A Distant Star

Creative Writing Thesis: Speculative Science Fiction

a thesis

submitted in fulfilment

of the requirements for the degree

of

Masters of Professional Writing in English Studies

at

The University of Waikato

Te Whare Wānanga o Waikato

by

Rachel Jade Childs

THE UNIVERSITY OF
WAIKATO
Te Whare Wānanga o Waikato

2022

Abstract

When Humanity left a ruined Earth, they vowed to leave behind everything that brought them to that bleak choice. It was the end of the world; if they could not change, they weren't worthy of a second chance on another planet. Tearing down unliveable cities, they built kilometres-long space-ships, able to support generations of travellers on their Migration to the most likely habitable exoplanets. *A Distant Star* opens at the end of the city-ship *La Sesa*'s journey, as it comes into orbit around their new homeworld.

However, the planet is already inhabited by a native sapient species. Acknowledging that Humanity doesn't have a great track record with such situations, *La Sesa* sends a historian, Lirit Sanget, and her team – medic Anahera and comm-tech Hikoa – to open communication with the local peoples.

Lirit has Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome, a connective tissue disorder and the common comorbid condition Postural Orthostatic Tachycardia Syndrome. Her limitations change the way she navigates a dangerous environment, but she forges her own path on an uncharted world.

Lirit, Ana, and Hikoa are pulled into a parallel world even less familiar than their new home. In this polarized reality, they find two species in a generational war. The three realize that their own biases affect their perception of the conflict: whose side they believe, which species they relate to, how they interact with warriors when all they know of war is a historical footnote. As the three piece the two species' stories together, they struggle with the realization that they have to watch their ancestors' mistakes play out all over again, and they cannot step in to stop it. They can only see their own choices in new light and find a way to change the trajectory of their future.

Positive, forward-looking, scientifically sound speculative science fiction is crucial right now. The trends in our modern-cycle news, media, fiction reflect the bleak dystopia of our global reality. We need stories that show us ways of pulling us out of the hell we're heading for, of fixing what is broken, of reaching Humanity's *potential*. Sci-Fi is so much more than escapist popular drivel or cool futuristic aesthetic; sci-fi is, and always has been, a way to tell such stories.

I was largely inspired to write this book by reading the *Wayfarers* Trilogy by Becky Chambers, especially the last book in the trilogy, *Record of a Spaceborn Few*. It was the first time I had a clear example of how a "post-inequity" society could function, what issues might arise in that society, and how to address those issues. It gave a tangible goal for activist work, and it gave me hope in our future. With this thesis, I aim to illustrate an equitable society; to use my lived experience to increase accurate, meaningful representation of people with disabilities in fiction; and redefine who can be considered a "science fiction action hero". Writing this manuscript is a way I can help others the same way stories like the *Wayfarers* have helped me.

Table of Contents

Pronunciation Guide: The Language of the Migration Diaspora

L. L. Zamenhof created Esperanto in the hope of giving all peoples a neutral language to converse with those different from themselves. Today, Esperanto is the most widely spoken constructed language in the world.

The people of *La Sesa* speak a dialect known as Migration Esperanto. The pronunciation and spelling rules have changed slightly in the 1,500-odd years since the publication of Zamenhof's *Unua Libro*, but most of the core principals are the same:

Vowels are "pure", like in Māori, Japanese, and Italian. Assuming 'Received Pronunciation' or 'Standard' British English for the given examples, English 'pure vowels' would be said: "Ah" as in "f**a**ther". "Eh" as in "p**e**n". "Eee" as in "ch**ee**se". "Aw" as in "c**a**ll", and "Ooo" as in "b**oo**t". As a general rule, if your jaw feels relaxed while you're making the vowel sound, you're probably right.

Two vowels next to each other are usually pronounced as two separate syllables. The exception tends to be vowel couplings that end with 'I'; usually, the "eee" sound merges into the vowel before it, and it's easier to pronounce as one (e.g. "Goddesses" would be said "Dee-AH-toy", with the "oi" said as once sound).

Stress is usually on the penultimate syllable of a word. "R"s are usually flipped or rolled.

Letters with a circumflex – "^" – above them are usually pronounced as though they have an "h" following the letter. For example, "Ĉ" is a "ch" sound, "Ŝ" is a "sh" sound, "Ŧ" is a "th" sound, and so on. The notable exception to this rule is "Ĵ", which is said "yuh" like the letter "Y" in English.

So, for example, the main cast includes:

Lirit = 'Lee-REET"

Hikoa = "Hee-KOH-ah"

Anahera = "Ah-nah-HEH-rah" or "AH-nah"

Prologue

The Creation Story, as found in The Book of Faith

from the Aetirung Religious Library, Hul'Uru City

Before the Beginning, there was a seed, a single atom with the potential of the Cosmos within it. Buried in the centre of an endless void, this seed collapsed upon itself and burst open with unimaginable force. In that moment, all that is came to exist.

Thus, the Cosmos began.

In this burst, three seeds of sapience were thrown into the void between many universes. They formed the hearts of the first stars. These first three stars became Genkitis, Olaimith, and Ekletvos: Goddesses who apotheosized Creation, Destruction, and Choice.

It is possible that these seeds of sapience straining to understand were the catalyst for the burst itself.

Curious, the three Goddesses reached out across the Cosmos. They could sense one another, but They could not join one another over the vast swirling chaos of the forming multiverse. Yearning for connection, They pooled Their energy into a way to travel quickly and easily through time and space.

And thus, the *Abchernipont'Apas'Amfi* – the Sacred Waters Between Worlds – flowed and formed an ocean in the space separating many universes.

When the three Goddesses united, They explored the young Cosmos through Their new creation. Around the shores of the Sacred Waters lay *Kalaymai*, thick veils dividing each universe from the others. The Goddesses found They could push through the *Kalaymai*, to explore the multiverse at Their leisure. They watched the dust from the burst settle, cling, form clouds that became nebulae and begot stars. They watched debris from the Burst catch in gravity wells to accrete fiery embryos of core elements. They watched the formation of galaxies and planetary systems, of stars and planets and moons pulled into each other's orbit.

They watched the volcanic turmoil of cooling rock and molten metal destabilize elemental gases and form atmospheres. Protected from boiling away into the void by the *Kalayma*, the Sacred Waters

spilled into these closed systems, creating the primordial seas, the multiverse's embryonic fluid, the weightless void below the Void. The Sacred Waters determined which worlds could hold Life.

The Goddesses watched destruction beget creation.

They took special note of celestial objects that existed in the same space, but on different sides of the *Kalayma*.

The Goddesses were curious. They were tired of merely watching the multiverse form around Them. They wanted to experience for Themselves. In the search to learn, the Goddesses planted the seeds for the Tree of Life. They unravelled tiny threads of Their being and sowed them into the seas of these worlds, so that They, too, could be part of the cycle of creation and destruction. These strands of divine matter were *zoeinai'ampelos*, the helix vines that bind all creatures on the Tree of Life.

Thus, Life began.

The Goddesses watched Life tailor itself to the primordial seas: molecules, cells, microbes, bacteria, algae; tissue, brains, symmetry, senses, body systems; worms, molluscs, crustaceans, lancelets, fish; algae, seaweed, swamps, grasses, trees.

Plants developed internal structures to reach out of the water for the sunlight. These structures became wood became trees. Trees allowed all other Life to thrive on land. Trees stabilized the volcanic environment, produced breathable air, gave shade and protection to the first creatures to leave the water.

The chaos of survival drove some creatures to lay their eggs in the sands beyond the marshes. Over time, sea-dwelling crustaceans who sought protection from predators became land-dwelling arthropods; soft-bodied molluscs became soft-skinned amphibians. Amphibians became reptiles, and reptiles became birds.

Thus, birds took to the sky and nested upon the pinnacle of the Tree of Life.

One line of hunting birds was the first and only creatures to evolve sapience on their own. They named themselves the Aetirung, the People of the Aether.

The evolution of the Aetirung sent the Goddesses into Their own primordial chaos. For the first time, They disagreed. Ekletvos was fascinated and wanted to watch the Aetirung evolve as the Goddesses had watched for billions of years. Genkitis was concerned and wanted to make contact with

the Aetirung to study them more closely. Olaimith was threatened and wanted to destroy the Aetirung who challenged the Goddesses' place in the Cosmos.

After much debate, the Goddesses agreed to watch the Aetirung as closely as They could without interfering. To do more would interrupt the Balance too much.

But Olaimith broke the Goddesses' vow. She travelled to the end of the reptiles' branch on the Tree of Life and artificially bestowed sapience upon a species She named the Pekatumal, the Wicked Ones. In secret, Olaimith planted hatred in the hearts of the Pekatumal and taught them to crave evil and cruelty, to delight in the Aetirung's pain.

When They discovered Olaimith's trickery, the other Goddesses were furious. They did all They could to protect the Aetirung without direct interference.

The Pekatumal drove the Aetirung to the edge of extinction. When the Aetirung discovered the *Abchernipont'Apasu'Amfi* and sailed the Sacred Waters, the jealous Olaimith cursed that wherever they go, they shall find only destruction.

We will not be destroyed.

Ekletvos and Genkitis protect us. We shall triumph.

Act One

The Ordinary World

"Lirit Sanget-Ĉazen?" The PSC doctor greets me in the wait-room.

Directing me down the corridor, she floats through the seventh door to the right, linen dress swishing around soft-soled canvas shoes. Trailing after her, I *do* float, my hoverchair whirring above the metal floor.

The examination room hasn't changed in the three cycles since I was here last. It's the same eerie white light, the same sterile steel desk and table and cupboards and sink, the same bare metal-and-rivets walls. The air filters hiss, no overlay of sound-softening ivy like every other communal space on the city-ship. The only green here is a string of hanging pots in the far corner – spiky striped spider plants, veined pinkish-purple orchids, a spindly areca palm on the floor beneath – but they aren't strong-scented enough to wash the acid tang of hydrogen peroxide and citric ethanol disinfectant out of my nose. Undertones of acrid fear pinch the back of my tongue. It feels like I've dry-swallowed a lump of iron, dull-grey unease heavy and cold and nauseating in my empty stomach.

"Welcome back for the final part of the medical tests, Lirit." The doctor motions to the examination table, taking a seat and placing her handcomp down. A nameplate on her desk announces the office of *Doctor Fahima Raŝad Ŝafikbri al-Hakim*; a second plaque beside it adds *Head Physician, Planetary Safety Committee, Planetary Settlement Board*. "I have a couple of follow-up questions for you, and then we'll move on to the physical."

The control panel on the right arm lowers my 'chair until my feet touch the cold floor. I stumble out of the cushioned seat, blinking away the second of dizziness. My legs wobble, but I don't pass out and my joints don't unhinge, so I'm already doing better than I expected.

Leaving my satchel pack strapped to the backrest, I push my hoverchair to the corner with the plants, power it down, and fold it up.

"Do you need any assistance?" Dr. Fahima pauses in setting up. Her long sleeves are rolled to mid-forearm. The hands that plug her handcomp into the wall screen are a warm sandy colour, similar to 2D photoimages of Old Earth deserts.

"I'm alright." My body and I have good cycles and bad cycles. This cycle – while one of the bad ones – isn't the worst. Besides, if I'm really not alright, at least I'm already in the Medical Centre.

Ah, lucky me.

The chrono on the wall blinks *1015 2S*, green and glowing in its sleek black frame. We're starting right on time. These tests should only take an hour and a half at the absolute most. I'll be home by end of second shift. That's not too long. Hikoa likely won't be home until then anyway.

Pulling myself onto the exam table, I reach for my plait, before flicking it back over my shoulder with a frustrated head shake. The hair tie hits my tailbone. Playing with my hair is a nervous tic I'm trying to rid myself of; if nothing else, it only calls attention to how much my hands are shaking. I tuck them under my bare thighs instead, but there's nothing I can do to hide how much my knees shake.

The bamboo-paper sheet does nothing to stop cold seeping up through the metal table. Maybe I can convince myself that's why I'm shaky. I'm just cold, and hungry, and a bit apprehensive. Pushing my spectacles up my nose, I risk a wary glance at the ceiling. I'm sure it has nothing to do with the wide disk of control panels and medical equipment above my head. It definitely has nothing to do with how angry I am at myself for signing up to spend two shifts in the place I actively avoid.

"There are three sets of tests to complete in this evaluation: a full physical examination, the second part of the musculoskeletal assessment, and a fasting blood test. We have to do the blood test last, since the difference in blood volume can affect the other tests," Dr. Fahima informs me. She told me all of this during the first evaluation, but she has to tell me again for clarity and informed consent and all those important things. "Does that sound alright?"

"Yes." Well, not really, but it's the best of two *drek* options: I can either sit through these *drekkin'* medical tests or remove my name from the Planetary Research candidates. I breathe around aerosolised antiseptic, try to loosen the taut-cable tension across my upper chest and shoulder blades.

If this were any other application for any other job on the city-ship, my health wouldn't be an issue. My health has *never* been an issue. I'm Senior Apprentice to the Head of the Meritan Archives, for stars' sake! I'm not far off becoming a full Chronicler: a tale-weaver, a custodian of mythos, a caretaker of history. That all but guarantees me a place in Native Sapients Cultural research.

I have my spectacles. I have my *korsaro* and joint braces and compression sleeves. I have my hoverchair, so I don't expend all my energy getting where I need to go. I have sound-simplifier earpieces so busy places aren't as overwhelming; hoverlifters to move heavy objects when my limbs go numb; heated gloves and socks to keep me from losing feeling in my extremities; portable cots if I need to rest; medications to ease stabbing nerve pains and rolling nausea and the anxiety of a heart that beats like a bird's.

A new, uncharted planet doesn't have those safety measures. A new, uncharted planet won't wait patiently for me to pop a joint back in before it kills me and everyone else on my team.

Those thoughts sound like broken glass in my head. They rattle against my skull when I think too fast, and the jagged edges fray the strands of my self-control. It hurts to think of my body as *wrong*, as *unsafe*, as *not enough*. It's not a perfect body, but it's mine, and it's *always* been enough.

"Your medical history has been updated from the first part of the PSC examination." The doctor's routine information brings me back from the planet's surface. She taps her stylus against the tip of her narrow, downturned-arrowhead nose. "The results of the initial scans, the tilt-table, organ function, and sensory tests, and the urine and stool samples will be another few standard cycles. And of course, we can't return the first blood test and musculoskeletal assessment until we have the results from this examination."

"That makes sense." I swing my legs absently, but stop when my patellae graunch.

I think I regret signing up for this.

"I have to check that you haven't stopped taking your medications in the last three cycles?"

"*No*." I wouldn't stab myself in the foot like that.

"Have there been any changes in the last three cycles?"

"The connective tissue stuff has been pretty stable. This cycle a lot worse, though; I pushed it too hard yestercycle." I crinkle my nose up and pull a face. I know my body's limits, I know better than to ignore the warnings it gives me, but laundry and groceries don't cease because I've got two shifts' worth of medical tests in a week. "I dislocated my left shoulder trying to fold out the dining table at a bad angle, but my cousin popped it back in within half an hour."

"… does your cousin usually reset your dislocations?"

The corner of my mouth tips up as I answer the question under the question. “Anahera is an Emergency First Responder, so yes, she’s got medical training, she knows what she’s doing, and she isn’t going to cause more damage. She also lives with me. It’s way quicker to have her treat my dislocations than to go all the way to the Medical Centre and back every time I pop an ankle.”

I catch the glint in the doctor’s gaze. Hope stretches its wings under my heart.

“Has Anahera also applied for the PSC teams?” Dr. Fahima asks, tone pointed, not like a kitchen knife, more like a stylus.

I swallow the laughing ‘of course’, and stick to a more formal, “Yes, she has. I’m sure you know Emergency Responders were the first group asked; Ana was the first person on *La Sesa* to sign up.”

Dr. Fahima styluses a comment in her handcomp. A line of typed text appears on the linked screen, but it’s too small for me to read what it says.

“Shall we start with the scan?”

“Sure.”

I glance at the chrono again. *1023 2S*. Assuming I don’t fail a medical test sooner, there’s one hour and fifty-two minutes left. That’s not too long, and the time will go faster now that we’re past the questions and onto the actual examination. Then I can go home and have latemeal and cuddles and a cup of my favourite cinnamon tisane. One hour and fifty-two minutes.

At the doctor’s request, I lie flat on the table, flipping my plait over the sidet. She arranges a concave pillow under my neck to keep my head still. I readjust my spectacles so the arms don’t dig in behind my ears.

“Comfortable?”

“Enough.”

Dr. Fahima pulls a metal scanner disk from under the table. It slots into rails running the length of each side, arching a quarter-metre-high oval around my feet. She taps a command into the control panel on the side, and a thin ring of LEDs blink awake around the circumference.

“Hold as still as you can, please.” With a mechanical whirr and a metallic clatter, the ring starts to slide along its rails.

Only moving my eyes, I stare at the chrono as though I can impel it to move faster. *1025 2S.* I swallow down the urge to sigh and force my shoulders not to slump.

It's three minutes under the looming intimidation of the medical machine. The scanner curves up around my exposed throat like a threatening hand. It doesn't come close to touching skin; I tense anyway. I imagine I can feel my quickening pulse thrum against metal-and-wire fingers. My heart tries to escape through my ribs. My empty stomach sloshes and curdles. Why do I have to have another scan taken, another test run, another medical device pointed at me like an Old Earth weapon?

I hate medicals.

I think I regret signing up for this.

The doctor waits for the results to pop up on her screen, and then she folds the disk away. The summary shows a chart of biometric readings and a series of graphs I don't understand. A projector lens under the screen emits a doll-sized holoimage: a three-dimensional model of my body standing on the desk, faintly glowing a cheerful cobalt blue. Electric green spots show normal, healthy readings. Far more spots come up an alarming red.

Dr. Fahima manipulates the holoimage with her fingertips, rotating and zooming in, isolating a section of my heart and lungs.

"Your pulse is a hundred sixteen beats a minute – really? –" she says, reading from the chart, "and your blood pressure is eighty-two-over-sixty-four. That is… concerning."

"I know." I press my lips together, hunch my shoulders. It's been a long time since my biometrics haven't concerned whichever medical professional happens to check them. "I probably should have warned you. Medical checks always make me a bit anxious, so my heart is usually much faster than it is normally, which is not exactly helpful for consistent readings." I huff. "It's 2210 PFT! Who has anxiety anymore? Though, it's less than a week since *La Sesa* entered Orbit, which is… beyond huge. I won't be the only one feeling more apprehensive and anticipatory at the moment." I shake my head. "My spouse did wonder once if I have a fast heart rate because I'm anxious, or if I feel anxious because I have a fast heart rate."

Dr. Fahima gives a surprised chuckle. "I suppose there's no way to tell which came first, is there?"

"No." I shrug. My mouth snaps shut on my nervous blabbering.

The doctor looks sideways at me, mouth bracketed by question-mark lines. I duck my head, and she moves on without pressing, raising the examination table to a semi-seated position. Thank the stars.

"Do I have your permission to complete the contact part of the physical?"

"Yes."

For the next twenty minutes, the doctor pokes and prods. She uses a hand-held ultrasonograph to take a closer look at some of the spots the scanner outlined in red. The capillaries under my nails fill like my blood is maple sap. I follow the tip of her stylus with my eyes as soon as the dull light stops stabbing them. Measuring the elasticity of my skin, the doctor pulls, and translucent flesh stretches from my bones like thin rubber, as pink and veiny as the potted orchids. She gently moves my arms and legs, flexing and twisting, unsurprised when my joints bend with no resistance.

It feels strange, having a medical condition named after people who died some fifteen-hundred standard years before I was born. I looked up Edvard Laurits Ehlers and Henri-Alexander Danlos in the Archive once, but there's almost no information on them. They were dermatologists who named a connective tissue disorder. That's it.

I glance at the chrono again. *1049 2S*. That's… fifty-six minutes before I can go home. That's not that long. I've already made it over a third of the appointment time. Only fifty-six minutes left. That's not that long. I repeat it like a mantra.

Dr. Fahima scrawls some notes, and then unplugs her handcomp from the wall screen.

"I should take your height and weight, too." Dr. Fahima helps me off the exam table and I slide-thud to my feet. My knees crunch.

Crossing to the far wall, I stand square on the pressure tile in the floor. The doctor taps the touch panel beside my left shoulder; I can't see it, but I know it's activated a laser in the ceiling to mark the top of my head. The panel lights up.

Well, I don't have to adjust my 'chair's default hovering height; I'm still one-metre-forty-eight. I'm still forty-four kilograms, and almost none of that is muscle. I'm still, in a word, *soft*. Soft and pale and scared.

"Ready for the last half of the musculoskeletal assessment?"

"No." I wrinkle my nose, squinting an eye open to look at her. "I don't like failing tests, even fitness tests." I haven't failed a test since tertiary study, and I'm six years into an Apprenticeship already. Stars, I don't think I've *taken* a test since tertiary study. I *really* don't want to fail one now.

"As we discussed last time, there is no 'passing' or 'failing' a medical test. The PSC needs to know what your baselines are so they can keep you safe."

I can't fail a medical test? Sure, and there are pixies in the food gardens, and I'm Teksisto Weaver-of-the-Web-of-Life, and there is broken glass in my head. I hate thinking like this. These tests measure how my body functions. It *doesn't* function; that's the problem.

My legs shake so much I'm scared my joints will wobble loose like a couple of faulty dowels. It's only a few steps to my knapsack, and I pull out my *korsaro* and joint braces.

The *korsaro* resembles a vest, fitting over my bare torso from just above my bust to just below my navel. It's made of bamboo linen, corded with harakeke flax, with specially made straps to reinforce my shoulders and ribcage. I got Hikoa to lace the back for me this morning, and I tug the front laces snug. The braces are designed to look decorative, like the strappy shibari harnesses Ana favours.

"Stand as you would normally," Dr. Fahima instructs, pointing to the middle of the med room, where she's cleared a space. I do as she says. My heart beats a rapid, fearful *not enough, not enough, not enough*.

Picking up her handcomp from the desk, she walks a slow circuit around me, stopping to press on the join of my shoulder and arm, the small of my back, the crook of my knees. She writes as she goes.

Dr. Fahima glances at my hands for a second longer than normal. As soon as she glances back at her 'comp, I look down, surreptitious. Blood pools in my pallid limbs, turning them a blotchy, cadaverous purple.

"Your posture is good," the doctor says.

"Most of my waking time is spent sitting." I wave at my hoverchair, still tucked in the corner. "I have enough pain problems; I really don't want posture problems as well."

"Understandable," Dr. Fahima grins, but then her face turns down at the corners, serious. "Now, the next part of the assessment measures flexibility. I know that your existing medical condition makes

you flexible already. Do not – I repeat, do *not* – try to push your joints past where they can comfortably go. This is to measure your natural mobility, *not* to compete for the most extreme angles your joints can possibly reach."

"Yes, Doctor." I duck my head into my shoulders. Apparently, the results of my first flexibility assessment are still in my file. That was years ago! I've learned my lesson since then: dislocations hurt like a *skavmo* and are not worth it to show off.

The doctor takes me through the exercises. With the connective tissue in my body about as stiff as ivy stems, I breeze through in under ten minutes. I can touch my thumbs to my wrists. I can press my palms together behind my back. Sitting on the ground, I can lean forward and wrap my hands around my feet without bending my knees. Well, my knees bend when I touch my toes, but backward, not forward, and only by ten or fifteen degrees.

The doctor nods when we get to the end of the exercises, still scrawling notes.

"Stand in your own time. I don't want you fainting before the blood test."

"What about after?" I quip from the floor. She raises a black eyebrow in an angled arch.

"I would suggest not fainting after, either, but as your doctor, I can *only* suggest. If you decide not to take the given medical advice, I can't make you comply."

"I'll try to behave."

I pull my legs under my hips and kneel for a moment, eyes closed. While I wait for my body to settle, I start to loosen my *korsaro* and undo my wrist and elbow braces. The assessment hasn't been that tiring – not nearly as much as last time – but while my breathing is even, my heart raps a complaining fist on the back of my sternum. My stomach grumbles. *Yeah, I know, I know,* I tell my body, *not long until latemeal now.*

"I can help you if you need."

I open my eyes to Dr. Fahima offering a hand. I grip her wrist and stagger back to my feet. The room spins like a flight vid-sim, and the edges of my vision bruise black. I lean against the examination table to wait it out.

I will not faint. I will not. I'm too stubborn to faint.

Without a word, Dr. Fahima puts my knapsack on the examination table so I can pack my things away without leaning over. I think *'thank you'* and hope it's loud enough for her to hear.

I pull myself back onto the table with shaky arms. I feel like my empty stomach has done a zero-G acrobatics course to the thudding drum of my heart and left the rest of me breathless in the spectator stands.

I check the chrono. Only thirty-six minutes left. That's not long.

Dr. Fahima crosses over to one of the cupboards above her desk and pulls out a sterile needle in an anaesthetic-lined package, three tube-shaped glass vials, a leather tourniquet with a small metal buckle, a hand-sized scanner, and an old-fashioned ink marker. Pulling a small metal tray from another cupboard, she powers its hover motor and pushes it all over to me.

"If I recall, blood tests on a patient with EDS can be a… unique experience," Dr. Fahima says.

I pull one corner of my mouth sideways.

"You could say that." In other words, it'll take at least four tries to find a vein. I would think, with skin as thin and pale as mine, with veins so easy to *see*, it would be easy to draw blood. No such luck, *drek* it. Teksisto has a mean sense of humour.

"Do you find one arm is usually easier?"

"Nope." I give a dramatic shrug. "Sometimes it's my right arm; sometimes it's my left; sometimes the doc has to try the backs of my hands *and* my feet *and* my wrists; once they started looking questioningly at my jugular…."

"Let's just see how we go." There's a knowing laugh in Dr. Fahima's voice, but none of the 'I know I'll get it first try' arrogance I've had from doctors before. She picks up the scanner and runs it slowly over the inside of my elbows. On the screen, a grainy blue-on-black image shows a map of my crooked veins. She does the same to my hands. "Hmmm, I think we'll have the best luck with your right elbow."

No sketching for me tonight, even if I have the energy.

It's been over two thousand years since the Galactic Migration, and blood tests haven't changed much, as far as my research tells. I get the leather tourniquet buckled too tight around my upper right arm, the light *tap-tap-tap* of the doctor's fingertip on the inside of my elbow. I look down at my arm.

My veins are tiny purple creatures, hiding far under the surface of my skin. They seem to shrink deeper under my glare, pressure building in my fingers.

While the water heats in the room's small sink, Dr. Fahima grabs a thin-walled latex bag. She fills it and rests it in my arm.

"May I ask you a question?"

"I hate it when people ask that," I laugh. "You've already asked me a question, so what's the point of asking if you can? Besides, you're the doctor. Half the reason I'm here is to answer your questions."

"This isn't an official question for the PSC report, just for my own curiosity. Hence, you are under no obligation to answer." She lifts the water-bag, looks at my arm, replaces it. My hand has gone swollen and cooked-rollbug red with trapped blood. My arm throbs against the tourniquet; I can feel my pulse in my fingertips. My veins refuse to budge.

"Now *I'm* curious." I grab onto the distraction. "Ask away. If I don't want to answer, I won't."

"Deal," the doctor nods. "There aren't that many people with illnesses like yours around anymore. Most choose corrective surgery or genetic treatments. Why haven't you?"

I scrunch my face up, but my practised answer comes easily. "It's not something I *need* to do. I thought about it, but the treatments are so invasive. Spectacles and braces don't require me to slice bits off my eyes with lasers or implant electrical devices into my skull or re-inject my own modified cells into my spinal cord. I know the treatments are safe. I know they're supposed to be painless. I know people have had genetic procedures done for over a thousand years and laser treatments for over two. But it's likely that, even with treatment, I'd still deal with symptoms. To be completely healthy, I would have to change myself so much that I think I wouldn't really feel like *me* anymore. To wish I didn't have the body I have would feel like wishing my eyes weren't blue or that my skin didn't freckle. Besides," I try on a grin, but it doesn't fit right now, "my optometrist is delightful. I'd hate to see her close because all her patients go to a surgeon instead."

"That makes sense." Dr. Fahima switches the bag of water for the scanner and marks the clearest warm vein with a dot of ink. "Ah, that one's starting to look promising."

She unwraps a needle from its package, clips the vial into place, and flicks the small switch on the side. The jagged outer ring blurs as it starts to buzz, almost too high and quiet to hear. I close my eyes. The procedure is all but painless with modern needles, but the sight of it puncturing my skin makes me squirmy.

"Gotcha."

My eyes pop open at the tiny *hiss* of a filling vial. I stare at it, and then the doctor, and then the vial again. There's a line of thick red moving syrup-slow up the inside of the glass.

"Huh. No one ever manages to get my vein first try. I'm always stuck in the Med Centre feeling like my auntie's pincushion."

"Patience and practise," she says, changing out the vial with efficient movements. "When I was an apprentice, one of my mentor's patients had EDS. I have lots of experience drawing blood on people with uncooperative veins."

The last vial filled, Dr. Fahima presses a piece of skin tape over the puncture. She labels them – *Ms. Lirit Taige Sanget-Ĉazen, D.o.B 24.09.2182.PFT, Collected 08.13.2210.PFT* – and places them in a biostorage box to be taken to the lab a level below. The needle goes in a yellow bucket for sterilisation, sharpening, and repackaging.

"Done!" the doctor says, bright and encouraging. She checks the chrono. "We're even running ahead of schedule. There is a room to the right just before you get to the main entrance. Since you are at higher risk for adverse effects, I suggest you rest there for a while. Suke Yoŝito is the nurse on call this shift; he can bring you fruit juice or tea and a biscuit."

"Thank you." Fruit juice? What a treat!

Careful of my sore arm, I push myself off the examination table.

My feet hit the floor, and my ankles crumple. Numb static arcs up my legs. Blank metal rushes up at me in slow motion, and for an eternal second, I know with heart-jolt certainty I am falling.

I sprawl face-first across the floor. My left ankle pops like an overripe fruit. White-cold pain screams up my spine and explodes supernova behind my eyes.

I try to move my foot. Nothing happens but mental static. The broken glass in my head has poured into my ankle; trying to move grinds jagged splinters into my bones.

I thud my head into the ground, clench my jaw to keep the scream stuck behind my teeth. Rust it all, why me and why now?

"Oh, my stars! Are you okay?" Dr. Fahima turns me over, quick but gentle, locking her fingers over my ankle like a splint. I look down. My left foot twists inward at an unnatural angle, almost perpendicular to the lumpy, jutting end of my shin bone. "We can sedate you to reset…."

"Don't… bother." I choke the words out between gritted teeth and measured breaths, one at a time so the lodged scream doesn't escape with them. "Not… worth it; sedatives… take forever. Just… give me a… a minute." Arching my spine, I reach up to check that my ribs are all still in place, and my subluxed shoulder pops back into its socket with an audible broken-glass crunch. Ow. Ow, ow, ow, *drekkin'* ow.

"Are you sure?" the doctor asks. I can almost see her Hippocratic Oath flashing before her eyes like a bad dream.

"Yup." I bite off the word.

Balancing on one hand, she settles herself better on the floor next to me and resumes her finger-splint. Another star-flare of pain bursts from the movement.

"What can I do to help instead?"

"Do they teach… you how to distract pa… patients in med… school?" Shattering pain deflates my already flat joke. "Three minutes or… so and it'll stop… stop hurting enough that… that I can pop… it back in."

Dr. Fahima's thin mouth twists to the side. Her eyebrow arches again. I look up at her, hopeful.

"Since you're… the PSC's Head… Head Physician, have you gotten a… a chance to go off-ship… to Glisesa yet?"

"Yes, I have. I was on the first shuttle down with Dr. Nitan Mun-Wen and the other members of the Planetary Settlement Board, in fact. She would be your Mentor at the Meritan Archives, wouldn't she?"

"Nitan!" I gasp. "Yes! She is. She's great. Tell me… tell me about the… the trip? What's it… what's it like? What to… what to expect?"

Sitting on the floor, she tells me about the preparation for her first trip to Glisesa's surface: the long elevator ride to the main airlocks, way at the very bottom Level of the ship, below even the huge lead-shielded engine rooms; the different sound of the close-cycled air filters in the decontamination corridor from the rest of the central-controlled artificial atmo; all outerwear placed into a container for an even more thorough sterilization process than the Ghemod-safe decon procedure; the fine mist of cold, bright-blue decon gel in the cramped main room, the tiny goggle lenses to protect delicate eyes from the flash of UV heat; a respirator mask hung around her neck in case there was something dangerous in the planet's atmo we hadn't been able to detect.

I listen, rapt, to the lurching strangeness of moving from artificial grav to *real* grav, and I wish for the same wild, free-floating wonder, so removed from the daily routine of two thousand years of city-ship life, so remote from everything we've ever known.

I want to experience it for myself.

I can't bear being left behind.

When the ache is down to embers, it only takes Dr. Fahima a gentle rotation and a careful push, and my ankle pops back in with an audible clunk and a quick stab of hot pain. Then she's running a hand-scanner over my leg from toes to knee to make sure my tendons and nerves and veins have all returned to where they're supposed to.

This time, I accept the offer of help back into my hoverchair.

I stop in the doorway, spin in a slow half-circle, facing Dr. Fahima but looking at my feet.

"I'm sure you're busy running all the medical tests for the PSC, but you wouldn't happen to have room for another regular patient, would you?"

"This is the last week of PSC tests, and I do have room for another patient after that," Dr. Fahima smiles. I smile back. "How about you speak to our receptionist on your way out?"

Heavy clouds of evening commuters part around my hoverchair. Whining out of the hoverator, I drift into the Transport Station on Level 520. The pattering of feet and voices drums into my skull.

Rubbing the crook of my sore elbow, I slump in the cushioned seat and close my eyes. The ‘chair’s little computer brain knows the way home. I don’t have to think anymore, thank the stars.

Vines climb nimble and verdant up willow trellises, making the ship’s passageways a forest planet. As I breeze from Transport Sector to Communal Sector to Residential Sector, long sharp-tipped pothos leaves twist into cream-edged hedera overhead. The plants are good oxygen producers and sound dampeners; the hiss of the air filter is far quieter here than in the Medical Centre. I reach out and brush my fingers over smooth leaves.

The cloud of people rains itself out as we disperse down passageways and corridors. It’s a relief to turn down the last corridor and into the narrow entryway of Homeblock 2651.

The cheerful bubble of pots drowns out my hoverchair’s quiet whine. It’s Hikoa and Ianĥe’s turn to cook latemeal; as soon as they work out who’s cheffing and who’s helping, the two of them working together is a recipe for culinary genius.

I follow the scent of coconut and ginger into the octagonal kitchen. Ia flits, sylphlike, from pot to pan to pot over the stove. She’s thrown on a short, cornflower-blue pinafore, a layer of linen between her and any spilled sauces. At the kitchen island behind her, Hikoa chops kumara and beans and carrots. The knife’s glint-thud is a metronome’s quick pendulum in zir steady hand.

Anahera sprawls over the bench across the room, her chin on her elbow and her elbow on the table. Riveted to a portable media screen, she pretends she doesn’t notice anyone else in the kitchen. She hasn’t yet convinced any of our homeblock that she prefers her own company to ours – and I’d eat a hullplate if she ever does – but she tries. I’ve never entirely understood why.

My cousin and I are about as different as genetically possible. At a glance, Anahera looks more like my spouse’s cousin than mine: smooth brown skin (though Ana’s is a warm mix of yellow ochre and brown ochre while Hikoa’s is a more neutral-toned dark walnut); thick, springy spiral curls of long, ebony hair, usually kept in a protective style (when Ana can be bothered to sit through hours of braiding, that is); eyes a brown so deep it seems to swallow their pupils.

That’s about where the similarities end, though.

“Honey, I’m home,” I tease. Ana’s got her earphones in, so she doesn’t hear me; I’ll never be as interesting as her current favourite serial show.

"Saluton!" Ianĉe calls from the stove. The fibreoptic filaments braided into her brunette pixie fringe are programmed pastel rainbow colours. "Latemeal should be about 15 minutes; we decided to start cooking early, since you had to do the whole fasting blood test thing. It's taro and rollbug curry tonight." Ia points the end of a wooden spoon at the container of scoop-out brownish-red shells, each the size of two large fists pressed together. Bred from large, edible Old Earth crustaceans for their easy resource- and space-efficient care, rollbugs are the staple protein of city-ship cuisine.

Oh, sweet stars, I appreciate having home-mates who enjoy cooking. On my nights to make latemeal, I just try not to poison us or forget about anything long enough for it to burn.

"You are deities, you know that? I am apotheosizing you both now. Teksisto, move over."

"Lirit!" Tossing zir headful of box braids over one shoulder, Hikoa sets down the paring knife and greets me with a welcoming kiss. "Saluton, *karamo*. How are you?"

"I feel a bit like a black hole." I pull my hoverchair up next to the kitchen island. Ana, noticing the movement, waves a grin at me and points at her screen. I nod at my cousin with a knowing half-smile – a full smile takes too much effort right now – and motion for her to take an earphone out.

"Are you watching *Planet Earth* without me?" I chide as soon as she's hit pause.

"Nah," she snorts. "I'm rewatching *Orbit*. They got Glisesa *so* wrong it's funny."

"Ah, cut them some slack!" I huff, "They'd only had the first holovids to work from at that point."

La Sesa has spent the last ten standard years in a slow deceleration loop around the system's trinary stars. It takes a long time to slow an object's momentum to orbital velocity from intergalactic-highway speeds… especially when the object in question is a seven-kilometre-long city-ship, and it has to slow down so gradually that its population isn't all launched into the front hull like a thirty-four-million-person hoverbike crash.

It made sense to send autonomous drones ahead to see what waited for us at our new homeplanet. The first season of Orbit would have come out within a ĵenth of the first probe footage.

I was eighteen when we first arrived at the edge of the Gliscorpi system, and Anhera sixteen, still both living with our parents and siblings in the same neighbourhood of homeblocks. I'd just broken up with Ianĉe, realizing I'm too anxious and insecure to cope with a polyamorous partner; she felt stifled and guilty trying to force herself to be monogamous when that's not how her mind is wired, and it

wasn't fair on the other members of her polycule either. It would be another two standard years before I'd meet Hikoa, a week into our Apprenticeships, when Nitan introduced me to the database engineers who keep the Archives' software up-to-date.

So much can change in a decade.

We have reached Glisesa, the destination of over two thousand years of our ancestors' dreams.

"The *Orbit* showrunners should do a Tenth Anniversary Special," Ana snickers, plunging through my memories with a diving-board *splash.*

"We should have a rewatch party!" Ianŝte pipes up from the kitchen island. Eyes lighting up, she bounces on one slender foot, wooden spoon waving as the idea sweeps her away. "Now that Ana's been, she can tell us what it's really like, so we know better when it's our turn for off-ship trainings. Oooh, Lirit, you should invite Dr. Nitan as well. Then, when we've all settled into working off-ship, we can have another rewatch party and *all* make fun of it."

Hikoa sighs, hands on zir hips, but ze's grinning. The metal beads strewn through zir braids *tinkle-chime* with the shake of zir head.

"Maybe we should let Lirit in through the door before we start planning to pile half of Level 520 through it as well?" Hikoa turns to me, kissing my temple. "Need a hand, *karamo*?"

"Yes. Please. My legs decided to throw a tantrum after the fitness assessment."

"Battery levels low, I'm guessing?" my spouse asks, resting a hand on the back of my 'chair. Bad cycles drain my mental batteries like one of those Old Earth lightbulbs. Ah, what are they called again? The really inefficient ones they used before they had LEDs and CSRs and SSLs? Um…

Incandescents! That's it! Bad cycles drain my mental batteries like an incandescent bulb.

"Battery levels critical," I inform zir.

With a quick glance at Ianŝte to make sure latemeal can manage without zir for another minute, Hikoa folds a stool out from the central island. Ze loops ropey arms tight around my middle and lifts me out of the hoverchair and into the stool. My legs dangle, numb and blotchy and mutinous, left ankle still swollen.

I peer over at Anahera, who's pressed her earphones back in. She doesn't have mental batteries like me; she has solar simulator floodlights that fill up a deep pit in her mind. Sometimes, they aren't

enough to keep the darkness contained, and it oozes and congeals until she's epoxied into her bed, brittle like fibreglass; other times, the lights are so bright that she can't see the sleepless shadows under her eyes or the reckless edge to her decisions. Since her diagnosis at fifteen, she's had two severe depressive episodes and one moderate manic one. She manages it well, but I worry. Major changes and external stresses – like reaching the end of a thousand-year journey, or being responsible for keeping a team alive in an alien desert – can induce episodes.

When she's back from *Orbit*, I'll ask about her light level.

"Do you want to keep the hoverchair nearby until after latemeal, or would you like me to put it in the lounge?" Hikoa asks.

"Would you mind putting it away?" I scrunch my face up into an apologetic question mark. Insecurity about the medical assessment sits in the pit of my stomach like too many of Paganio's fried custard *bomboloni*, queasy and cloying.

I've never felt insecure about having a disability before. Why would I?

There are no safety measures on an uncharted planet.

"What's wrong?" With zir usual skill at scanning my thoughts, Hikoa folds out the stool next to me and sits, knee touching mine, dark eyes pulling me toward zir with the gravity of black holes.

I tear my gaze from zirs, hunching my shoulders.

"It's a bad brain day as well as a bad body day. My thoughts are too big." I tap a finger against my temple, still looking down at my purple feet. "You put so much extra energy into caring for me – everyone in our homeblock does – and I don't want to burn you out."

"Where's this coming from?" Hikoa kisses the crown of my head, curls zir finger under my chin to tilt my head back up and kiss my nose. "You aren't going to burn us out. You know that. We *want* to help you, Lirit, *mi karamo*. If you saw any of *us* struggling, you would help us, right?"

"Well, yeah, of course I would." I tip my eyes down again. "If I could."

"And you *do* help us." Ze says it like a statement of fact, like *water freezes at zero degrees Celsius in standard atmo pressure* or *if the grav-generators suddenly stopped, we'd all start floating.* "You help us a lot. You do most of the homeblock laundry and grocery shopping. You do your part of the cooking and make latemeal once a week. You dry and put away dishes. You tidy so it's easier for us to scrub

and vacuum on cleaning day. You write great public lectures that are fun and interesting and teach us about important things. You leave kind notes around *La Sesa* to cheer up the people who find them. You volunteer for recycling duty every other ĵenth even though your condition makes you exempt from utilities roster. You help a lot. So, when we see you struggling, we want to help you, too."

"But…" I trail off. My thoughts refuse to be packed in a logical order so I can make them make sense out loud.

"Where's this coming from, Lirit?" Hikoa asks again. Zir voice has gone low and concerned. "Do you want to talk more after latemeal?"

I nod, not looking up.

"I love you," ze reminds, patient as the Mirror Lake.

"I love you, too."

"You know I wouldn't offer if I didn't want to help you, *karamo*." With another forehead-kiss, Hikoa stands and pushes the hoverchair toward its dock in the lounge. "I need to tell Kĵo and Czeraf it's almost latemeal anyway."

"Let them know it'll probably be another five minutes," Ia calls after zir.

I've wondered where the rest of our home-block was. Meals are most fun when everyone's here.

Faint knocking, the hiss of opening doors, and muffled voices track Hikoa's movements around the lounge. The timbre of zir footsteps changes from the carpet moss corridor to the panelled wood kitchen.

"Kĵo's talking to eir *inamor,* and Czeraf wants to finish the last bit of his poetry assignment before latemeal. Want a cinnamon tisane?" Hikoa asks over zir shoulder, already heading for the kettle. Zir braids sway and chime. "Will cuddles help recharge your batteries?" My spouse grins, cheeky. Ze already knows the answer. Cuddles are the best treatment for low-battery cycles.

"Definitely." I bump my head against zir shoulder as ze passes by. "You know me so well, *karamo*."

Sitting on the stool next to mine, Hikoa pulls me into zir lap, and wraps a supportive arm behind my waist. Ze drops an absent-minded kiss onto my temple. I wriggle my hand into zirs, and ze twines

our fingers, chalk in umber. I rest my cheek on the flat pillow of zir breast, breathe in the faint scents of warm skin, lemon soap, lavender-almond hair oil. Hikoa smells like home.

"You two are adorable," Ianŝte grins at us.

"So are you." I hold out the trembly arm not wrapped around my spouse. "Cuddles? Please?"

Putting her spoon down on its tile, Ia sits on Hikoa's other knee, slings her willowy legs over my thighs, and throws her arms around my shoulders. Hikoa rubs a gentle palm between her shoulder blades; I rest my free hand on her knee. She smiles a star-bright smile. We're tactile people, Ia and Hikoa and I, and I can almost imagine electrons sparking between us like plug pins in a charging port.

Ana takes out an earphone and glances at us over her screen.

"If it was anyone else, I wouldn't care, but if you're gonna hook up with my cousin and her spouse, I'll come back when latemeal's ready," she snorts, making to get up.

"We're not going to hook up in the kitchen," Ianŝte retorts. "It's unhygienic… and Lirit's not feeling well… and they aren't interested in being *haltoirĵf* clients."

"Sure." Ana rolls out the *rrr* sound to guarantee we hear her dubiousness, but she puts her earphone in again.

I read about the history of the *haltoirĵf* after I started working in the Archives. Esperanto, the primary language on the city-ships, started as an auxiliary Old Earth conlang, so it usually chooses the most common linguistic root from as many other languages as possible. But there was no consistent link between words for similar roles across Old Earth – *almah, courtesan, hetaera, oiran, tawaif, yiji* – so our ancestors condensed them all into one new word that wouldn't bring old prejudices with it.

I still don't entirely understand *why* there were prejudices; *haltoirĵf* and their pre-Migration equivalents are entertainers, educated in their chosen craft: whether that's literature, music, theatre, film, dance, burlesque, sex work, sculpture, fibre arts, painting, darkroom photography, holophotography, gardening, cuisine, whatever they're talented at that makes our bare, metal city-ship liveable. If I hadn't been accepted as an Apprentice Chronicler, my second choice was a *haltoirĵf* like Ianŝte and Czerafwin, but I would be a storyteller, rather than sex worker, mixed media artist, dancer, or poet like them. The only thing that makes *haltoirĵf* different from any other artist is that their Apprenticeships are through specific schools that train them to work with commissioners and clients

one-on-one, rather than through communal activities like my Public Lectures or wall murals or theatre plays.

Now that I think about it more, the terrible inequities of Old Earth probably led to private entertainers being exclusive to only a select powerful few. If we didn't have Hikoa's ma, Demetra, around to help with our small garden, I can see myself getting resentful if I wasn't able to ask an *haltoirĵf* gardener to come to our homeblock and teach me how to keep the plants alive.

The kettle beeps, and I startle out of my fatigued introspection with a squeak. With a giggle at my jump, Ia hops off Hikoa's lap. She stops zir when ze starts to stand, too.

"I've got to check on latemeal anyway, so I can make tisane while I'm up," she tells zir.

Hikoa brushes a grateful hand against her arm as she flits back across the kitchen.

"How was the medical?" Ze turns to where I'm still tucked into zir side.

I pause, tap my chin, summarize.

"... Unnerving."

"Was it as bad as you thought it was going to be?" Ze is entirely too smug.

"No, *mi amo*. It wasn't, *mi amo*. You can stop chivvying me about it now, *mi amo*." A cheeky smile sneaks onto my lips. "Speaking of chivvying, have you filled out those secondary-specialist forms yet? They need to be in before the fifteenth."

Hikoa arches zir eyebrows into unimpressed triangles.

"No, *mi amo*. I haven't, *mi amo*." Ze pinches my side gently, just in the squishy bit between bottom rib and hip bone. I squirm and slap at zir hands. Clipping the sarcasm from zir tone, ze continues. "I was going to ask you if you could use your wordsy skill to help me with it. Do you think you'll have the batteries tomorrow?"

"Maybe?" I tap the crook of my sore elbow, flex my fingers, straighten my posture. I probably won't be too sore to sit and type. It depends on if my mind decides not to cooperate with my body. "I don't want to promise, but I'll try."

"Thank you, Lirit." Zir long fingers find pebbles of tense muscle skimming long paths along my spine. Ze presses a thumb into a stubborn stone in my lower back, and I try not to wince. Ze's right: I really shouldn't let my back get so bent out of shape. "I'm proud of you."

"Really?" The gentle affirmation makes me glance up. "You are? Even though I only went because I couldn't put it off anymore, and it stressed me out so much my legs stopped working?"

"Yup," Hikoa says. The affection in zir voice curls under my ribs like my warm wheat-bag kitten. "It's not brave to do something you aren't scared to do. You did it even though you associate medical treatment with causing you awful pain and it terrifies you, so I'm proud of you."

"Definitely," Ianĥe adds, setting a mug on the kitchen island in front of me. I lean over it to breathe in cinnamon-scented steam, smiling my thanks. "Just think, Lirit, the medical stuff will be worth it; it's only ten cycles until we get to explore off-ship! It's gonna be *dolĉa*!"

