

Hejira: flight for life

Voice of Dr. Julia Heller:

"The planet will reject you." When Elizabeth Anson whispered these words we all thought them to be the last words of a dying woman torn by grief and guilt. We did not believe her. Even when Devon collapsed none of us truly believed the planet had anything to do with her illness. I wish I'd paid more attention to Elizabeth. Because, as it turns out, she was right.

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Click. Julia Heller switched off the data-screen of the spacecraft's onboard computer. It took a few moments for the afterglow to fade from her vision and she blinked. Swiveling her chair she got up with a weary sigh. It was time to tell the group about her failure.

Her footsteps clacked hollowly on the ship's metal floor when she crossed the mostly empty bays. She stopped briefly to look up at a white glazed crypt. Built into the wall, with the suspended form of Devon Adair barely visible through the misted glass, it reminded her of a coffin standing on end. More striking than pretty, with auburn hair framing her face and her body clad in a white robe, Devon was frozen cryogenically. She was kept in suspended animation until Julia found a cure for the mysterious disease that threatened her life. Once Devon had been a vibrant and strong-willed woman, the expedition's leader. Now a green dot blinking regularly on the cryobed's small control panel offered the only indication that she was alive at all.

"I'm sorry, Devon," Julia muttered. With a last glance at the display to make sure the crypt was functioning properly, she climbed the ladder leading out of the ship. When she popped her head through the hatch she took a deep breath of the cool night air; it smelled marvelously fresh after the long hours she spent inside the ship. It was almost a year now since they crash-landed onto G889 but the many smells and fragrances in the air never ceased to amaze her. It certainly was an improvement over the sterile no-smell of the recycled space station air.

"Did you find anything?"

Julia peered into the darkness, the question interrupting her thoughts. "No, I'm sorry, John. Nothing," she said while she continued to climb out of the hatch. She clambered down the ship's side and stumbled in her fatigue. John Danziger grabbed her elbow to steady her. A large man, he towered over her, unruly curls hanging to his shoulders. His eyes held an almost desperate plea as he looked down at her.

Julia ran her hands through her hair in frustration. "There appears to be no reason for

Devon's collapse. I can't find a cause. No viruses, no bacteria. The CT-scans check out fine, there's no tumor. Everything should be functioning normally. As you know, Devon doesn't have a bio-chip like the rest of us but as far as I can determine that has nothing to do with it either."

Danziger sagged visibly while the last glimmer of hope disappeared from his eyes. "Then we have to move out. New Pacifica is waiting. We need to prepare for the colony ship." His voice was flat and Julia put a consoling hand on his arm.

"We're not deserting her, John. We'll come back for her as soon as we can."

Danziger nodded, his jaw clenched tight, and he brusquely turned away from her. Not before she'd seen the shine of tears in his eyes though. Julia blinked to disperse the tears that threatened to form in her own eyes. In the distance a night bird cawed at the stars overhead, an empty sound that seemed to underline her words.

Another form materialized from the shadows to stand beside her. Alonzo Solace observed Julia silently for a moment, his brown eyes full of concern. He wrapped his arms around her and hugged her in silent support while Danziger attempted to regain control of his emotions. "You did everything you could, Doc," Alonzo whispered in her ear. "And more."

Julia hid her face against his chest. "I know," she sighed. "But I still feel absolutely useless."

Three weeks ago, just when they were about to leave the Venus-class spacecraft that crashed fifty years ago behind, Devon collapsed. Not able to determine what was wrong with her, Julia had her put in cold sleep in one of the ship's beds in an effort to keep her alive. The doctor worked day and night to find a cure and if Alonzo had not forced her to take breaks, she would have foregone food and sleep. She set up a temporary lab inside the old ship so she could use the immense computing power of the onboard systems. Yet, despite her efforts she was no closer to determining a cause than she had been three weeks ago. And without a cause, she couldn't even *begin* to work on a cure.

Danziger cleared his throat. "Go get some sleep," he told them. "We'll start packing in the morning and move out in two days."

Julia was grateful for Alonzo's arm supporting her. Now that she had given up, her exhaustion was catching up with her. On wobbly legs she shuffled down the hill to the tents erected in the valley. They had moved the camp while she worked. When Baines muttered something about not wanting to sleep next to a mausoleum, the others agreed; they found it difficult to find rest next to the spacecraft with Devon suspended in the

cold sleep crypt inside.

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A pale pink heralded the sun's imminent appearance on the horizon. Overhead the last of the stars faded from the sky. While shadows still reigned in the folds between the hills, the first rays of the sun glinted off the metal hull of the spaceship when the Eden Advance crew gathered for a short goodbye to their leader.

Julia glanced sideways at Danziger. Although nobody had mentioned it, the group followed his lead since Devon was gone. He stood at the front of the small cluster of people, his lips compressed in a thin line. Each hand rested on a child's shoulder. Left of him, and slightly in front, stood his daughter True, her hair tied back in a ponytail. To the right of Danziger was Ulysses Adair. The boy carried a solemn expression that was too mature for a nine-year-old. Absently he toyed with a red ribbon tied to the wooden stick in his hands. It was identical to the one the boy put next to his mother's cryo-bed, three weeks ago. The Terrians would keep her safe somehow. Or so he believed.

