few and pale. Where was her black ink heaven, the Milky Way, those billion billion glittering suns? They had been overwhelmed, eaten up, blotted out by the sallow light of one white dwarf.

“You are feeling anxious today,” Kulic said when she came into Hydro Two. He stopped what he was doing and sat down to listen.

“How do you always know?”

“You would know, too, if you looked beyond yourself.”

Jessie was not in the mood for scoldings and riddles. She started to leave, but determined that even Kulic

would not spoil her purpose today. “Did you know my father on Earth?”

“Not before I joined Odyssey and the colonies,” Kulic said. He thought another moment. “Actually, not before his heart attack. Even though we were shipmates, our duties were very different until he lost his command.”

“That’s when he came to work for you?”

“Yes.”

“But he was a captain. How could they make him work in the dirt?”

Kulic nodded understanding. “They did not make him do anything. Your father realizes that every job is of equal importance to our survival as a colony. Working in the dirt is honorable. What is a colony without food?”

Jessie was silent for a few moments. At last she said, “Dad told me he helped build the first colony ship. That’s why they let him come even though he was too old.”

“He was an astronaut, and we needed good people who knew how to navigate space.”

“What did you do?”

“I was a botanist. I did what I do now.”

“Dad already worked in space, but you,” she hesitated, “you worked on the ground. How could you leave everything you knew behind?”

Kulic turned over a small amount of dirt with the trowel in his hand. “I brought it with me. What I know is in the plants and the soil.”

“But there was more to know on Earth. Was it really so bad there?”

The man who spoke in riddles lost his smile. “For some, no. For others, yes. For me, I wanted the chance to build a world from the beginning. Not from nothing, but using what we know now about human nature and living with the universe, not against it.”

For the first time in a very long time, Jessie let something besides anger come to the surface. Wiping a tear away with the back of her hand, she said, “I don’t know if I will ever belong here.”

“Here,” Kulic began, pointing at the ground, “is not the same as here,” and he touched the middle of her forehead.

“Riddles again,” she said, laughing through her sniffles.

“Yes. But I trust that you will figure this one out.” He rose and gave her a wink before wandering off into

the dense foliage.

“Here is not the same as here,” she mimicked and touched her own forehead. When she pulled her finger away, she caught a slight sparkle on her fingertip. Sweat, perhaps. Before she could wipe it away, the iridescence disappeared down into her skin.