"I take it you're a tiny bit excited," Hikoa chuckles as Ia hops like a happy little sunbird. She presses her curled hands up under her chin.

"Of course I am, silly! It's all gonna be so *different*! I'll be able to experiment so much with light temperature and colour palette and aesthetic style and composition and everything, and I'm really looking forward to using the lens array Opa gave me...."

"Is that the one you braid into your fiberoptics and just pull whichever lens you need to your eye?" Hikoa asks, nodding at the filaments in her pixie cut.

"The one that looks like the phoropter at my optometrist's?" I add, more cheekily.

"The one I got for my last birthversary," Ia corrects. She stops hopping, balanced on one slim leg, and pokes her tongue out at us.

"I thought you said taking holophotos was going to be boring." I go to pick up my mug, wince when the needle-hole in my arm reminds me of its existence, reach out with my left hand instead.

"Kilometres of *bare dirt* are boring. Interesting new *alien plants* are not boring. Besides," Ianĥe shrugs, giving one of Hikoa's thick braids a light tug. "At least I already know the person managing the Experimental Gardens. Your ma is really nice."

"It's such a shame the Denaska aren't keen on photos or holos," I say. "It would be great if we could've all signed up for the same team."

"It's just as *drekkin*' well you won't be," Ana interrupts from the table. Episode over, she's taken out her earphones. "You're cool, Ia, so no offence, but I'm already gonna be stuck being third star in a binary system with those two."

"Is it really so bad?" I kick a purplish foot at her. "You didn't even have to sit medicals."

"I didn't need a full medical, no, but I had to have my lithium blood test a whole ĵenth before I was due for it." Ana wrinkles her round, flat nose.

"It's not like they made you get a third one; you just got your second one early," Ianĥe points out. "I guess if you can handle emergencies on-ship, they trust you can handle emergencies off-ship."

Ana snorts a laugh and flexes her biceps.

It's so simple for my home-mates. Ana is broad bone and padded strength and a driving need to help others; Hikoa is lean sinew and muscle like graphene cable, a clever, practical mind, and the observant focus of a high-resolution camera; Ianĥe is willow-whip agility and lithe grace and shiny intelligence that brightens everything around her. None of my home-mates have ever had to rely on medical aids or find different ways of doing things or worry about being a burden. There's no question that they will all get their pick of research teams.

I don't want to be left behind.

"The terrain will still exist when we get back," Hikoa assures Ia. I hear the conversation as though underwater and strain to surface from my doubts. "If there's something you absolutely HAVE to see, I'm sure we can ask Bernos to let you come with us for a cycle."

Letting myself drift on the current of kitchen conversation, I pick up my cup, wrapping my hands around the smooth ceramic. I'm too impatient to wait for the tisane to steep for the whole six minutes.

I swallow a mouthful. It's still weak, but hot and sweet, a quiet sonatina in cinnamon and honey notes, harmonies in ginger and vanilla and home. Each sip washes a little more of the tension away down my spine.

"Hey, Ana?" I remember when silence sits at the table with us. "Are lights on or lights off?"

"Eh…." My cousin always looks to the right when she considers something, same as me. "Lights at forty-ish percent."

"Okay." I give her a nod. "Let us know if you want us with you."

"Yeah. Sure." She won't, I know, but the offer is there. The offer is always there, on swirling, rainbow bright moments and on sinking, desperate, darker-than-space moments. Ana is strong, much stronger than I am. She's strong like rivets holding the hull together, strong like the Web of Life that

binds us to the Universe. She'll fight the two-sided creatures in her head for eternity, and only ask for our help when she's too bloodied to crawl.

"Hikoa, can you see where Kĵo and Czeraf are?" Ianŝe asks, and I focus my eyes and ears on the present, on our madrigal of interweaving voices, on the repeating motifs of home. I take another sip of tisane, and it warms my throat, spices and starlight. "Ana, would you mind folding out the table? Latemeal's ready."

"Yup." Hikoa disappears into the corridor again.

Ana lurches to her feet. Moving the benches out, she unstacks the five wooden table leaves and slots them together with a clunk. She sets the table, quick and careless. Ianŝe looks at the haphazard place mats and shakes her head.

"Czeraf says his assignment's being a pain," Kĵo explains, amusement warming eir tone as ey follows Hikoa into the kitchen. "He'll be here soon as he stops cursing at his handcomp." Tying straight, black hair into a loose queue, ey takes the plate Ia offers and folds eir long limbs under the table. "Thanks, Ia. Thanks, Hikoa. It smells great."

Skirting around Kĵo, Hikoa holds out a hand, eyebrows raised in question. I give a bashful nod and pick up my mug. Scooping me up in a *pieta* carry, Hikoa deposits me – and my tisane – gently next to Kĵo.

"Saluton, Kĵo. Mind if I drop in?" I joke.

"I'm sure that will be okay." Ey pulls eir gangly elbows in to make room.

"How's Jahanara?"

"Good!" Kĵo's quarter-moon eyes curve to amber crescents when ey smiles. "Busy. Apparently, lots of people want tattoos right now. He's started opening the parlour a fourth cycle a week to keep up."

"I guess reaching Glisesa is a commemoration-worthy event."

"Yeah," ey agrees. "Jana says he's never had to ink so many planets and constellations and star maps."

Appearing with two plates of food, Hikoa sits on my other side. Ianŝe is a step behind zir, perching next to Anahera and across from us.

As if summoned by the clatter of plates and cutlery, Czerafwin trips into the kitchen. His short, spiky hair is frazzled with finger-streaks, tufts of vibrant pinks and purples and blues a messy nebula around his head. He collects the remaining plate from the kitchen island, hip-bumps the cutlery drawer closed with a dry *thud*, and slides onto the bench next to Ianŝte.

"Sorry," he blurts, tugging fingers through his hair. "Sorry, sorry, sorry."

"I take it your assignment was fighting back," Hikoa says.

Czeraf groans. "And it was winning!"

"That could be your next poem," I suggest. "About a poem that jumps from the screen to argue with its author about how it ends."

"Yes!" Czerafwin reaches over the table to fist-bump me. "I want to write that now."

"Eat latemeal first," Ianŝte chides. "You're not going to get anywhere running on empty."

"Yes, *Ma*."

Settling in around the table, our homeblock eats and talks and laughs, and the dull grey shadows of pain slide under the table and away between the floorboards, drowned out by the harmonies of home.

The elderly tea-maker gives me a wide yellow smile and a small cardboard box. I ease the box from his frail hands; the tea bulbs inside give a dry rattle.

"Thank you, Mugon." I give him a bow in return. It's a good body cycle, a good brain cycle. My hoverchair carries two grocery baskets a couple steps behind me, its little computer brain linked to my wristcomp; if my good cycle holds, I won't need the seat.

"I saw your last presentation, at the Level 480 community centre," Mugon says. "The one on how similarities in Laws of War in Old Earth cultures and how the search for co-operative resolution of conflict is an anthropological universal? You make every topic you speak on so easy to understand! Have you picked a topic for your next talk?"

"Yes and no," I laugh, shifting my weight and stretching my knees. "We have to wait for the PSC. to finalise Research Teams. If I'm off on a trip, I won't be doing a presentation. Don't worry," I

add as Mugon gives an exaggerated frown. “In that case, my colleague Rishkav will take over for me. He’s amazing.”

“He ought to be! You set a high standard.”

The praise dusts pink on my cheeks. The tea-maker continues with a crinkle-eyed smile.

“Joy be with you on your adventures.”

“And with you, Mugon.” I grin, cupping a hand to my mouth in a theatrical whisper. “Don’t tell Hazai I said so, but you still make the best tea bulbs on *La Sesa*.”

Mugon grins with his whole face, presses an answering finger to his thin lips.

Waving to the old tea-maker, I tuck the cardboard box safely in my hoverseated basket. The rows of markets beckon, the tide of people drifting me down the wide walkway on the scents of a hundred varieties of camellia sinensis and spice.

I angle myself across the flow to harbour in a hollow between two stalls. Tucked out of the way, I pull up the grocery list on my wristcomp and check off loose rooibos leaves and jasmine-and-chamomile tea bulbs. I only have Pipra’s sweet chai masala on this level. Then that’s all for Refreshments, and I can head down a level to Grains and Wheats. Ianĥe is out of oat milk – Enĵa Mukani’s is her favourite – and Czeraf and I have a soft spot for Basak Leĉem’s bagels.

I’ll leave Fruits and Vegetables until last; it’s Demetra’s turn to work a stall this cycle, so I’m bound to stop and chat for a while. Then I’ll have checked off all my chores and can curl up with my novel and a cup of fresh tisane.

A cheerful chime from my wristcomp stops my planning mid-step, and I glance down. Rishkav has sent me a Chatter message. That’s odd. Isn’t he on shift right now? He never checks Chatter when he’s on shift.

Wait. I don’t have a shift this cycle… do I? *Flak*. Please let me not have forgotten another shift.

I shake the thought out of my head. No, if I was late, Rish would have called me, if Nitan didn’t beat him to it.

I tap the icon and open the message.

*Team lists are out! Go check *right now*. I think you’ll be pleased. :)*

Anticipation tremors up my fingers; it takes two attempts to sign into my intra-web account and pull up the Meritan Archive main page.

There's a new link. *Team Lists*. I click, read, grin, squeal; a group of people walking out of the Transport Station smile at me. I smile back, wide and a little wild. I twirl on the spot, a happy little dance.

Vegetables can wait; I have to tell Hikoa! Glancing at my chrono, I rush into the Transport Station, trailing my basket of groceries. Zir stickball practice will be just about now. If I hurry, I'll get there before ze finishes packing up.

I stab at the button for the Sports Centre. Is the hoverator going even slower this cycle? It must be. I wiggle, bounce from foot to foot, adrenaline numbing my knees. The light moves up, level by level by level.

Finally, I tumble out into the Sports Centre in a spill of over-full basket and spinning hoverchair. The screen in the Transport Station says that zir team has Tube 3 this cycle. Rushing through the doors into the Sports Centre itself, I carom through the transparent plastiglass forest of huge, hollow tubes extending metres past both floor and ceiling. The loaded hovermotor whirrs along behind me.

The light by the hatch is red, but the countdown chrono ticks *1:26… 1:25… 1:24….* The grav-field is off, and Hikoa's team is still in play. I crane my neck to look way up at the home goal some eight stories above my head.

There's my spouse, in defensive position above the magnetic-backed goal, compressed-air prop-pack clouding a white water-vapour nebula around zir forearms, ankles, and back. Zir box braids form a Medusa crown that writhes with the movement of zir head as ze watches the ball ricochet from magnetic net to stick handle to magnetic net; my head ricochets from spouse to game to chrono to spouse, counting seconds. Hikoa's at week five-and-a-half of the six weeks ze keeps longer-term protective hairstyles, so ze's let the ends start to braid out, and the pikorua curls give feather crests to each plaited snake.

It takes effort not to press my face to the humming plastiglass like a child. I channel my happy flutters into my fingers, spinning my plait around and around and around.

Finally, the buzzer sounds. Collecting up the vibrant-pink practice balls, the team angles propulsion packs and air tubes toward the extending platform. When all eleven are aligned feet-down within half a metre of the surface, the coach sails over to the control panel and turns the grav-field back on. Fifteen syncopated *thuds* thump into the metal platform, and then juddery grav-legs stomp toward the other side of hatch. The team tumbles out of the tube, already unstrapping air packs and stripping off uniforms.

I bounce back to give them room.

"Hikoa! HikoaHikoaHikoa!"

Ze turns; so does half zir team. The twins Govind and Gopala laugh and wave me a greeting. Ĉiang nudges a shoulder into Hikoa's.

Ah, well. Nothing like a dramatic entrance.

"Hey, Hikoa. Your fan club's here," Ĉiang teases.

"Good timing!" Gopala adds, waggling bushy black brows. He pulls off a sweaty grip-sock.

The team is getting changed post-practice. Hikoa stands, uniform shirt half off over zir head, bandeau with it, long line of rib and back muscles exposed. The tight bandeau has imprinted elastic lines across zir chest. Zir head pops up from a swathe of yellow-and-blue. Ze drops zir uniform shirt on zir gear bag and starts pulling on a fresh tunic.

"Lirit," my spouse replies, eyebrows lifted in question marks. "What's up?"

"Team lists have come out! Look!" I wave my wristcomp at zir. My elbow catches the hoverchair, sends it skidding, sends the team laughing again.

"I would look if I could. Stay still." Hikoa grabs my hand and holds it steady. The excitement and impatience has to go somewhere; my butt wiggles. "Stay still!"

Ze's taking too long to read it.

"You, me, and Ana are on the Native Sapients Cultural Team," I announce. "We start training next week."

The Emergency Response Offices are a mirror-image of the Meritan Archive Offices: a long, rectangular communal area bordered on every side by individual work rooms each about two metres square, with a block of five identical Administration Offices in the middle. I'm not an admin, but as Senior Apprentice, I get a middle office in the Archive anyway. It's just as well we're headed to the ERO admin offices; habit points my hoverchair that direction before my brain catches up. The other two follow with knowing grins when I redirect toward the closed door marked 'Bernos Kneller'.

Previously Head of the Emergency Services, now Head Emergency Responder on the Planetary Safety Committee and the wider Planetary Settlement Board. Anahera's mentor when she was Apprenticing. Gruff, demanding, slightly arrogant, but competent and direct.

It's barely the end of firstmeal on an Unuacycle, and most people won't start work until second shift. The communal space is unoccupied, and most of the surrounding doors sit open, the offices empty. Springy carpet moss muffles Anahera's stomping footfalls and silences the light pad of Hikoa's graceful, loping steps.

Bernos and Nitan have already arrived. We hear them before we're halfway across the central room. More specifically, we hear *Bernos* before we're halfway across the central room. I've yet to have an interaction with the man that hasn't started with me hearing him before I see him.

The closer we get, the clearer the words come through the door.

"You've appointed Lirit Sanget to lead the Native Sapients research?!"

I jam a hand over my mouth to muffle a squeak. What? *Me?* They're talking about *me*? Hikoa frowns, puts a protective hand on my shoulder. Ana rolls a glare at the ceiling. On a shared instinct, we all lean closer to the door.

"Lirit is the most senior Apprentice Chronicler, and she is for a good reason," Nitan's voice answers, the sort of lake-calm that hides storms. "She is a skilled story-weaver. Why are you surprised that she's my first choice?"

My face heats up UV-burn red. Hikoa gives me a grin that shouts, *I told you she's proud of you*. When I first started my Apprenticeship, it took me a while to adjust to the Head Archivist being more a 'warm smile and approving nod' type than an 'outright verbal praise' type.

"Have you taken leave of your senses, Nitan?" Bernos thunders.

Wait, *what*? Hikoa's grin drops. I press my ear against the door, try to ignore apprehension's claws scratching out a nest in my gut.

"Taken leave of my senses?" Nitan's voice swirls with undercurrents deeper than any pool or lake on *La Sesa*. "Would you explain what you mean for me?"

I can imagine the mild arch of her thin grey brow, the river system of creases around her dark eyes, the softening around her chin and neck as she tilts her head to the side. I snicker at the thought of Bernos on the end of the Head Archivist's pointedly magnanimous half-smile.

"We've been in orbit nearly three standard weeks by now," Bernos rumbles. "You've gone off-ship. You know what the terrain is like. Look at Lirit's medical record! Look." There's a pause. I imagine Bernos waving a handcomp. "She has *anxiety,* for stars' sake! I thought that was eradicated centuries ago. And that's the *least* worrying thing in here."

The claws in my gut blunt and chill. I think I know where Bernos is going with this.

My thoughts reflected in her dark eyes, Ana bristles, mouths at us, "He is *not* gonna go there."

"Let's see," the PSC head continues. "She refuses to cure her genetic illness, which causes – let me just read from her chart here – frequent joint dislocations, unusually severe bruising, and chronic pain. She also suffers a fainting disorder, chronic fatigue, aphasia, heart palpitations, shortness of breath, temperature dis-regulation, excessive dehydration, trouble standing up for long periods of time, and – as far as I can tell – chronic clumsiness just to round it all off. It would be a matter of simple surgery, but she won't even consider a neuro-balance implant, much less genetic treatment or corrective procedures."

His voice gets louder and louder as he lists symptoms, and I slump lower and lower in my seat, though I glare at my door at the last part. My medical record says 'impaired proprioception', not 'chronic clumsiness', and it's a little more complicated than a 'fainting disorder'. Hikoa's hand tenses on my shoulder. The sepia skin around zir eyes tightens in increments. Ana looks murderous.

"*Poulrant* him," she mutters, snapping for the door controls. "I'm gonna…"

I stick an arm out, catch her across the sternum.

"Hold up," I warn. "If Nitan doesn't handle it, I will. You don't need to fight this one for me." My family's anger works as a protective shield. If I can't push back against the slammed airlock of Bernos' misplaced vigilance, my cousin and my spouse will brace me.

We press closer.

"Tell me, then –" Bernos isn't done. "– what happens if she faints on the mountain path? Or if she falls? Or if she dislocates a joint in the middle of nowhere? Or if she gets heatstroke? There isn't much shade available out there. Or if she physically isn't strong enough to carry the amount of water she needs to drink and gets dehydrated? Or if she has a panic attack? Or if she mixes up her words and tells the Denaska incorrect information? Every symptom on this list could put her and anyone with her at risk out there, could put the whole future of the ship at risk. You know that, and you've *still* chosen her for the off-planet crews."

Bernos barrels on, oblivious to conflicting arguments that chase each other around my head like sharp-clawed rodents just outside the office door.

"Yes, I'm questioning what you've done with your senses. What was she thinking, even signing up? What are *you* thinking letting her, Nitan?"

Ana's eyes flare black flames. Hikoa's hand comes up from my shoulder to comb comfort through the wispy hair at the nape of my neck.

Nitan cuts back before panic can squirm down my throat, before my spouse and cousin can rush the door and tell Bernos exactly what *they* think of his *malŝpar*. When the Head Archivist answers, her voice is the honed edge of a loom's batten sword. I quietly envy the way she weaves her words.

"I'm thinking, Bernos, that Lirit is the most senior Apprentice Chronicler, and that the most senior Apprentice Chronicler is to be offered the role first," Nitan says in her calmest 'you know I'm being reasonable so you should listen' voice. I know the voice well. She *taught* me that voice. "I'm thinking that it would be cruel, and amoral, and *illegal* to deny her an opportunity like this because her body doesn't work the exact same way as ours. I'm thinking she's managed a large part of her life in a hoverchair already, and she gets around just fine. I'm thinking most of the track is navigable by buggy, so there won't be far to travel on foot anyway. I'm thinking that a member of Planetary Safety is

assigned to each team, so there will be someone with her trained to keep her safe… unless you doubt the abilities of *your* crew?"

"Doubt my crew…?" Bernos is even loud when he's sputtering. "Excuse me?"

"You're excused," Nitan replies flatly. Bernos's growl drowns out Ana's snort. A giggle bubbles in my nose like carbonated water, flavoured with coconut and hysterics. "After all, you've approved Anahera Ruth Ĉazen-Wudao's application despite her diagnosis of type-two Bipolar Disorder, and you've approved Tai Gang Hong even though he…"

"That's not the same! Even what's-his-name, from the very first Ghemod mission to land on Old Earth's moon…"

"Buzz Aldrin?" Nitan's doctorate is on the history of pre-Migration space travel.

"Yeah, him. Aldrin had bipolar disorder, too, and it didn't affect the safety of his team or his ability to do his job."

"Aldrin was thirty-nine standard years old at the time of that mission, well past the fifteen-to-twenty-five average of the condition's peak. Anahera is only a standard year outside that age range."

"It's not the same," Bernos insists. "Bipolar Disorder is a manageable condition, and Anahera manages it with medication, therapy, and lifestyle choices."

"Yes, it *is* the same. Lirit has ways to manage her conditions, too, and she does so well. I might expect this kind of reaction from you if she's suggested *terrasailing* to the rendezvous, but she knows how to keep herself and her team safe, and there are risk mitigation strategies already in place for off-ship work. There is no reason to deny her application."

I glance at Ana. If looks were lasers, she'd have burned a hole through the door by now. I reach over and grip her hand. I don't know if I'm wanting or offering support, holding her back or holding myself back.

Nitan continues speaking, quiet and firm, so I press my ear to the wall again.

"Lirit *will* be leading the Native Sapients research."

"No, she *won't*. It's too dangerous."

"Yes, she *will*, and that's final. I will not hesitate to take you to the Ethics Council over this."

"The Ethics Council?" Bernos sputters again. "You're really going to call my *ethics* into question? I'm trying to keep her safe!"

"There's keeping her safe, and then there's letting your biases decide what she's capable of."

I pause. The two of them are arguing over my capabilities like I'm a bit of new tech, but neither one of them has bothered to ask me; they know that I am due to come talk to them – I check my wristcomp – within the next two minutes.

The claws in my gut flex, coiled like a spring. To the Old Hells with this. I'll strike.

"Ana, link my 'chair to your wristcomp, please?" I push myself out of the seat, lock my knees through the blink of dizziness.

"With pleasure, cuz," she grins, all bite and bitterants. "Tell him to blow it out his airlock."

The door hisses open, and I stride into Bernos' office, Ana and Hikoa three steps behind.

The two directors stop dead. Nitan's eyes go wide and a little guilty.

"*Saluton*, Nitan. *Saluton*, Bernos. We couldn't help but overhear your conversation from out in the central offices, and I was wondering when you were planning on asking for my input?"

Bernos sputters again. I've seldom seen a face go quite that colour. He is *puce*. Nitan sucks her teeth, rubs a hand over her headful of Bantu knots. Angry claws in my stomach clench and squeeze, scratching a courage I don't usually have into my engine-hot blood.

"Last time I checked, neither of you live in my body. You can see some from the outside, sure. You've read my medical charts. You can guess at what goes on inside my insides. I've lived in the body for twenty-six years; you've only known me for the last six of them. Neither of you know for certain what I can or can't do, where my limits are, what I'm capable of. You two can argue about it all you want, but if you need to know for certain, you can *ask me*."

Bernos goes to interrupt. I don't let him. I focus my eyes on his left ear and keep talking until Nitan hushes him for me. His face goes redder; he doesn't like being hushed.

"I understand you have concerns; even Stage Three planetary exploration has a huge amount of risk still. There's going to be risk for *anyone* on *any* of the off-ship teams, because there's so much we don't know yet. That's why we're reaching out to the Denaska. That's why we're studying the planet so extensively before we start building homesteads and moving families down there."

I can see Ana in the corner of my vision. Her grin is wicked. I'm surprised she hasn't snuck out a vid-recorder.

"For now, it's the PSC's job to figure out the safest ways to mitigate what risks there are for the research teams assigned to study the planet. After this stage of exploration, we can start building a sustainable, healthy life on Glisesa for every person on this ship, while honouring and respecting the lives of the beings who have evolved here. That's the goal, isn't it? That's the whole purpose of the Great Migration. Our ancestors left their world so that we could start over, so that we could learn to be better, free of the poison of their hubris and greed.

"If it's so dangerous down there that I shouldn't even be allowed off the ship, then let's strike Glisesa off the list of habitable planets, and backtrack to join *La Kvina* on Lutĵenkib, or carry on for another fifteen lightyears to catch up with *La Oka* on Trapokod. If not, let's get on with the briefing."

It takes Bernos almost a full minute to temper his outrage. The seconds stretch like the micro-expressions stretch across his blond-bearded face, before he settles into grudging resignation and stony professionalism. He turns on a heel, plugs his handcomp into the wall screen, calls up his briefing slides.

"Sit." Bernos points at three empty chairs against the back wall. He barely waits for us to settle before launching into the introduction. "As you know, this will be the first of three shifts of preparation before you travel to Glisesa. After I teach you the basics of where you're going and what to expect while you're there, Nitan will be covering what we know about the Denaska so far. Doctor Fahima Raŝad Ŝafikbri al-Hakim, Head of Planetary Medical Care, will be briefing you on medical aid; I'll be taking you for more practical emergency aid during next week's off-ship training."

Oh! I lean over to Anahera with a grin.

"Dr. Fahima's briefing will be fun," I whisper. "She did my medical tests, and I think Hikoa's and Ia's, too. She's awesome."

"Lirit, stop talking," Bernos says, not changing tone. I flinch. My shoulders crumple into my chest, but they relax when he doesn't stop to reprimand me more. "You'll be fitted for protective gear next Kvaracycle. Practical training in desert and cave survival will be part of off-ship preparation. However, we are not able to train you on-site for volcanic conditions, so listen carefully. If we look at the map…."

Bernos presses a button on his handcomp, and a reddish-orange holomap of Glisesa's landscape flickers into existence. The 3D image shows a square section of the planet overlaid with a grid of fine lines. A small, glowing key in the bottom corner tells us that each grid square is 100 metres; labelled dots mark Shuttle Landing, Buggy Park, Experimental Gardens, Research Labs, Plains, Foothills, Plateau, Rendezvous, Cave-Warren Entrance.

"This is a scan of the area surrounding the research settlement," Bernos explains, falling into his over-enunciated 'lecturer' voice. "The blue line here indicates the easiest route to the rendezvous point. The Denaska representatives will take you the rest of the way from there, since the buggy won't be able to manage the terrain."

I sense his cold grey eyes like ice on my face as he says that last sentence. I pretend I don't notice, still paying attention to the holomap.

"As you know, the Denaska live in subterranean *koteri*, usually around underground lakes under dormant volcanoes. We have taken fly-over scans of this *koteri*'s volcano, and we can guarantee that it is at no risk of erupting any time in the next several centuries." Bernos taps a couple buttons, and the holoset zooms in on one of the mountains. A map of hair-thin red lines burrows into the shape. "You can see here that the tunnels leading in and out look too small for a Ghemod to navigate, so unfortunately, it is very likely you will not be able to visit the Denaskan *koteri* proper, though the First Contact team is in the process of asking if we can send a specialized probe."

Leaning forward in the same inquisitive motion, Hikoa and I nearly bang heads. We smile at each other.

"Since the Denaska's sensitive eyes mean that they cannot spend much time out of the caves, you will meet in one of these pyroducts – pre-Migration research documents also call them lava tunnels, lava tubes, or pahoehoe flows – instead." Bernos points to a thicker red line on the map, spreading like an Old Earth river system from the base of the volcano.

The PSC Head puts down his handcomp and rifles around in a bag behind the desk. He comes back with a bioplastic mask, attached via a silicone hose to an oxy tank. The mask's clear shell is oval, with a thin silicone band around the edge to seal onto the face.

"Most of the volcanic region has been dormant for long enough to be safe for Ghemod. However, we cannot guarantee that all vents are closed and that there is no risk. You will carry oxy masks on your person at all times. Obviously, your wristcomps are already programmed to detect harmful gases; if you get an alert while off-ship, follow basic airlock failure protocols: expel as much air from your lungs as you can, hold your breath out, close your eyes, and fit your mask as soon as possible. The mask will pressurize as soon as it seals, and you can breathe as normal. If anyone on your team is struggling, fit your own mask before assisting them."

I tamp down the urge to send a *look* at Ana. We live in a two-thousand-year-old metal bubble floating in the vacuum of space; every computerized device on the ship is programmed to detect any sign of things going wrong. Everyone gets the space safety talk at the beginning of the playschool year from ages four to eight, and usually our parents have talked to us first anyway. We. Know.

"We will run mask drills later in this training, and then again during off-ship training." Bernos taps, swipes, and the holoset shuts off. "For now, that is all. Nitan."

Bernos drops into his seat, arms crossed. Nitan takes over his place by the desk and sets her handcomp down.

"So that we're all on the same datafile," Nitan starts. "I'll go over the information we have so far. I know you already know most of it, but as the saying goes, 'knowledge is strength'."

She runs a hand over her Bantu knots and drops into Public Lecture voice.

"The primary focus of Native Sapients research over the past decade has been overcoming the language barrier, so that more in-depth communication is possible. The purpose of the Native Sapients Cultural Research team is, naturally, to open the first cultural exchange with the local *koteri*, with a focus on social customs and history. Hikoa," she turns to my spouse. "What's the progress up to at this point?"

"There are now five thousand seven hundred and fifty-six signs recorded in the translation database, mostly of the trade language and the local dialect. We're aiming to reach seven thousand by the time we –" ze motions to Ana and me, "– are ready to start cultural communication."

"Excellent." Nitan nods. "A standard week before the Migration Festival, the Heads of the Planetary Settlement Board successfully met with representatives of the major *koteris* of Denaska on

Glisesa to communicate our purposes and intentions, and to establish what boundaries the Denaska maintain for their peoples and their lands." She waves a paler-palmed hand at me, but directs her words to the other two. "While Team Lists hadn't been finalized by that point, the Senior Apprentices of the Board Heads attended that meeting via nanopixel conference; I assume Lirit has discussed it with both of you and shared the transcripts?"

Anahera and Hikoa nod. A smirk twitches at my cousin's lip, and her thoughts appear clear as a display screen above her head. *Yes, if by 'discussed it with us', you mean Lirit has only* just *stopped talking about how awesome it was.*

"As far as we can tell, the Denaska see themselves as a collective, each a single cell within the larger organism of their *koteri*, and each *koteri* an organ system within a planet-wide being. This means they have no concept of, nor word for, themselves either as individuals or as a people; 'Denaska' is an Esperanto loan-word simply for the ease of inter-Ghemod conversation, us being spoken-language communicators."

Nitan went over all this information with me before the Koteri Meeting, but I still can't make head nor tail of it. I can't stop myself wondering *but if one of them is talking about a specific individual, how can the one they're talking to know who they mean if none of them have names or pronouns*, even though I know that's the whole point. If one Denaskan has to refer to another specifically, they refer to the relationship: 'the-one-who-spawned-us', 'the-one-who-works-beside-us', 'the-one-we-spawned-with-last-water-season'.

Nitan is talking about the difficulties finding a Denaskan Ambassador to talk to the First Contact team. I blink myself back to attention.

"The Denaska are an anarchist society, with no chosen leadership; they make decisions as a whole for the good of the group. This means that no *koteri* would choose one individual to meet with us; the entire *koteri* had to be able to engage in the discussions. Since we are not able to fit through the Denaskan tunnels and many of them are not able to make it to the surface, we have lent each koteri the necessary technology to make this condition possible. When you meet with the Cultural Ambassador, de will have a specialized comm that will transmit visual of your meeting to der *koteri* and an electronic

vote-box that will tell dem what der community decides in real time if and when decisions need to be made."

Hikoa raises zir hand.

"On the topic of communication technology, has there been any progress on the ghemoid automatons?"

We're not able to use holoimage models for the translation programme, because the light risks damaging the Denaska's sensitive eyes. But we discovered at the Koteri Meeting that the Denaska have magnoreceptive organs in their abdomens, so our electromagnetic nanopixel projectors make them feel sick. Now, we're working on Plan C: automated bipedal mechanoids. But no one has bothered to work on bipedal automata since before the Great Migration. The general consensus is that a) bipedal mechanoids drift too close to our ancestors' near-disaster with Sapient AI, and b) most of our automated machines use tracks or hover tech anyway.

"No," Nitan admits, rubbing her Bantu knots. "Building an automaton that can balance on two legs but can adjust for the extra weight of six arms is proving… more difficult than expected."

A timer goes off on her wristcomp, and she smiles. Everyone on *La Sesa* is strongly encouraged to have a five-minute break for every twenty to thirty minutes of work; Nitan enforces it during presentations, saying she gets tired of talking to a room full of empty eyes and wandering minds.

"Speaking of social customs, as an apology for calling you in before the start of second shift and cutting into your firstmeal time, I've brought akara cakes. It is one thing to revise information you are already familiar with, but I cannot expect you to retain new information on an empty stomach!" Nitan rummages through her bag to retrieve a sealed container. "After break, we will discuss topics appropriate for the first exchange and the best ways to approach them."

The Call to Adventure

The outside hatch door takes up the whole back wall of the small shuttle, a solid disk slotted into thick silicone seals. It has no control panel, no tap-pads, not even an old-fashioned mechanical button: just an antique wheel latch, spoked and bolted.

Bernos marches out of the pilot cab and down the cramped central throughway, nodding at Ana on his route to the latch. With practised movements, Anahera grips the upper spokes. Her whole body is taut with the drag and pull, flesh against metal. The wheel turns. The locks disengage with a dull, well-oiled *thud*.

It is a final sound.

"You might want to put your protective gear on if you haven't already," Ana warns, not yet pushing the hatch open. She and Bernos wrap their *kapkovrual* around their heads and necks. Like the *haltoirĵf*, there were so many different words for similar Old Earth garments that we had to find a new word for the long, light rectangles of cloth we wear off-ship to protect from exposure and radiation burn; *kapkovrual* are analogous to *ghutra, hijab, kerchief, litham, niqaab, shayla, siro-vastra, veil*, or *wimple* worn by the people of Old Earth.

Hikoa and Nitan copy our PSC guides, covering Bantu knots and recently restyled croprow braids under ahimsa silk.

I shake myself out of my panic-induced fact-reciting. Pushing wraparound glareshades up my nose, I drape my *kapkovrual* as well, tugging the tail over my nose and mouth; a small grommet lets me hook the fabric to a fine chain that dangles at my temple from the brim of my visor. I pat my hair taping, make sure the two crossed plaits are still secure under the coffee-fibre fabric. We check cloth wraps and leather gaiters and boot clasps, wristcomps and canteens and hip panniers.

Hikoa squeezes my hand, *I. Love. You.* I squeeze back, one-two-three. *I love you too*.

Anahera pushes the hatch open, kneels, winds an ancient crank to extend the ramp.

I close my eyes and take my first breath of planet breeze, my first breath not filtered and recycled and breathed for a thousand years. From beyond the hatchway, starlight distils like madder-root dye through the thin skin of my eyelids. No, not starlight, *sunlight*. I breathe. I just breathe.

Every sipped breath tastes like celebration, like relief, like the future and the unknown. The air is thirsty, dry, sun-bleached sand and oxidised iron ore. It's like breathing through rocks or dried blood. I can taste the dust – chalky, stifling, metallic – on the back of my throat. My lungs shrivel in my chest like desiccated sponge.

Was the air on Earth like this? Was it this warm-scented, this dust-clogged, this gritty?

Destroyed air filters and particulate fires clog my mind. I twist nervous hands in dhoti-salwar-style legs of my coveralls, shaking out the loose folds. I understand the decontamination measures now. It's more than just making sure we don't infect the native population with our germs or infect our population with the native germs; *nothing* can be tracked back into *La Sesa*.

"Alright, Explorers!" Bernos barks. I jump. "Welcome to Glisesa!"

Spouting a reminder of the rules, the PSC Commander leads the way down the ramp. Nitan is next, and then Hikoa and I side-by-side behind her. Anahera follows last, watchful over us fledgling planeteers.

My hoverchair lurches over the boundary from artificial gravity to real. It doesn't feel much different, at least to the 'chair, just a bump like a shock absorber on a bicycle. It'll be interesting to see if the gravity feels different under my feet, especially with bioboots' cushioning.

I stop at the bottom of the ramp and look out at our new homeworld.

The first thing I see is the primary star.

The planet's star hangs in the endless sky, unsinking, unmoving, lower and closer and bigger than any image of Sol I've ever seen. Red-rimmed yellow, it glares down at us like the eye of a wrathful war-god. We've stepped into a bowl of viscous blood-red light, the angry sun reflecting off the small shuttle's metal-alloy flank to halo us in copper and volcanic-sand glass. I stare back at the star-god until my eyes melt into hot rivulets down my cheeks.

I don't know why I'm crying. I shouldn't be crying; it's a waste of water. The thought rushes over me like a rocky wave. We aren't on the ship anymore. We don't have taps or tanks or cyclers. On the planet's surface, there isn't so much as a stream to refill our canteens. Just mirages shimmering over sun-heated ridges.

How long will the journey to the Denaska village be? Long enough to sweat through a canteen? Long enough to kill us before we can return home, if our water reserves spill into the thirsty sand?

I look across an endless plateau of caked dust and rust-brown rock. Glisesa is a planet stained crimson. The tidal-locked twilight is clotted and red as a scab, a dry-mist gloom clinging as the system star's thick light fights the space-black void and our shielded glareshade lenses. Far in the distance, a mountain range rises jagged and angry under the glaring sun, peaks outlining the horizon with a wide black-and-red smear. Distant mountain shadows reach for the ship. This is a haunted planet, a planet of nightmares and desolation and blood.

This is where we've come? Over twenty-three thousand lightyears to a place that looks resentful at our very presence? And there's another peoples living on this desolate rock. How? Will they hate us as much as the land seems to? What are we doing here?

What are we doing here?

La Sesa is our home. *La Sesa* is the only home any of us can remember. We could have slotted into orbit around any star in any system and lived just as we have for another thousand years. We could have built the ships and orbited Earth until our homeplanet had recovered. We don't need to be here. We *shouldn't* be here.

I should have talked Ana out of signing up. Why did I nudge Hikoa into signing up with me? I can't protect them. Worse, I might put them in danger.

For the first time, my *korsaro* feels too tight under my loose coveralls. The bones are steel rather than flax around my chest; the breathable mesh is solid resined fibreglass rather than rice-germ bio-skin. I push my wide glareshades up my nose, fidget with the cord that secures them around my head. My legs clatter the hoverchair's footrests.

I open my mouth, tongue a scrap of leather inside it. Parched air rushes in, a scream reversed. The dust scrapes in my windpipe, turns to stone in my lungs. I scratch at the fabric smothered over my nose and mouth, yank it down, tear the chain's quick-release free. There's no oxygen. My body wilts, warps, curls up. I am a dry leaf, rigor mortis stiff. There's no oxygen. There's air whistling through the jagged-edged cave in my chest. There's just no oxygen.

I can't protect them. I can't protect myself.

"Lirit?" I only just register Nitan's gentle voice, Hikoa's hand on my shoulder, but I can't make myself respond. Their touch feels there, but not there, faraway, their hands phasing in and out of space over my jumpsuit.

"Lirit. *Karuna*." Hikoa's voice is soft. "We're here. You're safe. We're safe. It's okay."

"Lirit! Get your *drek* together!" I startle as fingers *snap* close to my face. I curl into my 'chair, hating my cowardice. I can't run. It's better to hide. Hide. Stay still. Stay quiet. Freeze. Can I freeze in desert star-heat? Get my *drek* together. I can't. My heart is beating so fast that the sunbird-flutter of my throat must give me away, and my lungs are on fire, a burning flare in the burning landscape, and I can't breathe. Bernos snaps his fingers at me again. He moves fast, casts a lumbering shadow, too close. I flinch.

"Shut the *fulgo* up, Bernos, you *raita kankro*. That doesn't help." Ana squats in front of me, rests her hands on the arms of my 'chair for balance. I look down. Loud angry voices mean *hide*. Freeze in a desert. "Lirit? Lirit, have we lost you already? C'mon, Lirit. Look at me." I blink. A stray tear spikes my lashes into grass-like stalks, dark brown rather than dull purple. I concentrate on the blurred silhouette. "Good. I want you to look at me and tell me the name of a plant starting with 'A'."

"Sound or letter?" Nitan clarifies.

"Sound."

"Ah… ah… " My brain's not in my skull anymore. I build our home-block into the blank space instead, flitting from wall plants to kitchen plants to living room plants to shower plants to…. "A… aloe?"

"Good." Ana pats my knee. "B?"

"Bamboo." That's easy. Our coveralls are made of bamboo. Well, bamboo-linen-and-coffee-fibre blend.

"Ĉ?"

"Chuh… chah…." My shoulders drop. I tilt my head back, but a finger on my chin tips it back down. Right. Look at Ana. Think. Chamomile doesn't count. Um…. "Cholla cactus!"

"D?"

"D… dandelion." There's dandelion thread woven into some of my clothes, to make the fabric stretchy so I can get it over my shoulders.

"Lirit? Where did you wander off to?" Ana taps the back of my hands with her fingertips, and I blink, shaking my head. My eyes narrow. The Anahera-shaped figure is starting to come into sharper focus. She's clearly been trying to get my attention for a couple seconds. "E?"

We work through the first half of the *skribsismo*, symbol by symbol. The rock in my lungs starts to crack, then crumble, then clear. I stop Ana when we get to 'Ĵ' for 'yarrow'.

"You did better this time." Hikoa pushes my visor back a little to kiss my forehead, bends to crouch beside me and link our fingers. "Remember when we first started those exercises? We had to go through all twenty-eight symbols, and sometimes we had to start over again. It only took you twelve this time, even when this is a huge unknown. I'm proud of you."

Even here and now, in this strange, dangerous, haunted place, Hikoa is composed and compassionate. Leaning our foreheads together, I try to match zir breaths, even and deep, familiar and calming, more grounding than the rocks below our feet.

I realize the others are clustered around me like I'm a child lost in the Market Sector. Bernos glares, heavy blond brow sloped low over his eyes. I look down at my lap, clip my *kapkovrual* back in place over my nose and mouth, pick at a hem at my wrist.

"Sorry. I didn't mean to…."

"Don't apologize." Ana smiles soft as I've ever seen her smile. "I had the same reaction my first time out here."

"Really?" I glance up. My cousin is tough as rivets. As far as I've seen, she lets maybe a dozen people behind her armour, and most of those are family. I can't imagine her swept away by panic like me.

"Yeah."

"I didn't know that." I take another deep breath and settle back in my seat, bite down on *why didn't you warn me before*. "Thanks. I think I'm okay."

"Glad to hear it," Bernos mutters. "If we can get on with training…." He jabs a finger in the direction of the research station.

Ana jabs a dirty look right back at him, but she takes my hand and starts off toward the small settlement of tents and a row of parked research buggies. Hikoa falls into step on my other side and takes my other hand, and the three of us walk – or, in my case, whirr – together. Bernos hastens to march a few paces ahead. He snaps to a halt in front of the first in a line of off-ship buggies.

The buggies look like two machines stuck together, a sleek front passenger compartment of domed silica glass and a squarish cargo trunk of stiff, canvas-weave aramid fabric fitted over a rounded bamboo frame with the matte gleam of aluminium-alloy reinforcing.

The buggy Bernos stops beside sits much lower than the others, on skids rather than tracks. Through the domed window, I can see a narrow cot behind the three front seats. It looks like there's room to store my hoverchair below the boxy mattress frame.

"Now, Explorers," Bernos starts. He's recovered his characteristic commanding pose and stentorian instruction. "Which one of you will be driving the buggy?"

He phrases it as a question, but his eyes pass right over Ana and I like we aren't there; part of the reason Hikoa was assigned to the Native Sapients team with us is because ze's the only one of us who can drive.

"Most of our research buggies are tracked, like the first-generation Old Earth exploration rovers," Bernos explains, motioning Hikoa forward. "It means that there is less advanced tech to get clogged with dust and potentially malfunction. However, given the… unique requirements of your teammates –" he flicks a glance at me, "– the Team One buggy has been fitted with a hovermotor. This does mean it will handle more like the… Anahera!" Bernos interrupts himself. "While you're not driving the research buggy, you still need to pay attention!"

I turn. Ana faces the low sun, staring at the distant mountain range. I have to move forward to see her puzzled expression. We follow her gaze.

A column of mist twists up between two peaks, glittering like gems beaded into a dyed-muslin sky.

"I thought Glisesa was a desert planet." Ana twists the sentence up into a question. I only just hear her. The mist catches the low-angled light, turns from water to vapour to fire. It looks like a Pillar Nebula.

"It *is* a desert planet," Bernos says.

"So, why is there mist? As far as we know, there is no water on the planet's surface; Old Hells, it's uncommon for us to even see a cloud. It makes no sense for there to be so much water in the air. That's *drekkin'* weird."

"Anahera," Bernos replies, in the patronising tone I'd heard him use with very young children, the tone that makes me want to grit my teeth and snarl. "What research team did you sign up for?"

"Native Sapients Research?"

"So, what does geology have to do with Native Sapients?"

"The Denaska live in subterranean caverns, and that's the direction we'll be heading, and…."

"Ĉazen." Bernos cuts her off by the last name, the patronising tone ground sharper. "How about you focus on paying attention to training and learning to play nice with our new friends, and you can leave it to the specialised Geology and Meteorology teams. Okay?"

The three of us are a rainbow of conflicting emotions: Ana a seething red; me struck winded, unbelieving bruise-purple; Hikoa muted orange-brown confusion. Bernos doesn't seem to notice. He continues.

"As I was saying, the hovermotor steering won't be that much of an adjustment from personal transport vehicles on-ship, but the terrain…."

"Hold up," Ana interrupts again. She spits out consonants, hides her concern behind bared teeth. "Have there been any reports of mist in the mountains before? Has anyone else seen this? Shouldn't we…."

"What did I just tell you?" Bernos erupts like a solar flare. I flinch. Ana glares. He shoots questions, not pausing for answers. "Did I not just tell you to pay attention during instruction? Have I not told you *repeatedly* that you are to *listen to the people in charge* while off-ship? Have I not trained you well enough to remember that medics only have final say over team leaders when it comes to medical emergencies? Have I not warned you that if you cannot behave, I *will* remove you from off-ship research? It's *mist*, Ĉazen, not an incoming meteor."

Ana opens her mouth, but Bernos cuts her down.

"Last warning, Ĉazen."

I have to squeeze my arms around my legs to stop my footrests rattling. I'm shaking. I can't tell if it's helpless anger or furious panic. *Too much. Too loud. Too soon.* Too scared. Too worn out. I stare at the deteriorating column of mist, before flinching away, glaring at a pebble by Bernos' left foot. I have to pay attention. Besides, it hurts to look at the sun-side horizon for long. It lights up the dust in the air in long laser beams, screams *look how much fire – how much danger – floats around you*.

I stare at the small stone. I can't concentrate on comprehension as well when I have to concentrate on looking at the person who's speaking. He knows that. I don't want to get in trouble. I hate being yelled at. I hate Bernos' arrogant temper. Why couldn't Ana lead our training instead? He *knows* she's good enough to lead the training herself; her primary role on *La Sesa* is teaching emergency response and mixed martial arts.

This isn't how our first journey off-ship was supposed to go. This isn't what I've spent weeks imaging. Stars damn Bernos.

Training continues. It sounds like *La Sesa*'s engine hum, indistinct and rumbling, coming from somewhere many levels below my consciousness. My mind runs away, away from the panic and the resentment and the injustice, and I know I need to focus, I know this training is crucial, I know it's a safety matter, but I don't have the energy left to rein my attention back.

If there's ever a situation where *I* need to drive the buggy, not fully remembering Bernos' instruction is going to be the least of my concerns. I give myself permission to tune out until Anahera nudges me, and we move on to first aid.

Nine standard cycles and another two off-ship trainings later, Hikoa and I clamber into the buggy's cabin as Ana stores my hoverchair and satchel under the backseat cot and secures the supply trunk in the back storage locker. Tucking my hip pannier into the compartment under my seat, I strap myself into the five-point harness.

A rumbling whoosh and the fading whine of engines behind us announces the shuttle's departure back to *La Sesa*. No turning back now.

"*Raita,* this is gonna be drekkin' epic!" Ana climbs into the right-hand seat and reaches for her harness straps.

I hope it's going to be – as my cousin so politely phrases it – "drekkin' epic", but I'm still more anxious than anticipatory. When I've gotten past the fact that my bluntly honest spouse, my impulsively reckless cousin, and notoriously absent-minded me are ambassadors for the entirety of the Ghemod population on Glisesa, I'm sure the hives of honeybees swarming under my stomach will settle, and the kicks of adrenaline will spark excitement rather than terror.

At least our first day meeting with the Denaska can't go as badly as our first day training off-ship, right?

Famous last words, the voice in my head intones, dry as the landscape.

No. We've learned as much as we could about the Denaska in the period of early exploration, during the ten years that *La Sesa* was losing its momentum around the binary suns at the edge of the system. I've trained for this for six standard years; seventy-eight Glisesan years, if I want to feel even more accomplished. I've got my spouse and my cousin by my side. I've met with the Denaska representative via holovid conference. I've interviewed all of the First Contact team. I've pored over every report and account and article on the Denaska from the last decade until I could list every dialectic variation and confirmed finding and cultural hypothesis. I cannot be more ready. I will take the fluttery, gossamer-winged breathlessness and swarming, fevered stings of adrenaline, and I will *make* myself be excited.

"Everyone ready? All buckled in?" Hikoa asks, finger on the ignition pad.

"Yeah." Ana settles back into the seat. She tucks her arms behind her head and throws her legs out into the footwell like she's just tossing her shoes somewhere and doesn't care that her feet are still in them. Her elbow nearly pops Hikoa in the temple. Ze ducks, practised in Ana-limb-avoidance.

"Yes," I chime. I'm as ready as I'll ever be.