Julia was standing next to them, Alonzo's hand tightly gripping hers. The others were scattered in twos and threes, according to the bonds and friendships that had formed over the long months on the planet. Of course Bess and Morgan Martin stood together, Morgan shuffling his feet while his wife squinted at the rising sun. Cameron was whispering something to Denner. Mazatl, Walman, Baines and Magus were talking quietly among themselves while Zero scanned the area from the ridge behind, the sun's glare bouncing off the robot's yellow casing.

Yale, Devon's old teacher and friend, cleared his throat. He stepped in front of the assembled crew and turned to face them. The black man's eyes were sad but he stood tall and square shouldered. His voice was strong as he spoke. "Friends," he said, "thank you. Thank you for your time, for waiting, for giving Julia the chance to examine every possibility. When we started this journey, long months ago, we knew it wouldn't be easy. We all realized it would be dangerous and that we might lose friends along the way. Nothing is harder than leaving a friend when you don't know if you'll ever see her again.

"I've known Devon since she was a little girl. Most of you only met her when we came here. But you'll all agree that she'd want us to move on. Go to find New Pacifica and welcome the Colony ship with the two-hundred-and-fifty families. Build the colony where the children can be healthy. It's now time for us to go on and make her dream a reality. And God willing, we'll return here someday to take her with us, to bring her home."

There was a long pause while throats were cleared and eye corners patted with kerchiefs or even bare hands. Julia squeezed Alonzo's hand. At last Danziger gave a start and straightened.

"Okay people, let's move out," he said hoarsely.

Reluctantly they turned away one by one and trudged down the hill. The vehicles were parked at the foot, fully packed and batteries charged. Before leaving, Danziger went to the ship and put a hand on its metal hull. "I'll come back for you, Adair," he promised in a barely audible whisper. "If it's the last thing I do."

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"Thanks." Gratefully Julia accepted the cup from Walman. The smell of freshly brewed coffee wafted up in steamy clouds and she sipped cautiously. It was early in the morning, the rose glow of sunrise still fading from the blue sky. A chill in the air reminded her that they were camped on an upland plateau. Julia wrapped her fingers around the dented cup to warm her hands. Overhead, the clear sky promised a serious rise in temperature during the next few hours. By midday it would be scorching hot.

In the past week Danziger set a steady pace, pushing people and vehicles to their limits. No doubt the long, grueling hours of walking took his mind off of the woman they left behind. And gradually the land had risen higher and higher, until they reached this high plain.

Julia wandered to the edge of the camp and stared at the route they would take. An endless prairie of yellowed grass stretched out in front of her, as far as the eye could see. A few small copses of stunted brush broke the monotony of the landscape. Far to the east jagged-edged mountains pointed snowy peaks even higher at the sky.

She downed the last of the coffee and started back to her tent to finish packing the equipment. The med-tent, which also served as a shelter for her and Alonzo, was the largest egg-shaped dome in the small camp. All tents stood in a semi-circle around the campfire with the vehicles parked between them, making it easier for the night watch to guard them against roving Grendlers. The ungainly creatures would steal anything that took their fancy. Julia was about to duck beneath the tan canvas of her tent when a panicked shout from one of the other domes ripped through the morning quiet.

"Bess? Bess!" Morgan's voice quivered on the brink of full-fledged panic. The flap of the Martins' tent flung aside and he stumbled out, Bess in his arms. Her head hung back, her long hair loose, arms dangling limply. "Julia!" Morgan shouted. Julia ran to them, yelling that someone bring her diagnostic glove.

"What's wrong with her? Julia, do something! Help her!" Morgan jabbered. He put his wife's body down in the grass and the doctor quickly began to examine her. Julia's heart seemed to skip a beat when she realized Bess was barely breathing.

"Morgan, what happened?" she demanded. Alonzo handed her the diaglove and she strapped it on. Hastily she pushed several buttons and ran her hand over Bess. Immediately the contraption began to list vital signs and diagnostic data.

"I don't know," Morgan wailed. "She just collapsed. One moment she was telling me she was going to get breakfast. The next she crumpled to the ground."

Julia's eyes widened in fear and she breathed in sharply through her teeth when she examined the glove's feedback. "Get her to the med-tent. Now." Alonzo and Danziger picked up Bess' body and scurried after the doctor. Morgan was wringing his hands while he followed on their heels.

"Julia, she's going to be alright, isn't she?" He nearly choked on his tears and kept trying to get hold of Bess' hand. Julia shoved him aside, more roughly than she intended.

"Lonzo, please get him out of my way?" Alonzo took Morgan by the shoulders and frog-marched him out of the tent.

"C'mon, Martin. Let the Doc do her work. You'll just be in the way." With a reluctant shrug Morgan allowed himself to be led out of the tent. But he kept throwing desperate glances over his shoulder.

Julia hooked Bess up to the monitors and placed an oxygen mask over her face. Thick, dark curls framed a pale face, the eyes closed. Her breathing was shallow. Distantly the doctor mused how fortunate it was that she hadn't packed her equipment yet. She readied a stimulant and put the injector near to hand. Just in case Bess' heart stopped. She didn't want to admit it yet but Julia was fairly certain that Bess suffered from the same ailment that nearly killed Devon. Total system failure. Without a cause. And for which she knew no cure.