Hikoa presses the ignition pad. The buggy lifts with a high, electric whine and the slightest wobble. The gyros kick in, and we even out, the skids hovering a metre above the rocky ground. Ze taps the buggy's small control panel, selects the GPS programme, and inputs the coordinates for our

meeting point. Pointing our nose toward the volcanic peak, ze opens the throttle and peels us away from the line of buggies. We speed away from the shuttle settlement and out over the open plains.

I spend the journey with my face pressed flat to the side window like an excited child. The safety belts cut into my shoulders, and the buckles dig into the steel busk of my *korsaro*; I ignore the pressure.

The landscape is so… vast. That's the only word I can think of. It's *vast*. No matter where I look, no matter how far into the horizon I train my bespectacled eye, there are no walls, no rooms, no corridors, no doorways, no control pads, nothing but sand and rock and sky. The plains are sculpted into features I don't even have proper names for yet: dry, hardy tussock grasses tuft like purple-black hair on the balding heads of UV-burnt dunes; bulging, puckered keloids and sunken, pitted atrophic scars rip into the landscape's thick hide; colossal pinnacles rise solitary somewhere in the far distance, pillar nebulae turned to stone, their tops sheared off flat and jagged.

It makes me wonder if pre-Migration Ghemod had some way to judge distances across Old Earth. I don't see how they could. Back at home, every corridor wall panel is three metres squared, so even with my bad depth perception, I can always estimate how far away something is; but there's no consistency to the size of living things, so there's nothing to measure against out here.

According to the GPS, we travel five kilometres of sparse-grassed desert plains before the land beneath the hover motors starts to tilt into a series of sharp inclines. The gyros whirr, and the buggy's nose pitches down a little to compensate for the angle. With the buggy staying level like my hoverchair does, it feels like we're levitating up the foothills.

We've reached the tablelands. Hikoa switchbacks us up and up and up, until we tip over onto the plateau and continue toward our meeting point.

The plant life is different up here. On the plains and around the shuttle landing, there's almost nothing but sparse tufts of spiky purple grass. Here, the grass starts to twist into matted, weed-like undergrowth and low, woody shrubs. I almost want to stop and touch them, trace their spindly branches of strange patchy bark, stroke their insect-swarms of spiny leaves, smell their fingernail-tiny white flowers.

I remember how inhospitable the lower plains seem. We are still visitors on this planet; we don't know what plants secrete toxins or wield thorns or produce enzymes to trap and digest unwary flesh. We don't know what other alien defences they may have evolved to survive this barren place.

Glisesa looks like a dead planet, charred and desiccated, but it hides its life in cracks in the red rock and the cool shadows of purple cliffs and the plants that have learned to mimic stone.

It's not a dead planet, but it still may be a deadly one.

The mountains grow in the glass-shield, until we pass into the jagged-edged night of their shadow. The buggy's front lights switch on and the GPS screen glows backlit. I trade my glareshades for my set of off-ship regulation spectacles, clipping the arms to the cord behind my head, and glance over the readouts.

Our meeting point is less than a kilometre away now. Less than a kilometre, and then we'll be meeting the ambassador of an alien race. Breath fluttery through the renewed buzz of anxious wings in my gut, I reach for my plait and curse when my fingers find only coffee-fibre cloth and ribbon taping.

I need to do something with my sudden-shaky hands. Rummaging under my seat, I find my travel bottle of rad block and busy myself smothering another layer on the exposed skin of my face and hands. Ana waves it off when I try to pass it to her behind Hikoa's head.

"Lirit, you don't need to fuss," she tells me. "We all put on rad block before we got in the buggy, and the Rendezvous is underground anyway."

"Easy for you to say," I force myself to banter back, though my cheek muscles strain around my smile. "For some of us, UV damage makes us turn bright red and makes the top layer of our skin peel off and hurts like Old Hells."

We may not have natural starlight – *sunlight*, I correct myself again, *from the perspective of a planet's surface, light from its primary star is referred to as sunlight* – on *La Sesa*, but I've learned very quickly not to spend more than about ten minutes at a time in the Gardens or the solar simulator pods without rad block.

Silence creeps back in through the buggy's air vents, and my worries and the pressure of our responsibilities return with it, settling like a heavy brocade mantle over our cramped shoulders. I run through our last briefing, filling my mind with lists of facts so there's no room for fear.

Ghemod have learned through our grim history that we fear what we don't understand. My role right now, with the help of Hikoa and Ana, is to learn about these people, to understand so that we don't need to fear. My role is to assuage the Denaska's fears about us. They have every right to fear these strange, noisy, bipedal aliens on their homeworld; by sharing ourselves – who we are, why we're here – we take the first step toward integrating peacefully… and by stating our goals, we hold ourselves accountable as well. By listening and learning and unifying on *their* terms, we take the first steps away from the mistakes of our ancestors.

Far above our upward climb, the highest ridges of the mountains catch in the red sun pouring like molten copper over the peaks, casting the valleys in shadow. In the darkness, it's hard to see much outside the glow of the buggy lights. The dry, low scrubland becomes a monstrous crowd of gnarled, stooped shapes dancing in the moving beam.

My worries crawl about within the matted branches. *Will we fall into the same actions of our colonising ancestors? If we make a mistake, will it spark the first inter-species war? Our species hasn't had a full-scale war since the Great Migration; we left our weapons on Old Earth. Do the Denaska have weapons? If it comes to war, will we be slaughtered? If it comes to war, do we have any* right *to fight back? This is not our place. This is not our home. Our home is La Sesa. Our home* should *be Earth,* should *be Sol – that distant star our best telescopes can only just see.*

I'm relieved when Hikoa pulls me out of the muck of my thoughts with a gentle squeeze to my mid-thigh. A puff of dust floats up on the still air as ze powers off the engine and the buggy sinks to its skids.

"We're here."

I rub nervous, breathy fog off the glass. 'Here' is the entrance of the pyroduct: a kilometres-long, livid-red hypertrophic scar slashed up the volcano's weathered flank; an open cleft of volcanic basalt where a section of the crusted roof has collapsed; a crumbled mosaic that has tumbled into a craggy approximation of steps.

Ana is first one out of the cabin, on her feet as soon as the buggy dome retracts upward. She stretches her spine and shoulders and neck in a series of concerning pops, before heading to the back of the buggy where she's stored the supply trunk. Hikoa clambers out after her.

"Need a hand?" Ze sticks zir head back through the open dome to talk to me. "Want me to get your hoverchair?"

"No, I'm okay. Thanks." I'm running on shakily excited adrenaline and pre-emptive pain medication. I pack away the *kapkovrual* visor under my seat and climb out of the cabin on fear-numb limbs. I feel the heavy mantle of *Ambassador* settle itself over my shoulders. My knees shake under the weight.

Anahera hands me my caving gear. I buckle on the helmet and oxy tank; flash the attached head torch to make triply sure it's still working; stretch the flexible air hose to confirm I can fit the mask over my face in time; inspect the protective leather-aramid panels sewn to the elbows, forearms, knees, shins, and butt of my coveralls; secure the cloth wraps around my wrist braces and the short leather gaiters over my high-ankled bioboots.

A tap on the side of my spectacles frame turns on the little computer chip lodged in the varnished bamboo. Hikoa's handcomp will link the translation programme to my spectacles and the other two's display lenses, giving us a written transcript of what the Denaska ambassador says. I glance at the top of my left lens. When I blink, it flickers on and types, <*waiting to transcribe*>.

I run a last, anxious check list through my mind, patting myself down as I go: caving gear, including decent helmet and oxy; one-litre canteen; pannier with basic personal med kit; a portable hoverbulb, set to mimic a much dimmer echo of Glisesa's red light; the satchel off my hoverchair, now slung over Hikoa's shoulders. Hikoa also has the translation kit; Anahera has the supply trunk and the full med kit. The only thing left is….

With an uncharacteristic, almost ceremonial solemnity, Anahera passes me the last, most important item: a two-litre, leather waterskin of the unimaginably ancient Old Earth design, engraved with a recreation of the Pioneer Plaque from the first ever Ghemod object to leave the Sol System. *La Sesa*'s most talented leatherworkers crafted it specifically for this occasion. I cradle the waterskin in the crook of one elbow, wrapping both arms around it like I would an infant.

Fresh water, the most priceless gift a desert people can receive, something we have – until nine cycles ago – taken for granted.

This is it. We can do this. I can do this. I take a deep breath through the cloth filter over my face.

I would be lying if I said I'm not terribly, terribly afraid, but I'm not afraid of the Denaska.

I'm afraid of us.

We step onto the silty pyroduct floor. The tunnel itself is probably three or four times the size of *La Sesa*'s corridors in every dimension, streaked with dust and sand blown in from the surface. The air smells dry, crumbly, slightly sulphurous. Thinking again of clogged air filters and particulate fires, I check the little square in the upper corner of my wristcomp screen. It's still green; it hasn't detected anything toxic.

A small silhouette clambers up a tall boulder far outside the pool of light from the entrance. The Denaskan Ambassador waves multiple arms in a complicated, joyful welcome-dance. I find myself waving back, before noticing the woven band of coarse plant fibre over der lumpy face. Of course. Since the Denaska almost never venture out of their subterranean warrens, they have decent monochrome vision in dark environments but cannot tolerate direct light; that's why we're meeting in a pyroduct cave and why the hoverbulb is set so low. The Ambassador will have picked up on our presence by the hoverbulb's faint light and the comparatively alien scent of our bodies – apparently, Ghemod smell *really* strong to species with more acute senses – and will have pinpointed where exactly we are by the vibration of our footsteps through the rock.

With a bow and a wave, the Ambassador beckons us further into the pyroduct. The farther we go, the less dust and dirt from the planet's surface, and the more creases and corrugations in the exposed cold-lava floor. After we've walked maybe the equivalent of the Meditation Garden's three-hundred-metre width, the floor becomes so bumpy and uneven that it's like walking over a tangle of metal cables. The first time I trip, I hand the waterskin back to Ana to carry. The third time I trip, I learn to plant the grip of my bioboots across as many of the folds in the rock as my feet will reach. Noticing my pace lag, Hikoa loops a subtle arm under my shoulders so I don't overbalance.

"Thanks," I whisper.

"Why are we whispering?" ze whispers back with a grin.

"I would like to avoid the Ambassador overhearing that I need to be rescued from falling over my own feet."

"The Denaska are almost completely deaf."

"*Almost* completely."

"Yes." The teasing angle of zir eyebrow is the only tell that Hikoa's deadpan isn't as serious as zir nod. "They 'hear' through vibrations through the rock. They may not hear you whispering to me, but they will have already 'heard' you tripping over. So… why are we whispering?"

"…" Pinching the bridge of my nose, I press my lips together behind a peevish sigh. "Why did Nitan think it was a good idea to send a Chronicler-Ambassador who forgets her brain when she panics? Apparently, we need to turn around, because I must have left it in the buggy."

"Because you're friendly and kind and helpful and succinct when you need to be, and you're the best choice for the role, that's why." Hikoa kisses my cheek, bumping the sides of our caving helmets together in gentle reassurance. "Remember what Nitan told Bernos?"

"Unprofessional!" I mutter under my breath, but the only heat I can muster is my face's UV-burn pink; I wish I still had the low visor and darkened glareshades to hide behind. Hikoa just grins and kisses my cheek again.

When the entrance is a faint star-glow in the distant darkness and the only light is the impossibly dim red glow of the hoverbulb, the Ambassador removes the plant-fibre blind. The transmitter and vote-box Nitan mentioned sits in a natural alcove in the wall. Settling down beside the tech, de looks up at us and pats the stone to der left. My cousin and I join dem, crossing our legs to sit on the corrugated basalt. Ana hands me the waterskin.

Hikoa busies zirself positioning the translator set-up – handcomp, display lenses, vibration stamper, mag projector, box full of electromagnetic nanopixels – on a ledge of rock maybe a quarter of a metre above the tunnel floor.

I attended the Koteri Meeting from my desk in the Archive offices, but this is the closest I've ever seen a Denaska in person. While we wait in anxious, buzzing silence, I observe the alien Ambassador while trying not to look like I'm observing dem.

For want of a better descriptor, the Denaska look a little like oversized tardigrades mated with rollbugs: a squat body the shape of an oak barrel, pudgy with stored water. De is about the length and width of Ana's muscular thigh, with eight stubby limbs ending in three blunt, claw-like digits. Der limbs have no joints. De has no recognizable ears or nose, and der eyes are buried under flat flaps of flesh; the only way to tell one end from the other is a small, almost perfectly round hole of a mouth that protrudes like a cylindrical snout. A sparse fuzz of whiskery hairs around der squashed face, across the underside of der belly, and between der claws make dem seem soft despite the overlapping sheets of thin chitin that covers der whole body. The Denaskan sign-word for their chitin layer translates as 'cuticle'; the Ambassador's cuticle is the same rusted red-brown colour as the mountain rock, with an unhealthy undertone of grey.

I stop that thought. Yes, a grey-skinned Ghemod is unhealthy, but a grey-skinned Denaska is normal, from what we've seen so far. That said, while I don't know, I don't think the whisker-thin cracks along the Ambassador's worn-down cuticle are a sigh of health.

Shame splashes down into my stomach, squirmy like I've swallowed a tank of live rollbugs; I've sat beside the Ambassador of another sapient species for all of ten seconds, and I've already mentally dismissed dem as 'revoltingly *krul*-ugly'.

I know better than that.

With a last, decisive *tap*, Hikoa sits back and hands the other set of display lenses to Ana. The projector whirrs to life, and a swarm of computerized, centimetre-cubed blocks rises above the magnetic box, taking the pre-programmed shape of a Denaska-sized Ghemod with eight three-fingered limbs. The… well… *pixelated* edges and solid, metallic gleam of the nanopixels are so different from the translucent blue holoimages we're used to, but the light given off by a holoprojector would be blinding to our hosts.

The Denaskan Ambassador… winces, I think? I can't tell. The folds of flesh around der face contract in a shuddery pinch for half a second and then relax back to reveal flat, black, pinhead eyes. I move the projector box backward.

"Saluton, Ambassador," I start, and the nanopixel miniature bows low, its many arms unfurling in sequence. "I am Ambassador-Chronicler L-I-R." Ghemod names, in our spoken language, don't

really translate into any dialect of the Denaska's claw-speech. Instead, the holo forms the first three letters of my name in modified Glisesan sign, for three fingers rather than our five. I wave at the others. "These are my colleagues, Envoy-Translator K-O-A and Envoy-Medic A-N-A. We are greatly honoured to have this opportunity to learn together with you."

<*We recognize you, L-I-R, Weaver-of-Tales. We [have] eye-sensed you before.*> The Ambassador returns the bowed greeting, more graceful than the nanopixels, like a flower blooming.

"You will have seen a nanopixel model of me at the Koteri Meeting," I explain, indicating the translation programme's figure; it motions to itself. "To show our gratitude and our friendship, we have brought water to share."

Careful to demonstrate to the Ambassador what I'm doing, I uncork the ornate waterskin, take a sip, pour a little into a small cup, and plug the stopper again, before offering the skin in both hands, laying in on the ground before the Ambassador. Full to its cork, the skin sloshes and bulges. The waterskin is heavy, nearly as big as the Ambassador derself, and de struggles to lift it. As de places it beside the vote-box, the fleshy folds around der face peel back. De turns back to us, front claw-hands twitching.

The Ambassador stands on der back limbs and takes the cup I offer. Extending der mouth-tube like a steri-straw, de drinks.

<*Welcome, water-friends. Thank you [for the] generous gift. We [are] joyful you [are] with us. We [are] joyful [to] learn with you.*>

The translation scrolls along the top of my left lens as de signs. It takes a couple sentences for me to reacclimatize; Denaskan language has far simpler syntax than Esperanto, which can make it difficult to understand, so the translation programme adds 'missing' parts of speech in brackets.

<*We do-not own individual* –> This is a Glisesan loan-sign, the concept of being 'individual', 'singular', 'alone' as alien to the Denaska as we are. From what we've gathered, a Denaska without a *koteri* tends not to live long. <– *name-designations [as] you [do], but [as a] sign [of] our will [to] learn with you, we have taken [the] designation D-E-N.*>

"It is an honour to meet you face to face, D-E-N, and to share water and stories with your *koteri*." I layer my professional Ambassador's mantle over my amusement. Every single Denaska who meets

with *La Sesa* takes the same designation and seems confused that they have to learn different ones for every Ghemod they meet.

Because I'm already thinking about it, I remember to refer to Nitan in the way de understands.

"At the Koteri Meeting, the-one-who-mentors-me told the story of how we came to be here. Would you please share with us the story of how your people came to be?"

D-E-N settles back onto der haunches, and I am reminded strongly of the posture both Nitan and I settle into when we host community story-tellings. There are few 'Ghemod Universals' – traits common to all Old Earth cultures – but apparently there are even a handful of True Universals.

<*The-Great-Eye created us to-be Its companions.*>

"The Great Eye?" Hikoa asks, peering at the handcomp screen under furrowed brows. "Have we translated that right?"

<*The-Great-Eye,*> de repeats. In signed languages, inflection is conveyed through expression and body language; we've had a *drek* of a lot of trouble signing with a species that has no recognizable – to us, at least – face. I read the words across the stop of my left lens, and they could be reverent or scornful of this Eye, or patient with these strange aliens from so far away, or incredulous at our ignorance. I can't tell. <*[The] One Eye [of the] Deity in [the] Sun.*>

Sun? I nearly ask aloud, the word a strange shape on my tongue, before I remember the difference in off-ship vocabulary. Right. The Great Eye must be the personification of the planet's primary star.

"Is The Great Eye your only deity?" I ask instead, excitement bubbling like fizzy water. *This* is why we're here: culture, lore, mythos, history, and the intersections between. "Or do you have other deities you worship as well? If there are other deities, is The-Great-Eye the most senior among them?"

<*The-Great-Eye [is the] only Deity we worship. We do-not worship The-Planet-Soul and The-Stone-Heart any-longer.*>

From my right, Anahera makes a surprised huff.

"Three Deities, but two of them are on the outs. Now *that* sounds like a story," she whispers to me. I hush her. At least the Ambassador isn't likely to have heard; the nanopixel figure hasn't registered her words.

<The-Great-Eye [was] lonely, so It formed three planets [to be] Its companions. This-planet [was] once covered in water and ice, many thousands [of] tunnel-heights deep, with only [the] tops [of the] tallest land-points dry. Deep beneath [the] big ice sheet on [the] sunless side, ocean currents kept [the] water warm and fluid.>

I remember from briefings that the basic Denaskan unit of length is the height of one of their inter-*koteri* tunnels, so about half a metre. The tall land-points must mean mountains.

<But [the] planets [were] not good companions to The-Great-Eye. They had no living things and no soul [of] their own; they [were] only water and ice and rock. [So,] The-Great-Eye came down [to] the tallest land-point and mixed water with clay [to] create [the] first one hundred cell-units [of the] first koteri*, [the] first [of] us.>*

Huh. In only the duration of the Ambassador's pause, I can think of six Old Earth creation myths where Deities formed the Ghemod from wet clay or soil. I have tried not to make my own assumptions or expectations as to the Denaska; I certainly haven't expected their stories to be so familiar.

<Now this-planet had life, The-Great-Eye held it close [so] It [could] always look at its face and see us. We lived on [the] surface, in Its light. We made our koteri *on [the] shores [of the] planetary ocean. We gathered sea-moss from [the] ocean and farmed rock-moss in [the] shade [of the] tall plants. We thrived. We gave thanks to The-Great-Eye for our creation and our* koteri.*>*

The Denaska initially evolved on the surface? Glisesa was a water planet? What happened? What changed? I lean forward, elbows on my crossed knees and chin on my palms, listening with my whole body.

<The-Great-Eye [was] happy with Its creation, but It [was] still lonely; Its light would dim and grow cold when It remembered that It had no equal, no mate, no koteri*, only young spawn who It watched over but who could not speak with it.*

It [was] overjoyed when The-Planet-Soul woke. Nurtured by The-Great-Eye and tended to by [the] first koteri, this-planet became not only alive with water and living things, but alive within Itself. In time, this-planet formed [a] spirit, [a] being, [a] self; It became [a] Deity. The-Great-Eye, already fond [of] Its creation, [was] happy. [A] koteri *[of] two will-not survive, but Deities are different. The two Deities [were] happy.>*

I find my hand stretching along the basalt floor, fingers outstretched. Hikoa notices, smiles, twines our hands. While we rely on each other, we are not a *koteri* of two either; we are part of a web anchored within our homeblock, our parents, our siblings, their partners, our friends, our colleagues, the whole of *La Sesa*. We are so surprisingly much like the Denaska in that aspect, too.

<But many generations after [the] Waking [of] The-Planet-Soul, [a] great Stone fell from [the] sky, crashing into [the] land points and sending up [a] great cloud [of] dust and sand. The-Planet-Soul took [the] great Stone and [the] dust and [the] sand, and It imbued it with part [of] Its soul to form [a] third Deity, The-Stone-Heart. The-Planet-Soul decided to keep Its new companion close, as The-Great-Eye kept It close.

The-Great-Eye [was] angry with The-Planet-Soul, hurt to-be betrayed and cast from [the] Deities' koteri. It [was] hot-angry, sending violent flares [that] scorched [the] planet, stripping away air and boiling away water. It [was] cold-angry, withholding Its light and warmth, and sending ice-seasons [that] froze [the] planet solid. Strong winds blew without end, so loud we [could] not hear anything else.

We had survived periods [of] The-Great-Eye's cold sorrow before, but this [was] different. [The] koteri's moss crop failed. [The] ice sheet grew farther and farther from [the] sunless side, freezing [the] ocean, meaning we [could] not Tun. We began to die.

The-Planet-Soul saw our plight, and It tried to help us, calling forth Its hot red blood and Its hot damp breath to keep us warm. But Its blood burned us, and Its breath choked our [no direct translation: Denaska respiratory system, comprised of pores in the flesh between cuticle plates. See: cuticle.]>

It takes me a second to remember that the Denaska have blue-green blood, which would make red blood something alien. But that still doesn't answer how a planet can bleed. I let my eyes focus on the pyroduct wall as I try to understand, but then it dawns.

Of course. We're sitting in a *pyroduct*: a tunnel formed of molten rock. There would have been volcanic eruptions that sent lava and ash and gases into the atmosphere.

I draw my attention back to the Ambassador and der story.

<Dying, [the] koteri *fled underground. We stayed in tun sleep, sheltered in hidden waters, until The-Great-Eye's anger waned.>*

What the Ambassador's myth describes sounds like the flare state of a young red dwarf star. Pre-Migration, there were scientists who disputed building the city-ships, arguing that red dwarf star systems – the most common in the Milky Way galaxy – were inherently uninhabitable for the very reasons the story tells; violent coronal mass ejections would erode the atmosphere, and dim star spots would cause global winters.

Thank the stars that Glisesa stabilized some before *La Sesa* arrived.

<When [the] koteri *woke, we discovered The-Planet-Soul had died.*

We could not go back [to] the surface. There [was] no water left for us [to] tun *when we needed. There [was] no shade [for] us [to] grow rock-moss. Our [no direct translation: organ in the abdomen used for detecting planetary magnetic fields] [were] confused; [the] magnetic field had changed.*

We, too, [had] changed during our long tun sleep. We [had been] too long without light. The-Great-Eye hurt us. We [could] survive on [the] surface, but we [could] not thrive.

We made our koteri underground, but we continue to worship The-Great-Eye, hoping It will accept our offer to become part [of] our wider koteri, so It will not be alone and angry anymore. We [have] remained underground, only coming to [the] surface on pilgrimages, ever since we woke… until strange aliens came from beyond [the] sight [of] the-Great-Eye. [The] aliens….>

The Ambassador stops, looking down at der front claws, glancing over at the full waterskin. I make a guess.

"Please speak freely. We won't be offended." I smile at der, remembering at the last moment to keep my teeth hidden behind my lips. When Nitan greeted the Ambassadors at the Koteri Meeting with a smile, it nearly caused a diplomatic incident. The Denaska don't really have teeth as we would recognize them, but the predators who hunt them do. As far as we know, Ghemod are the only creatures who don't consider bared teeth a threat display. "You seem strange to us, so we must seem equally strange to you."

The Ambassador continues, eyes hidden in der fleshy face. Der signs are quick, uncoordinated, embarrassed.

<[The] aliens seemed… larva-soft. They leaked water out [of] their bodies. They did not have [a] cuticle layer to shield their exposed flesh from burning. If their special air sacks became damaged

or dried out, they [could] not breathe with their skin. They [could] not tun. They did not have enough legs to-be steady on [the] land-points. We did not think they [would] survive long on [the] surface.

But [the] aliens brought ways to carry water with them, materials to protect themselves from the-Great-Eye's heat, poultices to heal Its burn.

The-Great-Eye does not seem to-be angered by their insolence. We pray this does not change.>

The Second Call

Traversing rocky, uneven terrain is much easier in a hoverchair than it would be in an old-fashioned tracked or wheeled chair, but it's still… turbulent. Hoverchairs are designed and built for use on the city-ships, for moss-carpeted metal, polished panelled oak, fleecy wool rugs. On the big chunks of volcanic rock, my 'chair drops over ledges, over-corrects, bounces like a repelled magnet. There are patches of the track where it's easier to send the hoverchair bumping on ahead without me and then scuttle down to meet it at the bottom.

This is one of those times. I can see the hoverchair mocking me gently from a flat ledge some ten metres down. Anahera sits cross-legged on the rusty dirt beside it.

It was a difficult enough hike on the way up to the pyroduct. It's far worse on the way back down. I thought caves were supposed to be *underground*; why did the Denaska choose a lava cave that ends halfway up a volcano? Old Hells, there's a whole mountain range that spans hundreds of kilometres across Glisesa's northern hemisphere and an equally sprawling limestone cave system beneath it. Why did the Denaska choose to live under a stars-damned *volcano*?

At least the volcano is long dormant, and the Geo teams have put a vast array of seismometric sensors to warn us if it decides nap time is over. Thank Teksisto for small mercies.

Long, low purple shadows and wall-less expanses sharpen contrasts and make it harder to judge distance. Loose scoria slips underfoot, a series of miniature, pebbled avalanches as Hikoa and I scudder down the mountainside, rollbug-like, digging shallow footholds with biobooted heels.

I stumble, toppling over backward like a finska pin. The impact empties my lungs. My bones judder in their sockets. I fan-blade down the slope in a spinning, tumbling flail of limbs, shrieking the whole way down.

A small, dry shrub growing from a crack in the rock catches me by the scruff of my coveralls.

"Ow."

Up the slope, there's the quiet scrabble of slipped footing as Hikoa skids after me. Sliding to a stop in a graceful spray of scoria, ze untangles me from the grass-blade-thin branches.

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah." I run a quick diagnostic. No major pain. All limbs still respond. My head throbs, but it was doing that before I almost landed on it. "Yeah, I think my pride is more bruised than the rest of me… possibly except my tailbone."

Ana snorts with laughter as soon as I'm back on my feet.

"I love you dearly, cuz," I call down to her. "but right now, I am going to throw something at you. That something is probably going to be a rock."

"Hey," she yells back. "I waited to see if you were alright *before* I laughed."

"Your tender mercies will be spoken of for generations as the pinnacle of Ghemod compassion."

Our new many-legged friend had no trouble leading us up to their village; four pairs of legs seem much better than just one pair on this terrain. It might be bumpier, but maybe I should ask Hikoa if ze can make me a chair with walking suction-grip tracks instead of a hover-motor? That way, the chair can do the climbing for me.

I rub my bruised backside.

Pulse pounding up my spine, I grip Hikoa's hand as ze hauls me onto and over yet another wobbly boulder. I'm starting to think Bernos had a point. This part of the commute is a bit more than I can comfortably handle. At least we only have to travel out here once a standard week, rather than once a standard cycle. Now that we've established that we can't fit into the Denaska's tiny tunnels, we can arrange to meet at a slightly lower altitude.

Hikoa and I finally make it onto the ledge. Ana clambers to her feet.

"About time," she says, brushing reddish-black dust off the seat of her loose trousers. A stain stays on the pale linen. I hold up a hand, lean my weight on my thighs, wait to catch my breath before I reply. My lungs won't quite fill up.

"So says the person assigned to keep me safe." I call the hoverchair to me, pull myself into the seat. "Should I tell Bernos that you watched from the bottom as I fell down a cliff?"

"It's not a *cliff*; it's a slope. If you'd actually fallen, I would have caught you before you hit the bottom. Besides, like you'd rather your cousin carry you around when Hikoa's with us." Her eyebrows waggle above her glareshades.

"… True." I stand on the footrest to peck zir cheek.

"You two are like something outta a bad holoflick."

"C'mon," Hikoa cuts in. The span of high, brown cheekbones visible between folds of fabric has the faintest dusky pink tinge. The long shadows cut over the planes of zir angular face. "We should get going, and it's not far back to the buggy now. You can argue on the drive back."

I set the hoverchair controls to find the buggy's locater so I don't need to think. I relax into the seat as we set off; if I remember correctly from the way up, this ledge marks the worst of the boulders and rocks, but the jouncing is still enough to cause sore muscles if I try to brace myself rather than swaying with the movement.

We haven't gone another twenty metres when I realize Ana isn't walking next to me anymore. I stop the 'chair and turn around.

Ana looks up at the rising edge of the volcanic ridge, a hand shading her eyes from the barren red light. I follow her gaze. Beside me, Hikoa murmurs an oath.

A winged shadow passes over the red sun like an eclipse. That is strange enough on this heavy-cored, high-gravity planet, but they bend their neck in flight to a device buckled around their leg on a thick leather band. Faint whistles and screeches glide like darts on the still dusk air, alien to our ears but distinctly a language.

There is another sapient species on Glisesa.

Three skeins of thoughts tangle over themselves as we speak at once.

"I'm not crazy, right? Did you see that, too?"

"What the… how? *How?*"

"Why haven't any of the teams said anything about…."

"But, then, what else are we missing?"

"Could that be… Do you remember that weird mist! That day at the first training! I wonder if…"

"That… that being had *tech.*"

"They had a *language*!"

"We're following, right?" Ana's question makes my head snap around so fast my neck cracks. I hadn't even thought of that. "It looks like they're headed for the end of mountain range. If we follow them, we can see which way they go across the salt flats over there, and we can figure out where they might have come from, or where they're going."

"But we're due back at the shuttle landing in…" I check my wristcomp. "… less than half a standard hour."

"So, we comm on the way," Ana shrugs. "We catch up if we can, talk to them if we can, and if we can't understand them, you work your cultural magic so they know we're not a threat; or, if we don't catch up, we figure out enough to find their settlement and come back with the full 'hey, we're your new neighbours' routine like we did with the Denaska."

I pause, shifting my weight from foot to achy foot. We can't. We'll inconvenience our shuttle pilot and the people at the research labs if we don't show up on time. We're due to dock with *La Sesa* before lastmeal; tonight's supposed to be fortnightly shared meal with my parents and Ezraĉ. We'll worry our families silly if we don't come back from off-ship.

"That tech gadget on their leg looked pretty flash," Hikoa says, slow and careful, a scale hanging in balance. "It would be awesome to see how it works."

Ten years of exploration, and not one probe or team has ever recorded sighting a being like that. Teksisto only knows if we might see them again. The chance to learn about a new peoples, a new culture, a new language.

"It's your call, Lirit," Hikoa says. "You're the one who will have to do the most extra work if we catch up with them."

"Um…" I hate making decisions. I look to the soaring silhouette; our chance of so much is a shrinking grey shadow sinking into a blood-stain sky. *Ah, stars and planets, this is a bad idea*. "Okay. We follow as far as the salt flats, and we radio in a report on the way."

"Yes!" Ana crows, punching a fist up. She misquotes *Planet Earth* with a grin. "To the buggy! We're goin' adventuring!"

The being is a dark, smoky spot in the distant sky by the time Hikoa starts the buggy whizzing across the plateau.

I pick up the comm unit, relay signal through the research station, listen to the buzz and crackle as it tries to connect to Nitan's comm, *one second, two, three… c'mon, Nitan, pick up*…. Hikoa accelerates around a boulder, hands steady and sure on the old-fashioned wheel. I stare at a spot on the far horizon, fighting the panic of the galaxy whipping past the viewport.

"Nitan Mun-Wen," she answers. "Meritan Archives Head Office."

"Hey, Nitan, Native Sapients Research team checking in." I should have thought about what to say before I made the call. "Uh… long story… slightly less long, we've just seen an alien. We're going to try to make contact."

I can almost hear the lines around Nitan's dark eyes tighten in the puzzled silence.

"You were *supposed* to see aliens. It's your *job* to make contact with aliens. What am I missing here?"

Old Hells, I'm telling this all backward. I'm rattled.

"Last time I checked, the Denaska can't fly." I describe the strange being, the laboured wing-beats and short glides like evolution still hasn't caught up with gravity, the signs of language and technology, our decision to follow as far as the salt flats. "I've read through all the previous research reports three times over. No one has mentioned seeing something – some*one* – like this before, have they? The Denaska haven't mentioned sharing the planet with another group of sapients, either."

"No." Nitan is silent for a moment. "I want to ask if you're sure, but…."

"I wouldn't have believed it if I hadn't seen it myself. Hikoa and Ana are with me, obviously, and they saw it, too."

"We did," Hikoa assures, brief and clipped, whole body focused on the terrain ahead.

"It seems that we've missed something, haven't we?" I picture Nitan pressing her full lips thin, rubbing a hand over her Bantu knots.

"It seems so."

"Should I send down the First Contact team to assist you, or do you feel confident handling this yourselves?"

"Um…."

The First Contact team are so much more qualified for this than us. We were only four and five when *La Sesa* sent out exploration probes from the edge of the star system; we've only ever read about first-stage exploration and the First Meeting. Chasing after an alien like farmhands after a chicken is the Worst. Possible. Way to introduce ourselves as a non-threat. There are many, many extant films from Old Earth to tell us how violently a pre-Migration Ghemod would react to a weird alien showing up on their homeplanet, and there's nothing to say that this species wouldn't react with just as much self-preservationary violence. It's taken ten years to build the translation programme to communicate with the Denaska. There's no way we'll be able to understand this being, even if we do catch up.

I look out the front viewport. It's not likely we're going to catch up; the being is barely a grey pinhead in the red-linen sky.

I squeeze my eyes shut, reach for my plait, remember my hair's bound under my *kapkovrual*. *Drek* on a bagel, I hate having to make decisions.

"How long would it take to get you and the rest of First Contact team here?" I ask instead.

I try to run the numbers in my head, but digits swim in my grey matter; on the other end of the staticky line, I can hear the scratch of Nitan's stylus doing more successfully. The team hasn't been called on for off-ship work in the better part of half a decade; it'll take some time for the four of them to find their uniforms, get enough supplies together, arrange a shuttle to transport them….

I am the most senior apprentice Chronicler on *La Sesa*; I could have already sat my finals but simply haven't gotten around to it. Anahera is one of the most highly trained and experienced emergency rescuers, one of the few who have needed to use their skills to save lives. I know the Hullsen family will be grateful to her for a long time. As well as being one of the coders on the Translation Project, Hikoa speaks Esperanto fluently, Yoruba, Igbo, and Hindi enough to get by, and French and Māori in broken sentences. We're together. We might not have quite as much practical experience as the First Contact team, but we are capable.

"No." I make the choice. "By the time anyone can get here from *La Sesa,* the being will be long gone. For now, we'll aim to find out where the being is going, if we can learn where they've been for

the last ten years. We won't *try* to make contact, but if there happens to be a good opportunity, I think we can handle it."

"We got this," Anahera chimes in from other side of the cabin.

"Yeah." I take a breath, check the speedometer over Hikoa's shoulder. "We'll comm in again when we get back to the research station. I reckon we'll be back within an hour, two at most."

"Right." I can almost hear Nitan's nod, quick and decisive. "The last scheduled shuttle leaves from the research station half an hour before latemeal. But if you aren't back by then, I know Yun Jin wants another planetary run with his instructor before his full shuttle licence practical; I'm sure he'll be happy to pick you up. Even if he's busy, there will be someone available."

"Thank you. We'll try to be back by the last shuttle, so we don't have to inconvenience anyone."

"If there truly is another sapient species we've missed, a little inconvenience is worth the opportunity," Nitan answers. "May the Stars light your path."

"Thank you."

The comm disconnects with a staticky *beep*.

Anahera reaches around and nudges me. I look up. The world rushes by too fast.

The being changes direction, no longer keeping parallel to the mountain range, but ascending the ridgeline toward the peaks. Hikoa follows their path. I suppose it makes sense for a flying species to live somewhere high up that other species couldn't reach as easily.

Come to think of it, I'm not sure how well the buggy will fare, either. Hands tight on the rattling wheel as ze points our nose straight up the slope, Hikoa voices the same thought before I can.

"If they continue into the mountains much farther, we may have to be content with making a note what summit they're heading for and then turning around. If this section of the range is anything like the terrain near the Denaskan village, there's no way I can get the buggy much beyond the foothills."

Silence races along beside us up the mountainside for a hundred metres or so. Sudden enough that I jump, Anahera pushes it out the way with an obvious question.

"If there's a whole species living on the *highest point in the habitable zone*, how the Old Hells have we not seen any sign of them? *La Sesa*'s orbit passes over this area; sometimes the shuttles do as well. You would think that, if there was a city up there, we'd have seen it."

"Maybe it's concealed from overhead?" I venture. I close my eyes, trying to recall what the mountain range looks like from the viewports on *La Sesa*'s underside. "Like, maybe they've built under one of the big rock outcrops?"

"We still should have seen them coming and going."

"I have no idea." I shrug.

The being slows, circling the lower slopes like they're looking for something. We're catching up to them. If I hold up a hand, the grey silhouette is now the size of my thumb tip.

In one abrupt action, the being tucks in their wings and swoops out of the sky. They must have found what they were searching for, and they've found it in the saddle between two peaks not far ahead.

Hikoa navigates us to a flat ledge at the entrance of a cave. The wind is already brushing away the imprint of the being's landing, but this *is* where they landed; taloned footprints lead into the mountain.

"Huh." Ana puts her hands on her hips. "This is not what I expected."

"Neither."

Why would a flying being live underground? Is this why we haven't seen them before now? But the Denaska barely surface from their warrens, and we found them within two probe missions. And if this is where the being lives, why did it seem to take so long for them to find it? If it isn't where the being lives, where *do* they live, and why are they here? Do they know about us? Why haven't they reached out? Do they not want us here? Do they think we're only visiting temporarily? How will they react when we start building permanent settlements? There are too many unanswered questions, and the answers hold our position on Glisesa in the balance.

The three of us look at each other, and some skein of thought unravels between us. The cave has a thread looped around my sternum, and somehow, I know the others feel the same pull.

Hikoa checks the buggy's GPS screen. "We have just over an hour and a half until the last shuttle. It took us about twenty-five minutes to get here from the Rendezvous Point, and it's about fifteen minutes from there back to the research station. That said, it looks like the terrain between here and the research station is pretty much the same as the rest of the lowland area, so it'll take less time to get back.

If we keep going for half an hour, it'll be another half an hour back to the buggy, and then we'll have plenty of time before the shuttle leaves."

"We have caving gear with us already." Ana shrugs. "No reason we can't."

"Right." This is probably seven kinds of *senpripensa*, but we're doing it anyway. "Let's go."

Hikoa grabs my hoverchair, Ana pulls out the supply trunk, and we approach the cave.

Crossing the Threshold

There is a pulsing beat within the planet itself, like the slowing heart of a great planetary deity. The cave is a living beast, a creature brought to life from an Old Earth legend.

No. No, this creature is older than our ancestors. It's older than the Great Migration, older than the world we abandoned. This is a creature conjured by the system's central star, by the deepest, wordless hopes of primordial cells. This is the ancient giant who carved the Denaska from stone. The mountains are its vertebrae. The karsts are its flanks, the matted grasses and snarled shrubs its fur, the moss around the cave entrance its velvety tissue.

Time stretches down into the underground. Anahera and Hikoa are statues carved of awe beside me.

I stare into the cave creature's mouth, see light glint from its jagged teeth as even the sun recoils from its darkness. I step onto its dusty tongue, and its sleep-breath becomes a curtain of earthy linen to nudge aside. It needles through my coveralls, frosts beads of desert sweat on my skin, leaves behind a film of salt and grit like calcite on its walls.

The cave's throat chokes with glistening lumps of hardened cartilage the pale, sick yellow of bone, textured with the desiccated, fissured ghosts of ancient water.

The ghosts follow us on the draughty air.

Leaving the red sun at the cave mouth, we turn on our head torches; mineral residue shimmers like crushed glass in the dull light. Calcified rootites spider down from the roof, stiff wires vibrating as we brush past. They tug at our jumpsuits like clinging ivy. Chalky red dust puffs under our steps, clings to our bioboots, stains our jumpsuit legs. It seems to want to lift from the temporary fossils of alien footprints and come with us.

I bend to examine one of the prints: three long, splayed toes, not unlike the sunbirds in *La Sesa*'s gardens, but tipped with puncture-points of what must be sharp claws; the faintest rounded-triangle imprint of the foot itself; and an odd backward-facing scratch-mark that seems more talon than toe. Carefully balancing on one leg, I leave my own moulded print beside the being's. My foot is just over

half the length. How big is this being? In the glimpse we got of them entering these caves, they seemed smaller than me.

As the cave's throat closes, Ana nods Hikoa to lead forward, and motions me with my linked hoverchair and the floating supply trunk in the middle. Urgency catches up, pushes us faster, hurries us on. We've lost sight of the winged being, but their taloned footprints are clear in the dust, and there's only one path to follow. I hope the tunnel doesn't split off; it must be easy to get lost so deep under the planet's surface.

"Let's go." Hikoa's voice sounds like another language in this alien place. Ze sets off at an easy lope, steady but not too fast, flowing like fluid over the rugged ground. I start after zir, my hoverchair and the supply trunk whirring after me, Ana's heavy footfalls taking point behind us.

We walk further and further into the caves, taloned footprints leading us deeper. I rest my fingertips against the wall, trailing along calcite maps. I try to focus on the sandpapery texture under my fingers, the spongy clay under my feet; I try to ground myself in the underground.

A rock catches my toes. I stumble. My flailing hand hits a stony edge. Too impatient. Too unstable. Catching myself, I suck on my fingers and taste blood.

"*Drek* it!" It feels wrong to curse here.

"You okay?" Ana asks. She pushes past the floating gear to put a steadying hand on my shoulder.

"Yeah. Not used to the ground yet." Uneven surfaces aren't something I've ever had to account for, nor breeze that isn't engineered and artificial, nor walls that can cut.

But when I look at my hand, the skin is chafed but not broken. My fingers drip only dust. It's not my blood I taste; the planet itself bleeds iron and salt, stone droplets cracking over its lips.

The stars feel even more distant down here. If not for the weak, grasping fingers of head torches, it's darker than deep space, quieter than the Grave Gardens. *La Sesa* is never silent, not like this. The silence is so loud, screaming at us. I find myself straining to hear the grounding bass hum of big nuclear-plasma engines, the breezy whoosh of life support, the rustle of vines crawling up wall trellises, the comforting buzz of my home-mates nearby. I squeeze my eyes shut, breathe out until my lungs clench, expect to die. Silence is the most dangerous sound. Silence is slow death: asphyxiation, hypothermia, ebullism, decompression, radiation.

The dull thud of our footsteps and the tiny, insectoid whine of the two hovermotors are the only signs we aren't floating in cold space.

We walk. We walk, and the tunnel seems to stretch in front of my eyes as ghosts ring my torch, and I can't tell what's shadow and what's vertigo. We walk, and my heart times us – faster and faster, inefficient and uneven and panicky – as my lungs bellow and breath rasps in my throat like rock dust. Pinpricks of sweat sew running stitches into my clammy skin. We walk, and every step feels like jagged rocks in my joints, but I keep the ache behind my teeth and keep walking, because we don't have time for me to settle in my hoverchair. We haven't seen the winged being since the cave entrance. We can't come all this way to lose our one chance to find another sapient species on this barren new world.

I don't know how long we've walked, or how far under the planet's surface we are, or where this tunnel might lead, or what we might be running from. I don't know what would drive a flying creature into a deep cave. I'll just let the glittering, refracting walls convince me the tunnel is bigger than it really is, and I'll focus on the search for the winged being, and I'll keep my pain locked away in a box in the back of my mind, and I'll keep walking and walking and walking.

"It's *cold* down here," Ana complains, cracking the silence like a coconut. "Like, they-turned-the-*drekkin'*-air-con-down-too-much cold." She sounds so affronted that I almost giggle. I can hear her hands rub over her sleeves, her bioboots thud as she jumps up and down for a few steps.

"It's just about perfect for me," I reply with a shrug. "Cool enough that I'm not going to overheat, but still warm enough that I'm not going to freeze."

"Lucky *kraffin'* you." I can hear my cousin's eye-roll.

"Sshhh!" Hikoa hisses. "Listen!" We freeze. Utter stillness. Utter silence.

There. My straining ears pick up the faintest sound, soft as the breath of a ghost.

plink

"Is that…?" Ana asks. She speaks low. Her eyes are wide in the dim torchlight. Hikoa and I nod, our words all dried up.

Water. Somewhere ahead, a single drop of water, falling far below the desert.

plink

The promise of water pours us down the tunnel like a flood. Ana speeds up, passes me on long, heavy strides. I file my body's complaints in the back of my mind – I have practice ignoring pain – and keep pace best I can, following along the wall. We cluster together, moving in a herd, looking for water.

plink

Then… a single, salt-stained tear-streak seeps down from the arched ceiling.

Metres later, another thread-thin trickle rolls over the rock. I press my fingertips to it, smear it like blood across rusted calcite. Then another trickle, enough to scour a shallow scratch down the wall… and another, and another, and another.

The trickles form a single rill that runs down the centre of the tunnel. The walls dampen, making the clammy calcite glitter like cut gems, making limestone sand stick to my fingers. The dusty floor turns to not-quite-mud, gluey and slippery at once. It cakes the treads of my bioshoes. My feet slide. I nearly lose my balance again. I catch myself on my toes and keep going, limping after Hikoa and Ana, hoverchair whining along behind.

The rill becomes a rivulet, then a brook, then a creek, then a stream, then a river, widening and deepening until we have to walk single-file along a narrow bank. Hikoa leads our damp little parade, torchlight counting off each clawed mud-print. Ana slows, takes up her role watching our backs.

I've finally managed to fall into a kind of numb, trance-like plod when the tunnel opens into a cavern.

The ceiling reaches up, up, up, far beyond our sight. We stop in the stone archway and stare into a blackness even more complete than before, a blackness that pours down the walls and obscures everything like thick fog. It must be as big as an Old Earth *katedralo* – as big as ancient gilt-gold temples to their benevolently cruel God – but it's impossible to see more than a couple metres ahead. Our eyes adjusted to the low light some time back, but our torches are swallowed up by utter darkness, dimmer than distant stars in the deepest, emptiest stretches of space. We could be in a sealed box, except every breath, every footfall, every drop of water is swallowed up into silence. Sounds seem strange, and it takes me a moment to realize that the space steals all echoes.

plink

The taloned prints continue in a wide arc ahead, keeping close to the edge. We follow along the trajectory, into the *katedralo*. The water droplets seem to follow us around the shore.

plink

plink

splash

"What the *flak*?" Ana's curses fade, and I flinch at the unexpected noise. "Ugh, *putra krul kankro*, my foot's wet! I stepped in a puddle or something."

"It's more than a puddle," Hikoa observes. Ze tilts zir head up, spreads zir headlight as far as ze can.

Our crescent of muddy path rings a moon-round subterranean lake. I can't even give a guess how big it is. From the distant glint, it must take up the whole of the cavern floor. The pattern of ripples suggests another river feeding in from somewhere out of torchlight.

"The Denaska did say that there were lakes in the caves," I comment. "It's kinda cool to see one."

"Yeah, yeah, you wouldn't say that if *you'd* stepped in it," Ana mutters.

"You *would* say that if you watched where you left your feet." I speak in whispers.

"Says the person who can't *feel* her feet half the time," Ana jokes back.

I wrinkle my nose at her, but I don't reply. I can sense the ghosts who have followed us more clearly in this place, like curious eyes on my back, like the lightest touch of draughty fingertips on my face, like the roots that tugged on my *kapkovrual*. This cavern – this *katedralo* – holds peace in its cupped hands, like the Archive Core, like the Grave Gardens, like the view-camera still orbiting above Old Earth, but… more. This is one of the Web of Life's anchor-points. It is sacred. I cannot make myself desecrate the sepulchral silence with casual banter.

The endless lake pulls at me. I want to stop, kneel by the edge, dip my hands in the clear water and watch the silt swirl around my fingers. I want to wade out as far as I can, until the floor drops away under my feet and I float in the dark silence of a world's hidden womb. I want to visit the ghosts that live at the bottom of the lake, dive until the waters pull me to where it wants me to go….

I'm at the edge, cold water lapping at the toes of my bioboots, and I don't remember getting so close. My thoughts chill me more than the damp air. What am I thinking? I can barely keep my head above water, much less swim well enough to think about going for a dip in an unexplored cave lake.

If nothing else, Teksisto only knows that the ghosts might not be alone down there. A shudder skitters down my spine.

I remember Bernos's briefing: *Underground water was considered one of the most lethal and terrifying environments on the Old Earth, attempted by* only *the most skilled and highly trained underwater experts. You do not have the necessary equipment. You do not have the necessary training. The practical knowledge of how to safely navigate subterranean waters has all but been lost; I am not risking lives on a half-forgotten paragraph from a half-forgotten note in the Archives. The natives' city may be built* near *a cave lake, but there is absolutely* no reason *for you to go into the water. Do. I. Make. My. Self. Clear?*

I back up, as close to the cave wall as I can, press a hand against its solid, textured surface. I want to ask if we can stop for a few minutes, to rest, to recharge, to let me settle into my hoverchair, to maybe pass around canteens and dried fruit. No. The water here is dangerous. Time to keep going. We can rest later.

"Lirit?" Hikoa is at my side, fingers on my elbow. I put my hand over zirs. "You zoned out there for a minute."

"Yeah. Just thinking."

"About?"

"The safety briefings, mostly." I look around again, and my torch catches a glint of speckled grey-white.

Feathers.

The winged being!

"Wait!" I call after them. "We don't mean to scare you! We're peaceful! We're just explorers!"

It occurs to me when the words are half-out of my mouth that they probably have no idea what I'm saying. Shouting after them will probably make things worse. I wouldn't want some strange creature

making loud noises at me; I can barely handle other *Ghemod* making loud noises at me. *Well done, Lirit.*

The flash of feathers disappears into the darkness.

Ana heard my cry. She's already moving. Hikoa isn't far behind. We scramble across the muddy lakeshore, across the vast crescent of the *katedralo*. I measure every stride, align hip-knee-ankle-toes, hip-knee-ankle-toes, pray my joints don't lock, don't give out, don't send me sprawling. *Not now. Please, stars, not now.*

We reach the rift in the rock where the being vanished. Another stream gushes down into the lake. A billow of air gusts over us. It's… different: warmer, muggier. It reminds me of *La Sesa*'s Rain Forest Garden.

The humidity leaches the tiniest seep of blood from my sinuses. I sniffle, clench my fingers so I don't rub at my nose and make it worse.

"Do we keep…?" Ana starts. Hikoa looks between us. I shrug, nod, square my shoulders.

"We've come this far." I'm not turning back.

We step into the second tunnel. Ana takes the lead this time, and Hikoa falls in behind me. We march, brisk-paced, through the darkness, following the dry scrape of the being's wings against the narrowing walls, their raptorial footprints in the soft clay.

I know I've been pushing it. I know I shouldn't have walked as long as I have. We haven't gone two hundred metres before my heel hits the floor, my joints spasm, my leg doesn't take my weight. A spiked rivet of pain drives through my ankle. I topple like a sack of kumara. Something pops audibly. My cry echoes down the tunnel; I feel it more than hear it, sandpaper in my throat.

The cave floor is every bit as rough as the walls; it's just muddier. I raise my head from the dirt, and it comes away with gunk caked to my cheek. Less than a metre from my face, the ground falls away into the stream. I stare into the clear water tumbling away below me, at flat, sharp-edged rocks cutting into wet clay. I'm glad I fell where I did.

"Ana, get the medkit. Lirit, are you okay?" Hikoa kneels beside me and helps me turn over, so I'm no longer face-first in gluey-grey clay. I grit my teeth and hold up a finger. So many nerve endings are screaming at me right now that I can't tell what's going on.

One by one, I test my joints, wiggling my toes, flexing my knees, stretching my back. My ankle aches, but it moves. The leather on my wrist guards and knee pads is scuffed, but it's stopped me from scraping my hands to all *rubuĵo*. I think I've avoided dislocating anything. Excellent.

No, I spoke too soon.

I haven't dislocated anything, but a subluxation isn't much better. My left arm is offline, no longer linked up to my brain right. It dangles awkward and limp from my shoulder. I try to move my fingers: mental static, tingling and numb.

Now that I've noticed it, the ache flares up, sharp fire and burning cold, all up my arm and over my ribs. I close my eyes, overwhelmed. Pressure wells up my throat. *Drek* it, it hurts. It feels wrong to even *think* swear words in this place, but I'm past caring. I grip Hikoa's hand in my good one until my knuckles bleach. Ze winces. I loosen my grip, tighten again without thinking. I don't want to cry.

I should have stopped earlier. I should have just taken the two minutes to get my hoverchair. Now, we have to wait the five or ten minutes it's gonna take to reset my arm. If we lose the flying creature, it'll be my fault. I don't want to let Nitan down. I can just imagine Bernos already, arms crossed and scowling. I curl my head into my shoulders, whimper when it hurts, twist the fingers of my good hand into my sleeve hem.

"Well done, cuz." Ana kneels next to Hikoa and me, slinging the medkit off her back and rifling around. "I never saw someone trip over air until you learned to walk."

"Hush," I counter, grateful for the banter. It helps. So does the coldpack she holds to my shoulder. "I'm… older than you. I learned to walk… before… before you were born."

"Do you want a shot before we do this *putra drekky* thing?" she asks, seriousness settling on her shoulders like a uniform.

I scrunch my face up, rush the words out in one breath. "We don't have that many of them, and they're only for emergencies, and I don't want to use them up on minor stuff, and…"

"Lirit." Ana puts her finger over my mouth. "If you don't count 'stuck in an uncharted cave, Teksisto knows how far underground, with a *drekkin'* dislocated shoulder', what the *krul* do you call an emergency?!"

"… Good point."

Anahera shifts into Emergency-Responder-mode. It's so subtle that I almost can't tell what changed, but…. She doesn't slouch as much. Her round eyes are wider, more alert, bright with competence. I frown. I haven't noticed such confidence missing in her until now. I don't know what to think about that.

The emergency injections don't need training to use. They are not subtle either. Ana unwraps one from its anaesthetic-lined package and jams it unceremoniously into my upper deltoid. I hiss like it's deflating me.

After a minute or so, it starts to work. The pain beats its fists against the wall of anaesthetic but doesn't get through. My arm goes a wobbly, drunken kind of numb. It feels like it's wandered off without the rest of me. Or maybe it's my brain that's wandered off and left my body behind? It can be hard to tell.

"This is going to hurt," she warns. I nod, eyes closed.

Ana picks me up around the waist, careful to brace my shoulder against hers so it doesn't jostle. Lying me on my belly on the floating trunk, she rolls my arm out and down, until my hand dangles perpendicular to the ground. She grips my wrist and pulls, gentle but firm.

Thank the stars for that injection. Instead of wrenching, grinding fire, it's more like sandpaper embers, achy but not painful. Vaguely, like vibrations from Kĵo's carving tool picked up through the living room table, I feel the ligaments take up slack, catch at their limit, stretch like saltwater taffy. The bone grinds around the edge of its socket like a bad boardskater. With another audible **pop-clunk**, my arm slips back into place.

Immediately, pain stops trying to slam through the anaesthetic. I sigh, squeeze Hikoa's hand again, rest my head against the muddy cave floor. Deep relief reduces the pressure in my body like incising an infection from a wound.

Ana grins.

"*Polvo*, I wish they had those injection things in the med centre." My vocal cords aren't behaving right. They're being rude and tripping my words up. "Why don't they have those things in the med centre? Or could we take some home? Why don't we have these at home?"

"You don't want to take them all the time," Hikoa reminds me. "It would *rubuĵo* your liver, and it would stop working as well after a while, and then we wouldn't have them for times like now."

With a gentleness that makes me worry she can read my whirling mind, Ana helps me sit up and positions my arm cradled against my chest, knots an apple-leather sling around it, and fabric-tapes everything to my coveralls so it can't move.

"Thank you." I bump my forehead gently into my cousin's arm.

"Yeah, well." Ana, stars bless her, has never known what to do with compliments or gratitude, and my thanks knock her out of ER-mode. She ruffles my hair, rough and awkward. "It's better than leaving you here in *drekkin'* pieces."

"Definitely." Hikoa kisses my temple.

Ana lurches up and holds out an arm. I clasp her wrist with my good hand, we brace against each other, and she pulls me to my feet. The cave rolls like a zero-G tube. I blink, shake my head, splay my legs like a lamb, find my balance.

"Lirit?"

I look up. In the time it took Ana to tape my arm back together, Hikoa's set up my hoverchair, gotten out a canteen and some dried fruit, and repacked the supply trunk. I tumble into the padded seat. I'm grateful beyond words.

"Speaking of which, should we keep going, or do we want to turn back?" Hikoa asks.

"I don't know," Ana replies.

"I vote we keep going," I press. "It's way less hassle for us now than it would be to get a team back here at some later point, and I don't know if we'll even be able to find this exact cave again."

"I love you, cuz, but I don't think you're sober enough to decide, honestly."

Anger surges through me. It clears out my mind a little.

"I am!" I insist. "I'm fine. I can keep going."

The second the words “I’m fine,” leave my mouth, I know with the solidity of hitting a dead end that I have taken the wrong path. Ana’s round eyes narrow. She leans her weight on one hip, crosses her arms, cocks her head. I can be an obstinate person, but for every combustible gram of stubbornness I possess, my cousin has at least ten.

“Like *polvo* you’re fine,” Ana snaps back. “I don’t think you can even stand!”

“What a good thing that doesn’t matter.” I wave down at my hoverchair. “It’s a shoulder, not a leg, and besides, I didn’t even fully dislocate it.”

“What?” Ana scoffs. “You’re gonna explore a cave passed out in your chair like Grandda?”

“Hey!” The word glances off the serrated walls. “That’s not fair, and you know it.”

“It is if it gets you to listen to me,” Ana shrugs. Something about sewing a medic patch on her uniform makes her immune to objection.

“We’ve been orbiting this star system for ten standard years. We’ve been in orbit above the planet for nearly a month. You have access to the files: how many research teams have we sent out from *La Sesa*? How many mentions have there been of flying species?”

I barrel on before she can take my questions literally.

“Glisesa’s gravity is – what? – two-point-something times Old Earth’s? It took sixty generations for us to adapt to that change. We didn’t even think flying creatures could have evolved here before this cycle. And that winged being had technology with them, so not only did they evolve here, but they evolved to around the same stage as pre-Final-War Ghemod. It seems like there’s another sapient race on Glisesa, and none of us even realized. I don’t care if I pass out and have to be floated through the caves like an extra supply trunk; I’m not turning back. I won’t. I can’t. I. Just. Can’t.”

“What a good thing it’s not your *drekkin’* decision,” she echoes. “It wouldn’t be your ‘fault’ anyway. You wouldn’t be letting anyone down. Why am I here again, Lirit? What’s my *drekkin’* job?”

My cousin and I glare at each other. My heart punches at my sternum. My shoulder aches. My skin feels itchy, salt-beaded, bubbling. I rub at my sleeved sling.

“Emergency Medic?” I think I know where she’s leading my dead end. *Korod*. I search for side passages in her argument. There aren’t any obvious ones.

"Emergency Medics get full say in decisions that involve the safety of the *drekkin'* team, right?" she prompts. I grit my teeth.

"Yes."

"You're hurt. You're high as a *drekkin'* pine on that shot. You're not *drekkin'* sober enough to make the choice whether we keep going or not. If anyone has a problem with that, they can bring it up with *me*." She stabs a thumb at her chest.

I stare down the dark tunnel, gnaw on my lip, shift my sore shoulder. I think of the single, frozen memory of grey-and-white feathers. The little voice in the back of my head agrees with Ana.

You know *she's right. It's just* raita *to argue. You knew something like this was going to happen eventually. This is your* family*: your spouse, your cousin. You are so scared of losing them. You are so scared of putting them in danger. If you are incapacitated, they are infinitely more at risk, especially down here.*

There are no safety measures on an uncharted planet.

And even if you are right, you know you're not going to win this anyway. She's more stubborn than you are.

I slump in my 'chair and look away. Movement catches the corner of my eye.

Oh. Poor Hikoa! Awkward and off-balance and hating confrontation, ze stands to the side next to the supply trunk, fidgeting with a seam on zir wristwrap with strained intensity. I can feel zir squirmy stomach-full-of-tiger-worms from metres away.

"*Murdo* it. Sorry." I reach for Hikoa, and ze moves to my side to take my hand. I lace our fingers tight as my *korsaro*. "What do you think? Forward or back?"

"Back," Hikoa says, fast as an airlock auto-seal. "Ana's right. We've probably lost the being by now anyway. Sorry, Lirit."

I'm outnumbered.

"Fine. Let's go back."

It wasn't far down the second tunnel when I fell, so it shouldn't be long back the other way. We follow the flow of the river back toward the lake.

The tunnel stops. It just stops. We've come to a wall of rock: no arch, no rift, no way out. The river sumps into the ground with a roaring murmur. The rock is calcified, gritty and glimmering and ancient. We stare. Lashing out, Ana pounds her fist against the wall. She rams her shoulder into it. She kicks it, hard. Nothing. It's like the entrance never existed.

"What. The. *Masakro*?" she seethes. She kicks the rock again. Usually, I'd tell her off for her language, but I'm too busy thinking the same thing. I reach for my plait, hiss when my fingers find cloth and helmet instead, return my hands to my lap where they flutter like dying sunbirds.

"Hmmm…." Hikoa nudges Ana out of the way and starts examining the block. "Has there been a landslide or something?" Ze lays a hand on the wall, runs zir fingers over its veins, presses on outcroppings, prods thread-thin cracks, lifts from the bottom. Nothing. It doesn't budge. Ze tries harder, limbs tensed like ze's fighting to keep zir movements steady and careful. "This doesn't make sense. This feels like a hardened lava flow or solid bedrock. It's… old. Permanent. This doesn't make any sense."

Pressure builds in my throat again, worse than on the surface, metres and metres of soil and stone pushing down on us. The cave is collapsing. I feel it close up, crush, grind, an Old Earth hunter's cruel snare. It scrunches me up like a scrap of tree-paper. I feel the trap snap shut on my skull, around my *korsaro,* tighter and tighter as I rock back and forth.

We're lost.

It's draughty down here, but the breeze brings no oxygen. There's dirt in my throat. It turns to stone in my lungs. There's no oxygen. There's air whistling through the cave in my chest. There's no oxygen. We're buried alive. We're buried, and we won't even nourish the Grave Gardens. There's no way out. We're stuck. We're lost. There's no way out. *There are no safety measures on an uncharted planet.* We're going to die down here, buried in rock, so far down that, if they even send rescue parties, they'll never find our bodies. We're lost.

I wonder if the spare torch batteries will run out before our water does. I wonder if we'll die in total darkness. I'll likely be the first to succumb to dehydration, will likely die dizzy and delirious as my autonomic system fails. I wonder if the others will have to sit with my body in the cold and the dark,

waiting to die as well. I wonder what the PSC will tell Ma and Da and Ezraĉ; Ŝnaĵda and Uhun and Marama; Tokamaki and Demetra and Orsan….

No. No, no, no. I squeeze my eyes shut. Um… category. Pick a category. Metals. Backward. *Z is for Zinc; W… W… I can't think of one for W – is there one for W? – V is for… um… V is for vanadium; U is for uranium; T̂ is for t̂allium….*

Ana sidles over to me around *M for Magnesium*. She taps my good shoulder. I startle.

"Is… is Hikoa… scared?"

"Of course not." The answer is a reflex, a hand jerked back from a scalding fear.

We watch zir examine the wall. I notice Hikoa's sloped brow, zir tight frown. I notice zir careful observation, how ze runs eyes and hands over every centimetre of rock. Ze's murmuring to zirself. I can't hear the words over the rush of the stream, and I'm not a skilled enough lip-reader to guess.

"I don't know," I admit. The distraction is a relief, but the topic makes the cage-snare tighten around my panicky heart. "I don't think I've ever seen zir scared; I don't have anything to compare to. But… I don't think so. That's just… how ze looks when ze's concentrating on something."

"You don't know?" Ana looks sideways at me, cupids-bow scrunched to an arrow point. "How can you not know? You've been together for years."

"Hikoa doesn't *get* scared." I shrug, wish my hair wasn't wrapped up so I could wrap my fingers in it instead. "There was this one time, years ago now, I was at one of Hikoa's sports practices. You know how they work, right? The zero-G tubes have mag fields around them so the grav generators don't work inside? The field failed, just for a split second. It's only happened a handful of times since *La Sesa* left Old Earth.

'Everyone dropped nearly five metres straight down before the field kicked in again. I watched the whole team just… fall. It was only a practise, so there was only a handful of spectators, but I knocked people over, I was so desperate to get to zir, even though I knew I couldn't *do* anything. A whole bunch of people screamed…." I trail off, interrupted by my own half-chuckle. "There was this one person on Hikoa's team who made a point of being really tough and not scared of anything, but he screamed the loudest. I don't think he lived it down. Anyway."

"It didn't scare Hikoa?" Ana guesses, incredulous.

"Nope," I shake my head, look down at my hands, pick at a curl of skin by my thumbnail, swap back to my wristwrap when I remember the risk of infection. "I talked to zir when we got home – to check if ze was okay, what I could do to support zir, if ze needed to talk to a psychologist or anything – but ze assured me ze was fine. I still remember exactly what ze said: 'The times when people are the most likely to panic are the times when panicking is the least effective action to take. Falling would have been more dangerous if I'd flailed around and landed badly. I needed to make sure I landed on my feet. I wouldn't have had time to flip around onto my feet. If I panicked, I would have landed on my head'."

"I thought sapient automatons were illegal," Ana jokes, and I know she's scared but doesn't want to admit it; her jokes get worse when she's scared. "Are you sure you haven't married one?"

"I do wonder at times." I give Ana a trembly lipped half-smile. "Don't get me wrong, I love zir to Old Earth and back, and I am very grateful that ze has such quick reactions, but *'if you panic, you'll land on your head'* wasn't the best piece of advice for someone with an anxiety disorder."

I give up. I hold out a trembling arm and look up at my cousin through blurred eyes.

Ana must be scared. She doesn't say anything, just squats down and wraps an arm around my good shoulder. I cling to her, bury my face in her shoulder, hold my breath so the sobs can't sneak out. We sit together, shaky and silent. I lift my face, lean on her shoulder, look over her arm at the back of my spouse's scarfed head. At the stone wall, Hikoa bends right down, balanced like a well-made kitchen knife, trying to see where the water goes. I want to grab the back of zir shirt in both fists, tether zir to me and let Ana tether us to the ground so ze doesn't fall, so the water doesn't drag zir away to where it wanted me to go.

Hikoa stands and comes back to us. Zir brows are still furrowed, zir plush mouth pinched in. Shifting zir weight from foot to foot, ze reaches out and holds my good hand.

Hikoa isn't scared. Ze can't be. We've been married for three years, and promised for six, and I don't even know what fear looks like on zir. Hikoa is never scared.

If ze's scared now, that would mean that we're really, really trapped.

"It's not a landslide," ze tells us. "The wall's solid; it looks like it's been there for millennia. My best guess is the stream split off somewhere between the lake and here, and we ended up in another tunnel." Ze shakes zir head. "I thought we would have noticed something like that, but apparently not."

"Ugh." Ana punches a fist into the soft part of her thigh. I slip my hand from Hikoa's to squeeze her shoulder. "I would have *drekkin'* thought so, too. We're better than that."

Hikoa shrugs, fidgets with zir pocket. If I kissed zir now, I think I could taste words on zir tongue, but ze doesn't say anything.

"Are we lost?" I ask, my voice small in the hard-edged space. I have to force the words past the stones in my throat.

"Not exactly," Hikoa says, but zir brows pinch together and the end of zir words twist up just the tiniest fraction of a question mark. We've been together for long enough for me to know that, in this case, 'not exactly' means something along the lines of: 'we're lost enough that I would be lying if I said no, but we're not *totally* in the *drek* yet, so I don't want to worry them by saying yes'. It doesn't lessen the frightened-animal kick in my gut. Ze explains. "There's a draught; this tunnel has to come out somewhere. We get to the surface, and then we can call *La Sesa* if we don't know where we are. I think it's safer than wandering around trying to find where we got lost. Does that make sense?"

"Yeah." I grab onto the idea with both hands. "We have an emergency comm in the supplies, right? We have flares. We'll get back home."

"Of course we will." Hikoa opens the supply trunk and hands me a packet of dried fruit snacks, before folding zir legs and lowering zirself to the ground. "Since we've stopped, we might as well rest."

I slide out of my 'chair to join the others on the cave floor. We sit for a few minutes, passing around food and water.

"Sorry," I say into the hushed stillness, "for fighting with you."

"I'm not sorry," Ana grumbles, but there's no fire in her voice.

"Yeah, I know. I was being a *punkado*."

"Yup, you were."

Her quick, medic-brusque agreement makes me snort.

"Love you, cuz."

"You, too."

The silence circles back and sits down with us. We share a canteen. We eat our snacks.

Fed and watered, we pack up the silence and the supplies and start off down the tunnel again. This time, I take the minute to get my hoverchair.

It's easier to fall into a numb trance without grinding pain in every step. I close my eyes and lean into the seat, think of Ana's comment about Grandda, and sit up straight.

We keep going.

Act Two

Meeting the Mentors

We turn another corner, and the cave floor angles steeply upward. Beneath me, the hoverchair tilts, levels, steadies. There's a faint glow ahead, an indistinct arch of a paler blue-grey. After hours of cavernous darkness, even the night sky glows bright.

We've made it. We've gotten back to the surface. I look to the others, and the glance we share sparks a charge. We hurry down the last section of tunnel. A breeze blows past, catches the trailing end of my *kapkovrual*. It's so much warmer, humid and garden-sweet. I taste the tiniest hint of blood at the back of my throat at the change in the air.

We push past the ceiling of trailing roots, the patchy carpet of moss, the curling, thin-leaved ferns, through the water-carved stone archway and into the open.

It's so *green*. How is everything so green?

I don't understand.

Glisesa is a crimson planet. Nothing on its surface is green. Its plant life is black-purple, not *green* like the plants we've brought with us from Old Earth.

Anahera, Hikoa, and I have surface in a forest clearing, ringed by trees bigger than I've ever seen, each as big as a zero-G tube. These wooden giants guard the perimeter, reaching verdant arms up to the endless, dark sky.

"What the *masakro*," Ana says again. This time, I elbow her arm, absent-minded. She wrinkles her broad button nose at me, before unclasping her helmet and pulling her *kapkovrual* off and shoving it in a pannier pocket. I follow her lead, but keep my two plaits ribbon-taped around my head. I move slowly, collecting our caving helmets and packing them away in the supply trunk. There's a crawling unease scratching at the base of my skull.

Something is wrong.

Hikoa looks around the clearing, turning in a slow circle, still alert and cautious. Ze scans the tree line, the leafy horizon above us, the cave entrance and humpbacked slope behind.

"The tunnels must have taken us under the mountain range," ze thinks aloud. Brows still furrowed, ze removes zir helmet and frees zir crop-row braids, too. "We must be on the night hemisphere of Glisesa."

"I didn't think plants grew on the night side," I remark. "It doesn't get enough light. It's frozen." I peer over the arm of my 'chair at thick grass and small, folded wildflowers. They whisper like ghosts in the wind.

The weight of my next thought makes me shrink back in my 'chair.

"If we're on the other side of the mountains, the workers at the shuttle landing won't be able to see our flares, will they? What about the wristcomps? Will they work? Are we too far away?"

Ana tilts her head and squints at me, one hand on her hip and the other pointing at the open sky. I follow her arm. "*La Sesa* is in orbit. We wait for it to pass overhead, and then we send up a flare."

"… Of course. Good idea." Why didn't I think of that?

If you panic, you'll land on your head,' pipes up the voice from its spot at the back of my skull. *Helpful*, I think back at it.

"*Kaiapo kino*." Hikoa murmurs. That catches our attention. I can't remember ever hearing Hikoa curse in zir ancestral language; ze seldom curses at all. Ana and I turn. Ze stares up at the sky, eyes flickering between the stars. "This makes no sense."

"What?" Ana demands at the same moment I gasp.

"What's wrong?'

"The stars are wrong."

"That doesn't make anything clearer," Ana huffs. "What the *drek* do you mean 'the stars are wrong'?"

"None of the stars line up with the map database," ze explains. "I helped code that database, but I can't find any familiar constellations here."

Ana and I look at Hikoa. Hikoa looks at the stars. We look up, too. I'm not observant enough to be good at finding constellations, not like my spouse, but there's a couple I can reliably pick out, regardless of whatever point *La Sesa* is at in its orbit. Hikoa's right. I can't see the Loom or the Ewe or the Bells. The stars are wrong.

An eerily Ghemod scream pierces between the trees like an arrow. I don't have time to flinch before the stars are *gone*, a patch of sky above us blotted out by a gliding shadow. I startle, curling into my 'chair. Ana's fists whip up, one foot back, crouched and defensive. Hikoa turns, keeps the shadow in sight as it circles our heads and comes back around.

The shadow hangs in the air above us on the powerful beat of four wings, rapid but steady. The soft grass ripples in the draught, a shallow tide breaking against the others' knees, buffeting the hoverchair until its little computer brain can't compensate anymore.

The being we've followed all this way has found us.

They give another cold scream.

My eyes flit like sunbirds, unsure where it's safe to land. I force myself to look up at the being: bone-pale talons, each nearly the length of my hand; multi-jointed legs bunched with sinew, armoured in dark grey scales from toe-tip to upper thigh; a sleek, avian body the pale, speckled grey of wood ash; black banding across a flared fan of tail feathers and the span of their four wings; spindly, long-fingered hands flexing at the mid-joint of elliptical secondary wings. Wide and heart-shaped, their flattish face would look almost soft, but the bony, crested keel that splits it in two. The bald keel extends from their feathered crest, down the centre of their facial disk, to melt into the upper part of a beak a bit like images of Old Earth dinosaurs or turtles.

The being has three sets of eyes, all near perfectly round, all a bright yellow that makes me picture jars of pale honey lit from within. One pair is forward-facing like ours, set close together on either side of their keel. Another, slightly smaller pair stares out from under scaly cheekbone ridges that give them a fierce, flat-browed glare. The third pair sit outside the shallow bowl of their facial disk, just behind where our ears are, nearly hidden in the stiff mane of feathers that halos their head and neck. They have three sets of eyes, and all of them flicker like yellow flames over us and the clearing and the treeline and us again, each pair moving independently of the others, and I can't pick which pair to meet, and I can't begin to guess at the expression etched into their flat-beaked face.

Even more terrifying are the jutting hilts of unknown weapons sheathed on their low hips and the plates of metal armour gleaming on their keeled chest. I've never seen a warrior of any species before, but I think this being is one.

"Who you?" the maybe-warrior demands, and I don't register their next question, because the jolt shocks my brain offline. They speak Esperanto. They speak Esperanto? It's stilted, clumsy, but recognisably *our language*. We're kilometres from home, so lost we don't recognise the constellations, and after a *decade* of painstaking word-by-word translation to communicate with the Denaska, we just *happen* to stumble across a species we've never seen before but who has already learned our language? *How in the galaxy?* How can they even talk with such a sharp beak? My questions chase each other, spinning in zero-G, bouncing off my skull and leaving bruises on my brain.

Hikoa catches Anahera's arm as she steps in front of us. She stares up at the being over zir shoulder, fearless, eyes widened and lips pulled back from her blunt teeth in a pūkana. Unarmed and unarmoured but bristling with rage, she looks every inch as much a warrior as the being. For a split second, I see the after-echo of our ancestors like an aura around her: boonie-brimmed helmet in place of our simple caving ones; the outline of a bulky ballistic vest over her pack and panniers; abstract blotchy camouflage over undyed coffee-yarn blend. I blink away the… genetic memory? Premonition? Omen?

"Spies?" Ana snaps. I've missed something. I blink, wrap my whole being around my focus and pull it back to the present. I can't *afford* to miss something. I glance between my spouse and my cousin.

"Don't, Ana. We don't know what's going on. Whatever we say might make things worse," Hikoa mutters through zir teeth. "I thought that, as a species, we were past starting wars."

Wars? The consequence of this moment kicks me in the gut hard enough to make me retch. This is too much. *Too much, too much, too much.* Our ancestors made so many mistakes. Have we made the same ones? Excitement and hope had swept us down through the cave streams, but now… but now… but… now….

What do I say? How do I convince them we're not a threat when I don't know if that's true?

I know better than this. I can do better than this. I *must* do better than this. I am a Chronicler, an Ambassador, a Caretaker of History. Negotiation, compassion, integrity, cultivation of equity and understanding of cultural relativism, de-escalation of conflict, compromise without conceding morals: this is my training.

But it's not, not really.

Acting as Ambassador to the Denaska, I *knew* something of the culture I had to integrate with. I prepared to share stories with a cave-dwelling desert people not even as tall as my knee, earless and mute, pudgy with stored water, multi-limbed, signing *welcome* with blunt, digging claws. I had a whole ĵenth of specialized training to spool out scenarios and draft my own scripts. Now, I don't have any prior knowledge to draw off, no idea what might cause offence.

I need to do *something*.

"Who sent?" the being demands again. Their harsh, halting consonants are the sharp *cracks* of a splintering chair leg. They snap me out of the panicked spiral into my own mind. "Ubkuŝngir?"

"Ubka-what?" Anger still boils under my cousin's eyes. "What the Old Hells are you on about?"

"Ana, be quiet," Hikoa murmurs. "Try not to antagonise them."

"They don't seem to give a *plago* if they antagonise us!" she shoots back.

"Manners not enemy spies for!" the being cuts in, crest feathers flaring. Their beak clacks on the words.

"For the last time: We're. Not. Spies!" Ana snarls, anger boiling up under her dark eyes like thermal mud. "If you treat people like this, no wonder you have enemies."

The feathers all around the being's neck and head erupt in a grey ruff. I flinch.

"Ana. History of Earthan Colonisation 101." I choke on the fragments of thoughts lodged in my throat. "Misunderstanding. Anger. Bad."

She glares at the being. The being glares back at her, all six golden eyes, harsh as a solar flare.

Hikoa isn't scared, is ze? Ze's too sensible to be scared.

I look at zir closer. Hikoa is bolted to the ground like ze has grabbed onto zir fear with every ounce of strength ze has and is physically keeping it from bursting into flight or fight. Zir knees are bent, but locked tense, lines of muscle cable-taut under the loose-fitted caving clothes. Zir long fingers curl and squirm and twist in the rough fabric. Ze's fixed on a polite smile with thin glucose-sugar glaze, but zir knuckles are bloodless on my good shoulder, and zir fear spins through my stomach, sickly and frightening. Zir irises – already a brown so dark they look black – are flat and vacant, pupils blown wide like ink drops on the wet, white page of zir eyes.

Now I know what my spouse looks like scared.

That single glimpse of Hikoa, a carved walnut-wood statue under the shadow of taloned wings and alien trees, stabs nauseous shards of ice into my stomach.

I can't make my throat work. My jaw is swollen; it clicks and graunches when I try to speak. My tongue is sandpaper in my mouth, scraping to find the words to make this okay somehow. My lips part, but they won't form letter-shapes.

"Nothing say?" the being hisses.

I turn to the being, lift out-turned palms in a helpless shrug, choke on apologies.

"I don't know what to say. I don't know where to start."

"She know what want say." A beaked chin juts in Anahera's direction. Ana narrows her eyes.

This is my training. I take a shaky breath, grip my family's hands. I can do this. I have no other choice.

With that thought, a sense of calm settles over me, that heavy brocade a comforting weight to still my agitated thoughts. I imagine the words unfurling from my chest as a spool of thread, steady and strong, testing their tension like warp lines in a loom.

I get to my feet, close my eyes against the wave of dizziness, straighten my shoulders, lock my shaky knees. Wrung out like an old dishcloth as I am, the draught of the being's wingbeats nearly buffets me back, but I plant my feet, feel the ground steady beneath me. I root myself like a tree in the damp, marshy soil. I feel immovable, as though my roots have reached down past the feathery grass and gripped rocky crust underneath. I face the winged being and bow low.

"Thank you for being so patient with strangers to your land, and we beg our most humble apologies for our accidental insolence." I get the impression this being understands more than they can speak. "I am Lirit Taige Sanget-Ĉazen ta, Senior Apprentice Chronicler aboard the city-ship *La Sesa* of the Ghemod Migration Diaspora. My colleagues are Anahera Ruth Ĉazen-Wudao ta, Planetary Safety Coordinator and Emergency Medic, and Hikoa Salest Puratoki ti, Translation Database Analyst. Whom do we have the pleasure of greeting?"

The main pair of golden eyes narrows. I can't decide which pair of eyes to meet – the bigger forward-facing ones or the smaller, higher, scarier ones – so I focus instead on the comma-slits of the being's nose, just above their fierce beak.

"Muŝum not tell who follow?" The 'sh' sound comes out more like a hiss.

"We can vow to you that we have no knowledge of any being with that name, nor have we any knowledge of you or your people. My role in our community is to compile information in a central place that we can all access, so as far as I know, none of our people have any knowledge that you existed at all." I nick open the smallest pin-scratch of vulnerability. "I have to admit, we don't even have much knowledge of where we are right now; we've lost our bearings and find ourselves far from our home."

"You no reason follow stranger to lost," says the being, cutting out a statement in the shape of a question.

Well, when they put it like that….

"Our purpose was curiosity. We didn't know there was another sentient species on Glisesa. The opportunity to find another group of beings on a world we're still strangers to…." To pause and weigh my words may be to line this being's suspicion with lead. I turn my hands palm-up, splay my fingers, bare truth over my heart. "Curiosity can induce some fairly illogical actions in our species. Should I assume that your species is different?"

This time, all three sets of eyes narrow at me, and I have to focus on rooting myself into the soil so I don't step back.

"Clever. Subtle," they grant. "Good fish information."

"I should have begun by offering you information about us. 'Ghemod' refers to what our people call ourselves." The acquiescence drags the little voice up from the back of my brain. I feel it lash out, tear at the inside of my mind, leave gouges in my skull. *Thoughtless, ignorant flak*, it shrieks at me. *Could you have cemented their convictions in slagrete any quicker? Foolish kankro! Why didn't you* start *with that?*

There is no time to panic. *If you panic, you'll land on your head.* I take a breath, start again.

"Ask any questions you have. We are happy to share whatever knowledge of ourselves and our peoples you wish to know."

"If spies, you… odd," the being relents.

They tuck their wings in and drop to a poised crouch before us, and I realize how small they are. They can't be more than a metre tall – feathered crest included – and the widest span of their double shoulders is maybe the width of my waist.

"Council have more questions will. Not make repeat. Come." Their head tilts like a question, but their tone is orders-brusque.

"Do I understand you correctly that you wish to bring us to your people's ruling council so that they may ask us more?"

"Yes." The being bobs their head side-to-side.

"We would be honoured to meet with them." I drop into another bow.

All I can think of is watching a hundred episodes of *Planet Earth: New Millennium* with Ana. *'Take me to your leader.'* The voice in the back of my head conjures the unsettling grey face of the *grizeta eksterani*, blinking enormous black eyes and waving a spindly three-fingered hand. I ignore it. In the show, it's usually the *grizeta eksterani* saying that line, but I don't think our ancestors ever met aliens on Old Earth. I might have found more relevant information before we left *La Sesa* if they had.

"We have walked a very great distance," I start, thinking through the logistics. "And we are injured and fatigued, so may I ask how far we would need to travel?"

The being cocks their head.

"One half *dana* and five *galam*?" The ascending pitch suggests an estimate.

I close my eyes for a second but don't let my neutral smile slip. Right. Aliens. I should have guessed that they were not going to give me a distance in metres. There's probably little use asking for a time measure, either.

I hope it's not far.

A plan is taking form in my mind like dust swirling in a nebula. The other two aren't going to like it, and I wish to the stars I could discuss with them first, but….

Before I continue, I take a half-step back, lock one knee and subtly probe behind with the other foot. I find Ana's toes and rock my weight a fraction, stepping on her bioboot, a gentle-but-firm warning. I feel her eyes narrow to a laser point on the back of my head, but I don't turn around. My words are to the being.

"I understand that it is a risk for you to bring strange beings before your Council. We are willing to do our part to build trust with you and your people. We will consent to a search of our belongings if it would assuage you that we carry no weapons. If you would feel more comfortable with us bound until we have spoken with your Council, we will submit."

"*What?*" Ana squawks, as predicted. I shift my weight back, tread on her foot a little harder.

"Ana," I mutter under my breath, keeping my neutral smile pinned to my face. "Just go with it. I'll explain on the way."

Hikoa sends me a questioning glance. If this were any other situation, I'm sure a quip would follow. As it is, zir thoughts are scrawled all over zir face, clear as if ze had spoken aloud: *You could have explained what you were planning before you pulled something like that.* I half-lift a smile back and twitch a nod toward the being, nose wrinkled up a millimetre in response: *I did explain… to all of you at the same time.*

I address the being again.

"My only condition is that my companions and I are not harmed in *any* way, which includes allowing us adequate rest and unrestricted access to our food, water, and medical supplies if and when we require it; that you bind our hands in front of us so there is less risk if we fall during the journey; and that I am allowed use of my mobility aid." I indicate my hoverchair with a hand. "We're taking a risk trusting you, too, but to form a rapport between our peoples is worth the risk."

I've set the loom on which an agreement can be woven, and I take the moment to check my words for loopholes or rotten threads. I can't find any obvious ones, but my mind is still tilting and spinning in my skull, unbalanced in my anxiety; I know this is the best choice to gain this being's trust, and hopefully the trust of their people, but I'm scared. I'm so scared. I focus my everything into keeping my feet rooted, keeping my body upright, keeping my face open. All I want to do is curl into Hikoa's hug and bury my face in zir lemon-scented warmth.

"Conditions fair." The being fans their wings. "Accept."

"Thank you for your consideration." I bow again, releasing my tight breath into the ground, unhooking my shoulders from my ears. This being must have some authority among their people if they can make a vow like that. But they spoke about this 'Council' as though they weren't one of them. I

don’t know what I don’t know, and questions multiply and spread like cracks in my skull. It’s time to channel Ana’s spontaneity and hope I don’t land on my head.

Drowning in a vortex of adrenaline and analgesic, I haven’t noticed the thick, leather straps that cross between the being’s chest armour and weapon sheaths. They turn to rummage through the pack secured above their tail feathers, but those bizarre second and third eyes swivel and scan, watching us, beady and glaring and suspicious. The primary set refocuses when they face us, short lengths of rope in their wing-joint hands.

Ana grumbles, but she and Hikoa hold out their wrists when I do. I notice the way my cousin keeps her hands close to her chest, clenching her fists and twisting one wrist, curving her elbows out from her ribs, locking her thick muscles tense as the cords in Hikoa’s stickball net. That’s probably smart. If nothing else, it’s going to be a challenge to wrap rope around my shoulder sling, and looser bonds might save me having to explain joint dislocations to an alien warrior if I fall. Or – I test my shoulder, back-forward, small circle – it might be easier to remove the sling before I’m bound.

Hikoa submits to the being as calm and placid as ze does for me. I just stop myself from shaking my head. Ze can’t be that unfazed, can ze? Yes, ze has the patience of a pine tree and the foresight of the shipbuilders, but ze really would have to be an automaton to *not* be worried now.

While the being makes their way to a bristling-but-compliant Ana, I tap the panel on my wrist and call my ‘chair to me. I’m shaking all over when I slump into the seat, knees knocking against padded footrests. Now that I don’t have to stiffen every muscle to stay standing, I redirect all my effort into my breath. My windpipe is flexible silicone; I aim the flow of humid air into my low back, feel my whole ribcage fill from the bottom.

Excess adrenaline pulses through my veins, and I don’t have enough energy left to wonder how much is bone-aching exhaustion, how much is the drugged after-effects of the pain shot, how much is fear of placing myself and my family into the clawed hands of an alien stranger, how much is timid relief that we’re still together and safe, how much is excitement at the chance to learn.

I look at Anahera and Hikoa – at my team members, at my family – and whisper a prayer to the Spirit of the Universe that I have made the right choice.

The river out of the caves leads us into the forested valley, along a narrow barely-a-path overgrown with purple-barked trees and bulbous, backlit mushroom-bushes. It's difficult to see ahead or behind; it's almost impossible to see side to side. Threads of twining lianas embroider spreading branches, dense foliage, and tangled undergrowth, so tightly knotted that they form a tunnel near as solid as the caves. Pale fog fills in the scant spaces between. Twigs snatch at us with spindly hands lines with peach veins. Blueish river reeds leave damp finger-smears on our trouser legs. Water droplets gather on broad yellow leaves and drip down onto feathery ferns. Lacy watercolour washes of teal mosses and lilac moulds spray out from damp shade.

Some kind of bioluminescent fungus lights our way in nebulous green, weak light diffused through the fog like the glowing shadows of ghosts. It grows on every river-misted surface, sending dazzling dandelion seed-puffs and a wet, turbid scent into the air as we move through the forest.

Watching the spores spin and glow like tiny stars, I think about the oxy tank under the satchel strapped to the back of my 'chair. Is there's enough air left to reach where we're going and back? What's the chance we'll need it more later on? If there is something deadly in the air, have we already breathed in too much? Life's heavy scent is thick as the second before a blood nose; I keep thinking of it as the smell of *green*, but the only green here is the unworldly glow of bioluminescence.

I risk a peek up at the being. If aliens arrived on *La Sesa*, how would we react if they hid their faces behind tech we didn't understand? I glance at the ornate weapon hilts strapped to the being's back. It's probably more realistic to ask: if aliens arrived on Old Earth, how would our warlike ancestors react if those aliens hid their faces behind tech they didn't understand?

Can I make the assumption that they wouldn't understand? The comm-like device still rests buckled around the being's ankle. They have technology as well. But… how advanced? Our pre-Migration ancestors progressed as quickly as they did mostly by inventing technologies to keep the war machines running. I glance at the weapons strapped to the being's back, remember the accusation of spying. Is the same true here? If so….

I don't even know what I don't know.

Trying to vent my burning anxiety before it turns to fear, I chatter questions that the being doesn't answer. We still don't know what species the being is, or what their name is, or even if 'they' is the right pronoun for them.

Eventually, I clamp my mouth shut. The deep forest is less eerie in silence than it is with a lone voice, squeezed high with fear, dulled by the glowing moss, and hushed by the muffled growl of the river. I don't even know if the others can hear me; the endless forest swallows up all sound. Like in the *katedralo* deep underground, ploughing brash through the muted stillness feels profane.

The only sounds are the rustle and call of air and animals in the vegetation. Non-sapient birds chatter unseen in the canopy, as though discussing the land-bound aliens trudging through their midst. A monkey-like creature about the size of a newborn lamb launches itself between branches above our heads, gliding on membranes stretched between each of its six limbs like the bats of Old Earth. Its tail – easily three times the length of its body – streams out behind it like a ribbon, and its thick coat of green fur glows faintly. Clusters of bright eyes peer out from the miniature caves of tree trunks to watch us pass through the gloom. Poisonously vibrant amphibians slip away to hide inside blood-red bromeliads. In a glade among the mossy teal glow, fire beetles form a dancing, swirling constellation, fist-sized stars fallen to the ground.

This place is so different to the practical Gardens back on *La Sesa*. These trees aren't neat, straight trunks of pine for floorboards and furniture; they aren't sweeping, drooped ballet-arms of willows to be woven into wicker or chewed into medicine. These trees aren't cultivated, cared for, chosen because they are shorter than the trellised metal ceiling. They aren't concerned by the vivid rainbow of flora and fauna that slither and crawl and hop and glide and soar within them. They just… exist.

Are all planetary forests like this? Are they all so lush, so wild, so unfettered?

I look up, trying to see the treetops in the leafy gloom. Our alien guard looks back down. I glance away; map the glowing tree-root roads of small, many-limbed mammals over compressed layers of rich soil and rotting leaves; study the feathery mosses and ferns that bend and dance under my hoverchair; look anywhere else so I don't catch one of the being's many, constantly scanning eyes.

The being glides behind us, silent but for the odd direction: 'follow close river', 'that way fork ahead', 'uphill here'.

According to my hoverchair's computer brain, we follow the river through this alien forest for about two kilometres. I was already running on adrenaline fumes when we left the pyroduct. I can't imagine how exhausted the others must be. After the sixth time Ana trips over her feet and either Hikoa or an enormous, spongy mushroom-bush catches her, the being agrees to untie us, at least until we reach… wherever this Council is. I think they said something about a city? Wherever we're going, I'm more grateful for my hoverchair than I have words for; I don't think my trembling legs would hold me up anymore, much less carry me over such uneven ground.

The inconsistency of the ground has been the only consistent thing since the shuttle landed on Glisesa. I'm starting to think it might be normal for paths to be difficult.

The growl of the river becomes a roar. We turn a corner, and the track curves, sinks down a steep strand, disappears into surging whitewater. We stop and stare.

Rapids cut a swollen, seething gash through the forest, a fluid blockade of noise and pressure and cold. Roaring its stinging rage so loud my ears buzz, the river sprays handfuls of molten metal at the land and drowns the worn rocks buried under its muddy bed. From the dark sky bandaging the ragged treelined edges of the cut, silvery light pours a glistening salve onto the far bank some impossible distance across.

I've seen video of Old Earth rapids in the Archives, but the 2D recording does not come close to being beside one.

The being looks at us with one set of eyes and at the river with another. None of their eyes have brows, but their face crest is pinched in a way that makes me think confusion or irritation. I hope it's the former; anxiety tries to convince me it's the latter.

"You not fly," the being states, tone flat as their yellow eyes.

"You only just figured that out?" Ana cocks her head and flaps. Living with my cousin for as long as I have, I should know that movements can hold just as much sarcasm as words. I give her a warning glance, but she isn't looking at me. "Was it the whole 'we don't have wings' thing that gave it away?"

"You not swim, too?" I sense a frustrated huff in the being's question, the way they pointedly ignore Ana's retort.

"Most of us can swim reasonably proficiently; I think Ghemod are semi-aquatic." Hikoa crouches down, grabs a glowing root and leans out over the bank, tests the water with the tips of two fingers. I see an afterimage of zir too close to the subterranean stream, trying to see where the wall of rock ends. The impulse to grab the back of zir coveralls and haul zir back from the edge makes my hands shake; they find my plait instead. Ze continues, "Not in water this fast and this cold, though."

"Us people not find way cross water not fly," they admit. "Harder grounders cross, safer us."

"You probably should have thought of that before deciding to take *grounders* captive," Ana huffs. I dig the arm of my hoverchair into her elbow.

"Ana! History of Colonisation 101. We aren't prisoners."

At least, I don't think we are. I'm pretty sure this being would let us go if we decided to backtrack with the promise to never return. I'm just too curious – *and stubborn*, the little voice in my head adds – for our collective good. I couldn't turn down a chance like this.

Even as I chide my cousin, an idea catches on the edge of my mind. I grab at the loose thread and tug on the thought.

The words unspool aloud.

"We can't fly, but we can hover."

Already, the voice is yelling from the back of my mind that this is an ignorant, reckless, *putra* idea. There is a *reason* I've never thought to try it before. Hikoa just said that this river is too dangerous to risk a dip, and despite aquatic physiotherapy twice a standard week, I'm still the weakest swimmer of us three. If I want to see if my hoverchair works over water, the Mirror Lake Garden on La Sesa would be a better testing area than river rapids. If it fails….

No. I can't overthink. Overthinking pours white-cold lead into my limbs, makes me slow and frozen and useless, makes me a liability, makes me dangerous as a faulty air hose. Ana keeps encouraging me to borrow a little of her spontaneity; Hikoa keeps reassuring me that I'm more capable than I credit myself. The winged being will be able to pull forty-four kilos of thoughtless Ghemod out of a river if I sink. I'm sure.

If you panic, you'll land on your head.

Before the others can debate points that the voice in my head has already argued, I tap the ‘chair’s control panel, squeeze my eyes shut, and point myself at the far bank.

“Lirit!” Hikoa and Ana shout. “LIRIT!”

The river drives handfuls of needles stab into my face and stitches my coveralls with cold. Angry water grabs at my footrests, rolls off my bioboots, weighs down my trouser cuffs. The world around me spins. The hovermotor whines and gurgles. My ‘chair shudders. It starts to tip.

I cling to the arms and try not to scream.

Then the ‘chair thuds into the bank, skids across wet mud, bounces twice, and wobbles to a halt. I pry my eyes open. My spouse and my cousin stand ankle-deep in cold water on the other side, one shaking her fist and the other with arms half-outstretched as though to catch me. Perched on a nearby branch, the being watches us like we might watch a particularly bad comedy. I think they are starting to like us.

“What the *drekkin’* Old Hells are you thinking?!” Ana hollers over the deafening growl of rapids. “You *drekkin’* wait until I get over there. It’s just as well you survived that little stunt, cuz, because it’s gonna be the last thing you *ever. Drekkin’. Do*!”