She worked in silence to stabilize her patient. Danziger quietly hovered near the entrance, apparently waiting for her to speak. Julia was unwilling to voice her diagnosis and kept herself busy to postpone the inevitable. She adjusted the drip that would provide Bess with the necessary fluids, checked the monitors again and straightened with a sigh. She pushed a strand of unruly hair behind her ear before turning to Danziger. She evaded meeting his eyes.

"I'm..." Her voice was unsteady and she coughed to clear her throat. "I'm afraid Bess has the same sickness Devon has. There's not much I can do. I've stabilized her condition as far as I can..." Her voice trailed off.

Danziger's eyes widened. "What?" he exclaimed. "That's impossible! You said yourself Devon didn't have a virus or something. Now you're telling me Bess has the same thing?"

Julia bobbed self-consciously on the balls of her feet. She lifted a hand and rubbed her eyes. "I know what I said," she sighed. "But I'm fairly sure Bess has the same thing, whatever it is. I have no cure. If we don't get her into cold sleep soon, she'll die."

Danziger let out a long breath. "We're a week away from the ship," he said. "Do you want us to go back? Will Bess even live that long?"

"I don't know," Julia admitted. "But I'm afraid she will definitely die if we don't go back." Danziger stared at her for a long time before nodding slowly.

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"Damn, the engine's getting hot again!" Alonzo swore beneath his breath and brought the DuneRail to a halt. Morgan started awake from an exhausted slumber. He was sitting in the back seat, his wife's unconscious body stretched out beside him. Her head rested in his lap, pallid face half concealed behind an oxygen mask. Julia turned to lean over the back of the seat and ran her gloved hand down Bess' body.

"Why are we stopping?" Morgan asked. "Are we there?" He looked almost as bad as his wife did. His lanky dark hair was pulled back in an untidy ponytail, red-rimmed eyes stood dull over sunken cheeks and a three-day stubble created a gray shadow on his chin. He'd hardly slept a wink over the past four days. None of them had, Julia thought, while she adjusted the oxygen supply for Bess.

They had made good time, at least. Alonzo had been pushing the four-seater Rail to its limits, driving through darkness and bright sunlight alike. With the former pilot deploying his skills at the steering wheel, and without the clumsy TransRover to slow them down, they were able to move fast. In four days they covered the distance that the group traveled in the past week. They only stopped when Alonzo ran the risk to fall asleep behind the wheel, or when the engine threatened to overheat, which happened too often for Julia's liking.

The vehicle's solar panels were turned backwards, to catch the last rays of the sun that was fast approaching the horizon. The sky ahead of them had already darkened to a deep blue, almost black. A few early stars winked coldly and long shadows ran across the low

hills, which were sparsely covered with brush.

Just a few hours more, Julia prayed. That was all they needed to reach the ship. If she could keep Bess alive for just a few hours more, the woman could be put into a cold sleep crypt until a cure was found.

Three times during the journey back Bess' heart had stopped. And every time Julia managed to get it beating again, administering shocks with the diaglove. A fourth heart failure would be fatal; Julia didn't think Bess could survive another attempt at resuscitation. Her situation had worsened gradually over the days. More and more body functions simply-- stopped. Her body was shutting itself down for no apparent reason.

"How is she?" Morgan asked. He shifted in his seat, careful not to jar Bess.

"She's stable," Julia replied, turning off her glove. "At least she's no worse than a few hours ago."

"Good," Morgan nodded. "She will be okay, won't she?"

"I'm doing the best I can, Morgan," Julia replied cautiously. Even if they could get Bess into a cold sleep bed in time, there was no way to predict if and when they could wake her again.

"Why can't we go any faster?" Morgan complained. "We're stopping too often."

"Because the engine's overheating," Alonzo snapped, turning in his seat to glare at the other man. His eyes were bloodshot from ceaselessly peering ahead into the flying dust and his patience was wearing thin. Julia put a warning hand on his arm.

"If we burn out the Rail, we'd have to walk. You know that, Morgan," she said soothingly.

"Yes, I know," Morgan muttered. "I'm sorry." He tenderly brushed a few wayward curls, matted with dust, from his wife's face. She let out a barely perceptible little sigh, then lay motionless. "Julia?" Morgan asked anxiously.

Quickly Julia switched the diaglove back on and ran it across Bess' body. A wobbly green line on the small display told her the patient was in cardiac arrest. For the fourth time. "Dammit!" Julia swore, jumping off the front seat. "Help me get her out," she told the two men. "Quickly!"

They gently laid Bess' body on the rocky ground and Julia changed the settings on her

glove to apply shocks. She put her hands against Bess' chest and ordered, "Cardiovert!" Bess' body jerked violently when the glove released the charge, and then she lay still. Flat line. "C'mon, c'mon," Julia muttered and turned up the frequency of the electrical current. Again she pressed her hand against the chest. Another violent jerk. Flat line.

The young doctor worked feverishly, trying to bring her patient back from the brink. But it was no use. Bess' condition had deteriorated too much; her heart was too weakened. At last Julia sat back on her haunches, pushing back strands of hair that clung to her sweaty face. Her blue eyes were full of regret when she looked up to meet Morgan's gaze. "I'm sorry," she muttered. "Bess is dead."

"Nooo!" Morgan wailed. "You lie! Not my Bess!" He grabbed his wife's limp body by the shoulders and shook her hard enough that her head whipped back and forth. "Talk to me, Bess. Please say something?" he pleaded in a tremulous voice. "Please?" Of course, he received no answer.