I duck my head and skim a sheepish grin back over the river. Peeling cramped hands from the armrests, I tumble out of my mud-splattered ‘chair. There is ground under my feet, marshy but solid. The animal terror starts to drain. The residue leaves me shaky but whirling.

Hikoa is convinced I’m an adrenaline junkie with anxiety. Ana is convinced I would be a lot more fun if I listened to the adrenaline more than the anxiety. By the fury I can feel burning from every line of her body, even across the river, I don’t think this is what she meant. I look at the steep drop, the icy spray, the rocks hidden like round-fisted monsters under the surface.

Never thought I would thank the stars for anxiety. I probably shouldn’t do that again. Ever.

“Uh…” I wave my hand, pointing at my wristcomp. “If whoever’s next wants to call the ‘chair back over…?”

“We are *not* using your hoverchair as a ferry,” Ana calls.

“It worked, didn’t it?”

“Combustion engines work, too. Doesn’t mean we’ve used them since before the Migration.”

Despite Ana's complaints, Hikoa shakes zir head and taps zir wristcomp. My 'chair skips back over the river like a slung stone.

"Do you have a better idea?" ze asks her, steadying the sodden 'chair when it reaches them.

"That thing barely managed with Lirit onboard," Ana argues. She points to her broad hips, jiggles a bulky-muscled thigh. "Some of us weigh a lot more than she does."

The being gives a very Ghemod-sounding huff, takes off, and grips the back of the 'chair in taloned toes. The motor's whine eases a semitone.

"Get in chair. One at time."

Having successfully shuttled Hikoa, Ana, and the supply trunk over the rapids, the being leads us another half a kilometre or so to the end of the valley. The foliage is less colourful on this side of the river, grey and dull, dark as Czeraf's charcoal etchings. Steep walls of cracked, glow-mossy limestone rise around us. They cant off the path, lead us to the bottom of a vertical cliff.

We've stopped at the base of a tree bigger than we've ever seen. It looks a bit like the fir trees back on *La Sesa*, with the tapered rings of branches, but it has to be as big as one of the zero-G tubes in the Sports Centre. Head tipped back until the muscles in my neck pull and my skull hits the headrest, I can barely make out the lowest branches. Hikoa, Ana, and I linking hands couldn't reach around a quarter of its trunk.

I didn't know anything could grow so big.

Thinking back to the river, I look at the being's wings and hope to the stars they don't expect us to climb.

"Here. In," they order, pointing a pinion to an arch carved into the tree's base. Ana glares her confusion and Hikoa raises zir eyebrows, but we obey and step onto a wood-panelled floor inside the hollowed-out trunk. The being lands beside us and pushes a button on a small, wooden box. The platform starts to rise, steady but swift.

"It's a hoverator!" I don't realize I've spoken aloud until Hikoa replies.

"It is, but it isn't. Huh." Ze kneels by the corner of the platform, examining it carefully, brows puzzled into question marks. My fingers twitch. If ze dangles zirself off another risky drop-off, I think I will tie zir to my 'chair. "It's not grav tech; it's mechanical. Look."

Now that Hikoa has called attention to them, I notice thick metal ropes knotted to the corners of the platform. Ze continues.

"I think the box houses a motor of some kind? Or maybe an automated reel? Something to wind the rope and lift us up?"

"No touch box," the being says, focusing a beady second eye on Hikoa. "You not fly. You touch box, you need fly; you touch box, I need talk Council you fall down tree."

Leaning against the supply trunk, Ana snorts. Hikoa gives a single, sharp nod.

"Right. The box must be important. Let's not touch the box."

What the Old Hells am I thinking?

Seven beings encircle us, rusty tawny statues seated upon wide plinth-boughs.

My eyes dart. They register holo-pics. A room of a hundred shades of brown and gold. A circle of living thrones growing from woven-wood walls. Bent necks and hunched wings and heavy usekh collars. Rainbows of gems and glinting metals beaded through age-dull feathers. Layered wings wrapped around streamlined bodies like korowai. Wicked talons gouged into varnished perches. Polished coppery-bronze ceremonial armour. Serrated swordstaffs held staunch. Feathery flames sconced high on the walls.

Dozens of tarnished gold eyes grab my plait and yank me backwards through millennia. I am frightened proto-hominid prey, a burl petrified to a tree trunk. We watch the umbra of hunting hawks overhead.

My limbs, my ribcage, my throat fossilise. My hands ache to reach for Hikoa, for Anahera, for protection, for home. I tense my fingers. Freeze. A single twitch is a beacon of a weak, injured animal.

No. I am as prepared as I can be. I am not doing this again. I *will* drag myself back to the present. *A is for australopith; B is for bones; C is for… um… tsimasepsep; Ĉ is for….*

Chanting. The Council starts to chant in the strange sung-speech: shimmery coloratura, low dove-coo counterpoint, throaty bass ostinato, glissandi scattered to the galaxy like handfuls of gems. The assembly sings a chorale of starlight.

"Great Mother," they intone as one.

Movement. We glance up.

The voice in the back of my head thinks, distant, *if you can fly, I guess it doesn't matter where you put your doors.* Near the domed ceiling so high above us, a shadow spreads dual pairs of broad wings. Silhouetted by the strange purple light, the shadow descends with the grace of a single spiralling feather.

We track this new threat as the Great Mother takes her seat at the head of the assembled Councillors. She wears an ornate headdress with delicate stylised wings. One pair frames her oval face; the other sweeps back and down, concealing her third eyes. A heavy usekh-style collar rests proud over her tawny breast, a wide band of golden metal inlaid with gems of iridescent colours. Metal feathers of almost gossamer-thin hammered copper highlight the black bands in her wings and tail, filling in thinning spots in her dull plumage. The upper part of her beak is armoured with what looks like iridium.

She brandishes a ceremonial staff, crested by a gold sun-disk with a flare of stylized talons, and points it at our captor like a weapon. The tip of the apical ray is stained brownish pink.

The chanting stops.

"Dumuz de Neosia," a croaky voice intones. The words are gravel rasped through tar, guttural and oily, scraping against my nerves and making my skin prickle. Long vowels draw from deep in the keeled chest. "You were not tasked with bringing the aliens before us, only ascertaining the threat they pose us."

Wait. How long have these beings been watching us? How did we not notice?

The feeling of many, many eyes once again needles under my skin, crawls through my arteries, gnaws at my hindbrain. I can't suppress a shudder.

Dumuz's armoured breast grazes the floor, wings curtsied behind them in layered skirts of banded grey. They speak to the floor in the trilling, cooing, whistling language they used to deactivate the sentinel orb. A sleek being to the Great Mother's left translates. Their contralto resonates in their scale-armoured chest in a way that reminds me of a solo cello.

"These three aliens spotted me upon my return. They followed me across the *Kalayma*, and I thought it better to confront them and bring them before you. They say they are peaceful explorers, Great Mother."

"We will discuss your… indiscretion at another time."

My shoulders curl in at the threat simmering under the Great Mother's words. I hope my decision doesn't get Dumuz in trouble.

"Before that discussion," the matriarch continues, looking down her flat beak at Dumuz. "I question why you trust their word so easily?"

The circle of crested heads turned to their keystone; the knowing, slick-oil voice; the marrow-deep deference that batters Dumuz to the woven floor…. the Great Mother wears authority with the might of armour.

I iron out a small frown. Councils might have a chairperson or a mediator to make sure the meeting goes smoothly, but they don't have *one* leader so much more powerful than the rest; that's the whole point of a *Council*, rather than a single ruler. I don't understand.

"They are quick to share knowledge of themselves and their people, Great Mother," the armoured contralto translates. "They not only submitted to binds, but suggested it. They did not recognize a sentinel orb; they reacted with loud noise and confusion."

The Great Mother turns golden primary eyes to us.

"Do you speak, *bar'lukur*?"

I swallow. Should I stand? Should we bow? That feels right.

"Yes, Great Mother." I get to my feet, blink away the dizzy shadows, try to mimic Dumuz's low, winged curtsy. With bound hands, the movement is stilted, a jerky puppet-string flop. Hikoa and Anahera take my lead. Anahera, usually crass and stomping, isolates each limb with a dancer's grace. I repeat the introductions I gave Dumuz.

The many eyes dilate and the comma-curl nostrils flare.

"You dare address the Great Mother directly, *bar'lukur*?" a gaunt, dull-feathered Councillor demands from the Great Mother's right. Their voice flakes like rusted iron, thin and brittle and abrasive.

A junior-looking Councillor – smaller, with much lighter and more dappled feathers, seated at the far outer edge of the circle – whispers to the one beside them and gets quickly hushed.

"The aliens speak the Sacred Language!"

I raise my face without baring my throat, set my stance like Ana taught me on the few cycles I was well enough to learn how to spar. I lock my fear so far in the back of my mind that even the rings of a thousand eyes can't see it. I am blank metal. My face is a hullplate. My body is a support beam. My voice is a steel hatch. I will conceal my softness under an Ambassador's mantle. I am blank metal. I won't give away so much as a scratch.

"It is my role to speak for my people."

A plump, wide-faced, glossy-feathered Councillor glances at the matriarch from their seat two to the right. At a subtle nod, they turn to address us.

"Speak." Their lyric-soprano holds none of the Great Mother's contempt. "Tell us how you came to be here."

This is my role. I am a Chronicler, a Story-Weaver, a Keeper of History.

I start at the end of our long journey, with *La Sesa*'s arrival in the star system from our distant homeworld.

"What weapons does your ship carry?" the translator interrupts my third sentence.

"None," I answer. My stomach shudders; too many thoughts crowd my skull. *If they know we are unarmed, if they think we're an easy target…. But if they think we're a threat, if they think we'll attack first….* I steel myself. "We have no weapons."

"None?" a handful of Councillors echo.

"None." I shake my head. "We are refugees of our ancestors' mistakes. Those who left our homeworld took an oath to dedicate themselves to peace. Our ancestors left all their weapons and the schematics to make them behind. It's been over a thousand years now; the knowledge of how to build weapons of war is lost. We have only testimony of the death they leave behind, to remind us of what we vowed to grow beyond."

Feather-edged fury ripples around the circular room.

"If you have no war, how were you injured?" the gaunt Councillor cuts in "You move like an old warrior, and your companions don't. Are you at the end of your life-cycle?"

What? I try not to frown. Are they asking if I'm elderly or dying? Why would they think that? I'm only twenty-eight, for stars' sake.

Oh. *Oh!* Of course.

It takes a couple moments to think of how to explain a medical condition to these armoured aliens who clearly value physical skill.

"I'm not a great example of 'normal' Ghemod," I confess. "My body doesn't make a structural protein called collagen correctly. Over a quarter of the protein in our bodies is collagen, and it comprises almost all of our connective tissue, which…."

"Connective tissue," a fierce-eyed-but-frail Councillor to the Great Mother's left repeats. They shift a multi-jointed leg and pinch a thick tendon in their thigh between taloned fingers. "Is that the same as *desamas'teneuro*? Tether muscles?"

"That sounds right." I shrug. "My *desamas'teneuroi* are loose and weak because my body can't make enough of the right protein. This means I get tired and injured much more easily. This cycle, I've had to do much more physical labour than I'm usually able to; I pushed past my body's limits, so I'm…" I stop, consider, sigh. We are here to learn and to teach. The Council does not trust us. I need to be honest. Besides, it's not like I can *hide* that my limbs feel like molten lead. "I'm moving so stiffly because I'm in a lot of pain. It will likely be worse nextcycle, while my body tries to catch up and heal."

Neck feathers puff above ceremonial armour.

"Why on Shargaidra would your *ov*…"

"Continue." The plump Councillor cuts her sinewy-strong colleague off. "Please."

I obey before any other Councillor can object.

I weave our story in tapestry, stopping to clarify questions as the Council demands or to allow Hikoa to hitch on details I've forgotten. I don't cast off the hem threads until I've looped the story around to the moment we entered the Chamber.

By the time I give a concluding bow, my legs tremble so hard I can barely keep standing. Under my heels, blunt iron spikes drive up into my tendons. I call my ‘chair to me, slump back into it in a graceless wad of pain-soaked limbs.

Thick silence suffocates. I feel it wrap cold tendrils around us, creep into my ears, press on my throat, curl heavy in my lungs. I look at the rope that binds me, the chafed rash it’s worn into my thin wrists.

After a long moment, the gaunt Councillor challenges the hush.

“Do you have any proof of these claims?”

I pause. We look at each other. Anahera glowers, crosses her arms, but doesn’t say anything. Her eyelids twitch like she’s trying not to let them roll. Hikoa shrugs a narrow shoulder.

Proof? These beings have stated they think we’re spies. How do we prove what we *aren’t*?

“No…?” I stretch the confession the distance of my sprinting thoughts. Two of the Council huff in stereo.

“They give us no reason to trust their word,” the gaunt one decides. She speaks over our heads as though we’re a command-bridge table.

Ana bristles, but stays silent. My cousin must have concluded that she shouldn’t speak; she hasn’t opened her mouth since the orb platform. With the threat of violence strung above us from decaying cotton threads, I’m starting to think none of us should have.

The plump being who questioned us earlier interjects.

“They give us no reason *not* to trust their word.”

Silence. Such choking silence.

“The aliens shall remain captive until we learn the truth,” the Great Mother declares.

“Or until those cursed *e’hu* fetch their spies,” the gaunt one adds. The matriarch flashes a many-eyed glare.

“It is decided,” the Great Mother states, simple, absolute. Her staff drums a single beat.

Captive. Compromise slips from my numb fingers. Tears blur the room to brown and gold.

Hikoa takes my hands, weaves our fingers together. At zir wrists, under the ropes, zir pulse beats against my fingertips. It's fast. I glance up at my spouse. Zir ochre skin has blanched to clay, and zir full lips flatten thin and cracked.

Anahera steps back to press her side into my armrest. I lean my head into her shoulder, giving what little strength I have left.

My heart shudders. Even on the knife-edge of violence, my family tries to comfort me, tries to protect me as I can't protect them. They should be thinking of a way out. *I* should be thinking of a way out. My brain is a cocktail of chemicals – adrenaline, acetylcholine, norepinephrine, analgesic – that smear the edges of my thoughts. I can't even think. I'm too scared, too overwhelmed, too wrung out. I hold my breath, trap a sob in my ribcage.

Bernos was right. *Every one of her symptoms could put her and anyone with her at risk out there*.

Trapped. Danger. Hide. Prey. Freeze.

Freeze.

No one moves. No one speaks. We are a hunted kind of stillness.

"Take them to the gaols," the Great Mother orders with a wave of a haughty wing-hand. The guards step forward. More swoop in through the grand doors. Two guards become three, then four, then nine. Did the guards arrive after we entered? Were they outside the Chamber the whole time? Was I so wrapped in my shroud of responsibility that I couldn't see through the brocade?

If you panic, you'll land on your head.

"Like *plago*," Anahera snaps. Eyes bulging in pūkana, she tenses, jolts her bound hands up. The guards raise their weapons. Serrated blades gleam in fiery light. Ana's a skilled mixed martial artist, but we can't fight off warriors.

I'm too tired to try. My family is *captive*, and it's my fault: my impulsive decision, my blundering trust, my wilfully ignorant hope.

I have been so caught up in idealistic fantasy, I haven't taken stock of the reality: the being who captured us is an armed warrior prepared to take prisoners. The possibility of accidental, irreparable offence is far too high to go blundering into a completely unknown culture *Planet Earth: New*

Millennium style. I should have negotiated for more information about where they were taking us, and who they were taking us to, before I risked having to negotiate for my family's lives.

All my fault. This is all my fault.

It never occurred to me that these beings may not welcome us.

"Stand down," I murmur to Ana. "Don't risk getting hurt. Please."

I want to throw myself into Hikoa's arms and howl tears into zir shirt, but I can't move. Ice forms under my sternum, in my belly, on the wet surface of my eyes. My aching joints freeze. I can't make myself let go of Hikoa's hand. Danger surrounds us on branched plinth seats; it glints on the edges of serrated weapons and bladed beaks.

The Chamber ruptures.

Four guards seize Ana, shoulders, elbows, legs. One raises a bladed staff when she braces stiff. It bristles with serrations that gleam deliberate and lethal under the fiery lights. She yells wordless rage, but doesn't fight. The staff lowers, rests on the wood floor. I choke on a sob that's almost relief.

One guard stutters mid-step.

"Great Mother," the guard bows. "Forgive me. I don't…. They aren't…. Which… which cell do we take them to?"

The Great Mother's head turns. The guard bows lower.

"Take the female ones to the female cells. Take the male one to the male cells." She speaks slow, harsh, beak clicking against the gravel consonants.

What? None of us is male.

The young guard wraps bony talons around my hands, tugging them from Hikoa's. I grab for zir again. I feel the sound torn from my throat, but I don't recognize it; it's raw, terrified, proto-hominid; too animal to be a whimper, too distraught to be animal.

I lunge out of my 'chair, throw my arms around Hikoa, and hold on. I press my mouth to zirs, fierce, desperate, praying to the stars it's not the last kiss my spouse and I share. Hikoa's lips seize in shock. A heartbeat, and zir aquiline nose presses into the tear streaks on my cheek, zir hands grip the back of my head.

A guard hauls me away and throws me back into my ‘chair. *No!* I am an exposed nerve, split wide and shrieking. Hikoa reaches for me, but another guard grabs zir by the braids and yanks; they startle when ze yelps and clutches zir head.

I scream tears as the guard corrals Hikoa together with Ana, keeps my family away from me. *No, no, no, nononononono!*

Why are they doing this?

I look at the Council, at Dumuz, at my spouse and my cousin, at my own bloodless hands, and then I see.

Brown feathers. Brown skin. Black banding. Black braids.

Grey-white feathers. Exhausted grey-white skin. Ashy-grey banding. Ashy-blonde braids.

Oh.

“Our species is different from yours,” I protest. “Our colouration doesn’t denote our sex. If your prisons are divided by gender, we….”

“Wait!” Hikoa interrupts, shock-sharp; a room of heads snap to zir. “I can prove we’re telling the truth!” Silence pulses for a beat. Ze curls zir shoulders, adds, “I think. I think I can prove we’re telling the truth.”

“Convenient,” huffs the gaunt councillor.

“*Neŝ tuku.*” I don’t understand what the plump one says, but tone sounds chiding.

The Great Mother raps her staff, and the Council quiets.

At a tight nod from the matriarch, the guards step back. Hikoa moves cold-caramel-slow: raises zir bound hands in front of zir, splays zir fingers, shifts zir weight to take a single pace forward, as non-threatening as possible. Ze holds so still. Hikoa’s almost never completely still. Ze’s always fidgeting or tapping or something.

The Council looks at Hikoa. The gaunt one opens her mouth, but the Great Mother shuts it for her with a glare.

“Aethemi,” she orders.

A trilled, whistly argument reverberates among the Council. Finally, the Great Mother motions the guards, and they untie Hikoa’s hands, though three stay within half a metre of zir.

"You will show us this 'proof'." The matriarch signals the guards, and they pass their stiff flight feathers down zir sides, arms, torso, legs. They rifle through zir pockets, pull out the handcomp, show it to the Great Mother, and then give it back to Hikoa.

"We first saw… Dumuz on the… the… Did you call it the Veiled Planet? What we call Glisesa?" ze starts, gesturing in the direction of our captor. "The native people of the planet… who we refer to as the Denaska; they refer to themselves as-" ze tucks the handcomp under an arm to motion the sign with both hands. "They have no sense of hearing, so they don't have a spoken language. They communicate through a signed language."

Hikoa tries to unfold zir 'comp, but zir hands are tied too close. Ze nudges it open the rest of the way with zir chin.

"Since we – Ghemod, our people – are so different from the Denaska, we can't do most of their signs; we don't have enough hands, but we have an extra finger." Ze absently wiggles a pinkie before going back to the handcomp. "So, a group of us have been working on a translation programme since we first made contact with them." Ze activates the device and opens the programme. The guards tense, almost imperceptible. "I don't know what coding technology you have, but this programme is *thousands* of lines of code; we could not possibly make something this big and complex in under five or six years. I can show you how it works. Here."

The pudgy little hologram flickers into existence and waves a complicated, six-armed greeting.

Hikoa's hand hovers over the keypad. Ze turns to me.

"I can't think of…. What should I get it to say…?"

"Uh… maybe a declaration of peace?" I suggest after a pause. The actor from *Planet Earth: Third Millennium* tips his hat in my head: *We come in peace. Take us to your Leader.* That is not helpful. "Is the input from the Denaska still saved?"

It seems like weeks ago that we sat in the bare, red dirt and shared water and stories with our eight-limbed envoy. I tap my wristcomp, surreptitious, and glance down. It's been… just over five hours since we left the Denaska village. *How?*

"Yeah, our introduction notes are still there." Hikoa pulls up the saved data.

"Can it sign our roles?"

Hikoa nods, inputs commands on the handcomp, and the holo figure moves. I recognise signs for *story, textile-maker*; *out-of-cave, to-protect*; *sculpt, signs, magic*.

"Nin'Ereŝ Nisabu'taŝem." The Great Mother addresses the frail, fierce-eyed Councillor. "Examine the alien's device."

The Councillor – Nin'Ereŝ Nisabu'taŝem, I would guess? Or is her name Nin'Ereŝ? Or is that her title? – rises from her branched throne on long, feathered legs and glides down to land beside Hikoa. Ze doesn't flinch.

"Show me this *code*."

"I'm opening the source files now," Hikoa says. Ze angles the small screen toward Nin'Eresh, and she cranes her ruffed neck over zir shoulder to see. "These are just the commands for the holographic animation part. So, this is what activates the little figure." Ze nods at the holo, which is currently shifting its light weight in standby mode. "Each line is a single basic command – this one is 'move left foot one centimetre forward', and the one just below is 'bend forward from waist at fifty degrees from ground' – and each block of lines is a full command for a different sign. So, those two individual lines are part of the greeting it does when we first turn the programme on. That motion looks really simple, but to code it…."

Hikoa has visibly brightened, complexion and expression both. Nothing makes zir as excited as being able to talk about the project ze's working on. It would make me smile… if not for the armed guards half a step behind zir.

Hikoa's fingers fly over the keypad, as skilled and agile as the winged beings' flight in zir way. Ze demonstrates the User Interface, with its blue-outlined type-box; ze shows how it has to be fluent in both our language and the Denaska's language and know how the two interact.

The Council doesn't ask questions.

"And," ze adds, still scrolling through lines of code, "this is only for this particular *koteri*'s dialect. We don't even know how many other communities there are on the whole planet; we have only really been able to correspond with the other groups through this one. Since they live underground, we can't even see where they live on our maps, and…."

"Maps?" the Great Mother asks.

"Yes. We've been mapping the area around our landing pad from the shuttles." Hikoa exits out of the translation programme and opens the map one instead. The holo-figure blinks out, replaced by a 3D scale map, the small homestead of tents, the row of research buggies resting on their skids.

The modelled settlement shrinks as more of the map comes into view.

"That's the Veiled Planet," a lean, broad-winged Councillor observes.

"Yes," Hikoa repeats. "This is my work 'comp. It's got all the information we thought we'd need on a visit to the Denaska. I can show you every file on it, and you won't find any information about your people or the people you think we're spying for."

"We truly didn't know you existed until we saw Dumuz fly over us," I add, quiet. "We didn't know any of this existed. A strange cave? Another planet? Another *reality*? We didn't think it *could* exist. That is why we're here: to learn, to understand."

Another wool-wrapped silence crushes into the room with us. Then the Great Mother speaks.

"We will deliberate on what you have presented to us and return with our decision before the *Kalayma* opens three days hence. You are not captives at this time, but we would… strongly suggest you remain on this Steppe until we have discussed terms for returning you to your people. You will comply with the guards at all times; they will incarcerate you if you pose a threat."

"We understand." I bow as low as my 'chair will let me. The words burn like acid, but I add, "Thank you for your consideration, Great Mother."

The four guards put Ana back on her feet, and they escort us out of the Council Chamber.

Behind us, the doors close like the eyes of the dying.

Tests, Allies, and Enemies

My head hurts so loud.

Everything hurts. My body screams.

What happened?

I reach out. The spot next to me is cold.

Hikoa?

Memories surface and sink in thick sleep-sludge. I sift through my groggy mind, drudge up a blurred echo of rock-choked, proto-hominid fear. My fingers clamp onto the bedroll. Bedroll, not bed. Not home.

Danger. We were in danger. We *are* in danger.

There were alien beings… warriors, with weapons, and…. It hurts to think. It hurts to *anything*. I have to. Where are Hikoa and Ana? I don't even know where *I* am. *Drek. Drekdrekdrek*….

I struggle up through grainy sleep-sludge, find the slippery edge of consciousness, grip it with morning-numb hands. My eyes won't open more than a sliver, and the wince of sandblast pain hurts too much to keep them open for more than a handful of seconds at a time. The flashes of vision are bleary and grey-brown and distorted and starting to spin. I scream at my body, *Get up. Get up! Get. Up!* My nerves refuse to move. They scream back at me for trying.

Where's Anahera? Where's Hikoa?

Footsteps. My throat clenches so tight I can't squeeze air through it. My breaths come loud and wheezy, and I have to be quiet, hide, freeze. Something growls. A scratching sound, and then light slices across my face in splinters. I force my eyes open. My mouth tastes like sleep and bile and fear, and….

"Lirit, it's okay. It's okay. Take your time; I don't want you to sit up too fast," a voice hums. Warm fingers comb through my hair; worn callouses catch tangled strands.

My lungs shudder-squeeze-sob. I know that gentle, polished-ametrine voice. The familiar rhythm along the crown of my head smooths over my awareness until there's nothing for frayed nerves to snag.

"It's okay. We're safe," the voice continues. "We're in the nest room in Dumuz's home. Dumuz is the one who found us yestercycle. His mate is the Councillor who translated from him, Inaĵat. They let us stay here until we can go home. We're safe."

Reassured, I focus on pulling myself into consciousness. I time my breath with the heartbeats hammering the back of my right eye. After three breaths, I allow my arms to roll-flop onto my forehead and crack the vacuum seal sticking my eyelids together.

"Hikoa."

"Good morning, *karamo*." My spouse smiles down at me. Thank the stars. I skim a hand up over my messy morning-hair, find Hikoa's fingers, hold tight. Ze's real. Ze's there. Ze's safe.

"Ana?"

Hikoa points to the other side of the cramped, circular room. I tip my head over. My cousin is bundled up in her bedroll, hammocked in a bower of woven branches. In sleep, she's foetal and innocent in a way she would never admit to.

Hikoa and Ana both seem unharmed – at least, by Ana's usual growly, snuffling snores, I think she's unharmed – and while the room isn't *La Sesa*, isn't the homeblock, isn't ours, the three of us are alone in it. We're alright. *Thank the stars thank the stars thank the stars*. The relief leaves me emergency-injection wobbly.

"Are you alright?" I ask. My hands run up Hikoa's arms, tug at zir sleeves, checking for injury. There's the faintest purply rope-burn over zir jutting wristbones, but other than that, only small, faded scars – marks of an active, practical life – remain on zir brown skin.

"Yeah, I'm alright. You? Battery levels?"

"Low. Very low."

Hikoa stills my hands, bends down, presses zir forehead to mine. Ze nudges my cheek with zir nose. Zir breath is warm and smells faintly of brine, and zir kisses taste fishy.

Huh? That's weird. We didn't bring pickled food with us. I shake my head. *Priorities, Lirit.*

"I expected you'd be pretty worn out after the adventures yestercycle. It's…" Hikoa checks zir wristcomp. "Dumuz told me the Aetirung measure time in degrees of the primary star and natural

satellites, so I've had to do some conversion; I think it's around the start of second shift? You've been asleep for about ten hours."

"Oh."

I sit up, blink away the tympanic dizzy-pain in my head, pester my eyes into working together. Cold air blankets bare skin as I push back the bedroll. Swallowing another yawn, I swing naked legs over the small hammock-edge and look around as I wait for my body to balance itself.

We're in a small, domed room. Four egg-shaped, bowl-like bower hammocks take up most of the circular space, growing out of the thatched walls. The bowers are padded with soft, fluffy plant fibres that make me think of dyed cotton.

Hikoa unstraps zir canteen from zir belt, unscrews the lid, attaches a steri-straw, and passes it to me. My numb hands don't want to grip the slick leather cover.

"I should probably wake Ana up, too," Hikoa says. I glance over at the bower where my cousin snores; it occurs to me that that's probably the growl I thought I heard. "None of us ate or drank enough yestercycle, and our hosts have been kind enough to share food with us."

"Good luck."

Blinking away sleep-sludge, I shove my spectacles on and scrounge my smallshorts from the woven floor. A yawn cracks my jaw. I let myself drop back onto the bedroll to wait for Anahera.

A groan slumps onto the floor; I look up to see a single brown hand emerge from the bundled bedroll to swat Hikoa's chin.

Unperturbed at being swatted, Hikoa keeps poking Ana in the forehead.

"Aaanaaaaa," *tap-tap-tap.* "wakey-wakey!"

"*Paf* off," grunts the bundle, swatting at zir again. She gets zir shoulder this time.

"Slapping me isn't going to do anything."

"I wish it did," Ana mutters.

"C'mon. Up." Ze rips the bedroll down with a practised yank. Ana curses. "There's food, and our host is waiting for us in the next room."

"Why didn't you say that earlier?" I turn to glance, bug-eyed and blushing pink, at the open door. Our host has been a room away this whole time? How good is their hearing? *Well done, Ambassador Lirit, so professional.* I scramble out of the bower.

The room reels sideways. In one practised movement, Hikoa steps in close and catches me as I reel with it. I blink up at zir.

The Council rescinded their previous ruling in light of new evidence, with the contralto offering to host us instead of imprison us. They've done their jobs protecting their people; we can do our jobs sharing knowledge of ours.

Ana, Hikoa, and I make our way into the central room. Like the few other rooms we've seen in this city, everything is constructed from living branches. There are growing seats padded with plant fibres and purplish fur, wall decorations of forearm-length feathers, broad yellow leaves, colourful stones, and bioluminescent mosses.

A winged being stands backlit by the open window: our would-be captor and now one of our hosts, Dumuz.

"*Hadan'ra aneŝule, tam zi'gi mu'lukur.*" He bows very low, like he did before the Council, his keeled – but currently unarmoured – chest to the woven floor. With a sweeping gesture of an upper wing, he beckons to a low… I guess it's a table? It's a round cross-section of branch, about a metre wide and quarter-metre tall, sat upright on one flat end.

"Please. Sit. You protected guests our home in are. We you harm not." He keeps all six of his eyes on the floor, his upper wings tucked back, and his multi-jointed hands outspread. I blink back at him; it is far too early, and I am far too tired, to make sense of our host's jumbled grammar.

Fatigue has hollowed my bones and filled their cores with cadmium. My joints complain *loudly* about lowering me to the floor, and Dumuz flinches when my knees crack. I've brought my small bedroll pillow from the nest-room; I tuck it underneath me. Anahera, still wrapped in her bedroll, leans against my arm. I adjust so she isn't jostling my sore shoulder.

On the low table, Dumuz places a hammered metal platter with small slabs of pinkish-white meat. It smells faintly fishy. I smile at our host, bowing my head, still a bit shy.

“Thank you. We appreciate you sharing your food with us. If we have any food you can eat, we are happy to share with you, too.” I’m not sure that my smile, genuine as it is, hides my exhaustion.

“You our protected guests are,” Dumuz repeats. His mate said the same thing after the Council meeting yestercycle. I’m still not sure what that implies, if there is any cost for their protection.

I shoo the thought away. They have their job. We have ours.

“Will you join us, Dumuz?” I ask. With hesitant motions, our host lowers himself across from us, well back from the low table. I try very hard not to stare at the sight of an avian sitting cross-legged.

Dumuz makes a show of eating one of the few slabs of uncooked meat and pushes the tray toward us. My cousin and I exchange a look.

“It’s some kind of fish,” Hikoa tells us. That must be why zir breath smelled like brine when ze kissed me. That makes more sense. “Obviously we don’t have any spices or anything with us and I didn’t want to risk using our hosts flavourings in case they aren’t edible for us, but the fish still tastes pretty good plain.”

There is a beat of silence. No one moves yet.

“Your people raw muscle not consume, your mate me tell. Your mate for you muscle… cooked.” Dumuz trips over the last word.

Anahera shrugs and takes a piece. She pushes her mouth to one side as she chews, leaning her back against my side, considering.

“Huh. Okay. Not bad. It’s not quite kaimoana, and it could use some ginger and scallions, or maybe some dried chilli and sesame, but not bad.”

“Ana, don’t insult our host’s food,” I mutter.

Reaching for a polite bit of fish, I turn to Dumuz.

“I know we don’t understand how odd this must be for you, but we appreciate your hospitality. When we first… met you, I offered to share whatever knowledge of us or our people you wished to know; that offer still stands. I’m sure you understand that we have a lot of questions.” The answer is almost certainly ‘no’, but I have to ask anyway. “Would you mind answering some of them?”

"Yes, if can," Dumuz replies. "Inaĵat more know. She Council at now. When return, she more answer."

I pause, breathe, blink slow. I don't even know where to start. I don't know what I don't know. And after all the secrecy and the *dissîiri* of the meeting yestercycle, I didn't actually think he would answer.

"Who are you?" Ana beats me to the first question. "I mean, I know your name is Dumuz, but I guess I'm asking: *what* are you?"

"There are more polite ways of phrasing that." With my cousin still leaning against my side, I can dig a subtle elbow into her ribs.

I look back to Dumuz. "What do you call yourself? What name do your people use to refer to themselves as a species? We are Ghemod… or *homonis sapiens*, if you want our scientific nomenclature. The word 'Ghemod' comes from *dʰĝʰemṓn,* an ancient root word for the name of our homeworld, but…." I realize I'm wandering off topic and crack my jaw shut.

"We are Aetirung," Dumuz states, lifting his head and fanning his tail feathers, a proud, fiery whip cracking through his tone.

I don't know how to respond; that we are Ghemod is simple *fact*, not good nor bad, but not a source of such pride. For a moment, I roll the new word around my mouth like a caramel toffee, taste its syrupy, lingering vowels.

"Where are we?" I move on to the next basic question, deciding to unpack Dumuz's almost defensive pride later, when I have more information.

"Neosia."

"What does that mean?" Hikoa asks, and I realize I should have been more specific. "Is Neosia the word for the city? The mountain? The forest? The planet?"

"*This* Neosia is." Dumuz motions to the room around us with his upper wings. "Home. Roost. Inaĵat's."

"*Oh!*" I bat down the urge to smack my palm to my forehead. In all the chaos, I hadn't gotten around to trying to link details together until now. "When the Great Mother addressed you at the Council Meeting, she referred to you as 'Dumuz de Neosia – Dumuz of House Neosia, right?"

"Yes."

"I understand." I nod. "Right. More broadly, where are we? What is this place? What do you call the community you live in? Is this a city?" I can't remember the words for smaller permanent planetary settlements right now.

"And I'm sure you have names for the forest, for the surrounding land, for the planet…?" Hikoa adds.

"Yes," Dumuz answers again. "This capital city Aetirung. Hul'Uru City into Mountain Sangkremsur built. Tallest peak of mountain chain Houran'Orzag, of forest Tirglimul, of lands Ogukamengi. Planet Shargaidra named is."

I mouth the unfamiliar names – *'kren-oh-SAHN-goor',* '*HOW-rahn-OR-zahg* – and wish I'd grabbed my handcomp from my satchel; I am far too close to asleep to remember these without writing them down. Though, a glance shows Hikoa has zir handcomp balanced on zir knee. Ze's taking hasty notes, stylusing phonetic spellings onto a rough-sketched map of the cliff-top city: *teer-glee-mool, OH-goo-kah-MEHNG-ee, shah-GUY-drah*

On the topic of where we are, though, there's one more question I need to ask. I'm just not sure how to ask it without sounding like I've left my brain aboard *La Sesa*.

"When speaking to the Council, you talked about the 'Veiled Planet' as though it was a different planet entirely. My first thought was that it had to be linguistic variation, but this place is *different*, in ways we would have noticed from our ship; the central star is different, the orbit is different, the vegetation is different. If this Veiled Planet is Glisesa and Shargaidra is separate planet, how in the galaxy…? We were underground…." I trail off, not even able to understand enough to understand what I'm asking. I don't know what I don't know.

Dumuz is silent for a long moment. I can see his keeled chest expand with slow, frustrated breaths. He opens his beak, snaps it closed, opens it again. Thin lip-like membranes behind the hooked point stretch and retract. I try very hard not to stare, but at least we know how the Aetirung talk now.

"I words know not. I to explain know not." He shakes out his wings. "Inaĵat ask how you here got."

I don't know enough about alien body language yet to decipher it. But from the sudden hunch of his upper shoulders and the strain of his neck, I get the impression we're skirting around the edges of a conversation our host is desperate to have and desperate to avoid.

"May I please ask you one more question, Dumuz? It's okay if you for whatever reason can't – or simply don't want to – answer."

Dumuz hesitates, and I almost regret asking.

"You ask can."

"Your mate Inaĵat and the rest of the Council all speak…" I stop. We share similar dialects, but it is unlikely that we have the same name for the language. And if we didn't seem to treat that part of our cultures so differently, I wouldn't have to ask.

"We call the language we're speaking at the moment Esperanto. In Ghemod society, we learn it as a first language, and then we can choose to learn other languages, usually ones important to the cultures our families come from. Most people speak multiple languages with varying degrees of fluency by the time they enter formal education. As well as this language, I can speak Yiddish mostly fluently, some English, and a little Cornish, Gaelic, and Norwegian. Hikoa also speaks Yoruba, Igbo, and Hindi partly fluently, as well as a little French and Māori; ze wants to learn Tahitian next. Anahera speaks Māori fluently, and knows some Yiddish and Han Chinese."

Dumuz just blinks round primary eyes at us. That was maybe too much background. I disguise my embarrassed wince.

"We language Emesali call," he says after a second.

"Right. Inaĵat and the other Councillors speak Emesali fluently, but you don't. Is it unusual for people here to speak another language or languages? Do you get the opportunity to learn other languages when you're young?"

"Emesali sacred language is. Only Council, High Command, Scribes, Priestesses, and Councillors – I Emesali word know not – Councillors' *dumunus* learn speak or write."

The implications hit me in the chest, one after another, like thrown stones. I'm still gaping around possible responses – *not* allowed *to learn a language? not* allowed *to have access to information kept*

behind an intentional language barrier? not allowed *to know the language that their leaders make decisions in?* – when Anahera blurts out what I'm trying not to think.

"What? *Really*? You aren't *allowed* to learn Esper… Emesali? *Why?*"

The voice in the back of my head sounds like Nitan. *Pause and take a breath, Lirit, think before speaking; remember the basics of cultural relativism; this is Dumuz's normal, so do not antagonize him with your snap judgements.*

"Wait, hold on," Hikoa pipes up. "You're talking to us, though? Sure, you're not as fluent as the Councillors, but you can more or less carry a conversation?"

Dumuz stops, beak still open, and his head bobs as he swallows.

"Your people different are. You sacred language speak, so I confront you sacred language speak. I you spies thought; enemies sacred language have learn, too. But… but that… that I very careless was. Panicky. *Buru*-hearted. Bad." Dumuz rolls his wing joints and shuffles so he sits on his haunches rather than with his legs crossed under his tail. "You secret keep? *Please*. Me to learn forbidden is. Council if learn I Emesali know, I… very bad trouble. Council who taught me find. More very bad trouble. Bad punishment. *Please*."

I bite the inside of my cheek before my next question can escape; I don't think I want to know what the punishment would be.

"I give my solemn promise that your secret is safe with me," I state. "I would never begrudge someone knowledge or education, and I would never threaten someone over wanting to learn. It… it…" I'm not exactly sticking to cultural relativism, but if Dumuz is doing something forbidden, I can guess that this is a part of his culture that he doesn't entirely agree with, either. "Our…. One of those paramount aspects of our society is to teach all we have learned to the next generation, so they may do better than we have."

With a look and a nod, Hikoa intuits my thought.

"I promise, too," ze says. "I won't tell."

"Same," Anahera adds. "I promise. You… you're doing the right thing, Dumuz. Keep learning. Stick it to those stuffy-feathers who say you can't."

"*Thank you*." Dumuz's gratitude is barely more than a thin, whistling breath. He doesn't slump or bow, but I can feel the relief pouring off him.

I don't know what to say. This is too many big questions for someone who's only been awake for ten-ish minutes. This is too many big questions for *anyone*. Silence weaves its way between the branching walls, surrounding us, compressing us.

I fight an unfortunately timed yawn. My jaw pops.

My choices are: rest now and be more functional later, or force myself to be semi-functional now and be completely unable to function later. In the back of my mind, Nitan tilts her head and gives me a half-smile, raising her eyebrow in a mild arch. She'll forgive me, but I don't want to let her down.

"I'll need to rest soon," I say, trying to disguise my bitterness. "But I can answer a couple questions now, if you want, Dumuz. We've asked a lot of you."

"You and you –" Dumuz motions to Hikoa and I after a moment's thought, "– mates are." He turns to Anahera. "You family are, too?"

"Yeah. Lirit is my cousin," she explains. "My mother is her mother's sibling."

"Ah, like a –" Dumuz makes a click-hoot that sounds like '*koo-zoh'*. "She egg-batch of your *ovipar*'s egg-batch is of."

"I think so?" The strange words slip on my sludgy brain. Thinking too hard is starting to make my right eyeball throb. "I don't know enough about your people yet, but that sounds like it might be equivalent."

Dumuz's jumbled words are starting to blur like wet ink. I'm processing thoughts slower and slower as sleep sludge rises higher and higher over my mind. Blunt knives have started to dig between where my spine joins my pelvis; pillow or not, I've been sitting too long.

I know I need to recharge my batteries, or I'll break down.

"I… I may need to go rest; I'm getting to the end of my mental stamina. Is that okay?"

It's not, not really. The Council has only allowed us three cycles here, and the idea of wasting any of that time burns bitter in my throat. The pull of a new people to talk to – outside, off-ship, diverse – squirms in my stomach and dances tremors down my fingers. My heart blares a rib-rattling siren *can't wait can't wait can't wait not enough time too much to do.* I don't know if I'll be *able* to rest. Part of

me hopes that my spouse and cousin will chivvy me into staying awake; we should adjust to the local orbital rotation, if we can.

"You know it's okay with us." Hikoa leans over the low table and kisses my forehead. "Sleep, Lirit. The city will still be here when you wake up." How does ze read my mind so well?

My hips and spine crack when I stand. Dumuz flinches again.

I stumble back into the bower. My body hits the bedroll, and my mind keeps falling, plunging back down into sleep.

Getting the heavy sheet-metal door open, I whirr out onto a narrow-terraced path.

The path follows the flat surface of a curving branch as wide as one of *La Sesa*'s corridors. With no woven walls or ceiling, it reveals my first clear sight of this impossible planet.

Everything is so *vibrant*. I thought the Entertainment Gardens on *La Sesa* were green, but this…. This isn't neat, rectangular, metal rooms of careful planting. This is a wild tumult of colours, a valley of trees that have ignored gravity to stretch a canopy just below the lower atmosphere, a hundred-thousand different perfumes of a hundred-thousand different plants, the distant calls of jungle creatures I can't even imagine.

The world expands out under the clifftop-city-in-the-trees, across kilometres of forested valley to the distant mountains, an imprinted ribbon in the dense foliage showing the path of the river. Somehow, the domed blue-tinged yellow sky above seems more vast than the space between stars. The primary star reaches down to touch my face with warm fingers.

This must be how the *La Dua* or *La Kvina* felt, arriving in star systems to find their new homeplanets lush and green and rich in life. This must be what moons see, looking down on their worlds, orbiting millennia after millennia as whole eras rise and fall beneath their feet.

A glance over the edge sends my vision spiralling back into reality. I back my 'chair up sharp.

We are an awfully long way up. It was risky enough to skim myself across the river yestercycle; I don't want to test if my 'chair can counter what looks to be a two-hundred-plus-metre drop from the top of a tree on the top of a cliff. With my luck, I'd probably hit every branch on the way down.

The view across the valley is like nothing I've ever seen, but I'll be able to enjoy it more from behind a balustrade, or at least with slightly more solid distance between me and the edge.

Keeping close to the woven wall, I follow the path around to the right, toward the faint warble of whistling voices. The branch I'm on splits into many, all extending out to slot between the branches of the surrounding trees. Smaller boughs have been woven between, encouraged to fuse together as they grow, making a living lattice floor that spans probably a good square kilometre of treetop.

I look at the fist-sized gaps in between and double-check the knot of my wristcomp.

When another attempt to contact Ana and Hikoa fails, I point my hoverchair down the sturdiest-looking branch and hope I don't get too irretrievably lost.

I haven't gone far when a contralto voice soars on the wind, solo-cello, warm, resonant. A winged being swoops over my head to land beside me. I startle and duck.

Inaĵat. The warrior-leader no longer wears ceremonial armour, but small gemstone beads still glint among sleek *female-coloured* feathers.

I can't get my head around that.

"Nin'Ereŝ." Pulling my shoulders back, I greet her with a painful, jerky bow from my hoverchair.

"Chronicler," she returns, focusing all three sets of eyes on me and flicking out her long flight feathers like a pleated skirt. "Call me Inaĵat."

"Then call me Lirit."

"*Hadan'ra aneŝule,* Lirit." She bobs her head in a way I'm starting to consider a smile. "Would you accompany me to the Markets?"

"I would be honoured." If nothing else, a guide with me now will probably save a search party later. It will definitely save me gentle teasing from Hikoa later about my situational awareness and sense of direction.

Inaĵat leads me along a connecting branch toward the adjacent tree trunk. We walk in achy silence for a few minutes, not… not quite uncomfortable, but… careful. I fuss with the end of a rebraided-but-unwashed plait. I've managed to twist fish oil all through it earlier, and after all the dust and mud and

grime of yesterday's travels, I'm starting to think I'd sell my left leg for a bar of soap and hot running water.

Finally, I blurt out, "Have you seen my companions this morning? I saw them at firstmeal, but they've been out of communication range since I woke up again, and I'm concerned about us getting lost in an unfamiliar city."

"Your companions are safe," Inaĵat assures me. "They are with Suliltur and Geŝtinura. It is likely we will encounter them at the Markets."

I allow myself a slumping sigh, and then pull my shoulders back again. The tense muscles lining my spine complain.

"Okay." I measure a breath. "Okay. Thank you."

We've reached the central tree trunk. I follow our host through an arch carved in the side of the home-block-wide trunk, onto a hoverator-that-doesn't-hover platform like as the one we used to reach the Council Chambers with Dumuz yestercycle.

The platform descends. Inaĵat slices through the silence with a graceful cello down-bow.

"I'm sure you have questions."

I smother my automatic sarcastic reply under my Ambassador Mantle and settle on a simple, "Yes."

"We have more questions for you, too, but they will keep until the next Council session later today." Inaĵat glances at me with her secondary eyes. "You have answered enough of our questions for now. It is only fair we take the time to answer yours."

"Thank you." I think of all the questions that have run about my mind like destructive *aos si fae*, of the broken conversation with Dumuz, of the temporarily useless wristcomp. "We did get a chance to talk to…." I cut myself off mid-word, shooting a discreet glance at our host. Yes, Inaĵat is Dumuz's *mate*, and I can't imagine keeping something like this hidden from Hikoa, but she's still on the Ruling Council. We promised Dumuz we wouldn't put him at risk.

But the Councillor merely gives a slow, knowing blink and inclines her head. My shoulders relax, and my next breath settles more easily in my lunge. It seems I may have found Dumuz's secret language tutor.

Still, what's that ancient saying, about discretion and courage? I can be subtle.

"We found… someone to answer some basic questions – where we are, who you are, and such – but they suggested that you would be able to give better answers to our more complicated questions."

I've just about sorted through which questions I want to ask and how I want to phrase them when I'm interrupted by the wooden *clunk* of the platform shuddering to a halt.

"This is the bottom of Skathpelmos," Inaĵat tells me. She must see the confusion flicker through my eyes, because she elaborates. "The Second Steppe. The Markets are on the Third Steppe. If you lose your way, ask to be shown to the Empraetagor."

My guide leads the way out onto pale, glowing moss and soft soil. I kick my bare feet through long tufts of feathery grasses. It tickles. I giggle. Inaĵat's third eyes flick a strange look at me.

Glancing straight up, I can see the floor of the bottom branch-floor, some fifty metres above my head, partly concealed in thick, yellow-and-purple foliage. Everything feels muted on ground-level, light diffused through a thousand leaves from high above, like an immersive holo-set of an ancient Earthen cathedral.

Inaĵat sets off again, and I trail behind her like a linked hover-cart.

"The question that… the Aetirung we spoke to suggested we ask you is: how did we get here?" I've been mulling over how to phrase this impossible question. "If Glisesa – the 'Veiled Planet' – is another planet entirely from here – Shargaidra – how did we manage intergalactic travel without leaving the surface? It can't have had something to do with that odd chamber in the cave, can it? The *katedralo*? Something about that place was strange, but…." I shake my head. "I don't understand. How did we get here?"

"You passed through the *Kalayma*."

Another bloom of questions spread over my skull like glow-moss.

"What does that mean? What is the *Kalayma*?"

Inaĵat stops for a pace. She tilts her head to the side.

"I forget you did not knowingly travel here over the *Abchernipont'Apasu'Amfi*."

"The what, sorry?" My sore jaw clenches to keep another sarcastic reply – and a barrage of yet more questions – behind my teeth. I'm still trying to get all the multisyllabic place names Dumuz told us to sink into my brain. "I think you should assume I know nothing and explain from there."

Inaĵat starts walking again and explains as she goes. She speaks slowly, but by the clenching of her lower wing muscles, she seems more uncomfortable than condescending.

"When we close our *lefaron* in flight," she starts, flickering translucent-green third eyelids to illustrate, "it lessens glare that can damage our eyes, but it also changes the light. If we look straight ahead, we see everything as normal, but if we turn our heads to the side far enough, everything darkens. It doesn't impact our flight – we don't purely rely on our eyes to navigate – but…."

"You have natural polarisation in your eyelids?!" I blurt, before clapping both hands over my mouth. "Sorry. I didn't mean to interrupt. If it is the same thing, we have to put lenses over our eyes to get that effect. Is it like this?" I take off my glareshades and hand them over.

Inaĵat stops to hold them up to one primary eye. I see the fuzzy outline of her head tilt to one side, but then she trills a laugh and tilts the 'shades instead.

"Yes." She hands my glareshades back without looking at me, staring off across the distant valley for a couple seconds, blinking rapidly. Oops, I hadn't thought of that. My vision is much worse than the average Ghemod, and Ghemod vision is probably much worse than the average Aetirung. If Hikoa has such a strong reaction to trying on my spectacles, it'll be much more uncomfortable for Inaĵat. "Our *lefaron* are… polarised."

"That is so awesome!" I grin. But my grin falters, remembering how we got onto this conversational grav-track. "What does that have to do with this *Kalayma*?"

"Light is not the only element to… polarise." Inaĵat clicks her beak, considers, then stops again.

Bending down, she scrapes away a small patch of moss and scoops a handful of reddish clay. Forming it into a rough ball, she holds it in multi-jointed fingers and continues walking.

"Imagine you seal your *lefaron* – or, well, put on your… lenses – and look straight at this ball. You can see it perfectly. But when you turn your head to the side, everything goes dark, and it disappears. Now, you put on a different lenses. When your head is where everything was dark before,

you see clearly the ball of clay is now green. When you tilt your head straight again," she rotates the ball a quarter-twist, "it is gone, and everything is dark."

I almost nod, but then stop myself. I'm not grinning, and I'm pretty sure that's how the Aetirung interpret a nod.

"I follow," I say instead.

"The red ball is the Veiled Planet, the world you call Glisesa. The green ball is Shargaidra, our world. The two exist in the same space, but in different…" Inaĵat's primary eyes scrunch as she mentally translates, "… realities or planes of existence, I would say. Paired planets like ours are intrinsically linked to each other, but not in a way that can be perceived by someone with knowledge of only one side. The *Kalaymi* are the places where reality tilts, where it's possible to pass through from one… plane to the other. The cave system has one such place. When you followed Dumuz, you passed into our plane."

"Oh." I don't think I'm following anymore.

I don't get to clarify. We've reached the edge of the Second Steppe. We're at eye-level with the top of the next Steppe's equally enormous trees.

I risk a look down and regret it.

Fragile rootites dangle from cracks in bare cliff face, like ivy has been ripped from its surface, revealing dark russet-brown stone stippled pinkish peach. Only sparse colonies of small plants remain, hiding in shadows across the sheer rock: flat, slimy-looking leaves unfurling among strings of yellowy, bead-like growths. I can't even glimpse the bottom of the vertical drop through spiralling branches of forearm-sized leaves. A single thick branch stretches out from the canopy toward us.

Of course, there's a gap between cliff and branch, yet more nauseous *nothing* dropping away beneath. Inaĵat clears the space with little more than a flutter of her primary wings.

Oh, Old Hells. Not again.

Most ship-born Ghemod grow out our instinctive fear of heights by the end of our first zero-G tube session. But on the ships, there are grav-generator safeties to stop a long, lethal fall. Here, I'm going to have to trust my 'chair again, but the stakes are much higher than the river.

Much, *much* higher.

Blood thuds against my pulse-points like building rapids. I can feel it in my throat.

I've used a hoverchair since I was – I have to think about it – eighteen standard years old? I've had this 'chair for a decade, and it has never occurred to me to learn how it works. If it's an independent anti-grav field, like the ship-to-planet shuttles, I'll be fine; if it relies on the floor to contain the field, like the grav-trains, I'm going to fall to my death. If I'd put in all of an hour figuring out the science that powers tech I use nearly every day, I'd know if my hoverchair will still hover two-hundred-odd metres off the ground.

Hikoa probably knows how grav-tech works. I'm going to ask zir as soon as I survive this.

If I survive this, I won't need to ask.

If I don't survive this, I won't *get* to ask.

Inaĵat waits on the other side, taloned hands folded across the front edges of her second wings. Her upper wings twitch, expectant.

"Are you on warm breezes?" she calls.

Her voice snaps me out of spiralling panic for a bird-quick heartbeat. What? I'm not on *any* breezes; it's too scary to leave solid ground. Wait. Is she asking if I'm okay?

"Yes." *No.*

I swallow hard; my throat shakes. Adrenaline grabs my belly and *twists*. I'm so scared I can't breathe.

The gap is only a metre, a metre and a half at most. Dumuz didn't have much trouble ferrying Ana and Hikoa over the river with my 'chair. I'm smaller than they are, and Inaĵat is larger and stronger than her mate. If everything goes horribly wrong and I drop like a bag of kumara, she'll have plenty of time to catch me.

That… doesn't help as much as I hoped it would.

You'll be fine, Lirit. You're alright. You're not going to die. The voice in my head sounds like Hikoa. I wrinkle my nose.

Um… Inaĵat said that Hikoa and Ana are already at the Markets. They would've had to get across the gap somehow, and they don't have grav-tech with them. So really, I'm more prepared than they are. Maybe, we're close enough now that I can comm them and ask.

I tap my wristcomp screen. It flashes ‘No Connection’ again and shuts off. *Plago.*

Maybe I don’t want to know how they got across the gap. The thought of them jumping it without any safeties punches the breath out of me.

“Chronicler Lirit?” Perched on the branch, Inaĵat shifts her wings again, that crossed-arms ruffle.

I’m an Ambassador. These beings value strength and courage. They already don’t trust us much. They aren’t going to understand that Ghemod are *born* with the fear of falling. I can’t let my fear chain me away from my role here. I can’t just….

I can’t.

I can’t I can’t I can’t.

I have to.

My shaking knuckles bleach on the arms of my hoverchair. My shoulders are knotted to my ears. I pull steel-boned control around every breath, *in six suspend two out eight*. Hikoa’s voice is gentle in my mind, guiding me through familiar exercises, reminding me what I need to do.

Three Sights: that bright-purple leaf with the yellow veins that’s sticking out from its friends; that patch of orange fungus growing on the underside of that twig; the blue gems shining on Inaĵat’s shoulder feathers. Two Touches: the warmth of the primary star on my shoulders and back – I hope I don’t get UV burn out here – and my hoverchair’s padding under my thighs. One Sound: the susuruss of moving air in the leaves.

Calm. I can be calm.

I am catastrophising. The scenario is not as horrible as it seems. I’m not going to die. The gap is only a metre. Even if my ‘chair starts falling, I’ll have enough momentum to reach the branch. This worked at the river. I’m not going to sit up here worrying while Ana and Hikoa wander around an awesome alien city doing my job without me. I don’t want to be stuck here, frozen with useless indecision, for the rest of this cycle. The longer I sit here overthinking, the more I’m going to freak myself out. Channel Anahera: act now, panic later.

I centre my ‘chair with the branch as perfectly as I can, hold my breath, laser-sight my eyes on the distant tree trunk, and slam my hand down on the control panel.

Oh, drek. Oh drek. OhdrekohdrekohdrekIhatethis.

The rising wind vortexes behind my lenses, slices between my eyelashes, batters my ears. A split second of stickball weightlessness, a breath-freezing wobble, a nerve-jangling bump… and there's a wide, sturdy branch under my hovering feet.

I let out a gusty sigh and slump in my seat. The adrenaline starts to drain, but it'll be a while until my heart crawls out of my throat and back where it belongs.

Inaĵat starts off again, walking down the branch toward the next massive tree trunk. Counting out another three slow breaths, I weld my spine to the back of my 'chair and pretend my stomach isn't still falling.

I focus on Hul'Uru as the city comes to life around me. I don't have a three-dimensional visualiser in my head like Hikoa does, but I'm starting to piece together the city's layout. From what I can see and what Inaĵat has said, the city is built into one terraced side of a flat-topped mesa. Each Steppe is made up of dozens of trees, each at least as big as Inaĵat and Dumuz's home-tree and many far bigger, with about a hundred metres between the end of one set of roots and the beginning of the next. They're positioned in alternating lines that span as far as I can see in both directions.

There are more beings on the canopy branch-roads: most walking – or flying – by themselves, some calling to each other in small flocks of twos or threes or fives. A handful seem to be either coming or going from the tree trunk hoverator-that-doesn't, but most simply leap off the edges and swoop out of sight.

It makes my heart skitter every single time. I have to tie my fingers in my plait to fight the urge to rush over and reassure myself there aren't piles of broken-winged corpses below us. It's scary enough to look up and see *endless empty sky without even a drekkin' handrail* and know that I am at the top of a tree larger than I can comprehend; then I look over to see a cheerful, lanky-legged Aetirung calling across the branches, waving to a friend with a secondary wing, and then falling backward off a deathly drop… only to reappear as a brownish blur soaring up to the Second Steppe. *Phew.*

This time, Inaĵat and I share the hoverator-ish – I really need to learn the proper name for them – with a cluster of three Aetirung youth. At least, I guess that they're young: barely as tall as the bottom

of Inaĵat's chest keel, all trilling giggles and patches of downy grey feathers and many-eyed stares. I try not to stare back.

"Uh… *hadan'ra aneŝule*?" I venture. The three pass looks between themselves and me, chirping and chattering, bobbing their heads and flicking their wing-tips. One of them sees Inaĵat behind me, and all six of – that's right, grey feathers, got to assume – *his* eyes go wide. He sounds a muffled shriek, and three go silent. As one, they bow from the waist and curtsy with their wings.

Inaĵat stands straight, the gemstone beads in her feathers catching shafts of light from the canopy entrance above. The Councillor may be only two-thirds my size, but I can see why the three young ones seem so awed. She speaks to them in their native tongue, a short, terse phrase. The tone seems reprimanding, but I can't tell what they've done wrong.

The platform judders to a halt. I look up again. The arched entry isn't that far above us, not even a quarter the height of a whole tree. I can't tell how many levels we've descended; unlike the other two trunk-shafts, there aren't any entries or exits counting off each one. But there's an arch in front of us now, so we've clearly stopped in the right place. This tree must be just one big level, rather than many smaller levels, but why would they waste so much usable space for a high ceiling?

I'm still puzzling when Inaĵat leads me out into the Markets. This time, I can't stop myself staring.

I think I subconsciously expected something like the Markets on *La Sesa*, but unlike the Aetirung, we can't build *up the walls*. Small wooden tables stretch not just across the kilometre of woven, living floor, but stagger up the even-spaced tree trunks like spiral stairs, all the way up to the floor of the canopy above, where I can see flashes of yellow sky and hopping feet through the gaps.

We were up on that canopy level, with those feet and under that sky, mere minutes ago. I've spent so much time here looking up that it never occurred to me to look down. So much life beneath my hovermotor, and I didn't notice anything.

In every dimension, on every possible vector of movement, Aetirung squawk and chatter and flit and soar, over and under and through and around.

"*Sweet stars*."

I don't know I've said it aloud until Inaĵat's keeled chest puffs with pride, and she looks out at her home with all her eyes.

"Welcome to the Third Steppe Markets."

My mouth works, once, twice, before words come.

"This is... I've never seen anything like this."

If Hikoa and Ana aren't already here, they *need* to see this. Ana will be like an atom in a nuclear engine, a ball of energy splitting into a million different directions to experience everything all at once. The crush of beings might unnerve Hikoa a little, but the potential of studying new tech and learning new things will silence the nerves. But if the two of them are already here, ze will want another set of eyes to make sure Ana doesn't get distracted by something shiny. Stars, ze will want another set of eyes to make sure *I* don't get distracted by something shiny. Even with sleepy lead still lining my veins, it's taking the full weight of my mental Ambassador's Cloak to keep me poised by my host's side.

Another set of eyes. I glance at Inaĵat and swallow a giggle. There'll be a few pairs spare around here.

"Lirit!"

I turn at my name.

Ana drags Hikoa through the feathered crowd by zir sleeve. I laugh at the dandelion-rubber expressions stretching across zir face: apologising for hitting a hovering Aetirung's ankle with zir head; pleading at Ana's back to *slow down, Lirit's not going anywhere, we have time, be patient, will you?*; turning around to talk to two Aetirung who seem to be following them; eyes sliding away from the growing numbers watching the kerfuffle of two aliens marching through their Markets.

"Cuz!" Ana whirls to a halt beside me and releases Hikoa's sleeve to wrap me up in a hug that pulls me half out of my seat. "Glad you're up."

"Ow." I press on my sore ribs. "*Saluton*."

And I joke that Hikoa is an automaton. Teksisto curse my *rubo* mental batteries.

I hug Ana back and give Hikoa a kiss, before turning to greet the two Aetirung with them. Bending low at the waist, I sweep my hands out as much like flared feathers as I can. I recognize one of them from the day before: the wide-faced lyric-soprano who deflected the other Councillors' suspicion for us. "*Hadan'ra aneŝule,* Nin'Eresh."

"*Hadan'ra aneŝule,* Chronicler." The plump Aetirung woman returns my bow. "I don't think we've been properly introduced. My name is Suliltur, and this –" she motions to the young Aetirung tucked behind her, "– is my *nunuz,* Geŝtinura."

"It's nice to meet you." I go to reach out a hand in greeting, pause, retract, try to shake the red out of my cheeks. Of course, the Aetirung don't clasp hands the way Ghemod do; not even all cultures of Ghemod clasp hands. I contemplate asking what *nunuz* means, but instead go with a simple, "Thank you, for your kindness to us before the Council. And, please, call me Lirit."

"My fellow Councillors can be… antagonistic," she says with a nod-smile. "Often, we have to be. I – and a few others on the Council – merely had the sense that this was not one of those times."

I open my mouth to respond, but a shrill alarm screams a warning, and the Markets erupt into sonic-boom chaos. I scream with it, hands clamped on my ears. The sound stabs straight through them. Even Hikoa jumps.

Within a second, Inaĵat lands beside us. Her keeled face is somehow more *alien* than when we first saw her. Her second and third eyes scan and roll like a frightened animal's, but her primaries burn with cold, golden fire. Tiny muscle twitches turn facial feathers to water, rippling and surging. Turning to the two Councillors, she clicks orders we can't understand. Sulitur and Geŝtinura take flight; I lose them in a blink amid the winged cloud streaming to every latticed exit.

Inaĵat focuses primary eyes on Hikoa. She doesn't shout, even as the alarm shrieks.

"Tech-Mapper, you remember the way to the First Steppe?"

"Yes." Ze nods once.

"Get to Neosia. Bolt the door. Hide."

"What's going on?" Ana demands, taking a half-step forward.

"We're under attack." Inaĵat's words are taloned. Hers is a voice used to being obeyed without question. "Fly. Go. *Now*!"

As one, we look at the Warrior Woman's rippling face, at each other, at the tree trunk behind us, and we're moving. Inaĵat is already gone when I glance back. The Market is already all but empty.

I'm grateful I stayed by the Transport Station.

We jam into the platform with five brown-banded Aetirung. It was full with just me, Inaĵat, and three young ones. With five broad-winged warriors, three Ghemod, and a hoverchair, none of us can even shift our weight. Even if I can't run, I need to *move*. We need to move and keep moving. Inaĵat's words echo. *Get to Neosia. Hide.* Public transport isn't hidden, isn't locked up against attackers, isn't safe. Panic prickles like static in my lungs. The tree-trunk walls press in.

The platform crawls up the tree.

I pull Hikoa onto my seat to make more room. Ze folds up in my lap and grips my hand, *I. Love. You,* zir calloused knuckles clenched bloodless around mine. I cling to zir fingers. The sharp points of zir pelvis dig into my thigh; I ignore the ache. Ana scoots her foot back from a warrior's needle-toed misstep. Pushing closer, she tips her torso over the back of my 'chair, head on my shoulder, face squished into Hikoa's back. She scowls, '*why don't you flap your drekkin' wings and leave the platform to us'* scrawled across her round nose and broad cheekbones in grouchy creases.

As we jostle, I see why these five beings haven't taken flight.

Their bodies are topographies of ridgeline scars and puckered, gashed valleys, some faded to sandy off-white, most still a raw, burned red that makes Glisesa's dust look greyscale. A bald stump is all one has left of a tail, the flank muscle down their left side sunken in like it's been cut away from their bones. Their leg is wooden rods and metal cable from the hip down; their flesh has grown down over the crude prosthetic like the images of Earthen trees grown over pre-Migration fences or bicycles or signs. Three others miss chunks of limp wings, or – in one's case – an entire secondary wing ripped away. The last one's chest keel is dented in. Deep, faded-maroon scars radiate out from the crater like dry river-paths where bone fragments shattered under split skin.

Sweet stars.

No one speaks. There's not enough and too much to say. Residual exhaustion cakes leaden and gritty under my eyelids, between my brain and skull, senses having to fight through silty, wet sand to register. The wool-packed silence gives me too much time to think.

Inaĵat said the city is under attack. The Council spoke of spies, enemies, weapons, *war*. Like all schoolchildren, we've seen the recorded 2D footage of Old Earth's endless war – charred memories left behind in the streets of murdered cities; rows upon rows of bare, dirty feet sticking out from under

stained sheets; reminders of what we have vowed never to let happen again – and we thought we knew what ‘war’ meant.

I see now why the Councillors didn’t trust us, if they thought we worked for beings who could cause those wounds.

My head spirals into slimy *what ifs*. *What if Bernos is right? What if my family gets hurt because I panic and freeze, or I can’t run fast enough, or I can’t fight trained warriors? What will those beings do to us if they get us? What if* La Sesa *loses one of their best emergency medics on a planet we didn’t know existed? Will Ana and Hikoa be able to negotiate or escape if I die?*

If we all die here, our families won’t even get to plant our remains in the Grave Gardens.

Stars, please, no, don’t let them die. Please.

Is it catastrophizing if it could happen? Those beings are here now. I almost lost my family to Aetirung gaols. I could lose them to much worse, and there isn’t a damned thing I could do.

I cling tighter to my spouse, reach back to grab my cousin’s hand. Fear leaks from my eyes, and the Aetirung stare at us, but I can’t think clearly enough to explain tears to them right now, and I don’t care what they think of open affection. I won’t let go even to scrub scared tears away. I bury my face in Hikoa’s chest and try to count lemon-and-sweat-scented breaths. *Three Touches: Hikoa’s bony butt digging into my lap; Ana’s hand heavy and comforting on my shoulder; the familiar, constant support of my ‘chair’s padded seat and arms.* Ze holds me tight. I cling to zir.

It’s a balm of a moment, a swipe of kawakawa salve over burnt fear.

“We’ll be okay,” Hikoa murmurs into my hair. “We’re gonna be okay.”

How does ze know that?

Hikoa shifts to kiss me, finds tears with zir nose; a thumb comes up over my jaw to smudge them away. Ze presses zir forehead to my temple, nuzzles my cheek, and a warm hand combs comfort through the loose, wispy hairs at the nape of my neck. I lean into the touch and pray to the stars it isn’t the last.

But the platform stops, and we have to move. Hikoa tumble-rolls off my lap and into a run, shouts for us to follow. Ze knows the way. Ze has a thousand paths mapped in zir mind. Ana pushes me ahead. I jam my ‘chair into sprint. The hovermotor screams.

The Aetirung disperse like smoke among the treetops. Ana, Hikoa, and I keep going, hurtle over the Steppe-gap, race across hundred metres of fear-blurred glow-moss to the next transport tree. By the time we get to the bottom of Inaĵat and Dumuz's home-tree, it's just the three of us Ghemod.

Except, it isn't.

We're nearly to the last platform, thirty metres from the archway, twenty-eight metres, twenty-six, twenty-five….

Four beings peel from the shadow of the undergrowth like nightmares made real. Some bizarre juxtaposition of insect and reptile, they're over two metres long, partially armoured in scaly, glistening, black plates with short, horn-like spikes along their sides. They approach with a shambling, uneven limp-step, bulbous rollbug bodies slung from five spindly, segmented limbs. I can't tell if the fifth – curved, sharp, dragging under their sloped backs – is a leg or a tail or a stinger or….

The alien soldiers grip heavy-looking metal clubs in their two skeletal upper limbs. Each one is solid metal the size of Ana's arm, and the aliens hold them like they weigh no more than a handcomp. I think of the Aetirung woman's smashed-in chest. My lungs shrivel in their cage, form a vacuum in the sudden terror-cold void; ice crystallises in the hollow space.

I've never experienced the literal sensation of feeling my skin crawl. I thought it was a figure of speech, but no. Each twitch of hairy antennae, every unnatural swivel of barely recognizable globule-heads on stem-like, brittle-looking necks make cold chickenbumps crawl up my arms and over my nape. A spear of ice burns through my body and pins me to the grass. Fear is a ticking insect crawling up my throat. Frozen into my 'chair, naked and scared and small, I have never wished harder that teleportation was real. We need to be somewhere else, anywhere else, anywhere but here.

The aliens advance. We step back.

Lipless mouths peel open, even rows of needle fangs behind curved mandibles. They're so close I can see oily, black saliva-venom-mucus-something bead on hollow incisors. I can hear the sick *thud-squelch* of many pincer-clawed feet boring into the damp soil, the ratchet *rattle* of their leg joints, the grating *rasp* of armour plates, the fingernails-on-dry-bamboo *tap-click* of their mandibles. They start to spread out, to block off any escape.

Muscles strung tense, Hikoa glances from them to the tree arch to me to the advancing soldiers; I can see metres and seconds and calculations flicking with the tiny movements of zir eyes. Ze angles zirself between *us* and *them*, staying close beside me. I look at zir clenched hands, half an arm's length from mine. I want to reach out, grab onto zir, remind zir *we'll be okay*.

"*Masakro*."

Ana looks at the converging aliens, and she cracks her knuckles and grins. It's a cold, cutting thing, a slash carved deep into her wooden face. My stomach contracts at the sight. The terror-void spreads ice through my belly. Liquid nitrogen chills my blood, and my muscle fibres splinter when I half-lift a hand.

The aliens creep closer, twenty metres away, eighteen, fifteen. They stop, positioned in a loose semi-circle, backing us against the base of the massive tree trunk, waiting for… something.

"Lirit, Hikoa, get to the tree," Ana mutters from the corner of her mouth. "I'll distract them."

"Like *drek*!" My mind shrieks, but the pressure of flat, alien eyes stifles my voice to a whisper. "You aren't…. You can't…."

"I can fight them." Her eyes don't shift from the biggest alien, sizing them up, but her limbs are relaxed. She rolls her shoulders, shakes out her arms. "I can take 'em."

Nononononono… no, this can't be happening….

"Four of them against one of you?" My words squeeze fast and shrill and raspy through my dry throat. "No way in the Old Hells. Ana, look at them, they're *soldiers*. I know you *can* fight, but even your M.M.A. classes…. You can't win this!"

"Sure I can. Look at those spindly legs. I'm sure even a kick from you would snap one."

"Anahera, *please*!" I ignore freeze-seared muscles and reach out for her with numb hands. In the same moment, my cousin steps in front of Hikoa and me. My hands close on air. With a haka-cry, she stomps a bare foot into the ground, rhythmic, grimaces her face into a fierce pūkana. The movement is defiant, proud, the challenge clear in any culture.

The four beings turn twelve pairs of eyes on her. Maybe sixteen pairs? I can't tell. Are there eyes in those sunken pits above their mandibles? She glares right back. Hikoa retreats out of periphery, moving somewhere behind me.

"Ana," I spit. "C'mon." I scoot forward, try to grab her wrist, try to pull her with me. She pushes me away. My 'chair goes spinning. I catch a glimpse of Hikoa, backing toward the tree, inputting something into zir wristcomp, then the hovermotor rights itself, and I face my cousin again.

"No." Ana is too calm, too manic calm. How many hours since we left La Sesa? When was the last time she took her meds? I can't remember how often she needs to take them. "I'll be fine; I got this. I'll be right behind you. Now, get out of here."

Nononononono….

One of the aliens starts to circle around behind us. It'll get between us and the tree. We'll be cut off. Trapped.

"Ana, come on." I grab at her arm again. "We're not leaving you."

Anahera doesn't budge, a single, naked figure facing three armoured soldiers. Fraying, I'm stretched between spouse and cousin, between rescue and escape, and there isn't enough time to choose.

"No," she says again. "*Get. The. Krul. Out. Of. Here*." Too fast for me to stop her, Anahera runs into the middle of the half-circle, squares up with the alien in front of her, shifts her weight into a sparring stance, shouts, "Hey, you *magra, avida lupago*! Yeah, you, *flak*-face!"

They converge on her. My body goes numb and empty as space.

"Ana!" I'm too far away to help her. Then I'm moving further. My 'chair turns and accelerates, but I haven't touched the controls. *What?* I hear the dry *crack* of a blow, but my spine spasms when I whirl around too fast. Convulsive pain wrenches me over. A tree root thicker than my entire body whips less than a hand-span under the footrests; I need to glance ahead along my 'chair's path.

Hikoa stands by the tree, tapping zir wristcomp. I look down at the control panel under my forearm. *Linked Mode,* it reads, *Link ID:* ♥ *Karulo* ♥.

No! No, no, no, no, Hikoa, what are you doing? Desperate anger builds steam in my chest. It rises, igniting, into my throat, behind my eyes, between brain and skull. My fingers are shaking too hard to input the override. I slam a fist down on the panel. It bows under the force. Letters smear to blue-grey streaks, dripping ink on the CTG screen.

There's a chittery squeal, and I look up again. The fourth alien soldier, the one who'd looped around behind us. Spindly arms wave above my head, two wielding weapons. I duck. The hovermotor screams. So do I. The alien rears up on three legs as my 'chair skids under its swollen thorax.

Within a blink, I'm inside the tree trunk. The platform starts to move, the arched gap shrinking, Ana's escape route shrinking with it. There are seconds left.

I look back. Ana is constant, brawny motion, block-dodge-strike-elbow-duck-punch-punch-kick-stomp-dodge, but she is badly outmatched. The soldiers' moves are just that little bit faster, have just a little more force behind them, are that little bit more ingrained. My cousin is one of the most skilled martial artists on *La Sesa*, but these are *soldiers*; their reflexes will be trained on battlefields, not friendly sparring competitions.

I need to get to my cousin. I need to her get out of there, cause a distraction, anything. Something grabs my 'chair, stops me. I try to pry long fingers off the arms. The hands tighten. I jam them under my knuckles, but they don't let go.

I catch one last glimpse of my cousin, as she raises her arm to stop a pincer coming down on her head. She braces, takes the impact, shoves into it. The alien kicks her. She falls, tucks, rolls, stumbles up again. Blood oozes from her lip, from the side of her head, from the gash in her forearm.

Then the platform moves past the arch, and I'm trapped blind in the hollow.

The fingers peel away, and I spin the 'chair around. Steam boils over my eyelids. I focus sea-salt eyes on Hikoa's blank face, and I have never burned so furious.

Uncontrolled fire can rip a city-ship apart in minutes, the tiny voice in the back of my head reminds me. *It can rip you apart just as fast.*

"What the *masakro*, Hikoa?! We need to…. She can't… not alone…." Too many words crash into tears at the back of my throat, spill out of my mouth in a sob. Ze stands in front of the control box. I try to whirr past zir. Ze steels zir stance, blocks the 'chair's momentum with zir body. "Get the *krul* out the way. I can't leave her. *We* can't leave her!"

I stumble to my feet, fling myself under zir arm with numb-legged weight. In the span of a breath, ze pivots to redirect our motion so I'm backed into zir chest. Hikoa wraps zirself around me and lowers

me to the floor. Ze encircles my wrists in strong fingers, folds my arms across my front, tucks zir ankles around mine, restrains me in a hold that's almost a hug. I'd be impressed if I wasn't raging.

"Let me go! LET ME GO!"

I writhe, lash out, contort, brace an elbow in zir sternum and twist-shove. My body is worn-out elastic, but it is still hyper-flexible; even if it stops me from being actually useful, it can *flakkin'* well wrench me free now. I pull my shattered joints and splintered muscles until sockets grind on shifting bones and a rib rips loose, and even then I try to aim nauseous spasms to pitch myself out of zir grasp.

Everything screams. Everything *is* screams. There is no other sound in the hollow space. The pain fragments my concentration. The tiny voice breathes, *you know better than to move with a dislocation,* flashes images of compound fractures and punctured lungs and injuries we can't treat off-ship. I ignore it. No time to be careful, or we won't have our medic at all.

Hikoa clutches tighter, but not so it hurts, never so it hurts. Ze's so stars-damned gentle with me. Body an inferno of rage and pain, I almost relish the flames that ignite my bone marrow easy as match-strike and boil my pathetic, watery body to steam. The pressure under my skin hurts so much less than the rib reeling my chest muscles around it, or Hikoa's soft, guilty care, or the brittle ice in my heart.

In that last glimpse… Ana bloodied, beaten…. My pain doesn't matter, not until she's safe.

"Let me go! Let me go back! *Please*." The last word cracks, half-demand and half-prayer.

Hikoa folds zir calloused fingers around mine; the shivers in my hands are jarring as an engine-quake under the hull of zir hold.

"I can't. I'm so sorry, Lirit, but I can't. You know that."

My spouse holds me still until the platform stops. I jerk out of zir arms and limp-run out onto the edge of the latticed floor. I look down.

This time, the nausea isn't from the hundreds of empty metres beneath the branches or the dislocated rib that is a red-hot palette knife pierced between lung and stomach.

Anahera slumps limp in one of the aliens' four upper arms. It holds her in a disgusted mockery of gentleness, like we might pick up a half-dead rollbug that's gotten out of its tank. Blood drools down her temple. The red is so bright, a raw wound in a forest of dull purple and luminous blue.

The aliens swim on rising tears, and I shove my spectacles up to scrub my face. I can't see. My eyes won't focus. I force them to.

It's too far to see if Ana's chest still rises.

A scream builds deep in my gut. I feel it, more than hear it, burn my vocal cords. *Distract them. Don't let them leave. Rip Ana from their pincers if I have to. Don't let them take her. Make sure she doesn't wake up alone. She hates waking up alone.*

Without even looking up, the four soldiers turn as one being, disappearing into the purple forest with my cousin their captive.

This is my fault. This is all my fault.

No.

Beside incandescent rage and space-cold grief, self-loathing catches my ribs like kindling. I have no right – *no stars-damned right* – to make this about me. This isn't *flakkin'* about me. Ana is gone.

Ana. Is. Gone.

My heart slips from numb fingers and plummets from the treetop city. It shatters in the crushed, bloodied grass that marks the place where Anahera fell.

Zir steps as silent as always and my eyes crusted in salt tears, I don't sense Hikoa approach until a calloused palm cups my shoulder. Without turning, I shove it away, before it can spill warmth along my arm. The motion twists the loose rib-knife. I grit a breath.

"*Korod*. Off." The curse bubbles like sick foam on my lips. *Too much. Too far,* the tiny voice in the back of my mind hisses. *Whatever you do, no matter how angry you are, you never* ever *swear* at *each other. You agreed on that years ago.*

"Lirit…."

I whirl around to scowl at zir. Hikoa's hands flutter in the space between us. Ze looks at me and brings them back to nest in the fabric of zir jumpsuit.

I can barely see my spouse through snarling and tears and loose hair. Good. When I look at the blurry, slender-curved figure, I instead see *Ana alone and fearless and so far away as she throws herself at solid black armour to keep us safe;* see *a limp body in alien arms and I can't tell if she's breathing*

anymore; see *I should have stayed with her I could have rolled out of the 'chair or overrode the link or…*. I look at Hikoa, and I don't see zir.

The muscles in my cheeks and neck pull taut. My face is a death mask, teeth a rictus snarl to lock bile-sour blame in my throat. I want to lash out. I want to scream at zir.

How could you leave her behind?

We are a team. We look out for one another.

How can I forgive you for betraying that?

But I grit my teeth until the roots grind into my jawbones, because if I start screaming, I won't stop until my vocal cords are shredded rags.

Whatever tatters of perception I have left know that, if I open my mouth, I'll lose my spouse, too. There is a fresh, gaping wound in my soul shaped like Ana; I don't know if I'd survive cutting Hikoa out of myself with sharp words. Instead, I lock my mouth shut and let every screaming curse burn in rising bile until I can swallow them down.

We stare at each other, tense, unmoving, unspeaking. Tears test the limits of surface tension across my eyes. A thousand emotions ripple over zir face, and I don't think ze has names for any of them. Zir fingers, zir jaw, zir shoulders clench, unclench, clench again. Zir mouth opens, pauses, shuts. Ze shifts zir weight, looks away, can't meet my eyes. Loose ends of bone don't quite line up in my chest, rattling against each breath. I have never been so furious.

"At least let me help set your rib," Hikoa murmurs. I know ze's right. Adrenaline is a hell of a drug, and as it starts to bleed off, I'm barely able to breathe around the stab-wound under my skin. I'm gambling luck on a punctured lung already.

"I can do it myself."

"You don't have to."

"I know." I hold my breath and start to feel around the dipped edge of the rib socket, testing what's moved by how much. "But I can. I've done it before."

"You aren't supposed to relocate bones yourself."

"Don't care."

Before ze can talk me out of it, I clutch my good-side arm around the unmoored bone, and in one motion, ram my shoulder blades together, throw my spine back, fling my bad arm over my head.

My rib seizes every knotted muscle down my side and *rips*. My lungs empty. The *whoosh* of breath drags a scream with it. Stars explode behind my eyes.

I cling to that blank whiteness.

"Lirit!"

Hikoa takes a step forward and pulls me close. It's not a restraint, not like before; it's a brace, a support, something to lean on. It's warm arms and post-stickball-practise sweat-scent and reminders of home.

I stiffen. Hiss. Pull back. I don't need a *drekkin*' shoulder to cry on. I need to get Ana back.

When ze doesn't let go, I wedge my arms between us, beat my fists against zir chest, over and over and over, feel the *thump* resonate in zir sternum under my ear. Ze doesn't flinch. Ze simply stands and waits until drizzle of blows become gripping fistfuls of fabric and choked, screaming sobs that shudder my ribs in their sockets and shake me apart from the inside out. Tears a spreading stain across Hikoa's chest, I howl myself hoarse.

Stars damn zir. Stars damn zir for sacrificing Ana, for protecting me but not her, for knowing before I did how much I needed permission to break down.

My body gives out. I sag to the woven floor. Ze guides me down and into zir arms, cradles me close like ze does when night terrors rip me from sleep, but this time, I can't wake up. Lungs scraped raw, a high, thin whine is the only noise I can make.

I have blazed with an anger that set my mind on fire and boiled over until I wanted to incinerate everything that came too close. I have burned and burned and burned until there is nothing left but ash and devastation and fire-cracked hullplates open to the void.

A tear drips onto my knuckle. Then another splashes my forehead. I startle, pull back, glance up.

I've never seen Hikoa cry. Ze's too *sensible* to cry, like ze doesn't panic or freak out or get angry. Usually, ze channels big emotions into action, does something constructive to fix their source, not spend time and energy letting them flood over.

No, ze's not crying, not quite. Ze sits staring at the air above my head, and zir eyes leak, silent and solemn and steady, without even a shudder or a sniffle to tell.

It's not forgiveness, but I turn to tuck my head into the curve of zir neck and cling tight. Ana's gone. Grief wells in the space between us like blood from the raw hem of a cut. We need each other, or we won't be able to get her back.

We hold each other, and cry, and mourn, curled together like frightened children on the treetop edge of a toxic world. That is how the Aetirung find us, too soon and too late, their enemies long retreated into the forest.

Approach to the Abyss

A winged warrior lands behind us, armoured from crested, helmed head to long, scaly toes. She's accompanied by Sulíltur and Geŝtinura. Hikoa and I both scramble to our feet, instinct keeping our hands wound too tight to separate.

My eyes remain on the warrior, cautious and uneasy. She carries weapons sheathed at her back and hips, but I can't look too long without my imagination wielding the weapons against us.

I don't recognize Inaĵat until she unhooks the feather-scale cowl that covers her neck and shoulders. She looks more like the terrible, sinewed hunting-shadow we first met.

"Oh," Hikoa murmurs, more to zirself than me, I think. "The way the scale is arranged obscures where their other eyes are, so they're more protected and can't be targeted as easily. Clever."

My eyebrows jump up my forehead. Of all the things to think about right now…. Our whole reality has broken apart like *La Dektria*, venting atmo and unshielded from stellar winds, and we don't have so much as a distress beacon. And Hikoa notices the practicalities of war designs.

I tear my eyes from Inaĵat's sheathed swords to my spouse. It takes a moment to see through the shadow of Ana's capture. Zir eyes have gone tree-paper-and-wet-ink flat, not so much looking at Inaĵat as staring at the space she happens to be.

It's been a long time since Hikoa's been so stressed that ze hyper-focuses. And, well… I can agree that thinking about everything else is too much right now. So, armour. Fine.

Inaĵat's armour is simple: overlapping metal plates carved into feathers and laced together into fabric-like sheets with stitches of wire. Her hammered-metal helmet sweeps into a streamlined point that follows the contour of her head keel. The sides taper to chevrons that curve around her facial disk; the face plate split to allow use of her sharp beak.

Inaĵat tucks her helmet under a secondary wing.

"Come," she orders, not breaking stride as she marches past us.

I call my 'chair to me and start to follow, relieved exhaustion weakening both muscle and distrust; I don't need to decide what to do anymore. I don't need to think.

"The Great Mother has called an emergency assembly," Sulitur explains as we move toward the vast doors. "If nothing else, you will be safer within the protections of our sovereign Chambers than you are out here in the open. Please."

I don't know why the Council wants us at this 'emergency assembly', but it doesn't feel like we have much choice. I am in decaying orbit above the edge of a gravity well, a single misstep from falling into the void, my mental batteries blinking warning lights, redlining, shutting down. Critical system failure is inevitable. I'm not sure how much longer I can keep going until I crash.

We can't go home until Ana is safe. I squeeze my eyes shut against the image of her *limp in alien arms and*…. No. Ana's alive. She has to be. We've lost her for now, but… lost as in 'misplaced', not as in… as in 'gone'. We'll get her back.

There are no safety measures on an uncharted planet.

Every symptom on this list could put her and anyone with her at risk out there.

If you panic, you'll land on your head.

Hikoa and I glance at each other. Hands searching and linking, we join our waiting guides.

As if on cue, the grand doors open. Guards swoop to flank the entrance, armed with serrated swordstaffs and hook-tipped throwing blades and belted quivers of iron darts and circular, long-barrelled *somethings* that look far too much like hand-cranked rifles. I press into Hikoa's side, as much as I can in my 'chair, angling my body between zir and the alien gun-machines.

Three other Councillors already wait on their branch-plinths. Inaĵat, Sulitur, and Geŝtinura take their places in the round, and the chanting wells from keeled chests and glinting gemstones and feathery torch-flames. More guards ring the vaulted room, their weapons catching golden-eyed light.

The Great Mother descends from a chanted starlight chorale and raps her staff.

For a heartbeat, I am once again frightened proto-hominid prey, a burl petrified to a tree trunk, an animal under the umbra of hunting hawks.

Before I can wrest my fear into determination, two armoured warriors sweep through to land in front of us and bow their keels to the floor. The guards close the grand doors behind them. I flinch at the thunderous finality.

"Lulal. Ŝara," the Great Mother orders the two warriors. "Report."

"The intruders reached the *Usdu'Meĵoros* before we could engage, and we dare not follow them into their territory," one says. She straightens her back but keeps her head lowered. "They have likely taken the captive back to their stronghold."

They let Ana's captors escape? They chased them, but then just… stopped? Because of some arbitrary border?

"That is… unfortunate," the Great Mother responds. Only her tone – the restrained inflection, the measured-to-the-millisecond pause – betrays her anger; the pitch and volume don't change at all.

Shaking in exhausted rage, I understand the matriarch's contained anger. I'm not doing well at containing mine.

The Great Mother flicks her flight feathers, as though brushing dust out of the air, and the two scrape to the back of the Chamber. In the same motion, she turns to us and beckons us forward in their place. My knees shake in the ice of her gaze, clattering against the footrests. It takes my remaining dregs of strength not to cower.

"Did you witness the abduction?"

"Yes," I rasp around new tears that prickle at my raw throat.

"*O, lukur'bar dumu'guli ŝe mul ak'dim.*" Sulitur's too-many eyes turn to me, but her gaze is warm, and I don't freeze in prey-fear. I don't know what the words mean, when she glides into her native tongue, but I can hear pity drip from the unfamiliar syllables. That would fuel sparks of anger, but I sense her words are more a reminder for her colleagues than they are comfort for us.

"We need your testimony of what you witnessed," Inaĵat says, brisk but not unkind.

Letting my fingers fall from Hikoa's, I duck out of my 'chair around zir side, balance my weight on my feet, like Ana taught me. I can sense my spouse at my shoulder, a hullplate between me and the starless void of grief. I lift my chin without exposing my throat, face the Council eye-to-eyes.

"If you know more about what happened, you'll be able to make a better rescue plan, right?"

"That is the principle of informants, yes," the gaunt Councillor cuts in. I remember them all too well from our first audience with the Council: the matriarch's right hand, dull-feathered and vicious. Aetirung don't speak the same body language as Ghemod, but somehow I can hear an eye-roll equivalent in her tone. Sulitur glares at her for us.

"You are under our protection," Inaĵat says, slow and careful as Kŷo cutting fabric patterns. "Those *mirmeruŝ* –" she spits the word like a curse, "– cannot be allowed to think that means nothing. They will face retribution for their insolence."

"We have your word you'll rescue Ana?" Vague memories of Conflict-Resolution and Negotiation workshops float through my mind like Garden misting machines. *The one who cares the most has the least power. Be honest… but be wary.*

Inaĵat glances at the Great Mother, who opens her mouth, though she makes no sound. Our host inclines her head.

"We will not let them keep her," she tells us. "You have our word that we will rescue your companion."

"Then I will testify."

I am Senior Apprentice Chronicler and Story-Weaver of the city-ship *La Sesa,* and I will tell the tale of how Anahera Ruth Ĉazen-Wudao was captured by unknown enemies. I will tell this tale like any other story – like my hoverchair is the cotton-velour armchair in the Level 480 community centre; Czerafwin near the door pretending he hasn't shown up just to hear me tell old myths; Mugon the elderly tea-maker listening, intent, and smiling his wide, yellowed smile; a gaggle of children clustered like open-faced flowers in a garden bed of multicolour cushions – and if my audience calls it a 'report' rather than a 'myth'…. Well, linguistic variation has always been one of my special interests. I will tell this story because stories are knowledge and knowledge is hope. My voice is my strength, as Ana's courage and Hikoa's perception, and I will not let it fail.

I sit, weld my spine to the back of my 'chair, laser my eyes to a branch just above the Great Mother's head keel, and I speak.

But adrenaline and exhaustion have addled my brain and whisked my memories quaggy. Holopic images drift on my mind's rimy surface, fade, blur, sink down again into numb cold: Anahera limp and bleeding in spindly arms; my body a dangerous blaze of pain and fury, and pails of tears aren't enough to extinguish it; the archway shrinking, and Ana, a constant whirl of brawny motion, too far away to reach the gap in time; my spouse's choice, as alien to me as glowing moss.

Hikoa, observant and level-headed even when reality is crumbling, reorders my thoughts for me when I can't remember what holopic happened next.

When the story is woven and the warp threads cast off, the Council's choral becomes a dissonant eight-part fugue, voices swooping over and under and through and around, argument in polyphonic counterpoint. The main theme is the same in every reprise: *"How dare they? We won't let them get away with this!"*

The Great Mother taps her staff to command silence. It makes me remember period performances of *ars antiqua* plainsong, the conductor beating time into the floor with a long wooden baton.

"This fear of attack is not their burden," Sulitur addresses rest of the Council. "We have forced them to bear it. We cannot ask them to keep it."

My breath wheezes in my too-tight throat; in the winded, breathless hush, it sounds like the rush of the shuttle engines. With closed eyes, I can nearly imagine Ana, Hikoa, and I on the flight back up to *La Sesa* from the off-ship research stations.

We will make it home. All of us. Somehow.

The Great Mother raps her staff again.

"Nin'Eresh Geŝtinura. Source water, food, and a healer for the aliens, and –" Her primary eyes track me as I sway in my seat, "– and perhaps *ginkoĵsa*. Nin'Eresh Inaĵat, choose your three best *igbar*; they leave at dusk. We reconvene to strategize in three degrees hence."

A shapeless shadow peels from the darkness by the hoverator-that-doesn't. Hikoa and I tense, zir fingers clamped bloodless bone-brown on my shoulder. We don't run, don't move, don't breathe.

But the figure lowers her cloak-like wings to reveal one of the Councillors. I recognize her; she's the one who examined Hikoa's handcomp in that traumatic first meeting with the Council, the frail-looking one with fierce eyes.

"*Hadan'ra aneŝule*, Chronicler, Tech-Mapper," she greets us with a shallow bow. Away from the formality of the Council Chambers, hers is the slow, gentle voice of a storyteller; I recognize it

within a breath. In a community centre housed in my skull, Nitan settles into an overstuffed armchair surrounded by children and recites the history of the Great Migration from deep in her memory.

"*Hadan'ra aneŝule*, Nin'Eresh."

"Our words and culture are very different than yours, Chronicler, but I gather my role here is similar to yours. I am a Scribe: I record Council assemblies and notate important events, and I maintain the Repository of Written History."

"That sounds close," I agree, shifting my weight from knee to knee.

The Councillor looks at me with primary and secondary eyes, though the third pair still scan the area around us.

"Your guides will be able to tell you more of the practical military matters on the journey to the stronghold." She rolls her winged shoulders; I sense she's uncomfortable. "But I do not feel it is acceptable to send you off without *any* information on where you're going and who you may encounter while you're there."

"Thank you." I close my eyes and slump into my seat. *Finally. Answers. Thank the stars.* "What *were* those creatures? The ones who took Ana?" I ask. I stop, scrunch my nose, take a breath, rephrase. "Who are you at war with? The other Councillor said the *e'hu* were the person or people likely to send spies? But I think Inaĵat called them *mirmeruŝ*? And I overhear someone else call them *kazazk*?" I trip over the unfamiliar sounds. "We… our people know nothing of war, of this world, of the people on it, and we want to learn. We want to understand."

"Those are… those are not words our enemies use for themselves, but rather insults bandied about by our warriors. I have no love of our enemies, but there is no honour in fighting those you consider no threat." The Councillor jostles her second wings in a way that seems flustered. "*Mirmeruŝ*, while not… a compliment, at least recognizes their worthiness as powerful enemies."

"Oh." My face flares red-hot. My fingers find the end of my oily plait, twist and twist and twist.

"Our enemies call themselves Ubkuŝngir." The Councillor holds out a book in her long-fingered hand, angling her upper wing so that her flight feathers conceal my taking it. The cover is black and hard and shiny, the texture of an enormous fingernail. There are soft under-feathers tucked into the

pages, their downy ends fluffing out above the top by the spine. “This holds accounts of our ancestors from the start of the Great War. It will answer your questions more… discreetly than I can.”

Hikoa’s square eyes narrow.

“What does the rest of the Council not want us to know? Why do they not want us to know it?”

The Councillor pauses for so long that I think she’s not going to answer.

“The story of our species’ survival is… not an honourable one,” she says finally. “Many of the more martial of us have come to feel we are disgraced by the events before the War; they believe that our ancestors’ cowardliness is as much responsible for our current position as the Ubkuŝngir.”

My mouth draws in at the corners. Our people are embarrassed by the history of how we got to where we are, too, but that’s why the tale of our species’ failure is our *most important lesson*. We don’t know how far we’ve come if we never look behind us.

The Councillor is handing me a history textbook like she’s smuggling me a weapon. *What?*

“Thank you,” I murmur, slipping the book into a pannier. The Councillor bows her head once, decisive, and melts back into the shadows she came from.