Morgan wrapped his arms around his dead wife's torso. Her head fell forward to come to rest against his shoulder. He hid his face in her curls, his whole body shaking with desolate sobs. "She was my life," he wept. "I might as well be dead too."

Julia's eyes filled with tears when she watched Morgan's grief. She reached out to put a hand on his shoulder, then hesitated. At last, without touching, she drew back. Her gaze met Alonzo's. His eyes were dark and filled with sadness, an echo of her sentiments.

Julia climbed back to her feet slowly. She peeled off the now useless glove and flung it angrily in the back seat of the Rail; even with all her modern day knowledge and the aid of the diagnostic tool she had failed to keep Bess alive.

"We better call the others," she said to Alonzo while pinching the bridge of her nose tiredly. She glanced at Morgan rocking back and forth with Bess in his arms. "To tell them what happened."

"Yeah," Alonzo replied quietly. "I'll call."

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"And thus we've come together once again to say a last farewell to a dear friend..." Yale's voice faded to the background as Julia's thoughts drifted to mull over the events of the past few days. Bess wasn't the only one to die from the mysterious disease. When Alonzo called in to report her death, he was told that a day earlier, Magus also succumbed. She was still alive but barely so, according to Walman who answered the Gear. Magus died while they were working to get her into a capsule.

"Universe to universe, ashes to ashes, dust to dust," Yale intoned the final words of the burial ceremony and Julia started from her reverie. Slowly everyone turned away from the fresh grave, leaving it to Zero to fill the hole. Several other crosses already stood planted side by side in the hard soil. One was marking Eben's grave where they buried her a second time, weeks ago. And another for Bess, whom Alonzo and Julia interred two days ago, before the others arrived.

When his wife died, Morgan sunk into a deep depression, a near catatonic state. Julia had been forced to pry his hands loose from Bess' cold fingers before they could bury the poor woman. He spent his days at her grave now, muttering below his breath, only returning to camp to eat and sleep. And that he did merely because the others forced him to.

When Magus' funeral was over Julia returned to her research deep inside the old spaceship. Two of their number had died from the unknown illness, and a third friend was in suspension in cold sleep. Not knowing what they were facing the group was unwilling to move on toward New Pacifica. Without much discussion a decision had been reached: they would stay near the ship, which still offered the best facilities, until Julia discovered a way to deal with the disease.

Except Julia didn't have an idea where to start. She'd been over everything when Devon collapsed and she didn't think she overlooked any possible cause. She felt the weight of failure while she sat staring, with unseeing eyes, at the latest test results in front of her. She couldn't remember the last time she had slept, let alone ate. Her eyes burned with fatigue, the skin felt drawn tight across her features. A good thing there were no mirrors in this ship, she mused absently, her thoughts straying from their path. No doubt even she, never a vain woman, would be shocked by her own appearance.

A sound near the hatch startled her out of her musing. Rubbing her eyes, she turned. Alonzo stepped off the ladder, a bowl of food in one hand. "I brought you dinner," he said. "You have to eat something. And get some sleep."

Julia shook her head, motioning to the samples still waiting to be tested. "I don't have time," she said. "And I don't want to eat in here. Not with--" She didn't finish but motioned toward the bay with the cold sleep bed that held Devon's suspended body.

"You won't be of much use to anyone if you collapse," Alonzo chided her gently. His eyes tightened with concern and his voice was firm. "Eat something and close your eyes for a few moments."

She sighed tiredly and accepted the bowl. He was right; she was near the edge of collapse

herself. "I can't figure out what is wrong," she muttered, anger at her own incompetence seeping into her voice. "I've been over it again and again. It's not a virus, not a bacteria, I can't find a trace of any illness." Julia pointed at the angular lines on the screen in front of her, a display of the progression curve of the sickness. "See? This is where the kidneys give out, then the liver, there's the loss of motor control and here, finally, the heart and lungs fail."

Alonzo was about to reply when shouts outside interrupted them. "Juliaaaa!!" Cameron's voice bordered on the edge of terror. Without thinking Julia shoved the bowl back at Alonzo, grabbed her diaglove and raced for the ladder out of the ship. Cameron and Mazatl were waving frantically at her. Other group members, alarmed by the shouts, appeared from every corner of the camp.

"It's Denner," Mazatl explained hurriedly. "She collapsed." Fear showed in both men's eyes. A quick scan of Denner's inert body confirmed to Julia what they already knew. Total system failure. The woman's heart was still beating, albeit weakly and she might have a chance if they put her in cold sleep right away.

Julia yelled at Alonzo, who was following her out of the ship, to prepare another crypt while she worked to stabilize Denner's condition. Then, with the help of Cameron and Mazatl, they lowered the woman down the ladder into the old spacecraft and stood her upright in the crypt. Julia held her breath until the machinery caught and the temperature inside dropped to stabilize at just below -195.8 C.

"Dammit," Julia hissed to herself, frustration causing her to curse. "That's the fourth woman to--" Abruptly she halted and her eyes went out of focus as she stared at an unseen spot on the far wall. Blinking, she turned to the men present.

"That's it! That's the first real connection I have found!" They looked at her uncertainly and Julia quickly explained. "So far, only the women in our group suffered from this... disease." She wasn't sure if disease was the right word, but for lack of another description it would have to do for now.