The supply trunk and packs and panniers loaded, Hikoa and I say a conflicted goodbye to Inaĵat just as the primary star touches down onto the distant horizon.

Dumuz, once again our guide, leads us through the sleepy city to the bottom of the steep-stepped Mesa. We wend through the forest in the dark unease of our thoughts and the greenish-blue glow of bioluminescent moss. I’m sure Hikoa has at least a vague idea of where we’re going, but I only half-remember the damp, overgrown path from the first march under too-many watchful eyes. I tug a loose thread at the seam of my caving-trousers with absent fingers, focusing on not letting my fear drown me.

Dumuz leaves us at the river crossing. Just downstream of the rapids, torches on poles in the soft ground illuminate four Aetirung working on a hollowed-out log. I know there’s a specific word from a small water-ship. What is it? ‘Boat’? Or is it ‘canoe’? Or ‘kayak’? I can’t remember the difference.

I give my head a shake. That isn't important right now. *Focus. Observe*. The four all carry packs belted between their brown-feathered secondary wings. They're all dressed in light scale armour, and they are all armed to the beaks.

"*Hadan'ra aneŝule*," one of the warriors greets us.

"*Hadan'ra aneŝule*." I'm getting more practised at the unfamiliar vowels and flared-finger wing-bow.

The warrior flicks a flight feather over her companions in turn, making introductions in the heavy, fluid lilt of an Aetirung not practised in speaking Esperanto. "I am Girsurta de Katfĵge, expedition medic. This is Nirera de Skenemo, and the hatch-sisters are Ŝara and Lulal de Tibirum."

"I am Lirit Taige Sanget-Ĉazen ta. This is my… my mate, Hikoa Salest Puratoki ti."

"We know." I can hear the grin in Lulal's voice. Her sister cuffs her with a wing.

"Inaĵat warned us that you couldn't fly," Nirera says. "It's lucky we captured one of the *kazazks'* boats a while ago." She bobs a sharp, wicked nod-smile, holding the boat – I thought that's what it's called – steady for us to climb aboard. "How polite of us to return it to them."

"We're happy to help." I return a mocking nod as I manoeuvre my 'chair up beside the boat. Somehow, the light banter of this volunteer rescue team flows over my tongue like cinnamon tisane. The thought of *home* – of Anahera and our cousinly teasing – scalds down my throat.

"Do you need a hand?" Hikoa asks, subtle, by my ear. I judge the span of shallow water between riverbank and boat, recall the adrenaline-drunk frenzy of skipping myself over the river like a flat stone, and shake my head. Hikoa squeezes my shoulder. "I should help the others load our trunk. They probably won't know how to switch the hovermotor off. Let me know if you change your mind, okay?"

"Go help; I can manage." I shunt full speed across the narrow gap, clunk over the boat's side, and tumble out of the 'chair headfirst into the space between two benches. "Ow."

"You alright?" Hikoa calls from the shore. I pull myself up into a bench seat, powering my hoverchair off and tucking it underneath.

"Yes." My dignity is more bruised than my head.

"Let yourself rest, then; we're almost done."

With a surreptitious glance at the four Aetirung watching Hikoa demonstrate the trunk's control panel, I pull the Councillor's history book from a trouser pocket. Finding the first feather with a fingertip, I flip it open and start to read by the flickery torches. I'm vaguely aware of Hikoa jumping the side of the hull with zir usual effortless grace and taking a seat beside me.

Seconds later, the firelight dims, and I glance up.

Nirera douses the torches in the river one by one, laying the poles in the bottom of the boat. Flitting to the bow, she gives the sisters a hand-signal, and they take up their oars. They nudge us away from the bank. The current catches us, and we're gliding down the dark river toward the sea beyond.

We're on our way to the stronghold. There's no turning back.

Knowledge is the best remedy for fear of the unknown, I hear Nitan remind me in my head. I turn my attention back to the book, squinting to decipher the unfamiliar dialect in the pinkish-white glow of the planet's two moons. On its crumbly pages, the Aetirung ancestors weave their people's story, a tapestry to wrap around our fragile Ghemod bodies, to protect us from stinging spikes and needle teeth and curved mandibles that drip black oil.

An Account from Councillor Nin'Ereŝ Darutu de Ablal,

as found in The Great War*, by Haĵa de Dubsar*

from the Aetirung Central Library, Hul'Uru City, Sangkremsur Mountain

The Aetirung evolved on Caelumen, a world far across the primordial waters of the Abchernipont'Apasu'Amfi.

Spurred by Olaimith's interference, the Pekatumal long sought to drive us from our homes through war, violence, famine, disease, genocide. They poisoned our water, our land, our bloodlines.

When there were less than a thousand Aetirung left, Anzud – the last Great Mother of the Old World – made the decision to leave our homes and go into hiding in the Forests. For many long seasons, our ancestors lived a grounded, wing-clipped existence, hidden under the forest canopy, separated from

the skies. Those years were mere survival, not life. Survival is no emblem of great triumph; it is the choice made when the only other option is extinction.

Imarul, eldest daughter of the Great Mother, discovered the first Kalayma in a misty cavern near where the remaining Aetirung had settled. The Kalaymai and the primordial seas beyond were a gift from the Goddesses: a way to leave our homeworld for somewhere the Pekatumal could not destroy us.

Great Mother Anzud guided her people across the Abchernipont'Apasu'Amfi to a new land, which we blessed Shargaidra. Here, the survivors founded Hul'Uru, our sovereign city, and rebuilt their lives in peace, safe from the Pekatumal's genocide.

The shaping of the city had not yet reached half-grown branches before an igbar squad reported to Great Mother Anzud. The scouts had spotted a creature speaking an isolated dialect of Enokian to a device embedded into its arm. Curious, the igbar followed this creature into a cave, and they discovered that we were not alone.

There was another sentient species on Shargaidra.

At first, we feared the native species would destroy us as the Pekatumal had. But they treated us with kindness, gifted us the mountain we had built our city into and the land around it with no thought of compensation from us, let us lead communication so we did not feel threatened.

It took many, many seasons for the Ubkuŝngir to understand our dialect and us to understand theirs. When we had settled into our home on this planet and felt confident to communicate in our shared language, the Ubkuŝngir monarchs invited a small Emissary Corps for a formal peace meeting.

Seven Aetirung visited the underground stronghold, including Great Mother Anzud and her daughter.

We found their remains dumped at the foot of Sangkremsur Mountain, throats slit from third-eye to third-eye so deeply they were nearly beheaded, bodies ripped apart and drained of all blood. The Ubkuŝngir monarchs would give us no explanation why.

Our last communication with the Corps was an emergency alert from Commander Ŝubur, Head of the Great Mother's personal guard. I, myself, picked up the signal and listened to her last message.

Ŝubur informed us the Ubkuŝngir monarchs had invited them into a trap. She spoke of finding the Pekatumal's particular evil hidden under the ground: harem-rooms full of bejewelled *ene'arad*

bound in pretty chains; chambered pods where they subjected their children to mutilation in the name of science; assembly-line tunnels where they implanted genetically engineered soldiers with technology to control them. Our warriors had fought, for themselves and to free the *ene'arad.* They had all been slaughtered.

Our proudest warrior screamed for help, begged for her life, and I listened on the channel as their soldiers cut her down without mercy.

In the face of extinction, survival is the only choice, whether the means are honourable or not. In the face of debasement, we have the choice to die with honour. Our Emissaries were murdered trying to free the *ene'arad* kept by Ubkuŝngir monarchs. They died a Good Death, a Warrior's Death.

Though it pained the survivors to leave homes they had barely settled, the next Great Mother, Iŝkurad, sent her best igbar to find a world beyond the Kalayma where we could live without fear. They did not return.

We had no choice but to grant the Ubkuŝngir the War they wanted. If those creatures would invite us into their home to slit our throats, how could we trust that any other Emissary would not meet the same fate? How could we ever trust them to negotiate peace with us in good faith?

The Great War began with Aetirung blood on Ubkuŝngir swords, and it will never stop.

The Ordeal

A rugged, blocky shape emerges from the horizon line, towering higher and higher above the calm sea as we approach. It guards the smaller of the two moons behind its vast bulk and shields more and more of the bigger one with every metre the sisters row us forward.

"The Teikupog Cliffs," Girsurta says under her breath. "The main entrance to the stronghold." She points to a section ahead and to the right with a long flight feather. "See that crack there? The one that runs from sea-level to about halfway up the surface, just to the inland side?"

Hikoa stares, squints, nods. I blink. I can't see anything in the silhouetted texture of the rock. I don't really see it until we're about a hundred metres away. By then, the tiny fissure has become a four-metre-wide inlet, and the sisters guide us down the high-walled river.

None of the Aetirung have outright told us not to speak, but the oppressive weight of the cliffs presses silence down into us. I secure the crumbly book back in my pocket; turning pages makes too much noise… and some buried instinct whispers that I need to keep this book hidden. As we slip further into the rock, our boat gets quieter and quieter, no talking, then no rustling, then no movement at all but the soundless, practised glide of oars through the water.

Here in the shadow of the stronghold, our simple plan – sneak in, get to the Dungeons, give Anahera whatever medical care she needs, and limp out – seems a lot less simple.

I close my eyes, dig at the splintered flashback of *Anahera slumped limp in alien arms*, and feel smouldering sparks catch in my ribs. The anger helps, but it doesn't quite spread to the deep pit fear has gouged, numb and cold, into my gut. I can do this. I have to do this.

We'll get Ana back. She'll be okay. She has to be.

Leaving the boat upside-down on a sheltered, stony strand, we travel single-file down a narrow path, heading inland. The sisters have taken the lead, and they guide us to an arch hewn into the cliff side. It's been carved to look like a natural feature of the rough surface. Nirera holds up a fist, level with her second shoulder. She points to the sisters, and then to the entrance.

Blinking third-lidded acknowledgement, Ŝara and Lulal slip into the gap. I hear a muffled *buzz*, a dry *thump-crack*, and then *nothing*. Lulal sticks her head out and beckons us inside.

I try not to look at the two monstrous guards slumped by the wall. One's bony head-plate has cracked open. Sickly yellow blood trickles down its mandibles. I have to hold my hand over my nose to keep out the death-sweet stench.

We travel in silence for two minutes… three… five…, moving through wide, arched stone tunnels. Colonies of bioluminescent moss grown in elaborate floral motifs high on the walls, illuminating the passageways with their ethereal blue-green glow.

Nirera leads us around a corner, and two armoured guards jerk to their asymmetric legs. One of them bares its lipless needle teeth. The two block the corridor with their bodies and ready their clubs.

With a glance, Nirera, Ŝara, and Lulal step forward, unsheathing serrated swordstaffs. Positioning herself in front of us, Girsurta draws two small blades and waits.

The warriors rush forward, duck, sprint, glide, three angles of attack. Both guards turn and retreat. The sisters click their beaks, uncertain, glancing from medic to commander and back.

"Do we give chase…?"

"I'll take the Ghemod the other way," Girsurta says.

"We'll take out the guards, and then loop around to meet you by the dungeon gates." Nirera pushes the sisters down the hall, whisper-shouting them on. "Hurry! Before they reach reinforcements…."

The three disappear down the corridor and around another corner.

"Cowards!" Girsurta spits after the guards. She turns, gestures, leads us through a warren of identical halls until we reach a wide ramp, spiralling away deep into the ground.

Together, we descend into the tunnels.

The luminous moss doesn't grow this far down. Its intricate vine-patterns fade away near the start of the tunnel to the dungeons. All light fades with it.

Blinded, we crawl on, metre by metre, down and down and down into darkness so complete I cannot see even Hikoa's silhouette a step ahead of me, much less Girsurta a step ahead of zir.

A heavy foreboding scratches at the back of my brain with blunt claws. I push it away.

For a haunting moment, I am again walking into the belly of an alien planet, following taloned footsteps and the ghosts of water into a cave system darker than the space between stars, quieter than the Grave Gardens; this time, we don't even have our head torches to guide our way.

Then warm light flickers up ahead. Girsurta holds up a fist, signals a handful of complex gestures, bridles her rising feathers when Hikoa and I frown confusion.

"We're at the meeting point," she whispers, stretching her beak open so we can read the lip-like membranes articulating underneath. "The gate-room to the dungeons is up ahead."

We sidle around the last corner and freeze. Skittering feet indicate many, many legs circling behind us.

They set a trap.

Oh, stars.

Dozens of soldiers border the gate-room, statues stood at attention elbows-to-elbows, clubs on their shoulders. They line the walls, frame the solid metal gate, flank the official-looking trio in the centre of the small room. The three figures stand waiting, draped in rich cloth and jewelled finery.

Still as the stone walls, I flick my eyes to Girsurta. She has fought these creatures for years. She knows their weaknesses. She has to have a way out. But, no. Girsurta's six eyes roll and flash, animal-like, breathing hard through comma nostrils, keeled chest heaving. Tiny shaking shifts in her wing muscles scream *terror protect flee escape there's no escape*.

Ears ringing with blood, my insides wither, spasm, squeeze my heart through my raw throat. My pulse slams into the thin skin under my jaw, again and again, so hard I'm afraid that it will hack my neck open before the soldiers have the chance.

Seven bodies dumped at the foot of Sanghar Mountain, throats slit so deeply they were nearly beheaded…. Seven bodies. Me, Hikoa, Anahera, Girsurta, Nirera, Ŝara, Lulal.

Nitan's voice echoes in my skull, and it might be the last time I'll hear her. *History is an ouroboros, a cycle of death and rebirth, but it will gorge itself if we do not take care.*

What are they going to do to us? What have they done to Ana?

The frozen vacuum in my lungs aches like my ribs are holding back cold space, but if I breathe, I will sob, and if I make a sound, I will draw their attention to us. I've put Hikoa in enough danger already, and that knowledge burns, a star going supernova in the void of my chest.

Not Hikoa. Not Anahera. Please. No.

Think. I have to think. We need a plan. How can Hikoa and I plan without sound or gesture?

One of the officials steps forward, and my thoughts snap like loose threads. Unarmed but for its fangs, it holds two pairs of palm-less hands out to us.

"Muŝum," our guide spits at the creature.

"Girsurta," it returns in a voice like an airlock hatch failing. It gestures to Hikoa and me with a multi-jointed arm, bulbous head inclined on its spindly neck. "There is no need for violence."

I startle, curse, freeze. The creature's Esperanto is nasal and droning, but fluent as any Ghemod, the dialect less archaic than Aetirung Emesali.

"So says the one who sent attackers into our sacred city to steal hostages," Girsurta retorts.

"You-abstract would steal property, *gabkas*, not sentient beings."

Every feather on Girsurta's body stands on end. Wings unfurling, she *shrieks*, a single screaming cry that echoes in the small, stone room.

"You-one are outnumbered, Girsurta. Your-one other *gu'erim* are already in custody. Please, lay down your-one weapons and comply."

Both sets of winged shoulders slump. She turns her beaked disk-face to us, and – surrounded by black carapaces embedded with gems and needle-lined mouths bracketed with oily mandibles – she no longer looks alien. She simply looks defeated.

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

What are they doing to do to us? What are they going to do to her?

"Baŝaturmu." At the leader's word, another of the officials steps forward, along with three soldiers. While they restrain Girsurta's clawed wings and taloned feet and snapping beak, it leans forward, gentle as a lover, and sinks needle fangs into the side of her neck.

Girsurta's head collapses onto her keel. She goes limp. The soldiers drag her away through the gate.

For a terrible moment, I watch them drag Ana through the same bleak gates. I look away.

Hikoa's clammy fingers tighten on my hand, not a measured, reassuring squeeze, but a convulsive panic that clings at my heart. Only one of us needed to be here. It should have been me. Ana is *my* cousin. It's *my* fault she's here.

But if Hikoa had stayed behind at Neosia, ze would never know what happened to me or to Ana.

As it is, no one else will know. We are hundreds of kilometres from the stars, from *La Sesa*, from home.

As soon as the metal locks bolt, the officials kneel before us, brushing long fingers over our heads, stroking bony knuckles across our cheeks, clicking and buzzing and flittering like bees around a flower. Every instinct in me screams to recoil from them, but their cold touch freezes me in place.

"Oh, thank the *Diogir*! Are both-you hurt? What have they done to all-you?" the leader frets.

Without moving my head, I flick my eyes to Hikoa. Zir dark knuckles are bloodless between my fingers. Ze stares, eyes blank as tree-paper, not even blinking.

"When our scouts reported that they had imprisoned aliens, we feared the worst." The leader strokes Hikoa's braids. Ze flinches, and I have to grit teeth and fists to stop myself shoving its bony hand off zir. "When our first rescue failed, we hoped they would bring both-you here, but we didn't think they actually would. But all-you are here now. You're safe. Oh!" It stops, looks to one of the others, twitches, pats my knee. My skin crawls under its glass-cold fingers. "Both-you will want to see Anahera. She needs both-you. We are familiar with such afflictions and our *azu* have tried their best, but we don't know what they did to her, and all-your physiology is so different from ours; we were afraid we would do more harm than good. Come, we will take both-you to her."

Seizing the Reward

The only word I can think of to describe the chambers is ‘sumptuous’. Fine tapestries, colourful blankets, asymmetric recliners, and plush cushions soften the arched stone rooms. Small clusters of Ubkuŝngir lounge, talking in a chittery hybrid of Esperanto and their native language, working craft projects between their multiple hands, or sitting still and silent in some form of meditation. Some call greetings to Muŝum, Baŝaturmu, and Umgalu; some click their upper forefingers to their dainty mandibles; some merely watch us pass by.

These clustered beings are different from the ones we’ve seen before, softer somehow, the curve of their spindly necks more delicate, their fingers less pincer-like. Their exoskeletons aren’t as bulky or armoured, and their mandibles are less than half the size of the guards’. Instead, the fingernail-thin plates are encrusted with patterns of gems and crystals polished to smooth, iridescent shells; they remind me a bit of tortoises from the Archive files on Old Earth fauna.

Hikoa and I exchange a glance. Zir quirks a concerned eyebrow. Are these the harem-slaves the Councillor’s book talked about?

The monarchs lead us into the back room. There, a handful of beings – different again from the ones we’ve seen; still less armoured, but also less jewelled – buzz around a bundle of blankets.

Anahera.

The Ubkuŝngir part to let me stumble to her side.

She looks *awful*. Insomniac shadows ring her eyes dark as my worst bruises, her face bloodless under her bark-brown skin. Her long hair is greasy and full of dirt, tangled around her in restless sleep, come loose from its plait. She barely looks up when I kneel by her side and stroke her head.

Three instincts pile up against my skull, all trying to act at once: sit here and close my eyes and pretend Ana’s simply forgotten to keep up with her meds for too long and crashed in our lounge room; or pull her into a hug and tell her how hard we’ve fought to get her back and comfort her until the hollowness in her mind fills; or whirl around and demand to know what in the galaxy they’ve done to her and don’t they dare turn it around and blame the Aetirung because she was not like this when she left and we’re looking at months of rehabilitation if those *stars-damned* soldiers of theirs have given

her a concussion. We were supposed to be going *home* today! We were supposed to be back at *La Sesa*, so we could rest, and wash, and have a proper meal, and Anahera and I would be able to take our meds, and….

No. Prioritize. Anahera. I jam all my rage into a tiny metal box, lock it tight, and shove it under the mess at the back of my mind. My cousin needs help. If nothing else, she might not be able to tell me everything I need to know, so I can't afford to antagonize the Ubkuŝngir yet.

"Hikoa?" I decide instead, not taking my eyes off Anahera's pain-pinched face. "Bring me a bag of dried fruit and Ana's canteen, please?"

With a rustle-clunk, Hikoa appears beside me and puts the supplies down by my knee.

"Thanks." I peck zir cheek and turn back to my cousin. "Ana? Hey, cuz? How long has it been since you last ate?"

It's all but impossible to keep track of time in a subterranean city with no cyclic lights, but by the chrono in my hoverchair's computer and Hikoa's adjustment for Shargaidra's longer rotation, it's around mid-morning the next day when one of the delicate, jewel-shelled Ubkuŝngir approaches our bedroll bundle. She introduces herself as Ŝerizida, *sukal* to the monarchs. By her brief description, a *sukal* is an advisor-assistant.

What catches our collective Ghemod attention most, though, is the thick bundle of towel-like fabric and scented vials she carries as she offers to guide us to the baths.

Even Anahera, still shaking off the heavy synthetic sleep of the Ubkuŝngir's sedative, scrambles out of her bedroll at that. I'm already shucking off my smallshorts and unwinding the tattered ribbon tape from my hair, untangling my plaits.

Ŝerizida leads us down a short series of passages to the bath chamber. I can barely slow myself down to stick an arm in to test the temperature before sliding into the empty baths, letting my head dip under the surface for a handful of peaceful, muted seconds.

The pool looks like it should be cold, still in the damp chill of the cavern room, but it really is as warm as a bath. Looking closer, I see the ripples of natural hydrothermal vents jetting warmth into the

bottom of the subterranean pool; drains on the other side lead to a small stream and keep the baths from overflowing. Clever. I'm sure Hikoa's already trying to figure out how it works.

Tiny waves pass over my shoulders as Anahera and Hikoa join me. As expected, my spouse peers down through water, brows furrowed, eyes following the path of the currents as they swirl and flow and keep the temperature stable.

"I'm gonna stay in here until I prune," Ana mumbles, resting her head back against the rounded stone rim and letting her body float.

Chittering her mandibles in an insectoid laugh, Ŝerizida sits by the edge, lining up vials and towels. I pick up what looks to be a bar of soap wrapped in felted plant fibres. It's big and clunky and odd-shaped, made for hands very different from ours, but I dig my nails into the coarse weave and start scrubbing.

Only belatedly do I hope that the Ubkuŝngir make simple soap as we know it, and whatever's in the bar isn't going to react with our skin and hair in some painful, embarrassing way.

But after a tentative sniff and prodding squeeze at one of the other bars, Hikoa shrugs, dunks zir head to soak zir braid, and starts rubbing soapy fingertips along the channels of scalp between zir croprows. That's good enough for me.

Ŝerizida still seems to have picked up on our moment of indecision.

"We… we did not wish to offend you-all, but we have given you *zananga* – a body-cleanser made for young ones who have not grown their *murŝubga* yet – so it should not do damage."

"Thank you… thank you-general?" I can't really bow while naked and submerged to my shoulders, but I incline my head as respectfully as I can. "That was very thoughtful of you-who-thought-of-it."

"This is not the first time our people have taken in alien visitors," our new host says with a flutter-twitch of the hairs across her forelegs. Her head bows, and something like *sadness-resentment-grief* flickers like an arc of static of down the gentle bend of her plant-stem neck.

Silence grows sudden roots.

Sunk deep into her mind, Anahera still floats by the edge of the pool. She's turned over in the water so that her chin rests on her arms rests on the stone lip, looking at the remaining bar of soap with

blank eyes. We still don't know how much of her lethargy is the effect of the Ubkuŝngir's sedative venom – evolved for use on avians, not mammalians – how much is her not having her medications for the last… far too long, and how much is a combination of the two. I scoot over to her, and at her bare-centimetre nod, pick up the bar and start washing her lank, greasy hair.

"We are very curious about you-collective," I hedge, anxious hands keeping me busy, justifying not looking up from Ana's hair to meet our host's many sunken eyes. "Perhaps while we're bathing, we could exchange knowledge of our peoples… so we might understand each other better?"

Nothing that the Aetirung have told us about the Ubkuŝngir aligns with our own observations. I need to treat this conversation as though we have received no knowledge from the Aetirung, ask the same questions, and see where the answers differ. I have read enough of the Archives to know I need to check *all* affected primary sources if I want to piece together the truth in the middle.

"Oh, thank the *Diogir*!" Ŝerizida surprises me with the relief that pours out of her; her sigh is nearly enough to deflate her whole body like a jewelled balloon. "I wished to ask you-collective if you-any would be willing to share knowledge, but I feared you-collective would see pointed questions as a threat rather than mere curiosity, or feel it was a demand in return for continued hospitality."

I surprise myself more with the fit of helpless laughter that bubbles up my throat. Sneezing water out of my nose, I splutter and try to breathe deep, popping the ridiculous fit as quickly as I can. Ŝerizida stares, unblinking, but then I don't think she *can* blink. Anahera and Hikoa stare, too, the four of us all blank-eyed and statue-still, uncertainty turning the water to ice.

"I am so sorry. I'm not laughing at you… you-one. Just… that was the same reason that I had not asked you-any before either. We feared you-collective would see questions as a threat rather than curiosity, or feel our presence here hid ulterior motives. We would love to share knowledge with you-any, and I'm grateful you offer the opportunity."

Our host laughs, too, chittery and high.

"We have a saying, among our people," I continue with a shrug. "'Conversations are like incising an abscess: the more they hurt to open, the more necessary it is to do so.' We know nothing of your people, and you know nothing of ours. That is no foundation for trust."

"I agree." Ŝerizida bows her head, and for the smallest fraction of a second, I can swear I see the after-image of history replaying itself over our present moment. As I could almost see the aura of our ancestors around Anahera as she bristled under Dumuz's suspicion at that sharp-edged first encounter, I see Ŝerizida's ancestors around her bowing to a stranger who claims a homeworld far across the stars.

I blink the omen away. It must be far too long since I slept well.

"It's probably best to start with basic information," I say instead, going back to sectioning Ana's hair to work out the tangles. "We are Ghemod. Your people call yourselves the Ubkuŝngir, right?"

"Correct."

"Where are we? What are your people's names for the planet, the lands you inhabit, the cave system you live in, this fortress-city beneath the cliff?"

"Planet Ki, Lands Madarali, Caves Huridium, City Badunu'Iri," Ŝerizida rattles off. Those are definitely not the names the Aetirung use, but then that's why I asked. The planet we call Old Earth hosted more than seven thousand different languages over our species' time there, and almost all of them had different words for their homeworld.

"And we got here from our own… plane of existence by passing through a Veil that covers some kind of inter-dimensional ocean that only allows …?"

"Between the many shores of the *Zuagub'Namu'Murub* and each of the worlds it connects is a *Baragdul* cloth. At the depths of the *Zuagub'Namu'Murub*, there rests a universe within a single droplet, *Engur*, where the *Diogir* reside. Ki, our world, shares a physical space as Ishmedin, your world, on different shores of the *Zuagub'Namu'Murub*. Since Ki rotates on its axis and Ishmedin does not, their shores only align about once every three rotations."

"So… we'll get to go home then?" Anahera asks. She looks up at our host with dark, waxing-moon eyes, hooded by exhaustion. Subtle as I can, I squeeze her arm, resting my chin on her soapy shoulder for a second.

"The next Alignment is in two rotations," Ŝerizida says, and something in her thin voice is soft as a descant. "You may stay as long as you wish, but if you wish to leave then, we will take you home."

I press my lips together, looking over to Hikoa, who looks back at me with furrowed brows and the same question in zir eyes. We have a discussion in eyebrows: *which one of us should ask*.

I turn to our host.

"This… this may seem like a strange question, and I want you to know are so deeply grateful to you and your people for your hospitality and kindness. We just… we just don't understand *why*. You are at war. You have no reason to trust us. The Aetirung…" I trail off, look away, busy my hands with Ana's wine-cork curls. I cannot to compare one culture to another; that's not fair to either of them. "You could very easily have assumed we were on your enemies' side. Why did you risk your own people to help us? Why do you open your home to alien strangers?"

Ŝerizida's jewelled body deflates again, and I can almost see a leaden sorrow like a weight on her reed-narrow upper shoulders.

"Our people communicate in part through pheromones. To some degree, we can scent the emotions of beings around us," Ŝerizida explains, indicating two tiny pits just above each of her mandibles, so small that I can still barely see them even with my spectacles still on. "When our scouts first saw you-three, you-three were walking through the Kurnugur Forest in bonds, captured by the Aetirung. You-three *reeked* of fear and bewilderment, so strong that our scouts could sense it from over ten *nindan* away. It seemed very unlikely that you-three were there by choice."

Ŝerizida sighs again, middle hands tapping against the sides of her fingernail-thin exoskeleton.

"We are all too aware what our enemies are capable of. If we sat back and let them harm strangers when we have resources that the strangers don't have to protect themselves…." Her thin voice dissipates like steam, and her long neck bows again under that heavy sorrow. "We are so sorry for the fear and despair we caused you-all. We assumed that you-all would be happy for the opportunity to escape. We did not consider that you-all would be more afraid of us than you-all were of our enemies."

I push myself through the water to where our host sits, reaching up to offer a hand. Her three long fingers wrap so completely around my hand that they overlap themselves to pinch between our palms. Her skin is cold against mine, and glossy-hard, like holding a vacuum tube of silica glass.

"Thank you." I look up at her unreadable, pupil-less main eyes. "We, too, apologize for our role in the miscommunication between us. We are deeply grateful for your-collective compassion. We do not have much to offer in return but the same trust you have shown us. We will share knowledge of our people as you-one have shared knowledge of yours. What do you want to know of us?"

Ŝerizida ponders, tapping her mandibles together, upper hands folded in her lap, and then asks simply.

"Where are you from? Why are you here?"

Like that first assembly before the Aetirung Council, I tell the story of our people's journey. But this time, instead of cowering under a branch-woven circle of suspicious aggression, unable to rely on the medical aid I need for fear of showing weakness… instead, I soak in our hosts' baths, washing my cousin's hair when she finally feels safe enough to let me help her, in the presence of a single adviser to a people who seem as curious about us as we are of them. This time, instead of fierce-eyed guards armed with swordstaffs and the echoing insistence that we speak lies, my family and I are surrounded by gentle currents of warm water and able to rest for the first time in cycles upon cycles.

For the first time since we passed through an unseen veil, I can do what I'm meant to do.

Act Three

The Road to Atonement

We've been given permission to explore every part of the fortress. Nothing is off-limits.

So, as soon as we can chivvy Anahera out of bed, the three of us investigate this cliff-walled, stone-hewn city. Hikoa leads us out of the sumptuous sleep chambers, following zir mental holomap. Our vague plan is to retrace our steps back to the dungeons – the lowest level of the fortress – and explore our way up to the top levels.

The hum of my hoverchair's motor makes the passageways seem almost like home; if I close my eyes, I could be back on *La Sesa*. I make myself stay in the present, though. There's no point exploring with my eyes shut.

We reach an intersection. Hikoa stops, brows tilting inward as ze decides which arm of the T to take.

"It shouldn't be too much further?"

A panicked flap of feathers rushes down the corridor ahead.

I get a single glimpse as Girsurta flies past us: all six eyes face forward, wide and unseeing; ripples cascade through her shaking crest; her primary wings thrash at the enclosed air.

With a *whoosh*, Girsurta bolts around the corner out of sight. The echo of her wing-beats fade. A shrieky cry rings against the steep-walled valley outside. The three of us are left staring down the passage after her. We all speak at once.

"What the *flak*? Who the Old Hells was that?"

"Where are Nirera and the twins?"

"What in the galaxy scared her so bad?"

We stop, look at each other, debate in clamoured whispers.

"Do we go after her?"

"She'll be long gone; she doesn't need the boat, remember. She'll be back in Hul'Uru before we reach the sea."

"So, do we see if we can retrace her steps? Try to find the others? Figure out what happened?"

"Sure."

"What others? What twins? Who the *flak* is Nirera?"

"I'm honoured you think we could have broken in here to rescue you by ourselves, cuz."

"C'mon." Hikoa is already mapping possible routes with zir limited observation of the tunnels. "We'll fill you in on the way."

We find the source of Girsurta's flight before Hikoa and I have told Anahera the whole story. Turning into the passage the Aetirung had come from, we simply have to follow the distant chanting. As we approach, it gets louder and louder. A harsh voice shouts, triumphant, and an army of voices responds in buzzing, guttural roar. By the time we reach the end of the tunnel, the calls are the rumbling, chest-splintering plainchant of the nuclear engines.

The drone overflows an enormous pair of open stone doors into the corridor. Without a word, we poke our heads around the corner, *one two three*.

What in the galaxy is going on? This… this doesn't look good.

The chamber beyond is a magnified echo of the gate-room. Soldiers border every towering stone wall and line up in formation, all looking toward the raised dais in the back of the huge room. Kneeling on the ground below crouching Hikoa and standing Ana, I can only see the heads of the Ubkuŝngir on the dais.

The three monarchs stand to the side, observing but not involved. In the centre, a monstrous Commander thumps its armoured chest in front of the martial crowd. It lifts a rusty axe high above its head. Pale blood drips from the rusty, weighted blade. As one creature, the rows of soldiers lift their clubs in buzzing salute.

The entire chamber is soaked in death. It reeks of fresh fear overlaid with centuries of decay.

In a gap between a forest of raised arms and ranked bodies, I get a fleeting glimpse of the dais stage.

Swathes of anaemic brownish-pinkish seep into the stone floor, drip down the walls, spatter the Commander's armoured chest and pincers, stain everything the colour of washed-out rosewood. A scattered handful of brown feathers drift in pools of fresh blood.

What could have scared Girsurta so bad that she fled without her team-mates or her charges? What could have caused so much blood? The Aetirung are not very large beings; they can't have that much to spare. What…? The Ubkuŝngir couldn't have….

A raptorial foot, talons capped with rubber gum, disappears behind a hanging tapestry, dragged through to a hidden passage.

"*NO!*"

The cry reverberates around the execution chamber before I register my chafed throat scraped raw again, my hands outstretched, Hikoa and Ana wide-eyed horror three steps behind me. My palm claps over my mouth a second too late. It takes all my ice-blooded confusion not to run, gagging, from the room.

Every solider turns on asymmetric legs to face us, clubs held defensive. The commander drops the axe to the ground with a wet *thud*.

"Little *Nu-Kuŝu*," it rasps. Scorn drips molten polonium off every syllable, liquid fuel to the nuclear embers dormant in my chest. "Have you-one something to speak?"

I am on fire again, fury and regret igniting my kindling ribs, spreading through my bones. My marrow is curium cores and cold fission. I will burn the Commander to ash.

"You murdered them."

I go to push through the crowd, all focused fury and bony elbows, but the soldiers part like hairs to a comb. The ones closest stand primed to restrain me at an order. I grit my teeth. At the first hint of verbal dispute, they prepare to remove the disputer with violence. The Commander is twice my size, covered in solid bone, a trained solider, and I've never wielded anything more dangerous than a kitchen knife; yet they react as though I'm a physical threat. I wish it surprised me.

As I storm into the armoured ranks, the voice in the back of my mind notes that I should be scared, but I'm not. I don't know why; that's a thought to come back to later.

"You executed them." I glare at the Commander from the foot of the dais. The sour-salt scent of alien blood inflames the rage searing through me. "You executed *unarmed prisoners*."

"We did what we had to do to protect you-all from our enemies. We warned them what the cost of invading our home would be."

"You *perforta* hypocrite!"

"Ungrateful…!" The Commander rears on its back legs, slamming three-toed pincers down onto stained stone. I stare it down, right through the centre of its bulgy bug eyes, dare it to come up with better logic than intimidation and venomous, bitten silence. Every half-sobbed breath reeks of blood and viscera, of sour death and fear-loosed bowels, of the last moments of beings – protectors, volunteers, friends – who have had their lives taken for our safety. My rage burns the scent into my eyes and throat.

I cauterize my own wounds with laser-scalpel words. It tries to speak over me. My voice rises like the sea outside the stronghold until the Commander gives up with an angry hiss.

"Why in the Old Hells did you think we were here in the first place? *You* invaded *their* home and captured *my cousin*. You *expected* us to try and get her back. You guessed how they would react; you set a trap; you took them captive without bloodshed. Why did you execute them? *Why?*" I grit my knuckles into the stone until my blood joins our protectors'. "Was that part of your plan? Use the simple, *nu-kuŝu* aliens as a convenient excuse to murder more of your enemies?" I spit its own scorn at its feet.

Some distant, detached part of myself is aware of tears like pours of molten steel searing into my face. I don't wipe them away. My fingers dig bloodied crescents into the stone dais; if I let go, I will crumble.

"They are our enemies. They are deceitful. They cannot be reasoned with. We have tried." The surly, inept pity in its harsh voice is as stinging a slap as the scent of death.

"The *sapient beings* you murdered are Ŝara and Lulal de Dulenuma and Nirera de Skenemo. Ŝara and Lulal are sisters. They offered to help us because they couldn't bear the idea of one of them captured without the other. Nirera was married to a sculptor named Mituadim. She volunteered to help us because Mituadim was murdered by your scouts while looking for clay, and she didn't want another… uh…." I struggle to think of the word she used, give her translation instead, "… another not-solider, another person with no active part in your War, killed for a mistake."

"If we show them mercy, they slaughter us." The Commander rests its lower arm on the stained axe handle. "If we had let those prisoners go, we would face them in the next battle; they would search out the ones who imprisoned them. The more of them we can kill without risk to our own, the less of

them there will be to kill us. Protecting you-three was the primary goal, but if there was a chance to send a message to our enemies, to make them fear us…."

I grip my purpose with both hands and yank it over myself, shelter into the weighted mantle of *Ambassador, Chronicler, Educator*. It's the only way I can cope.

"With… with respect, I get that cultural relativism is even more important between different species as it is different factions of the same species. Just… listen. Please."

The Commander's mandibles clack, the fine hair-like antennae on its back legs bristle, but it acquiesces with a buzz-saw sigh.

"Speak."

"I get that your history is not ours. I get that we –" I gesture back to Hikoa and Ana, still petrified in the shadow of the doors. The distant part of my mind whispers thanks for their trust in me; more rests on this argument than Bernos' pride or Nitan's approval or even the Denaska's communication. "We have no direct experience of war. But that inexperience is a privilege from generations of our ancestors' trauma. When breaking international Laws of War became… acceptable – something that could be, if not openly condoned, but…" I click my fingers, dive back into my mind to search for the right words, "… rationalized, or excused, or ignored – our entire species nearly wiped itself out."

"You-one said that your-collective history is not ours."

"Whatever the species or culture, if a soldier fears that being taken captive will be worse than combat, they will be more likely to fight to the death before they allow themselves to be captured. You haven't made them fear you; you've made them hate you. You've made them willing to do anything to destroy you."

"They already hated us. They came here to destroy us!"

"They hate you because you invited them into your home to destroy them! I don't understand!" I stare up at the Commander. It looks back, contemptuous, alien eyes unreadable. "I don't understand *why*. Why execute them? Why continue this War endlessly? Why start it in the first place? *Why?*"

"Is that what they told you?" Every whiskery hair on the Commander's legs ripples. It reminds me of Inaĵat's angry feather-ruffle. "Is that the lie those vultures spread? That *we* are the ones who started this war?"

"I read the account of one of the Councillors who served at the beginning of the War." I stare through the Commander's feet to the bloodied back wall, all concentration on keeping my thoughts from forming images of violent death. "Your ancestors invited a delegation of unarmed Emissaries into the stronghold to slaughter them, dumping their bodies at the base of the city as a declaration of war."

"*What?!* That account is a lie."

"That account is their truth." It's the politest approach I can manage to say-without-saying, *there can't be any way to rewrite your people's actions as justified*. I rifle through my pockets, pull out the smuggled textbook, and drop it onto the dais. It lands with a hollow *thud*. I flick it open to the pages I've read over and over since the water-boat from Hul'Uru. "One of the Councillors gave me a book of historical accounts from the start of the War."

The Commander's hand tightens on the axe. I hold my breath to keep from flinching. Movement ripples around my peripheral.

In the blue-hot flames of my fury, I've forgotten we aren't the only ones in the chamber. Behind me, I sense Ana bend into a fight stance, feel the tension of an army an order away from battle. The soldiers bristle, the front ranks forming up as close to the dais as they can, a blunt, spike-legged shield.

I've forgotten, too, the presence of the three monarchs. Muŝum steps forward on her spindly legs, moves between the Commander and I, kneels at the edge of the dais to look me in the eyes. I'm unable to read expression in bulging eyes and mandibles, but I can feel the rage radiating from her soft, unprotected flesh.

"Put that cursed thing away. *Now*," she orders, nasal voice slow and measured, viscous mech-oil strained through muslin cloth. I open my mouth to ask why, but then I see the Commander scrubbing its shaking pincers over its bone-armoured chest, feeling around the edges of its carapace, as if reassuring itself that it is still whole. I look down at the book, bound in shiny, black fingernail-plates, and my entire body recoils.

"Oh, stars." I stare at my hands, at the book, at the monarchs. Acidic nausea bubbles in my throat. How could I have been so wilfully ignorant? "Oh… oh, *stars*. Oh…." I gag.

The book sits there on the dais floor, inanimate and evil. I can't make myself touch it again, even to put it away, but the Commander looks like the book's sharp edges have ripped into an old wound,

like scabs over its… no, *their*, their until I can ask what they call themself. I will not be party to desapientizing these beings any longer; I never should have been at all. The Commander looks like scabs over their heart have torn open, raw and bloodied all over again, and the knife sits on the stone slab in front of me.

Holding my breath, I call my hoverchair to me and drop the cursed book into my satchel. I cannot bear to feel its weight in my pocket and know I'm holding a sapient being's tortured death.

"You didn't know. Oh, *Diogir,* you didn't know." Muŝum's voice leaks watery relief. "There…. With respect, there is a lot you don't know, Chronicler. We believe that you-three should speak to the One Mind. Follow us."

Resurrection

I leave my hoverchair at the mouth of the tunnel. Something gives me the impression that the Hall of Memory is not a place where the Ubkuŝngir would welcome 'alien' technology… especially not with the cursed book it carries.

In reverent silence, the governors lead us into the cave passage at the heart of the fortress. Muŝum holds an alchemic globe, lighting the way. The floor slopes steeply, down and down and down, step after aching step, further and further under the surface. A slight breeze like the movement of the air filters raises chickenbumps on my sides.

One glinting point catches my attention. It glows the colour of the moss patches, but it's too small and symmetric, no more than a pinhole in the solid fabric of the cave.

It looks like a star.

Tilting my head to the side, I slow a little, drift over to the wall, brush my fingers along the surface. I trail my fingers up, up, up rough-textured stone.

The rock extends as far as I can reach. We're still underground and travelling deeper still. How in the galaxy has a star ended up stuck down here with us?

There's another one… and another… and another.

Scattered among subterranean stars, I feel more at home than I have since the moment we boarded the shuttle from *La Sesa*.

"What…?" I push aside the shroud of silence. "How…?"

"The Hall of Memory is our most sacred place," Muŝum begins, nasal voice a low hovermotor hum, hands held out as though in prayer or invocation. "Each soul light holds the… – I'm not sure if there is a word in our shared language – the *gidim* of one of our ancestors: their… their essence, their memories, their experiences, the core of what made them who they are. Our ancestors sleep, beyond where pain or fear can reach them, but we may visit who they were."

"Life after Death?" My thoughts spill into the channels between my brows.

"No." The fine whiskery antennae-hairs along Muŝum's legs twitch. I think she's looking at me, her head tilted the slightest angle to the left, but I still can't tell what those many-lensed eyes see. "We

may translate them for you-three as soul-lights, but the dead's souls have passed on to travel the cosmic winds. As we said, these lights are only remnants, memories. They contain everything the dead has experienced and learned, but they are not able to create new memories or truly interact with the living."

"If we can't talk to them," Hikoa asks, "how will the ancestors answer us?"

"Good question." Muŝum taps her mandibles. "They will show you what you need to see."

Hikoa's forehead furrows from the rows of zir braids to the bridge of zir flat nose. Before ze can ask for clarification, Baŝturmu cuts in.

"You-three are the first *bar'lukur* to enter the Hall of Memory." The venom in xyr tone and fangs may not be lethal, but xyr voice hisses like acid.

Bar'lukur. That's similar to the words the Aetirung Council used to describe us, the same words the Ubkuŝngir Commander used. I keep intending to ask for a translation, but I've gotten the impression it refers to a stranger, an outsider, a potential threat, an *alien*.

I stop. Hikoa quirks me a question-mark eyebrow; Anahera bumps into my back, toes of her boots clipping my heels. I turn to the monarch, bow low to one creaking knee, tap my fingernails against my eye-teeth in the closest approximation of the mandible-click respect I can manage.

"We recognize this is not a decision you…" *Linguistic differences, potential for miscommunication or offence,* reminds Nitan's voice in my head; I need to change my speech patterns. "… you-formal made lightly. We understand that we cannot understand how much this means, to allow strangers into the deepest soul of your-formal home."

"No, you-three cannot understand." Baŝturmu's lidded eyes narrow, but xe seems appeased. Jewelled shoulders dropping, xe turns xyr knobbly head and continues into the star-speckled subterrane.

The soul lights gather, constellations of fallen stars hidden deep under layers of rock and soil. They bloom, denser and denser, until there's hardly enough room between them to lay a fingertip.

A shiver prickles over my skin like arcs of electricity.

I am looking at the entirety of a species' history, a hall of bright ghosts that extends beyond sight. This is their living Archives. Every individual Ubkuŝngir who has ever existed, can tell their own story, their own truth. They can continue to teach others so that no knowledge is lost; others can continue to

learn from their experience directly. They don't have to write a memoir or a textbook or a history and hope that it won't be misinterpreted years into the future when society has changed.

This place is our core belief made solid, the unspoken, inherent creed of every city-ship, carved into stone walls under a distant planet: teach all we have learned to the next generation, so they may do better than we have.

I breathe my mother's words into the silence: *each generation plants the seeds of the next; each generation grows from the roots of the one before. Life and Death are a cycle, two halves of the whole of existence.*

I think of the millennium of Ghemod who have lived and died in *La Sesa*, the cyclic growth of the Grave Gardens, and I cannot imagine how much of the hull would be covered by souls if we had the ability to conserve them.

"The ancestors will give you the answers you seek." Muŝum's words curl like the smoke of a single candle.

Questions follow us like ghosts into the cool darkness. I don't know if I'm more scared of those ghosts, or the ghosts who will answer them.

I expect the tunnel to open out into a cavern or hall – like the *katedralo* in the belly of the mountains between worlds, or the ornate chambered rooms of the rest of the fortress – but it's more like the sudden, ancient wall that blocked our return out of that reality-warping cave. The roof slopes down; the walls close in; the tunnel just ends.

A small pool sumps away beyond the boundary. Solid rock shears down to meet the taut surface. I'm reminded of the river under the impossible wall. But rather than a river, a thin syrupy gel fills the pool, dandelion-tea yellow in the warm alchemic light. Mind gel, Muŝum called it before, a synthesis of the fluid inside the Ubkuŝngir nervous system.

The monarch gestures with a secondary hand. I look down her clawed fingers to the pool. The monarchs have assured us that we will be able to breathe the gel without problem, but our physiology is so different…. I would be much more comfortable with an air tube, at the very least.

Hikoa, Anahera, and I exchange a glance. Muŝum *has* said that this will answer all our questions.

Ana shrugs, strips off, sits naked at the side of the pool. I tilt my head at Hikoa, who steps over to help me with the laces of my *korsaro*. Ana has the right idea, I think; it would feel… profane, somehow, to enter the pool clothed. I fold Ana's smallshorts and singlet with mine and Hikoa's, leave them in a neat pile under Baŝturmu's bulgy, disapproving eyes.

The pool looks like it should be cold, still and viscous in the damp chill of the cave, but it's more like a tepid bath. Sinking into the gel feels like being reborn, or perhaps unborn, density bringing us to rest just beneath the surface. The gel slides over my chin, my lips, my nose, my closed eyes. I hold my breath, waiting for panic that doesn't come.

There's no reason for panic. We have never been so safe.

I breathe. I breathe, and feel my very alveoli buoyant in the gel that fills my chest with warmth. I breathe, and feel a heartbeat not my own, a deep, steady certainty that pulses in the spongy centres of my bones.

I can sense Hikoa's laser-bright curiosity focused like a camera lens, Anahera's flickering floodlight thoughts rushing by – these two fragile, fierce, infrangible beings of stardust and compassion in the nebula of my mind.

Beyond those two familiar home-warm lives, I can sense the three monarchs, low ultraviolet pulses, dim with concern and age, bent under the heavy pall of grief and guilt and duty. Beyond the monarchs stretch the hundred thousand lives of the fortress, the warrens between them and every other community within the planet, glinting waves an endless subterranean ocean. So far above, starbirds flitting through the cities in the sky, phoenixes like Old Earth myth burning and falling and rising again. I can sense *La Sesa*, a beacon of hearth-warmth in the endless void, and the one hundred and nineteen city-ships spread through the galaxy, candles floating on the currents of the Milky Way.

Across the span of the cosmos, numberless flora and fauna and organisms that defy our narrow boxes, all woven into the very fabric of reality itself, each individual life a bead of light threaded onto the strands of the Web of Life, as vibrant and different and many as the stars.

The multiverse holds us in its womb, gathers us close under its heart. The galaxy spans out in a multidimensional tapestry, points of light connected by bright threads, atom-thin but unbreakable, shining, iridescent, alive, dancing in the solar winds of change.