Forgetting all about food or sleep, Julia chased the men from the ship and returned to her research. She set to work with renewed vigor. Now that she had a connection between the patients, a common denominator, she might discover why they got sick. And if she found out the 'why' she might find out how to stop it.

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It was hours later, close to midnight, when Julia finally emerged from the ship. As soon as she appeared the remaining members of the group gathered. Cameron's eyes held the

same plea that Julia had seen too often on men's faces, these last weeks. Walman yawned sleepily, having woken from a slumber; the others looked tired but alert. Only the kids were in their tents, sound asleep.

"Well?" Danziger voiced the question on everyone's lips. He rubbed at the stubble on his chin. He looked haggard; with Devon gone he had taken over the responsibilities for the group, and for Uly. Losing his people one by one didn't sit well with the big mechanic. "Did you find out what it is? Can you cure it?"

Julia turned up her face to meet his eyes. "Yes and no," she replied tiredly, swaying on her feet. Alonzo sprang forward to support her and she offered him a grateful smile.

"What's that supposed to mean? Yes and no what?" Baines demanded before Julia could continue.

"Hey, slow down," Alonzo growled. "Let her sit first, will you." He helped Julia to a seat near the fire and handed her a cup of coffee, which she accepted gladly. The men -she was the only woman left, Julia thought grimly- crowded around, towering over her.

She looked up at them. The flickering light of the flames caused shadows to dance on their faces. "I think I know what causes their illness," she began. "Elizabeth was right, the planet is rejecting us."

"That's ridiculous," Baines grouched amidst agreeing mutters. He had been moody and sullen since Magus passed away and Julia suspected that something had started to blossom between them during the long journey. "A planet's a *thing*. It doesn't make people sick. And it sure as hell doesn't 'reject' them!"

Julia grimaced. "I wish that were true. We've all experienced the strong metaphysical presence of the planet," she continued. "The Dreamplane, the spider tunnels. I think this planet is *not* a thing but a living organism. An organism that doesn't want us here. Or, more precisely, that doesn't want *women* here."

More mutters came from the assembled men. Voices were raised in surprise and disbelief, demanding an explanation. Julia waited until they quieted before she continued. "To the planet, we are alien bodies, like a virus. And the same way our immune systems are triggered when a virus enters our bodies, the planet's immune system is activated by our presence. For some reason, women are deemed a threat."

"But why the women? And why now?" Danziger wanted to know. He glanced over at the tent where True was sleeping before turning a penetrating gaze back at Julia.

She shrugged. "I don't know 'why'," she said. "Maybe it's a cyclical thing. Or maybe we triggered the planet's immune system with the uplink to Eve. I just don't know. I've found out how it works though. How much do you know about human genetics?" Sheepish grimaces were her answer mostly and she nodded resignedly. "Bear with me, okay."

Taking a few moments to gather her thoughts, Julia explained. "As you may know, humans have 46 chromosomes, in 23 pairs. You all do. Each of your parents supplied one half of every pair. And those chromosomes are of a similar composition, both in men and in women. Except for the last pair. It's this last pair that decides if a fetus will be male or female. A man has an X and a Y-chromosome, while a woman has two X's."

"And the planet attacks only those who have the double chromosomes," Yale understood.

Julia nodded. "More precisely, it alters one of the X-chromosomes. When the body receives conflicting information it can no longer function properly and simply shuts down."

"So, put in a new one of those chromo things," Cameron urged. "If that'll make Denner better." He cast a glance full of longing at the space ship.

Julia shook her head tiredly. "If it were that simple... I don't have the necessary equipment for that kind of genetic surgery. And even if I could, the planet would simply change it again. I'd almost go so far as to say it tries turning women into men. The Terrians are all male and--"

"That's all very well," a cold voice coming from the darkness interrupted her. All eyes turned to the sound and Morgan stepped into the wavering circle of light cast by the fire. The thin man's face wore a constant scowl these days and his eyes were dulled with pain. The men made way as he approached Julia who climbed to her feet warily. He glared at her.

"If all that's true, then why are you still here? Why aren't you sick and frozen like a Popsicle in there? Or dead and buried, like my beautiful wife?" Morgan's voice broke on the last word. He turned and faced the assembled men. "It's another Council trick, that's what I think. They've tried everything to stop us. And now they'll kill us all. They already killed Bess."

Alonzo took an angry step toward Morgan and opened his mouth to defend Julia. She put a hand on his arm to stop him and said, "Morgan, I'm sorry about Bess. But I assure you, the Council has nothing to do with it." She met the eyes of the others one by one. To their credit, none refused to meet her look. "I don't know why I'm not sick," she

continued. "Maybe it takes longer because my genes are skewed. Maybe the rejection process is different with every woman. We've seen the underground colony of the Elder; there were women there, and children born here. But if I'm right, and I'm quite sure I am, none of those women will survive to grow old."

Alonzo stepped up behind her and wrapped his arms around her tightly. "I don't want to lose you," he muttered in her hair, his voice hoarse. Absently she stroked his arm, not knowing what to say.

Danziger had been awfully quiet during Julia's explanation. "So True will die too," he said. It wasn't a question; he was merely stating a fact.

Julia nodded. "I'm sorry," she said.

He stared at her for a long time, until she shifted uncomfortably. Then he straightened and raised himself to his full height. "We will leave here," he announced.

A babble of voices rose at his announcement. "I'm not going to abandon Denner," Cameron stated. "And I can't believe you want to leave Devon."

Danziger raised his voice to be heard over the din. "Shut up!" he bellowed. Then, in a calmer voice, he continued. "I was talking about leaving G889." This caused an even louder uproar and Danziger had to raise his voice again. Once everyone was silent, barring a few skeptical murmurs, Danziger turned to Alonzo.

"The ship, will she fly?"

Alonzo shrugged. "It's possible," he said cautiously. "Depends on the amount of fuel left. And the damage she sustained when she crashed." He suddenly grinned boyishly. "If you can fix her, I'll fly that baby."

Julia untangled herself from his embrace and turned to face him, an incredulous expression on her face. "It's impossible," she said. "For starters, there aren't enough cryo-beds aboard the ship for all of us. And have you forgotten the Colony ship is due to land in another year? Besides, where would we go? Back to the Stations?"

"Yeah, and if that ship works, why don't we just *fly* to New Pacifica?" Walman suggested. Alonzo was shaking his head.

"Won't work," he said. "Venus boats were designed for deep space missions, not surface transports. They're powered by a nuclear reactor. Not something you want to use on a planet. This one," he motioned to the craft on the hill, "has been modified. The

radioactive fallout from the reactor is contained and discarded when the ship reaches outer space, where it's harmless. Firing up the engines for lift off adds a lot of nuclear waste on top of what she's produced over the past fifty years or more. If we took her to New Pacifica, we'd be sitting on a nuclear accident waiting to happen. No, if we take her up, we got to take her home."

"I'm not going anywhere," Morgan piped up. He had drifted back into the darkness, outside the circle of light. "I'm staying here, with Bess."

"I'll deal with the Colony ship," Danziger said gruffly. "You take True," he made a strangled sound that might have been a sob, "and get her the hell out of here. I can hitch a ride back on Colony."

"No," Yale spoke up for the first time since Danziger suggested leaving the planet. "I'll continue to New Pacifica and meet the ship. You go with True." He raised a hand to forestall any protests. "True needs you. And the people aboard Colony are much more likely to accept the news from me than they will from you. No offense, John, but they know me. They've all seen me with Devon during the intake interviews. They'll listen to me. Even though I'm merely a Yale."

o0o

"Oh man, I loved to fly these things," Alonzo said. He moved the luma light to look around, creating shadows that danced across the metallic walls and support beams. The power was turned off while they took stock of the damage. The control panel in front of him was dark. Needles lay still, all levers were pulled down and the displays showed a matted black. He leaned forward in the pilot's seat to touch the controls. Lightly, like a lover's caress. "These birds were state-of-the-art when they first came on-line. The Venus-class went out of fashion with the later designs but let me tell you, this lady was once considered a great ship."

"Yeah?" Danziger muttered in a muffled voice beneath him. He had removed the paneling and his large body was doubled up into a small compartment underneath the control board. "Right now she's also very broken." He inched back carefully. "A lot of the wiring has corroded over time," he said. "Some of the fuses have melted. Probably when the ship crashed. I can replace those. At least the reactor and the shields are intact. The injectors are shot though; I'll have to rig something to replace them. And you'll need to reprogram and calibrate the navigation instruments."

"Of course," Alonzo nodded. "Can't have the Council interfering and sending us straight back down, like they did with Bennett. I'm going to take her out of her manually. I'll ask Baines to help, we can bench mark against the Rover's data."

"Will that get us home alright?" Danziger asked. Alonzo shrugged.

"Can't tell," he said. "One minuscule deviation could put us millions of miles off course. We might wake up to find ourselves in the core of the Sun. Not that we'd ever notice." Alonzo curled his lips in a sardonic grin for a moment before he continued. "But I don't see we've much choice."

Danziger straightened and dusted off his hands. "Nope," he agreed. Alonzo eyed him sideways and they exchanged a look of silent understanding. No choice at all, that look said. They both had too much to lose *not* to take their chances with the old ship. Julia. True. And Devon.

"I'll go talk to Baines," Alonzo said and hopped off the seat.

The bright sunlight hurt his eyes after the dim interior of the spacecraft. He squinted and surveyed the small camp. The tan canvas tents were erected in the hill-valley, a little beneath the ship that rested nose down on the gentle slope. Red-and-white striped nylon overhangs, once proud parachutes, provided shade and flapped lazily in the dry, warm wind coming down from the high plains to the west. Alonzo observed Julia as she came out of the med-tent with her hands full of sample slides. His features softened; she kept trying to find another solution to the planet's rejection. She would continue to try until the day they left.

Momentarily forgetting his resolution to talk to Baines, he quietly walked up behind her, took her shoulders and whirled her around. Lowering his head he placed a firm kiss on her lips. Julia gave a surprised yelp; his mouth on hers muted her voice and she nearly dropped the slides.

"What was that for?" she asked breathily when he finally let her go.

"Because I felt like it," he grinned sheepishly. His smile faded. "Julia, I love you. I don't ever want to live without you."

"You won't," Julia promised. But her face clouded and she turned away from him.

"Julia?" Alonzo asked. Sudden concern hardened his voice. "What is it? You're not feeling sick, are you?" He cupped her chin in his hands, tilting her face so she had to look up at him. "I'll get you out of here," he said. "The ship is our ticket home."