I feel the multiverse's heart beat in my breast, and something in me breaks.

No, it doesn't break. It is not hullplates rent apart; it is an airlock hatch opened to atmosphere after millennia in the void of space. I step through my sundered fear and into the One Mind.

I have no idea what I'm seeing. It feels like I've sunk into Ianêe's digital art programme.

The space is fractals, pixelated and distorted. Multiple layers of images stack on the surface of my eyes: a layer of light and dark, of each primary colour, of visible colours I don't have names for, of a fluorescent purply-whitish glow that must be ultraviolet, bright shadows that must be infra-red, orangy-purple radio waves and squiggy bright-white magnetic fields centred around blurred objects. I'm seeing through a fish-eye lens and a panorama lens and a thermographic lens and an out-of-focus vid-sim lens, all wrapped in the hazy mist of a dream.

I try to blink, to clear my vision, but I can't. Am I wearing my spectacles? Everything's so blurry. I try to reach for my face. I can't move. My neck bends, my head points down, but I didn't tell it to.

Oh.

Stubby three-fingered hands and underdeveloped pincer-grippers protrude from segments of heat-yellow, off-white thorax. The sagging, larval abdomen below lacks bony plates and lower limbs, cushioned on a soft-looking ultraviolet rug.

I am living a Ubkuŝngir's memory.

"Ti." I'm submerged in a bowl with the humming voice; it sounds watery and indistinct, and I can't tell where it's coming from. My… our… her head looks up at her name. The elder who stands before her is near twice her height, a towering shape outlined in thermal yellow-green. Their thin carapace is a lustrous indigo that makes their jewelled shell look backlit. They place a spindly hand on her head. "You-one do not have to make this choice yet."

A sense of *certain-resolute-ready* hardens the young Ubkuŝngir's small, fleshy body to tempered passion and molten steel. Somehow, even though Ti hasn't spoken, I can taste the elder answer her. To me, their acceptance and pride are honeyed lemon tisane, soothing subtle-sweet with the faintest hint of something sour-bitter underneath.

Six others enter the small room. After rows of armoured soldiers and decorated officials, I barely recognise them as Ubkuŝngir. Like Ti, their abdomens glow with mottled yellow heat uninsulated by exoskeleton or carapace. But rather than larval white flesh, their bodies look a bit like old fruit: round and spongy and covered in downy, reddish fuzz.

They look matronly, the voice in my head suggests.

No, they *smell* matronly. I can smell their care and devotion and concern, their fondness and pity and apprehension. Like I would read a cover page and know the novel's title, Ti *knows* what they feel. She *smells* what they feel, and my mind can only register it in impressions of milky chai and fresh ink and aromatic family dinners.

The six surround Ti. Lifting her in soft, padded pincers, they bear her through the fortress' tunnels. On the long walk, I start to filter out the inputs I lack the sensory receptors to perceive, start to push through the dreamy fog, start to relearn how to see and hear and smell.

We reach a long, high-ceilinged corridor. Neatly spaced archways, wide and doorless, line each side. Each entrance opens onto a chamber. I catch a glimpse of pockmark-like pits in the floor.

Ti knows the purpose of this many-roomed passage, and so I know, too.

The most important choice an Ubkuŝngir will make is their place in the hive, their caste, their purpose. When a larval youth has made their decision, they cocoon themselves in one of the pits in the particular chamber set up for the development of their chosen role. Tended to by nursery workers like the ones carrying Ti, the young Ubkuŝngir pupate for up to thirty-four cycles – a full phase of the planet's three moons – before emerging as adults formed to best realize their duty and their sense of self. They might adopt a new name, one that fits who they are at that point in their lifespan, and then they take their place in their community.

For the first time since the settling of the fortresses, the anarchic democracy needs a Queen to represent them.

Eldest and most impartial among the handful of candidates elected, Ti has now made her choice.

At the farthest end of the chambered hallway is an ancient stone-and-metal vault door, hinges rusted and carved designs worn smooth. Pulling a thin, flat piece of metal from a drawstring pouch, the pit-matron starts to scrape away the hard wax that seals the locking mechanism.

This is the only locked room I've seen in the fortress.

Another velvet-skinned *emegaglu* matron joins them at the chamber entrance. She looks up at Ti, high on the bearers' thin pincer-shoulders, and asks in words and pheromones at once.

"Do you make this choice willingly?"

"Yes."

The *emegaglu* falls in a step ahead of them. Careful and sure, the six carry Ti along paths between the holes. Most are plugged with some kind of thick wax; from within them radiates the orangy radio fire of warm life, dim in the kaleidoscope of Ti's mind. The open pits look barely big enough to hold an Ubkuŝngir soldier, filled with the same syrup-thick mind-gel of the Memory Pool.

At the back of the chamber is another locked door, less than a metre wide, the upper hinge at the matrons' shoulder height.

The bearers ease Ti into the tomb-like vault. Gel squeezes her larval body, oozes across her unformed limbs, bubbles over her mandibles, her scent-pits, her antennae. As it covers her many eyes, each layer of vision blinks out – infra-red, thermographic, primary reds and blues, nameless colours, ultraviolet, panoramic, fish-eye – until all that's left is the blurry greyish-yellow of the gel. Then the door closes, and even that goes dark.

I hear, distant and deadened, metal rasp against the latch mechanism.

They lock her inside, bury her alive in brain fluid.

I start to panic as Ti starts to lose consciousness.

A voice floats through heavy stone, through thick gel, through unformed ear-holes.

"There hasn't been a True Queen bred since the beginning of the Great Peace. We should not ask this of her."

Ti floats in the eyeless void, and the memory falls away into the dark.

I stand at the edge of the hive pool. For a moment, I think I've returned, but my head doesn't obey my thought to look for Ana and Hikoa. I try to blink, and my vision layers with impossible colours.

The memory coalesces around me.

"Huburum?"

Ti – no, she has renamed herself Tiamtu, in honour of the monarch who established the Great Peace – Tiamtu's voice sounds different when heard through someone else's earholes, rather than through her own skull-plates. The newly hatched monarch's voice is softer, but stronger and surer as well, a core of nuclear fuel submerged at the centre of a coolant pool.

For the first time, I see Tiamtu from outside herself. She stands, elegant and regal, on four long, multi-jointed legs, a head and shoulders above the rememberer.

With a sense of ritual as intrinsic and unspoken as a breath, I… Huburum steps forward to help the monarch remove her draped finery. I taste lavender and lemon and cinnamon so strong it burns as vir hand brushes the monarch's impossibly slim neck. I feel Huburum's love like a mouthful of fresh-brewed tisane, like Hikoa's hand warm on my back, like nuzzled kisses and entwined ankles in the soft, peaceful moments before sleep.

Unarmoured, unadorned, the light fuzz over Tiamtu's elongated abdomen looks like a fur cape. The newly hatched monarch holds out a delicate, three-fingered hand, and Huburum helps her into the mind pool.

I prepare to open myself up to the cosmos again, that living space between multiverses, but my senses white out, bright static across the surface of my eyes, between the little bones in my ears, over the ends of every nerve. I don't have the neural systems to process the physical world through Ubkuŝngir senses; trying to process the metaphysical one feels like my worst migraines coagulated into the fabric of my soul.

When reality comes back into focus, we are cocooned in the radiant dark of an astral void. Three globes of light circle us, the size of stellar remnants, too dazzling to look at for more than a few seconds at a time. For a moment, I think we are somehow in deep space, in the centre of a trinary star system. The central entity looks like any other red dwarf star, not much different to Glisesa's, to the dozens of others *La Sesa* has passed on our long migration through the galaxy. Except…

I can see its UV signature in a purply halo, iridescent in the bright infrared shadow. I can see the dancing white lines of its EM field in waves around its core. I can see not just the light of the star, but its heat, its radiation, its energy.

I can feel its power, creative, destructive, stable, ever-changing.

These are deities, true *deities*. This shouldn't be possible.

Huburum turns vir sight, and I get a closer look.

The entity to the right crackles and rages, a mosaic of smoke and storms, red and purple like a fresh bruise, arcs of lightning as long as city-ships sparking over its turbulent surface. The one to the left burns like an alchemic globe, warmth lit within as though by a liquid fire.

"Child." The voice is desert sands and ocean currents and mountain winds on a hundred thousand different worlds, ancient as stardust and nebulae and the formation of the universe. It is the sound of dust settling on the fabric of time. It resonates in some endless well behind my soul, somewhere beyond memory or consciousness.

"Eternal *Diogir*. Utudim. Gulamzir. Psangad." Tiamtu is a single photon held still between fundamental forces. Huburum's thoughts scrape over my own; ve has always thought Tiamtu is so radiant as to match the deities she names.

Deities. Actual *Deities*. *What?* I don't have a physical head to shake clear. Most Universalists, myself included, understand Teksisto to be a… an abstraction, a personification of the Web of Life, a reminder of the balance between all living things. Not a physical being. Not a corporeal deity.

Not… not a memory. Or is this the memory of a dream?

Tiamtu is talking to a *Deity*.

"We recognize that Your mortal children are not meant to address You directly…."

"Yet, you are here, child." I can hear a gentle, chiding laugh in that ageless voice.

"We seek Your guidance. Please." Tiamtu has no physical body here, but I sense the intention of a bow in the weave of bright threads around her soul. "Strange *bar'lukur* have come to our world. They are distrustful, volatile, destructive. They do not respect the spirit of Ki." Ki, the Ubkuŝngir word for their homeplanet. "They speak a dialect of the universal language – we acknowledge them as Your children – but *Diogir*…."

"There are very few beings who have evolved means to come before us directly as you do," reminds Utudim from the left. "We cannot show you more than we can show any other."

"What is Truth, child?" Psangad, the central star, prompts.

"Change the only constant in the multiverse." The words feel well-worn, fluent, retold. "All Life transforms into Death and is reborn again, for Life and Death are the eternal cycle, the circle that the Web of Existence balances upon."

Respect the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part. I recite the Seventh Principle in my mother's voice, raise the old words from the depth of remembrance.

"Greet these beings as bringers of change," Psangad advises. "It is not yet time for your light to extinguish."

The expanse of space implodes across my soul, and the memory goes nova. Our audience with the Deities is ended.

This time, the memory slingshots me into the centre of the fortress like a stickball goal. I am in Tiamtu's mind again, Huburum a step behind. To her left, a venerable Great Mother leans on her taloned sun-staff – at a glance, the same one in the current Great Mother's possession. She's accompanied by a younger Aetirung woman who must be her daughter; as unfamiliar as I am with their avian features, the similarity in beak shape, crest structure, and feather banding is clear.

The monarch guides the Great Mother through the many sumptuous chambers of the fortress' inner living space. I can't tell if it's the same suite of rooms, but it's similar to the ones where Muŝum, Baŝturmu, and Umgalu brought us, where they were looking after Ana, where the *haltoirĵf* stay.

At an unseen cue, one of the delicate Ubkuŝngir rises from her asymmetric recliner, leaving her clustered friends chatting and crafting and relaxing among piles of plush cushions and soft blankets.

"Great Mother Anzud?" Tiamtu rests a hand on the feathered wing. I feel the oiled feathers under her pincer-fingers, the slight powdery grittiness of dried-clay cosmetic, the hard bumps of gemstone beads.

Anzud.

I remember the Aetirung text. I remember the anonymous Councillor melting from the shadows with a book we didn't know was cursed.

No, no, no, no, no….

This isn't my body – I have no tear ducts to cry, nor cheeks to wet, nor guts to squirm – but my entire soul recoils into the back of Tiamtu's mind. I feel like pounding on the inside of her skull, begging the One Mind, *I can't face living through this, let me out, don't show me this, I get it, please.*

I already know how this memory ends.

"This is Kanaĵsura, one of our most accomplished *damwa'lugsarim* and a skilled *guda* dancer," Tiamtu introduces. The dancer bows, fine gold body-chains tinkling over her fingernail-thin carapace like fountains; it looks like something Ianţe would wear. "She will be part of the entertainments this evening."

At a confused six-eyed stare, the monarch asks Huburum to pass her a tree-paper-and-leather book, checks through the notes the two species have compiled on cultural differences.

"I think you would call her an *ene'arad*?" She checks again, tilts her head on her slender neck, clicks her mandibles; I get the impression of Nitan pressing her lips together in thought. "There isn't one precise word in your dialect that describes the role well. I think *zu'karkid* may be closer, perhaps? I'm not sure."

"Do you mean *arad'karkid*?" The Great Mother's croaky voice flattens.

Ene'arad. *Arad'karkid*. I've encountered those words before. They were mentioned in the paper-book that anonymous Councillor gave me just before we left Tir-Iri. I try to push through the dream-fog to reach my own memories. I know I know the translation….

Oh.

Oh, no, no, no….

Tiamtu checks the book.

"Yes?"

Nonononono….

"You breed your own *munus* for *arad'karkid* like animals?" The Great Mother's tone tempers to a blade edge. Her feathers ripple like molten metal.

"What? Animals? What did I say?" Tiamtu's head arcs back on her long neck. She leafs through the book with frantic fingers. "*Munus*…? That means 'woman', correct? Some of the *damwa'lugsarim* are women, but not all; most are neuter. And *zu* – that definitely means 'educated'…."

"You think it makes it right because you educate your *arad'karkid*? *Nu'ul menden abutum'du ak'dug nu'ul.*" Her yellow eyes ignite in a rage of sparks, scorching away her grip on their shared language.

The Great Mother flicks her flight feathers at her entourage.

"*Zagta arad ama'gi bur*!" She raises her staff, brings it down on the stone floor with a crack. "*Gabal*!"

The Great Mother takes to the air. The Aetirung pull short swords from sheaths hidden under ceremonial armour. They rush the unarmed guards. The chamber ruptures into chaos.

The memory fragments into holo-pic shards. One second, Tiamtu is scanning scrawled notes; the next, she's a room away, Huburum's shoulder plate in her abdomen, the crack of steel on bone ricochetting off the walls. The monarch tries to wedge herself in the doorway. Her delicate hands tear on the stone edge. Her pincers gouge thin lines in the stone; her blood tattoos the incisions sickly yellow. Huburum tugs on her shoulder, as firm as ve can risk, trying not to let the sharp points of vir fingers dig too deep into soft flesh, trying not to spill more of vir wife's blood.

"No… *no!* Huburum, let me go! I can't leave…!"

"Monarch, I must keep you safe…."

For a blink, Ana stands bloodied, beaten, barely standing, a solitary figure shrinking as the platform rises. I need to get back to her. I need to help her. Hikoa restrains me.

I blink again.

"No!" Tiamtu rips out of her spouse's arms. "What monarch flees while her people die?" She takes off into the blood-sleet storm. "Stop! Please…!"

Two Aetirung lay in spreading pale-red pools. The other three move in sync. Small and aerial and quick, using the height the chambered room, the warriors dart above and between the lumbering guards. Their serrated swords sing death to bulging eyes and bony skull-plates. An iron hilt clangs on an armoured backplate; the sword tip splits the bony chest. The guard chokes, spits frothing blood, stares at the greenish-yellow that slicks over his side. The Aetirung darts over the body before the guard stops gurgling.

One of the guards grabs an Aetirung by the leg and yanks it out of the air. Ze slits her throat in one motion, dropping the body to the ground. The last Aetirung warrior takes off, tapping at a band on its leg, warbling a tremelo message. Two guards give chase.

The Daughter splits off, seizes Kana by the upper arm, hauls her back, rounds up the group of her clustered friends, shoves them toward the open doorway. One screams, shrill, tinnitus and shrieking metal. Tiamtu tears after them.

"Stop!"

The monarch's body is not designed to run. Her soft, sloped abdomen scrapes on the stone floor. Her delicate legs buckle under the strain. She falls hard.

For a winded breath, the edges between this memory and mine blur. I try to reach back, check the roots of my ribs. My arms are not mine; they do not move. I have no ribs to check.

Skittering feet announce reinforcements. A squad of armed, armoured Ubkuŝngir marches into the room. One carries a bundle of clubs, which ze distributes to the guards left standing. I recognize the unadorned shell of an *azu*, a medic, as ze orders guards to carry the wounded out.

The Great Mother descends from her perch above the tapestries. She lands on Tiamtu's skinned hands, hooked claws digging into thin arms. Yellowish blood oozes, warm and thick. The monarch looks up at a verticil of blades. I hadn't realized the rays of the sun-staff were weapons.

"I may die here, but you will not take me. My daughter will escape your death-pit, *abutum'du,* and she will bring your *arad* with her!" The Great Mother raises her staff. "She will be a better Mother than I was."

"No!" Huburum lunges between them. The staff rips through vir chest, drives vir back into vir spouse, clangs against the stone floor between her bloodied forearms.

Huburum looks up, and the light goes out behind vir eyes.

The memory fades, Tiamtu's screams ringing in the void.

"Child." The voice, star-bright and cold and disapproving, resonates in the space behind my soul, somewhere beyond memory or consciousness. I can sense the void screaming, like this nowhere-place is an open wound in the One Mind. "You return."

Dread digs into my hind-brain like an infestation of rodents.

"Eternal Diogir. Utudim. Gulamzir. Psangad." The fundamental forces of the multiverse struggle to contain Tiamtu's fire between the three starlight deities.

The monarch's rage scorches the edges of my senses. The inside of her mind is a gaping, charred gouge of grief, a wound flayed open and bleeding thick, foul smoke. Nerves attached to a body I can't access cry and wither. Being in Tiamtu's mind hurts like a stove-burn; like the headlines sixteen years ago that screamed *La Dektria Ruptures! Twenty-Eight Million Lost* and oh stars my letter-friend is dead; like a terrible vision of Hikoa in Huburum's place, our future soaking into my hands and spilling across metal floor panels.

I scramble to escape. Snatching at an old mind-healer's advice, I pull the idea of a forcefield around me, pixel by floating nano-pixel, like Li Hui's portable armour generator in *Planet Earth: Return*. A corporeal boundary across the incorporeal bond of the mind pool, I feel the fire recede to the dull burn of a reset joint.

"You lied to us!" Hunkered down in a distant corner of Tiamtu's subconscious, I can guide my attention back to her rawest memory.

"We reminded you of Truth, child."

"You told us it was not yet our time. You said our light was not to be extinguished yet. But Huburum. Is. *Dead*!" Even trapped in her mind by the storm of her rage, I can hear the venom spit off Tiamtu's disembodied words. "Huburum is *dead*. My love and my advisers and a roomful of *damwa'lugsarim* and *bidu'lengak* lay slaughtered! Why? *WHY?!*"

This… this feels wrong. This is too… too intimate to witness, to feel, to intrude on. I shouldn't be here.

"We told no lie," Gulamzir says, stormy voice simple. I can almost hear the divine shrug. "You still live to accuse us of betrayal. Your people's light has not been extinguished. It is not your time. This is Truth."

"It is not Huburum's time!" Tiamtu screams at her deities. Her light flickers and thrashes around her. "Ve is barely a quarter of the way through vir lifespan. We should have had seasons upon seasons yet; we should have grown shell-soft together!"

The deities wait out her grief-storm. They say nothing.

"We opened our homes to your 'bringers of change', and they slaughtered us where we stood! How can you say it's not our time when you send your favoured children to destroy us? How can you say our light has not been extinguished when the brightest and kindest of us are gone?" Tiamtu's voice shatters like sand glass, fragile dangerous shards glittering in the space around her. She pauses for a breath that she cannot take. "How am I supposed to keep burning, how am I supposed to be a beacon to my people when all the light in my world has gone out?"

"Child," Utudim says, gentle as a breeze. "Huburum is safe within the One Mind of…."

"You expect reliving old memories to comfort me when I have lost the ability to make new ones?" Tiamtu cries. "Vir *gidim* remains, but ve is gone."

Psangad sighs.

"We are not deliberately cruel, child; we merely keep the Balance. We do not control the actions of mortals. Those individuals made the choice to attack, and they have reasons for making that choice, even if those reasons are not clear to you."

"Then tell me of their reasons," Tiamtu demands. "Tell me how those… those *buru'numa* justify slaughter."

"We cannot interfere in the conflicts of mortals, child," Psangad says. "You know this. We have upset the Balance by allowing you an audience, and your sense of betrayal is the result."

"Then I will ask those vultures myself." There are slivers of glass in Tiamtu's voice, quiet and jagged. I can feel her reaching into the darkness of the void, smothering herself in it, cloaking herself in her own shadow so that she is no longer afraid. She turns her face to Gulamzir's radiant darkness, feels its corruption seep into the gaps between her bone plates, basks in its heat like unshielded nuclear rays. "If they fail, we go to War."

Distant from the blinding fire of Tiamtu's mind, close across the void, I think I almost taste… something sweet-bitter, the faintest hint of divine satisfaction. I focus on the three star-like shapes, the

three Diatoi, these beings who cannot be real. I think of the creation and destruction of our nature. I think of the stories in our Archives, of the all the too-many extraordinary ways our species has created to destroy itself. I think of our species' first – often fatal – forays into space travel, fuelled by conflict with itself. Our species built itself mechanical phoenixes, set fire to them only to rebuild them over and over again, and took to the stars on their backs.

I look at the Diatoi, and I realize we have been created in Gods' image.

Two pairs of twig-thin arms haul me from the pool. I come back to myself, not tearless weeping like Tiamtu, but coughing, wheezing for wet breaths, snorting gel out of my lungs. I wipe goo off my face; my fingers come away salty with tears.

Where's Hikoa? Where's Anahera?

Ana looks like she's taken a bad hit in a martial arts lesson, slack-jawed and hunch-shouldered and blank-eyed blinking. Hikoa simply looks… hollow. I keep my cousin in direct sight-line and cling tight to my spouse's hand and don't let go.

Reality doesn't feel real anymore.

The monarchs guide us through the fortress to their meeting place, but the tunnels, the glow-moss, the tapestries, the chamber, even Hikoa's fingers gripping mine… They all have a dissonant, dreamlike mist, as though I watch the world pass through a warped viewport.

My head aches.

Umgalu places a seat behind me. Some distant part of my mind registers that one of the others has linked my hoverchair to follow us, and it would probably be politer to sit in my own 'chair than make the monarchs bring more in because there aren't enough – especially when the asymmetric Ubkuŝngir seats are not designed for beings with only two legs – but I'm too numb to move. I just stare at my hands.

I have been so *konsenscia*. I have looked at the expanse of the Hall of Memory and yearned to know, to live, to experience the whole of an alien species' history as no Ghemod has ever been able to.

But these beings are at war. Their history is trauma and grief and pain staining the lives of generation upon generation for the last hundred years.

And for what?

I have a dread-sick feeling in the hollow of my stomach that I may have guessed *what*.

Before anything else happens, I need to know.

"*Arad*," I say aloud, once the monarchs have taken their seats. I hear my own voice from some distant corner outside myself. "What does that word mean?"

"It means 'servant', of course," Baŝturmu huffs.

"Servant." I stop, recall the second-hand memory of the Caste Chambers. "From what I've seen, your society puts a huge emphasis on choice. Your servants choose to serve?"

"Of course!" Baŝturmu repeats, a low anger buzzing under xyr voice. "Do you not have people who choose to serve others? Does no one among you entertain or labour or protect? Do you have no cleaners or soldiers or miners? How does your society function?"

"We are *umsimi'arad*," Muŝum elaborates. "Crowned Servants. It is our role to serve our people."

"Oh." Realization collapses my lungs. Horror seeps into my bloodstream from the blow. "Oh, stars. Oh, no, no, no…."

I feel scraped thin, like an exposed nerve. Little tremors tumble down my arms; my fingertips shudder. I bury my face in my hands and smother down a rising tide of sudden, stinging tears.

"What?" Muŝum asks.

I can't do this. I have no right to blunder into another species' trauma and heave their enemy's trauma down onto their heads.

I can't *not* do this. I have no right to withhold the knowledge another species needs make an informed choice.

But how do I even start?

"I don't ask you this to put any blame on you, nor to imply that you owe the Aetirung so much as an empathic thought, nor to guilt you into forgiving unforgivable acts. I understand that too many lines have been crossed to ever move beyond the hurt." I crawl around the edges of what I mean to say, but this topic is so thorny and tangled and long-overgrown that I'm not sure there's a better way to

approach it. “I ask you this because I know that there is much I don’t know, and I don’t want my ignorance to cause misunderstanding. I know that a handful of traumatic memories will absolutely not convey the scale and tragedy of your people’s history….”

“Get on with it!” Baŝturmu orders. “Ask.”

“What have the Aetirung told you of why and how they came to this world?”

“Nothing. None of the *gidim* from that time record the Aetirung saying anything about their past,” Umgalu says. “They seemed resistant to discussing it – and there was clearly something painful in their resistance – so the ancestors didn’t push them.”

“Has there been any communication between the Ubkuŝngir and the Aetirung since the start of the war?”

“No.” Muŝum’s tone is firm, final. “We will not make the mistake of trusting them again. There is no reason to communicate with those we cannot trust to keep their word.”

“What is this about?” Baŝturmu demands. “What are you suggesting?”

“We are *bar’lukur*, outsiders, aliens. We have no part in this war. We stumbled into your homeworld by accident, unaware that we could travel to another world without space travel. When the Aetirung first saw us, they thought we were spies. They thought that you had recruited us or bred us to infiltrate their sovereign city. When the Ubkuŝngir saw us, you thought we were prisoners. You thought the Aetirung had conquered another species to indoctrinate as soldiers.”

“That does not answer my question,” Baŝturmu retorts.

“We are the only neutral beings to communicate meaningfully in peace with the Ubkuŝngir *and* the Aetirung since the beginning of the war, aren’t we?”

“Yes,” Muŝum says after a moment. “I believe you are.”

“Our –” I gesture to include Anahera and Hikoa, “– purpose is to share knowledge, to learn and teach in turn, to establish communication, to weave connections between sapients. This is what we have trained to do for… since….” A standard year for us will not be standard anywhere else. How else can I define time? “… since we became adults, since our… our emergence. This may make us a useful tool.”

“A tool?”

“A tool to… to allow you a different perspective.”

What am I doing? I can't do this.

The rule of confidentiality states that *nothing* a patient says is to be shared with anyone other than the doctor's supervisor, except when the patient has disclosed that they pose a specific danger to themself or others.

These beings are at war. They are *killing* each other. How much more danger could they be in?

This isn't my place; this isn't my story to tell.

But the Ubkuŝngir won't trust the ones to whom the story belongs, while they have already shown trust to someone separate from their conflict.

But the Aetirung are ashamed of their history, and they likely wouldn't tell this story anyway; we only learned because of one leader's dissent.

But it is the Aetirung's choice not to tell. I cannot betray that. I cannot share their secrets without their knowledge or consent.

But did they feel they could ever tell their story to those they thought would destroy them?

If I don't tell now, how many more years will the story go silent?

"I know you have no reason to trust your enemies. I know you have no reason to trust us as you have, and I know that you would be well within your rights not to trust us. I know that… that the people who this happened to are not the people who are responsible for hurting you. I… I know that there is much we don't know."

I rub my temples, where a migraine hammers blows.

"During our time in Hul'Uru, one of the Councillors went against the Great Mother to recount their point of view of the beginning of the war. She still seemed hesitant to speak of her species' past. She didn't tell us much. I didn't really understand what she did tell us until I saw your point of view as well." *Breathe, Lirit. Breathe.* "I think I might know why the Aetirung Emissaries attacked your ancestors."

"Why?"

I can't make myself meet the monarchs' eyes. *What am I doing?* I can't barge into another species' trauma and tell them they're *wrong*.

"Why?"

"In… in the Aetirung dialect, '*arad*' means… means 'slave'." The effort of speaking fractures the translation on my lips. "In particular, the word refers to a slave taken from an enemy people, usually a high-ranking individual, often a… a monarch, or a member of a monarch's family. The words '*ene'arad*' and '*arad'karkid*' specify…" The words taste of sick-sweet death on the back of my tongue. "… specify sex slaves taken from an enemy people. The purpose of *arad* – especially *ene'arad* – is to humiliate one's enemy as a whole."

"It should not surprise me that those vultures need a word for such a concept," Baŝturmu says after a beat, shaking xyrself out of xyr shock. "It should not surprise me that they have perverted such a word to express their own brutality."

If any being took someone I loved from me, I would hate them. I know myself well enough to know that. It wouldn't matter to me what trauma that being had gone through; it wouldn't make up for the trauma they made the choice to inflict. How can I ask more of a people who have survived generations of violence?

No. To explain is not to excuse. I can share the knowledge I have been trusted with, but that is not to shape the Ubkuŝngir's reactions for them.

Despite the burden of leading a traumatised people into combat, Muŝum has been nothing but empathic, kind, generous, trusting. I still don't understand how or why we have been welcomed here; given what happened the last time they greeted strangers with open arms, these beings have every right to treat us as a threat. But they didn't. They put themselves at risk – again – to save strangers they thought were in danger.

I get the sense that the Ubkuŝngir fight because they don't see any alternative but their own destruction.

What will they choose if they learn that their enemies fight for the same reason?

If I don't tell now, how many more years will the story go silent?

"I… I am going to pass on the history the Aetirung councillor shared with me. I tell you in confidence. None of what I say can leave this room. I *cannot* overemphasise how important that is. You must *promise* that you will not use any of this knowledge against the Aetirung. We have no part in this war, and you *will not* use us as a weapon."

Muŝum bows to her front knees. She clasps my wrist, looks me in the eyes.

"*Na'e gatil ŝum'zeng*. I give my word as a servant of my people."

Umgalu and Baŝturmu follow her lead and vow their discretion.

"The words *'ene'arad'* and *'arad'karkid'* don't describe what the Aetirung did. It describes what another species subjected the Aetirung to."

As wrong as it feels to tell someone else's story for them when I have access to primary sources to read from, I cannot make myself refer to the cursed book. I cling to Hikoa's hand, stare at the floor, pull a forcefield around my mind, and I recount the Aetirung's escape from genocide.

"The Aetirung Emissaries thought the *damwa'lugsarim* were slaves taken from enemy factions of Ubkuŝngir. They saw them as a warning, a threat, a sign that everything they had tried to flee had followed them to a new planet. Their only previous interactions with another sapient species had been of systematic genocide. To the Aetirung, the implication of seeing sex slaves was that, if a species would be so proud to enslave their own people – even, it seemed, to breed their own people like animals to produce more slaves – they would not hesitate to enslave an 'inferior' people."

The stone walls ring silent. As far as I can tell, for all their many eyes, the Ubkuŝngir can't cry, but Muŝum and Umgalu both look like they want to. Even Baŝturmu looks stunned, winded, like xe's been punched in the chest-plate.

I look down, tell the story to the stone floor so I don't have to face those haunted eyes.

"The Emissaries thought they, as leaders of their people, had been tricked into coming to the fortress because it was the easiest place to capture them. They thought they were going to be enslaved and used either to undermine the resolve of their people or as bargaining chips to force surrender. They decided they would rather die than be used as a device to make their people suffer, and if they were to die here, they would die fighting back and freeing as many other slaves as they could."

I know better than most the signs of someone standing on the knife-edge of crisis. I hadn't thought that those signs would translate across species. Muŝum trembles; first just the whiskery hairs on the multiple joints of her multiple limbs; then the ends of her three long pincer-fingers; then her delicate mandibles, so much shorter, blunter, less intimidating than the inborn weapons of the guards and soldiers; then the thin, peach-fuzz skin across the underside of her abdomen, the tiny shivers an engine-

quake barely stifled under a gemstone carapace. Her spindly legs shake, then buckle, and she crumples. Umgalu and Baŝturmu follow her to the floor.

One of my hands is still laced tight in Hikoa's fidgety, floundering grip; I extend the other to the monarch. Muŝum folds her cold, alien fingers through mine, tucking herself into her advisers' soft underbellies. Her hind-most legs beat against the stone. A tearless, buzzing wail wells up from deep in the monarch's soft thorax, spills from low in her long throat. The sound scrapes across my eardrums like metal on metal, like a failing hovermotor, like an emergency evac drill alarm. It cuts to the quick of my soul, and there is nothing I can do to stop the bleeding but hold the hand of the queen as she mourns.

The Return Home

The Veil opens again the second dawn after our emergence from the One Mind.

It's time for us to go home.

Commander Namtar and a squad of nine soldiers accompany us across the sea and around Sangkremsur Mountain, careful to stay on the Ubkuŝngir side of the river.

While the squad scouts ahead, I leave the history book on a tree stump within sight of a clearing across the river. Part of me is tempted to throw the cursed thing in, but I remember the Councillor's hesitance, the confession of their ignored history. The knowledge it contains – the knowledge it embodies – shouldn't be lost.

When we reach the cave, I catch Hikoa's shudder as the walls close in, Ana's wary eyes scanning for hidden threats, and I wonder if Tiamtu's memories will ever not feel like our own.

The commander and xyr squad lead us to the entrance to the *katedralo*, coming to a halt before the archway. The impossible wall is gone, like it was never there at all, like nothing has diverted the river in aeons.

Facing the commander, I bow from the waist. It seems… impersonal, inadequate, but I'm not sure if warriors would welcome a traditional farewell from *bar'lukur*. Anahera shrugs, one-shouldered, and throws an arm around Namtar. The commander stiffens; the soldiers jump to their clubs, stingers arching up; I open my mouth with apologies squirming on my tongue. But I guess the Ubkuŝngir have seen us pass affection between ourselves often enough to know a hug is not a last-minute attack. Whiskery hairs twitching, Namtar inches xyr armoured arms around her shoulders, squeezes once – quick and hesitant – and backs up.

Before I can say anything, Namtar surprises me. Clasping Ana's forearms, xe leans down and presses xyr chin to hers, tapping dimples into her cheeks with the points of xyr mandibles, before releasing her and clasping forearms with Hikoa.

I did not expect a warrior's farewell. When Namtar reaches for my arms, I bare my teeth and tip my throat, reciprocating the *zu'ur* as best I can. To place one's unarmoured under-chin within the reach

of another's mandibles is a trust I didn't think we would receive. I try not to think that such an action may not be so meaningful, when xe knows our blunt teeth and single-hinge jaw pose such little threat.

We have learned to trust them, these terrifying beings of bone armour and insectoid voices and misunderstood rage. We have journeyed through the heart and mind of their people. That is already a show of trust that I don't know if we deserve.

"Thank you," I murmur. "Thank you-collective, for protecting us, for making sure we got back to our home safely."

Namtar clicks acknowledgement. With a last goodbye, the soldiers watch us pass through the Veil; I hear their syncopated toe-steps retreat up the passageway.

The full-moon lake greets us with that same, ghostly draw. One of the many shores of the *Abchernipont'Apasu'Amfi*, the *Zuagub'Namu'Murub*, the Sacred Waters Between Worlds. If we were to dive to the bed of the primordial sea, swim down and down and down until the pressure crushes consciousness from us, would we find ourselves in the Diatoi's void, in the radiant darkness of the multiverse's womb?

If I dive down, will I face the Diatoi myself, rather than seeing them through another's memories?

I wedge myself between Anahera and Hikoa, finding their hands and holding tight like a child. Hikoa links our fingers, easy and quick. The lake calls. We stick close to the far edge of the crescent, so close to each other that their legs push into the sides of my 'chair.

I slump into my seat, boneless, as we pass through the Veil entrance into Glisesa's cool, dry caves.

We're finally going home.

Anahera, Hikoa, and I trek back to the rocky flat where we left the buggy, too worn out for conversation. I wish my mind would settle down in my skull and let me rest. Ever since we disconnected from the One Mind, a single, nagging thought has run round and round my mind like a rodent. I picture the vid clips of Old Earth mice; I can almost feel it chewing and scratching and popping up out of the warren of folds and crevices at random.

We come over the rise to see Czerafwin and Ianŝte sitting cross-legged in the shade of a different buggy – one of the tracked ones, rather than our hovermotor variant – sharing onigiri with three Denaska. A translation holo shifts through quick, neat gestures as Ianŝte chatters about the landscape painting she's working on through a mouthful of seaweed and vegetables.

"Huh?" says Ana. Our two home-mates turn.

"OH, MY STARS!" Roughly fifty kilos of happy Ianŝte-hugs hurl into my lap hard enough to knock my 'chair spinning. She leans over the armrest to squeeze Hikoa around the middle as soon as the motor rights itself. "Lirit! Hikoa! Ana! We were so worried! We need to radio in; everyone will be so relieved! Where were you? What happened?"

Czeraf is already on the buggy comm.

Ia's onigiri, thrown down in her haste, sprinkles the rocks with rice grains; the Denaska shake grumpy signs at her. The HUD in my spectacles transcribes, <*Bad! Not leave food out. Not want [no exact translation | small pest animal found in volcanic soil]*>. Mouth drawn in at a guilty angle, Ianŝte sidles off my lap, curls her hand into an *apology* sign, and starts to clean it up.

"I don't think you'd believe us if we told you." Hikoa runs zir fingers through zir braids. "I'm going to guess the PSC will want the full story, and I think we'd all prefer to only tell it once. Is that okay?"

"Yeah, of course." Czeraf gives us a once-over, an eyebrow inching toward his multicolour hairline. We've been wearing the same grubby jumpsuits since we left *La Sesa*, we've gone all that time without a comb or a toothbrush between us, and we've been traipsing through everything from dust to mud to alien goo; we must look – and probably smell – a mess.

One of the Denaska waddles up to Czerafwin's knee; my HUD types out the conversation.

<Lost friends found. End agreement now. Us not return with you [to] camp [of] angry [no exact translation | predatory reptile known to hunt outside Denaskan lava tunnels]. It not welcome.>

"We understand," Czeraf says. "Thank you for all your help. We are very grateful, and we are sorry."

The Denaska flicks der blunt fingers out in a sign that the HUD translates as *[noncommittal gesture]*. De presses der three pairs of palms together and flares them apart and out in a shape like a trumpet bell. I recognize that signal as a dismissal, even before the HUD definition pops up.

The three Denaska drop down to all eight legs and scuttle off over the rise.

I glance at Hikoa and Anahera, and see my confusion mirrored in their furrowed brows and tight mouths. I've understood each word of the conversation separately, but trying to make sense of them together is like trying to put a jigsaw puzzle together with the help of a random number generator.

"What was that about?" Ana asks outright.

"We… we'll explain on the way." Ianŝte waves us over to the buggy. "Let's get you home."

A figure paces along the edge of the shuttle landing. By the time we're two hundred metres away, I can see the meaty hands clasped tight behind the figure's broad back, the hunched shoulders, the heavy lumbering stride. As soon as he hears the buggy, he turns on his heel and marches to its parking spot to meet it. The muscled arms cross; a tapping foot sets off little puffs of red dust.

The second our feet touch the floor, Bernos explodes like a hull breach. Ricocheting shrapnel blasts us one after another.

"Where the Old Hells *were* you? You send one staticky message to Nitan about some flying creature – which you know *perfectly well* is impossible; the gravity here is too high – and then you disappear off the face of the planet for *nine rotations*."

I fight the urge to rub my pulsing temples. I do not want to deal with this now. I want to get back to *La Sesa*, have a shower so long that the utilities workers get cross with me, hug my family, and sleep for a week. I don't even care about what order those things happen in.

Bernos rounds on Ianŝte and Czeraf before I can form an answer.

"And where are those stars-damned maggots? They were supposed to report back with you. Apparently, they finally decided to admit they knew where they-" he waves at the three of us, "-were, but those grubs are too stars-damned cowardly to accept any consequences for taking hostages."

The words spit in my face like hot cooking oil.

"What did you just call them?" My voice sounds sandpaper-harsh, even to my own ears.

The leader of off-ship exploration did *not* just call sentient beings pest animals. He knows where that door leads. If he's acted like this in front of the Denaska…. All the years of work we've all put in…. I grit my teeth.

"The *Denaska,*" I emphasise, "had no idea where we were. They had no reason to know." My voice shakes with the effort of not shouting. I'm almost tempted to tell him that while he was threatening the native peoples, we were listening to the Aetirung debate whether it would be more convenient to use us as bait or simply kill us. But that will only raise questions I do not have the energy to answer. "We told Nitan very clearly that we had already left the Denaskan town before we were sidetracked. Why in the galaxy would you think they had captured us?"

"You *disappeared*!" Bernos yells. "We had rescue teams out around the chrono for a standard week. We tracked your heading from the signal direction when you contacted us to the salt flats. We searched the foothills, the plateau, the mountains, every direction you could maybe have gone. We searched every crevice and cave and sinkhole, every possible place you could have fallen or taken shelter in. We found your buggy. We found your footprints going into the cave. I personally led the rescue team through that stars-damned cave. Five. Separate. Times, but it's pretty much a kilometre of straight tunnel. Unless you decided to swim under the river sump at the end of the passage, there was nowhere you could have gone."

I'm tempted to tell him that his rescue team missed the *katedralo,* but there's no point; the Veil was closed, inaccessible. I can hear the ice and vinegar under his voice. I take a breath, close my eyes, rein in my temper, listen to him with as much empathy as I can apply around my ears. I cannot imagine how scared he must have been.

"You disappeared without a trace immediately after your first visit with the Denaska. We found your buggy kilometres away from where you were supposed to be, and the only clue as to why you were there was a single communication about an impossible alien. There were footprints going into the cave, and none coming out. The only cave-dwellers we know who would have been capable making you disappear like that are the Denaska. The only other option, of course, is that you were *konsenscia* enough to disobey Every. Single. Rule of off-ship discovery and wander off by yourselves."

"Bernos." Resentment at being thrown into yet another stressful word game stokes the embers left smouldering under my stomach. I hold my palms up to defer him, hold my breath to smother my anger. I do not hold much hope that he is going to believe us, and I do not have the energy to deal with his scepticism and scorn on top of everything else.

"What?" he snaps.

"I know you were scared. I would be, too, if someone I was responsible for went missing. But it is not fair on anyone to accuse the Denaska of treachery, nor us of wilful ignorance, before you know what happened."

"Then. *What. Happened*? Tell me."

Hikoa's lips part around the same sentence ze told Ianîe. Bernos cuts zir off.

"No, Lirit is the Chronicler here. She's the Team Leader. Let her tell me herself. Let her prove that she can do things for herself without relying on you."

I stare Bernos down, his eyes easily the same height as an Ubkuŝngir soldier's, and I realise.

I'm not scared of him anymore.

I faced down the Great Mother when she spoke of taking my family from me and imprisoning us. I faced down the Commander while they still held the axe with which they executed our friends. I have lived the memories of a being who faced down her *gods*. I am not going to roll over and bare my throat to avoid a confrontation with a petty bully.

"No."

I am angrier than I have ever been, angrier even than at Ana's capture, or the Aetirung's aggression, or the Commander's execution. In those situations, some part of my mind that sounded like Nitan reminded me of cultural relativism, alien morality, unknown context. Bernos doesn't have that excuse.

That niggling little thought pops up again.

"No? Excuse me?" The parts of Bernos' face visible between *kapkovrual*, sunglasses, and beard are puce. *You're excused,* Nitan replies in my head. I can picture her tilted her, her half-smile, and exhaustion is the only thing that stops me from laughing, slightly hysterically, in his face.

"As you said, we were missing for nine cycles." I kept count of only six cycles on the other side of the Veil, but orbital distances and tidal locking might shift Shargaidra-Ki time from Earthen standard. "As you know, we did not have enough water, food, or medicine with us for that time. We obviously found a source of water, or we would be dead, but we are all hungry, and exhausted, and feel like *drek*."

I stop to measure my next words, but Bernos opens his mouth to interrupt me, so I plough on.

"I stood up for myself and my team at the very first briefing, when you refused to let me even set foot on the planet because of my health conditions. If I didn't prove my ability to you at that point, or by coming back safe after nine cycles lost on a barren planet, then I'm not sure what good it's going to do to try again now. I will debrief you and Nitan in full as soon as Anahera, Hikoa, and I have recovered."

I will likely ask to speak in front of the next inter-ships committee meeting, too, I think. I push that rodentian little thought back into warren of my brain and continue on the current issue.

"Right now, my team and I are going to board the shuttle and go back home as soon as it's possible to leave."

I walk over to Anahera and Hikoa, slipping my fingers through my spouse's. Ana prepares to push the supply trunk onboard the nearest shuttle.

"Don't you walk off when I'm talking to you! The shuttles aren't going anywhere until…"

A shout cuts through Bernos' sentence. We turn toward the sound. Ana's fists snap up, one foot back, taut as cable. Hikoa grips my hand, convulsive. But, with a whoop, Ana takes off for approaching buggies, and Bernos's anger deflates.

The rescue teams have gotten back.

Suspecting I know who let them know, I find Czeraf's colourful head and mouth, *"Thank you."* He waves a long-distance comm at me with a grin.

Da, Ezraĉ, Tokamaki, Auntie Ŝnaĵda, Ommers Elgief and Solt̂anu, Ĵegor, Rishkav, Kĵo and Jahanara spill from the buggy convoy like water. I get a glimpse of Auntie Ŝnaĵda strewing Ana's face with kisses like handfuls of stardust, crying into her matted hair; Hikoa's father and sister throwing their arms around zir shoulders. Then Ezraĉ hugs me so hard I lose my feet, and he stumbles into a klutzy pivot so we don't topple over, and I swear he's grown another three centimetres since we left. And I'm

never going to bicker with him again, because even if he does leave the washroom a mess when he visits, he searched for me when I was missing, even though the whole idea of leaving *La Sesa* scared him something awful. Around us, voices and laughter echo to the distant mountains until it sounds a little like sobs.

"Ezraĉ!" I mumble into my brother's elbow. "You're squeezing all the water in my body out through my eyeballs. I'm already dehydrated, darn it."

"I didn't know my sister's a sponge." Ezraĉ squeezes so tight my bioboots leave the dirt.

"Put me down!" I flail my feet.

"Good to see you're still kicking."

Okay, maybe I'll still bicker with him, but only because it's funny.

"Thank the stars you're safe." Da pulls me into a hug. "Tekoran wanted to help look for you so badly, but her doctor said it was too high a risk for her. General exploration is one thing, but a rescue is something else."

"That's probably a good idea." I roll my sore shoulder, the one I subluxed in the caves so many days ago. Ah, the genetic wonders of EDS. "If you think someone is at greater risk because of their health condition, it does seem problematic to send someone else with the same condition out after them."

"That was the thought." Da clasps my shoulder. "We better get you home."

"Yeah." Nine standard cycles of exhaustion catch up, and they don't care when they pile into me. I tap on my wristcomp until my 'chair appears, steering my numb legs to collapse onto the seat. "Let's go home."

Hikoa meets me at the shuttle airlock to tell me Anahera's already onboard with her ma, Tokamaki has packed the supply trunk for us, and most of the rescue team are taking a second shuttle back; the PSC medics want to have a look at us on the trip back, and a full-capacity passenger section won't have enough room for equipment. I scrunch my nose and sigh. A medical examination started this adventure, and apparently it will finish it, too.

Before we board, I stop to look back toward the mountains. That niggling thought has begun to scrawl a speech for the Inter-Ship Committee across the inside of my skull.

Yes. We need to go home.

Epilogue

Leaders of the Inter-Ship Committee, I recognize that the proposition I bring before you may seem to fly in the face of all that our species has worked for over so many generations. I recognize that it may make the last two thousand years seem wasted.

That time was not wasted. We needed that time to mature as a species. We needed that time learn to live the changes our ancestors vowed to make, to make them intrinsic to our way of life. We needed that time to learn how to exist and thrive within a closed system, to allocate the resources we have to those who need them most, to not waste what we have, to not take resources from our descendants. We needed that time to allow Earth to heal, before we can ask its forgiveness.

Recent satellite vidfeed from Earth shows that the environment has regenerated to the state it was before the pre-Global-Change-Movement Industrial Age. Biodiversity is thriving. Radioactivity from the Final World War has declined back to baseline cosmic radiation levels. The atmosphere and magnetosphere have stabilized. The last remnants of our ancestors' cities have been reclaimed by the Earth. We would start again fresh, but with the knowledge and experience our species has gained in our journey to the distant stars.

I know this proposition asks a huge amount of those populations who have already built lives on their chosen homeworlds. For those fortunate enough to settle on planets without sentient peoples, they can make their own choice whether or not to return. For those of us who have moved in on inhabited lands, *we do not belong here*.

I know that this statement rests on observations that we do not want to accept; I did not want to accept it either, even when the evidence was before my own eyes. That is what made me realize the necessity of this choice. If we cannot acknowledge information that goes against our beliefs, if we have become so set in our ways that we cannot question or change, then the evidence supports the observations and the observations supports the evidence. We as a species have matured a remarkable amount over the Great Migration, but we still have a long way to go.

We have still made the same mistakes of our ancestors by assuming we are entitled to share another's home.

Creation and Destruction coexist within our species' nature. Our cultural universals include a capability of wonderful and terrible acts. No matter how far we've come, no matter how much we have changed what it means to be Ghemod – to use the outdated term, what it means to be *Human* – we are not ready to expand beyond our own homeworld. We may never be.

We need to return to Earth.

We need to go home.