"That's just it," Julia replied softly. "I don't have a home. I can't go back to the Stations. The Council--"

"Will have long forgotten about you," he interrupted. "Doc, by the time we get back, some sixty or seventy years will have passed since the Eden Project departed. Nobody'll remember you or your mission. Don't worry. We'll make a life somehow. Together. I promise." Julia nodded faintly in acknowledgement but her eyes remained doubtful.

"I still don't like it," she mumbled. "We've come so far, achieved so much. To turn back now..." She pulled her head away from his hand and shook it miserably. "Why won't the Terrians help? It's their planet. And they wanted Uly here. Don't they understand he's leaving with us?"

Alonzo sighed and stuffed his hands firmly in his pockets. "Julia, we've been over this. I tried talking to them. I can't seem to make the Terrians understand what the problem is. Or even that we *have* a problem."

"What's not to understand?" Julia asked angrily. "Bess and Magus are dead! Devon and Denner would be if we hadn't put them to sleep. And you're telling me they don't think that's a problem?"

Alonzo shrugged. "Hey, I'm just the messenger," he said. "They don't see death the way we do. To them it's merely a stasis, while waiting in the Mother's fold to be reborn."

"If their precious 'Mother' keeps killing off the women, there won't be much chance of anyone being born, let alone reborn," Julia said bitterly. She rubbed at her face with the back of her hand. "I'm sorry, it's not your fault. I feel so frustrated; I can't do anything. And that ship, it's so old. What if it crashes again, like it did with Bennett?"

Alonzo flashed her a sudden confident grin. "Don't worry about that, Doc. You got the best pilot available to fly her. It'll be okay, trust me." A wan smile was his only reply.

oOo

The next two weeks sped by in a blur. Day and night they worked on getting the ship repaired and ready for the journey home. Even Morgan dragged himself away from Bess' grave to lend a hand. He operated the TransRover's instruments while Alonzo and Baines recalibrated the navigation systems and programmed a course that should take them straight to New Mars Station. Julia oversaw the repairs and modifications to the failed cryopods. Those were needed to keep them alive during the long flight home and the systems were old and rickety. Danziger had to call upon all his talent for improvisation to get the engines up and running. He cannibalized the TransRover, stripping the vehicle down to its axle in his search for the parts and wiring he needed to refurbish the spacecraft.

The men worked at a feverish pace, constantly afraid that True or Julia would suffer the planet's rejection before they were ready to leave.

"Try again, now," Danziger's voice said in Alonzo's ear. Blinking to see past the Gear's projection, he pressed a series of buttons glowing red. They changed to green and he nodded with satisfaction.

"Ignition sequence commenced," he muttered. Behind him, at the other console, Baines was calling out numbers.

"Power at ten percent. Fifteen percent. Twenty..." Alonzo flicked another switch.

"Reactor engaged." He grabbed the lever in front and slowly pushed it away from him. He held his breath until a low humming, increasing in pitch, filled the cockpit. "Yesss!" he yelled. "Danziger, you did it!" He whirled in his seat and slapped an upraised palm against the hand Baines held up, a wide grin splitting the black man's face.

"You don't have to shout at me," Danziger grouched. He grimaced and rubbed the ear that held the Gear's earpiece. Alonzo grinned at the mechanic's image that wavered before his eyes.

"Sorry," he muttered but his face didn't show any contrition at all. After days of trying, full of failed attempts and new modifications, they were finally successful; the power that the nuclear reactor generated was conveyed to the ship's engines and its life support systems.

"I guess it's real now," Baines commented. "We're really going back." Alonzo's euphoria that the engines were working properly quickly dissipated when he thought of the long, perilous journey ahead and the friends they would leave behind.

"Yeah," he nodded soberly. "We really are."

oOo

The day came that the ship was fully restored and prepared to take off. Mazatl and, surprisingly, Morgan offered to stay behind and accompany Yale on the journey to New Pacifica. They would meet the Colony ship and explain why the colonists should return to the Stations. Morgan said he wanted to stay as close to Bess as he could, for as long as possible. To him, that meant staying on the planet. Uncharitably, Alonzo thought that lack of faith in the old cryobeds played an important part in Morgan's decision as well.

Mazatl simply enjoyed life planet-side. He said he was beginning to gain an understanding of old legends about 'Mother Earth' and didn't mind staying a little while longer. Him being a man, he wasn't at risk of dying suddenly and unexpectedly from the planet's rejection either. Amazingly enough, Alonzo thought to himself while listening to the small man explain quietly to Cameron and Danziger, he wouldn't have minded staying a bit longer himself. His interaction with the Terrians had changed him, he realized, more than he knew. Then again, he wasn't changed so much that he didn't look forward to flying again. He was eager to experience that sense of power once more, when one featherweight caress of the controls would make tons of steel do as he wanted.

A light touch on his arm made him look down. He met Julia's eyes, her face upturned with a tremulous half smile playing around her lips.

"Nervous?" he asked.

Julia bobbed her head. "A little," she admitted.

She was the main reason that he was going back, Alonzo knew. Life without her would be no life worth living. And staying here would kill her eventually. Perhaps, he thought while taking her hand in his and patting it encouragingly, she had changed him even more than the Terrians had.

"So, this is it, huh?" Morgan said as he approached them. He craned his neck to look up at the ship, its hull gleaming dully in the early morning light. The ship's engines hummed quietly while charging to reach their maximum power; it would take all the thrust they could provide to break free from the planet's gravity. "You're leaving."

Alonzo nodded. "Yep." Far behind Morgan, at the other end of the valley, one tent still stood. The others were struck and packed aboard the ship, along with the passengers' personal belongings. The Rail and the ATV stood parked neatly side by side next to the lone tent, ready to take the three volunteers to New Pacifica.

"Are you sure you don't want to come with us, Morgan?" Julia asked. "We do have another cryobed if you want it."

Morgan shook his head. "No, I want to stay here as long as possible. I know it sounds crazy, but I can feel Bess' spirit near me." He scuffed at the ground with the toe of his boot, cheeks coloring slightly with embarrassment.

"It doesn't sound crazy at all," Julia replied. "Nothing about this planet will surprise me anymore."

Alonzo put an arm around her shoulders and nodded in agreement. "Between the Terrians and the Dreamplane," he said to Morgan, "you're probably right and Bess is still here, in a way."

Morgan raised his head and looked at them, his dark eyes suddenly hopeful. "You really think so? Julia..." He hesitated briefly. "What I said, about this being a Council trick... I didn't really mean that. But I wish you'd found out sooner what was happening." Heaving a deep sigh, Morgan swallowed hard. "I miss her so much," he murmured.

Julia reached out to hug him. "I know," she replied softly. "And I'm so sorry I couldn't save her. I would give anything to take you and Bess back with us."

After a moment, Morgan visibly pulled himself together and Julia stepped back. "Have a safe journey," he muttered.

Alonzo took Morgan's hand, shaking it vigorously. "We'll see you in fifty years?"

"Yale," Uly's voice piped up suddenly, "is that really true? Will you and Morgan and Mazatl be there when we get back to the Stations?" His small hand was hidden in his tutor's larger one while they walked up to the ship.

"Yes," Yale smiled down at the boy. "The colony ship will fly back much faster than you do. We'll be waiting for you."

"And you'll still be a little brat, while I'll be an old man," Morgan commented in a glum tone. His voice held no malice though and Alonzo chuckled.

"Wow..." Uly breathed while his nine-year old brain tried to understand the implications of space travel and cold sleep.

"I still think maybe we should all wait for Colony," Julia mumbled. Alonzo's head whipped around. He stared at her, eyes wide in shock while Danziger turned and opened his mouth to protest. Julia held up her hands. "Okay, okay, I know. It's too risky for True. And me." Alonzo let out a breath.

"Take care of Uly," Yale continued his farewell as if Julia hadn't spoken. He transferred the boy's hand to Danziger's callused one. The mechanic nodded.

"We will, Yale." True replied in her father's stead. She was standing next to Danziger and stared down at Uly with the full superiority that being almost two years older than the boy afforded her. Alonzo grinned inwardly. Danziger would have quite a handful when the girl was a few years older and a true teenager, he thought. But that moment was

more than fifty years in the future.

oOo

It seemed to take forever but finally the good byes were all said and done. Everyone boarded and Julia threw a last, wistful look at the planet. She gazed up at the bright blue sky, marred only by a few fluffy white clouds on the horizon. Her eyes wandered across the gently rolling hills, covered with grass and moss and the occasional brush. It's so beautiful, she thought and Elizabeth's words echoed in her mind. "You found love here. I just wish you hadn't found this planet."

Julia shook her head to banish the voice while Alonzo closed the hatch, cutting off the sunlight. Darkness enfolded them. Immediately the ship's computer turned up the overhead lights and the bay brightened. The occupants all stared at one another for long moments. Baines, Cameron, Walman. Danziger and True. Uly, looking very small and lonely. Behind them, silently asleep and completely oblivious to the world around them, Devon and Denner stood upright in their caskets.

Danziger cleared his throat. "Julia, I think it's time you prepare us for cold sleep." She nodded, not trusting her voice enough to speak.

She started with the children, True and Uly. "Is it just like last time?" Uly asked, a little frightened but trying very hard not to show it.

"Yes," Julia said. "It'll seem like any other night's sleep. Except years will have passed. And of course you'll have to stand up while you sleep." She offered him a comforting smile.

"Will my Mom be okay?" Uly continued.

"I hope so, Uly," Julia replied honestly. "We will try everything we can to make her better."

With his mind put at ease Uly allowed her to inject him with a sleeping aid. And while he drifted off she punched in the commands for the cold sleep crypt. It closed with a hiss and the rapidly lowering temperature sucked all the moisture from air inside the crypt, sealing the boy in the cold.

One by one Julia helped the others enter cold sleep, while Alonzo ran through the final pre-flight checks. At last they were the only ones awake.

She met his eyes, dark and serious. Suddenly they sparkled wickedly and a mischievous

grin broke on his face. "Whaddayasay, Doc? Want to celebrate life a little, now everyone's asleep?"

It broke the tension and Julia laughed. "You're incorrigible, aren't you?" she grinned back. The smile dissipated as she continued, "We better get going. We can celebrate life all you want when we wake up." Alonzo nodded and turned to the console. "I'll keep you to that," he chuckled below his breath and began the countdown to lift off.

oOo

Voice of Dr. Julia Heller:

As the planet falls back behind us, I can't help but wonder. Did we make the right decision? Was there really no other way? Will we survive the long sleep? And what are we going to find when we arrive at the Stations?

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